Adolescence in the Church:
Perspectives from College Students and Adults on Mentorship
and Christian Formation

Savannah Spicer
Department of Family and Human Services
John Brown University
Siloam Springs, Arkansas 72761 USA

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Melissa Hall

Abstract

Studies of adolescent development indicate that adult mentoring relationships are beneficial to an adolescent's social, emotional, and spiritual development[5, 15, 18]. Additionally, these studies display how adult mentors can be useful in guiding adolescents towards a sense of self-awareness. While research emphasizes how needed and beneficial adult-adolescent relationships can be [4,5, 14,15, 18], there is a gap in literature on the engagement between adults and adolescents in the church. With the numbers of Millennials leaving the church after entering college on the rise[17] this study seeks to understand how mentorship in the church affects a student's decision to continue their spiritual formation in college. The intent of this mixed methods study was to investigate the perspectives of adults and adolescents who have been involved in mentoring relationships in the evangelical church. This study includes a qualitative inquiry of 9 pastors or youth pastors in the church exploring their experiences and perspectives with mentorship. The quantitative aspect of this research study interpreted the spiritual formation of 200 college-age students in order to determine if there is a correlation between mentorship during adolescence and faith in post-secondary education. Ultimately, the findings of this research study display the seemingly ever-present need for increased interaction between adults and adolescents in the church.

Keywords: adolescents, Millennials, mentorship, spiritual formation

1. Introduction

"I'm Gen Y, I Love Feeling Entitled, and It Shows"[1] measured the entitled mindset of Generation Y, also known as Millennials. Other research papers and journal articles have been written on similar subjects, ultimately criticizing the character of the millennial generation[11,12]. It now appears that negative views on the character of Generation Y and adolescents cross the minds and media of older generations in rampant force[1, 11,12].The terms *Generation Y* or *Millennials* refer to individuals born between the early years of the 1980's and the early 2000's[17]. This generation is, at the time of this study, in the prime of adolescence. Although adolescence is typically viewed as the phase of development occurring throughout middle school and high school, the current generation proves that adolescent development and behavior can stretch through college and even into the years after that[3]. Gen Y has been characterized as entitled, self-centered, disrespectful, and lacking in motivation[1,12]. These traits give institutions such as colleges, churches, professional organizations and businesses reason to fear this group of adolescents as they begin entering young adulthood[1]. Rather than come alongside adolescents as they are learning and developing, adults tend to spend less time with their children and students, leading to the diversification of the relationships shared between adults and their growing counterparts[3]. This growing gap combined with adolescents' feelings of entitlement, lack of interest in education or work, and their desire to please their peers[1] seems to give reason for adults to easily separate themselves from Gen Y. While studies have investigated the ways mentorship can aid adolescent Millennials in their development[4,5,7,15], there is a gap in literature addressing how the church can implement mentorship for the benefit of

adolescents. Since Millennials are participating less in organized religion[17,] the question arises of where the church is failing to connect with Gen Y. This study desires to collect information about the processes the church is using to connect adolescents to adults in the congregation, as well as how the church mentorship influences an adolescent's desire to continue spiritual formation into college.

2. Literature Review

While divisions between adults and adolescents are visible in many places, one of the locations where the divide between generations is most apparent is within the evangelical church setting. Not only is there divide within the methods the church uses to practice religion with adolescents in comparison to adults, but the church often completely separates the two. The church markets to their youth in completely different manners than to their adult congregates[3]. While Millennials are a generation different from those before them, separating these adolescents from adults in the church could be leading to the fall out of well over half of the Millennials raised within the church[2,6].

As noted in most research involving adolescents, personalized attention and social support are aspects this group not only expects but also requires for success[17]. However, the current culture of the United States does not seem to provide a setting where these aspects are given. As American culture has changed throughout time, generations have altered their character traits in order to fit culture[16]. In recent years, the traits of individualism have significantly increased while social support has decreased[16]. Because religion is typically a corporate practice that offers social support through various means, it is possible that a decrease in practices of religion aligns with declining social support[16].

An article in *Christianity Today*[13] may best describe the frenzy about Millennials leaving the church in stating, "Like some reverse Paul Revere, many ride through the fiber optics of the Internet and into church basements shouting, 'The millennials are leaving! Watch out for the rise of the nones!'" (p. 32). Although this seems over the top, many adults in the church seem to feel the departure of Millennials from the church as a major concern, and their concern is not misplaced. Statistics from studies on Millennials display that almost 70 percent of those raised in the church have disengaged with it by the time they reach their 20's[6]. Barna Group[2] found that of Millennials who grow up in the church, nearly 60 percent have dropped out at some point. Another study displays that a gap between adolescents' religious affiliation and their parents' religious affiliation has grown with the Millennial generation in comparison to previous generations[16]. This data suggests that not only are more students growing up without religion, but also they are abandoning their parents' religion by the time they enter college[16]. It seems the Millennials are indeed leaving the church. The 'rise of the nones' refers to the increasing amount of people who choose not to identify with any religious tradition[13]. Tonoyan and McDaniel found that less than half of Millennials claim religion to be important in the daily life[17]. Another source claims that one third of Americans under the age of 30 identify as having no religion[6].

A natural reaction following these statistics would be to wonder what the church's reaction has been to the departing Millennial generation. While 82 percent of Protestant pastors surveyed in 2010 agree that they are "concerned that the emerging generation of children, teens and young adults is not embracing the Christian faith" and 65 percent of pastors surveyed in 2009 admitted to feeling concern about the future of churches led by the Millennial generation, less than half of these pastors agree that their churches are intentionally trying to reach for the Millennial audience[9]. Rather than place efforts into appealing to the traits of the Millennial generation, churches seem to be building up a "millennial anxiety," otherwise known as "the fear that those between the ages of 18 and 25 have little interest in the church, and that the church has failed to convince them to stay[13]." With no action geared towards drawing in and keeping Millennials spiritually[9] and churches working too hard to appeal to the 'brand' of being a cool church[6], it seems Millennials will remain outside of the church.

Despite the astounding amount of research accounting for the loss of Millennials in the church[6], some studies suggest that practicing Christian Millennials are strong both in their church attendance and their spirituality. A general social survey from 1972 to 2006 by Smith and Snell found very small changes over time in religious affiliation and attendance to services and no changes in overall belief in God[16]. Although research comparing nationally representative surveys of adolescents over several decades displayed a change in religious orientation between Millennials and their Baby Boomer and Gen X predecessors, researchers concluded that the large majority of Millennials are still involved in religion to some degree[16]. Kinnaman[2] found that 96 percent of Christian Millennials believe the Bible contains the means for a meaningful life and is the true word of God. While there are variations in trend on this subject, most research seems to find the Millennial cohort to be less religiously inclined than those before them[16].

Many studies have found information supporting change in the Millennial generation's spirituality when compared to Baby Boomers and Generation X. Millennials themselves back up the claims older cohorts are making about their lack of commitment to the church through multiple research studies[2,16, 17]. In multiple individual surveys given, adolescents and young adults accounted for their lack of church attendance and lack of spirituality[2,16]. One study found Millennials to be less likely to attend religious services, more likely to identify as having no religious affiliation, and more likely to claim religion is not important to their life than their predecessor generations[16]. Studies by Barna Group[2] found that among young adult Millennials who grew up in the church, nearly 60 percent stop going at some point. Barna Group[2] also found almost half (44%) of Millennials participating in their survey believed an accurate description of the church to be too similar to an exclusive club. A study by Barna Group president David Kinnaman[2] found that non-Christian Millennials are more likely to believe the Bible is an outdated, irrelevant book or just another book of stories than the inspired or actual word of God. Cumulatively, research displays negatives opinions many Millennials seem to hold towards religion and the church.

Barna Group and Cornerstone Knowledge Network conducted a collaborative national research program surveying views Millennials hold of the Christian community[2]. While their research confirmed claims of negative perceptions Millennials have towards the church and Christian community, it also displayed some positive Millennial perspectives[2]. Millennials who attend church say they do so "to be closer to God" or "to learn more about God"[2]. Many survey participants – 65 percent – believe a fitting description of the church is "a place to find answers to a meaningful life" and 54 percent claim that they see the church as relevant to their life[2]. When asked what an aspirational image of the church should be, nearly half (48 percent) of Millennials surveyed chose an image of a small group having a Bible study[2]. These findings not only counter the idea that most Millennials are leaving the church, but also display evidence of their desire for social and intellectual aspects of their religion[2]. They also support the results of Twenge, Exline, Grubbs, Sastry, and Campbell[16], which displayed that despite Millennial adolescents proving to be less religiously oriented than generations before them, the majority of the Millennial generation is still involved in religion.

Research indicates that adolescents who attend churches that foster intergenerational relationships are more spiritual developed, have higher attendance rates, and are more satisfied with their religious experience[2,16]. When the church works to allow cross-generational experience, ill perspectives from generations both old and young are diminished, and connections are made that can blossom into mentoring relationships with eternal fruit of spiritual formation. Adolescents of the Millennial generation are crying out for attention and guidance from older generations and are responding to their lack of development gained through spending time with adults. Whether it is through consumer culture or an idea that they can grow up on their own[3], adolescents are compensating for this loss of relationship in ways that seem to affect how they relate to adults upon entering the workforce[10]. Mentorship, community, and transformation of spiritual identity are needs that can be met within the body of the church[8]. Lanker[8] conveys this overarching idea by stating, "natural mentoring of adolescents for their spiritual development happens best when the church views itself as a family – where those who are older intentionally live life by God's truths and seek to pass it on to younger generations through both words and deeds" (p. 277).

3. Methodology

This study inquired about the experiences and attitudes held towards mentorship within the evangelical church. Through quantitative measures, the researcher studied attitudes of college-aged Millennials towards the church and their experiences of mentorship within it. The researcher also was able to gather qualitative interview data to interpret the perspectives of pastors and youth pastors on mentorship and engagement of adolescents after graduating high school. These methods were a part of a mixed methods phenomenological study. The information gathered will enrich perspectives held on the Millennial generation and the way the church caters to them and following generations of youth.

In the qualitative portion of this mixed methods study the researcher interviewed nine leaders in local church congregations. These nine participants were chosen purposefully due to their title as either pastor or youth pastor over a congregation. The participants were from multiple denominations of churches located in two separate towns in the Midwest – one a large suburb in Kansas and the other a small town in Arkansas. Each interview followed a framework of these essential questions:

1. How does the church motivate youth in spiritual formation?
2. What ways does the church seek to promote adult and adolescent connections?
3. In what ways are mentorship opportunities fostered in the church?
      a. Do these relationships occur frequently in the church?
4. In what ways do you see mentorship influencing student's spiritual formation?
      a. How does this seem to affect the student's spiritual growth after going to college?
5. From your perspective, is there a difference in spiritual growth between adolescents who were mentored prior to college and those who were not?

After collecting and recording the interview data, the researcher transcribed each interview. The researcher read through each interview after all had been transcribed and allowed tentative themes/codes to emerge in order to perform data analysis. Common and repeated themes were determined as the focused codes of the analysis, and will be discussed in the data analysis chapter of this study.

The researcher utilized a quantitative approach to gain a sense of the millennial generation's ideology of the church and mentorship. An online survey was used by the researcher to gain large-scale data on the perspectives and understandings of mentorship from college-aged students. The survey was designed in light of the succeeding research questions:

1. How do college age students perceive the impact of mentorship in adolescence within the church in their spiritual formation?
2. What is the engagement of mentoring between adults and adolescents in the church?

The data were condensed from 202 participants to 200 participants after eliminating those who were not within the age range of 18 to 23 years old. The researcher began analyzing her data by collecting the average scores a participant recorded on the Likert scales over the ten questions inquired about the participants' self-assessed spirituality. She determined that those whose average Likert score was 1.8 or less over the ten questions were had strong spirituality. She then compared those who were determined to have strong spirituality with those who claimed they participated in mentorship to some extent to find correlation. The researcher also sought to find a correlation between the responses of participants on spirituality and approaches to church. Comparison, t-tests, and Anovas were utilized in order to interpret the quantitative data.

4. Results and Discussion

The results of this mixed methods study uncovered the attitudes toward mentorship held by adults working in the church as well as adolescents in college. Overall, the data revealed that many mentoring relationships are associated with strengthened spirituality that endures the transition into college. The data also collectively revealed that many adolescents do not engage in mentorship and feel mentoring relationships are not as desired or welcomed by adults in their community.

Through the qualitative portion, the researcher found that churches reporting a strong presence of natural mentorship fostered this through a created culture of intergenerational community. In contrast, churches that reported a lack of natural mentoring relationships conveyed a lack of connected, intentional community within their church congregation. Many churches reported placing adults into youth settings such as youth group, camp, and student events as a gateway for mentorship relationships to occur. Lastly, church leaders reported a key way to foster natural mentorship, in their experience, as well as enrich the formation of an adolescent, was by allowing students to experience an opportunity of responsibility within the church. Those opportunities included tasks such as changing microphone batteries, controlling the lighting for the service or leading story time for the children's ministry. Although noting methods such as these used within the church to create mentoring relationships, many churches admitted not perceiving mentorship as occurring as much or as often as it should in order for students to enjoy the benefits that come from mentorship.

An interviewee stated that students who received intentional mentorship were "connecting not just with [their mentors] but they're more open to connect to the church as a whole when they see that there's some good in the connection around them, when they see that they're vulnerable and when they are open to connect with others that good can come from it." The researcher was able to conclude from responses that mentorship also allowed students to desire community in their lives, even after leaving the church where they became acclimated to it. One participant stated that he noticed the way mentorship "has transformed their involvement in churches as well as being in the

church," while another saw students' view of church transformed: "Church is not just something I go to because my parents tell me I have to and sometime when I'm old enough I will now be apart of the family." Rather, students believe that they are a part of the church family right now, as they are, and they are accepted as valuable members rather than looked down upon. It was this product of mentorship that permitted church leaders to see mentorship as something leading towards church retention as an adolescent transitions out of their home.

In the quantitative portion of this study, survey participants reported they were more likely to be mentored (66%) than spiritually formed (51%). However, those who were mentored displayed on average stronger evidence of spiritual formation than those who were not mentored. An Anova comparing levels of spiritual formation showed that the p-value for mentored students responses was P = 4E-20 and P = 7.13E-20 for non-mentored students, proving both groups to have statically significant results. Factors with larger differences between those who were mentored and those who were not include: "I am mentoring someone younger," "I consider myself committed to a life with Christ," "I read the Bible outside of church," and "Practicing my faith is important to me." In each of these factors, mentored participants agreed more strongly than non-mentored students. Of the students who reported to be well spiritually formed, 85% of them were mentored in adolescence. Those who were mentored additionally reported stronger likelihood of attending church on a weekly basis by eight percent. These findings allow the researcher to note that although mentorship does not cause spiritual formation to occur, there is a correlation between those who have strong spirituality that endures through college and those who were mentored or are currently being mentored.

Through the survey the researcher was also able to gather data from 67 students who were not mentored reporting reasons why they did not engage in mentorship during their adolescence. The answer chosen by 87% of non-mentored participants for not engaging in mentorship was "No one has ever wanted to mentor me." One third of the non-mentored respondents said they did not engage in mentorship because they "did not know that people did [engage in mentorship]." Some reasons given by respondents that were not provided as choices were: "No one has initiated mentorship," "I didn't know who to mentor or how to seek out a mentor," "Fear of rejection," "Haven't put myself out there," "Haven't prioritized it," and "I don't want a mentor."

Out of the five churches interviewed, pastors and youth pastors reported that they all believe there is room for improvement in the ways they seek to connect adults and adolescents. Every church but one reported active desire to work on creating that as part of their church culture. Several churches noted that our national church culture does not promote adults or adolescents to seek out relationships with one another, seeming to cause mainline churches to fail to promote this as well. The engagement between adults and adolescents in the church typically seems to be a relationship of separation and distance, which several churches interviewed were intentionally trying to break. This agrees with the literature implying that there is a void between adults and adolescents of the Millennial generation[3]. Although survey participants reported high rates of mentorship, only one third of those mentoring relationship began organically in the church. Many students reported engaging in mentorship that was unrelated their faith (around 20%). Therefore, the researcher has reason to believe that adult and adolescent mentoring relationships are not occurring very often in the church, though church leaders are desiring for this to occur in order to benefit the Millennial generation and following generations.

5. Limitations

A primary limitation is the researcher's lack of expertise in this subject and her growing understanding as the study progressed; this could have affected the questions the researcher chose to ask, the way in which they were worded, and, therefore, the responses that were given. In the qualitative portion, the researcher also was not able to conduct all interviews face-to-face, which may have impaired her interpretation of results through lack of observation of communication cues such as facial expressions and body language. Another limitation that came as a result of interviews was several unexpected interruptions such as dropped calls or interaction from others during two of the interviews.

The researcher noted limitations within the population she was able to reach for both qualitative and quantitative data measurements. Many of the churches utilized in the study were churches the researcher was already familiar with or had relation to, causing some bias or knowledge that was not presented in the content of the interviews. Although the researcher was careful not to let preconceived notions enter the results, there is always a chance this could affect her analysis. In the quantitative portion, a limitation was found in the distribution and availability of the survey for participants to take it. Because the survey was posted on Facebook, its availability was limited to those who saw it posted or who were "friends" on Facebook with the researcher and those who reposted it. It is also possible that the participant demographics are skewed by the nature of its distribution, therefore the data collected are not representative of all millennial college students as a whole, but rather a limited portion.

6. Recommendations for Future Research

The overwhelming theme communicated in qualitative interviews with church leaders describes that a culture of community and intergenerational connection are necessary for natural mentorship to occur. In order to gain a more complete understanding of this concept, further research should be conducted to discover how this culture can best be cultivated and maintained. Only 22% of survey participants met their mentor through church; however 72% of all participants attended church weekly for the majority of their life before college. This displays not only a need but also the open opportunity for more mentoring relationship to occur. Further research could also be conducted to explore adult perspectives on why mentorship does not occur more frequently as well as why adults seems to refrain from entering into mentorship relationships with adolescents.

Additionally, this study displayed that while many students are mentored (66% of survey participants) not many are receiving spiritual mentorship. The researcher believes additional research finding the perspectives and testimonies of students who have strong mentoring relationships could build off the findings of the current study. These have the potential to uncover key themes or qualities necessary for mentorship that cultivate strong spiritual formation and sustainable faith in adolescents. Further study could also be directed to understand the outcomes of different forms of mentorship on adolescent development.

Finally, this study could be expanded to examine the entire scope of a church by studying aspects of community, youth ministry, adult ministry, intergenerational connections, and spiritual formation. This study displayed that many churches have areas where they have great strengths as well as areas of weakness to be improved. By examining in a large scale study how all of these combine to create a culture where students have sustainable faith and adults are mentoring adolescents, mainline churches can have a frame of reference to improve their weaker areas.

7. Conclusion

Ultimately, the findings of this research study display the seemingly ever-present need for increased interaction between adults and adolescents in the church. Through interviews with pastors and youth ministers in multiple churches, the resounding view was that natural connections are best fostered in a community where mentorship is an aspect of culture. Interviewees expressed their desire to create this culture within their churches, as well as the struggles faced in doing so. Because of these struggles, it is often perceived that mentorship is not necessary for the spiritual formation of youth nor is it normal within the church. Survey participants agreed with this idea in expressing their reasoning for not engaging in mentorship such as, "No one has ever wanted to mentor me" and "I didn't know people did that." Students who participated in the survey displayed that growing up attending church every week does not necessarily translate the habit into their lives when they leave home. Strong spiritual formation accompanied or created by mentorship has the ability to produce students who desire to retain their faith through the transition into college.

8. References

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