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LONELINESS AND THE CHURCH: CREATING EFFECTIVE DISCIPLESHIP SYSTEMS FOR THE NEXT GENERATION

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LONELINESS AND THE CHURCH: CREATING EFFECTIVE DISCIPLESHIP SYSTEMS
FOR THE NEXT GENERATION

By

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Abstract

Loneliness is the most common shared experience. With Generation Alpha already predicted to be the loneliest and most anxious generation of all time, it is more important than ever for next-generation ministry leaders to step ahead of the trend of loneliness and establish effective discipleship systems within their ministry. This study explores to what level people are experiencing loneliness on a daily basis and how their church involvement impacts said loneliness. The church is good at offering large group and small group connections for individuals, but most participants said their church does not offer mentorship opportunities, neglecting the vital intimate dimension of connection Dr. Vivek Murthy discusses. This study proposes a youth leader training manual for churches to implement to make sure each student is able to have a one-on-one coaching relationship with their leader.

KEY WORDS: Loneliness, Mentorship, Discipleship, Generation Z, Generation Alpha

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Vivek Murthy, General Surgeon under the Obama Administration, in his book *Together*, describes three dimensions of connection every human needs to have so they do not experience loneliness. An intimate, social, and collective type of connection is necessary for each person. When I read this, it gave vocabulary and validated emotions I had felt in the past. Like everyone, I have had times of deep loneliness but never validated those feelings because I still had a best friend or a group of friends. I did not realize there are different types of connections that are necessary. No person is exempt from experiencing loneliness. Even if a person is able to name their emotion as that, so many issues people face each day are rooted in their experience of loneliness. Loneliness is a subjective deficiency or lack of relationships. Each generation is experiencing loneliness at a higher degree. In continuation of this trend, Generation Alpha is predicted to be the loneliest and most anxious generation of all time. The loneliest generation is quite a label to have as the oldest is only 10 years old.

Learning these two facts prompted the question in me -- what is the Church doing about it? The church should be able to offer all three dimensions of connection, but people are still not feeling fulfilled in their relationships with others or with God, causing them to turn to substances, other religions, or complete apathy towards Christianity. How can I as a future Next-Gen pastor step ahead of these predictions and create effective systems to help people on their journey to combat loneliness?

The Problem

In 2015, Twenge found 31% more students in 8th and 10th grade felt lonely in comparison to the same survey being completed in 2011. The same was true for 12th graders at 22% more people experiencing loneliness (Twenge 2017, 97). Now, the survey is 6 years old,

those statistics are even more relevant. The COVID-19 Pandemic, extended use of technology and media, and other external factors have triggered the increase in levels of loneliness in young people. But, young people are not the only ones experiencing high levels of loneliness.

Researchers use metrics to measure anxiety and depressive symptoms in adults to identify their levels of loneliness as they express in similar ways. During the COVID-19 pandemic, 30% more adults were likely to screen positive for anxiety and depression than before the pandemic started (Van der Velden et, al 2021, 4). As the pandemic called for isolation, working from home, and general disengagement from social activity, it is assumed the levels of loneliness increased by a similar amount. People's experience with loneliness is cyclical. Their expressions of anxiety and depressive symptoms make it hard to form the connections that are needed to not feel lonely. When the opportunities to meet people are taken away, this cycle becomes even harder to break.

One consistent factor in the lessening of anxiety and depression for individuals is religious involvement. Hudson researchers noted communities of color have fewer rates of anxiety and depression due to higher rates of religious involvement (Hudson 2015, 586). Additionally, there are high correlations between religious involvement and low rates of suicidal ideation for teens. When compared to suicidal ideation trends for non-religious teenagers, the social support that religious communities offer has a positive impact on a student's struggle with suicidal ideation (Cole-Lewis 2016, 1175). Youth identified prayer, faith-based connections, and other expressions of their religion as helpful tools to cope with depressive symptoms (Cole-Lewis, 1183).

If faith-based activities benefit mental health, should this not also be the case for loneliness? The two, anxiety and loneliness, are understood to be experienced similarly which should cause this hypothesis to be true. This thesis seeks to understand the connection between

loneliness and one's religious experience. The hypothesis is that similarly to studies done with depression and anxiety, levels of loneliness will be lessened with increased involvement in a local church. By measuring people's religious background; current church involvement, and general types of connection, there will be a correlation to the quantitative experience of loneliness someone experiences. The data that is collected will inform a proposal for a discipleship system that churches could implement based on the needs in their community.

Research Questions

To answer the correlation between religious involvement and loneliness, this research seeks to answer three major questions covering the topic of loneliness, young people's experience with religion, and discipleship. First, to what level are people experiencing loneliness on a day-to-day basis? If the hypothesis is correct, loneliness is becoming an epidemic for many with what seems to be little support for it getting better. This thesis hopes to answer how college-aged students are experiencing loneliness and how it impedes their life.

Second, this thesis seeks to discover how the church helps people create the connections they need to. No person is immune to experiencing loneliness, however, if religious involvement is supposed to reduce levels of loneliness and has the ability to provide the three dimensions of connection, then people who are actively involved in a local church should have appropriate connections in all three dimensions.

The last research question is how does discipleship impact levels of loneliness, especially with the next generation? As a culmination to the prior research questions, this question seeks to understand what the missing gap is between one's church involvement and their experience of loneliness. If churches are not providing adequate discipleship opportunities, what can be added?

Loneliness is a cyclical experience and the church should be the best place to break that cycle --

especially at a young age.

Significance

The research that is completed in this survey will benefit the current generation of

college-aged adults but also Generation Alpha in current children's ministry and youth ministry

contexts. Due to the connection and similarities between Generation Z and Generation Alpha, the

conclusions from this study will impact Generation Alpha. The long-term goal of this survey is

with the implementation of new discipleship systems, young people will see lessened rates of

loneliness. This benefits the current generations and generations to come. If churches can

implement effective discipleship systems to engage the next generation, then these benefits can

become a reality.

Summary

The church has a unique opportunity to create healthy environments where young people

can create intimate, social, and collective dimensions of connection. There is, however, a missing

piece. Generation Alpha's trend of high levels of loneliness is an indicator that the church needs

to make a change in how they are helping connect people. Prior research shows high rates of

anxiety and depression are lessened by religious involvement. Loneliness and symptoms of

mental health display in the same way so religious involvement should, in turn, lessen levels of

loneliness. By answering the three research questions, this thesis hopes to show that the

correlation between levels of loneliness, the opportunity for connection, and the discipleship

opportunities of young people is high. If the church can be a place of healthy connection, then

young people may not leave the church at such a high rate.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated the effects of loneliness for people around the world. It has raised questions like what is loneliness, what the long-term effects are, and why one experiences loneliness. Even before the start of the pandemic, Generation Z (Gen Z), the children born between 1995 and 2010, were already labeled as the loneliest generation. The coming generations are predicted to have the same label but to an even higher extreme (Twenge 2017, 97). If people are wanting to reverse these predictive trends, the American Church needs to examine its discipleship systems to see if they are providing its members with the proper connections to fight against loneliness. This literature review looks at data and studies from older generations and will use the limited data on Generation Z to conclude Generation Z's experience with loneliness. The review will also explore the current, common forms of discipleship within the church and how research has shown subjective religiosity affects loneliness symptoms.

What is Loneliness?

Dimensions of Connection

For the purposes of this research, one must know the definition of loneliness. Loneliness is defined as a situation in which a person has a subjective deficiency or a lack of relationships (Biehl 2018, 1). It is important to note that loneliness can feel different for each person based on the relationships they are lacking. A person could be in a room full of people and feel lonely, or they could have a great intimate relationship with someone and still experience loneliness.

Dr. Vivek Murthy, General Surgeon during the Obama and Biden administrations, studied people experiencing loneliness and found that this subjective deficiency is divided into three main categories of relationships. A person must have relationships that fulfill all three of these 'dimensions' to not experience loneliness: intimate; social; and collective. Murthy goes further

by saying these three dimensions of relationships are necessary for the person to thrive, not just diminish feelings of loneliness. The first is an intimate relationship, a one-one connection where someone feels like they can share their full self. This could be a romantic partner, best friend, or close mentor. Next, each person needs relational connections. For example, does the person feel like they have friends who they can invite to their birthday party? These relationships are still close friends but do not need to be as deeply known as the intimate connection. Last, each person needs a collective dimension to their social relationships. This is answering the question if the person is involved in an activity or group to give them something with which to belong. For some, this could be a strong ethnic identity, a religious community, a sport or club, or even an experience in line at the grocery store to remind the person there is more to life than just them (Murthy 2020, 8).

The Shared Human Experience

Each person can experience loneliness. Humans are built for human connection and when that is missing, loneliness acts as a vital function to warn the person something essential is missing (Murthy 2020, 23). Studies have shown loneliness goes beyond the psychological need but that social connection is as basic of a need as hunger and thirst. The fundamental drives of hunger and thirst operate when someone lacks social connection (Inagaki 2016, 1099). Additionally, the region of the brain that is activated when a person experiences loneliness is the same region of the brain that activates when the person experiences physical pain (Linneman 2018). This has been true since the Garden of Eden when God created Eve for Adam. As God is creating Eve, He says to Adam, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make him a helper suitable for him" (Genesis 2:18, NIV). While often this verse is cited as proof that people should be married, it shows a deeper reason that connection is a basic need for humans. God created

fruit trees for Adam to eat from, pointed out the water in the springs underground, gave Adam a

job and purpose, and then created Eve for him. These were the basic needs that God identified

for Adam and Eve which he then provided.

The Triggers for Loneliness

If companionship is a basic need like food and water, why do people not treat it like one?

For many, they mitigate their feelings of loneliness due to having connections in other

dimensions. They may feel that they have an intimate and collective connection but they are

lacking the relational. They undermine their own experience rather than being able to name it as

loneliness. People need to know the signs of loneliness so they can see the need and treat it as

such. Below are several external experiences that can trigger loneliness for people.

First, many studies have seen high correlation trends between media usage and

loneliness. While it is unclear if media usage affects loneliness or if loneliness affects media

usage, there have been lots of trends showing that younger generations are addicted to media

(Yalcin 2020, 210). Media, especially social media outlets such as Instagram, Snapchat, and

Facebook, have made the fears of being left out exacerbated as young people can see in real-time

their peers hanging out without them. Situations like this beget loneliness. However, when a

person is feeling lonely, they are likely to withdraw from in-person interactions to media outlets

which perpetuate this cycle of media addiction and loneliness. Olgathe Khazan puts it like this,

"if you use those digital connections as a way station [ways to meet up somewhere], it's

associated with lower levels of loneliness. If it's used as a destination, they tend to withdraw

socially because it's punishing and interacting digitally perhaps as a non-authentic self, makes

them feel more like they're accepted but it doesn't actually make them feel less lonely" (Khazan

2017). Teenagers are the people who use media the most and it is shown in their current trends of

loneliness. 31% more students in 8th and 10th grade felt lonely during a 2015 survey in comparison to the same survey being completed in 2011. The same is true for 12th graders at 22% more people experiencing loneliness (Twenge 2017, 97).

Teenagers are also subject to experience increased loneliness due to transitions. While any person can experience feelings of loneliness due to transition, studies have shown people transitioning into college experience high levels of loneliness due to a new environment and change in social support from friends and family (Sladek 2015, 299). When people enter into a new environment, there is a sense of losing social support and connection which emphasizes the feelings of loneliness within somebody. Young people who are entering college often lose connections with people in their city of origin which makes them feel like they lost the intimate, social, or collective connection they need. Additionally, loneliness can increase feelings of social anxiety within people creating another tiring cycle of people being unable to make friends due to anxiety, increased loneliness, and then increased social anxiety because of the increased loneliness.

Another trigger for loneliness is unforeseen circumstances that affect large communities at a time. The COVID-19 pandemic is one of those unforeseen events that has been catastrophic for people's physical and mental health. With stay-at-home orders, two-week quarantines, and mandated isolations, people are not able to connect on the necessary levels. In studies of retirement facilities, long-term care facilities, and elderly homes, there was a higher number of loneliness and people expressing anxiety and depressive symptoms (Van der Velden et. al 2021, 2). The correlation between loneliness and mental health problems has also been at an all-time high. A study shows that 30% of adults were more likely to screen positive for anxiety or depressive disorders during the pandemic (Van der Velden et, al 2021, 4). As discussed before,

the anxiety or depressive symptoms create a vicious cycle of loneliness as one makes the other worse.

The Effects of Loneliness

Mental Health

The triggers of loneliness show consistent data that loneliness is almost always paired with struggles of mental health (Chang et. al 2020, 1). It is important to understand the symptoms of anxiety and depression to understand the full effect loneliness can have on one's mental health. An important note of this literature review is loneliness does not automatically mean that the person can be diagnosed with anxiety or depression. The goal is to explore the similarities between these mental illnesses and the effects of loneliness. This will bring up similar symptoms as opposed to diagnosing participants.

First, anxiety is one of the most common mental illnesses that people today are facing. People that struggle with anxiety see symptoms of low self-esteem, fatigue, insomnia, addictive behaviors, social withdrawals, perfectionism, and a myriad of physical health issues such as stomach ulcers, weight gain or loss, and change in appetite (Yalçin 2020, 209). When a person experiences a loss of a necessary dimension of connection, it can result in the exhibition of one of these symptoms. Anxious symptoms can act as an alert to the person that they are not feeling fulfilled in their current connections.

Similarly, depressive symptoms can act as the same alert. People who experience depression understand this statement that it is more than just a sad mood (Twenge 2017, 83). For many, this 'sad mood' is paired with hopelessness, lack of meaning, loss of interest in life, a lethargic state, and suicidal ideations (Twenge 2017, 82). Again, the goal of this review is not to diagnose those experiencing loneliness with clinical depression. But, to understand the severity

of depressive symptoms, one must understand that clinical level depression is the leading cause

of disability leave for Americans aged 15-44 (Hudson 2015, 584). When a person experiences

loneliness, they can quickly slip into the depressive symptoms listed above and not realize that

the root of the issue is a lack of connection.

Physical Health

Change in physical health is also a predictor of one's experience with loneliness. Vivek

Murthy, during his time as a practicing care practitioner, realized that the root of many people's

struggles with weight or addiction is a lack of connection. In his book, he mentions, "the impact

of lacking social connection and the reducing of life span is equal to the risk of smoking fifteen

cigarettes a day, and it's greater than the risk associated with obesity, excess alcohol

consumption, and lack of exercise" (Murthy 2020, 13). If people are feeling like they are lacking

a connection, they will either turn to addictive behaviors to numb the anxiety and depressive

symptoms. Additionally, if a person is experiencing low self-esteem and a sense of exclusion due

to loneliness, the peer pressure of casual drinking and drugs can lead to addiction when the

person becomes dependent on them to find the needed connections.

Loneliness also has a large impact on people's sleep. One of the common symptoms of

anxiety and depression is the person could either experience insomnia or consistent fatigue and

in some cases both. If a person is not experiencing fulfilling social connection in all of the

needed dimensions, they are likely to sleep more than their average peer. While this may seem

like a good thing, too much sleep can exaggerate the person's feelings of being left out as there

are people who are living life around them. People that feel fulfilled in their social connections

sleep less because they are with people more frequently (Sladek 2015, 310). When a person is

lethargic and allows themselves to sleep more throughout the day, it can keep them more

disconnected than when they started. These physical trends are exacerbated in Generation Z as they are currently experiencing the highest rates of loneliness and mental health challenges.

Behavior in Children

Children can experience the same physical and mental impacts of loneliness that an adult can feel. However, due to language development, this may not always be expressed in the same way. Children's expression of loneliness can be shown in disruptive behavior, social withdrawal, bullying, and other antisocial behaviors. The rise in aggressive or antisocial behaviors in children acts as an indicator to the adults around them that they are not meeting the dimensions of social connection that are necessary for all people, regardless of age (Berlin 1995, 93). Children who are experiencing loneliness are more likely to be rejected by their peers, continuing the cyclical nature of loneliness. For some children, the root of their loneliness is based on their attachment styles with their parents and primary caregivers. People with insecure-avoidant and insecure-ambivalent attachment styles that are developed in infancy are already at a greater risk for loneliness due to deeply rooted trust issues, avoidance of emotional vulnerability, and poor temperament (Berlin 1995, 99). Insecure-avoidant attachment is when an individual does not feel security with any caregiver so they become emotionally unavailable to those around them. Insecure-ambivalent attachment is when an individual is not secure in their relationship with the caregiver but it expresses dependence and clinginess. These individuals are often difficult to soothe even when in the presence of a safe place. Divorced and broken homes also severely impact the child's development in the ability to modulate aggression and in the child's ability to separate themselves emotionally from their parents (De Figueieredo 2012, 704). When a child has experienced a divorce or separation in the family they can believe that the family's love for the child can end in the same way it did for the other parent. This is debilitating in one's ability

to trust others and show emotional vulnerability thus hindering their social connections (De Figueiredo 2012, 712). This not only shows the importance of helping parents connect with their children but creating early intervention programs and systems for the next generations.

Youth Ministry and Discipleship

Subjective Religiosity

Religion in general, not just Christianity, has been shown to reduce the effects of anxiety and depressive symptoms as well as loneliness. There is a term, subjective religiosity, that is used to define people's religious involvement. Measuring one's subjective religiosity is beneficial to determine the effects of religion on one's mental health. It seeks to understand the intrinsic aspects of religious commitment; the centrality of religion to an individual; the self-characterizations of being religious; and public and private religious behaviors that affect behavioral norms and social expectations (Hudson 2015, 585).

Communities of color who are historically more religious than white communities have seen the benefits of their religious involvement. In a study to compare the rates of depression and depressive symptoms between communities of color and white communities, researchers found religious involvement was a common trend for those who experienced lower rates of depression. It did not mean the people did not experience depressive symptoms but there were lesser rates. Additionally, the study found that black and brown communities had lower rates of depression collectively due to their higher rates of religious involvement (Hudson 2015, 586).

On a similar note, there are high correlations between religious involvement and low rates of suicidal ideation for teens. When compared to suicidal ideation trends for non-religious teenagers, the social support that religious communities offer has a positive impact on a student's

struggle with suicidal ideation (Cole-Lewis 2016, 1175). Youth have been able to identify prayer, faith-based connections, and other expressions of their religion as helpful tools to cope with depressive symptoms (Cole-Lewis, 1183).

What is Discipleship?

Since religion has a positive impact on the anxiety and depressive symptoms that a person faces, Christianity is no different. The public and private disciplines of Christianity are built to develop one's faith in Jesus but in turn, this helps one with the struggles they face regularly. Once a person becomes a Christian, they often enter systems of discipleship. Discipleship is a common word used in Christian culture to mean "to make a disciple". The word disciple is taken from the original Greek word 'manthanō' which translates to 'to learn'. This word was used to describe someone who would attach themselves to another to gain practical and theoretical knowledge through instruction and experience (Richards 2015, 307). During Biblical times, a rabbi would have a disciple who would learn all of the written and oral traditions of the Scriptures. Before they were released to do their own ministry, they had to be taught by the rabbi for several years (Richards 2015, 307). Jesus is known for having his 12 disciples, or followers, with him during his time on earth. Jesus and the 12 disciples helped form the modern model of discipleship as Jesus spent intentional time with these people to teach them their commands and move them from believing his words to obeying his commands (Richards 2015, 308). It was because of this time with Jesus that the disciples became the pillars of the early church as it was their mission to go out and tell others about the death and resurrection of the Messiah.

Someone who actively pursues a life with Jesus is a disciple and therefore undergoes a process of discipleship to learn more about their walk with Jesus. Discipleship is the step after

receiving salvation that brings a new believer to sanctification, the process of becoming like

Jesus. The goal of discipleship is not knowledge of Scripture and God but rather the likeness of

Jesus (Richards 2015, 308). Churches create discipleship systems to help people follow the

command of Jesus to make disciples. Some of these systems include one-on-one mentorship and

small groups. Especially in youth contexts, the marks of discipleship are missed. Intentional

discipleship is a greater need than just attending sports games. Discipleship involves intentional

teaching, correcting, and leading by example to help a young person become more like Jesus.

Now more than ever, young people are looking for authenticity and servant leadership from their

adult leaders (Ji 2011, 320). Disciplers through various formats should represent these values.

Despite the high trends of anxiety, depression, and loneliness in Gen Z, there are high

rates of young people leaving the church. This has created an inability to produce long-term

members of the faith (Moser 2019, 2). According to George Barna, a church data researcher, in

2019, 64% of young people are leaving the church now, even if they grew up attending regularly

(Barna 2019). This is a 5% increase from when the same survey was conducted in 2011. The

COVID-19 crisis has exaggerated these trends once again as it has created an easy excuse for

people to stop attending as churches were not meeting in person (Ham 2020). If no personal

devotion or commitment was being made then young people have an easy reason to not return to

the faith. Aaron Earls compiled a list of 10 characteristics of a church that attract young people

which includes sincerity, avoidance of hypocrisy, authenticity, support, non-judgment,

forgiveness, inspiration, care, welcoming environment, and unity (Earls 2021). If these are the

traits young people are looking for, what is the church missing for the rate of young people to be

leaving? All of these characteristics are demonstrated through the people at the church rather

than the messages being preached which should indicate the need for more people who are striving to be like Jesus.

Church Connections

The three dimensions of social connection that were discussed earlier should all be able to be found in a local church setting. If the church is looking for the holistic benefit for the person, addressing all of the dimensions of connections is very important.

First, for the intimate connection, churches should be able to offer Christian one-on-one mentorship. The mentor should cultivate emotional intimacy while encouraging the person and teaching them the spiritual disciplines. It is a one-on-one representation of pastoral care and allows the person to help build their faith (Wakeman 2012, 285). For the social dimension of connection, churches can offer small groups based around a Bible study, hobby, or activity so the person can create friendships with other people. These small groups do not have to foster deep, intimate connection that is required in the mentoring relationship but it allows the person to be themself and create friendships. Last, being a part of a religion or church community allows the person to fulfill the collective dimension that is also needed. The church can make extra effort to fulfill the need to be a part of something bigger than oneself by encouraging serving on a team, saying a prayer together, or hosting casual community events where everyone is invited. While all three dimensions of connection seem to be easily fulfilled in a church setting, there seems to be a disconnect between the theory and the practical application. The study aims to prove where the disconnect is for college students.

Conclusion

The impacts of loneliness on someone's life can affect their mental and physical health. People can enter into dangerous cycles of isolation, anxiety and depressive symptoms, and

addictions which can impact their loss of one of the three necessary dimensions of connection. The loss of one of these connections creates feelings of loneliness which can lead to continued isolation, anxiety and depressive symptoms, and addictions. While every person experiences feelings of loneliness, the rates of young people experiencing loneliness are at an all-time high. Studies have shown that religious involvement has beneficial impacts on anxiety and depressive symptoms. Church communities should be able to have the same beneficial impact on a person's struggle with loneliness. The following study seeks to learn the connection between college students' loneliness, their anxiety and depressive symptoms, and their religious involvement. A self-assessment will also be sent to youth pastors to evaluate their discipleship systems to meet the needs of their young people.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This study seeks to examine individuals' perceptions of effective discipleship systems with regards to experiences of loneliness.. Levels of loneliness are increasing with each generation as the use of technology, fast-paced lifestyles, and the rise of anxiety and depressive symptoms also increase. Additionally, young people are leaving the church at the highest rate in history. If churches can implement effective discipleship systems, they may be able to impact these current trends..

Research Design

This survey is a mixed-methods design study including both qualitative and quantitative data. This study utilized an availability sampling design in which participants 18 years and older were able to participate. The survey was distributed via social media and included questions utilizing a Likert scale and several open-ended questions about participants' experiences with religion, discipleship, and loneliness. By using both qualitative and quantitative data, this study collected statistical and anecdotal information on the experiences of discipleship and loneliness as well as gleaning from the personal experience of religion from each participant. As one's perception and experience with religion is so individual, using qualitative questions is more beneficial to understand the needs of the people being studied. This survey will utilize a scale the University of California in Los Angeles (UCLA) created called the Loneliness Scale (Diehl 2018). Utilizing a four-point scale, participants answered a series of statements about their experience with loneliness. This quantitative measurement allows this researcher to compare levels of loneliness among young people. Additionally, this survey included five questions about subjective religiosity created by Darrell Hudson (Hudson 2015). These five questions

represented qualitative data as people shared their personal experiences with open-ended

questions.

Research Questions

        The basis of this study seeks to answer the following three questions:

1. To what extent are people experiencing loneliness on a day-to-day basis? Participants'

   level of loneliness is being operationally defined with the Loneliness Scale created by the

   University of California in Los Angeles (cite)

2. Is the church helping people make the necessary connections? This was assessed through

   a mix of quantitative questions and qualitative questions about one's experience with

   religion and the Christian church.

3. How does discipleship impact levels of loneliness, especially within the next generation?

   This was evaluated through quantitative questions where participants rated their current

   church's discipleship systems.

        This study hypothesizes that participant's level of loneliness will negatively correlate

with their involvement in the Christian faith, meaning those that exhibit high levels of loneliness

will report low levels of involvement in the Christian faith. Following data analysis, there will be

a proposed discipleship system that churches can implement to best reverse the trends of

loneliness within their young people.

Participants

        This survey was distributed through social media which means that anybody was allowed

to take the survey. While the desired participants are people in the age bracket of 18-25, as

people of these ages have the most relevant experience to answer the research questions stated

above, all data were analyzed and recorded to see if there were generational differences between

participants. Participants were asked to disclose their age to identify those participants in the

18-25 age bracket. These young adults are anticipated to have the most similarity to younger

generations. The sampling method utilized in this study is availability sampling. However, it is

anticipated the results demonstrate good variability as the researcher and participants shared the

survey on their social media which represent several different spheres of influence. The desired

sampling size was 100 participants including various religious backgrounds and ages to get the

widest sample of information.

Data Collection

This survey was sent out via Qualtrics as it ensures confidentiality and allows a variety of

question types. Once the participants opened the questionnaire, they were asked to sign a waiver

that they agree to participate and do not hold the researcher responsible for any psychological

impact that this will cause. All information was disclosed before the approval process from the

Institute Review Board (IRB) so participants knew they were completing an ethical survey. The

survey was sent out after a pilot study was conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of the

questions being asked. The data collected during the pilot study was not analyzed but helped the

researchers see the questions needed to be more specific so participants knew what information

to disclose. Prior to the pilot study, the questions were left broad to see the genuine response of

the participants. This was not effective and was changed accordingly.

Quantitative data was collected utilizing a Likert scale from 0 to 3, 0 represented

strongly disagree, 1 represented disagree, 2 represented agree, and 3 represented strongly agree,

with the option of "n/a" meaning not applicable. Using this scale will allow the participant's

personal experience to translate to comparable information to other participants with the use of

total anonymity. There were five questions asked that have an open text box to allow participants

to share more about their personal religious experience. These qualitative answers were used to

guide the creation of the discipleship manual found in appendix C. The qualitative data analysis

method involved identification of keywords that represented similarities in responses..

Conclusion

      To answer the three research questions stated above, the use of an anonymous survey that

utilized quantitative and qualitative data was very beneficial. The questions answered in the

survey give insight into young people's experiences with religion, loneliness, and church

discipleship. Moving forward, this analyzed data will be able to give churches information about

why the young people are leaving at such a high rate and what they look for when they leave.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

      To answer the three research questions for this thesis, a survey was created for participants of all ages and religious backgrounds to fill out. The survey was sent out on two social media platforms – Instagram and Facebook to the surveyor's friends. The survey was posted for one month. There were 66 completed surveys with viable data. Below are charts and graphs with the results and correlations of various survey questions.

Note: UCLA score and Loneliness Levels score are used interchangeably. The loneliness levels are based on the University of California in Los Angeles (UCLA) Loneliness Scale.

Church Attendance by Age Group

Age Group	Most Common	Never	A Couple Times a Year	One Sunday a Month	Most Sundays	Every Sunday
Overall	Every Sunday	10	7	5	15	30
18-25	Every Sunday	3	1	3	11	22
25-30	A Couple Times a Year	6	6	0	2	4
30+	Every Sunday	1	0	2	2	4

Table 1.1

      Table 1.1 shows the breakdown of church attendance across the participants of the study. Of the 66 people who completed the survey, 45.5% of the participants attend church every Sunday, which did not fit the original goal of having the majority of participants being non-Christians. Of the 10 participants who said they never have attended church, some did not

attend as a child so it is not a value, some do not practice Christianity, and some do not believe in

God.

The table shows the 18-25 years olds who participated in the survey are the most faithful

in going to church. The 25-30-year-olds are the most indifferent to church – either they never

attend or only a couple of times a year due to familial or moral obligation.

Loneliness Levels by Age Group

Age Group	Average	People Scored 20+	Highest	Lowest
Overall	15.3	20	45	0
18-25	15.3	12	43	0
25-30	14.2	5	32	2
30+	17.3	3	45	1

Table 2.1

This table shows the overall loneliness levels based on the University of California's

Loneliness Scale tool. Participants read 20 statements and used the Likert scale from 0-3 to

respond to each statement. The sum of those statements creates a score out of 60 to measure the

person's loneliness. Among the 66 participants, the average score was 15.3, which is slightly

below the average number of a person who is lonely. The University of California in Los

Angeles (UCLA) deems a score of 20 or higher marks above-average loneliness in a person.

There were some data points that skewed the overall average such as people who did not answer

all 20 statements. This table is broken down by the age groups included to see if there is a trend

in the various age groups. The average age for the 18-25-year-olds, the age group with the most

participants, is the same as the overall average.
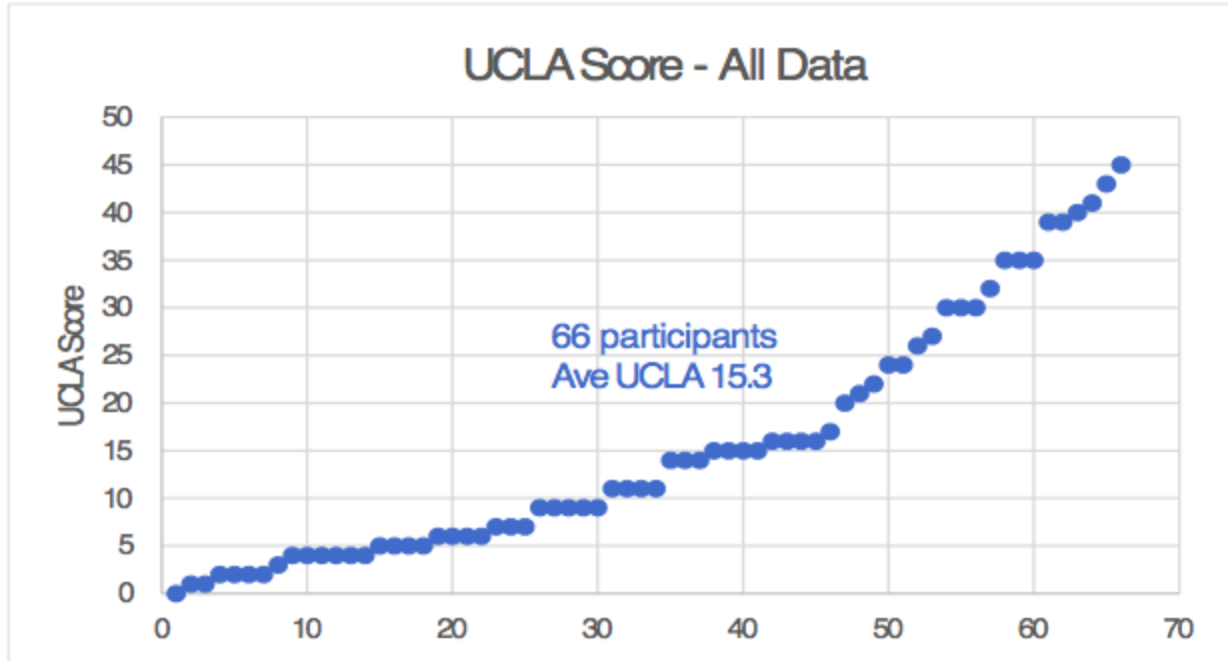
Graph 2.2

This scatter point graph shows all 66 participants with their individual UCLA loneliness

scores. In comparison to the chart above, this includes all 66 participants to see if there are any

major trends. This graph does not also include any breakdown of the age of participants. The

overall average is listed on the graph.

Anxiety Symptoms by Age Group

Age Group	Average	Highest	Lowest
Overall	3.1	8	0
18-25	3.2	8	0
25-30	2.8	7	0
30+	2.5	7	1

Table 3.1

When given a list of 12 symptoms of anxiety and depression, participants were asked to

check off which symptoms they feel on a weekly basis. These twelve symptoms listed are the

most common symptoms of anxiety and depression that researchers expect those with these

disorders to experience. Across all participants, there was an average of 3.1 symptoms

experienced on a weekly basis. Participants in the 18-25 age group have a slightly higher of 3.2

symptoms, but this is due to the larger number of participants. No participant in the survey

experienced more than 8 symptoms on a weekly basis.

Anxiety Symptoms Experienced
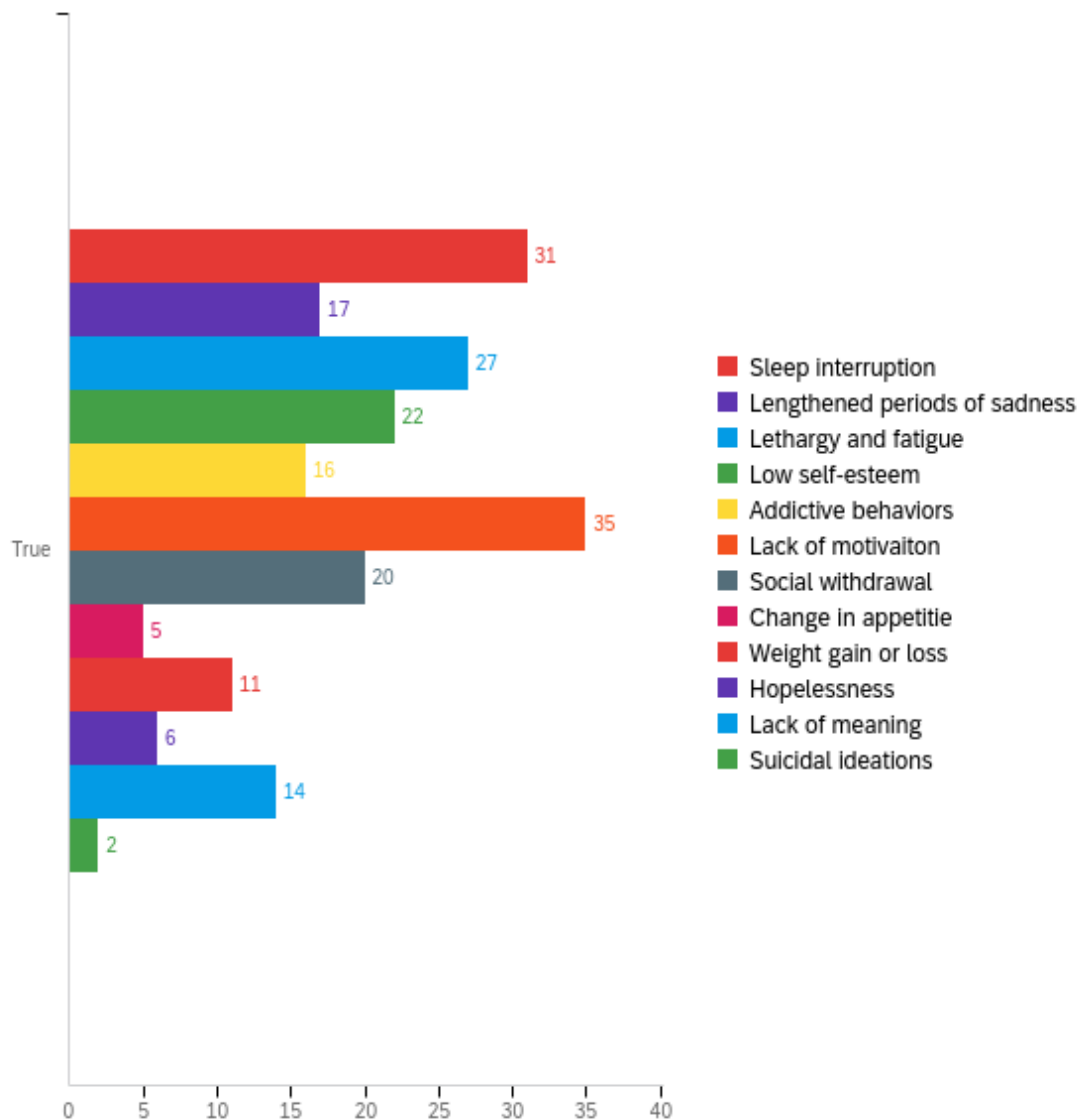
Graph 3.1

Participants were given a list of the twelve most popular symptoms that people with anxiety and depression experience. Of these twelve options, participants could choose as many symptoms they believe they experience on a weekly basis. The most common symptom experienced among the 66 participants is a lack of motivation with a total of 35 people (53% of participants). Sleep interruption was the second most popular response with 31 people (47% of participants) and lethargy and fatigue was the third most popular response with 27 responses (41% of participants).

*Correlation Between Church Attendance and Loneliness Levels*
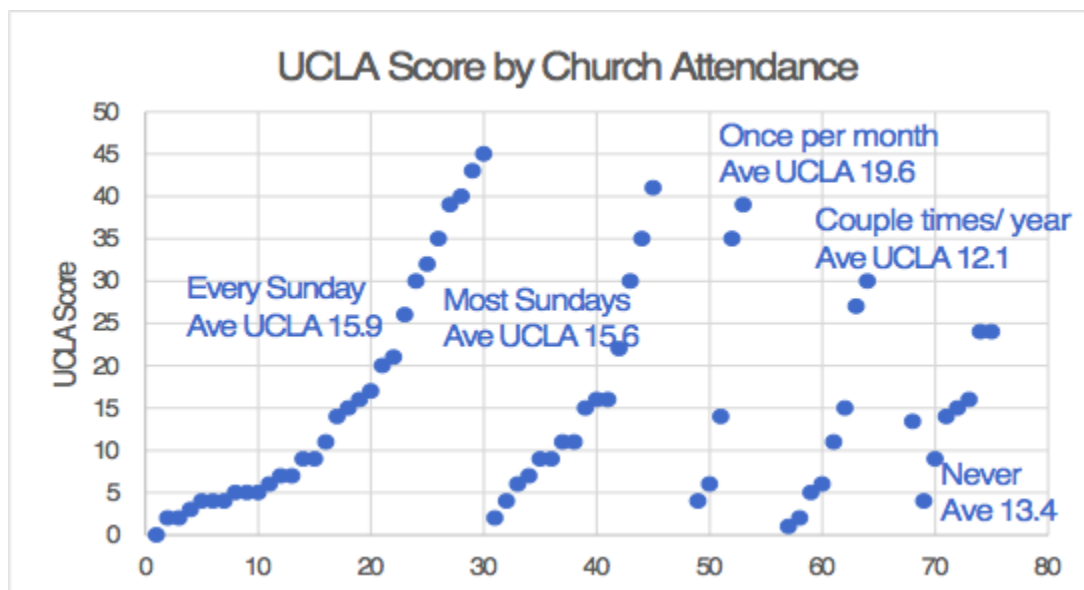
Graph 4.1

Participants were asked to disclose their normal church attendance patterns. There was a list of 5 options – never, a couple of times a year, once per month, most Sundays, and every Sunday. Of those options, participants could choose the option that best represented their church attendance patterns. This scatter chart shows all 66 participants' data to measure the correlation between one's loneliness level and their average church attendance. The significant data indicates participants who attend church about once a month have higher levels of loneliness.

Participants who chose this answer for their church attendance are higher than the overall survey

average and higher than the other choice options. Most Sundays and every Sunday option also

see a higher average than the overall survey. A couple of times a year and never experience low

averages of UCLA scores but this is due to the low response rate in these categories.

Correlation Between Loneliness Levels and Anxiety Symptoms
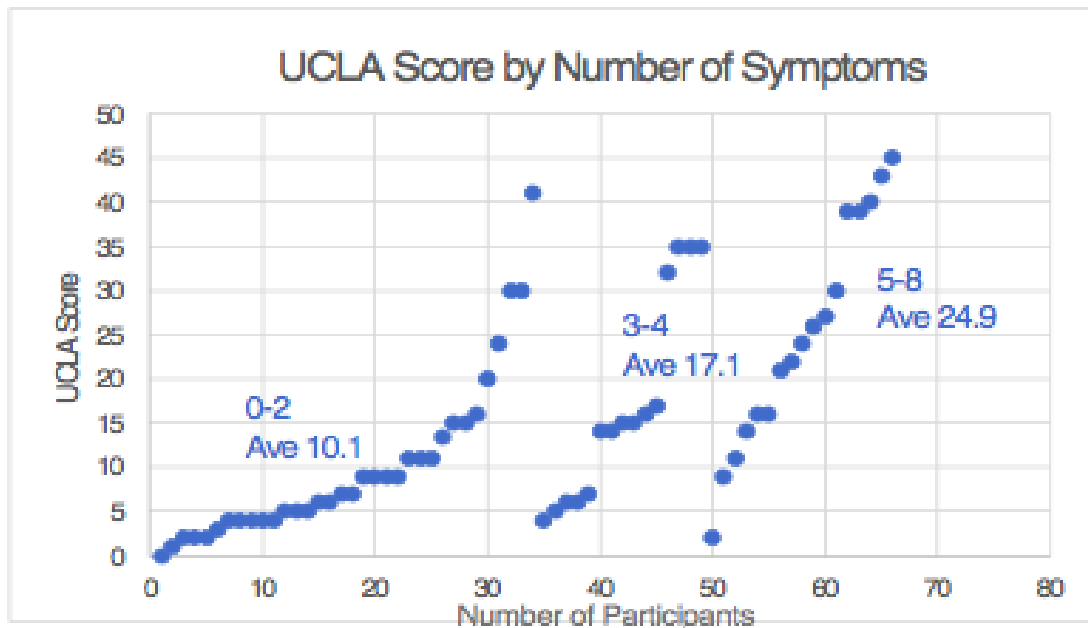

Graph 5.1

   To see if this survey was conclusive with other studies, the loneliness levels (UCLA

score) for all participants were compared to the number of anxiety/ depressive symptoms one

experienced. All 66 participants are plotted on this graph to show that the higher number of

symptoms one feels per week is correlated to a higher average UCLA score. Participants who

experience between 0 and 2 symptoms of anxiety and depression on a weekly basis have an

average of 10.1 on the UCLA loneliness scale. Participants who experience 3 to 4 symptoms of

anxiety and depression score an average of 17.1 on the UCLA Loneliness Scale. Participants

who experience between 5 and 8 symptoms of anxiety and depression a week have an average of

24.9 on the loneliness scale, which is higher than the average loneliness of the survey and higher than the UCLA declared average.

*Correlation Between Church Experience and Anxiety Symptoms*
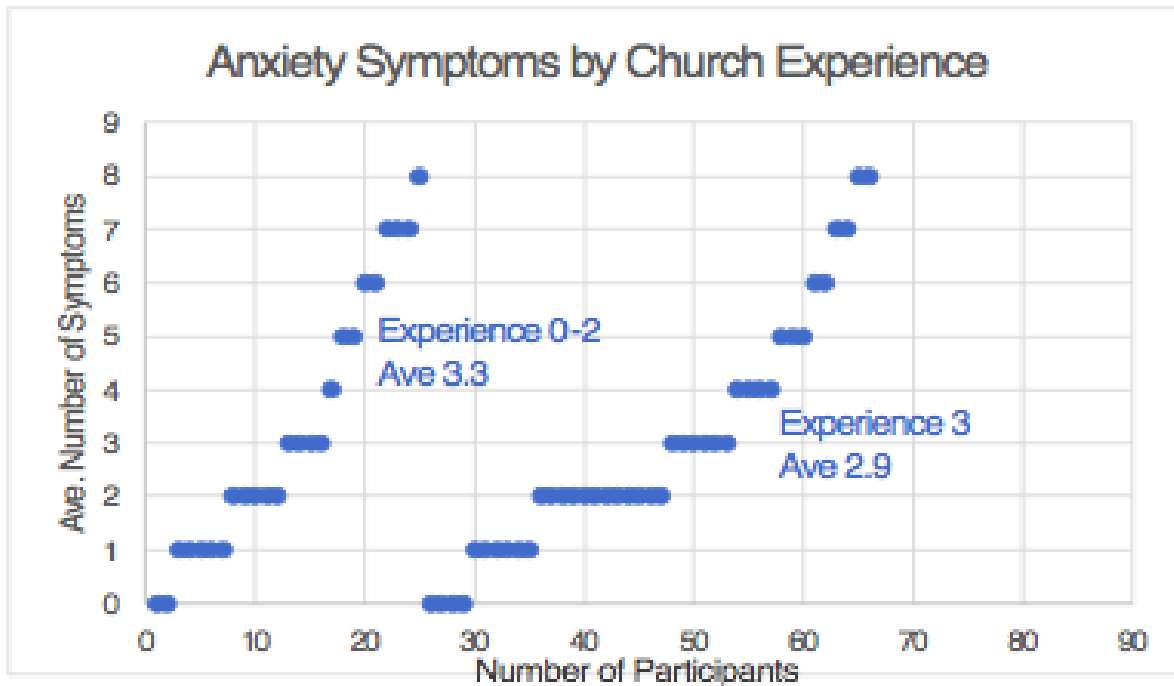
Graph 6.1

Participants were asked to rate their overall church experience on a scale of 0 to 3. 0 indicated an extremely poor church experience and 3 indicated a great church experience. To see if the number of anxiety symptoms correlates to one's overall church experience, all 66 participants' plots of data were graphed to see if there is any statistical significance. Participants who rated their church experience as a 0 had an average of 2.8 symptoms of anxiety and depression per week. Participants who rated their experience as a 1 have an average of 3.9 symptoms of anxiety and depression per week. Participants who rated their experience as a 2 had an average of 3.2 symptoms. Participants who rated their church experience as a 3 had an

average of 2.9 symptoms per week. Due to the collection of the participants, most participants

fell into the '3' category which was a potential skew to the data.

Correlation Between Mentorship Opportunities and Loneliness Levels
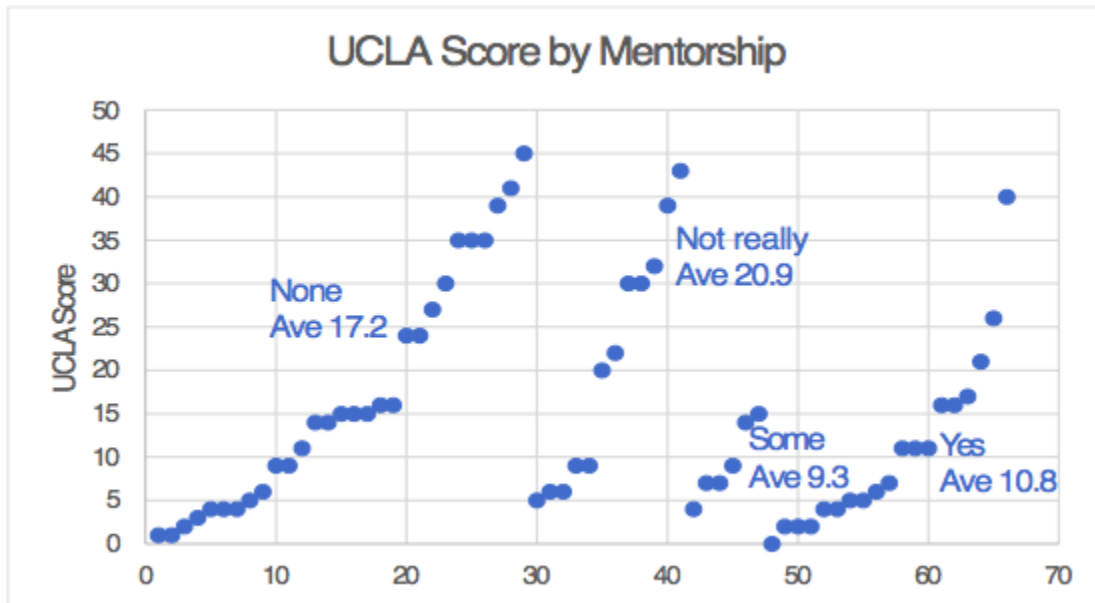
Graph 7.1

     In the survey, participants were asked to rate if their church offered any one-on-one

mentorship opportunities. They were given 4 options – none, not really, some, and yes. The

majority of the 66 participants answered that their church offered no one-on-one mentorship

opportunities. The average loneliness level for people with this answer was 17.2. Participants

who answered 'not really' meaning that there might be some but they are hard to find, not

accessible, or not appealing have an average UCLA score of 20.9. Participants who answered

'some' had an average UCLA score of 9.3 and participants who responded 'yes' that their church

does offer one-on-one mentorship opportunities had an average UCLA score of 10.8.

Correlation Between Connections and Loneliness Levels

UCLA Score by Level of Connections
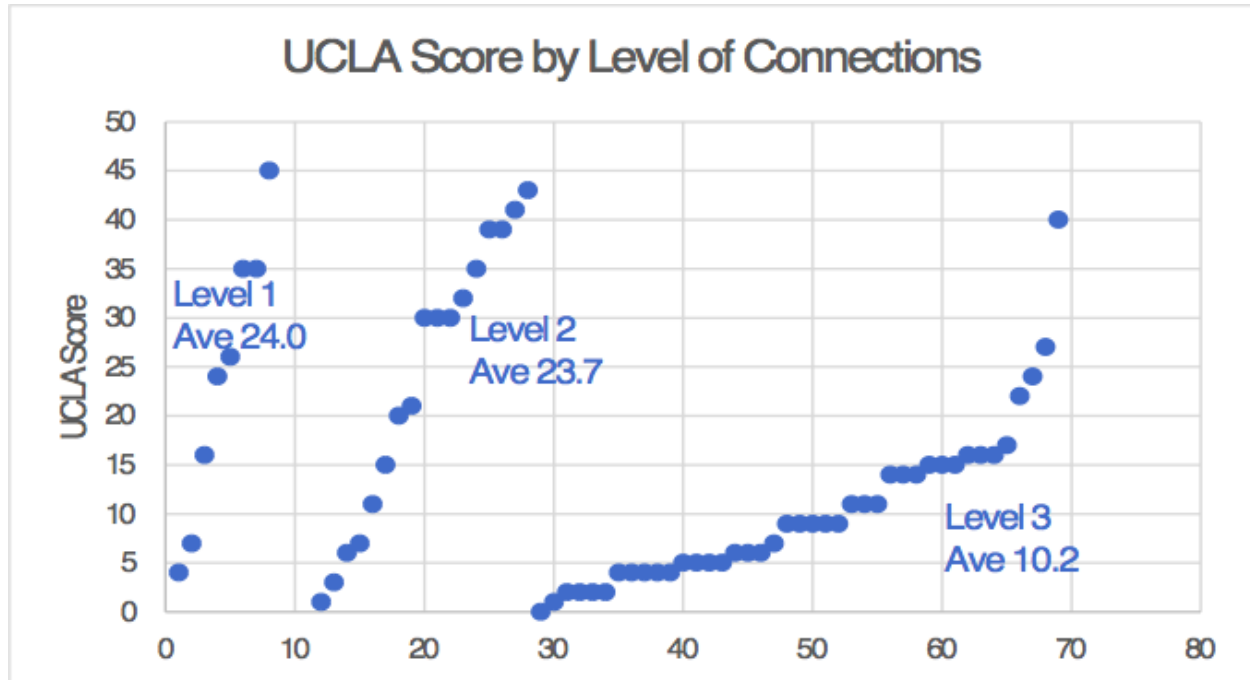
Graph 8.1

Based on Vivek Murthy's theory that each person needs three dimensions of connection – intimate, social, and collective, participants were asked to rate their personal level of connection within each dimension. They were able to rate on a scale of 0-3 with 0 meaning they do not have anyone in that dimension and 3 being they feel satisfied in that dimension of connection. From their self-rating of these three dimensions, each participant received an overall average to represent their individual level of connection. On the graph, level 1 represents people who had an overall average of 0.5 and 1.5. Level 2 represents participants who scored between 2.0 and 2.5. Level 3 represents people who scored 3 in all three dimensions of connection. In comparison to the participants' loneliness levels, those who landed in level one had an average UCLA score of 24. Participants who were in level two had an average UCLA score of 23.7. Participants who were in level 3 had an average loneliness level of 10.2.

Correlation Between Church Experience and Loneliness Levels

UCLA Score by Church Experience
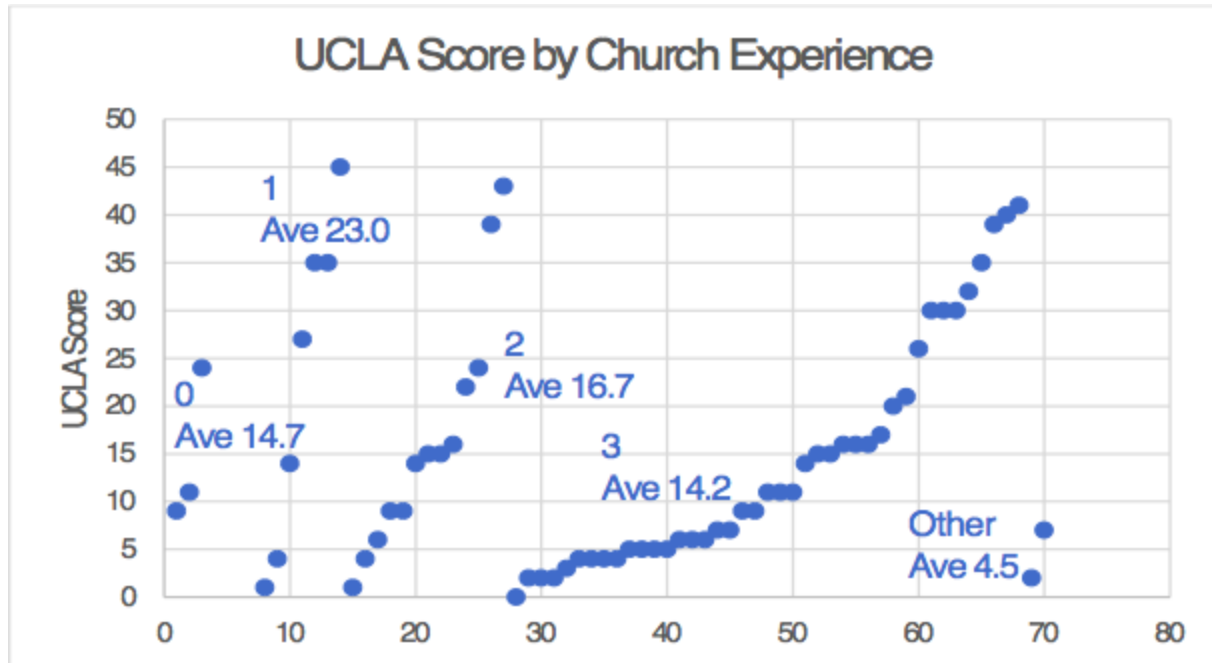
Graph 9.1

Participants were asked to rate their overall church experience on a scale of 0 to 3. 0 indicated an extremely poor church experience and 3 indicated a great church experience. This data was compared to the participants' UCLA score to see if there is a correlation between overall church experience and one's loneliness levels. Participants who rated their overall church experience as a 0 had an average loneliness score of 14.7. Participants who rated their overall church experience as a 1 had an average loneliness score of 23.0. Participants who rated their overall experience of 2 had an average of 16.7. Participants who rated their overall church experience as a 3 had an average of 14.2 on the UCLA loneliness scale. The other category is for those who did not answer this survey question.

Answers for What People are Looking for in a Church
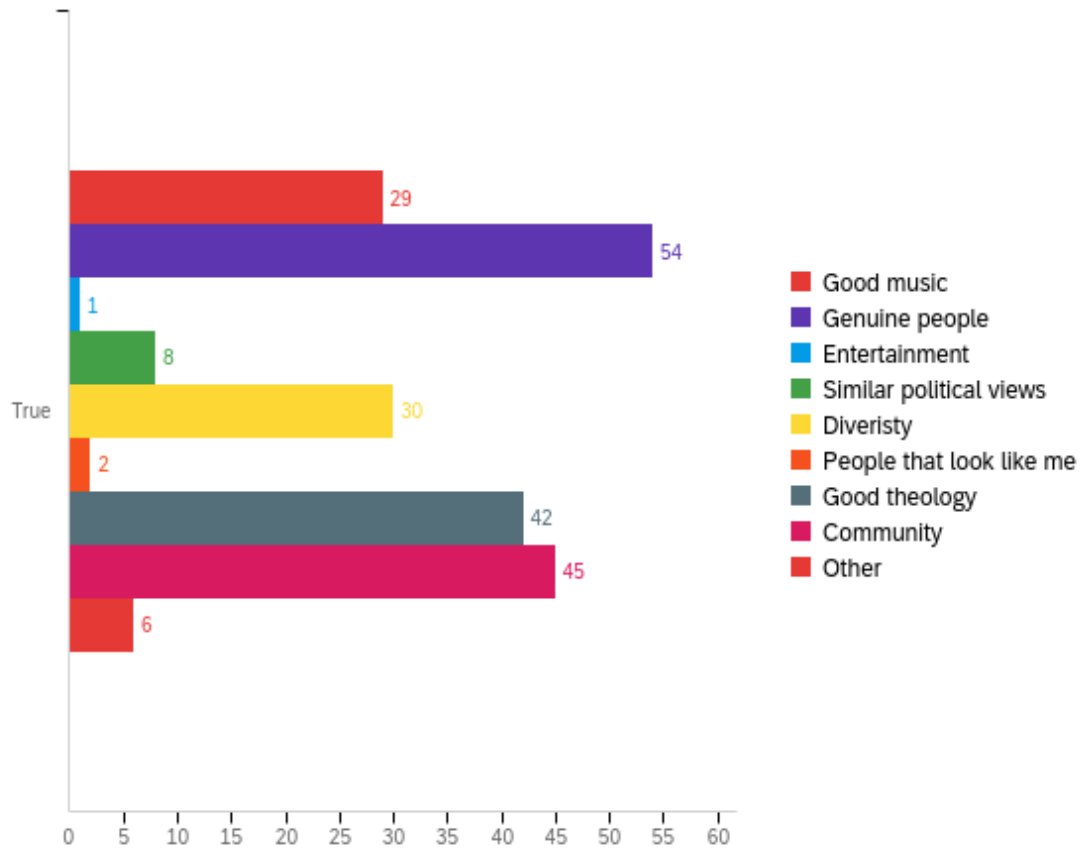
Graph 10.1

At the end of the survey, all participants were asked to choose all applicable answers for the question "what do you look for in a church?". Graph 10.1 shows all total answers for the 66 participants. Genuine people had the largest answer rate with 54 people out of all 66 participants. The second most popular answer was that people look for a community with 45 answers. The third most popular answer was good theology with 42 responses.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

The completed survey provides a great depth of information to inform pastors and leaders of loneliness within their congregation. It is not a surprise that all people experience loneliness to some extent on a weekly basis. This section will analyze the findings in relation to the listed research questions as well as provide an answer to what leaders can do with this information.

Significant Findings

Chapter 4 of this thesis provides detailed graphs and charts with all data from the conducted survey. For the proceeding of this survey, only the charts and graphs that provided statistically significant information will be mentioned.

Research Questions

One of the first research questions that was asked on this survey was, 'to what level are people experiencing loneliness on a day-to-day basis?' Based on the 66 participants of the survey, the average level of loneliness experienced across participants was 15.3 out of 60 (Table 2.1). The University of California in Los Angeles says that their nationwide average is 20 out of 60. People who score 25 or higher are experiencing high levels of loneliness. The 66 people who completed the survey fall below the nationwide average. 30.3% of participants score on or above the national average with a score of 20 or higher. The data collected from this survey shows that people are still experiencing rates of loneliness, even if they are not exceeding the national average. The outlier data of people who scored below 5 skewed the survey average as well. The data shows that people are still experiencing loneliness on a day-to-day basis but only people who are experiencing loneliness on a high scale see it impact one's day-to-day life.

This can be seen by Graph 5.1 which explores one's UCLA score by the number of anxiety and depressive symptoms one feels on a weekly basis. The survey's results for this question are conclusive with nationwide surveys that the higher levels of loneliness per person equate to more anxiety and depressive symptoms. Participants who answered that they experience between 5 and 8 symptoms on a weekly basis had a UCLA score average of 24.9, which is significantly higher than the survey average.

The second research question that was answered in the survey was, 'is the church helping people create the dimensions of connection they need?' Participants were asked questions about their personal connections across all three dimensions that Dr. Murthy outlines in his book *Together*. Answers to all three questions about connections were added together to create an average answer between 0 and 3. This was then compared to people's loneliness score. Graph 8.1 shows people who rated their levels of connection a 3 out of 3 had significantly lower levels of loneliness than those who rated their connections lower. As the majority of participants were faith-based, this data can assume that the majority of people who rated themselves as a three are finding healthy dimensions of connection. The survey results also showed that the majority of churches are offering small group opportunities that people want to be a part of and the church does a good job to remind the individual that they are a part of something bigger than themselves.

The third research question asked was, 'how does discipleship impact levels of loneliness, especially in the next generation?'. While information about the next generation was inconclusive due to a low number of participants in all age categories, there was significant information about churches offering mentorship opportunities for their congregation. Participants were able to answer the statement, "my church offers mentorship opportunities" with four

options – none, not really, some, and yes. The majority of participants answered 'none' or 'not really' and their UCLA score showed that this has serious impacts. Graph 7.1 shows that the average UCLA score for those who answered none was 17.2 and for those who answered not really was 20.9. The average score for those who answered 'some' or 'yes' was nearly half. This shows that there is a significant disconnect for churches to fulfill the one-on-one dimensions of connection needed for people. This fulfilled the hypothesis that one-on-one mentorship is what people are missing in church relations.

Other Significant Information

One of the questions participants answered was, "what do you look for in a church?" This was meant to be a broad question for those who attend church on a regular basis and those who do not attend church. There was a list of options to choose from, including an 'other' option, based on other surveys completed by church contractors on what people look for when they find a church. 54 of the 66 participants answered 'genuine people' and 45 of the 66 participants answered 'community' over all other options about theology, worship, or diversity (see Graph 10.1). 81.8% of participants would stay at a church if they felt like the people were genuine and that they lived out what they said. Generation Z is passionate about authenticity and individuality within a person causing this to be a key factor in creating effective discipleship systems for the next generation.

Survey Limitations

Despite being sent out on social media to reach the broadest range of people, the survey only pulled 66 responses. The 66 responses were also completed by people who were predominantly Christian, which also was against the original goal of the study. The results and data were limited in this way as data was skewed to include people with high church attendance,

rather than people of all faith backgrounds which was the desired goal. Due to the surveyor's circle of influence, having predominant Christian responses was expected but still limited the data collected to see if people who are not involved in faith-based activities experience higher levels of loneliness. Another limitation of this survey was that some participants did not answer all the required questions. For the multiple-choice questions, some participants did not answer the question fully skewing the data.

Implications

Large Group

One of the three dimensions of connection that Dr. Vivek Murthy outlined in his book was that people need a 'collective' dimension that takes place in a large group setting. This means that people leave a space remembering that they are a part of something larger than themselves. If young people are seeking authenticity and individuality, large group events for the next generation have to be led by people who are transparent and free to be themselves. If a student feels that the large group event is being led by a certain type of person that they cannot 'fit' into, they will be more likely to disengage. A large group event for a youth group would be a worship service or fellowship night where all youth students and leaders are gathering together. Practices that should be included in events like these are a diverse group of leaders leading the charge. This does not just mean in age and race but in appearance, style, way of speaking, personality, and more. Church culture can still be strong and relevant when embraced by all people. Another practice that should be included in collective worship or a collective prayer can be said to unify the people in the church. Some youth groups might include a sinner's prayer at the end of the service, a question and answer portion, a repeat after my call to action, reading

Scripture out loud together, or general moments of worship where everyone is thinking about the same thing can be effective strategies to reach the collective dimension of connection.

Small Groups

Small groups are an important part of many youth group structures. In Dr. Murthy's dimensions of connections, small groups should help to fulfill the 'social' dimension of connection which allows people to feel like they have friends to invite to their birthday party. Community is one of the main reasons people go to and find a church. Small groups need to do an effective job at connecting students to one another so they can find meaningful friendships. Small groups need to be a balance of fun activities with deep connections so students are connected in many ways. While how churches choose to create small groups – whether age and gender-based, school-based, location-based, or activity-based does not matter so much, small groups should have a ratio of one leader for every five students. Several studies have shown that it is hard for leaders to lead more than this number of people to the level and depth that is often needed (Ham 2020). Having enough leaders per small group also ensures that students are able to have several opportunities to connect with leaders if they do not immediately connect with one. This creates an effective way to ensure leadership and stewardship of the one-to-one discipleship opportunities discussed in the next section.

One-on-One Discipleship

In congruence with the data found in the survey, creating effective one-on-one discipleship systems will have the largest impact on the next generation. Dr. Murthy calls this dimension of connection 'intimate' as it is supposed to be a connection in which one participant feels comfortable to share anything. The survey uses the term 'mentorship' to talk about one-on-one discipleship due aid those who cannot define discipleship. However, the model of

one-to-one discipleship that will be used for this portion of the survey is closely related to coaching, not mentorship.

A mentor is one who is on a similar path of life to the individual so that the mentor can offer advice on where they have been (Biehl 1996, 35). Someone would seek out a mentor to model a certain area of the individual's life. In comparison, a coach is one who invites people to walk together even if the coach has not been where the coachee wants to go. Coaching is about helping people to learn rather than teaching them (Stoltzfus 2005, 8). Youth leaders should be trained in coaching so students feel they can maintain their individuality while pursuing genuine relationships with people. Coaching also requires a deep level of friendship with the individual before beginning which builds the trust between the two people.

There are three main areas a youth leader needs to focus on at the beginning of a coaching relationship with a student. The first is connection. Part of having a 1 to 5 ratio for leaders to students is to ensure that any student is able to find a leader with whom they connect. Students want to be able to explore their individuality in a meaningful way and to force a connection with someone does not allow this. It is important that small group leaders plan and attend fun events for their small groups to participate in to create a connection outside of a church context. This is especially beneficial for youth students who have not yet made a decision to follow Jesus as it creates atmospheres for them to get comfortable being in church environments. Youth leaders must not just attend church-promoted social events but they must participate. Building a connection over a game or an activity is a great way to reach young people. Another way to develop this coaching connection is through hospitality. A leader should feel free to open their home to their youth students if they can guarantee another adult will be present. A person feels served and welcomed to a deep level when invited into someone's home

(Miller and Hall 2007, 107). Bringing a student to a safe, neutral place that is not the church or their home can be important to their comfortability in sharing.

The next important step in developing a coaching relationship is having a focus for each conversation or meeting. Students need to feel they have the authority to guide the conversation in the direction they want to go. It is the job of the coach to recognize the focus and help keep the conversation on track so that the student feels their desired outcome. This could be conversations about the next steps in their relationship with Jesus, conversations about colleges, relationship conflict, or other areas that are important to the student. It is vital to note that a coach is not a therapist or counselor. Youth leaders should not give medical advice to a student about their mental health journey. Referrals should be easy access for the youth group so leaders can connect students to the necessary resources. The coach's job is to help the student learn what works for them and to support them on their journey through conversation, presence, and prayer. Last, leaders need to be trained in compassion. This includes asking discovering and precise questions, using active listening, and remembering specific details of the conversation.

Appendix C has a detailed training manual that pastors can use to train their leaders. These three steps are covered in more detail to ensure that students are able to receive the intimate level of connections needed to score lower on the UCLA loneliness scale.

Future Research Recommendations

This study shows that there is an effect on what the church offers in terms of discipleship – whether it be in a large group, small group, or one-on-one setting. This study could be enhanced by surveying more people across all different faith backgrounds to see if this continues to be true. Future research could also be more age-specific, whether with minors in Generation Alpha or Generation Z or continuing to survey young adults to inform information about future

generations. Another way to enhance future research would be to include information about the current youth groups' discipleship plans to see how churches can specifically improve. This could be done with interviews with youth pastors or specific survey questions for ministry leaders. The effectiveness of the training manual can also be included as a future research point to see if intentional coaching methods positively impact a student's levels of loneliness or their connection to church.

Conclusion

The data found in the survey is congruent with other nationwide surveys and Dr. Murthy's findings of the different dimensions of connection. People are finding good connections at church but the intimate dimension is missing for most. When thinking about discipleship systems for the next generation, the emphasis must be on creating one-on-one methods and having healthy small group structures so that students can find the dimensions of connections they need in a life-giving way. If the predictions of loneliness levels in generation alpha are true, establishing these systems will be vital for the health of the individual and the future of health of the church at large.

Appendices
Appendix A – IRB Approval Letter

SOUTHEASTERN
UNIVERSITY
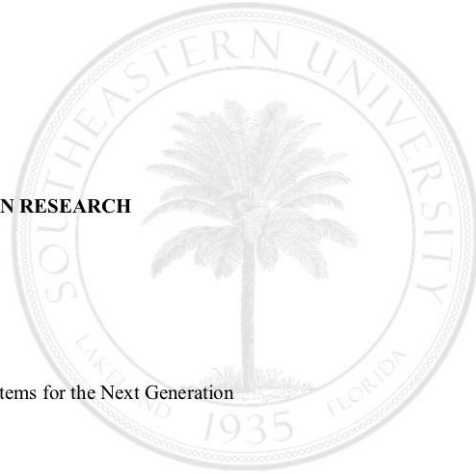
NOTICE OF EXEMPTION FOR HUMAN RESEARCH

DATE: October 8th, 2021

TO: Daniel McNaughton, Sarah Brits

FROM: SEU IRB

PROTOCOL TITLE: Loneliness and Church: Creating Systems for the Next Generation

FUNDING SOURCE: NONE

PROTOCOL NUMBER: 2021 MT 19

APPROVAL PERIOD: Approval Date: October 8th, 2021, Expiration Date: October 7th, 2022

Dear Investigator(s),

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the protection of human subjects has reviewed the protocol entitled, Loneliness and Church: Creating Systems for the Next Generation. The project has been approved for the procedures and subjects described in the protocol.

Any changes require approval before they can be implemented as part of your study. If your study requires any changes, the proposed modifications will need to be submitted in the form of an amendment request to the IRB to include the following:

- Description of proposed revisions;
- *If applicable,* any new or revised materials;
- *If applicable,* updated letters of approval from cooperating institutions

If there are any adverse events and/or any unanticipated problems during your study, you must notify the IRB within 24 hours of the event or problem.

At present time, there is no need for further action on your part with the IRB. This approval is issued under Southeastern University's Federal Wide Assurance 00006943 with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP). If you have any questions regarding your obligations under the IRB's Assurance, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Sincerely,

Rustin Lloyd
Chair, Institutional Review Board
irb@seu.edu

Appendix B – Survey Questions

1. What age bracket are you in? (Choose One)

    a. 18-25

    b. 25-30

    c. 30+

2. Have you taken this survey before?

    a. Yes

    b. No

Please answer the following questions with as much information as you are willing to disclose.

1. How important was religion in your home while you were growing up? What religion were you involved with?
2. How important is/was it for your parents to send or take their children to religious services? What are/ were the services like?
3. How important is religion in your life? What does this look like for you daily?
4. How important is prayer when you don't deal with stressful situations? Do you participate in any other spiritual practices for stressful situations? If yes, which ones?
5. And, how religious would you say you are? How do you define being religious?

For the following statements, please answer using the Likert scale from 0-3 or select N/A if the question does not apply to you.

3 = I often feel this way

2 = I sometimes feel this way

1 = I rarely feel this way

0 = I never feel this way

1. I am unhappy doing so many things alone

2. I have nobody to talk to

3. I cannot tolerate being so alone

4. I lack companionship

5. I feel as if nobody really understands me

6. I find myself waiting for people to call or write

7. There is no one I can turn to

8. I am no longer close to anyone

9. My interests and ideas are not shared by those around me

10. I feel left out

11. I feel completely alone

12. I am unable to reach out and communicate with those around me

13. My social relationships are superficial

14. I feel starved for company

15. No one really knows me will

16. I feel isolated from others

17. I am unhappy being so withdrawn

18. It is difficult for me to make friends

19. I feel shut out and excluded by others

20. People are around me but not with me

21. I go to church regularly.

22. I have had a positive church experience.

23. I have good connections with the people I meet at church.

24. I have one person in my life to who I can always turn.

25. I have people I can invite to my birthday party.

26. I like going to church for the community.

27. My church announces discipleship opportunities.

28. My church offers small groups that I want to be a part of.

29. My church offers mentorship opportunities.

30. My church reminds me that I am a part of something bigger than myself.

31. My church is doing the best it can to meet the needs of the people in its community.

32. My friends are interested in coming to church with me.

33. I go to church events alone.

34. I do not feel welcome inside of a church.

35. I do not know what discipleship means.

36. I experience symptoms of anxiety and depression regularly.

37. I can tell people about my anxiety and depressive symptoms.

38. Which of these symptoms do you feel on a weekly basis?

    a. Sleep interruption

    b. Lengthened periods of sadness

    c. Lethargy and fatigue

    d. Low self-esteem

    e. Addictive behaviors

    f. Lack of motivation

    g. Social withdrawal

    h. Change in appetite

    i. Weight gain or loss

    j. Hopelessness

    k. Lack of meaning

    l. Suicidal ideations

39. My church supports my mental health.

40. My mental health feels better after participating in religious practices.

41. I turn to social media to find connections.

Please select the best answer for the following questions about your church attendance.

1. How often do you attend a Church service?

    a. Every Sunday

    b. Most Sundays

    c. One Sunday a Month

    d. A couple of times a year

    e. Never

2. When was the last time you were at church?

    a. This past Sunday.

    b. Sometime this month.

    c. Sometime this year.

    d. Last year.

    e. More than one year ago.

    f. I can't remember.

g. Never

3. What do you look for in a church service? Select all that apply.

    a. Good music

    b. Genuine people

    c. Entertainment

    d. Similar political views

    e. People that look like me

    f. Diversity

    g. Good theology

    h. Community/ friends

    i. Other

4. If you do not attend church regularly, why do you not attend? Select all that apply.

    a. I cannot find a church that I like.

    b. I cannot find a church with which I agree.

    c. I feel anxious.

    d. I do not have a need to go.

    e. No one has invited me.

    f. I do not believe in God.

    g. I do not have friends that go.

    h. I forget on Sunday mornings.

    i. I already am a Christian.

    j. The people are insincere.

    k. They ask for money.

    l. I have had a bad experience.

    m. There are too many rules.

    n. The church is boring.

    o. Other

    p. N/A

5. If you do not attend church regularly, do you have intentions of returning to church?

    a. Yes, I will go on Sunday.

    b. Yes, I am trying to find the right church for me.

    c.   Maybe, I am figuring out what I am looking for.

    d.   Maybe, but not right now.

    e.   No, it is not for me.

    f.   No, I do not believe in God.

    g.   N/A

Appendix C – Youth Leader Training Manual

The purpose of this youth leader training manual is to provide the tools for youth pastors to train their leaders in effective coaching strategies with their students. This can be presented to a leader by itself or presented in a seminar format for leaders to discuss together. The understood context for the training manual is for youth leaders to foster coaching relationships with their students in their small groups.

Step 1 – Connection

Creating a lasting connection with the youth student you are beginning a coaching relationship with is vital. Connection with youth can be done in a variety of ways – connection over a shared interest, intentionality, over an activity, or just based on proximity. Students are looking for genuine authenticity and will connect with someone who is confident in themselves.

1A – Be the Initiator

In large group and small group settings, students are not always confident to approach a leader. It is the task of the youth leader to approach the individual in a confident way. Students are likely to be suspicious of leaders who seem to have ulterior motives so the youth leader must always approach the student with the primary intention of developing a friendship. Other intentions such as serving, or even starting a coaching relationship, must be a secondary priority when approaching the student.

This first conversation should be to learn about the student and for the student to learn about you. You can share about yourself in a genuine way so that the student can find a mutual interest between the two of you. Questions about the student's interests, hobbies, school, friends, and family are great topics to discuss in the first conversation.

Students may also feel threatened by having an eye-to-eye conversation with someone they do not know. Having these first conversations over a meal or an activity such as basketball or frisbee provides an activity to talk about if the conversation is lagging.

1B – Hospitality

A great way to build the connection with the student is to invite them along to different activities. Inviting students to other students' sports games, meals, or even over to the leader's home helps deepen the connection outside of the church or small group context. This moves the relationship from 'person I met at church' to 'trusted friend'.

If your youth group context has strict rules about students and leaders hanging out here are ideas to engage with students:

- Invite the student to another youth group member's sporting game

- Coffee shop or casual restaurant where there are always other people who can see

- Small group events in a park

- Reach out to parents before inviting students to your home

- Participating in a shared activity – playing one-on-one basketball, painting together, going to the student's concert, etc

Step 2 – Focus

When developing the coaching relationship with the student, conversations need to be in an environment in which the student feels comfortable. Not every student wants to talk about themselves over a cup of coffee. Finding an environment that works for the

two of you is important. Healthy discipleship does not need to be in a serious context, it can be done in a game of basketball or while going on a walk.

2A – Identify the Need

The difference between a coaching relationship and a mentoring relationship is that in coaching you are helping the student get where they want to go, regardless of if you have been there yourself. Students are all wrestling with different things, whether they seem important to you as a leader or not. It is important as their coach to identify the student's needs even if they cannot express them explicitly. Not all conversations will be surrounding a topic you know about or anything serious and life-changing, but it is important that the student feels like they are able to guide the conversation with topics they want to talk about. If they feel like they are being belittled or interrupted, they will retreat from being open with you.

Identifying the need in a coaching conversation requires active listening and remembering different conversations. If a student tells you a lot of different aspects about their home life, school life, or interest, it would mean the world to them if someone remembered. Writing down important information after a conversation can be helpful in identifying the need of the specific conversation as you know the context.

If a student is already a follower of Jesus and has a firm relationship with Him, identifying the need can be a more specific conversation of 'what area of your walk with Jesus would you like to focus on?'

Tips for Identifying the Need:

- Remember past conversations for context

- Watch the student's nonverbal cues – do they seem more anxious or distracted?

  Are they more engaged? Are they fidgeting when talking about a certain topic?

  Do they seem to be sleeping well? How are they doing in school?

- What does the student keep bringing up?

2B – Guiding the Conversation

Depending on the student's age, they might not have the ability to guide the conversation in the direction they want or intend. Once you identify the need or main idea of the conversation, it is important to think of guiding questions you can help the student think through about the topic. A great tool to do this is TOMS. TOMS is an acronym that stands for:

T – Topic – What topic would you like to talk about today?

O – Outcome – What is the desired outcome?

M – Meaning – Why is this important to you?

S – Success – How will you know you have gotten there? (Abate 2014)

Using TOMS during a coaching conversation can be important to get the student thinking outside of the box or looking for a different perspective on their needs. While these questions do not need to be asked explicitly, they can be a general guide for the conversation so the student feels like they are able to move forward with the topic. Conversations like this may differ depending on the identified need. One session might be a topic that does not have a clear outcome such as a parent's divorce whereas another session might be clearer such as deciding which university to attend.

Questions to ask if there is not a clear outcome:

- How do you feel about that?

- How do you see this situation ending? How do you see things getting better?

- How is it impacting your daily life?

- How can I help support you?

- Why is this situation important to you?

Questions to ask if there is a clear outcome:

- What is your best-case scenario?

- What is your worst-case scenario?

- Why is this important to you?

- Have you thought about it like this…?

- What does a 'win' look like in this scenario? How can you get there?

Step 3 – Compassion

One of the important aspects of a one-on-one dimension of connection is genuine care for one another. For people to feel fulfilled in their intimate relationships, they have to know that what they are saying is not only heard but understood. If a person does not feel validated in their experiences then they are not going to want to share. When developing a coaching relationship with a student, having compassion is vital.

3A – Active Listening

Since coaching is about helping a student get to where they want to go, not to where you have been, active listening is a vital role in showing the student compassion. Active listening includes engaging eye contact, verbal and nonverbal responses, and precise recall of what has been said. A student that feels heard is likely to feel comfortable sharing in other relationships they have strengthening all areas of their connection.

Tips for Active Listening:

- Watch nonverbal cues – do not sit with body closed off to the student such as crossing arms or angling body away

- Do not get distracted by phone or surroundings – put phone on do not disturb and away so the student knows they have your full attention

- Everytime you are about to interrupt the student think if it is helpful for their processing not yours

- Ask specific, clarifying questions if needed – "when you said this, what did you mean?"

3B – Precise Questions

To build upon the skills of active listening, asking precise questions about what the student is saying is very important. It lets the student know that you are not only hearing what they are saying but understanding and processing it in your own way. Questions should not be in the form of backhanded advice but should rather be to probe the student to get a broader perspective of their need or situation. This is a great time to relate to other conversations to see if needs or situations connect at all.

Examples of precise questions:

- How do you think this relates to the conversation we had last week?

- From what you are telling me, it sounds like you were angry but your actions seem like they were more sad. How are you feeling about it now?

- You said … and that surprised me. Can you tell me more about it?

- Who else in your life have you told?

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