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Building for the Future:
Creating Faith-Building Community for Young Adults in the 21st Century

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Abstract

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The focus of this Doctor of Ministry final project revolves around the creation of a young adult small group ministry to provide a supportive community within the local church for the continued faith development of young adults who have graduated from high school through those entering professional careers. This age group traditionally has had no faith-based learning or small group environment in the church. This project details the process of identifying the need for such a group and establishing the group while also noting the theoretical research regarding faith development for this age group, based on the initial study by the author of many writings from church leaders and academic theologians and developmental psychologists. Understanding how society has evolved through generations regarding Christianity in America helps us to understand the development of religious thought in America in the 21st century so that we can speak to young adults' spiritual needs in ways with which they can identify. A small group environment provides a safe space for young adults to be in conversation with spiritual leaders while asking questions about the existence of God and the role of faith in their life. The ultimate goal is that they remain connected with a spiritual guide during this crucial phase of faith development so that they do not feel that graduating from high school means graduating from church. Whereas this project was created for a specific church, many of the findings may help others learn about the need for young adult ministries within the church and how to start them.

Building for the Future:
Creating Faith-Building Community for Young Adults in the 21st Century

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Introduction:

“This is not your father’s Oldsmobile”¹ – an ad slogan that became a catch-phrase for distancing oneself from the traditions of the past – may have been “a nail in the coffin”² for the Oldsmobile line of cars, but it doesn’t have to be a death knoll for the church. When it aired on television in the United States in 1988, the catchy slogan was aimed at attracting younger buyers to General Motors’ buying market. What the marketers could not have foreseen was that it would have the opposite effect – that it would insult the number of faithful customers while simultaneously distancing the younger buyers who respected the previous generations and were offended at the slogan. The more modern line of cars had options and style for a new generation of consumers, and the intention of this ad campaign was to suggest that new times called for new approaches to automotive engineering, including placing an emphasis on safety and fuel economy. Since many of the classic cars were made by Oldsmobile, a better option may have been to celebrate the classics and the history of success as they introduced a new line of cars.

Times have also changed for the church, and latest fads in worship styles suggest a “This is not your father’s Oldsmobile” kind of approach to worship. While giving the next newest style of worship to the younger generations, perhaps churches can learn what the automobile industry learned as a result of their ad campaign – that newer may be more up-to-date, but newer innovations can build on the past rather than disowning it. Younger generations may enjoy more modern music, but spiritual development continues to be an ongoing need in the church, regardless of the age group. The church must continue to be a voice in the conversation of

¹ Slate.com. *Moneybox: Commentary about Business and Finance*. December 13, 2000. http://www.slate.com/articles/business/moneybox/2000/12/oldsmobile_victim_of_its_own_brand.html (accessed August 14,2018).

² Ibid.

spiritual development of young adults. Although the recent surge of books on the religiously unaffiliated “Nones” cry out that young adults are leaving the church in droves, churches must not give in to doom and gloom religious studies. The church continues to be a viable voice in society, and she must find a way to continue to be an active voice in the lives of young adults. As approaches to education in Sunday school and discipleship groups have changed over the years, many tried-and-true methods of religious education and growth experiences continue to be an effective way of growing disciples in the Christian faith at all ages of development.

The adults in the age groups referenced in the “Nones” are young adults who leave home and leave church to spread their proverbial wings and seek independent living while learning to maneuver adult life and decisions. Trends of graduating seniors leaving town to pursue a college education are still prevalent among many emerging young adults, but not for all of them. Some young adults choose to remain at home during the first two years of college to defray the extra expenses of living on their own. Some young adults now take career classes in high school and begin working full-time when they graduate from high school. Studies would make it seem that young adults are waiting the time to kiss the church goodbye and walk away to make their own decisions rather than having to do what their parents tell them to do. According to Thom Rainer, however, “high school students do not have a deep desire to leave the church.”³ Conversely, “the church is essential to them because they know that they are essential to the church, even at a young age. The myth of freedom is debunked. Churches should not place all the blame on the students for exiting the church. While students are certainly accountable for their own actions, the church also has the responsibility to make students a valued part of ministry.”⁴ The church

³ Thom S. Rainer and Sam S. Rainer, *Essential Church?* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 1999), 28.

⁴ Rainer, 28-29.

cannot be held blameless for young adults walking away from the church but must provide opportunities for spiritual development for young adults.

The church has always been a place of spiritual growth and community gathering. So, how did the church become complacent and even accepting of young adults not being present in the community gatherings? To understand how the church began to accept the absence of young adults as the norm, consider the last thirty to forty years. During the Baby Boomer generation, parents understood the value of an education as many were glad to go to college and not to war. During a time when getting a college education was not expected and certainly was not easy to afford, parents wanted to provide for their children the education that was difficult for them to attain. Many parents expected teens to go away to college or enter the military when they graduated high school. As graduating seniors moved away from home to attend colleges and universities, hometown churches found it acceptable not to hold Sunday school classes and activities for those who were only at home on holidays.

In the 21st century, however, not all young adults move away from home to attend college, yet local churches still have no programs or classes for them. This leads many young adults to feel that they have “outgrown” church.⁵ When students do move away to attend college, they may opt to attend campus ministries at their colleges instead of a local church. Students may visit their home church on school breaks, but many feel that there is no place for them in their home church because the church does not have classes or opportunities for them to meet together with others in their life stage. With the advent of distance learning and high

⁵(Anonymous respondent to a questionnaire given to post-high school students on why they no longer attend church, July 2017.) (All responses on this survey were anonymous and are found in Appendix A.)

school career academies, some students do not leave home to pursue a higher education. Instead, they take advantage of online classes, satellite campuses, and high school career classes to develop skills for starting a career as soon as they graduate from high school. Then, they live at home until they are financially stable enough to afford their own apartment or home. Other students may pursue both career and education simultaneously while living at home to defray living expenses. With no place to feel included in a religious community, a growing percentage of young adults leave the church altogether,⁶ and some return only after they are married with children since churches usually have classes for children or young parents. However, some never return if they feel that the church offers no opportunity for spiritual growth with their peers in similar life stages. This trend is troubling for the church because with fewer young adults in the church, fewer adults carry on the work of the church in the society.

According to psychologist A. Michael Maclean, “Identity...is assumed to be multifaceted, consisting of a number of components.... Religion, a significant component of identity formation” plays a major role “in moral functioning” of individuals and of society.⁷ Religion can be intrinsically part of us, guiding who we are, how we think and what we do, or it can act extrinsically to be a means to an end, such as personal comfort, moral behavior, or social status.⁸ Either way, religion benefits society by providing a moral basis for behavior. Through its own patterns of development and negligence to the generations of emerging adults, then, the church contributes to the breakdown of moral conduct in society by not offering support and

⁶ James Emery White, *Meet Generation Z: Understanding and Reaching the New Post-Christian World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2017), 21-23.

⁷ A. Michael Maclean, Lawrence J. Walker, and M. Kyle Matsuba, “Transcendence and the Moral Self: Identity Integration, Religion, and Moral Life,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 43, no. 3 (2004): 429 (accessed August 30, 2018, <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/d3db/a987d2400318e187c4b022076bccf8737b93.pdf>).

⁸ Maclean, Walker, and Matsuba, “Transcendence and the Moral Self,” 430.

spiritual growth opportunities to emerging young adults as they transition into a new stage of life – becoming adults.

Disaffiliation from the local church, however, does not mean that young people stop developing a spiritual identity. According to a study on spiritual development during adulthood, spiritual awareness and changes in development “occur more frequently during periods of transition and crisis than during times of stability.”⁹ From my own observations of teenagers in my household, teenagers begin to explore their feelings about organized religion and new ideas about spirituality as they transition to adulthood. Blossoming young adults start to think about how they relate to their place in the universe and their responsibility to the universe. As they develop, young adults tend to move from the protective shelter of their parents’ religious institutions into the wider world of self-awareness and belief experimentation.

So, what is spiritual development, and why is it important to this project? One useful definition of spiritual development is “the process of growing the intrinsic human capacity for self-transcendence, in which the self is embedded in something greater than the self, including the sacred. It is the developmental ‘engine’ that propels the search for connectedness, meaning, purpose, and contribution. It is shaped both within and outside of religious traditions, beliefs, and practices.”¹⁰ Parents and church leaders invest time and money into providing resources including curriculum and pastoral care for children from birth through the 12th grade to give

⁹ Paul Wink and Michele Dillon, “Spiritual Development Across the Adult Life Course: Findings From a Longitudinal Study,” *Journal of Adult Development* 9, no. 1 (2002): 81 (accessed February 18, 2019, doi:10.1023/A:1013833419122).

¹⁰ Peter L. Benson, Eugene C. Roehlkepartain, and Stacey P. Rude, “Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence: Toward a Field of Inquiry,” *Applied Developmental Science* 7 no.3 (2003): 205-206, accessed February 18, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1207/S1532480XADS0703>.

them a spiritual foundation and to begin shaping their spiritual development. The United Methodist tradition values the spiritual development of all children, and at baptism, includes a congregational vow to “nurture one another in the Christian faith and life and include”¹¹ anyone baptized, regardless of age, in the care of the congregation. Covington First United Methodist Church leadership works to establish long-lasting relationships between children and adult leaders so that as they grow, their trust of the leaders grows. The church provides an intentional space to build community and encourage faith formation among middle and high school-aged youth, but until this study, did not provide a space for emerging young adults to continue their spiritual development in the church. As young adults experience a transitional time when spiritual development naturally boosts, the local church has not provided a space and resources to for pastoral leaders to guide the emerging young adults through this time of spiritual growth and development. Therefore, the church has failed young adults by not keeping their vow to include them in the care of the congregation. This paper identifies this problem within Covington First UMC (Section 1), discusses the trend in society of young adults leaving the local church to explore faith development (Section 2), and explains the project of creating an intentional space for young adults to build faith in community with others who are at similar stages in adulthood (Section 3). Section 3 will also include insights and evaluative tools for determining the success of the program. My project helps the local congregation acknowledge its part in the lack of young adults in the life of the church and suggests ways to correct the course before the church follows the fate of “your father’s Oldsmobile.”

Section 1 – Statement of Problem

¹¹ *The United Methodist Hymnal: Book of United Methodist Worship* (Nashville, Tennessee: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), 35.

From the time of their birth and baptism into the community of faith, the congregation vows to provide a loving and caring environment for children and youth, helping them to grow into faithful disciples of Jesus Christ. This vow is the same, regardless of the age at which one is baptized, and it has no expiration date. United Methodists believe that all people have sacred worth, yet, the message young adults receive speaks otherwise when we do not provide a space and resources so that they can continue to grow into faithful disciples. When examining the finances and attendance of our congregation in 2015, the leadership of the church noted that young adults were missing from actively participating in the life of the church. Recognizing that young families were visiting the church but were not becoming involved, the leaders of the church started a small group for young parents and sent invitations to young families with children who had visited our church in the recent past. The children's leaders also prepared the children's program in advance for the new children that this new class would bring. The young parents responded well, and their small group has become one of the fastest growing age groups in our church as young families join by personal invitation from their friends. This also boosted our children's and youth departments with newer young faces as well. With the intentional connection to the Preschool as an ongoing mission and ministry of the church, the church continues to build bridges into the community by providing spiritual support and pastoral care to young families who do not have a church home.

While the growth in the number of young families is encouraging, one age group is still missing – those age 18 or older who have not yet married and do not have children. Young adults in this stage of life do not attend worship or other church functions except on major holidays (Christmas and Easter). While some have travelled to other cities to attend college, several of our young adults attend local colleges, have jobs locally, and commute from their

homes. The church has not prepared a place for these young adults to gather for spiritual growth and enrichment. In this project, “young adults” refers to those who have graduated from high school and are in higher education or careers, but who have not married and do not have children. In this definition, “young adult” is more about *both* the age *and* stage of life. While this study encompasses those aged 18-24, we have found that some young adults in their later twenties, and mid to late thirties also fit into this group because of their stage in life.

In Linda Mercadante’s *Belief without Borders*, a study of those who are “spiritual but not religious,” the author discusses how religious attitudes in young adults have developed over time in our society to the point where they are today. Mercadante gives a logical and thorough explanation of the development of attitudes toward religious practices over time as she lays out each generation, beginning with the Greatest Generation through the newest generation at the writing of the book, Generation Z. “Baby Boomers,” born between 1946 and 1964, have minimal religious backgrounds overall, and includes those who are suspicious of religious experiences.¹² Many Baby Boomer parents chose to de-emphasize religion in their families as they were rearing their own children because they wanted to let their children choose a religion for themselves. This lack of religious emphasis and spiritual formation of children has influenced the overall faith development of Generations X, Y, and Z. Baby Boomers gave birth to Generation X, born between 1965 and 1982, who gave birth to Generation Y (Millennials) and Generation Z children. According to Mercadante, Generation X (also known as Busters) were “born in the midst of the cultural and spiritual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s.”¹³ Those in Generation X were born into an age where the focus was less on religion and more on political

¹² Linda A. Mercadante, *Belief Without Borders: Inside the Minds of the Spiritual but Not Religious* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 39.

¹³ Mercadante, *Belief Without Borders*, 41-42.

action and freedom. Mercadante explains that many of the Gen Xers she met had Baby Boomer parents who “wanted to give their children the freedom to choose what they wanted to believe and whether or not to affiliate with any organized religion.”¹⁴ Finding practices in various world religions and other non-religious experiences helps those in this age group to diversify while trying to be true to their inner selves. In turn, Millennials (born 1984-1994) and Generation Zers (born 1995-2010) are suspect of religious institutions overall. Many do not believe in a supreme or divine being who is known for love but simultaneously allows evil and hatred to exist in the world. Millennials live out their belief in a cause larger than themselves as activism for the world in which we live (global warming, sustainability, animal rights, veganism and vegetarianism), and Gen Zers’ activism lies in the promotion of physical health and looking to the stars and space as a future home for expansion. Terrorism has been a constant threat during the childhood years of both Millennials and Gen Zers, and is apparent by the popularity of violence terroristic videos games which top the lists of sales among teenagers and young adults.¹⁵ James Emery White includes in his list of characteristics of this age group their eagerness to change the world, their likelihood to become entrepreneurs, their absolute dependence on internet and electronics, their uncanny ability to process multiple sensory inputs simultaneously and understand them all, and their ability to sift through enormous amounts of information quickly while focusing on the items which catch their interest.¹⁶ Millennials witnessed 9/11/2001 and Y2K firsthand, and many remember the news reports and school conversations about the new millennium as well as feeling the threat of terrorism on our own

¹⁴ Mercadante, *Belief Without Borders*, 42.

¹⁵ Gus Turner, “The Best First-Person Shooter Games of All Time,” *Complex*, July 29, 2017, accessed on February 19, 2019, <https://www.complex.com/pop-culture/the-best-first-person-shooter-games-of-all-time/>.

¹⁶ White, *Meet Generation Z*, 35-49.

soil. Whereas previous generations relied on encyclopedias and libraries for information, both Millennials and Gen Zers experience Google, TED talks, and YouTube as their main sources of information and instruction.¹⁷ Those entering adulthood now are Gen Zers who do everything online, from registrations and purchases of online classes to independent learning on Vimeo, YouTube, or Ted Talks. The difference in learning styles and immediate access to unlimited information also has a profound influence on worship and small groups with which young adults connect. The new popularity of online churches among young adults fulfills the perceived need for religious instruction, but not for building community with others in similar stages. By providing experiences online *instead* of intentional small groups, the local church may be sending unintended messages, much like the Oldsmobile marketing campaign, that there is not a place in the local church for young adults.

So, why *are* young adults missing from our church? To establish a starting point of post-high school experience and current trends among our older young adults (those who graduated from high school 1-5 years ago), church leaders conducted an anonymous online survey of young adults who grew up in our church and asked them about their religious beliefs and habits. We invited over forty young adults to take this survey on SurveyMonkey.com, and of those invited, only three chose to participate. This small number of participants does not give a representative assessment, but the failure the majority to participate may send a message as to how they have “checked out” of church. Of the participants, one said that the church has no small group for them to attend and that they feel that they have “outgrown church.”¹⁸ They feel that they have moved beyond the church’s capacity to teach them since the church has not

¹⁷ White, *Meet Generation Z*, 41-45.

¹⁸ (Anonymous respondent to a questionnaire given to post-high school students, July 2017.) See Appendix A for the responses to this survey.

(historically) provided classes for them. One said that they have been attending religiously affiliated groups on their college campuses, and they plan to return to worship at their home church when they are home on holidays. Another said that they no longer see the need for religion in their lives. Even though they still consider themselves “spiritual,” they no longer turn to organized religion like the church to meet this need. Instead, they are involved in self-help religious programs, such as yoga and meditation practices from other religions. Linda Mercadante calls these the “Spiritual but Not Religious, or SBNRs.”¹⁹ Those in this group address their spiritual needs by means other than organized institutions which Mercadante calls “lived religion,”²⁰ which includes practices of other traditions (yoga, meditation), involvement in social action groups (animal rights, social justice issues), and other means of inspiration (12-step programs, self-help programs, meditation, and others).²¹

Since this lack of a place where young adults feel like they belong exists in the church, what can be done about it? Leaving to chance whether these young adults will return to church after they have families is not an option. According to a report in 2003, “the further down you go in the generational food chain, the lower the percentage each succeeding generation reports going to church.”²² At the time of the report, 36 percent of Gen Xers were involved in church. Pew Research shows that the number of young adults attending church once a week dropped significantly from 34% in 2007 to 27% in 2014.²³ This trend is also prevalent among young

¹⁹ Mercadante, *Belief Without Borders*, 32-34.

²⁰ Mercadante, *Belief Without Borders*, 10.

²¹ Mercadante, *Belief Without Borders*, xv, 6, 55-58, 71-91, 173-177.

²² Reggie McNeal, *The Present Future: Six Tough Questions for the Church* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 3.

²³ Pew Research Center, “Religion Landscape Study,” Pewforum.org, accessed on Feb. 22, 2019, <http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/generational-cohort/>. Also accessed categories of Younger and Older Millennials, <http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape->

adults in our community. Frequently, I see young adults that I have known for several years, and most of them are not part of a church small group or learning environment. United Methodists have a responsibility to remain in the conversation with young adults, not just by sending gift cards (which has been the church's outreach to college students in recent years), but to remain part of an ongoing conversation of faith as they ask questions of faith formation and theodicy in their late teens, twenties and thirties. As a result of this study, the church is becoming aware of this need to continue to surround young adults with a community of love and understanding, and to encourage spiritual growth in the young adults in our community. By forming a small group specifically for young adults, the church will begin to build relationships with young adults during the emerging adulthood years that will continue throughout their lives.

Section 2: Research and Theory

Many of the sources that I consulted reported the reason behind the decrease in young adult participation in religious organizations lies with the students and with the organizations themselves or with the church's failure to stand against the permissiveness of culture. Ray Comfort, for example, explains that 80% of youth leave church because they do not have a relationship with Jesus Christ or because parents live hypocritical lives, not giving them clear examples of committed discipleship to follow. Thus, they have grown up in the church but have never become part of the church by making their profession in Jesus Christ. If they did become professing members of the church, then according to Comfort, they were not serious and did not

study/generational-cohort/younger-millennial/ and <http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/generational-cohort/older-millennial/>

really receive Christ as Savior, since they are questioning the beliefs of Christianity.²⁴ In James Emery White's *Rise of the Nones* and *Meet Generation Z: Understanding and Reaching the New Post-Christian World*, he discusses at great length the church's failure to be a countercultural voice amid a growing permissiveness among parents and their teens. In his books, White sees the growth of SBNRs (Spiritual but Not Religious) as the result of parents' rejection of religion. In other words, parents relaxing rules in response to cultural "peer pressure" regarding current morality trends has resulted in what he calls "Kids Getting Older Younger,"²⁵ in which children are exposed to adult themes in pictures, movies, and language at an earlier age – before they are emotionally and mentally able to understand or deal with the consequences of such exposure. According to White, this accounts for children listening to sexually explicit song lyrics and watching sexually charged movies, video games and videos long before they are equipped to process adult information responsibly. White suggests that this cultural trend down the slippery amoral slope is because parents are no longer doing their job of morality training. White places part of the responsibility on the church, as he suggests it is not being a prophetic countercultural voice in an ever-increasingly secularization of society. "Think about how faith is tended. It needs *support*. Apart from a Christian community, we quickly wither. We need a context of encouragement. Beliefs don't exist in a vacuum; they need to be nurtured, reinforced. A secularized world no longer offers the deep religious socialization and the frequent reaffirmation of beliefs necessary for a distinctive faith to flourish."²⁶ White explains that "church and

²⁴ Ray Comfort and the Living Waters Team, "On the Box with Ray Comfort: Why Do 80% of Youth Leave Church? #499," Published Jan. 9, 2013, video, Accessed August 18, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WB3TZy7I3Bs>

²⁵ White, *Meet Generation Z*, 56.

²⁶ James Avery White, *Rise of the Nones* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2014), 47-48.

counterculture...lie at the heart of reaching a post-Christian generation,”²⁷ which is his description of Generation Zers. David Kinnaman, President of the Barna Group, reports that “about eight million twentysomethings...were active churchgoers as teenagers but...will no longer be particularly engaged in a church by their thirteenth birthday.”²⁸ One study even developed a survey to predict the likelihood of students remaining faithful to the church after graduation from high school, stating that “parents are among the strongest influence on the faith formation of teenagers.”²⁹ James Bryan Smith presents a slightly different voice in the conversation. In *The Good and Beautiful Community*, Smith records a conversation he has with his son, who discloses that worship is boring and that some of our “perceived” ways to influence younger worshipers to come to church may actually be hindrances. During a conversation, Smith’s son, Jacob, says that he does not like rock music in church, and finds it distracting rather than leading him into a spirit of worship. Jacob also discloses that the parts of worship that he likes most are the parts that are “least like the world he normally lives in.”³⁰ Smith then suggests a different parental approach that involves relationship, which gets to the heart of what our Millennials and Gen Zers find most appealing – relationship. Understanding that worship is about relationship with God and with each other is tantamount to helping others find their place in worship. Smith writes, “Instead of making people feel guilty about not going to church, I

²⁷ White, *Meet Generation Z*, 69.

²⁸ David Kinnaman, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church...and Rethinking Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 22.

²⁹ Wesley Black, “The Search for Lasting Faith: Development of a Scale to Predict Continued Faithfulness in Church Attendance Following High School Graduation,” *The Journal of Youth Ministry* 6, no. 2 (Spring 2008): 53, accessed August 17, 2018, <https://login.proxy.library.emory.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLA0001665111&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

³⁰ James Bryan Smith, *The Good and Beautiful Community: Following the Spirit, Extending Grace, Demonstrating Love* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 176.

would rather try to make people excited about the opportunity, which can only happen when we understand what worship is all about.”³¹ Leaders, including parents, who see a young adult’s freedom to choose church as a point of connection can help the church to be in relationship with those in the missing generations by building bridges of understanding. Building a community for all people means building relationships with all generations, including the ones that are currently missing from the church. On this basis, the main point of this project is not just to start another church group, but to build relationships between church and those missing from its active community life.

So, is it the church’s fault that it is missing young adults? One study suggests that students who stray from the faith do so because of inadequate preaching and teaching in churches, laying the onus of the young adult exodus from religious institutions on the institutions and leaders.³² According to Thom Rainer, a church with an effective discipleship program will not experience the same rate of loss as other churches. The four components of his solution include a simple path of discipleship, an increase in the expectation of Biblical study and knowledge, a level of expectation that all members are required to meet, and a plan to invite others to participate in the study. While this might be a clearly designed path for spiritual growth within a specific local church, this does not offer a “one size fits all” solution to the 21st century issue of decline in church attendance among young adults. The authors’ oversimplified fix of what they see as the issue is to provide more stringent education and expectations in a small group setting. The idea of creating a path of spiritual growth in a church is useful but does not address why young adults leave religious faith or why they question religious beliefs after high

³¹ Smith, *The Good and Beautiful Community*, 176.

³² Rainer, *Essential Church?*, 164-183.

school and into college. Similarly, Andrew Root addresses this problem in his evaluation of *Sticky Faith* and other curricula: “In their perspectives, the objective seems to be *keeping* young people in religious institutions. But, while this may be of importance, this article contends, following Charles Taylor, that we face a secular age where the plausibility of belief itself has been undercut.”³³ In other words, belief in a religion is no longer assumed to be a common experience of all young adults. Root explains that the problem with faith continuing through young adulthood is not, as some would describe it, an issue of subtraction, where religion has been taken out of society. While the loss of prayer in schools and decline in moral commitment in society certainly signifies a loss that increasing youth religious activities cannot fix, Root sees society as experiencing a lack of need for God: “Many young people have constructed their lives in such a way that they feel no need for God. They have no sense of a gaping loss or sense of subtraction in their lives. Instead, they have added new narratives, moral codes, and identities beyond God to direct their lives.”³⁴ Root goes on to explain that society has reduced God to a concept, and as with any concept, it either works or does not work for each individual. “Concepts do not, necessarily, put a demand on me. So, if the concept of God helps you be authentically you, then it is worth keeping. But if the concept makes you feel unhappy, or guilty – or worse, restricted – you then abandon the concept for the sake of your own authentic journey.”³⁵ Root explains that a truly authentic person will get rid of concepts that are restrictive or that do not contribute to one’s sense of self and authenticity, such as “Marriage, God and

³³ Andrew Root, “Faith Formation in a Secular Age,” *Word & World* 37, no. 2 (2017): 129, accessed August 18, 2018, <https://login.proxy.library.emory.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLAn4073398&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

³⁴ Root, “Faith Formation in a Secular Age,” 130.

³⁵ Root, “Faith Formation in a Secular Age,” 132.

morality.”³⁶ Root continues by addressing God as an active force rather than merely a concept. Faith, then, rather than being an unwillingness to subtract God from our lives, becomes a dynamic force in our lives when God becomes more than a concept. In explaining Taylor’s definitions of the progression from sacred to secular, Root sums up the development of faith as being transition from God existing to the concept of God being unbelievable.³⁷ In other words, in society, the divine went from inhabiting structures such as churches and cathedrals to a concept that most of the society finds unpalatable or unexplainable. What Mercadante describes as parents giving children freedom to explore other religious practices and beliefs, Root describes as a degeneration of an understanding of faith, reducing God to a concept and faith to a practice of keeping people in church. For Mercadante, a 21st century understanding of belief in a divine transcendence is optional and can be composed of many different practices. For Root, our current Secular³ culture is suspect of anything transcendent as more than a fairy story, “a dark corner where transcendence/divine action is an impossibility.”³⁸

While this almost sounds like the death knoll of “your father’s Oldsmobile” for the next generation of the church, others do not readily accept that all hope is gone. Some of the descriptions that Root promotes from Taylor’s writings may provide explanation for some trends in young adult thought, but societal factors are not the only influences on a young adult’s spiritual and faith development. Likewise, Black’s idea that parental influence is key may not be the only explanation of lagging faith development in young adults. And although many would love to place the blame on organized religion, Rainer’s idea that better church programs will stop

³⁶ Root, “Faith Formation in a Secular Age,” 132.

³⁷ Root, “Faith Formation in a Secular Age,” 138-139.

³⁸ Root, “Faith Formation in a Secular Age,” 140.

the hemorrhaging of the young adult population from church is inadequate to diagnose and treat current trends.

Looking closer into the sociological and psychological aspects of human development, one key explanation of why young adults leave organized religion may be found in their psychological development rather than solely in faith studies. According to Melissa Chan of the University of California, some changes in faith development occur across faith community lines and do not exclusively pertain to Christian denominations. In her study, she looks at the faith development across cultural, gender and religious lines in a four-year study of young adults. Participants for this study ranged in age from 18 to 22 and varied by gender, religious group and ethnicity. Chan defines religiosity as “the importance that individuals place upon their religious affiliation and practice,” as she examines “religious affiliation (i.e., association with a religious institution or denomination), religious identity (i.e., the sense of group membership to a religion and its importance to one’s self-concept), and religious participation (i.e., the extent of engagement in religious activities such as church attendance).”³⁹ Chan reports that youth questioned their own worldview when presented with different worldviews, which occurs in a tremendous way in college. While other studies had supposed that for students who lived at home and commuted to a community college, parental influence would keep them from straying too far from their family’s religion, Chan observed that even in 9th – 12th grades, student participation in religious activities declined. Likewise, there was no remarkable difference between those who lived at home during college and those who lived on campus. Parental

³⁹ Melissa Chan, Kim. M. Tsai, and Andrew J. Fuligni, “Changes in Religiosity Across the Transition to Young Adulthood,” *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 44 (2015): 1555, accessed August 18, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-014-0157-0>

influences were not profound enough to keep students from becoming detached and uninterested in the religious life of their church. Interestingly, in Chan's study, females were more likely to remain involved in religious institutions longer than males, with male involvement dropping off about two years sooner than female involvement. In another interesting finding, while religious behavior drops off over the transitional years into adulthood, "their religious beliefs remain stable or even increase."⁴⁰ So while participation declines during teenage years, affiliation and identity remain stable into young adulthood.

According to Chan, "religious identity may be the most relevant religious dimension for well-being as the sense of belonging to a group may be associated with more positive emotions, sources of support and a greater sense of significance."⁴¹ Religious identity promotes a sense of meaning and purpose. Results showed that the percentage of decline in religious affiliation occurred without regard to religion, ethnicity, and gender, with all showing similar rates of decline. Noteworthy, in Chan's study, most of the respondents were either Christian or Catholic. Religious identity, however, did drop dramatically for males more than for females. Regardless of the decline, "Trends in national surveys suggest that young adults still report religion as an important aspect of their lives."⁴² Chan describes this change in religious identification as more of a psychological developmental stage rather than a faith development issue. While there might be a decrease in affiliation from a specific religion or group, this may be viewed as "an opportunity for self-exploration" when young adults begin to disassociate from the religion of their parents and begin to develop their own faith identification. With the freedom in college to explore other social aspects of their adulthood, young adults may focus less on religion and more

⁴⁰ Chan, Tsai, and Fuligni, "Changes in Religiosity," 1556.

⁴¹ Chan, Tsai, and Fuligni, "Changes in Religiosity," 1557.

⁴² Chan, Tsai, and Fuligni, "Changes in Religiosity," 1563.

on relationships. More research on whether this decline in religious affiliation is needed to see if it stabilizes or reverses as young adults age and start families. Chan concludes that this young adult stage of life appears to be distinctive from high school regarding development of religiosity. “Disaffiliation from specific religious traditions and faiths appears to be relatively normative, whereas changing levels of religious identity reveal the beginning of the tendency for females to exhibit greater religiosity than males during adulthood.”⁴³ The implication for Christianity is that while it may seem that young adults are leaving in droves and the church is declining, this is at least partly a normal developmental stage which affects young adults across religious and ethnic lines. A more in-depth study could examine more closely the overlapping factors resulting in the decline of young adult involvement in religious organizations. For the scope of this project, however, the question of why young adults leave the church is only part of the issue. Understanding young adults and the phases of life that they go through is essential to learning how to stay connected with them throughout their changing development.

According to Cheryl Black, young adults thrive on relationships, but for many young adults, friendships are harder to maintain once the young adult graduates from high school where sustaining friendships with larger numbers of people was easier.⁴⁴ Even living on a college campus provides access to relationships with others, but those living at home and going to commuter colleges may find it harder to sustain friendships while also going to school and working.⁴⁵ Providing an atmosphere where interpersonal relationships can be nurtured is

⁴³ Chan, Tsai, and Fuligni, “Changes in Religiosity,” 1565.

⁴⁴ Cheryl M. Black, “A Proposal for Young Single Adults” *Journal of Christian Education (US)* 1 no. 2 (1981): 43, <https://login.proxy.library.emory.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLA0000954020&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

⁴⁵ Black, “A Proposal for Young Single Adults,” 43.

essential to starting a young adult small group. A small group should be a safe space where people can come and share thoughts, ideas and even questions about life, faith, and God, without fear of judgment. Understanding that questioning religion is a normal part of human and faith development helps leaders to accept that all questions are good questions, and that no question should be considered absurd or simple. Helping young adults understand that their questions are part of normal human development will help to alleviate angst and even guilt they may feel about questioning theological issues and tenets of the faith. If they have been reared to accept church doctrine, giving them a space to explore how they may or may not agree with their parents' beliefs may be a selling point for having them participate in a class. While this 21st century religious landscape may look different from their parents' 20th century church-life, helping young adults find how they fit into the religious culture around them will help them to become grounded in their own beliefs. This may not be their father's Oldsmobile when it comes to religious beliefs, but it may be safer and a better fit for this generation of young adults so that they can prepare to lead the church into the next generation.

Section 3 – Project Steps, Evaluation and Future Plans

Steps Taken in Forming the Small Group

As Daniel L. Migliore says, “If theory without practice is empty, practice without theory is blind.”⁴⁶ In planning where to start with the group, I based my starting point on what I already know about young adults as well as on what I have learned during the study of theory described in Section 2. After much reading and assimilating thoughts and deciding which ones bear significance in my current context, I needed to decide on a few particulars before proceeding. To

⁴⁶ Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 9.

do this effectively, I used information from an ethnographic study of the community to find out about young adults in the community and in the church. In doing this, I needed to take walks around the neighborhood to see where young adults tend to gather for other types of meetings.

Place

The first step in thinking about an intentional space for young adults to meet was to decide if the meeting space should be on the campus of the church or somewhere in the community, which involved answering some questions about the intentional purpose of the group itself. If the point is to have a space for a group of members of our church, then meeting inside the church would give the group a sense of inclusivity – being included in the life of the church. While certainly this is one of the needs that led to starting the group, meeting on campus is not the only way to create a sense of inclusivity. Because space is at a premium on Sunday mornings with other long-established groups that meet during the traditional 9:45 a.m. Sunday school time, meeting on the campus of the church would be limited to a time other than Sunday morning. If the focus is that college students could feel comfortable about coming and going during the year without feeling like they are intruding into a group that is already defined, then meeting on campus may not be the best way to achieve that sense of freedom. If we would like for others to know about the group and possibly come to the group even if they are involved in other churches as this is going to be the only young adult/college group in the community, then having it in a neutral space not located on church property would be the best site so that those involved would not feel a sense of guilt for coming to a function offered by a church different from their own. In getting to know what is important to young adults, I first needed to find out where young adults gather to talk, work, and hang out, so I visited areas in our community to see which businesses were the most popular among this age group of young students and young

professionals, keeping in mind that today's young adults are attracted to areas with free Wi-Fi and room to network with friends and students. On the square in Covington, Bread and Butter Coffee Shop provides such a space. Frequented by groups of young adults, both college students and professionals, Bread and Butter is the perfect location for a group to gather.

I staged visits to Bread and Butter during peak business times to see if larger numbers of young adults come there and to observe their activities and areas of interest. The findings were intriguing. Most groups of young adults intentionally meet for coffee, but they also unintentionally meet up over coffee – meaning that they accidentally run into each other and “catch up” with each other). Most meetings take 30 minutes or less, whether intentional or unintentional. In the same way that people in offices meet around the water cooler or coffee pot for a break and conversation, young adults use public places such as coffee shops as office or study spaces and welcome a standing break of 15-30 minutes as they study or work. In watching young adults work and study in the coffee shop, I would also note their concentrated work or study time laced with occasional greetings to passersby. Occasionally, these young adults would stop work, walk around the coffee shop, order something to eat or drink, and chat with friends who were also working in the coffee shop. This valuable information helped me to form a group that intentionally limits formal meeting times to about 30 minutes. I approached the owner, also a young adult and member of our church, to see if we would be allowed to meet there regularly and if we could reserve space, if there was a cost, and if we could put up advertising about the group.

Because a coffee shop is a neutral and familiar place, meeting at a coffee shop opens the door for young adults to attend a small group without physically going to a church, which some young adults would not do. For some college students, meeting in a neutral place may encourage

them to invite friends and classmates to participate. Meeting in a coffee shop provides a level of comfort for young adults since many of their social or school focus groups meet in similar places. Unlike restaurants, coffee shops allow freedom to come and go without customers feeling pressured to purchase, which for some young adults is a plus as college students sometimes have limited income. Also, meeting in a coffee shop allows the church to provide some benefit for the young adults by providing refreshments without overbuying and having waste, as would happen with buying for an undetermined number of attendees at a local church. Having a group meet in a public space instead of on the church campus allows the community to see the church in action outside its own walls and property, and this, in turn, may attract those who do not necessarily feel comfortable going to an established congregation with a 200-year-old building. Coffee shops can be places that are attractively decorated to meet the visual preferences of 21st century students and entrepreneurs, and having a “think tank” atmosphere for young adult small groups attracts those who may be passing through, but who would not step inside the walls of a traditional church with stained-glass windows. Although some young adults may be attracted to tradition itself, many feel uncomfortable in formal church settings.

Time

Once I had decided on a space, the next step was to decide on a time for the group to meet. After discussing the advantages and disadvantages of different days and times, we settled on the “normal” Sunday school time since it fits nicely into a 30-minute window, following the findings of the previous step. For the meeting, the group gathers at 9:45 – 10:00 a.m. for food and coffee, and we start intentional conversation and discussion at 10 a.m. which is aimed at issues identified as most important to young adults in college or professional life stages. While people sometimes stroll in late, most of the attendees value our time together and come on time

or early. Sunday mornings are traditional Sunday school times, and many of the young adults are still accustomed to getting up on Sunday mornings, especially recent graduates who were involved in youth Sunday school. This gives a sense of purpose to rising early and getting their day going, especially if they have impending projects or exams.

After deciding on place, day and time, I advertised by putting a notice in the church announcement sheet which is given out every Sunday morning at all services and which goes out in email form on Monday morning of each week to every member of the church.⁴⁷ I placed posters announcing the class around the church and at the coffee shop.⁴⁸ I also researched our church database for the members who fall into this category and stage of life that we are missing in the church. I sent personalized invitations to each recent graduate, knowing that following graduation, many of them would be looking for opportunities to get together in the same way that they had met in high school. High school graduates feel disconnected almost immediately following graduation as they are no longer students at their high school, and they are no longer involved in high school youth group at church. I followed up with a text message to each student and a Remind 101 text notification to remind them of our meeting and to remind them to invite a friend to come along. I have also invited group members to connect on a daily Bible reading application.

Curriculum

Format and content are two of the most important decisions to make when forming an intentional small group for the purpose of faith formation. We want people coming to the group to have a good time, but it should also be a meaningful experience, and the information they gain

⁴⁷ See Appendix B.1.

⁴⁸ See Appendix B.2.

should be useful to them in their daily lives as they move through work or school. Since we have attendees in either or both areas of life, choosing a curriculum and a format for the class is foundational to the success of the purpose while keeping the class discussions lively and interesting. After reviewing many books on college faith formation and devotional materials for young adults, I decided to begin the small group with a devotional that offers short readings based on a scriptural text and a prayer. Each entry is less than 400 words, so the readings take five minutes or less. The devotional, *Prayers, Papers and Play: Devotions for Every College Student* by Barbara Canale, speaks specifically to the life of a college student, but because I have both student and professional attendees, I change the wording of some of the entries so that they are applicable to either school or professional life.⁴⁹ Also, since this devotional is written from a Roman Catholic perspective and includes prayers to saints, I change those references to be more generally Christian references about prayer. I provided a copy of the devotional book for each attendee and had extra copies on hand for young adults that wanted to “test drive” the group for one session. I also explained to the group the theological differences between a protestant perspective and a Roman Catholic perspective regarding veneration of saints. Explaining that many of Protestant practices came from Catholic tradition, I pointed out that many key differences also exist, including veneration of saints and worship of Mary.

Meeting

Our first class was held on Sunday, June 3, 2018, and we had two attendees. When reflecting on the size of the group, I had expected a small outcome at first because this weekend was the weekend following Memorial Day and only two weeks after high school graduation.

⁴⁹ See Appendix D.

Many of the graduates were still traveling with their families in celebration of their milestone. We decided to continue to meet at the same time every week, and on the second Sunday, we had three attendees, followed by four attendees for the following two weeks. In July, attendance rose to five and eventually to seven attendees during the early and middle of the July. As we continued to invite young adults and they brought friends, the group grew until, at the end of July, we faced first-time college freshmen heading off to college (for those attending college out of town), and our attendance dropped by three people in August – when things started to get interesting. As word passed that we had opened a young adult class, we started to attract young adults of all ages. Some had finished Ph. Ds, and some who were in the middle of other life situations such as caregiving or teaching. One Special Needs young adult began attending with his mom because he had aged out of the school-aged special needs Sunday school class. All of these had one thing in common – that they felt like the church had forgotten about them because until June, we had not had a class for young adults. From the childless married couple who teach in a local school but didn't feel “at home” in other Sunday school groups to the late twenty-year old student from the local college who attends another church which also has no young adult class or group, this class has evolved into a small group experience for those who feel as if the church had forgotten them, including the students from the local college for whom this class was first formed. This class provides a space for relationships between people who might not otherwise know each other, but who are all in the same stage in life and who are struggling with similar needs and issues.

Format and Substance

The format for the group meetings is casual with a clear sense of who is leading the discussion. One young adult with previous experience of leading a college small group helps in

facilitating discussion, filling in as main facilitator when I am not there. It is important that there is a pastoral presence at the meetings for times when discussions become theologically challenging, such as with questions of theodicy: “where was God when ...?” After all, if theology is “the continuous process of inquiry that is prompted both by the surprising grace of God and by the distance between the promise of God’s coming reign on the one hand and our experience of brokenness of human life on the other,”⁵⁰ then one trained as pastoral leader could help navigate the deeper questions of faith as they arise while providing a sense of importance to the group, helping them to know that young adults are important in the life of the church. If the nature of the church is to be holy as noted in scripture, then young adults need to gain a clearer understanding that holiness in the life of the church is not being perfect, but as John Wesley said, it is moving on to perfection. According to Migliore, “the true holiness of the church is seen not in impeccable conformity to conventional moral rules but in the courageous criticism of injustice, acts of solidarity with the poor and the outcast, and the sharing of friendship and power with the weak and despised.”⁵¹ Helping young adults to understand that they can be in relationship with the vulnerable as well as with each other is important because in some ways, we are all vulnerable. If the format is to be casual, yet we are to be about the business of growing in faith as disciples of Jesus Christ, we must convey to young adults that questioning authority and confronting status quo are not only permissible but should be a requisite action of every Christian. Speaking truth of the Gospel to the powers that exist and rule, whether in the church or in the public forum, should be the prophetic action of every follower of Jesus Christ, who also spoke truth to power. Giving young adults permission to be in ministry with the poor

⁵⁰ Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 9.

⁵¹ Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 271.

and vulnerable, and to question the authority and teachings of the church with an open mind toward learning helps them to learn about social issues while giving them a safe space to question how Biblical teachings apply to current social needs. Guiding young adults through the process of this kind of questioning helps them to understand the teachings of the church and scripture while simultaneously giving them a safe space to agree or disagree, allowing them to form their own informed beliefs rather than merely accepting beliefs without explanation.

Structurally, each meeting has an informal check-in time from 9:45-10:00 a.m., a devotion and group discussion time from 10:00 – 10:25 a.m., and a prayer time where participants can share needs for the week in either their lives or in the lives of their families. The meetings start by going around the table to ask how each person's life is going. Attendees are encouraged to share struggles with personal life, college demands, or spiritual growth. The leader or I read a scripture and devotional reading from our book, *Prayers, Papers, & Play* and pose questions based on the reading. For example, one week, the reading was from Proverbs 19:2 which says "Desire without knowledge is not good; and whoever acts hastily, blunders."⁵² I read the devotion entitled, "Be still" about how students (and everyone else) tends to overcommit themselves between social activities and college demands. The leaders posed the question, "Do you ever feel overwhelmed? Talk about what overwhelms you." After discussing the question which evoked answers from students and young professionals alike, we talked about how we all need to stop and take a breath to keep from being overwhelmed. We ended the time with the prayer in the devotion book: "Dear God, Cast my anxieties away as I prepare for final exams [here, I filled in the words with whatever people were facing]. Extinguish my fear of failure and

⁵² Barbara Canale, *Prayers, Papers, & Play: Devotions for Every College Student*, (Liguori, Missouri: Liguori Publications, 2013), 82-83.

replace it with love for you. Expand my mind so that I can hold the knowledge I have acquired and use it accordingly. I adore you, my sweet, loving Lord. Amen.”⁵³ We usually end each time with prayer right at 10:30, honoring our commitment to time and participants’ schedules. Keeping to a certain time frame helps the participants know that leaders are mindful of each person’s time constraints and commitments and shows that we are committed to helping the young adults stay on track with their schedules and pressured demands of school or work as well as encouraging the students to continue conversations outside of group time. We also encourage students to participate in a worship service of their choice and to continue to be fed spiritually while worshipping in community with other Christians. Of course, I am available throughout the week to anyone in the group who has questions or would like to continue exploring a conversation that piques their interest, and from time to time, I suggest books or articles that participants may find helpful as they explore their own faith journey. One of our goals is that each participant receives a text during the week that is either inspiring or thought provoking along with a reminder about the gathering for the next Sunday so that they know they are always on our minds and in our prayers.

Evaluation

Several methods of evaluating the effectiveness of this group are available, but not all are effective. One way of evaluating the effectiveness of the group is to talk as a group about how participants think the group is going and what kinds of things would be beneficial to explore as a group regarding their faith development. Talking about how the group has been helpful or how something that we talked about helped them in some way either in school, personal or

⁵³ Canale, *Prayers, Papers, & Play*, 83.

professional life helps me to understand how to focus the conversation. The shortcoming of an oral questionnaire is that respondents may not be completely honest because they do not feel comfortable sharing their opinions in public in a group setting. In private conversations, I have received feedback like, “We don’t like it when the leader reads a lot”⁵⁴ and “I enjoy the time when we all talk about what’s important to us.”⁵⁵ Based on these concerns, I have made changes to include shorter readings and to ask more probing questions. While this is the most personal way to interact, results are not readily quantifiable. I have used a survey in Google Forms to send to the attendees to get their written responses. Questions and graphs indicating responses can be found in Appendix C.1 and C.2.

In the class, we discuss some topics they find beneficial, whether church-related or not. Several of the young adults responded in conversation that they would find material on personal finances and balancing a checkbook helpful, as well as material on time management and prioritizing schedules in life. At the church, we occasionally have Dave Ramsey classes on budgeting that would be beneficial with some sponsors to help with scholarships to defray costs for those who need it. Several different time management classes are also available which I plan to research and present to the group. The young adults need to know that we are interested in helping them form faith practices and beliefs, and that faith practices inform our entire human experience, including school, money, time, and making wise decisions. Opening discussions about money and time also open doors to conversations about deeper spiritual matters. As Genie Hargrove, a wise tax advisor once told me, “if people will talk to you about their money, they

⁵⁴ Interview with a participant, February 25, 2019. (All interviews were confidential.)

⁵⁵ Interview with a participant, August 2018.

will talk to you about everything else.”⁵⁶ She was a CPA, a pastor and a dear friend, and she was right.

Recommendation for Future Development and Growth

My dream for this group is that they will continue to meet, to share ideas, coffee and life, and to learn and grow deeper in their faith. I hope that people in this group form a cohesive bond of friendship with each other so that they will reach out to each other for conversation. I would like to schedule a mission trip to either the North Carolina mountains or to South Georgia or Florida to help those in need so that our young adults can grow deeper friendships than is possible in just 45 minutes each Sunday. Understanding that the life-cycle of a United Methodist Pastor in a church is limited, I would like for this group to continue to grow even after I am moved to another church. Therefore, getting others involved with this group as leaders is a necessity. Working with new high school graduates was the best and fastest way to jumpstart this group as they were being displaced in the church en masse upon graduation. Advertising each year and planning an Invitation Party just after graduation from high school would be a great way to keep this ministry going and get new people into the group. To start a separate small group for young adults that have been out of school for a while, I would invite friend groups to start meeting together at a neutral place or at someone's home at a time that is convenient for them, and to use a similar format for meeting, finding out with what participants are struggling and making resources available to help meet their needs. If each group enlists the mentoring of a spiritual leader in the church to walk with them, each of these smaller group settings has great potential for growth, and their effectiveness and potential will be great. As the

⁵⁶ Personal conversation, Summer 2010.

leader meets with each group, with younger leaders being ones who have most recently faced the struggles of emerging young adults, each group will be able to encourage each other and build spiritual friendships that last and carry over into living and serving God through the activities of the church. As our church only has two appointed pastors, some of the leaders could come from the trained lay servants in the Lay Servant Ministries program, especially those particularly close in age to the young adults.

Conclusion

This program was started to address a specific need at a specific local church based on a trend noted in our congregation and in society. Other churches that have similar needs could follow a similar plan to start a young adult ministry in their church by first understanding the stage of the group with which they will work. Exploring scholarship on the psychological development of this age group really helped me to understand that people develop beliefs about religion at different ages, and they question ideas about religion in general early in young adult life. Some questions stem from the desire to build a foundation for inner personal life and worldview, and some of the questions come about as a result of questioning one's parental teachings and beliefs. Most questions arise out of a search to be the unique individual that each one was created to be. Through study of the age group from religious and psychological human developmental points of view, I have been able to better understand the faith issues facing emerging young adults. While young adults leaving organized religious institutions may be a trend in society overall as is clear from my research, this is also a normal part of growth and development for young adults – finding their own beliefs rather than standing on the beliefs of their parents. Rather than blaming parents, students or society for what seems to be an exodus from the church pews, we should try to find ways to walk with young adults through this normal

stage of development so that they no longer feel alone or forgotten by the church as they navigate waters of questions and beliefs. By starting small groups in which young adults can build and foster relationships with others while growing spiritually, the church can accompany these emerging adults into adulthood without losing sight of them along the way. After all, according to Greg Cootsona, “Emerging adults’ views and the influence of these views are transforming the way our culture talks and writes about science and religion”⁵⁷ by asking questions and by growing through learning. As the church remains part of young adults’ conversations about life through fostering relationships with church leaders and with other young adults, this influence may influence the ways that they talk and write about religion overall, fostering hope in the next generation that the church has not forgotten them. With prayer and the hard work of building relationships with children from a very early age and maintaining those relationships through adolescence and into young adulthood, perhaps the church will not go the way of “your father’s Oldsmobile” after all.

⁵⁷ Greg Cootsona, “Some Ways Emerging Adults Are Shaping the Future of Religion and Science,” *Zygon* 51, no. 3 (Sept. 2016): 557, accessed August 18, 2018, <https://login.proxy.library.emory.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLAIg0V170331001019&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

Appendices

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- A.2 Answers to the Questionnaire Submitted by Responders
 - A.2.1 Respondent 1
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- B.2 Announcement Poster Used for Young Adult Class
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Appendix A.1 Questionnaire Used in College Student Survey:

This was done in SurveyMonkey.com

1. Name (optional)
2. How long have you been an active member at Covington First UMC?
3. Since graduating high school, have you continued a relationship with Jesus Christ? Be honest. (i.e. reading your Bible, attending campus life, small groups, prayer, - OR – not at all, not so sure I believe that anymore, not spiritual, not religious)
4. With all of the news coverage of the violence taking place in school settings, how, if at all, has this shaken or strengthened your faith? (Now – we don't want Sunday school responses. Would really like to hear your honest opinions.)
5. As a Christian, your beliefs and faith should mold your behaviors and responses. (Think about your social settings both face to face, or on social media.) Are you experiencing or witnessing bullying (whether it is directed to you or others)? How does this make you feel? How do you respond to this?
6. Looking back at your time at the church, what could your church have done better to prepare you for the challenges you now face?
7. What are the hot topics or burning issues that you or your friends live with everyday? (Think outside news media – what struggles do you encounter?)
8. What are you worried about at this point in your life?
9. Would you be interested in doing an online video group chat as an outlet? A small group that would be a safe place to discuss not only the good things but the difficult things in life – through

the lens of a Christian. Not a Bible study, but a “let’s do life together’ group – honest though – the good, bad, the ugly – leave the “fake” at the door kind of group.

10. If you are not interested, what could we do or offer to support you in your spiritual walk?

(For instance, email links to blogs, podcasts, anonymous Q&As, help you to find campus ministries/opportunities).

Appendix A.2 Answers to the Questionnaire Submitted by Responders

A.2.1 Respondent 1

- Collector: Web Link 1 (Web Link)
- Started: Monday, April 02, 2018 5:20:29 PM
- Last Modified: Monday, April 02, 2018 5:37:50 PM
- Time Spent: 00:17:21
- IP Address: 162.197.60.30

Page 1

Q1

Name (optional)

Respondent skipped this question

Q2

How long have you been an active member at Covington First UMC?

15+ years

Q3

Since graduating high school, how have you continued a relationship with Jesus Christ? Be honest (i.e. reading your bible, attending campus life, small groups, prayer - OR - not at all, not so sure I believe that anymore, not spiritual, not religious)

attending the Methodist campus ministry, having a personal student discipler, mission trips, etc.

Q4

With all of the news coverage of the violence taking place in school settings, how, if at all, has this shaken or strengthened your faith? (Now- we don't want Sunday School responses. Would really like to hear your honest opinions.)

It hasn't. Things like this happen because there are bad people in the world, not because God allows them to happen. As humans, we still have a certain amount of free will.

Q5

As a Christian your beliefs and faith should mold your behaviors and responses. Think about your social settings (both face to face, or on social media) Are you experiencing or witness bullying (whether it is directed to you or others)? How does this make you feel? How do you respond to this?

I don't generally witness bullying. I do, however, witness sexual harassment, sexism, racism, etc. regularly and do my best to correct other people when it occurs.

Q6

Looking back on your time at the church, what could your church have done better to prepare for the challenges you face?

I think our home church does almost nothing for young adults once they graduate from the youth program, regardless of whether they go to college or go straight into their careers. The one exception would be the College Ministry matching youth with an adult Sunday School class, as I generally feel like at least someone at the church cares about me. I have no complaints about my

time in youth, but I cannot speak for the youth program as it is today. However, I know that there are many people of youth age that are extremely unhappy with the way it is being managed now.

Q7

What are the hot topics or burning issues that you or your friends live with everyday? (Think outside news media- what struggles do you encounter?)

N/A

Q8

What are you worried about at this point in your life?

I'm more worried about the youth and college programs at my home church collapsing at this point. I do not think they are being considered as a high priority, which is extremely sad since these teenagers should be set up in a strong foundation before they graduate. I'm worried that, as its being run now, the older youth members are being forgotten when they are ones you should be pouring into so that they can continue their walks with Christ after graduation.

Q9

Would you be interested in doing an online video group chat as an outlet? A small group that would be a safe place to discuss not only the good things but the difficult things in life- through the lens of a Christian. Not a bible study but a "let's do life together" group- honest though- the good, bad, the ugly- like leave the "fake" at the door kind of group.

Not particularly.

Q10

If you are not interested, what could we do or offer to support in your spiritual walk? (For instance, email links to blogs, podcasts, anonymous Q&As, help you to find campus ministries/opportunities).

If I am being totally honest, I don't need any help in this from the youth or "college ministry", if it even exists. I consider myself one of the luckier ones because I managed to develop my walk with Christ further without any help from my home church in the past. Instead, focus on the ones you haven't failed yet; pour into the older youth members and work with them to find outlets wherever they go and whatever they do after high school.

A.2.2 Respondent 2

Respondent #2

Collector: Web Link 1 (Web Link)

Started: Tuesday, March 27, 2018 7:39:48 PM

Last Modified: Tuesday, March 27, 2018 7:48:59 PM

Time Spent: 00:09:11

IP Address: 162.201.73.54

Page 1

Q1

Name (optional)

Respondent skipped this question

Q2

How long have you been an active member at Covington First UMC?

8 years

Q3

Since graduating high school, how have you continued a relationship with Jesus Christ? Be honest (i.e. reading your bible, attending campus life, small groups, prayer - OR - not at all, not so sure I believe that anymore, not spiritual, not religious)

At first yes, but the more I was away from my church home the more I realized how much I missed it and was very particular about how I liked to worship. I only like going to church when I'm at home now.

Q4

With all of the news coverage of the violence taking place in school settings, how, if at all, has this shaken or strengthened your faith? (Now- we don't want Sunday School responses. Would really like to hear your honest opinions.)

It hasn't affected it either way.

Q5

As a Christian your beliefs and faith should mold your behaviors and responses. Think about your social settings (both face to face, or on social media) Are you experiencing or witness bullying (whether it is directed to you or others)? How does this make you feel? How do you respond to this?

Not really.

Q6

Looking back on your time at the church, what could your church have done better to prepare for the challenges you face?

I felt like there was no program for me once I graduated. The program where the Sunday school class sends me a card every now and then is all I really have. And while that is a great, it would've been nice to have someone organize like a dinner during Christmas break or summer.

Or even have a Sunday school class for young adults to go to - even if that includes people of the age of 35 it would be nice to have a group relative to our age.

Q7

What are the hot topics or burning issues that you or your friends live with everyday? (Think outside news media- what struggles do you encounter?)

Right now it's just trying to accommodate to what life's going to be like after graduation.

Q8

What are you worried about at this point in your life?

Finding a job and being happy with it. Also finding a place where I belong outside of just Covington.

Q9

Would you be interested in doing an online video group chat as an outlet? A small group that would be a safe place to discuss not only the good things but the difficult things in life- through the lens of a Christian. Not a bible study but a "let's do life together" group- honest though- the good, bad, the ugly- like leave the "fake" at the door kind of group.

I wouldn't be interested in doing a video group but I would be interested in doing an in person group

Q10

If you are not interested, what could we do or offer to support in your spiritual walk? (For instance, email links to blogs, podcasts, anonymous Q&As, help you to find campus ministries/opportunities).

I think before we do this we should focus on our youth group. They're more important than the college ministry and its sad to see not as many people going as when I was in high school.

A.2.3 Respondent 3

Respondent #3

Collector: Web Link 1 (Web Link)

Started: Tuesday, March 27, 2018 7:56:21 PM

Last Modified: Tuesday, March 27, 2018 8:06:28 PM

Time Spent: 00:10:07

IP Address: 174.218.7.190

Page 1

Q1

Name (optional)

Respondent skipped this question

Q2

How long have you been an active member at Covington First UMC?

Since I was very little

Q3

Since graduating high school, how have you continued a relationship with Jesus Christ? Be honest (i.e. reading your bible, attending campus life, small groups, prayer - OR - not at all, not so sure I believe that anymore, not spiritual, not religious)

I still believe but not very active

Q4

With all of the news coverage of the violence taking place in school settings, how, if at all, has this shaken or strengthened your faith? (Now- we don't want Sunday School responses. Would really like to hear your honest opinions.)

This had made it harder to stay in touch with my faith but at the end of the day you realize that you're faith is all you have.

Q5

As a Christian your beliefs and faith should mold your behaviors and responses. Think about your social settings (both face to face, or on social media) Are you experiencing or witness bullying (whether it is directed to you or others)? How does this make you feel? How do you respond to this?

I am not expericing blot witnessing bullying. This is because I do not allow it if I am around to stop it.

Q6

Looking back on your time at the church, what could your church have done better to prepare for the challenges you face?

I think they prepared me well

Q7

What are the hot topics or burning issues that you or your friends live with everyday? (Think outside news media- what struggles do you encounter?)

I don't encounter very many struggles because my friends and I tend to be more easy going and try to keep away from controversial issues.

Q8

What are you worried about at this point in your life?

I am worried about my grades and becoming the best person I can be.

Q9

Would you be interested in doing an online video group chat as an outlet? A small group that would be a safe place to discuss not only the good things but the difficult things in life- through the lens of a Christian. Not a bible study but a "let's do life together" group- honest though- the good, bad, the ugly- like leave the "fake" at the door kind of group.

No because the friends I have made help me and I help them through life everyday.

Q10

If you are not interested, what could we do or offer to support in your spiritual walk? (For instance, email links to blogs, podcasts, anonymous Q&As, help you to find campus ministries/opportunities).

Things to read that could help me understand my faith more

Appendix A.3 Background for the Answers Given by Respondents

The church had recently undergone a change in youth directors, and the previous director was well-loved and appreciated, but resigned her position to take a full-time job at another business in town. The young adult that responded was bitter about the resignation of the youth director and was not accepting of the new director that was hired because that person came after the young adult had already graduated. Feeling abandoned by her previous youth director, he/she became bitter toward the church. Because the name was not given, we have no way of knowing who filled out the form.

Appendix B.1 Announcement in Church Bulletin



Graduates & Beyond
Coffee & Convo
Beginning June 3rd

Sundays @ 10 a.m.
Bread & Butter on the Square
Covington, GA

Appendix B.2 Announcement Poster Used for Young Adult Small Group



**Young Adult
Back Room Conversation
Sundays**

**Gather @ 9:45 am
Begins @ 10 am**



**bread
butter**

bakery+cafe

Appendix C.1 Evaluation Survey to Gauge Effectiveness of Small Group

This survey was done in Google Forms.

Young Adult Small Group Survey

Thank you for taking this survey. I would like to ask you about your experiences with the Young Adult Small Group.

Please answer as honestly as you can as your responses will help me to improve your experience in the class.

* Required

Email address *

Your email

Name

Your answer

Age

18-24

25-34

35-44

45 +

What I like most about the group

- The time we meet (9:45-10:30 a.m.)
- The place we meet (Bread & Butter)
- Informal
- Small
- The materials we talk about
- The Coffee!!! (or Tea, or Eats)
- Other:
-

What I like least about the group

- The time we meet (9:45-10:30 a.m.)
- The place we meet (Bread & Butter)
- Informal
- Small
- The materials we talk about
- Other:
-

I have been encouraged during the week because of my participation in this group

None of the Time

All of the Time

1

2

3

4

5

I found that something we talked about in small group was applicable to my life

Never

Frequently

1

2

3

4

5

I have been more encouraged to read my Bible during the week because of this group

Never

Daily

1

2

3

4

5

I find that I understand more about the Bible because of this group

Less Frequently

More Frequently

1

2

3

4

5

I find that I pray more during the week because of this group

Never

Daily

1

2

3

4

5

I find strength in knowing that others in the group are praying for me

- Yes
- Sometimes
- Not really

I feel that I have more friendships because of this small group

- Yes
- Somewhat
- Not really

I feel missed when I am not there on Sundays

- Yes
- Sometimes
- Not really

I feel comfortable recommending this small group to young adult friends

Less Likely to Recommend

More Likely to Recommend

1

2

3

4

5

What do you like about this small group?

Your answer

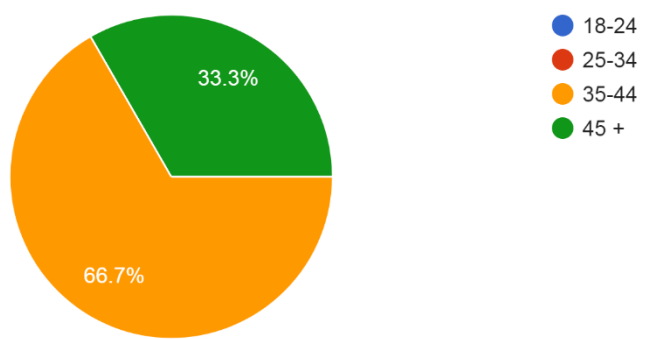
What could we do to improve this group?

Your answer

A copy of your responses will be emailed to the address you provided.

Age

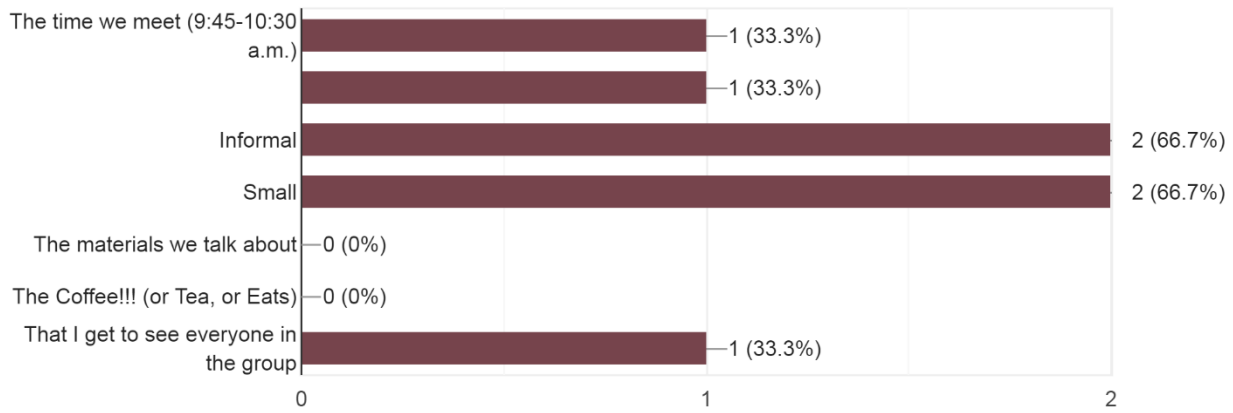
3 responses



Appendix C.2 Summary of Responses (to date)

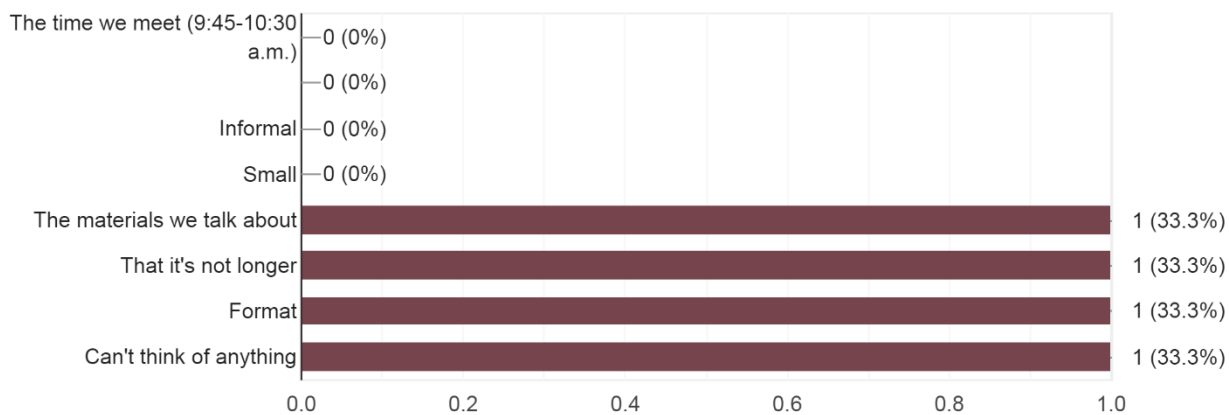
What I like most about the group

3 responses



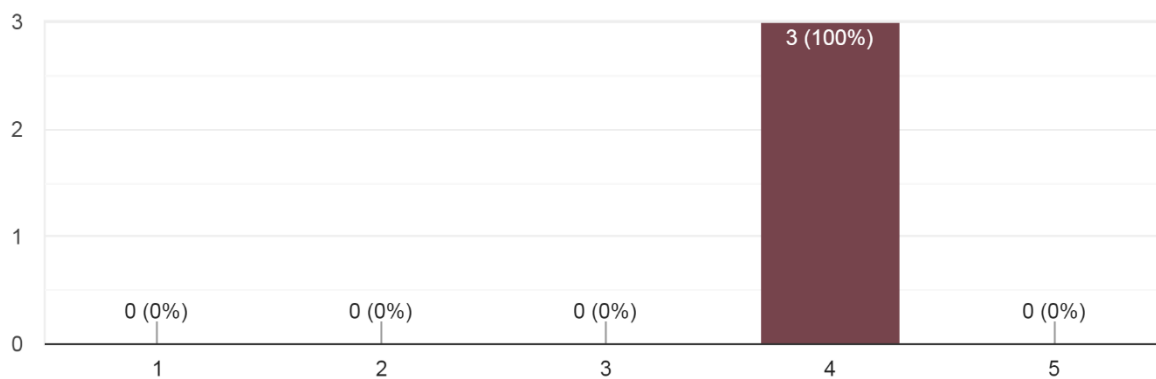
What I like least about the group

3 responses



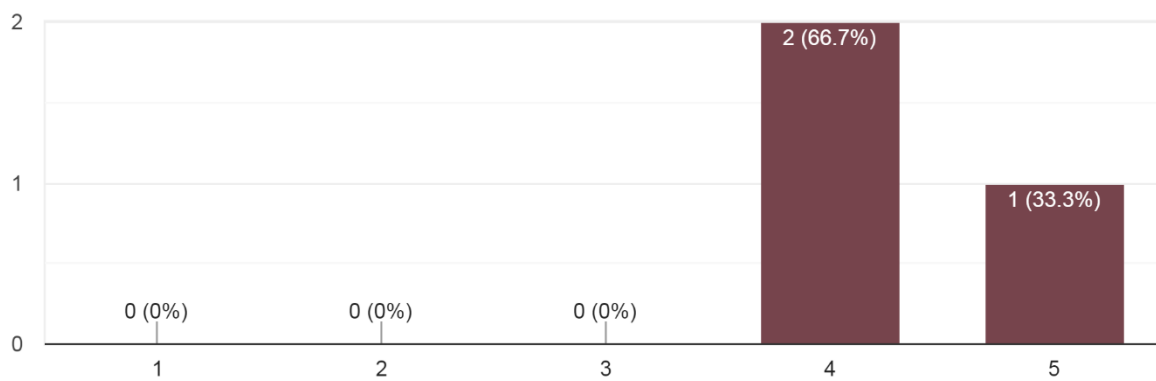
I have been encouraged during the week because of my participation in this group

3 responses



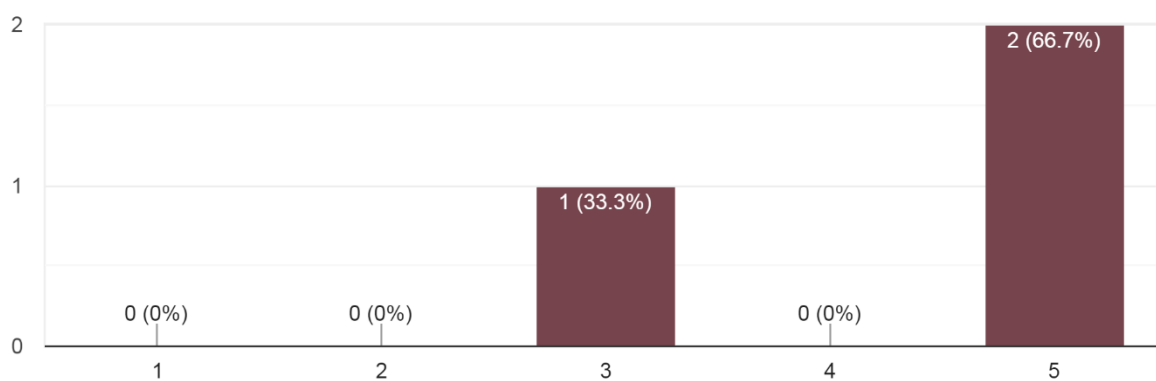
I found that something we talked about in small group was applicable to my life

3 responses



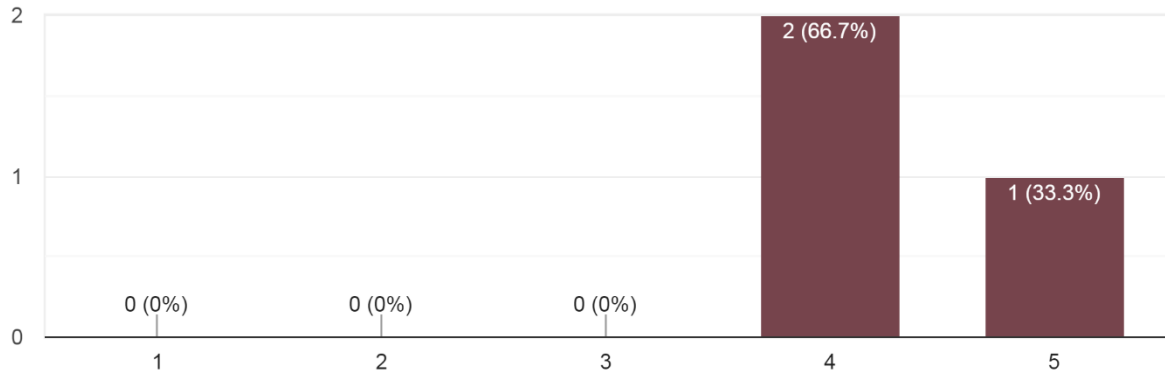
I have been more encouraged to read my Bible during the week because of this group

3 responses



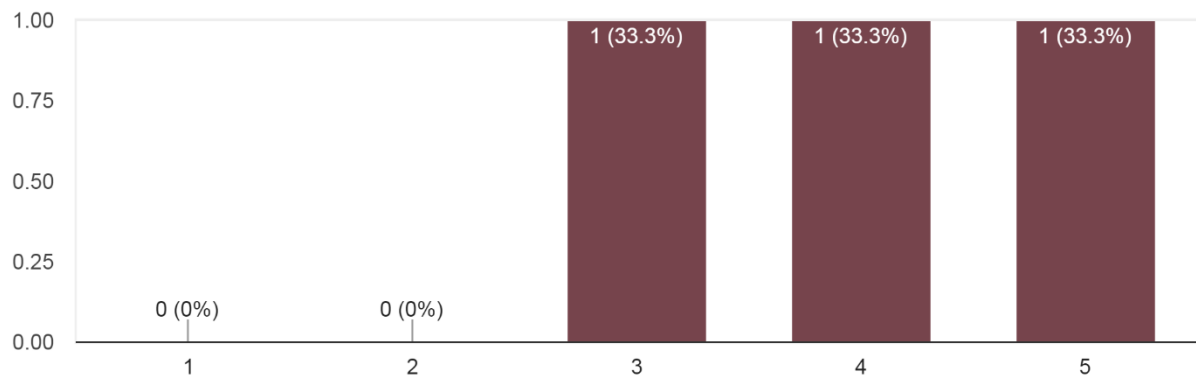
I find that I understand more about the Bible because of this group

3 responses



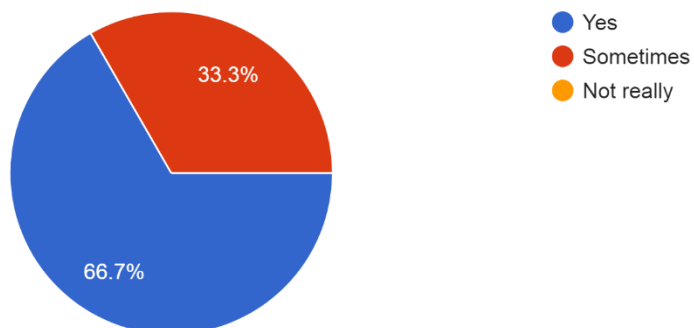
I find that I pray more during the week because of this group

3 responses



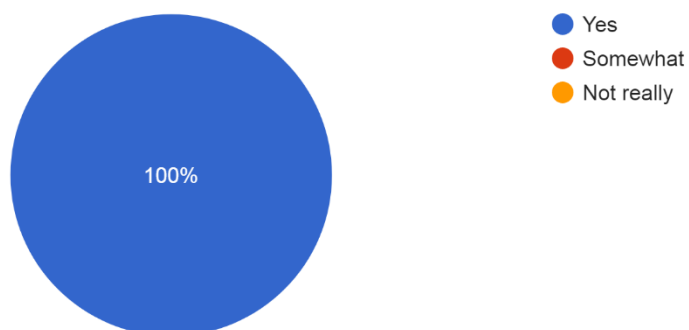
I find strength in knowing that others in the group are praying for me

3 responses



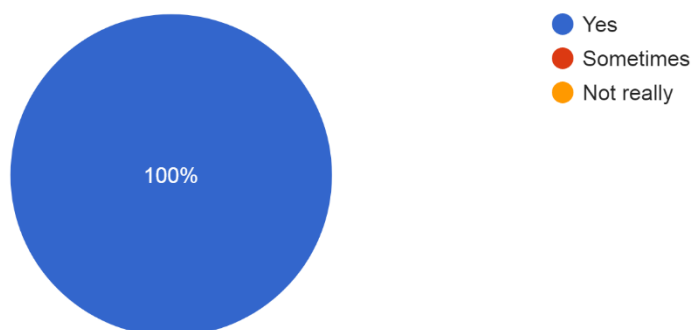
I feel that I have more friendships because of this small group

3 responses



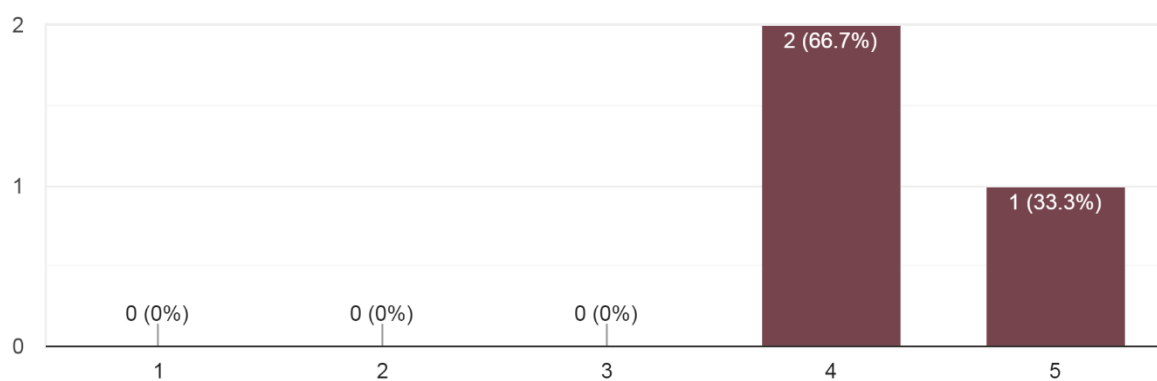
I feel missed when I am not there on Sundays

3 responses



I feel comfortable recommending this small group to young adult friends

3 responses



What do you like about this small group? 2 responses

I like that we can just talk about whatever is happening in our lives.

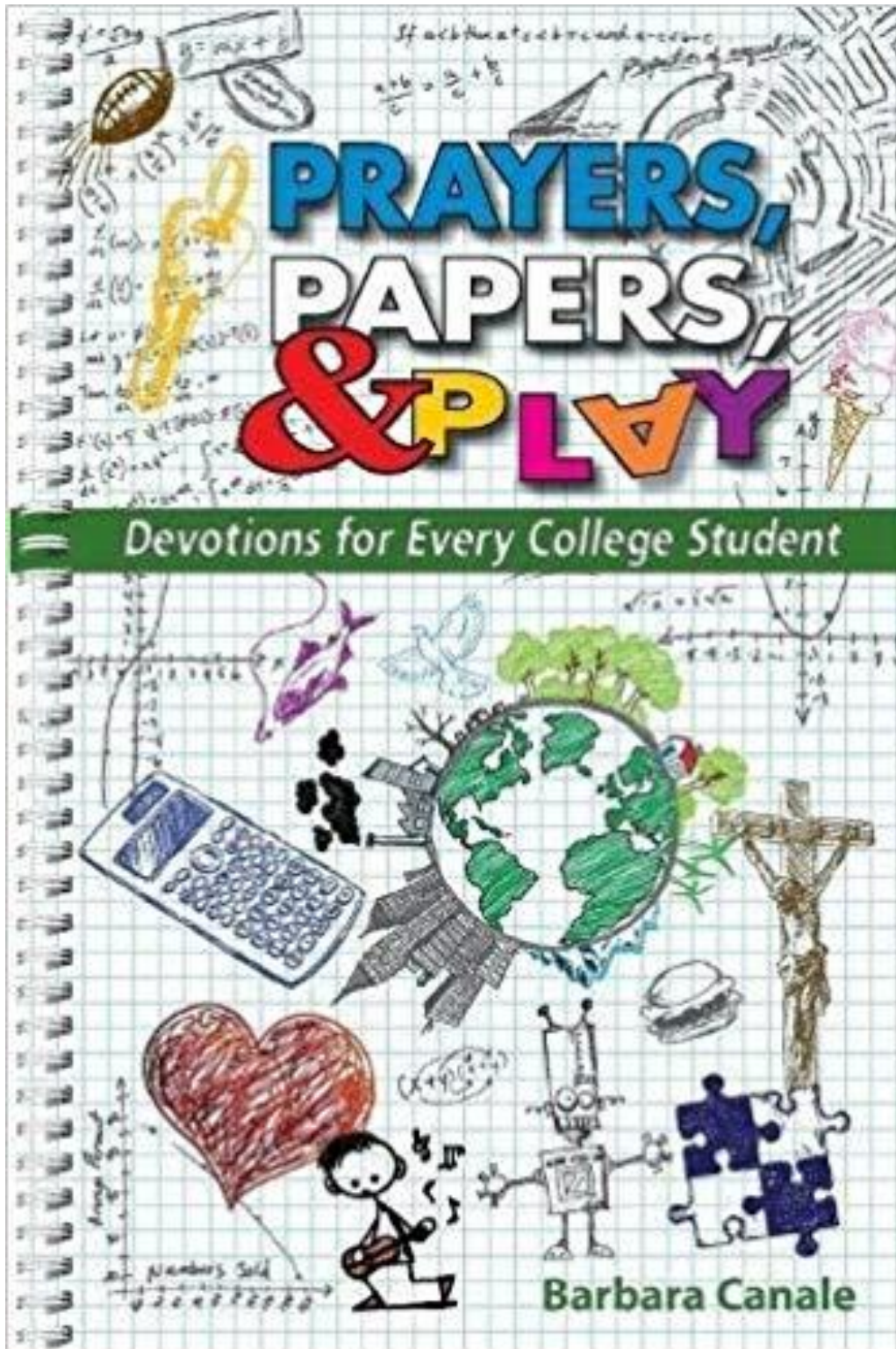
The fact that we have it

What could we do to improve this group? 2 responses

Less structured books, more just talking time.

More focus on scripture

Appendix D Curriculum Used to Start the Young Adult Small Group



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