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YOUTH MINISTRY PROGRAMS: *WHAT THEY CAN PROVIDE AND WHAT
MAKES THEM EFFECTIVE*

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Introduction

How many times have you or someone you have known been to a religious camp in the summer, been to a church event on a weekend or during the summer, or participated in some other religiously affiliated program on a regular basis in middle school and high school? It would be a pretty safe assumption that at least one person you know has been involved in at least one of these activities. Have you ever wondered why it is that people participate in these programs or have you ever been asked why you participated in them? Again, it is probably a safe assumption that you have run into one of those questions at least once. Have you ever considered what the answers might be?

In this era of tight budgets, and cuts in school and city services, many programs for children and youth come and go. They may lose financial sponsorship, or support from the community, or children may lose interest in a program and eventually the program. However, youth programs remain available to adolescents in the United States. Although these programs may vary in size and in what they offer, most religious denominations continue to provide a program of some sort targeting the needs and interests of their youth. Moreover, the programs are an integral part of the lives of some of these youth. At a time when adolescents have the opportunity to participate in a wide variety of programs and are being asked to give to each program “all they have,” it is worth while to ponder and brings to light the question of how adolescents and youth choose the programs they take part take in. When adolescents have so many choices of programs why do they chose to be active in church youth programs, and why do these programs make the cut while others do not? Which brings us back to the question we have all encountered at some point: *why participate in church youth programs?* A more

important question is, *when adolescents participate in religious youth programs what do they get out of it, and are their lives affected and impacted in any way from their participation in the program?*

The thesis of this paper is that high quality religious youth ministry programs do affect the lives of adolescents who participate in them. Participation in religious youth ministry programs impacts adolescents' lives in many different ways. When examining how participation in such programs can affect an adolescent's life, it is important to know why adolescents participate in the program, as their reason(s) for participating can influence what they take away from the program. The effects of participation are also to be considered when looking at ways to improve, grow and change religious youth programs.

While adolescents are not always able to recognize the impact that their participation in religious youth programs has on them, the data will show that in fact there are differences between the behaviors and choices of those who participate and those who do not. When examining the bigger picture of how religious youth ministry programs affect adolescents, there are several subcategories of impact to review. These subcategories include the influences that religious youth ministry programs have on adolescents' faith life, the decisions they make, and the sets of skills they can gain. In the bigger picture it is also necessary to think about what goes into a successful program. A definition of a successful program and how it can impact the affect the program has on participants will be discussed later on in this paper.

In order to make the claim that a religious youth program is successful we must first define what it is to be successful. In this study, success will be defined as a high quality process (programming) that supports and allows adolescents to develop and grow

as individuals and in their faith life. Such programming creates is also a helpful support system for them through the participation and encouragement of the friends and leaders involved in the program, and what they learn and develop through participation in these programs will impact them beyond their time as participants in the programs. In a successful program once an adolescent leaves a program because they are no longer in middle or senior school they will still have the skills and fundamentals for continuing in their growth as well as will demonstrate use of skills they developed through participation in the programs.

The purpose of these claims is to better understand the ways in which religious youth ministry programs affect those who participate in them. These claims will be supported through information gathered in a variety of surveys and other data demonstrating ways adolescents have been impacted through their participation in religious youth ministry programs. The other purpose of these claims is to examine these data to better understand what a successful youth program is. Understanding these indicators will allow us to better comprehend important aspects about both the nature and needs of adolescents and the nature of well designed and implemented high quality religious youth programs. To begin with, we will be able to reassure ourselves that when we feel as though there is no way to reach adolescents or that when we are not sure if they are paying attention, they are! The adolescent may not realize it, but they are absorbing what is being suggested by adult and peer leaders and learning from the experiences and activities. That suggests that when it comes to the programs we *can* learn what the elements of high quality, successful or impactful programs are and also know how these programs can be designed to thrive and assist youth in their development.

Part I. Adolescents Participation in Youth Ministry Programs

Data on Adolescents and Their Choices

Adolescents are at an age where they are often very easily influenced by the people that surround them and the activities they engage in. They are also at an age when they can be difficult to work with. The more we know about the specific ways to work with them and reach them the better we can support their growth. Perhaps with this information we can learn how to teach and work with them better, rather than writing them off as being difficult and having an attitude, as sometimes happens in their interactions with adults.

In gathering research it became clear that this is a relatively new area of study. While youth programs, both religious and non-religious, have been around for many years, people have not been studying the impact, nor the importance and need for these programs until rather recently. Since this is a new and emerging area of research there are some specific aspects where no information has yet been gathered or disseminated.

Through the development of my research and in seeking to answer specific questions with current insight it became clear that part of my work was going to be to conduct my own research. Through the books and articles I reviewed and interactions with professionals I spoke with, I was able to understand what I needed to know more about and from there was also able to write two different surveys to distribute. The first survey was for adolescents ages 12-18. This survey posed questions to why children participated in youth programs what they liked and what they would change in programs they participated in, and how, if at all, they viewed their participation in these programs as an influencing them outside of the program. This survey was distributed to 303

adolescents in three different Lutheran congregations, one located in Minneapolis and two in Saint Peter. One of the goals was to hear thoughts from adolescents that are currently involved in religious youth ministry programs. Mount Olivet Lutheran Church in Minneapolis is where one of the surveys was distributed. This is one of the largest Lutheran churches in the United States and has a very large youth program. Trinity Lutheran Church and First Lutheran church in Saint Peter were the other congregations selected for this survey. Over a period of two weeks both middle and senior high school students took the survey.

The second survey, Church Youth Experience (CYE) was given to a population of individuals 18 and older, people who are currently out of high school. This was an online survey that was open to people to respond to for three weeks. It was sent to 156 people, of which 58 completed the survey. The intention was to explore thoughts from those no longer in middle school or high school and to learn if they had participated in religious youth ministry programs. The purpose was to see how they believed they may have been impacted in a longitudinal fashion.

These two surveys then allowed me to gather information in several areas. Likely, the most obvious information I gained was thoughts and opinions from adolescents participating in the programs and from people who are beyond adolescent years. The information also allowed me to compare answers about how people describe the programs influencing them and why people do, did or did not participate in the programs.

While the information I gathered is an important part of my work, it is by no means the only information I use to substantiate my thesis. Although this is a relatively new field of study, others have also conducted surveys, collected data and drawn

conclusion about religious youth ministry programs. Since my own research was completed on a small and limited scale I will be using the information from several different sources to support my claim. I will be relying mostly on ‘self report’ survey data that I and others have collected, as well as correlative analysis, to defend my thinking. “Self-report” means that I will be using data from my own research and collecting, reported directly by those participating in programs, and their own reflections and perceptions of the quality and impact of that experience. I compare the information from the sources I have and the information I gathered from my own research to support of my argument. Although ‘self report’ data can be problematic as it is difficult to validate for reliability, it is useful as a resource that is reflective in nature. It is able to provide supportive trend information as well as individual, situational feedback.

Why Adolescents Participate in Youth Ministry Programs

First I will examine why adolescents participate, or don’t, in religious youth ministry programs. Do they participate because of their parents’ influence and because parents possibly force their attendance? Is it because of a friend or two who participate? Could it be the program design and activities or the leaders of the program, or is it because of personal choice?

Adolescents have different reasons for participating in various extra curricular activities. Their reasons could be because of peer influences, family, a teacher, personal interest or for any other range of reasons. Religious youth ministry is no exception to this pattern. Teenagers participate in a program for a number of different reasons. For some, these reasons change over time; for example teenagers might start attending because a family member makes them go and then after a period of time they go because of friends

or because they like the program or the adults leading the program. There is a lot that can be gained through participation in such programs. Religious youth ministry programs are good programs for adolescents to be a part of; the trick, of course, is getting them there. In one of the survey I conducted asked current participants why they participate in these programs there was a range in responses. On the survey they took, a question asked them to mark the reason why they participate. The following shows their responses. The total is greater than 100 percent, as respondents could select multiple reasons.

Why Adolescents Participate in Youth Group Activities (Answers are in percentages)

Because of the people that run the program(s)	44
Because an adult from home makes you	23
Because you enjoy it	81
Because of your friends	72
Because of your faith	62

Source: data obtained from Abby Norlin-Weaver, Current Adolescents *Youth Group Experience* Survey (Minnesota, 2008)

There were a handful of people who filled in the response ‘other’ when it came to their reason(s) for participating in a religious youth group. The responses for other included 1) for me and 2) because of Cathedral of the Pines (a summer camp run by Mt. Olivet Lutheran Church). From this table it is clear that the number one reason adolescents attend a religious youth program is because they simply enjoy going. With the reasons given “because of your friends” and “because of your faith” following close behind, the impact of friends as well as faith is important. It is also interesting to note here that the lowest percentage by a large amount is the response of “because an adult from home makes you.”

The next data set examines the responses given by those young adults who had been participants, reflecting on that experience and their reasons for having attended.

Reason for Past Participation in Youth Group Activities Given By Young Adults
(Answers are in percentages)

	No	Some what	True	Very True	N/A
My parents influenced my participation or lack of my participation	5.2	22.4	31.0	41.4	0
My friends influenced my participation or lack of participation	24.1	20.7	29.3	25.9	0
The program(s) provided influenced my participation or lack of	10.3	6.9	44.8	36.2	1.7

Source data obtained from Abby Norlin-Weaver, *Church Youth Experience* (Minnesota, 2008)

The above percentages show the wide range in peoples' reasons for participating in religious youth groups. It is interesting to compare these responses of the young adults surveyed to those of the adolescents surveyed. For the majority of the adults their parents were the reason for their participation or lack of and the influence of friends did not seem to have as much influence on their participation or lack of. This would be the opposite of the responses from the adolescents' survey, where it was noted that adults at home had the smallest influence and friends were in the top three reasons they participated in the programs. I am not sure why the responses vary between age groups. My speculation as to why there is a difference would be that adolescents tend to depend more on their

friends. As adults looking back, perhaps it is easier to see how much influence their parents have on them.

As we are developing some understanding as to why people participate in religious youth ministry programs during adolescent years, we will begin to examine how high quality programs can affect a participants life. The following examination will look at both what the immediate and long term impacts are.

Part II. How Participation in Youth Ministry Programs can Affect Participants

Ways in Which Participant's Lives can be Impacted through Participation

There are many ways in which religious youth ministry programs impact the lives of adolescents who participate in them. If you ask an adolescent how their participation in religious youth ministry programs is impacting them, while they may acknowledge that they have activities to part take in and opportunities to make friends and socialize, they may not realize the other ways in which the programs influence them. However, data collected to date makes it clear that participation in religious youth ministry programs does in fact impact adolescents' lives in a variety of ways. It affects them on a deeper than surface level, often beyond what they articulate. Some of the critical ways adolescents are impacted would include decisions made and behaviors outside of the program time, the relationships formed through their participation, and a variety of skills and beliefs that gained. The skills, beliefs and practices picked up through participation are some of gains that can impact a person on a longitudinal scale.

While in Middle and Senior High School How Participation in Religious Youth Programs Can Influence Them

While it can be difficult to judge how participation in a religious youth ministry program influences the behavior and decisions adolescents make outside of the program, the following data I have collected will show in what ways it can be measured. The data and evidence presented here comes from interviews and surveys conducted with adolescents currently in middle and senior high school. For this section the majority of information will come from three different studies. The first is the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR). This survey was conducted in 2003, and it is the largest national survey done to date on adolescents and religion in the United States. The NSYR randomly surveyed 267 adolescents (children ages 13-18) all over the United States, asking them questions about their faith, spirituality and what their practices they may have in regards to these beliefs. The survey posed questions about the adolescents' participation and decisions about a variety of activities and situations. The second two studies will be ones that I have conducted. Recall that these two surveys are: the Church Youth Experience survey of people who are no longer in middle or senior high school and no longer participate in religious youth ministry programs and the survey given to current participants in youth ministry programs. This provides a picture of some of the longer term impact participation in such programs can have on people. These three surveys will be used in connection with one another to determine in what ways religious youth ministry programs impact adolescents' lives.

Studies have shown that a personal faith life, whether public or privately practiced, is important and beneficial to people. The NSYR responses supported that data as well. According to the NSYR "20 percent of adolescents feel that faith is extremely

important, 31 percent said faith is very important and 31 percent feel faith is somewhat important in shaping their daily lives. In comparison with the 11 percent who did not feel faith was very important and another 7 percent who feel it is not at all important. When it came to the question of ‘what role faith plays in major decision making processes’ 20 percent felt it was extremely important, 29 percent felt it was very important and 31 percent felt that faith is somewhat important in making major decisions in their daily lives. With 11 percent who do not feel it is very important and 8 percent who do not feel faith is at all important in making major decisions there is a significant number who believe in the importance of faith.”¹ The survey I gave to adolescents currently in youth ministry programs asked them if they considered themselves to be religious and or spiritual. There responses showed 80 percent consider themselves religious, 8 percent consider themselves religious and 11 percent consider themselves somewhat/kind of religious. For spirituality the responses were, 72 percent consider themselves spiritual, 12 percent said they do not consider themselves spiritual, with 16 percent who said they somewhat/kind of consider themselves spiritual. Though the question of a faith life is different than that of being spiritual or religious, we are still able to see that through participation in youth ministry programs adolescents can gain, develop and recognize with religion.

Based on the data present in the NSYR, it is safe to say that religious faith influences the activities that adolescents surveyed decide to participate in outside of church. The data from the current youth experience survey also indicated that participation in youth ministry programs builds individual religious connections. It seems

¹ Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford, Oxford Press, 2005) 40.

that adolescents who are involved in religious youth ministry programs are less likely to participate in risky behavior than peers who do not and to spend time away from potentially negative media influences. They are less likely to smoke cigarettes, smoke marijuana and drink alcohol or if they do drink they drink less than others. It also appears that those who participate in religious youth ministry programs are less likely to get in trouble at school; they are less likely to skip class and less likely to get expelled.² The tables below shows the exact percentages found by the NSYR. The first table shows percentages on adolescents in regards to participation in risky behavior and behavior at school. The second reflects their consumption of media, both in terms of the amount of time and choices about media. In each, those youth who are religiously active responded with less involvement in both risk behaviors and media involvement that would be time consuming as well as potentially destructive morally and/or physically.

Risk Behavior of and Getting into Trouble by Religious Ideal-types U.S. Adolescents, Ages 13-17 (percentages)

	Religiously Active	Not Religiously Active
Activity		
Smoke Cigarettes	1	14
Drink Alcohol		
Weekly	0	11
Never	88	49
Never Skip Class	76	48
Receives Grades Lower than B's	3	14
Parents believe Teen is Rebellious	3	17

Source: data adapted from Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford, Oxford Press, 2005) Table 34, 222

² *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, 221.

Media Consumption of Religious Ideal-types U.S. Adolescents, Ages 13-17
(percentages)

	Religiously Active	Not Religiously Active
Activity		
Week day average hours spent watching television	1.8	2.5
All or most movies watched are R rated	14	42
Average number of x-rated, pornographic movies, videos and cable programs viewed last year	0.5	2.5

Source: data adapted from Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford, Oxford Press, 2005) Table 35, 223s

Participating in religious youth programs also correlates with and may influence adolescents' moral beliefs and practices concerning sexual activity. There are substantial differences in beliefs and sexual activity between teenagers who are active participants in organized religious programs for youth and those who are not. According to the NSYR the following are what the adolescents who were interviewed had to say:

Sexual Belief and Activity of Religious Ideal-types U.S. Adolescents, Ages 13-17 (Percentages)

	Religiously Active	Not Religiously Active
Activity		
Believe in waiting for marriage to have sex	95	24
Believe it is okay for teens to have sex if they are emotionally ready for sex	3	56
Have been physically involved with another person, more than holding hands and light kissing, since turning 13	29	53
Have ever willingly touched or been touched by another person in private areas under clothes	18	43
Have had oral sex	11	30
Have had sexual intercourse	9	26
Average number of sexual intercourse partners (among sexually active teens per group)	2.7	4.1

Source: data adapted from Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford, Oxford Press, 2005) Table 36, 224

To put it simply, these data provide a fairly dramatic comparison between adolescents who indicate they are actively religious and those who are not, relative to their beliefs, practices and participation in various sexual activities. While for a couple of these indicators there is not a large difference between those who are active participants and those who are not, there remains a difference and the notable gap in those who are religiously active and believe in waiting for marriage to have sex, and those who do not. The difference between those who are active participants and tend to stay out of or participate less in these various activities and behaviors that are unsafe for them and those who are not active and are sexually active is important.

These data suggest that by being an actively religious participant there is a correlation that the adolescent will not partake in a variety of dangerous activities, they

are more likely to do well in school and less likely to be sexually active; all indicators that the adolescent is more likely to successfully navigate a difficult time period.

According to data from the NSYR ‘Moral Development and Beliefs’ is another area where it appears that participation in religious youth groups affects adolescents’ lives, and it guides them in dealing with a wide variety of influences teenagers experience in their daily life choices and impacts the decisions they make. This idea is also suggested by another article by sociologist Christian Smith. Smith argues that participation in religious youth ministry programs will further reinforce moral order from the church. Even further, he suggests that because adolescents will be surrounded by peers in youth ministry programs who will be learning and practicing the same morals and perhaps have similar beliefs increases the influence it has on the participants.³ Through participation in religious youth groups adolescents learn what morals are, and what morals are espoused as part of their religious tradition. Through learning what morals are practiced in their religious tradition they begin to consider them for themselves. As they begin to do so these morals become a part of their daily lives and practices. They may not realize it, but from an early age they begin to see things they can define as right and wrong in the context of their experiences, and they put into practice these beliefs of right and wrong for themselves. It appears that it is these practices that influence some of the decisions they make in what kinds of activities they take part in outside of school and church. As displayed in the data from the tables on the previous pages, moral beliefs have an impact on an adolescent does.

³Christian Smith, Religious “Participation and Parental moral Expectations and Supervision of American Youth,” *Reviews of Religious Research* 44(2003): 416.

Life Skills and Practices That Can be Gained Through Participation

Another way in which adolescents may be impacted through participation involves the set of skills they gain. Any tangible skill that an adolescent can gain through participation in religious youth ministry programs as a middle and senior high school benefits them throughout their lives. These skills include things such as learning and practicing what a community is and what it means to be an active and contributing part of a community. Some learn what it is to have a good work ethic; learn to be on time for things, to show up with a commitment to an event or organization and how to work hard. Adolescents may also learn what it means to be a leader and gain the characteristics and skills needed to be a leader in a group. In a survey of 58 young adults (meaning they are 18 and older) the following results are skills they believe they gained through participation in religious youth ministry programs as a teenager.

The table below shows the collected responses from a self-report CYE survey of young adults. Again this is self-report data that I have gathered. For this survey it is data that I have collected from the population no longer in their adolescent years. Participants were asked if they believed that through participation in a religious youth ministry program as an adolescent they felt any of the skills or benefits (listed in far left column) were gained on a 4 point scale. The data in the table shows that of the survey respondents overall more people believed they did gain these skills while participating in religious youth ministry programs as an adolescent than did not. In comparisons of the combined scores in the lower end of the scale with the combined scores at the upper end of the scale, the responses are rather dramatic, as the overwhelming majority of those

responding indicated they had gained specific characteristics and skill sets, as well as a support system that often included an adult mentor.

Learned Skills and Benefits from Religious Youth Ministry Program Participation
(Answers are in percentages)

	No	Some What	True	Very True	N/A
A sense of community	10.3	15.5	29.3	41.4	3.4
Life Skills (such as work ethic, teamwork, task commitment, etc.)	15.5	20.7	15.5	44.8	3.4
Leadership Characteristics	22.4	6.9	15.5	48.3	6.9
Adult Mentor	20.7	15.5	17.2	41.4	5.2
Support System	8.8	19.3	24.6	42.1	5.3

Source: obtained from Abby Norlin-Weaver, *Church Youth Experience* (Minnesota, 2008)

These data support the claim that participants of religious youth ministry programs gain in a variety of areas that are likely to provide positive longitudinal impacts for the participants, or impacts that last beyond their youth. The survey also provided an opportunity for open response. In that area, an anonymous person stated “participation in religious youth ministry programs as a teenager was beneficial to my overall character development.”⁴ Another anonymous person said: “through participation they gained better communication skills.”⁵

The ways in which adolescents can gain these skills through their participation in religious youth ministry programs vary. They gain a sense of community in two ways. One is that the programs itself offers a community for a teenager to become a part of. This community includes the group itself and the larger church congregation. Second, through various service projects offered in the youth programs adolescents take part in

⁴ Abby Norlin-Weaver, CYE, (2008).

⁵ Abby Norlin-Weaver, CYE, (2008).

community outreach activities. The community that adolescents become a part of in the congregation and group then becomes a support system that includes adult leaders, pastors, youth directors and friends who care for the participants. In such groups, teenagers are often provided different opportunities and roles to take on as leaders in the church. Some of these roles would include mentors to others, assisting in worship, counselors for camps and other activities with the church as well as many other outreach opportunities.

It is in these roles that adolescents learn how to be a leader and what it means to work in different positions. All of these different proficiencies are ways in which religious youth ministry programs assist adolescent in their growth and development of life skills. As sociologists Smith and Denton note, “American religions provide organizational contexts where youth can observe, learn and practice valuable community life skills and leadership skills, which are transposable for constructive uses beyond religious activities.”⁶

Relationships Gained Through Participation

While it is clear that participation in a religious youth ministry program impacts adolescents in their daily lives. Some of the ways as noted include the skills gained through participation in youth ministry programs are also used in school, sports, and team activities, in their neighborhoods and beyond, both in the present and in the future. Another notable impact and benefit to participation in religious youth ministry programs are the various relationships gained.

⁶ Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford, Oxford Press, 2005), 244.

It takes many different people and supports to make a program run smoothly and all these people interact with one another on a regular basis. There are the adult volunteers, the youth leaders and directors of the programs, the pastors and of course the teenagers who take part in the programs. In the CYE Survey 36.2 percent of the people surveyed said that their relationships with the adult leaders involved in the program had great influence on their participation.⁷ Another 41.4 percent responded that it was “very true” that they gained an adult mentor through participation in the program.⁸ The NSYR found that the religiously active teenagers feel they have an average of 8.4 adults in their lives they can go to for help and advice compared to the 5.0 the non-religiously active teenagers said.⁹ These leaders can be important and positive mentors and role models for the youth. Smith and Denton write “American religions can provide youth with adult and peer group role models, providing examples of life practices shaped by religious moral orders that constructively influence the lives of youth, and offering positive relationships that youth may be invested in preserving through their own normatively approved living.”¹⁰

Having role models and mentors from these programs provides adolescents an example of how to live a healthy life, and a place where they can practice their moral and religious beliefs in their every day lives during formative years. It gives the youth an important person(s) in their life that they can depend on, learn from and not want to let down or disappoint aside from a parent or guardian the youth have at home. It is essential

⁷ Abby Norlin-Weaver, Church Youth Experience Survey (2008).

⁸ Abby Norlin-Weaver, Church Youth Experience Survey (2008).

⁹ Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford, Oxford Press, 2005), 226.

¹⁰ Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford, Oxford Press, 2005), 243.

for adolescents to have adults in their lives apart from a parent or guardian that they can trust, talk to and share things with. According to Gane and Kijai: the role of the adults is described well in this quote: “Christian educators, pastors and youth workers are in the unique position of assisting adolescents in developing a healthy well-integrated, personal and spiritual identity.”¹¹ An unknown person said this in a response on the CYE survey:

The biggest thing adolescent youth programs gave me were adult mentors. The mentors I met were people with whom I was comfortable talking, and they gave appropriate adult advice that wasn't from my parents. (Most likely, it was the same advice my parents would have given me, but talking with respected adults is easier if they aren't related to you.) I loved that in addition to offering words of wisdom, they would offer to pray with and for me. This is something I miss now as I'm looking for a new church home.¹²

This is not to disregard the importance and strength of friends' influences on adolescents. Indeed peers also play a large role in the beliefs, practices and participation of themselves and of their friends.

In the relationships that are gained through participation in religious youth ministry programs there are two things that happen simultaneously to impact an adolescent's life. The first is that they grow the number and quality of various relationships, which are important for an adolescent to have, inclusive of peers and older role models and mentors. At the same time these peers and adults can also positively influence the life choices a youth makes. The teen has a role model who shows them 'the way' and gives them advice, both actively and through example, on how to live a moral life. The relationship may be based on the desire a youth has to have a mentor, and the relationship will support them in positive decision making as they wish to gain the approval of those providing positive models.

¹¹ Barry Gane and Jimmy Kijai, “The relationship between faith maturity, intrinsic and extrinsic orientations to religion and youth ministry involvement,” *Journal of Youth Ministry* 4 (Spring 2006): 50

¹² CYE (2008).

An adolescent's faith, relationship with God, and spiritual lives are naturally also impacted through their participation in religious youth ministry programs. Adolescents are just like many other religious people: they question and struggle with their faith and are growing their relationships and beliefs in their faith. So, it is timely that along with guiding teenagers in life situations religious youth ministry programs guide them in the development of their religious lives.

This guidance and active instruction in the tenets of faith is a major difference between a religious youth ministry program and other programs offered for adolescents. When studying responses to the CYE survey that adults responded to, 36.2 percent said that faith development was a very large part of what they gained through participation in these programs while still another 15.5 percent said it was a large part for them.¹³ Religious youth ministry programs are places where teenagers can feel comfortable talking about their faith, ask people to pray for them and learn more about the traditions of their faith. Knowing the importance of the relationships developed through participating in these programs adds additional substance to the likelihood that the instruction will become part of a lifelong personal religious practice on the part of those involved.

Examining Long Term Impact

It is clear that the lives of adolescents who participate in religious youth ministry programs are impacted in many ways both in and follow them outside the program while they are active. The next logical question would be to wonder if any of this has lasting impact, and what happens when they leave the program after middle and senior high school. The results from the CYE also asked how respondents believe participation from

¹³ Abby Norlin-Weaver, CYE (2008).

their youth has or has not continued to impact them when they no longer are a participant in these programs. The results of the survey, suggest that when it comes to skills, relationship choices and faith practices, people overall seem to view earlier participation in religious youth ministry programs as still impacting their lives. Results from the survey are summarized in the table below:

Skills Gained in Middle and High School that Still Impact My Life Today
(Percentages)

	Yes	No	N/A
Faith Practices	61.4	33.3	5.3
Community Service Practices	71.9	22.8	5.3
Work Choices	64.9	31.6	3.5
Work Habits	61.4	35.1	3.5
Relationship Choices	66.7	29.8	3.5

Source: data obtained from Abby Norlin-Weaver, *Church Youth Experience* (Minnesota, 2008)

One long run measure of the success of a religious youth ministry program is whether participants are impacted and can articulate effects from the program they have taken with them outside and beyond the program. In examining the results as shown in the table; it seems that ‘yes’ - participation in religious youth ministry programs impacts a person beyond adolescents. This data proves that these people did suggest that they have taken skills and life practices and also make life decisions based on what they learned through participation in religious youth ministry programs. This instrument also provided space for comments. In reflecting on past participation in a high school youth ministry program one respondent noted “I am so thankful that I was involved as I was in high school, and I really miss it now. I definitely gained great relationships, a stronger faith and loved the feeling I got when I volunteered.”¹⁴ This seems to indicate that in

¹⁴ Abby Norlin-Weaver, CYE, (2008).

reflecting on their experience this individual found it meaningful and suggests continued impact on their experiences, relationships and faith development.

In summary, participation in these programs can provide so much benefit to an adolescent. They clearly have a greater likelihood to stay out of or to be involved less frequently with behavior that is considered risky. They grow and develop as individuals in many different ways. The relationships developed are great support systems and are important for teenagers to have. A comment made in the CYE survey states “religious youth programs greatly shaped the person I am and choose to be today.”¹⁵ These programs teach adolescents life long skills and values; in examining the skills and values gained, one must acknowledge the positive impact these programs have. The question then remaining is what this all means and how all of these things come together to inform those in a position to design or improve such programs.

Part III. Examining Youth Ministry Programs

Successful Programs

When trying to measure the success of a program it must be clear what a high quality program brings to participants, and how it impacts participants’ lives. For purposes of this discussion, the criteria for determining a successful religious youth ministry program will include; 1) the ability for youth to become connected to an adult leader through the program; 2) if the program meets the “every day, everywhere ministry”¹⁶ needs of the youth the programs offered are meant to impact; 3) if the lessons

¹⁵ Abby Norlin-Weaver, CYE, (2008) .

¹⁶ Lyle Griner National Director of Peer Ministry at the Youth and Family Institute, interviewed by author, Minneapolis, MN August 2008.

learned in the programs stay with an individual over an extended period of time; and 4) if the program continues to flexibly develop and change over time.

Available information to date suggests more specific evidence of the indicators one might look for, including how a program can influence an adolescent, both while in the program and on a long term scale. As an example, key findings suggest that through participation adolescents gain relationships with adult role models and mentors and their religious and moral beliefs can be reinforced and applied in their daily lives. As a result, the participation provides an influence on the decisions adolescents make to participate in risky behavior activities, and in how adolescents behave at school. The choices they make to participate in the alternatively healthier activities are those which provide skill and relationship development. In the end, it appears that all of what they learn they take with them and use throughout the rest of their lives.

Knowing that these types of programs can offer so much to youth, it is important to take a look at the programs themselves. Given the four elements noted above, it is reasonable to look beyond the relationships themselves. Examining the purposes, curriculum, design structures and implementation of the programs and ensuring that these various aspects are meeting high standards to provide the best potential impact to the participants of the programs begin to provide a framework for determining the quality of the programs. It may also provide insight into why the mentoring relationships make a difference and indicators of the programs' development.

Religious youth ministry programs have a better chance of making an impact on an adolescent's life when they are well designed, well run, and well maintained. A flourishing program is one that can impact adolescents in ways that have been previously

discussed. Religious youth ministry programs offer a variety of opportunities and range of activities. Each church that has a youth ministry program tries to run its program(s) to meet the needs of the specific congregation, working with factors that include congregational size, financial budgets, the population demographics of the congregation, location of the church, and other considerations. Based on these dynamics the youth directors and pastors of the congregation should design a youth program that they believe will work best for them and attract young people to participate. The way the program is designed and run is extremely important, since if these things are not done well youth will not attend the program. This section will be an examination of religious youth ministry programs. The purpose of this examination will be to compare what different programs offer to adolescents, consider various ways to update a program and then with these elements as a lens, see if the program meets the criteria of a successful program.

Elements of a High Quality Program

Further analysis of what makes a program successful will be derived from a compilation of the work to date of various scholars as well as practicing youth workers' definitions and thoughts. These different pieces will be synthesized to further support the proposed definition of success, which can be reached through following six specific key indicators. The indicators will provide insight into how to design and nurture a successful program, aligning with the previously stated definition. The measure of a program in terms of how it is doing and in how successful it is will continue to be supported by the definition. The analysis of how programs both are run and should be run will be based in this definition, as well as from thought by adolescents currently participating in religious youth ministry programs. There were a total of 303 of middle and senior high students

from two congregations surveyed about the program they currently or most recently have participated in. They were asked how they felt about the program they are involved with and what, if any thing, they would change about the program. The participant suggestions of how to change/improve programs will be important to think about, as they are thoughts straight from the consumer population the programs are aiming to reach.

Recalling that the criteria of a successful religious youth ministry program will include; the ability for youth to become connected to an adult leader through the program; if the program meets the “every day, everywhere ministry”¹⁷ needs of the youth the programs offered are meant to impact; if the lessons learned in the programs stay with an individual over an extended period of time; and if the program continues to flexibly develop and change over time means that these are key among the many factors that should be noted. As one studies the quality of religious youth ministry programs these factors must be analyzed in learning more about what makes for a high quality program.

Factors Leading to Success

One important factor that influences a good program is the adults involved in the organizing and running of the programs. We have seen how relationships with these leaders can influence an adolescent’s life. Now let’s examine what the adults’ role is in the development and management of a program. It is important for leaders of youth programs to be willing to serve: to serve both God and the congregation.¹⁸ Part of being a good youth leader is having the ability to teach: to engage youth in study rather than simply to tell about faith. This may sound like a strange and perhaps obvious thing to say, but it is important to know what this means and to take note that this is part of building a

¹⁷ Lyle Griner, interviewed by author, Minneapolis, MN August 2008.

¹⁸ Steven Patty, Steve Keels Eds. *Truth Quest Impact* (Nashville Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2005), 214.

good program. Youth leaders should be able to teach the adolescents, not simply act in the role of some one who watches them or spends time with them without important interactions. A youth leader should be able to teach adolescents the skills they need to do things for themselves, including the skills required for decision making in a situation that requires the application of moral thinking. Through ministering the teachings should go further than just preaching those skills, but also include both teaching lessons from the Bible and modeling those lessons to encourage the development of the youths' faith.

Consistency. It is important for adolescents to have consistency in their life, to be able to depend on something and to have a routine. Some studies have shown that in schools students do better and have better relationships with their teachers when they have them for more than the usual one year. 'Looping,' as it is known, allows for the formation of relationships that support students in this effort. It is also true that often the 'specialist' teacher like the one teaching music or physical education knows the students quite well due to having them over several years, and that they are often a source of support for students as a result. It has been found that the practice 'adds' as much as a month of time to the academic learning timetable and that the strength of the student-teacher relationship is much stronger.¹⁹ The same practice leads to similar outcomes with the leaders of a youth program who interact with young people over several years. Programs are stronger when the leaders stay with the program for multiple years. If the staff is consistent the youth are able to develop stronger and closer relationships with them. In building relationships this also gives families and youth leaders an opportunity

¹⁹ <http://ceep.crc.uiuc.edu/eecearchive/digests/1997/burke97.pdf> accessed November, 2008.

to know each other better and work together.²⁰ Staff consistency also allows for a program to remain steady in how things are done, while at the same time allows for the development of the program to move forward without it having to go backward first. This is not say that a program can not go forward when the staff changes, but it means that the same staff will know what has been attempted and previously been a success or failed.

The continual development of a program is vital to having a high quality program. A large part of a religious youth ministry program's success comes from adolescents participating in and continuing their participation in the program. For adolescents to maintain interest in the program there are several things that need to happen. One is that the program should focus on adolescents; it should focus on the issues that adolescents are dealing with, and meet the needs of those adolescents. A second criterion along the lines of meeting the needs and dealing with the issues adolescents have, is that the program should stay current. As times change, as pop culture changes, as the interest of adolescents change and society changes, so should the program that is a support system for them both reflect and address those changes.

As was briefly noted, part of what makes a religious youth ministry program different from other programs is that while participating in it teenagers can develop and grow in their faith in an environment that supports their natural need to ask questions and make sense of what they are learning. For this to happen, the programs need to be structured around faith and spiritual development. There is no doubt that part of what attracts teenagers to attend religious youth ministry program are fun activities and

²⁰ Billy Johnson Youth Leader at Mount Olivet Lutheran Church, interviewed by author, Minneapolis, MN August 2008.

friendships, but while engaging in these activities it is important to make intentional time for faith development. Doug Fields, author of the book “Purpose Driven Youth Ministry: 9 Essential Foundations for Healthy Growth” does a good job of providing thought about how a program can expand, develop and grow a participants faith life. For example in Fields’ writing he poses the following questions to think about when considering and planning for the development and growth of a program. The questions to think about are “Do you provide a youth ministry environment where spiritual growth is valued? What role does prayer play in your program? And, where is God’s power evident in your ministry.”²¹ This is one critical aspect of the programs: that they are working towards spiritual development and it is important for the leader(s) to have a plan of how to account for this when creating an event or spending time with adolescents individually.

Fields also suggests that reflecting on a program on how a program is doing would be to think about the following five ideas in regards to the program. The five ideas are: “(1) to put relationships first, (2) a fresh source of ideas, (3) strength beyond a personality, (4) an ongoing follow-up system, and (5) clarification of their purpose and potential audience.”²² In other words, what these ideas suggest is the relationships that are made through participation in the programs should be a top priority for a program, ensuring a place where new ideas are generated to continue a program in new ways. The program must be more than just what the leader of it does to personally attract youth (so if the leader leaves for whatever reason the program is still there are going strong), always checking in with each youth individually to know where they are at and know

²¹ Doug Fields, *Purpose Driven Youth Ministry: 9 Essential Foundations for Healthy Growth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 40.

²² Doug Fields, *Purpose Driven Youth Ministry: 9 Essential Foundations for Healthy Growth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 194.

what is going on in their life and lastly to remember who the program is for and think about why the program is there in the first place.

Improvements for a High Quality Program

It is worthy of examination to consider the ways in which a program can be improved. These improvements are ways to work towards meeting the four criteria of a successful program. As information and studies about religious youth ministry programs and religious lives of adolescents develop there is a strong suggestion that parents and life at home have more influence than what some have previously thought in regards to adolescents' religious lives and practices. According to Doug Fields "youth workers are becoming increasingly aware that a student-only youth ministry is less effective than a family-friendly youth ministry."²³ While it is true that religious youth ministry programs impact the spiritual lives of adolescents, a large part of their spiritual development also comes from religious beliefs stated or modeled by parents and from practices that take place at home. If families have such a strong influence on the beliefs and practices of adolescents, leaders of youth programs should work with the parents and guardians to make an even deeper impact on the lives of adolescents. When what is being taught in youth programs converges with what is also taught and reinforced at home there is a higher likelihood adolescents will take on those practices for themselves. For some adolescents, it greatly increases the probability that they take these practices with them into their adult life.

Knowing the role of families allows the leaders of the programs to either change or design a program around this information. To begin with, it means that leaders should

²³ Doug Fields, *Purpose Driven Youth Ministry: 9 Essential Foundations for Healthy Growth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 251.

communicate with the parents and guardians, let them know what activities are going on, and what the focus of the activities are. It also means that leaders should try to get to know the parents as much as they can. This advice also connects to the idea of being consistent with the staff, since having a leader at the same church for an extended period of time allows the leader and parents to get to know each other better and work to support the adolescents better. Becoming a family-friendly youth ministry does not mean that parents need to attend every activity with the youth, but rather that parents should be included in knowing what is going on and maybe every once in a while attending an activity, perhaps one targeting issues the ministry program can assist the parent in addressing with youth.

Fields argues that parents should be viewed as partners in working with adolescents.²⁴ A youth leader can learn things from parents and parents can learn things from youth leaders about how to help the youth and provide whatever it is the youth need. One way to think of this idea is to see it as a team work, since “youth ministry is really a team ministry working with parents, not a competitive ministry in which youth workers fight with parents for the time and attention of young people.”²⁵ When reflecting upon a current program or thinking about developing a new one the youth pastors and leaders should think of ways to keep parents involved and not isolate their work and relationships to simply focus on the adolescents.

²⁴ Doug Fields, *Purpose Driven Youth Ministry: 9 Essential Foundations for Healthy Growth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 252-253.

²⁵ Steven Patty, Steve Keels Eds. *Truth Quest Impact* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2005), 247.

Keys to a High Quality Program

After considering the sum of information that came from books and conversation with professionals in the field I have come up with a suggested set of 'keys to a high quality program'. These six keys are critical bits and pieces from the different conversations, surveys and sources that I then decided collectively would make a high quality program because of the reoccurrence of the ideas. Out of all these various thoughts and ideas on how to design and run a program, the following are six keys to consider as critical for a high quality religious youth ministry program. There certainly may be others; however, they incorporate the findings of the research that I and others have conducted. Attending to the six keys as indicators of quality will result in meeting the four criteria for success.

The six keys are 1) provide a family friendly program, 2) ensure that the program is geared toward the participants, 3) create a focus on relationship development (both with a faith life and with people involved in the program), 4) intend for long term impact on the participants, 5) provide consistency and 6) continually reflection on the program and its effectiveness. When these six keys are all in place a program that is beneficial to everyone who has a connection to the program will result.

Elements of the keys come from a broad perspective. As an example, several different sources suggested that the new trend and development in religious youth ministry programs is to build programs that are more family oriented,²⁶ while others have either suggested or made it a strong point that the programs should focus on the needs of

²⁶ Pamela, McCall. "All in the Family: Don't Isolate Youth in 'Youth Programs'." Christian Century 118 (2001): 22-23.

those who are currently involved in the program.²⁷ Based on sources that have shown the importance of adult role models and from responses in the three different surveys, the broad need for relationship development stuck out as an important aspect.²⁸ As with many things the more consistent a program is and the more consistent are the people in charge the better it is for all involved, and so a key element follows.²⁹ Similarly, the best way to make sure a program is meeting the needs of those involved and that it is providing all that it can is to remember to reflect upon the program.³⁰ Following are more developed descriptions of what these six keys mean and how they all fit together to make a high quality program that will meet the criteria for a successful program, written to address those adults in charge of the design and delivery of programs. The order does not suggest importance; rather it is the combination of these elements that is important.

1) A family friendly program: Orient the youth program to include families. Create a support system for parents and the adolescents. When looking at the data presented earlier recall that parents and family have an impact on adolescents' participation in youth ministry programs. Examining a parent's involvement from that perspective is a good place to start when thinking about their influence. Now, take a parents involvement a further than just getting a child to participate, rather get them involved as well. It is good for teenagers to have adults in their lives aside from their parents who care about them and this is a great gain for adolescents who participate in youth programs. It is also important for the parents to know the adults involved in their

²⁷ Steven Patty, Steve Keels Eds. *Truth Quest Impact* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2005), 217.

²⁸ "Forty Developmental Assests: for well rounded and healthy adolescents" <http://www.search-insitute.org> accessed August 15, 2008.

²⁹ Billy Jonhson interviewed by author August 2008.

³⁰ David,Olshine, "Smell Check," *Group Magazine* 34 (2008): 67-68.

children's lives and have the option to turn to these other adults for help. While the majority or nearly all of the activities may be meant exclusively for adolescent participation, let parents know what is going on and include them!

2) Ensure that the program is geared towards the participants: Religious youth ministry programs are called that for a reason, since they are programs meant for adolescents. Keep this in mind when planning and organizing activities. Ensuring that the issues discussed, direction the group takes and overall theme of the program is meeting that need and the interests of adolescents that are currently in the program will positively affect the impact and the participants.

3) Create a focus on relationship development: From the responses in all three surveys that were introduced previously the relationships that can grow from participation in youth ministry programs is important. Through out the three surveys respondents commented on the role peers and adults from the programs have; that they influenced both their lives and participation in a program. When thinking about the curriculum of a youth program and again when planning the activities, one must think about the specifics of youth relationship development. Consider how the activity allows them to develop and deepen relationships with both peers and with adults, as well as their faith. It is important to think deeply about how the activity and the curriculum will allow them growth and guide them in deepening their faith and their personal relationship with God.

4) Intend for long term impact on participants: A great measure of how effective a program is, is knowing that participants are applying what they learned through participation in the program in their lives after they have 'graduated' from youth

programs. Their religious life, the values they learned, and the faith practices they studied should all be portable once they are no longer participants in youth programs. The CYE surveys results shows that it is possible for participants to walk away from a youth ministry program taking with them what they learned in the program. All the skills, development, growth, all that can be gained through participation should be things that an individual can take with them, to transfer to their next life stage.

5) Provide consistency: It is important for several reasons to provide for consistency in youth program leadership. This allows a deeper development in relationships between the youth and the leader, as well as between the family and the youth leader. It also makes for a strong program and provides a good foundation to continue the growth and development of a program. If the program experiences frequent changes in leadership, leaders should examine the reasons that is happening and if it is not avoidable, should plan for easy transitions between leaders.

6) Continually reflect on the quality of the program and its effectiveness: Time should be taken to reflect on a program, both by participants and by the leadership. People often get so caught up in the rush of life that time is not taken to gather participant feedback, to reflect, to consider what is working and what is not working. This also creates an opportunity to ensure a program is still geared towards the current participants. Thorough reflection supports changes and continuous improvements to a program.

It can be difficult to judge whether a program is successful or not, whether or not it is of high quality and effective in shaping and supporting the lives of adolescents who are participating in the program. One way to begin looking at a program is to communicate with those involved in the program. The three surveys discussed through

out this paper are good examples of how much information we can learn when we communicate in some way with those who are currently or at one time were involved in the program. The four criteria discussed in the beginning and the six keys that emerge from research conducted to date provide some avenues for assessing a program. For example, the quality of a program could be measured through the use of the six keys, noting that a program that adheres to the six keys leads to the programs ability to meet the four criteria for success. The six keys can be used as a guide for a program to reach the four criteria. When assessing a program see if it offers the aspects as suggested and so meets each of the six keys, it can become a guide for use in to how to measure a program.

Given the information available, the following are ideas for assessing a specific program's quality, value and potential for long term effectiveness and impact. First, examine the program closely; talk with the participants and families of the participants and see if these elements are present. Use survey instruments to gather information from the families and participants. Setting a clear mission, standards and guidelines for programs also gives leaders of current programs a way to check-in and make changes as needed, while at the same time giving a guide of what to think about and include when creating new programs and allowing potential participants a clear view of what they might expect. Such clarity can assist with any necessary transition in leadership as well.

Conclusion

Attention to the quality and potential impact of effective religious youth ministry programs is important when it comes to the influence it has on its participants. As noted in the data shared, when adolescents participate in religious youth ministry programs they appear to be less likely to participate in risky activities, have better participation in school

and learn important and significant life skills. These are all positive results and if participation in youth ministry programs influences their decisions, as it would appear that it does, then one can conclude that the programs play a key role in adolescents lives. Many youth who were surveyed about the youth program they participate in indicated that their perception is that it has made them a better person, made their faith stronger, made them think about how they treat other people, and that they think about their actions before acting on them. It is great that youth participants feel this way, and it makes it all the more necessary to consider the quality of a program and consistently consider how well they are being served through participation in such youth programs.

Multiple personal and anecdotal examples and data collections have demonstrated how participation in religious youth ministry programs can positively impact an adolescent's life. The quality of the program itself is closely linked to the individual's experiences and longitudinal impacts on a given adolescent. This is to say that having a high quality religious youth ministry program is key to adolescents being able to walk away with applications for their daily lives, as participants and in their futures. Religious youth ministry programs do appear to positively affect the lives of adolescents who participate in them.

It is critical to focus on those who will participate as well as those who will lead a program. In the analysis of impact, it all comes back to understanding the needs of the adolescents who participate and being able to support them and guide them. It is important to see that everything in the various data collections is connected to one another. Looking at the connections as a sort of 'logic model,' in order for programs to have any impact on adolescents they need to participate and in order for them to

participate there needs to be a program of sufficient quality to attract and retain them.

This is a critical connector, that for a program to impact adolescents positively it needs to be an effective program that truly reaches the participants. When one takes the connectors apart and examines them a little more closely it becomes easier to see how it all fits together, which provides information to act on as well as for further study.

The data suggest that the lives of participants are at least 'slightly changed' by all that they can gain simply through their participation. It is great to have teenagers show up and participate in a program, but it is important to know why they are there, what it is that motivates them to go. Knowing this allows for the leadership to target the specific needs of the youth involved in programs as well as to evaluate the impact of what they are planning and providing.

It is clear that teenagers who participate in religious youth ministry programs behave differently and make decisions that are dissimilar by comparison to those who do not. By self-report, those who participate gain several life skills, important support systems and a place to develop their faith. These things appear to happen because of the impact of the programs themselves. The quality of the program plays such an important role in all of this, perhaps the most important one. Most important because without a strong program there is not much to offer the children beyond a range of interesting social activities and as a result youth may not gain anything of long term value. For example, the curriculum of the program influences what participants learn and then take with them. What they learn from the curriculum and leaders of the program is what they take with them and usually put in to practice in their daily lives.

For different reasons teenagers across the United States participate in religious youth ministry programs. Data suggest that some go because of parents, some because of friends, some go because of the program(s) and others chose to go for themselves. Whatever the reason may be, when they attend, their lives are impacted through participation. In examining a national survey (NSYR) insight is gained into some of the ways participation in such programs can impact adolescents, while at the time in this study we compare that information to data that was collected locally. Review of the different sets of data was important because the more information the better, but having the additional self-report surveys adds another, more local facet, to the information. The data that came from the self-report surveys allowed me to collect information that was not already (or readily) available. These particular surveys begin to supplement this argument in areas where previous research was either lacking or was not found. In comparing the very different surveys (the ones I did with the NSYR) I was able to compare a sample from a national scale with that of a local scale. Even though it was not a large local scale it was still able to provide some useful comparative feedback.

This paper has several limitations that must be noted. There is simply not enough information available that focuses specifically on how religious youth ministry programs are able to impact the lives of the adolescents who participate in them. There is little comparative qualitative analysis as to how adolescents feel about the various aspects programs and how they believe participation in the program influences their lives, much less anything that is very quantifiable. It is for this reason I made the decision to conduct my own surveys. Through my own data collection I was able to gather some additional thoughts and feedback from adolescents currently in youth programs and from people

who are older and no longer in their adolescent years. Gathering information from the two different populations was important because the older population was able to better reflect upon their experiences now that they are beyond the program and it also provided some useful insight as to how participation as an adolescent can impact a person's life in the long run.

Conducting my own surveys has its pros and cons. My resources and time were very limited, making it a fairly small scale collection, and leading to a limited data set. However, the additional information was supportive of the overall argument and gives some greater, localized detail. In addition to the sample size, those who responded tended to be more demographically similar than dissimilar, inclusive of generally Christian, middle class young people who self-elected to respond, which makes it more difficult to generalize conclusions beyond the population represented.

Another limitation would be that while there are many potential areas to examine when studying adolescents and the quality and impacts of religious youth ministry programs, this work was relatively narrowly focused on the broadest of impacts. Some of the areas that would be interesting to consider for further or future study would be why some adolescents drop out of programs or to delve further into why it is that some simply never go. With additional resources and time it would be interesting to go further in depth with specific areas of focus from this paper, as an example to work towards some common agreement over what 'high quality' may mean in the design and deployment of a program.

It is surely safe to say that more research needs to be done in this area. There is much for us to learn when it comes to adolescents' involvement in religious youth

ministry programs and how involvement in such programs can impact their lives. It is also possibly worth considering is that of the adolescents surveyed many of them spend a fair amount of time involved in church activities per week. From their responses are displayed ranges of average hours they spend in church programs per week:

Average hours spent per week in church activities (Answers are in percentages)

0-2	21
2-4	47
4-6	23
6 or more	9

Source: data obtained from Current Adolescents Youth Group Experience Survey (2008)

It seems that with adolescents spending any portion at all of their time participating in religious youth ministry programs we should be doing all we can to ensure it is of high quality and potentially impactful. The best pathway to that end lies in gaining increased understanding about how participation impacts them, the best ways to reach those who participate and learning more about what it really takes to do our best to make the program the best it can be.

As we study information and the analysis that is currently available, the majority of researchers and practitioners appear to base their thinking on the work of Christian Smith. While there is no doubt that the work he did with the NSYR was of great value and importance, there needs to be more studies like this done. I can only hope that as time goes on more research will be done in this area and that we use the information to our advantage.

In an earlier section data was presented that shows whether or not people consider themselves to be religious or spiritual. In future research it would be interesting to

compare responses of adolescents and those of adults on their religious and spiritual lives. Does a person's views change, do they stay the same. What development occurs between the years of adolescence and adulthood when it comes to their belief in religion and spirituality? Potential question for study would be what causes their view to change, and at what age does the change occur. As a next study, I could repeat the data gathering with different populations and look for similar trends. It is also possible that other factors, for example, marital status or level of education or other demographic information may reveal some further insight.

Following a similar pattern of thought it would be interesting to examine the/any correlation between participation as an adolescent in youth group with the retention of that person in the same congregation and retention within the same denomination.

In our current society the stresses and pressures for adolescents continually worsen. Many complain that children are growing up faster than they should, but if we can meet the needs of children, and support them in their lives perhaps we can relieve some of those stresses and pressures and let them be children again as well as support them through their adolescence.

This paper brings to light a few things that should be considered. While people may be aware that religious youth ministry programs can impact the lives of those who participate in them, they may not be aware to the extent in which these lives are affected. A portion of many of the different ways a teenager can be impacted are mentioned and explained to allow for a better understanding and insight into the ways in which participation impacts participants. It also provides reminders for those currently running religious youth ministry programs things to think about in regards to their programs. This

allows for reflection on and evaluation of a program to see if it is offering all that it can and thereby allowing participants to get all that they possibly can out of the program. For adults involved in ministry all this information should be given careful consideration, as it provides them greater knowledge into ways to potentially reach participants.

Adolescents are at a higher level of vulnerability than at other stages in religious development and knowing different ways to reach them and the best ways to support them are important. If we know what works, and how to improve what does not work participants can be affected in great ways.

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Appendix A – Church Youth Experience Survey
(Administered to young adults, 18+ years of age)

Church Youth Experience Survey

What is your gender?

What is your age?

As an adolescent (ages 12-18) did you participate in religious youth programs?

Do you consider yourself to be religious?

Do you consider yourself to be spiritual?

For each of the following statements, please select the response that best describes your experience:

My parents influenced my participation or lack of participation

My friends influenced my participation or lack of participation

The program provided influenced my participation or lack of participation

My relationship with adults involved in the youth program

My feelings about my faith influenced my participation or lack of participation

My religious affiliation influenced my participation or lack of participation

As an adolescent, were you an active participant in para-youth programs such as 'Young Life' or other activities with a spiritual tone not affiliated with a religious institution?

Through your participation in religious youth programs, do you believe that gained an of the following benefits:

A sense of community

Any life skills (such as work ethic, team work, task commitment, etc.)

Leadership characteristics

Adult mentor(s)

Faith development

Support system

Other skills gained

If you responded in the previous question that you were impacted 'somewhat' or 'true' or 'very true' in any area please respond to the following. The skills I gained impact my life today in:

Faith practices

Community service practices

Work choices

Work habits

Relationship choices

Please share any additional thoughts about your experiences with religious youth programs and their impact on your life.

Appendix B - Current Youth Experience Survey
(Administered to current middle and high school students)

Current Youth Experience Survey

What grade are you in?

How old are you?

Do you consider yourself to be spiritual?

Do you consider yourself to be religious?

What has the most impact/influence on your spiritual life?

Friends

Family

Youth group

School

Other

On average how many hours do you spend participating in church activities in a typical week?

0-2

2-4

4-6

6 or more

Why do you participate in church activities? (mark all that apply to you)

Because of the people that run the programs

Because an adult from your home makes you

Because you enjoy it

Because of your friends

Because of your faith

Does your faith influence your behavior outside of church activities? If yes, in what ways?

If you could change one or two things about your youth group what would it be?

Do you feel welcome and comfortable participating in your youth group?

Please share any other thoughts or feelings you have about participating in your youth group, your life or anything else you'd like to add.