THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN YOUTH MINISTRY AND AT-RISK BEHAVIOR IN YOUTH

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Introduction

Youth Ministry programming holds an important place in the life of many Christian churches and this is also true of the Seventh-day Adventist church. Youth workers know intuitively that what they do makes a difference in the lives of the youths that they serve. However, much of the commentary relating to youth ministry and at-risk behavior is visceral often being based on hunches, guesses and opinions (Gane and Kijai, 2006). Empirical data is needed to support professional responses within such an important church ministry. One study of 1047 adolescents conducted almost two decades ago in Australian and New Zealand demonstrated a link between youth ministry involvement and lower levels of at-risk behavior (Gane, 1997).

In this study secondary data analysis is used to investigate the relationship between involvement in youth ministry and various measures of at-risk behavior. It is hypothesized that adolescents and young adults who are highly involved in youth ministry activities have lower levels of at-risk behavior.

Over the past decade there have been a number of studies on adolescents that have suggested that at-risk behaviors are on the rise. Dunn, Ilapagu, Lashan, Blackwell and Regina (2008) reported that alcohol use by teenagers was at levels that cause concern. They reported the following statistics: "According to the Monitoring the Future Study, 41% of eighth graders have used alcohol, 19.5% have been drunk, and 17.2% have been drunk in the past 30 days" (p. 588). They found that there is a strong relationship between self reported substance use and risky sexual activity. Ryan, Heath, Fischer and Young (2008), and Rothman, Wise, Bernstein and Bernstein (2009) also observed that alcohol use was often accompanied by risky sexual activity.

Alcohol abuse has featured in a number of studies. Livingston,

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Testa, Hoffman and Windle (2010) found that if alcohol was restricted at home then a young person was less likely to indulge in heavy drinking when they left home, but if they were exposed to heavy drinking at home this would become a pattern when they left home. John Cochran (1993) studied a number of groups of adolescents and tracked their use of alcohol. He found that alcohol use was lowest in the strongly religious group and that use depended on the view of the type of alcohol used. Liquor (high alcohol content) was the least likely to be used by any of the adolescents, but this was especially true for the strongly religious group.

A number of studies concluded that adolescents were rarely involved in just one risky behaviour (Craciun and Baban 2008; Hershenberg and Davila, 2010; Park, Weaver & Romer 2009; Price & Shibley, 2009; Wilson, Asbridge, Kisely and Langille 2010).

The influence of parents in building resistance to at-risk behaviors is well documented (Longmore, Eng, Giordano, & Manning, 2009; Coley, Votruba-Drzal & Schindler, 2009; Trejos-Castillo & Vazsonyi, 2009; Hadley, Brown, Lescano, Kell, & Spalding, 2009; Califano, 2008; Grasmick, Hagan, Blackwell & Arneklev, 1996). Ryan, Heath, Fischer, and Young (2008) discovered that "an accepting supportive relationship" (p. 237) that was non-judgemental was most helpful in aiding recovery in adolescent females who were involved in self harm. Moilanen, Shaw and Fitzpatrick (2010) suggest that "parenting and the context of the parent-child relationship are linked to self-regulation during early adolescence; however, it appears that parental antagonism and relationship quality, not maternal regulatory supportive parenting, contribute to rank-order change in self-regulation abilities" (p. 1357).

There is very little reference in the literature to church related programs, specifically youth ministry, and the relationship between the levels of youth involvement in at-risk behavior and youth ministry participation. Feldman, et al., (1997) and Bingham, Miller and Adams (1990) reported that church going tended to delay the loss of virginity in the sample they studied. However, more recent research by Kathleen Leonard (2010), reported that "religiosity was not related to self-reported sexual activity or contraceptive use" (p. 578). Vazsonyi and Jenkins (2010) found contradictory evidence that suggested that "religiosity and self-control independently and additively function as key social control mechanisms" is the area of sexual behavior (p. 561). The Valuegenesis survey was constructed in consultation with the Search Institute in Minneapolis and other research done by the Search Institute tends to support the findings of this study (Search Institute).

Julie Steen (2010) found that boys and girls clubs did not have very much influence on whether a teen used alcohol, tobacco or marijuana but admitted more study was needed to look at church based programs to assess the impact of community-based institutions. Her re-

search revealed however, that availability and access to youth clubs were the determinants for lower levels of involvement in at-risk behavior. Delinquent behavior in adolescents is often linked to at-risk behavior and was found by Adeseun (1993) to be only slightly affected by religiosity. He came to the conclusion that religion has an influence on delinquency as it strengthens the delinquency inhibitor and weakens the delinquency generator. Earlier Perkins (1985) had come to similar conclusions, that a relatively strong faith commitment to a Judeo-Christian tradition was a significant moderating influence on alcohol and other drug use. Litchfield (1997) found that future-intended religious involvement tended to correspond to lower levels of involvement in deviant behaviors even more than current religiosity.

Recent studies in the area of neuroscience (Begley, 2000; Durston et al., 2001; Brownlee, 2005; Monastersky, 2007) have discovered that the teenage brain undergoes a dramatic growth spurt. It was previously thought that this only took place in the early childhood years but MRI scans have revealed that it takes place again during the teen years. The teen brain is very like the adult brain in many ways but very different in some significant areas which may help explain why normally sensible teens make some inordinately bad decisions. Brownlee (2005) interviewed a number of leading scientists in the area teen brain development and reported that:

> different regions of his brain are developing on different timetables. For instance, one of the last parts to mature is in charge of making sound judgments and calming unruly emotions. And the emotional centers in the teenage brain have already been revving up, probably under the influence of sex hormones.
>
> This imbalance may explain why your intelligent 16-year-old doesn't think twice about getting into a car driven by a friend who is drunk, or why your formerly equable 13-year-old can be hugging you one minute and then flying off the handle the next (p. 15).

Brownlee (2005) cites one of the leading scientists in the field, Jay Giedd, a child psychiatrist at the National Institute of Mental Health in Bethesda, Maryland: "Adolescence is a time of tumultuous change in the brain. . . Teenagers are choosing what their brains are going to be good at – learning right from wrong, responsibility or impulsiveness, thinking or video games." It seems that this stage of development of the adolescent brain can cause teens to engage in risky behavior. Monastersky (2007) states that "neural systems in teenagers develop first in areas that respond to thrills, novelty, and rewards and develop later in areas of control" (pp. 15-21).

It appears that teens have real trouble making consistently sound judgments, as the part of the brain responsible for control, the prefrontal cortex, is still developing, and they are more likely to be driven by emotional response rather than reason. This may explain why they will give mental assent to abstinence from a certain at-risk behavior like drinking alcohol, but at the same time actually take a drink when one of their friends offers it to them at a party.

Adolescence is that time in life when people are most likely to experiment not only with identity but also with behavior (Erikson, 1968). Whether this experimentation becomes a lifestyle or not will largely depend on the strength of the bond the adolescent has to parents, their church, and the types of peers they associate with (Benda & Corwyn, 1997). It is our contention that youth ministry plays a vital role in imparting values and helping adolescents with the erection of boundaries.

Method

The sample for this study consisted of 11,481 students who completed the Valuegenesis II survey conducted by the North American Division of the Seventh-day Adventist church during the 2000-2001 school years. The Valuegenesis Study was designed to examine a wide variety of factors (e.g. denominational loyalty, faith maturity, faith development) pertinent to the understanding of youths attending Seventh-day Adventist schools in North America.

The students in this study were 11-20 years old (M=14.85, SD=2.05), predominantly Caucasians (51.4%), female (53.2%) and mostly born in the United States (81.3%). Most of the respondents reported that they were baptized Seventh-day Adventists (73.1%), and attended church weekly (79.5%). The distribution of students across the grade levels (6-12) was fairly even at around 11% to15%.

This particular study is focused on how at-risk behavior may be related to involvement in youth ministry which was measured using a set of nine items (see Table 1) that asked respondents to indicate the extent (1=not at all to 4=very much) to which certain activities (youth camps, short-term mission trips, Bible/Leadership camps, youth rallies, evangelistic outreach, Pathfinders, community outreach, and religious youth organizations) positively impacted their faith development. It is reasonable to assume that activities such as Pathfinders (a club similar to scouts for youth aged 10 to 16 years of age) and community outreach programs can impact one's religious development only if the subjects are involved in them in some way, directly or indirectly. (Community outreach is a term to cover a multitude of activities such as mentoring younger students, prayer walks through specific neighborhoods, food distribution, and property maintenance for the elderly or sick. Community outreach puts young Christians in close contact with people who have needs and allows the student to express their care and share their

faith.) We used this set of items as proxy measures of youth ministry involvement. Factor analysis in the original study supported "impact of youth ministry" as one of the scales to be used in the investigation. The Cronbach's alpha reliability estimate for the proposed 9-item measure of youth ministry was 0.914.

At-risk behaviors were measured using 10 items (see Table 2 for the specific behaviors) and factor analysis supported the development of the associated scale (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.76$). From this scale an at-risk behavior index was developed following the procedure used in Valuegenesis 1 (Benson & Donahue, 1990). This index "attempts to address whether a youth is engaging in deviant behavior of a sufficient intensity to raise concern" (p.32). Operationally, a youth is at risk if he/she was involved in one or more of the following during the past year: 'drank alcohol 6 or more times', 'use marijuana more than twice', 'used cocaine more than twice' , ' engaged in binge drinking once or more times' , 'hit or beat someone more than twice' , 'engaged in shoplifting more than twice', 'gotten into trouble in school more than twice', 'ever engaged in sexual intercourse', 'felt very sad or depressed during the last month', and 'ever tried to kill myself' (p. 32). A score of 1 was assigned for every item in which a subject meets the criteria indicated earlier resulting in an index with a range from 0 to 10.

The grouping of participants into at-risk and not at-risk was developed by applying these criteria. Analysis investigated the predictor variables that can be associated with group membership.

Results

Youth ministry and faith development

Table 1 shows the percent of students who agree 'somewhat' or 'very much' that involvement in various youth ministry programs have impacted their faith development. For example, 53.8% of the students indicated that interaction with the youth pastor has 'somewhat' or 'very much' impacted their faith development. Similarly, approximately 61% of the students reported that participation in youth camps has positively impacted their faith development. Other youth ministry programs for which more than half report an impacted were school leadership camps (58.5%), short term mission project (59.5%), pathfinders (49.5%), conference youth rallies (55.3%) and evangelistic outreach (52.5%). Item means range from 3.37 (SD=0.97) for *community outreach at school* to 3.70 (SD=1.07) for *short-term mission projects*. This suggests that on average participants are impacted 'a fair amount' (3) or 'very much' (4). The purpose of these ministries is supported by these self reported outcomes by young people. Skewness indices range from -0.42 for *youth pastor* to 0.09 for *community outreach at school*, all within the range -1 to 1 indicating that responses are quite normally distributed.

Table 1. Youth Ministry Indicators

Item	n	%[a]	Mean	SD
Bible/Leadership camps through school (n=7875)	4605	58.5	3.65	1.04
Community outreach at school (n=8831)	4019	45.5	3.37	0.97
Short-term mission projects (n=7025)	4180	59.5	3.70	1.07
Religious youth organizations, AY, MV (n=6627)	3480	52.5	3.52	1.05
Pathfinders (n=7036)	3484	49.5	3.44	1.08
Conference youth camps (n=8081)	4918	60.9	3.73	1.05
Evangelistic outreach (n=8054)	4229	52.5	3.51	0.98
Conference youth rallies (n=7643)	4226	55.3	3.57	1.01
Youth pastor (n=11433)	6149	53.8	3.30	1.41

[a]Percent "somewhat' and 'very much'.

At-risk behavior

At-risk behavior indicators are shown in Table 2. Approximately 25% of the students had used alcohol at least once during the past year. About 10% had used marijuana; 13% had participated in binge drinking; and more than half (57.4%) have gotten into trouble in school at least once during the past year. Approximately 18% reported they shoplifted; 12% engaged in sexual intercourse at least once; and about 50% felt sad and depressed some or most of the time over the past month. Quite disturbing is the indicator that 15% of the students had attempted suicide. The at- risk index (computed based on the procedure described earlier) is $M = 1.53$ (SD=1.59) and is positively skewed at $M = 1.53$ (SE=0.023). For this reason, we categorized at-risk behavior as Not At-Risk (at-risk index=0) and At-Risk (at-risk index =1 or higher).

Table 2 At-risk behavior indicators

Statement	Percentages 1	2	3	4
[a]In the last year...				
...drink alcohol (beer, wine, liquor) alone or with friends (n=11440)	75.5	11.6	4.8	8.1
...use marijuana (grass, pot) (n=11416)	89.5	3.7	1.8	5.0
...use cocaine (crack, snow, coke) (n=11395)	96.7	1.1	0.4	1.8
...have five or more drinks in a row (n=11433)	87.2	5.6	2.2	5.0
...hit or beat up someone (n=11438)	55.1	24.8	7.4	12.7
...take something from a store without paying for it (n=11424)	81.7	10.9	2.9	4.5
...get in trouble in school (n=11395)	42.6	31.5	11.4	14.5

Table 2 At-risk behavior indicators (continued)

Statement	Percentages 1	2	3	4
[b]Ever had sexual intercourse (gone all the way, made love) (n=11396)	87.3	3.7	1.4	7.6
[c]Have felt sad or depressed in the last month (n=11378)	11.1	38.4	32.2	18.3
[d]Ever tried to kill yourself (n=11423)	84.3	9.0	2.7	4.0

[a]1= never, 2= 1 to 2 times, 3= 3 to 5 times, 4= 6 or more times

[b]1= No, 2= once, 3= twice, 4= 3 or more times

[c]1= not at all, 2= once in a while, 3= some of the time, 4= most or all of the time

[d]1= no, 2= Yes, once, 3= Yes, twice, 4= Yes, more than two times

Youth ministry and at-risk behavior

This paper primarily examines whether at-risk behavior is related to youth ministry involvement. Specifically, to what extent does a set of measures of youth ministry involvement differentiate students with at-risk and students with no at-risk behaviors? A direct discriminant analysis was performed to answer this question. Assumption for equality of population covariances was met (Box's M=40.14, F(45, 9808682)=0.88, p=0.68). Table 3 summarizes the result of the discriminant analysis. Due to missing values on one or more discriminating variables, only 3369 (888 Not at-risk and 2481 at-risk subjects) of the total cases of 11481 were retained for this particular analysis.

One discriminant function was calculated with Canonical R=0.147, thus, accounting for 2.2% of the between group variance. The function is statistically significant ($\chi 2$= 73.59, df=9, p=0.000) suggesting that the set of measures of youth ministry involvement significantly differentiated students with at-risk behaviors and those with no at-risk behaviors. The structure (loading) matrix of correlation between predictors and discriminant function is also shown in Table 3. Using a cut-off loading of 0.33 (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007), it appears that all of the measures of youth ministry involvement are useful predictors for distinguishing between students with at-risk behaviors and students with no at-risk behaviors. The best predictors appear to be evangelistic outreach, community outreach, short-term mission projects and Bible/leadership camps through school. Overall, the univariate analysis indicates that students that were not at-risk reported higher averages on all the measures of youth ministry involvement than students who were deemed at-risk.

Table 3. Result of discriminant analysis of at-risk behavior

Discriminating Variables	Structure Matrix	Group Means and Standard Deviations: Not At-Risk (n=888) M	SD	At-Risk (n=2481) M	SD	Univariate $F_{(1,3367)}$
Evangelistic outreach	0.91	3.80	0.99	3.54	1.06	61.56*
Community outreach at school	0.78	3.60	0.95	3.34	1.01	45.08*
Short-term mission projects)	0.76	3.81	1.03	3.54	1.08	43.11*
Bible/Leadership camps through school	0.73	3.80	0.99	3.54	1.06	39.51*
Conference youth rallies	0.69	3.69	0.99	3.45	1.04	35.12*
Conference youth camps	0.62	3.83	1.02	3.60	0.09	29.05*
Religious youth organizations, AY, MV	0.61	3.64	1.06	3.42	1.08	27.73*
Youth pastor	0.56	3.84	1.13	3.63	1.16	23.02*
Pathfinders	0.54	3.57	1.09	3.37	1.11	21.46*
Canonical R	0.174					
Eigenvalue	0.022					
Wilk's Lambda	0.978					
Chi-Square	73.590					
df	9					
p	0.000					

*p <0.001

Conclusion and Discussion

In this paper, we were interested in the extent to which at-risk behaviors among a group of Adventists youth 11- 20 years old may be related to involvement in youth ministry. Youth ministry involvement is defined by the extent to which their faith development was impacted by nine youth ministry programs (e.g. youth rallies, pathfinder, short-term mission projects). An at-risk behavior index was developed from a 10-item measure of at-risk behavior. In this study we found that (a) each youth ministry program impacted somewhat or very much the faith development of 45% or more of the Adventist youths, suggesting that at least 45% of the youths were involved in one or more youth ministry programs; (b) given the average at-risk index at less than 2 (range is 0-10), at-risk behavior among Adventist youth is quite low. However, it would be prudent to note that about 50% of the youths 'felt sad or depressed' some or most of the time; and that about 15% have attempted suicide; (c) students with no at-risk behavior reported significantly higher averages than those with at-risk behaviors on all measures of youth ministry involvement. Outreach programs, short-term mission trips and Bible/Leadership camps appear to be the best predictors for distinguishing students with and without at-risk behaviors.

One would expect to have larger than 45% of Adventist youth involved in youth ministry programs. Unfortunately, for various reasons, not all Adventist schools or churches have organized youth ministry programs. Our colleagues who are familiar with Adventist schools in North America indicated that approximately 70% of the schools are small (typically multigrade with less than 50 students). Many of these schools do not have the resources (financial, personnel, etc.) to have organized youth ministry programs. Additionally, there are a number of church leaders who believe that the Adventist school system, which is subsidized by the church, is all the ministry that needs to be offered to church youth. This paper supports the belief that there should be an intentional youth ministry either separate from the school or running concurrently with it.

All the respondents in this study identified themselves as Seventh-day Adventists. Like many Christians denominations, the Adventist church has strong health messages. So it was not a surprise that the at-risk index revealed that only a small percentage of the youth are involved in at-risk behaviors. In reporting the result of Valuegensis I, Benson and Donahue (1990) reported that about 90% of parents of Adventist youths talk to their children about faith, enforce drug standards and strongly oppose alcohol use. In the same report, they indicated that up to 81% of Adventist youths reported that their teachers emphasize keeping Adventist standards, drug/alcohol education and education about sexuality. Moral education emphasized both at home and at school appears to impact at-risk behavior. This may explain why the at-

risk behavior of students in our study is quite low.

In a previous study (Gane & Kijai, 2006), we found that youths involved in youth ministry are more likely to have mature faith and higher intrinsic religious orientation. Other studies (Cochran, 1993; Adeseum, 1993; Perkins, 1985; Litchfield, 1997) have suggested that religiosity influences at-risk behavior. As expected, this study found significant relationships between youth ministry involvement and at-risk behavior. Non-involvement in at-risk behaviors is often a part of a commitment made by youth involved in Adventist youth ministry. Those aspects of youth ministry that showed the highest association with low or no at-risk behavior are very much experienced based programs and activities, (evangelistic outreach, community outreach, short-term mission projects and leadership camps). These program and activities give the adolescent an opportunity to articulate their own conviction about various elements of their faith. The outreach programs the youth are involved in encourage them to share with the people they meet and give these youth opportunities to express their own faith and the impact of it upon their lives. Although short term mission trips may often involve extensive physical activity such as building or repair work on an orphanage, school or church, time is specifically set aside for youth to share their faith in vacation Bible school type programs, conducting worship and sharing through Bible study. So it is encouraging to find empirical evidence to support positive links between youth ministry involvement and low at-risk behavior.

The youth involved in the ministries mentioned above recognize the at-risk behaviors to be harmful and not in harmony with their faith. The youth should be aware of the hypocrisy of sharing aspects of a lifestyle that they are not personally committed to and hence they are less likely to be, or become involved in the at-risk behaviors. The lifestyle issues referenced in the at-risk behaviors are dealt with in depth in the curriculum of the Pathfinder clubs and youth are encouraged to adopt them as their own. The issue of premarital sex is also discussed at some depth in the small group ministry and pathfinder club meetings. This is also true for bullying/violence and shoplifting. Attitudes and choices are made as part of a life experience while leaders who share these attitudes and choices have the opportunity to influence and model when working closely with the adolescents. In these aspects of youth ministry the adolescent cannot be just a passive recipient as active involvement is unavoidable.

The measures of at-risk behavior are identifiable as aspects of "Adventist" lifestyle. Involvement with alcohol, tobacco, drugs, and premarital sex are all behaviors that are inconsistent with being an "Adventist" Christian. There is no other aspect of church life where lifestyle issues are dealt with more intentionally than in youth ministry activities and programs. The youth ministry offered to the youth in this sample

would espouse the "Adventist" lifestyle and this would be seen by the youth as a vital part of being Adventist.
The positive peer pressure experienced in youth ministry has a powerful influence over the choices that youth make. The study by Hoge, Petrillo, and Smith (1982) suggested that youth groups have as strong an influence on denominational membership as did the parents. Cohen (1995) found that youth groups had an impact on Jewish youth accepting their Jewish identity. This effect is also likely to be the case in this study. As the youth in this study were all attending SDA schools, it is fair to suggest that they had more invitations and also compulsory demands for commitment made on them than their counterparts in the state school system.

Although Erikson (1968) informs us that adolescence is a time of turmoil and experimentation, this study asserts that those youth with the greatest exposure to and involvement in youth ministry have lower levels of at-risk behavior. Generally, youths in these programs are fairly homogeneous in their goals, they enjoy fellowship, they are committed to the shared mission of their church and youth group, and they often express their desire to be more involved after a mission trip or outreach experience. Involvement in youth ministry heightens their desire and commitment to lifelong involvement in the mission of the church. Consequently, these common goals, which generally reflect the lifestyle positions taken by their church, will have moderating effects on the at-risk activities and behavior is of these youths. The power of youth ministry resides in the relationships developed between caring significant older people and youth.

Some Recommendations:

- Many local churches take the needs of their young people seriously enough to provide adequate financial and human resources to conduct effective youth ministry for their young people. Church and school leaders should become intentional in their support for youth ministry and where it does not exist, introduce it.
- Church leaders should significantly influence their youth by financially enabling them to be involved in evangelistic outreach, community outreach, short term mission trips and bible/leadership camps.
- At a time when finances are tight and churches are consuming their reserves, each church needs to realize that the youth are their greatest asset and continue to give priority to investment in them through competent, trained leadership both at the professional and volunteer levels.
- Leaders should encourage parental involvement in youth minis-

try activity as this reinforces the lifestyle the parents want their children to adopt.

- Youth should be encouraged by their parents, teachers and church firstly to commitment to Christ, and then as a consequence to become involved in gospel oriented ministries that will help them in their commitment to a lifestyle free of at-risk behavior.

Further research should identify those churches and schools that have positive short term mission trips, evangelistic outreach and Bible camps running regularly and through both qualitative and quantitative research seek to discover what it is about these experiences that influence life-style choices so positively.

Since all of the respondents in this study were attending Adventist schools similar survey research should investigate the responses of Adventist students who attend state schools. Prior work done by Gane (1997) would suggest that youth ministry has a strong relationship to non-involvement in at-risk behavior regardless of the school they attend. However, this added research would be important to discover how effective the role of the youth pastor and youth ministry is in relation to at-risk behavior in the lives of students not attending Adventist schools, and by comparison the moderating influence of "Adventist" school life on involvement in out of school youth ministries. Further, many of the youth ministry activities identified and attended by these students are sponsored by their conference youth department and it would be important to discover if leadership at this level has been professionally trained in youth ministry and if in fact this makes a difference.

There is strong evidence of the positive impact of youth ministry on the lives of the young people involved. It would appear almost negligent for any church to see youth ministry as just an option; it is an imperative. Although the results in this study are based on Seventh-day Adventist youths, there is a likely generalized effect with similar implications for Christian denominations that have formalized and organized youth ministry programs.

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