Faith Development in Youth Recreation in Religious Organizations

A thesis presented to
the faculty of
The Patton College of Education of Ohio University

In partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Master of Science in Recreation and Sport Sciences

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December 2015

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Abstract

SMITH, SHARRON C., M.S.R.S., December 2015, Recreation Studies

Faith Development in Youth Recreation in Religious Organizations

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Throughout adolescence youth are involved with many different types of recreation. These types of recreation can vary from extra curricular activities after school, band, travel sports teams or event church. Unfortunately, even in these times of leisure youth can still struggle with issues, many of these issues can arise from identity related questions. Scholars have found recreation helpful in shaping the development stage, but very little research has examined how recreation shapes spiritual development. This research will begin to fill that gap by examining what role recreation has towards faith development. Though interviews data can be examined to determine if spiritually focused recreation can be used within religious organizations to help reduce the stresses that youth face.
Dedication

*May this be an offering.*
Acknowledgments

I’d like to thank my advisor, Beth VanDerveer, for always being on my side, and Krisanna Machtmes, without you I’d be lost.
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Chapter 1: Rationale

Climbing mountains, rafting rivers, and trekking through some of the most beautiful land that few will see is not just an activity, it is an experience. It is an experience with the power to mold change, conquer fear, and promote human growth. Adventure and recreational programs engage participants and learners in the experience to develop interpersonal and technical skills, facilitate reflection, and support sound values. This experiential learning cycle, when applied and facilitated correctly can optimize learning, engage learners consistently, and transfer aspects of positive change into everyday life (Wagstaff & Attarian, 2005).

Adventure and other recreational programs that are spiritually focused hold the same positive physical and mental benefits as other programs, such as increase self-confidence, communication, cooperation, and responsibility to care, but also add the deeper element of attending to the spirit. Programs that use adventure as a catalyst have been in effect for a while, however, focusing studies toward spiritual development have recently become more popular (Barnett & Weber, 2009; Bobilya et al., 2011).

According to Bobilya et al. “we have increasingly come to neglect the student’s inner development--the sphere of value and belief, emotional maturity, spirituality, and self-understanding” (2011, p.303). Not enough literature has explored the relationship between leisure and spirituality, or the relationship between leisure and religious organizations (Barnett & Weber, 2009; Heintzman & Mannell, 2002).

Cut off from nature, we have lost a sense of a sacred reality, we reject spiritual values and neglect our own and others’ spiritual needs…Even in the field of
experiential education, there has been too little effort made to allow the sacred to be reconciled with the physical reality of our experience (Stringer & McAvoy, 1992, p.13).

Many scholars agree that spirituality and spiritual experiences connect one to deeper understanding of self, others, and something greater than the self (Bobilya et al., 2011; Marsh & Bobilya, 2013;). This search for something greater has been argued to be one of the most important and impactful aspects of human development (Benson et al., 2012).

As humans travel through each stage of life they develop; most of that development is through their identity. Erik Erikson (1968) identified 8 stage of identity development that all humans experience in their lives. During each stage the individual must find a balance between the factors that influence development to achieve self-verification (Baumeister, 1986). “Identity achievement is a crucial developmental milestone, as it enables a young person to make positive contributions to society and to avert identity diffusion and despair” (Furrow, King, & White, 2004, p. 17).

Identity is created through social situations. A person’s identity must be recognized by others for one to understand their own personal meaning. It is developed as a person associates with roles they believe are important. Identities or roles that someone associates with will be placed in a hierarchy system. The more important a role is, the higher it will be in the hierarchy and the more commitment or salience that will be exhibited in social situations (Morris, 2013). When trying to find an identity, especially in adolescence, youth may demonstrate different identities depending on the
group or groups in which they find themselves (Best, 2011). “This is the identity–
verification process… a dynamic, ongoing, continuous process of counteracting
disturbances that occur in the situation” (Burke & Stets, 2009, p.139).

This self-verification process is viewed at the source for worth, efficacy, and
authenticity (Deaux & Burke, 2010). Studies on identity have categorized the motives
for self-verification as, “…to reduce uncertainty about one’s place in the world, …
increase self-esteem, create meaning, and maintain balance and consistency” (Deaux &
Burke, 2010, p.317). The more important the identity is to an individual, the greater the
benefit. Similarly, the more important an identity is, the more committed an individual
will be to the role that verifies that identity (Thoits, 2012). The evidence suggests that
individuals that are salient to an important identity will have a higher view of the self, as
well as better mental and physical benefits (Deaux & Burke, 2010; Thoits, 2012). Wiley
and Berman (2013) suggested that adolescents with salient identities experienced fewer
psychological issues, and reported high levels of well-being, adjustment, and emotional
stability.

Furrow et al. (2004), found that “stable connections of the self were associated
with the ability to connect an experience to larger questions in life, including meaning
and purpose (Beaumont & Scammell, 2012; Thoits, 2012). The researchers also found
that when identities were built around a strong moral or ethical framework, it provided
youth with a basis to make life choices (Baumeister, 1986; Furrow et al, 2004;).
“Fidelity to an identity signifies a commitment that in turn provides direction and
belonging to those who have an established identity” (p.18).
While examining aspects of salient identity, the positive benefits such as purpose for life, belonging, and connectedness to others, correlated with characteristics of a highly religious individual. According to Furrow et al. (2004) it “provide(s) youth with clear beliefs, values, and worldviews that serve as a cornerstone of a young person's identity and proscribe for them their societal roles” (p.17). Having a positive framework sets the foundation to allow individuals to move beyond self and look toward society (Furrow et al., 2004).

In a national survey over 65% of Americans say that they believe themselves to be spiritual or religious individuals; and over 30% more claim to be spiritual or religious in some aspect of their life (Mahoney & Krumrei, 2012). Unfortunately, religiosity and spirituality within development had been neglected in the literature, and most of what is now emerging was compiled in 2000 or later (Benson et al., 2012; Boyatzis, 2012).

Spiritual development is a part of being human, whether progress is unconscious or willful (Benson & Roelkepartain, 2008). Boyatzis (2012) confirms this by saying that spirituality contains three variables, it is a natural human tendency, is socialized and crafted by experiences, and is tied to the idea of something beyond the self. This process of development is active, always changing and growing depending on others and society. Spiritual development

…presses us to look inward to accept or discover our potential to grow, contribute, and matter, and to look outward to connect with life, including being in relationship with family, community, the world, and for many, the sacred, divine, or some form of universal reality (Benson & Roelkepartain, 2008, p. 20).
Spiritual development occurs through social learning, and is shaped by one’s personal experiences and influences, similar to identity (Boytazis, 2012). Modeling from parents and the religious communities assists with adolescent development, however, so will influences within schools (Schwarts, 2006). In the United States public school system, spirituality must be left out of what is considered human development. Guidance counselors and teachers promote spirituality and meaning through positive character, academic excellence, and moral purpose, which can be a major support for those students who do not associate with any religious affiliation (Richmond, 2012). However, students are faced with many issues and threats within the school systems (Wiley & Berman, 2013), and not all situations are positive social learning environments. Influences on development can range from family, school, micro-communities that one is involved in, as well as macro-communities, such as values, beliefs and cultural views (Boytazis, 2012).

A spiritual based framework can provide the structure needed that can relate to social and historical views as well as model the attitudes and behaviors that is expected of the individual. Results of the study by Furrow et al. (2004) even show that youth were more likely to report purpose and meaning in their lives when they associated with a religious identity.

However, with increased research in the field of spiritual development, very little has focused on adolescence. From 1990 to 2002, less than 1% of literature focused on youth, but many psychology development theories and positive youth frameworks have been developing over the past 20 years. From that literature, youth mature their spirit as
part of an exploration in the world and within themselves. One scholar commented that it was “about orienting life toward what most vitally mattered. It is about fostering richer, deeper, fuller life by carefully attending to its spirit” (Benson et al., 2012, p.479). This forces people to develop by not just looking at themselves, but who they are within the bigger picture (Benson et al., 2012). Horney said, “…man, by his very nature and of his accord, strives toward self-realization, and that his set of values evolves from such striving” (1950, p.15). The search to grow compels all people to fill the holes missing in their lives.

In the lives of youth today, identity, and issues related to identity are emerging and becoming popular in the literature as well as society (Beaumont and & Scammel, 2013; Benson et al. 2012; MacDonald, 2009). Although, studies that relate identity to spirituality are rare (Beaumont & Scammell, 2013), significant correlations can be made while examining the benefits of a stable identity and the benefits of a religious or spiritual identity, suggesting a link between those with committed religious identities and strong sense of self (Marsh & Bobilya, 2013; Beaumont and & Scammel, 2013; Boytasiz, 2012; Benson et al. 2012). However, relating that literature to implications in religious organization has not been explored (Bobilya et al., 2011; Heintzman & Mannell, 2002).

Through the literature developed in spiritually focused wilderness programs, results find spirituality, self-confidence, self-efficacy, and many other positive aspects increase during the course of the program (Marsh & Bobilya, 2013; Bobilya et al., 2011), since these programs are not used in religious setting and spiritual development is
in desperate need for youth ministry (Benson & Roehlkepartain, 2008); could these
development issues be addressed through a recreation or adventure experience?

Therefore the purpose of this paper is to examine the role that recreation plays in
the development of adolescents in a religious organization; and if spiritually focused
recreation programs can address any of the identity related conflicts that arise in the
lives of these youth.

**Definition of Terms**

**Spirituality:**

“The intrinsic human capacity for self-transcendence in which the individual
participates in the sacred-something greater than the self” (Boyatzis, 2012, p.152).

**Identity issues:**

“When the focus of clinical attention is uncertain about multiple issues relating
to identity such as long-term goals, career choices, friendship patterns, sexual orientation
and behavior, moral values, and group loyalties” (American Psychiatric Association,
2000, p.685).

**Spiritual functions of recreation/spiritually focused recreation:**

“Ways in which people’s recreation maintains, enhances, or even inhibits their
spiritual well-being” [adapted from (Heintzman & Mannell, 2003, p.208)].

**Code:**

“Most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summarize,
salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or
visual data” (Saldaña, 2013, p.3).
Provisional Coding:

“beginning with a ‘start list’ of researcher-generated codes based on what preparatory investigation suggests might appear in the data before they are analyzed” (Saldaña, 2013, p.141).

Structural coding:

“Applies to a content-based or conceptual phase representing a topic of inquiry to a segment of data that relates to a specific research questions see to frame the interview” (Saldaña, 2013, p.84).

Holistic Coding:

“a single code to each large unit of data in the corpus to capture a sense of the overall contents and the possible categories that may develop” (Saldaña, 2013, p.141).

In-vivo coding:

“…refers to a word or a short phrase from the actual language found in the qualitative data record, ‘the terms used for [participants] themselves’” (Saldaña, 2013, p.91).
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Identity

As humans travel through each stage of life, they develop an identity. Erik Erikson (1968) identified 8 stages of identity development to accompany each stage of life. During each stage the individual must find a balance between the factors that influence development. The first stage is infancy, the infant must navigate through a cycle of trust verses mistrust between the parent and child. The second stage is during the toddler stage, where autonomy verses shame and doubt are present. The child will begin to experiment with behaviors and be able to make personal choices. The third stage is early childhood and initiative verses guilt, a child will be more likely to test the boundaries of the family and the types of behaviors that are acceptable (Erikson, 1968). The child also becomes more aware of the self, such as body image and characteristics (Baumeister, 1986). The fourth stage is late childhood and industry verses inferiority (Erikson, 1968). In this stage children learn societal norms and individuals begin to develop a sense of an inner self (Baumeister, 1986). The fifth stage is adolescents and identity verses role confusion. At this stage those previous thoughts of self and values are challenged and adolescents begin to explore different aspects of the self. The sixth stage is young adulthood and intimacy verses isolation, where young adults can continue in their identities or their search, or create a new identity within marriage and children. However, knowing that some young adults have not achieved their desired identity they could avoid relationships and become more isolated. The seventh stage as adults, is generativist verses stagnation, this is the longest stage. This stage speaks to the need to
care for younger generations, wither through children or mentoring youth in some way. Older adults is integrity verses despair, a period of reflection of the life that the individual has lived. As with all stages successful competition depends upon balanced navigation of each stage (Erikson, 1968); balance will lead to less distress and despair (Furrow et al., 2004; Baumeister, 1986).

Human beings actively seek to understand the world around them and who they are within that world, or their identity (Haggard & Williams, 1992). Of the three fields that study identity and identity theory all agree that identity is an ongoing, social process (Deaux & Burke, 2010; Burke & Stets, 2009). Culturally shared meanings of roles and identities create the standard for individuals. For someone to establish an identity for the self, that identity or role needs to be verified by others. The characteristics shown when associating with an identity help define the self to that individual and to others (Deaux & Burke, 2010; Baumesiter, 1986). “These characteristics are often seen as actively protected or defended in a self-verification process, which gives rise to feelings of self-worth, efficacy, esteem and authenticity” (Deaux & Burke, 2010, p.317). Self-verification is accomplished through commitment to the identity and through behaviors exhibited by the individual (Deaux & Burke, 2010).

Identities or roles that someone associates with will be placed in a hierarchy system. The more important a role is, the higher it will be in the hierarchy and the more commitment or salience that will be exhibited. Within the Identity Theory conception of Commitment, or a person’s commitment to the identity, there are two dimensions. The first is interactional commitment, or extensiveness, which comes from the individuals
that you spend the most time around. Some examples would be family, or friends that a person would see often, and possibly religious organizations, athletics, or other regular social fraternization (Morris, 2013, Burke & Stets, 2009).

The second is affective commitment, or intensiveness. Within a person’s social groups, there are some things or characteristics that one believes are more important than others. The amount of importance or commitment determines if the identity will continue or not after the social situation. For example, going to an art museum, then taking a class or activity that could lead to more artistic identity (Morris, 2013, Burke & Stets, 2009).

In a recent study by Walker and Lynn (2013) they proposed that the Identity Theory Conceptions of Commitment needed to be extended, so that the link between social networks and the self could be researched further. With identity being closely connected to social situations and verifications, the researchers believed it safe to assume that social personal network of a person to be hierarchically ranked similar to the system of self (Walker & Lynn, 2013). The larger the drive for success and accomplishment an individual had to a role, the more salient the role would be in the individual’s life (Walker & Lynn, 2013). This would suggest that the larger the role of an individual, the more committed they were the to identity, the more verification to that committed identity, the more meaning and purpose that would be present in the individual’s life (Walker & Lynn, 2013; Deaux & Burke, 2010; Burke and Stets, 2009). However, because the study used cross-sectional data, direction of causality could not be
established. Results showed that salience was not determined by social hierarchy, no matter the amount of time or people within a group or role (Walker & Lynn, 2013).

Part of the reason that this study’s hypothesis was not supported is because individuals, especially in today’s society, associate with multiple identities (Burke & Stets, 2009; Baumeister, 1986). People can display different identities because they occupy different roles (Burke & States, 2009). When people take part in an activity, such as career, hobby, leisure, or choosing a spouse, it will help define that individual in society. Baumeister explains,

...there are so many possible combinations that one’s own combination seems unique among one’s acquaintances. There are millions of clerks, millions of joggers, and millions of guitar players…With other joggers, one is the guitar player; among musicians, one is the clerk (the one with the “daytime job”); at work, one is know as the jogger or guitarist (1986, p.138).

We have as many selves as we do people that we interact. Even though we may use the term identities, the meaning still takes the same form. In a very complex society, like America, the number of possible identities could be in the thousands (Burke & Stets, 2009).

Similar to the roles that individuals have, identities will placed in a hierarchy system based off the identity’s importance to the self (Morris, 2013; Burke & Stets, 2009). When a lower identity has found an important characteristic, such as a shared meaning in a common social setting, the lower identity will associate with the characteristic within the boundaries set by the higher identity (Burke & Stets, 2009).
Many times, more than one higher identity will influence the lower identity. It is possible for more than one high-status identity to contribute at the same time “…each controlling a different set of meanings in the situation, had their outputs combines into a single standard for a lower-level identity that controlled the negotiation behavior” (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 136). All higher identities “…act to measure the difference between perceived meanings and those meanings held in the identity standards” (Burke & Stets, 2009, p.136). This implies that the higher identities are what people search to strengthen or validate more than strengthening the lower identities (Burke & Stets, 2009).

In a recent study by Morris (2013), exploration of salience and identities were examined. Participants used self-reported identities as part of a behavioral choice investigation. Morris (2013) hypothesized that the more important the identity to the self, the more salient that identity would be to the individual. When salience was challenged participants would associate with the identity they viewed as most important. These results supported the hypothesis of hierarchy in the system of the self (Morris, 2013).

Adolescents and Identity

Within the stage of identity development adolescences is the time categorized as identity verses role confusion (Erikson, 1968), where “the young person struggles to select the roles, goals, and values that can offer him or her a sense of direction and purpose in life” (Wiley & Berman, 2013, p.1300). This time can cause distress for teens, and this distress can continue into young adulthood (Wiley & Berman, 2013). On
top of the task of finding balance during adolescence The Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System conducted by the Center for Disease Control evaluated high school students across the U.S. and found that hurdles were increasing (“Adolescent and School Health”, 2012). They found that 17% of females and 23% of males have consumed alcohol before the age of 13. Thirty-two percent of females and 45% of males have tried marijuana in their high school career. About 14% of total high school students have tried cocaine, and about 16% have reported using ecstasy. Finally, almost half of male and female students reported having sexual intercourse (“Adolescent and School Health”, 2012).

According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders Fifth Edition Text Revision (DSM-V-TR) identity problems are defined as “when the focus of clinical attention is uncertain about multiple issues relating to identity such as long-term goals, career choices, friendship patterns, sexual orientation and behavior, moral values, and group loyalties” (American Psychiatric Association, 2000, p.685). These problems are related to increased behavioral problems, decreased ability to complete developmental tasks and increase stress (Wiley & Berman, 2013).

In a study by Best (2011) she explored identity formation, and how identity becomes meaningful to adolescents. Aspects of identity are shaped through academic status and through organizations that one is involved (Best, 2011). She noted that identities are created through established symbols (appearance, clothes, style, material objects), practices and ritual enactments (activities, hobbies, behaviors, beliefs) and sites (social media, popular leisure places, school social events, etc.) (Best, 2011). Some
sociologists have noted that the social identities constructed in the school reflect the inequalities of individuals (Best, 2011). However, no matter how influential this stage is, defining oneself is important and can bring many positive benefits should one focus on the self instead of another social identity. Identity formation in adolescence lays the foundation for adulthood (MacDonald, 2009; Keisling et al, 2006), and making the right choices to move toward a better future is crucial.

In a study by Wiley and Berman (2013) that investigated identity related psychological problems, the hypothesis that individuals with a committed identity might experience fewer psychological issues was supported, which has also been supported in previous research (Thoits, 2012; Furrow et al., 2004). Some of the benefits in psychological health include but are not limited to higher mental well-being, adjustment, and emotional stability (Wiley & Berman, 2013). Better mental and physical health was also associated with committed or salient identity (Wiley, & Berman, 2013; Thoits, 2012; Furrow et al., 2004).

Other studies have suggested that commitment to an identity can provide meaning (Beaumont & Scammell, 2013; Richmond, 2012; Thoits, 2012; Deaux and Burke, 2010; Furrow et al., 2004). This search for meaning has been defined as “the strength, intensity, and activity of people's desires and efforts to establish and/or augment their understanding of the meaning, significance, and purpose of their lives” (Beaumont & Scammell, 2012, p.354). Meaning, purpose, and fulfillment have been shown to be associated with salience (Beaumont & Scammel, 2013; Richmond, 2012; Thoits, 2012; Deaux and Burke, 2010; Furrow et al.,2004).
As adolescents develop the inner self, the more meaning and purpose they will find in their lives (Beaumont & Scammel, 2012). The more meaning and purpose, the less likely they will be to associate with negative factors that could influence the self (Boytazis, 2012). By developing the self and giving the adolescent the framework to make decisions, they are better prepared to make choices and handle problems. Benson et al. (2012) argued that “among the most interesting and impactful human capacities are the lifelong pursuit of meaning, purpose, connectedness, and self-transcendence….This dynamic, lifelong ‘work’ is as psychologically and socially compelling as any other dimension of human development” (p.482).

**Identity and Spirituality/Religiosity**

Studies on spirituality and religion have been on the rise for the past few years but literature relating spirituality to identity is lacking (Beaumont & Scammell, 2012). One reason for this is because spirituality is difficult to define, as well as separate from religion. Defining spirituality in scientific terms is not easy and very little progress has been made in the past (MacDonald, 2009). Other issues and explorations of whether spirituality is real, as it pertains to things higher than the self (MacDonald, 2009) have also been overlooked in literature.

Within the research, spirituality can be divided into two groups. The first is theistic, founded on the belief of existence of a single higher being, and the second existential, founded in the belief that spiritual experiences are the mind making connections and creating meaning from the experience (MacDonald, 2009). The existential side of spirituality looks for explanation in reality and how it plays a role in
the human mind, where theistic finds meaning though God in those experiences. Even though spirituality is seen as a common human trait (Benson et al., 2012), culturally it is seen as a basis for moral behavior (Furrow et al., 2004; Richmond, 2012). However, as MacDonald argues, many cases support that spirituality can be reasonably studied through brain functioning and is supported by science (MacDonald, 2009). However, the issue of spiritual reality is not discussed in this paper.

Defining spirituality outside of religion has also been a concern. Religion was defined as the “search for significance in ways related to the sacred” (Benson et al., 2012, p. 474). However, religion was also defined as beliefs and principles that were connected to a religious institution, where as spirituality was viewed as a personal connection to something higher, or sacred (MacDonald, 2009). In a national survey most Americans describe spirituality in personal terms, and religiousness as institutional belief that included personal aspects (Marler & Hadaway, 2002). From the many surveys conducted, it seemed that both terms were viewed as interchangeable and mutually exclusive, and most Americans view themselves as both religious and spiritual (Marler & Hadaway, 2002).

Spirituality can be defined as,

… the intrinsic human capacity for self-transcendence in which the individual participates in the sacred-something greater than the self. It propels the search for connectedness, meaning, purpose, and ethical responsibility. It is experienced, formed, shaped, and expressed through a wide range of religious
narratives, beliefs, and practices, and is shaped by many influences in family, community, society, culture, and nature (Boytazis, 2012, pp.152-153).

This definition not only encompasses the traditional aspects of religion and the church, but also the unconventional ways that individuals worship and meet their needs spiritually (Benson et al., 2012; Mahoney & Krumrei, 2012; MacDonald, 2009, Marler & Hadaway, 2002). For the purpose of this paper, spirituality will be used as a term relating the individual and their search or connection to a greater purpose, meaning in life, and/or a relationship to a higher sense of self, higher being, or God. Religion and/or religiosity will refer to the organized system of beliefs and principles that provide the framework for direction in life. Both terms remain separate, but concepts of each are included when developing a religious or spiritual identity. Both terms and the debate to define them, is still ongoing (Boytazis, 2012; Marler & Hadaway, 2002).

Most studies that examine religion and spirituality examine them separately. One such study by Richmond (2012) examined the connection between spirituality and the family. The issue of spirituality was viewed and compared against what it is not, such as separatist and materialistic views, and it’s relation to the family, since the definition to define this term is still under debate. The values between each concept were defined and spirituality was seen as a “family value that included a sense of community and connectedness” (Richmond, 2012, p.460). Results showed that families that maintained a sense of hope and appreciation as well as meaning and purpose, that youth were more likely to deal with life events and handle challenging situations (Richmond, 2012).
Another study viewed religion and its role in youth development (Furrow et al., 2004). Findings suggested that religion played a large role in unifying moral and ethic identities. Commitment to those beliefs gave the foundations for the morals that youth displayed. Individuals who reported meaning and worth in their lives used self-descriptors that have been associated with religious identities. The study also suggested that individuals who build identity within the framework that religion offers, are more likely to encourage better well-being for the self and greater societal good (Furrow et al., 2004).

Boytazis (2012) found that higher spirituality correlated with better mental health, similar to previous research (Furrow et al., 2004; Thoits, 2012;). Other benefits included decreased anxiety in students that were considered at-risk, lower depression rates, lower substance use and higher self-esteem (Boytazis, 2012). One of the more interesting results found in this study was that the less religiosity or spirituality a person showed over time, the more the individual was to partake in the use of substances; and the higher religiosity or spirituality a person showed over time, the more likely the individual was to partake in civil involvement (Boytazis, 2012).

A spiritual identity is most often seen as a way that the self relates to the spiritual. Meaning “…the self's existential search for ultimate meaning through an individualized understanding of the sacred” (MacDonald, 2009, p.91), and how an individual’s experience and the relationship to the divine is processed in the self. Relating to adolescents many studies are showing that, whether religion or spirituality, the benefits and concepts are important to youth (MacDonald, 2009).
In another national survey of children and adolescents, 51% said that religion/spirituality was very important to their everyday lives, (Boytazis, 2012). One-third of the same adolescents said that religion/spirituality was at least somewhat important in their lives. However, as Boyatzis (2012) states, “circling numbers on a survey…is one thing and living a life that embodies faith is quite another.” Stringer and McAvoy commented that the ways that people find meaning and purpose are no longer helpful in our society, and that spiritual development or “centering” (1992, p.13), is in desperate need for our youth in our manic society.

**Recreation and Spirituality**

Many researchers have found that people participate in adventure recreation as a way to recharge or seek out spiritual fulfillment (Stringer & McAvoy, 1992). Programs such as Outward Bound (OB), National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS), and Outdoor Adventure Education (OAE) programs have reported increase mental and health benefits, but also significant increases in personal and spiritual growth (D’Amato & Krasny, 2011). The study by D’Amato and Krasny (2011) explored the learning properties of a prolonged adventure recreation experience; and of the 23 participants that were involve with the study, all of them reported the benefits mentioned above.

Similar to spirituality and identity, leisure and its relationship to spiritual well-being is largely unexplored. However, in a study by Barnett and Weber (2009) the role of faith-based recreation was emphasized by parents. Parents enroll children and youth in religious activities to help shape their future, benefits such as:
developing his or her identity; shaping the child as a person; developing him or her into a "better" person; coming to know him/herself better and to see his/her own strengths and weaknesses; improving self-image and self-esteem; building self-confidence; self-discipline, and self-control; developing strength to handle problems; learning to set and accomplish goals; enhancing creativity; and others (Barnett & Webber, 2009, p.171)

have been reported. Other benefits that speak to the character of participants were also reported. These results can speak to generalize recreation in the literature, as well as within spirituality, “arguing that opportunities to actively explore one's identity through enjoyable activities may be one of the most important characteristics of organized recreational activities” (Barnett & Weber, 2009, p. 171).

Other faith-based recreational aspects have been explored in college bound young adults. Upon entering college, many students are confused about their faith and what religion means to them (Bobilya et al., 2011). During the study, Bobilya et al. (2011) looked at spiritually focused adventure programs and how to assist with college transition and spiritual formation. The study emphasized that spiritual development did not have to occur within a religious belief system. The results showed that in addition to helping create a community, and developing competence, both interpersonally and intrapersonally, that participants increased in spiritual development. Those areas of development included a stronger relationship and awareness of God, as well as an increased awareness of how that relationship relates to one’s faith (Bobilya et al., 2011).
Summary

As part of the human experience, most scholars agree that all humans search for purpose and meaning (Benson & Roehlkpartain, 2008). Most Americans agree that spirituality or religion is very important to them (Boytazis, 2012; Mahoney & Krumrei, 2012). When examining spirituality as part of a recreational experience people who have more experience and skills seem to look for spiritual aspects from outdoor adventure situations as a way to renew and refocus (Marsh & Bobilya, 2013). However, even for beginners, framing a recreational experience to focus on spiritual development can have significant benefits as well. Unfortunately, the use of recreation programs within religious organizations is largely undocumented within the literature (Heintzman & Mannell, 2003). Furthermore, spirituality and development is not as well understood in scientific terms as other aspects of development, and how spirituality can foster identity is largely absent from literature as well (Barnett & Weber, 2009; MacDonald, 2009; Kiesling, Sorell, Montgomery, & Colwell, 2006; Heintzman & Mannell, 2003).

As far as the role of development in youth, literature supports that identity commitment is associated with positive benefits; and it is becoming more common to look to religion and spirituality as strength for well-being (Benson et al, 2012). This paper will begin to fill the lack of literature. Since spiritually focused recreational programs have been supported to address aspects of spiritual identity, these programs can serve as tools for youth ministry to address issues. The purpose of this study is to assess adolescent’s recreational choices and their religious or spiritual identities within those activities, as well as any disconnect, or identity related issues, they might exhibit.
between the different recreational environments. The study will also explore if 
spiritually focused recreational opportunities can be used in a church setting to 
strengthen youth’s spiritual development.

**Research Involving Adolescents**

When collecting data with adolescents, collection should be precise in order to 
obtain the researcher’s desired results. A few of those points are that collection should 
be short and to the point, simple language, and the researcher should be able to provide 
different versions of their questions (Shaw et al., 2011). Within the study the researcher 
kept questions short and simple so that participants could easily understand the 
questions. In cases where participants did not understand the question, careful 
consideration was given to rephrasing in order to convey the same meaning of the 
previous question.

Another important point is to make sure that the participant’s voice is heard 
(Shaw et al., 2011), typically this is done through analysis however, within the study, the 
researcher to kept this in mind during data collection. By asking participants to 
elaborate in their answers, even if the context in which they were talking was clearly 
understood, confirming their voice in the answers helped alleviate the issues. This way 
when the data was analyzed, the possibility of taking the transcriptions out of context 
was less likely.

In order to stay focused on the end goal, the researcher should make sure that 
there are clear research questions to provide direction, that the atmosphere is 
comfortable and open so that participants feel free to express their thoughts and
emotions in their answers. Finally, the researcher should actively listen in the interviews (Shaw et al., 2011). Each of these points was very important during the interview. Each participant was assured that their answers were confidential and that it was a voluntary study. In order to make the participants feel comfortable, the researcher began with questions about the participants, learning what they like to do in their free time, and what kind of things they liked and why they liked them. Throughout this, the researcher was engaged, commenting on the answers and giving positive reinforcement to their personal opinions. By doing this it not only gave rise to the comfortable atmosphere, but also helped establish trust between the researcher and participants, in hopes of creating more truthful responses.

When reporting the results especially in qualitative research, certain answers that participants give are quoted in the last chapter to add more quality to the report. However, since consent was needed from parents or guardians, the possibility exists that parents would be able to identify individual answers in the report. Within the research steps have been taken to neutralize any identifying factors and keep confidentiality a priority.
Chapter 3: Methods

Overview

The purpose of this study is to examine the role that recreation plays in faith development within youth. From the literature review a two research questions emerged and will be addressed though this research design. The first research question addressed what role recreation has on faith development. The second research question examined if youth altered their faith in order to be more comfortable in social situations, including recreational settings.

The researcher sought approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), which approvals all researcher within the university. IRB ensures that each study adheres to federal, state, and university policy, and it is responsible for keeping studies safe and ethical for the participants and the researcher. After a detailed proposal of the study the IRB approved the study and the researcher could begin interviewing.

Respondents

Participants in the study ranged from ages thirteen to seventeen. These adolescents were involved in a religious organization and participated in other recreational or leisure activities. The participants were pooled from Fincastle Baptist Church, a rural church on the east coast in which the researcher was already a member. This church was chosen based on its willingness to participate in the study and the cooperation of the administrative staff. The willingness of the church was due, in part, to the established relationship of the researcher and the church. Being a member of the church, the staff wanted to help the researcher complete this study. Participants were
informed of the study and meetings were conducted Sunday after the regular services in order to inform parents and other potential research participants of the study. Participation goals were to recruit 8 to 10 youth to interview and should data saturation not be satisfied, other interviews could be conducted. After a short recruiting period, 12 youth expressed interest and all were interviewed.

**Study Setting**

The interviews were conducted in a neutral setting in order to reduce the influence on the participants. The interviews did not exceed a half an hour and were audio recorded for transcriptions. Upon arrival participants brought signed consent forms, and signed assent forms. They were reassured of the confidentiality of the study and that the study is completely voluntary, which is noted in the transcriptions.

**Research Design**

Since this was an exploratory study a qualitative design was appropriate in order to address the research questions. Qualitative research allows the researcher to more closely examine a participant’s feelings and beliefs. The researcher used the interview data collection method. The interview questions followed a semi-structured format, where the main questions remained unchanged and the additional probing questions to illicit more detailed or richer responses. The questions were developed from a review of the literature and from discussions with content experts. Questions were carefully worded in order to allow the desired responses to emerge naturally.
Procedures

Interviews were recorded to allow for future transcriptions. During the interview process the researcher took field notes that address the environment, participant behavior, and other physical characteristics that are not present through the audio recordings. The researcher engaged in the conversation and was sympathetic to the emotions of the participants in hopes of eliciting more meaningful responses. All of the field notes were then added to the recordings following each interview for organizational purposes in the transcription and in coding. Interviews were conducted until data saturation was reached. Upon data saturation the interviews were transcribed and the researcher became familiar with the data.

Data Analysis

After transcriptions and familiarization with the data, provisional codes were established. These codes were based off the literature review and the hypothetical results (Saldaña, 2013). The beginning of the interview supported attribute coding such as age, gender, and an activity index. The transcribed responses contained descriptive coding which focused on the research topic, in-vivo coding or word for word coding, and values coding when they emerged. All of the following were structurally coded based on the themes that emerged within the smaller subset of codes, such as in-vivo, values, and descriptive coding. The structural coding was based off the literature and previous supported research, which established the provisional codes.

Additional holistic coding (Saldaña, 2013) was also used when addressing additional themes and topics that emerged in the data. Within in the field notes of the
researcher, emotional coding addressed how the participants reacted, their perspectives and the more meaningful responses that emerged in the interviews. The field notes contain process coding, which looked at the observable actions of the participants and situation during the interviews.

**Questions**

The following are the questions that were asked during the interview. The interview was scripted in order to remain the same through out multiple interviews. Each of the main questions below are italicized are the global opened ended questions asked in the interview. The questions listed underneath each main question are additional probing questions that could have occurred during the interview.

1. So before we begin why don’t you tell me a little bit about yourself?
   For data reasons could you state your age and which school you go to? Are you involved in anything at school?
   
   What do you do in your spare time?
   
   Could you tell me more?
   
   Why is this important to you?
   
   Could you tell me why you like it?
   
   Could you tell me why you dislike it?
   
   Do you feel like you’re supported in the things that you do?

2. Would you describe your faith?
   
   Could you tell me about times when you’re comfortable in your faith?

3. Could you tell me about 3 specific times when your faith was challenged?
What kind of environments?
  What do you mean?

4. What are the biggest influences in the development of your faith?
   Any others?
   Did any of these have a greater initial impact than any others?
   Why or why not?
   Could you tell me more (about what your thinking on that)?
   Why do you feel that way?
   Any other reasons?

What role does the recreational activities in the church play in your faith?
   Could you tell me more about that?
   Why or why not?

Additional Probing Questions:
  Repeat question.
  Anything else?
  Any other reason?
  Any others?
  How do you mean?
  Could you tell me more about your thinking on that?
  Would you tell me what you have in mind?
  What do you mean?
  Why do you feel that way?
Why do you say that?

Which would be closer to the way you feel (when discussing it)?

**Trustworthiness of the Data**

The trustworthiness of the data was based off the relationship of the interviewer and the participant and how the participants acted during the process. Unfortunately, this truthfulness is something that cannot be guaranteed, and it is listed as a limitation. However, assuring the participants that their responses were confidential assisted in developing those desired responses.

To assure that the responses, transcriptions, and codes were trustworthy the data was triangulated. Aside from the primary investigator, two additional investigators that were not present for the interviewing process reviewed the transcriptions and coded the data. This helped establish similarities in the data and helped in reducing any bias that may arise in the researcher’s lens.

**Limitations of the Study**

One of the main limitations of this study is that it is a sensitive topic. Participants of this study were asked questions that dealt with their personal life, and how they interacted with other people. Being in a religious organization, participants were likely to know the difference between the answers that should and should not be said in matter of the church and religion, and it is possible that participants may not have been truthful during the interview.

Another limitation could have been the interviewer. Knowing that the interviewer is a member of the church that the participants attend, the youth may be less
inclined to tell the truth during the interview. However, being removed from the church setting and the youth group over the past six years, while attending higher education, could have been enough time to alleviate the connection.

Finally, results found from this study could be supported with the data. Additional research should be conducted to assess whether spiritually focused recreation programs could assist with the identity related issues that might arise during the interview process and analysis.
Chapter 4: Results

The results of the study were guided by the semi-structured questions and following probing questions during the interview. The questions explored aspects of faith and it’s personal meaning to the participants, as well as some of the situations youth faced. Youth’s responses to each question elicited themes based off the literature review; youth’s view of faith, comfortable environments in faith development, challenging environments in faith development, and the role of recreation in faith development. The data analysis revealed three emerging categories in each environment for faith development and relationships between the positive environments and recreation, all of the following contained some aspect of 1) the people in the environments, 2) the emotional responses to those environments, and 3) the values or beliefs present in the situations.

Participant Profile Information

For this study, youth were active in recreation and leisure activities and had been involved with a religious organization. Of the 12 individuals that participated in the study 10 of them participated in multiple sports and other individual leisure activities in their spare time, such as spending time with family and friends. Five of the 12 individuals enjoyed spending their leisure time in the outdoors, hiking, spending time on the river, or riding motorize recreational vehicles in the local area. Four of the 12 individuals commented that spending time in church, such as volunteering or attending events, was another form of leisure, and one individual spent most of their leisure time in a mentoring and nurturing role.
**Spirituality**

When asked to describe faith, youth choose terms such as trust, belief, and used exampled of commitment to the religion. These terms related to the adolescents view of their faith and its importance in their lives (Best, 2011). Six out of the 12 described faith as trust. One participants commented that it was “how much trust your could put in God”. One participant elaborated on trust stating that it was something that you’re not always sure about but it’s going to come through for you but you don’t know the details. So you just kind of have to take that leap that you know in the long run that it’s going to turn out good, but at that moment, it’s hard to see.

Three out of the 12 described faith as a belief or believing in something, another described it as trusting those beliefs. Two participants described faith as a commitment to the beliefs such as living for God, following what He says, and living their life as an example to others.

**Identity**

For spiritual and identity development youth need environments that can provide a safe and comfortable atmosphere for learning and growth to occur (insert citation). Within the interviews terms such as “encouraging” we're used to describe environments that were comfortable in faith development. On the other hand, when describing those environments that made growth and development youth described feels of confusion and potential distress when torn between identities.
Comfortable environments in faith development. The first section of the interview examined examples of when youth were comfortable in their faith. Probing questions further explored the situations, the people, and the reasons behind these responses. Youth reported environments that made them feel comfortable, people in those environments, and reason why those environments made them feel that way.

Nine out of the 12 youth reported that the church environment was supportive of faith development and many of the same youth, three of those nine, also commented that the youth group part of that. One participant noted that “when you’re at church or worshipping, you always feel comfortable, confident, overflowing.” Upon probing, youth reported that the pastors and the other Christian mentors and teachers were a large part of what created such a positive atmosphere.

Other responses suggested that the family and home environment was another place for you to grow spiritually. Many youth noted that their parents were a large part of their development both through support at home and through taking them to church. One participant noted that

…they (parents) are very good a showing us a great example of what life would look like with the Lord, but they didn’t tell us ‘you have to do this.’ They’re like ‘it’s your choice,’ but the way they live their life made it like, why wouldn’t you want to life with the Lord…

Some youth commented that either through a divorce or difference in beliefs that only one parent was supportive of their spiritual growth. Of the two individuals that
commented on that topic, both found support through other means, such as additional Christian mentors or other forms of leisure.

Friends were also noted as a strong positive environment for growth. Many of the youth expressed their close ties to their Christian friends was a large part of continuing their development. One commented that “I have a pretty good group of friends that also go to my church and we hang out a lot…we go to coffee shops or something and just like, share stuff that’s going on…kind of like accountability partners.” A few participants noted that at times their sports events could be a positive environment for growth. Youth would pray before games for safety and good attitudes, and one student commented that during travel games the youth would even read the bible and other studies together in fellowship.

In all of the above environments, participants noted that the reason they were so comfortable is because of the people. Family, friends, and Christian mentors all shared the same beliefs and understood each other. All of these factors contribute to a safe environment were one participant noted “I feel like, when I have questions about what the Lord is doing in my life or need encouragement, I feel comfortable there and just like, opening up.”

Based on the responses of why the environments made youth feel comfortable in their faith, six major themes were found. Figure 1 shows a representation of those themes. Christian mentors were found to have the highest influence on the environment, emerging in 46.5% of the data. The second highest influence was feeling connected to others in the environments, which was reported in almost 17% of the interviews.
Similar beliefs and feelings of belonging in the environments was reported 10% of the time, and feeling safe and have a positive learning environment was also reported around 8% of the time.

![Comfortable Environments in Faith Development](image)

**Figure 1:** Comfortable environments in faith development can lead to identity verification in adolescents.

When asked about the biggest influence throughout the comfortable environments for their faith development, almost half of the participants said that their parents and Christian mentors, such as pastors, contributed more than others. Others noted that the youth group was a great place to develop. “The pastor can preach to kids in the same age group…you can relate a lot better, and you get to be with friends, and you get to play games to help you draw closer and fellowship.” One participant noted that in the youth group “one night we had an acoustic worship set and it was really like, touching…it just kind of moved me, like to think about everything and because it was just so peaceful.”
Challenging environments in faith development. When examining the challenging environments in youth’s faith development, six situations emerged in the data. Figure 2 shows a representation of that data. Forty-one percent of participants said that people at school and even people at school related sports created challenging situations. Other environments with friends and peer pressure when hanging out were reported 20% of the time. One participant stated that work created a challenging, and another stated that social media had become difficult with recent news and trends.

![Challenging Environments in Faith Development](image)

Figure 2: Challenging environments in faith development can create identity related issues.

The second section of the interview examined further examined the situations where youth where challenged in their faith. Additional probing questions looked into some of the emotional responses elicited in these situations. All of the challenging environments were due to different beliefs of the other individuals in those situations. Having the highest response youth reported that in school many of those differences were in regards to drugs, language choices, co-ed relationships and the goals of those
relationships. When faced with these situations youth stated that they could feel like the outcast. One participant noted, “a lot of them would talk about subjects that felt very differently about—sometimes, I felt intimidated, like I was the only one that thinks this way about something.”

Other participants described situations where friends did not maintain the same commitment to their faith, or didn’t show that they cared about their faith, could have an impact on faith development if not kept in check. One participant stated that “I try to tell them no, peer pressure, you know, and most of the time it doesn’t happen.” These situations arise both in school and when out with friends and can create a difficult choices for youth of faith. One participant openly shared an experience about that struggle.

I would say going into high school from middle school. At that point, my friends were in my mind, I thought they were following a good path and they understand what it’s going to be like being Christian in high school. But as soon as we got to high school everything changed and I found myself surrounded. A lot of my best friends were not living the life I was living and I felt kind of like alone, and it was really hard to stay on the right path when they were constantly around me. So, I think at that point, I decided not to totally remove myself, but I wasn’t putting myself in places where I was going to be emotionally influenced by them.

Three participants commented that there school sports were also challenging for the different beliefs of individuals on the team. One such youth commented that many
of her friends on the team didn’t understand why she would miss practices for church, and that at times it could cause her to doubt if she was doing the right thing.

Other situations that create difficult environments for faith development are through common situations in life, such as bad days, family issues and tragedies. Many youth reported that “when things go wrong,” it can make you question and doubt, creating thoughts such as “why is God doing this to me.” However, many youth reported back to faith and trust and knowing that they have mentors to turn to in these times to gain a different perspective.

Other situations, like witnessing to others, can create challenges. Many youth spoke of bullies in schools and how when trying to witness that kids can be mean, refuse to listen and walk away. In other environments with peers, one youth stated that it’s hard not to be confrontational, but remembering that most of them haven’t had those good examples in their lives can help, and that listening and trying to set that example is all that can be done at times. One participant stated that sticking to those values could be hard, “because I grew up in a Christian home, I’m used to it and they’re not and it kind of makes me feel for them. It makes me feel like they’d be a lot happier with Jesus.”

Witnessing to others who need help in times of trial can also be challenging when stepping up to make a difference. One participant shared an experience where he felt the need to start a fundraiser and raise money for a fellow student who was diagnosed with cancer. “It was a big decision.” Deciding to step up and bring an event
idea to the principle of the school and to the family, was a difficult choice for one youth who was passionate about showing people that someone cares.

**Recreation and Spirituality**

One of the more powerful aspects of recreation that facilitates change is through the rest and relaxation that occurs (instead citation in). Furthermore, the study by Barnett and Weber reported that parents use recreation in a religious environment to facilitate the values and moral present in the religious home (2013). The additional benefits reported we also seen in studies that used adventure education to help adolescents transition into young adulthood and supported through additional studies about the benefits of recreation (Barnett & Weber, 2013; Bobilya et al., 2011; D’Amato & Krasny, 2011).

**The role of recreation in faith development.** The final section of the interview addressed how recreation affects faith development. Youth were asked about how to the recreational opportunities offered by the church affected them, and if any aspects of sports affected that development. Students commented that the recreational opportunities provided a different environment from the normal church setting. This fun and more open setting not only allowed them to relax, but also created an environment to help them witness to friends. “You get to do fun things and interact with other people, and it makes other people want to come that normally wouldn’t.” This welcoming and interactional atmosphere was noted by other participants as well; “it definitely allows myself to kind of relax but I’m also surrounded by people that are encouraging, so I can get myself together again, I guess, and kind of get poured into.”
Two other participants stated that their sports activities helped influence their development through prayers and bible studies that the teams will do together. When looking at sports based camps through a church or similar organization one student stated that “I feel like it helps me progress and to make my relationship with God stronger, because I’m free to talk and express my feelings about my faith…because I can’t really do that in school sports.” Another student noted that sport camps that not only focused on God but also helped in skill development was a large influence in their faith. This environment allowed the youth to grow and develop their relationship with God, related to speakers who shared common interests, and work with mentors who could not only teach them about their faith but also help them learn skills of their sport.
Chapter 5: Summary

This study provided insight to youth and how recreation in religious setting could contribute to their spiritual development. The results may be considered meaningful to faith-based institutions and have the potential to provide opportunities for identity exploration, reflection, and commitment to the ideological, social, and spiritual formations of faith. Furthermore, the environment that youth ministry can provide can offer a way to explore the relationship of the self and the sacred, build a faith-based community, and allow youth to transcend their daily issues to nurture their spiritual development (Keisling et al., 2006). When exploring those environments for growth in a recreational setting youth would be able to discover aspects about themselves they never knew and affirm positive views of self, others, and God (Heintzman & Manell, 2003).

Spirituality and Youth’s View of Faith

How youth view their faith shapes the view of self, which affects their decision and choices, which in turn will either affirm or reject that identity (Burke & Stets, 2009). Based off the results three out of the twelve youth reported that they viewed faith as a belief, which suggests that this view is founded in the religious framework. According to Boytasiz, religiosity consisted of four variables that all assess to how individuals relate to those beliefs and how they feel about those beliefs. Having little emotional response to faith and development of faith, as highlighted in one interview, faith was seen less personal and more of a foundation. However, as most interviews suggest belief and trust in those beliefs, create more of a personalized experienced, which as
research suggests leads to spirituality (Benson et al., 2012; Boytasiz, 2012; MacDonald, 2009; Marler & Hadaway, 2002).

Seventy-five percent of the participants that interviewed described faith in ways that suggest emotional investment in that faith, terms such as trust, commitment to the beliefs, and following what God commands. This suggests that not only are youth viewing their faith in terms of spirituality but they are also growing and developing a relationship to the sacred. Boytasiz (2012) states that “spiritual development proceeds from intuitive understanding to increasingly reflective thought…thus,…it arises not from mere acquisition of knowledge about the transcendent but from increasingly meaningful and organized experiential connections of the self to…the ‘something more’” (p.153). In order to further this development in the youth interviewed, and foster it in others, environments need to be created that can lead to the desired outcomes.

Identity Verification

Through the interviews three main themes were occurred, the people involved, the emotional responses, and the values and beliefs present in the situations, which create the environments for faith development. Youth reported feeling safe, connected, and a sense of belonging because of the church, the church family, and youth group. These essential elements in youth ministry can assist in “helping them (youth) name and respond to the power of God’s presence in their everyday lives” (Hryniuk, 2006, p.147). This is done by not only creating an experience, but by fostering a way of life. As participants noted the youth group and the atmosphere gave them a place for support and self-reflection, which as research suggests, can lead to a deeper connection in their
relationship with God (Beaumont & Scammell, 2012; Boytaszis, 2012; MacDonald, 2009;).

Youth reported that the biggest influence on these environments were their Christian mentors. In the interviews, youth stated these mentors such as parents, pastors, Sunday school teachers, and even friends that encouraged the participants to grow in their faith played a large role in that development. Most reported that parents were even more influential because of their example and through taking them to the church. However, as the research supports, parents are essential to the beginning of faith development, but is not enough to sustain that growth (Schwarts, 2006). Teens who had developed a strong faith not only had parents who shared the same beliefs, but close friendships.

The relationship with Christian friends becomes, then, not only useful to the adolescent as a place to be comfortable with shared beliefs, but also a forum that legitimates the adolescent’s own search for individual belief and commitment that was started many years earlier within the context of the parent-child relationship (Schwarts, 2006, p.323).

Through these environments and connections with people, youth can affirm their commitment to that religious identity as affective commitment or intensiveness. Intensiveness refers to the importance of the relationships to the individual’s identity (Morris, 2013), and as supported by Walker and Lynn (2013), the number of individuals in the role based group did not seem to have an affect on the commitment, meaning that
even a small group of friends could have a huge impact on youth based on how important they were to the individual, which was also present in the data.

The friends and environments lead to a stable view of the self, which in turn gives youth a deeper relationship to God, as well as the positive mental and emotional support in those times of stress and identity confusion (Hryniuk, 2006; Keisling et al., 2012; MacDonald, 2012;). Feelings reported by most participants suggested more stable views of the self, such as a sense of connection and belonging to those environments. Without these concepts, youth ministry can find it hard to reach those youth who struggle.

Identity Issues

Many participants reported that at school and when spending time with friends that held different beliefs, it created difficult environments for faith. Friends and peer pressure were hard to overcome and could create identity despair in friendship patterns according to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th edition (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). As the youth reported “you try to tell them no…but it doesn’t always happen,” the need to belong in each social situation, a basic human behavioral trait, creates this internal conflict (Haggard & Williams, 1992), and feelings of doubt, and becoming the outcast can elevate this confusion (Burke & Stets, 2009).

One such participant described the struggles of a challenging situation. Before reflecting on the effect this environment was having in the participant’s life and stepping
back to remove themselves from the environment, they reported on the emotional toll it took.

I definitely felt really lonely and really exhausted because I was constantly trying to pour into them…I didn’t have these best friends pouring into me. So I kind of felt like I was giving a lot of myself to them and trying to be there for them, but I didn’t have those other people, on the other side of me, encouraging me at that time. So I guess I just felt discouraged and lonely.

Horney (1950) accurately summarizes these types of environments and how they can affect individuals if not acknowledged by the person involved.

…living in a competitive society, and feeling at the bottom-as he does-isolated…, he can only develop and urgent need to lift himself…ways to cope with others has forced him to override his genuine feelings, wishes, and thoughts…his feelings and wishes thus cease to be determining factors; he is no longer, so to speak, the driver, but is driven (p.21).

By understanding how important the need to belong, youth ministry can be that driving factor to create these feelings in a positive environment and the connections that individuals seek.

**Recreation and Spirituality**

Many youth reported that the recreational opportunities that the youth group has to offer help them to relax and recharge outside of the normal experience of church. Furthermore, these environments allow youth to connect with individuals who hold the same values and beliefs, which strengthen those ties and relationships. These
recreational and adventure opportunities are educational or therapeutic programs that can foster interpersonal and intrapersonal growth in participants that use elements of action and reflection. Research has shown that along with building a community and allowing self-reflection, that the skills learned from these environments can transfer into everyday lives (Bobilya & Akey, 2002). By giving participants a chance to step outside of their comfort zones and challenge themselves, growth and development through a spiritual lens can act as the catalyst missing in religious recreation. The most influential aspect of these types of programs is the community that was built and how the adventure opportunities helped foster those meaningful relationships, which correlated with the data in the interviews.

Bobilya et al. (2011) found spiritual experiences in recreation allowed students to develop their relationship to God because of the characteristics of these recreation and adventure opportunities. Some of these same characteristics, such as interpersonal growth, was present in the data, suggesting that should youth invest in spiritually focused recreational opportunities the potential for faith development is higher than through traditional church activities alone, based off current research (Barnett & Weber, 2009; Bobilya et al, 2011; Bobilya & Akey, 2002).

Recommendations and Future Research

Results support that spiritually focused recreation can have a huge impact on youth through growing their close social ties, allowing them a chance to recharge and restore, providing a safe environment for reflection, and connection with God through deeper spiritual development. Opportunities such as adventure recreation would allow
youth ministry a chance to reach youth by giving them the chance to willingly step into an environment of growth and impact, as well as create additional opportunities to belong.

Further research studies should be conducted assessing if these spiritually focused adventure opportunities provide the environment needed for significant growth, and how youth view these opportunities. The study should also examine youth behavior immediately after the study, as well as a follow up assessment after a set amount of time.
References


Appendix A: Institutional Review Board Approval

The following research study has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board at Ohio University for the period listed below. This review was conducted through an expedited review procedure as defined in the federal regulations as Category(ies):

7 0 0

Project Title: Faith Development in Youth Recreation in Religious Organizations

Primary Investigator: Sharron Smith
Co-Investigator(s): Krisanna Machtmes
Andrew Szolosi

Faculty Advisor: Beth Vanderveer
Department: Recreation and Sport Pedagogy

Office of Research Compliance Staff
Rebecca Cate, AAB, CIP
Shelly Rex, BS
Robin Stack, CIP

Approval Date: 6/19/15
Expiration Date: 6/18/16

This approval is valid until the expiration date listed above. If you wish to continue beyond the expiration date, you must submit a periodic review application and obtain approval prior to continuation.

The approval remains in effect provided the study is conducted exactly as described in your approved application. Any additions or modifications to the project must be reviewed and approved by the IRB (as an amendment) prior to implementation.

IRB approval does not supersede other regulatory requirements, such as HIPAA, FERPA, PPRA, etc.

Adverse events/unanticipated problems must be reported to the IRB promptly.