

JESUS IS LORD: Research as Fresh Listening in Relational Youth Discipleship

Dr. Dave Rahn • Association of Youth Ministry Educators • Dallas, Texas • October 2026

It is the nature of scholarship to specialize. But a perspective's particularity inevitably leaves crucial gaps in our collective understanding. We know this, commonly embracing the protocol of naming our own study's constraints as our research is published. Tacitly we invite those with similar interests to explore and contribute fresh insights to the relevant body of knowledge. The confession of an investigation's limitations reminds us we need humility and collaboration to work with other scholars "for the life of the world."¹

Scholars who embrace Jesus as Lord can recognize how he perfectly integrates all truth. In deference to Christ and graced with "his mind"², we offer some pieces to the larger puzzle he alone can see and assemble. We therefore have the privilege of seeking the Lord as childlike listeners, eager to hear and learn about what he is already doing in the world before we try to explain it. If indeed we embrace that we can only "know in part"³ while we inhabit earth, we can also enjoy knowing Jesus as our sole source of undeserved fruitfulness because we are attached to him.⁴ These theological truths call Christian researchers into humble collaboration with the living Christ. Grace invites our careful listening, trusting the Lord who connects every dot, jot, and tittle. Truth calls for such integration. We gain understanding that matters to the world as Jesus helps us recognize connections larger than any single investigation can reveal—a gift gratefully received through diligent inquiry without presuming our efforts alone are sufficiently helpful.

Fresh listening therefore reaches both backward and outward. What Jesus has done may illuminate what he is doing, while findings from seemingly independent investigations may disclose connections previously unseen. Spirit-led discernment invites us to revisit both experience and evidence with an integrative question: ***What is Jesus up to?*** This paper draws upon five decades of ministry experience and scholarship to pursue that question through three converging lines of inquiry:

- My personal ***cold case study*** from within the *Jesus Movement*
- ***Breadcrumbs*** that connect multiple student leadership studies
- Ministry ***blind spots*** inhibiting faithful imagination and practice

Can youth ministry scholarship go beyond identified gaps in the literature to attentively discern where Jesus has already worked and is currently working? Such responsive listening focuses our scholarly calling toward humble collaboration with him in that work.

A Cold Case from the Jesus Movement

Fresh listening to the Lord invokes questions that are important today. When asking, “***What is Jesus up to?***”, might fresh listening include reconsidering what he has done before? It exceeds our imagination to know *how* God purposefully puts *all things* to use for good with us who love him, but this is the wide-eyed promise of faith when we confess Jesus is Lord.⁵ No experience lies beyond God’s redemptive use. Remembering and reflecting often position us to hear the Spirit prompt never-too-late faithful responses. Jesus is Lord and his timing is exquisite.

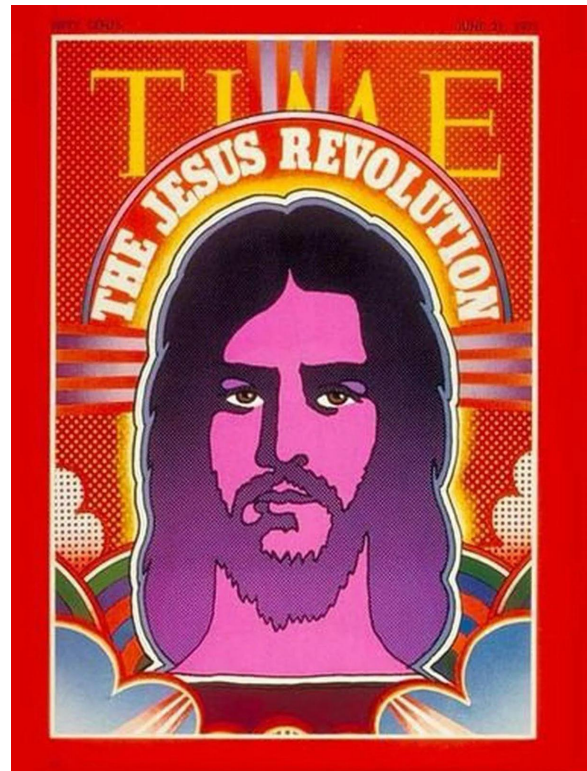
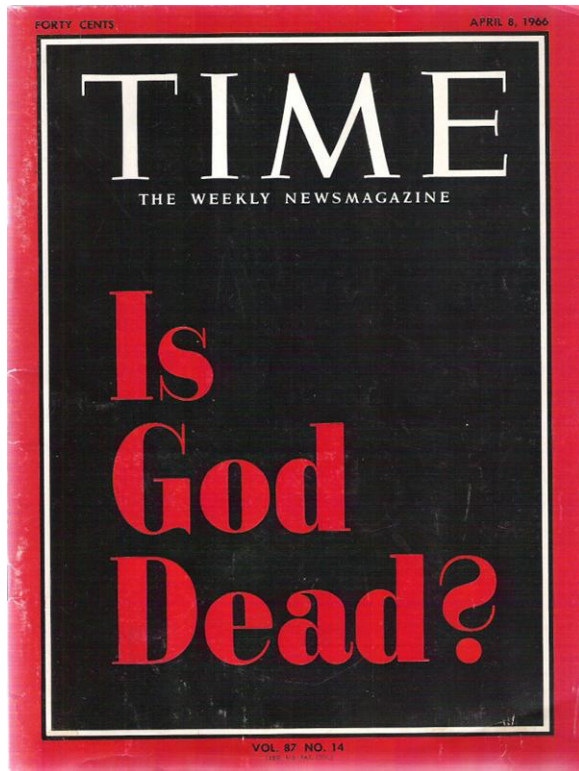
That’s why I’m captivated by some of my flashbacks from 55 years ago.

By dragging out memories filed away so long ago, I’m like a detective revisiting cold case data—however incompletely my archived fragments might represent the whole story. Concerns about the state of youth discipleship and its consequential impact on the Church in America warrant “pulling out all stops” to gain breakthrough discoveries.

Have these artifacts collected too much dust to be reliable? Memory is selective, retrospective interpretation introduces bias, and confidence in old stories deserves caution. But those limitations do not give their potential relevance an expiration date when Jesus is Lord. Reopening unscrutinized experiences may expose clues whose significance we failed to recognize at the time.

Here are a few facts to set the stage for this archaeological dig. Having been raised in a good home without the benefit of routine church experiences, it was on March 6, 1970, that I first “heard” the gospel. This is not to say that I was never exposed to Jesus Christ. But it was in my socially perplexed state as a high school sophomore that God and I truly connected such that I realized life was about to become different. Nine months later I began taking my faith seriously enough to express my personal learning in public ways. It is not an overstatement to say that my most fruitful experiences of youth ministry took place during 1971–72, while I was certifiably still a “youth.” Nothing I’ve seen, done, or studied since has quite replicated what I experienced during that season. Why not?

This appears to have been an unusual time in history. The **TIME** magazine cover on April 8, 1966, blasted this question: “*Is God dead?*” Five years later, on June 21, 1971, **TIME**’s cover of psychedelic artistry sat under this title: “*The Jesus Revolution.*” Contemporary accounts confirm that my adolescent impressions belonged to a much larger phenomenon.



Commonly associated with the counter-cultural conversions of hippies on the west coast,⁶ manifestations of the *Jesus Movement* were also evident in Central Illinois, where I was finishing high school. Donald Williams’ opening assessment of this phenomenon on behalf of *Christianity Today* (August 27, 1971) was significant: “*To be sure, the broad evangelical awakening going on today bears the marks of the so-called youth culture. To write it off for this reason, however, would be shallow for the critic and disastrous for the church. The Jesus movement must be given more than a cheap sociological and psychological explanation.*” News reported in the same magazine a few months later, on March 3, 1972, described how Eastern Illinois University was experiencing a genuine revival.

In the final few days of December of 1971, while waiting to join around 1,000 other Peoria Area Youth For Christ high school students heading to a Holiday Teen Convention, I was asked by the YFC executive director to be interviewed by the local TV station. The reporter asked me if I

was part of the Jesus Movement. This wasn't a membership vetted organization, so I quipped that I probably was, since I was wearing a belt that declared "Jesus is Lord."

In 1969 Nixon's aide John Ehrlichman famously invoked the phrase "Will it play in Peoria?" It so happens that NBC national news personality, Edwin Newman, decided to do a feature around life in this Midwestern city during the spring of 1972. His investigation led him to include a stop at our high school, where his team interviewed me and a number of other seniors at Richwoods. Looking to hear from "normal teenagers," the team instead encountered several Richwoods seniors who kept talking about Jesus. Whatever Newman had expected to find in Peoria, our faith became part of the story.

American youth ministry seems to have settled over the past 50 years into practices with results that are concerning to many.⁷ Might fresh listening to this old story expose neglected emphases worth recovering for relational youth discipleship today? Three questions pop up:

QUESTION #1 – *When do established protocols inhibit adolescents from following Jesus as Lord?* It seems apparent that hippies and Jesus freaks had a common benign neglect if not outright disdain for The Establishment. I remember two distinct instances where I walked on campus and into sit-ins covering the entire foyer at our school. One was a protest aimed at the PE teachers who had dry-shaved the sideburns a kid was sporting to enforce the Richwoods dress code. The cultural milieu surrounding the Jesus Movement similarly weakened the presumption that established practices deserved unquestioned allegiance, making room for an unashamed, radical, and bold pursuit of life with Jesus as Lord.

A confrontation comes to mind that illustrates our willingness to disrupt an inhibiting status quo. We had formed an informal weekly fellowship of about 40 regular attenders and learned that some of our group attended a church where the Bible was ridiculed. A trio of us took it upon ourselves to meet with the pastor and express our concerns. Rather than welcome the input of a few brazen high schoolers, this clergyman endeavored to enlighten us. He described the Bible as a worthy doorstop and not much more. The encounter fortified our resolve that following Jesus included discerning whether even respected leaders were faithfully handling truth. Centuries ago, the revered elder, John—beloved apostle of Jesus—had tackled a similar problem in a church and identified that the positional prominence that drove Diotrephes was an endangerment to faithfulness to be countered by truth-seeking like what Demetrius embodied.⁸

On another occasion a few of us asked a pastor who was very supportive of our efforts to consider shifting the focus of his Sunday night services so we could all join together to try and practice the Spirit-led fellowship Ray Stedman wrote about in *Body Life*.⁹ This led to a discussion about this pastor's reluctance to launch any small groups; his chief concern was that they were vulnerable to doctrinal drift. More saddened than cautioned, we left that encounter with less confidence that established churches could inhabit dynamic flexibility under Jesus' lordship.

The pairing of these stories might help pinpoint what can inhibit young people who engage their faith journeys along the well-worn pathways laid out by adult elders. One pastor essentially said, "*You kids can't trust Scripture like that.*" The other, a trusted shepherd, inferred, "*I can't trust you kids with Scripture like that.*"

We had christened our group *Maranatha* and lodged it as a Thursday night Bible study time during a weekly lineup that had plenty of other options to connect and reach out. During 1971–72, around 120 kids a week attended Monday night's Youth For Christ inductive Bible study of Romans. A largely different crowd averaging about 180 went to the Tuesday night Young Life outreach in the home of a wealthy businessman. In those days, quite a number of us also went to the same church for Wednesday night prayer meeting in addition to Sunday morning and evening services. In our hunger to grow closer to Christ, it was not uncommon for someone to find a book gem at the local Christian bookstore that we would all read and discuss.

One of the most upending discoveries was when we studied Rosalind Rinker's *Prayer: Conversing With God*.¹⁰ This form of prayer captivated us and we loved to engage it every chance we could. That eventually led us to co-opt Friday nights at 11 p.m. where many of us would meet up at a beautiful Catholic church with unlocked doors to lay on the carpeted aisles, gaze up at the dimly lit stained glass windows, and pray conversationally as a conclusion to our week. I'm confident that some of what inspired us was that we were doing things to follow Jesus as Lord together that weren't practiced in the churches we knew about in Peoria. Like the time we tied two houseboats together so we could sing and pray together while floating down the Illinois River. Looking back, I wonder whether originality was really what attracted us. Perhaps it was agency. We were doing things together in response to Jesus that nobody had programmed for us. Established ministries supplied Scripture, relationships, models, books, leaders, and places—and we eagerly received them. But our hunger to follow Jesus kept generating responses beyond what adults had prescribed. Perhaps established protocols become inhibiting not merely when

they are wrong, but when they occupy so much space that young people have little room left to discern and respond to Jesus themselves.

Now I wonder if we've spent 50 years shaping excellent youth ministry that's inadvertently become too complete, leaving adolescents primarily to participate in adults' responses to Jesus rather than discover their own. Perhaps protocols inhibit when they become so comprehensive that there is insufficient room for adolescents to exercise their agency by discerning and responding to Jesus as Lord.

QUESTION #2 – How are teen peers who inhabit following Jesus as Lord uniquely helpful to one another? My remembrance of my first 2½ years following Jesus features stories about friends. Brent cried in the church basement. Jeff typed in the back row. Nancy hosted in the sales booth. Denny mused at the swimming pool. Bill sang during chemistry lab.

Little did I know that Brent had been praying for a true friend to walk with through high school. When he invited me to spend the night at his house on the first Friday of March in 1970, I cared very little that hanging with him would include going to a youth outreach at church. We were sophomores, I had no social home, and Brent was class VP. My mindset on that eventful night was wholly aimed at moving our relationship from casual class acquaintance to genuine friendship.

The message delivered by Don Engram to ~30 teens in a musty church basement surprised me. I did not know Jesus. The evangelist said Jesus saw me, loved me, and wanted to walk every day with me. The Spirit pinpointed my loneliness and I said “yes” to something I did not understand. On the next night of this youth outreach, Engram adjusted his sermon to fit the group of gathered Christian kids. At his conclusion, he told us to pair up and pray with one another, something I had never done. So, I only half-complied. Brent and I dragged our metal folding chairs to a corner and I watched him slowly pray...about me. At first, he was simply grateful. But then his shoulders started heaving and sobs got in the way of his words. I stared incredulously. Brent began pleading for forgiveness. *About what?* About being so selfish as to have prayed for a true Christ-following friend he could walk alongside during high school. For the next nine months—until I began investing in my own personal relationship with Christ—that shared experience and the authenticity of Brent's tears were all that I knew for certain about following Jesus.

Fast forward to the summer before my senior year. I had first visited Young Life during their final meeting in May. Over 200 teens were crammed into a rich guy's basement and I spoke up about going all in with Jesus. That ultimately set me up for a week at Frontier Ranch in Colorado two months later where I shared cabin space with eight intimidatingly popular guys. Wondering on night one if I was about to become the cabin pariah, I nonetheless found courage to whisper into the dark about Jesus as we all unpacked what we were learning. By the week's end I had bonded with Jeff and become fearless about sharing my faith. The two of us plotted and prayed often about how we could boldly join Jesus to reach our friends at RHS.

It so happened that Jeff and I had both enrolled in first period typing class. We commandeered prime seats next to each other in the back row of a room mostly populated by younger students. As the class routine was established around typing whatever you wanted for the first 15 minutes, Jeff and I decided to spell out specific prayers we hoped God would answer that particular day. For example, *Lord, help me to have a conversation with Kelly about you today because I know her dad left home over the weekend and she needs to know how much you love her.* I typed. Jeff typed. We exchanged lists, promising to pray over each other's requests as we moved through the day. When we crossed paths between classes, it was not uncommon to celebrate an update: *Jeff, cross off #4!! I got to share Jesus' love with Kelly!* During this first semester of our senior year in high school, we saw 18 of our friends put their faith in Christ.

Nancy was another partner in this adventure. We managed the student council sales booth together during two lunch periods. My gregarious friend Nancy would invite someone she knew into the booth for a conversation, and life with Jesus was our favorite topic. Very few people I've ever known had such a welcoming way to host people as did Nancy. Her gifts helped transform our tiny sales booth into sacred space.

In those days, I was the student manager for Richwoods' swimming team and, after four years in the role, I coordinated younger managers like Denny. A hulking sophomore middle linebacker who starred in football, he hardly fit the stereotype of a swim team manager. For endless hours we sat poolside, our conversations barely interrupted by team duties. Denny laughed hard, openly mused about why girls were so fickle, and accepted no easy answers as he quizzed me about following Jesus. He put his faith in Christ during that season, becoming the default leader of *Maranatha* in the two years after I graduated.

As a senior, I spent two hours daily in an advanced chemistry class. Bill—a *Maranatha* co-leader with winsome quirkiness and guitar playing skills—was also in that class. Constant lab work afforded us lots of freedom. I remember talking openly about Jesus’ return, trying to pull our teacher into these discussions, and then hearing Bill invent some musical ditty to playfully express our joy in Jesus while in lab gear.

Brent, Jeff, Nancy, Denny, and Bill are a few of the friends with whom I experienced the adventure of following Jesus together. These memorable snippets cast light on faithfulness in formation. To be sure, adults were supportive. But the “active agent” that seems most intriguing to this cold case inquiry is the way peers are already embedded in one another’s ordinary lives. We could see each other taking Jesus seriously—in basements and back rows, sales cubbies and swimming pools, hallways and chemistry labs. Now I wonder if we’ve underestimated the formative advantage adolescents enjoy when following Jesus is not merely taught or modeled for them by adults but inhabited alongside friends who are discovering their own responses to him.

QUESTION #3 – When young leaders emerge who follow Jesus as Lord, how can adults best collaborate with what Jesus is already doing? Much of my subsequent ministry, research, and writing has emphasized the importance of Christ-loving adults entering the worlds of adolescents, building authentic relationships, and making Jesus known through shared life experiences. But evidence from reopening the cold case of my own transformative launch into life with Jesus doesn't quite support all the convictions I eventually concluded were essential.¹¹

Parents are primary influencers on their teens’ faith journey...unless they’re not. My father’s response to my explanations about what following Jesus meant to me was a bemused caution. He predicted I would likely grow out of my faith fervor. Among friends with a similar story, I took great comfort in how Jesus seemed to redefine family.¹²

Walt had an infectious hunger for understanding biblical truth and was a skilled Sunday school teacher. It’s safe to say that my personal Bible study habit was one of the ways Walt marked me.

Hank pioneered Young Life in Peoria. A wealthy businessman who invested both time and money in this ministry, he helped set me up for leadership by pulling me into camp, putting me up front during meetings, and even hosting me in his home for a month of Young Life study during my freshman J-term. He was the first to urge me to consider full-time youth ministry.

I also vividly remember a conversation with T.A. as I headed into my senior year at Richwoods. He was the Campus Life/Youth For Christ director in charge of Richwoods' club. Having gathered a small group to lay out plans for the year, he spoke pretty directly to me when I suggested I might not be available due to the drugstore clerk job I had: *"You'll just have to decide what's most important, Dave."* I quit the next day.

The Campus Life Insight meetings on Monday nights were aimed to help Christian kids grow in maturity. As a result, we leaned into an inductive Bible study of Romans. But T.A. only had one other adult volunteer, and the house where we gathered had no room big enough to handle the 120 kids who showed up. T.A. asked me to lead the study in the third room, supplying me with a manual I could follow to do so.

Gary was our Young Life small group leader, eyes glistening with anticipation as he masterfully led us in and out of conversations about how to better follow Jesus. Marv was hired to take over the reins from Hank's volunteer service, and—noting how hungry we were to grow—designed a discipleship intensive experience for a few of us.

What I remember was feeling the love and support of adults in specifically programmed spaces. They inspired us. Taught us. Challenged us. Their contributions were in places they had specifically designed to welcome us into. They heard about our experiences together and encouraged us to keep discovering new adventures. After one of us grabbed a book about fasting, we concluded our first 24-hour experiment by gorging ourselves at McDonald's; Hank and Marv roared when we told them.

I considered all of these adults to be friends. Not like Brent, Jeff, Nancy, Denny, and Bill. That would have seemed unnatural. Now I wonder if adults aren't perfectly placed by Jesus to notice, resource, and support the emerging peer leadership they cannot inhabit and must not inhibit. Perhaps collaboration begins by listening closely enough to discern what Jesus is already doing among young people, then contributing what adults uniquely can without occupying space that belongs to peers.

Breadcrumbs from Student Leadership Research

I expect fresh listening that asks, ***"What is Jesus up to?"*** can also help me revisit three decades of research for points of convergence with these Cold Case takeaways. The danger is

presumption; eager followers can jump ahead of what Jesus is actually saying or doing.¹³ But his Lordship over *all things* also invites scholars to notice connections across studies that were never designed to answer the same question. So, I'm framing this inquiry simply: *What clues has Jesus been leaving throughout decades of research?* Here's what I've noticed so far.

BREADCRUMB #1 – THE FRIENDSHIP FACTOR. *Close friends appear disproportionately important in adolescent faith formation.* While the popular notion of peer pressure sets off alarms around negative impact, research actually tells a different story. Teens' best friends matter more than their general peers, influence among close friends is reciprocal, and it's as likely to be positive as it is to be negative.¹⁴ These insights sit alongside the widely recognized role of parents in faith formation within this notable research insight: "adolescents who experience poor relationships with their parents are more vulnerable to peer influence than are those who may have quality family relationships."¹⁵

In a study Tom Bergler and I led to discover what storylines were most salient among 70 recent adolescent converts, camps, retreats, and events were most frequently mentioned. But programs may host decisive moments without being the most decisive influence. Undergirding this programmatic tag was learning that respondents considered the nonverbal witness and verbal interaction with friends to be most important to their coming to faith.¹⁶

An adolescent's relational trail is significantly marked by **friendship** signage. My latest investigation led me to design a research project that would allow us to gain further insights on how a teen's own collection of closest friends wield their influence. Our analysis of a data set of 2,019 relationships¹⁷ confirms my conviction around this first breadcrumb: *if we care about young persons' faith formation, we should pay careful attention to the relationships they themselves consider most important.*

BREADCRUMB #2 – SIMILARITY ADVANTAGE. *Peer modeling carries distinctive formative power.* Six findings from social-learning research offer a helpful framework for assessing the potential strength of one person's modeling influence on another: 1) How much likeness exists between the two? 2) How well does the model align with the values of a significant and shared belonging community? 3) Over what length of time has the model been observed? 4) Has the model been seen in enough different situations to demonstrate consistency? 5) Does the model offer explanations alongside behaviors? 6) Does the model share feelings accompanying behaviors?¹⁸

It's not hard to see why high school classmates or teammates who are friends enjoy several natural advantages as potential models. An excerpt from *Evangelism Remixed* helps make this finding concrete: *"When student leaders saw adults lead someone to Christ at least weekly, they reported leading more than eight friends to Christ themselves. If they observed adults evangelizing only monthly, student leaders were likely to lead fewer of their friends (four to eight) to Christ....Students who saw other students lead peers to Christ were dramatically more effective in their own evangelism efforts than those who didn't benefit from such examples....All of the students who were most effective in helping friends come to Christ had seen other teens lead a peer to faith."*¹⁹

This potential advantage of peer modeling helped give shape to six questions we later asked 161 church youth group attendees about each of their closest relationships:

1. Is this person an adult or peer?
2. Have your connections included shared church experiences?
3. Have you had conversations about Jesus?
4. Have you prayed repeatedly together about personal concerns?
5. Have you talked together about how to apply what the Bible says?
6. Has this person shown you something helpful about how to follow Jesus?²⁰

Approximately three out of every four relationships studied were peers rather than adults. And while more than two-thirds of the adults named by these teens were among those marked YES for question #6, this same characterization was only evident in one-third of their peers.²¹ The similarity advantage of peers, then, may represent enormous untapped formative potential when their observable lives offer something about following Jesus that's worth imitating.

BREADCRUMB #3 – LEADERSHIP DRIFT. *Some versions of student leadership can divert adolescents from their most consequential arena of influence.* The first two breadcrumbs signal how important peer relationships are to the adolescent spiritual formation adults hope to catalyze and support. This third research nugget raises the possibility of unintended disruption associated with a widely practiced youth ministry strategy: *student leadership*.

What requires clarity is a definition of student leadership aligned with faithfulness under the lordship of Jesus. When this defining work begins by assuming that young people are being groomed to lead within existing organizational expressions of church, the structure itself may begin determining what counts as leadership. Asking young people to invest their energy in

program planning or upfront coordination may diffuse their focus from the relational arenas where they already exercise peer influence. Linhart and I found that “...students who exert evangelistic influence on their friends are also less likely to be invested in program planning and leadership; it distracts them from the more substantive role of loving their friends well enough to reveal the hope of Christ in up close and personal ways.”²² Empirical research can investigate whatever version of student leadership we construct; theological alignment must first ask whether existing systems, programs, or relationships²³ are the most faithful arenas toward which to guide young people.

Ebonie Davis and I later explored *grit*²⁴ as a construct for helping Christ-followers focus tenaciously on what matters most.²⁵ Scripture repeatedly frames faithfulness in similarly concentrated terms: guard the heart above all else, serve one master, count everything else loss compared with knowing Christ. There are scripted versions of following Jesus that can actually clog our ability to hear and respond to his dynamic leadership as Lord. Anything—including good programs and good organizations—that persistently diverts our attention from inhabiting all of life with him risks malformation. *What if the most consequential leadership arena Jesus has already given adolescents is not the youth ministry programs provided by the church but their own existing networks of friendships?*

BREADCRUMB #4 – RESPONSIVE SHEPHERDS. *Adults matter enormously, but their most helpful contributions change as young people grow.* Given the long arc of my efforts to train adults who faithfully love and lead young people, it’s difficult to avoid taking some genuine responsibility for how they spend their time. Youth ministry professionalism has taken shape on my watch. Now I wonder whether I should have been more emphatic that relational discipleship requires adults to remain flexible enough to respond to what they discover.

Published results from one study explored what was most formative for YFC City Life young people who had grown to become indigenous urban leaders. We learned in the stories of 81 adolescents from eight different cities that what adults most helpfully contributed shifted as adolescents matured. Strong family foundations and models of Christ-centered living figured prominently in their initial movement toward trusting Jesus. As they grew, exemplars receded into the background while mentors and spiritual practices became more consequential. Their emergence into leadership was especially accelerated by mentors who opened doors to stretching opportunities. Strikingly, half of all coded responses fell within the domain of

relationships.²⁶ Faithful adults did not become less important; what young people needed from them changed.

But developmental flexibility is not enough. Responsive shepherds must also discover the particular relational world each adolescent actually inhabits. When the **Arbor Research Group** shared results from an innovative design for uncovering detail about the relationships young people consider most important, we encapsulated our findings by comparing stark differences in the friendship storylines of two otherwise similar ninth-grade girls.²⁷ We discovered something adults cannot possibly know without taking time to understand what is happening in the ordinary lives of particular teens. When adult shepherds are flying blind, even their best-intentioned efforts will necessarily be hit-or-miss.

Grit & Joy later pushed this responsiveness beneath observable behavior. Its guiding water metaphor²⁸ distinguished adults who seem content to splash around with teens from those willing to snorkel beneath the surface, and those prepared to accompany Jesus into the murkier depths where identity is being formed. The point was not that every adult must go everywhere with every adolescent, but that *helpful shepherding requires enough relational depth—rooted in fresh listening to Jesus—to discern what kind of accompaniment is needed.*

It seems clear that adults and teen peers make differentiated contributions to relational youth discipleship. *Can adults inhabit the role of responsive shepherds by listening closely enough to Jesus and young people to discern what faithful contribution is needed next?*

BREADCRUMB #5 – RELATIONAL ECOLOGY. *Every adolescent lives within a network of relationships already shaping formation and influence.* Thirty years ago, I was intrigued by the social preference mapping tool social scientists used to describe someone's particular friends in relation to their *visibility* and *likeability*. When these two attributes intersect, it's possible to see how a popular teen is highly visible and likeable (+,+) and a controversial person may only be highly visible (+,0), while someone socially rejected is also highly visible but unlikeable (+,-).²⁹ This, of course, did not help *identify* a particular young person's closest friends. Now I wonder what, exactly, I imagined the pastoral value would be in *locating* them on such a map. For instance, if five of the most influential people in a girl's life are largely neglected (-,0) among their peers, how does that sort of information actually help those who shepherd that young lady?

This illustrates a genuine challenge for those of us who engage in empirical research in the name of youth ministry. Interesting data is not always useful data, and its ultimate value for

ministry must be discerned by whether it helps us participate more faithfully in what Jesus is already doing. Volf and Croasmun are scathing in their critique of fellow theologians who work to impress one another rather than improve the world. Their “manifesto” contends that they deserve their diminished state of influence among thought leaders.³⁰

Relational ecology could easily tempt us to obsess over details that matter little to young people faithfully following Christ. I’ve often contemplated what revisions I might make to the six questions we asked about the 2,019 close relationships collected from 161 young people.³¹ How could I have better served relational youth discipleship?

Across decades of research, the clues seem to converge. Faith formation is not primarily delivered to adolescents through programs but carried through relationships. Programs matter, adults matter, leadership opportunities matter—but their fruitfulness may depend largely on how well they serve the relational ecology through which young people learn to notice, trust, follow, and influence others toward Jesus. There seems to be little doubt that, while adults may carry Christ-centered influence more reliably into a young person’s closest relationships, their peers possess vastly more friendship real estate. *What kind of Christ-following influence is actually flowing through a particular young person’s closest relationships? And what might inhibit adults from collaborating with Jesus so that more of the relationships adolescents already inhabit become places where following him is seen, spoken, practiced, and reciprocally strengthened?*

Blind Spots of Church Imagination

Assumptions about church organization can sometimes prevent us from noticing what Jesus is doing.³² If his active formation of relational shepherds bumps up against an institutional imagination encumbered by the demands of organizational maintenance, youth ministry itself may become one of the unintended casualties. The issue is not whether churches are busy. The issue is whether we are free enough from organizational demands to recognize the priorities of our Lord Jesus Christ. This part of the paper—more than any other—pleads for collaborative interaction in response to my public wonderment.

By the time the aged apostle John was exiled to Patmos, the seven churches of Asia Minor had settled into patterns the risen Christ saw with penetrating clarity. He found much to commend, but five of the seven also received rebukes. Perhaps these indictments establish a

precedent for asking the Lord to expose church blind spots that might inhibit our faithfulness today. I've wondered whether his rebukes of the churches in Ephesus, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, and Laodicea might help shape five questions that help us listen to Jesus and align relational youth discipleship practices with his will. What other questions are worth asking?

BLIND SPOT INQUIRY #1 – *Have our efforts to do youth ministry FOR Jesus displaced the relational love Jesus wants to animate among us?* “*You don’t love me or each other as you did at first!*” (Rev. 2:4, NLT)

When the machinery of a church is cranking, hard work and perseverance can be readily apparent. Yet, as this first-century church heard, operational intensity can mask a drift away from being animated by Jesus’ love. The pursuit of excellence often leads churches to rely on program specialists who are expected to deliver consistently high-quality ministry. While reflecting on my *Cold Case*, I wondered whether programs could become so *complete* that young people fail to cultivate the agency needed to grow in faith. Even admirable efforts, when misaimed, can distract us from the *most excellent way of love*.³³ If Jesus names such a blind spot within an Ephesus-like church today, it may take courage to overcome the surprise. “*Anyone with ears to hear must listen to the Spirit and understand what he is saying to the churches.*” (Rev. 2:7, NLT)

BLIND SPOT INQUIRY #2 – *Where have we accommodated ministry assumptions that Jesus himself may want us to challenge?* “*You tolerate some among you whose teaching is like that of Balaam...*” (Rev. 2:14, NLT)

Churches are hardly immune to bending truth when faithfulness requires inconvenient adjustments. Yet, from the church’s inception, truth-bending for gain has been intolerable to Jesus.³⁴ Before John recorded Christ’s indictment of Pergamum’s fellowship for tolerating false teachers, he had contrasted a local church leader “*who loves to be first*” with one “*well-spoken of...by the truth itself.*”³⁵ The danger intensifies when those entrusted to shepherd others become self-serving arbiters of truth.³⁶

Do we usurp Jesus’ right to name our identity³⁷ by inviting young people to assert “their truth?” When youth ministry adults put student leaders in charge of organizational efforts, might this be a blind spot that inadvertently inhibits their formation as representatives of Jesus, *the truth*, among their friends? *The path forward depends on listening to the Spirit for understanding.*

BLIND SPOT INQUIRY #3 – *What are we tolerating because its apparent fruitfulness*

makes us reluctant to test whether it is faithful to Jesus? “*You are permitting that woman... to lead my servants astray.*” (Rev. 2:20, NLT)

Jesus found much to commend among his followers in Thyatira, even as they tolerated corrupting influence in their midst. This side-by-side pairing of genuinely good ministry outcomes with less obvious deficits can readily create blind spots. When we scramble to keep the roaring fire of vitality stoked, we don’t notice wayward activity hiding in the shadows. Visible indicators like enthusiastic program participation or positive energy can be self-validating...and distracting. The vigilance Jesus asks of us may not come naturally, but apparent fruitfulness does not excuse its absence. Earlier we called for adults to inhabit the role of responsive shepherds, emphasizing the importance of their own hearts to what they offer. Productive ministry teammates still need Jesus to confirm that their intended faithfulness is rooted in carefully listening, discerning, and responding to his Spirit. *Ears to hear?*

BLIND SPOT INQUIRY #4 – *Have organizational signs of life persuaded us that youth*

discipleship is healthier than Jesus knows it to be? “*I know all the things you do, and that you have a reputation for being alive—but you are dead.*” (Rev. 3:1, NLT)

The research project resulting in the publication of *Evangelism Remixed* sought to exploit our network of national youth ministry leaders to find ministry sites with a reputation for doing student leadership really well. Judging by reputation, Sardis might have popped up in our exploration. In the phone interviews that undergrads did to help us filter out who might be worth visiting, six of our fourteen screening questions essentially asked, “*How many?*”³⁸ Effectiveness indicators that help ministries earn impressive reputations can also give us false assurances. Our busy activity can be a blind spot, leaving the consequential relational realities of our efforts—clearly known by Jesus—almost entirely unseen. *God delights in revealing truth to those humble enough to ask, listen, and respond faithfully.*

BLIND SPOT INQUIRY #5 – *Has confidence in what our churches provide young people*

obscured our dependence upon what only Jesus can provide? “*You say, ‘I am rich. I have everything I want. I don’t need a thing!’ And you don’t realize that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked.*” (Rev. 3:17, NLT)

The church in Laodicea didn’t just have blind spots; it was completely blind. Unlike the other churches, this fellowship receives no explicit commendation from Jesus. Youth ministry over the

past 50+ years has produced increasingly sophisticated resources, professionalized expertise (sanctioned by academia), well-written curricula, creative programs, attractive facilities, and innovative strategies. It is understandable if this has bred confidence in what we provide. But fruitful discipleship finally depends on adolescents and adults hearing and obeying Jesus as Lord. And the saddest misperception of all is being lukewarm when we imagined we were hot stuff. Even then, Jesus offers a merciful invitation: “*Look! I stand at the door and knock. If you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in, and we will share a meal together as friends.... Anyone with ears to hear must listen to the Spirit and understand what he is saying to the churches.*” (Rev. 3:20, 22, NLT)

Conclusion

In the interest of youth ministry scholarship, this paper has sought to articulate *fresh-listening epistemology* in the service of *church-renewing ecclesiology*. By revisiting my *Cold Case* memories from 1970–72, I took personal liberties that might otherwise seem inadmissible within scholarly inquiry. But the centrality of Jesus’ Lordship warrants asking, “*What might we have failed to capture from our lived experiences that could be helpful today?*”

Within the *Breadcrumbs* section, I suggest that looking for ways Jesus might be converging research that was not originally conducted with such a master plan in mind is also legitimate. If today’s insistent inquiries into improving youth discipleship can benefit from fresh reflection on decades-old research evidence, let the treasure hunt through our musty archives begin!

If this were the extent of my ambition in this paper, scholars might be justified in simply weighing the merits of these strategies among other designs for making their contributions. But the *Blind Spots* section delivers an upending claim on our work. We’ve noted that at one point in history, the risen Christ observed that his church...

...in Ephesus failed to see that love had been displaced despite their hard work and perseverance.

...in Pergamum failed to see that truth had been compromised by false teachings they permitted.

...in Thyatira failed to see the leadership corruption they tolerated amid apparently fruitful activity.

...in Sardis failed to see barrenness beneath their reputation for vitality.

...in Laodicea failed to see how desperately needy they genuinely were.

For the entire relational ecology young people inhabit within local churches, one question may be especially consequential: “*What might Jesus see about us that we cannot see for*

ourselves?” The Lord who sees his church clearly is also the Lord who keeps speaking to anyone with ears to hear.

As Christian scholars, our calling extends beyond sharpening what we know how to ask; we give Jesus our priority attention, inviting him to disrupt our questions by what he reveals. Fresh listening invites us to revisit experiences, reconsider evidence, and expose assumptions with enough openness to be corrected—even when faithfulness requires inconvenient adjustments.

Living under the Lordship of Jesus requires enough humility to believe that our most dangerous limitations may be the ones we cannot name until we listen.

¹ Miroslav Volf and Matthew Croasmun, *For the Life of the World: Theology that Makes a Difference* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2019).

² 1 Corinthians 2:16.

³ 1 Corinthians 13:12.

⁴ John 15:5.

⁵ Note especially N.T. Wright’s translation of Romans 8:28: “We know, in fact, that God works all things together for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose.”

⁶ *Jesus Revolution* (2023), directed by Jon Erwin and Brent McCorkle captures the spirit of this phenomenon.

⁷ Here’s the paper that significantly helped to launch TENx10: Pinetops Foundation, “The Great Opportunity: The American Church in 2050,” (2018). Online at <https://www.greatopportunity.org/>.

⁸ See 3 John.

⁹ Ray C. Stedman, *Body Life* (Glendale, CA: Regal Books, G/L Publications, 1972).

¹⁰ Rosalind Rinker, *Prayer: Conversing With God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1959).

¹¹ One of the legacies of my national leadership in YFC from 2000–2020 was to ask every ministry site where Christ-loving adults might connect with unchurched teens to practice these *5 Essentials*: 1) *Widespread Prayer*; 2) *Loving Relationships*; 3) *Faithful Bible Teaching*; 4) *Collaborative Community Strategy*; 5) *Adults Who Empower*

¹² Mark 3:31–35.

¹³ I can relate to Peter’s experience when he was privileged to see the transfigured Jesus talking with Moses and Elijah (see Mark 9:2–8). Note how God redirected his focus to *listen* to Jesus rather than build something he didn’t need.

¹⁴ Dave Rahn, “Reckoning With Adolescent Influence: A Sociological Perspective,” *Christian Education Journal* 3NS, no. 2 (Fall 1999), 81–91.

¹⁵ Rahn, 84–85.

¹⁶ Thomas E. Bergler and Dave Rahn, “Results of a Collaborative Research Project in Gathering Evangelism Stories,” *The Journal of Youth Ministry* 4, no. 2 (Spring 2006), 65–74.

¹⁷ Ebonie Davis, with Dave Rahn, Terry Linhart, Tyler Greenway, and Eric Sheih, “Engaging Youth Discipleship Through a Relational Discovery Paradigm,” *The Journal of Youth Ministry* 21, no. 1 (Spring 2023), 29–62.

¹⁸ Davis et al., 33.

¹⁹ Dave Rahn and Terry Linhart, *Evangelism Remixed* (Grand Rapids, MI: Youth Specialties/Zondervan, 2009), 35–36.

²⁰ Davis et al., 45.

²¹ Davis et al., 48–49.

²² Rahn and Linhart, 142.

²³ Dave Rahn, “Focusing Youth Ministry through Student Leadership,” in Kenda Creasy Dean, Chap Clark, and Dave Rahn, eds., *Starting Right: Thinking Theologically About Youth Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Youth Specialties/Zondervan, 2001), 169–170.

²⁴ Angela Duckworth, *Grit* (New York, NY: Scribner, 2016).

²⁵ Dave Rahn and Ebonie Davis, *Grit & Joy: Help for Bewildered Families of Teens* (Nashville, TN: D6 Family Ministry, 2025).

²⁶ Dave Rahn, "Unlocking the Keys to Indigenous Urban Leadership," *The Journal of Youth Ministry* 11, no. 2 (Spring 2013), 29–40.

²⁷ Davis et al., 49–51.

²⁸ Rahn and Davis, 1–3.

²⁹ Dave Rahn, "A Sociological Framework for Doing Youth Ministry," in Richard R. Dunn and Mark H. Senter III, eds., *Reaching a Generation for Christ* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1997), 98–99.

³⁰ Volf and Croasmun, 1–9.

³¹ Davis et al., 45.

³² See Howard A. Snyder, *The Problem of Wineskins* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1975).

³³ Paul uses this language in 1 Corinthians 12:31 to set up his teaching about the love of God in chapter 13.

³⁴ See the story of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts chapter 5.

³⁵ In 3 John, this is how the *TNIV* translates the descriptions of Diotrephes (v. 9) and Demetrius (v. 12).

³⁶ Eugene Peterson's pastoral perspective might have informed how Psalm 53:3–4 reads in *The Message*:
"Useless, unshepherded sheep, taking turns pretending to be Shepherd. The ninety and nine follow the one. Don't they know anything, all these impostors? Don't they know they can't get away with this, treating people like a fast-food meal over which they're too busy to pray?"

³⁷ See the promise to these same believers in Pergamum who repent from trivializing truth in Revelation 2:17.

³⁸ Rahn and Linhart, 146–148.