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## **Mentoring and its Impact on Young Adults in Church Congregations**

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**Mentoring and its Impact on Young Adults in Church Congregations**

By

Linnae Stole

An Action Research Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

**Master of Arts in Organizational Leadership**

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Signature of Advisor: \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

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### **Abstract**

Young adults today yearn for purpose, connection, and authentic relationships (Lottes, 2005, p. 135-136). In this transitional age between adolescence and full adulthood, mentorship and encouragement from other adults in their lives can help them see the possibilities of their vocational calling (Price, 2013, p. 94). Church communities have the unique opportunity to support their young adult members in this work as it relates to their personal spirituality and God-given purpose. Through a survey of pastors and other church leaders, alongside a focus group of churchgoing young adults, this research project explored how churches can incorporate mentoring into their ministry strategy to support young adults in the areas of vocational discernment, spiritual growth, and living their faith outside the walls of the church. I used the results of the data collected to develop recommendations for a local congregation, St. Andrew Lutheran, in Eden Prairie, MN, to incorporate mentoring principles into its ministry strategy. I then presented my recommendations to the young adult leadership team at St. Andrew and evaluated the session's effectiveness through an attendee survey. The results of the research suggest that intentionally creating spaces for informal mentoring to occur within churches can help young adults navigate life transitions in the post-high school and post-college years.

Researchers have explored and extensively documented the benefits of mentorship in various secular and religious settings across age groups and demographics. For example, college freshmen with mentors show greater gains in problem solving, goal setting, and decision making compared to their peers who did not have mentors (Cosgrove, 1986, as cited in Cramer and Prentice-Dunn, 2007). Other studies show how mentoring can impact early career development, company retention, and leadership development (Cottingham et al., 2011, p. 254). Within church congregations, research has shown the benefits of mentoring for women in leadership roles, adolescents developing their personal spirituality, and across generations to build stronger faith communities. However, limited research has been done to explore the benefits of mentoring on young adults in faith communities in the post-high school years, approximately ages 18-30. I hypothesized that incorporating mentoring principles into ministry strategies could be an effective tool for pastors and other church leaders to support their young adult members in pursuing their vocation, growing spiritually, and living their faith outside the walls of the church. The intention of my study was to explore broader themes around mentorship both within and outside church congregations alongside the themes of young adult spirituality and vocational discernment. After a review of the existing literature, I conducted a survey of pastors and other church leaders, and a focus group of young adults. I then presented my recommendations to the young adult leadership team at St. Andrew Lutheran Church in Eden Prairie, Minnesota.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Young adults are at a time in their lives when they are exploring their spirituality and critically examining the beliefs with which they were raised (Barry and Nelson, 2005, p. 246). Even in an increasingly secular culture, an estimated 72 percent of young adults ages 24-29 report belief in God, and 50 percent view God as a personal being involved in the lives of people

today (Manglos-Weber, et al, 2016, p. 195). Ongoing research and programming conducted by the Lilly Endowment (2020) over the past twenty years has found that this demographic wants spaces to discuss ideas around purpose and identity, they value theological traditions in making significant choices related to work, family, friendships and community service, and they desire to have a voice in the direction of ministries that shape their lives (para. 5). The institutional church also remains important to many; in a 2017 Lifeway Research study of American Protestants between the ages of 23 and 30, 54% of those who attended church regularly between the ages of 18 and 22 stated that they “wanted the church to help guide my decisions in everyday life” (p. 25). Gara (2008) describes millennials as a “generation of seekers,” who desire “conversations with others,” “new types of social networks,” and spaces where it is alright to not have all the answers (para. 4). Furthermore, Thurston and Ter Kuile (2015) explain that, while many young people today are less tied to the creeds and dogmas of institutional religion, spirituality and community are integral for them to lead a meaningful life (p. 6). These characteristics and desires require that churches become more innovative in engaging their young adult populations than by following the typical formulas that worked in prior generations.

But what does innovation mean for the 21<sup>st</sup> century church? In an ongoing study of young adult vocation and spirituality, Augsburg University (2019) states that innovation is about “faith communities stepping into vocational discernment in partnership with young adults...engaging [them] in this contextual learning work and trusting that God has a new thing for us...” (p. 8). Stevens (as cited in Price, 2013) defines vocation as “what it means to seek and follow God in the everyday settings in which life and work happen” (p. 87). Liebert (2008) defines discernment as “the process of intentionally becoming aware of how God is present, active, and calling us as individuals” (p. 8). Ultimately, vocational discernment is about whole-person development of

the self and an understanding of one's self in relation to one's community. And even in a rapidly-shifting cultural landscape, the church needs to recognize its role in supporting people on the journey; as McAllister-Wilson (2015) explains, "the Christian faith still offers answers to the fundamental questions of purpose and identity that every person, in every age, must grapple with" (para. 12). Churches still have a role to play in offering up safe spaces for conversation and spiritual exploration, and providing opportunities for relationship-building to occur, as these have been shown to be significant needs for young adults finding their place in the world.

Churches can create these safe spaces by incorporating formal and informal mentoring into their ministry strategies. At a high level, Lund, et al. (2019) define mentoring relationships as "connections between more experienced individuals and less experienced (often younger) 'mentees' in which the former plays a role in guiding the mentee in some area of the mentee's life" (p. 1473). Specifically, within a faith-based setting, Wakeman (2012) describes mentoring as that which "can assist people in becoming what they were designed to be by God" (p. 281). Research suggests these types of mentoring relationships play an important role in helping young people identify long-term aspiration and purpose as they enter adulthood (Lund, et al, 2019). Furthermore, mentoring in churches can help people of all ages to understand their potential as it relates to their God-given purpose (Wakeman, 2012). However, little research exists to show whether churchgoing young adults would benefit from participating in formal and informal mentoring opportunities focused on spiritual growth and vocation, and my project aims to fill this gap.

### **Background and Purpose**

I have been on my own personal journey of vocational discernment since the age of 20. What is God calling me to do with my life, and how do I find spiritual purpose in my job when I



do not plan to pursue any sort of formal ordained ministry? Many of the experiences I had with my peer group in my twenties helped me answer these questions, but it was challenging to find people who had already walked the path from whom I could learn and grow. I believe I would have benefited from having more spaces to discuss vocation and calling with older members of my church community had they been available to me. Therefore, the purpose of my research project is to explore how churches can use informal and formal mentoring to support young adults in the areas of spiritual growth, vocational discernment, and living their faith outside the walls of the church.

The central focus of my project was at my home congregation, St. Andrew Lutheran Church, in Eden Prairie, Minnesota. One of the largest congregations in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), St. Andrew had a baptized membership count of 6,596 and average weekly worship attendance of 1,169 as of 2018, compared to average weekly worship attendance in the ELCA as a whole of 95 (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2020, p. 9; Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2019, p. 196). St. Andrew has extensive spiritual growth opportunities for all ages, including early childhood programs, a thriving youth ministry, a summer camp program, and numerous adult education opportunities. A recent area of expansion has been in its young adult ministry. In 2018, St. Andrew applied for and received a grant from Augsburg University's Riverside Innovation Hub to grow this focus. Over the last two years, the pastors and a team of young adults have worked to develop new opportunities for those in their 20s and 30s, including Bible studies, service opportunities and even a summer kickball league. In conversations with the pastor, he shared that many young adults at St. Andrew wrestled with understanding their vocation and personal calling. This led to the development of my research project focused on mentoring, which ultimately aims to build upon the work St. Andrew is

already doing. My end goal was to provide recommendations on how the pastors and other church leadership could create spaces for young adults to continue questioning and wrestling with personal calling and spirituality. I also hoped these recommendations could be useful on a broader scale for church leaders engaging young adults in their own communities.

### **Literature Review**

The scholarly foundations for mentoring date back decades and now touch a wide spectrum of settings, from corporate America to college campuses to church spaces. The experience of young adults in American society is a newer area of study, with the concept of “emerging adulthood” only defined by Arnett in 2000, initially focusing on the ages of 18-25 (Arnett, 2000, p. 469). The following review of the literature attempts to place the experiences of emerging and young adults in the context of their spiritual development, looking specifically at how mentoring can help them navigate an uncertain time largely unknown to previous generations. I will first highlight the benefits of mentoring that already exists, including four specific studies of secular workplace settings, church leadership spaces, and young adult experiences. Then, I will illustrate what successful mentoring relationships might look like in a church-based setting, including the benefits of formal and informal mentoring for young adults. I will outline some key differences between formal and informal mentoring, and considerations churches should make as they incorporate mentoring into their ministry model. Finally, I will highlight new work currently in progress to re-envision mentorship and relationship-building in the 21<sup>st</sup> century out in the community, beyond individual church spaces.

### **Overall Benefits of Mentorship**

Mentorship is effective in various contexts to help meet individual needs, including within churches and in secular organizations. In a study by Olivet Nazarene University (2018) of

3000 American workers, 76% responded that having a mentor was either “important” or “very important” for their personal and professional development. Additionally, young adults who have support from non-parental figures often report better psychological well-being, more rewarding relationships with peers, and higher academic success as they transition into adulthood (McDonald et al., 2007, p. 1328). Below, I highlight several studies that have been conducted in various contexts as an initial exploration of the research that already exists around mentoring. These include a mentoring program for new nurses in Canada, two separate studies showing the impact of mentoring on American female clergy, and a study of undergraduate students in the United States who were paired with mentors during their freshman year of college. In each situation those who worked with mentors found they were able to achieve higher levels of confidence and resilience in their chosen setting.

### ***Early career guidance in a service-oriented profession***

In my review of the literature, I found multiple research studies showing the benefits of mentoring relationships for people just starting in their careers in service-oriented professions. For example, in one study, a group of 44 clinical nurse students from a Montreal university were paired with licensed clinical nurse mentors in a group setting in the months prior to and immediately after their graduation from university. The groups met three times and focused on various challenges they would face as new nurses, including stress management, adjusting to organizational culture, and the overall transition experience. The survey results from participants suggested that participating in the mentoring program had a positive impact on the new nurses as they transitioned out of the classroom and into the workplace. They also reported lower levels of stress and higher self-confidence (Lavoi-Tremblay, 2018, pp. 1-2).

### ***Women in ministry***

Engaging with a mentor is one way people in ministry, especially women, can grow in their role and in their sense of who God has created them to be. Even in a situation where one feels called to a career, they still need support from those who have walked the path before them. For example, in a study by Newkirk and Cooper (2013), researchers examined the experiences of ten African American female Baptist ministers. Some met one-on-one with mentors in a formal setting, some met in groups for mentorship, and some received no formal mentoring at all. They concluded that mentoring is important for the growth and development of women in ministry, whether in formal or informal settings (p. 337). Such relationships “allow good leadership and practices to develop,” and “may provide opportunities to forge partnerships and alliances” (pp. 340-341).

A separate study conducted by Tunheim and DuChene (2016) of seven female bishops in the ELCA showed that professional mentor relationships are a key development component for all people, especially women who strive to achieve ranks of higher leadership (p. 217). All the women in the study reported having either at least one male or female mentor, and they discussed how mentoring supported them in the challenges of their vocation. One woman explained that she was urged to “go where a woman had already served so that I could learn my craft...I’ve learned a great deal from women who have found ways to succeed...” Another shared her male mentor “pushed me to do things I would not have done myself. He gave me opportunities” (p.212). Despite the small scale of these studies, they provide evidence of ways churches can use mentoring to support leaders in areas of personal calling and vocation.

### ***Young adults***

According to Cramer and Prentice-Dunn (2007), mentorship can play a significant role in the healthy development of young adults. They propose good mentors can help facilitate the

search for self-image, belonging, and social bonds both personally and professionally at this vulnerable time of life (p. 777). Citing prior research, they suggest that college freshmen participating in mentoring programs showed greater gains in problem solving, goal setting, and decision making compared to their peers who did not have mentors. The most successful mentoring relationships also went beyond focusing only on academic success to encompass whole-person development (Cramer and Prentice-Dunn, 2007, p. 771). Additionally, a study of college students by Lund, et al. (2019) showed that having at least one mentor was strongly connected with having a greater commitment to individual purpose (p. 1472). The study showed that the presence of key qualities in mentors—authenticity, engagement and empowerment—may be especially crucial traits of those working with young people as they seek to understand their place in the world (p. 1478).

### **Effective Mentoring in Church Settings**

Understanding the role mentoring can play in settings such as early-career guidance, leadership attainment and elsewhere, we then must ask effective mentoring looks like in faith-based settings. Stanley and Clinton (1992) define faith mentoring as “a relational experience where one person empowers another by sharing God-given resources” (as cited in Mazak, 2016, p. 86). This type of mentoring focuses on developing the spirituality of those involved, where the mentor sometimes guides the process, and the mentee directs it at other times. It transcends the usual career and role-modeling activities to focus on the whole person (Buzzanell, 2009, p. 17). Matthaei (1991) further expands on the importance of the relational aspects of mentoring: “A faith mentor is a co-creator with God who...participates in the relational, vocational, and spiritual growth of other persons” (as cited in Robinson-Birchett, 2013, p. 16). For young adults in particular—who are at a crucial juncture in their spiritual development—looking to others for

support, whether those of a similar age or older generations, can provide a sense of belonging and comfort that they are not alone. Such relationships can provide “intellectual, emotional, and spiritual” support as the young adult navigates the direction of their life, and can nourish the connection between the body, the heart, and the intellect (Parks, 2011, p. 147, 200). Faith-based settings that recognize the unique needs of their young adults and effectively create spaces for connection and self-discovery are more likely to see this population display deeper levels of engagement, a desire to live out their vocation, and a willingness to ask challenging spiritual questions.

For those who wish to become mentors, understanding their role within the context of Christian public service is crucial to developing a successful relationship with a mentee. Regardless of the setting, key qualities of beneficial mentoring relationships include mutual engagement, empathy, authenticity, and empowerment (Lund, et al. 2019, p. 1474). Serving as a mentor is more than simply having a conversation with a mentee about their job or experiences at church; it requires that the mentor look deeper at their own vocational path to support the mentee in the ways that are most needed. At the same time, mentees must be willing to engage in deeper reflection and personal growth to achieve their own goals as the relationship develops. It is a dialogue; as Parks (2011) explains, “it is a way of being in conversation with others that involves...listening, desire to understand, and willingness to be affected” (p. 185)

Robinson-Birchett (2013) notes prior research proposing several key functions of a successful faith mentor: a guide, a model, and a guarantor. As a guide, a mentor “journeys through life with another, pointing out landmarks, modeling alternatives, supporting choices, and interpreting life events” (p. 16). As a model, the mentor “by word, actions, and presence, models a meaningful lifestyle, clarifies important life issues, and provides guidance for deepening

spirituality in a caring and accepting environment” (p.17). Finally, as a guarantor, the mentor “guarantees another person’s growth in a trusting relationship and accepting environment” (p. 19). This approach emphasizes the importance of mutually beneficial relationships between mentors and mentees to enhance the spiritual development of each. It gives each participant equal voice to define the relationship and reflect on his or her desired goals for growth and development.

### ***Effective faith mentoring for young adults***

Creating spaces for mentorship to occur within faith-based settings can help young adults learn about themselves, build connections with others, and develop their understanding of God in their lives. According to Roberto (2012), young people come to know a living and active God through relationships in the community (pp. 108-109). They want more than a weekly Sunday sermon to grow in their faith, and churches can take advantage of this by creating spaces for growth and connection. Providing opportunities for mentoring can accompany teaching and pastoral care, helping with the overall process of spiritual growth (Wakeman, 2012, p. 285). Especially with young adults, mentors can role model meaning and purpose in their own lives and show what it means to have passion for their work and other long-term causes (Lund, et al. pp. 1473-1474). Furthermore, for many young adults being mentored is part of their leadership journey as they seek “genuine collaboration in moving congregations forward...they want to collaborate with others...to discern where God wants to lead the congregation” (Powe and Smothers, 2015, para 4).

By forming close relationships with mentors who are farther down the path of discernment and spiritual understanding, young people can begin to see the possibilities that lie before them in life and where God may be calling them. Mentors also play a vital role for young

adults by encouraging them to critically examine what they were taught as youth and forge lives that are distinctly their own. To illustrate this point, Daloz and Parks (2003) share the story of a twenty-something named “Sarah,” who struggled with drugs, alcohol, and a general sense of isolation in her first year at a large state university. After transferring to a small, religiously affiliated liberal arts college, she found support on her vocational and faith journey from professors and other students. She describes a mentor as “someone who doesn’t tell you what to think but invites you into a journey with them and shows you ideas, feelings, realities you didn’t know before” (pp. 20-21). When churches encourage this type of relationship-building among young adults, those young adults may feel more connected to the church community and see that there are people who care about their long-term goals, dreams, and spiritual growth.

### **Formal vs. Natural Mentoring**

Churches that want to use mentoring as a part of their ministry should consider the benefits of both formal and “natural” mentoring programs. In a formal mentoring situation, mentors and mentees are typically paired up based on some shared goals but may not have previous connection with each other, such as the Big Brothers/Big Sisters youth development program (McDonald, et al., 2007, p. 1329). Natural mentoring, on the other hand, evolves more organically in the social settings in which individuals already engage (church, work, school, etc.). It is defined as “non-parental adults, such as extended family members, teachers or neighbors, from whom a young person receives support and guidance as a result of relationship developed without the help of a program specifically designed to...form such a relationship” (Lanker, 2010, p. 268). These types of relationships may have benefits over formal mentoring programs due to their organic nature and the potential for reduced pressure on those involved. Furthermore, logistical challenges in formal mentoring programs, such as making and keeping an



appointment or either individual's motivation for participation, can also act as a barrier to success (Hamilton, et al., 2006, p. 729). Finally, natural mentoring reduces the need for leaders to develop and maintain more programs in an already program-rich environment (Lanker, 2010, p. 268).

Finkelstein & Poteet note that current research on the value of formal programs vs. natural mentoring shows mixed results (as cited in Chao, 2009, p. 315). Lanker (2010) suggests that formal mentoring has been shown to have little significance in the lives of adolescence, and churches should focus on fostering natural relationships that already exist between adults and adolescents (p. 275). However, a study conducted by Lavallais (2018) of 38 youth participating in a one-on-one church mentorship program saw increased self-esteem in participants after meeting with their mentors regularly for approximately four months (pp. 67-68). Ultimately, further research needs to be conducted in church settings before making any claims on the benefits of formal vs. informal mentorship, and the needs of the individual congregation will also play a crucial role in determining the best approach.

### **Spiritual Mentoring Beyond Church Spaces**

This study on mentoring is part of a broader conversation on the role of the church in public spaces. While the research primarily focuses on how churches are engaging young adults within their churches, I would be remiss if I did not spend a bit of time highlighting the innovative work happening outside congregations. Recognizing that the model of "church" as we currently know it is changing rapidly, numerous institutions are looking critically at new ways to "do church" in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. While not all specifically geared towards the young adult population, they are focused on listening to where people see God at work, fostering

relationships between churches and the wider community, creating spaces where mutual learning, and by extension mentorship, can occur.

For example, in October 2020, the theology department at St. Catherine University (St. Kate's) in St. Paul, MN, announced a new initiative for contemplative discipleship funded by the Lilly Endowment (McDonough, 2020, p. 1). This initiative addresses the growing number of people leaving churches to seek spiritual sustenance elsewhere, and the urgent need for church leaders to re-think how they engage with the wider world. Through a focus on contemplative and discipleship practices, participants from congregations around the Twin Cities metro area will take the time to reflect, developing a greater awareness of themselves, God and others as they ponder questions such as "Who are we as Christians?" and "How are we called to transform the world?" St. Kate's understands that thriving congregations intentionally take the time to engage in dialogue with the broader community. As such, this initiative focuses on listening to people outside their walls, learning together how to address together the major challenges of our time (McDonough, 2020, pp. 1, 4).

Another organization doing thoughtful, intentional work on the role of the church in the world is the Christensen Center for Vocation at Augsburg University in Minneapolis, MN. A Lilly Endowment-funded grant called the Riverside Innovation Hub started in 2017 to "cultivate curiosity at the intersection of faith communities, young adults, and the neighborhoods they are a part of" (Augsburg University, 2019, p. 8). Augsburg is one of 12 innovation hubs around the country in the initiative. Within the Twin Cities metro area, 25 faith communities (including St. Andrew) are working with innovation coaches over a three-and-a-half year period to reflect on what it means to engage young adults, both church members and others, in "life-giving ministry and relationships" (Augsburg University, 2019, p. 8). Using a people-focused approach, the

Riverside Innovation Hub is exploring what it means to shift the work of the church into the public square rather than holding to the traditional models of Sunday morning worship and church doctrine. The initiative believes that “young people...will be drawn to a faith community actively engaged in proclaiming good news...” and seeks to create safe spaces for the development of self and neighbor (Augsburg University, 2019, p. 20). In October 2020, Augsburg announced an additional \$1 million grant from the Lilly Endowment to expand its work with congregations (Augsburg University, 2020). Augsburg’s work is just one more step on the journey towards re-thinking the modern church, creating intentional spaces for young people to discern God’s call for themselves and their communities.

### **Summary: Mentoring as a Path Towards Vocational Discernment**

Author and theologian Buechner once said “Vocation is the place where the heart’s deep gladness meets the world’s deepest hunger” (as cited in Daloz and Parks, 2003, p. 22). Young adults in particular are at a time in their lives where they are trying to understand their calling and life purpose. Daloz and Parks (2003) propose that “mentors can play a vital role as they encourage questions that upend the givens of youth and offer bridges to a worthy dream of a life distinctly one’s own” (p. 20). Studies such as those done by Lavoie-Tremblay (2018), Newkirk and Cooper (2013), Tunheim and DuChene (2016), and others already show that mentoring can help people succeed in service-related and faith-based professions. Within church spaces, effective faith mentoring can also help individuals better understand their relationship with God and find direction in life, regardless of age (Matthaei, 1991, as cited in Robinson-Birchett, 2013, p. 18). Understanding these broader benefits of mentoring can help leaders think about ways to apply the principles specifically to young adults. And on a broader scale, institutions connected to the church are looking at what it means to engage with the wider community and create spaces

for mutual learning and spiritual growth, which is a crucial step for the church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Based on the existing research around both mentoring and young adult spirituality, I believe that church leaders can use mentoring as a tool to support their young adult populations, who are often at a critical juncture in their faith journey. Creating spaces for connection with those further along in their faith journey can help young adults pursue their vocation and grow spiritually, and ultimately help them live their faith out outside the walls of the church.

### **Method**

As stated previously, the purpose of this research was to explore how churches could incorporate mentoring principles into their ministry strategies to support their young adult populations. The project started with a survey of local pastors and a focus group of young adults at a single congregation, followed by a presentation to the young adult leadership team at St. Andrew.

### **Project Design**

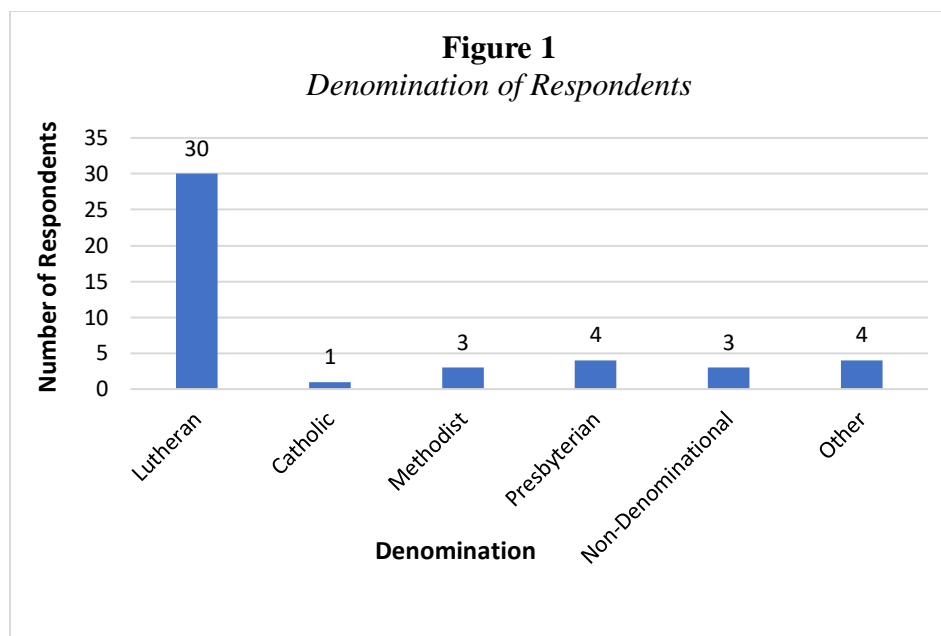
I initially approached the young adult pastor at St. Andrew in February of 2020 to ask what he saw as the most pressing issues for the young adults in the congregation. He shared with me that he often observed this population wrestling with issues of vocation and discerning their life path. Based on our initial discussions, a project centered around intergenerational mentoring began to take shape. While I had initially planned to conduct a formal mentoring pilot with young adults and older adults (age 55+) at St. Andrew, the emergence of COVID-19 in March 2020 forced me to scale back my project. Church programming was suspended, and the pastoral staff shifted their focus to re-designing ministry strategies to serve the congregation in a virtual manner. Instead of a full pilot program, I received support from the pastor and young adult

leadership team to conduct a focus group of young adults on the role of mentoring in their lives and in their church communities growing up.

In June of 2020 I distributed a survey to local pastors. I chose a survey method because of the way in which it supports researchers in “obtaining information from a representative selection of the population” (Bell, 2010, p.11). By hearing from pastors at multiple churches across denominations, I believed it would help support the validity of the existing research and the experiences of focus group participants as I proposed recommendations for St. Andrew.

The survey included both qualitative and quantitative questions. Quantitative questions focused primarily on demographics (role in church, denomination, etc.), along with yes/no questions related to mentorship. Qualitative questions asked about mentorship in the respondents’ congregations and how congregations supported their young adult populations in vocational discernment and spiritual growth. A list of survey questions is included in Appendix A.

I collected email addresses from church websites of various denominations in the Twin Cities metro area and distributed an email requesting their participation. I also posted the survey on the Twin Cities ELCA Facebook page, on my personal Facebook page, and communicated directly with friends of mine who hold pastoral/church leadership roles. I received 45 responses to the survey from church leaders of various denominations. Respondents included 16 pastors, 11 in a children/youth ministry role, and 11 in an “other” category, such as a deaconess, seminarian, or missionary-in-residence. Seven respondents declined to answer the question asking about their role. Additionally, the figure below illustrates the denominational makeup of the survey.



After conducting the survey, in August of 2020 I recruited participants from St. Andrew for a virtual focus group on the topic of mentoring. I chose a focus group because of the ways in which the “synergy” of a group can encourage participation, and “ideas can expand” with people bouncing ideas off each other (Cresswell, 2016, p. 127). The focus group questions asked about participants’ experiences being mentored in their faith communities as children, experiences with mentorship after high school both within and outside faith communities, and their interest in mentoring at St. Andrew in their current stage of life. The focus group questions are included in Appendix B.

I wrote the invitation email, and St. Andrew’s young adult pastor forwarded it to the young adults of the congregation on my behalf. Ultimately, six people participated, all between the ages of 19 and 29, including two males and four females. Four participants had attended St. Andrew at least since their confirmation years (7<sup>th</sup> grade), and two had attended as adults for at least five years and had joined because of a friend or significant other. Three of the six were also

on the young adult leadership team. All participants were involved in at least one area of ministry at the church.

### **Data Analysis**

After I completed the survey and the focus group, I began analyzing the data for common themes. Since I was presenting recommendations to St. Andrew, I paid particular attention to the ideas shared by the focus group participants, while using the survey data as a validation point on what had worked in other congregations. I started by creating codes and breaking them down into themes for further analysis. Once I had a final list of themes, I took all the data points, including quotes from the survey response and focus groups, and consolidated them into a list under their respective themes. I knew I would have significantly more data than I would end up using in the final report, but sorting the data in this way helped me to work with it and re-think placement of various data points as I moved forward with the work.

At this point I started developing my action plan to develop a set of recommendations for St. Andrew on how to use mentoring with the young adults of the congregation. I developed a PowerPoint presentation for the young adult leadership team and presented it on October 4, 2020. The presentation shared how St. Andrew young adults defined a mentor, their experiences being mentored as youth and in their post-high school years, and their thoughts on informal vs. formal mentoring in their spiritual lives. To give further validity to the data, I shared high level themes from the pastor survey so the team could understand how other churches were using mentoring. Finally, I included recommendations on ways that St. Andrew could incorporate mentoring principles into its ministry strategies, both in the present era of COVID-19 and once it is safe to gather in person again. As a final evaluation method, after the church presentation, I

invited the participants to complete a short survey on their reactions. I then coded those responses and added them to the data set.

### **Validity**

With multiple data sources, I used a theme of triangulation to ensure validity in the data, “building evidence from different sources to establish the themes in a study” (Cresswell, 2016, p. 191). The pastor survey and focus group shared many similar themes, such as how young adults engage in the church, the importance of relationship-building, and potential barriers to participation. This lent credibility to the data. When I presented to the St. Andrew young adult leadership team using those themes as a framework, the team was receptive, and their evaluation surveys offered further credibility that incorporating mentoring principles could benefit the congregation. Furthermore, because several of the focus group participants also serve on the young adult leadership team, they had the opportunity to provide further input on the action by responding to the evaluation survey. Cresswell (2016) refers to this as “collaboration with participants,” and helps to ensure support for the study and subsequent action steps.

### **Limitations/Concerns**

From a data collection standpoint, the demographics of the focus group could cause concern in the validity of the data. My study only asked for input from young adults at St. Andrew. Since one hypothesis of the study was that young adults would benefit from being mentored by older members of the congregation, asking the older population if they would like to serve as mentors or participate in intergenerational activities would be a logical next step.

The onset of COVID-19 also limited the scope of my study. Because I was designing the research project in the early stages of the pandemic, St. Andrew was not in a position to support the implementation of any new programs. The church is currently operating in a “hybrid” model



of in-person and virtual activities, with most people choosing to engage virtually. I considered this barrier in my recommendations to the leadership team and tried to come up with a variety of suggestions that could occur virtually or in-person. While the team reacted positively to my presentation, neither I nor the church have tested any of the suggested recommendations as of the conclusion of this research project.

The civil unrest that occurred in Minneapolis in the summer of 2020 indirectly impacted my study as well. I had planned to distribute my survey to area pastors the first week of June, but I chose to delay distribution for several weeks because of George Floyd's murder in Minneapolis on Memorial Day. After the murder occurred, area churches shifted their focus to supporting the clean-up efforts in the city, and many pivoted their ministry strategies to focus on racial justice. Church leaders who may have responded to my survey at other times found themselves stretched too thin during the summer of 2020. Furthermore, while there may be a role for mentorship as it relates to church members supporting each other in their understanding of these issues, my project had already received IRB approval when the murder occurred, and does not specifically address that issue.

### **Reflexivity**

As a member of St. Andrew for more than 30 years, I have a personal stake in the outcome of this research project. I underwent my own journey of discernment and spiritual exploration as I navigated the post-college years, and I wanted to find a way to support other young people in my faith community. Many of the themes that emerged in the focus group and survey aligned with my own experiences: in that time of life, I also found myself incredibly busy, trying to establish a career, make friends, secure myself financially, and generally figure out the trajectory of my life. I could understand the hesitancy participants had to participate in

“formal” mentorship programs because of those reasons. My own experience shows that people, especially people in this age group, do not necessarily want more programming, they want the opportunity to form relationships. If churches can find ways to support their young people in that relationship development, whether with each other or in spaces with older adults, those young people can more easily transition into the next stage, whatever that looks like for them.

### **Findings**

Several key findings emerged through the focus group and the pastor survey, which led to the recommendations I made to the St. Andrew young adult leadership team. As I expected, mentoring is occurring on a broad scale in congregations both formally and informally. Young adults from St. Andrew and survey respondents found significant value in informal mentorship as it helped them form authentic relationships and support each other in navigating life stage changes. The data also highlighted potential barriers to effective mentoring, ranging from limited young adult engagement within individual congregations to the general overscheduled nature of American culture. Finally, I found that St. Andrew’s young adult leadership team appeared interested in implementing some of the recommended strategies.

### **Broad Scope of Mentoring in Congregations**

Responses from the pastor survey showed how formal mentoring in congregations is occurring primarily with children and youth, while informal mentoring is happening in various ways across age groups. When asked “does your church have a formal mentorship program?” of 43 respondents answering the question, 10 said yes and 33 said no. Of those answering yes, eight responded with further details, five of which highlighted their confirmation/high school aged mentorship ministry. A few of their responses are included below:

- “During lent, confirmation students (7<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> graders) are asked to find a member of the congregation to be their Lenten Mentor.”
- “Each junior high or high school student is paired with one young adult mentor... Mentors are there to accompany students on the journey and guide them along the way.”
- “Each year our [6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> grade] students are assigned a different adult mentor. They meet monthly to discuss a list of questions about life and faith.”

Additionally, one survey respondent noted their congregation had piloted a formal adult-to-adult mentoring program and a marriage mentoring program. The marriage mentoring pilot is no longer active (though some couples continue to meet informally), while about 10 couples in the adult-to-adult pilot have maintained their relationship.

Mentoring is also happening informally in various ways, from adults teaching Sunday school and serving as confirmation small group guides, to older youth developing leadership skills walking alongside younger youth. Some examples from the survey include:

- “Youth leaders acting as mentors to younger children: teaching Sunday school...vacation Bible school...assisting choirs...a youth who leads a Pokemon club and plays/teaches younger youth.”
- “We see mentorship in our cross+gen ministry on Wednesday evenings between youth and adults, younger adults and older adults, older adults and small children, and even between similar age groups.”

The survey also showed how pastors observe young adults mentoring others in their congregations in both formal and informal situations. One student ministry director explained that “we see young adults showing up as mentors for our junior high and high school

students...establishing a relationship, and sharing the love of Jesus...The beauty of this program is that it is as much for them as it is the students.” One pastor stated that “[my] church is almost entirely young adult, so [mentorship] is more about peer to peer accountability/support, and that happens in volunteer settings, in leadership settings, and in casual interpersonal relationships.” Other respondents shared how young adults show up to teach Sunday school, serve as camp counselors and support high school students in leadership development and spiritual growth.

### **Young Adult Desires for Mentoring**

In the focus group, St. Andrew young adults primarily showed an interest in informal guidance on life stage changes, such as figuring out life in the post college years and what it means to raise a faithful child in the church. For example, a college-aged participant shared how “in college, you have this mindset that at the end of four years you have a degree...and no one really tells you what to do after that.” A church member in her late twenties looking forward to starting a family with her partner asked, “how do you make that transition [from adults to parents] in your church community? I’ve never heard that talked about, but...that’s something I’d be eager to get some guidance in.”

While the participants found value in more formal mentorship opportunities in areas such as academics and work-related matters, they seemed more interested in informal opportunities when it came to their faith development. As one participant shared, “there are definitely things I would prefer to have an informal mentor for, things that are more emotional...faith is one of those things.” Another said that “talking faith-wise, having the emotional connection that I consider informal, that’s probably more valuable.” Furthermore, participants suggested that creating spaces for informal mentoring to occur where your guard is down would feel more authentic and natural: “Rather than two people sitting down in a coffee shop where you’re the

mentor and you're the mentee, when the relationship can happen more naturally it can have firmer roots," one explained.

Focus group participants also showed a willingness to serve as mentors both to their peers and to those church members younger than them. Those who were several years out of college felt they could support younger church members in the post-high school years as they transitioned into the working world. "We're not going to have all the answers," explained one participant in their late 20s, "but...you can ask questions and we can be alongside you...we're along for the ride because we know it's not the easiest transition." Another college-aged student proposed that the virtual Bible study she planned to lead for St. Andrew college students could include participants from the 20s/30s group to provide additional support and connection. Above all, whether through formal or informal mentorship opportunities, the focus group participants clearly wanted space to create relationships with each other, make long-term connections with others in the church, and talk through the tough questions as they figure out the direction of their lives.

### **Pastoral Observations Around Vocational Discernment**

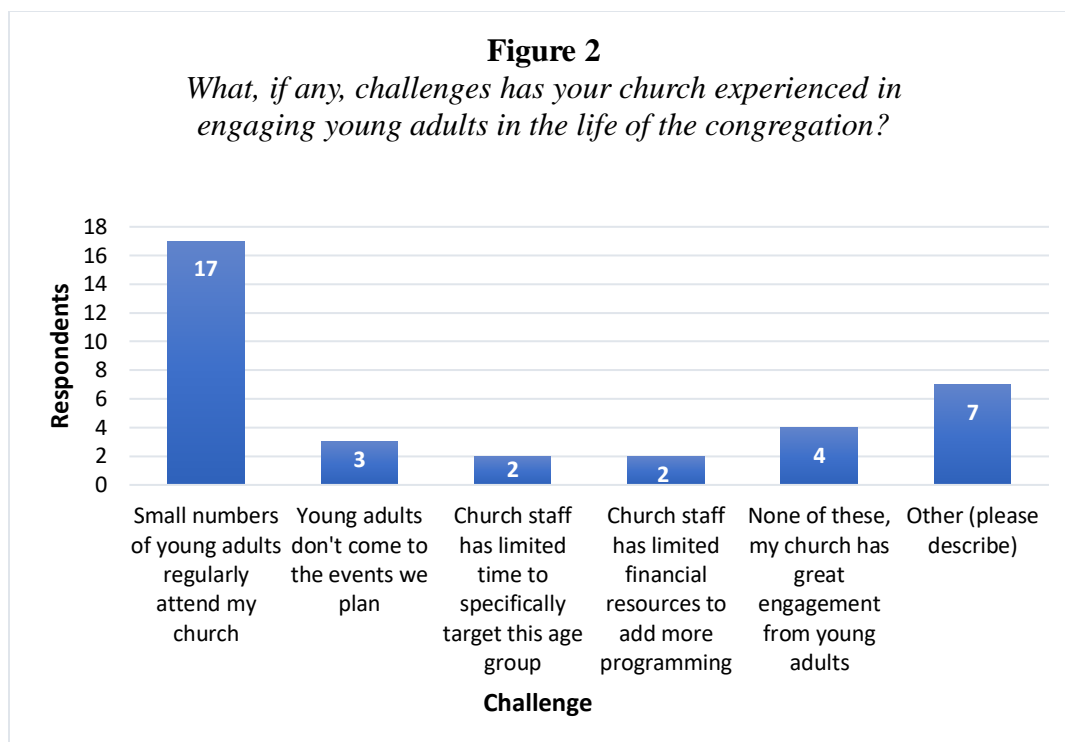
Survey results showed that conversations around vocational discernment and life direction happen most often in informal settings between pastors, young adults, and other church members. An open-ended question in the survey asked, "How does your church help your young adults to explore their vocation and grow spiritually in community with each other and others in the church?" In response, one pastor explained the importance of listening to where a young person's gifts and passions could be used and steering them accordingly. "Discerning where God-given gifts and worldly needs intersect is just a part of my own thoughts," she explains, "so I'm often listening with these things in mind...nothing formal happens...but discernment is a

part of our conversations on an ongoing basis.” Other respondents spoke of established settings in the church where informal mentorship happens around the topic of discernment: “We offer a weekly summer trip for young people...and informal conversations for young adults to talk through their vocational and spiritual questions.” A campus ministry pastor shared that “we do [vocational discernment support] through intensive leadership development, worship, small groups, and pastoral care. We also do ‘profession specific’ vocational work through occasional speaker series, specific small groups, or retreats.”

Some churches also shared how creating space for young leaders in the congregation has led to mentoring around the topic of discernment and individual life paths: “College-aged student leaders accompany us on high school summer trips, and we have mentoring/one-on-one conversations with them about the role of faith in what they are pursuing in life.” There are clear benefits to all involved, as evidenced by one student ministries director whose young adults serve as mentors for junior high and high school youth: “We know that being in process and allowing room for ongoing growth ...allows mentors to show up as they are, but also learn more about Jesus as they mentor.”

### **Barriers to Incorporating Mentoring**

Significant barriers exist for churches to incorporate opportunities for mentoring, including a lack of resources from churches (both financial and personnel), and a general lack of engagement from young adults. Figure 2 below shows responses to a survey question asking “What, if any, challenges has your church experienced in engaging young adults in the life of the congregation?” Respondents had the option to check all responses that applied to them.



As Figure 2 illustrates, a significant barrier to mentorship is simply the lack of engagement from the young adults themselves. A pastor shared that “some of our young people have moved from the area, so it is hard to keep them in touch...” Another explained that “[young adults] are out establishing their life. I often see them return to church when they have children and start thinking about the values and faith they want to pass on.”

After “small numbers of young adults regularly attend my church,” a response of “other” ranked second highest in barriers to mentoring. When asked to describe in further detail, respondents included comments about young adults moving away after college, lack of clarity within congregations as to where young adults fell within the ministry strategy, and the need to shuffle resources to more “pressing” areas of ministry during COVID-19.

Churches also struggle with getting people to commit to more programming. One student ministry director whose congregation has tried to establish an adult mentoring program explains that they “struggle with the community and their capacity to take on ‘one more thing’ in a

society where people are already stretched so thin.” Other respondents expressed similar concerns (“everyone is so busy, that it’s hard for people to commit to anything extra”). Furthermore, adding more programming or new areas of ministry requires resources, for example in church staffing, financially, and recruiting/training capable volunteers. To effectively serve people, a director of faith formation explained the need for a “full-time position outside of the pastor, and that is where we struggle currently.” Because of the limited resources many churches face, they often run with an “all hands-on deck” model, where individuals have to step into roles that may not specifically align with their job description. One youth minister noted that their church recently dedicated someone to young adult ministry, but then their technology/communications person resigned prior to COVID-19. Once COVID-19 hit, the immediate need for tech support was significant, so that staff person began supporting that function rather than young adult ministry.

Finally, survey respondents noted a struggle to find volunteer resources if they tried to implement formal mentorship programs. “We have seen the decline of old folks giving of their time freely,” explained a deacon. Another minister shares that “we see...a desire for [mentoring] from the young adults, but the older adults are less engaged.” Since this study did not target older adults in data collection, additional research would be needed to better understand if this is a broad phenomenon or unique to these specific congregations.

### **St. Andrew Reactions to the Research**

St. Andrew’s young adult leadership team had a positive reaction to the presentation I gave on mentoring after the survey and focus groups. The team itself has just five people, and four of them attended the presentation. Of those, three responded to the post-presentation survey. Based on those responses and verbal feedback from the pastor during the presentation, I believe



St. Andrew would consider incorporating some of my recommendations. Evidence to support this claim includes the following points below:

- In a question asking “How likely would you be to encourage St. Andrew 20/30 somethings to participate in any of the suggested mentoring-related activities/events?” all three survey respondents noted that they would be either “likely” or “very likely.” The respondents could select from five options ranging from “very unlikely” to “very likely.”
- One question asked if respondents had other suggestions on ways to incorporate mentoring into the ministry model. One respondent noted that the team had discussed hiring a consultant to work on integrating some of the ideas, especially those focused on connecting college students with older members of the congregation.
- In the presentation, the pastor asked me if I would agree to do further work to implement some of these suggestions starting in the winter. A similar comment also appeared in a survey question asking for other suggestions from respondents.

### **Discussion**

Based on my study’s findings, mentorship appears to be an effective tool St. Andrew and other congregations can use to support their young adult populations in building community, forging stronger intergenerational connections, and developing leadership skills. Church leaders shared the benefits of mentorship in their congregation (it is “life changing” according to one pastor; mentoring “provides opportunities for leadership,” says another), and young adults shared how they have grown by being mentored over the years (“empowered” “taught me

responsibility”, “challenged my faith,” explained focus group participants). These results are backed up by existing research, such as Roberto’s (2012) work on intentionally intergenerational faith communities that “affirm each person’s value in the total community regardless of age,” and “provide ‘up close and personal’ formation in faith” (p. 107). The following discussion expands on the themes of the findings section above, focusing on the broad scope of mentoring in congregations, desires from young adults, pastoral observations around vocational discernment and relationship-building, challenges to consider for successful mentoring, and St. Andrew’s reactions to my recommendations.

### **Broad Scope of Mentoring in Congregations**

Mentoring plays an important role in the lives of individuals in congregations across age groups, as shown both by survey and focus group responses. Survey respondents noted that many of the most organic relationships in their congregations—especially when young adults were involved—flourished when church leaders were intentional about creating spaces for relationships to grow. “Mentoring happens in many ways at our church,” said one pastor, “because we are intergenerational and intentional about...our young adults partnering with older adults in ministry...”. As it relates to young adults, for St. Andrew, this could mean being more intentional about connecting college students and recent grads with older members of the church in their 20s and 30s, or creating informal spaces for intergenerational connections between young adults and older adults. On a broader scale, churches should look critically at the spaces that exist for their young adults to learn and grow from older members. As one respondent noted, “I think breaking through from ‘friendly’ and abstract support to a more focused and concentrated walk will help people experience the same intentional and present walk that the Triune God is actively involved in.” Some research has already been done to support churches in this space; for

example, Roberto (2012) oversaw a six-year Lilly Endowment funded project focusing on the effects of intergenerational faith formation. He found that intergenerational learning increases participation in church life, strengthens faith communities, and creates a learning environment conducive to all ages (pp. 117-118). Based on the actual interests of young adults within individual congregations, churches can develop resources and spaces for connection accordingly to meet those needs that align with their church's culture. Furthermore, looking at how mentoring has occurred across other demographics (such as youth) can give churches a starting point for working with the young adult population.

### **Young Adult Desires for Mentoring**

St. Andrew young adults share similar desires to other young adults as they seek informal support navigating life stage changes. Parks (2011) highlights the stories of several young people, from a recent university graduate to a young lawyer in a new city, all trying to figure out their futures. As one explains, "I feel like I'm a pioneer, trying to make my way west on no trail...what I really want is some sort of guide to...call down directions to me about which way to head" (p. 231-232). Buzzanell (2009) also suggests that from a spiritual perspective, mentoring "may be less about...formal mentoring...than about everyday moments-by-moment processes" (p. 20). Whether in a church setting or elsewhere, these informal connections can help young people as they are figuring out their lives, their careers, and making decisions that will shape their futures.

Even as they are seeking support themselves, many young people, including those from St. Andrew, also want to share their own struggles in navigating early young adulthood. Research suggests that many young adults in congregations want to take on these types of leadership roles to understand their God-given purpose. For example, Powe and Smothers (2015)

explain that “young adults are seeking an opportunity to lead so they can live into their commitment to follow God’s lead and help others to do the same.” (para. 5).” This is a form of vocational discernment as they are seeking their God-given calling. Church leaders should remember these desires when exploring how to implement more opportunities for mentoring into their ministry strategies, whether for youth, young adults, or older adults. Ultimately, however church leaders choose to address the issue of cross-generational learning, mentoring, and leadership, they need to remember the desires of the young adults themselves. In meeting their people in spaces of shared understanding, the whole church can benefit and grow in faith together.

### **Pastoral Observations Around Vocational Discernment**

Young adults are full of questions as they are determining the course of their lives, and pastors acknowledged this in their survey responses. They see the value in their work as mentors and guides to help the young people in their care live out their God-given purpose. Their understanding of this unique role aligns with Parks (2011), who explains that “it is the purpose of mentoring environments to provide a place within which emerging adults may discover themselves becoming more at home in the universe” (p. 202). Other research literature also supports the importance of relationships with trusted peers and leaders in helping young people identify calling and purpose. From pastors and teachers to youth ministers, Price (2013) highlights several examples of young people who sensed a calling and were guided by mentors who recognized their gifts and talents (pp. 89-94). Price also explains that Christian vocation involves “key relationships, social networks, participation and an interactive engagement with God...” and churches have a key role to play in helping their young people navigate this path (p. 95). St. Andrew is already doing this work well; focus group participants shared examples from

their own lives of church staff, youth group leaders, and confirmation volunteers who helped them grow over the years, in faith development and intellectually. Living apart from family, they found parental figures and supporters who helped them gain confidence in their life direction. The support they received from their informal mentors aligns with Matthaie's (1991) understanding of a mentor as a guide who "journeys through life with another, pointing out landmarks, modeling alternatives, supporting choices, and interpreting life events" (as cited in Robinson-Birchett, 2013, p. 16). Ultimately, faith communities willing to dive into the "muck" of life alongside their young adults will not only help them find meaning and purpose in their lives, but the communities themselves have a chance to invite God into the messiness for the benefit of the broader community.

### **Barriers to incorporating mentoring**

Lack of engagement from young adults in church congregations is a key barrier to successful mentoring, and this exodus from the institutional church is well-documented. For example, a 2017 study conducted by Lifeway Research showed that of Protestant young adults ages 23-30 who had attended church for at least a year during high school, 29% cited a lack of connection to people in their church as a reason they stopped attending. Another 20% cited they were "too busy" as a reason they stopped attending (pp. 13-14). Research shows that many of these young adults consider themselves people of faith, but do not feel they need religious communities to help them find community and authentic relationships (Augsburg University, 2019, p. 16). Daloz Parks (2011) refers to these communities as "networks of belonging" and says that "for the emerging adult, community finds its most powerful form in a mentoring community" (p. 120). The church can step up to fill this role by adapting and taking the risk to break with tradition to serve young people in the ways that best meet their needs. More churches

recognize the need to re-think the traditional models of engagement; one survey respondent shares their own church's approach to helping their young people build this new community:

“We are...changing things to keep our young adults engaged in the community as we typically are not seeing them as much in a worship settings...the main thing is making sure that the door is always open and that we are meeting people where they are... Too many try and fit young adults into a God box of Sunday morning...”

Ultimately, while fostering young adult community and creating space for mentorship within the congregation is a good first step, the next question asks what it looks like for churches to take these principles beyond their walls. Rather than hoping for another cultural shift where young people suddenly start going to church in larger numbers again, church leaders must ask what is the role of the church in the next 20 or 30 years to go out into the world as Jesus did and meet people where they are? Augsburg University (2019) points us in the right direction with its understanding of innovation as “listening to our neighbor, discerning God’s call, and responding in hope” (p. 53). It means breaking down cultural barriers, going beyond Sunday morning worship services, and listening to how young people today experience the divine in their everyday lives beyond the church. Thurston and ter Kuile (2015) identified several key themes of secular organizations that are successfully engaging young people in this work, including fellowship, personal reflection, pilgrimage, aesthetic discipline, liturgy, confession, and worship (p. 7). They highlight the stories of young people today finding community in CrossFit gyms, Zen Buddhist centers, over shared meals with friends in urban and rural settings. With this knowledge, churches willing to look beyond their pews to experience God’s movements in the world may find themselves in a better position to guide young adults in their community, whether church members or not.

## **St. Andrew Reactions to the Research**

St. Andrew's young adult leadership team reacted positively to my presentation and showed interest in implementing some of the proposed recommendations. However, I want to acknowledge that St. Andrew has resources available that many other churches do not. Prior to COVID-19, average weekly worship attendance exceeded 1,000 people, compared to under 100 across all ELCA churches (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2020, p. 9; Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2019, p. 196). The church is in a solid financial position, with more than \$2 million a year in donations (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2020, p. 9). It also has an early learning program (daycare and preschool) and church-owned camping ministry that bring in additional revenue. Five pastors split up duties ranging from international missions to elder care to stewardship. Furthermore, as highlighted previously, the church received a grant through Augsburg University's Riverside Innovation Hub two years ago to expand its young adult ministry. There are funds available and a pastor dedicated (at least in part) to young adult ministry. In fact, in the final presentation survey, one respondent noted that the team had discussed hiring a consultant to implement some of the strategies I had recommended. These are aspects of St. Andrew's congregational life that many other churches do not have, and with these resources, innovations in the young adult space are more likely to take root.

Like the pastor survey responses, the final presentation survey responses from St. Andrew's leadership team highlighted time and buy-in as potential barriers to implementation of recommended solutions. However, other common themes that showed up in the pastor survey, such as a general lack of engagement from the young adult population, did not appear in the presentation survey. From my own observations participating in St. Andrew young adult activities, engagement appears relatively strong; I have been involved in young adult Zoom calls

since last spring with attendance as low as seven and as high as 25, depending on the nature of the topic being discussed. Ultimately, if St. Andrew's leadership can present opportunities to young adults in a way that resonates with them and helps them navigate their life path, I believe further initiatives around mentoring can be successful in the church.

### **Recommendations and Implications**

The primary goal of my research was to explore how a single congregation, St. Andrew Lutheran Church, could effectively incorporate opportunities for mentoring into the ministry strategy, with a secondary goal to consider the broader implications for church leaders. Based on my findings, it became clear that the most effective strategies would require minimal resources from both the church staff and potential participants. They would also address the needs of young adults in various stages of life and focus on more informal methods of mentoring rather than highly structured programming. Because of COVID-19 I could not actually implement any suggestions, but I provided recommendations to the church in three categories for their future consideration: low, medium, and high complexity. I also split up my recommendations between college students/20s and 30s, and 20s and 30s/Prime Timers (the name St. Andrew calls its 62+ group). These recommendations are outlined below, along with some additional considerations for church leaders in their own work on mentorship.

#### **Low Complexity Initiatives**

These initiatives would be unstructured and informal, with the primary goal to create space for connection that could lead to the formation of relationships and informal mentorship occurring. My goal for this level was to suggest options that could meet people where they were at and would take minimal effort from pastoral staff or leadership to implement. For example, in non-COVID times, Wednesday nights are the most active night of the week at St. Andrew.



Confirmation, choirs, youth groups and adult education meet on these nights, and the church offers a community dinner as part of the evening. Once Wednesday night activities resume in their full capacity, I recommended a regular (e.g. monthly) dinner for young adults and Prime Timers to connect and chat in between their other church activities to create space for connection. Other recommendations between young adults and older adults included prayer partners, intergenerational volunteer events, and occasional informal social events like patio crawls specific to the young adults and Prime Timers.

For connection between college students and young adults, I proposed a “buddy” program, where young adults in their 20s and 30s would pick the name of a college student church member to connect with a few times throughout the year, such as at the start of the school year, during finals, and at the end of the year, by sending a note/card of prayer and encouragement. I also recommended that 20s/30s church members could take the initiative to personally invite new college grads from St. Andrew who live in the Twin Cities to social events and Bible studies, since one comment in the focus group highlighted how intimidating it could be to enter a group when you have been away for so long.

### **Mid-Complexity Initiatives**

These initiatives would be semi-formal, focused on structured programming that would not officially pair people, but would allow for connections and discussion over topics of shared interest. They might require a bit more time from participants, but still require minimal resources from pastoral staff and typically would not require anyone to commit for a significant amount of time. For example, I recommended occasionally inviting a Prime Timer or Prime Timer couple to speak at a 20s/30s event to share their stories and build intergenerational connections. I also proposed an intergenerational Bible study or book study that could be led by a young adult, a

Prime Timer or even co-led. For the 20s/30s and college students, I proposed incorporating the 20s/30s into the existing college-aged Bible study by occasionally stepping up as facilitators, or by attending on a one-off basis to talk about life in the post-college years.

### **High Complexity Initiatives**

While I shared some high-level suggestions for a formal, paired mentoring program, I do not believe St. Andrew would benefit from implementing this type of programs right now, both as a result of my initial research and reactions from the young adult leadership team. In my presentation, I recommended focusing efforts around mentoring on the lower-complexity initiatives to gauge initial interest and engagement. I shared with the leadership team that if young adults expressed a desire for a more formal program, I had some resources to share to assist in that effort.

### **Implications for Church Leaders**

The results of my study illustrate that mentoring can be an effective tool churches can use to support their young adult populations. The recommendations outlined above focus on the programming and ministry at a specific congregation, but leaders could replicate them in other settings with proper care and exploration. Church leaders should strive to thoroughly understand the needs and desires of their young adult populations, whether through individual conversations or a broader survey, before taking any concrete actions. Recognizing upfront any barriers that might exist, such as the time people can dedicate to participating, the staff/financial resources available, and the willingness of the broader congregation to engage can also lead to the higher likelihood of success. Regardless of the congregation, successfully incorporating mentoring into a church's strategy should not just focus on establishing new programs to highlight in a ministry

booklet, but should be an intentional step towards engaging young adults in the life of the congregation as they discern their life path.

### **Conclusion**

This action research project attempted to show that incorporating mentoring principles into a church's ministry strategy could be an effective tool to support young adults in the areas of vocational discernment and spiritual growth. Ultimately, the results of the study showed young people most often want support focused on relationships and connect as they transition into adulthood. Whether trying to make friends in a new city or navigating the path of marriage and children, they are eager to learn from those who have gone before them in natural, authentic settings. They also want to walk alongside those coming up behind them to share their own experiences. Based on the stories and desires of St. Andrew's young adults, supported by the pastor's survey and the existing literature, I developed a series of recommendations for St. Andrew to implement. Due to the impact of COVID-19 on current ministry models, neither I nor the church has tested any of the recommend strategies. However, with the positive reactions I received from the church's young adult leadership team in both the presentation and the post-presentation survey, I believe these are viable recommendations that could help expand the young adult ministry.

Church leaders should also look at these recommendations as a jumping off point for their own engagement with young adults in their congregations and in the broader community. Our current religious landscape requires innovation and trust to chart a new course for thriving ministry, and I believe a focus on mentoring through relationship-building and connection can help churches envision new ways of young adult engagement.

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## Appendix A: Pastor's Survey

### Pastor Survey

*[Note to IRB: This intro text will be embedded as the first page of the survey, with a consent button that will direct participants towards the content of the survey.]*

*As part of my master's degree in organizational leadership at St. Catherine University, I am studying how mentoring programs can be used to help churches support their young adult populations, roughly age 18 (post-high school) through age 30, in exploring their vocation, growing spiritually and living their faith outside the walls of the church. This questionnaire is intended to give you the chance to share the ways mentoring occurs on a broad scale in your congregation and the potential crossover and benefit to mentoring specifically geared towards young adults in congregations. Additionally, the information you provide may help churches understand the role mentoring can play in their own congregations. For purposes of this survey, vocation is defined as "what it means to seek and follow God in the everyday settings in which life and work happen."*

*This survey should take no longer than 15 minutes to complete.*

*This survey is voluntary. If there is a question you prefer not to answer for any reason, simply skip it and move on to the next question. You may remove yourself from participation at any time. All of your responses will be kept confidential, and all data reported only in the aggregate. I will ensure that any personally identifiable information in your comments is protected or removed.*

*If you have any questions about this survey, please contact Linnae Stole at [lbstole280@stkate.edu](mailto:lbstole280@stkate.edu).*

*By continuing on with the survey, you are indicating your consent to participate and for the responses to be used in the manner indicated above. This survey is set up so that you may start and stop, returning to the link in your email to update your answers at a later time. If you have any trouble with this feature, please email Linnae Stole at [lbstole280@stkate.edu](mailto:lbstole280@stkate.edu)*

1. Role in Church: (open response, 30 character max)
2. Denomination: (check one)
  - Lutheran
  - Catholic
  - Methodist
  - Presbyterian
  - Non-denominational
  - Other (please describe) (30 Characters Max)
3. Average weekly worship attendance
  - >50

- 50-100
- 101-250
- 251-500
- >500

4. Does your church have a formal mentorship program?
  - Yes (proceed to question 5)
  - No (proceed to question 8)
5. (If responding yes) Is your mentorship program geared towards a specific demographic?
  - Yes (describe)
  - No, it is open to anyone who wants to participate
  - Other (describe)
6. (If responding yes) In 2-3 sentences, describe your mentorship program
7. (If responding yes) In 4-5 sentences, describe the value a mentorship program has brought to your congregation.
8. In 3-4 sentences, describe the ways you see informal mentoring occurring in your congregation (e.g. youth leaders acting as mentors to younger children, adults guiding youth in confirmation or Sunday school, etc.). If you see examples of adult-to-adult mentoring occurring, please share as part of your response.
9. How does your church help your young adults to explore their vocation and grow spiritually in community with each other and others in the church?
10. What, if any, challenges has your church experienced in engaging young adults in the life of the congregation? (check all that apply)
  - Small numbers of young adults regularly attend my church
  - Young adults don't come to the events we plan
  - Church staff has limited time to specifically target this age group
  - Church staff has limited financial resources to add more programming
  - None of these, my church has great engagement from young adults
  - Other, please describe
11. Do you think some sort of a formal mentorship program would benefit your young adult population in vocational discernment and spiritual growth (for example, pairing interested young adults with older members of the congregation who commit to walking alongside them in these areas)? Why or why not?
  - Yes (describe in 2-3 sentences)
  - No (describe in 2-3 sentences)
  - Other (describe)

12. What would be your main barriers to starting a mentoring program (check all that apply)?

- Not enough time for church staff to work on this
- Not enough interest from church members
- Lack of resources (e.g. guidelines, curriculum) on how to start a program
- Other, describe:
- N/A

13. Anything else you would like to share?

## Appendix B: Focus Group Questions

### Opening question:

- Tell us your name, how long you've been attending St. Andrew, and one area of ministry you are involved in

### Introductory question:

- How would you define a mentor?

### Transition Question

- How were you mentored as children/youth, in particular in your faith community, whether St. Andrew or elsewhere?

### Key Questions

- How have you been mentored in the post-high school years?
- As it pertains to your faith development at this stage of life, would you find value in connecting with older adults to learn and grow from?
  - What would an ideal setting for connection look like for you?
- Would you be interested in participating in intergenerational ministry opportunities with the Prime Timer (55+ group), for example, an intergenerational Bible study, volunteer opportunities or even something as simple as a Wednesday night community meal?
  - What appeals to you about these options?
  - What other ideas do you have to create space for intergenerational learning at St. Andrew on a more informal basis?
- If St. Andrew were to implement some sort of a formal mentoring program with older members of the congregation, would you be interested in participating?
  - Do you think such an experience could help you in your vocational discernment/spiritual growth process? If so, how?

### Ending Questions

- Is there anything else you want to add but didn't get the opportunity to say?