Discipling Across Cultures: Spirit-Led Practices in Assembly of God Youth Ministries

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I have no known conflict of interest. This project was made possible through the support of the TENx10 Collaboration at Fuller Theological Seminary. The opinions expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of Fuller or the TENx10 Collaboration.

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**Abstract**

This basic qualitative study explores the Spirit-led, relational discipleship practices used by Assemblies of God youth pastors in engaging ethnoculturally diverse teenagers across the United States. Through interviews with 18 leaders from 13 states, findings reveal a movement away from program-driven models toward relational ministry rooted in presence, prayer, and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Youth leaders developed cultural intelligence, often informally, by listening to cultural insiders and reimagining church spaces as safe “third places” for faith, identity, and belonging. Engagement was measured not solely by attendance, but by Scripture engagement, service, and the development of the Fruit and Gifts of the Spirit. Participants also reported barriers such as prejudice, language, and collectivist family expectations. Despite these challenges, youth leaders embraced culturally responsive, Spirit-empowered practices and fostered inclusive leadership teams. As demographic shifts continue, this study urges a broader conversation around Spirit-led discipleship that cultivates deep relational engagement.

*Keywords*: Relational Discipleship, Youth Ministry, Assemblies of God, Cultural Intelligence, Pentecostal Spirituality.

**Introduction**

Recent studies indicate a rise in the nones — those who claim no religious affiliation (Pew Research Center, 2012, 2024). Other studies suggest that many adolescents and young adults leave the faith, particularly after high school (Cox & Eyre Hammon, 2024; Earls, 2019). However, some scholars disagree with these assessments. Bengtson et al. (2013) found that over half (60%) of children retained the faith of their parents after entering adulthood. Further, longitudinal studies conducted by Bengtson et al. (2013), Smith & Denton (2005), and Smith & Snell (2009) noted that involved parents and grandparents, along with nurturing communities of faith, played a role in faith retention. These factors, among others, seem to have prompted Chaves (2011) to comment, “It should make us skeptical when we hear that American religion is changing dramatically or suddenly” (p. 11).

While there has been a decline in attendance in the U.S. among mainline denominations (Jones, 2024; Public Religion Research Institute, 2024; G. A. Smith et al., 2025), the same may not be true for the Assemblies of God. The Assemblies of God (AG) was founded in 1914 in Hot Springs, Arkansas, by approximately 300 people. Since then, the AG has grown to one of the largest Pentecostal denominations, consisting of 2,984,353 adherents in the U.S. (General Secretary’s Office, 2024) and over 86 million globally (Forrester, 2024; General Secretary’s Office, 2024). According to data from the AG, after a loss of 12.1% during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and a 4.4% loss in 2021, the movement recovered 3.1% in 2022 and 6.5% in 2023 (General Secretary’s Office, 2024). Demographically, the AG is diverse, with approximately 44% of adherents from ethnoculturally diverse backgrounds, 51% of adherents under age 35, and 28.5% of ministers female (Forrester, 2024; General Secretary’s Office, 2024).

Prior to the pandemic, AG youth ministries were growing numerically, although they were not keeping up with the percentage of AG attendance as a whole. From 2014 to 2016, ages 13-17 were approximately 10% of AG US attendees (General Secretary’s Office, 2021). While slightly declining before the COVID-19 pandemic, this number dropped to 9.5% during 2020 (General Secretary’s Office, 2021). Interestingly, research indicated that many of the youth ministries that moved from programmatic models to relational models during the pandemic tended to be more resilient and continue to engage adolescents, while those who maintained a programmatic model or online only model saw a decline in attendance (Brown, 2021; A. J. Gryskiewicz, 2022).

In summary, the AG US seems to be growing numerically, is ethnoculturally diverse, and had approximately 300,000 13-17-year-old adherents in 2020—the most recent year age-based data was available. Yet if Pulis' (2014) assertions are correct, AG youth have been excluded or underrepresented in many major youth studies, such as *The National Study on Youth and Religion* (C. Smith, 2009), *Sticky Faith* (Powell et al., 2011), *The Jesus Survey* (Nappa, 2012) and *Hemmoraging Faith* (Penner et al., 2012).

Since limited studies include AG youth ministries and the AG is ethnoculturally diverse, it would seem prudent to examine the relational discipleship practices of youth leaders in the United States working with ethnoculturally diverse teenagers and their levels of engagement achieved through those practices.

Problem Statement

There are limited studies that include Assembly of God churches that examine the relational discipleship practices of youth leaders in the United States working with ethnoculturally diverse teenagers and their levels of engagement achieved through those practices.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore and describe the relational discipleship practices utilized by youth leaders in Assemblies of God churches in the United States as they engage with ethnoculturally diverse teenagers. Specifically, this study seeks to understand how these practices promote spiritual growth and measurable engagement among youth from ethnoculturally diverse backgrounds.

Research Question

“What relational discipleship practices do youth leaders employ in Assemblies of God churches across the United States when working with ethnoculturally diverse teenagers, and what are the levels of engagement achieved through these practices?”

Scope

This study was limited to Assembly of God churches in the United States, with 18 participants from 13 states. Participants included four female and 14 male participants. The participants were from or near cities with immigrant and ethnic populations.

Limitations

Locating female youth pastors within Assembly of God (AG) churches working with ethnoculturally diverse teenagers was challenging. According to AG statistics, 71.5% of credential holders are male. In comparison, only 28.5% are female (General Secretary’s Office, 2024), lending some credibility to the anecdotal observation that most youth pastors within AG churches seem to be male. To mitigate this limitation, I leveraged networking or snowball sampling to locate more female youth leaders within the scope of this study. Due to the geographic distances involved, interviews were conducted virtually through Technology-Assisted Qualitative Data Collection (Dzubinski, 2017).

Participant Selection

I used maximum variation and network sampling to recruit participants for my study. As previously noted, 18 youth pastors, 14 male and four female, from 13 states participated. The selected participants served at AG churches, considered primarily, but not exclusively, Anglo. Additionally, all participants served for at least one year at their church location. Table 1, Study Participants, details the demographics of the participants.

Table 1. Study Participants

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Pseudonym | State | Sex |
| Annabelle | Arizona | Female |
| Benjamin | Arizona | Male |
| Blake | Missouri | Male |
| Caleb | Kansas | Male |
| Carter | Alabama | Male |
| Charlie | Maryland | Male |
| Daniel | California | Male |
| Frank | Nebraska | Male |
| Gabriella | California | Female |
| Gavin | California | Male |
| Haley | Kentucky | Female |
| Jacob | Utah | Male |
| James | Texas | Male |
| Landon | Lousiana | Male |
| Marvin | Colorado | Male |
| Stacey | Texas | Female |
| Thomas | Michigan | Male |
| Wade | Alabama | Male |

Methodology

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews. Interviews were approximately one hour in length and recorded and then transcribed. Transcripts were imported into NVIVO, a qualitative data analysis tool, and coded using initial and focused coding. As an experiment, fully anonymized transcripts with no personally identifiable information (PII) were processed using a large language model AI tool for additional grund based coding in accordance with IRB guidelines.

Findings

Youth pastors at AG churches discipling ethnoculturally diverse youth reported several levels of engagement. The most prominent levels included Spirit-led relational Discipleship, personal and corporate development of cultural intelligence, and assessing spiritual maturity through spiritual growth and measurable faith practices. Participants also reported issues such as family dynamics, cultural barriers, and prejudice as barriers to engagement.

Engagement Through Spirit-led Relational Discipleship

Participants described how they moved from programmatic models of youth ministry to relational models of youth ministry. This shift took the form of moving away from or minimizing the time spent on sermon or lecture-based teaching to small group discussions. To be clear, most still maintained their weekly service, which often included a sermon or teaching. However, all participants developed and incorporated small groups into their ministry. Participants also described moving out of the four walls of the church to spend significant time with teens in their world—in other words, they developed and incorporated a ministry of presence.

From Programs to Relationships

For many participants, programmatic models of youth ministry did not seem to engage adolescents. Indeed, some, like Jacob, expressed that the programmatic model they had been following was ineffective at spiritual formation and led to an attendance decline. Jacob said,

We used to do these 90s-style 40-minute messages, flashy services, games, and altar calls. I realized these kids weren’t really learning anything from these 40-minute messages! Man, they could barely remember one point. I got to a point where I had seven leaders and only two students. So, we scrapped the entire model and rebuilt it around small groups and one-on-one discipleship.

Like many others, Landon also used programmatic models but found them lacking. While teaching still occurs at each meeting, Landon expressed that learning transpires in small groups. Landon said, “For years, we leaned on big nights and program-driven events. Now, it’s all about the small group pastors. Ten minutes of teaching to set the tension, and then the real ministry happens in the conversations that follow.” Similar comments were made by Cater, who noted that his youth ministry events “weren’t building lasting faith,” so he moved from “from events to life-on-life,” and Charlie, who said that it was in “small group relationships where discipleship actually happens.”

What made the participants move from programmatic to relational models? Yes, they saw that the programmatic models were ineffective, but what led them to the relational models? Participants described a season of thoughtful reflection through prayer and a reliance on the Holy Spirit to guide them. Gabriela elaborated,

We are very much a Holy Spirit-filled, presence-driven church. We rely on the Word of God and the Holy Spirit to steward, disciple, mentor, build, and pastor each student the way God wants us to. The Lord shows us how to disciple each unique student individually.

Stacey articulated how reliance on the Holy Spirit led to relational ministry and how she leaves room for the Holy Spirit to move in her ministry by saying,

He’s it [The Holy Spirit]! He’s our big game plan. We’re really just interruptable. We plan [our meetings] with Planning Center and put in a lot of work to be organized, but if the Spirit wants to do something different, we can just throw out all the planning.

Other participants, such as Annabelle, strongly felt a personalized call from the Lord to prioritize discipling adolescents. Annabelle commented,

The Lord spoke to me and gave me a heart to reach them. The Lord just really placed it on my heart, telling me, ‘I need you to disciple this next generation and raise them up to pave the way for future ones to come.’

For some, it was not easy to change their ministry praxis. Many had been using programmatic models for years, and the call to change led them to reflect on the nature of youth ministry. Sometimes, this meant deconstructing everything except being faithful to the Word and the leading of the Holy Spirit. Carter explained his process. “I didn’t look at structures or models. The first thing we did was rebuild this whole youth ministry, and we went in relationally.”

Jacob described it as a journey of discovery where he had to “figure out what ministry and discipleship is all about.” After much prayer and reflection, he ultimately felt that “this is what God has called me to do.” Even after making the changes, some participants found that the relational models needed to be adjusted or individualized. Wade recalled how, after trying a “one size fits all” discipleship model, he and his team began to customize their approach “case by case, depending on the person.”

Throughout the interviews, participants expressed an overall dissatisfaction with programmatic models. The move to relational models of youth ministry often occurred after prayer, fasting, and listening to the leading of the Holy Spirit. Some participants found that the relational models needed to be adjusted for the cultures and adolescents they were attempting to engage. These adjustments usually led the participants outside the church to engage with ethnoculturally diverse teens in their cultural contexts and spaces.

Ministry of Presence

Youth leaders focused on adolescent ministry outside the church via a ministry of presence— being present in the students’ lives during rites of passage or other important life events. Many leaders also noted that the ministry of presence was not limited to adolescents. Youth leaders also leveraged relationships and time spent with the teens’ parents or guardians (grandparents or aunts and uncles). Youth leaders often expressed a prompting of the Holy Spirit to make these changes. Caleb felt directed by the Holy Spirit to make these changes and noted, “Discipleship happens outside the church— at sporting events, meals, and home visits.” Similarly, Frank observed that discipleship happened “outside the church” and away from the church building, where he could connect with ethnoculturally diverse teens and their parents. Frank explained,

Outside the church, I was able to share a meal with two students and their families. Their dad was Mexican, and their mom was African American. Another of my students is from West Africa. I go to her volleyball games and sit with her parents. So, outside the church is where we can develop relationships. It’s about knowing them and their families, being welcoming, and being curious about their lives. It’s about being relational beyond religious activities. It’s about going into their world.

Carter and Stacey echoed Frank’s thoughts and related them to rites of passage, celebrations, and somber family events. Carter illustrated how he was “invited to quinceañeras, family BBQs, birthday parties, and even funerals. If you want to reach our Hispanic youth, you have to be willing to show up for their families, not just for them individually.” Recognizing that family is an integral part of Hispanic culture, Stacey remarked, “If there's a family birthday, a cousin's party, a baptism—you better believe that's where they're going to be. So we’ve tried to engage not just the student but also their whole family when possible.”

Some youth leaders, like Wade, Gavin, and Gabriella, seemed to have no place off-limits for them to try to connect with students. Wade shared, “I’m in their homes. I go to some of their events— sporting events, open mic nights, and places of work. I try to be relationally available in their lives.” For the study participants, it was about getting outside of the four walls of the church and, to quote Gavin, “Go to where they are!” Which interestingly aligns with the AG’s emphasis on mission and evangelism.

Being present in the students’ lives was practiced by participants; further, they required their youth leaders to do the same. Several youth pastors, such as Frank and Thomas, encourage their leaders to meet with and disciple three students weekly. Thomas used his own life as an example, explaining, “I mentor three students as an example, and then I encourage all our leaders; they have to pick three students they mentor.” Not only were leaders mentoring or discipling students, but they also met with students in various places and situations. Leaders often met students at sporting and life events, coffee shops, and restaurants. Not only did the leaders meet with teens, but they were also encouraged to connect with the parents or guardians of the teenagers they were discipling.

In brief, participants and their leaders spent significant time going to spaces occupied by ethnoculturally diverse teens to connect with the adolescents and guardians. Often, these were public spaces, but just as often, they met in the teens’ homes or places where rites of passage or other special events occurred. Youth pastors discipled students and directed their youth leaders to follow their example.

Engagement Through the Development of Cultural Intelligence

Participants explained that relational discipleship is best accomplished with a team that can help carry the load and provide personalized contact with individual students and their families. So, along with the encouragement to connect and disciple teens outside the church, leaders noted how they regularly trained themselves and their leaders to develop cultural intelligence, created safe places, and diversified their leadership teams.

Modeling the Way

To borrow terminology from Kouzes & Posner (2023), leaders modeled the way they expected their leaders to emulate through regular interaction and training. For example, most participants, such as Annabelle, Wade, and Jacob, met weekly with their teams. On the other hand, Daniel met once per month with his leaders and seemed to be an outlier in the data. Annabelle found that meeting with her leaders weekly was effective at “discipling [her] leaders to disciple the students by having those intentional relationships.” At the meetings, participants used behavior modeling and nonformal and informal teaching methods to encourage team members to emulate the discipling behaviors they expected team members to reproduce.

One recurring method participants used to develop their cultural intelligence was to leverage information from cultural insiders. Daniel expressed how the emic perspective of a cultural informant proved invaluable in connecting with East Indian adolescents and helped him avoid cultural faux pas. Daniel explained,

I worked for an Indian guy for a long time, and he’s been my resource when it comes to reaching Indian kids with the gospel. He’s a huge resource for me because there’s a lot of things they take offensively that I didn’t know! For example, when I order pizza for them, I will order cheese pizza because they don’t eat pepperoni. I get food catered to their beliefs. I’m not trying to change their culture. I’m trying to love them where they’re at.

Jacob described how he gained fluency in Chinese culture from classmates in his doctoral program and later by working in a lab run by Chinese scientists. He leveraged these experiences to connect with Chinese teens in his community. According to Jabob,

The whole lab was Chinese, so I learned that culture really well. So when I approached this kid from China, who is a legit 12-year-old genius, we talked about culture and bantered a little bit. I know when it is safe to make little cultural jabs to grow the relationship without being offensive. But yeah, that cultural awareness just really helps me approach them with— what’s a good word here?— Cultural wisdom?

Participants found that cultural insiders, including ethnoculturally diverse teens, were a crucial source of cultural knowledge that helped the leaders develop their cultural intelligence. Using this knowledge, youth pastors taught leaders to seek expert help by talking to people, according to Blake, “who know that culture well.”

Interestingly, all participants noted that insider information and personal experience were their primary sources of information when developing cultural intelligence and competencies. When specifically asked about resources they found helpful for connecting with ethnoculturally diverse youth, only one, Frank, provided any resources. These included *Perspectives of the* *World Christian Movement* (Winter & Hawthorne, 2009), *Third Culture Kids* (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009), and *The 3D Gospel* (Georges, 2017). When explicitly asked about classes or workshops that helped equip them for relationally discipling ethnoculturally diverse youth, Haley was the only participant who had taken an intercultural studies class.

The data indicates that participants intentionally sought to expand their cultural intelligence and competencies through insights shared by cultural insiders. Furthermore, they encouraged their youth leaders to follow their examples and make similar connections with those with emic perspectives. Trusted friends and coworkers, parents of the students, and the students themselves often provided cultural insights. However, most participants had no formal, nonformal, or informal training on ministering across cultures, and only one had read academically on the topic, illustrating a gap in ministry preparation and training.

Creating Safe Spaces

While participants moved many relational discipleship activities outside the church, participants reimagined the church location as a safe “third place” (Oldenburg, 1996, p. 6) where teens could connect, develop cross-cultural relationships, share different perspectives, and feel accepted. Carter noticed that sometimes it was uncomfortable for teens to be in ethnoculturally diverse groups, but spiritual and relational growth can occur in challenging situations. Carter said, “I want students from different cultures and ethnicities to hear different perspectives... when they [adolescents] begin to share, they become more comfortable, and we’re going to hear more of those perspectives.”

Annabelle created safe places by developing “collaborative activities” that create a sense of community and encourage “active listening and respect” from teens and leaders. For example, in her context, it would not be unusual for the leaders and teens from their English-speaking congregation to attend the Spanish-speaking congregation to support Latino teens singing, speaking, or performing in Fine Arts. Annabelle recalled how she is seeing the fruits of her efforts as teens are establishing cross-cultural and cross-congregational friendships.

Participants observed that some ethnoculturally diverse teens struggled with a sense of belonging. However, by creating a safe space, Haley found that students can find some measure of comfort in their ethnic racial identity development (ERI). Haley hosts “International Nights,” when ethnoculturally diverse students can share essential aspects of their background, culture, and home life with other youth group members. She recalled how the “International Nights” helped a student struggling with her ERI. Haley reminisced,

A student told me that she didn’t feel like she belonged in the United States and didn’t feel like she belonged when visiting her grandparents and cousins in [South America]. But when she walks into our church, she feels like she belongs because everybody else understands that she’s living in a third culture.

Participants confessed that it is sometimes complicated for ethnoculturally diverse teens to navigate their ERI, and thus, there is a need for safe places to process their thoughts. Charlie described one teen who was culturally isolated in their school. He said, “This kid was a recent immigrant, and there were no other diverse students or adults in the school. It was a White middle-class environment.” Other times, teens wanted to avoid calling attention to themselves or came from situations where their families did not celebrate their ethnocultural background. In these cases, Caleb found that some teens have “learned to hide and not present [their culture] to other people.” Similarly, Blake described how some teens “want to be seen as just an American kid, not as a Nigerian immigrant or a Congolese immigrant, or whatever country they happen to be from.” In these cases, participants noted that teens wanted to blend in or be in a diverse group with students from diverse ethnocultural backgrounds, so they were just one of many teens.

At the same time, ethnoculturally diverse teens attracted other diverse teens who were not necessarily from the same cultural backgrounds. Charlie told a story of one teen who shared the gospel and discipled six other teens shortly after his conversion. According to Charlie,

We have one student; his dad is from Ghana, and his mom is from India. He became a part of our ministry, was really quick to grasp the gospel, and started making disciples. He brought a Muslim student who converted to Christianity, and then a student from Mexico, and then four other friends, all within his first two weeks in the youth ministry.

Likewise, Gavin described how he and his team initially evangelized among Latino and African American communities in his area. Shortly thereafter, they hit a type of critical mass where the ethnoculturally diverse teens began to bring their friends, and the demographics of the youth group shifted. Gavin explained,

Our church is in a tougher area of [California], and so we wanted to make sure our church and our youth group looked like the kids who were in the neighborhood, and we weren’t stealing kids from other churches. So we went out and got the teens who were in the neighborhood, and then the teens in the neighborhood invited their friends who were in the neighborhood. So our youth group looked, at a certain point, very heavily Hispanic and Black.

Carter’s observations aligned well with the insights of other participants. He recalled how diverse teens brought other diverse teens to a safe third place, fostering an inclusive atmosphere. Carter recalled,

The biggest success is when they [ethnoculturally diverse teens] say, ‘This is my home church! I’ve never felt more welcome! There’s people like me all around!’ You know, that’s what we like to hear—that no one feels left out or singled out or feels like this isn’t their youth group, but they have people just like them, who maybe have similar stories or similar backgrounds, that are coming.

Participants across the country commented that diverse teens often drew other diverse teens. By fostering safe third places, participants created an atmosphere where students could express themselves and share their culture. The adolescents also developed cross-cultural friendships and felt safe enough to invite their peers and other diverse teens. The safe places also served as a buffer where teens could manage and develop their ERI as they saw fit in a warm and welcoming environment with caring adults who fostered Christ-like relationships with them.

Diverse Adult and Adolescent Leadership

Critical to engaging ethnocultural teens was the development of ethnically diverse leadership teams. Leaders’ insights and life experiences often helped the ministries connect with teens. James explained that one of his leaders was originally from the same low-income neighborhood as many African American teens the ministry was attracting. The leaders’ emic perspectives proved valuable in connecting with students in that area. James commented,

We’ve been having a lot of students from the south side of [the city]. One of my leaders grew up there, and he has a heart for ministry. So he’s really taken this role to develop and disciple the students he connects with from there. That’s kind of how it is across the board within our youth ministry.

Having leaders with insider knowledge of a culture also helped Frank’s team engage and disciple Haitian immigrant teens. Frank clarified,

Nadège (pseudonym) is just a blessing. She was a youth leader who just jumped on staff last year. She’s Haitian and just connects well with our girls. They respect her because she understands what they’re going through. Not only does she look like them, but she talks like them and understands their culture. So it’s been a blessing to have people on our team who directly understand their culture.

From Frank’s perspective, Nadège could connect with the adolescent females in the group because she looked like them and could connect with them on a cultural and linguistic level. Participants stressed this theme repeatedly. While the diverse leadership teams included adults, participants often included ethnoculturally diverse teenagers. Blake was early in the journey of moving to relational discipleship models, had three teen leaders he was actively discipling and developing into leaders, one was a “second-generation Nigerian”.

Participants incorporated diverse teen leaders in a variety of ways. Some older teens discipled and mentored younger teens, and participated in evangelism and outreach. Other diverse teens led worship, operated sound and tech equipment, or participated in Fine Arts. Stacey had “plugged in” Hispanic and African American teens into the worship team, and as leaders of the public school “Jesus Clubs,” her ministry developed.

A final common thread among some participants was how teen leaders often returned to the youth ministry as adult leaders after graduation. This process of recruiting and discipling diverse teens as leaders seemed to provide a recruiting source of diverse adult leaders as older adults transitioned out of youth ministry or younger adults moved away for employment or school opportunities. Frank described the process in his ministry, “Some… started in Middle School and are now in High School and [some] are serving in the church.”

To summarize, participants developed cultural intelligence by gaining emic perspectives of cultural insiders. Furthermore, they modeled the way by encouraging their youth leaders to do the same. By creating safe third places, participants encouraged ethnically diverse teens to share their stories and cultures. Through these dialogues, cultural understandings and fluency developed among teens and adults alike. In these safe places, adolescents struggling with their ERI found comfort being surrounded by a plethora of diverse teens. For some, it was a place to blend in; for others, they could wrestle with their ERI development without fear of judgment. By actively recruiting ethnoculturally diverse leaders, adults and teens alike, participants found they had a built-in source of insider information and team members who could move and minister effectively between cultures.

Engagement Through Spiritual Growth and Measurable Faith Practices

When I asked participants how they measured engagement and success in relational discipleship, I was surprised at the continuity of their responses, which coalesced into two broad themes: students’ consistent participation in Spirit-led faith practices and the observable development of the Fruit and Gifts of the Spirit.

Consistent Faith Practices

According to participants, highly engaged adolescents committed to regular and personal scripture engagement and personal and corporate prayer, including praying for others. Engaged teens also participated in worship and evangelism and stepped into leadership roles in the church. Participants used no single metric to measure successful engagement, but rather a host of metrics. Having several metrics gave a more holistic picture of how the student was developing and revealed underdeveloped areas that needed to be reinforced or strengthened. Stacey described how she measures engagement using several different markers,

This sounds so Christianese, but changed lives— watching their behaviors and desires change. Watching what they post on social media, what they’re willing to share and talk about, and what they stop sharing and talking about are all measuring sticks if there’s been a change and a shift. Watching their attitudes and willingness to memorize scripture is a really big one for me. So, watching students take time to do that and hide God’s Word in their hearts. Watching them prioritize and shift toward the Kingdom things in a tangible way is how we measure if discipleship is really making a difference.

In addition to connecting to their small groups and being in a mentoring relationship with an adult leader, Landon uses an App from My Healthy Church (2025) to help assess scripture engagement. To his surprise, he found this area needed improvement, resulting in a shift in the ministry. Landon explained,

As a part of the process, we ask uncomfortable questions, challenge them, look them in the eye, and call them to a higher level of living. We started tracking Bible reading last semester through the app. There wasn’t a lot of movement there last semester. This next semester, it’s going to be the only goal that I have. We’ve hit our other goals, and as far as I’m concerned, it’s just not hard to grow a youth ministry; it’s hard to disciple students. So I’m just not interested in anything other than discipling students and getting them in their Bibles at least four times a week.

Often, youth leaders connected being discipled to making disciples as a faith practice. In other words, if a teenager was being discipled, there was a stated expectation that the student would share their faith with their friends and actively invite their peers to church. Several times, participants quoted Mark 16:15 as an essential framework for their ministry. Gabriela encapsulated this idea, saying,

We always talk about “Go, therefore, and make disciples [Mark 16:15].” We tell our kids, “There’s no way you’re going to come in this group and feel like you can just sit back and relax. Come in, get filled up, and then go out and do what the Bible tells you to do. So we have a lot of young people who are mentoring and discipling their peers.

Not all the participants used the same faith practices to measure engagement. Some used attendance, mission trips, or Fine Arts participation as metrics, while others did not. However, all participants used multiple faith practices as data points to measure effectiveness. Youth leaders could individualize the discipleship process by assessing discipleship development, addressing underdeveloped areas, and correcting deficits in their relational models.

Observing the fruit and gifts of the Spirit.

Closely tied to assessing faith practices and spiritual disciplines, leaders also observed if students were developing the Fruit of the Spirit and Gifts of the Spirit in their lives. Unsurprisingly, Pentecostal youth leaders at AG churches leaned into the realm of the charismata. All participants referred to the Holy Spirit in some context. Indeed, in many cases, it was challenging to separate previously noted faith practices like prayer from glossolalia or other charismata since they were often linked. The most common references included the Baptism in the Holy Spirit, the Fruit and Gifts of the Spirit, reliance on the Holy Spirit for ministry decisions, and creating space for teens to experience, listen to, and follow the Holy Spirit. Participants felt they were effective in relational discipleship if students actively sought the Baptism of the Holy Spirit, developed the Fruit of the Spirit, and lived by the Spirit. A common theme among participants was how students had an experiential encounter with the Holy Spirit at youth camp. Benjamin explained what this looked like in his context,

At our youth camps and youth services, we push for the Holy Spirit and Baptism in the Holy Spirit and things like that. But before we do that, we make sure to teach on the Holy Spirit, the Gifts of the Holy Spirit, and things like that. That way, they fully understand how it all works, what speaking in tongues is, and what it means when you start feeling overwhelmed with God’s presence. We’ve done that at every youth camp we've had. And the students, I would say a majority of my students, who go to youth camp end up being baptized in the Holy Spirit or experiencing the Holy Spirit in a new way whether it’s speaking in tongues, whether it’s falling out in the Spirit, or whether it’s just feeling the peace of the Holy Spirit.

While many participants noted that discipled youth had power encounters at youth camp, camp was not the only place such encounters occurred. Just as many participants described the Gifts of the Spirit flowing in their small groups and youth services. Stacey described a typical service,

We often have altar calls for being filled with the Holy Spirit and opportunities for students to pray over each other for healing. And we actually… we've had a lot of healings in our youth ministry in the past six months, especially. Watching students pray over each other, watching their friends get healed, and even adults sometimes coming up and getting prayer has been a huge. You really can’t fake that Fruit.

Wade explained how he saw the Fruit of the Spirit develop in the lives of students they were discipling. He stated, “We’re measuring faithfulness. We’re measuring generosity. We’re measuring not personality assessments, but their maturity level in many areas. Their relational dynamics, their leadership skills, their communication skills. We’re measuring the Fruit of the Spirit in their lives.” Jacob recounted how the Fruit of the Spirit was developing in the life of an Asian student he was discipling. For Jacob, this development was a marker of growth and progress. He said,

One of my [Asian] students and I talked about going into that deep spiritual stuff. Man, this kid gets on fire for Jesus. He is developing the Fruits of the Spirit, specifically, joy. The Holy Spirit is also developing in him a hunger for holiness and righteousness. He’s like, “Man, I don’t want to do those things anymore.” He has the conviction of the Holy Spirit now. So, yeah, yeah, absolutely, you see the Fruit growing in him.

Often, as participants reminisced about how they have seen students transformed by the power of the gospel, smiles spread across their faces, and they spoke excitedly about the growth evidenced by the Fruit of the Spirit in teenagers’ lives. As Marvin recalled the progress of one particular student in his group, he used the metaphors of blooming and blossoming to describe the growth he observed. Marvin rejoiced,

It’s been an amazing experience to watch a student who you know is a little hesitant at first, because of everything that is happening in their lives, to see them bloom and blossom into someone who loves God. Regardless of what their situation looks like, being able to see their progression is the most amazing thing… I think it is the Fruit of the Spirit developing within them, that peace, that patience, especially when there’s a lot going on in their lives. Knowing that as they’re blossoming and blooming, like I've said, it’s through the Gifts and Fruit of the Spirit.

The vast majority of participants noted the recurring themes of spiritual growth, hallmarked by spiritual markers. However, some participants did not use the Fruit or the Gifts of the Spirit as metrics for growth. Either they did not directly address the issue, or like Haley, noticed the Fruit of the Spirit in students’ lives, but did not use it as a marker for disciplship engagement or progress. Haley observed that students became more engaged as “intellectual, personal discipleship” occurred. In other words, students became engaged with discipleship when it was more intellectual and less experiential.

In summary, participants measured engagement through two key indicators: measurable faith practices and the observable development of the Fruit and Gifts of the Holy Spirit in teenagers’ lives. Youth leaders assessed engagement not by a single metric, but through a range of spiritual disciplines, including prayer, worship, evangelism, leadership, and scripture reading. These multiple metrics allowed participants to identify growth and areas needing improvement. Many youth leaders highlighted the importance of the Holy Spirit, noting how students sought the Baptism in the Holy Spirit and increasing evidence of the Fruit and Gifts of the Spirit in their lives. While a few participants emphasized other indicators of discipleship over experiential markers, the majority viewed spiritual transformation—evidenced by both inward change and outward practice—as the hallmark of meaningful discipleship and growth.

Barriers to Engagement

Participants reported barriers that hindered their ability to relationally disciple ethnoculturally diverse youth. These barriers fell into three broad categories: Internal and external prejudice and discrimination, and cultural and linguistic barriers. To be clear, participants reported other barriers, but these themes were the most recurring amongst all participants.

Internal and External Prejudice and Discrimination

According to participants, prejudice and discrimination were factors that hindered their efforts to relationally disciple teens from ethnoculturally diverse backgrounds. Often, marginalization came from sources outside of the church. This external discrimination was levied towards immigrants of all ethnicities and co-cultures with a long history in the U.S. Landon, serving at a church in the Deep South, described some of the history of the area where he lives. Landon explained,

[My city] is historically divided and segregated. There’s classism and racism to this day in the schools. For example, I’m in one school and there’s about six youth of color, and then I’m in another school and there’s about six white kids in the whole school. So the big question in [my city] is, where’d you go to school? That question will open or close doors because it says a lot about you. I’ve been in wealthy schools that were predominantly White, and I’ve been in incredibly toxic poor schools that were predominantly Black, and then some are a little mixed in between, but our youth ministry pulls from all of them.

Jacob serves at an AG church in Utah, and he described his city and church as diverse with immigrants from Africa, Asia, Europe, and Latin America. He noted that he commonly sees the Russian and Ukrainian immigrants “hanging out” and getting along; this is not always true of all immigrants in their public or community sporting events. Jacob opined,

We encounter a ton of racism on the playing fields in our city, and we have amendments in our city that are being pushed that will limit funding for our school because our players are just so good! Our players come from everywhere, and people will— well— they’ll shout racist slurs, the N word, because the [teens] are winning these basketball tournaments, they’re winning these soccer tournaments, because my Brazilian students are great at soccer.

Instances of external prejudice and discrimination were not limited to the Southern and Western U.S. Charlie is at an AG church in Maryland, and he recounted an incident that occurred while his teens were participating in an outreach event approved by the city. Charlie reminisced,

I took a group of students on an outreach approved by the city, but it wasn’t communicated to the police. The team used washable chalk paint to graffiti the sidewalks with encouragement throughout the downtown area of our city. The city council knew about it, but the police didn’t. The police came and confronted us in a very negative way, and that was a tough thing to navigate. Afterward, I had some hard conversations with the parents. They were like, “Why did you put our students in that environment?” Because it wasn’t a lens I would have seen, you know? As a White individual in that environment, maybe I wouldn’t have had the same experience. I was blind to what could have happened.

Many participants shared stories of external prejudice and discrimination toward ethnoculturally diverse groups. External marginalization frequently made it difficult for youth leaders to gain trust among the diverse communities of teens. As Charlie discovered, individuals’ cultural lenses are colored and shaped by their experiences, and not all cultures and co-cultures share the same perspectives. Equally damaging was the marginalization that occurred within the church.

Carter reported that social media posts by students or parents in the church contributed to discriminatory attitudes and behaviors. Parents posted political messages with anti-immigrant sentiments, which impacted their children’s views and perspectives. Additionally, the posts were public and viewed by immigrant families and teens in the church. Carter explained that teens would come to the youth group and expose their “family beliefs,” which would start arguments in the youth group. As a result, Carter has established the youth ministry as a politics-free zone, and he confronts students and parents when necessary. Carter described the process, saying,

Frankly, I've had to pull those students aside with their parents and say, “Listen, we’re a multicultural youth group, we’re a multicultural church, and we believe that this is what heaven’s going to look like, so this isn’t going to change— this is how it’s going to be. When your students are here, they need to be okay with that, and if they’re not okay with that, then maybe this won’t be the perfect church or youth group for them.” I believe racism is a heart issue, so I just don’t tolerate that. I can pour into that student, meet with them privately, and talk about all those things. Sometimes we have some students who are set in their ways because their parents are set in their ways, especially here in the South.

Unfortunately, examples of racism and xenophobia were mentioned by several participants. However, participants were quick to note that when racist behavior occurred, it was quickly confronted by the youth leaders or the leaders in the church. Landon recalled an overt example of discriminatory speech during a church service when someone began to pray against a particular immigrant group, and how his pastor addressed the individual. Landon commented,

We had a prayer meeting a couple of weeks ago and were praying for our country. Somebody stepped up and started praying against the Haitians in our country. Immediately, the sheepdog comes out. My pastor went to that person and said, “Hey, would you step out of the room?” And, you know, pastor dealt with that.

Looking beyond the church at the larger structure of the AG, a few participants noted that there can sometimes be cultural or ethnic blindness at the Network Youth level. Landon commented that when he takes his teens to the Fine Arts or Youth Convention, the worship team is often made up of a homogeneous group of teens, or the videos and skits used for illustrations or promotions are mostly White teenagers. Landon said,

I want my kids to see themselves in these videos. I want them to see other people who look like them, are discipled, are preaching the gospel, and are worshiping. My kids notice that stuff. I mean, they’re not dumb. They’ll ask, “Hey, Pastor, when will you get a video with people that look like us?” I don’t have an answer for that.

Sometimes the discriminatory attitudes inside the church were from Whites toward immigrants and people of color. However, just as often, these same attitudes were displayed by immigrants inside the church towards other immigrants, African Americans, or Anglos. Blake described how he was surprised by the animus of some African immigrants in his church toward African Americans.

We were shocked to find out that some of the African immigrants are a little— actually prejudiced— towards African Americans. They don’t particularly speak kindly of them very much. They just tend to say that they think they’re lazy, kind of the typical stereotypes that you hear... stuff you would expect to hear from a country White guy that’s a little bit racist. One elderly [African immigrant] lady was talking to us, and she’s like, “Yeah, we’re not like those, you know, Black people that don’t get a job. We’re Africans. We're different.” She said it out loud in the church, and we were shocked to hear that.

Similarly, Gavin recalled that Filipino parents in the church did not want their teens attending the youth group because there were “too many Black kids at the youth group.”

Participants also described instances of discrimination by immigrants and co-cultures towards Whites that hindered the youth leaders’ efforts at relationally discipling ethnoculturally diverse youth. Stacey experienced some difficulty crossing ethnic and gender boundaries as she ministered to immigrant teens from paternalistic cultures. She explained, “Some families will refuse to call me Pastor Stacey, and others will just call me ‘that White girl.’ I can see in their students that they struggle a bit more with my authority or taking my advice.” Other leaders reported being excluded from some ecumenical events because they were White. Perhaps the most common form of racial stereotyping towards White youth leaders occurred when parents or teens presumed the youth leader would not understand what it was like to grow up poor, fatherless, or struggling with addictions.

Cultural and language barriers

Sometimes, as in the case with Stacey, prejudice and discrimination had their roots in the worldview and values of the immigrant culture. Stacey found it challenging to minister in a patriarchal culture. Rather than fight the cultural values of immigrants, she worked within their framework, influencing the next generation. Stacey explained,

I don’t always fight that. I have enough guy youth leaders that I can hand them over to them. The goal is the same— we will raise them up, and eventually they’ll get it. But right now, fighting parents on that is too much work.

Blake encountered a similar problem connecting with female adolescents from patriarchal cultures in West Africa. He clarified that many West African couples will not sit together in his church. If a husband and wife want to sit near each other, the wife will sit in the row behind her husband. When Blake attempted to connect with the girls, “they would talk so low, it was really hard to hear them…to make connections.”

The collectivistic nature of African, Asian, and Latin American cultures was both a barrier and a blessing to youth leaders. Participants found that once they made a relational connection with the parents, they usually had the parents’ support in discipling the teens. However, making that connection with the parents was sometimes a long, hard slog— especially from the perspective of participants from Western individualistic cultures. Participants often struggled with teens missing church or ministry events because the teen was expected to prioritize family events, such as a second cousin's birthday party or quinceañera, above any non-family event. Initially, many youth leaders struggled with the tensions created by the collectivistic versus individualistic worldviews. However, as they developed relationships with the families and began attending the family events, they gained a type of insider status. Carter illustrated this concept by saying,

They want you more involved in the family activities. So it’s not just focused on the student, but now also focusing on the family as a whole, so we just had to learn how to balance and be flexible in that, and understand the culture that our Hispanic community is more of a family-oriented community.

Adding an additional layer of complexity, some participants encountered language barriers. It was complicated to connect with some parents without a shared language. Of the 18 participants, only two had fluency in a second language— Spanish and French. Yet language was a significant hindrance. Haley called this her “biggest hurdle when it comes to scheduling, planning, executing events… for many of them, English is their second, third, fourth, or tenth language.” Likewise, James found the number of languages and cultures in his community a daunting barrier. James clarified,

“We’ve been facing… a language barrier, where families speak Spanish, they speak Hindi, they speak Korean, Vietnamese. It’s those parents that are hard for me to relate to, or just having that parent connection that is vital in our ministry.”

Most participants overcame language barriers by recruiting and developing ethnoculturally diverse leadership teams. Other times, youth leaders relied on multilingual teens to help translate and act as a bridge to monolingual parents. Nonetheless, language was often a barrier, especially as leaders initially began their efforts to relationally disciple etnocturally diverse you.

To conclude, participants reported instances of internal and external prejudice and discrimination that hindered their efforts. Overt and intentional discrimination, as well as cultural and colorblindness, were primarily types noted. Marginalization and discrimination came from many directions, from Whites toward immigrants and co-cultures, from African immigrants to African Americans, and from African Americans and Latinos to Whites.

Differences in collectivist versus individualistic worldviews created barriers to effective engagement as participants grappled with the family dynamics of ethnoculturally diverse teens. Additionally, the lack of a shared language between youth leaders and immigrant parents hindered communication and relationship development.

Discussion

The findings indicate that youth leaders moved from ineffective programs to meaningful relationships and provided opportunities for experiential faith. The data also indicated that while youth leaders developed cultural intelligence personally and corporately, few resources were related specifically to youth ministry. Finally, a review of the data suggests that the quantitative operational definition researchers use to measure whether teens are leaving their faith may be insufficient.

Lifeless Programs to Meaningful Relationships

Unsatisfied with the lifeless programs that were not producing disciples, participants moved to relational models. An abundance of data illustrates the effectiveness of caring adults disciplining teens in the context of a relationship (Barna Group, 2023; Moore, 2022; Penner et al., 2012; Powell & Clark, 2011; Pulis, 2014). The data indicate that relational discipleship led to higher engagement by ethnoculturally diverse teens. By incorporating male and female leaders from ethnoculturally diverse backgrounds, participants created what Powell & Clark (2011) term a ”sticky web of relationships” (p. 93). They rightly point out that extended families have been the primary source of care and support. This support framework is especially powerful among families from collectivistic cultures, where support extends beyond the nuclear family to extended family and even fictive kin. By prioritizing relational connections with teens and their adult family members, youth leaders are, in effect, becoming part of the extended family. This process is more noticeable in cultures that value patron/client relationships, where leaders can serve as bridges to the church and fictive kin. (Howell & Montgomery, 2019; Oh, 2018). Participants found that as relationships with teens and family members developed, they were often invited to family meals, events, and rites of passage. The more they participated in these activities, the more teen discipleship engagement increased. Therefore, it would seem prudent for youth workers seeking to engage ethnoculturally diverse teens in discipleship to consider investing significant time and energy in developing a network of culturally diverse youth leaders who can engage with teens and their families.

Developing Culturally Intelligent Teams and Environments

Participants explained how they worked to develop cultural intelligence for themselves and their teams. Overwhelmingly, they used data from cultural insiders as their primary source of information. Informants were usually people within the church, such as youth leaders or other adults, but just as often, emic perspectives came from adolescents or people outside the church. Learning from cultural insiders is commonplace in missiological circles and is particularly robust in AG missions. Many participants’ attitudes towards evangelism, discipleship, and mission echoed those of AG missions. Indeed, the second general council of the AG in 1914 emphasized the idea that the AG should be actively involved in “the greatest evangelism that the world has ever seen” (Gohr, 2019, para. 2). The churches included in this study seemed to prioritize evangelism and discipleship of all peoples, and seem to lean toward AG missiological principles in their outreach approaches.

Yet, according to youth leaders, there was a significant absence of formal, nonformal, and informal training on ministering to or discipling ethnoculturally diverse teens. To their point, while there are many books on youth ministry, there are few academic studies and resources on multicultural youth ministry. Some organizations, such as the Fuller Youth Institute (FYI) and scholars (Espinoza et al., In Press 2026; Gryskiewicz, 2018, 2024, 2025), are attempting to fill the gap; however, the field is largely unexplored. As the world becomes more globalized, the need for more research and practical teaching in this area becomes more urgent. Almost all participants responded with virtually the same comment and question when asked about resources. Generally, they commented that they did not know of any resources and would ask me to recommend books, podcasts, or videos.

Despite lacking resources related to ethnoculturally diverse ministry, participants strove to develop culturally intelligent environments. In other words, participants created safe third places where teens of all cultures and ethnicities could gather and explore faith, culture, and ERI development. Safe places were not places of exclusion but where diverse teens could meet people with similar life experiences and vastly different backgrounds. One factor youth leaders highlighted was the active participation of church leaders in confronting prejudice and discrimination in the church. Indeed, having culturally and ethnically diverse leaders who are intentional about reaching ethnoculturally diverse groups aligns strongly with the literature related to multiracial churches (DeYmaz & Fennell Okuwobi, 2016; DeYoung et al., 2003; McIntosh & McMahan, 2012). It appears that many of the principles found in multiracial churches in the U.S. (DeYmaz, 2007; Woo, 2009; Yancey, 2003) and international churches abroad (Dreessen, 2020; Dye, 2017; Gryskiewicz, 2025) would be broadly applicable to discipling ethnoculturally diverse youth. I found it both curious and surprising that participants had created structures, by trial and error or personal experience, that aligned with the literature without exposure to the data. I wonder what impact it would have on youth ministry if materials on discipling ethnoculturally diverse youth were widely available and known throughout the youth ministry community.

Pentecost and Measurable Practices

In many cases, it was impossible to separate measurable faith practices from Pentecostal distinctives of the Baptism of the Holy Spirit, the Fruit of the Spirit, and the Gifts of the Spirit. Descriptions of prayer often segued into praying in the Spirit or glossolalia— similarly, responses about student-led evangelism connected directly to Spirit empowerment, boldness, and power encounters. Conversations on life change were intertwined with the development of joy, peace, patience, and kindness— the Fruit of the Spirit. According to Blake, teens were “engaging in altar ministry, prayer ministry, exercising those Spiritual gifts… in corporate worship.”

While faith practices such as attendance and Bible engagement were used to assess spiritual development, equally important, spiritual growth was assessed by the Gifts and Fruit of the Spirit. Youth leaders asked, Is the student seeking the Baptism in the Holy Spirit? Is the Fruit of the Spirit developing in their life? Are they seeking to be used in the Gifts of the Spirit? Are they living by the Spirit? Using metrics of observable Spiritual growth and measurable faith practices, participants described ethnoculturally diverse teens as highly engaged in discipleship.

These observations call into question studies that use attendance as their primary operational definition (Lifeway Research, 2007, 2017) to measure whether adolescents leave the faith. If a teen only attends church twice a month for three months, were they ever “in” the church? To illustrate, if I visit the hospital two to four times a month, does that make me a patient, a medical professional, or something else? More data is needed to understand that I was visiting patients. Attending church, school, or sporting events does not necessarily equal commitment. Further, as Pulis (2014) noted, “stopped attending does not equal leaving the faith” (p. 12).

Perhaps a more robust operational definition is called for— one that measures attendance, Bible engagement, and spiritual growth using the Gifts and Fruit of the Spirit and the pursuit of a Spirit-filled life. This suggestion is likely controversial since some evangelical movements are continuists and make room for the supernatural, while others are cessationists who hold that charismata have ceased. However, since Pentecostal and Charismatic movements seem to be growing in the U.S. and abroad, perhaps it is time to explore the significant gap in Pentecostal and Charismatic youth ministries, especially concerning discipling ethnoculturally diverse youth.

Study Limitations

This study was narrow in scope, only examining AG youth ministries and youth leaders in large cities actively discipling ethnoculturally diverse youth. It should not be taken to imply that all AG youth groups are doing so. Indeed, many AG churches are in rural monoethnic communities and lack the demographics to engage culturally diverse groups. While it is unfortunate that the AG Annual Church Ministry Report (ACMR) no longer reports age-based demographics, future studies on the demographics of AG youth ministries would be useful to the church and the academy.

Recommendations for Further Study

Based on the data collected, several recommendations for further study follow. First, for a comparative analysis, expand this study beyond the Assemblies of God to other Pentecostal and Charismatic movements within the U.S. The study could also include non-Pentecostal traditions to assess the transferability of relational Spirit-led models across denominations.

Second, explore the role of the Holy Spirit in youth evangelism and discipleship across traditions. How do Spirit-empowered practices such as healing, tongues, and prophecy influence adolescent engagement and retention across continuationist and cessationist lines?

Finally, participants showed a strong desire to develop cultural intelligence and awareness but lacked any formal training. Further studies could design and test training models or curricula for youth leaders to integrate evangelism, discipleship, and cultural intelligence.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has shown that AG youth pastors and their leadership teams are highly engaged in discipling ethnoculturally diverse youth. They spend significant time with the teens and their families while developing cultural intelligence. They recreated the church as a safe place and confronted racism and injustice inside and outside of the church. Participants measured spiritual growth using Bible engagement, attendance, leadership, and the Gifts and Fruit of the Spirit. Their discipleship models were deeply rooted in Pentecostal spirituality, with students experiencing the Holy Spirit through prayer, worship, Christian service, and the charismata. Youth leaders reported high levels of engagement from students who had parental support, engaged in faith practices, and sought Baptism in the Holy Spirit and the Fruit and Gifts of the Spirit. As ethnocultural diversity increases globally, future discipleship efforts must embrace Spirit-led, relational, and culturally intelligent approaches to reach the next generation.

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