NOT ON OUR WATCH

THE GREATER DFW NEXT GENERATION SURVEY

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WE ARE THE CHANGE

Research Findings
presented to

MOVEMENT | DFW

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Abstract

During the time period between October 2021 and March 2022, the Arbor Research Group collected data from more than 1,500 varied and willing participants in an effort to answer two questions:

1) **How is the observed national crisis of Christian faith abandonment among young people reflected in the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex?**

2) **What changes in ministry practices can best help DFW young people thrive as followers of Jesus Christ?**

Evidence is presented in this paper to corroborate the fundamental concern about faith abandonment. Further, contextualized observations about the particular DFW church experience among young people are offered. Finally, insights from Arbor's carefully triangulated research methodology are synthesized to suggest a pathway for changes in discipleship practices, one that exchanges catalytic disruptions among ministry leaders for a flourishing faith — radically focused on Jesus — among DFW young people.

Annotated Chapters

CHAPTER 1: *The Next Contribution to a Bigger Story*

This research seeks to advance the story embedded in prior studies and existing literature. We collaborate to seek truth. Research offers value through an empirical way of knowing, but cautions should be considered within general and specific limitations of any research. Research outputs depend on contributing inputs. Finally, what do the research efforts themselves tell us about DFW churches' readiness to collaborate on behalf of discipleship innovation with young people?

CHAPTER 2: *Digging into the Faith Abandonment Crisis.*

Results of the widespread online survey data are co-mingled with what was learned through probing interviews. These inputs help us listen carefully to what respondents express about their experiences.

CHAPTER 3: *Exploring the Relational Environment of Teens.*

DFW young people reflected on and told us about more than 2,000 individual relationships with adults and peers they deemed closest. The insights from analyzing these data converge to support a clear, biblically compelling focus for transformational discipleship in DFW.

CHAPTER 4: *Collaborating for Discipleship Innovation*

Drawing upon the quantifiable data of this study and fortified by the interview perspectives from ministry leaders and young people alike, catalytic suggestions are offered that can change the trajectory of faith for DFW young people and the Church at large.

CHAPTER 5: *Leading the Change: Ideas for* **Movement | DFW**

A by-product of having an outside team like Arbor Research Group jump into immersive scrutiny for a season is that new observational insights can be culled and contemplated. This final, short chapter attempts to do just that by offering eight recommendations.

APPENDIX: *Additional Findings from the Survey*

CHAPTER 1
The Next Contribution to a Bigger Story

When sociologist Christian Smith started to leak findings from the *National Study of Youth and Religion* (*NSYR*) ahead of his landmark publication[1], the buzz began to build among scholars invested in youth ministry. These data established a baseline of reliability that gives definition to the surrounding terrain, like the most prominent mountain anchors lesser peaks in the range. Numerous further studies continue to explore and expand on the treasures of the *NSYR*.[2]

The most celebrated conclusion of this seminal research stretched youth ministers' vocabulary: *moralistic therapeutic deism.* As Smith and his colleagues dug into the substance of faith among America's young people, these three words captured the shape of their religious beliefs and practices, identifying a contour influenced by American culture. (Savvy sociologists would be surprised if this were <u>not</u> so.) This description came with a warning flare: *teen faith looks very little like historic practices of Christian orthodoxy.* Princeton's Kenda Creasy Dean poignantly drove home the consequential impact of this observation in the opening pages of her book a few years later:

> *Here is the gist of what you are about to read: American young people are, theoretically, fine with religious faith—but it does not concern them very much, and it is not durable enough to survive long after they graduate from high school.*
>
> *One more thing: we're responsible.*
>
> *If the American church responds, quickly and decisively, to issues raised by studies like the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR)—the massive 2003-2005 study on adolescent spirituality in the United States that serves as the original impetus for this book—then tending the faith of young people may be just the ticket to reclaiming our own. As the following pages*

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[1] Christian Smith, with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The religious and spiritual lives of American teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

[2] These include Christian Smith, with Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition: The religious and spiritual lives of emerging adults* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the faith of our teenagers is telling the American church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); Lisa D. Pearce and Melissa Lundquist Denton, *A Faith of Their Own: Stability and change in the religiosity of America's adolescents* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Christian Smith and Amy Adamczyk, *Handing Down the Faith: How parents pass their religion on to the next generation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

attest, the religiosity of American teenagers must be read primarily as a reflection of their parents' religious devotion (or lack thereof) and, by extension, that of their congregations....

...Since the religious and spiritual choices of American teenagers echo, with astonishing clarity, the religious and spiritual choices of the adults who love them, lackadaisical faith is not young people's issue, but ours. Most teenagers are perfectly content with their religious worldviews; it is churches that are—rightly—concerned. So we must assume that the solution lies not in beefing up congregational youth programs or making worship more "cool" and attractive, but in modeling the kind of mature, passionate faith we say we want young people to have.[3]

Don't miss Dean's observation that young people have a faith that "is not durable enough to survive long after they graduate from high school." Her cautions have been echoed in numerous places, including a significant paper recently published by the **Pinetops Foundation**: *The Great Opportunity* (2018).[4] This report aims to incite collaboration on behalf of the millions of young people projected to leave the faith they were raised in.

The current **Not on Our Watch** research mirrors this intention from Pinetops. Of special interest is this summary of their third chapter: *"The Church must transform youth discipleship."* The stirring that prompted this study is found among kindred spirits elsewhere. We engaged our work as intrigued servants of God who share timely affinity with other parallel and momentous efforts. Notably, the **TENx10 Collaboration** (*TENx10.org*) seeks to mobilize 100,000 diverse local churches and ministries to engage in a ten-year focus on the "relational discipleship" of 10,000,000 young people, "radically focused on Jesus."

When leaders of **Movement | DFW** commissioned the Arbor Research Group for this study, they sought *catalytic research* that could unite Dallas-Fort Worth churches to improve the discipleship fruitfulness storyline among young people. This begs the question: *"What explains why 15+ years of thunderous empirical studies signaling GenZ faith disaffiliation <u>have not already</u> moved the Church to more selfless collaboration than we've seen?"* While there may be other reasons, we're drawn to consider these two: a) we either do not believe the crisis is real, or b) we do not believe collaboration for
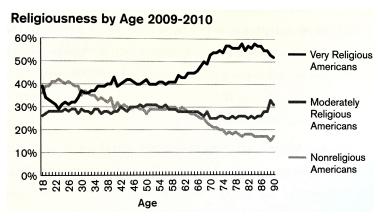
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[3] Dean, *Almost Christian,* 3-4.
[4] Pinetops Foundation, "The Great Opportunity," *The Great Opportunity*, 2018, https://www.greatopportunity.org/.

discipleship innovation will provide the solution this crisis needs.[5] The two lines of inquiry shaping this project address each of these possibilities:

1) How is the observed national crisis of Christian faith abandonment among young people reflected in the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex?

2) What changes in ministry practices can best help DFW young people thrive as followers of Jesus Christ?

The first question will be largely tackled in Chapter 3 of this report. We concentrated our inquiry on describing the widely acknowledged crisis in ways that will ultimately be helpful to ministry leaders intent on collaboration. It's been our experience, unfortunately confirmed again in this project, that research alone is insufficient to persuade the disinclined to move. But we can offer clarifying direction to those already convinced something must change.

The GenZ national storyline is well-documented and unnerving. We are convinced there's enough evidence in the collective data that the call for urgent improvement in youth discipleship is warranted. But there are those who offer a noteworthy counter-perspective. Rather than seeing current disaffiliation in the rise of "the *NONES*" as a never-before trend requiring desperate ministry measures, Frank Newport of Gallup cites an extraordinarily high and historically stable correlation of .94 between two factors: 1) age, and 2) being very religious.[6] This raises the possibility that we're seeing the age cohort behave like it always has. We think the risks are far too consequential to _not_ aggressively improve youth discipleship — a response that should be our norm in the Church rather than an exception.

Religiousness by Age 2009-2010

It is, however, indisputable that the **age factor** is more significant than any other when it comes to predicting religiosity. If Gallup forecasts are correct,

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[5] In consideration of the effectiveness of using fear in persuasion, see: Em Griffin, *The Mindchangers* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1976), 67-77.

[6] Frank Newport, *God is Alive and Well* (New York: Gallup Press, 2012), 107.

we should see an uptick in Boomer religiosity soon. A 2018 update from the *Longitudinal Study of Generations* reports just such a trend.[7] Recalling Dean's sobering call-out, let's consider the precarious formational challenges facing parents today.

The current cultural upheaval is bewildering to Christ-loving parents who are most invested in transmitting faith to their teens. Their concerns are justified. But these days call for wisdom, vigilance, and brave faithfulness...not panic. The *National Study of Youth and Religion's* Christian Smith recently shifted his attention to how parents pass on their faith. In summary of their findings, he and his co-author provide instructive hope for the entire constellation of persons invested in Christian youth discipleship:[8]

> *Conventional wisdom has it that many parents want to push off the job of religious education onto religious experts in their congregations. That may be true of more religiously disconnected parents. But we found that the vast majority of parents who affiliate with religious congregations actually...view themselves as the primary agents of their children's religious formation. They tend to see their congregations as secondary resources only supporting and reinforcing their tasks as parents.*

So, what help do Christian parents seek from their churches? Not primarily religious content but *"warm and friendly atmospheres and inviting and rewarding activities and relationships for their children."* These expectations may unsettle congregational leaders who've been accustomed to seeing their roles as chief teachers of Christian distinctives *"...since parents are the ones who determine what and how religion will be transmitted."*

> *That is simply the reality of life for religious organizations under the macro-cultural regime of religion constituted as a personal identity accessory.*

Note the phrase Smith and Adamczyk have introduced to unpack the context of spiritual formation: *religion is a personal identity accessory.* They describe this as a *"massive, macro-cultural transformation"* from a time when religion was a *"community solidarity project."* These insights mirror Carl

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[7] This update extends the summary findings found in Vern L. Bengston, with Norella M. Putney and Susan Harris, *Families and Faith: How religion is passed down across generations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

[8] Excerpts over the next two pages are engaged from Christian Smith and Adam Adamczyk, *Handing Down the Faith: How Parents Pass Their Religion on to the Next Generation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 222-226. Kindle edition.

Trueman's recent analysis.[9] Society has been tethered to "expressive individualism"[10] and the currents of our life together now flow into a "culture of authenticity."[11] As we swim in this river the only way to be true to oneself is to act "outwardly in accordance with one's inward feelings."[12]

These waters are uncharted and justify parental concerns as parents seek to grow their children's faith. They also map the discipleship challenges.

> Parents may be culturally authorized to insist that band practice and homework get done. But the same approach to, say, children's prayer or scripture reading is impossible. That would be "shoving religion down their throats." To understand why, we have to see, again, that the character of the American religious field has transformed in recent generations. What most Americans consider religion even to be has changed. So has the significance of religious congregations and the authority of religious traditions. The American family itself has also altered and, along with it, the position and authority of parents vis-à-vis children. More broadly, the very notion of what a human "self" is, and the associated vision of what makes for a "good life," have transformed to prioritize individual autonomy, choice, and acquisition of the resources needed to consume both material goods and stimulating and fulfilling experiences. Bad grades in school and failures to fulfill commitments threaten to compromise the likelihood of children living good lives, as American culture defines that. A lack of interest in religious devotion, by comparison, poses much less of a threat.
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> How then in such an environment are committed religious parents supposed to transmit to their children anything like coherent religious worldviews, authoritative religious traditions, and formative religious practices? The majority of American religious parents decide that their most promising strategy is simply to model religious values and practices naturally for their children in their own lives, and then to look for "teaching moments" to talk with their children about religion. A minority of parents do not even try or actually have reservations about passing on their religion to their children, and so instead merely "expose" their children to their religion or many religions and then let them decide for themselves which option is "right for them." Yet even parents who take a more direct approach pay careful attention to not overdo the religious socialization, so as not to incite pushback and rejection. In the end, it turns out, the children are in the driver's seat when it comes to religion, so parents have no choice but to finesse more subtle approaches and hope they succeed in due time. Some

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[9] Carl Trueman, *Strange New World: How thinkers and activists redefined identity and sparked the sexual revolution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022).
[10] Robert Bellah, et. al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and commitment in American life* (Berkely, CA: University of California Press, 1985), 333-34.
[11] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2007), 475.
[12] Trueman, *Strange New World,* 23.

definitely do. But others, as trend data on the religiousness of young Americans show, increasingly do not.

Parenting is a whitewater adventure today. While these particular rapids are perilous, there is some trustworthy wisdom to draw upon from research. For example, "above and beyond any other effect on children's religion is the influence of their parents." Insecure though they may be about how to engage their teens, parents remain most significant to their formation.

> *Most religious parents do seem to understand that their children will pay more attention to what they do religiously than what they say. Contradictions and hypocrisy are not effective means of socialization. However, strong evidence also shows that parents talking to their children about their religion, and not simply quietly role-modeling it for them, is a powerfully important practice. If there were only one practical take-away from our research, it would be this: parents need not only to "walk the walk" but also regularly to talk with their children about their walk, what it means, why it matters, why they care.*

Tucked in the comments above is a clue about making use of prior rock-solid research about *how* our formation takes place, whatever the environment. Smith's advice simply invites parents to add two of six already proven factors of influence to their "quiet role-modeling" efforts at faith transmission.[13]

➢ **Similarity** - when models are 'like' someone, their influence tends to be greater

➢ **Alignment** - when models accurately represent values important to one's significant community of belonging, their influence tends to be greater

➢ **Consistency** - when models are seen as consistent in a variety of settings, their influence tends to be greater

➢ **History** - when models have been observed over longer periods of time, their influence tends to be greater

➢ **Explanations** - when models offer insights about their behavior (e.g., 'why', 'what', 'how'), their influence tends to be greater

➢ **Transparency** - when models disclose how they feel as a 'commentary' about their behaviors, their influence tends to be greater

This **Not on Our Watch** research seeks to helpfully inform youth discipleship, so let's consider a distinction between *exemplars* and *mentors*. Observed and admired, exemplars don't leverage relational proximity to influence others.

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[13] This is a summary of Albert Bandura's social learning research about modeling dynamics. See Albert Bandura, *Social earning theory*, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1977).

Mentors, however, enjoy the power of relational interaction. In one study, urban indigenous ministry leaders credited extended family members as exemplars who inspired them to first put their faith in Christ. But mentors played crucial roles in their Christian growth and development as leaders.[14] Smith suggests parents should do more than settle in as religious exemplars but step into active mentoring roles. This finding drives home that recommendation:

> *General parenting styles matter. Parents who want their children to carry on their religious traditions should practice a general authoritative parenting style. Combining clear and implemented life standards and expectations for their children with expressive emotional warmth and relational bonding with their children fosters relationships that most enhance effective religious transmission to children. Comparatively, independent of other religious factors that also matter, parents who are more permissive, disengaged, and authoritarian are simply less successful in passing on their religion to their offspring.*

The focus of our inquiry highlights processes for Christlike transformation that can withstand oppositional undercurrents. The Kingdom to which Jesus calls followers has always been at odds with popular culture. As heard in some of our interviews, the church-friendly environment of the Dallas-Fort Worth area may actually distract ministry leaders from forming young people to "radically focus on Jesus." If so, could it be that teens are bereft of the mentor models *from any sector of their lives* that fortify them to thrive in Christ?

Excavating their story drew us to explore the busiest relational traffic patterns of adolescents. As Smith and Adamczyk assert, *"Faith transmission processes unfold within complex networks of influential social relationships, not between autonomous individuals."*[15] Robust youth discipleship cannot afford to neglect forces of significant influence. Our hope for this research project is that exposing what's been overlooked will guide collaborators into ministry innovation for disaffiliating young people. To that end we concentrated on exploring their existing relationships, including their church engagement. We did so by knowing where to dig and treating what we uncovered with care.

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[14] Dave Rahn, "Unlocking the Keys to Indigenous Urban Leadership," *The Journal of Youth Ministry* 11:2 (Spring, 2013).
[15] Smith and Adamczyk, *Handing Down the Faith,* 226.

We dug for participants. There was a time when, if researchers wanted to ensure a return rate of 60-80% in mail and telephone surveys, they need only follow the well-vetted guidelines on the subject.[16] The Lilly-funded *Study of Protestant Youth Ministers in America* followed these instructions carefully. But the research team—including *Search Institute's* brilliant founder, Merton Strommen—was only able to secure a sample reflecting 52% of those solicited to participate. Statisticians Mark and Milo Brekke explained this limitation by offering an observational context worthy of reflection for our current study:

> *Sadly, our observation over the past 20 years indicates that response rates to most surveys began to drop severely in the mid-1990s. The survey industry is well aware of this growing problem, and the cause is fairly clear: with the explosion of customer satisfaction surveys, marketing surveys, and direct mail and phone marketing over the past dozen or so years, the American public is saturated with requests for information. Increasingly, many people are viewing any kind of survey as an invasion of their privacy and time, and they are simply saying, "No!"[17]*

Because **Movement | DFW** exists to facilitate missional collaboration, it is crucial for leaders to consider how difficult it was to secure research participation from among those who have identified themselves as members. Our profile of participants is presented in Chapter 2 of this report. But the Brekkes' global observations twenty years ago may also apply to today's hyper-linked, info-tech environment. **Our capacity for collaboration seems to be shrinking at a rate inversely proportional to social media accessibility.**

This explanation should not prevent **MDFW** leaders from weighing the strength of the collaborative bonds they have been able to forge thus far. An insistent question for consideration has surfaced: **Can an alliance that was largely unresponsive to research requests be expected to make significant ministry changes *if needed* to upgrade youth discipleship in the Metroplex?**

We dug through belief statements. Survey data, such as that done by Barna and Pew,[18] provide self-report snapshots most commonly drawn upon to

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[16] Don A. Dillman, *Mail and Telephone Surveys: The total design method* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1978).

[17] Merton Strommen, Karen E. Jones, and Dave Rahn, *Youth Ministry That Transforms: A comprehensive analysis of the hopes, frustrations, and effectiveness of today's youth workers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan/Youth Specialties Academic, 2001), 357.

[18] Barna Group, *Faith that Lasts Project* (Ventura, CA: https://www.barna.com/research/ five-myths-about-young-adult-church-dropouts/, 2011); David Kinnaman, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church...and Rethinking Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books,

map the landscape for ministry. Beliefs, especially, are linked to our understanding of faithful discipleship through outcome measures. So, when GenZ is characterized by wobbly orthodoxy, our lifeguard instincts kick in.[19] Years of ministry practices testify to a deeply rooted conviction that discipleship requires learning biblical truth-as-content through instruction.

The consideration of young peoples' beliefs is supported by the theoretical constructs Pearce and Denton offered. After multiple years scrutinizing the *National Study of Youth and Religion* data, they suggest three dimensions of religiosity for measurement: 1) the **content** of religious belief, 2) the **conduct** of religious activity, and 3) the **centrality** of religion to life.[20] We paid attention to their framework in this study.

But we also appreciate how the efficiency and clean, graphic-laden reports that come from survey data don't handle nuance very well. That's why our research design employs mixed methods of discovery. Qualitative research helps keep us from making unwarranted leaps into particular applications without slighting our appreciation for the aerial view captured by survey data.

Sifting through belief statements from young people is a wonderful launchpad for interviews and focus groups. We are eager to accurately hear what teens and young adults want to communicate. Our findings are most reliable when multiple perspectives converge to say the same thing.

A dustup occurred during 2000 in response to Barna's research report and eye-popping conclusion: "Teens and Adults Have Little Chance of Accepting Christ as Their Savior." His tightly focused definition of salvation prompted an

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2011); Pew Research Center, *U.S. Public Becoming Less Religious: 2014 U.S. Religious Landscape Study* (Washington, DC: https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2015/11/201.11.03_RLS_II_full_report.pdf, Nov. 3, 2015); Pew Research Center, *The Age Gap in Religion Around the World* (Washington, DC: https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2018/06/Religious Commitment-FULL-WEB.pdf, June 18, 2018); David Kinnaman and Mark Matlock with Aly Hawkins, *Faith for Exiles: 5 ways for a new generation to follow Jesus in digital Babylon* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2019); One Hope, *Global Youth Culture: A One Home Research Study* (Pompano Beach, FL: https://onehope.net/global-outreach/research/, 2020); Pew Research Center, *U.S. Teens Take After Their Parents Religiously, Attend Services Together and Enjoy Family Rituals* (Washington, DC: https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2020/09/PF_20.09.10_teens.religion.full_.report.pdf, Sept. 10, 2020).
[19] Barna Group & Impact 360 Institute, *GenZ: The culture, beliefs and motivations shaping the next generation* (Barna, 2018), 78-79.
[20] Pearce and Denton, *A Faith of Their Own,* 13.

instinctive response from *Group's* editor, Rick Lawrence. A quick coalition of youth ministry professors launched a brief seven question survey with 369 survey respondents from ten Christian colleges in order to uncover "the rest of the story." Sure enough, Barna could justify his conclusions based on positive responses to the two defining questions asked. But a few more questions from the academics alerted folks to the limitations of that interpretation...and raised cautions about hasty ministry applications.[21]

If a survey is the only tool used in data collection, conclusions are more trustworthy if three or more slightly varied questions are statistically bonded than if a single item must bear the weight of measurement. Ideally, open-ended questions like those that can be asked in focus group interviews help ensure the real story can be explored.

Of course, even if data collection and analysis processes are carefully handled, ministry leaders eager to put research to good use sometimes race toward misapplications of the findings. Most common is the inclination to infer that one or more correlating factors is what causes an outcome we care about. The Gallup data we looked at earlier illustrates this limitation. While we can say with 94% certainty that someone's age is a reliable predictor of their religiosity, we cannot say that age actually *causes* faith. If we thought this was true, why would we waste ministry efforts on non-responsive young people? It may be that the practice of *"rumspringa"* by Amish communities is a kind of ministry strategy geared for the long haul and based on observing how widespread the faith wandering period was among their adolescents. To know if that were so, we'd do well to ask some Amish bishops...

We dug into religious practices. Claims for empirical research validity in arenas of ministry practice need to find their home in theological reflection. The inclination of pragmatic Americans is to hurry past the careful attention required for activity to be judged faithful. And most people's default ministry strategy is to embrace past personal experiences for their own standards. It's only logical, then, that we should expect to see spiraling loops that degrade in quality over time. Absent the Holy Spirit's intervention, natural patterns of ministry transfer make it likely that the next generation of leaders will be less fruitful than the best that preceded them. We've certainly observed this

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[21] Dave Rahn, "The Truths that Matter Most," *Group* 26:5 (July/August, 2000), 31-34.

phenomenon among youth ministry's student leaders, where the pioneers set a pace for evangelism fruitfulness that is seldom sustained.

This, of course, is a great reason to pray without ceasing! If we're convinced that no good thing results from busy-ness disavowed by our Lord Jesus Christ, we can set aside our trust in ministry methods to align with biblical priorities. Since scientific observation is only one way of knowing, researchers enjoined to the mission of God in the world should carefully discern how to avoid being distracting influences rather than agents of focus. It's possible to inadvertently "bless the mess" of ministry practices by ranking some activities as preferred over others when none of it is automatically sanctioned by God.

With that caution in mind, consider this illustration. Among those seeking to understand Christlike transformation through the lens of social science research, there's ample reason to ask followers of Jesus to engage Scripture on their own every day. This spiritual discipline is highly correlated with other measures of vitality and shows up with regularity in substantive research.[22]

Characterize this as one of numerous "means of grace"—a practice pattern essentially proving our availability to transformation by God's Spirit through demonstrable efforts. While historical champions of this way of life abound, many in this contemporary day might credit Dallas Willard for "next-level" scrutiny of using disciplines to become genuinely conformed to the image of Christ.[23] The challenge for researchers is to avoid settling for some shorthand representation of a practice that loses all power when it becomes formulaic. Consider this explanation of what it means to engage Scripture daily:

> *When we trained the young people in our research to engage the Bible, we explained that reading a passage needed a "plus one" experience. Engaging is deep-dive worthy, but reading can be a surface experience. Their electronic media deluge has trained them to skim quickly. So, we asked participants to choose at least one of six options to supplement their daily reading: 1) meditate on it, 2) pray over it, 3) talk about it, 4) memorize*

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[22] See Greg L. Hawkins and Cally Parkinson, *Move: What 1,000 churches reveal about spiritual growth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Willow Creek Association/Zondervan, 2011); The Barna Group, *State of the Bible 2018: Bible Engagement Segmentation* (Philadelphia, PA: American Bible Society, 2018); David Kinnaman and Mark Matlock with Aly Hawkins, *Faith for Exiles: 5 ways for a new generation to follow Jesus in digital Babylon* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2019).
[23] Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the character of Christ* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2002).

part of it, 5) write about it, and/or 6) act on it. Each of these qualified as an engagement strategy to help our hearts take a listening posture with God.

Like any effort, practicing this habit can, of course, become mechanical. Worse yet, it might become a source of pride when we check off day after day of this routine. So, skip a day every once in a while. This isn't rocket science. We all know what it's like to be talking to someone who clearly is not postured to hear us well. Chances are pretty good we've been those poor listeners who have caught ourselves mid-distraction and, as a matter of choice and effort, repositioned ourselves so we could give full attention to what someone is saying. Why would we not give at least this sort of effort to God once a day?[24]

Now, in the most practical way, imagine how to accurately capture the dynamic that's going on here in a survey. In this project, we asked young people to tell us how frequently they *"…take time to be alone, read Scripture, and listen to God."* We trusted that the bundling of three distinctly different activities would be easily understood by respondents and, fortunately, our judgment call seems to have been solid. But we really wanted to know so much more than a single survey item can measure. If spiritual disciplines are reduced to checkbox habits—as they easily can be through research or self-monitoring efforts—they can become empty practices, the sort of heart-distracting attachments Jesus warned the Pharisees about.

Just before Dallas Willard died, neuro-theologian Jim Wilder had engaged him to explore why practicing spiritual disciplines has shown spotty evidence, at best, of transformational power. Recent brain-mapping technologies have allowed researchers to locate character and identity development in the faster, non-verbal side of the brain. This calls into question whether our classic, foremost paradigms about discipleship need revisiting. Even as sociological research draws a bead on religious belief **content** and **conduct** in two of the three measurement dimensions for religiosity, it may be that the third element—the **centrality** of faith—provides the catalytic key most critical to understand by ministry leaders. ***What makes faith central to life?*** Brain

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[24] Dave Rahn and Ebonie Davis, *Disrupting Teens with Joy: Helping youth discover Jesus-focused, gritty faith* (San Diego, CA: The Youth Cartel, 2020), 112.

science illuminates how the Great Commandment aligns us with an answer to this question, affirming the primacy of relationships for our formation.[25]

God *is* love and ultimately desires us to live in union with him. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit testify: *"relationships matter above all else."* What if the essential nature of discipleship draws upon the formational power of relationships? Further, what if our under-appreciation of this reality has led us to "mis-hearing" what troubles our young people about faith and church?

We've given considerable weight to data from the *NSYR*. As the first findings from the NSYR were published, another book—employing an entirely different means of discovery—hit the youth ministry world. Chap Clark's research positioned him as a participant-observer, resulting in a qualitative ethnography that, in retrospect, might deserve to be characterized as *"a canary in the coal mine"* in light of the urgent call for collaboration today. Even the title of his book, *Hurt,* sounds an alarm. Two summary statements of Clark's work fortify the direction Arbor Research Group took for this research project: *in spite of receiving unprecedented resources aimed at their well-being, young people feel systemically abandoned and isolated by adults. They have built an underworld of peer relationships to cope with this deep hurt.*[26]

So...we determined to dig into their relationship environment. The survey we built to collect data from a large sample asked young people to first identify whether the number is "0", "1", or "2+" in response to each of the following two questions:

➢ On a weekly basis (if not daily), how many <u>same-age friends</u> do you typically connect with, feel especially close to, and feel glad to be with?

➢ On a weekly basis (if not daily), how many <u>adults older than you</u> do you typically connect with, feel especially close to, and feel glad to be with?

We limited these choices fully aware of the bias the response options offered. The comparisons we sought to make would flow from further questions about these relationships. But we recognized how this approach also allows for the measurement error known as *noise* to enter into the judgments made

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[25] Jim Wilder, *Renovated: God, Dallas Willard & the church that transforms* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2020).

[26] Chap Clark, *Hurt 2.0: Inside the world of today's teenagers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004, 2011).

by respondents.[27] Imprecision was built into the question by the asking for a summary with a number. For example, it's more difficult to answer "yes" or "no" to a question about whether *your friends* (a summary) pray than it is to answer the same question about a particular friend.

The tension of survey design is to ask great questions and get plenty of responses. Too many questions asked almost guarantees respondents will not persist to complete the survey. Not enough questions may secure plenty of participants, but the data fall short of being helpful. The **Arbor Research Group** strategy is to trust that mixed methods can help fill in the gaps of understanding. For that reason, we created a *"Relationship Discovery Exercise" (RDE)* for use in youth group meetings. We could gain measurement reliability by eliminating the "summary step" embedded in the survey, a trade-off that meant more time would be asked of respondents. The *RDE* was shaped so a gathered group of teens could enjoy responding to questions within the expectations of their normal meeting times. By asking gathered young people to think about particular close connections one at a time (dyads), we were able to reduce a source of noise in the judgments they offered and collect 12,114 data points from 1,496 peer friendships and 523 adult relationships for analysis.

Dyadic relationships have been a favorite study target of well-regarded human development scholar, Urie Bronfenbrenner.[28] His relational theory eco-system is at the heart of Fuller Youth Institute's thinking about *belonging, identity,* and *purpose,* marking his influence on the **TENx10 Collaboration** (www.tenX10.org). The work of famed Oxford anthropologist, Robin Dunbar, informing our relationship capacities also gave shape to the innovative data collection method employed in this study.[29]

Since his original study in 1995, Dunbar has substantially illuminated how humans operate with a measurable relationship capacity limitation. Our brains do not allow us to care for an unlimited number of people (*caring* is measured by emotional closeness and frequency of connection). We navigate

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[27] Daniel Kahneman, Olivier Sibony, and Cass R. Sunstein, *Noise: A flaw in human judgment* (New York: Little, Brown Spark/Hachette Book Group, 2021).

[28] Jack O. Balswick, Pamela Ebstyne King, and Kevin S Reimer, *The Reciprocating Self: Human development in theological perspective* 2nd edition (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016), 115-116.

[29] Robin Dunbar, *Friends: Understanding the Power of our Most Important Relationships* (London: Little, Brown/Hachette Book Group, 2021).

the ebb and flow of 150 manageable relationships, distributed within four concentric circles that reflect various intensities of demand. Well inside the 150 total friends we can care for is a "sympathy ring": *we invest 60% of all our social interaction time with these 15 people*. Thus, **Arbor's** inventive *RDE* concentrated one aspect of this research on the closest relationships reported by the young people we engaged through youth group gatherings.

Jesus' life and ministry testify to the universality of our relationship capacity limitations. Theological reflection can be rich and hopeful as we aim for more clarity about ministry practice among young people. God-in-Christ emptied himself to take on the constraints of a human being. Jesus leveraged his neo-cortex limiter in a focused discipleship strategy that is ultimately destined to reconcile all things to God. It's not hard to see Dunbar's relationship rings of 5·15·50·150 reflected in the pattern that Jesus set with 3·12·70·120 followers… especially since we can't exactly number the women who might be included among his friends. Clearly, neither our vision nor our faithfulness need be encumbered by how few people we can give loving attention to at once.

Jesus also invited followers to join him in relationship because it's built into the very fabric of how our brains function. Only in relationship could Jesus' disciples be privy to and grasp otherwise hidden, but crucial, truths about enjoying life abundant with God. The brain's habit-forming processes further suggest how powerful their 15 closest relationships can be upon the way young people understand and follow Jesus. Those they hang with most host "environmental cues"—shaping them for routine ways to engage God and their world.[30] And as we earlier noted in drawing a distinction between an exemplar and a mentor, relationships often settle into grooves that exclude any normalizing conversations about Jesus Christ as the "radical focus" of life.

In 2006, Schwartz published research from his study of more than 4,000 young people that identified how the conversations and exemplary lifestyles of friends accounted for more than a third of the differences adolescents attributed to their faith formation.[31] Indeed, the communication dynamics at work within peer relationships have long been known to wield considerable

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[30] The work already cited by Wilder, *Renovated,* can be fruitfully enhanced by engaging James Clear, *Atomic Habits* (New York: Avery Books/Random House, 2018).
[31] Kelly Dean Schwartz, "Transformations in Parent and Friend Faith Support Predicting Adolescents' Religious Faith" *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 16:4 (2006), 311-326.

influence on adolescents.[32] A distillation of the research is that **we expect faith-social influence on young people to dynamically flow from others, especially those represented within the network of relationships most meaningful to them.**

We have come to understand that Christ-following directional influence embedded in close relationships accurately describes discipleship. What comes to light is that the stark conclusions voiced more than a decade ago by scholars like Chap Clark and Kenda Creasy Dean describe a gap that may largely account for the faith and church disaffiliation of GenZ. Perhaps teens' closest relationships simply wield more influential pull than the church-based champions of Christ-centered living.

Could *youth discipleship innovation*[33] be as simple as adults re-calibrating ministry until relationships become sturdy enough to bear the weight of Christ-centered influence?

Josh Packard's *Springtide Research Institute* summarized findings in 2020 with these words: "**Relational Authority**...the only real pathway to having a lasting influence in the lives of young people."[34] Their conclusions supplied a five-sided scaffolding that we have embraced in this project. Remarkably, *Springtide's* insights parallel the formidable research done more than 30 years ago when *Five Cries of Youth* claimed outcomes with enough structural reliability and validity that they would endure. The extended "shelf-life" of those findings appears to be justified three decades later.[35] Note how these two studies converge while maintaining their respective distinctions:

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[32] See Dave Rahn, "Reckoning with Adolescent Influence: A sociological perspective" *Christian Education Journal* 3NS:2 (Fall, 1999), 81-91; Dave Rahn and Terry Linhart, *Evangelism Remixed: Empowering students for courageous and contagious faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Youth Specialties/Zondervan, 2009); Amanda Hontz Drury, *Saying is Believing: The necessity of testimony in adolescent spiritual development* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015).
[33] As called for in *The Great Opportunity.*
[34] Josh Packard, *The State of Religion & Young People: Relational Authority* (Springtide Research Institute, 2020).
[35] Merton P. Strommen, *Five Cries of Youth: Issues that trouble young people today* (New York: Harper Collins, 1988; 2nd edition, 1993).

From Packard's *Relational Authority*...	From Strommen's *Five Cries of Youth*...
LISTENING: makes time to listen to me and remembers what I've shared	CRY OF THE PREJUDICED: flags the need for open-minded story discovery
TRANSPARENCY: discloses personal feelings and experiences that relate to me	CRY OF THE JOYOUS: flags the need for identification with God and his people
INTEGRITY: follows up and follows through on whatever they say they'll do	CRY OF PSYCHOLOGICAL ORPHANS: flags the need for structured family stability
CARE: wants and works to help me become the best version of myself	CRY OF SELF-HATRED: flags the need for trustworthy, uplifting friendships
EXPERTISE: knows a lot and relates to my own experiences in a helpful way	CRY OF SOCIAL CONCERN: flags the need for activism that seeks selfless good

Most research dines at a table of collaborators, building on what's already been established and aspiring to advance a particular body of knowledge. That's why we've drawn upon robust studies from multiple sources. And even though we did not explicitly involve parents in the data-gathering for this project (their influence in faith formation is well-documented), our intent to investigate dynamics within relationships received a boost from Christian Smith's latest research. What we heard in the open-ended interviews will add color commentary to what we learned from online surveys and the *RDE*'s. Taken together, we seek to make a fresh contribution to the collaborative efforts it will take to reverse the trajectory of faith abandonment among too many young people.

Weighty and Far-Reaching

We've been especially attentive to how **Movement | DFW** ministry leaders desire to invigorate youth discipleship with brave, collaborative innovation. The timing of this project feels ordained of God to help advance the national **TENx10 Collaboration**. Their ten-year aim is for a hundred thousand local churches and ministries to engage ten million young people in *relational discipleship radically focused on Jesus.* They have secured wide-ranging agreement around three defining parameters for this focus: a) Christ-centered *belonging*, b) Christ-centered *identity*, and c) Christ-centered *purpose*. Some are observing that what happens among America's teens may, in fact, be a second-order effect, the spillover resulting from a first-order transformation among churches aligning for unprecedented collaboration.

Are we on the verge of a new collaboration frontier? Our focus had us studying young people and the formation gaps that could be addressed through improved discipleship. But we were keenly mindful about the desire to catalyze collaboration through this research. So, when we kept tripping over indicators that hint at collaborative inadequacies for the innovative mission required of church leaders in DFW, we took note.

Few sectors of society are unacquainted with collaboration, and a vast amount of research exists to make sense of why some efforts at working together are more successful than others. For our purposes, a structured review of collaborative *goals*, *roles* and *tolls* hosts some biblical reflection.

GOALS. Decades ago, Morton Deutsch laid groundwork that's a useful first filter for work evaluation.[36] An *individualistic* goal structure exists when personal achievement is unrelated to others' success or failure. A *competitive* goal structure exists when the path to personal success requires others to fail. And a *cooperative* goal structure exists when the only route to success necessitates that others also succeed.

Consider these related scenarios: A weekend golfer who plays 18 holes might aim to putt fewer times than in the previous round. This individualistic goal can be personally fulfilling. It can also help prep the golfer for a competitive goal ahead: to win the club championship and the coveted parking spot

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[36] Morton Deutsch, "A Theory of Cooperation and Competition," *Human Relations,* 2 (1949), 129-52.

reserved for the sole victor. At another time, this same golfer could enjoy the camaraderie of playing in a scramble where only a team's collective efforts are scored. Savvy scramblers often adjust their play together to get the best result. For instance, they might ask one to putt first in order to show teammates how the ball breaks on the green, trusting one of them to make the putt. Such cooperative goal structures are more loudly celebrated than what is typically heard on golf courses, where individualistic or competitive goal structures are the norm.

We openly cheer for each other when we collaborate, we secretly root against each other when we compete, and we largely ignore each other if we can claim success without any consideration of others' influence. It's also not uncommon to collaborate *within* a team mainly to compete for the win *against* another team. The Body of Christ certainly includes such layers at work. When churches collectively claim to embrace the unity Jesus prayed for, but act more like individual entities or competitors, should we be surprised if we hear GenZ express dissonance over the authenticity gap they observe?

ROLES. Our sense of belonging in social groups large and small is critically linked to our confidence that the role we play is a good fit for us and contributes to the group. To the extent that well-defined collaborations help members attach to a shared, compelling cause where they believe their participation is necessary, they increase the likelihood of success.

When significant people are overlooked when roles are assigned, we can expect to see their investment dissipate. The principle of ownership is at work here, and its dynamics can be seen in the following formula:

$$\mathbf{E}_g = \mathbf{Q}_g \times \mathbf{O}$$

We pursue goals to achieve them. In the formula above, "$\mathbf{E}_g$" represents the effectiveness of a goal as measured by its success. But before we apply ourselves to this achievement, we give shape and clarity to the goal itself. That's represented by "$\mathbf{Q}_g$" in the formula; it's the *quality* of the goal. The fascinating wild card of *ownership*—represented by the "$\mathbf{O}$"—deserves far more consideration than it's often given. In short, achieving a quality goal, plan, or decision <u>depends</u> on the ownership of those needed to actually work

to achieve the goal.[37] Brilliantly crafted strategic plans have fail to be executed because they bypass this ownership formula. Miscalculations about true stakeholders may bring them into the collaboration as _doers_ rather than _shapers_. Since the work cannot be accomplished without the significant investment of these stakeholders, it fails because ownership expansion was too little, too late. Success and failure in collaboration can be traced to how well assigned roles empower contributors for shared ownership.

An above average number of DFW churches have organizational cultures with securely established operational rhythms. They have enjoyed social influence and favor for years in the Metroplex. Wisdom is needed about how to engage them. If treated as _pro bono_ donors of time and energy, will they own the potentially disruptive magnitude of collaborating to improve youth discipleship? Innovation often upends "business as usual."

Who is authorized to redirect God's people toward this, or any cause? Jesus alone. Thankfully, orchestrating the Body of Christ includes providing gifts, assets, and resources perfectly fit together for the work he calls us to.

The question of roles and ownership beckons application for the present study. Are young people themselves to be considered stakeholder/owners in the discovery process or recipients of adult-centered insights? Many a youth minister has, over time, wisely shifted their paradigms to embrace young people as co-leaders. Their posture is _with teens_ rather than _for_ them. Inviting those often excluded to contribute ignites an openness to transformation, as Jesus modeled and taught. Belonging may correlate with aligned behavior, but it doesn't always cause it. The GenZ population in DFW is doubtless accustomed to seeing churches strut their strength. Ministry leaders secure enough to "wash their feet" can captivate teens by selfless power-sharing, an alluring surprise to what they've come to expect.

TOLLS. Now, more than ever, the cultural context of hectic lifestyles and 24/7 access to..._anything_ has everyone weary and wary about whatever asks for our attention. The concrete highways that collaborative efforts travel respect the fact that participants must count the cost before they join the coalition. As those who know of God's future judgment, church leaders will admit every person is entitled to ask, _"What's expected?"_ Since we're accountable life

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[37] Norman Maier, _Problem-solving discussions and conferences: leadership methods and skills_ (New York: McGraw Hill, 1963).

caretakers, the question is reasonable and prudent. With that understanding, collaborations designed to *ask very little in order to gain a great deal* certainly seem well-conceived. They acknowledge that with limited capacities we must constantly weigh opportunities to divert time and energy from one focus to another. This implicit, culture-bound normalcy among people is not to be interrupted without good cause. A crisis provides good cause.

Nehemiah is one biblical example of God using crisis-awareness to move his people into faithful action. King Saul's panicky, unsanctioned sacrifice is a counterexample. Most significantly, we're hard-pressed to see any crisis that intruded on the way Jesus trusted the Father to perfectly guide the earth-bound limitations he accepted for his mission.

The GenZ crisis in America can be useful to the Body of Christ, but only in the same way that any pain alerts us that something is wrong. If attending to this crisis leads us to bypass the Lordship of Jesus Christ, our Head, we will spin mighty efforts into fruitless results and neglect other worthwhile work he wants from us for now. So it is that in DFW (or anywhere) a single reason must now and always be both sufficient and required to redirect God's people into a particular collaboration: **Jesus wants this**.

This **Movement | DFW** research project did not directly aim to uncover whether would-be collaborators are poised for nimble, faithful, and selfless responsiveness. But we've stumbled over this question because its answer is so consequential to the discovery vision that launched us:

> **Does Christ want to disrupt existing work-life patterns of God's shepherds to collaborate for reasons that include, but are not limited to, the faith abandonment crisis seen among young people?**

We hope to offer insights from our listening efforts to this question.

If our prayers are answered, DFW ministry leaders will emulate the men of Issachar. They will lean into the findings presented here with discernment, leveraging insights about GenZ's disaffiliation crisis to understand the times. But more profoundly, they will go on to collaborate with the *ears to hear* what Christ the King wants from the Metroplex Church.

In 1975, Juan Carlos Ortiz wrote an enthralling personal story about a wonderfully disruptive, Christ-directed unification of churches in Buenos Aires. His introduction set the stage for the compelling vision that followed:

> *When I came to the church in Buenos Aires, it had 184 members. We got to work right away, and after two years of vigorous organizing and outreach, we were up to around 600. We had tripled.*
>
> *Our follow-up system was one of the best. We had form letters number one, two, three, and four for every category – males, females, children, Jews, Arabs, anyone you could imagine. We had records of each telephone call and visit; we were pushing subscriptions to helpful magazines. The cards showed exactly how each person was doing, whether he had been baptized, everything.*
>
> *The denomination was so impressed that I was invited to be a main speaker at two different conventions to share my follow-up system and distribute samples of all our forms to the pastors.*
>
> *Yet underneath it all, I sensed that something wasn't right. Things seemed to stay high so long as I worked sixteen hours a day. But when I relaxed, everything came down. That disturbed me.*
>
> *Finally, I decided to stop. I told my board, "I must go away for two weeks to pray." I headed for the countryside and gave myself to mediation and prayer.*
>
> *The Holy Spirit began to break me down. The first thing He said was, "You are promoting the gospel the same way Coca-Cola sells Coke, the same way Reader's Digest sells books and magazines. You are using all the human tricks you learned in school. But where is My finger in all of this?"*
>
> *I didn't know what to say.*
>
> *Then the Lord told me a second thing, "You are not growing," He said. "You think you are because you've gone from 200 to 600. But you're not growing – you're just getting fat."*
>
> *What did that mean?*[38]

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[38] Juan Carlos Ortiz, *Disciple* (Carol Stream, IL: Creation House, 1975), 5.

There is a plethora of practical guidance available to guide collaborators.[39] The temptation to *"grab & go"* is particularly dangerous for hasty, hurried, and harried people. While millions have read Ortiz' *Disciple* over the past 47 years, we suspect more of them copied some latter technique he described to unite churches than took a two-week retreat to listen to God. Busy unfruitfulness is timeless. We've presented decades of warnings about the hurt of young people; the inattentive pace of ministers is a parallel, if not related, problem.

What will it take for Dallas-Fort Worth church and ministry leaders to first collaborate, then innovate, so that youth discipleship practices are fruitful?

Let's see.

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[39] Here are a few treasures: Jim Petersen, *Church Without Walls* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1992); Michael Winer and Karen Ray, *Collaboration Handbook: Creating, sustaining, and enjoying the journey* (St. Paul, MN: Fieldstone Alliance, 1994); Chris Lowney, *Heroic Leadership: Best practices from a 450-year-old company that changed the world* (Chicago, IL: Loyola Press, 2003); Phillip Butler, *Well Connected: Releasing power and restoring hope through kingdom partnerships* (Colorado Springs, CO: Authentic Publishing, 2005); Ronald J. Sider, John M. Perkins, Wayne L. Gordon, and F. Albert Tizon, *Linking Arms, Linking Lives: How urban-suburban partnerships can transform communities* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008); Sally Nash, Jo Pimlott, and Paul Nash, *Skills for Collaborative Ministry* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2008); Christena Cleveland, *Disunity in Christ: Uncovering the hidden forces that keep us apart* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2013); -- Daniel Goleman and Richard Boyatzis, *HBR's 10 Must Reads on Collaboration* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press, 2013); Paul Fleischmann, *Better Together: Discovering the dynamic results of cooperation* (Self-Published, 2014); Bryan Loritts, *Insider Outsider* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018); Lucas Ramirez with Mike DeVito, *Designed for More: Unleashing Christ's vision for unity in a deeply divided world* (New York: FaithWords/ Hachette Book Group, 2018); Francis Chan, *Until Unity* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2021).

CHAPTER 2
Digging into the Faith Abandonment Crisis

Results of the widespread online survey data are co-mingled with what was learned through probing interviews. These inputs help us listen carefully to what respondents express about their experiences.

How Arbor Research Group Started Digging
In early November 2021, email invitations announcing the "Not on Our Watch" survey project were sent to key ministry leaders historically supportive of **Movement | DFW**. The invitations were accompanied by a landing page with videos from local DFW-area ministry leaders, highlighting the problem churches face today and inviting local leaders to participate.

Arbor built a seven-minute online survey as a primary data collection strategy. It was designed for easy access during ministry events, meetings, retreats, etc., and it asked for responses from a population of young people ages 15-28. Group leaders who agreed to participate were subsequently asked to consider additional ways of providing input through focus group interviews or a large group event. The hope was to leverage the brief survey experience as a portal for further, deeper exploration.

Focus groups were conducted both in-person or online. Participants included adult leaders, young adults, or current youth ministry students. These helped to triangulate "member checks" by providing stories, themes to explore, and new findings to consider. They added crucial, data-thickening perspective to information collected through other methods, like surveys.

The project inventively created a third way to gain insight, using large group gatherings of currently churched young people. By leading them through a dynamic exercise, we were able to peel back the curtain and peek into the relationship storyline at work in the lives of some DFW-area young people. This method yielded a large amount of data to be studied and ended up being the most significant research element to the project. Given its importance, results of this strategy will be thoroughly explored in Chapter 3 of this report. Indeed, insights from this line of inquiry point to why *the relational connective tissue young people experience with faith and church is the best target for efforts to improve youth discipleship*.

In hopeful anticipation of the adult ministry collaboration incited by this project, ministry leaders were also given a way to engage their volunteers. After calling a phone number provided and listening to a brief message, adults who invest directly in the discipleship of young people were asked to record 30-second responses, offering their perspectives about what makes— or *should* make—Christian relationships distinctly different.

Because we were unable to launch into these multiple data-gathering efforts until November, the holiday ministry season inhibited participation. Further efforts to solicit participation from DFW-area churches and ministries were engaged in January and February of 2022.

Participation Challenges
One "finding" for this project is the confusing unresponsiveness from DFW-area leaders, including those who seem to be enthusiastic about their affiliation with **Movement | DFW**. Trusted leaders urged engagement via video. Influential key leaders endorsed the value of the research to be undertaken, stressing how important it is to jump into discovery together. Yet most church leaders never responded to emails, phone calls, and text messages. Phone conversations that were met with enthusiasm and the pledge to participate never materialized by actual involvement. In fact, they simply became unresponsive to texts and emails. This storyline, even among **Movement | DFW** champions, was far too common to ignore as data to be reckoned with, given the goal is catalytic collaboration.

One exceptional and effective source to deliver participants was long-time youth minister Rick Eubanks, currently employed by the *National Network of Youth Ministries*. As early as October, he was actively recruiting people who agreed to join in the research project. One pastor who brought a team of four into a focus group interview stressed that he was "only there" because of the respect he had for Rick, trusting his advocacy.

In a similar vein and at a later stage, Dr. Johnny Derouen's involvement in mid-January (cheered on by Dr. Richard Ross) also boosted Arbor's efforts to secure church involvement. In order to work around unresponsiveness, **Arbor Research Group** engaged their own national survey team to directly connect with DFW-area young adults so we could grow the population of people completing online surveys to a significant size.

Though not directly aimed for or anticipated, Arbor's first research "finding" for this project is highly consequential to the goal of catalytic collaboration in DFW that reshapes the faith trajectory of young people: ***aligning efforts to improve discipleship will likely depend on responsiveness not seen in the evidence of this research project.*** Did our participation requests expose reliability not yet sturdy enough for the challenges of actually redirecting time as mission collaborators?

Our report will further discuss evidence for this finding in Chapter 4.

A Summary of the Process

Arbor Research Group administered an online survey that was completed by 1,499 respondents. These were young adults from DFW-area churches (ages 18-30), those who are no longer churched (ages 18-43), and young people (ages 15-25) in DFW-area ministries.[40] The first presentation of the data at Dallas Theological Seminary on March 30, 2022, was based on an initial analysis of 1,367 respondents deemed at that point to have met the sampling criteria.

In preparation of this final report, we further scrutinized and scrubbed the data, reducing the sample of survey respondents to 923.[41] This assured us that we were studying those whose location and age matched our target. Though reduced in number, this still sizable population reflects the earlier presentation accurately gives balance to the three sub-groups. This now updated data set slightly changed the percentages earlier reported, but there were no changes to the ordering or correlations. We've been able to confirm the data pattern and ensure the quality of responses, giving us additional confidence that the findings herein are representative of the population under study.

There were ten online focus groups with an initial involvement of 90 young adults from the DFW area. In the end, 42 young adults fully participated in these focus groups. They came from area church ministries, online surveys with DFW young adults, and the referrals of **Movement | DFW** network

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[40] The ministries came from 39 different churches.
[41] This process involved data collected via third-party agencies. No data collected from DFW-area churches were included in this process.

leaders. Across all groups there was representative ethnic and gender diversity.

Seven DFW-area youth groups hosted a large-group event with Dr. Dave Rahn. Three of these were conducted in-person, and four were done as groups gathered for Dr. Rahn's *Zoom* facilitation. Though shaped for research purposes, the format of reflective action included an ancillary ministerial element that was refreshing. One youth group applauded Dr. Rahn at the end of the exercise. In another, a young man experienced the love of his youth group community after sharing about the deep hurt he had held inside since his grandmother's death. There was one young person who asked her youth pastor to process more after the experience and ultimately shed joyful tears as she shared that God was calling her into full-time ministry.

Themes that Emerge from the Survey

Churched young adults, non-churched young adults, and currently in-church young people within the DFW Metroplex completed the brief online survey. These three different sample sets provide responses to inform the two research questions of this project.

1) **How is the observed national crisis of Christian faith abandonment among young people reflected in the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex?**

2) **What changes in ministry practices can best help DFW young people thrive as followers of Jesus Christ?**

Here are some of the themes observed:

DFW-area young adults no longer attend church for surprising reasons. The most popular reasons cited by respondents for why they believe young people don't attend church are below:

- *"They feel that the teachings of the church are outdated, confusing, and irrelevant"*
- *"They feel that the church is inauthentic or manipulative"*

The least popular options were also revealing:
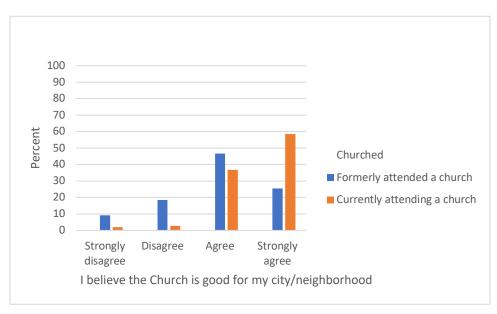
- *"They feel that the spiritual health of the church is not good"*
- *"They feel that the church isn't making a positive social impact"*

Existing literature and previous research about young people don't hint at these *most* and *least* popular responses. We think they reveal a unique aspect of DFW-area churches that can helpfully guide ministry responses.
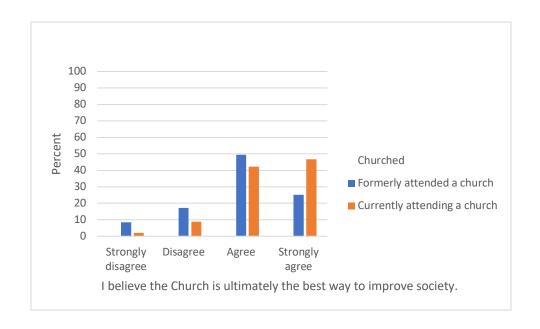
It was both fascinating and obvious to the **Arbor Research Group** team that something different is going on in the DFW-area population compared to previous studies. First, they have a positive opinion of the church. Even those who are no longer churched think that church "at its best" is an important and positive influence. In general, they did not think that the spiritual health of the church was poor or that it had become too political.
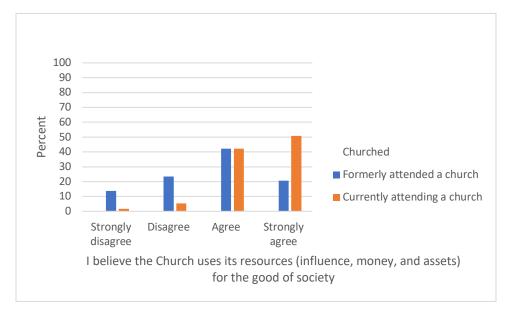
Second, we did not hear much about the church becoming too political. Given the current political divisions in the USA, that was a surprise. We checked all open-ended questions, just to be sure, and there was a noteworthy absence of politically related concerns.

At the present time, this population seems to be not too "far" from the church. That there is not a general rejection of church is encouraging. If churches can find a way to heed the advice of these young adults, it's not unreasonable to hope over a third of them will return in the near future.

I believe the Church is good for my city/neighborhood

I believe the Church is ultimately the best way to improve society.

I believe the Church uses its resources (influence, money, and assets) for the good of society
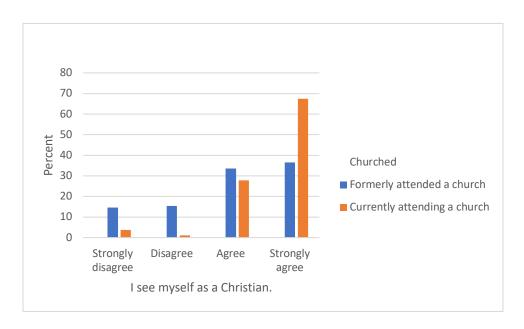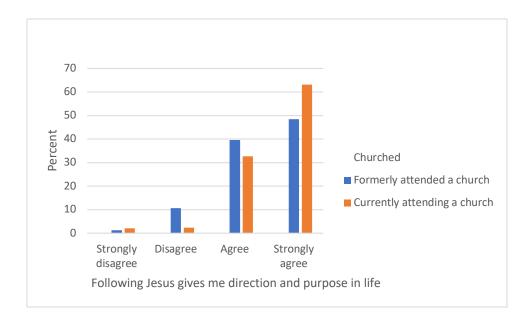
Those who no longer attend still see themselves as Christians. In the comparative analysis between populations, one thing that stands out is how many formerly churched people still either see themselves as Christians or claim to be influenced by Jesus. This suggests they are being nurtured in some way on an ongoing basis. It was not uncommon to hear about their listening to sermons or participating in online communities.[42]

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[42] See more about this phenomenon: David Kinnaman and Mark Matlock, *Faith for Exiles* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2019).
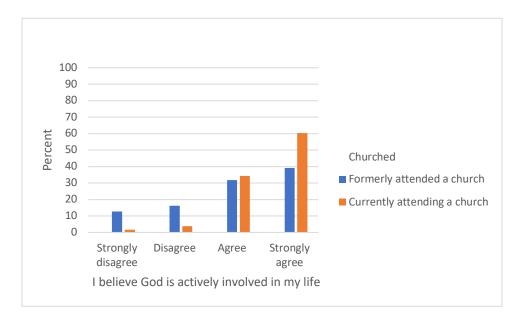
Though the two graphs that follow reveal similar patterns, there is a statistically significant difference to note that correlates with their church participation. 70.1% of the formerly churched young adults said they agreed or strongly agreed with the statement *"I see myself as a Christian."* Strikingly, 88% <u>of the formerly churched</u> young adults agreed or strongly agreed that *"Following Jesus gives me direction and purpose in life."*
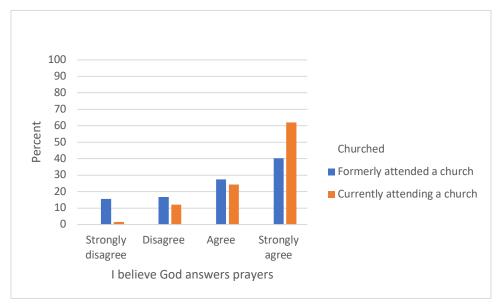
Currently churched young adults report predictable belief differences about God. One-fifth to one-third of the formerly churched population has

moved away from a Christian faith that includes confidence in God's active involvement. More explicitly, and perhaps obviously, this includes a distinction in what they believe about whether God answers prayers or not.
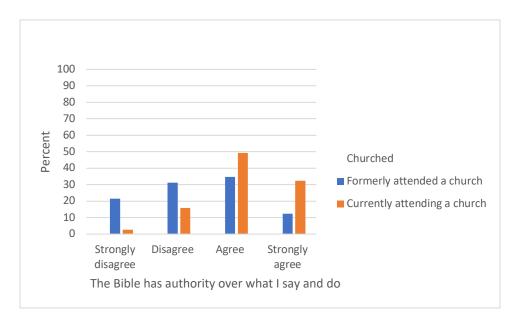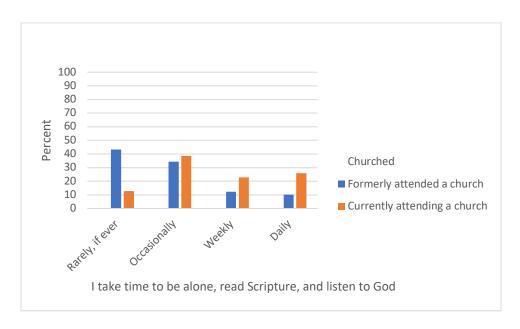
The personal spirituality of non-churched young adults is most often constructed apart from Scriptural authority. One of the most important findings for the entire project is that, though the formerly churched identify as Christian and have some desire to think Christianly, their lives generally do not reflect a relationship with Jesus Christ that includes submitting to his

Word. More than half (52.9%) of the formerly churched disagree with the statement *"The Bible has authority over what I say and do."*
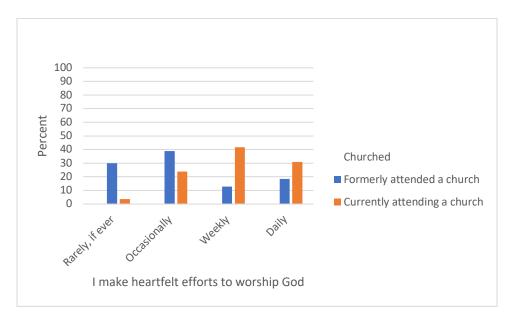
While 47.1% of non-churched consider the Bible to be authoritative, only 22.4% of them take time weekly or more to be alone, read Scripture, and listen to God. This certainly raises questions about how such infrequent practice translates into true biblical authority for living. Unfortunately, this same practical neglect is shared by 57.6% of churched young adults.

A few consequential questions arise for church leaders-as-shepherds:

- How concerned should DFW ministry leaders be to see that over half of their students engage with Scripture and prayer less than weekly?
- What are the implications of this pattern for teaching? For church programming? As a deficit needing attention by ministry leaders?

To assist in this reflection, consider the programmatic influence of current church ministries as reflected by the graph above. About 75% of churched young adults and students say they make heartfelt worship to God at least weekly. This reveals an expected product of ministry programming, where worship music is a key emphasis. But it also makes the contrast with the previous graph about Scripture engagement critical when trying to understand how our programmatic efforts shape discipleship outcomes.

Certainly not all worship is dependent on church programming; about a third of the young adults who do not attend church report making efforts to worship God each week. However, that is less than half of what takes place among church goers. Is the faith being built dependent on church programs? If so, why be surprised if college pressures and temptations and their new adult freedoms lead to less than enduring faith?
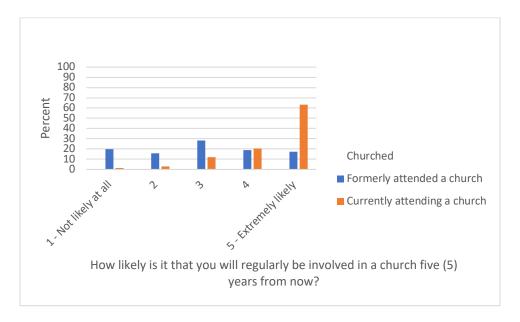
Spiritual practices are interrelated. During analysis, every measurement of spiritual practices (e.g., devotions, prayer, worship, and church attendance) were significantly correlated with one another. This means that as one rose or fell, the others did the same. All religious variables (e.g., *"I see myself as a*

follower of Jesus/Christian", "Following Jesus gives me direction and purpose in life") were positively correlated, as would be expected (i.e., as ratings for one variable increase, ratings for the other variables also increase).

Though not a "discovery finding," this provides common sense validation that reassures us about the project's design and outcomes. Further...

- The vitality of Christian faith is expressed and therefore observable in practices reflecting the confessional commitment of surrender.
- The presence and patterns of these practices set the stage for how and if someone actively participates in the Body of Christ.
- Ministry leaders can be confident that if one of these practices is absent or weak then the others are likely to be fragile, at best.

At least one-third of young adults who have left the church plan to return within the next five years. More than any single item in the survey, the currently churched and formerly churched were different in how they responded to the question, *"How likely is it that you will regularly be involved in a church five years from now?"*

In summary, about a third of non-churched plan to return to church within five years, a third say they will not likely return, and a third are unsure.

Remember, at one time these young adults were churched and would probably have responded more positively. What happened during their transition from "current attenders" to "formerly attenders"? As a central

inquiry of this project, we hope to gain wisdom for church leaders in the stories of currently churched young people who are pulling away from Christian adults and peers.

Though there are mixed reasons supplied, the most common identified response from young adults about why they stay in church is because of the relationships they have there. This data is summarized below:

- *"The relationships I have at my church"* (42.1%)

- *"The worship experiences at my church"* (33.4%)

- *"The teachings at my church"* (31.7%)

- *"I grew up attending this church"* (31.4%)

- *"The spiritual health at my church"* (24.4%)

It is interesting that there's not one clear response (i.e., even the option that was selected the fewest times was selected by 13.7% of participants, and none of the options was selected by more than half). This distribution of a survey's forced choices could indicate young people actually have different reasons, uncertainty about what their reasons are, or thoughts about church that weren't adequately represented in the options.

Themes that Emerge from Focus Group Interviews

We asked a series of questions regarding why young people are leaving the Church and what church leaders and churches can do to stem the tide. Five themes emerged from the advice offered. The first three answers were heard from all focus groups; the final two were frequently shared but not necessarily heard in each of the ten groups.

1. ***The main reason young adults say their friends are leaving the church is because her people come across as judgmental.*** The judgmentalism of churches is something "felt" by these young adults. They described it as a "vibe" that is given off by churches. The teaching, actions, and reactions from the church seemed to construct a standard to be met before young people could feel welcome and accepted. Their judgment may or may not be accurate, but this was their perception. Young people testified to the tangible learning through observation, and the example of leaders is on display. What net effect does the collective posture of church leaders and members demonstrate to young people? The other aspect of this is that the teaching of Christ and the

   > ***"That feeling of judgment that if I am involved in church then I can't make mistakes. I can't be open."***

   content of the Bible does contain a call to surrender and obedience. At the same time, there is a posture that Jesus took toward sinners that contrasted the posture of the highly religious of the day. Perhaps it is here that we can reflect on this response. One young adult summarized this concern well: *"Don't make someone feel like they've done something wrong more than you make them feel loved."*

2. ***A consistent answer— related to the first—is that sermons and teaching do not resonate with or connect to young adults.*** As the surveys showed, teaching (and this is a broad category) is the primary reason that people leave their churches. _It is also the main thing that current churched young adults cite as the reason they stay in their churches!_ Teaching is integral to the fruitfulness and effectiveness of churches. This concern for teaching is further understood by the following three sub-themes:
   - The teaching doesn't connect or resonate with the culture or the listeners. It is seen as outdated or irrelevant.

- The teaching doesn't stick to the Bible and is weak on application. The teaching *feels* (and this is the correct word) more like moralistic directives and personal opinion.
- The teaching avoids the hot topics of the day and doesn't allow for conversation and questions. One student boasted, *"My current church doesn't shy away from talking about what's going on in the world."*

> *"I remember just always feeling like, 'hey, they're mentioning like these five things every time they talk about sin, but they're staying away from these topics' so I didn't really feel like I could get help with what I was going through."*

When the teaching is dynamic and relevant, it's what draws young people in. When the teaching is able to take God's truths and connect them well to everyday life, it can be transformational and life-giving. The stakes are high, as one student's comment suggests: *"The Bible is just confusing—the judgment of Christ being the only way. It puts a lot of pressure on me."*

3. ***Young people advised to be sure and show love that's welcoming.***
When young people said to "be open," they were expressing how to address this concern. There was explicit empathy and understanding for why their peers are leaving the church and a disappointment in how churches in general respond to those who "struggle" in life. Even though they were committed to churches, these young people could see and understand why others chose to leave.

The immediate measurement of whether a church was welcoming or not was how they responded to young people who identified as LGBTQ+. Though on the surveys only 15.4% of unchurched young adults said that the church's teaching on sexuality was a reason that they no longer attended church, during the focus groups this was the primary example for church's problems.

It is important to note that these students don't share the strong conviction about sexuality they see from their churches. For them, there is willingness to leave judgment up to God, while being sure to not ostracize or "judge" their friends' choices. This was especially true and strongly expressed among those who shared they have a friend or family member identifying as LGBTQ+.

This advice from young people offers a helpful way for churches to think through their posture toward LGBTQ+ persons. Under the admonition of Scripture to *"always be humble and gentle"*[43] and in recognition of Jesus' identical welcoming posture,[44] it may be helpful to consider how to ensure love is *felt*, as if responding to a daughter or son, sister, or brother. The struggle is real; compassion is needed.

> *"I think not seeing someone as different just because they're gay. I've heard this term before: 'just love them'. But that's not what we're supposed to do. You should see this person the same as a straight person. I feel like when they say that it sounds so fake. I feel like they don't mean it. They say they love everyone but they're the same people that are being homophobic."*

4. ***Actively involve young adults in the church's ongoing work.*** Focus group participants shared this perception as a consistent critique. They did not feel like young adults were invited into active church involvement. This may be confounding to most pastors who see themselves as constantly asking for greater participation from all.

> *"It comes back to church hurt. The one that sticks out is people who don't think they are seen by leadership. They don't have people that they feel are their people..."*

Asked to unpack this, interviewees cited a desire for young adults to serve in visible roles in the church (e.g., greeter, usher, and on-stage). They also thought such service would be a good way to introduce and involve non-churched young adults to life in the church—and to serve side-by-side with church leaders. *"[The teaching] is more effective if you (as a leader) got down and dirty and served."*

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[43] Ephesians 4:2, NLT. See also Paul's coaching of Timothy about teaching those who oppose him in 2 Timothy 2:24-25.
[44] Matthew 11:29

5. ***Invest in making young adult ministry relevant and vibrant.*** Ministry to young adults requires intentionality that inspires innovation. Young people said churches need to keep trying new things with an eye on how to help other (outside) young adults be drawn into belonging with the community. They also said that small groups are effective formats for young adults.

> *"We have to change with the times. Attending one church, driving to one building…it's just outdated, and it feels too scheduled and ritualistic. That's why I think we are seeing where a lot of youth are gravitating toward conferences and evening things and movements and stuff like that. It's more gathering together in a casual way, in an honest way, than 'this is something I have to do.' People just like to feel like it's their choice and I think Sunday morning church now feels more like an obligation…"*

The intentionality should be obviously evident in particular ministry efforts. One participant said, *"What attracted me to Cottonwood was that they had a dedicated night of worship just for young adults on Monday nights."* Another idea was to separate the young adults into life stage groups: married/non-married, professionals, and college students.

We also asked focus group interviewees why they were committed at a time when other young adults seemed to be leaving the Christian faith. They identified their family upbringing: *"[Being committed] starts at a young age."* Another agreed, *"I am more connected because it was engrained in my head. When I became older, it was always there."* Another added that it was because of the quality of her young adult program at her church (Commission Church in Plano).

> *"People leaving the church is kind of how the world is right now. If you want to be like your friends, and they're not Christians, your values don't fit. I can see why a lot of young adults can get swayed by the world."*

All agreed that the peer culture at college pulls young people away from church. One student expressed it this way, *"If you're a Christian, you're antagonized. And people succumb to that pressure to fit in. We as a church need to make young people feel like they're not alone in this fight. They should feel like they are not alone. This is what helped me: my pastor made me feel like I was part of something bigger."*

Others expressed how important relationships were to the likelihood of a long-lasting, vital engagement with church and faith in Christ. We'll probe this as one of the most significant findings of this project in Chapter 3.

Bottom Line: Why DFW-Area Young Adults Leave Church

The results of this research, as reported in the table below, suggest that there is no single explanation. Rather, each disaffiliating young person is likely to have a unique story. Far from being unhelpful to ministry, these varied and mixed responses illuminate a path forward that will require more than programmatic tweaks. In fact, we believe it reinforces the need for collaboration among ministries that synergizes efforts expended for outcomes that depend on resources far greater than those currently lined up for youth discipleship.

Reason	Percent
"Church members (or staff) seemed too judgmental."	38.3%
"I didn't feel connected to people in the church."	34.5%
"I just got too busy."	36.3%
"My work responsibilities prevented me from attending."	32.6%
"I started to have doubts and serious questions."	29.6%
"I disagreed with the church on a particular issue."	27.0%

What is true for young adults throughout America is also true for those from in the DFW area. Over one-third of these young left DFW-area church communities because they felt that the church seemed judgmental. These numbers are strikingly similar to Lifeway's 2017 report that 32% of young adults left because church members seemed judgmental.[45]

Feeling "connected" or "welcomed" is integral to a young person's confidence and participation in a church community. About one-third (34.5%) of young

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[45] "Church Dropouts: Reasons Young Adults Stay or Go between ages 18-22," Lifeway, 2017, http://research.lifeway.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Young-Adult-Church-Dropout-Report-2017.pdf.

adults left their church because this was missing. The necessity of *belonging* is so widely acknowledged that it's a core discipleship element helping to anchor consensus among **TENx10** collaborators.

The young people we heard from in focus groups agreed that churches need to be more welcoming. This finding is nuanced by Barna's research about how young people wrestle with the exclusive nature of Christianity. With authenticity that's true to how they feel, youth work to find solidarity with each other, "even if that means glossing over real differences."[46]

As we will see in Chapter 3, relational connections—and their lack—can affect more than church involvement. When failing to experience the support of Christ-focused adults or peers, personal spiritual practices receive less attention, and faith-centered convictions about life become vulnerable. Further, participation in church programs like a weekly youth group is no guarantee that these relationships will be present.

There is also a pragmatic reality that many young adults are simply too busy (27.8%) or take on new work (26.5%) that leads to disengaging with their church. Some in this study reported getting lazy; others cited the COVID pandemic as a reason. With a shrug of the shoulders, some responses expressed a tone of near-indifferent resignation as they offered no reason except a lack of intention to explain why they've dropped out.

A persistent theme over decades in the literature is that young people want church to be a place for asking questions and exploring doubts. Our data show that 22.6% of DFW-area young people carried their questions elsewhere. And 22.4% left church in disagreement over a particular issue.

Barna research flagged this problem over ten years ago. David Kinnaman[47] explains how this is one of the top six reasons young adults leave church:
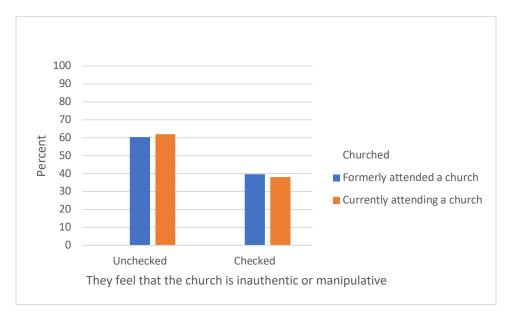
> They do not feel safe admitting that sometimes Christianity does not make sense. In addition, many feel that the church's response to doubt is trivial. Some of the perceptions in this regard include not being able

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[46] "Six Reasons Young Christians Leave Church," Barna, September 27, 2011, https://www.barna.com/research/six-reasons-young-christians-leave-church/.
[47] See David Kinnaman, *You Lost Me,* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011).

"to ask my most pressing life questions in church" (36%) and having "significant intellectual doubts about my faith" (23%).[48]

The hope we found in this study is that many DFW-area young adults are NOT entirely disenchanted by church. However, they are precariously perched at a point of no return. It will take courage, clarity, and innovation to renew ministry to young adults that can secure their healthy spiritual practices, those that indicate they engage in a trusting relationship with Jesus Christ.

When asked, *"What are the two biggest reasons that young adults leave the church? (Carefully choose up to two reasons.)"*, both groups—young people who are *currently* churched and *formerly* churched—responded to all the options with a large amount of agreement. Looking at survey data with the benefit of probing interviews has led us to conclude that a core factor for young people sits under this heading: **Church Teaching.**
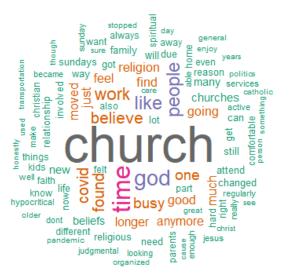
Church teaching is formally represented in settings like youth group lessons and Sunday morning sermons. But there are also conversational exchanges that carry instruction—especially values—in *atmospheric* ways.

This can help us understand why such a large minority of former and current church attenders agree that inauthenticity or manipulation are evident in church. We think the LGBTQ+ concern is more than an isolated issue for young people; it's more likely a litmus test of authenticity as defined by today's cultural standards (discussed in Chapter 1). In that sense, the church's

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[48] "Six Reasons Young Christians Leave Church," Barna, September 27, 2011, https://www.barna.com/research/six-reasons-young-christians-leave-church/.

response to those who identify as LGBTQ+ effectively functions as a judgement criteria for many young people.

Those who were formerly churched were asked this open-ended question as they completed their survey: *"In one sentence, list the main reason(s) you are no longer actively involved in a church."* A linguistic analysis of these responses produced the word cloud reflecting a variety of answers. But there was also this insight when analyzing the emotions in the text: **the idea of trust appeared more often than any other.**[49]

Each of us seek to enjoy relationships that fit us. What people can be trusted as consistently heading in the direction we want to travel in life? We hunger to surround ourselves with those who reinforce the identity we want for ourselves. Contemporary culture shapes young people to cherish the value of authenticity, as expressed by being true to their own feelings. If a large number of young adults perceive their church hosts unreliable people for their life-trek into who they wish to be, should we be surprised by their disaffiliation?

We see a hopeful path forward. Judgments about belonging are best understood as instinctive decisions rather than carefully thought-out deliberations. So, the **Arbor** team explored how teenagers' relational environments can help us understand formational influences that aid or inhibit their journey into thriving Christ followers who can invigorate the Church in Dallas-Fort Worth. Those results are discussed in Chapter 3.

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[49] See the Appendix for further discussion of emotional sentiments.

CHAPTER 3
Exploring the Relational Environment of Teens

DFW young people reflected on and told us about more than 2,000 individual relationships with adults and peers they deemed closest. The insights from analyzing these data converge to support a clear, biblically compelling focus for transformational discipleship in DFW.

The Relationship Discovery Exercise

Shaped for a 40-minute experience in a high school youth meeting, seven groups hosted an *RDE* involving a total of 161 young people. The average age of participants was 14.8, 55% were male, and 87% were white. Three of the meetings were led onsite and in person by Arbor Senior Researcher Dr. Dave Rahn. The remaining four meetings were led via Zoom by Dr. Rahn. All were co-hosted by youth ministers and adult leaders in the church's youth ministry rooms, and five of the seven meetings treated this event as a normal gathering of youth. Room preparation ensured they could spread out so as to respond comfortably and independently.

After a brief introduction, Dr. Rahn asked that each young person open the baggie supplied to them containing 15 white index cards, a pen, and one card of a different color. They were then invited to write the initials of 15 people with whom they felt particularly close on the center of each card. Closeness was described by whether they felt and conveyed gladness to be together and they connected frequently. Teens were urged to think about adults in all walks of life, include family members if so led, and also to identify peers who fit this criteria. They were coached that, while frequency of contact typically means at least weekly, monthly connections might also work and it was OK to factor in connections that were made through technology rather than in person.

Instructions included giving permission for respondents to choose a number of close relationships that were less than 15 if they got stumped. This number represents the "sympathy ring" of ~15 *best friends* as represented in Dunbar's friendship circles. After the exercise was completed and all of the cards were collected, it was explained to the teens that research shows 60% of all our social interaction takes place with our 15 closest friends and family members. It makes sense that these are the people who might influence us the most.

After tagging white index cards with the initials of 15 different people, they were asked to place specific marks in exact locations (as the slides made clear) on each card in response to each of the following questions:

1. *Is this person an <u>adult</u> or <u>peer</u>?*
2. *Have your connections included shared <u>church</u> experiences?*
3. *Have you had conversations about <u>Jesus</u>?*
4. *Have you <u>prayed</u> repeatedly together about personal concerns?*
5. *Have you talked together about how to apply what the <u>Bible</u> says?*
6. *Has this person <u>shown</u> you something helpful about how to follow Jesus?*

Once this part of the exercise was completed, young people were directed to set their 15 cards back in the baggie and pull out the different color card to record something about themselves. Demographic data were written on one side of this card. The other side asked questions about how much they agreed with seven different belief statements, and how often they engaged in four different religious practices. Questions mirrored the information collected through our brief online surveys.

The bundled baggies were collected and ultimately converted into data that could be statistically analyzed. A brief wrap-up served youth ministry's larger purposes, as reported by a youth pastor who gushed about the great conversations taking place. In one setting, a teen tearfully confessed being called into full-time ministry. At another, a young man unburdened himself of private and long-held grief he had never expressed. One group even burst into applause at the conclusion of the Zoom-led RDE.

The data set we analyzed as a result of this process included over 12,000 distinct pieces of information collected from 161 young people. The data averages and standard deviations about their beliefs and practices gave us our initial glimpse into the profile of these participants:

BELIEF STATEMENTS: Strongly Agree (4) · Agree (3) · Disagree (2) · Strongly Disagree (1)	AVG	StDev
My parents inspire me to follow Jesus.	3.53	.69
I see myself as a follower of Jesus.	3.63	.59
The Bible has authority over what I say and do.	3.10	.75
Following Jesus gives me direction and purpose in life.	3.55	.64
I believe God is actively involved in my life.	3.42	.75
I expect to be a strong follower of Christ when I'm 40 years old.	3.58	.68
Belonging to a Christian community is essential to following Jesus.	3.12	.90
FREQUENCY STATEMENTS: Daily (4) · Weekly (3) · Occasionally (2) · Rarely, if ever (1)	AVG	StDev
I participate in serving others through church.	2.52	.73
I take time to be alone, read Scripture, and listen to God.	2.51	1.02
I make heartfelt efforts to worship God.	2.95	.81
I initiate conversations about faith with others.	2.23	.88

This quick overview offers nothing unexpected from what we know about these Christian beliefs and practices. These teens express less certainty of agreement about the authority of Scripture and the need for Christian community, and there is a very significant difference among them in how frequently they practice "quiet time" with God.

We applied another statistical test of these data to explore how beliefs and practices might relate to one another. This surfaced a bit of intrigue, especially because we noticed the weak correlation between parents as inspirational faith exemplars and four common faith practices:
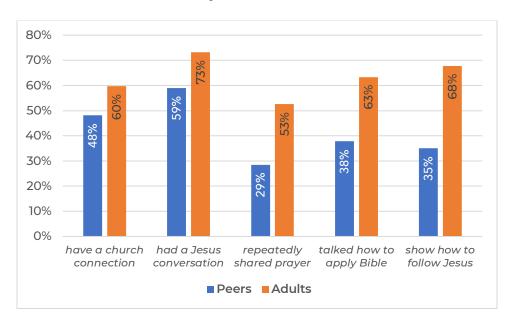
	I participate in serving others through church.	*I take time to be alone, read Scripture, and listen to God.*	*I make heartfelt efforts to worship God.*	*I initiate conversations about faith with others.*
My parents inspire me to follow Jesus.	**.01**	**.14**	**.15**	**.12**
I see myself as a follower of Jesus.	**.33**	**.45**	**.56**	**.40**
The Bible has authority over what I say and do.	**.13**	**.29**	**.39**	**.16**
Following Jesus gives me direction and purpose in life.	**.24**	**.50**	**.56**	**.32**

I believe God is actively involved in my life.	**.23**	**.51**	**.53**	**.36**
I expect to be a strong follower of Christ when I'm 40 years old.	**.27**	**.47**	**.52**	**.38**
Belonging to a Christian community is essential to following Jesus.	**.28**	**.33**	**.22**	**.14**

We subsequently engaged in the main focus of our study to understand more about the closest relationships young people have and how they can bring strength or distraction to their resiliency as Christ followers. Our richest discoveries in this research project came from studying the information these teens supplied about 2,019 relationships they identified as their closest. The adults listed among those closest relationships, which would have included parents, represented 25.9% of these 2,019.

Relationships Under Scrutiny

Unsurprisingly, the closest relationships young people have with peers are different from those they have with adults. The table below captures how.

We were able to identify the following four distinct profiles of relationships that could describe each of the 2,019 responses from the young people. These, also, reveal differences in what close peers and adults provided these teens to support faith that is focused on Jesus.

	"hero"	*"show"*	*"talk"*	*"zero"*
Church connection	*mostly*	*sometimes*	*sometimes*	*never*
Jesus conversation	*always*	*mostly*	*mostly*	*never*
Repeatedly shared prayer	*always*	*seldom*	*seldom*	*never*
Talked how to apply Bible	*always*	*sometimes*	*seldom*	*never*
Show how to follow Jesus	*always*	*always*	*never*	*never*
	26%	**18%**	**32%**	**24%**

To isolate the *exemplar* factor, we can see that, in aggregation, about 44% of the closest relationships these teens report in their lives have shown them "something helpful about how to follow Jesus." Though most of these came from their peers, it was far more likely to be seen from adults. More than two of every three close relationships with an adult were cited for their helpful role in showing what it looks like to follow Christ. In contrast, two-thirds of the 1,496 close peer friendships were observed to fall within either the *"talk"* profile (largest by far) or the *"zero"* profile; they were NOT cited as helpful models of following Jesus.

These four relationship profiles proved to be helpful in predicting the corresponding strength for desirable belief and faith practice outcomes.

As the percentage of people with this relationship profile increased... *...we saw statistically significant differences in the agreement or frequency with items.*	*"hero"*	*"show"*	*"talk"*	*"zero"*
My parents inspire me to follow Jesus.				
I see myself as a follower of Jesus.	INCREASE			DECREASE
The Bible has authority over what I say and do.				
Following Jesus gives me direction and purpose in life.		INCREASE		DECREASE
I believe God is actively involved in my life.	INCREASE			INCREASE
I expect to be a strong follower of Christ when I'm 40 years old.	INCREASE			DECREASE
Belonging to a Christian community is essential to following Jesus.				DECREASE
I participate in serving others through church.	INCREASE			DECREASE
I take time to be alone, read Scripture, and listen to God.	INCREASE	INCREASE		DECREASE
I make heartfelt efforts to worship God.	INCREASE			
I initiate conversations about faith with others.	INCREASE		DECREASE	DECREASE

A single sentence summary of this finding is that *young people whose closest relationships include more friends and adults with actively Christ-focused profiles tended to rate this survey's variables of Christian faith and practice higher than those who had fewer of these among their closest relationships*. This finding mirrors what our bivariate correlations earlier discussed from the large data set of young people completing the shorter online surveys. To be sure, it's not the discovery of this finding that captures our attention. It's how this exposed truth helps us to understand what may be missing in our typical patterns of youth discipleship.

We can illuminate this by comparing the profiles of two young teens in our research inquiry. Only a year apart in age, both of them *strongly agreed* with all seven of the belief statements. Each of them also had exactly three peer friendships with whom the only feature they reported was that they had shared conversations about Jesus. For ease of reporting, we'll name one "Zoe" the other "Heidi."

Zoe indicated that she engaged in heartfelt worship weekly. This is a pretty normal pattern reflective of the Sunday morning experience emphasized by most churches. As it relates to each of the other three practices, Zoe checked "occasionally" to report her frequency of practice.

In fact, across the board the average reported frequency for all four of the faith-related practices we asked about was 2.55...squarely between "occasionally" and "weekly." That's why Heidi's pattern is worth noting. On a *daily* basis she "makes heartfelt efforts to worship" and "takes time to be alone, read Scripture, and listen to God."

The difference between the two teens' 15 relationship profiles is stark. Heidi reported that eight of her relationships matched the **hero** profile; four of these were adults. Zoe had NO adults listed among her 15 and nine of the closest peer friendships she identified matched the **zero** profile. In fact, even as Zoe sat in a ministry room surrounded by peers, since no one among her closest relationships shared her connection to church, we sadly realized that she was—*at the very moment we collected her information*—not yet influentially bonded to anyone in her youth group.

The two "tails" in the distribution of 2,019 relationship profiles were split in half; 26% were **hero** profiles and 24% were **zero** profiles. But this mustn't be misconstrued. Each young person has a unique relational environment,

unknowable apart from the sort of practices advocated by Springtide Research Institute.[50] The stories that Heidi and Zoe report about their closest relationships differ considerably from one another's now. Is it likely that this factor will influence each of them in the days and years ahead?

Occam's razor states that the simplest explanation is usually the best one. There is a formational force in relationships. Chap Clark warned of their neglect over 15 years ago. Is there any evidence that ministry leaders have adjusted the focus of their efforts to correct this investment oversight?

Youth discipleship that directly targets helping teens believe the right things devote time to teaching strategies. Faith-building practices that flow from such an approach will often focus on coaching young people how to behave...and urging them to do so. This allocates ministry efforts in a direction that is entirely different from what would be most fruitful.

Unlike right beliefs, which require our brain's conscious attention, humans calculate how or if we fit with certain people quickly and imperceptibly. Group identities are constantly evaluated as we choose where to belong. Once we engage with "our people" we establish *habits of interaction* that exist as internal dynamics within each of our closest relationships. Our brains will convert gray matter thought routines into white matter super-speedy habit highways whenever possible in order to conserve energy. We can testify to how easily our most familiar relationships slip into behavioral ruts that may or may not include enhancing Christ-focused living.

Further, since each person's closest relationships are fluid, it makes sense that life transitions will introduce the likelihood of rearranging who gets most of our attention. Few changes match the dramatic nature of these adjustments as much as that of young people heading off to college.

Knowing that family members' status among our closest relationships tends to be more stable over time than peer friendships, we were drawn to wonder about parents in this mix. But though the young people in this project _say_ they are inspired by their parents, the weak correlations earlier mentioned do not paint parents as powerful, positive influences. This illustrates a formidable recent research finding about the gap parents must overcome to pass on

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[50] Josh Packard, *The State of Religion & Young People: Relational Authority* (Springtide Research Institute, 2020).

their faith. However exemplary their behavior may be (i.e., *"My parents inspire me to follow Jesus.")*, faith transmission requires transparency and words that explain how Christ *in us* guides activity *by us*.[51] Teens dispossessed of clarity about Jesus Christ at the root of their parents' lives may vaguely understand faith, but should we be surprised if they're vulnerable to the influence of others in their close relationship circles? Earnest parents across the country anguish every day about whether their GenZ sons and daughters will return to church.

Each young person has a story about the profiles of their "Current Top 15" that can be evaluated like an investment portfolio. Is close friend influence helpful to those who aspire to radically focus on Christ? Unless ministry leaders prioritize their shepherding responsibilities to engage this world of tug-of-war relationships, the very foundation of Christlike character development may fail to be activated. Note how some of those interviewed expressed this relational priority:

> *"I think a big thing is people not feeling like they are heard. People want the acknowledgement. 'Hey, I hear what you are saying' and caring enough to investigate why issues are so important to them and sway them so much."*

"[They] are the type of people that want to know you as a person and really care about you, and because they really care about you, and they're like hey you know what, because I care about you, I want to tell you about this [Jesus] and I want to bring you here [church]. They're just really genuine people."

"[My neighbor of 10 years is like my aunt.] She's one of those people that you can talk to about anything. She's very calm and she's one of the people that has the strongest faith I've ever met... just unwavering faith. She's told me her story several times. During COVID we went on one of our long walks and she was telling me she grew up in a Christian home. Her family was very poor, and there were issues with her parents. She was like God's going to take care of me, undoubtedly. I was walking next to her and thinking 'this is insane.'"

"In college everything changed. I found my Christian group, my friends [when I] joined Young Life. I met some of my best friends through that org. They're my girls! That's how I became strong in my faith. It helped me realize God is a relationship."

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[51] Smith and Adamczyk, 2021.

"There was an older couple and the youth pastor. They really impacted me because when I came around it was very different; they wanted to just hang out with me and talk with me. Their conversations were never like judgmental or trying to change you. They just spent so much time with me outside of church, like going to dinner just getting to know me… Of course, I knew that they wanted me to be set free from things, but that wasn't like the main topic of conversation. I couldn't scare them away."

As we saw from "Zoe's" story, if the relational profiles teens are most exposed to are either contrary or indifferent about living with Jesus as Lord, the odds are stacked against faith resiliency. Innovation in youth discipleship will be leveraged by relationship shepherds who earn the privilege of influence through proximity and loving listening. This is the portal through which adults can shape teens' Christ focused beliefs and practices.

What's at stake is whether adults are willing to redirect their time from predictable programmatic routines into the messy and disruptive world of teen relationships. Largely uninvited and sometimes unwelcome, adults must choose discomfort and selflessness if they are to gain relational authority. Can those needed to turn the tide be convinced to penetrate the relational environment of young people? We doubt that research data can open hearts that have yet to be convicted by the Holy Spirit. But we have great hope that—even as relationships are the key to youth discipleship transformation—they may also unlock the kind of leadership collaboration that will catalyze youth ministry innovation and uncommon fruitfulness.

CHAPTER 4
Collaborating for Discipleship Innovation

Drawing upon the quantifiable data of this study and fortified by the interview perspectives from ministry leaders and young people alike, there are some obvious catalytic conclusions that can change the trajectory of faith for DFW young people and the Church at large.

Our most important relational connections can be explored like directional vectors of influence. That's been our aim in this **Movement | DFW** project. We have sought to capture GenZ stories of relationship connections with God, others, the church, and their world in such a way that we can catalyze ministry leaders for breakthrough collaboration. Ideally, this research will result in widespread, focused, and fruitful practices of disciple-making relational authority. Young adults in DFW can hopefully flip the script, no longer angling toward faith abandonment but invigorating God's people with pace setting, Christ-obsessed vitality.

But for this vision to take place, something must change. **We've presented evidence in this project that intensifies what researchers warned about years ago.** The hard reality is to acknowledge that churches have not yet made whatever adjustments are needed to turn the tide. Inputs from survey data expose the relational hopes from young people for these improvements.

Our linguistic analyses of responses to similar open-ended survey questions point in the same direction. Currently churched young adults and high school students were asked, **"What's the best thing that adults can do to help young people to follow Jesus?"** They said: *encouraging young people, being honest and connecting with them to provide authentic experiences (e.g., sharing struggles, relating to them), listening to them, praying for them, showing them how to live this life, and setting a good example for them.*

High school students wrote: *providing advice, encouraging them, leading/listening to them, having personal conversations and relationships with them, getting involved in their lives, being a mentor to them, praying with them while also having fun.*
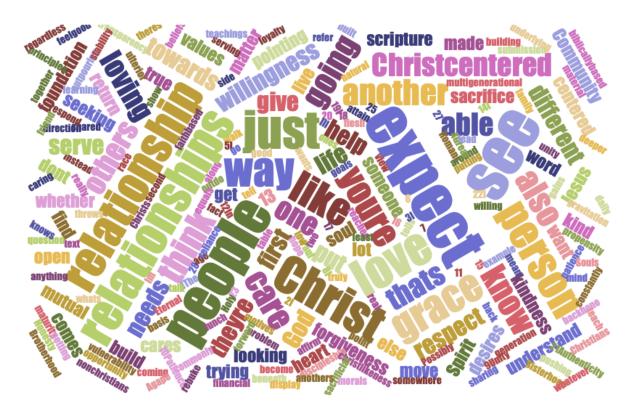
And this slight variation of the question was sent to formerly churched young adults: **"What's the best thing that adults can do to help young people to**

grow in their Christian faith?" A summary of their responses includes *reaching out to youth and youth groups, be more understanding and helping them to understand Christianity, lead by example, be honest, listen to them, and be more accepting of people.*

Two same sentiments/emotions were most frequently expressed by all three of these groups: **trust** and **joy**.[52] These represent (at least) an overall positivity from all respondents as they answered this question.

These responses from over 1,300 young adults and high school students ask adults to be authentic, engaged encouragers involved alongside young people to listen, understand, accept, and lead by example. Do adults who currently work in relationship with young people agree?

We gave an opportunity for adults to record 30-second phone responses to this question: **"What do you expect to see in Christ-centered relationships that's different from other relationships?"** Though we were disappointed to only have 29 people submit answers, their input revealed enough consistencies to pop in the word cloud below.

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[52] These emotional sentiments came from an analysis of open-ended questions using the latest linguistic software.

Veteran youth ministers affirmed how important personal relationships are in their youth ministry. One said, after he heard a GenZ specialist speak at his church, *"That's not our students because he doesn't know our students....At the end of the day we minister to our individual students—no one's going to be able to write a book on that kid unless they know that kid. Our job is to meet those kids and figure out what's going on with them."* The conversation quickly shifted as two youth ministers discussed how time is both the key to discipleship and the capacity limitation they must organize around. *"I don't think we're constrained by a system; we're constrained by our own capacity. I feel like we've got a pretty good system in place because we recognize the main thing, it's just a matter of making it happen."*

Lest we allow the idea of relationships to languish without the attributes we consistently heard, consider how the following graphic representation captures the challenge for would-be collaborators and disciple-makers alike.

From his home in Dallas, Dr. Jim Denison writes a daily article integrating biblical truth with contemporary cultural challenges. On April 6, 2022, he

referenced the work of Carolyn Chen, co-director of the Berkely Center for the Study of Religion at UC Berkely in describing American's "collective worship of work." The excerpt below is a timely contribution to this report:

> She cites a [McKinsey report](#) that 70 percent of employees said their sense of purpose is defined by their work. In her view, the "invisible religion of work" has "become an unassailable part of our culture."
>
> According to Chen, "At a time when religious-affiliation rates are the lowest they've been in the past seventy-three years, we *worship* work—meaning we sacrifice for and surrender to it—because it gives us identity, belonging, and meaning, not to mention that it puts food on our tables" (her emphasis).
>
> In her view, "houses of worship" that can compete with the worship of work "would have to claim our time, energy, and devotion like work does. We would have to sacrifice and submit to their demands, as we do for work. We would have to build communities of belonging, together seeking meaning and purpose outside of our productive labor."

It is evident that Chen's writing applies to the disaffiliation of young people that this research has concentrated upon. Less obvious, but perhaps more consequential, is to wonder whether DFW church leaders have become so attached to their "work of ministry" that substantial change is unlikely. Even among those who seek to serve God with all their hearts, functional routines can eventually become brittle wineskins unable to carry the life-giving new work that God wants to accomplish.[53] So, we humbly ask, ***"How can leadership collaboration for the sake of youth discipleship innovation become sanctioned as the necessary 'work of ministry'?"***

We know that it will take precious relational capacity to collaborate...unless such alignment is conceived as a task that's unrelated to Jesus' love mandate and unity prayer for us all. It will be tempting for high-achieving operations to eschew working together in order to enjoy the efficiencies of established in-house ministry patterns. From everything we've picked up in the research discovery attempted through this project, this trade-off is a turn off for young people. Hard drivers are not known for slowing down to seek the perspective of those without power or status. To the extent that the church culture of DFW can proclaim "we get things done," twenty-somethings may be heard

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[53] Howard A. Snyder, *The Problem of Wineskins: Church structure in a technological age* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1975).

muttering, "yeah, but you don't listen very well" and teens like Zoe are silently sitting among the counted program attendees without being invested in by any Christ-focused heroes.

Our focus group conversations encouraged us by the openness and hunger we heard. The message about relationships of love, respect, and discovery came from more than young people. Ministry veterans are ready for change; they have a gnawing sense that something is amiss. One said, *"I think the world is looking for the church to be real and not only love them —the outsiders who aren't believers—but they want to see the church loving each other. Sometimes as the church, the universal church, we struggle with that. That's the reason I think people don't come to church or they don't want to hear about it because they see us fighting and we're not practicing what the Scripture says that they will know you because you love each other."*

One DFW church team agreed that the dysfunctionality of the home is where the relational problems of GenZ come from. Against that backdrop, speaking truth requires tiptoeing, lest they appear judgmental. Their frustration was real, but as they shared aloud, they landed on how being genuine and coming alongside people in relational discipleship was the only way forward. The senior pastor in their midst confessed to being convicted about his insensitivity and offered this: *"...if there is going to be a DFW movement, us older fellows need to chill. We need to chill. Be intentional but be authentic and be gentle and understanding. And hear them [GenZ]...especially when they have something to say."*

One ministry veteran made this observation: *"Discipleship needs to be reformed to get back to what's most important."* That spurred this contribution: *"... faith is faltering because we're not basing it on the main thing."* But it was an earlier statement from that particular focus group that rings most true to the **Arbor Research Group** as we submit this project summary:

I have a feeling as though this isn't about GenZ.
It's about the leaders who work with GenZ.

We agree.

CHAPTER 5
Leading the Change: Ideas for Movement | DFW

A by-product of having an outside team like **Arbor Research Group** jump into immersive analysis for a season is that new observational insights can be culled and considered. This final, short chapter attempts to do just that by offering eight recommendations.

Intimacy with Jesus is inviting. Soaked in love and joy, it captures the attention of those in our relationship circles, paving the way for belief and corresponding lifestyle adjustments. If we've imagined that right belief and faith-based practices precede relationships, we've mistakenly calculated the cause when all we possess is observable associations.

> This research re-orders the sequence in discipleship innovation: Relationships are the first priority in formation.

Young people today, more than ever, need among their closest friends some adults and peers whose intimacy with Jesus makes them heroic, engaging, and inviting examples of a life radically focused on Christ. Exactly how many *"hero relationships"* are sufficient is a question for further, likely longitudinal, research.

The fruit-bearing question for **Movement | DFW** is how to shape leaders who collaborate to deploy what *GenZ* needs most: an abundance of heroes who listen well and relentlessly lead them to love, know, enjoy, and obey Jesus Christ, our Lord. Here are eight recommendations from **Arbor**:

1. ***Establish a metric that defines a ministry's collaboration readiness.*** Potentially branded **ETx**, it would identify measurable levels, or threshold indicators, to help **Movement | DFW** gauge whether particular ministries carry the DNA of *Entrusted Teammates* needed to multiply the vision through selfless work together.

   Since **Movement | DFW** exists to facilitate synergistic work together, it will always be helpful to anchor each judgment about what *should* be attempted in an accurate assessment about what *can likely* be accomplished. This doesn't bypass the need for every collaborative ministry opportunity to receive its own rich, task-based scrutiny. But we suggest that something similar to measuring blood pressure could be usefully

referenced before attempting next level teamwork. Locking onto a first check health baseline that *tracks actual relationship activity among members* can provide such a useful readiness indicator.

If leaders *only* connect around mutually beneficial professional goals, they will draw upon this same criterion to weigh the next request to participate and contribute. On the other hand, if Christ-focused relationships are actively cultivated, leaders will consider the extra benefit of harmony in work together, a fruitful gift with far-ranging spillover potential. As discussed in Chapter 1 around the ownership principle at work in defining roles among collaborators, such a metric will best be developed for use by those whose cooperation in implementation will cherish this target.

2. ***Build an infrastructure of Christ-focused relationships that can be trusted to deliver Christ-directed work together.*** The operational standard for these relationships will have been set by the work done as recommendation #1 is accomplished. This is the suggestion most directly related to the findings of this research project. Discipleship is a multiplication strategy, and unless those who aim to work together can testify to the way *they* enjoy a radical focus on Christ when they connect, the inevitable reproduction story line will fail to reach the transformational threshold being sought. There are natural and supernatural forces requiring our alignment in both discipleship and leadership collaboration.

An emphasis on organizational simplicity to focus on Christ together can re-norm the relationship habits among ministry leaders inclined to spend time talking about their common work challenges or celebrating fruitful outcomes. To set aside a short amount of time so Christ-followers can give uninterrupted attention to the fresh activity of Jesus Christ in their lives can be meaningful, as has been recently chronicled.[54] If **Movement | DFW** can facilitate this outcome, a lineage of ministry efforts to life-giving discipleship will be established. Without such a concentration, **Movement | DFW** risks being sidelined as niche

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[54] Dave Rahn, *"Can a Simple 'Backbone Habit' Re-Align Relationships?"* (Dallas, TX: paper presented to the **Society of Professors in Christian Education** and the **Association of Youth Ministry Educators**, October 15-16, 2021).

resource providers who may or may not be disruptive to the priority focus of DFW shepherds.

3. **Movement | DFW** *can engage other networks (like Rick Eubanks and the National Network of Youth Ministries) to become known for* **"Kenositic Collaboration"** *that measurably attracts GenZ young people into church.* We believe the catalytic contribution of **Movement | DFW** to DFW ministries resides in the first two recommendations. Far from nonessential, these represent a crucial corrective needed in the way churches engage young people and, critically, how ministry leaders relate to one another. This is a shared mission focus with the National Network of Youth Ministries.

   The notion of "kenositic" is based on the Greek word (*kenosis*) for self-emptying that markedly describes Jesus' incarnational journey. One of the significant turn-offs among young people is how distasteful it is to see the church expressed in so many different denominational and organizational silos. Selfless ("kenositic") collaboration has a chance to reverse the tendency that commonly seeks brands of distinction rather than a Kingdom-first, Christ-supreme reputation.

   By tethering the health of DFW ministry to interchurch relational partnerships in fierce coordination with those already laboring in that space, **Movement | DFW** will willingly risk organizational preferences to accurately reflect Christ's example of humble service. We trust that the best way to spark selflessness is to set the pace.

4. ***Identify marginalized sectors of the Body of Christ in DFW and make concentrated efforts to advance their empowerment.*** This initiative continues the directional theme suggested thus far. It requires willingness to set aside power and stature that is offensive to young people and gets in the way of making God known. Once the work of humble discovery has surfaced ministry leaders working in Dallas-Fort Worth shadows of obscurity, **Movement | DFW** might consider what power-sharing could be most helpful to further the momentum of closing the gap so that the Church reflects the single-minded heart of love that has been fruitfully influential amidst times of cultural hostility in history. An obvious idea might be to consider opening up board positions to diverse, underserved ministries, but we urge Spirit-led

discernment and warn against actions that will mostly aim to change image rather than address true disparities.

5. ***Establish a dynamic connection with the TENx10 Collaboration.*** As hinted at in suggestion #3, there is wise synergy that can be gained when mission-aligned partners find one another. **TENx10.org** is being established to address the same concerns about GenZ faith and church disaffiliation that this project sought to assist. For the most part, the **TENx10** engagement efforts with would-be collaborators has been channeled through existing national organizations and denominational leadership.

   If churches in DFW begin to morph into *The Church* in DFW (remembering the Buenos Aires story of Juan Carlos Ortiz from Chapter 1), it will be extremely helpful to the landscape-changing vision of **TENx10** for them to appreciate a matrix of collaborators who've come to work together in local communities because of organizational influence *and* the more robust relational invitations we're advocating.

6. ***Sponsor a "Posture Shift" workshop led by Bill Henson, to be followed up by teams plotting consequential, coordinated steps for early adopting DFW ministries to close the authenticity gap.*** Insofar as the research surfaced concerns from churched and unchurched DFW-area young people about a program-infected Church that has not listened well and seems unwelcoming to the LGBTQ+ friends of young people, we suggest engaging *PostureShift.com*. This action would be consistent with **Movement | DFW** as hosts and conveners of meaningful ministry conversations; it's also a tangible way to advance the research's admonition to listen well. Posture Shift may be just the sort of resource that can help leaders advance both their understanding and the tone of conversations helpful to this and other issues where young people feel unheard.

7. ***Launch coalitions of DFW academic and business leaders willing to offer niche support to those investing in GenZ discipleship.*** This is consistent with the penetrating "more than ministry" network that's been a distinctive, inspiring contribution of MOVEMENT.ORG. The Dallas-Fort Worth area is home to world class seminaries and great higher education institutions. We suggest coalescing scholars who

launch their considerable influence from these schools, giving them an access pathway to put theory to practice and combine diverse gifts to seek the welfare of the city they call home.

In a similar way, business leaders bewildered about the trajectory of young people may appreciate a concrete way to invest in community flourishing by growing up indigenous leaders for the future. Educators and marketplace leaders alike can be wooed to become relational mentors, facilitated via **Movement | DFW** connections. If these cultural comptrollers engage young people as empowering listeners, they can reverse the systemic abandonment storyline. *Churches will benefit from an image makeover when they become a prime source of genuinely helpful relationships to young people who had them pegged for unappealing, building-centric programs.*

8. ***Embrace the pace-setting potential of DFW as generous exemplar-servants, while guarding against becoming product promoters.***
Dreams of influence beyond the Metroplex were embedded in the hope of this research project. Indeed, if breakthrough ministry practices can be identified, articulated, and locally implemented, there's considerable likelihood that leaders from other cities will take note. The inclination of too many religious leaders today is to monetize whatever can be marketed. GenZ has taken notice of this frequent pattern and they're not impressed. We encourage **Movement | DFW** to champion authentic integrity, not through self-promotion, but by generating relentlessly consistent testimonies of truth, unity, purpose, and joyful belonging through Christ. This is the proof that will win the day, worthy of our calling.

Appendix
Additional Findings from the Survey
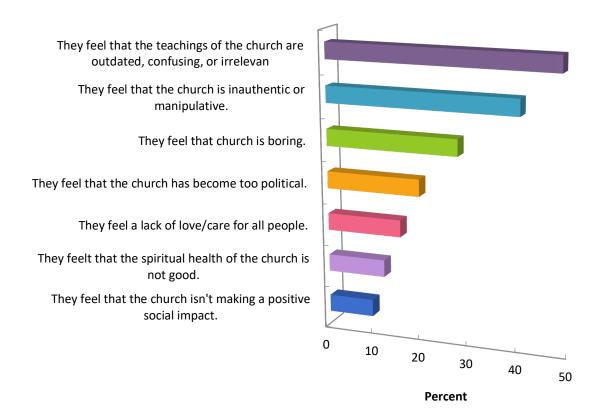
The important statistics and findings of significance have been included in the main chapters of this formal report. This appendix includes additional findings and statistics that may be of interest to researchers and Christian leaders.

Christ-centered relationships are crucial for ministry effectiveness. 37.1% of formerly churched young adults over 18 years of age reported that they did *not* have a positive Christ-centered relationship with an adult while they were involved in the church. Another way to say this is that about 4 in 10 young adults once regularly participated in DFW-area youth ministries for over a year without establishing a positive Christ-centered relationship with an adult in that church. If we think about a "not on our watch" aspect to correct, this is clearly part of it.

Two-thirds of formerly churched young adults may never come back to DFW-area churches. 35.7% of formerly churched young adults reported that it was not likely they would be involved in church in five years. 19.8% rated it "not likely at all" and 28.2% were unsure about their return. This project reinforces what other researchers have reported, that if a young person leaves a church there is a 2 in 3 chance that they may never return.

The teachings of the church are both a repellant and a draw. Almost half (47.6%) of formerly churched young adults over the age of 18 say that young adults are leaving the church behind because they feel that the teachings of the church are outdated, confusing, or irrelevant.
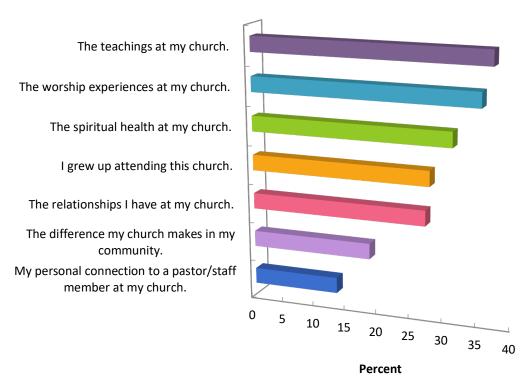
(Formerly churched) What are the two biggest reasons that young adults leave the church?

Response	Percent
They feel that the teachings of the church are outdated, confusing, or irrelevant.	47.6%
They feel that the church is inauthentic or manipulative.	39.6%
They feel that church is boring.	27.3%
They feel that the church has become too political.	19.4%
They feel a lack of love/care for all people.	15.4%
They feel that the spiritual health of the church is not good.	11.9%
They feel that the church isn't making a positive social impact.	9.3%

Conversely, 36% of churched young adults (ages 18-30) say they stay involved in their church *because* of the teachings of their church (the #1 answer).

What are the TWO top reasons you stay involved in your local church?

Reason	Percent
The teachings at my church.	36.5%
The worship experiences at my church.	34.9%
The spiritual health at my church.	30.8%
I grew up attending this church.	27.5%
The relationships I have at my church.	26.9%
The difference my church makes in my community.	18.4%
My personal connection to a pastor/staff member at my church.	13.2%

It is clear from this project that there would be benefit to research the role and content of teaching in the local church. That teaching (its content and connectivity) showed up at the top across three methods is significant and surprising. It is also clear that local churches need to give careful review to the teaching ministries as they relate to evangelism and discipleship.

Encouragingly, DFW-area young people feel able to express doubts about their faith at their churches. Since this was a prominent obstacle in other research on young people leaving the church, we asked it of those currently involved in DFW-area churches. 32.1% of churched young people said they "often" felt comfortable expressing doubts about their Christian faith at their churches while 39.3% said that they "sometimes" were comfortable. Only 11% said that they would "never" feel comfortable expressing doubts. Interestingly, 17.5% said the question wasn't applicable to their situation, effectively skipping having to answer the question.

Authenticity is important. 39.6% said that young adults leave because they feel that the church is inauthentic or manipulative. The focus groups and the open-ended survey questions show that young people want to be able to trust their church and its adult leaders/. They want their leaders to "practice what they teach," and that they (the young people) *are able to observe that authenticity in their lives.*

This confirms other research regarding evangelistically effective youth ministries that showed that when groups are emotionally safe and socially safe places for young people, they are more likely to see teens coming to Christ than groups where students cannot trust their leaders' consistency.[55]

Cohabitation exists across all groups. 26.3% of the formerly churched young adults and 19.8% of the currently churched reported that they live with a boyfriend/girlfriend/fiancée.

Relationships are centrally important to youth in student ministries. Clearly the most significant story from the project is the important role that Christ-centered relationships plays in stemming the tide of young people leaving a church. When asked why they have stayed involved in their church, 60.9% of youth in student ministry groups say that the relationships they have at the church.

This research confirms work previous done by Fuller Youth Institute (**Tenx10** and *Growing Young*[56]) and Barna (*You Lost Me*). Each of these affirmed the critical role of intergenerational relationships in the lives of teens in student

[55] Dave Rahn and Terry Linhart, *Evangelism Remixed: Empowering Students for Courageous and Consistent Faith.* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan/Youth Specialties, 2009).
[56] Kara Powell, Jake Mulder, and Brad Griffin, Growing Young: Six Essential Strategies to Help Young People Discover and Love Your Church. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2016).

ministries. This project shows that when those relationships are absent, they correlate to (result in?) a teenager not engaging in the spiritual practices that evident a vibrant Christian faith. It would follow that these dormant students, currently "active" in DFW-area youth ministries, would be the ones most likely to fall away from church in the future.
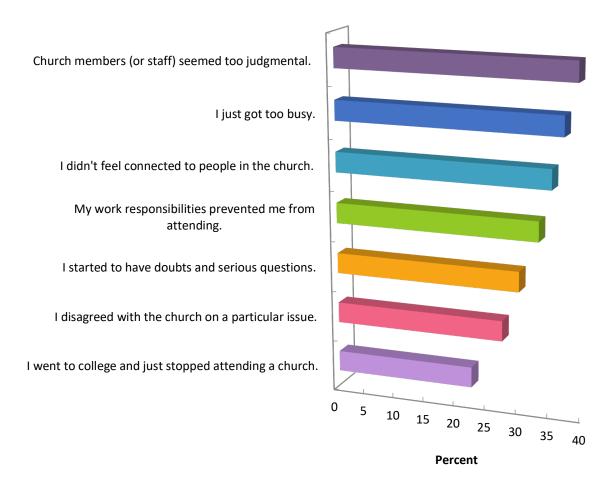
Contemporary worship experiences: About 12% of those in church groups have difficulty connecting to God through worship and roughly another 30% *occasionally* connect to God through worship experiences. Another way to say this would be that, for 40% of young people in a ministry, it's not "automatic" that they are engaging in current worship experiences.

There is a significant percentage of unchurched young people in the DFW area who remain positive about Church. As mentioned before, this was certainly an encouraging aspect to this project, and perhaps unique to it. Even when we surveyed the "general population" of the DFW area, we found mostly positive responses to the church questions. When nonchurched adults indicated that it was likely or extremely likely that they would return within five years, we discovered a rich history with their local church (see below), a history that serves like a tractor beam pulling them back to something that was once special.

You mentioned that it's likely you'll be involved in a church within five (5) years, why do you think that is true?

Response	Percent
Church once was a vital part of my relationship with God.	48.8%
I want my children to be involved in church.	43.9%
I think the church can help guide my decisions in everyday life.	42.7%
I've just gotten busy and need to get more disciplined.	41.5%
I feel that God is calling me back to church.	40.2%
I want to connect with others (or friends) who attend church.	32.9%
I want to be committed to the purpose and the work of the church.	29.3%
I want to follow the example of someone in my family.	19.5%
My family wants me to.	11.0%

We presented four sets of reasons to the formerly churched young adults for why others have said that they no longer attend a church. These reasons were drawn from previous research done so that **Movement | DFW** could discover and compare what is happening with DFW-area young people and churches.

Top Reasons for Leaving Church	Percent
Church members (or staff) seemed too judgmental.	38.3%
I just got too busy.	36.3%
I didn't feel connected to people in the church.	34.5%
My work responsibilities prevented me from attending.	32.6%
I started to have doubts and serious questions.	29.6%
I disagreed with the church on a particular issue.	27.0%
I went to college and just stopped attending a church.	22.1%

We have included the entire list here for reference to other published research projects.

Other Reasons for Leaving Church	Percent
I had emotional issues that I needed to deal with on my own.	21.2%
God seemed to be missing from the church experience.	20.8%
I just needed a break.	18.1%
I stopped believing in God.	15.9%
The church's teaching on sexuality was out of date.	15.4%
I didn't connect with the adult leaders of the youth group.	15.0%
I moved too far away from the church.	14.5%
I didn't connect with other young people in the youth group.	14.5%
The church I attended seemed to be anti-science.	11.9%
There was a relational conflict with a former pastor or staff member.	10.6%
The Bible was not taught clearly enough.	8.8%

The Church and DFW-Area Young People

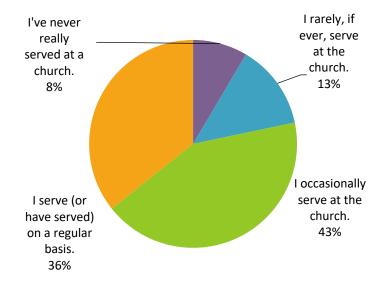The denominational makeup of the formerly churched group differed from that of the churched:

Formerly churched:

Denomination	Percent
Baptist	26.0%
Roman Catholic	12.3%
Church of Christ	11.9%
Nondenominational	6.6%
American Baptist	3.5%
Presbyterian	3.5%
United Methodist	3.5%
Assemblies of God	2.2%

Currently churched:

Denomination	Percent
Baptist	24.2%
Nondenominational	16.0%
Church of Christ	11.6%
Roman Catholic	7.2%
Nondenominational – Bible	4.1%
Church of God in Christ	3.3%
American Baptist	2.8%
Christian Reformed Church	2.2%
Pentecostal	2.2%

Serving the church. We asked young adults who currently attend church to pick one of four answers that best describes how often they serve at their church.
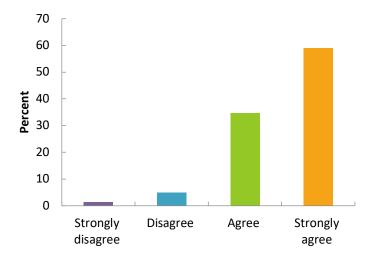

Value	Percent
I've never really served at a church.	8.5%
I rarely, if ever, serve at the church.	13.2%
I occasionally serve at the church.	42.6%
I serve (or have served) on a regular basis.	35.7%

Being welcoming to others. One of the conundrums in the data centers around the issue of being welcoming to others and welcoming to those who are seeking or struggling in their faith. Some respondents used the word "accepting."

On the surveys, the churched young adults indicated that they felt their church was welcoming of all people, with 89.7% agreeing or strongly agreeing with that sentiment. Students in youth ministry groups (91.7%) felt just a strongly about this.

My church is welcoming of all people.

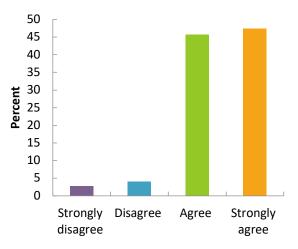| Value	Percent
Strongly disagree	1.4%
Disagree	5.0%
Agree	34.7%
Strongly agree	59.0%

90% of churched young adults and 93% of students in youth ministry groups affirmed that "all of my friends would be welcome" in their youth ministry. Yet, when we sat down to interview them, they expressed concern that churches weren't welcoming enough, or that "being more welcoming" was something that their ministry/church could do better to reach more people. No matter the final answer, it is clear that being a place of welcome is important to ministry success and it is important to young people in our ministries. They are watching us as church leaders and how we welcome their friends and others.

It's a Matter of Trust

Trust: An embedded and important component to effective ministry with young people. Embedded throughout the project, from talking about have a dynamic relationship with Jesus Christ, to the role and content of church teachings, to the importance of authentic Christ-centered relationships is the presence or absence of trust. Trust is perhaps too often assumed to be present when in fact it may be eroding slowly over time. Youth ministry's history includes a period of time where "trust-building" activities were regular weekly components. Perhaps renewed conversations regarding "levels of trust" would be helpful as ministries pivot to help stem the tide of young people leaving the church.

For churched young adults who took the survey, they have significant trust in their church.

I trust my church.

Value	Percent
Strongly disagree	2.8%
Disagree	4.1%
Agree	45.7%
Strongly agree	47.4%

Trust was a prominent sentiment in their survey answers as well. On the surveys, we asked Christian young adults an open-ended question regarding what is the <u>best</u> thing that adults can do to help young people follow Jesus. After accounting for the common words (Bible, church, and teaching/loving), we found a compelling list:

- Encouraging young people.
- Being honest.
- Connecting with them to provide authentic experiences (e.g., sharing struggles, relating to them).

- Listening to them.
- Praying for them.
- Showing them how to live this life.
- Setting a good example for them.

Students in youth ministry groups responded along similar lines, though with some differences:

- Providing advice.
- Encouraging them.
- Leading/listening to them.
- Having personal conversations and relationships with them.
- Getting involved in their lives.
- Being a mentor to them.
- Praying with them while also having fun.

Dr. Shieh then performed *a sentiment/emotion analysis* of the responses using our linguistic analysis software. Since this is automated, it is not precise, and it cannot provide insight on why users are feeling a certain way, but it can provide value to quickly summarize the responses:

> We see that trust and joy represent almost 60% of the classified words, which are associated with positive emotions and can be interpreted as a good sign of the overall positive sentiment of the respondents.

We asked a similar question on the survey to those who were formerly churched. Their answers were less relationship-oriented and more general. In fact, the two most common themes centered around the words "make" and "stop." The more common sub-themes included the following:

- Make it more fun.
- Make things more relatable/comfortable/genuine.
- Stop being so judgmental.
- Stop trying to force God on people.

To explore this further, Dr. Shieh created a series of bigrams, the most common two-word combinations found in these open-ended responses. These provided additional understanding of what some things formerly churched adults can do to help young people grow in their Christian faith:

- Stop telling/judging people.
- Create a safe environment.
- Answer questions honestly.
- Share their personal experience.
- Provide fun activities.
- [Have them] attend church.

When we analyzed the *sentiment/emotion* of the responses of formerly churched young adults, Dr. Eric Shieh found a noticeable difference:

> There is almost double the percentage of words classified under the fear or anger emotion for the formerly churched response (combined almost 20%) than compared to the responses of the high school young adults or currently churched young adults.

We did a basic word count and uncovered additional themes for what ministry leaders can do to help young people grow in their Christian faith.
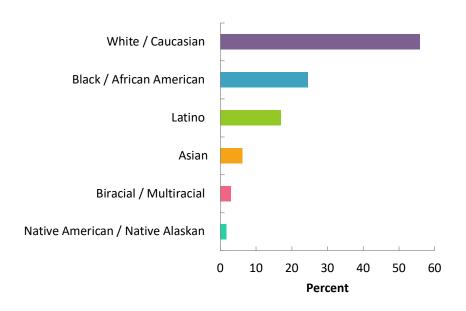
- Reach out to youth.
- Be more understanding.
- Help them to understand Christianity.
- Lead by example.
- Be honest.
- Listen to them.
- Be more accepting of people.

DEMOGRAPHICS

Gender. The gender of participants was consistent across all groups, reflecting a 2-1 ratio of women to men. This is common in survey-related research and safeguards were put in place to make sure that there was a minimum 33.3% level of participation from men.

> Men – 34.7%
> Women – 63.7%
> Prefer not to Answer – 1.6%

Ethnicity. There were significant differences between the ethnicity of the young adults, gathered from the general population in the DFW area, and the ethnicity of those participating directly from DFW-area churches.

From the general DFW-area population:

DFW-Area Young Adults:

Ethnicity	Percent
White / Caucasian	55.8%
Black / African American	24.5%
Latino	16.9%
Asian	6.2%
Biracial/Multiracial	2.9%
Native American / Native Alaskan	1.7%

DFW Participating Churches:

Ethnicity	Percent
White / Caucasian	90.1%
Latino	6.6%
Biracial / Multiracial	3.3%
Native American / Native Alaskan	3.0%
Black / African American	2.7%
Asian	5.3%