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GROWING TOGETHER: INCLUSIVITY IN YOUTH MINISTRY PRAXIS AND THE CHALLENGE OF MAINLINE CHURCH ATTRITION

BY

M W Droege

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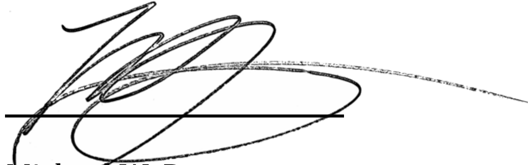
DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis, *Growing Together: Inclusivity in youth ministry praxis and the challenge of mainline church attrition* is my work. All the sources that I have used or quoted have been acknowledged employing complete references.



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The author, whose name appears on the title page of this thesis, has obtained the required research ethics approval for the research described in this work. The author declares that he has observed the code of ethics for scholarly activities and has in general observed the principles of honesty and fairness in giving credit and appropriate acknowledgement to the work of others.

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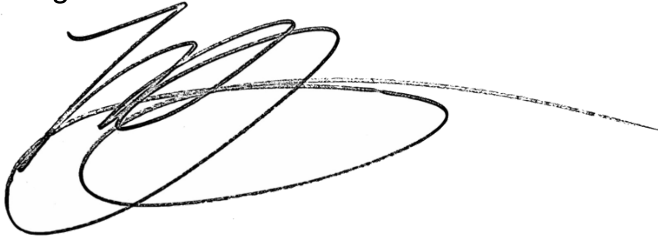

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Abstract

The problem concerning this research is why, after a century of professional study, training, and resourcing in youth ministry, does the American church still experience generational attrition? This research argues that 20th century hegemonic ideas surrounding adolescence transformed emerging adults transitioning from childhood to adulthood into a problematic sub-culture that needed specialized programming to protect and mold into productive members of the hegemonic class. The mixed methodology and multi-disciplinary approach to the development of youth ministry demonstrates a historical and methodological connection to mainline church attrition, but it also invites us to reconsider the foundational concepts of adolescence that inspired 20th century youth programming. The common complaint among churches today is the lack of teenagers that they "have". However, an empirical investigation into their historical practice demonstrates a lack of inclusion on the part of churches who no longer have a vibrant teenage population vs those that do. Utilizing the inclusive missional ecclesiology of Malan Nel as a point of departure, this research includes a theoretical consideration of a kinship model, most often practiced in African American churches, and a consideration of adolescence itself as a theological conversation partner. Empirical research provides a vital "text" for consideration as the theoretical and the empirical are brought into conversation to provide a practical theological approach to reformation in not only the praxis of youth ministry, but the posture toward adolescence. As a result, a way forward is suggested that moves a congregation from an exclusive programmatic structure that does not foster intergenerational community to one that considers all voices and all gifs as vital to a missional identity.

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1 Introducing the Research

1.1 The Background to the Research

The background to the question presented in this research is the current identification of the generational crisis of attrition faced by the mainline American church. The subtitle "youth ministry and the challenge of mainline church attrition," suggests a connection between the practice of youth ministry and the identified crisis of attrition faced by the mainline church in the United States. As a teenager who grew up in the church, I found my faith energized by a different style of doing ministry with my cohort that I would later come to understand as a parachurch youth ministry. The ministry did not meet in a church building, nor did it seem to have any denominational affiliation. However, the culture of the meetings connected who I was as a teenager culturally and the adults practiced a relationality that made me feel like there might be more to the Christian faith than I had considered as a churched kid. It was in that environment that I sensed a calling to youth ministry. The expression of that calling has taken on multiple forms, but at the heart was this desire to help other youth experience what had happened to me – a reformation and reimagination of the possibilities of being a Christian. I enrolled in college to study youth ministry and practiced youth ministry as part of the curriculum. I built relationships, planned engaging programs, and taught about Jesus. After college I was hired by a church to be the bridge between the "church kids" and the growing population of "neighborhood kids" who had just started to attend the Wednesday night youth group. If success is gauged by numbers, the ministry was successful, growing 5 times in size to over 100 teenagers attending weekly. However,

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tension became high within the church as these neighborhood youth were not translating into the larger congregation. The large population of minority teens created a measure of fear in the predominantly white congregation and neighborhood. As the hired “expert” it was understood that I would be able to control this population. The few teens that did come to services recognized a significant gap between their experience of the church on a Wednesday night and their experience of the attending congregation on a Sunday morning. Eventually, the teens stopped trying to attend worship and the church grew impatient with what seemed like a wild Wednesday night and both the teens, and I were asked to leave. Hurt and disappointed by the church, a remnant of those teens and I found welcome within Young Life. I became an area director, and we started a club. The framework of relational ministry seemed ideally suited to what I understood as youth ministry, yet after nearly a decade the problem of translation to a church remained the same. I spent 8 years of quality relational ministry but was able to embed very few within the care of a local congregation. I returned to a congregation after my time in Young Life to find that another generation had left the church and even with decades of education and talent for youth ministry, there was even fewer youth who were willing to be a part of a ministry, much less a part of a congregation. At the time of the writing of this thesis, it has been 33 years of practice, education, and training in the discipline most often referenced as youth ministry. I have scores of people who have a loving and appreciative relationship with me, but very few who have a vital relationship with a local congregation. I am only one of countless youth ministers in this country with a similar story. Very few are even continuing in youth ministry.

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A long career spent in any field allows a viewpoint of time. The discipline of youth ministry has only become more professional, more relational, and more educated. However, attendance and participation by youth and subsequent generations who had experienced youth ministry continued to plummet not grow. My experience in seminary only served to confirm what the American church understood empirically – the American church, and particularly the mainline protestant church, was in a state of crisis that could not be attributed to education or pedagogy. Never in the history of the planet were youth ministers better educated or equipped than they are in the 21st century.

It also seemed incongruent to blame external circumstances such as the business of suburban culture, technology, or even Covid-19. Youth ministers are uniquely equipped to adapt to the challenges of a fluid culture and each cultural challenge is met with a response from the field of youth ministry with a moderate measure of effectiveness. In my own case, my training in relational ministry ensured that I had vibrant and meaningful relationships with youth. The capability of youth ministers to have meaningful relationships with youth do not seem to be a challenge. The challenge seems to lie in the reality that these relationships are not translating to a meaningful connection to the congregation as is often the hopes of youth ministry.

Beyond my own experience in youth ministry, recent theological inquiry has agreed that the predominant challenge faced by the church is not the relational or the pedagogical, but theological. To be more specific, the challenge is ecclesiological. The church has developed a praxis of ministry that has excluded emerging generations in the name of excellence in ministry. Bailey and Ward (2019:67) argue that the theological conversations that provide the underpinning of youth ministry has been

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formed via orthopraxy – the sense in which we seek a successful practice, and the success of the practice becomes theologically justifiable. These accepted norms of practice lead to justifications that can be described as 'thin theology' (Bailey and Ward 2019:29). In recent decades there has been a growing desire to connect youth ministry to a theology of the whole church and this research features some of the key theologians and researchers in the field. This research suggests that theology must be the starting point in developing a praxis of youth ministry, but one that engages the most recent scientific understanding of adolescent development and the lived experiences of the very teenagers that youth ministry aims to serve.

It has become overwhelmingly clear from this research into adolescent faith formation praxis that a renegotiation of the perspective on adolescence and their relationship to the mission of the local church and the global church is of vital importance. This perspective requires that our conversation around the praxis of youth ministry be more than an "update" to styles of ministry or a more modern pedagogy. What the research suggests is that the problem of attrition facing the mainline church in the United States is less an adolescent issue and more of a congregational or ecclesiological issue. Echoing Nel (2009:1), this work will be "taking seriously the missional identity of the congregation as well as the critical role of ministry as congregational role-fulfilment" in consideration of youth ministry, both as a praxis resulting from 20th century ideations around adolescence and their role in ecclesial life. Only in the last 20 years are we starting to see invitations to "think theologically" about youth ministry in the American context (cf. *The Theological Turn in Youth Ministry* by Kenda Creasy Dean and Andrew Root (2011) or the anthologies of *Thinking*

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Theologically about Youth Ministry ed. Dean (2001). We owe a great debt to pioneers in youth research such as Strommen and the work of what began as the Youth Research Center (now Search Institute) who have been supplying guiding data since the 1970's, even if it was not being popularly considered in the field of theology. Strommen (1963:124-125) concluded from his research that personal faith needs the sustaining power of a congregation and that the ministry to youth is a collaborative effort by the whole congregation with adults freely admitting their need to be helped by youth. This will be echoed later as Freire (1970:79) points out that any revolution (or reformation) is collaborative. That is a statement that lives beyond what is considered "youth ministry" or youth group into a consideration of our relationship with the missional nature of a local congregation and our view of adolescence. Strommen (1963:xvi) admits that his conclusions offer "an interpretation reflecting my biases and theological stance." Yet, it is this theological reflection that turns data on youth ministry into a work of practical theology. Without reflexive theological thinking, data is infused into curricula or programs intended to address the symptoms or problems of youth rather than considering how youth fit into the life and mission of the congregation. This is often indicative of hegemonic youth ministry praxis. For this reason, I have chosen the mixed methodological approach described below with an exploration of four "texts" that I believe contribute to our task which I will discuss in more detail below.

Without the collaboration of data, the conclusions could only be applied to symptoms of teenage life and culture. Youth ministry often reflects the problems of being a teenager from the perspective of adults. From this vantage point, youth ministry becomes a form of behavior modification to restrain the runaway desires of adolescents

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in a world fraught with danger. Youth group lessons are formulated to keep kids off drugs or from having sex or to commit to obeying their parents and making good moral choices. In that sense, theological reflection is presented with a prescriptive intent toward individual piety. However, the task of theological inquiry is to do more than reflect on the unique challenges of adolescence, but to learn how to address those challenges by considering a theological and missional identity that fuels the church's engagement with the emerging generation.

It is important here to erect a couple of borders and explain their intent. While this research will have application to the global church and each age cohort represented within, I have chosen to narrow this research to adolescence within the context of the United States.

1.1.1 Why Adolescence?

Youth have been the predominant focus of my research and practice for over 30 years because of the critical nature of adolescence. My motivation is twofold as it pertains to an adolescent focus. First, it is for the sake of teenagers. Reflecting on my story of being a teenager above, I have always been motivated in guiding youth to a deeper understanding of themselves and faith. The growing number of teenagers that are developing outside of the church does not merely have implications for the future of a local parish, but these adults will be growing without the joy of being a part of a local family of faith. That being said, congregational life is a reason to focus on youth. Not only are adolescents in a unique period of formation often misunderstood by the adults in their lives, but it is also clear that they are a hinge point on which congregational life

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exists. As discussed below, adolescence is a time of decision-making where one considers their relationship to the others in their lives and the institutions in which they had been raised. Understanding this period of adolescence is critical for the church in its desire to pass the trust of the gospel from one generation to the next. Understanding adolescence has been the centerpiece of youth ministry since its development, yet there is clearly a missing piece to our understanding considering our attritional pain point seems to be rooted in the liminal stage of adolescence. This is why it is critical that we focus attention at this stage of life for this research.

1.1.2 Why the United States?

Let it be stated again that the research can be suited to a global audience, yet as the subject of youth ministry and its relationship to mainline church attrition has been deeply explored, the ideations formed in the United States play a central role. It will become clear as the history of youth ministry is considered, as well as theological developments that grew from the "orthopraxy," that American hegemonic culture has had a major impact in the ecclesiological impact of youth ministry. It is within early 20th century American thought that modern concepts of adolescence were formed as well as cultural transformations that resulted from industrialization and immigration. This knowledge has implications far beyond the United States as the global church will have a text to consider how this orthopraxy has been exported around the world through missionary efforts, colonization, and professional education.

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1.2 The importance of this research

It has become normative in the United States to refer to the American church as an institution in crisis. There are books such as *The American Church in Crisis* by David Olsen (2008) that bemoan the realities that the American population is growing rapidly but overall, the American Church's growth has stalled or is in decline. The American culture wars are often raising the flag of crisis and point to moral decline due to a more open and liberal approach to social issues that have been considered evangelical touchpoints since the 1970s. This sense of crisis has applied to youth since the late 19th century and throughout the 20th century. The "crisis" of youth, to borrow from Elkind (1984:3), has been the dominant approach to considering adolescence since Hall (1904). Elkind (1984:3) begins by examining the notion of "hurried" adolescence, wherein teenagers are expected to mature quickly and take on adult responsibilities prematurely. He argues that societal factors such as technology, media, and societal expectations have disrupted the natural progression of adolescent development, all components that are part of the cultural imagination regarding adolescent life. With the rise of social media and the constant exposure to adult themes, teenagers are often overwhelmed and struggle to find their place in the world.

The idea of crisis has been extended to the whole church as an industry in the U.S. has grown around trying to solve the problem of attrition in the American, particularly mainline, church. Youth are irrevocably tied to this decline. Responses from church leaders and members alike will often point to the lack of youth and the aging nature of congregations that we will see in the next chapter. A Hartford Seminary study on Faith Communities Today (2021) noted that while senior citizens (65 and over) make up only

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17% of the U.S. population, they make up 33% of the churches. Conversely, 18–24-year-olds make up 24% of the population but only 14% of the churches. It is impossible to divorce the experience of attrition from the youth population. They are indivisibly linked not only in the cultural posture toward blaming adolescent disinterest in church life, but the recognition that it is within the youth population that we begin to see a disconnecting from a local congregation. This suggests a correlation with our relationship to the emerging generation and congregational thriving.

The American church is in a crisis of attrition that tends to blame a culture that is shifting away from being "less religious" yet has demonstrated inability to invite emerging generations to participate in the development of theological wisdom. This research argues that it is this wisdom that allows the Christian faith to develop contextually and be relevant to modern times. This research identifies theological characteristics of churches who have been successful in their ministry with youth and considering these characteristics through a theological, sociological, and developmental lens. The intent of this research is to invite further conversation in the cultural imagination regarding adolescence, the adoption of that cultural imagination into our formation and catechesis, and a call for the church to lead the way into revolutionary change. The larger intent is to contribute to the field of practical theology by calling for a deeper consideration of adolescence in the role of prophet in the lens of Osmer (2008: 135-137). I believe that the considerations presented here are a call to do further theological reflection on the exclusion of adolescents from the theological and missional corpus and result in making room at the table again for youth.

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1.3 Motivation

I have outlined my personal narrative as a youth ministry practitioner above, but I offer two areas of motivation as a researcher that both involves my personal experience and my desire to consider that experience through the rigors of academic research. I offer my personal experience as introduction here in a different manner than above. The above was intended to illustrate the research problem while here the intent is to offer personal experience as a contributive text as well as what I hope to offer to the international corpus of literature in on the subject of congregational life and the ministry with youth.

1.3.1 My Personal Experience

This arc of this research began in a M.A. program at Drew University. At that point I have been youth ministry practitioner for over 20 years and was struggling with the questions that how, after a decade of excellence, innovation, and professionalism in the field of youth ministry (not to mention the innumerable resources available to the Christian church) that youth ministry as an industry was not contributing to the health and growth of American congregations. I suspended an MDiv program to study this question in depth. My research led me to the discovery that the accepted narrative of attrition was not applicable to the global church – or even applicable to the American church as a collective. Non-hegemonic American cultures were experiencing statistical stability or even growth (see chapter 2). This led me to the sobering revelation that there might be something wrong with the methodology behind the investment of my entire career. I committed to researching these questions, particularly a comparative look at

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what discoverable thru-lines might be identifiable. At the beginning of the research, I also believed that it was simply an issue of praxis; specifically, an intergenerational praxis where I began to focus my attention. However, my research led me to recognize that underneath the praxis is a theological framework that operates with a different premise in various contexts.

I bring to this research the breath of diversity of American Christianity and, where contributive, Christian expressions around the world. The personal experience that contributes to my interpretive lens began my journey as a youth in what would be described as Christian Fundamentalism then finishing my adolescent formation within the Evangelical and Pentecostal world. My continuing theological journey found further development and nurture within mainline and progressive Christianity both as a youth ministry practitioner and academic for over 30 years. I offer my theological journey to locate my lack of denominational agenda that may allow me a unique perspective. Being theologically located within a progressive and deconstructing (or what Guder (1998:50) might refer to as "disestablishing") places me in an intersection to observe multiple streams of Christian expression as a disinterested observer while still writing for the good of the whole Christian movement. Over those decades, I have had rich experiences with predominantly White/European style of worship as well as immersion within the African American tradition, Latin American tradition, and several years of service with a Chinese Christian congregation. What I have discovered is that the crisis of attrition is not homogenous across the expressions of the American church, nor is the theological and practical approach to adolescence or youth ministry. But the crisis has become pervasive, being particularly acute among the predominantly white mainline

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congregations. While the attempts to deconstruct and prescribe solutions for this crisis are legion, prescriptive suggestions often focus on the mechanics of ministry and, I believe, do not provide enough of an inquiry into the foundational beliefs and praxis that have laid the foundation for this crisis. It is my belief that the field of practical theology has much to offer this investigative process into the crisis facing the American mainline church and, in the process, inform the global church of our findings to give an appropriate lens in which to view their own praxis.

1.3.2 Contributing to the International Corpus of Literature

Having been a leader in the American church for over three decades, I have been highly motivated to offer contributive research to the crisis facing the American mainline church that goes beyond following the next trend. I have become convinced that the problem is deeply theological and not programmatic (cf. Nel 2018:19). Youth ministry has had many, what could be called, stylistic updates over the course of the last 100 years but, as stated above, limited theological inquiry regarding the nature of youth work and its role in the theological life of a local congregation. Nel (2018:21) brings the timeline into focus: "Theology and society have been calling for a radical change in the old paradigm of separating catechesis and Youth Ministry for over a century." Nel sees a partnership between theology and society and is sounding an alarm that there is something amiss in the church's approach to youth. This research will put a particular spotlight on the relationship between the development of adolescence in society and the exclusion of youth as theologically contributive. Nel (2018:21) objects to a praxis that is little more than an "authoritative transfer of knowledge to those who have not come of

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age yet." This research will suggest an opportunity for the church to no longer be dominated by the weight of attrition, but to lead a reformative and restorative effort on behalf of teenagers. This work will be echoing Nel's (2018:22; cf. Osmer 2008:135-137) call to view "youth as 'prophets' who confront and encounter their societal realities." Arzola (2008:30) suggests that a prophetic approach to youth ministry is based on an ideology of liberation, a subject we will return to in chapter 6. Youth are the reciprocal liberation ministry of the church as they hold space between the cultivated traditions of a community and a vision for what may be forward.

1.3.3 Contributing to the field of Practical Theology

Practical Theology is a vital discipline due to its nature as an interdisciplinary field that seeks to connect religious beliefs and traditions with lived experience, contextual ethical practices, and the discoveries of social science that inform how humans live and grow as communities. Osmer (2008:12-13) suggests in his first corollary of his central argument about the fourfold nature of practical theology is its applicability to all specialized subdisciplines of practical theology. This perspective agrees with Nel (2018:3ff) that youth ministry is demonstrably a discipline of practical theology, and not merely as an expression of Christian Education where it is most often placed. Applying the interpretive tool of practical theology to youth ministry is helpful due to the implications of the tasks of practical theology to the field of youth ministry. The multifaceted nature of practical theology aligns with the reality that it is not theory alone that shapes the lived experiences of individuals, including religions such as Christianity that claim revelation. As a youth ministry practitioner, across multiple generations and

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cultures, I have witnessed first-hand how humans and their beliefs are shaped by multiple streams of experiences and thought rather than a liner stream of static revelation. I have witnessed the challenge that emerging adults face when trying to reconcile the "handed down" theologies with their personal lived experience and the experience of their cohort. The dissonance often results in a dismissal of the incongruent philosophies, most often in favor of their personally developed philosophy. The time I have spent as an emerging practical theologian has allowed me to discover ways to integrate realities that have historically lived in a Cartesian dualism. This dualism has not only powerfully shaped the sense of self in the west (Mesle 2008:9) but force static concepts of truth that disallows the integration of the lived realities and knowledge of the young into our worldview as well as the shared wisdom of non-hegemonic cultures. Practical theology also comfortably co-exists with process-relational philosophers like Mesle (2008:10) who suggest that "learning to value diversity is one of the vital tasks we face if we are to live together in the modern world." Mesle is not simply talking about diversity of cultures or religious viewpoints, but of the integration of disciplines as well. While Process Theologians (see Cobb, Suchocki, Griffin) and Practical Theologians (see Nel, Osmer, Hess, Mercer) may differ greatly on the unchanging nature of God, the shared ground informs a more dynamic or fluid approach to our theological discourse and resulting praxis that requires a constant reflexivity rather than assuming an "arrival" of a way of thinking or living. The work is challenging to be sure, but a failure of coherence between disciplines or the challenges in finding intersections should not result in homogenous cohorts, but a continued commitment to forge a path of synergy. This research invites multiple applications to

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the research offered here even beyond the scope of ecclesiology or faith formation because that is the unexpected gift of practical theology.

For this work, multiple thought leaders and disciplines are engaged in collaboration. For this to be a theological study of course we must engage a theory of ecclesiology that reflects on the biblical record as well as the lived experiences of the human texts. A great deal of this work is built upon the work of Nel (2015, 2018) who offers not only a capable inclusive hermeneutic that gives us a renewed vision for youth work, but his work on identity-driven churches gives us a theoretical framework for how Christians can view themselves as the church. In addition, it is critical to a holistic understanding of the church in America must be the inclusion of the development of African American ecclesiology as a distinct and parallel theological framework that grew alongside, but often separately from hegemonic (white) theology. This engagement offers clues to a holistic perspective on this research. African American theology grew as a distinct theological framework developed on American soil. In many ways, a look at African American theological process allows for a short-term lab in how theology develops in a contextual way and forms around the challenges, needs, questions, and celebrations of a cultural cohort.

Beyond the scope of our theological framework, I include the historical perspective to allow us to see the formation of praxis within the American experience. This allows us to see how cultural changes, economic changes, philosophical and scientific changes, and even changes in media affect our theological framework and create the need for a response from theological practitioners and educators. Our streams will include both the developments in adolescent theory outside the church (as

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well as why the developed) and the subsequent development of youth ministry to demonstrate a synergistic effect on adolescents.

The work of social and developmental scientists are drawn upon to provide a picture of what is happening to and with the youth themselves. Our picture is incomplete without a clear understanding of adolescent experience. Though here I exercise restraint so as not to fall into the trap of attempting to create a homogenous adolescent experience. Inclusion of adolescent experience is presented as invitation for further contextual research.

I have also considered it important to include Freire's work to provide a philosophy of education that can be included in our theory of formation as well as to explore some work on organizational change to create a pathway to work on the needed ecclesiastical change. I believe these ingredients are critical to this research as we consider our pathway to restoring adolescents to the theological conversation of the church.

1.4 Identity Formation as the Critical point of Departure.

The field of Youth Ministry acts, I believe, as the perfect interpretive lens in which to ask the relevant questions necessary to diagnose the American Mainline church. Root (2020:23) suggests that "it is possible that youth ministry always shifts in response to moral transitions" which helps us both understand the moral imagination of the incoming generation, but also expose the values and fears of the generation who assumes the responsibility for bringing them into adulthood. Continuing Root's (2020:23) line of thinking, we may unpack the values of the people we serve by looking at how they

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address adolescence. He suggests that much of youth ministry reflects a perception of a "right way to live." This can be the perception of either the current generation or the generation trying to raise them. Either way, youth ministry gives us a lens by which to view the current cultural conversations that will be affecting the church in both the current time and in the near future. This gives further clarity to the use of "prophetic" in this research.

Viewing this through a practical theology lens, we can then make observations as to the interplay between the intention of the adolescent and their world vs. the adult world that seeks to address the raising of this emerging adult. A serious look at youth ministry praxis and the praxis of the wider world of the adolescent will begin to help us understand the theological reflections that both drive and inform youth ministry. Root and Bertrand (2023:219 cf. Nel 2000:7) offer a guide here:

> If practical theology, and Youth Ministry following in, is concerned with the theological activity of local communities of action, then Youth Ministry imbedded within practical theology is fundamentally about the articulation and association of two distinct forms of action (praxis): God's and humanity's.

Root's (2000) work on the future of Youth Ministry suggests that the challenge of modern youth work is the identification of this action in the discovery of the "good life." Root's (2000:18) inquiry has at its heart the question of God's action and "if youth ministry had always found itself in this pernicious place next to parents' and young peoples' vison of the good life". I would argue that this tension has always existed in what we consider to be modern youth ministry. If parents, and the greater world of older adult society, sees adolescents in an underdeveloped or immature state, then there will

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always be a dissonance in the developmental readiness of the emerging adult and the larger society restraining their contribution and participation. In the limited cultural scope of Root's (2020:31) work of American suburban life, that praxis is expressed in what he describes as the "slowdown".

> The highest moral good for parents in our time is to protect their children through oversight, helping prepare them for the competitive rat race of modern society, finding happiness with who they are in this fast-paced life.

It is vital that we engage this moral imagination and the accompanying praxis engaged by families seeking to thrive within this imagination with the secondary praxis of ministry that seeks to challenge this imagination.

1.4.1 Context as a Critical Contributor to Identity Formation

Bevans (2014:46) references his own "conversion" to contextual theology to a Sunday where he spoke of Christ as the "rising sun" only to be challenged by a man from India who referenced the sun as an "enemy" that you seek shelter from. This conversion relived him of his resistance to theologians such as Cone (*Black Theology, Black Power*) with the thought that there was not "black theology" but only theology. It was in that moment he recognizes that what he meant by "only theology" was the theology he was taught as a student in Rome (Bevans 2014:46). He recognizes that western approaches have gone beyond simply dissatisfying but have become "oppressive" and calls for a recognition that while the scriptures are normative for many Christian theologians, they are the record of a lived history and experience of the people of Israel and subsequent theological development has been in the context of the lived

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history and experiences of each theologian (Bevans 2014:47). The field of practical theology is rich with appropriate consideration of a multitude of contexts. African American (Andrews), Gender (Hoeft, Mercer), Womanist (Parker), and Asian American (Goto) reflections are readily available as are well reasoned considerations of practical theology within the fields of religious education (Hess). Therefore, a development of a practical theology of adolescence is a challenge to which this research will contribute.

1.5 The Youth Problem

For this discussion, I will employ Senter's (2010:96) use of the phrase "*the youth problem*" to identify the source concern for historical youth ministry improvisations that have addressed the liminal stage of adolescence. The cultural imagination, and subsequently ecclesial praxis, developed an image of youth as immature and in need of protection, control, and molding. The traits that contribute to identity formation as humans move from childhood to adulthood became something to cause alarm rather than something to nurture. The field of ethnography contributes to the understanding of what the youth problem might mean as well. The problems of youth are very different when considering the contextual lens of the community addressing the problem. The "slowdown" about which Root (2020:65) writes allows for an understanding of this liminal period of adolescence as not only temporally adjustable but highly influenced by the means and the parental desires of a particular adolescent cohort. For example, a *youth problem* for the subjects of Root's book might be getting into a good school, depression, substance abuse, or sexual issues but might not include education, food security, or civil rights. As a result, both effective praxis and associated theological

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reflection will vary based on context. Barnes and Wimberly (2018:30-31) suggest that Youth Ministry in the context of the African American community must go beyond religious instruction and be involved in the unique challenges of being a black teenager. This is not to suggest that being African American automatically means struggling with poverty or associated social ills, but there is a systemic oppression that is experienced by the black community that is unique to that community and must be considered in any youth ministry praxis that engages African American teens or churches. Andrews (2014: 12) contributes much to the intersection of practical theology and the African American experience when he states that: "By necessity, African American practical theology redresses oppression and supports engaging with constructive, pastoral, and prophetic approaches to theology." Black theology lives in the tension between the expectations of the hegemonic imagination and the communal experiences of being Black in America. Andrews (2014:13) suggests that the guiding question of African American practical theology must be: "In whose social interest does our practical theology function?"

Employing the above-mentioned caution, I believe we can apply the same thought to the adolescent world as we recognize the impact of the social constructed components of adolescence and recognize, to borrow Andrews' language above, a need to redress oppression that has been experienced by the adolescent community. In the context of youth ministry then, we must ask ourselves to what end does our faith formation praxis point, or who is served, or liberated, by our praxis? The answer to this question begins to inform the theological reflections held in the various contexts within the U.S. (as well as globally), and thus provides a vital framework for developing a praxis of youth work

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that becomes the *euangelion* that begins to reflect the *missio Dei*. If that mission to which the church is called involves the liberation of those in bondage, then youth ministry by its very nature must be liberative. More on this will be explored in the discussion of liberative education in chapter 6.

This research explores the landscape of African American praxis below, but the dialogue is introduced here to provide context to the problem we are addressing and the complexity of the question. Much can be said about a shrinking population of church attenders, yet statistically speaking, the crisis of attrition introduced in this chapter and explored in the next chapter has not been the reality for the Historic Black Church (HBC) throughout the 20th century and into the new millennium. This suggests that there is something in the praxis that exists within the HBC that is different in essence to the hegemonic mainline church. Any practical theology of American youth ministry must draw upon the theology and lived experience of more than just the hegemony. I do this with caution recognizing that I am socially located within the hegemony I am critiquing. However, as a work of practical theology, this research is further indebted to Crenshaw (1989) who developed the concept of intersectionality. According to Crenshaw (1989:139), intersectionality arose from the need to address the experiences of African American women who faced both racial and gender discrimination but were often overlooked or misunderstood by dominant feminist and antiracist frameworks. The concept highlights the importance of considering how different aspects of identity and social positioning intersect to shape individuals' experiences, opportunities, and access to resources. But it also serves to recognize that we are not a homogenous social category. Within all persons, and consequently each teen, are myriad identifiers and

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identity lies at the intersection. If the heart of Christian formation is the formation of identity and the subsequent contributive identity of each member to create a corporate identity of the local church, then we must take seriously the context and social realities of the people with whom we partner in ministry – this includes teenagers.

1.6 Methodology

As a practical theological guide to the framing of this thesis, this research will draw upon the work of Osmer (2008), as many have before, to provide a scaffolding to guide our investigation. Osmer (2008:4) describes the four "tasks" of practical theology thusly:

- The Descriptive-Empirical Task is the work of gathering information that helps us discern patterns and dynamics in particular episodes, situations, or contexts. This marked the first stage of this research. It was vital to not only deliver statistics on general church growth or attrition within the United States, but to do a deeper investigation into ethnographic considerations as well as the historical roots of youth ministry couched within the hegemonic imagination. Without a full picture of the landscape, the data is subject to cultural and theological bias, which this research suggests that it has.
- The Interpretive Task draws on theories of the arts and sciences to better understand and explain why these patterns and dynamics are occurring. For this work, the three texts of history (that will include interpretations of culture and childhood), missional theology, and adolescent theory will be engaged to provide interpreters to the descriptive-empirical task.

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- The Normative Task uses theological concepts to interpret particular episodes, situations, or contexts, constructing ethical norms to guide our responses, and learning from "good practice." Based on our understanding of an inclusive and missional approach, suggestion of the parameters of reform with be offered.
- The Pragmatic Task determines strategies of action that will influence situations in ways that are desirable and enter into a reflective conversation with the "talk back" emerging when they are enacted.

Also helpful is his simple questions:

- *What is going on?*
- *Why is it going on?*
- *What ought to be going on?*
- *How might we respond?*

These questions will not be used as a strict outline, but as guiding questions to illuminate the research into the question of generational attrition. This approach also honors Osmer (2008:11) who suggests that these tasks are not linear but more of a "spiral" that constantly inform one another during the inquiry. It is noted that Browning (1991:1-9) approaches the tasks as a triangle rather than a spiral – the base of practice that travels toward theoretical reflection but then returns to practice. Regardless of the shape that is used to perceive the work of practical theology, the process will be by no means linear – resulting in an established conclusion to guide faith formation practice in every context – but reflexive and contextual. As stated above, the research here is offered as anchor points for that reflexive work. The intent is to provide the contextual

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questions and theological reflections that provide value to praxis and then to allow contextual praxis to inform those reflections.

This chapter will provide a data-driven foundation by reflexive engagement with readily available longitudinal statistical research on church involvement coupled with statistical observation and analysis of the praxis of American churches across various cultural contexts. An exhaustive study that researches Christian involvement across cultures in the U.S. is beyond the scope of this research, but the sampling provided demonstrates a historical praxis that has had an impact on generational sustainability over time. Both the statistical and qualitative research will be compared with the responses of various American Christian expressions and denominations to attempt to correct the downward trend.

What is gained from this research is a deeper understanding of the relationship between praxis and theology as it is reflected in youth ministry. Engaging in this tension by exploring the hegemonic faith community and the HBC through empirical research will reveal how youth ministry in the United States has come to grow and where the American church – and by reflection, the global church – needs to continue to ask contextual questions and practice a posture of listening and adaptation. The research has suggested that the challenges facing the formation of emerging adults into the Christian faith do not lie in methodology or external distractions, but in the collective identity within the church as a missional entity that values the contributions of all. Additional clues will be found in the exploration of African American theology and practice and an honest critique of hegemonic presuppositions developed in the 20th century.

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1.7 Summary of the Chapters

Chapter 2 will situate the research within the present data surrounding attrition. This is not only intended to allow us to see the present location of the American church, but to erect borders to what we will be considering in this research. The lens of the project is adolescence, but the audience is the church. Accurately applied, this research will be considered as impacting congregational life and praxis though it will be addressing youth ministry specifically. The statistical data will be considered along with empirical data that gives all the data proper nuance. The empirical data will provide an opportunity to consider the effects of various denominational and cultural approaches to youth. Included in this chapter will be a reflection on the impact of contextual theology, specifically within the Historic Black Church (HBC) in the U.S. The purpose of considering practical theology associated with the ethnography is to draw us into recognizing the vital nature of reflexive theological inquiry and the importance of context.

Chapter 3 will invite us to consider how hegemonic practices developed in the U.S. regarding what is considered youth ministry. The inclusion of history is critical to the understanding of why western Christianity youth ministry praxis exists in its current form. This is where the foundational concept of the “youth problem” comes into play as the church is grappling with new ideas regarding the interpretation of adolescence within a unique cultural framework of white Americanism. Within the exploration of history, there comes the recognition that youth ministry in the United States did not only introduce a praxis, but shaped the theological conversations in the U.S. This will provide

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a lens to understand why the church developed the approaches to teenagers that later became normative. We will trace the development over the 20th century from denominational societies through present day deconstructionist movements after COVID-19 and the impact of race and social unrest on local youth ministry.

Chapter 4 is the theoretical chapter as ecclesiology is considered through a missional lens. Here I will betray my own theological stance as being missional and will demonstrate a great debt to Nel in the presentation of the missional nature of the church in relationship to adolescence. An understanding of the nature and purpose of the church is critical before we begin a serious development of a practical theology of adolescence. Ecclesiology informs what we do with data as it is discovered. This is the anchor point because the data can take us to diverse approaches, but a clear missional and inclusive ecclesiology will ensure that we are approaching the problem through the lens of the mission and purpose of the church. That purpose is to form a community that lives out the mission of God together. As a result, I will be arguing for a reformation to youth ministry in chapter 6 that reflects a missional mindset.

Chapter 5 offers one final critical piece to our formation of an inclusive missional identity by helping the church further understand the relationship of adolescent developmental theory to a missional identity-driven framework. In other words, adolescents and the church are in parallel process in which integration is mutually beneficial. To understand how adolescents form identity within a communal framework helps the church view itself in a developmental way. The impact of Covid-19 and the concept of Gen Z and above as digital natives will also be discussed.

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Chapter 6 will synthesize the research into the development of a practical theology of adolescence and invite the church to reform. A whole church praxis that reflects an inclusive missional framework will be suggested. Suggestions of how current praxis can be renegotiated considering this research will be discussed. Since implementation requires what Osmer (2008:177) refers to as "transformational leadership", lens of theorists who study paths of change will also be considered. This research will conclude that transformational change will not be located in the youth group, nor implemented by a small (or single member) leadership team. As Nel (2009:3) suggests about congregational change:

> The point of departure taken in finding missional identity is that this comes from the inside, it is intrinsic motivation, theologically informed, not made by leaders, however important leadership in the process might be.

It is also Nel's point of departure that becomes the tipping point in congregational change regarding ministry with youth. Decades of professional youth workers have come and go with varying results. It is not that they were not talented, personable, spiritual, or educated. These talented people worked in a sub-basement of congregational life and transformative change comes by full incorporation of youth into the life of the whole church. There will be a call to leadership to provide the guidance needed for a reconsideration of the role of youth in the church and society, but the motivation must come from the congregation to be sustainable.

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2 The State of Mainline Youth Ministry in the U.S.

As mentioned in chapter 1, this research is a mixed methodological approach that puts four distinct "texts" in conversation with one another. This is to seek an answer to the question of generational attrition in the U.S. mainline church. In light of this research's following of Osmer's tasks as a chronological guide, it is valuable to begin with the state of the American church. It was also with intention to provide the empirical research in this chapter in order to provide a more complete picture of the state of the American church. This provides valuable orientation to the tasks ahead. The statistical give us a mathematical image of American religious attitudes, but the ethnographic and the empirical provide a necessary commentary to provide the clearest picture of this image. This chapter is designed to provide a snapshot of the state of American Christianity that is by no means comprehensive nor accounts for all of the nuances of context. American Christianity is not monolithic. The diversity of American expression provides a laboratory to consider the cultural, contextual, and theological implications of ecclesial expression. When the U.S. is taken as a monolith, there is one emerging picture of ecclesial decline that has been used as an alarm bell for a crisis in American Christianity. However, this study suggests that there is a different way to consider the data that not only paints a more accurate picture of American Christianity but provides clues toward a path of reformation.

2.1 Statistical Research on American Religion

By way of clarification, this research focuses on the American expression of Christianity known as "mainline." This term not only denotes specific denominations

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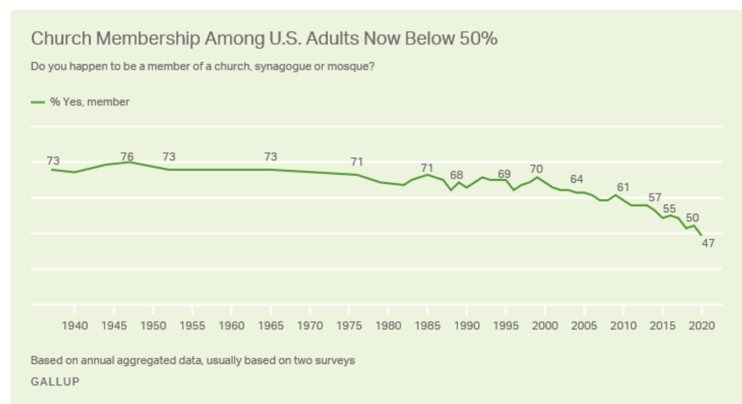
such as the United Methodist Church, Episcopal Church, or the Presbyterian (U.S.A.) denomination, but churches that would identify with the culture and theology of a mainline congregation. This includes the community churches affiliated with the International Council of Community churches featured in the empirical study. This study acknowledges the large representation of evangelicalism in the American Christian landscape and recognizes the impact of evangelicalism on the development of youth ministry in the U.S. With this acknowledgement, this study has chosen to focus on mainline congregations. It is the historical nature of the mainline church that is considered helpful for this study. That being said, the author acknowledges the symbiotic nature of the youth ministry movement and the rise of evangelicalism in the United States. While evangelicalism itself is not new, many evangelical expressions (churches) are only a generation or two old. This study desired to interview churches that were historically rooted within their communities to understand the effects of youth ministry praxis in a denominational setting.

2.1.1 Mainline Church Statistics

In 2020, prior to the pandemic, membership in a church, synagogue, or mosque fell below 50% for the first time since the Gallup organization began surveying in 1937 (Jones



2021). In the early 20th century, the percentage of Americans who belonged to a major

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religious organization was 73%. Gallup's research suggests that this is primarily a function of the increasing number of Americans who express no religious preference whatsoever. Americans who do not affiliate with a particular religion has grown 21% over the last three years, accounting for just under half of the institutional decline. The rest can be attributed to the lack of formal commitment to a particular religious institution (church, synagogue, mosque) even if they affiliate with that religion. This is most starkly seen in the percentage of identification with an established faith expression among millennials (36%) vs. traditionalists, our oldest living generation (66%). This trend is expected to continue as reliable statistics become available for Generation Z (Jones 2021)

2.1.2 Recognizing the effects of COVID-19.

It should be noted here that the Gallup research, and the corresponding start of this research, began prior to the lockdowns and peripheral effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Research is still being completed toward what the effects of the pandemic will have on the mainline protestant church, but early empirical observation demonstrates a negative impact in youth and families, but not in the religious attitudes of Americans. Many churches are expressing concern that they have experienced an irrecoverable loss due to the loss of attendance. Its notation here is to acknowledge that the mainline church in the United States was already on a critical downward trajectory prior to the global crisis of COVID-19, though it is an oft-cited reason for congregational malaise. However, we also cannot discount the impact that COVID-19 and forced lockdowns have had on church life and it is worth mentioning here.

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The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on all aspects of society, including religious institutions. Churches, not only as places of worship, but as providers of community, were deeply affected because the normal categories employed to meet congregational or faith needs were no longer available.

Of course, one of the most noticeable effects of the pandemic on churches has been the disruption of traditional worship practices. Most churches suspended in-person services and quickly transitioned to virtual platforms (Baker 2020:2205). This shift to online services, though necessary, significantly altered the communal experience of worship and changed how church members viewed worship and other practices, such as youth ministry, that had relied on in-person activity.

The pandemic has accelerated the adoption of technology within churches. Many congregations embraced digital platforms to connect with their members and engage in online worship experiences (Baker 2020:2210). This technological adaptation has widened the reach of churches, enabling individuals who may have been unable to attend in-person services to participate remotely. However, it has also highlighted the digital divide and the challenges faced by those without access to technology or who have resisted digital connections. This provided intergenerational opportunities of which many churches have taken advantage. The challenges of transitioning to an online environment and creating authentic community is the realm of the emerging generation and they had a great deal to contribute.

But it is also important to note that the pandemic had a significant impact on adolescents who were in the middle of a season of identity formation. The loss of

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familiar avenues of formation (school, church, friends, older family members, etc.) provided notable disruption.

One of the most significant effects of COVID-19 on teenagers has been the disruption of normative educational practices. School closures and the transition to remote learning have posed challenges in terms of academic progress, access to resources, and social interaction (Loades, Chatburn, Higson-Sweeney, Reynolds, Shafran, Bridgen, Linney, McManus, Borwick, & Crawley 2020:1218). The digital divide and unequal access to technology have further exacerbated educational inequalities, disproportionately impacting vulnerable students.

The pandemic has taken a toll on teenagers' mental health. Lee (2020:421) suggested that social isolation, uncertainty, and the loss of social support systems have contributed to increased levels of anxiety, depression, and stress. The disruption of daily routines, limited physical activities, and concerns about the future have further compounded these challenges and we have seen an increased provision of targeted mental health support for teenagers.

But of course, the starkest affect is the social life of adolescence. Teenagers rely on their social connections and peer relationships for support, identity development, and emotional well-being. COVID-19 restrictions, including physical distancing measures and limited social interactions, have significantly disrupted these crucial aspects of teenage life (Dumas,

Roughly four-in-ten Americans have participated in religious services, either virtually or in person, throughout most of the pandemic

Among all U.S. adults, % who in the last month ...

	NET Participated in religious services in some way	Attended in person and online or on TV	Only attended in person	Only watched online or TV	NET Did not attend in person or watch online or on TV
Nov 2022	40%	12%	16%	12%	60%
Mar 2022	43	14	13	16	57
Sept 2021	42	12	14	16	58
Mar 2021	41	10	7	23	59
July 2020	41	9	4	27	59

Note: Figures may not add to 100% or to subtotals due to rounding. Estimates for March 2021 and July 2020 based on respondents who participated in both surveys.
Source: Survey conducted Nov. 16-27, 2022, among U.S. adults.
"How the Pandemic Has Affected Attendance at U.S. Religious Services"
PEW RESEARCH CENTER

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Ellis, & Litt, 2020:257). Adolescents may experience feelings of loneliness, disconnection, and a lack of belongingness, which can have long-lasting effects on their social and emotional development. We will not fully know the affects in this short time after the pandemic, but the thru line in these conversations remains the experience of belonging and inclusion that is vital to adolescent development. The COVID-19 pandemic revealed significant deficits in ecclesial life when it comes to providing a nurturing identity forming experience among adolescents.

Using data from five surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center, we see a new patterns of in-person and virtual participation in religious services. The findings reveal a slight decline in in-person attendance, while virtual engagement has experienced significant fluctuations. Despite the challenges posed by the pandemic, the overall share of U.S. adults participating in religious services has remained relatively steady, albeit with notable shifts in how they participate. I include this data to offset a common articulated outside circumstance of the pandemic to account for attrition numbers. If anything, there has been an expanded opportunity to engage in Christian worship using digital means.

However, this does not give a clear picture of trends because it only accounts for overall church involvement and is not a predictor of coming trends. To shed light on these implications, a comprehensive study was undertaken by researchers from the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) and the University of Chicago (Witt-Swanson, 2023). The study sought to assess the pandemic's influence on church attendance on emerging adults and adults of particular political persuasions. The research aimed to identify whether the pandemic merely accelerated pre-existing trends in religious

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change or if it brought about unique impacts on attendance patterns. The study recognizes the concerns that arose about the future of the church as an institution, especially given the already present trends of declining church attendance before the pandemic. The question facing the researchers was whether the COVID-19 crisis further exacerbated these challenges or create something new. The study relied on data collected through the 2022 American Religious Benchmark Survey, which featured responses from 9,425 Americans collected between February and April 2022. The survey focused on individuals who had previously registered their religious affiliations and church attendance patterns in a survey conducted between 2018 and March 2020, allowing for a comparative analysis before and after the pandemic. For this study, the most significant and noteworthy findings was the unique impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the attendance patterns of emerging adults. Though general statistics remained generally static, those 18 to 29 experienced a major shift in their religious engagement, reflecting the pandemic's distinctive influence on youth. The original impetus of this study, began pre-pandemic, was the declining religious affiliation and participation of youth. According to the data, the pandemic accelerated this trend, leading to a significant decrease in their church attendance. According to the study, 42% of young adults reported changes in their church attendance following the pandemic, reflecting a higher degree of variability compared to other age groups.

This decline in church attendance among young adults can be attributed to several factors. Firstly, the pandemic disrupted their routines and social interactions, leading to a sense of disconnection many regular institutional norms including traditional church life and youth groups. The closure of physical places of worship and the shift to virtual

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platforms may have been a great assist to middle and older adults but they have not resonated as strongly with adolescents and other young adults, who often value communal and experiential aspects church life.

Secondly, the pandemic coincided with an era of increased religious disaffiliation and growing secularization trends among young Americans, often named as "deconstruction" where it is finding life on social media platforms such as TikTok. The study's findings align with previous research that had already highlighted the weakening of religious ties among young adults before the pandemic. The isolation and uncertainties brought about by COVID-19 did not cause this disconnection or deconstruction but simply reinforced this disengagement from religious institutions.

The study also revealed something that seemed incongruent to many observers. There was a tacit assumption that teens would easily translate to digital religious experiences due to them being known for their adaptability and comfort with digital technology. While virtual church services provided an alternative for worship during the pandemic, some young adults may have opted for other digital or non-religious pursuits during their free time. Ironically, this shift towards digital spaces may have contributed to their decreased attendance at physical religious services.

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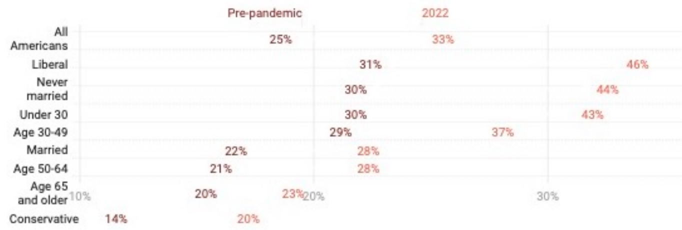
It is notable that the study revealed that young adults were more likely to attend religious services less frequently after the pandemic than to increase their attendance. This suggests that the pandemic's impact on emerging adult's religious practices will have a lasting effect, resulting in a permanent reassessment of the role of traditional religious institutions in their lives.



The hope this research finds is that leaders and communities may benefit from understanding the underlying reasons for the disengagement among youth. By acknowledging the challenges, there may be motivation to rethink ecclesial practices. As the post-pandemic era unfolds and the church to adapt, the church must respond to these shifts with adaptability and creativity, seeking to address the specific needs and aspirations of youth. I believe this begins with a return to the theological root of our mission and purpose and how those relate to the emerging cultural cohorts within our parish and in the community in which our parishes sit.

2.1.3 Denominational approaches to addressing the crisis.

Of course, a question that the research suggests considering these statistics is what strategies are being employed to address the present crisis? Since the identification of adolescence as a social construct that needed to be relevantly addressed, denominations have poured resources into trying to understand the uniqueness of the

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adolescent experience, the developmental science driving adolescence, and the creation of programming and resources to draw this age-group into congregational life. Chapter 3 will outline in more detail how churches in the United States recognized and created strategies surrounding the engagement and formation of Christian youth. In that chapter, it is suggested that the American church, starting in the late 19th century but predominantly developing throughout the 20th century, began to create specialized ministry to adolescents developed around fears of a changing society experiencing urbanization and immigration. What we consider "youth ministry" or "youth work" in the vernacular of ecclesial praxis of the last century is here identified as a segregated work of a local Christian community that seeks to engage the adolescent population of a church or community, beginning in the mid 19th century and continuing into the 21st, reflecting the dominance of the age/stage model with a focus on crisis conversion and subsequent education (discipleship). The earliest efforts were more in line with the Sunday School movement, which served predominantly as an educational vehicle to the vast numbers of immigrant and poor that crowded U.S. cities and were mostly dormant on Sunday when the factories were closed (Watson 1862:19). Modern youth ministry is most clearly traced to the work of Francis Edward Clark and the Society for Christian Endeavor (Senter 2010:76). The success of Christian Endeavor became both a motivation and model for denominations who were fearful of the growing cohort of urbanized young people (Senter 2010:58-59,154). By the turn of the 20th century, mainline denominations had their own societies or "leagues" such as the Methodist Epworth League and the Luther League (Senter 2010:170). The efforts of these leagues were often quite successful in their goal of increased involvement of the young in church

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life, setting a template in a ministry praxis that quickly became a non-negotiable for the 20th century church. The societies eventually fell to a more localized style of ministry with churches having their own youth ministries and denominational offices providing resources and training, many of which continue to this day. Support offices for most major mainline denominations in the U.S. were identifiable.

The Episcopal Church offers a youth ministry support department (https://www.episcopalchurch.org/ministries/youth-ministries/) as does the United Methodist Church (https://www.umcyoungpeople.org). The United Church of Christ's youth page contains a single paragraph of support for youth and a printing of 1 Timothy 4:12 (https://www.umcyoungpeople.org). The Presbyterian Church U.S.A. stands out as the only major U.S. denomination whose office seems to be supporting lifelong and intergenerational faith formation (https://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/theology-formation-and-evangelism/office-of-christian-formation/).

Most resources designed with emerging adults in mind come from publishing houses and para-church ministries, committed to a youth group model. The resources are vast and ever-developing, but except for the Presbyterian Mission Faith Formation office, the template of age-focused ministry has not been renegotiated as is the call of this research. Statistics demonstrate a considerable attrition, yet denominational offerings are designed for a style of ministry that this research argues is not effective through an ecclesiological lens. This is why an expanded view of the statistics is required here. Drawing in ethnography and empirical research will begin to lay a foundation for a more nuanced consideration of ministry with adolescents.

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2.1.4 Identifying Ethnographic issues related to statistics.

This research has adopted an admittedly complex approach for developing a practical theology of youth ministry, considering multiple streams of thought as it applies to our consideration of a ministry with adolescents and within adolescence as a theory. However, it is within that complexity that we develop the dialogical posture that effective ministry requires. Scanlan's (2021:31) definition of ecclesiology provides a framework for this discussion:

> Ecclesiology, it has been said, is primarily a response from the Church as to what it is to be the Church in light of the key questions and challenges of the place and time in history in which the people of God find themselves.

His invitation to develop a *phronesis*, or practical wisdom, requires a consideration of youth and youth theologies as vital to the development of the ongoing conversation about the Church in mission in our time (Scanlan 2021:32). This invitation, for the context of this research, also extends an invitation to consider non-hegemonic youth ministry praxis and theologies to form phronesis. I will be using the term ethnographic to describe a posture for qualitative research as we consider specifically the lens of the African American experience and the HBC. Scanlan (2021:34) provides the framework for this research's use of ethnographic. He describes it as a "mode of looking" that aims to bring ways of understating into awareness, making them explicit and public, and building a credible argument that what one has learned should be believed by others. There is a great deal of caution when bringing this element of research to contribute to the overall work. It is similar to an anthropologist travelling to an unknown tribe and

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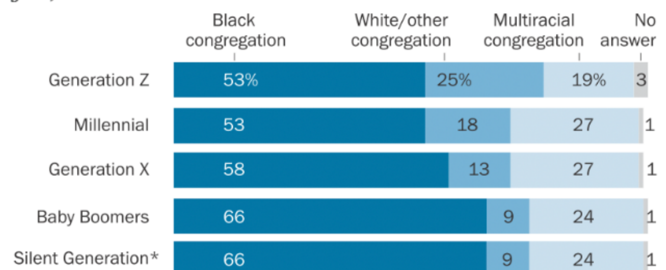
attempting to interpret the nuances and practices of that tribe as a conclusive and comprehensive description of that people group. My approach is a more collaborative exercise that allows the literature and empirical data to speak in dialogue with the rest of the research, or what Scanlan (2012:34) describes as a "dialogical ethos." This dialogical ethos both informs the research and provides a developing template in our development of an ecclesiology that is not intent on communicating a static truth to waiting learners, but one that invites contextual collaboration. In reflection with Burawoy (1991:271), I am employing ethnography not as a thesis on African American theology or the African American experience but utilizing the dialogue to advance a theory of collaborative ecclesiological development.

As mentioned above, until the 2000's when the millennial generation and the faith life trends began to be statistically realized, there was little change in the faith life of the HBC. However, a Pew Research Center survey released in February of 2021, indicates that the trends affecting the predominantly white, mainline church are also visible in the HBC (Pew 2021). Generational patterns of belonging to a predominantly black church began to change in 1998, values instead trending toward openness or even desire to affiliate with a mixed-race congregation or mostly white congregation (Pew 2021:9). This is much different than the visible trends of generations before who might have attended some mixed-race

Younger Black adults less likely to attend predominantly Black congregations

Among Black Americans who attend religious services at least a few times a year, % who attend a ...



*This includes a very small number of those in the Greatest Generation (born before 1928).
Note: Figures may not add to 100% due to rounding.
Source: Survey conducted Nov. 19, 2019-June 3, 2020, among U.S. adults.
"Faith Among Black Americans"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

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congregations, but not ones that were predominately white. Only 9% of the “Silent” and “Baby Boomer” generations would have attended a white congregation, yet “Generation Z” attends these congregations at a rate of 25%.

If correlating statistics are presenting themselves among Christians now sharing similar theological reflections and faith formation praxis, then we must look at identifiers that have changed since the millennial generation began to be statistically significant. When researching major African American denominational resources, it becomes clear that there is a different approach and a different understanding of youth ministry than is found in their hegemonic counterparts. Examples include the African Methodist Episcopal Church’s emphasis on leadership training and young adult councils (https://ameced.com) and the Church of God in Christ’s Youth Ministry department that is designed around preparing youth for Christian and societal leadership. (https://www.cogic.org/iyd/about/). Included in this research is the understanding that in any discussion of ministry in the United States, we must contextualize the conversation through the lens of culture and location. It is false to understand the United States as monocultural or even a blended culture, though there were attempts at this throughout the 20th century and into the 21st as we will reflect upon throughout this work. The exclusion of African Americans or Latin-Americans from the participation in hegemonic (white) American culture and opportunity has allowed us to view the faith formation practices of these cultures to identify similarities or differences in not only the praxis, but how that praxis has affected longevity. As Powe (2012:xii) points out, most African American congregations until recently have been immune to ongoing cultural shifts because the black church has historically been the epicenter of the African American

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community. The question for this research is what factors have allowed for the HBC to remain statistically unchanged while the hegemonic mainline church began a downward trajectory of attrition since the 1960s? In addition, understanding what has changed with millennials and the state of the black church should also prove to be informative. Powe (2012:2) runs his work through the lens of Strauss and Howe's (1991) work on *Generations* and notes that the wide cross-section of Strauss and Howe's research does not consider the uniqueness of the African American experience. The example Powe (2012:22) uses is how the changes to the racial landscape after the civil rights movement affected the "*Intergrationist*" Generation (Generation X in hegemonic culture). Battles over bussing or neighborhood integration not only affected the physical landscape of the post-civil rights generation but affected the communal nature of communities in which millennials were born. I recall being a high school student in the American Midwest in the late 1980's and experienced desegregation of my high school firsthand. What is shocking to me upon reflection is the attempt to integrate communities by removing adolescence from their communities instead of seeking to improve educational conditions in their home neighborhood. What was not considered is that these communities of color were created when white people moved to the suburbs in what is known as White Flight – leaving urban areas as economic wastelands with little opportunity. Systems of racial segregation had successfully kept African American people trapped in "hoods" and, unsurprisingly, the attempt at desegregating schools failed. However, the next generation turned their eye back to the city for cheap housing and the opportunity to create businesses that would appeal to the young. Gentrification and development have contributed to a new diaspora of traditional African American

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spaces, fragmenting communal ties. This is having ramifications for the once not affected Black Church. Mitchell (2018:19) engages Powe (2012) by suggesting that the traditional structures and practices that the Black Church depended on are not anchor points for this generation and that there is a need to "find spaces outside the church to find sanctuary…" This loss of the Black Church as the epicenter of African American life does not diminish the need for community or suggest a completion of the struggle for civil rights or the mission of the church, but it does suggest that for the first time the HBC is having to rethink ministry structures in light of newly emerging crisis of attrition.

Music and culture flowing from the millennial and emerging generations does not suggest a loss of spirituality but an openness to non-traditional means of making space where traditional structures have failed. As is notable in the younger adult generations of Millennials and Gen Z across cultural lines, there remains a hunger and appreciation for the spiritual life. Springtide Research Institute (2020:37) in 2020 showed that 71% of American teens across all ethnicities considered themselves at least slightly religious, yet the same research shows that only 44% believe that attending religious services are important. The trend can also be seen in civil rights activism, historically a realm of the black church but largely absent from the Black Lives Matter movement that has been driven by young people since the slaying of Michael Brown in Ferguson, MO in August of 2014 and has continued through the murder of George Floyd, Freddie Gray, Brianna Taylor, and long list of many other African Americans who fell victim to police violence. The notable absence of the church from this movement of young African Americans is noted by Allana Haynes (2020) of the Baltimore Sun in an article for Religion Unplugged:

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Two salient facts mark Black Lives Matter as a departure from past social justice movements: it is not attached to any particular religious institution or organized religion, and it adheres to a tactic of anonymity, with no defined leadership. Unlike the civil rights movements of the past, which were spearheaded by ministers and church members in the historically black church, when it comes to Black Lives Matter, it seems the church has been relegated to the back seat.

Does this suggest a distancing of youth from the church or a distancing of the church from a youth movement? Haynes (2020) suggests a parallel to the lack of involvement of churches in the Black Lives Matter movement and Cone's consideration of the "black power" movement of the 1960's, also a largely youth driven movement. These movements did not embrace the non-violent approach and had different perspectives on morality than the church members making up the civil rights movement and as a result the church did not affiliate with their cause. However, Cone (1997:111) saw the disaffiliation in the black power movement as a mistake as he suggested that it was…

> …time for the Church to be relevant by joining Christ in the black revolution. Unless the black church is prepared to respond to Christ's command of obedience by becoming one with the unwanted, then it, like its white counterpart, is useless as a vehicle for divine reconciliation.

His redemptive perspective was that the church must "take seriously the reality of black people - their life of suffering and humiliation" (Cone 1997:117). However, we are seeing a disaffiliation with the new generation and their call to action in regard to black suffering.

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Haynes (2020) interviewed Dr. Mable Elliott, pastor of God's Touch Healing Ministry Church in Harlem, NY, who suggests that it was the leadership of the church that made the civil rights movement successful because the church practiced a faith driven form of identity formation vital to emerging adults:

Back then, it was solid. Everyone in the household went to church. Kids did not have a right when it came to that. It made them know and love themselves even more because they knew who they were. You can fight better when you know who you are. Without the church, there is nothing. Black lives do matter. Life matters. Knowing God matters.

Elliott's observation suggests a correlation between the lack of support for the call of youth in the era of Black Lives Matter and the disassociation of the young with the institutional church which can lend a clue to the overall disassociation with the church increasingly evident with modern generations. It is notable that statistical shifts affecting the HBC run parallel with the fragmenting of black communities and the dissociation of the church with the values and movements of the millennial and post-pandemic generations. Mitchell (2018:71) cites the lack of acceptance of the LGBTQIA+ community as one issue along with a lack of cultural and community engagement (particularly the BLM movement), Ageism (in this case, treating Millennials as children though they are in their late 20s and 30s), that has influenced involvement with the HBC and has moved the Millennial generation away. But Mitchell (2018:9) also suggests that the church has had a hard time adapting "how we worship, how we reach out to others with the gospel – or those whom we need to reach out to who are not part of the Body…" These issues and other clues drawn from the praxis of the HBC in America will

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lend valuable insight in addressing the questions facing the entire American church as every church feels the attrition of emerging generations.

2.2 Qualitative Research on American Churches

As a valuable text to include as a collaborator to the theoretical study, a small sample of mainline American churches were engaged in a statistical study. The intent of the research sample was to see how youth workers understood the tasks and roles of youth ministry within their churches and establish correlation between the hypothesis of the theory and what is happening in real time. I wanted to discover how or if teenagers were included in the life of the congregation and how or if teenagers were connected with the church's overall sense of mission. While the study is a small group of seven mainline churches, they represent a cross section of American ecclesial life and represent different cultures and different contexts to have a lens to consider the impact of historical praxis. My second intent in these interviews was to gauge the effect of the practice of youth ministry over time. The only criteria for inclusion in the study was that the church had to have a current youth praxis or had one in the past. There were no borders set on what was meant by youth ministry. Their interpretation of youth ministry was critical to the sample.

2.2.1 Methodology: Qualitative Research Design

The research methodology employed in this qualitative study involved interviews with seven mainline churches that were randomly selected by colleagues from various mainline denominations that would also provide a diversity in ethnic expressions. The

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purpose was to gain a comprehensive understanding of the churches' characteristics, practices, and challenges, exploring potential correlations across diverse religious and cultural backgrounds. The intent was to discover valuable insights into the commonalities and differences that exist within these religious communities when it comes to their youth ministry praxis. The assumption was not that this would be exhaustive or inarguable, but to provide a snapshot of ministry that would be illustrative. The following is an overview of the research design, population, data collection instruments, and data analysis techniques.

In considering various qualitative research techniques, this research chose to look at a few "case study" churches that had historical experiences with youth. The number of churches chosen is intentionally small. This is to provide a comparative sample that the with a more nuanced data set that considered the unique context of each church. This nuance could be lost in a larger sample set unless a much larger team was employed in the interview process. Since I could not follow this group of churches over an extended period to analyze the development of certain outcomes based on their exposure to specific risk factors or interventions, I chose to formulate questions that could identify their historic exposures and practices. The selection of these churches was left to colleagues to ensure the purity of the selection, but with the caveat that selected churches had practiced some form of youth ministry for multiple generations even if that youth ministry is no longer active. Churches were asked to consider their practice over the years and provide competent interviewees who could speak across generations. The interviewees needed to be informed of or had experienced past and present youth ministry. None knew the intent of the study beyond it being a study on youth ministry.

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The design was chosen to collect data through a historical lens, the goal being the identification of certain characteristics of historical practice that may give clues as to the sustainability of a youth ministry. With the representation in interviews, I was able often to have data spanning at least three generations.

By placing this data alongside the other "texts" included in this research, the qualitative study provides a valuable illustration of the data and theory provided within this thesis.

2.2.2 The Qualitative Study Timeline:

1. Selection of Participants: The first step in the study was the selection of a well-defined group of individuals who do not have the outcome of interest at the study's outset. For this study, a general call was put out to colleagues who are denominational or organizational leaders. They were asked to refer churches who had been in existence for more than three generations so that we had long-term data to work with. Referrals included churches from the International Council of Community Churches, Drew Theological School, Lifelong Faith Associates, and the United Church of Christ. The intent was to create as pure a sample as possible without the "stacking of the deck" in terms of research sample. The colleagues involved in the selection process did not know the assumptions of the research question. They only had the criteria stated above with a request for a diversity in the selection process.
2. Baseline Data Collection: The baseline data collected comprised the length of time churches have been in existence, median age range as well as age span,

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size of the worshipping congregation, as well as the predominantly ethnicity within the cohort. This data forms the basis for comparisons and analyses throughout the study. I wanted to see if there were any correlations between the theological assumptions and practices of particular ethnic groups based on what we have learned about theological foundations. Clearly, this did not have the intent of providing a comprehensive set homogenous assumptions regarding baseline theological beliefs, but to provide clues of potential correlations.

3. Interviews: Once churches were selected and the appropriate consent forms collected, interviews were collected and recorded over Zoom. Churches were again reminded that the interviews were being recorded and that no one should feel compelled to participate. They were reminded that it was for an academic study and that all answers and participants would be held anonymous. The interview design was intentionally closed to ensure consistent data collection. Below are the closed questions that each church was asked.

Interview Questions

1. In what ways do youth experience a sense of belonging/inclusion in your church?
2. What are the ways this church passes on faith from generation to generation?
3. What role does the family play in formation?
4. In what roles do adolescents participate in your church community?

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5. What would you say are the three most important needs of young people in your community in order of importance?
6. Have you seen your population of own young people grow, shrink, or stay basically the same over the last couple of generations?
7. In what ways are your young people involved in outreach into your community/in the world.

Some of the terminology was left somewhat intentionally vague in order to also understand how people use terms like “belonging”, “inclusion”, “participate”, or “outreach.” A more specific definition of inclusion and belonging will be developed in the theoretical chapter below. How respondents understood these terms becomes more evident in the answers to the questions.

4. Outcome Assessment: Once the interviews were completed, Zoom provided a transcript of the interviews. ATLASti was used as the software tool to crawl the data and tag the answers for analysis. I employed a research assistant to help me navigate the software and to provide an unbiased researcher to keep the data analysis pure. The research assistant knew the research question, but they did not carry the same assumptions regarding expected findings. Once the research assistant had poured through the transcripts adding tags, answers could be grouped into characteristics that emerged from the answers.
5. Data Analysis: Once this work was completed, this researcher analyzed the data collected to assess the relationship between praxis and the development of the

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outcomes. Network groups were employed to determine the strength of associations, potential confounding factors, and any causal links.

2.2.3 Identified benefits of this approach:

1. Historical Perspective: This design offered a long-term perspective, allowing this researcher to study the natural progression of ministry praxis and understand how theology and context influenced outcomes over time.
2. Causality Assessment: This approach was designed to identify clues to causality. The questions chosen and churches that participated allowed the researcher to identify relationships between praxis and outcomes. By considering praxis along with the outcome, research can infer a causal link, provided that other sources of bias are appropriately addressed.

2.2.4 Profiles of the Churches Interviewed

Below is a summary of the interviews as well as the discoveries of the analysis. To protect privacy, churches are only identified with letters of the alphabet along with geographic and demographic details. All interviews were conducted on Zoom and the churches answered all of the questions. The choice of providing a summary below is to provide a snapshot of each church before offering an analysis of the results below their profiles. The research provided some strong categorial discoveries that will guide the research through the theoretical conversation and end up in valuable dialogue with one another.

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2.2.4.1 Church A

Church A was founded in 1853 outside of Kansas City, MO and has no denominational affiliations. The average age of the congregation ranges from late 30s to 97, with a median age of 65 to 70. They estimate 50-60 in attendance each week. However, since COVID-19, about half of the congregation has not returned to in-person worship. The church has a predominantly White ethnic makeup and is located in the suburbs of Kansas City. There were two representatives of the church in the interview, the male pastor and a female board member, both Caucasian and both in their 80's.

In terms of youth involvement and sense of belonging, the church used to engage youth through community activities, but currently lacks youth participation. They blame COVID-19 as a factor for the lack of families involved in church. Youth ministry as well as children's work existed separately from congregational life, though children were involved as acolytes from time to time.

The church passes their faith values from generation to generation through active involvement in financial support of mission work and financial support of local and international charities. The church cited this involvement as demonstrating what it means to be a Christian. When asked if families play a role in formation, they answered that grandparents were involved by bringing their children and grandchildren to church when they visit.

There is no regular involvement of adolescents in specific roles within the church, although they mention a 30-year-old serving on the church council.

The church also supports special needs students in the community by providing food and engaging them in yard work and cleaning at the church. Additionally, the church

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offers scholarships to college students, many of whom have an association with the church.

When asked what they consider the three most important needs of young people in the community in order of importance, they offered acceptance, understanding, and listening.

The interviewees believe that the primary need of youth is Christian education, teaching about Jesus Christ. They also emphasize the importance of being examples and providing mentorship. Additionally, they mention the need for young people to have fellowship with others who have a Christian background.

The interviewees mention that the population of young people in church has been decreasing over the years, possibly due to competition between sports and church activities. They also express a desire for young people to be involved in outreach, such as mission trips, but currently do not have the numbers to support this.

Church A concludes by highlighting the importance of making church engaging and interactive for young people through activities like community events.

2.2.4.2 Church B

Church B was founded in 1640 and is located in Connecticut. The church is predominantly white, and the ministry praxis is a youth group model. The median age is 45 with an age range of infancy through the 90s. Youth group is described as very inclusive and welcoming to all teens in the community. There was only one interviewee from this church, the youth minister who is a Caucasian woman in mid-life. She has been in the job over multiple generations, yet her professional position does require me

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to acknowledge potential bias in some of the answers. The interviewer made every effort to allow the data to present itself honestly and found the potential bias to provide a nuanced look at the ministry.

The church has made an effort to connect the younger generation with the congregation, but the sense of belonging is primarily felt within the youth group. This awareness came after the respondent spoke of a sense of belonging and the interviewer followed up with an inquiry toward where teens found belonging. The church year includes intergenerational events to connect generations and also includes children and teenagers in worship services. Adolescents are given opportunities to participate in various aspects of church life, including music, readings, ushering, and artwork.

The role of the family is seen as crucial in the formation of faith in young people, with active involvement from parents making a significant impact.

Church B identified the three most important needs of young people are community, positivity, and belonging/love.

The population of young people in the church has shrunk compared to previous generations, however the youth group is still quite large at around 70.

In terms of outreach, the youth group is involved in various service projects and mission trips, and they also participate in outreach initiatives within the local community. The youngest Sunday school kids draw and color place mats for the local community dining room, while the older children make peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for the same cause. Teenagers volunteer to cook and serve at the community dining room. Additionally, the church sponsors two children from India and the kids write letters and

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send money to support them. The church also organizes a mission trip every year, typically to Appalachia, where they help repair homes. The youth group completes 15 hours of local community service and also rake leaves for 12 hours in November. They do meals at homeless shelters and engage in activities to create awareness around service. The youth group's focus is on service and participating in these activities has a profound impact on the kids, helping them see the world in a different way. Although many of the youth group participants initially had no faith-based inclination, they come to understand the church's role and some develop a personal faith and belief in something greater than themselves.

2.2.4.3 Church C

Church C is an Asian-American congregation in Northern New Jersey founded in the 1970s. Median age is around 40 with the full spectrum of ages represented in congregational life. Church attendance is slightly more complicated as the church is represented by two distinct congregations – a Korean speaking congregation comprised of adults and an English-speaking congregation made up of the young and their adult teachers. The main congregation (Korean speaking) is around 250 while the English congregation is around 50 (25 teenagers and 25 younger ages). The representatives interviewed were the youth minister in his mid-twenties, a volunteer in her mid-twenties, and two female volunteers in their mid-forties, all Korean immigrants to the U.S.

Belonging is created for youth through activities and relationships, however adults from the larger congregation are involved in education ministries, mentorship, and in

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creating spaces for the young to interact. The presence of parents and casual approach of the pastors are noted as how they pass on faith to youth. The church aims to create an inclusive and supportive environment, however there is little engagement of the young in the larger church due to the language barrier. It was noted that after high school only about 10% of the youth continue with any church during college and less than 50% stay involved with church as a young adult.

Church C identifies the primary needs of youth as love and empathy, patience, and understanding. The youth at the church are involved in outreach and volunteer work, although it can be challenging due to scholastic schedules.

2.2.4.4 Church D

Church D identifies as a predominantly African American congregation with primary lineage in the Caribbean. Church was founded in 1860 and is in the suburbs of New York City. The average age is about 45 and they also run the entire age spectrum. The church has a youth group, but that youth group is heavily involved in church activities. There were a larger number of representatives in this interview. Two teenagers, one male and one female, four middle-aged volunteers, and two senior citizens with historical perspective. All the representatives shared a Caribbean ethnicity. The church also identified the commitment of families to faith formation and the importance of attending church from a young age. All affirmed that young children have very little option in coming to church each Sunday. The interviewees who identified themselves as youth affirmed this but feel that even though there is more leeway in attending now, they still attend church and support their family members. There was a clear culture of

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kinship and community within this congregation that seemed to create a greater sense of sustainability in youth participation than any other church interviewed. One notable example is an elder interviewee who upon learning about the opportunity to participate in the research study, immediately bought herself an iPad and started taking classes to learn how to use it. She expressed the reason as a determination to stay connected and keep up with the younger generation. She said it's been a challenge, but she's making progress. They were able to discuss the needs of the younger generation and how the church can engage them through hands-on projects and mentorship programs.

2.2.4.5 Church E

Church E was founded in 1885 and exists in a suburb of Boston, MA. The median age of the congregation is around 60, with a range of ages from 20s to 100s. The worshipping congregation is around 400 people, with a predominantly Caucasian ethnic makeup. The church has a large church school program with approximately 175 kids registered, offering nursery through 9th grade. The church also has a youth group that stays connected through high school and college and becomes mentors. The person being interviewed is the director of Faith Formation, Youth, and Family Ministries and has been working at the church for 23 years. We must also be aware of potential professional bias within this interview. For example, the respondent suggested that youth in the church feel a sense of belonging and inclusion, but further investigation revealed that it is particularly through the confirmation program, where they are required to attend regularly and engage with others in the church. They have built meaningful relationships and feel accepted and loved by their church family. Youth, as

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well as the greater church, are highly involved in mission work and programs on racial justice through their denomination.

The needs of youth were articulated as: Spiritual guidance and support, a sense of belonging and community, and opportunities for leadership and engagement.

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2.2.4.6 Church F

Church F was founded in the 1930s and has a median age of 65 to 70. The congregation size is around 75 and includes both online and in-person worship. The church is racially diverse, with a predominantly African American membership, but also includes Caucasian members and biracial/mixed families. The representative interviewed was the pastor in his late 60’s who had been the pastor over multiple generations. His answers offer a historical perspective, and he offered a desire to answer without bias for the sake of the study.

In terms of youth involvement, the church integrates young people in services, giving them opportunities to read scripture, perform music, and share their gifts. They also participate in special days and events and have an ongoing Sunday school program.

The church passes faith from generation to generation by including multiple generations in worship services. Adolescents have various roles in the church community, such as worship leaders, scripture readers, performers, and participants in dance ministries. They are encouraged to pray publicly and engage in different aspects of the church's activities. They also rely on personal experiences, baptisms, and the involvement of parents and grandparents in teaching and explaining faith to younger

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members. Community service plays a role in faith formation as well, with children and adults encouraged to donate to and serve the less fortunate.

The family plays a critical role in faith formation at the church. They encourage family members to be present during orientation and membership classes and emphasize caring for and supporting one another. The church also holds family-centered events and celebrations.

When discussing the needs of adolescents, they emphasize the importance of safety, family, and faith for young people. They discuss how they address these needs through their church community and the challenges they face in doing so. They also mention the role of mentors and teaching through examples. Overall, they emphasize the need for honesty and striving to meet the needs of different age groups.

They mention their experience with peacemaking training and the challenges of navigating church and family dynamics. They do mention that the population of young people in their church has been shrinking and the need to focus on outreach and evangelism. The young people in their church are involved in outreach in their schools and local community, as well as in national service efforts.

2.2.4.7 Church G

Church G, founded in 1932, is a predominantly African American congregation in Washington, D.C. They have a worshipping congregation of about 75 and a median age of 55, though the entire age spectrum is represented in their congregation. This church provided the largest representatives for any interview. They were coordinated by the lead deacon, an African American male in his 60’s. Three youth were involved

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as well as three senior citizens and two middle-aged volunteers. All representatives were ethnically African American, and none held a professional position at the church.

Church G emphasizes youth involvement and inclusion. They tie involvement directly to a feeling of belonging, particularly in their role of leadership in worship. The pastor is committed to youth representation and leadership in every ministry of the church. They engage young people in church activities and encourage their participation. They stress the role of family in passing on faith. Multiple generations are involved in nurturing the young. The church supports families facing challenges. Youth actively participate in outreach programs and enjoy serving others, bringing blankets and food to the homeless along with other church members for example. They also maintain a relationship with DC public school students who fulfill community service hours through activities of the church.

When asked about the needs of youth, they mention encouragement, positive role models, and trust.

2.2.5 Results of Qualitative Study

As stated above, it was critical for the integrity of the research to have done the coding with an independent research assistant. Having conducted the interviews, it was clear what patters were emerging and what coding groups were anticipated. The coding work corroborated the hypothesis and two major themes emerged: Belonging/Inclusion and Mission/Service. It was also clear that there was a distinction between a practice (like creating a sense of belonging or having service programming) and a culture that naturally included adolescents in church life or a culture that had a clear sense of

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mission. This distinction is presented as an opportunity for future research while exploring the implications of praxis here.

2.2.5.1 Marker 1: Belonging and Inclusion

As the transcripts were run through ATLASti, two growth markers emerged as the most dominant: Belonging and Inclusion. These emerged so strongly that there was a consideration to combine the markers into a group. However, upon further examination, it was clear there were some subtle differences, though they are included here as a unit. For example, church B mentioned why youth feel compelled to bring friends to the youth ministry; “People bring friends and I think that that's why it has become so large, because the teens in the community feel like it's a place. That can go. That's safe. It's a place where they belong.” This was particularly highlighted by Church E’s confirmation program where they expressed a sense of acceptance by the church. Church E does practice a segregated ministry that meets at the same time as general worship except for times where the youth are performing prepared music, but the interviewee noted that when confirmands were asked how they felt about their church after their assignment to ask questions of congregants during coffee hour, the response was that “they love their church family, and they never felt more. Accepted and a part of it.” Church C also highlighted belonging as a hallmark of their ministry: “So for a sense of belonging, definitely, you know, try to create an environment where they're most comfortable. That’s what I do.” These churches scored very high on a sense of belonging, but when the marker of inclusion was kept as a separate code, a different picture emerged. Church G demonstrated a practice of inclusion described as; “They're still singing in the

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choir. They're still ushering, they're still leading the services. You know, they come up under good training and because they come up under good training, they enjoy. We added different things like the dance ministry" with another interviewee adding: "Everything that's on the program for the church they are participating in, even the little ones, participate in the high schoolers and college students when they're home from school." This seems to be a subtle difference in an intergenerational kinship ecosystem. That being said, there is more of a movement in some to create a more inclusionary practice. The Connecticut church noted: "Our pastor also is very she loves having kids up there, reading scripture and being part of being part of the worship service" noting that it was something they had just started recently. There seems to be a growing awareness of the need for generational inclusion, even in an age-segregated format.

All churches interviewed that had any kind of engaged youth population noted a sense of belonging as critical to their success. This research affirms this as a vital component to not only youth ministry, but ecclesial life as a whole.

In addition, it is this subtle nuance of inclusion that provides a critical clue to this study. As stated above, words like inclusion and belonging are words understood to be positive and desirable words, however there is a divergence in what is meant by these terms. Belonging addresses key human need for community – a place to feel safe and affirmed. Inclusion has the added missional, and arguably theological element. When belonging expands into inclusion, it is more than affirmation that is being experienced, but also agency. Agency is a critical tool in identity formation. As we have identified adolescent identity formation as a correlative experience of congregational identity formation, then it bears out that churches were teenagers not only feel affirmed but are

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treated as collaborators report a higher degree of youth sustainability, even if the actual numbers of participating youth are lower than in churches reporting only belonging or a limited inclusion.

2.2.5.2 Marker 2: Mission and Service

A critical learning was the role that service played in a church where there was a high degree of youth participation. One adolescent interviewee in Church D described what makes a youth ministry attractive to him: “I feel like more hands-on projects, like more programs where we are more active in the community. Nowadays, with my generation we have a very short attention span, so anything that's like “hands on” you know? Like, you know, we involve ourselves, we do things. We go around. We like that. I feel like if we, you know, had more programs where we were able to. You know, help around the community. We help people who were starving. We went to hospitals. I think. You know, things like that really do help people in a way…we also have fun doing it as well.” He was indicating that a sense of mission was what made his experience in church meaningful. Churches B and E reported a strong mission and service component that was attractive to community youth, even though these programs ran parallel to the larger church and not as a part of the whole church’s service in the community. Church G’s outreach to the unhoused population where their church is located provides illustration of the distinction between having mission and service programs and being missional. Church G identified the crisis in those in their community who are living on the street. Addressing this issue has become a unified church mission. Elderly women collaborate with younger counterparts to craft blankets, while children

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and youth team up with adults to prepare sandwiches. Subsequently, all capable members distribute these to the unhoused population surrounding them and provide whatever congregational care they can provide. Church F reported a similar ministry where even the youngest are included: Faith is “passed through community service. There's children and adults encouraged to give donations to those less fortunate. Could be food or could be clothing. If we go do something in the community, we usually take our children along with us and they see it in in place …” As far as making sure the church senses the “whole church” aspect of service, they are included on Sunday with “pictures or something. This is to say: “This is what you did.” It’s usually an inclusive statement: “Whether you're there or not, we did it” and it gives a sense of community and belonging so that so no, hopefully, no one steals disconnected, even though they're sitting in the church.”

This is a powerful missional posture. The congregants who are not able to physically participate in a particular outreach are still provided “we” language because it is the ministry of the church, and all are included in that ministry.

Though the hypothesis going into this work was that there was an interdependent relationship between belonging, inclusion, and mission, the interviews provided deeply poignant real-world examples of how this is experienced beyond theory.

2.2.5.3 A note about Family

This research was designed to consider the question of attrition from an ecclesiological perspective, not one of the sustainability of individual faith. As a result, it did not explore what is far and away the most critical factor in the sustainability of faith

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and that is the family. The focus of this study was a critical consideration of the church's corporate life and ecclesiological orientation. However, as part of scientific integrity, the factor of family must be briefly stated here. Family participation ranked extremely high in churches reporting youth engagement. This was particularly true in those churches exhibiting a kinship orientation. The commitment of the family to the faith life of the congregation was often mentioned as a characteristic of churches with youth involvement. This provides additional support to Smith's (2021) study on "Handing Down the Faith" where he talks extensively about the parent factor in faith sustainability. From a communal point of view, it was clear that youth involvement and parent commitment to the overall mission and life of the congregation had clear connections.

If an interpretation of growth is not through a merely numerical lens but represents the experience of youth present who are experiencing a sense of excitement around identifying with the mission and life of a local congregation, then churches B, D, F, and G could be arguably experiencing growth. They all mention youth involvement in both age-specific activity as well as congregational life. On the other hand, churches A, C, and E seem to be in a period marked by indicators of decline. These categories were weighed heavily and depended on the church's sense of the continuum of faith formation rather than comparative attendance. For example, Church F and Church C both indicate a healthy number of teenagers coming to their meetings and activities but indicate that the enthusiasm for church experiences a sharp decline after high school. On the other hand, Church G and Church D both indicated that there were not as many teenagers involved as their might have been in the past but indicate a greater overall involvement and retention of members as they become adults.

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All churches indicate that they are not as numerically strong as they used to be. This is not limited to the adolescent cohort, but in church life and attendance. However, the churches that had youth involvement seemed to indicate a general appreciation and respect for the young. One example from Church E was a member who said: *"…we let them come forth and bring their ideas and we listen to them, and we give them the opportunity to try to implement the things that they know about faith and church and how you conduct yourself and carry yourself…"* This is a valuable nuance to other avenues of caring such as Church C who had adults involved in preparing meals for the young, but the young had no agency within the greater congregation. All churches indicated a youth group model as their praxis, even if they no longer had any youth. However, in the churches that still had functioning youth ministries, there was a strong indication that the youth group was not the only locus of youth engagement.

2.2.6 Interpretive Discoveries of the Data

This research began with the recognition that praxis of segregated, though specialized, ministry to youth that exists within or outside of the local church has not resulted in the growth or stability of the local church. This study will include a great deal more "texts" in consideration of the subject, but what can be seen from the small sampling included is that growth or attrition is more nuanced than simply a problem of adolescence or the gifting and pedagogy of a youth practitioner. The statistical data delivers a picture of simple growth or attrition over time – attrition seemingly growing more acute during the era of youth ministry professionalism. Further ethnographic consideration of the statistical data presents a picture that is more nuanced as it is

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discovered that it is not the whole American church, but predominantly the hegemonic American church. The initial discoveries of the research sample are that there is a praxis of inclusion that tends to be more dominant in non-hegemonic churches than in hegemonic counterparts. Church D, Church F, and Church G all speak of their youth as a part of all that they do. Inclusion is not something that they have to "try" but something that they "are." This will be described below as a "kinship" orientation that is harder to identify in a western middle-class framework. Church B and Church E do practice intentional inclusion in their praxis with some success but use the word "try" when it comes to including. This indicates that inclusion is not a natural part of the praxis but recognized as vital even with some resistance. In addition, churches that seem to have a clearer sense of mission and purpose within their community along with their practice of inclusion indicate a greater degree of youth involvement. For example, Church G is very aware of the unhoused people that surround their church and provide food and blankets to meet the urgent needs faced on the street. All ages participate in different stages of this act of love. This indicates an outward-facing orientation of this church that all ages recognize as a part of being a Christian.

2.2.7 Crafting a theology of belonging and inclusion

One of the most important questions in the interview portion of the research was around belonging and inclusion. It has become an informing reflexive theological question that has informed conclusions drawn from this research. It was important to observe that many of the churches struggle with this question, yet the question of belonging and inclusion is a vital one not only for the 21st century but is theologically

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appropriate. The issue of belonging is sometimes used in contrast with believing. Niemelä (2015:1) highlights Nordic churches and the concept of "believing in belonging" to describe a state church where few people were part of the church for reasons of faith but were there to be part of the community. This contrasts with what she considers to be the British posture of believing without belonging (Niemelä 2015:1). She suggests that neither perspective is enough for Generation Y who are leaving the church and finding belonging elsewhere. This does not suggest that Generation Y (or any generation) is no longer seeking belonging. A 2020 Springtide study highlighting Gen Z showed that membership or participation is not enough to feel a sense of belonging. Emerging generations are losing faith in institutions. On a scale of 1-10, only non-profit institutions achieved a "5", all others, including organized religion, received a lower score of confidence (Packard 2020:39). Even among those who are members of a religious institution, a full 25% still feel that no one understands them (Packard 2020:40). However, the percentages of teens who feel isolated and alone is positively impacted when they feel received by one or more adults within that institution. The percentage continues to decrease as more adults are added (Packard 2020 46) and the level of belonging progresses from being noticed to being named to being known (Packard 2020:63). It is this level of being known that I suggest offers clues to sustainability in faith formation.

This leads to what this research considers to be a more helpful definition of inclusion that will guide the theoretical development of this work. The work of intersectional theology is particularly contributive. Kim and Shaw (2018:41) posit that "*As a theological method, intersectionality presumes that each of us does theology from a social location*

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that has influence (of which we are sometimes aware and sometimes not) on our theologies." They utilize the use of the word "inclusive" as theology that "captures the breath and diversity of human encounter with the Divine" and that we can only produce theologies "*from our social locations*" so that each of us has "*something significant to add to the whole of Christian theology*" (Kim and Shaw 2018:41). They engage the work of Vivian May (2015:219) who points out that "*intersectional approaches do not presume and underlying sameness but take seriously the realities of diverse ways of being and knowing*." The concept of agency in inclusionary theology is illustrated by Pansardi and Bindi (2021:51-71) and their concept of "power to" vs. "power over" in which they consider agency to be the ability to act (power to) instead of the experience of being oppressed by power (power over) (cf. Follett: 1940: 78-79). They go on: "*while the 'power-to' frame points to the capacity of an actor to perform actions in a certain social context, the 'power-over' frame signals an understanding of power as constraint(s) and, more in general, as - direct and indirect, intentional and unintentional - influence exerted by an actor over another actor's behaviour*" (Pansardi & Bindi 2021:12).

This provides a more precise definition of inclusion to guide in developing an inclusive theology of adolescence and subsequent ministry with members of this liminal stage. If the foundational assumptions of intersectional theology are accepted, then inclusion is not merely making physical space for adolescents within an ecclesial ecosystem, but honoring their agency as theological and missional collaborators with a unique voice developed from the unique context of being their particular age in the time in which they are living.

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2.2.8 Summary

This chapter began with considering the mathematical realities of the American church, demonstrating the urgency of the research question regarding generational attrition. Overall, the numbers paint a picture of a church that is not keeping up with population growth nor holding steady with its own membership. This data alone does not offer interpretation or solution, it only indicates the current situation. When the data is considered ethnographically, the hope of some clues begin to emerge. Why has the African American church been insulated from the attrition while the hegemonic mainline church was experiencing decline? What factors can be identified to suggest why the Historic Black Church is now beginning to feel the pinch of attrition when the Millennial generation began to present causation? Clues surrounding the HBC's orientation around issues that are meaningful to emerging generations inform the data as well as the changing landscape of African American communities experiencing gentrification. Generational practices of kinship and a connection to purpose and mission are marks of Churches in the empirical study that still have active engagement across generations. There is a clear correlation between belonging/inclusion and a sense of mission among churches that continue to exist within environments of growth or life. This requires a consideration of the historical development of ecclesial praxis regarding ministry with youth. Are there events, philosophies, or theological developments that have contributed to the current state? The following chapter will consider the historical framework that gave birth to the development of modern youth ministry.

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3 A Historical Interpretation of Youth Ministry

3.1 Justification of a chapter on History

As stated above, addressing the research question of the cause of generational attrition within the mainline U.S. church requires a consideration of history as a contributive "text." Beginning with the foundational framework of practical theology, that theology is forged from our experiences in diverse contexts that includes historical developments, it is critical to explore the development of youth ministry within a historical narrative. This offers us a look "along" youth ministry rather than simply a look "at" youth ministry. Knowing the historical assumptions and developments will help demonstrate that the application of adolescent theory to the theological and missional work needs critique through an practical theological framework, potentially calling the application and assumptions into question. This work acknowledges that history is an interpretive discipline that provides an admittedly narrow viewpoint that serves to critique a thesis. I have chosen key points in the development of youth ministry, starting with the development of adolescence itself, to demonstrate a pattern that has guided a social and theological construct that I believe needs to be reconsidered. This is not intended to be exhaustive. Exhaustive history would have to consider the moment-by-moment human decisions or circumstances that lead to the monumental moments recorded by those who attempt to make sense of our present experience. When attempting to provide a history of youth ministry in the United States, it is recognized that there is much that is worth considering providing the fullest understanding of all the influences that have affected how faith formation is practiced in the U.S. This research attempts to identify certain historical hinge points that nurtured our collective

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imagination of what youth need and what characteristics identify an effective youth ministry. The two expressions of youth ministry in the United States chosen for this study, the Caucasian mainline church and the historically Black church, have developed their pedagogy within very different cultural realities along a parallel track. Understanding and critiquing the factors that helped create each approach will prove invaluable to any serious engagement of American youth ministry and its influence globally. It is helpful to explore the historic, cultural, and economic ecosystem that inspired these movements to inform a critique of their efficacy and do the practical theological work needed to develop a relevant faith formation praxis.

I believe there is a thru line motivating the praxis of predominantly Caucasian mainline denominations through the modern evangelical movement. Senter (2010:96) identifies this thru line as the concept of the "youth problem." Joseph Kett (1977:4) confirms this view of youth as a "problematic time of life" and that their "distinctive position in our society inevitably spurs judgements and evaluations which require a historical perspective" This is not a new perspective. While I disagree with her conclusion, Kirgiss (2015:50) as a medieval scholar is right in her assessment that there has been a recognition of the uniqueness of the liminal stage of life for centuries. Kirgiss (2015:120) points out that even the term adolescence is found in writings before the industrialized era, however, where I disagree with Kirgiss is her assessment that the rise of modern adolescence is propaganda. Nel (2018:128) is more gracious in his assessment of her contribution in that she rightly points us to the centuries-old attempts to understand the complexities of this liminal stage. It is not the existence of a liminal stage of human development that is marked by new energies, emotions, and identities

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that is put forward for critique, but the constraints and marginalization put upon humans at an emerging stage of life. When we speak of the development of adolescence, it is not a stage of human development that we are critiquing but the systematic shaping of the adolescent cohort by what White (2016:119) refers to as the "iron-cage of market rationality." Nel (2018:129) also affirms the connection of market rationality to our cultural understanding of adolescence when he says that "adolescence as a phenomenon has largely been created, and dictated to, by the labour market." We will discuss how the changing labor market in 2023 is affecting our renegotiation with adolescence below. The nature of the marketability of and to adolescence does provide a worthy consideration while assessing Kirgiss' argument and the lens by which many youth ministry resources are produced. Her predominant audience is readers of youth ministry resources as Kirgiss' work is published by Youth Cartel, a resourcing organization for youth ministry. This is not to accuse the manipulation of scholarship to serve marketable ends, but there would be a significant impact to the market of youth ministry materials if the foundational framework is suspect.

The idea that adolescents are culturally "dictated to" (in Nel's words above) by the needs of the market is realized by the concept that a "good" adolescent is one that is under control and in line with the roles set forward by cultural agreement. Again, White (2016:119) describes it this way:

> A 'good' adolescent is seen to be one installed in school, working toward a professional job, consulting the goodies of the market, and keeping current on cultural memes that define coolness, and allowed only a certain amount of tension as they negotiate a space between peer culture and family life.

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My agreement with White's perspective has inspired the inclusion of a history of the relationship between our concept of adolescence and the inevitable expression of the cultural imagination on what has become known as youth ministry. The sea change that we will identify, and which became a catalyst for youth ministry, begins not with the identification of the uniqueness of the adolescent stage. Nel (2018:13) affirms that a ministry that incudes youth will do so in a "differentiated" way. I do not argue for the ignorance to the physiological, psychological, or cultural uniqueness of youth. My challenge is to the assumptions that have caused us to isolate and marginalize the youth cohort from society, and subsequently ecclesial life, while continuing to market toward them. Chinn (2009:13) suggests that industrialization and subsequent immigration were the seeds of the creation and identification of teenagers as a separate cultural cohort. Chinn delves into the historical roots of adolescence, tracing its emergence as a distinct life stage in various cultures throughout history. She argues that adolescence is not a universal, biologically determined phenomenon but rather a socially constructed concept that has evolved over time. Chinn draws on extensive research to demonstrate how factors such as industrialization, urbanization, and educational reforms have influenced the delineation of adolescence as a separate phase of human development. Kett (1977:11) concurs by pointing out that the language of age is more nebulous than we might have otherwise considered. In pre-industrial society, an infant might be one who is under the direct control of their mother and childhood could be used for anyone under the age of 16. He cites several examples of this nebulous and fluid consideration including the revivalist Cotton Mather who described the religious change that occurred in "young children" between the ages of 7-

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16 and seemed to distinguish only three age groups – children, young men, and old men. (Kett 1977:11). 18th century reflections of the end of childhood are less about age and seem to be more about the time of leaving home or entering the work force (Kett 1977:17). Census classifications after 1740 generally considered the ages under 16 as "dependent" ages and those between 16 and 60 as "productive" stages, (Kett 1977:17) giving the impression that pre-industrialized society saw adulthood as being connected with a contributive ability rather than a stage of human development. The cohort that we know of as "teenager", sociologically diagnosed as being in the period of adolescence, was indeed, with appreciation for Kirgiss, a 20th century phenomenon. In addition, as Nel (2018:20) points out youth ministry as we understand it did not exist until the Industrial Revolution. Kett (1977:210) correlates the rise of modern youth ministry with the sociological anxieties of the early 20th century. He indicts Christian youth ministry as a factor in the invention of adolescence where "prolonged immaturity could sustain itself" and where one could "shield young people from contamination by the alien culture of big cities and immigrants." This is what is referenced in Root (2020:60) as the "slowing down" of adolescent development. He sees youth ministry as a tool of this slowdown. He argues that in contemporary society, adolescence is extending and becoming prolonged, resulting in a delay or deceleration of traditional markers of adulthood. Societal changes and cultural shifts have led to the elongation of adolescence, with young people taking longer to transition into adulthood. This extension of adolescence is attributed to various factors, such as the postponement of marriage, increased educational requirements, economic challenges, and cultural shifts in the understanding of maturity. In Root's (2020:65) view there are many suburban

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parents who utilize youth ministry to enable this slowdown by giving age-appropriate activities that are void of what parents perceive as the negative influences of the outside world. They are often given a great deal of activities, but limited responsibility in the church as a whole. The practice of this form of youth ministry remains largely uncritiqued and is still the normative practice of many suburban Caucasian churches and the ministries that have been influenced by a century of practice. This practice's historical roots require critique through a practical theology lens.

We will attempt to trace a parallel line through Historically Black congregations. African Americans developed a pedagogy that was not based on identifying youth as problematic. Pahl (2000:73-74), suggests that instead, young people were viewed "kin" where they were empowered by the congregation and the socialization practices of African American congregations. Youth had problems, as the community had problems, but they were critical co-laborers in addressing the identifiable problems of systemic racism, poverty, and violence. Pahl as a historian writes from an intersectional perspective. While the book provides a comprehensive analysis of youth ministry in modern America, it also reflects Pahl's broader interests in the intersection of religion, culture, and social justice of which I see as critical to a more comprehensive missional view of youth ministry Pahl (2000:3) is struck by the irony that despite the intense institutional attention paid to youth, they remain vulnerable. He suggests it as one of the "great ironies of twentieth-century American history" and emphasizes the importance of addressing issues such as race, class, gender, and sexuality not only with our practice of youth ministry, but our understanding of the development of youth ministry in modern America (Pahl 2000: 3). It can be argued that there was most certainly a "youth

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problem" within the Black community in the 20th century, but the problem wasn't in teen culture, but in the surrounding culture that oppressed them. Black teens were not included in the hegemonic imagination that was systemically and often violently oppressive to them. Thus, these young people grew differently than their white counterparts, resulting in subtle but identifiable expressions of faith formation that has implications to the field of faith formation as well as contributions to the field of practical theology. The second thru line we will be following is the rooted formation of the Historically Black Church as a community of hope and the "village" approach to faith formation praxis.

3.2 20th Century Renegotiation of Adolescent Theory

This study is not intended to merely report on historical developments surrounding adolescent theory, but to consider the ground of development. As has been stated above, adolescence as a concept is nothing new. What became a 20th century phenomenon, and a correction this research intends to suggest, is the marginalization of adolescence into a segregated sub-culture. This marginalization began in the Industrial Revolution and followed streams of the cultural imagination surrounding childhood and adolescence that was being given articulation from social theorists and activists. This perfect storm created what we understand as adolescence and motivated the church to reconsider ecclesiological praxis.

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3.2.1 Industrialization

We must first explore the question of where the modern concept adolescence began, and we find it in the heart of the Industrial Revolution. Modern adolescence itself is not normative in the sense that it is consistent throughout historical anthropology. Instead, it is a social construct deduced from certain economic and cultural realities that resulted from the industrialization of the United States during the Jacksonian presidency. While Jackson's presidency has been most recently noted for the crimes against indigenous people and the expansion of U.S. landholdings, this economic prime directive also applied to positioning the United States as a manufacturing global competitor on a par with England. Jackson's hire of Samuel Slater, a British industrialist, is credited with the initial expansion of the factory system across the U.S. (Tucker 1984:3). The inclusion of industrialization in the discussion of the roots of modern adolescence is because of the notable cultural shifts in family and community. The earliest roots of our modern understanding of adolescence grew in the soil of this societal shift from the village to the industrialized factory town or city (Chinn 2009:17). Chinn sees a distinct difference between the familial interactions of the Antebellum south, as an example, where families co-existed and co-labored together in largely agrarian communities and the industrialized north where there existed a migration from the village to factory towns and cities. While the term "antebellum" conjures the "Gone with the Wind" opulence of plantation life, Chinn is looking largely at the rhythms of life and the intergenerational nature of agrarian life. With the coming of industrialization, the rhythms of seasons of work and rest that characterized an agrarian lifestyle were exchanged for a year-round manufacturing season, the 12-15 hour a day workday, and

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a six-day work week. The only free day of the week in the 19th century was Sunday, which opened the door for what Senter (2010:95) describes as the first wave of youth ministry, the Sunday School movement, which I will describe below. The social changes that came with industrialization created an alarm not only in the religious world, but the culture began to explore the ramifications of a drastically different world that they were now inhabiting Tracking the social movements are critical to our understanding of how we inherited a ministry style to a specific cohort. One of the earliest and most impactful factors in the creation of an adolescent class were the images of Lewis W. Hine. While not specifically addressing adolescence (as they would be included in the labor market for another few decades), Hine opened the door to think about the fragile nature of developmental stages and caused a national conversation about who people are at various stages.

3.2.2 Lewis W. Hine and the Power of Images

Economics often plays a major role in the shaping of cultural norms. Below, I will demonstrate how the new economy of the late 19th century not only created a new social class system of workers, management, executives, and owners, but also created a new generational dynamic in which policymakers, sociologists, and ultimately the church had to engage.

While industrialization had a cultural impact on the poor and the families of immigrants, the success of the factories also created a new wealthy class in American cities. The plantation system of the antebellum American south demonstrated a similar system that funneled wealth from the labor of African slaves into the hands of plantation

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owners and their families. Children of wealthy plantation owners were not co-laborers with those who made the land produce, thus freeing the plantation owners' children to develop a new culture. This culture has been romanticized in books and films about the time, such as "Gone with the Wind." Industrialization and the collapse of southern wealth after the American Civil War created a new wealth funnel generated by the urban poor and the families of immigrants that resulted in a cultural imagination of childhood that would be instrumental in creating modern adolescence. This is evidenced in the work of Lewis Hine and his photographs of childhood.

Lewis W. Hine, a pioneering documentary photographer of the early 20th century, played a crucial role in raising awareness about the harsh conditions and exploitative practices of child labor in America (Ostaszewska, 2021). Hine's images created a new discourse that effectively transformed public sentiment regarding child labor, leading to legislative change which further contributed to the development of the adolescent cohort as we will see below. His photographs captured the reality of child labor, depicting young workers toiling in factories, mines, and fields under hazardous conditions. (See Figure 1) These images served as powerful evidence of the harsh realities faced by child laborers, forcing viewers to confront the

Figure 1 Lewis Wickes *Hine, 1909 photograph of a young spinner in a Georgia cotton mill The Photography Collections, University of Maryland, Baltimore County (P545), under CC BY-SA 4.0*

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Figure 2: Lewis Wickes Hine, Trapper Boy, Turkey Knob Mine, MacDonald, West Virginia, 1908 The Photography Collections, University of Maryland, Baltimore County (P148), under CC BY-SA 4.0

inhumane treatment these children endured. (See Figure 2) Hine's photographs not only highlighted the physical toll that child labor took on its young victims but also shed light on the psychological and emotional impact it had on their lives. Chinn (2009:29) introduces Hine's work as a particularly important event in the creation of adolescence because Hine's photographs brought a conversation about the nature of childhood into the American cultural imagination. History has shown that true cultural change often happens only when social justice issues are raised to the sensitivity of the hegemonic imagination. That was the goal of Hine's work. As stated above, the factory system consisted of long workdays that kept entire families, including children, occupied in industry 6 days per week. In 1908, the National Child Labor Committee, or NCLC, hired Hine to document the life of children in the factory system. Photographers were generally not allowed on the factory floor by owners, so Hine took on a persona that would grant him access (fire inspector, Bible salesman, etc.) and crisscrossed the country taking thousands of photographs for the committee. Hine's photography raised a public outcry. Hine's images were in stark contrast to the innocent images of children and mothers that dominated Victorian consciousness. Now Hine showed images of children for whom innocence was long lost, their size dwarfed by the large machinery

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that served as their backdrop. Because of Dewey, (see below) the idea that the work of the child is play dominated the hegemonic cultural imagination. This value dissonance was viewed in Hine's series "Contrasts," where he placed a sequence of photographs side by side. For example, in a series that highlighted dolls, there were photos of Victorian girls playing with dolls (see fig 3) next to photos of girls the same age making dolls (see fig 4). In similar fashion, another series highlighted children who picked natural flowers versus those who made artificial flowers. The photographs were meant to be tacitly understood as pitting an ideal vs. a social violation, making it clear that Hine believed in the emerging idealized views of childhood and the photos would not require argumentation. All that had to be done was release the photographs into the cultural consciousness and the NCLC and other social activists, who had been introducing stories about children in the U.S. workforce, were able to create social support to enact legislative change. Hine's work contrasted the child at play with the child at work and became a catalyst for the NCLC to lobby for a unique division of the U.S. Department of Labor dedicated to creating standards surrounding children in factories. The critical piece of understanding for our current research is the emergence of a distinct role for humans who have not yet reached

Figure 3: Library of Congress, Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Reproduction No. LC-DIG-nclc-04209. Lewis Hine. "Children Playing with Campbell Kid Dolls.".

Figure 3 Library of Congress, Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Reproduction No. LC-DIG-nclc-04209. Lewis Hine. "Children Making Campbell Kid Dolls"

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adulthood, that of protection, education, and play. Once this concept entered the cultural consciousness, the negotiation of what age is being considered is negotiated. Industrialization and inhumane labor practices inspired a consideration of development that had not been part of the conversation.

3.2.3 Dewey and the influence of a Pedagogy of Childhood

A consideration of the "perfect storm" of cultural watersheds at the beginning of the 20th century must include Dewey's (1897) "My Pedagogic Creed" that framed education as the job of the child. Dewey (1897) suggested that their role must be learning, through play and instructional means, to take their place in society and not merely existing as a cog in machinery. He stated, "I believe that education, therefore, is a process of living and not a preparation for future living." According to Dewey's creed, education should be student-centered and focused on the needs and interests of the child rather than the preparation for being productive in society. He believed that education should not be limited to the transmission of knowledge from teacher to student, but rather should be an active and experiential process that encourages students to connect learning to their active social or home life. Dewey argued for a more holistic approach to education that integrates academic learning with practical experiences. He believed that learning should occur in real-life contexts and that students should be actively involved in their own learning. This means that students should have opportunities to apply what they have learned to real-world situations that reflect who they are in their community and in their home so that even practical skills like "cooking, sewing, or manual training" connects to their non-work life so that there is a correlation between learning and living.

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Additionally, Dewey stressed the importance of social and cooperative learning. He believed that education should foster collaboration and social interaction among students, as this not only enhances learning but also promotes the development of social skills and democratic values. In this we see the direct thru line from industrialization to Root's (2020:31) discovery of the "slowdown" and the drive toward "hypergood" (which Root suggests is a sense of happiness) that we will unpack further. You can hear the echoes of Dewey as he states that:

> The highest moral good for parents in our time is to protect their children through oversight, helping prepare them for the competitive rat race of modern society, finding happiness with who they are in this fast-paced life.

This is not to suggest that only modern parents are the only ones in human history that desired happiness for themselves or their children. Root identifies happiness as being a *sumnum bonum* throughout history, but in modern times there has been a "doubling down" that can find its initial root in the conversations emerging the critique of late 19th century industrialization, the emergence of a theory of adolescence, and the subsequent pedagogy of childhood.

3.2.4 G. Stanley Hall and "Adolescence"

The impact of G. Stanley Hall on the American conversations and subsequent global understanding of adolescence cannot be understated. The concept of adolescence gained recognition as a distinct stage in human development during the late 19th century as Hall, an influential figure in late 19th century psychology, played a pivotal role in shaping our understanding of adolescence through his pioneering work. Hall

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emphasized the importance of studying this transitional period due to its significance in determining one's future adult identity (Fasteland 2019). A developing cultural agreement that flowed from Hall's writings regarding the nature of childhood and adolescence had immeasurable influence on American faith formation pedagogy. Hall suggested that the turbulent emotional experiences resulting from physiological changes experienced by emerging adults were universal rather than culturally specific (Chamberlain 1904). Of course, this perspective has been rightly challenged. Functionalism emphasizes the role of social institutions in shaping adolescent development, arguing that education, family, and peer groups contribute to social integration and identity formation (Fasteland 2019). Even in a peer review from 1904, it was suggested that conflict theory highlights the power dynamics and inequalities that influence adolescents' experiences, particularly regarding class, gender, and race (Chamberlain 1904). Symbolic interactionism focuses on how individuals construct meanings through interactions with others during adolescence. Practical Theology as a discipline leads a challenge to this theory by the very nature of the practice of inquiry. But we must recognize that Hall's seminal work "Adolescence" (published in 1904) laid the foundation for subsequent research on adolescent psychology and impacted the cultural imagination regarding the liminal stage from childhood to adulthood. As a result, in our discussion surrounding the history of adolescent faith formation, we must take a moment to consider the developmental theory of adolescence itself as a historical occurrence and the impact that this theory had on the formation of 20th century faith formation praxis.

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To understand Hall's (1904) theory on adolescence, it is essential to examine the key early influences that shaped his understanding and approach to studying this critical period in human development. One prominent influence was Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, which emphasized how individuals go through stages that mirror earlier evolutionary forms (Reed & Fitzsimmons-Benson 2016:34). This concept laid the groundwork for Hall's belief that adolescents go through a "recapitulation" or reenactment phase where they experience developmental patterns like those observed throughout human history. This is comparable to Herbert Spencer, who also influenced Hall, and his idea that societies also evolve over time (Arnett 2020:40).

Koteskey (1991:42) rightly identifies the non-existence of adolescence in the biblical record due to the non-existence of adolescence as a concept before late 19th century. He even goes so far to say that he did not identify adolescence because:

> …although he was a teenager, he never was an adolescent. Adolescence had not yet been invented in Paul's day, so he could not write about it.

Prior to conceptualizing adolescence, puberty would have been considered the entrance to adulthood not the ushering in of the liminal stage of the teen years. Koteskey (1991:44-46) further points out that puberty, or the early teen years, would have been the time to consider adult expressions such as marriage, work, and responsibility within the greater community.

Hall's (1904) work on adolescence appeared the same year as the NCLC and only a few years after Dewey's work. Hall's two volume work on adolescence was highly influential in defining that bridge between the pedogeological philosophy of Dewey and those coming of age to enter the workforce. Hall's (1904) work *Adolescence: Its*

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Psychology, and its Relations to Anthropology, Sex, Crime, Religion, and Education argued that adolescence was a time of great tension indicated by the term "storm and stress" ("Strum and Drang"). This tension puts the person in conflict with themselves as they go through the constant pendulum swings that eventually lead to adulthood. He argued that hormonal fluctuations caused increased emotional intensity and influenced aspects such as mood swings commonly associated the adolescent years. Hall acknowledged the social changes that adolescents experience during this stage. He recognized the growing importance of peer relationships and how they influence self-identity formation (Arnett 2020:50). According to Hall, these physical, psychological, and social changes collectively shaped the nature of adolescence.

Within a generation, we see a radical shift in what is considered the appropriate age to take on adult responsibility in "civilized" society. Westermark (1926:31), writing in 1926, states that marriage at the age of puberty is now only found among the "uncivilized races", which further highlights the social division between the hegemonic imagination and those other inhabitants of the United States who were of other races. This is influenced by Hall's recapitulation theory. In other words, as individuals progress through adolescence, they go through stages that parallel earlier forms of human existence. Hall believed that during adolescence, individuals reenact behaviors and experiences observed in ancient cultures (Reed & Fitzsimmons-Benson 2016:42). He argued that this was a necessary process for individuals to achieve maturity and integrate into society successfully. The influence of xenophobic ideation is visible in the development of adolescent theory as well as the motivation in their development as we will see as our argument develops. Hall himself was a eugenicist and white supremacist

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who considered non-white races to be in their own state of adolescent development and need protection and nurture to develop.

The concern for Hall, as was for many writing at the time, was that unaddressed "adolescence," a term that before Hall's work was not widely used nor understood as a concept, can lead to crime and other negative social conditions. The storms and stress of adolescence disassociates children from "old moorings" to attain the higher level of adulthood. However, for Hall (1904:1:xiv), the danger lies when "home, school, church, fail to recognize its [adolescence] nature and needs and, perhaps most of all, its perils." Hall (1904:xiv) also suggested that these perils are magnified with the "increasing urban life…" that came because of industrialization and immigration. This fueled the emerging belief that there was a "youth problem" or what Foster (2001:93) calls the "moral panic" that needed to be addressed.

One cannot undervalue the influence of the Industrial Revolution on the development of this movement as the underpinnings of gathered and segregated youth begin to happen as a direct connection to industrialization of American culture. As Nel (2018:20) pointed out, youth ministry did not exist before the Industrial Revolution. As my own earlier research discovered, factories fragmented families into gendered and generational cohorts that proved more efficient to production but presented a new problem for social observers (Droege 2017:13).

Early attempts at youth ministry can trace its roots to Hall and the hegemonic fears related to the cultural changes of industrialization and immigration. Hall had given name to the youth problem that became identifiable in a changing social climate. Hall himself had a conversion experience in what he would describe to be his teenage years. In his

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watershed work he suggests that adolescence is that time where people are most open to spiritual conversion. Citing anecdotal evidence from evangelist D.L. Moody and others, Hall builds a case that because of the turbulence of this period of life, the young are more open to crisis conversions, the hallmark of youth ministry in the 20th century (Senter 2010: 44). Senter (2010:85) also reminds us that the earliest evangelistic efforts of Moody was “Mr. Moody’s Sunday School” in Chicago. The Sunday School continued the model of a directed ministry toward the children that has been a hallmark of an industrialized pedagogy since Raikes and eventually grew to the non-denominational Moody Church still in existence in Chicago today. This lives in sharp contrast to Bushnell’s 1861 work that the young are nurtured in Christian families that became replaced with a more “crisis” posture when it comes to Christian conversion and growth. Bushnell had perhaps the strongest critique of the popular revival-style conversion in the work Christian Nurture (Kett 1977:114). Though Kett (1977:84) considers Bushnell’s approach as “utopian”, he does suggest that it is an option only for the middle class who can have a present family life. In the popular evangelical viewpoint of the day, the streets with crawling with urban dangers and youth on the edge rather than caring families. Bushnell’s suggestion that true conversion is of a gradual nature is overshadowed by the more popular idea of radical change, something that flows from Moody and other revivalists and is clearly tied to the urban fear mongering popular at the time. Conversion of the teenager in a crisis experience became the driving theology of American Protestant youth ministry, eclipsing the work of Bushnell and paving the way for a unique new approach to reaching the newly forming adolescent cohort.

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3.3 Cultural Responses to Adolescent Theory

In the section above, we can see the swell of a cultural movement. The perfect storm of Hine's images, Dewey's pedagogy, and the work of Hall began to adjust how people saw the transition from childhood to adulthood. Society was no longer comfortable with definitions of childhood and adulthood that relied on their ability to work or bear children. Dewey had provided a concept of childhood where their primary "job" was to play and to learn and now Hall had offered up another vision of adolescence as a cohort that is filled with passions that are easily influenced and need to be protected and managed. This not only had cultural consequences, but legislative ones as well.

3.3.1 Child Labor Laws and the seeds of an Adolescent Sub-culture

The segregation of childhood and emergence of an adolescent class finds its legislative roots in labor restrictions that emerged in the early 20th century. The first child labor law, the Keating-Owen Child Labor Act of 1916 (1916) banned the interstate sale of goods made by children but did not forbid their presence in the manufacture of those goods. By restricting the sale of goods produced by child labor, the law aimed to create economic incentives for businesses to hire adult workers and improve working conditions. However, the Keating-Owen Child Labor Act faced significant legal challenges and was ultimately declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court in 1918. In the case of Hammer v. Dagenhart, the Court ruled that the act exceeded the federal government's authority to regulate interstate commerce and interfered with the rights of individual states to regulate labor conditions within their borders. A national law banning the industrialized labor of children under 18 was not able to withstand the Supreme

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Court until the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, since southern states largely resisted any national governance in their labor practice. Considering the other provisions of the law such as fair minimum wage and provisions for overtime, the law was less about protecting children than it was about creating a protected job marked for adults who suffered during the U.S. Great Depression. Bakan (1971:979) goes so far as to indict this labor surplus and the need to limit the labor force as a catalyst for the acceptance of adolescence as a scientific and developmental reality. He notes that AFL union (known then as the Knights of Labor) joined the NCLC in lobbying for age-restrictive labor laws (Bakan 1971:979). According to Koteskey (1991:48), although social developments such as labor laws, compulsory public education, and delayed marriage were always “phrased in humanitarian rhetoric about ‘saving the children,’ many times the underlying motives were more economic and self-serving”. White (2016:118) also affirms that “child saving” organizations contributed to the institutionalization of adolescence.

Whatever combination of historical forces caused the cultural attitudes toward the young to shift, the argument of how youth should be spent was now an irrevocable part of the American conversation about itself. As Adler (1905:426) put it, there was a “vast social interest at stake, the interest of the American civilization…” which drove the conversation. Of course, what civilization that is being considered is also a key part of the conversation.

3.3.2 Public High School and the creation of the “field” of Youth Ministry

What took the place of the factory day was the expansion, and soon compulsion, of public education which began to emancipate the culture of the young even further from

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their family and intergenerational experiences. The public-school system began systematizing and nurturing the values of the emerging concept of being "American."

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, children exiting the factory were not 2nd and 3rd generation Americans. These were the children of immigrants, primarily from Europe, whose families were experiencing a cultural disconnect from the old world and a connection to the new. There were some attempts at stitching together the old and the new worlds, such as Jane Addams' experiment at Hull House and the Labor Museum that encouraged cooperation with the old and new worlds (Michals 2017). Hull House became a center for social reform, offering a variety of programs and services to address the needs of the community. These included kindergarten and daycare services, vocational training, English classes, healthcare clinics, and legal aid. The settlement also provided recreational and cultural activities, such as art classes and theater performances. The Labor Museum tried to avoid the disconnect between the older generations and traditions from countries of origin and the young who were becoming more Americanized (Addams 1911). However, public education not only taught whatever boards of education felt was needed for students to productively contribute to the gross national product and exist as a good American citizen, but successfully created a class of adolescents that lived a quite different and often separate existence from their immigrant parents in areas of language and culture. Consider even the word "teenager" that was not a common term until it began to be used to describe this cultural cohort in the 1930s. Education, the ability to work and make one's own money while still living under the financial care of parents, and a cultural identification of the uniqueness of this group of people, allowed for the creation

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of a new class of people who in turn created among themselves a unique culture, language, social strata, and value system. Thus, as the American church followed the cultural imagination new approaches were required to deal with the emerging youth problem.

3.4 Parallel Experience of African Americans

Here it is important to note that we cannot speak of American teenagers in broad strokes. While the development of the "teenager" began with a fearful reaction to immigration, there was the eventual assimilation of European-descended ethic groups into white American society and the homogenization of white identity within the public school system and marketed American culture. This sub-culturalization of the American teenager was not extended to the descendants of enslaved Africans or immigrants of African descent, particularly in the American south. When speaking of the development of African American youth, we must recognize the marginalization and lack of opportunity extended to those of European lineage. Spencer and Dornbusch (1990:123) note that the experiences of minority adolescents in the United States are complicated by issues not faced by hegemonic youth. Spencer and Dornbusch (1990:123) note that they are not suggesting that there is a cultural isolation that causes these youth to be unaware of the values of the majority culture, but that "social injustice (denial of legal rights), social inconsistency (the institutionalized disparity between what is stated as a value and what is actually done), and impotence (in this case, the denial of efficacy) affect the aspiration, expectations, and achievement of minority youth."

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The centrality and importance of the church to African American life is nearly impossible to untangle from the development of African American culture and thus we will provide more interweaving of the development of ecclesial life that we would with merely hegemonic experiences. Comer (1972:17) describes the black church through the eyes of a young African American male:

> The black church…was a place for participation and belonging. The deacons, trustees and ushers were ten feet tall on Sunday. This was not Inland Steen, Miss Ann's kitchen, or the bank. This – The Church – was theirs. In retrospect, the trustees were like the city board of finance and the deacons were like the city council.

The first Sunday School Curricula developed toward African American youth was developed in 1915 when internal conflict arose within the National Baptist Convention of the United States of America regarding curricula for African American churches. This resulted in the formation of a separate Black Baptist convention and publishing house (Wright 2017:49). This arose because of there was an identified need within African American curricula for the weaving of African American history with biblical history. For example, I would like to highlight the "*Exodus Youth Study: A Path to Freedom*" released in 2003 by the Women's Division of the United Methodist Church. This study weaves the biblical exodus story with the African American struggle for freedom. It's stated goal is the demonstration of the book of Exodus as a "road map for the liberation of another enslaved people – the people of Africa in America" (Wilson 2003:v). This has historical roots that we will discuss further in the next chapter that connect to theological developments of a "kinship" model of ecclesial life. For example, in African American

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churches, there is often not a paid, professional youth ministry or stand-alone youth ministry. Youth ministry includes an assortment of opportunities to participate in the lie of the larger church. There has been the suggestion that there is a different requirement of African American youth ministry in the African American church than there would be in their hegemonic counterparts (Barnes and Wimberly 2016:33). Spencer (1995:39) notes that while African American youth are confronted with the same developmental needs and tasks of their white counterparts, they have fewer role models than the ones needed for guidance, mentoring, relationships, and support. This is addressed and often provided within a kinship framework. Spencer (1995:39) continues by noting that African American children generally attend resource-weak schools, live in neighborhoods prone to economically linked violence, often have teachers who would prefer not to teach in their communities, and remain as objects of cultural stigma because of well-publicized stereotypes of violence and aggression (including sexual aggression). African American youth often find themselves in a self-fulfilling prophecy loop due to the labels put upon them that has nothing to do with their birth. In much the way I will argue that society created the adolescent community and gave it its characteristics, African American youth have been segregated into the cultural imagination in such a way as to create extraordinary obstacles. A notable current example is the defeat of Affirmative Action within the United States in 2023. The Supreme Court of the United States denied Harvard University's practice of recognizing the impact of race in college admissions, erasing 20 years of attempting to level the playing field. The decision is written in the language of racial equity:

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> Because Harvard's and UNC's admissions programs lack sufficiently focused and measurable objectives warranting the use of race, unavoidably employ race in a negative manner, involve racial stereo- typing, and lack meaningful end points, those admissions programs cannot be reconciled with the guarantees of the Equal Protection Clause. At the same time, nothing prohibits universities from considering an applicant's discussion of how race affected the applicant's life, so long as that discussion is concretely tied to a quality of character or unique ability that the particular applicant can contribute to the university. Many universities have for too long wrongly concluded that the touchstone of an individual's identity is not challenges bested, skills built, or lessons learned, but the color of their skin. This Nation's constitutional history does not tolerate that choice (Students 2023:8).

This inequity of experience is my primary critique of many studies of youth ministry in the American context. Here I agree with Ogbu (1981:415) who observed that "the research model of dominant group developmentalists is ethnocentric…It decontextualizes competencies from the realities of life". We cannot divorce the sociological challenges of growing up African American in the United States within a system that systematically denies black flourishing while using the liberative language of American freedom. However, the reason for the inclusion of African American development in this research is not to "focus on negative outcomes" but rather shine a light on the "adaptive process" of African Americans in spite of obstacles (Spencer and Dornbusch 1990:125).

As we recognize the economic influence in the shaping of adolescence, it can be argued that the rise of adolescence did not truly occur within the African American

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community until the civil rights era, and highly infused in ecclesial experience. King (1995:xix) frames the environment of African American adolescent development through the lens of educational opportunity. He states that the time lag between childhood and adulthood functioned quite differently for white boys and girls, poor or wealthy, and African Americans, many of whom were born into enslavement or certainly within a system of extreme racial inequity. 20th century African American adolescents were descended from ancestors who as adolescents were judged on their "value to their owner's property" and had "distinct and perfect knowledge" of the same (King 1995:8). In other words, they understood that their value was not intrinsic to their existence but subject to the productive role they played in the wealth of their owner. In this environment there is little space for a prolonged liminal period of development. A person's identity consisted of their physical value to a slaveowner's property. Kinship ecosystems are formed within this reality as children grew and became commodities to be bought, sold, or traded, erasing the familial structures that anchored European-descended families. In that void stepped "fictive" families where children had a plethora of "aunts" and "uncles" to whom they would show deference and receive communal protection (Chatters, Taylor, & Jayakody 1994:297-312). West (1993:161) sees the roots of this kinship forming from the uniqueness of American religious expressions (namely Methodists and Baptists) that tended to focus on "conversion experience, equality of all people before God, and institutional autonomy." The ecstatic demonstrations of vital faith gave enslaved people a sense of equality among humanity and a "special self-identity and self-esteem that existed in sharp contrast to the inferior roles placed upon them in American society." That institutional autonomy allowed the

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creation of spaces (namely the church) where there was an assurance of control by the enslaved community over their own affairs. This becomes a crucial characteristic of emerging black theology and the foundational groundwork of the church's central role in the civil rights movement of the 20th century. The emergence of a uniquely African American Christianity led to an existential freedom that developed ritual, song, and theology that shaped the experiences of African American youth on a different trajectory than their hegemonic counterparts.

Adolescents taking their place as leaders within the black community began in education. Education provides a lens to look along in the struggle for equality. By the start of the 20th century white middle and upper-class boys could leave home to receive a formal education during a workday while girls had no significant role beyond marriage and childbearing. As the 20th century continued, formal education (and a period of adolescence) was extended to white girls and lower-income white boys who were exchanging apprenticeships for high school. If the development of adolescence is traced to public schooling, educational opportunities, thus the prolonged liminal stage of adolescence fostered by institutional high school, were denied to African American youth. This remains true until the era of desegregation, starting with the Supreme Court decision that segregated schools were inherently unequal (Brown vs. Board of Education). Though the legal battle was won, the cultural battle began as the young sought to get an education without harassment. Young African Americans had to enter school while the military was deployed to ensure the safety of black students who were trying to seek an education. The most famous of these young African American teenagers were known as "The Little Rock Nine." The nine students, who were the first

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African American students to enter Little Rock Central High School in Little Rock Arkansas, were first blocked from entering by the Arkansas National Guard who were ordered by the state governor. The students persisted and finally, after appealing to the President of the United States, the state guard was federalized and they became escorts instead of obstacles, ensuring the safety of the students.

This gives rise to a new concept of adolescence, the role of activist. This is a much different viewpoint of the youth in need of protection that exists within the hegemonic imagination. These are the youth that are forging a path to freedom and liberation – often putting themselves at great risk for the cause of the larger community. Sit-ins, marches, and voting rights efforts were driven by the emerging generation who were not born into slavery but were certainly born in an ecosystem of inequity and they organized to move beyond legal freedom from slavery into full acceptance within the opportunities of American youth. For a more detailed look at the youth movement in one American city, I defer to Kinchen's (2016) study on student activism in Memphis from 1965-1975. She notes how the movement led by youth inspired the adults, particularly churches, to support this movement. One notable instance was Easter of 1960 when the week prior, students had been arrested by sitting at a whites-only lunch counter. Churches across Memphis encouraged their members to forgo Easter fashions and give the money they would have spent to defend the youth (Kinchen 2106:33). Youth were the primary drivers of many of the earliest achievements of the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People). Rosa Parks is of course, known for being arrested for not giving up her bus seat for a white person, launching the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the modern civil rights movement, but her inspiration was

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15-year-old Claudette Colvin who, as a student, began to understand her constitutionally protected rights and got arrested for her refusal to give up her seat on a Montgomery bus (Levine 1993:24).

Of course, African American youth continue to lead the black community even within greater assimilation and tolerance by the hegemony, notable in the Black Lives Matter movement. In the next chapter, we will comment on how BLM strikes the church differently than the more organized civil rights efforts of the 20th century. Harris (2019:124) comments that BLM is different than the older civil rights model that is associated with Dr. Martin Luther King. That model, he asserts, was a clergy-based and male-centered hierarchal structure that continued in the next generation movements of the 1970's and 1980's (i.e., Jessie Jackson's PUSH Coalition and Al Sharpton's National Action Network). BLM activists shy from a centralization lead by a charismatic leader and insist on a group centered model of leadership – drawing more of a comparison to the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) of the 1960's (Harris 2019:125). The tool of social media, led by the emerging generation, has allowed for this decentralization, and has resulted in historical civil rights institutions no longer seen as the gatekeepers of social change (Harris 2019:125). Organizations that are part of the decentralized BLM movement such as Millennial Activists United led by Ashley Yates point toward a sense of humanity toward the issue of police brutality rather than the legislative agenda of the generation before and is offering a counter-narrative to politics of achieving black "respectability" within white society without changing the cultural imagination toward black value (Harris 2019:126). This brief summary provides a narrative of African American adolescence from the civil rights

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movements of the 1950's and 1960's through to the modern BLM movement of the 21st century though there are volumes more to be explored. The history of African American youth has been intertwined with black identity and the progress of the black community and will have great bearing on our development of a practical theology of youth ministry. At this point, I will rewind the historical narrative and look more closely at the development of youth ministry as theories of adolescence developed.

3.5 Development of Youth Ministry

The intent of this chapter is to provide a sense of the hegemonic imagination that provided the soil for the development of what became commonly understood as youth ministry. The challenges of industrialization and immigration combined with the academic conversations surrounding the fearful cultural landscape expanded its influence to the church. It is clear from the parallel experiences of the African American community that there was a xenophobic element to the application of adolescent developmental theory that created a different experience of development for the non-hegemonic cultures in the United States. Ministry praxis of particular and exclusionary ministry found a model in Sunday School, developed in the earliest days of industrialization.

3.5.1 Early Foundations: Robert Raikes and the Sunday School Movement

The roots of Sunday School can be traced back to the late 18th century in England, where Robert Raikes is often credited with pioneering the movement. In 1780, Raikes established the first Sunday School in Gloucester, aiming to provide basic education

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and religious instruction to children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. The reasoning behind their creation is a matter of perspective, but the impetus seemed less that religious in origin. Raikes biographer Thomas Walters identifies the origins of the Sunday School as solving the problem of noisy youth polluting the serenity of the "sabbath" (Sunday) in industrialized Gloucester. Raikes observed local children "cursing, gambling, and fighting". The recorded response to Raikes' inquiry was: "This is nothing [compared] to what goes on on Sundays. You'd be shocked indeed if you were here then" (Walters 1930:4).

The "most unrestrained behavior" in Raikes' conceptualization, could be solved by a Sunday schooling program that had some success in other communities already. These schools operated on Sundays, utilizing the day when children were free from work to receive education. Raikes used his position as editor of *The Gloucester Journal* to support the concept of a school on Sunday for the children of families employed in factories, in which of course children were also employed. Senter (2010:105) notes that the Sunday School movement was designed to solve the current youth problem of the unwelcome behavior of children during non-work hours, but it became a moment of social change that began to put a spotlight on the education of the poor. The Sunday School emerged as the first successful attempt at educating the working class. Formal education was typically the realm of the middle and upper classes whose children did not need to work in the factories to support the family. Rakes brought formalized education to the children of the working poor. Here it is important to observe that Sunday School in its origination was not a faith formation program. When Raikes launched his movement in 1780, his school taught reading, writing, and social skills,

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using the Bible as the primary text. With instruction early in the morning, a break for lunch, then an afternoon reading, there was now little room for children to run the streets. Children would attend an early afternoon church service and then return to their studies until 5:30PM when it was time to go home. Raikes' regular reports in the *Journal* allowed for the ideas of Sunday School to spread. Abolitionists Wilberforce and Newton both adopted the Sunday School to educate the children of slaves, and Wesley and Asbury used the tool as a means of educating indigenous, poor, and enslaved people in the southern United States (Senter 2010:56). This is, arguably, the first intentional ministry to African-born youth in the United States, but it also laid the foundation for the separate and unequal educational practices for African Americans that continued well through the civil rights era, and arguably into the 21st century. This serves as another example of the parallel lines running through the hegemonic experience versus the minority experience throughout this chapter. Within a generation there will be a shift in the viewpoint towards child labor in the U.S., but there will be a different approach when it comes to people of African descent. The Supreme Court upheld this parallel approach with what has been called the "separate but equal" decision of *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896, which meant that African Americans and Caucasians would create distinct cultures and would be presented with disparate opportunities despite the ruling's wording that separate must also be equal (Medley 2003).

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3.5.1.1 Christian Endeavor and Denominational Societies

This chapter overlays historical developments to demonstrate recognizable thru lines to establish the "why is it going on" task of our project. While we have laid a foundation that demonstrates the soil that gave birth to adolescence and hinted at the rise of modern youth ministry, we will now consider the rise of youth ministry itself. Senter (2010:158) argues that the beginning of the second cycle of youth ministry began with the founding of The Young People's Society for Christian Endeavor and the subsequent youth society movement at the turn of the 20th century. By February of 1881, when The Young People's Society for Christian Endeavor had been founded (later shortened to Christian Endeavor and will be referred to as such here), there had been various "pledge" movements to recruit young people into lifestyles that reflected a Protestant ethical construct. Many of these pledges reflected the scourge of the moment, alcohol. Temperance pledges were common in the latter half of 19th century America. An example of one19th century juvenile temperance pledge is:

> I do voluntarily promise that I will abstain from Ale, Porter, Wine, Ardent Spirits, and all intoxicating Liquors and will not give nor offer them to others, except as medicines, or as a religious ordinance, and I will endeavor to discontinuance the case and practice of intemperance (Smith 1994: 23).

Pastors and Christian educators were concerned that Christian conversion was being lived out with very little evidence of Christian living. So, at the core of the Christian Endeavor movement was a pledge that all members of the society were required to take. As Senter (2010:154) notes, Clark was not intending to start a new youth movement, instead responding to the concerns for the youth in his own church. Senter

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(2010:154) identifies the "youth problem" of the Willison Church, the Portland, Maine church where he was pastor. With this growing adolescent cohort, it was unclear to church leaders where young people fit into congregational life, which would not have been a challenge pre-industrialization or pre-Hall. In addition, economic prosperity was beginning to offer alternative activities that were far more appealing to the youth pastors and other leaders were trying to serve. The youth problem being faced was attractiveness of roller skating, dancing, soda shops, theaters, etc. vs. what the church offered. This created a sense of panic among pastors and church leadership. Christian Endeavor was the first significant historical effort made to address people in their late teens as a group to be won rather than a part of the community to be nurtured.

The tactic of the society was to take the common practice of pledges found in the temperance movement and apply them to Christian practice. Initially, Clark's pledge read:

> Trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ for Strength, I promise Him that I will try to do whatever He would have me do, that I will pray to Him and read my Bible every day, and that, just so far as I know how, through my whole life I will try to lead a Christian life (Senter 2010: 58).

Senter (2010:58) notes that Clark's pledge was not adopted by the church world without criticism. By 1890, Clark had re-written the pledge to account for pastors' concerns that the pledge would take young people away from the church, since no part of the pledge suggested church involvement. Whether this was reflective of emerging thinking or merely an oversight, Clark revised his original pledge to include supporting the local church and attending all regular Sunday and mid-week services.

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As a pastor Clark's intent clearly was never to move the young away from the church, but to provide a tool for the young to understand what it is to live as a Christian and to help them live a lifestyle of Christian characteristics. This new creature called "adolescent" or "youth" in the common vernacular, was a being that churches struggled to fit into church life.

Senter (2010:59) suggests that the driving question was that if the young became full church members too early, and then strayed from the faith, it would make their inclusion into church membership meaningless. However, if the church delayed too long, the youth might turn from the church and never return. Clark wanted to demonstrate that young people had the ability to make vital Christian commitments.

The original meeting of the society was held at the pastor's home. The constitution of the society was read and then students were asked to sign the pledge. By Clark's (1922) own account there was hesitation until the teenager who helped Pastor Clark organize the event signed his name. Fifty-seven signed the pledge that night and over one hundred by the end of the year.

Primarily driven by the young people themselves, Christian Endeavor began to spread rapidly across New England. As a result of this spread, what is arguably the first book in modern youth ministry was written by Rev. Clark (2017) entitled "*The Children and the Church, and The Young People's Society of Christian Endeavor, as a Means of Bringing them Together*." As members spread across the country, they took the ideas of Christian Endeavor with them, starting chapters wherever they moved.

Additionally, Rev. Clark began to hold conferences to teach attendees the principles and methods of the new society. Representatives of multiple denominations were

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present and new chapters continued to spring up. The growth continued to be met with both praise and criticism of pastors who were concerned about the non-denominational aspect of Christian Endeavor. Even with Rev. Clark's expressed commitment to make sure Christian Endeavor served the local church, the non-denominational aspect inspired denominations to start their own societies rather than adopt Christian Endeavor as their primary vehicle. By the early 20th century, the DNA of the society for youth ministry was woven into the fabric of the protestant church in America.

Christian Endeavor attempted to solve the "youth problem" and therewith identified the existence of youth as a problem to be solved, a tacit component in the youth ministry efforts of the 20th century. The problems of youth changed as the church moved into the 20th century. The emergence of this new cultural cohort created problems for a society that formerly had changed by degrees and typically as an intergenerational unit. This group of young people grew independently as they spent most of their time together. As Fass (1977:13) observes,

> The problem of youth was connected to changes in family nurture, education, sex roles, leisure habits, as well as social and behavioral norms. Above all, youth had become a challenge to an older social order.

The challenge the church faced was far greater than the problem of church attendance or low commitment on the part of parents. The youth ministry DNA inserted into the church saw teenage life as something to be counteracted, rather than engaging with this new group of members and allowing the church to adjust to the prophetic voice of the young. As stated above, the primary concern driving Christian Endeavor was the positioning of adolescents into church life, i.e., established church norms. Pledges are a

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"top-down" approach to ensuring compliance with established praxis, but they do not consider the reciprocity of the emerging generation. This created a tension since leaders saw youth as a problem for youth ministry to solve rather than seeing them as partners in the overall mission of the local church.

However, the spread of the *Endeavor* model also demonstrated a growing cohort model of ministry that spread into other outreach efforts. Wells (1966:3) describes societies among Indigenous people, prisons, sailors, railroad men, as well as unique societies in large churches and denominations.

3.5.1.2 Denominational Youth Societies

The society movement was not limited to Christian Endeavour, though this was a model being adopted in churches all over the country. Methodist Episcopal Churches in Philadelphia formed a "Church Lyceum" in Philadelphia that encouraged the reading of approved books (Senter 2010:171). Other MEC churches adopted the model, but the Lyceum did not grow much past Philadelphia. MEC churches in Brooklyn formed their own societies which eventually grew to the Methodist Episcopal Young People's Union to be created in 1883, marked by "friendly intercourse" with the Young People's Baptist Union (Senter 2010:171). The Epworth League, formed in 1889 grew from 5 regional Methodist youth societies in Ohio. These were primarily youth led movements and provided a contrast to the top-down pledge approach of Christian Endeavor. The Oxford League, also a Methodist movement, continued this top-down approach. encouraging pastors to sign their churches up for Oxford Society chapters. The wide definition of "youth" (anywhere from 10-34) in other societies such as the Methodist Young People's

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union and the Epworth League made the need for adult leadership unnecessary. Youth largely organized themselves with officers and a clear leadership structure.

The intriguing part of the earliest developments of these denominational movements is the intended challenges the societies intended to address. In the late 19th centuries, Baptist societies grew with objectives around prayer and social interaction or fellowship. On the other hand, the Walther League, formed around that time, identified the youth problem as the Americanization of their young. Senter (2010:177) suggests that the loss of control and the changes in the surrounding culture were a grave concern to predominantly German Lutherans. Thus, the Lutheran societies were resistant to youth leadership and insisted on their “Christenlehre”, or their own way of forming the young within a German tradition – which was adjusted with anti-German sentiments arising from German aggression in the world wars (Senter 2010:177). The Presbyterian church on the other hand largely embraced the Christian Endeavor movement, eventually forming the Department of Religious Education in 1912 to focus on the Christian education of children and youth (Senter 2010:179). The influence of Hall and the focus on youth and the perceived problems of modern age have seen in every major effort to minister to youth over the next 100 years. If our practical theological lens suggests that theology and praxis are contextually developed, we must recognize that the history of youth ministry in the late 19th and early 20th century reflect a hegemonic fear considering the urban locations of these efforts and the absence of black Americans in the narrative. As was noted in chapter 1, until very recently the HBC was not affected by statistical attrition or by the same fears that drove the development of youth ministry across established white denominations. As we reflect on the historical developments to

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find clues to "why is it going on?" we must investigate the corresponding historical praxis of the African American community.

3.5.1.3 "Decentralized" movements of Black churches.

Continuing our integration of the Historic Black church into our theological construct, it must be noted that while there are thru lines in every theological and practical development, no group is homogenous in perspective or approach, and this goes for the Christian faith of African Americans. Savage (2008:2) affirms this by suggesting that referring to the theoretical construct of the "Black Church" overemphasizes a unity and cohesion of thought and practice. She writes that Black churches: "Are among the most local, the most decentralized, and the most idiosyncratic of all social organizations. Despite common usage, there is no such things as the 'Black church'."

Lincoln and Mamiya (1990:12-19 cf. Pahl 2000:77) there has always been an "authentic tension" found within African American religious history within a number of "key polarities," such as priestly vs. prophetic functions of churches, other-worldly vs this-worldly theologies, and an accommodating vs a resistant attitude toward white Christianity. These tensions remain true today as the challenges noted in chapter 1 via Mitchell and the millennials find the church struggling with maintaining the dominance it had in black communities since the successes of the 1960's – finding themselves in many of the same debates on what it means to be relevant found in their white counterparts. However, as noted above, these challenges are also associated with

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movements and values among emerging adults and the ability of the church to participate in a relevant manner with the needs of modern youth.

Affirmation of this tension does not suggest there are not or were not cohesive movements among African American Christianity, and an exhaustive account of African American spirituality is beyond the scope of this research. However, as we look for clues to how identity is formed among youth requires us to consider the theo-political movement of the black church during the civil rights era. The emphasis on societies or concerted efforts to keep the emerging generation “churched” are not found in any significant way when looking for youth ministry in the HBC. Youth ministry, in the form of a directed ministry to teenagers, is a present reality of many black churches, but it did not come about because churches were struggling with youth involvement. Until most recently, Black congregations tended to grow together as a deeply rooted intergenerational community that possessed an outward focus on the betterment of Black life. As Pahl (2000:74) interprets Gayraud Wilmore’s (1983) work, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*:

> By connecting Christian young people to congregations where people related to each other as kin, African American churches across America have empowered young men and women through congregational and direct social practices.

This concept of the kinship of congregational life and, by extension, youth has been a hallmark of youth ministry and black ecclesiology. By connecting youth to congregations that carry a concept of mutuality that comes from a kinship posture, African American churches engage the critical problems of young people through congregational spirituality but also social practice (Pahl 2000:74). The “youth problem”

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that the African American community faced in the 20th century was, and continues to be, civil rights, and brought the young together with other adult activists to secure basic rights for Black Americans. The movement to empower African Americans has often been a youth led movement. According to newspaper reports, the Silent Protest of 1917, considered the first civil rights march in the U.S., included approximately 800 young people (Morand 2020). This grew a generation of young ministers who saw the local congregation as the gathering place of the Black community, a community who can be galvanized in their God-given value and moved against the culture to secure equality and address the systemic realities of exploitation of African Americans. This work continues in the current decade to some degree, though many Black churches adopted hegemonic youth ministry practices as “youth problems” of poverty, gangs, drugs, violence, and teen pregnancy became a starker reality of many urban communities in the latter half of the 20th century as systemic racism forced African Americans into generational poverty and locked them in neighborhoods with limited resources and opportunities that were afforded to their white counterparts. The HBC became an oasis of community and familial connections to maintain the integrity of the black community and organize for black empowerment systemic equity.

Pahl (2000:74) traces the root of the modern expression of African American youth ministry to churches such as Bethel A.M.E. church in Baltimore which formed because free blacks in Baltimore were becoming Methodist yet found themselves restricted in the white congregations. The newly formed African Methodist Society took on the name Beth-el in 1785 and became a founding member of the African Methodist Episcopal denomination in 1816 (Bethel A.M.E. cf. Pahl 2000:74). I include Bethel due to the

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methodological template created that has been reflected in the youth ministry expression of many HBCs. Anchoring back to Savage, this is all with the understanding that there is no more a homogenous black praxis than there is a homogenous white praxis or even a homogeneous motivation, but it does allow us to consider how the identified problems of a community's context affect a church's ministry to or with youth. Pahl (2000:75) tracks Bethel's history as a center for abolitionist preachers, a station on the Underground Railroad, founders of Wilberforce University (the country's oldest Historically Black College) through its active participation in picketing and boycotting Baltimore stores that practiced racial discrimination and mobilized against the city of Baltimore to include black police officers on the force. All of these movements involved the young people at Bethel, though all would be intergenerational in nature. This is not to suggest that Bethel did not practice what had become a more traditional approach to youth ministry developed by the hegemony. From the 30s to the 50s Bethel youth were involved in youth ministries that involved Bible study, prayer, music, and socializing, but the climate of racial segregation and racial violence infused these gatherings with a significance that would not have been reflected by their white counterparts. As Lincoln and Mamiya (1990:241) assert, the emergence of the HBC as a centerpiece of African American development, equality, and excellence positioned the church as the most economically independent institution sector in the black community.

I have been particularly assisted by William Meyer's (1991) study on *Black and White Styles of Youth Ministry*. Meyer's comparison of a predominantly white church (St. Andrews, a large middle-class Presbyterian church) and a predominantly black church (Grace, a large middle class United Church of Christ congregation) uses the

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word “style” to describe the corresponding discoveries of praxis found in studied churches, however I would suggest that his study provides a framework that goes beyond style and addresses a practical theology discoverable within each congregation. The pastor of Grace also identifies the “kinship” model as driving their theology of practice and juxtaposed this perspective with what he describes as a “corporate model” favored in many denominations (Meyers 1991:99 cf. Pahl 2000:81). The use of the word corporate emphasizes the practice of professionalization of youth ministry that often results in a separate and parallel church made up predominantly of adolescents being served by a paid adult and adult volunteers. The result of this mentality often fosters an “’us’ vs. ‘them’ mentality and never the ‘we’ of the church; never the belongingness” (White 1991:109). Myers (1991:109) also reports the feeling of the youth workers being “trapped” in that parallel church and not with the church as whole and promotes a feeling of possessiveness on the part of the youth minister towards the youth ministry and the youth themselves. Grace’s model of kinship “centers on intergenerational, communal worship and the empowerment of adolescents who can critique the mainstream culture from a theological, African American stance” creating a situation where “every ordained minister, even Pastor Able, is intimately connected with at least one youth program” (Meyers 1991:109-110). Pahl’s (2000:81) reflection on Meyer’s work identifies the kinship model creating a population of youth that “have been welcomed as members of the community who belong, rather than as problems to be managed or children to be kept pure”. Note the harkening back to the concept of youth as problems to be managed and protected that developed within the parallel hegemonic imagination. African Americans would have been categorized as an “adolescent” culture

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in the philosophy of Hall and writers of the day noted above and thus locked out of the social consciousness that worked to improve the lives of young Americans in the early 20th century, resulting in the maintenance of the kinship model developed pre-emancipation. Meyers in his consideration of his work recognizes that African families were often separated so that the definition "families" had to stretch beyond the borders of blood in order to have communities of support. Enslaved Africans were eventually Christianized with the caveat that their baptism would not change their status as enslaved people (Bennett 1975:67). The development of "slave codes" clearly outlined what it meant to own people who were also Christians. Slave owners as well as those benefiting from systems of enslavement made it a crime to stand up straight and look a white man in the eye, beat drums, wear nice clothes, carry weapons, marry without permission and, even if married, could not protect their family from the whims of the enslaver. One of the codes included gathering in groups – the exception being church worship, so church became a place to organize, find safety in groups, and tend to one another. Within the DNA of this history, the Historic Black Church continued to be a central hub of black life. In this model, the church is seen as a central institution in the community, serving not only as a place of worship but also as a hub for social, political, and economic activities. It is a space where African Americans can gather to find support, strength, and inspiration in the face of a hostile hegemony. One of the key elements of the African American kinship model of church as it pertains to this research is the emphasis on community and collective identity. Understanding identity formation and how the church sees itself positioned in the world is critical to the question of how one forms into it. The church becomes a "kinship" or extended family, where members

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support and care for one another. Historically, the church has been a place where individuals can find a sense of belonging, acceptance, and love when the rest of society is not as kind. Hayes (2012:16) sees a “vital relationship between the life of the individual and that of his or her community.” She goes on to assert that the type of individualism as it has developed in Western society was unthinkable because an African is defined by his or her community and the roles that community sets before them. It is a vital union or bond that brings together not only the living – but ancestors that have gone on before (Hayes 2012:17). In that way, there is a confidence in the continuance of the community rather than merely personalized success. Individual successes are shared as communal successes. Individual struggles are shared as communal struggles. Barnes and Wimberly (2016:30) refer to this mindset as “village-mindedness” when it comes to the formation of youth. This “child-centered” approach recognizes the unique challenges of youth growing up in the current time vs. the world of parents or grandparents and develops a holistic approach that meets the needs of youth beyond Sunday school, choirs, and Bible studies and seek innovative ways to address those needs (Barnes and Wimberly 2016:33). This child centered focus and village-minded approach continues the tradition of kinship by suggesting that African American youth are “essential to the past, present, and future of the Black family, Black community, and broader society and that they are often vulnerable and should protected by these same groups” (Barnes and Wimberly 2016:10). This is not the same sense of protection that is intended by the desire to maintain a sense of innocence in childhood, but a gathering of the community to keep them connected to their cultural heritage and prepare them for thriving in the hegemonic society in which they will be entering.

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This is not to say that the kinship model does not emphasizes the importance of spirituality and faith in the lives of African Americans. Quite the contrary. African American worship continues to draw on the rich cultural heritage of African spirituality and incorporate elements of African traditions such as call and response, rhythmic music, and expressive worship styles often identified with the black church experience. Raboteau (1978:209) states that "slaves did not simply become Christians; the creatively fashioned a Christian tradition to fit their own freedom experience…" Furthermore, the African American kinship model of church often takes on a prophetic role within the community as we will discover with our exploration of West in the next chapter. The church becomes a space for organizing and empowering individuals as a communal force to work for equity in their communities as well as being what Barnes and Wimberly (2016:72) describe as "often the only educational stopgap for many African American youth to learn about their culture."

Looking through this lens, it is important to consider that the current conversations of youth societies, through the lens of Senter, Pahl, Kent, and others, and the succeeding exploration of the para-church movement is predominantly a white phenomenon. As we engage African American scholarship on village-mindedness and the role of the church in support of the Black community, a different historical understanding of "Black youth ministry" emerges on a parallel track that will enrich our understanding of the missional intent of the local congregation.

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3.5.1.4 Parachurch Youth Ministry

Senter identifies the next movement in the history of Protestant youth ministry among the white middle class as organizations that ran alongside but were independent of the local church. These organizations eventually found their methodology adopted in local churches and denominational offices, and being taught, largely without critique, for the rest of the 20th century. The uniqueness of these ministries in their earliest incarnations is the absence of the church or ecclesial accountability. This will be a paradigm shift from the efforts of the last generation such as Christian Endeavor and denominational societies.

Senter (2010:212) describes what is going on in the adolescent world as a "secularization" that impacted the effectiveness of the church-based movements that depended on church involvement and attendance in order to solidify the intended commitment and piety desired by ecclesial stakeholders. A "Baptist" or "Methodist" club would be limited in its effectiveness in a world where a growing number of teens no longer identify within those denominations. We will discuss the prominent players in the coming parachurch movement that dominated the middle of the 20th century, but there is a recognizable bridge in Evelyn McClosky's Miracle Book Club that cannot be denied as a watershed moment in the history of youth ministry in the United States. (Senter 2010:86)

3.5.1.5 Miracle Book Club

In 1939, Jim Rayburn, a student at Dallas Theological Seminary, began a chapter of the Miracle Book Club in Gainesville, TX. Bible clubs led by and for high school students

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were not unheard of in the early 20th century, but the Miracle Book Club was unique in the sense that it was an organization with a curriculum and regional directors. Senter observes that success of the Miracle Book club was so far reaching that it shows up in the records of club programs of Young Life and Youth for Christ, both of which changed the course of youth ministry for the next century.

What made founder Evelyn McClusky's Miracle Book Club a catalyst for a new movement, was the location and intent of the club itself. Miracle Book Club did not meet in a church or any particularly Christian location, but in "neutral" locations near the public high school. As high school students gathered in these locations, they were not introduced to a pledge-style call to Christian practice, rather McClusky's style was conversational invitations intended to meet four goals. The first goal for McClusky's club was personal salvation, followed by a realization of Christ's living in the students. This realization would then lead to the third goal of victorious Christian living and to the fourth goal of being Christian "conversationalists" who would repeat the process over with others (McClusky 1939:125). Senter (2010:86) also notes that McClusky's changed the youth led model to a more adult leader model and avoided the "red tape" of ecclesial accountability or approval. While there was a structure and leadership associated with the Miracle Book Club, it was the model itself that those concerned about the current youth problem of secularization could read about and easily adopt. This would lay the foundation of the parachurch movement that would experience rapid growth in the mid-20th century and dominate the youth ministry landscape.

The Miracle Book Club's style attracted Jim Rayburn and matched well with his own conversational style of preaching and his relational nature. Rayburn quickly became the

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most effective Miracle Book Club teacher as his Gainesville club grew from three to 123 members in 13 months, and he became the director of the Texas chapter. Rayburn was a charismatic speaker who built his clubs around his communication skills rather than around the strict curriculum of McClusky. However, the basic form of meeting in homes and inviting teenagers into a relational expression of Christianity, drawn from McClusky, is visible in the DNA of Young Life and countless para-church expressions throughout the 20th century.

3.5.1.6 The Young Life Campaign

In the spring of 1941, Rayburn folded the Texas clubs under the name "The Young Life Campaign," taken from a similar ministry in the U.K. with which he had come in contact. He had developed a leadership team and had the financial backing of Club Aluminum chairman Herbert J. Taylor of Chicago, following McCluskey's model of avoiding ecclesial limitations and finding direct support from wealthy businessmen who were concerned about the state of teenagers in America. While taking some of the methodology from Miracle Book Club, Rayburn's Young Life Campaign (later shortened to Young Life) was unlike any of the youth ministry movements before. It did not have Bible study as its central purpose (the primary departure from the Miracle Book Club), it was not denominationally based (such as the Baptist Young People's Union, Epworth League, Walther League, etc), and it was distinct from Christian Endeavor in that it did not meet at nor did it uniquely encourage the local church, and it required no pledges or commitments. It would continue the influence of McCluskey's model on the landscape of youth ministry by being completely adult leader driven, a departure from many of the

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youth societies across the country. In fact, student leadership was discouraged. The Young Life Leaders Manual from that time states:

> The Leader is it! A Young life Club does not begin and grow by a group of young people sending for materials and methods. It gets results as the LEADER meets his qualifications and is HIMSELF effective in conducting the meeting and teaching young people to do so (Taylor 1942).

In this way, it resembled more of a missionary effort on the part of adults to unchurched high school students across the country. Rayburn's attempt to solve the "youth problem" was not to raise the bar of Christian commitment, but to see these students as unaware of the Christian message altogether. This adult-driven approach was one of the many contributions to youth ministry that would shape efforts throughout the 20th century. "Earning the Right to Be Heard" would be a motto for Young Life's relational approach to evangelism, another recognizable contribution to 20th century ministry to teenagers. The incarnation as interpreted by Rayburn and Young Life leaders, meant that leaders must go to where the teenager they want to reach gathered and be present in teen spaces, such as their school, hangouts, etc. The forging of friendships and trust led to invitations to Young Life Clubs in the homes of high school students, where leaders would lead singing, games, skits, and a gospel message delivered as more of a "talk" than a sermon.

By 1945, Rayburn had secured the funding to purchase Young Life's first property, which started one of Young Life's most effective tools, its resort-style camping ministry where students left their communities to experience what Young Life describes as "the best week of their lives." The Young Life organization was so effective with what it was

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doing that within the first 15 years of the movement it had grown to over 400 clubs across the country. Young Life continues to this day with its own statistics suggesting an average of 369,000 students attending over 8000 clubs worldwide (Young Life Website).

3.5.1.6.1 History of Young Life

There is a need to explore this movement in the history of youth ministry because goes beyond phronesis. Young Life not only developed a new method of youth ministry but codified a new theology in the process. This is not to suggest that relationships were not part of ecclesial life prior to the formation of Young Life in 1941. Ward (1995:16) engages relational language when speaking about the mission of God – which he frames in the concept of vocation:

> Our vocation arises from our conviction that God invites us as Christian people to share in his relational care for the world. We build relationships with young people because we are Christians.

The success of Young Life is the capitalization of relational or "incarnational" ministry to the point that relationships become the entire point and drive not only the theology of Young Life, but the lifespan and imitation of Young Life in youth ministry around the world has made this the predominant theological thrust of modern American theology.

By way of disclosure, I should note that I served on Young Life staff as an Area Director from 2000-2008. I entered Young Life staff as a youth pastor who had been serving a fundamentalist Baptist church where the concern was raising the young within fundamentalist Christian doctrine. The church's facility (which included a basketball

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court) and the kindness and welcome of the adult volunteers became appealing to youth from the surrounding neighborhood, causing the group to grow to around 100 teenagers weekly. While there was a prepared youth “sermon” and an attempt to make things fun and relational which was greatly successful as far as teenagers were concerned, but not successful at all through the lens of the church. The church was, of course, happy with large numbers, but was not happy with the lack of formality in religious instruction or the behavior of the attending teenagers. The attending teenagers were not engaging in anything immoral or illegal, they were simply not behaving in an orderly fashion that reflected the desires of the older generations of the church. The church formerly requested that the youth ministry cease being open to teenagers from the neighborhood and would instead focus the attention on religious instruction of the children of attending families. This was when I was invited by a Young Life regional director to convert the work I was doing into a Young Life “area”.

I mention this because this research critiques a ministry of which I was an intimate part. Along with continuing in the style of ministry that I was already doing (relational), I was able to be part of a team of people I valued who were committed to excellence in youth ministry. The numerical successes they demonstrated seemed to indicate an effectiveness in their praxis. My experience and skill fit perfectly into the Young Life model, and I spent nearly 8 years as a vital part of Young Life region that included the state of New Jersey. I was able to grow a ministry, build multiple clubs, and develop leadership in my time with Young Life. They provided me a path out of the fundamentalism where I had been serving and I had many good years. My path with Young Life ended in the year that the “non-negotiables” were published (more on that

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below) and I began to vocally question Young Life's detachment from the local church or theological accountability. It was suggested that my path lie beyond Young Life. I hold no animosity toward Young Life, but academic accountability dictates that this history is disclosed. Their contribution to the theological conversation has nothing to do with my participation, but I have been able to have a unique insight that is contributive.

Young Life developed on a parallel track to the Youth for Christ movement started by Wyrtzen and replicated across the country. It should be noted that Wyrtzen's ministry that became known as Word of Life and what became known as Youth for Christ were also parallel movements. Shoon Tanis (2016:4) notes that this parallel track was assisted by what was already a growing evangelical orientation in the United States. This evangelical orientation was shaped by a growing democratic individualism and very optimistic views of human nature. The seed bed of evangelicalism vs a more conservative fundamentalism or the mainline church was a willingness to put into practice certain cultural trends, like radio, to move their message forward. Shoon Tanis (2016:5) further notes that youth movements that we will see in the 1930s and 1940s would not have been possible if not for the schism that took place between the fundamentalist and modernist churches of the 1920s. After the so-called "Scopes Monkey Trial" where fundamentalist national influence took a major blow, grew to engage society with a "new" Christianity that did not subscribe to the same narrow-mindedness. Suspicion of liberal theology coming out of Europe required a new American expression of Christianity that reflected American values and innovations – particularly those expressed in the growing new youth cohort. Smith (1998:9) notes the conspicuous nature of the conflict within culture. In some ways, fundamentalism was

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strong as an institution, but they were losing the battle of hearts and minds in American culture as they were perceived to have become “withdrawn, defensive, judgmental, factionalized, brooding, self-righteous, anti-intellectual, paranoid, and pessimistic.” This is fertile ground for a countermovement for, by, or among youth as there was now a need to strengthen Christianity outside the boundaries of the denomination. Young Life, and other youth ministries were part of these new counter movements (Shoon Tanis 2016:7).

Youth represented territory that needed pioneering by these new movements. Rayburn considered himself a pioneer of a new frontier (Shoon Tanis 2016:23). It was not merely religion that was invested in this new cohort. Economic prosperity and the emergence of this new market effectively reinforced the teenage subculture by creating products aimed at teenagers – either form what they liked or what marketers thought they should like based on adult perspectives on character building or wholesome living (Shoon Tanis 2016:17). Keeping in mind that within the cultural imagination, teenagers were awkward and vulnerable who were susceptible to raging hormones, insecurity, and fervent idealism (which often differed from the ideals of their parents) which exposed them to worldly temptations. They had to be protected from this adult world in which they were not ready to participate. The high school created this protected environment by providing a disciplined, wholesome, and adult-guided environment until they were ready to enter the adult world (Palladino:xv). Through this lens, we see a youth ministry movement that is looking to provide that same nurturing value with the addition of religious faith.

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It is this world where the son of a fundamentalist preacher, disillusioned with fundamentalism, contributed to a unique American theology. Root (2007:49) sees Rayburn as the inventor of the style of ministry that we have come to understand as relational ministry. I have no reason to disagree. Youth for Christ utilized the distinct youth culture (radio, pep rallies) in its methodologies, (Root 2007:49) but it was Rayburn's ministry that "addressed a new form and attitude toward relationships within society" (Shoon Tanis 2016:23). Rayburn's son, Jim Rayburn III spoke of his father's early perspectives when given the task of establishing a Sunday School: If you want to have anybody to show up, don't have it on Sunday and don't call it school" (Rayburn III 1999:27). But it was the work of Lewis Sperry Chafer that was the predominant influence on Rayburn. Coming from a strict fundamentalism, Chafer's perspective on the finality of the sacrifice of Christ where it pertains to sin was revolutionary to Rayburn (Rayburn III 1999:31-32). Pahl (2000:68) offers this as a contrast to the Youth for Christ movement that, while unitizing modern methods, were still subscribing to a set of doctrines and practices couched strict moral standards surrounding dancing, drinking, smoking, swearing, or attending movies, with a person's status before God. This continues to be the practice and perspective of Wyrtzen's Word of Life organization. Rayburn saw Chafer's teaching and writing as so liberative that he enrolled in Dallas Theological Seminary (started by Chafer) which is where the critical internship with Rev. Clyde Kennedy at the Gainesville Presbyterian Church began. Rayburn himself stated that "So far as I am concerned, personally, there would have been no Young Life work at all without Dr. Lewis Chaver's course in soteriology" (Rayburn III 1999:132). This newfound freedom meant to Rayburn that he could live in an expansive world that he

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did not know was available to him and he brought that spirit of freedom to his work with teenagers. Rayburn began with the Miracle Book Club, but felt much the same about Miracle Book Club that he did about Sunday School:

> If you want to see a bunch of sad apples, just have a meeting for kids who'll stay after school. I got the biggest selection of teachers' pets you ever saw, not a red corpuscle in the whole crowd. Everybody I wanted to reach was out on the football field, and everyplace else, right while we were having our club meeting. After nine months of that, I knew I had to try something else (Rayburn III 1999:44).

Rayburn's ministry grew very quickly, focusing on what Young Life began to call the "key kid", those kids out on the football field after school. Meetings were held at night in informal settings. The rallies of YFC and the tent meetings of his father were rejected by Rayburn as was the student led movement of the Miracle Book Club and the denominational efforts of the last movement of youth ministry. This was entirely new. Relational and incarnational ministry became the praxis of the Young Life Campaign (Shoon Tanis 2016:31).

The critique of this movement is that, to quote Root (2007:17) it was "formed from the material of cultural engagement rather that from the theological pillar of the work of the incarnate Christ in the world." This orthopraxy of relationships influenced the gospel that young life presents and one with which Young Life has wrestled in recent decades. If relationships are the gospel, how much "belonging" does one give to a teenager who has not exhibited faith? While Youth for Christ had a clear doctrinal statement upon its official organization in 1945, Young Life resisted any such formality until the mid-70s. Their methodology became their doctrine, their *orthopraxy*. Young Life adopted a basic

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evangelical statement of faith in 70's, but since the relational embodied presentation of the gospel is Young Life's existence (the soteriology of Chafer) there was limited understanding of the ramifications of this orthopraxy. This praxis theology was a part of the DNA of every Young Life leader but was not given any formal thought until 2007 and the work of the "non-negotiables" (Shoon Tanis 2016:60). I mentioned above my experience with Young Life and thus I was present for this movement to standardize the presentation of the gospel, in essence, Young Life's soteriology. The non-negotiables were controversial in Young Life and resulted in the departure of a number of staff, but they inform the impact of the formed theology of Young Life. I offer the non-negotiables to support the argument of how relational ministry impacted modern evangelical theology.

(Please note, most copies of the "non-negotiables" are unavailable. Young Life does not publish this paper and most copies from external websites have been removed. I have seen this document personally when I was on Young Life staff, though it is long been discarded. I am relying on the reprint of the non-negotiables in Gretchen Shoon Tanis' work "Making Jesus Attractive" though I affirm it's veracity. All references to the content of the negotiables are from Shoon Tanis while other commentary is noted.)

3.5.1.6.2 Young Life Non-Negotiables

1) We proclaim the Person of Jesus Christ in every message.

Why this is a unique distinction is that lays the foundation for the ultimate object of relationship – the person of Jesus. When Young Life speaks about the gospel, it is the person of Jesus to which they are referring. The paper says that "Our message is

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Jesus" and that every communication from a Young Life leader will contain a reference to Jesus. The first point quotes Rayburn: "First, we must stick to presenting Jesus Christ. There are all kinds of secondary things we could get involved in, but they aren't Young life's business. We are not going to 'major in minors,' but in the one all-important essential: that Jesus Christ is our greatest need, and that He's all we need."

2) **We proclaim the reality of sin and its consequences – that apart from divine grace, we are estranged from God by our disobedience and incapable of a right relationship with God.**

This of course presents sin as a relational issue. Shoon Tanis (2016:62) rightly points out that the document uses words like '*estrangement, alienation, lostness, separated, and purposelessness*' to represent humanity's condition along with legislative words like *guilty* and *condemned.* Adhering to the first non-negotiable, Jesus is also used in any proclamation of sin. In an, in my opinion, overreach of a Trinitarian framework, a violation of God is a violation of Jesus. Thus, when a teenager is confronted with the very attractive Jesus, it is the absence of that relationship due to the rebellion of the hearer that creates the deepest feelings of regret.

3) **We proclaim the crucifixion of Jesus Christ as the ultimate proof of God's love and the only solution to our problem of sin.**

In this statement, the cross is considered a "demonstration of the love of God (Romans 5:8)" and accomplishes our reconciliation whereby our relationship with God is restored. This substitutionary atonement is always to be presented from the gospel narratives and not through other passages of scripture since Jesus is the object of this

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relational theology. Other passages can be used as secondary support, but it is only the gospels that are used in the proclamation of the crucifixion.

4) We proclaim the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Very little time is given to supporting the resurrection, but the inclusion of the resurrection is crucial for a relational theology. Jesus is presented as the object of our friendship and affection so the crucifixion cannot be merely proprietary, it must provide opportunity to know the living Jesus, the center and substance of all Young Life proclamation. The lack of attention demonstrates a departure from a theological grounding of the resurrection as the power of God for the salvation of the world and Jesus as the “first fruits” of those that would rise again. Arguably, this demonstrates the lack of importance of immortality that Young Life perceives in the teenage experience. Clearly a departure from fundamentalist emphasis on eschatology or even the dispensationalism of Chafer. Of course, this argues that Young Life’s non-negotiables are an exercise in perceived practical theology, focusing on the importance of relationship to teenagers as opposed to the need to feel a confidence in a post-life experience that would have been a primary concern of the 1st century church. In all my years at Young Life, I never heard the gospel proclaimed as efficacious. The focus was always on the reunion of Jesus and his disciples and the implied invitation that was to come next.

5) We proclaim the risen Christ’s offer of salvation by inviting our high school, middle school, and college friends to confess Jesus and Lord and Savior.

It is this point that much of the controversy within (and outside of) Young Life rested. It answers the critical question of belonging within Young Life’s relational structure. The

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statement further states that “The sacrifice of Jesus, although sufficient for the salvation of the whole world, is only efficient for those who confess Jesus as Lord and respond in faith, appropriating Jesu’ death and resurrection for themselves.” This finds its echo in what Andrew Root (2005:58) identified as the “self-chosen relationship” that lays the foundation for Young Life praxis and subsequent theology. This is an invitation to a relationship with the living Jesus with whom they have no relationship and do not have the opportunity for relationship without responding to the atonement of Christ by faith. It is in this fifth point that Young Life received the most theological pushback both from within and without. Leaders were very concerned that this message betrayed the orthopraxy of belonging that they lived out every day. Incarnational ministry seemed to indicate, and Young Life leaders demonstrated, that the gospel was the “already belonging” of the presence of Jesus. That when they entered the world of teenagers, it was to excite them toward a way of living in the joy of the Spirit of God, not to bring them to the point of deciding if they belonged. Christian Smith argued that it seemed like a move toward a more corporate fundamentalism (Asay 2008) and Tony Jones (2008) suggested that Young Life is “worried about the influence of neo-orthodox theology, and they are thus battening down the hatches on a certain type of conservative, Reformed orthodoxy.” Smith goes on to further suggest to Shoon Tanis (2016:68) via emailed communication that this statement is a reflection of the American culture’s “captivity to the rational choices of autonomous individuals to make contractual agreements as the basis of valid relationships.” My goal in offering the critique of this statement is not to weigh in as a soteriological statement is beyond the scope of this research. This controversy is offered to highlight how a praxis developed into orthopraxy which

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became an embedded theology. Young Life's insistence on the personal relationship with Jesus as a "self-chosen relationship" (Root 2005:58) allowed for the feelings of intimacy and importance that were lacking in a mechanized society where people became cogs in an industrial or corporate wheel. Of course, this message of personal salvation was also central to the message of Billy Graham who grew his evangelistic empire on the theology of personal salvation – which would be the key to personal happiness and the salvation of our national way of life.

6) **We proclaim God's call to discipleship by encouraging all who respond to grow in their faith.**

Of course, this is relational as well. The focus is to be "part of the church and make a difference in the world." This is not expected to be an individual pursuit but one that is done with others. Membership in a local church is not the logical product of this, but simply the seeking out of other believers. Within Young Life this happens in the Campaigner meetings – the weekly Bible study led by a Young Life leader. This is a reflection of the DNA of 20th century youth ministry and the suspicion of the institutional church that was the soil that grew Young Life. Young Life is highly skilled at presenting Jesus as a compelling figure and encourages a life that reflects evangelical values, but it does not require engagement with an intergenerational body of cultivated spiritual wisdom. The negotiables end with a stated desire that Young Life remains faithful to Scripture and their collective understanding of Biblical truth. This is also a key component of American evangelicalism – the belief that all believers negotiate their spiritual path directly from the scriptures.

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The non-negotiables of Young Life not only provide theological insight into the organization, but it also provides a guide to the continuum upon which teenagers are guided and a theological framework that guides their future faith development. It is the direct access to Jesus that forms the foundational framework of all those who are formed within Young Life. Shoon Tanis (2016:77) quotes former Young Life president Bill Starr: “This is why we try in every way to introduce kids to the Person, not the Faith or to Christianity, but to Jesus Christ. We believe meeting Him is central to all the rest of living. The ultimate Friend. The supreme meaning that keeps life from being absurd.” This places every believer outside the territory of developed theology and corporate wisdom. Each have direct access to Jesus and while corporate growth is encouraged, there is a tacit resistance to intellectual or formulated theology. The entire point of young life orthopraxy is a personal, self-chosen relationship with Jesus.

3.5.1.6.3 Critique

In January 1960, *Time* magazine carried a rebuke from 5 protestant ministers regarding Young Life’s practice and their message.

> Young Life is, in effect, a separate teenage church, financed and directed by adults who are not answerable to any local group. We believe its outlook is too narrow, and that its emotional effect is eventually damaging to young people most attracted by its appeal. The leaders tend in the direction of fundamentalism. They give easy answers to life’s most difficult problems (Time 1960).

Young Life’s lack of relationship to the local church has resulted in the criticism that they produce spiritual orphans who look back on their Young Life days with fondness or

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a week of camp as “the best week of their life” (this is Young Life’s self-description of camp). The lack of connection to a local church can easily result in feelings of disconnection and an inability to find the church to be anywhere near their Young Life experience. If youth are not nurtured within the embodied wisdom of a local congregation and invited to grow within and alongside in collaboration with others who are growing as followers of Jesus, it is very difficult to establish a collaborative relationship later in life (often after college).

While this is a lengthy presentation of one organization in a chapter on the history of youth ministry, the impact of Young Life and the soil of evangelicalism that gave it birth and who Young Life, in return, affirmed cannot be understated. Young Life’s history goes from having a method to participating in developing a uniquely American theology steeped in individualism, personal choice, and American idealism. It is from Young Life and Youth for Christ that the next stage of youth ministry is born – the youth pastor – which will have further exploration below.

3.5.1.7 Youth For Christ

The Young Life Campaign was not the only unintended offspring of McCluskey’s work. Youth for Christ, which I mentioned above developed on a parallel track to Young Life, also finds its roots with McClusky and the weekend rally ministry of Jack Wyrtzen in New York City. Wyrtzen’s contributions to the stream of youth ministry in the U.S. are significant. Wyrtzen’s rallies grew and became Wyrtzen’s Word of Life International. Like Rayburn, WOL purchased property in Schroon Lake, NY a camp that is attended by hundreds of teens each summer. WOL continues to be in service to this day, though

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it is not it's continuance that is significant but the emergence of a new model that is built in response to cultural development that is significant. Wyrtzen had popularized large gatherings of young people in public locations, such as Times Square and Madison Square Garden, to hear gospel music and enthusiastic preaching. Wyrtzen's own conversion and early faith journey represented the teen that this new parachurch movement was designed to reach. His parents were Universalists, but Wyrtzen himself did not affiliate with any church on a consistent basis. As a result, when he experienced a Christian conversion, he didn't turn to a church, but rather to a group of friends who called themselves Chi Beta Alpha, which eventually grew into Word of Life Fellowship. By bypassing the established church, Wyrtzen became the leader of a movement that capitalized on charismatic preaching and the new medium of radio from which he broadcast his Saturday night rallies (Senter 2010:261). Senter (2010:260) also reminds us of the bridge of influence on Wyrtzen and new style of ministry emerging by taking us to Percy Crawford and his "Young People's Church of the Air." Crawford's use of radio to perfect his place as the "master of the seven-minute sermon" forced another change on youth ministry. In radio, "dead air" would cause a listener to turn the dial elsewhere, so Crawford developed a face paced and engaging style where there was very little lag time. This became highly influential on sermons and talks directed at youth for generations to come (Senter 2010: 261). This style of ministry, engaging and entertaining radio programs broadcast from large "rallies" was replicated across the country and became known as "Youth for Christ" rallies appearing in major metropolitan areas across the country.

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Youth for Christ rallies were built on the same premise as the popular high school pep rallies held across the country that were designed to get school communities excited for an upcoming football game. Similarly, Youth for Christ rallies used a pep rally format to engage teenagers around the Christian message. In fact, an apt description of the YFC movement would be "pep rallies for Jesus." While Youth for Christ was a national movement, it was not an organized movement at this stage. A few of its leaders in various cities organized their efforts into Youth for Christ offices: Chicago and Kansas City being the most notable. Harold Fey (1945), who was a contributor for The Christian Century, attended a Chicago rally held at Chicago's vast Solder Field. His observation of the whole message of the YFC movement was:

> *Give your heart to Christ. Conversion is not explained, but is made to seem very urgent, absolutely necessary. At a given time in every meeting a person is asked to raise his hand or to stand. Later he is given a copy of the Gospel of John and asked to read it. There are vague suggestion that he should join a church if he can find one which is "true to the Book." …He is told that he should continue to attend YFC meetings and that he should "witness for Christ." This witness consists in getting other people to attend meetings or inviting the person next to him to "give his heart to Christ*.

Torrey Johnson, who headed up the Chicago efforts, was instrumental in nationalizing Youth for Christ as an organization in 1944 with young evangelist Billy Graham as the first staff member, who had been hired primarily to preach at large-scale rallies and on the radio.

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Metzker was the president of the Youth for Christ work in Kansas City and was being pressed by a high school senior who had concerns that rallies were not sufficient tools to do the work of discipleship. Taking advantage of YFC vice president Jack Hamilton's recent call for Metzker to come to YFC full time, Metzker (who also served as KC director of the Miracle Book Club) was hired to infuse the in-home discipleship model of Evelyn McClusky and incorporate it into the work of Kansas City Youth for Christ. We continue to return to McClusky and her undeniable influence in what became the standard of youth ministry in America.

Hamilton's requirement was that he had to raise his own salary, which also continues to be a model of parachurch youth work into the 21st century. While many churches support parachurch workers, staff support largely comes from individuals, especially people of means. This can be seen in the Young Life model as well. Young Life was able to bypass local churches by gaining the financial support of businessmen like Herbert J. Taylor and theological educators at Wheaton College and Fuller Seminary, a strategy repeated by countless para-church youth workers throughout the modern era (Senter 2010).

3.5.1.8 Youth Specialties and Group Magazine

By the 1960's, churches had begun to adopt the practices and methodology of the parachurch movement, co-opting them from an evangelistic endeavor into whatever the core rationale of each church happened to be. Youth Pastors, who were a more recent component on a church's staff, were becoming more commonplace, and new publications like Youth Specialties and Group Magazine emerged as influential guides

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for Youth Pastors and other staff. These two publications were instrumental in developing how the church understood youth ministry in the latter half of the 20th century.

As we have discovered, youth ministry in the 20th century was a cycle of a philosophy or methodology that developed outside of the church, which then co-opted methodologies and foundational beliefs of the competing realities of parachurch work. One of the most successful examples of this was the rise of Group and Youth Specialties, both periodicals were designed to give church youth ministries the tools to create a parachurch style of work in the church.

In 1968, Youth Specialties founders Rice and Yaconelli, packaged some of the ideas they had used as YFC staff and sold them to churches in a 52-page manual they simply called “Ideas” (Senter:2010:250). The initial run was quite popular, and they followed up in 1969 with Ideas Vol 2. With these, the 20th century youth ministry resource juggernaut of Youth Specialties was born. Ideas took the concept of co-opting the methodologies of para-church organizations to a whole new level when many of the resources published (and copyrighted) by Youth Specialties were practiced by Youth for Christ and other para-church organizations of the time. This is not to suggest plagiarism by Rice or Yaconnelli, but rather to note that Youth Specialties represented a marketing turn in youth work that opened the door to the professionalization and entrepreneurship that would characterize much of the youth work in the next three decades. Youth Specialties as a company grew quickly, hosting their first National Youth Workers Convention in 1970, which at its peak eventually hosted thousands of youth workers at bi-coastal events. Attending these events became an annual tradition for many professional youth

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pastors and church volunteers alike and were a tour stop for big name Christian artists and publishers seeking to sell to the larger youth ministry market.

Similarly, in 1974, Thom Schultz, a youth pastor in Loveland, Colorado, took the concept of getting ideas into the hands of churches and put it into magazine form; thus, forming Group Magazine (Senter 2010:251-252). The wide appeal of Group was the gathering of ideas, much like Youth Specialties, but without adherence to a particular brand. With a subscription to Group, youth pastors could receive a monthly volume of curated games, skits, bible studies, and articles designed to equip the church youth worker. By the next decade, Group Magazine had a circulation of 57,000. Group went beyond the magazine by creating experiences for church ministries to attend with their group. Group Workcamps filled the niche of providing a mission trip experience for teens as well as conventions and gatherings in different forms. Unlike the National Youth Workers Conventions which were designed for adult leaders, Group events were designed to be large gatherings of teenagers complete with rally-style meetings (radically modernized) and small group experiences.

As the “business” of youth ministry grew, I argue that the hegemonic church in the United States adopted the assumption that a growing and healthy church would have a professional youth pastor (a truly successful church would have a high-school pastor and a middle-school pastor), volunteers, a healthy budget to purchase available materials, and a full slate of activities in which youth could participate. A well-rounded youth ministry calendar would always include youth group, small groups, mission trips, before school prayer meetings, service projects, lock-ins, and even a separate worship that ultimately represented a “youth church” concept. While arguably well intentioned,

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this research argues that the "departmentalizing" of adolescents in churches assured a growing gap between the youth and the rest of the church. Yet it also tacitly created a Christian standard of ministry that excluded lower income communities and communities of color who functioned quite differently.

3.5.2 The Absent African American Voice

Senter (2010:311) admits in the epilogue that his book largely ignores youth ministry as expressed in the African American community.

> More than perhaps any other church's form of youth ministry, the black church has resisted the temptation to place young people in their own little silos.

This starkly dissatisfying summary of the ministry to youth practiced by the Historical Black church in the United States does not suggest cause to the lack of growth of a unique youth ministry industry within the African American community. This does not mean that churches in the African American context did not give attention to their young people. It is quite the contrary. As noted above, Barnes and Wimberly describes Black theology as being "child centered." That said, Barnes and Wimberly interpret this quite differently than the predominantly Caucasian church. To be child-centered in the approach to ecclesiological practices and faith formation praxis argues that the church takes the raising of the incoming generation seriously and gives attention to the whole child (Barnes and Wimberly 2016:2). This runs in contrast to Mercer's (2005:118-121) consideration of the marketing or commodification of childhood that makes hegemonic children's programming seem child-focused. Her critique suggests that "while religious educators consistently have focused considerable attention on children, much of that

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work has taken the form of ideas about how to work with children educationally at different age levels to nurture their faith, rather than offering a sustained conversation about the theological meanings of childhood" (Mercer 2005:120-121). I suggest that there is a lack of historical writing on youth ministry in the Black community due to the practice of kinship that places the young within the community. This communal praxis is central to the ecclesiology of the Black church. This support flows from West African concepts of extended family and kinships which were violently challenged by the practice of slavery, which might sell family members to unknown places around the country. The church emerged as a new family that existed for those who were constantly being uprooted. Smith (1985:25) suggests that the Black family was able to survive slavery because of "its adaptability to change and its extended (rather than nuclear) structure.".

Fred Oduyoye, in a recent interview, described the function of the Historical Black church's faith formation practice up to the latter half of the 20th century as one of generations passing faith through tradition and the emotional connectedness of this extended family. There were no "youth groups" or specific youth programming. Instead, the young learned how to do church by participating with adults who were serving in functions such as ushers, worship leaders, etc. As Oduyoye puts it, there was a sense of "we all."

Oduyoye's argument is affirmed by Stewart (1985:25) who suggests that comfort with the nature of being African American and commitment to the interpersonal relationships that are key to their survival is vital to growth and health of the African American Church. During the time of the explosion of the industry of youth ministry in

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the largely white church world, the Historically Black Church continued to forge relationships and confront a much different youth problem than attrition, as the youth problems faced by the African American community were those forged by the systemic inequality of American life. This is reflected in Barnes and Wimberly (2016:2) as the "village-mindedness" of the Black church. Their theory of being "village-minded" is a observation that a village minded church meets more than the religious appetites of a young person but is an ecosystem that works for the equity and vibrancy of the whole person. This, of course, happens in greater or lesser degrees depending on the church. Clearly, the surrounding hegemony was not going to work toward Black greatness or establish a theology that embraced an honored the Black body, so the onus was on the church to educate, care for their own poor, and organize for social change.

This is clearly visible in the 1950's and 60's when the church was often the organizing body for social action. The lines between the church and organizations such as the NAACP, Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, were non-existent. Marches and demonstrations were led by ministers, often organized within a local church, and fueled by youth and young adults. Of course, this is not a univocal representation of the praxis of the Historic Black Church. As we can read in Joseph R. Washington Jr.'s (1964:143–150) angry critique of African American churches, not all churches expressed kinship in terms of civil rights. Washington observed an "inward turning" of the Black kinship traditions that overemphasized the struggle for justice and was divorced from universal Christian traditions and lacking a theological foundation that united it with the greater Christian Church. Washington's (1964:149) critique argued that the church's had become

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distracted by "working together to pursue and achieve equal rights and opportunity for each and all." However, the concept of kinship and intergenerational connection to the causes driving local church mission forged a formation praxis that did not isolate youth but invited emerging adults to take their place in the larger community and the struggle for freedom.

Statistically, African American churches did not experience decline until the beginning of the 21st century, when there became a noticeable slip in the numbers of young people staying with the church. I suggest that a part of this slippage is the normalization of hegemonic youth ministry praxis within the African American church that started as the Millennials were entering youth groups and African American leaders were being trained in more "white" styles of youth ministry. Oduyoye himself was part of a coalition of African American youth leaders from large churches in various urban centers that were invited to Willow Creek Community Church in Barrington, Illinois for an introduction to the industry and practice of youth ministry in the resource rich suburban expressions. African American leadership became visible in Youth Specialties and organizations like Young Life began expanding their brand into urban centers creating "Young Life Urban." When asked about the perceived results of this expansion of youth ministry thought into the African American community, Oduyoye was frank about the positive effects of building cross-cultural relationships and being more welcome into larger rooms of youth ministry conversations, but the loss to churches is certainly felt. As exposure to the wider world crept into the Black community, even with positive effects, the familial ties to the local church diminished. Without these emotional ties to a local church, African American youth began to make non-traditional choices of

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attending large suburban churches, non-traditional worship centers, or no church at all. Mitchell (2018:105) in his work, Black Millennials and the Church, notes additionally that the Black church's relationship to the LGBTQIA+ community and slowness in adopting digital spaces has further alienated a generation who now exist in a diverse and global connectivity. In many ways, the millennial generation in the U.S. has more in common cross-culturally than their earlier counterparts had with different cultures throughout U.S. history.

A similar trajectory can be seen in the Latinx faith community. Crane (2003:128) calls Latinx churches "communities of memory" where shared Christian traditions keep spiritual harmony in the home and provide links to their ancestral heritage. Through the traditions and language of the church, Spanish-speaking communities in the U.S. can avoid what Crane (2003:128) identifies as "dissonant acculturation", the dissipation of cultural and familial connectivity by assimilation into the dominant culture. For non-dominant and immigrant cultures in the U.S., the church (or other religious tradition) exists as a place in which to practice cultural identity. When emerging generations identify outside of the cultural expressions of their ancestors and do not see their own values reflected in the beliefs and practices of the church, they no longer see themselves as vital to or with the church and are no longer driven to be engaged. The 21st century church must reconnect with its own sense of purpose and mission in the world.

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3.6 Summary

The early 21st century story of faith in the U.S. involves a sense of disconnectedness from the values, traditions, and beliefs of the stakeholders of earlier generations. The 20th century was filled with experiments by the church to engage kids and solve the "youth problem" as each generation's social location-defined morality. Early in these efforts, as a new "youth class" was being created by industrialization and given a sociological lens by Hall, the effort was centered around pledges to provide a moral compass to this emerging generation. As the country grew the wealth of the middle class, pledges morphed into programming that intended to engage this new youth culture emerging from public high schools with high energy rallies and the modern medium of radio. On a parallel track, Jim Rayburn was developing a new form of ministry that tapped into the felt needs of the American teenager in regard to relationships over theology. The success of Young Life and the perfect storm of American individualism and an American ideal led to not only the formation of a new kind of youth ministry, but the formation of a methodological doctrine of relational soteriology that has become deeply embedded in the cultural imagination of the American church.

In the latter half of the century, to solve the problem of discipleship, parachurch organizations moved to smaller group clubs and the church began to adopt parachurch strategies *en masse* through the efforts of organizations such as Youth Specialties and Group, making "Youth Group" style ministry into a mainline and evangelical norm. Many of the early youth pastors were trained and experienced in the methodology and orthopraxy of Young Life and Youth for Christ and brought this sensibility to churches all

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across the country. This style ministry was largely limited to wealthier, white congregations who had the fiscal means to hire staff, attend camps and events, and purchase resources. African American churches and Latinx churches continued to practice a "whole church" faith formation that effectively kept their church communities stable until the last decade of the 20th century and the rise of the millennials. This approach seemed to provide additional clues to the research question considered. The 20th century response to adolescents resulted in a segregation of the teenage cohort and the creation of a sub-culture that did not integrate with the larger adult community as contributive agents. This history begins to demonstrate a pattern of exclusion that exists in stark contrast to the communal praxis of the HBC.

As the church enters the 21st century, there is a shared crisis where lack of connectivity to a local Christian community has caused a severe attrition that threatens the relevance of the traditional mainline and African American church in the United States. Arguably, the dialogue between the African American, Latinx, and mainline Caucasian faith formation practices will allow us to consider how to guide the 21st century American church into an age of multiculturalism, digital connectivity, and polarization. In order to accomplish this and avoid simple solutions, it is critical to develop a foundational theology as another "text" to inform a practical theology of adolescent formation that can attend to the question of generational attrition at hand.

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4 Engaging Ecclesiology as Inclusive and Missional.

4.1 Introduction

Our stated problem is that of the attrition experienced by the mainline hegemonic church in the United States and trying to understand the root causes and a way forward from a practical theological perspective. The statistical data backs up the empirical observation that the U.S. church has lost significant influence and place among younger generations. That this attrition continues to increase regardless of the quality of the publications or professionalism of those entering the field of youth work. An examination of the historical development of adolescent theory and subsequent reaction of the church in the development of youth programming has been informative. It is critical that we take some time to explore the theoretical so we can avoid the cycle of simply trying to find another method to address the problem. I have become convinced that there is something deeper at work which Root (2021:5) references as a congregational depression. There is a malaise in being the church that has stemmed from the growing absence of youthful energy and participation. In all the interviews conducted and nearly all the conversations that I have had with church leadership and congregants, there is an overwhelming depression that is affecting not just a concern about the state of emerging generations, but a deepening malaise toward their very sense of mission. Root (2021:7) identifies the modern roots of depression as "despondency, a feeling that you just couldn't find the energy to keep pace." Olson (2008:162) sounded the alarm 15 years ago (pre-pandemic, pre-Trump) that the American church was dealing with three critical transitions: Christian to post-Christian, modern to postmodern, and monoethnic

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to multiethnic. His premise was that the church was finding it challenging to keep up with the changes then, calling them “dangerous and uncharted” (Olson 2008:165). We must note that Olson’s observations were a call to address cultural change that did not include the changes brought in how we live and work because of COVID-19 or the deepening political divide in America that has greatly affected religious life. Root (2021:63,71,123) reflecting on those cultural changes also identifies new areas of cultural shift: technological acceleration, changes in our social life and institutions, and the general pace of life. This affirms Jacober’s (2011:17) assertion that “the questions that plague adolescents are constantly changing, as much as the adolescents themselves”. My departure with Jacober (2011), as well as many modern theological interpretations of adolescence (see discussion of Kirgiss), is the limitation of those questions to adolescence. I affirm the uniqueness and intensity of the liminal stage, as is demonstrated below, but I approach that uniqueness as a prophetic gift of the church that requires inclusion rather than a problem that the church needs to face to protect institutional integrity. I believe that these issues that are affecting the church in America are intrinsically interwoven with our sense of mission and how we include emerging generations in that mission. The goal is to have adolescents find their identity within the ecclesia as the ecclesia is discovering their identity in God.

The 20th century found the American church developing bespoke ministry to adolescents and commissioned volumes of research on the subject, but with very little demonstrable impact. This research suggests that the issue is systemic and ecclesiological rather than programmatic or even pedagogical. It is critical to consider the relevant and recent research as it pertains to not only what is being learned about

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adolescence itself, but the contribution of scholars who consider youth ministry in an ecclesiological context. Without a grounded theological understanding of the place of youth in the life of the church, we might conclude that we are merely in need of more attractive youth programming or better trained or skilled youth ministry professionals. However, there is something deeply theological that we must consider when critiquing 20th century praxis. As it has been argued above, the church seemed to predominantly address the "problem" of youth and the cultural pitfalls surrounding them, but not the theological contribution of youth to the life and growth of the *ecclesia*. This followed the hegemonic imagination of the liminal stage of human development as being fraught with danger and in need of protection.

In this chapter, scope will be broadened from merely programmatic youth ministry, as discussed historically in the previous chapter, to consider the theological understanding of the mission and work of the whole church, of which a vital component is the ministry with and alongside youth. The problem being addressed in this research is the problem of attrition in the mainline church and we must root the conversation with clarity in the ecclesiological underpinnings, coupled with the current understanding of human development in the stage known as adolescence. The primary lens may very well be the attrition problem in the U.S. context, but as the literature is considered in the following chapter, the voices are intentionally diverse culturally and ethically, as well as in terms of gender diversity, to address a praxis that is highly influenced by euro-centric values and perspectives, and reflective of a time in the past rather than an engagement with what God currently is doing in the church. As a result, conclusions from the literature will neither be prescriptive nor conclusive where praxis is concerned Instead

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gives us a framework of thinking to allow for a more fluid and engaged ecclesiology that invites each new generation to the conversation.

We will form this piece of our ecclesiological puzzle by engaging Dr. Malan Nel. His work (Nel 2018) will serve to build a solid foundation of missional ecclesiology from which to work. Nel's work gives us a solid grounding in missional and trinitarian thought that argues for the inclusion of youth in the mission and practice of the whole church, steeped in an understanding of the nature of the church and not simply the challenges of adolescence. Root furthers this theological grounding through a lens of Christopraxis, allowing us to see our communal life and intersectionality, which includes the whole of the church, as critical to our understanding of God. This will be supported by de Kock and Norheim's (2022) recent volume addressing the theological questions vital to youth ministry. We will also be returning to Nel for a deeper consideration of identity formation both of and within the church, relying on his development of the concept of an identity-driven church.

Critical to the scope of this work will be the engagement of African American scholars. We will engage several scholars who will provide a different theological lens from which to consider youth. Barnes and Wimberly provide a foundation of "village-mindedness" in African American praxis which is corroborated by Myers' study in 1991 comparing the youth ministry work of a white church and a Black church in the United States which we addressed in the discussion of history above. A recent article in *The Atlantic* by Tim Keller (Keller 2023) suggests that an answer to the steep decline in mainline church attendance in the United States is to engage the theology of the historic

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Black Church and the ability the church hold both “righteousness and justice” together in their ecclesiological life. On the other hand, the hegemonic church in America tends to choose one or the other, with the evangelical church focusing on righteousness leading to hard-right leaning tendencies and Christian Nationalism and the mainline church focusing on social issues, lending itself to activism that struggles with the development of personal piety. I have become convinced that this intersectionality will contribute to the ecosystem of an inclusive ecclesiology by helping us include the context and contribution of African American youth to the discussion. It is worth clarifying the inclusion of race in this discussion of developing a theology of adolescent inclusion particularly when doing so through the lens of the U.S. context.

I will then place West (2014) and Osmer (2008) in dialogue surrounding the concept of the prophetic office. West will be a bridge from the foundational discussion of the practice of the Black church to Osmer’s consideration of the prophetic nature of practical theology. While not specifically about youth ministry, West offers us a way to consider the voice of a human cohort in a prophetic manner. For our purposes in this research, we can not only translate this perspective to the teenage cohort, which is arguably a cohort created by the rejection of the larger hegemony and is how Borgmann (1997:72) suggests that sub-cultures are formed, albeit significantly less violently than African Americans. I will be relying on the concept of the prophetic office that Osmer (2008) introduces in his Introduction to Practical Theology to provide a definition of what is meant by “prophet.” I believe it is helpful to engage the prophetic voice to free us so that we may consider a dynamic theology rather than a static theology dominated in western thought. My arrangement of the literature intends to build toward an inclusive

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theology of youth ministry that suggests a praxis that goes beyond static catechesis toward a recognition of youth ministry as theological work done with adolescents in what might be termed as a dynamic catechesis.

With the guidance of this foundation, we will critique two of what I believe are misalignments of ecclesiological praxis – the church as a religious educational institution and the church as the moral instructor and institutional preserver. I believe these two ecclesiological misalignments, combined with the hegemonic imagination of adolescence as an underdeveloped and irresponsible cohort, created much of what we have come to rely on as youth ministry praxis and need to be addressed and critiqued.

We will finish this chapter asking how we might find a theological core for youth ministry with Scanlan's (2021) work on interweaving ecclesiology as a possible approach for re-envisioning youth ministry as a vital component of our theological and missional work. This work will be coupled with de Kock and Norheim's development of five critical questions for youth ministry.

4.2 Engaging Ecclesiology

I want to begin this section with an understanding of why I believe a conversation regarding ecclesiology is vital to the development of our practical theology of adolescence and the development of a more thorough and effective approach to youth ministry. If contextual developments such as industrialization, concepts of adolescence, fears of a changing world, etc. led us to the creation of an approach to youth ministry that changed course from communal formation, then we must concede that there is a problem with our understanding of the nature and mission of the church and the role of

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teenagers within it. I will attempt to build a case for a reconsideration of our ecclesiology to include teenagers as vital participants in a process of communal formation or identity formation and a missional life. For this work I will be relying on the work of practical theologians writing in the field, particularly Nel, Osmer, de Kock, Norheim, and Root, to help us reconsider our perspectives and emerge with a more integrated approach to who the church is and who the church includes.

4.2.1 Hermeneutical understanding of the church and mission

Nel (2018:19) frames our foundational understanding of how our ministry to youth must begin with a clear understanding of the nature of the church and the nature of the church's mission in the world by suggesting that youth ministry is deeply theological because we "participate in something God is doing, caring for and loving children, adolescents and young adults, helping them discover life and the life abundant." Nel (2018:19) makes the argument that in doing so we are "doing theology" when we are doing youth ministry because youth ministry itself is "deeply theological." This continues to argue for the repairing of the autonomous breach between youth ministry and the larger church as Borgman (1997:7) questioned 25 years ago.

> Is theological reflection about young people and the youth culture merely the application of a theology codified in the sixteenth century or is in the arena in which exciting theology is now being done?

Traditionally, Youth Ministry and catechesis (Christian education) were treated as separate entities, with the latter being theologically grounded while Youth Ministry was often viewed as incidental or unofficial (Nel 2018:19). I concur with Nel's (2018:21)

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theological and contextual point of departure that the research presented here clearly demonstrates that there are more than enough reasons to see youth ministry as a vital component of a comprehensive ministry that includes catechesis (often expressed as a youth group or confirmation course) as a key component of the overall ministry of the whole church. The current described “crisis of attrition” mentioned above calls us to reimagine youth ministry in a more comprehensive and theological manner that integrates an updated understanding of adolescence with a holistic and missional view of ecclesial life. It is worth restating what I demonstrated in chapter 2 that youth ministry, as we understand it today, was not part of the ecclesial fabric of western society before the Industrial Revolution (Nel 2018:21). They are critical to the theological discourse of the church rather than considered “banks” (to borrow language from Freire 2018:72) to pour static theological knowledge into. Taking youth seriously as theological subjects is essential for the development of a viable practical theology of youth ministry – or of the youth themselves. I fully agree with Nel’s (2018:22) suggestion to consider all ages as theological participants with children as philosophers and youth as prophets – which I will discuss more below. I consider this the vital starting point of the needed transformation of our ecclesiology toward a comprehensive missional approach. This does not reduce the value of youth ministry as an essential aspect of church life, but it does invite us to design youth ministry from a proper theological foundation. The root of theological inquiry is our perspective of theology being “static” or “dynamic” or what de Kock and Norheim (2022:10) reference as a “liquid” approach vs. a static approach, a term they expanded on from Ward (2017). Ward (2017:78), while not speaking directly about youth ministry as de Kock and Norheim (2022) do, suggests that a complicating

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factor in theological construction is that "lived cultural forms" are different than the "doctrinal work in the academy or even the pulpit." Doctrinal theory formed within the academy alone, or what might be considered a "biblical" theology, does not require the reflexivity of how the church is "making itself in culture." A static approach to our theological inquiry on the nature and work of the church will simply look for prescriptive texts to inform the behavior of the church in the 21st century (or any century).

In 2022, I found myself in a debate with a presenter at a gathering of church leadership trainers regarding what it means to "thrive" as a congregation. The presenter took the audience to Acts 2:42-47:

> They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved (Acts 2:44-47 from the New American Standard Bible Revised Edition).

The presenter was suggesting this was a prescriptive, "static" call to certain behaviors of a thriving church; namely 1) devotion to apostle's teaching 2) fellowship, 3) sharing of communion, 4) prayer, 5) sharing of goods, 6) generosity, 7) praising God.

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Not to argue with the good of these suggestions, but a hermeneutic that does not recognize the unique situation of the first church will miss the important understanding that their praxis flowed from the shared belief of the imminent return of the resurrected and ascended Christ and the circumstances of being a first century Jew in Jerusalem. If these are facets that make up a congregation acting in the fullness of the call of the kingdom of God, are we to assume then that the *missio Dei* does not address systemic racism or rampant gun violence in the United States? Does the church provide no theological understanding to the opioid crisis or to the high suicide rate of LGBTQ teens?

The first century Jerusalem church developed a contextual ecclesiology that reflects an intersection between the realities of their cultural life and the revelations of the events surrounding the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. We even have guidance within the biblical record of a changing hermeneutic regarding shared tradition such as a Christian's relationship to the mosaic law (Acts 15:2-35, Hebrews 7:12), organization of the church (Ephesians 4:11, I Corinthians 12:28), and what happens to those who are dying before Jesus' return (I Corinthians 15:51-53).

The church is in a constant state of complex theological construction and reconstruction to engage the question of the mission of God within time and place. This reflective work of practical theology is a unique gift to the church for the rapidly changing climate of the 21st century. It grants us a mooring theologically into a dynamic inquiry that holds fast to the core nature of our faith but allows for a conversation with the emerging culture with youth leading the conversation as they have always done. The normative and pragmatic tasks of practical theology are, of course, dependent on

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what a community considers more static facets. Osmer suggests these are one's view of praxis, theological anthropology, and cosmology (2005: appendix) with Root adding epistemology to the list (2014:25). However, these are also subject to the progression of new discoveries and developing cultural conversations to which we are indebted to a comprehensive congregational approach to youth ministry as practical theology in action. As Nel remarks (2018:214-215) "Youth Ministry is simply part of a comprehensive ministry from the "ecclesiastical offices" and that they exist as an "integral part of the faith community". The challenge of this kind of inclusion is certainly the affect that this may have on those "static" facets noted above. Nel notes (2018:230) that churches are sometimes disloyal to their own identity because there is an expectation that children and adolescents grow up to a particular age (which would have been historically confirmation, but with the shifting cultural imagination around adolescence, that age has become far later and more fluid) before they can share in the ministry of Christ. That sharing in the ministry of Christ will directly influence the static nature of our praxis, theological anthropology, and cosmology as we engage new perspectives learned from the new knowledge and insight of emerging generations.

It can be argued that even the contribution of epistemology by Root becomes subject to how adolescents hold knowledge in a post-modern way vs. classical understanding of the world of information. Anthony Reddie (2002:57) calls this "forming wisdom through cross-generational connectedness," drawn from his work with African Caribbean youth. Reddie (2002:69-71) sees wisdom formation (what might be termed faith formation in another context) as happening with a mutual invitation to do the work together and not just an invitation from adults to learned "passed down" traditions. This mutuality frees

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each participant the power dynamics that often present a challenge in multi-generational understanding. What happens, usually over a meal (with guidance from experienced leadership) is a reciprocity that is distinct from the "reminiscence work" where the adult speaks to the young in a one-way discourse. Reddie (2002:72) reminds us that cultural theory points out that, contrary to what we might think, cultures are "neither static or material entities in and of themselves. Rather, they are constantly being remade." The implications for the church are obvious. If we consider the church to be a static culture that is merely there to be passed down to emerging generations, then the fluid process of theological development that takes the contributions of the young will be largely ignored. The visible result is that the young go somewhere else to be heard.

4.2.2 Toward a Missional Hermeneutic

Nel's (2018:196) perspective on the church as "missional" informs much of the foundational understanding for a theologically grounded approach to adolescent faith formation. It can be argued that youth ministry as practiced by the mainline and evangelical American church has existed with missional, or, better spoken, "missionary" tendencies. It is often the arm of the church that most clearly practices outreach (or evangelism), servant work in the community and world, and has the development of community within the DNA of the practice. However, youth ministry is often practically seen as "a mission of" the larger church as opposed to missional in the sense that youth are a target of outreach or evangelism instead of being seen as a vital part of congregational life and work.

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When youth ministry is considered vital to congregational life rather to individual youth, it is only in terms of institutional survival, not theological progress, and development. Youth that were enthusiastic about being a part of the church in during the “Jesus Movement” of the 60’s and 70’s did not find a welcome integration into the theological life of local congregations but were often marginalized and any that did find theological space found it in uniquely youth movements such as the Calvary Chapel or Vineyard movements. Traditional churches tended to “double down” on catechistical practices that formed within traditional or familiar structures so that they could preserve a "future church." With a sense of irony, the Word of Life movement developed from a structure that took cultural developments like radio or high school rallies seriously and allowed them to shape their praxis into an organization where conservative churches looked for moral preservation of conservative values. Word of Life Institute was developed as a two-year training school for ministers (men who were nicknamed “preacher boys”) and were trained in a particular Christian fundamentalism that promoted a conservative American theology and praxis that is reflected in the institute handbook. The handbook contains strict governance over not only theological beliefs, but social behavior, sexual behavior (including detailed limits and an anti-homosexual stance), and even dress that is expected to be a standard of Christian life and practice (WOLI Handbook:2023). The intent of mentioning the above has nothing to do with the theological perspective of the organization, but it betrays a perspective of protectionism that sees the young as the church of the future, not as active contributors to the theological discourse that will guide the church into the future. I am reminded of the critique of process philosophy that there is not a stated or static future but that our future

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does not exist until we create that future (Mesle 2008:5). I believe this approach has been rightly criticized for its focus on using youth as mere numbers or stop-gaps to ensure denominational survival (cf. Mercer 2005:33).

With an inclusionary theological perspective, the focus changes from institutional survival to the importance of building a missional local church, with Youth Ministry playing a vital role (Nel 2018:196). Through the missional lens, there is the recognition that it is not about institutional survival, but nor is it the responsibility to create something innovative. The development and growth of the local church is about realizing what God has already planned for His people. Youth are integral to this process, and their involvement is seen as part of God's larger plan for God's church. It follows then that youth ministry should not be seen as a separate entity but as an essential part of building up the local church theologically, not merely programmatically. Thus, inclusivity is critical, with youth included in the broader goals of the congregation. The growth and development of the local church must involve all members, including the youth, to create a more integrated and cohesive faith community. Goals for youth ministry should integrate with the overall goals of the local church and should not be exclusive to the youth or exist as a parallel church. Everything that applies to older members of a congregation; faith in Christ, meaningful engagement with the Bible, mission goals, service, worship, etc. also apply to youth. The reorientation of our theology toward an inclusive missional approach eliminates the need to have separate ministries for different age groups but the development of an intergenerational ecosystem that seeks to walk in the discovered mission of God in their local context.

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When we engage that purpose of youth ministry, it is revealed that the survival of the church or way of doing church (denomination) is often the driving value. This is where we see the phrase, often spoken in a well-meaning way, “the youth are the future of our church.” Nel (2018:195) reminds us of Little’s (1968:15) critique of this philosophy as the “future church heresy” that ultimately distanced young people from the conversations and only put off the deep theological reflections that were required of the church in a time of social upheaval, not unlike the upheaval the U.S. is experiencing at the time of this writing. When we place youth squarely within the context of the mission of God (*missio Dei*) we begin to see youth ministry through the lens of our congregational conversations and ecclesiological development rather than a “farm team” approach where youth are not seen as a vital part of the present work of God in the local church. Where the disconnect lies, in the view of this research, is when the required theological work of youth ministry happens divorced from the work of the church at large. This challenges the conventional wisdom that drove the historical expression of youth ministry discussed in chapter 2. Youth ministry has been practiced as a tangential work of the church instead of a constitutive component of congregational life.

It is helpful to provide a framework for our term “missional” when in North America it has so often been used to describe the practice of reaching the unchurched. Here we can acknowledge the work of Guder (1998:4) who defines the difference between having a mission or being a missionary and being missional:

> This ecclesiocentric understanding of mission has been replaced during this century by a profoundly theocentric reconceptualization of Christian mission. We have come to see that mission is not merely an activity of the church. Rather,

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> mission is the result of God's initiative, rooted in God's purposes to restore and heal creation.

The missional movement invites a conversation around the mission of the church or intent as a congregation rather than what can be described as a chaplaincy ministry, which Hunsberger (2009:78) suggests has been dislocated from the church along with "the privileged position of influence" that the church enjoyed up to the later 20th century. Much of what we have seen in the North American context has been very focused on providing space for the "unchurched" – re-imagining Christian worship as coffee houses, "theology on tap" at a local pub, or other places where the non-religious can be comfortable for the purposes of evangelism (Effa 2015). This demonstrates a longing for something authentic that engages where people live their real lives but does nothing toward ecclesiastical renewal. As Effa (2015:378)states:

> Christian faith is nurtured and sustained by participation in a community that confesses its sins, is assured of God's forgiveness, listens to the Word, has its kingdom imagination sharpened through prayers of intercession for our broken world, and then is sent out, week after week, to be agents of transformation in the pathways of life. Attempting to live a churchless Christianity cut one off from disciplines and patterns that are very difficult to cultivate on one's own and contributes little or nothing toward the renewal of the church. Sipping cups of coffee or beer while building friendships with unchurched people is a wonderful expression of incarnational mission but how long can such mission be faithfully expressed without the regular rhythms of gathering and sending?

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The result of this is that missional gets redefined or imagined as simply another style of doing ministry rather than the deeper ecclesiastical conversation that is required. The engagement of mission, or *missio Dei*, has served as an ecclesiological disruptor that moves the intent of youth ministry, or church work in general, from a preservationist mentality to its inclusion as an equal partner in the universal mission of God localized in the church.

4.2.3 Identity Driven Churches

Of course, there is an underlying question when it comes to identity – whose identity is at issue? Is it the identity of the church its place as a socio-political force within society or the value of the unique identity of individuals and their unique social locations? This research is arguing that the corporate identity of the ecclesia and the individual identity of a person within a stage of life and social context are reciprocal and contribute not only to the recognition of individual identity, but the ability to form identity that reflects the contributive nature of new data (emerging generations and culture) with already discovered data (tradition and life experiences of elders). This relational fluidity allows for the formation of wisdom that is critical to the building up of the body of Christ.

Nel (2015:14) roots this concept of "building up" in both testaments of scripture. The thru line in the building process is that it is God that does the building, and, it seems, the tearing down as well. The vital imagery is that even in the tearing down and rebuilding process, God's "grace is that he is as eager to build and plant as he was determined in his judgment to pull out and tear down" (Nel 2015:14). Thus, we see the challenges (the tearing down) faced by God's people always have the "orientation

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toward the future" that involves the building of the body (Nel 2015:14). While the building that God does is with people and for the good and wellbeing of the people, God considers it a divine work. Note this passage from the prophet Jeremiah:

> See, days are coming—oracle of the Lord—when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors the day I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt. They broke my covenant, though I was their master—oracle of the Lord. But this is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after those days—oracle of the Lord. I will place my law within them and write it upon their hearts; I will be their God, and they shall be my people. They will no longer teach their friends and relatives, "Know the Lord!" Everyone, from least to greatest, shall know me—oracle of the Lord—for I will forgive their iniquity and no longer remember their sin (Jer. 31:31-35 NRSVUE).

As Jeremiah speaks of imminent destruction, there is an orientation toward hope that does not require mere human agency; "No longer will a man say to his neighbor 'Know the LORD'" but the reformation of God's people involves a spiritual renewal that comes from within; "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their heart." Built within this framework is a clear sense of belonging as every age from "the least of them to the greatest" contribute to the theological life of the congregation.

In addition, as Nel (2015:15) further points out, there is a missional aspect to the identification of God's people. He references Jer. 12:16 that projects the orientation toward a future where their communal life and corporate identity will result in gentiles turning to Yahweh and are included (built into) the people of God:

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> And if they learn well the ways of my people, and swear by my name, saying 'as surely as the LORD lives' – even as they once taught my people to swear by Baal – they will be established among my people.

This demonstrates an inclusivity as "swearing by Baal" would have been a serious violation of the covenant – yet there is room for them within the people of God. Arguably, this further demonstrates a fluidity within their ecclesiology (if you will) as the reception of foreigners would have been a rather surprising concept to a world whose theological framework tied gods to tribal lineage or geography.

As Nel argues (2015:15) this line of building (*oikodomein*) is drawn from the Old Testament into the new. Within the messianic concept, God continues to be the subject and builder. God uniquely exists within God's people in the person of Jesus and through his death and life is the builder of his ecclesia, being built to withstand even the gates of hell. Paul continues the building motif, comparing the ecclesia to a body with vast diversity that is vitalized by the head (Christ) and the writer of Hebrews compares the ecclesia to a building "whose maker and builder is God," also continuing the future orientation. Even the gifts received are given "for the building up of the congregation" (Nel 2015:17; cf. I Cor. 12:1-11) which has both the aspect of belonging and mission. Both are critical to identity formation.

Bediako (1992:21) further illustrates the critical nature of Christian identity within the world that produced the New Testament writings. He reminds us that religious identity "was a matter not of personal belief and devotion, but of social duty and ancestral practice." While considered "barbaric," Judaism was a recognized religion in the Roman empire and protected within the tense roman *Pax* due to its "right to exist

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according to the traditions of their ancestors" (Bediako 1992:16). The challenge facing the new sect, or *supersuitio,* of Christian worship was the identification with a movement that did not have the protection and basic acceptance within Roman society nor the unbroken ancestral lineage with mainline Judaism (Bediako 1992:16). This, of course, changed as Christianity became a "civil theology" as apologists worked to demonstrate the validity of the Christian message couched within Hellenistic thought and the eventual acceptance of Christianity as the religion of the empire (Bediako 1992:100-119). Why this history matters to Bediako is his intent to suggest the need for a further development of African Christian identity that does not come through a European lens. He highlights Setiloane (1976:235) who calls on independent movements to "accept the fact that they have to do with their own world and worldview, and this is in contradiction to many missionaries whose motto was, 'You must become like us.'" This echoes Idowu (1968:433) who suggests that "it was a serious mistake that the church took no account of the indigenous beliefs and customs of African when she began her work of evangelization." The Eurocentric gospel had "nothing to do with the past of Africa" and has, according to Idowu (1968:433) "communities of believers who, by and large, live ambivalent spiritual lives" which he pits against the cultural intellectualism he perceived in Western Christian thought. He recognizes that the gospel had to take a path through cultures and affirms that path. However, he echoes Nel above that there must be a recognition of the God who is already at work within a people even as the church passes faith from one to another.

> Christianity is a Universal Religion instituted of God through Jesus Christ the Saviour, of the whole world: that it came into being in consequence of the

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> invincible love of God for the world which He created and in which His redemptive purpose has always been at work. If Christianity came to Nigerians through Europeans, that is only because God has used Europeans as vehicles and transmitters of His redemptive truth to Nigerians. In is of the nature of Christianity that it must be shared and passed on; and so it was imperative that when Europeans received Christianity through Asians, they must also pass it on to, and share with, others. This is the process by which in the eternal purpose of God Christianity reached Nigerians. Christian Nigerians will also find themselves in the position of those who transmitting the Gospel once the Church in Nigeria attains true selfhood and is sufficiently alive and virile (Idowu 1965:7-8).

Rather than ambivalence, Bediako (1992:269) refers to "confusion" that would not have occurred if "European missionaries had been more critical of the identification of European cultural values and the Christian faith." Bediako (1992:277) sees this contextualization within the communicative acts as "problems of the appropriate liturgy in the worshipping community, as well as questions affecting dress and vestments for religious personnel, become meaningful only after the religious community has come into existence in its social setting and is conscious of its own identity." This research, and even the purposes of this chapter, extends beyond questions of liturgy or vestments, but his point about how meaning is drawn only when social setting and identity are part of fabric of how a faith life is formed is critical to the question at hand.

This is why the discussion of adolescent development is considered so vital. The sense of belonging, exhibited in the reciprocity, and a clear sense of purpose (mission) is critical to pass through liminality. It can be argued that the church remains in a liminal

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state of pre-maturity until the characteristics of belonging and mission become exhibited in the praxis of congregational life. Nel (2015:19) this maturity as understanding "that spiritual maturity is not a state, but a way of growing in faith, hope, and love" noting that being in this state of fluidity is essential to revealing "the real nature of the only true God." There is a humility that is required in this process that "breaks down the self-sufficiency of groups of believers" which Nel (2015:20) identifies as a common characteristic of middle-class communities (cf. Schwartz & Schwartz 1984:70).

As we identified in the historical chapter above, this self-sufficient middle class was the laboratory that gave birth to much of what became understood as youth ministry in the United States. Nel (2015:20) also restates the missional aspect as he reminds that a departure from this middle-class self-sufficiency "entails a willingness to serve" that is "driven by love" and challenges a "sick self-righteousness" and transforms the disciple from consumer to a disciple committed to "the building of the body as a whole" of which everyone is a vital and living part.

This research intends to make vital connections between the identity formation that is vital to the maturity of the body of Christ and the characteristics of maturity that are vital to the formation of people in the liminal stage of adolescence. In a similar fashion, we should not understand maturity as a terminus, but as a location of maturity that continues to build with achieved characteristics of vital belonging (inclusion) and mission (purpose). This transforms the idea of building from the strategies of "church growth" to a deeper sense of identity. Church growth has within it a success strategy that has economic or power implications whereas maturity focuses on the aspect of becoming as the predominant driving force. This can be compared to the pressure

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emerging adults often feel toward “what are they going to be when they grow up” and the need to choose post-high school educational opportunities that will be most advantageous to economic success and personal fulfilment. Neither of those are an aspect of identity formation. Looking through the lens of practical theology, we begin to redefine our approach to adolescence itself. Rather than strategies of success, we begin to consider the uniqueness of adolescence and our ministry with them in terms of belonging and mission. In other words, how to we include their uniqueness (gifts, context, person) into the constantly developing ecclesial mission? Nel (2015:28) sees the convergence of these ideas in many churches approach to youth ministry as “an investment for the sake of the future of the given institution.” Resources are seen to be “banked” in the adolescent cohort so that members have confidence that the institution will continue much in its present form. Framed in this manner, it is obvious that both the institution and the adolescent are being set up for inevitable failure. It is no longer building that is the goal, but preservation. Within a preservationist framework, it is entirely possible that the church can lose its sense of purpose through the missional lens considered in this research (Nel 2015: 28).

It should be noted that this framing does require us to consider if there is a distinction between the congregation (ecclesia) and the institution (church/kirche). Nel (2015:41) argues, and rightly so, that the nature of the church as an expression of God does require us to consider this distinction and rethink our ecclesiology, though it does not flow that we must abandon the institution. I would affirm this perspective for fear that this research is used to argue the abandonment of adolescent education or

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socialization. It is more of a matter of what we consider ourselves partners in building. It is worth echoing Bonhoeffer's (2015:8) statement that:

> He who loves his dream of a community more than the Christian community itself becomes a destroyer of the latter, even though his personal intentions may be every so honest and earnest and sacrificial.

The distinction does not require an ecclesial binary (ecclesia OR kirche) any more than it requires us to choose between including adolescents or a distinctive youth ministry. This research demonstrates the vital nature of developing a distinctive engagement with the adolescent cohort that recognizes their uniqueness and seeks to recognize that uniqueness as one of the informative "texts" that forms and reforms the mission of a local congregation, and following, the collective identity of a denomination.

4.2.4 Trinitarian Lens

This also finds purchase in trinitarian thinking, in that the church is an embodiment of who God is in God's person as well as a part of the life of God in the world through the grace of the Spirit. God sends the Son, who is the embodiment of the character and mission of God (those are arguably one) who in turn sends the Spirit – again the fullness of the person of God. Jacober (2015:38) sees the Trinity as "fully present in practical theology." Nel (2018:23) affirms that this thinking is "the essence of understanding ourselves as people in mission." Nel refers us to Guder (1998:5; cf. Nel 2018:24) who says that a "trinitarian point of entry into our theology of the church necessarily shifts all the accents in our theology." Guder (1998:5) goes on to suggest that seeing the church as an extension of the mission of God forces us to "recognize the

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ways in which the Western church has tended to shape and fit the gospel into its cultural context and make the church's institutional extension and survival its priority." Organizational forms, such as denomination or traditions, will always be included in a missional ecclesiology, but Guder (1998:71) argues that these should not be seen as the "essence" of the church The result of the sending of the Spirit is naturally the sending of the church which the Spirit inhabits. The ramification for the church is the formation of an identity of shared mission with God. Here it is again helpful to return to Nel (2018:196-197) who reminds us that the Spirit gifts the church for such a mission, to build up a congregation to be a capable agent of grace. Youth, by their very initiation into the Body of Christ are incorporated into this plan.

This clearly goes beyond the pedagogical tools infused into youth ministry over the course of the last 100 years, shifting from pledges to educational, to relational, to service oriented, but there remains a need to reconsider the theological motives that drive modern youth work. Nel (2018:229) has noted that the industrial revolution set a course of individualizing youth, producing a domino effect of creating the cohort known as teenagers. As a result, we continue to deal with the ramifications of the loss of intergenerational community daily. Nel (2018:23) begins his argument for reconsideration by rooting us in Trinitarian thought and highlighting the missional nature of the Godhead. The reason this is critical for Nel begins in our confession of the oneness of this God. We confess this oneness yet recognize in that confession that there is a relationship within that oneness. This confession defines our very being as the people of God; we are because of him and in that confession define who we are as the expression of the community of God. Nel (2018:26) states, "we do not only have

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relationships, we are our relationships." If youth work is attending to the mission of connecting emerging adults to the person of God, then it follows that this connection happens by joining the confessing community in a meaningful and reciprocal way. The church may join with the apostle Paul in affirming the church as the Body of Christ (I Corinthians 12:12-26), yet in practice see some members, particularly the young, as lesser parts of the body rather than vital to the movement and mission of the body.

4.2.5 Christopraxis Lens

It is also helpful to come back to Root (2014) as we build our case for a practical theology of the church that is rooted in the activity of God, or more specifically the activity of Christ. Root has been a faithful dialog partner in discovering this intersection between an academic approach to theological inquiry and personal experience. Root's view (2020:147) is that "God's being is in becoming…constituted in a shared life" or what he describes as the experience of joy "being in communion through acts of love, mercy, friendship, gratitude, and compassion." This requires theology to be inherently practical because "it's very epistemological object is the pure subject of God's ontological state of ministering to creation" (Root 2014:95).

This is different than a moral discipleship model where there is a behavioral expectation that flows from Biblical inquiry. Root's "Christopraxis" is the intersection of the cross with the encounters of God's people; a collaborative and reflective practice that takes seriously the ministry with God's people and the science of biblical hermeneutics. Scanlan (2021:20) further defines Christopraxis as "the ongoing ministry of Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit." Jacober (2011:29) also invites us into a

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reflexive approach to practical theology with Christ at the center in a Christocentric approach. With the cross as the intersection of divine and human action, we can further understand that this intersection or mission is the driver of our ecclesiology (Root 2020:89). The church, through this lens, becomes not only the herald of the cross, but the continuing ministry of the cross. This continuing ministry is by no means static but deeply fluid as it engages the cultural forms that shape that ministry.

This is far more than simply creating modern tools to make a static message palpable or attractive to a cultural cohort (in our case, adolescents), but it is finding a deeply theological question at the place where the cross and culture intersect. This further supports the Trinitarian vision of Nel as it solidifies the participatory nature of the God-self, that there is an aspect of that which is unchanging (broader tradition) and that which operates contextually (liquid ecclesiology). Bevans (1992:2) suggests that we can only speak about a theology that makes sense at a certain place and in a certain time. He further argues that theology that is not reflective of our times, our culture, and our current concerns – and therefore contextual – is also false theology (Bevans 1992:3).

Root (2020) widens this lens to the practice of youth ministry in his book “The End of Youth Ministry?” Root engages the participants (youth, parents, youth workers, church leadership, etc.) in youth ministry to create a working theology of youth ministry because it goes to the heart of human experience in the role of the prophetic voice. Root’s (2020:20) observation that youth ministry as it is practiced is a stretch toward the “good life” requires a deep inquiry into how stakeholders define that good life. As stated above, there is a desire on the part of the stakeholders of tradition to shield the young from developing an identity outside of the approved paths of tradition. The challenge to

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traditional stakeholders is that parents are choosing other "good life" paths for their offspring. Far from being a concept to be avoided, Root (2020:146) suggests that the good life is a point of orientation for youth ministers moving the young along the path toward joy, which he suggests is "the communal experience of life coming out of death, which produces union with God and neighbor" (cf. de Kock and Norheim 2022:222). Soccer over youth group has been a cry by the stakeholders of tradition to demonstrate the moral collapse of American society, however it fails to recognize that there must be a reason that the parents of the soccer players, who grew up groomed by the tradition, are choosing a different definition of "good." Root (2020:29) suggests that one possible factor is that youth ministries still function on a twentieth-century moral conception that is no longer broadly present. What is not present is an active engagement with the ones who have set their lives on the flourishing of their children to inquire as to the moral imagination of the emerging generation; the theological critique of the generation who, despite the creativity of the presentation, were recipients of a "static" theology that no longer reflect their lived experience of the world, or even God.

However, it is that lived experience, brought into the community of Christ, shared by the community of Christ, then lived out again by the community of Christ – with all voices present – that begins to focus the church on a missional life. In this discovery we find that our purpose is in the being and becoming what we are rather than the desperate attempt to preserve or enlarge the institution which has been passed down. A proposal for a change in the faith formation praxis of the American mainline church does require a core critique and re-engagement of our ecclesiology. Preservationist thinking will continue to strip the church of its relevance until the missional narrative is lost

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completely. Root draws us into consideration of the theological foundation of the practice of youth ministry through the development of Christopraxis, which informs us of the vital nature of engaging our praxis of youth work through a practical theological lens. This “fluid” approach to ecclesiastical construction challenges what I suggest is the two predominant misalignments of our ecclesiology of praxis. I will term these a hermeneutic of biblical education and a hermeneutic of moral preservation.

4.2.6 Implications of Biblical Education Hermeneutic

I can clearly remember when, as a child, I was asked to retrieve something from an adult who was in “big church.” I was in Children’s Church, which was a kid-friendly version of the experience of a normative service. We had all been up in the main sanctuary for the first song, but then were released at the final stanza to our basement room where we would sing songs, give an offering to a missionary, and hear a Bible lesson presented either on flannel graph or in story book form. However, when I went upstairs to the sanctuary, I could not help but feel that there was something happening to which I was not invited. This is not to say that I did not experience care from members of the congregation. I did indeed feel affirmed and cared for by the adults who participated in programming for children and youth. I was intrigued by the idea of what might happen or what might be said in which I was not included. As I became a teenager and too old for attendance in Children’s Church, I began to be aware that this form of church programming was because the content of a sermon was not easily applicable to children. I confess that as a teen the same was true, but we lacked access

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to anything that was "teen friendly" and so we all sat together in a couple of church pews and mainly passed notes.

Occasionally, a preacher would acknowledge us with a moral directive aimed toward something assumed about adolescence, but our lived experience was something done outside of church – sometimes in spite of church. My home church had youth ministry in various forms depending on the personality and intent of the person placed in charge. It was clear that the design of programming at this church was to deliver biblical content in a manner best suited to the learning capacity and style of the intended learner. The "moral" of each teaching was personal morality and piety with the assumption that our generation would eventually join the larger church community and raise our own family there. My personal youth ministry experience reflects the cultural absorption of the "youth problem" and the youth group being designed to inspire a commitment to God, through a very conservative theological lens, and the escape of the dangers of an "immoral and godless" world.

Root (2020:122) reminds us that this is nothing new by taking us to Luther and the commitment of the reformers to personal piety and virtue as a path toward holiness. While the purpose of youth ministry might differ theologically depending on the denomination, the praxis reflected an assembly line process that became how the industrialized world worked throughout the 20th century. As noted above, intergenerationality was replaced with factory techniques that utilized the strengths of each age and gender cohort to play their part in product production. It is no surprise that curriculum theory took root at this time. Franklin Bobbitt (1918:42) wrote in his 1918 work *The Curriculum*:

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> The central theory is simple. Human life, however varied, consists in the performance of specific activities. Education that prepares for life is one that prepares definitely and adequately for these specific activities. However numerous and diverse they may be for any social class they can be discovered. This requires only that one go out into the world of affairs and discover the particulars of which their affairs consist. These will show the abilities, attitudes, habits, appreciations, and forms of knowledge that men need. These will be the objectives of the curriculum. They will be numerous, definite, and particularized. The curriculum will then be that series of experiences which children and youth must have by way of obtaining those objectives.

Approaches to curriculum theory have varied widely. However, by the beginning of the 20th century, common practice was to move children through an established educational system with each stage identified by an ordinal number (1st grade, 2nd grade, etc.) and characterized by a group of age-differentiated students gaining varying degrees of proficiency in subjects designed to prepare students in the "performance of specific activities" considered central to human life. Our educational system keeps students away from the home for six hours or more per day and involves parents most often as support volunteers for various support activities. As the church adopted curriculum theory in its praxis of faith formation, it began working on a foundational assumption that if we give children the proper theological information, then they will be equipped for the activities of church life. Mercer (2005:163) calls this the “reduction of Christian education of children to instructional downloading of moralistic sound bites delivered to children through entertainment-oriented styles of teaching in a context

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sequestered from the practices of the wider community of faith." Mercer refers us to Bourdieu's (1984:169-175) concept of cultural capital and cultural reproduction recognizing that children are being raised in a "habitus" of the dominating culture which not only delivers information but molds a child in the tacit values of a culture. "The habitus is not only a structuring structure, which organizes practices and the perception of practices, but also a structured structure: the principle of division into logical classes which organizes the perception of the social world is itself the product of internalization of the division into social classes" (Bourdieu 1984:170). Mercer challenges us that our very structures of formation – or expansively our practice of all ecclesiastical life - inform youth of the nature of the church and the expectation of their identity within the institution.

Religious education, much like the various applications of CT, can take on different forms such a traditional didactic style, rotational methods, discovery learning, and catechistic to name a few. Mercer (2005:165) looks at the rotational example, which uses different "workshops" to reinforce the subject matter of the day. He suggests that the rotational model takes seriously Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences by engaging kids with the same story or theme from multiple angles that might include storytelling, music, art, play, etc. Yet none of these theories calls into question the sheer definition of learning in an ecclesiastical context. Foster (1994:22-35) suggests that there are several flaws in applying this theory of education to catechesis or lifelong discipleship.

- Loss of a "corporate memory" of our faith tradition.
- Failure to teach the relevance of the Bible to everyday life.

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- Reducing religious education to a program rather than a way of life into which people are mentored and apprenticed.
- Being held captive by the dominant culture in which the Good News is being shared.
- Failure to adapt our educational strategies to the changing world in which we live.

As a practical theologian, Mercer (2005:12) looks to the field to "fund emancipatory practices with children" rather than an educational model that "oppress some persons" (e.g., women and children). The principle of "double messages" can be applied to adolescents who hear that the church "values" them but in practice only if they do not act like themselves – only as younger versions of the adult authorities in their life. For many congregations, valuing the young means sequestering them in programming designed "for them" with religious instruction communicated in the language of youth. This conjures imagery of a 19th century factory that has identifiable cohorts doing jobs suited for them alongside only their peers. We can see a thru line from the cultural re-imagining of education and the moral imagination of childhood that came together to shape faith formation through the 20th century as the young became further distanced from the greater congregation.

4.2.7 Implications of a Moral and Institutional Preservation Hermeneutic

In our exploration of the history of youth ministry we identified much of the early motivations surrounding modern expressions of youth ministry as an attempt to solve the perceived "youth problem," which can be further defined as rampant immorality, and

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the perceived threat of urbanization and immigration. The attempt to shape faith formation to counter perceived cultural godlessness is nothing new. Root (2020:120) identified Luther's emphasis on virtue as a path to holiness by narrating Luther's pilgrimage to Rome. Luther expected visions of holiness surrounding him as he entered the holy city. Instead, Luther was dismayed by what he perceived as neglect – potentially signaling an inner rot. The proverbial domino effect that led to the Ninety-Five Thesis and foundational theologies of the reformation are for another work, but we can see how movements in faith formation are often reactionary rather than hermeneutical. Much of the curriculum aimed at youth during the 20th century focused around "teen issues" such as drug use, sex, and even suicide. There was even a return to the "pledge" concept of Christian Endeavor with songs like DeGarmo & Key's "The Pledge," which challenged us to "live for him" because he "died for me" (1989) and events like "See you at the Pole" that encouraged a public statement of faith by praying around the flagpole at their public school (syatp.com). This is not to suggest that values are not central to the act of discipleship. Root (2020:162) reminds us that "identity is indeed built around moral horizons" but argues that these moral horizons must be developed within the communal narratives that make the moral horizons essential to the identity formation of the adolescent rather than a doubling down on behavioral directives. These narratives continue to be formed within communities where adolescents seek to discover themselves in the story. In the dissonance between stated values and lived values, the lived experience of a community of nurture will have a greater effect on the value formation of an emerging adult. A Search Institute study (Scales, Benson, Roehlkepartain 2001) on how well American adults related to teenagers discovered that

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most surveyed adults agreed that teaching shared values, guiding decision making, and discussing personal values were highly regarded. However, one of the conclusions of the study was that “despite a broad consensus among American adults about what they should do for kids, few adults actually do these things. The alarming gap between what adults believe kids need and what adults actually do shows that we are not providing kids with the relationships and support necessary to grow up healthy” (Scales, Benson, Roehlkepartain 2001). Churches rely on educational programs to teach values but seem to fall short in the embodiment of an ecosystem of Christian discipleship that fosters the rootedness or corporate memory that develops identity. The result is often what Martineau, Webber, and Kehrwald (2008:9) described in their denomination as “Cafeteria Catholics;” not a wholesale rejection of the Christian faith but picking and choosing what values they wish to incorporate into their life rather than a whole church engagement in discerning the Christ life. This demonstrates that values are not passed down by ecclesiastical directive, but by the lived experience of the identity forming community.

4.3 Building Toward an Interweaving Ecclesiology

It is helpful to remind ourselves of the arguments of Nel and Guder (above) to provide a framework to our understanding of missional church praxis. Guder (2015:29) makes the case that authentic theology needs to be “contextual, local, at home in and relevant to the particular setting with which a Christian community confesses and witnesses to faith.” This, of course, is a challenge to the conventional understanding of

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mission as a program of the church that infuses a foreign culture with the Christian understanding held by the missionary or evangelist.

As history has demonstrated, much of what was considered “mission” work ultimately was the planting of a western model of Christendom. This is the form of faith that is so often described as “in decline.” The structures and privileges of western Christendom are continuing to crumble, making way for a necessary shift in our theological discourse and approach to what we mean when we say mission (Guder 2015:29). If we take this concept and apply it to our understanding of adolescent identity development and take seriously the place of adolescence in our communal consciousness, then a new way of doing theology emerges which the church must embrace if it is to stop the rapid disintegration of not only membership, but social impact. The Eurocentric model of church “planting” only takes culture into account when looking for an entry point to introduce western theology and ecclesiastical practice. It could be stated that doing theology in a missional way means we are no longer “bringing God” to other contexts but looking for God who is already there and allowing the uniqueness of the context to formulate the theological discourse or establish what the gospel means to a people instead of the hegemonic imagination of the church planter.

If we accept the location of the adolescent as “other” in the hegemony, then the only hope of liberation for the youth and the church is to recognize the presence of God already at work in the adolescent. The incarnation serves as our most clear biblical example of this approach. Jesus did not “plant” an established “heavenly” order of theology or worship but instead took a posture of listening and of suffering to establish

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his high priesthood (Hebrews 4:14-16). Nel (2018:217) suggests that God continues to "comes to his people" by means of Spirit, Word, and the service of people. It is the human element in this that is most striking, and I would argue that it is difficult to separate "spirit," word," and "service" as if they operate independently of one another. It is the work of Practical Theology – through our trinitarian lens – to understand that the work, or mission, of the church is the operation of God's coming to God's people and through the agency of the Spirit, illuminating the word, and mobilizing the community of God to reflect the *Imago* and *missio Dei.* This does not happen in a "top-down" infusion of theological concepts, but in a contextual and collaborative effort of a local faith community with all voices present.

4.3.1 God's praxis through Communicative Acts

We must identify the communicative offices of the church to consider whether the voice of youth is present as we seek God's "coming" in the mission of the church. The work of the church, as Nel (2018:222) articulates, are the communicative acts expressed in three "clusters:" Relational Communication (*kerugma and leitourgia)*, Relational Caring (*koinonia* and paraklesis), Relational Service (*diakonia and maturia)*, as well as Relational *didache*, and Relational leadership (*kubernesis*). We can see the contextual possibilities of youth ministry in each expression of God's communicative acts within the church. Nel (2018:224) suggests a valuable premise when considering the praxis of youth work. Youth ministry is not an additional avenue of God's coming to youth but "about finding a place for youth within every ministry of the church…the people to whom God comes." Nel further states that whatever is described and

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discovered in these ministries is relevant to youth and therefore the church is not required to create a "youth" version of all the ministries of a church.

Nel (2018:225) makes the case that there is a "twofold task" when it comes to the inclusion of youth within the mission of the church. A congregation first must "sensitize every disciple in ministry for its relevancy to the youths (as part of the whole) and then rediscover and define the place of the youths as part of the congregation." The gift that adolescents are to a local congregation is that inclusion requires the church to be in a constant state of reformation, or what Cloete (2015:1-7) describes as "creative tension" within a congregation. These emerging adults act in a prophetic role to inform the church of the current conversations and social justice emphases of the world a church serves.

This is the missional work of constant contextualization that stands in contrast to the preservationist model of "passing down" the faith to the next generation. With this missional model, the church remains in conversation with the Spirit doing the work of practical theology. As *kerugma* and *leitourgia* are both present when the church gathers to inform and guide one another (as are *diakonia, koinonia*, etc.) so to do the various objects and partners in ministry across the age cohorts intertwine to provide a fuller picture to the church of its identity and purpose (*imago* & *missio*).

This is not to suggest that ministries are mono-cultural or homogenous. Within the unity of the local church there is not an erasure of the uniqueness of one another, but merely a recognition of the presence and needs of the body. Nel (2000:231) calls this "differentiation." We include and serve alongside youth in all the ministries of the church yet strive to understand the different developmental and social location of a 16-

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year-old and the 60-year-old in the same ministry. It is fitting to highlight some of these communicative acts to serve as example of youth inclusion.

4.3.1.1 Kerugma

Preaching has often been an area of challenge for the church when it comes to being age inclusive. Preaching has been seen as the domain of the adult that bears little relevance to the lives of youth. However, the presence of youth forces the preacher to see the voice of youth in the text (Nel 2000:232). Those who give effective witness are always guided by the audience of their preaching. A preacher writes for those who they intend to receive the message. The removal of youth as a factor for the preacher does not allow for the sharpening of the preacher. A preacher or witness in this case will never be challenged to hear the voice of God in any other perspective than their own. In how we understand the questions of the liminal stage of human development, the acts of identity formation (*who am I?, who are you?, where to I belong*?) would be a powerful homiletic tool if a preacher is willing to step out of their own contextual "shoes." Wright (2010:6-7) describes this contextualization as "community interpretation," suggesting that it is not only the spoken word that communicates but the context of the preacher. For example, what he refers to as a "state church," by which he means a recognizable cathedral-type structure is designed to elevate and center the focus on the speaker and, by default, puts the hearer on the margins. In contrast, anabaptist traditions where meetings would be held in "woods, caves, boats, homes, and open fields, lacked such influential symbolic restrictions." The same could be said of the

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Brethren or Quaker tradition where services are held in the round free of designated clergy. The word is heard in a context as much as it is heard in a language.
The gift of practical theology for the field of preaching is the understanding that there is a communication of a person's place in the heart of God by something as simple as the location of the hearer in relation to the preacher. In creating an environment that nurtures the identity formation central to the adolescent stage of development, emerging adults will catch the message of either marginalization or inclusion depending on their perceived value to the preaching ministry of a faith community.

Wright (2010:63) further notes that from a sociological point of view, preaching may be seen as an identity forming event. It is most often how a community identity is constantly reinforced. A common complaint among the young is that "church is boring.". I suggest by this statement that the young are saying "this is not for me" or "I am not included in this event." John L. Thomas Jr. (2018:40) in his work on Black preaching suggests two contextual commitments on the part of the preacher: lived experience and pastoral care. Thomas' point is that those a preacher seeks to reach must understand that there is a relevant lived experience by the preacher to that which the hearers are experiencing.

The secondary commitment to pastoral care ensures that the preacher does not leave their hearers with merely the feeling of comradery in suffering but offers a release of suffering. Most preachers are, of course, beyond the organic lived experience of the adolescents under their care. However, *kerugma,* if considered within the context of identity formation, can become a powerful tool of inclusion and affirmation of the

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adolescent place in the *missio Dei* as their lived experience is invited into the shared story of congregational life.

Volez (2010:99) calls preachers to develop approaches to youth grounded in "listening to, learning from, and critically reflecting about adolescents' communicative practices." This liberates the young from "nostalgic" preaching where the faith is rooted in some imagined past and engages the preacher (and the congregation) in the narrative of the emerging generation. Volez provides a powerful reminder that the goal is not to simply to do "youthful preaching" as the title of his book suggests but leads us to the goal of youth as preacher. As the voice of youth is given space in the *kerugma* of congregational life, the entire body is invited to view the young as "symbol-wielding actors attempting to 'gain adherence,' 'form attitudes,' or 'induce action,' in their communities."

4.3.1.2 Leitourgia

Here too we have an opportunity to welcome youth and allow the church to reform once relevant practices and maintain a freshness of encounter with the divine. Liturgical stagnation is merely the fault of a lack of inclusion. There is a great capability within the youth cohort to bring a fresh perspective and critique of our liturgical experiences. When worship becomes stagnant to an emerging generation, the trend within the American church seems to be the constant creation of a new expression of church that operates independently of the church of origin. The practice of creative tension allows for the new expressions to exist within the wisdom of rooted history. Here I have great appreciation for the work of Cloete. Cloete roots the creative tension needed in the missional

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theology of Nel, as does this work. Cloete (2015:2) rightly notes the complexity in the development of liturgical practice that can invite an entire congregation into worship. If we view the voice of an emerging generation and the voice of an established generation as "two seemingly "opposite positions," the goal for Cloete is not the dissolution of the tension but instead to "keep the tension intact and create energy for creative innovation through ministry. Therefore, the ideal seems not to release the tension, but rather to keep it intact and let it work for something greater and better than the current reality." Cloete (2015) further suggests that "ministry that separates people according to age or social status prevents Christians from hearing the insights from the entire faith community." This goes to the heart of how the church views itself. A pedagogy that does not include the voice of those intended to be participants only results in further marginalization. This is supported by the work of Fiore (2012:133) in their critique of curriculum used in urban public schools in the U.S.:

> The problem with 'scripted curricula' is that it does not incorporate the experiences, values, or backgrounds of the students, thus further marginalizing them while losing their interest and not encouraging them to think about the injustice in their immediate sphere.

Fiore (2012:135-137) cites a 2003 study by Mahiri and Conner (2003:126) which focused on the creation of a small middle school in northern California that allowed teachers and administrators to control the curriculum and pedagogy. Their approach echoed Thomas above in that the staff began with listening and learning about the complex lives of the students. This understanding allowed for a shaping of curriculum that simply included and reflected the life experience of the learners and invited them to

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see learning in their context. The experiment proved successful in inspiring the students to engage in academics. This study, of course, reflects the argument that many have made for age/stage faith formation. With a focus on a unique age cohort, this kind of bespoke education happens without the complication of the other age cohorts. But as we have made the case that the purpose of the church is not education but the formation of the community of God, gathered for the mission of God, one can see the vital nature of shaping our liturgical life so that every member can identify within the communal worship of the whole body. Here we can return to Nel (2018:215) who reminds us that youth are not "a separate group within the congregation." "Where this sense of wholeness is lacking," Nel (2018:215) argues, "the parts may degenerate into counterproductive youth programmes."

4.3.1.3 Koinonia

One of the greatest gifts to and from youth must be in our mutual *koinonia*. Nel (2018:236) reminds us that God comes to God's people *through* God's people. Ketcham describes the concept of reciprocity – how we contribute to one another – in her book *The Reciprocal Church*. It is a concept theologically tied to the incarnation – God literally comes to God's people through God's people, as one of God's people. Ketcham (2018:21) suggests along with the other literature in this research, that we have a dominant frame in place that utilizes social-science research to examine why young people are leaving church behind. She suggests theological inquiry that reframes the situation and invites us into a new way of seeing. Ketcham (2018:43) suggests a "supportive ecclesiology" that does not leave the individual and their unique relationship

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to Christ behind but builds upon it. But while recognizing the vital reality of personal Christian experience, she calls us to abandon the "service provider" model of the church that exists solely to support that personal Christian experience and, as logic follows, can be abandoned if it is perceived that the church is no longer serving my personal piety, or my piety no longer needs servicing (Ketcham 2018:45). It is that uniqueness, or "differing wills" willingly brought into reciprocal community that makes the church (ecclesia) so powerful because to truly experience koinonia is to encounter difference (Ketcham 2018:58).

This places our experience of each other, our corporate *imago dei*, as something dynamic rather than something static to strive to become. We begin to experience that dynamic in youth as we discover the unfolding potential of their lives. Through our experience of each other, the Spirit transforms not only the youth, but us, and continues our formation together to best represent God's purposes and heart in the world (Ketcham 2018:139). Nel (2018:236) describes this mutuality as people who, through the indwelling of the Spirit, also become people through whom we live and discover our humanity. We must "intensely focus" that mutuality on the youth because "they can only mature fully in a climate of koinonia." This is why Nel suggests that small groups are "part and parcel of vital churches." It is the nature of the church that God comes (*paraklesis*) through the vital fellowship (*koinonia*) of the Body of Christ. It is vital that youth share in the life of the Spirit and community through this vital ministry of God to and within God's people.

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4.3.1.4 Diakonia and Maturia

One of the simplest ways to include youth in the whole of the church is through the church's acts of service. This service is not to be understood as mere charitable acts or activities, but, as Nel (2009:9) describes it as the "being of the congregation." It is not uncommon to call upon youth to perform physical labor on behalf of church members who might be too tired, or too old, or too busy. However, an inclusive approach does not merely invite the young to the "grunt" work of the church but invites them to participate in the active work of every ministry. We have noted the activism of youth and will continue to return to this vital component of adolescence, as part of this prophetic voice. Two components of vital diakonia are worth noting in this section: activism and interwovenness. Nel (2018:237) describes the interwovenness of youth in the diakonia of the church in terms of the ministries the local church currently practices. It is vital to our mutuality and the inclusion of the emerging generation to see them involved across the developed traditions of a congregation. It is, of course, productive to the ensured continuation of the local tradition and aids in the development of mutuality. Nel points out Strommen's (Strommen 1974: xi cf. Nel 2018:237) empirical work, which demonstrated that youth have a specific inclination to a service-oriented life. This requires humility and power-sharing on the part of the current position-holders, particularly those who are not looking for "help" but for whom youth participation will require additional attention and flexibility.

The *activism* component is even more challenging for a congregation to integrate. Understanding and including the activism of youth becomes part of the practical theological reflection which informs a dynamic *missio Dei.* It is in the activity

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that we proclaim (*marturia)* the *missio Dei* – or what Nel (2018:38) also refers to as the *missio ecclesia* (cf. Bosch 1991:389ff). Often, the activist heart of youth points toward the truly felt challenges and inequities of the world around them. If youth, as Strommen pointed out above, have a service-oriented life, then we can see with often clearer vision what the mission of God means in our time and place. The local church has often remained committed to a ministry founded a generation (or two) ago that was a response to known and felt needs present at the time but struggles to keep the vitality of that ministry in a current age. Root (2012:38) continues his contribution to our conversation by suggesting that "at its core, youth ministry is about participating in God's own action." In a mutuality model where we understand youth ministry to be the recognition of what God is already doing in and with youth, then it follows logically that we must pay close attention to that which God is doing in their call to action. It becomes a part of the prophetic voice for what God is calling God's church to in the current time and place.

4.3.1.5 Didache

It is appropriate that Nel (2009:11) reminds us of the vital place of relational *didache*. Even in a fluid ecclesiological framework, the disciplines passed from one generation to another form a practice of life that makes what we do distinctly Christian. I have come to believe this as an important function of the passing of the faith that may have been over emphasized in a pure catechistic framework, but clearly deemphasized in a relational theology framework. Yaconelli (2003) suggested that long-term discipleship is the goal of youth ministry and, by that measure, the 50-year (at the time

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of Yaconelli's article) experiment of youth ministry is a failure. As we form a picture of God's communicative acts, all work together to create vital and thriving churches where youth can continue to build the story of God within God's church.

4.3.1.6 Kubernesis

I again am indebted to Nel (2009:12) for the highlighting of the leadership component of the communicative acts. The thru line of this work is a recognizing of the vital nature of adolescence in the life of the church. A predominant feature of churches where youth are thriving (and the congregation thriving) is that youth have agency in the forward movement of the congregation. Taking charge in the direction of the community of faith or an aspect of that community, puts "skin in the game" as it were for emerging adults. If youth are to be invited into all aspects of the life of the congregation and the communicative acts of God, it flows that they need not be locked out of this vital component of learning to lead.

4.4 Ethnographic Considerations

Vital to this research is the engagement with the both the tacit and implicit ecclesiological praxis of non-hegemonic church life in the United States, with a particular consideration of the Historic Black Church. In consideration of the above, how does the HBC or African American ecclesial praxis, inform the communicative acts? The following should be held with the same recognition of non-homogeny that should be applied to any discussion of culture or context within this research, yet due to the historical, historical, and theological contexts in play, there is value in the consideration

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of how the communicative acts have found expression. Inspiration for my thesis arose from my M.A. work for Drew University around youth ministry in the global and cultural south. I will draw upon that work as well as further research since that time.

William Myers (1991) published a comparison study between the youth ministry styles of historically black congregations and historically white congregations. Meyers suggests that clues may be found in how white congregations and Black congregations view themselves. Where white congregations, representative of the hegemonic culture, valued individual education and the dynamics of competition, the Black church's myth of origin contained the dynamics of personal sharing. Myers (1991:109) observed that white churches describe their organization as a figurative corporation while the African American church sees itself as a politically aware spiritual kinship. Youth ministry, in the traditional model, is viewed as fragmenting the church and creating a second congregation alongside the intergenerational congregation. While there are several African American churches that borrow from the dominant U.S. model, it is notable that a whole-community perspective with intergenerational interaction has gone a long way to resisting the attrition characterized by white mainline churches. This is reflected in Stewart (1994:42) who suggests that key to the continued growth and health of the African American congregation was a comfort with the nature of being African American and commitment to the interpersonal relationships that are key to their survival.

Susanne Johnson (2008:154) sees this link between spirituality and survival in her exploration of faith-based youth community organizing (YCO) where youth and their adult members are trained in "the art of public life and public theology" and connect "the traditional resources of Christian spirituality to the social, economic, and political

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realities that shape their daily experience and that of their families." Involving youth in the YCO experience dissolves the dissonance youth sometimes experience between church and "real life." They are shown how their Christian faith and subsequent church family engages the real-life problems of their local community.

Barnes and Wimberly (2016:9) speak of the onus placed upon the Historic Black Church in the United States to "provide an overall safe, nurturing environment for youth as well as holistic programmatic instruction that fosters morality, character development, self-efficacy, hard work, and appreciate for the benefits of broad-based education and training." In their research, "child-centeredness" places the child (or emerging adult) at the center of congregational life, believing that success of the child is possible only through "godly validation and practical support from parents, clergy, adult program leaders, and other allies inside and outside of churches" (Barnes and Wimberly 2016:9). This holistic approach to youth ministry indicates the impact of context upon not only praxis but the theological work of the church. Child-centeredness draws mission directives from the success of the child in their midst. This is a departure from the hegemonic imagination the "slowdown" revealed in Root. The call of African American churches is the nurture and acceleration of Black excellence. This could account for the elective absence of youth program members in predominantly white, mainline congregations as the directives are more elusive and seem to focus on the preservation and growth of the institution. The focus of hegemonic communities of faith do not move the child forward toward real-word achievement and engagement but almost seem designed to provide a governor on growing up. This, of course, can be traced back to Hall and the cultural imagination surrounding the hegemonic fears surrounding cultural

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integration as was discussed above. The historical experiences arguably could have provided a catalyst for the communicative acts to be developed through a kindship ecclesiology that seemed to have allowed the HBC to avoid the attrition experienced by the mainline church. This seems confirmed by the struggle of the HBC to map the post-civil rights and black consciousness eras (Powe 2012:41) where the voice of the young is not as integrated into ecclesial life as in previous generations. This lends further nuance to the prophetic role of youth ministry.

4.5 Youth Ministry as Prophetic Work

At the beginning of this chapter, I invited us to consider the role of adolescence in the ecclesial life of the congregation. That consideration does not challenge the known science or history of liminality in human development, only the segregated role and assumptions placed upon that liminal stage. The history of adolescent development and the learning of developmental or neurological science are reflexive – and I welcome that reflexivity. However, there is room for the contribution of theology to guide us from eliminating or postponing the adolescent voice from congregational life and theological inquiry. The heightened period of sensitivity and formation – particularly in the area of identity – suggests a prophetic role in the church that is often overlooked. I wish to develop that here.

4.5.1 Osmer's Lens of the Prophetic Office

Osmer (2008:133) offers a description of the prophetic office, which is:

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> to describe the interplay of divine disclosure and human shaping as prophetic discernment. The prophetic office is the discernment of God's Word to the covenant people in a particular time and place.

It is that "particular time and place" that is uniquely helpful to our engagement of youth ministry and the role that youth ministry, as well as the youth themselves, can offer "prophetically" to the church wherever and whenever the church is existing. Osmer refers to Heschel who suggests that the prophets were not merely the speakers of God but spoke the word of God through engagement with known covenants and current challenges facing God's people.

Osmer (2008:133) notes that Heschel (1962:22) says: "The prophets…did not simply absorb the content of inspiration, they also claimed to understand its meaning, and sought to bring such meaning into coherence with all other knowledge they possessed." It is this existence of the prophet between God and the community of God that I find uniquely informs the development of a youth ministry praxis. No other cohort is defined so acutely by the forces of time and place and the need for compassionate discernment. Youth live in the intersection of youth culture, which is a concentrated form of emerging values and innovations, and the traditions of the church developed in the last generations.

If the prophet begins with the "human participation in God's pathos…" (Osmer 2008:136), then any understanding of youth ministry praxis must begin with a deep listening (as in the descriptive-empirical task), guided by informed understanding (as in the interpretive task), before any normative work takes place. "Discernment is the activity of seeking God's guidance amid the circumstances, events, and decisions of life

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(Osmer 2008:137). It is this work of discernment, critical to a theology of youth ministry, that we must recognize in contrast to an approach to youth ministry that only seeks to utilize youth culture to inform an ethical interpretation of the generation before. Without the interpretive work of practical theology, youth ministry becomes a constant repackaging of biblical interpretation or dogma to make it palatable to an adolescent ear or strike the adolescent heart This is what Scanlan (2021) describes as an "imposing" approach to not only faith formation, but ecclesiology, and will be described in more detail in the next section. A theological interpretation draws in "present episodes, situations, and contexts" to discern the heart and call of God (Osmer 2008:139). In a practical theology of youth ministry, we are not learning youth culture and mores to deliver an imposed or assumed static biblical truth. Rather we are engaging youth and their context in order to do the theologically necessary interpretive work that the church requires to discern the will and call of God for a particular time and place. Through this lens, youth work, and following the whole discipline of religious education, is less about giving youth answers and more about inviting youth to help us form the right questions. Hess (2012:299) creates a contrast between traditional models of "religious instruction" and processes that practical theology requires. She places "theology and cultural wisdom into a mutually critical and mutually enhancing conversation with one another for the purpose of evoking and probing depth questions…". She suggests that a tradition, in this case a Christian tradition of formation, is always "still in the making" and stays alive by "tenaciously *protecting the question mark*" (emphasis Hess). She references Pelikan's (1984:65) suggestion that traditions, which he calls the "living faith of the "dead," are vulnerable to "traditionalism," which he refers to as the "dead faith of

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the living." To avoid the dead faith, Hess turns us toward the active process of traditioning, or as she calls it, practicing a "questioning theology" (2012:305) or doing our theology within the deep questions of life and resisting the temptation to begin with the answer before knowing the question.

Siebel (2010:2) suggests two components to the traditioning process that we will address below. Relevant to Hess' determination, though, is Seibel's observation that traditional communities look to passing on their traditions to enhance the plausibility of the community to its adherents. If traditions can be capably passed from one generation to the next, there is a confidence that they are participating in ancient traditions without a recognition that every tradition was once an innovation created by the process of traditioning done by the ancestors of the community. Each generation is developing, and in conversation with, the questions and issues of the present situation. A perspective of faith formation that requires them to merely be the receiving of deposited wisdom is wholly inadequate and does not participate in the vital work of traditioning. Much of 20th century youth ministry can be understood to be what Hess describes as the discernment of a supposedly unanimous testimony of a homogenized tradition that only engages the culture to look for clues for the location of points of entry in order to deposit these traditional theologies and values. Hess cites the work of pedogeological theorist Paulo Freire who argues that the educational movement is from one direction. "There is no comeback, and there is not even any searching. The educator, generally, produces answers without having been asked anything" (Hess 2012:301). This pedagogy of adaptation merely adjusts methodology to deliver answers in the most effective fashion rather than develops a capacity for questions. Hess (2012:305)

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suggests that it is the "practical theologian's distinctive task to generate a 'questioning theology' and it is the religious educator's task to uncover and re-ask the questions that are the very pulse of a tradition."

Seibel (2010:1) suggests that two things must be considered if this traditioning process is to be accomplished. "Firstly, the relevance of the church's mission and message must be rediscovered and re-appropriated in cultural forms that speak to the members of each new generation" and that "the congregation should be willing to empower each rising generation with the freedom to make their distinctive mark upon the shape of that tradition." It is this work of empowering that I find particularly critical to the traditioning work.

I will borrow from the research of the Search Institute that identified power sharing as one of the five developmental relationships that help emerging generations form identity. Search (2018) suggests that there are four critical components to this relationship: Respect, Inclusion, Collaboration, and Leadership. These elements present a challenge for a traditional body that has, through 20th century cultural imaginations, viewed teenagers as underdeveloped. Here we are reminded again of Borgman (1997:72), who suggests that the subculture of teenagers was created, as any subculture is, by the disrespect of the hegemonic culture. We can see from Search's identification of the vital components of power sharing, which is itself a vital component of adolescent development, an entry path for emerging generations to take their place among the "elders," not simply as compliant adherents to the pre-established culture, but as collaborators in the work of developing that culture. This fundamentally changes the foundational understanding of the church as the deliverer of unchanging tradition

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from one generation to the next and requires a clear intergenerational engagement that assumes fluidity in tradition. It is within this traditioning that youth continue the process of identity formation – the discovery of who they are in Christ (de Kock and Norheim, 2022:146). While this has always been a consideration of youthwork, it has been done within a peer-comprised sub-culture rather than within the greater community of faith.

4.5.2 West's lens of "Black Prophetic Fire."

I am reminded of West's (2014) work, "Black Prophetic Fire," in which he suggests that the African American voice in America should be heard through the office of prophet as it challenges accepted norms and calls us to a new way of living and considering the systems that oppress and marginalize. He defines the Black prophetic tradition as one of "lifting every voice" (2014:1). Here it should be noted that the use of "Black" in this context refers to Americans who trace their roots to enslaved African people. The "Black prophetic fire" goes beyond the prophetic figures that are rightly highlighted such as Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. Du Bois, Martin Luther King, Ella Baker, Malcolm X, and Ida B. Wells who stand forward as Black leaders. West (2014:2-3) offers that their voice would not be a herald of change if not for the Abolitionist Movement, Pan-Africanist International workers movement, civil rights movement, anti-U.S. apartheid, Black nationalist, and Black women's movements respectively. It is the voice of the community that is lifted by those whose voice is more often heard and remembered.

Written during the end of the American presidency of Barack Obama, Dr. West suggests that the election of a Black president and the emergence of a wealth class of

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Black Americans has caused the corporate fire to be quenched with a change of focus from the real challenges of Black people in America to the vicarious identification with Black leadership or successes. The danger of the election of a Black president can be mistaken for wholesale victory instead of a symbolic achievement (West 2014:41). This realization became obvious in the Donald Trump election in 2016 and subsequent civil rights crisis' that defined the years since.

The concern for West in 2014 was that with the Obama presidency being the face of the American empire, it became more difficult for Black courageous and radical voices to bring critique to bear on the U.S. empire. He notes that empirical indices of infant mortality, mass incarceration rates, mass unemployment, and dramatic declines in household wealth were all marks of an increase in the suffering of the African American community during the Obama presidency than in the recent past (West 2014:161). However, with the tension of the Trump years (cf. Bowens 2023:89) and the resurgence of white supremacy and Christian nationalism in recent American experience, it is the youth voice that has been the change maker and, once again, the prophet that the American nation needed for national reckoning. Bowens (2023:89) suggests that black living is one of protest, that living as black in America means recognizing theologically "that black human existence as one that hinges on society's clinging to black subjugation; hence, we hear the chants, cries, and yells of protestors proclaiming that "Black Lives Matter" (cf. Nemiroff 1995:17). For Bowens (2023:90) the voice of protest within black youth (and any age that joins their voice) is couched deeply in the central core of Christianity:

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> Systemic racism has created unnatural communities, that is communities that God did not ordain, which are designed to exclude black people from the necessary resources to maintain human well-being. To maintain this politics of exemption necessitates the violation of racialized bodies in every way possible—dehumanizing conditions, violence, inequitable policies and structures, which excludes black people from the *imago Dei* and further grotesquely compromises and mars black people for the upkeep of white supremacy. The practice and discipline of theology must consider whether or not it should base its protest on inclusion into a highly racialized system—an unnatural system distorted by sin—that is designed to be exclusive. This is to say, we must measure the sharp differences between a protest that advocates for inclusion versus a protest that confronts the core problem of power and thus protests for abolition in the service of creating something revolutionary and new that represents a just society.

This has often been the movement of youth in the U.S. The rise of #BlackLivesMatter serves as a prime example of not only youth galvanizing and leading a movement, as well as how the movement in turn shaped youth culture in the U.S. The movement originated as a simple hashtag in 2013 after the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the wake of the killing of Black youth Trayvon Martin. The hashtag #blacklivesmatter was adopted by youth in St. Louis, MO to express their outrage following the police killing of teen Michael Brown and further national movement in the aftermath of the police killing of Eric Garner in New York. After the killing of George Floyd, the movement gained national and international prominence even as a largely youth-led movement. In a recent Yale study, 50% of Black parents reported that

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"thinking about race and police brutality has caused stress for their adolescent" (Baskin-Sommers 2021). The significance of this movement is that it is a return to the Black prophetic fire of West and is a movement largely comprised of youth.

In the study cited above, adolescents reported being engaged with the BLM movement: 66% through TV/radio/Internet media, 30% through social media, 12% reporting having attended one or more demonstrations, and 35% reported knowing someone who attended a demonstration without them (2021:1). It is notable that it also marks a change in the centrality of the church as a hub of civil rights activity. BLM is a decentralized youth movement where the church is largely absent.

I consider a discussion of civil rights in the United States to be important in our understanding of how we view both the church and the youth of the church. In considering the question of youth, they become the heralds of the world coming and calls us to process that new information and walk thusly into the call of God. More will be said below on the impact this research had on race, but to highlight the role of the church in this youth movement, Terrance Johnson (2016) of Harvard Divinity School considers this absence:

> It's more than fair to suggest that the church has not lived up to its ideals in relationship to women, and the gay, lesbian, and transgendered community. But the BLM movement, similar to the Black Power movement, is challenging the Black Church as well as its real and imaged communities to reexamine sexuality, gender, and class as it pushes the nation to overhaul the criminal justice system. In fact, the BLM movement is exposing a religious transformation within African American life: the decentering of the Black Church.

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Johnson notes that even within the civil rights movement, churches were not involved in the Black Power movement, a largely youth movement that challenged the church's traditional values regarding what should be liberated. Then, as is happening today, youth have turned from the church toward non-Christian faith or the absence of faith. Within the context of youth ministry, we must become just as absorbed by the context of adolescence and the various streams that make up adolescent context than we are by trying to understand how to connect incoming generations to ancestral traditions. This is accentuated by Powe (2012:41) who points out that many African American congregations are trying to hold on to the vision of the civil rights and Black consciousness eras but are not connected to the vision of the post-civil rights generation within their churches or the general public. He suggests that the civil rights generation wants to "define the meaning of space for the post-civil rights generation" (Powe 2012: 47). This is not to suggest that institutions defined by the civil rights era are not spiritual or not open to God's movement in the world, but it is a failure on the part of many to maintain a healthy dialogue that connects current realities to faith practice (Powe 2012:51). Praxis often suffers due to a commitment to a program or style of ministry that was birthed to address the uniqueness of a "time and place" of the past instead of a nimble willingness to ask questions about a current context. I am convinced that one of the gifts of including adolescents in the whole work of the church is that the prophetic voice of the emerging generation allows the church to respond to coming cultural needs instead of playing catch-up with a culture that has already gone ahead. This consideration of current youth culture has been a hallmark of youth ministry since its inception. As we discussed in chapter 2, modern youth ministry aimed to meet or

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battle against the perceived youth culture, however the contribution of practical theology is the engagement of the theological basis for youth ministry. This further supports the supposition that the church is not served by an isolated youth program that provides unique programming for adolescents when that program is not an integrated part of the whole mission of a local church.

4.5.3 Prophetic Lens as Shaper of Ecclesiology

Applying Hess' (2014:305-307) work to Osmer's (2008:132-133) discussion of the prophetic discernment, how else shall we discover the heart or "pathos" of God without a willingness to engage the pathos of God's people, the object of God's love. The biblical story is a conversation between the heart and longing of God and the longing of the people God loves. The people then are not merely the objects of the prophetic voice but are participants in the prophetic role themselves; the collective longing of the human heart in a particular time and place into which the heart of God speaks of both the pain and the hope of the current moment. This challenges the approach of prescriptive texts and methodologies that diagnose the problems facing the adolescent cohort that begin with their perceived relationship or compliance with accepted tradition or developed normative standards. The goal is not conformity on the part of the teenager, but the discovery of adolescent questions and the prophetic task of seeking God's voice within the question. This process places the teen cohort as a voice guiding the church to God instead of the "problem" that needs to be solved.

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4.6 Finding a Theological Core for Youth Ministry

Root (2020:147) has focused on the centrality of the person and work of Jesus and the affect this focus has on identity formation. But what affect or participation in this forming identity of the young person is, or should be, united with the community of believers which continues to be united in Christ (de Kock and Norheim 2022:146)? Here I find the ramifications to our theology of ecclesia to be particularly engaging. If the work of practical theology is to present a traditioning theology that has theology being a practice in flux rather than a static set of principles that the church is tasked with delivering to each new generation, then the role of each generation in the life of the church shifts from simple receptor to participant, co-creator of theology and mission. In the context of our research here, teenagers are tasked with being dialogue partners in co-creating the traditions and mission of the church within the life of the congregation and breath of the Holy Spirit.

This may further our understanding of the *koinonia*, the intended experience of God in God's community. de Kock and Norheim (2022:95) highlight Höring's (2013:56) suggestion that bringing *koinonia* back as a central concept may help us formulate a youth ministry that has "a habit that corresponds to the gospel and to the needs of people." Youth ministry that separates the experience of God from the unity with the Body of Christ demonstrates an ecclesiology that is highly influenced by western individuality and has had severe impact on the ability of emerging generations to experience mutuality within the context of the western church. Schwab (2008:16) observes that it rightly follows the late-stage advancement of a capitalist society, and

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"due to an accelerating economic capitalization, all age groups are now equally preoccupied with issues of personal self-preservation."

It stands to reason that segregated youth ministry grew from industrialization as discussed in the chapter on history. This stands in direct opposition to the founder of the Christian church that prayed for a one-ness or unity among the members of His *ecclesia*. That unity must include all members of the church. Scanlan (2021:72) goes so far as to suggest that the "role of youth work in shaping and forming the mind, methods, and spirituality of the Church has been largely ignored." He posits that there has not been good scholarly reflection done around the theological work and contribution of teenagers. The church has conducted much inquiry and created a legion of methodology to "reach" youth and migrate them into church life, but not taken seriously the theological reflection of the young people themselves and its impact on the church overall. He identifies three limited approaches to ecclesiology and youth ministry: "ecclesiology that is assumed, imposed, or alluded to."

- *Assumed* ecclesiology makes the mistake of assuming a "shared understanding of the Church between author and reader" or it could be said, the leader and the follower or the teacher and the student. Known metaphors are widely shared such as "family, community, or Body of Christ" (Scanlan 2021:73) yet there is not an articulated understanding of what is meant or the theological implications of that to the relationship between the emerging generation and the traditional generation.
- *Imposed* ecclesiology is what can be identified in popular youth ministry methodology. The approach of starting with an assumption of the church, or

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idealized church, and then shaping youth ministry to fit into the pre-supposed ecclesiology of the authors has resulted in adopted methodology that does not take the youth and their theological work into account – it only seeks to leverage knowledge of youth culture and psychology to direct them to a desired religious outcome. When I began in youth ministry in the 1990's, there was already a generation's worth of these approaches: leader-driven, purpose-driven, seeker-sensitive, incarnational, etc. and a host of organizations that were practicing these approaches (Sonlife, Young Life, YFC, Youth Specialties, etc.). As generations continue, new ecclesiological frameworks result in new methodologies (Yaconelli's *Contemplative Youth Ministry*, Powell's *Growing Young*, etc.) that begin with an assumption of church life and call and suggest how youth ministry fits. Scanlan's (2021:73) critique is that both approaches "give little if any agency to the young people themselves and revert to a much-criticized blueprint approach to ecclesiology."

- The *alluded* to ecclesiology that Scanlan identifies does recognize critical approaches to working with young people and the high-quality research into the science of youth and faith. Large projects such as the Exemplary Youth Ministry Study conducted by Luther Seminary in Minneapolis (firstthird.org) and the National Study of Youth and Religion conducted by the University of Notre Dame under the direction of Dr. Christian Smith (https://youthandreligion.nd.edu) contributed vast amounts of vital research and insight into our understanding of what is going on with emerging generations and their relationship to faith and the church, but Scanlan rightly offers that the question of ecclesiology is not at the

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forefront, but merely *alluded* to. This is not so much a criticism of their scholarship, but a recognition that the work of an ecclesiology formed within the adolescent cohort lies beyond the research questions that address "faith formation or the way that young people hold faith" (Scanlan 2021:73).

Scanlan seeks to reimagine youth ministry as inviting the adolescent cohort to imagine ecclesiology within the larger church. David F. White's work on discernment as communal practice allows for a re-negotiation of our ecclesiastical imagination through oppressive political agendas. White (2005:143) claims that "The Christian story cultivates an alternate perspective of the world, a dream in which the world is being reconciled." Allowing youth to adopt the central missional principle of God's work of healing the world without imposing a generational interpretation of what that healing means for the church, allows for youth ministry to be a community of dialog between God and the church. This new ecclesiastical imagination allows for the emergence of relevant ways that the gospel addresses the felt needs and engages a ministry of liberation – drawing the world closer to God.

How then does the church faithfully achieve the transmission of faith practiced as a" dialog between generational perspectives and practices" (Schwab 2008:10) if youth exist in a generational subculture isolated due to a general lack of respect for these forming identities (Borgman 2013:170)? The centrality of Christ or the cross is efficacious for individual development or enrichment, but without a clear missional ecclesiology that is generationally inclusive, our theology is incomplete, and the church has suffered from this generational isolation.

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Our theological assumptions of what is the proper theological centerpiece to have as a starting place will impact where we end up. We have earlier articulated that youth ministry's foundational roots are less theological than they are practical – rooted in soil such as the church's fear of the onslaught of new ideas brought by an industrialized nation with idle children and the influence of foreign cultures. The methodology grew into ways to teach the church the language of youth culture so that the church would have the ability to influence youth for the gospel of Jesus Christ. Much work has been done in the 21st century to re-engage the field of youth ministry and appropriately place it as a sub-discipline of Practical Theology. I celebrate the work of Root and the foundation laid by Nel, Borgman, Guder, and Dean as well as the continued work of Seibel, de Kock, Norheim, and Scanlan who continue to move youth ministry toward a theological directive. This is a healthy step in revealing the theological underpinnings of the theological modus that drives the western church. A theology of the Christ may include a theology of the cross, but vital inquiry with youth must be made toward what we might mean. An interpretation of the theology of the cross appeals to a western mind because it maintains an individual approach to both theology and piety. This is not to say that a vibrant theology of the cross is theological error, but cross theology divorced from the reflective work of practical theology has informed both the church's evangelion as well as its devotional life. The tacit philosophy seems to be if we can "get teens to the cross" then our work is largely completed. The movement of Jesus, the *ecclesia* that Jesus himself proclaimed to be forming, did not have "getting to the cross" as its central purpose, but the "carrying of the cross," the laying aside one's life for the sake of others, the essence of the kingdom of God. Are we "saved" as an

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experience of individual faith in the finished work of Christ on the cross or invited to continue the ministry of Jesus into the community of Christ (church) that is the movement of God on earth to build the Kingdom?

Jesus told the apostle, that upon this rock he will build his "church" (*ecclesia*). We have assumed that Jesus was talking about something future – something post cross/post resurrection. What if the building was better understood as expansion? What if Jesus' church (gathering, movement) was already in place with the 12 and others? What if Jesus was inviting expansion of this movement that he led, a ministry that we continue to this day? What if he left his Spirit to infuse the movement and help us in continuing to know how Jesus would lead in the changing contexts of society?
The institutionalization of the ecclesia has been one of the predominant issues in the engagement of each new generation. The preservation of an institution (tradition vs. traditioning) does not invite others to participate in the heart of God. Ward (1996:45) suggests that an original motivator of modern youth ministry was this preservation. If this "grand strategy" could only tap into the right cultural language, then it could "secure" the future of the church. Youth work was a direct response to the "onslaught of liberalism" and the church becoming that which stems the tide.

4.7 Summary

The theological reflection of adolescence calls us to reconsider our ecclesiology by recognizing that the western theological discourse has included a cultural imagination of adolescence as underdeveloped or a "less than" member of society. This has caused adolescence to be separated from the life of the ecclesia and placed into bespoke

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cohorts with the intent that they are being trained to be ready to continue the static traditions of the life of the western church. Modern research into adolescence informs us that adolescents are in a concentrated period of identity formation which happens within a person's community. For modern youth, the predominant option given to them by the surrounding culture is to form their identity within the cohort in which they have been relegated to exist.

The church is not called to live segmented, but to live in thriving community continuing the *missio Dei*. Youth have always been intended to be a part of this thriving community and to participate in all aspects of God's coming to God's people and to the world. In their developmental position of concentrated identity formation, youth have a unique ability to act as a prophetic voice to the church as oracles of the coming cultural calls and can unite with elder members in forming communities of wisdom to guide the church compassionately and relevantly.

This will require what Scanlan (2021) called and "interweaving ecclesiology" where the youth voice is given agency as the church continues the work of wisdom formation. This places youth work beyond the realm of Religious Education and instead places youth work as a critical function of the work of current ecclesiological life and theological development.

It is becoming clearer that giving attention to the crisis of attrition being addressed by this research is not merely an issue of the changing nature of adolescence and the responsibility of the church to create engaging programmes, but the issue is theological at its core. An inclusive missional theology invites a cultural counter-narrative to hegemonic adolescent exclusion that is emerging as a leading

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candidate for generational attrition. The question remains then, what are adolescents telling the church about themselves by the very nature of their developmental stage of life? The adolescents themselves emerge then as a critical “text” in the formation of a practical theology of adolescent ministry.

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5 The Adolescents Themselves

5.1 Theological Collaboration with Adolescent Identity Development

As mentioned in the introduction, this chapter is distinct from the historical development of adolescence, yet not intended to give a discourse on developmental theory. This chapter will certainly contain work done in the developmental science but presented as a practical theological tool to understand the locus of adolescence within the theological development of the ecclesia, a critical component to this research. As a result, this discussion of adolescence and the intensive stage of identity formation that is characterized within this stage should be considered as collaborating with the theoretical chapter above. The chapter will begin with framing the object of our consideration – the adolescents themselves. This research elects to address the unique stage of adolescence due to the pivotal nature of identity development within the liminal season between childhood and adulthood. Understanding the developmental realities of adolescence will help begin to form a picture of their unique stage of life as well as create a foundation of understanding as we develop a contextual theological approach to youth ministry as a unique feature within congregational life.

To provide a simple framework, I will highlight the helpful work of Dr. Joanna Lee Williams of Rutgers University to remind again of the developmental stage of those in the teen years. The role this serves to the overall argument is to help us recognize the time of concentrated identity formation occurring at this stage, which has often been used to exclude or segregate emerging adults. I will argue that it was a false and harmful conclusion to attempt to neutralize this developmental stage rather than to

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recognize the vitality of this stage and invite its nuance into congregational life and ecclesiology.

5.2 Adolescence as Developmental Stage

The 20th century mapped an adolescent in crisis haunted internally by the "*strum und drang*" that so fascinated Hall (1904). *Strum und Drang*, referring to the German literary and art movement, indicated a kind of expression that gave free rein to emotions and individuality, resulting in sometimes dissonant work. Hall applied this to the stage of life from approximately ages 12 to 25 and sees the transition to adulthood as a markedly emotional and self-involved time rife with the dangers cited in the discussion of history above. Gratefully, there has been an expansion and critique of Hall's work. It gives us a greater sense of the nuances of contextualization and identity formation that provides reliable guides with which to develop our theology of adolescence and our faith formation praxis. What we know of adolescence is that it is a period of identity formation. Arguably, we are doing identity formation our entire lives, but a key part of the transition from childhood to adulthood is the location of oneself with others. Williams (2018), suggests three distinct stages in adolescent development as they seek to answer the question "Who am I?" Williams (2018) references these as early, middle, and late adolescence and speaks from a developmental stage, providing a wide range of actual age where these traits may reveal themselves, depending on the context and uniqueness of the individual. The following summarizes the characteristics of each identified movement according to Williams. Her framework is utilized to give a sense of

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place in the adolescent journey that will provide a foundation to the discussions of identity formation and individuation below.

5.2.1 Early Adolescence (11-14)

Early adolescence is where we begin to see the acceleration of the formation of a unique identity that no longer depends solely on their family. Williams (2018) suggests that as early as 11 years old, individuals will begin to see themselves in multiple ways outside of the family. A primary change is to begin to self-identify as a member of a peer group and to exhibit a flexibility in their own self-presentation depending on the social demands of the situational context of their current group. They become much more sensitive to feedback from others, inspiring the flexibility stated above. This flexibility goes beyond their peer group as they are still seeking affirmational feedback from their role within a family or as a student. This results in adults' oft-stated perspective that they do not recognize their child's behavior, since the child has a less normative way of existing in the world because they recognize the weight other people have in their self-identification.

5.2.2 Middle Adolescence (14-18)

The year span of what Williams identifies as the middle stage of adolescence might seem surprising. Those of us who have studied adolescence for more than a generation share the conventional wisdom and consensus that adolescence is a stage that ends at 18. However, when we consider adolescence as a social construct that did not exist prior to industrialization, and thus is tied to economics and a cultural

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imagination, we affirm the fluid nature of adolescence as a developmental stage. As a result, we should be aware that some of the facets of adolescence or the identification of adolescent characteristics may not ring true in a context where the economy allows for Root's "slowdown" and the ultimate creation of adolescence. However, the context of this effort is the industrialized U.S., so there needs to be an awareness of what is occurring at this stage in the U.S. to weave their distinctive experience into ecclesiastical life. It is in Middle Adolescence that they begin to see themselves as an adolescent in the larger world. More than simple identification with a group of peers, they see themselves as a distinct cultural cohort with questions of what roles come with this identification. This results in the observed phenomena of "trying on different hats" or alternative identities to see what "fits." This stage becomes a rich time for their participation in the world as they consider themselves in relation to social issues and questions of their day such as race, religion, or gender, and are beginning to have stronger opinions on social questions. The progress of this stage solidifies their positions and identity, and they leave behind the fluidness of traits exhibited in various contexts and begin to become "who they are" regardless of the group.

5.2.3 Late Adolescence (18-24)

This later stage is rarely considered when we address concerns about youth ministry. However, understanding where these individuals are going is critical to knowing how we may serve and incorporate them as a church. As they enter this later stage, they find a much deeper concern regarding who they are as an adult in intimate relationships, career goals, or group identities such as gender, sexuality, race, politics, or religion.

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This does not suggest that the above was not considered during middle adolescence. Instead, the difference is an adult solidification of identities rather than how certain identities exist as a teenager in the world. This also does not suggest that there will not be further exploration and change. Rather, development is a choice we make to continue or not continue to develop. Therefore, it is vital for the church to understand the adolescent cohort as fellow explorers with a different vision to contribute rather than a static cohort with homogenous traits that need to be managed.

5.3 Adolescence as a flexible state of development and socialization

With an understanding that everything described above assumes further nuances of individual development and unique contexts, the research provides a pathway of the normative task. In the previous chapter, we discussed the normalization of the liminal season of adolescence from Hall onward; noting that current scholarship would differ at major points from Hall. Throughout the 20th century, the concept of adolescence was rarely debated. Rather, it was only diagnosed, and solutions were suggested to address the "youth problem." Prior to the work of Hall, there was little concept of a liminal stage in human development. However, the industrial revolution's dissolution of the intergenerational work life found in agrarian society sparked a series of events that expanded this liminal stage into what we know as the modern teenager. As Nel (2000:178) affirms, "with the migration to the cities during and after the Industrial Revolution children and other youth people for the first time in history lived and worked outside their parent' homes." This is, of course, not just strange for the church, but strange for all of society.

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It should be noted that not merely people were moving from rural contexts in the U.S. to rapidly growing cities, but industrialization saw U.S. cities swell with immigrant populations fleeing war and famine in Europe. During the first decade of the 20th century, the U.S. population soared by 16 million, largely from Northern Europe (Chinn 2009:14). Chinn (2009:5) further notes that by 1920 much of the population of New York City were either immigrants (35.4%) or the children of immigrants (41%). This is also apparent in Ueda's (1987:4-11) exploration of the Boston suburbs from agrarian to industrial in the latter half of the 19th century. He notes that in just 10 years after the establishment of the city of Somerville, MA, the population of manual workers (as opposed to farm workers) rose from 5% to 25% of the labor force (Udea 1987:11). As a result of this influx of industrial labor, there was a concerted commitment to public education among the business class that translated, as it always does, to legislation (Udea 1987:15). This commitment was fueled by the explosive population growth of the poor Irish that had flooded Somerville looking for work. Their presence succeeded in creating what some social observers noted as a social disorder that created "dangers to peace and prosperity presented by the ignorant poor at the border of the neighborhood" (Udea 1987:16).

This realization sparked social fears that fueled much of Hall's work. The world was moving too fast, vast populations of Europeans were arriving to fuel prosperity, and the young were seen as vulnerable to this rapid growth. Hall (1904:1: xi) sounded the alarm by suggesting that children are growing up too rapidly by "our urbanized hothouse life, that tends to ripen everything before its time." It is not hard to see the xenophobic spirit in Hall's work and in subsequent social and religious responses. "Urban" was often

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used as a euphemism for foreigners and there was a fear that exposure to new and strange ways of living would ruin the pace of American child development. It should be further noted that Hall was a white supremacist and eugenicist who also used the term "adolescence" to describe non-white cultural groups at a stage of "incomplete growth" (Schwebel 1974:10). He often used his concept of an adolescent stage of human development to describe the developmental location of non-white peoples. It must be noted here that what defined "white" in the 19th century did not include the Irish, the Italians, or even Jewish populations (Jacobson 1999).

Clearly, this had an impact on far more than the pedagogy of Christian formation, but as Felder (1993:184) notes, an American "white" lens has become the standard by which we read and interpret the scriptures as well as how we practice faith formation. As much as modern theological work tries to look through global lenses, the ideas suggested by Hall have rooted their way into the moral imagination of American society. It launched an era of trying to arrest the pace of adolescent development and of addressing the "youth problem" of growing up too fast or being exposed to values contrary to the family or community of origin.

This motivation to slow down the developmental process continues to be echoed by Root (2020:60) who suggests that the "slow down" is driving motivation for many parents across the country. He suggests that youth ministry is "needed to recuse the speed with which young people are racing to grow up, thus making sure that they didn't go crazy before getting to one of the well-worn identity paths of adulthood." What is "slowed" according to Root is the process of identity formation that we have identified as critical to adolescent formation. The "well-worn" paths already pre-approved by the

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parents and/or church lack the nuance provided by the participation and agency of the youth themselves. Root (2020:64) suggests that parents are afraid to release their child into the "fast paced" world and instead want them to enter with a strong self-identity and the tools needed to be successful, but this puts teens in danger of growing up too slowly. He says when youth ministry plays a "supporting role, seen as adding to (or at least watering) the seeds of values that parents plant and offering tools for finding happiness, then youth ministry too becomes protection from emotional injury" (Root 2020:65). The goal has been to give adolescents time to get "to one of the well-worn identity paths of adulthood" (Root 2020:59). To successfully do the normative task, those fears and the values that drive them must be adequately considered and engaged with our ecclesiological work.

5.4 Adolescence and the Process of Identity Formation

As we saw throughout the framework of Williams above, identity formation is the thru line of adolescent development, regardless of its length or context. Identity is the job of the adolescent. Echoing Erikson (1997:35-36) this research agrees that the cultivation of a coherent sense of self and identity as a pivotal developmental task during adolescence. Jocober (2011:56) refers to back to Erikson when she suggests that identity formation is a major component to individuation. She also clarifies that individuation does not mean isolation but quite the opposite. I offer a lengthy quote from Jacober (2011:62):

> Individuation does not take place in a vacuum. One needs only look at any seventh grader with whom you have an inside relationship to see the beginnings

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of what is, at times, seemingly a split personality. He will be a class clown at school, protective older brother in the neighborhood and chief torturer of his little brother at home. He will give a head nod to family in public and fall asleep in a family member's lap on the couch at home, securely hidden from the world.

This corresponds to Williams' reflection on the "trying different hats" of early adolescence. The process of individuation and differentiation is one of seeing the reflection of oneself in the eyes of new spheres of affirmation. Social relationships move from being supplemental playmates within the realm of the family to being critical in one's perception of who they are in the world (Jacober 2011:63). I suggest that it is an overlooked component of our youth ministry praxis. That is not to say that there has been a lack of awareness as to the stage of identity formation that is represented by the teenage years, but a misplaced concept that it happens without the nurture of the whole community or that it only happens within adolescence. Personal identity drives the perception of oneself and is critical in the decisions one makes concerning themselves and their relationship to the world around them. As we saw above, young humans embark on a journey of self-exploration, pondering questions about their identity, desired roles in adulthood, and their place within society (Branje et all 2021). This period marks their growing awareness of their distinctiveness and uniqueness compared to others, as well as their sense of similarity across different domains and the continuity of their identity across various contexts. It is not merely a journey of decoding a hidden truth that was not present in childhood, but the attempt to identify where that truth about themselves fits into a world where they are more than their family of origin. Jacober (2011:27) refers to this as becoming aware of "an existential otherness" that

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inspires an investigation into the nature of human existence. This distinction is critical as we define our various definitions of adolescence as known and identifiable stage of human development vs. the institutionalization of that liminal stage into the cohort we know as “teenager.” That tension is visible throughout this work. Jacober (2011:52) also acknowledges this when she refers to the “prolonged adolescence” that has resulted from “cultural mainstreaming.” This section seeks to recognize the process of individuation of which identity formation is a critical piece.

5.4.1 Formation of Personal Narratives:

Branje (2021) also reminds us that a critical way in which adolescents strive to establish continuity and self-sameness is by crafting personal narratives that integrate their past, present, and future selves. This is arguably the power of storytelling in a religious context and why it becomes critical for an adolescent to not only hear the stories, but to seem themselves active within the stories. Through the construction of autobiographical stories, adolescents recognize themselves as consistent individuals across diverse timeframes and situations (Branje et all 2021). The flexibility of adolescence allows these experiences to be very real, yet we recognize that they are highly subjective as adolescents shape them according to their own interpretations of the events that shaped their identity. They also remain subject to change as teenagers reflect upon experiences as they gain new information and new experiences.
The field of adolescent identity formation has reoriented our understanding of how teenagers cultivate their sense of self and how this process evolves over time and with whom it evolves. This research has considered the role of cultural, familial, and societal

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contexts in shaping identity formation processes, reminding us of the critical nature of a community of nurture, arguing that is it is critical for an emerging adult to be an active participant in their community of identity if they are going to form lasting bonds and see themselves within the narrative of ecclesial life.

5.4.2 Identity Formation within Communal Structures

What Williams describes above is a process of forming an identity from a childhood space (identifying in terms of concrete identities like given gender roles such as boy or girl, family roles such as child or grandchild, or societal roles such as a grade in school or even faith roles) to an adult space of forming fluid identity structures based on how one relates to the people and cultural structures around them. Kroger (1989:1-2) describes the difference as "self-definition" emerging from the provided definitions of childhood. As Kroger clarifies, self-definition is not something that happens entirely in the self, but is an identity formed by the conditions in which the adolescent exists; "whether seen as an artifact of the mass media, an ambivalent legal system, and affluent society, or a technologically advanced culture with prolonged educational demands, all such socio-cultural approaches to adolescence stress the role played by society in the creation of conditions making identity a matter that needs addressing by its more youthful members."

To put Williams and Kroger in dialogue is to understand that there is an emergence of self-occurring in the liminal years, but that emergence does not happen in a vacuum. A key component to that emergence is the cultural ecosystem nurturing that identity. How a person's identity forms, and how long that identity takes to emerge, may

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depend on how they are able to absorb and process the affirmations or malignment of their identifying community. To quote Erikson (1977:106):

> The process of identity formation depends on the interplay of what the young persons and the end of childhood have come to mean to themselves and what they now appear to mean to those who become significant to them.

Hudson (1991:271), when speaking of the context of African American males, sees identity forming influences in peers, family economic resources, and the impact of living in an integrated community. He also challenges us to not only think of adolescent development in a mono-cultural way, but also to recognize that even within cultural cohorts, exposure to things such as educational opportunities have significant impact in identity formation. His work further challenges the notion of a "miscellaneous" Black culture, identifying a population of young males who do not have the culturally "requisite" skills or values to function comfortably or effectively in the broader Black community.

This phenomenon was visible in my work with an American Chinese congregation. The adolescent cohort was raised in the U.S. by immigrant parent, something which made them neither "Chinese enough" for those in their ancestral cohort and not "American enough" for their schoolmates. The resulting cultural cohort – referred to as "ABC" or "American Born Chinese" – had to form identity within a lack of place. This church became a valuable place of observation of the creation of unique identity cohorts.

Due to the difference in language, the "English speaking" youth attended a different worship than their "Chinese speaking" elders. This further solidified their sense

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of other and a subculture of ABC's developed within the structure of what was essentially a youth ministry. To refer to Erikson (1977:106), the members of this group became significant to them because it was a safe place for them, and the result was a formation within the group. It is noted that this formation was not essentially discipleship but sometimes existed despite the spiritual structures. I believe the lack of intergenerationality made it difficult to create the "corporate memory" due to the isolation of the cohort.

In many ways, the Historical Black Church's practice of intergenerationality proved more effective in the development of a cultural faith identity. As adolescents grew through the Black church, there was a greater exposure to the wisdom traditions of the elders and, until recent generations, proved effective in the development of committed people of faith. Wimberly and Parker (2002:13) speaking through the lens of the Black Church experience suggest that "Christian wisdom formation is a human relational and contextual sojourn. For Christian wisdom to be formed, past and present Christian faith exemplars must guide it." The distinction between religious education and wisdom formation is in the intergenerational process of becoming and belonging more than the banking of information. There is a critical reciprocity in the formation of identity within community through this lens. As Wimberly and Parker (2002:19) go on to further suggest: "wisdom formation of the young requires exemplars who embody wisdom in the way they live their lives as well as who can tell the stories of how they have 'come this far by faith'." The reciprocity is highlighted as "these exemplars must be willing to hear the stories of the young in order to become aware of the distinctive issues they face" (Wimberly and Parker 2002:20).

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Scanlan (2021:106) sees these "modes of belonging" as critical to forming an identity within the ecclesiastical community. His case study work with churches in the U.K. identified 4 modes of belonging exhibited by churches with functioning youth ministry: social space, safe space, intergenerational significance, and connection with a broader tradition, as critical to effective youth ministry. The students in Scanlan's study could identify these characteristics among those that secured their involvement in the youth ministry of a local parish. However, it should be noted that within the identity of these characteristics of the youth ministry, there was still a distinction between the youth ministry and "church." Church was seen as the "other group" where their only relationship with it was in the areas of mission and outreach (Scanlan 2021:120). Churches expressed the desire to have youth as "part of the family," but one studied church also planned youth activities at the same time as adult-oriented worship. Scanlan (2021:122) identified this as a common paradox, something that he explores later in his work, as will we in the final section of this chapter.

5.4.3 Identity Formation in Digital Space

Through the lens of recognizing the influence of "other" in the work of identity formation, we cannot undervalue the digital landscape in adolescent development. Root (2020:65) speaks of the attempt by parents to protect their child from negative stimulus and showcase only positive and affirming input. In some U.S. contexts, as stated above, the youth group is seen in a supporting role to the work of the parents in protecting teens from emotional injury. However, the ability to control or filter these stimuli are severely muted when an emerging adult has full access to the entire world. In

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adolescence, there is a stronger emphasis on social feedback when it comes to how a public self is presented and has a great impact on one's own self-perception. In other words, who they think they are is based on affirmation or negative comments (Bornstein & Lamb 2010: 427).

The advent of social media venues allows for not only a wide field of identity observation, but instantaneous feedback on the success or failure of any "new hats," that an adolescent wishes to try on. Digital space can be thought of as a constant experiment in self-creation with the constant critique of their peers. As Williams noted above, it is not uncharacteristic for an adolescent to try various self-expressions to see which ones reconcile with who they believe themselves to be within the affirmation of their significant community. This "fidelity", as Erikson termed it, allows for a synthesis of self that leads to a comfortable self-identity. What is unique about digital space is how it functions in both time and as real space. Raul Katz (2014:866) outlines four ways in which new media has changed human interaction.

1. *Digital space extends communication ability in both time and space*. We are no longer dependent on a location or a position on a clock to communicate with people for it still to be considered "real time and real place."

2. *Digital space has substituted face-to-face activities*. I would include voice-to-voice as well. Communication via text or pictures (memes) is the preferred method of communication with the emerging generations.

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3. *Digital space consolidates activities when mass and interpersonal communication combine*. No longer do we do activities like watch a film or a concert and then discuss after or the next morning in a "water cooler moment." Mass experiences are coupled with free-flowing chats and often one-on-one engagement by the content creator as a part of the experience.

4. *Digital tools require people from diverse backgrounds to assimilate to established media formats and language*. In that way, digital methods become a "great equalizer" in how we communicate – paving the way for a more global interaction where emerging adults have greater access to a larger community and discover communities of formation and connection.

Zirschky (2015) rightly couches the digital question in ecclesiology. It is not the tech that attracts teenagers to devices, but connection (Zirschky 2015:6). This reframes the question from "apps" or equipment to "what does it mean for the church to live together in koinonia in the face of a networked society." Zirschky (2015:13) offers an alternative view of the "glow of the screen" as the access that young people have to a world of "connective relationships" not easily replicated in disconnected or in-person society. The ecclesiological impact is that the incoming generation is creating habits that disrupt the dominant practices of "face forward" ministry. The other side of covid-19 lockdowns have made this a challenge of the entire church as many, if not all, traditional in person gatherings have moved to a digital space, challenging the pre-pandemic critique that only in person experiences offered full meaning. However, in his consideration of our in-

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person gatherings, Zirschky (2015:23) does suggest that if our in-person gatherings did not foster a sense of "belonging, intimacy, and presence" then they would have failed the test of presence that digital natives might be experiencing online. In this way, we see the young as emerging again within a prophetic voice critiquing in-person approaches that lack the test of presence that they are fostering in digital social spaces.

This removal of digital natives from the familiar stages of identity formation allows them effectively unlimited access to other like-minded people who are also doing identity formation in what is essentially a laboratory of self-expression. What is more, in this space they are free from the authoritative governance of the adult world contended with by all other generations (Williams & Merton 2018: 256). Zirschky (2015:31) affirms this by suggesting that text messaging and social media allow the emerging generation to subvert adult-structured environments. These happen in "low key undetected ways" and include adolescents bringing their whole community with them wherever they go. It is easy to compare this with the accepted "see you next Sunday" version of community that might foster membership, but not community or intimacy (Zirschky 2015:37).

The advent of the "digital natives" presents a challenge for those in leadership who are more familiar with public spaces of identity formation that exist in a particular time and physical location. It should be noted that neither the process of forming identity nor the need for corporate identity formation has changed, only the location. The church also must become fluent in the language of digital space if there is to be significant work done with the current generation and most certainly with the incoming Generation Alpha. de Kock and Norheim (2022:68) call the church to "de-laboratorize" our thinking away from "mainly cognitive oriented, institutionalized youth work" toward a more

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narrative approach where "the adolescents' own life stories are connected to the narrative of the faith tradition." While I will argue that in order to truly create a faith-forming ecosystem, there must be some physical engagement across generational cohorts in a coordinated time on the calendar, there must be a reciprocity in language learning to understand the formational impact of digital ecosystems. As we form a theology of praxis when it comes to adolescence, an awareness of this process of identity development and its associated factors are paramount.

5.4.3.1 Covid-19 and Digital Safe Spaces

This study would be incomplete without acknowledging the impact of Covid-19. The pandemic served as a commentary on adolescent formation to illustrate both the vital nature of intergenerational communal formation and the significance of digital spaces. Adolescents no longer had the normative avenues of identity development which either forged new pathways or left many adolescents in a mental health crisis.

In a study of adolescent mental health conducted in 2021 by the U.S. Center for Disease Control (CDC), it was noted that "approximately one in three high school students experienced poor mental health (most of the time or always) during the COVID-19 pandemic (37.1%) and during the past 30 days (31.1%). During the 12 months before the survey, 44.2% experienced persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness; that is, had ever felt so sad or hopeless almost every day for two weeks or more in a row that they stopped doing some usual activities" (Jones 2022). In addition, in the 12 months before the survey, nearly 20% of American adolescents had considered suicide.

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However, the data regarding connectedness is informing. The data showed that students who felt close to persons at school had a lower prevalence of poor mental health during the pandemic (28.4% versus 45.2%) and during the past 30 days (23.5% versus 37.8%), of persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness (35.4% versus 52.9%), of having seriously considered attempting suicide (14.0% versus 25.6%), and of having attempted suicide (5.8% versus 11.9%). Similarly, students who reported being virtually connected to others during the pandemic had a lower prevalence of poor mental health during the pandemic (35.5% versus 42.0%) and during the past 30 days (28.7% versus 36.8%), of persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness (41.9% versus 51.7%), of having seriously considered attempting suicide (18.4 versus 24.9%), and of having attempted suicide (8.0% versus 12.2%) compared with those who were not virtually connected to others during the pandemic (Jones 2022).

Of course, virtual connectivity is fraught with danger when it comes to identity formation. The developmental need for affirmation is revealed instantaneously in the form of responses to social media posts (likes, shares, etc.) and these can shape adolescent identity in positive or negative ways. However, what the pandemic lockdowns revealed about the contribution of adolescent individuals is not only our need for connection when it comes to mental stability, but teenagers demonstrated an adaptability to creating modes of belonging when physical spaces are no longer a possibility. Social media, text groups, and “massive multi-player online games” allowed this cohort to weather the challenges faced by the more static adult world and contribute greatly to our understanding of the vital nature of relationships. The Covid-19 pandemic revealed the nature of belonging within the adolescent cohort and their adaptability

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allowed the other cohorts within the church to have access to new ways of thinking about how to engage in broader traditions. The contribution of this cohort was only ignored to the peril of congregations unable to adapt and can serve as a template of inclusion as we consider the hermeneutical lens of ecclesiology.

5.5 Summary

The gift of looking through the lens of the adolescent cohort gives us a living illustration of what identity formation looks like and provides a lens for the church to understand its own process of identity formation. This aids the theological construct of identity formation within an ecclesiastical setting by allowing the church to witness the process of formation generationally. In addition, it places the adolescent as a critical contributor to theological identity formation. In many ways, it can be argued that the church exists within liminality on its way to maturity, which is not so much a destination as it is an orientation. Children, on their way to maturity, begin with recognizing the "otherness" around them and begin asking the questions of how they fit into the world of others. There is a process of trial and error (trying on of hats), yet the mission of finding their space in the world remains. They ask the critical questions of their own identity as well as their relationship with that which challenges the other inhabitants of the planet. In seasons of disruption, they turn to their community – if they have been given access to a healthy community. Even in digital spaces, it is community that is sought, not distraction. If given the opportunity, the emerging generation will always give the established generations the tools needed to understand not only the technology but understand it theologically. This is where the valuable process of wisdom formation

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comes into play as the established generation can give language to the discoveries of the young. Through this lens, it can be argued that understanding the characteristics of adolescence through a theological lens provides the church with a roadmap of its own identity discovery. The youth are engaged not because they are the future of the church, but their very process calls to the church to consider itself.

The question driving this research has been why, after a century of research and development in adolescent theory and ministry with youth is the mainline church still suffering generational attrition? Bringing the "texts" presented into dialogue suggests that weaving teenagers into the theological life of the church and local expression of the *missio Dei* has significant influence in generational sustainability. The segregation of youth into cultural cohorts has resulted in a disconnection to the spiritual and missional life of the local church as well as vacated their unique gifts and voice in the ongoing theological and missional dialogue. What remains to be considered in light of this research is a way forward for the U.S. church as well as what can be learned by the church worldwide in consideration of the experiences of the mainline American church. This is the task of the next chapter.

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6 A Practical Theological Way Forward

6.1 In consideration of systemic change

It is critical to a work of practical theology that we go beyond theory and invite reflection into praxis if we truly aim to address the problem of generational attrition within the mainline church. Osmer (2008:175) guides us into this final section through the pragmatic task of servant leadership. The goal of this research is not to merely critique 20th century developments around adolescence or the church's response to these developments without suggesting a possible path forward. It is the goal of practical theology to "form and enact strategies of action that influence events in ways that are desirable" (Osmer 2008:176). The challenge is not merely an external one, but internal. Osmer (2008:176) reminds us that the "leaders of mainline congregations face not only the external challenge of a changing social context, but also the internal challenges of helping their congregations rework their identity and mission beyond the era when they were at the center of cultural influence and power." This research has shown that these misalignments contributed to the social crisis that the church now faces.

This work is proposing that to address the challenges of youth ministry, there is a requirement to consider the systems by which the church operates. In other words, there must be a reconsideration of our ecclesiology from a missional perspective that sees youth as vital to the mission and no longer engage in "future church heresy" that places youth in a marginal position outside the life and praxis of faithful communities. Nel (1990:9) connects the future church heresy with an orientation toward survival. A

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survival mindset sees youth ministry as well as the youth themselves as merely "investments in the future that should be nurtured to ensure the survival of the given institution." (Nel 1990:9) The survival of the institution must be replaced with a commitment to mission – which includes all ages.

6.2 The Four Texts of this Research

It is helpful to refer again to the four texts presented in this research for consideration. The task below is to reveal a logical argument flow that is coming through when the texts are brought into conversation with one another, particularly the theoretical and empirical work. As a fuller and more complex sound is created by a chorus of voices vs. a single voice, these texts unite to develop a fuller picture of the intended ecclesial life. This fuller picture gives us a clear lens to critique the historical record.

6.2.1 Qualitative and Statistical Text

Text one is reflected in chapter two were both statistical and qualitative research was utilized to demonstrate that while there is indeed statistical attrition in the U.S. church, there is careful consideration required to understand the meaning behind the statistics. When one assumes that the institution is embodying an ecclesial ideal or that the statistics are somehow universal, it is easy to see why the most common assumption is that there is something wrong with the culture or the youth themselves. However, when we consider the statistics ethnographically, a picture emerges that invites us to consider non-hegemonic ecclesial praxis. For example, we considered the fact that the Historic

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Black Church was largely unaffected by late 20th century statistical attrition through the lens of more communal and intergenerational praxis of wisdom formation. This is a notable finding considering the research question of generational attrition. Churches that carried a view of themselves as "kin" and that kinship extended beyond the church walls were not affected by the secularization of culture in the way that their counterparts seemed to be experiencing. This was confirmed by the qualitative interviews. Churches that naturally practiced inclusion and mission, regardless of ethnicity, had a greater degree of youth involvement and sustainability than churches that practiced an age segregated ministry and lacked a clear sense of mission. Often, the latter churches expressed a "future church" concern as their members were dying out and there were few or no young to ensure the continuation of the local church. It should be noted that no church in the empirical study were experiencing growth, inviting the development of a different rubric of ministry quality.

6.2.2 The Historical Analysis

Text two was a careful consideration of the historical roots of modern youth ministry praxis with an eye toward the cultural environment where youth ministry was forged. If praxis is a contributing factor in generational attrition, then a consideration of the historical roots of praxis is helpful. A critique of this historical development is not to suggest that the developers nor the practitioners had poor intentions, but to allow us to consider that our praxis may not be compatible with seeing youth as theologically vital members of ecclesial life. The rootedness of youth ministry in a misapplied and misappropriated interpretation of adolescence is suggested. Hall's (1904) work

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identified characteristics of passion and tension in youth, but his research was delivered through a lens of xenophobia that would not be acceptable today (Hall 1904:716 cf. Fallace 2012:517). His view of adolescence as a fragile and dangerous time resulted in youth being transferred from contributive members of society to custodial institutions. This hegemonic fear not only resulted in the creations of public educational institutions, but the church also adopted these concerns, and the era of modern youth ministry was begun. Youth ministry through the 20th century adapted and shaped itself based on the rapidly changing developments of the subculture (teenagers) that was in formation due to its rejection by the larger culture. The ministry itself followed the experience of youth and moved from a distinctive ministry within the denominational system (youth societies) to fully autonomous ministries operating outside of the church. Praxis eventually become theology as choosing an individual relationship with Jesus became the normative theology of the hegemonic church. The success of "parachurch" ministry became the normative praxis of many American churches in the mid and late 20th century. While ministries were now couched within a church building or ministry roster, they operated as separately as parachurch ministries had with the occasional crossover of Youth Sunday. This resulted in a "church within a church" that seldom translated to faithfulness after graduation. However, this was not the reality of the Historic Black Church that remained "child centered" and featured all generations in worship and in corporate social concerns. Though as black communities become more gentrified and churches less contributive to social concerns of youth (LGBTQ issues for example) the Historic Black Church is experiencing a statistical decline for the first time. This is a critical piece of discovery.

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6.2.3 Inclusive Missional Theory

Our third text is the realignment of our ecclesiology as missional and inclusive. This was the largest element of this research due to the critical nature of forming a Christian identity. This research is indebted to the scholars who brought us to a theological understanding of "what ought to be going on" regarding our theological posture and understanding of ecclesial praxis. The church must reengage with its theological core of seeking to be the mission of God. God's communicative acts are not the domain of the clergy, but a ministry to which all contribute. A missional posture that identifies all members as being theologically vital to the revelation of the unique and contextual mission of the church requires an inclusiveness by definition. This makes "church growth" strategies irrelevant since numerical growth is no longer the goal. The goal is life together, growth together, and service together.

6.2.4 Adolescents in Identity Formation

Our fourth text is the period of adolescence itself. It is helpful to again restate the purpose in making this research focused on adolescence when the research can clearly be applied to the entire Body of Christ. As is suggested in the theoretical chapter, the emerging generation carries a prophetic voice by the very nature of their moment in human development. While all humans are in a constant state of identity formation through our lives, the adolescent years gives us the opportunity to see the process in a concentrated form and enact the practice of inclusion once again. The liminal state of adolescence does not allow for a static ecclesiology but requires a fluidity as the church

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continue the work of wisdom formation as the people of God. Thus, adolescents are not fragile beings to be sequestered until fully developed, but contributive beings seeking personal and communal identities. As they find space within the church to discover those personal and communal identities, they participate with the whole church in their own fluid process of identity formation.

6.3 The Theoretical and Empirical in Conversation

This is where this research finds its nexus. This research has presented the theological argument that the church is called to be inclusive and missional, the expression of the life of God in the world. The church finds its origin in the will of God, its gifting from the Spirit of God, and its mission in the action of God in the world. It has been argued that an inclusive missional hermeneutic reflects a theological understanding of the nature of the church using both a trinitarian and Christopraxis lens. This understanding critiques the practice of excluding adolescents from the life of the church, but instead to view them as gifted and vital contributors bearing a prophetic role in the life of the congregation. Their inclusion is contributive to the process of fluid identity formation that is vital if the church is to escape a static ecclesiology that has contributed to generational attrition.

The empirical research affirmed the theoretical findings and added additional nuance. Every church that reported adolescent engagement and sustainability of membership reported characteristics of inclusion and mission. The nuance that the empirical research uncovered is the subtle difference between inclusion and what has been understood as “belonging.” Belonging is a critical component to identity formation,

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as was affirmed in the chapter considering adolescence as a developmental stage. However, when considering belonging from an ecclesiological point of view, an experience of belonging does not connect an adolescent to the missional life of a congregation. That requires an ecosystem of inclusion where emerging adults experience a collegial experience where they identify their own agency within congregational life.

Subtle nuance was also visible when speaking of the difference between missional and having service projects or trips. Ministries that reported service-oriented activities showed a larger percentage of participation, but churches that had a whole-church sense of mission where youth were included seemed to have a greater experience of longevity when members left high school. This is a critical understanding when considering a missional orientation.

Putting the theoretical and the empirical in conversation yielded a powerful learning that this research hopes inspires further inquiry. There is a critical theological awareness that stands to be uncovered when adolescents are no longer a marginalized population but are included as equal members of a congregation and held with the wisdom of their elders.

The final piece of adolescent identity formation adds a critical bridge to begin to explore the pragmatic task of this work. If the church can connect to a process of fluid identity formation, demonstrated in adolescence, there is a path to the needed reformation called for in this research.

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6.4 Identity-Driven Reformation

We return to Nel (2015, cf. Nel 1994) who suggests that our identity as missional is what defines us. It is helpful to be reminded of this foundation as the process of reformation begins to be established. He goes so far to say that "the church is missional, or it is no church at all" (Nel 2015:11). This process of identity finding does require a "going back" (Nel 2015:26) to reengage the vision of our participation in what God is already doing in the world and motivating the entire congregation to participate. The loss of cultural influence that was a hallmark of Christendom has provided both a challenge and an opportunity to reengage with our central purpose of being the expression of God in the world. The church's struggle within the culture wars in the early part of the 21st century in America attest to this challenge of describing our identity. The church in America finds itself wrestling with their relationship with the fraught Red/Blue (Republican/Democrat) divide, often choosing sides and claiming each side in the name of Christ. Schade (2019:2) has tried to create a path of compromise by suggesting a blended approach she calls "purple" as a path of unity. However, my critique of all of these is the lack of a clear identity of the church as the mission of God in the world rather than how the church identifies in relationship to political winds. This is not to suggest that the church only possesses a "religious" identity that does not speak to culture, but that our identity "comes from the inside, it is intrinsic motivation, theologically informed, not made (fabricated) by leaders…" (Nel 2015:35). This is why the inclusion of all voices is crucial to this theological work. As has been suggested above, the inclusion of youth not only contributes to the identity development of the congregation, but the youth themselves. We have argued the stage of concentrated

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identity development characterized by adolescence. This identity development must happen within a communal framework to be efficacious to the Christian teen. Their involvement, thus, is of a reciprocal nature. As the community is critical to the identity formation of youth, so are youth critical as participants in the identity formation of a congregation. Now the question remains how this is accomplished.

6.5 Reformation

We have developed the nature of the missional identity in the last chapter. The goal of this chapter is to engage the process of reformation. I affirm Nel's (2015:205) statement that "developing a missional local church as a ministry is indeed a process of reformation." It is not so much change as becoming more of "what we already are in Christ" (Nel 2015:205). This is not an overnight change but subject to "the general laws of social mechanisms" that lend themselves to slow processes of development (Nel 2015:206). While I discuss organizational change strategies, I agree with Nel (2015:206) that forcing strategic planning into congregational life does not "reflect theologically on developing missional congregations." I prefer the word "reformation" to "change" because the requirements are not how we change to meet the challenges of the surrounding culture, but how we consider the theological precepts for being a church (Nel 2015:207). I would suggest that this is a process that involves the entire congregation guided my keen theological and pastoral leadership. It is in this way, as Nel (2015:207) describes, that the congregation discovers its own nature and raison d'être. It is this discovery that provides an alternative to simply strategic thinking or political alignment but moves a congregation toward the heart of God. Here I borrow

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from Robinson (2008:5) who describes a missional perspective as a "third way" that does not require engagement with the binaries – even if that means choosing a banal middle. Robinson is reflecting on the binaries of left and right nor requires some kind of compromise between the extremes, such as a "purple" church. However, I can see the binary structure in how we have considered the challenges of adolescence. To utilize Robinson's (2008:7) language, the binary might be described as "open set" or "bounded." He describes "open set" as space in which there are no borders or boundaries and "anything goes." This clearly was a driving concern in the early days of youth ministry. There was a perception of the wild and dangerous passions of teenagers and this passion created a societal problem. Robinson's other extreme is the "bounded" approach. This opposite approach has "very clear, bold, and heavy boundaries" (Robinson 2008:7). Of course, this approach only going to be effective with the smallest percentage of adolescents. I suggest that a separated-out youth ministry created a middling compromise where there could be more youth-oriented openness within the clarified boundaries of a youth ministry. This compromise allowed the church to address the challenge of developing adolescence without the hard work of reformation that inclusion would require. Robinson (2008:8) describes this as a "centered set" approach where mission becomes the purpose that draws the church together. There are no boundaries yet the mission distinctives are clear and holds the church in unity under the mission of God and bound by the Spirit. The rest is subject to the fluid ecclesiology expressed above.

This is what is meant by systemic change. It is not the manipulation of the strategies of a local congregation to increase membership or maintain budgetary goals.

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It is certainly not found in the latest youth ministry product or youth ministry professional. It is allowing ourselves to "no longer conform to the pattern of this world…" as Paul says in Romans but allow for the "renewing of your mind" that comes from engaging the centrality of mission. That re-posturing begins to occur when the goal is not to adjust program or structures in order to be more attractive to intended clientele, but as Nel (2015:218) aptly states, it is about the "renewing of people."

The church must engage in what Osmer (2008:183) calls a "servant leadership" that has a clear sense of the goal of enacting change. This servant leadership gives us a reorientation toward the roles of youth pastor, youth leader, and congregation. This research has shown that a goal of transformational leadership in youth ministry is a reconnection with the *missio Dei* – both on a macro and a contextual level. In this case, we must begin our leadership as a body, looking internally, to reorient and realign our ecclesiology so that it reflects inclusivity and belonging regarding the emerging generations. This process is one that will require empowering those on the margins to be participants of their own empowerment.

6.5.1 The Gospel Itself

An additional assumption should be addressed before models of reformation are explored, that of the liberative nature of the gospel itself. Freire (2018:44) suggests change happens when the oppressors (referring to the system of later adult domination that has marginalized the youth voice) and the oppressed (referring to the youth themselves) recognize that the current system dehumanizes both the oppressors and the oppressed (those at the center of power and those on the margins). This

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dehumanization has robbed the church of vital components of its mission – that of creating the ecclesia of Jesus with the gifts needed to participate in acts of redemption. The juvenilizing of the liminal stage of human development has not only oppressed and marginalized humans of a particular age, but the systems that oppressed them (the church following hegemonic fears) has paid the price discussed in chapter one. I have argued that that the exclusion of adolescence from the theological and missional life of the church, but the restoration will be a slow process.

If the present orientation is dehumanizing, and ultimately robbing the church of the gifts and body of wisdom needed to fulfil the mission of the church, then steps toward reformation is vital. This research has identified the reformation as a whole church activity and not merely the pedagogy or methodology of a trained few in a segregated program. As a result, outlined below are areas of posture and attention that have been identified for reformation. These suggestions draw upon the research above and are presented as a distilling of the above research into actionable steps that will allow for renegotiation within a local church context. Before these are addressed, it is valuable to consider models of corporate change to understand the challenge of reformation in light of the research question.

6.6 Considering models of communal change.

The underlying question that this research is attempting to consider is what theological learning flows from the crisis of attrition within the American mainline church. I suggest that it is not so much a crisis as it is a moment of reformation for the church where the church has the opportunity to connect with its mission. While there is no

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shortage of models of communal or corporate change, I have found Sherwood and Glidewell's (1973) work on Planned Renegotiation, otherwise known as the "pinch" model, helpful for us to frame this moment of reformation. What the model suggests about human relationships is that (both personal and corporate) relationships proceed with similar steps. Sherwood and Glidewell (1973) identified these as:

- Information gathering: In the stage of information gathering, there is a period of learning about one another both explicitly and implicitly. These learnings shape how we will relate to one another. Jamison (1988) suggests that in this period we "consciously or unconsciously start anticipating how each other will behave." It is understood that this information gathering could be accurate or inaccurate, but regardless they shape our orientation toward another human being or groups of human beings based on assumptions or experiences.
- Shared expectation, roles, and ground rules: As data is collected, relational covenants are formed. These can either be based in a growing trust or a growing mistrust, but the expectations of behavior, what role we are going to play in one another's life, and the rules by which we explicitly or implicitly abide begin to take shape. Relational cohesion occurs when all parties abide by the rules of engagement while relational breaches occur when those rules or roles are violated. The American phrase "who does she think she is?" as a pejorative reflects the frustration with anyone stepping from pre-determined relational expectations.
- Comfort and productivity: This occurs after data is collected and there is either a spoken or tacit agreement to all the roles and expectations of the relationship.

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This could be a personal relationship, cultural relationship, or a professional relationship. What is achieved is a stability sought after in any relationship.

Through this lens, we can assume that comfort and productivity are the products of an idealized relationship. The "pinch" they reference happens when the relationship no longer meets the agreed-upon expectations. In a perfectly healthy relational environment, the pinch would result in a loving renegotiation of the expectations of the relationship and relationships would settle once again into a state of ease. However, an unaddressed pinch result is what they call a "crunch," which is a period of anxiety, disappointment, or despair. Here, there are a few choices:

1. Try to return to the original agreement (go back to the way things were) without problem-solving. This is reflected in the current post-pandemic desire to "go back" to a way of being the church that is nostalgic in the imagination of many older members. Members who nostalgically remember a thriving youth group do not understand why they simply cannot return to a time they consider to be the "glory days" of youth ministry. They do not recognize the cultural changes that have happened, nor do they recognize that the past praxis led to the current pinch. There is no return that will repair the relationship.
2. Terminate the relationship. This is, of course, a viable option if renegotiation is not possible or the parties are unwilling. In personal relationships this might mean a divorce or breakup. Corporately this could mean dissolving a company. This termination has revealed itself in the attrition described in this research and the subsequent closing of American churches. Theo-cultural immobility has led to

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the dissolution of not only localized membership but the disaffiliation with American Christianity at an ever-increasing rate.

3. Renegotiate – potentially under duress. Once a relationship goes beyond the "pinch" point and parties are feeling that sense of "crunch" or crisis and choose to move forward without a vain attempt to make old categories work again or dissolve a relationship, renegotiation of the relational contract can occur. Of course, the duress and anxiety associated with renegotiation at this stage is difficult and painful and success is not guaranteed. However, at this point, it is the only option to save the relationship.

Once renegotiation happens, whether planned in a peaceful manner or somewhat forced, we can return to the relationship with a new set of expectations after a period of gathering new information - hopefully, this time, with the crunch avoidable when the inevitable pinch happens. The intent is to avoid a crunch period with planned renegotiation at visible impending pinch points.

This is where an adequate practical theology of adolescence comes into play. Considering the cultural and largely hegemonic relationship to adolescence, data was collected through what we already knew about the liminal stage (referring back to Kirgiss who rightly spoke of adolescence as a known experience for much of recorded history) but was run through a grid of industrialization, urbanization, and immigration that resulted in a posture of xenophobia and protectionism. Public schooling as a means of homogenizing an ideal culture successfully created the sub-culture of teenager. This subculture reinforced and exaggerated the liminal stage as multiple generations collected more "data" about the other in a growing generation gap that required

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renegotiated relational rules. Youth were to follow the pre-set path determined by adults and adults were to provide the resources to ensure productive citizens. This was an elective relationship that Root (2007:48-49) reminded has resulted in a theological shift that went beyond a relational style of ministry into a relational theology. In terms of youth ministry, or any ministry, the "pinch" referred to by Sherwood and Glidewell (1973) can be understood as changes in culture, changes in our understanding of teens, theological developments, economic changes, or any other disruptive development that changes the original assumptions. As I articulated in the chapter on history, youth ministry continued to renegotiate based on these pinches, but the net result continued to be ecclesial decline.

The most recent example of a cultural pinch would be the Covid-19 pandemic. Covid-19 can be thought of as a pinch in our relationship with the emerging generation as the institutions of relational agreement (school, church, etc.) were no longer possible. Our systems of formation were not only disrupted, but they were also exposed more fully as inadequate to meet the challenges of a global pandemic. This reflects on the statistical research that demonstrated that COVID-19 did not have a direct effect on the spiritual lives of Americans, only the institutions of engagement. Church catechistic programs were already suffering, but with their complete removal or inability to translate to online spaces, we found we lost momentum with yet another generation. Church ministries were already in the cycle noted above. Covid-19 did not cause the pinch, that was already in existence, but moved it quickly into "crunch." Many have attempted to return to familiar structures of ministry such as youth groups, camps, mission trips, etc. while others have given in to despair and have given up on youth ministry all together.

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While no one celebrates the suffering caused by Covid-19, there is opportunity to look carefully at the exposed areas of our faith formation systems and renegotiate with the emerging generation based on the expressed needs and discoveries that emerged during lockdown. We often witnessed the expressed desire, and attempt, to return to the original agreement of youth groups and regular teen life. However, I suggest that the church has a window of opportunity to lead a cultural conversation that brings the church to a planned renegotiation driven by theological reflection on the nature of our identity as the missional expression of God. The following are areas of reorientation.

6.6.1 Posture vs. programmatic change

The desire to simply “digitize” normal categories of ministry were visible during the pandemic when there was an opportunity for renegotiation. One example of this digitation of old categories came from Yale Divinity School. Yale published a how-to guide for youth ministry that provided guidance to local churches trying to keep youth ministry alive during lockdown (Gorrell 2021). What is notable in this document is that it simply attempted – skillfully if not adequately – to translate established youth ministry practice to a digital space. Gorrell’s (2021) work is stunningly well-produced and is excellent in creating a youth ministry small group curriculum that guides teens through conversations addressing mental health challenges of isolated teens. However, it was merely a guide to take the youth group model onto the internet.

Most church leaders I have spoken to report strong participation in the early days of digital youth ministry, but this waned after several weeks. To borrow the words of Powe (2012: xiii), it was simply attempting to put new wine in old wineskins. Ministries

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had some success with bringing teens online in the beginning, but many ministries found that teens were “Zoomed Out” and needed something that a digital peer group was not providing. Gen Z, the current generation of teenagers as of the writing of this work and who were in high school during the pandemic, were already digitally connected to their community and spending digital time chatting, sharing social media, or meeting in massive multi-player online games such as Fortnite. In other words, they had already established digital methods of community and were not in need of an ecclesiastical recreation.

This revealed what was true already but became obvious during the lockdown of Covid-19. Youth ministries depended on the inclination of youth to gather for social purposes. In fact, according to Barna (2016:40), over 85% of ministry leaders considered social activities as a primary activity of youth ministries (compared to prayer at 29% and adult mentoring at 25%). This lies in opposition to the foundational assumptions of Nel, Guder, and Robinson that the goal of youth ministry is not socialization but to incorporate youth into the greater ecclesial mission. What we needed was to become aware of the missing pieces of our faith formation ecosystem. Families were ill-equipped to continue their family’s faith forming life. They did not have adequate relationships with older and younger generations to engage in the problems of loneliness and isolation felt by not only adolescents but also by seniors. The disconnection from the wisdom traditions of their elders became more acute as their only church engagement was with their youth leader and peers. What was missing is a communal commitment to be the ecclesia even if physically separated.

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Rob Dyer (2021), a coach with Ministry Architects, wrote a blog post that has circulated throughout the American church titled "*They're not coming back*." In it, Dyer suggests that our experience of the pandemic continued and, in many ways, finished a trend that started well before we had ever heard of Covid-19. Dyer suggests that turning the situation around requires an innovation that we have yet to discover, yet I believe the clues are in what we have discovered here. When the church practices an intergenerational *koinonia*, it begins to rise above the nuances of program and roots the people together within the soil of the gospel. This is not an innovation, but rather a theological shift that requires grieving programmatic styles of formation that intended to educate the mind but did not build the church.

Any renegotiation of our youth ministry praxis must begin with a missional perspective on the church that invites us to engage youth as theological and missional partners in the work that the church is called to do. This is the "ecclesial imagination" that Dykstra (2008:57) mentions as the way of "seeing and being that emerges when a community of faith, together as a community, comes increasingly to share the knowledge of God and to live a way of abundant life – not only in church but also in the many contexts where they live their daily lives." Without the renegotiation of our posture and attitude toward the adolescents within the church, this ecclesial imagination is limited to the cohort who maintains power. This is not something that can be produced in the "top-down" approach to religious education, or the "banking" concept to borrow from Freire (2018:72) where information is deposited into waiting vessels from those possessing the necessary wisdom. If we apply Freire's (2018:72) "*raison d'être*" that libertarian education, or in the case of this research we might say faith formation, lies in

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a “drive toward reconciliation,” then we must recognize that our posture toward adolescence must be to reconcile this cohort to ecclesial life and to invite them to participate in the ecclesial imagination. In this way, we create a counter-cultural movement that not only liberates everyone within the church but speaks in a transformative way to the surrounding culture. To continue with Dykstra (2008:57), this grows from the people themselves, fostering a “way of seeing and being that is in some ways different in content, quality, and character from that which prevails in the culture surrounding them.” This, of course, does not guarantee a transformation of surrounding culture, but it allows for a living and breathing example of the mutuality that can exist within a missional framework. Nel (2018:215) states that “where this sense of wholeness is lacking, the parts may degenerate into counterproductive youth programmes.” This is the visible cultural state surrounding the church with age segregated youth education, sports, and consumer culture. But “a spiral of mutual influence, encouragement, and empowerment” (Dykstra 2008:59) is by its very nature liberative to the participants of the faith community and could be to any community.

6.6.2 Inclusion vs. Programming

Ketcham (2018:15) accurately observes that recent history demonstrates a:

…long list of deeply committed adults who devote tremendous time, energy, and resources to young people. Over the past century, this dedication has led to rapid growth in the field of youth ministry. Church and parachurch youth ministries of all stripes (some with hefty budgets) have multiplied. Youth workers are increasingly well equipped, some earning specialized undergraduate and

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graduate degrees. Curriculum and training events are widely available. No longer are these events primarily selling games and techniques. They also offer deep insight and prompt thoughtful and entrepreneurial ministry initiatives. Scholars in theology and the social sciences publish in academic journals focused on youth ministry. All of this sounds like clear, even measurable success.

Commitment to youth ministry is not the challenge. Barna (2016:91) suggests that 73% of senior pastors say that youth are a top priority. Seminaries teach youth ministry programming and practice, with some like Fuller Seminary in California even offering youth ministry as an emphasis for MDiv programs. However, as Ketcham (2018:15) points out, the reality in the United States is that with all this investment and quality of resources and staffing, the fact remains that those teens, now adults, appear "disinterested at best, antagonistic at worse." Her concern then is, as is the focus of this work, that youth ministry practices aren't consistently fostering a sustained faith (Ketcham 2018:19). Ketcham's (2018:29-30) assessment is that many have a "superfluous ecclesiology," which means that the church is "unnecessary for the Christian to mature and grow as a follower of Jesus Christ." The missed theological framework that Ketcham (2018:31) suggests is that of the church is "vital" to a maturing faith in Christ. Youth ministry best slots into the "supportive" ecclesiological framework, accounting for the high commitment to forms and practice of youth ministry but not a commitment to inclusion of the young into the vital life of the church. Ketcham also returns us to the concept of ecclesia, the called-out ones, by way of reminder that a proper ecclesiology is that we "belong" to the church and that the church belongs to God as children of Abraham belonged to Israel and Israel to God. The intent is inclusion

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in the church, not the church as means to an end of personal salvation or as a religious service provider.

Inclusion follows the posture argument above by actively giving agency to the adolescent population. Returning to Root's "slowdown," we now have a cohort within our population that is capable of contribution but are being restrained by the power holders of society, with parents being in the lead.

6.6.3 Missional Posture vs. Missionary Activity

The challenge of reorientation includes the reclassification of youth ministry from a ministry of the church to an integrated facet of the missional calling of a congregation. In his teleological discussion of the purpose of youth ministry, Nel (2018:195) provides critical contribution to this field of thinking through his critique of the "future church." The "future church heresy" (cf. Little 1968) is masked as a commitment to youth and can come with extensive resources and staffing. However, this viewpoint suggests that the teenage population's primary value is in the preservation of the existing institution. Theologically, there is no distinction of age when it comes to the building of the church. The driving fuel of the church is not age or even education, but the gifting of the Spirit. Nel (2018:195) points us to Ephesians 4:1-16, where the emphasis is placed on how the giftedness of the spirit acts as the uniting and mobilizing force that equips the church for its mission. There is no suggestion that the gifting of the Spirit does not appear in adolescence. In fact, evidence would suggest the opposite. If God in God's wisdom has equipped God's church for God's mission, then logic dictates that we acknowledge that for the last 100 years we have been losing a large percentage of those gifts by denying

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active participation of youth in the mission of the church. This is of particular importance for covenantal congregations who practice the baptismal initiation of children and the subsequent confirmation of that baptism in early adolescence. Reflections of congregations who practice rites of confirmation have affirmed that the post-confirmation experience seldom includes the intentional identification and integration of the emerging gifts of adolescents.

In the last few generations, teens have been invited into another directed ministry, typically known as youth group, suggesting that adolescents are still considered objects of church ministry instead of vital gifted contributors to the purposes of God in the world (*missio Dei*). As Nel (2000:64) rightly suggests:

> God's purpose with the congregation is also God's purpose with the youth as an essential part of the congregation. The purpose of youth ministry should be aligned with this purpose of God for us and with his church.

Nel (2018:197) is "deeply convinced that if we do not relate the purpose of Youth Ministry to God's purpose for all his people, the congregation itself suffers and grows poorer." I am convinced that the missional nature of the church requires the constant engagement of the tension between the wisdom of the established leadership and the passions, gifts, and calling of the emerging generation. This could be viewed through the lens of what Cloete (2015:1) calls "creative tensions in youth ministry" by recognizing that there is a natural "distance and closeness" regarding youth. There is a natural seeking of an individual identity and a need to do that identity formation in and with the local congregation. There will also be tension between a way that one cohort sees the world and the way another might see the same world. All this falls under the

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implications of a missional approach to youth formation, and the encouragement from Cloete (2015:2) is to "keep that tension intact and create energy for create innovation through ministry."

This does require a paradigm shift in how we have thought about the "youth problem." As we noted above regarding how we came to our perspectives on youth itself, youth became a cultural problem requiring the intervention of adults to preserve the ideals of society and protect their young. Clements (2020:200) perceives the goals of many modern expressions of youth ministry as loyalty to church institutions and encouraging chosen expressions of Christian behaviors. He calls this identity foreclosure, drawing on the work of Marcia, as the act of forcing an identity and behavior on young people instead of allowing them to grow and contribute to the community. I do not wish to diverge from the theological grounding of the importance of valuing the gifts of all ages in the ecosystem of the local church but noting that the process of identity formation is not only a central facet the liminal stage of adolescence, it is paramount that we consider the formation process. Clements (2020:217) looks through the lens of Kierkegaard and suggests that models of youth ministry that do not appreciate a person's responsibility before God for their own selfhood and discernment of God's presence in their lives will fail to do the sustaining work of identity formation within the church, or what he calls "staying power." Youth ministries/groups have been seen as a remedy to this crisis and have been skilled in creating group identities around the work of the youth group and the trappings of the group's unique Christian cultural expression. The breakdown seems to occur as a person is emerging from the adolescent identity of youth group and does not have the ability to form within the

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formed adult group, which is the main body of the congregation. The disengagement from the understanding of the young as gifted contributors to the mission of God expressed in the local church creates an arrested development in the Christian formation process, resulting in unintended outcomes. We suggest here that our goal for the Christian youth is to achieve an identity within the Christian movement. It is not uncommon to find oneself in an identity crisis in adolescence. Adolescence is a period of moving from an identity as a child in a family, to an identity as a person, a member of a peer group, and a part of a larger narrative. Gerkin (1986:52) speaks of the significance of finding oneself as part of a greater narrative in identity formation: “By means of stories of the self and of the world around us we hold together events, persons, and experiences that would otherwise be fragmented. To be a person is therefore to live in a story.”

A missional approach allows every member of a congregation to see themselves as part of a greater story, the story of what God is doing in the world.

6.7 Servant Leadership

The arguments presented here reorient the view of adolescence from a “problem” to a part of ecclesial life and mission. It is worth restating that the research is not suggesting a homogenization of all ministries so to neglect the uniqueness of age or stage of life. Practical theology is dependent on differences, and the identification of those differences, to develop contextual theologies that matter in the real world. What this research suggests is an investigation of that uniqueness and an incorporation of that uniqueness into the life and mission of the church. As a result, I will consider both

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the role of the youth pastor/leader and the posture of the congregation through the lens of Osmer's (2008:175) path of servant leadership. Osmer (2008:176) suggests three forms of leadership that come into play: *task competence*, *transactional* leadership, and *transforming* leadership. Simply defined, task competence is the ability of leaders to perform the tasks required of them. In this case, a clear understanding of the research presented here is critical, but also the ability to articulate it and exhibit the skills required to perform the priestly listening and interpretive tasks within their own context. Transactional leadership is often challenging, but critical for servant leadership. The leader often cannot get everything they want but finds the ability to compromise with some exchanges. In the youth ministry setting, a leader might recognize the need for an inclusive posture with adolescents, but a wary congregation might be committed to segregated youth ministry. A transaction might be to keep the youth group alive while experimenting with the new inclusive innovation. That way all feel they are being heard and have some agency in decision-making.

The final component of servant leadership is the ultimate goal of this work – transformational leadership. This is where the systemic change suggested herein becomes a reality. Osmer (2008:178) considers this a "deep change" that requires the "internal work of discerning their own core values, as well as the inner voice of the organization they are leading." This leadership is "costly and risky" because it most often encounters resistance (Osmer 2008:178). I affirm Osmer's (2008:178) view that when it comes to mainline congregations, it is this leadership that is most critical. All three styles are needed if transformational change is to occur. A leader who attempts to

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go straight to systems change without the "earning it" that competence and transaction provide will find the resistance to be insurmountable.

6.7.1 Youth Pastor/Youth Leadership

Root (2005:335) offered his desire that the role youth pastor transforms into that of practical theologian that bridges the gap between youth and congregation. I affirm this stance. While arguing for a distinctly inclusive missional posture, this work does not argue for the dissolution of professional youth ministry, merely a redirection of intent. The youth professional as well as skilled youth leadership play a crucial role in the tasks of practical theology. No one is positioned as critically as an adult who exhibits a posture of priestly listening and the education to do solid interpretive work. In this arena, we owe a great debt to ancestral innovators in youth ministry that discovered the value of befriending youth. As a Young Life staff person, I was trained, and trained others to be, friends of youth. I do not resist the concept of being a friend. I still take my cues from Jesus who was called the friend of sinners. However, I no longer see friendship as a ministry tool or am comfortable with those cultivated relationships being limited to the youth group. That is not to say that being a friend is the sum of the gospel, but the building of a community that reflects the heart of God. Through this lens, I recognize that my ministry of friendship or relationship extends beyond youth being objects of conversion into the practice of "being" a friend and inviting all into an intergenerational ecosystem that reflects divine love. As I extend this concept into our ministry with youth, the application of the relational youth leader is one of extending participation in the ministry of the church (inclusive and missional) to youth. This is where the youth leader

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as practical theologian is so critical. The unique and differentiated youth ministry is vital in order to gain understanding of the complexity of their lived experience. In that sense, youth are always a generative text that continues the guide the church in a prophetic manner. The role of the youth worker then becomes that of researcher and interpreter. If the theology that drives the church includes God's "already present-ness" then it is no longer a question of bringing Jesus to a teenager but looking for the work of God in the lives of teenagers. The role of the youth pastor or youth leader as the primary spiritual relationship of every teenager is not a sustainable role as relationships are far too complex and require too much time in order to be effective with a growing and ever-changing group of adolescents. The role of the youth leader then is one of listening and translating with adolescents and providing a translating bridge to the greater congregation.

This requires a competence in a ministry of presence within the young (competence) but also the ability to be transactional when dealing with adults who are nostalgic for another time or perspective.

6.7.2 The Congregation

As it has been stated above, the role of the congregation is inclusion. Whatever form a youth ministry takes – youth group, mentorship, etc. – the goal is always to incorporate the emerging generation into congregational life and mission. This requires a posture of willingness on the part of the elders and worshippers to receive new wind and allow theology and praxis to be fluid. The role of the congregation as the wisdom body allows for the body of wisdom to continue to grow and remain relevant. This does

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require an embrace of the inclusive missional identity as the driving paradigm. The church is not what it does, but who it is. This is the reciprocity required for transformational change and why the "planned renegotiation" model is particularly appealing for this process. A congregation that lacks a habit of using a practical theological model of inquiry, interpretation, renegotiation, and implementation in a reflexive way will almost certainly find themselves in the pinch moments. A reflexive posture of engagement places all of the texts in conversation in an ongoing manner. This research argues that it is this reflexivity that is critical to practical theology. Practical theology is not practiced if the move is from one static ecclesiology to another. It can only provide transformational change if a congregation is willing to collaborate with the texts that are, by nature, contextually fluid and ever-changing. Osmer (2008:178) rightly identifies that transformational change requires a congregation to "confront their own hypocrisy in failing to embody the values they espouse" as they seek to alter their praxis to reflect their theology. This is where the life of the Spirit becomes most visible as this requires humility, patience, and love. However, whatever is lost (power, influence, culture, comfort) will be replaced with a far greater reward. As Osmer (2008:192) states: "losing their power and influence represents a chance to gain a more biblical and authentic understanding of true power and influence." This research argues that this is the full inclusion of the adolescent voice in a faith community committed to "being" the mission of God.

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7 Conclusion

As I take the time to write these concluding thoughts, reflection on the last 5 years of work is inevitable. What began in 2019 as a continuation of a 2016 master's thesis on considering youth ministry in the United States in dialogue with the global south quickly was run through a global pandemic, rapid increase in professional responsibility, and, most importantly, the illness and passing of my beloved wife. In many ways, my own life began to reflect the theological fluidity that is proposed in these pages, and I saw, even more acutely, the need for this study. The question of how, with all the resources and available education in the field of youth ministry, is the mainline church still experiencing generational attrition has emerged as not merely a pragmatic or cultural question, but a deeply theological one.

There is a desperate need for an ecclesiological reformation within the American church that does not happen simply within the academy but involves a conversation with the whole American church. This conversation, due to the critical locus of the American church, must be intersectional. This work argues for generational intersectionality, but it also demonstrates the vital nature of cultural intersectionality. The richness of the theological experience of the African American church can be a guide for the hegemonic church to reform itself into a community reflective of the *kin*-dom of God.

However, it is the issue of generational inclusion that is the central discovery of this research. A willingness to recognize the roots of adolescent marginalization and 20th century ministry models allows the church to engage the virtue of humility (Osmer 2008:193) and recognize the hypocrisy (Osmer 2008:178) in creating programs for youth that present as valuing youth yet keeps them locked out of congregational life.

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The emergent generation must be invited to a prophetic role within the American church. The current theological movement of deconstruction has been interpreted as a movement without faith that has contributed to the current crisis of Christendom. However, through a practical theological lens, deconstruction could exist within the church as a movement of faith. There is an opportunity to invite the questions and critiques of emerging generations to continue the reforming identity of the church as a fluid movement of the Spirit of God. A missional orientation moves the church to the central mission of being a healing and restoring presence in the world. This orientation requires a willingness to be fluid in ecclesiological praxis as well as theological discovery by remaining committed to the mission of God.

What this process has gifted to be is a renewed commitment to draw in the diversity of voices within the people of God – the whole people of God – in order to continue to become the people of God. I am grateful to all who have contributed to this research in their own unique studies as well as those who provided personal support throughout the trials of the last year. I am grateful to the University of Pretoria, with the most gratitude going to my supervisor Dr. Malan Nel. Dr. Nel has been a steady companion who has offered his wisdom with strength and gentleness befitting his position and experience. There truly would be no work here at all without his guiding hand of friendship and mentorship.

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