A MIXED METHOD QUALITATIVE STUDY OF EAST TEXAS CHRISTIAN TEENAGERS’ EXPERIENCES AND THEOLOGICAL LEARNING AT CONGREGATIONAL YOUTH MINISTRIES

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PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

There is currently no qualitative or ethnographic study of youth ministry within the boundaries of East Texas (ETX) Nor is there any qualitative research on Christian ETX teenagers’ experiences of their congregational youth ministries (CYGs). Therefore: *The purpose of this mixed method qualitative study is to examine Evangelical Protestant ETX congregational youth ministries and Christian ETX teenagers’ experiences of community, theology, and worship in those Evangelical Protestant ETX congregational youth ministries.* The qualitative study’s mixed methods include an ethnography of ETX CYGs’ primary programmed event. It would also include focus groups with high school aged participants who can provide thick and rich description of their experiences in their youth groups. The study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. How do Christian ETX teenagers describe themselves and their reasons for participating in the youth group?
2. How do ETX teenagers create community at the primary youth group event in Evangelical Protestant ETX congregations?
3. What practices, pedagogies, and rituals make up the programming at Evangelical Protestant ETX congregational youth ministries?
4. How are practices, pedagogies, and rituals which make up the programming at Evangelical Protestant ETX congregations formative to Christian ETX teenagers?
5. What theology is communicated through the youth group programming at Evangelical Protestant ETX congregations?
6. How do ETX teenagers narrate their theology based on their youth group programming?

METHODOLOGY

The study consists of two parts. The first part is creating a descriptive ethnography of what happens at a typical “primary programmed event” for ETX youth groups; that is a typical youth group event. The researchers set-up two video cameras to record the youth group’s structured evening program. One records teaching, worship, or other upfront activity done by the youth pastor or youth leaders. The camera captures the youth group response. The researchers also collected field notes in journals and analyzed the video for qualitative categories and themes. Informed consent was procured prior to site visits from the senior pastor, governing board, or youth leaders. Participant congregations were informed of their right to reasonable confidentiality, termination of participation, and the right to see the finished research products. No financial compensation was given to the churches.

To participate, the CYG’s participating in the study had to meet the following definition of ETX Evangelical Protestant Congregational Youth Ministry. The criteria for inclusion would be Evangelical Protestant congregations in ETX. For this study, ETX is defined as the geographic region from the Louisiana border on the East to the Oklahoma border on the North; ending east of Dallas and north of Houston. For the sake of this study, it will encompass the area created by a radius of approximately ninety miles around Longview TX. By Evangelical Protestant is meant congregations in the Protestant tradition that adhere to:

* + The doctrine of the final authority of the Bible.
  + Historical character of God’s saving work recorded in Scripture.
  + Salvation to eternal life based on the redemptive work of Christ.
  + The importance of evangelism and missions
  + The importance of a spiritually transformed life.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The congregations participating had CYGs with at least fifteen students regularly attending to 150 students regularly attending. The youth ministry program also must have a primary event (such as a Wednesday night group) that meets separately from adults other than adult volunteers.

The second part of the research involved organized focus groups conducted at the local church with four to five Christian teenagers who regularly participate in the church’s CYG. Informed consent was sought from the teenage participants and their parents or guardians, seeking their permission and willingness to participate in the study via the focus group. The teenage participants and the two researchers met for approximately an hours’ time at each church, though some meetings went longer and some went shorter. One to two video cameras, an cell phone audio recorder, and computer audio recorder captured the focus groups. The participants were led through a semiformal interview protocol of ten predetermined questions that were be interspersed with impromptu questions based on the group’s conversations. Like the congregations, these participants were informed of their right to reasonable confidentiality, right to not answer questions, right to termination of participation, and the right to see the final research products. Focus groups occurred at the participant’s church. No financial compensation was given to the participants.

The teenagers who participate in focus groups would need to meet the following criteria:

* The teenagers must be upper classmen in high school (juniors to seniors).
* The teenagers must be self-described Christians. By Christians, I mean students who have expressed a faith commitment to Christ as Savior and who seek to follow Christ’s example in their lives.
* The teenagers must be identified by their youth leaders as invested in the youth group.
* The teenagers must be regular participants in the congregation’s youth group, which will be defined as two to four times a month at the youth group’s primary event.
* The teenagers must have participated in the youth group for approximately one year.

The semiformal focus group with four to five Christian high school aged student participants from every youth group visited. IRB approval would be sought from LeTourneau University. Letters of informed consent would be sent to the students and the students’ parents for mutual consent to participation in the focus group, outlining expectations for reasonable confidentiality, rights reserved to the students in the focus group, including right to terminate participation and access to the finished research. Audio recordings and video recordings of the focus groups would be made with audio being transcribed by a transcription service and checked by the researchers. NVivo software would be utilized to generate a first round of coding. The primary researcher would then continue coding the transcriptions, videos, and field notes from the focus groups. Codes and themes would be examined through a member check process with teenagers who participated in the focus groups.

The semi-formal focus group protocol consisted of the following questions.

1. Tell me about yourselves and how you became involved in this youth group.
2. Why do you think other teenagers who participate come to your youth group?
3. What specific relationships are important to you in this youth group?
4. What parts of a normal youth group meeting are the most important to you?
5. Share a story about a meaningful moment that occurred at your normal youth group meeting.
6. If you could choose three adjectives which describe the teaching at a normal youth group meeting, what would they be and why?
7. What do you appreciate about how the leaders teach at a normal youth group meeting?
8. Describe what you have learned about God and what he does from this youth group.
9. Describe what you have learned about humans and their purpose from this youth group.
10. Why you would or why you would not invite someone to this youth group?

**FINDINGS**

The findings will be divided in the two parts of the study. Part 1 will examine themes gathered so far from the site visits. Part 2 will examine categories and themes from gathered so far from the teenage participant focus groups.

*Site Visits*

By the time of submission of this paper, the researchers had visited five churches and scheduled two addition churches to visit. They had solicited several additional churches and were waiting to schedule future visits. Four the churches were within the city limits of a medium sized city, with one inside a small town.The Christian Missionary Alliance, Southern Baptist Convention, the Christian Church were each represented by one of the churches visited, alongside an independent Bible church and community church. All churches were primarily middle class Caucasian churches. African American churches and Hispanic churches are being solicited for participation with future visits hopefully to be completed prior to the 2025 AYME conference. The two additional churches scheduled are affiliated with the Church of Christ and the Evangelical Presbyterian Church. Three of the site visits occurred in May and June 2024, and two occurred in September 2024. East Texas (ETX) churches usually disband their normal programming and meetings during the summer in favor of fewer meetings, more recreational events such as pool parties, and to make space for mission trips and summer camps, hence the gap in data collection between June and September.

It is important to remember that the themes developed from five churches cannot be fully classified as thick, rich description sought in a standard qualitative study. These findings are therefore preliminary and must be further developed through future research.

Architecture of the Spaces

**Configuration 1**: **Large Two Room Space***.* Congregational youth ministry (CYG) occurs in a distinct building set apart from the primary church building and exclusively for children or youth which is configured into two or three primary spaces. The first space is some combination of a foyer space, eating area, table game room, and/or hangout area. This space can include kitchen access and serving bar or have a serving bar protrude into the space. The third space is the worship and teaching space with a well-equipped stage including drums, large screen, and ceiling or pillar mounted lights. There is perpetuals blue or purple light illuminating the stage and a sound booth in the back corner of the room. The “vibe” of these rooms is semi-industrial with corrugated metal and large wood paneling on the walls.

**Configuration 2: Single Multi-Purpose Room**: CYG occurs in a room either in the primary church building or a secondary building, but that building is not exclusively youth or children oriented. The space is oblong, with one of the shorter walls equipped with a large screen television and the other wall providing shelving and counter space for snacks, games, and other supplies. The center of the room is ringed with overstuffed chairs or couches. Objects like pianos, stacked chairs, and folding tables are stored in these rooms and are usually unused during the youth group event; these items are pushed out of the way to the walls.

**Important Artifacts in Youth Spaces:** CYG spaces include significant artifacts that bond the youth group together or are important symbols for the church. The American flag is displayed in some fashion, perhaps alongside the Christian flag. World maps are displayed on the wall of the space. Quote walls or boards or photograph walls or collections of youth events or specific teenagers are prominent. In one church, the information bar was a central gathering space for interaction with the youth leaders.

**Participant Use of the Space:** Teenagers typically segregate themselves by gender when staking out territory or seating during the evening, with one gender claiming a side of the worship space or a side of the ring of couches. The exception is when there is a dating couple in the youth group; these pairs sit together on the girl’s side of the building or ring. In the foyer spaces, territory is also staked out between the boys and the girls and between middle schoolers and high schoolers, especially when there are different zones of seating. Girls will claim a ring of couches and sit in a large circle. Boys prefer to sit at tables; with middle school boys near the food counter or snack bar. While there is always a large group discussion, small groups are gender bases. During small group discussions, the students spread out in the worship and foyer spaces or move outside. In the single multipurpose room configuration, other rooms in the building or hallway are commandeered by the group as meeting spaces. The youth leaders take up positions at the start of the evening in two places; the youth pastor or primary leader will either be stationed just outside the main entrance to the foyer space, or at the information table just inside the front door. Curiously, while there was never an evening with no student cell-phone usage, there was a conspicuous absence of students on their phone. Rather, students would gather around students playing board games such as chess to cheer or jeer the players.

Program Structure of the Evening

**General Program Structure***:* ETX CYG’s run on clear schedules with sharp start and stop times. Students may come early and some may stay late, but the programmed events are clearly delimited by the clock. The schedule of a youth group evening ran in the following manner: Initial gathering of students/mealtime, structured game time, worship in song, lesson or talk, and small groups. Worship is not always included, youth groups with a multipurpose room configuration either did not have worship or did not have worship weekly (one group opted for a monthly worship evening run by teenagers in the group). Churches with the three-room configuration always had worship in song led by a band. The band might include a combination of students and adult volunteers, might be students only, or might be the youth leaders doing an acoustic set. Regardless, churches who have participated so far only had two songs per worship set. Small groups, as will be seen below, were an important aspect of the evening to the focus group participants, and they were the last component of the evening.

**The Lesson or the Talk:** Youth leaders took a broad approach to the pedagogy and structure of their formal teaching, no two taught alike. None-the-less, there were some recurring themes. On the one hand, CYGs utilizing a three-space layout with a formal worship space taught from the front in lecture style (either sermon, biblical study, or thematic lesson). On the other hand, CYGs utilizing a multipurpose space layout utilized either a video curriculum or a prewritten subscription curriculum which came with its own predetermined small group questions.

*The Teenager Focus Groups*

The teenager focus groups all occurred on the site of the church with participants solicited by the primary leaders of the CYG. However, not all of the focus groups occurred on the night of the site visit. Two visits occurred during the month of May. Three occurred during the months of August and September. Focus groups consisted in every instance of a mix of male and female participants. Focus groups were four members each with the exception of a single group with three members. Focus groups also included students within the parameters with one exception. Two freshmen were included in a focus group. They were chosen because of their perceived maturity and theological awareness; one was taking dual credit at a local Christian University.

Committed Life-Long Church Attenders

Focus group participants described themselves as lifelong attenders at their CYG’s church. They describe themselves having faith in Jesus from a very young age, but have a resurgence or recommitment to faith later in their middle school or early high school years. For these teenagers, their parents pre-determined their church participation by the selection of their church.

A Safe Space: Why Teenagers Come

When asked why other individuals come to their youth group, focus group participants described their youth groups have a safe space. Christian teenagers who attend public schools and Christian private schools feel a mix of loneliness and social awkwardness at their schools. Youth group provides a social atmosphere where meeting with other believers is possible. ETX teenagers report that they are “the only Christian” or one of a few Christians at their school. Even at Christian private schools-participants report that a majority of students do not follow Christian faith and practice in a way the focus group participant perceive as authentic.

Focus group participants see their CYG’s as openly friendly and welcoming. There are two key factors involved in the safety of small groups: the leaders and the other students. Leaders do not have to be like teenagers; indeed, one focus group expressed immense respect for a male leader who was “scary” but committed and consistent. Leaders are broader than youth pastors or key leaders. Indeed, one focus group had transitioned through three youth pastors in about four years. Youth leaders can provide Christian perspective on life challenges or simply be another adult who is “not my mom or dad.” Youth leaders often provide a model, a picture for the teenager of what constitutes maturity in a Christian. The youth leader becomes an inspirational and copiable model of imitation for the teenagers in the group. Nonbelievers seem to be welcome at youth group, though some teenagers are uncomfortable with the idea of inviting lots of non-Christians to youth group. The fear is that the presence of non-Christians will somehow threaten the safety of the atmosphere for Christian students.

Other teenagers are also key components of the CYG community. Focus groups describe their CYGs as “not cliquey” or moving away from being cliquish. Focus group participants attributed this to the size of their groups- a sort of Goldilocks experience of being neither too big or too small. This set of friends provides the peer connections of safety.

The Evening Itself

**It’s the Small Groups, Stupid!** When asked what the focus group participants particularly enjoyed about the evening, the teenagers described small groups as of upmost importance. One focus group described their church as having two sets of focus groups: discussion groups which were gender-based accountability groups that occurred before the formal youth group programming began, and the small group discussions which happened after the lesson just prior to dismissal. Only one CYG did not do small groups on their primary event, but they did on Sunday mornings during the Sunday school hour. Small groups are where the pay-off for the intense relationality of the friendships occurs. Small groups are where teenagers feel safe enough to discuss the challenges of their school and family lives and discover that they are not alone in the trials they face. The adult leaders proctor these small groups, insuring the safety of the disclosures which are lubricated by humor.

**Worship is About Decompressing and Connecting**: Students viewed worship as a way to decompress from the pressures of life at public and private high school life. The relationships and secular influence at high school is overwhelming to many of them. Worship provides a means of release and connection to other Christians also facing the same pressures. Worship is catharsis from school.

**Cannot Help but Bring up Camp:** In conjunction with discussing the youth group evening and the small groups particularly, the focus group participants cannot help but bring up summer camps. Summer camp trips sponsored by the youth group are important to cementing the bonding that occurs in the friendships between the students. Camp is where a matrix of shared experiences and “inside jokes” forge relational interconnections between the teenagers in the youth group.

The Value of Teaching

When asked to describe the teaching of the youth group in three words, the teenager focus groups turned to words like “relatable” (in that students could connect with their leaders over the material when they gave personal examples from their life) “intentional” (exhibited trust in the leader’s selection of the material), and “deep” (what happens when students get to dig into the intricacies or the meaning of a biblical text). One focus group described the teaching as “serious.” The value of the teaching might revolve around students’ admiration for the leader who has spent time preparing or with whom they particularly relate.

The Pedagogy

With one notable exception, where the leadership was shared between a married couple, the lesson is led by a male leader; the hired youth pastor. Each youth group had a different learning strategy, but there were still commonalities. Churches utilizing a three-large space configuration had talks given by the youth pastor. Churches using a multipurpose room configuration had large group discussions paired with a pre-written or video curriculum. In both configurations, the evening ended with gender based small groups. The teaching shared one particular common theme: responding to the world. The world is negative and in opposition to the church; teenagers must respond to it through moral example, gospel witness (evangelism), and resilience against evil.

What Teenagers Learn in Youth Group

When it came to questions eight and nine of the interview protocol, the questions appeared to be the hardest to answer for the focus group participants.

**God and God’s Actions:** The teenager focus group participants struggled to answer the question, “What have you learned about who God is and what God does from this youth group?” Usually, a list of God’s non-communicable attributes was given: omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent. That is, God is big and great. God is often recognized as the creator. One student described God as Father, but God’s fatherliness was not connected to the Trinity but rather to God’s actions as creator. God is loving or love. One student admitted that it was hard to pull apart what her parents had taught her about God, some struggled to separate what they had learned in a camp context versus the youth group context.

**Humans and Human Purpose:**  This question was also complicated for the teenager focus groups to answer. Humans are described as made to glorify God. Humans are the image of God, but students struggle to clarify what is meant by the Image. Human purpose is often linked to “spreading God’s Word” or “gospel.” Humans are never described ontologically or eschatologically.

**IMPLICATIONS**

Same as the findings, the study is at far too early a stage to make any solid implications that may or may not be transferrable to other youth ministry contexts outside of East Texas (ETX). Five congregational youth groups (CYGs) is far too small a sample size from to propose certain generalizable implications. None-the-less, acknowledging the need for further research, with the data currently available this paper now turns to implications which might arise as important themes from which CYGs can learn in the future.

*Safe Space!*

The ministry of congregational youth ministries in ETX, as perceived by the Christian teenager participants, is to create a safe place for teenagers to be Christians together. The safety is in the network of Christian relationships which have existed for a long time between the students who have grown up with each other in the church and perhaps have survived multiple youth pastors or other key significant leadership, and the current network of youth leaders who shepherd the space. Small groups and summer camps are significant as places of relational connectivity, participation or discovery of common shared experiences, and affirmation of Christian identity from adults and peers. Adults function as guardians of the environment and models of Christian maturity in terms of character and relational intelligence. The teenagers function as welcoming and fun social contacts which connect to each other as they affirm and share Christian experience. The teenagers seem to police this environment themselves to foster the relational connectivity; avoiding their phones and other electronic devices to enter face to face relational space. It cannot be overstated as fare as the teenagers are concerned: no small groups and no camp means no youth group.

*Teaching and Worship Support Christian Identities as Behavior*

The primary function of teaching and worship in ETX CYGs is to support Christian identity formation within the youth group while resisting the world. The teenager focus group participants affirmed this when they called the teaching relatable. It is important to remember that each church had its own unique approach to delivery of content or teaching. That teaching or content, however, was always aimed at the behavioral. By behavioral, it is not implied a certain legalistic rule standard, but rather that behavior cemented Christian identity outside of the youth group in certain behaviors which identified one as being a Christian. Christians for example, witness to non-Christians about Jesus, invite friends to church, act as salt and light in the world, date or pursue singleness in a distinctive way, etc. These behaviors, however identified in the content, are what make one a Christian; relationships between Christians flow over and through these behaviors.

*Discipleship is Performative Axiology*

Again, while emphasizing it is too early in the study to suggest definitive implications, this understanding of Christian identity is *only* axiological, and not properly theological, ontological, or epistemological. That is, the content of lessons did not focus on theology but application. Axiology without theological mooring borders on the pragmatic and ideological. That is, it is identity in action only, not in being. Identity in being appears to be missing in ETX CYG’s, which explains why identifying who God is and what God does was difficult, and why identifying humans and human purpose was even more difficult. This produces an orientation to application which depends on the vision of the leadership rather than a rigorous theological framework for union and mission with God. This also explains why relationships with adults are pivotal to understanding Christian maturity. The leader shows the student the proper behaviors. Faith formation becomes performative.

It also explains why teenagers were not sure about evangelizing or bringing non-Christians into the youth group. Non-Christians do not know how to act like Christians. To bring non-Christians into the space is to de-Christianize the space, which makes it unsafe to act like a Christian. Again, faith formation becomes performative.

FURTHER RESEARCH

Obviously, this present study needs to be carried out until saturation occurs in the findings. However, several future avenues for research already suggest themselves, even at this early point in the study. Already under development is a study on lead youth workers at East Texas (ETX) congregational youth groups (CYG). This study takes the form of a grounded theory, and seeks to determine who is leading ETX CYGs, the constitution of their preparation for ministry, the nature of their calling to the ministry, and their goals and values within their congregations. In addition, pursuing a fuller picture of ETX CYG curriculum’s and rhythms would also be a valuable study. A descriptive ethnography of camp weeks of ETX CYGs would be valuable, though time consuming. A parallel study of ETX parachurch youth ministries (PYMs) would also prove valuable. The goal would be to paint a comprehensive social, theological, picture of the entire array of youth ministries in the ETX area, which might provide transferrable implications to youth ministries in other areas of Texas or the broader North American context.

1. Cf. Marsden, George. *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism.* Eerdmans, 1991. Pp. 4-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)