

ABSTRACT

GRACE THAT GOES BEFORE: JOHN WESLEY'S DOCTRINE OF PREVENIENT GRACE AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE FOR YOUTH MINISTRY

by

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Student ministry has advanced in many ways over the past two decades. There are more theological degrees that focus on youth ministry and there are more theologically trained youth ministers than ever before. However, recent research shows that the church is failing in its strategies to disciple young people:

- The majority of teenagers who have spent years attending church activities have not integrated their faith into who they are and how they live (Barna 1).
- Congregations and communities of faith in the United States are failing in religiously engaging and educating youth. Most young people have a view of God that is not consistent with the Scriptures (Smith and Denton 7-8).
- Emerging adults' religious beliefs have little connection to their religious training in childhood and adolescence (Arnett 2).
- The levels of disconnection among those in their twenties suggest that youth ministry fails too often at discipleship and spiritual formation. The discipleship they receive in their youth ministries is not staying with them once they leave for college (Kinnaman and Lyons 1).

This study challenges youth leaders to rethink their approach to youth ministry based on John Wesley's theology of prevenient grace. The challenges facing youth ministry and an understanding of Wesley's prevenient grace were garnered from the literature

review. The information from the literature was then taught and discussed during a series of workshops with the youth leaders at Frazer United Methodist Church. The youth leaders next took what they learned in their workshops and applied them to their ministry with students. Employing a pre- and post-youth ministry questionnaire, as well as two focus group interviews, the combined data showed the effectiveness of a youth leader workshop on John Wesley's view of prevenient grace and how it might shape the discipleship of students. The findings suggest that the workshop helped the youth leaders better see the connection between theology and youth ministry and changed the way youth leaders see and disciple to students.

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JOHN WESLEY'S DOCTRINE OF PREVENIENT GRACE AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE
FOR YOUTH MINISTRY

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by

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CHAPTER 1

Overview of the Chapter

Chapter One provides the framework for understanding John Wesley's theology of prevenient grace and its potential impact for the youth ministry at Frazer United Methodist Church. The researcher provides a rationale for the project based on personal ministry experience and supported by research. Included in the overview of the research project is the purpose statement, statement of the problem, information about the participants, literature review themes, and the definition of key terms.

Personal Introduction

"And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?'

Then I said, 'Here am I! Send me!'" (*New Living Translation*, Isaiah 6:8).

The calling to ministry comes in a variety of ways and through many different means. The majority of people do not hear an audible voice like Isaiah. Many people start by volunteering and fall in love with the work. Others simply see the needs of people and feel the desire to help them. Some individuals feel this calling through the words of a preacher or in a time of prayer. Yet still others, including this researcher, are spoken to through God's Word. One night I read this verse from Judges 2:10: "After that generation died, another generation grew up who did not acknowledge the Lord or remember the mighty things he had done." I knew then that God wanted me to do my part in bringing up a generation that does know the Lord. I've been involved in student ministry for over almost eighteen years now. I have loved working with students and their families.

However, one sad part of student ministry is that the latest research shows that churches and student ministries are largely failing in our attempts to disciple young people. In addition, youth ministry has become more difficult now that we live in a post-Christian society. Families attend church less frequently, and, therefore, more and more teenagers have never been to church as children. Church attendance continues to decrease in mainline churches, including my own denomination the United Methodist Church. The struggles for youth workers certainly include outward circumstances and cultural issues. However, I believe part of our problem is theological, and here is where we need to explore John Wesley's doctrine of prevenient grace.

I remember attending college and reading about prevenient grace for the first time. Prevenient grace means God loved us long before we loved Him. God has been working in our lives long before we ever gave Him two thoughts. It is by God's grace we are saved because it is God's prior love that leads us to repentance. "God shows his love for us, because while we were still sinners Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). There is a grace that comes before our own response or movements. Prevenient grace is proof that God's love is not based on our performance or our prior actions. God's love is always first. These beautiful truths truly changed my life and have shaped my own thinking about ministry. I was able to look back on my own life and see how God was working in my life long before I ever thought about God. God was working for my good even in the midst of my stubborn rebellion.

I truly believe a robust understanding of prevenient grace can transform the lives of youth leaders. I believe the doctrine can make us increasingly grateful and less cynical.

I believe it can transform the way we see young people and the way we understand ministry. More importantly, I believe it can equip youth leaders in their goal to disciple young people. In recent years there have been a variety of writings on theology and youth ministry. *The Theological Turn in Youth Ministry* by Andrew Root and Kenda Creasy Dean and *Foundations for Youth Ministry* by Dean Borgam are two resources among several that have helped connect theology with the practice of youth ministry. This project hopes to make a similar contribution. The motivation for this project was twofold: a desire to glorify God and a passion for helping youth leaders. I offer this research about God's prevenient grace with the hope that the church will be strengthened in its pursuit to disciple young people and glorify God.

Statement of the Problem

The latest research shows that current models for youth ministry are not effective in reaching and disciplining young people. Results from the National Study of Youth and Religion published in 2009 show an approximate 30% drop in weekly religious attendance across multiple Protestant denominations (Snell and Smith 213-214). Many teenagers no longer grow up in church as society becomes increasingly secular. There is a great need to equip youth leaders theologically in order to disciple young people more effectively. Crafting ministries that convey God's prevenient grace is critically important in reaching young people in this post-Christian society.

Most youth ministry books are practical how-to-do youth ministry resources. While these books are much needed, there is also a need for resources that equip youth workers in how-to-think about youth ministry. Faulty thinking leads to faulty practice, which causes a variety of issues for youth leaders.

Another issue in youth ministry is that most ministries and programs of the local church are geared toward people already in the church. In Alabama (the Bible belt) most ministries assume everyone is already “saved.” However, society has become increasingly post-Christian and therefore youth ministries need to rethink how to minister in a culture where most young people no longer grow up in church. Youth ministries need programs that focus on discipleship (sanctifying grace); however, youth ministries also need to think about programs that connect with young people who have little understanding of God or the church (prevenient grace).

Purpose of the Project

The purpose of the research was to evaluate workshops on John Wesley’s theology of prevenient grace and their impact on the ministry of the youth leaders at Frazer United Methodist Church.

Research Questions

In order to understand how a theology of prevenient grace can inform and strengthen youth leaders and their youth ministries, one must begin with studying John Wesley’s view of prevenient grace. The next step is to evaluate how workshops on prevenient grace could impact youth leaders and their understanding of ministry. Two researcher-designed instruments collected data for the project. The first instrument was a pre- and post-workshop questionnaire and the second instrument was a set of focus group interviews. The same questionnaire was used after the workshop to see if the priorities and confidence of the youth workers were impacted by the workshop. The first focus group interview was conducted directly after the workshop and the post-workshop ques-

tionnaire. The second focus group interview included the same participants and was conducted six weeks after the workshop. Participants were also asked to keep a reflection journal in those six weeks to record their own thoughts and ideas. The purpose of the focus groups was to allow a broader discussion about the workshop and its impact on the student ministry.

Research Question #1

What did the youth leadership know about prevenient grace and its significance for ministry before the workshop?

Research Question #2

What did the youth leadership know about prevenient grace and its significance for ministry after the workshop?

Research Question #3

What were the significant influences from the workshop that most impacted the youth leaders in terms of leading their ministry area?

Rationale for the Project

First and foremost, this project matters because prevenient grace helps in understanding the nature of God. Theology (knowledge about God) impacts the way people live, for better or for worse. In addition, theology impacts the way leaders minister to others.

Second, an understanding of prevenient grace transforms the way youth leaders see young people. Understanding the culture and the unique challenges of teenagers is extremely important. However, seeing them as people made in God's image and with whom God is already active is equally important.

Third, the latest research shows that current models for youth ministry are not effective in reaching and disciplining young people. For example, in September 2006, the Barna Group released their study's conclusions, stating that "the most potent data regarding disengagement is that a majority of twentysomethings—61 percent of today's young adults—had been church-ed at one point during their teen years but they are now spiritually disengaged." According to Gallup polls, approximately 40% of eighteen to twenty-nine year olds who attended church when they were sixteen or seventeen years old are no longer attending (Gallup 2006). Results from the National Study of Youth and Religion published in 2009 show an approximate 30% drop in weekly religious attendance across multiple Protestant denominations (Smith and Denton 10).

The same study also revealed that most teenagers have fallen into a belief system called Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. Young people inside the church have an understanding of God as good, but God is not directly involved in their life. This version of God basically wants everyone to be kind and moral (Smith and Denton 262). In addition, many teenagers no longer grow up in church, as society has become increasingly secular. There is a great need to equip youth leaders theologically in order to disciple young people more effectively. In this post-Christian society crafting ministries that convey God's prevenient grace is critically important in reaching young people.

Definition of Key Terms

The following definitions are given in order to provide clarity of the terminology used in this study.

Youth Ministry: Ministry focused on reaching and discipling students in 6th-12th grade.

Youth Leaders: Individuals who are the primary leaders for the youth ministry at their local church. This includes part-time and full-time staff.

Youth Lay Leader: Individuals who have a leadership role in the youth ministry but are not paid staff.

Prevenient Grace: The grace of God “that comes or goes before,” to use Wesley’s terminology. Prevenient grace is God’s prior love that leads a person to salvation, and it is a grace that is available to all people.

Delimitations

For this project the researcher chose to focus on John Wesley’s understanding of prevenient grace. The truth of prevenient grace did not originate with John Wesley, and the discussion of prevenient grace did not conclude with him either. However, for the purposes of this study the goal will be to understand Wesley’s understanding of prevenient grace and its significance for ministry.

In addition, the project focused specifically on the practice of youth ministry. There has been great research done in terms of Wesleyan theology and pastoral care or missions. Although there is more to explore in those areas, this research stayed specific to the practice of youth ministry. Specifically, this project concerned itself with youth ministry in the United States.

In defining youth ministry, the project examined ministries to students between 6th and 12th grades. Many youth ministries include college students, and even young adults in some cases. However, the specific context of this project was Frazer United Methodist Church, and the youth ministry there is for 6th grade through 12th grade.

In terms of the questionnaires and focus groups, the research focused on the youth leaders at Frazer United Methodist Church. The leaders include staff and lay people but only individuals in leadership positions and not other volunteer roles.

Review of Relevant Literature

This project consulted Biblical, theological, and sociological literature in order to gain insights into Wesley's understanding of prevenient grace and to further explore the latest developments in youth ministry. The Biblical review summarizes the different passages that speak to God's prevenient grace. This section focuses primarily on the book of Acts because the focus of this project is to understand how God's prevenient grace can shape the way one can think about ministry in the church.

The section on John Wesley's view of prevenient grace was centered primarily on Wesley's writings themselves. John Wesley wrote a great deal about prevenient grace, and the review especially focuses on Wesley's understanding of ministry in light of God's prevenient grace and how prevenient grace relates to the discipleship. Current Wesley Scholars like Randy Maddox and Ken Collins were also consulted in this section.

The section on youth ministry focuses first on the current culture of teenagers today as revealed by books like Patricia Hearsch's *A Tribe Apart* and Chap Clarke's books, *Hurt and Hurt 2.0*. The current effectiveness of youth ministry in the lives of young people is seen in Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton's groundbreaking book called *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*. Other youth practitioners have already responded to this latest research and the need for youth leaders to step back and think theologically about youth ministry. Two writers who have

written extensively on this topic are Andrew Root and Kenda Creasy Dean. Their writings and research were invaluable to this project. However, there are not many youth ministry books written specifically from a Wesleyan perspective. Furthermore, there is a dearth of youth ministry books that delve deeply into John Wesley's understanding of prevenient grace. Combining Wesley's theology with an understanding of youth ministry contributes a new set of ideas to the current conversation about youth work.

Research Methodology

The project was an intervention designed to improve the participants understanding of youth ministry. The project requested the participation of youth leaders who have been involved with the student ministry at Frazer Church for over a year. The project also included the three members of the youth staff. Each leader participated in a workshop that took place in the student ministry gathering area.

Each participant completed a youth ministry questionnaire before the workshop and then completed the same questionnaire after the workshop. The curriculum for the workshop was based largely on the literature review, which included the latest research on youth ministry and the biblical and theological foundations for understanding prevenient grace. After the workshop and post-workshop questionnaire, the youth leaders were given a 10-minute break with snacks. After the break, the youth leaders participated in a focus group interview to give further reflections on the workshop and the possible implications for the youth ministry. Six weeks later, a second focus group took place with the same youth leaders in order to discuss how the workshop did or did not affect their practice of youth ministry. Participants were asked to keep a reflection journal in those six weeks in order to record any thoughts or ideas.

Type of Research

This project was an intervention designed to empower youth leaders to rethink how they do youth ministry in terms of effectively discipling young people. The project included mixed-methods for the research. Data was collected through a pre- and post-workshop youth ministry questionnaire. The pre-questionnaire assessed the participants' current understanding of youth ministry, while the post-questionnaire evaluated their changed perspective on youth ministry after they had participated in the workshop.

After collecting the quantitative data, there was a follow-up focus group interview with the youth leaders to further discuss the workshop. A second focus group interview was conducted six weeks later for further reflection. The qualitative data collected from the focus group, together with the quantitative data, served as the basis for the analysis and conclusions.

Participants

Participants included youth leaders and youth staff that serve at Frazer United Methodist Church. Their ages ranged from 22-50 years old, and the group included singles, married couples with children, and married couples without children. Every leader has been serving in the youth ministry for at least one year.

Instrumentation

Data collection instruments for the pre- and post-intervention tools were researcher-designed. The instrumentation included quantitative and qualitative tools. One tool was a set of questions for a focus group setting (Youth Leader Focus Group) and the other tool was a set of questions for the questionnaires (Youth Leader Questionnaires).

Each of these tools encompassed the research questions and responded to the intent of the purpose statement.

Data Collection

Data collection for this research project included a pre- and post-workshop youth ministry questionnaire for all the youth leaders. The pre-questionnaires were completed at the very beginning of workshop. The post-questionnaires were given after the one-hour workshop. In addition, after the workshop there was a focus group interview with the youth leaders to further discuss the workshop. There was a second focus group interview conducted six weeks after the workshop. All of the data for the study were collected at Frazer United Methodist Church.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data collected through the Youth Leader Questionnaire was processed first using explorative analysis to identify patterns, themes, and categories. The project then followed the coded descriptions to perform content analysis. The focus group interview with the youth staff was used to discuss the workshops and the concluding results from the content analysis. Answers from the focus group were also analyzed and grouped together according to the research's major themes.

Generalizability

The hope is this project will be challenging and informative to youth leaders, whatever their tradition or location. However, this study focused on 6th - 12th grade students living in the United States. As such, the results of the study may not apply to adolescents in other countries who carry different cultural and religious experiences. The

challenges and opportunities facing young people may be different in those places. The project should be applicable and helpful for youth leaders in the United States.

Project Overview

Chapter Two will review relevant literature and research in the areas of youth ministry and prevenient grace. The literature review includes the Biblical and theological foundations for prevenient grace and its importance for ministry. In addition, John Wesley's writings are examined in order to understand his view of prevenient grace and how it shaped his way of thinking about ministry and his understanding of discipleship. The latest research on youth ministry and its current impact on adolescents are discussed as well. Chapter Three explains in detail the design of the study, its methodology, and the data-collection process. Chapter Four presents the analysis of the research. Chapter Five discusses the implications of the project and offers practical ways the results can improve youth ministry. The chapter will also offer suggestions for further study and research.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW FOR THE PROJECT

Overview of the Chapter

This chapter includes a review of literature relevant to the study of prevenient grace and its potential impact for student ministry. The research in this chapter was grouped into three sections. The first section examines the Biblical foundations for God's prevenient grace with a special focus on how it impacted the ministry of the early church. The second section will provide a theological overview of prevenient grace based on the writings of John Wesley and recent scholarship of Wesley's

works. The third section will review the current effectiveness of youth ministry and the latest research concerning theology and youth ministry.

Biblical Foundations

The goal of Wesleyan theology is to put forth scriptural Christianity. Thus, this section will focus on God's prevenient grace as found in the Old and New Testament. The research project is specifically focused on how prevenient grace can shape ministry practices, and so the Biblical data will focus primarily on the ministry of the early Church.

Prevenient Grace and the Old Testament

God's prevenient grace is seen from the very beginning as humanity is created by God and made in God's image (Genesis 1:28). In addition, God creates humanity in order to have a relationship with humans. From the outset, humanity is created so that people reflect God's likeness and thus are able to have a relationship with God.

God's covenant relationship with the Israelites was founded on God's prevenient grace. The root meaning of the word grace in the Hebrew is "favor." God's unmerited favor is seen in God's promises, the giving of the law, and the rescuing of the oppressed (Roetzel 387). God rescues the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and provides for them each day before He gives them the law. God's grace came before God's instructions. Numerous times, Moses reminds the people that God did not save them because they were better or more righteous than other groups of people. God saved them because of His grace. Deuteronomy 7:7 provides an example, "The Lord did not choose you and lavish his love on you because you were larger or greater than other nations, for you were the smallest of all nations! It was simply because the Lord loves you."

Later, in the book of Jeremiah, there are the famous words of the prophet's calling, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you" (Jeremiah 1:5). God was working in Jeremiah's life long before he knew it. Throughout the prophets, God continues to seek out His people despite their rebellion and sin (Ezekiel 34; Hosea *passim*).

Prevenient Grace and the Gospels

The incarnation of Christ points to a God who enters into the world in order to redeem a lost humanity. Jesus in several places describes His mission as one in which He is seeking out the lost. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (John 3:16).

One story in particular highlights God's prevenient grace in the ministry of Jesus. In Luke 19:

Jesus entered Jericho and made his way through the town. There was a man there named Zacchaeus. He was the chief tax collector in the region, and he had become very rich. He tried to get a look at Jesus, but he was too short to see over the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree beside the road, for Jesus was going to pass that way. When Jesus came by, he looked up at Zacchaeus.

(Luke 19:1-5)

By this point, Jesus was well known. His reputation for being a prophet, a healer, and perhaps even the Messiah had spread everywhere. Thus, as Jesus enters Jericho a crowd forms around him. Zacchaeus wants to see Jesus, but due to the crowd and his lack of height, he is forced to climb a tree. It is not clear why Zacchaeus would care enough to

climb a tree to see Jesus. Zacchaeus had a very comfortable life. He was a part of a country and government who ruled most of the world. He was rich and had a job that would continue to make him rich. He had an easy, secure, and successful life. Yet, in Luke 19 Zacchaeus climbs a tree just to get a glimpse of Jesus. Part of the reason has to do with prevenient grace, the grace that goes before salvation. Maybe Zacchaeus was in the tree because he felt shame and guilt about the things he had done in his past. Maybe he was in the tree because no amount of money could bring him contentment or peace. Whatever the reason, the grace of God causes Zacchaeus to climb a tree. He knew something was missing, and he was curious about this man named Jesus who people were calling the Messiah. As Jesus is going through the crowd, he looks up and sees Zacchaeus. The story gets even better. Jesus sees Zacchaeus and then invites Zacchaeus to have a meal with Him:

When Jesus came by, he looked up at Zacchaeus and called him by name. “Zacchaeus!” he said. “Quick, come down! I must be a guest in your home today.”

Zacchaeus quickly climbed down and took Jesus to his house in great excitement and joy. But the people were displeased :He has gone to be the guest of a notorious sinner,” they grumbled. (Luke 19:5-7)

Not only did Jesus look at Zacchaeus, but also knew who he was and yet still invited him to a meal. Zacchaeus jumps down from the tree with excitement and joy. He says “yes” to the invitation and begins a relationship with Christ. The amazing truth of the gospel is that God invites people into a relationship.

In this passage the crowd was not happy about Christ’s invitation to Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus was the wrong type of person. He did not have the right background, and he

worked for the wrong country. Furthermore, he was a tax collector who cheated people out of money. He was rich and most of his neighbors were not. It is not clear why Jesus would want a relationship with this person. Nevertheless, Zacchaeus' lifestyle and occupation did not remove beyond the reach of God's "seeking love" (Craddock 219). Jesus responds, "This is the very reason I came, for the Son of Man came to seek and save the lost" (Luke 19:10). Throughout the gospels, Jesus seeks out the lost and the marginalized. Christ welcomes prostitutes, lepers, Samaritans, and many other people considered to be sinners. As Dr. McKenzie points out, "It takes Jesus' noticing Zacchaeus and summoning him to come down to move Zacchaeus from being up a tree to being at the table with the Savior" (Jarvis and Johnson 169). Jesus is the primary actor and initiator in the story.

Prevenient Grace and the Early Church

God seeking humanity is a continued theme in the early Church. In the apostolic letters, there are several verses that speak to God's prior love and grace. "But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). "We love him (God), because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). Indeed, the entire gospel hinges on God's prevenient grace because this eliminates any false gospel that claims there is certain things people must do in order to earn their salvation. God's prior grace eliminates any boasting on humanity's part because every Christian is saved by grace. Paul puts it plainly to the church in Ephesus, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9).

The church's ministry is always in response to God's prior actions. Thus, there is often a pattern in the New Testament epistles where theology sets the foundation for praxis.

Many of the New Testament epistles follow a pattern where the writer discusses doctrine (what Christians believe) and then follows it with a call to certain actions (what Christians should do) (Keener, “Background Commentary” 448). Furthermore, God’s prevenient grace is seen in the ministry of the early church as the disciples spread the gospel across the world. As noted by scholars like James Dunn and Craig Keener, the early church, as seen in the book of Acts, is empowered, sustained, and directed by God’s presence through the Holy Spirit. It is a story of people being led and inspired to do actions far beyond their own ability (Dunn xix; Keener “Acts” 642-662). Once again, there is a particular story that highlights the power of God’s prevenient grace.

In Acts 10, Peter is praying and has a vision. In the vision, God asks Peter to eat unclean animals. Peter protests because the food is forbidden. God replies by telling Peter, “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.” While Peter was wondering about the meaning of the vision, some men knocked on the door and invited Peter to come meet a Roman centurion named Cornelius. A key leader in the church, Peter, who is Jewish, is being sent to a Roman officer named Cornelius, who is a Gentile. The context here is that Jews and Gentiles did not like each other. In fact, most Jews considered Gentiles unclean and thought that eating with Gentiles made a person unclean. Jews and Gentiles typically avoided each other. Yet God arranges this meeting between these two men to do something very special. The interesting part of the story is not only that had God spoken to Peter but also that the day before Peter gets his vision an angel appears to Cornelius telling him to send people to get Peter. God was working in Cornelius’ life long before Peter’s arrival. God is already at work, and Peter is now partnering in that work with God.

Peter arrives and listens to Cornelius and then shares the gospel:

I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right. You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, announcing the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. You know what has happened throughout the province of Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached— how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him. We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a cross, but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen—by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name. While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. (Acts 10:34-44)

The Holy Spirit literally interrupts Peter as he is preaching. Seeing the Spirit fall on the Gentiles, Peter then baptizes them. This is an unthinkable occurrence. Some scholars describe this text as the Gentile Pentecost. This story began a huge shift for the early church. This story is not simply about the conversion of Cornelius; it is also about the conversion of the church. What happens here is God, starting with

Peter, begins to bring about a conversion from deep-seated prejudice to a new way of seeing people. The conversion of Cornelius prompted a deep change within the church. This event led the early church into a bigger discussion about the inclusion of Gentiles and eventually resulted in a full-scale mission outreach to the Gentile nations. Peter and Cornelius played a part in the story, but God's active presence is the primary actor (Keener "Background Commentary" 317).

Adam Dodds, in his article on *Regeneration and Resistible Grace*, comments that the whole of the Christian life depends on God's prevenient grace. There are many things that people can do on their own, but being a Christian is not one of them (31). He writes, "A person will not and cannot become a Christian apart from the prior and accompanying unmerited drawing action of God (and the evangelistic witness of the Church). So, classically and vitally, regeneration/ conversion has its basis in God's creative love toward humanity and causes and enables the creature to love God in return" (32). God's love being freely given to humanity is a core theme throughout the Old and New Testament. This is a specific and powerful kind of love that seeks out conversion and reconciliation. God's grace has a purpose. The purpose of this redemptive grace is the creation of a community that is God's covenant partner (Israel and then the Church) and which reflects God's love and mission to the world.

Theological Foundations for Prevenient Grace

The focus of the project is to examine specifically how John Wesley's understanding of prevenient grace can impact the discipleship of today's teenagers. Therefore,

this section will focus specifically on Wesley's theology of prevenient grace and its importance in ministry and discipleship. The section will engage Wesley's own writings and other recent scholarly writings on Wesley's view of prevenient grace.

John Wesley and the Church Fathers

John Wesley did not invent the concept of prevenient grace. His understanding of prevenient grace was rooted in scripture and further outlined by the Church Fathers. For Wesley, the teachings of the Church Fathers had a major impact in his own theological understanding. In Wesley's mind, the Church Fathers had greater authority due to their closeness to the early church (Green 273-274). The scope of this research cannot cover the entirety of Wesley's theological influences.

However, one particular theologian who heavily influenced Wesley was Saint Augustine. Indeed, Augustine has likely had greater influence on Christian theology than anyone besides Jesus and Paul. He greatly impacted the Catholic Church's understanding of original sin, ministry, sacraments, and the church. He also had a major influence on Protestants through his understanding of salvation by grace (McDermott 49). In fact, it was in the writings of St. Augustine that the term "preventing grace" originated in its Latin form, *praevenire* (Bicknell 190). In his *Treatise On the Spirit and the Letter*, Augustine stated that:

Since God, therefore, in such ways acts upon the reasonable soul in order that it may believe in him (and certainly there is no ability whatever in free will to believe, unless there be persuasion or summons towards some one in whom to believe), it surely follows that it is God who both works in man the willing to believe, and in all things prevents us with his mercy. ("Anti-Pelagian Writings" 110)

In later writings Augustine indicated the difference between preventing (anticipating) and later (following) grace, "Now the Scriptures refer to both of these operations of grace. There is both this: 'The God of my mercy shall anticipate me,' (Psalm 59:10) and again this: 'Thy mercy shall follow me all the days of my life' (Psalm 23:6)" (133).

Augustine's personal understanding of prevenient grace is seen all throughout his autobiography, *Confessions*. Augustine begins his confessions by recounting his life as a child. Overall, he had a good childhood and was well-cared for by his mother and nurses. Augustine points back to his childhood as indication of God's prior mercy and grace already working in his life. Augustine also sees God's grace in his education and the opportunity he had to attend school and learn about a variety of subjects. As a young person, he did not particularly like school, but he later realized how his education was good for him. God's prevenient grace caused him to learn certain things that would benefit him later in life (Augustine "Confessions" 30-32).

As a young adult, Augustine lived a rebellious lifestyle. He had a group of friends who lived in ways he knew were wrong. He had failed romances and pursued his lustful instincts, but nothing could bring him satisfaction. However, looking back even on his most rebellious days, Augustine could see God working in his life. Even before he believed in God, he had a sense of right and wrong and experienced guilt for the wrong ways in which he was living. His sense of emptiness and lack of satisfaction pointed to God's prevenient grace operating in his life. Eventually this grace led Augustine to the point of repentance. God's prevenient grace led him to open the book of Romans, and the first verse he saw was Romans 13:13, "Not in reveling and drunkenness, not in lust and wantonness, not in contention and envy, but arm yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ;

spend no more thought on nature and nature's appetites." Augustine immediately responds, "I had no wish to read more and no need to do so. For in an instant, as I came to the end of the sentence, it was as though the light of confidence flooded into my heart and all the darkness of doubt was dispelled" ("Confessions" 178). It was this prevenient grace that led Augustine to God's justifying grace. Augustine understood that God's grace and love had been with him long before he ever accepted it. God's grace led him to grace and forgiveness.

While Wesley at times differed with Augustine, he was profoundly influenced by his writings. Augustine's understanding of grace, specifically the different ways God's grace operates in people's lives, would shape Wesley's own understanding of grace and ministry (Crofford 76-78; Payk 26-27). Like Augustine, Wesley could look back on his own life and see God's prevenient grace operating through the upbringing he received in childhood and events later in life including escaping a house fire, failing as a missionary in Georgia, and surviving a near shipwreck.

In conjunction with Augustine and the early church fathers, Wesley was also greatly influenced by his own Anglican heritage and the Church of England. It is outside the scope of this project to go into much detail, but scholars like Frank Baker, Thomas Oden, and Ken Collins have spent considerable research in showing Wesley's commitment and influence from the *Articles of Faith* and the *Book of Common of Prayer*. The *Articles of Faith* included a section that states, "The condition of man after the fall of Adam is such that he cannot turn and prepare himself, by his own natural strength and works, to faith, and calling upon God; wherefore we have no power to do good works, pleasant and acceptable to God, without the grace of God by Christ *preventing* us, that we

may have a good will, and working with us, when we have that good will” (Oden, “Doctrinal Standards” 135). Likewise, the *Book of Common Prayer* uses the term “preventing grace” a total of eleven times. Thus, the doctrine of prevenient grace was ingrained in Wesley’s belief system, and it was a doctrine he believed was crucial for the Anglican faith (Payk 37-38; Baker 311; Collins *Theological Journey* 36-46).

John Wesley and Prevenient Grace

The next section will focus specifically on John Wesley’s understanding of prevenient grace and in particular how it impacts ministry and discipleship. There have been numerous nuanced discussions about prevenient grace; however, the focus of this review is specific to how prevenient grace impacts ministry. Wesley understood grace both as the undeserved favor of God and as the power of the Holy Spirit that empowers people to walk with God. The grace of God is at the very center of Wesley’s theology. He believed God is constantly active in the pursuit to redeem humanity. God’s love and presence is always working in people’s life in order to redeem and sanctify (Langford 20). His understanding of prevenient grace is seen as God’s grace that “goes before.” Wesley writes:

By “the grace of God” is sometimes to be understood that free love, that unmerited mercy, by which I, a sinner, through the merits of Christ am now reconciled to God. But in this place it rather means that power of God the Holy Ghost which “worketh in us both to will and to do of his good pleasure.” As soon as ever the grace of God (in the former sense, his pardoning love) is manifested to our soul, the grace of God (in the latter sense, the power of his Spirit) takes place therein.

And now we can perform through God, what to ourselves was impossible...a recovery of the image of God, a renewal of soul after his likeness. (Jackson *Works* 1:309-310)

Wesley used the term “grace” in two different ways. He used it in a narrow sense to refer to all the degrees of grace that come before justifying and sanctifying grace. He also used it in a broad sense, which views all grace as prevenient in that God initiates a relationship with people. God’s prior activity is the root cause of every stage of salvation and sanctification (Collins *Holy Love* 40; Maddox *Responsible Grace* 84).

Prevenient grace places God’s law upon the human heart so that all people have a general understanding of right and wrong. Wesley strongly affirmed the doctrine of original sin. Apart from God’s grace, humanity is completely doomed in their sin. Wesley did not believe that people in their natural state of being would ever freely choose God. In this sense, Wesley agreed with reformers like Calvin and Luther. Yet what set Wesley’s theology apart is his belief that no human is in his or her natural state. Wesley believed that a certain amount of free will had been restored to all people through the supernatural work of Christ (Collins, “Way of Salvation” 42). God’s grace restores a measure of free will to humanity where they now have the ability and responsibility to respond to God. Every person now has a basic knowledge of God, an understanding of morality, and the ability to respond to God’s calling (Collins “Way of Salvation” 40-44; Rogers 196). Wesley writes:

But I do not carry free-will so far: (I mean, not in moral things:) Natural free-will in the present state of mankind, I do not understand: I only assert, that there is a

measure of free-will supernaturally restored to every man, together with that supernatural light which enlightens every man that cometh into the world. (Jackson-*Works* 10:230)

This means that God has taken the first step in redeeming humanity by giving people the ability to respond to God's offer of salvation in Jesus Christ. God is moving in the lives of people and is inviting them into a relationship. If this invitation is accepted, then the person can experience God's justifying and sanctifying grace. Wesley points out, "Salvation begins with what is usually termed (and very properly) 'preventing grace'; including the first wish to please God, the first dawn of light concerning his will, and his first slight, transient conviction of having sinned against him" (Outler-*Wesley's Sermons* 3:203). The acceptance of prevenient grace leads the person through the way of salvation to deeper depths of discipleship. Prevenient grace leads to justifying grace where a person is now saved from the guilt of sin and restored to a right relationship with God. Justifying grace leads to sanctifying grace where a person is then freed from the power of sin and restored to the image of Christ. Sanctifying grace continues to increase until that person "attains the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Collins and Vickers *Sermons* 66).

Wesley believed that prevenient grace is given to everyone, and, yet, this grace can be refused by everyone as well (Maddox *Responsible Grace* 90). This grace is not an impersonal force or a thing to be received. God's grace is rooted in the work and sacrifice of Christ (Wynkoop 98; Jackson *Works* 2:545). Every grace one receives is from Christ and in Christ (Wesley 53). For Wesley, grace and salvation are always relational. God's grace empowers but does not overpower; it is freely available but also free to be resisted (Maddox *Responsible Grace* 86).

Wesley's understanding and explanation of prevenient grace partly grew from disputes with Whitfield and other Calvinists. However, this was not simply an academic debate. For Wesley, understanding prevenient grace was extremely important in terms of understanding God and the way of salvation. Prevenient grace allowed Wesley to affirm that salvation is by God's grace through faith alone without having to affirm the doctrine of predestination. The doctrine of predestination, in Wesley's mind, was not merely a theological debate but compromised God's character and the gospel. Wesley even wrote at one point that the doctrine of predestination "represents the most Holy God as worse than the devil, as both more false, more cruel, and more unjust" (Outler 3:555). Wesley believed that God is love and that God desires for all to be saved and that this understanding of God's nature is essential in understanding God's love for oneself and God's love for others.

Once again, Wesley agreed with his counterparts in regard to the total depravity of humanity in their natural state. However, he separates himself in indicating that no person is actually left in his or her natural state. God's prevenient grace restores humanity beyond the natural state of total depravity (Jackson-Works 12:453). In his sermon, *On Working Out Our Salvation*, he writes:

For allowing that all souls of men are dead in sin by nature, this excuses none, seeing there is not man that is in a state of mere nature; there is no man, unless he has quenched the Spirit, that is wholly void of the grace of God. No man living is entirely destitute of what is vulgarly called "natural conscience." But this is not natural; it is more properly termed "preventing grace." Every man has a greater or less measure of this, which waiteth not for the call of man. (Jackson-Works 3:207)

For Wesley, prevenient grace separated him from the Reformed doctrine of predestination that was popular in his day. The theological category "preventing grace" allowed Wesley to hold together in tension the ideas that humanity is completely dependent on God for salvation and, at the same time, that humanity is held responsible for their acceptance of that salvation. God's prevenient grace is free *in* all, meaning it does not depend on human effort or accomplishment. Also, God's prevenient grace is free *for* all, meaning that all people receive its benefits. (Jackson-*Works* 3:542-563; Collins "Holy Love" 24). It is Wesley's doctrine of prevenient grace that allows him to hold in tension the doctrines of total depravity, salvation by grace, human responsibility, and the offer of salvation to all (Collins "Holy Love" 82).

Implications for Youth Ministry

Wesley's doctrine of prevenient grace has several implications for youth ministry. First, prevenient grace means every aspect of ministry begins with God. God is at work in every moment and in every person. God's grace and love is universal, meaning it is for all people. Youth leaders tend to think of ministry as something one does for God rather than primarily as something God is doing with and for each individual (Moore 219; Willimon 75). Prevenient grace removes unhealthy pressure on youth leaders. Youth ministry is not primarily about what youth leaders can do. Youth ministry is primarily about joining in with what God is already doing. Youth leaders can also have optimism about ministry because God is already at work. It is the job of the youth ministry to join God's mission that has already begun.

In addition, prevenient grace changes the way youth leaders see their students. God is already with them, and God is already working in their lives. This allows youth

leaders to see the potential in students which they cannot see in themselves. Youth leaders can interact with teenagers with confidence knowing that God has gone ahead of them preparing those teenagers to receive the gospel message (Seamands 20; Neuhaus 16). Often there can be hopelessness when it comes to reaching today's teenagers. Prevenient grace is a reminder that no person is hopeless and that God's grace is always operating.

Furthermore, prevenient grace redefines the outreach of a youth ministry. Youth ministries do not simply minister to students currently inside the church but reach out to students outside the church. If God is continually extending grace to those who are not even following Him, the definition of who is in the church youth group becomes quite different. The youth leader is a pastor to everyone involved in a church's social network, and as a pastor they are extending God's prevenient grace in all of those lives (Steele 17). The words of Wesley become the youth ministry motto, "The world is my parish."

Lastly, prevenient grace helps youth leaders see their ministries as a means of God's grace. God's grace is always reaching out in order to reconcile and redeem humanity. The church partners with God in being agents of reconciliation. Thus, the youth ministry is always working in conveying God's prevenient grace. Sometimes youth leaders will have the privilege of seeing young people experience God's justifying grace. However, even when they do not get to see this experience, they can be assured that God is using them to share His prevenient grace.

Sondra Higgins Matthaei points out how the church had a huge impact in the faith formation of John Wesley himself. His growth and transformation did not occur in isolation. He had family members and friends who helped guide him. He had spiritual mentors like Peter Bohler and the Moravians. These individuals supported Wesley as he struggled

with questions and doubts. They were conduits of God's grace, which was working in Wesley's life. Thus, the role of the church is critical as it prepares people for God's redeeming work (Matthaei 208-210).

Youth Ministry and Prevenient Grace

The next section will cover several elements regarding youth ministry. The section on youth ministry in today's culture will give a brief survey of today's teenagers and the overall effectiveness that youth ministries are having in discipling young people. The section on youth ministry and prevenient grace will look at the latest literature on the impact theology can have in terms of discipling teenagers. In addition, any literature that specifically speaks about youth ministry in combination with prevenient grace is also surveyed.

Youth Ministry in Today's Culture

Adults often perceive young people as difficult, rude, and rebellious. Parents fear their children becoming teenagers. Many parents joke that they are going to ship their children off to boarding school when they turn thirteen. The truth is, young people can, and often times are, difficult, rude, and rebellious, and the reasons can be unclear. Perhaps what adults see as an unruly generation is really a vulnerable population living out the necessary reaction to being neglected and ignored (Clark 13).

There are teenagers who are from solid homes. They feel secure and safe. Thus, those youth are typically both healthy and happy. Sadly, most young people do not fit this description. The latest research paints a bleak picture of teenagers today. Almost fifty percent of students in America admit to cheating; one in five get drunk on a regular basis, and more than half drive recklessly (Roehlkepartain and Scales 37). One in three youth

over the age of ten is sexually active (Friedman 74-78). It is not clear why youth behave in such ways. Perhaps it is because they are a neglected and vulnerable group. For example, one out of four young people live in poverty. In addition, half of all families have experienced the damage and destruction of divorce firsthand. Furthermore, most parents now work full-time, and today's young people have less adult contact, in terms of quality time, than any other generation in human history (Pipher 231).

Even the definition of a "good parent" today contributes to the neglect of young people. A good parent is now seen as one who is very busy and keeps their child just as busy. Young people are placed into more and more programs and sports every year. By the time a teenager enters high school, they have been subjected to a decade of adult-driven and adult-controlled programs and institutions that are mainly concerned with adult agendas and needs. Kids are busier than ever with homework, practices, and games. These activities are not bad in and of themselves. However, when parents begin to equate *busyness* with *care* there is a problem. Indeed, numerous adults will stress these and other activities as evidence of their dedication to their kids. Families have lost the capacity to spend unstructured time together. In short, most adolescents feel they have been abandoned. Therefore, they have created their own world, or sub-culture, which attempts to protect them from being hurt. While many young people seem to have a fun and care-free attitude, below the surface lies a world where internal fears, loneliness, and insecurity try to remain hidden but, in the end, dictate much of their actions. Their world is one where relationships are typically shallow and where outward performance and image has become essential to their lives (Clark 21-24; Hersch 363-365).

In addition to the cultural issues facing young people, there are also disturbing trends concerning their spiritual formation. Fewer and fewer young people are attending church as a whole. Between 1976 and 1996, the number of 12th graders attending religious services in the United States declined 8% (Roof and McKinney 153-155). Several recent studies reveal that the majority of teenagers who have spent years attending church activities do not live out their faith and that most have a view of God that is not consistent with the Scriptures. In addition, the discipleship they do receive in their youth ministries is not staying with them once they leave for college (Barna; Smith; Arnett; Kinnaman).

Two recent books have been groundbreaking in the student ministry world: “Soul Searching” by Christian Smith and “Almost Christian” by Kenda Creasy Dean. Both books are in response to the results of the National Study of Youth and Religion. The National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR; see www.youthandreligion.org) was a unique research project on the religious and spiritual lives of American adolescents from 2001 to 2005. The study was located at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The NSYR conducted a national, random-digital-dial telephone survey of US households containing at least one teenager age 13-17, surveying one household parent for about 30 minutes and one randomly selected household teen for about 50 minutes. In addition, 17 trained project researchers conducted 267 in-depth face-to-face interviews with a subsample of telephone survey respondents in 45 states. The interviews were sampled to capture a broad range of differences among US teens on religion, age, race, sex, socioeconomic status, rural-suburban-urban residence, region of the country, and language spoken. The

project was the largest and most complete study of American teenage religion and spirituality to date (Smith and Denton 4-6). The results of the study produced a combination of good and bad news.

The good news is that the vast majority of U.S. teenagers continue to identify themselves as Christian. The majority of teenagers also have a favorable view of God and the Church. The research shows that most teenagers are not switching faiths and have not become atheistic. Furthermore, in surprising news, the bulk of teenagers tend to be very similar to their parents when it comes to religion. Therefore, contrary to popular belief, most teenagers are not as rebellious about religion as often thought. Teenagers are relatively conventional in their religious thought and very content to follow in their parents' footsteps.

However, the bad news is that the majority of teenagers do not practice their faith on a regular basis and the majority of them are no longer in a faith community and, as noted above, the dropout rate continues to increase (Smith and Denton 68-69, 260-261). In addition, the majority of teenagers are unable to explain what they believe and how their beliefs impact their lives. Their understanding and commitment to their religious beliefs is generally weak and shallow. Most teenagers have a belief system described as Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, which is characterized by a belief in a detached God where the goal is personal happiness and the main ethic is being nice. God exists but is not overtly involved in one's life unless there is a crisis. God wants people to be nice because good and moral people go to heaven when they die (Dean *Almost Christian* 14; Smith and Denton 262). The problem is that most young people consider themselves Christian, but their understanding of the faith is not in any sense seriously connected to

the gospel or historic Christian tradition. The bad news gets even worse because Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is not simply naive beliefs from nominal Christians but is instead looking like the new mainstream American religious faith that has been shaped by a post-Christian, individualistic, consumer-driven culture.

In fact, this particular faith system is so entrenched in churches that even young people growing up in congregations hold similar beliefs to Moral Therapeutic Deism. In many of the interviews, even teenagers who grew up in church and have Christian parents had no ability to articulate their faith and did not practice their faith in any consistent way (Dean *Almost Christian* 16; Smith and Denton 262). The problem is not simply “out there” in the culture, but the problem resides in the church. Again, the good news is that teenagers are not hostile to Christianity or the Church. The bad news is that they do not really think either is very significant, and, worse yet, the Church is partly responsible for this belief. Therefore, the Church must rethink its approach in discipling young people.

Youth Ministry and Prevenient Grace

Study after study is showing that most churches are not effective in their attempts in discipling young people. Fortunately, numerous youth ministry scholars like Andrew Root, Kenda Creasy Dean, Dean Borgman, and others have responded to these studies with proposals for how the Church can do better. As revealed in this section of the literature review, most authors do not speak of Wesleyan theology or prevenient grace specifically. However, two themes emerged from these leaders in youth ministry that are closely related to prevenient grace.

The first theme is a rethinking and a reemphasis on relational ministry. If a major problem for young people is abandonment, then one solution is obvious: adults need to

reinvest in the lives of individual young people. Students need adults who will be present, who will listen, and who will really care (Clark 175-189; Hersch 10-30).

While this solution seems simple, making it happen can be difficult. Even youth ministers, whose full-time job is being with teenagers, have trouble with adequately helping teens. Investing in the lives of young people takes time, energy, and patience. Youth ministers are so busy with meetings and programs that frequently they have no time and little energy. The church, like families, have forgotten how to *be* together. Youth ministers have become less like pastors and more like program directors and administrators. Thus, youth ministers will need to rethink their programming in such a way that it allows more time for authentic relationships, mentoring, and discipling. Relational youth ministry not only helps a student who feels abandoned, but it also helps them encounter Christ. Several writers have noted the importance of relational ministry in terms of experiencing God's presence. God's presence is experienced in community and in relationships (Jacobson xiii; Root *Taking Theology* 170-180). One text which is cited often in this conversation is Matthew 25.

In Matthew 25:31-46, Jesus connects relationships with judgment. He states that people will be separated into two groups, sheep or goats. Those who welcomed strangers and have helped those in need have welcomed Jesus himself. In addition, the people who have served "the least of these" will be welcomed into the Kingdom of God. In contrast, those who have rejected "the least of these" have rejected Jesus and will consequently be left out of the Kingdom. Thus, a person's service to others, or lack of it, will one day be judged by God. Recognizing Jesus in the faces of youth gives provides both the motivation for youth ministry and the ability to sustain it. Every young person is worthy of care

because loving them is to love Christ. In addition, seeing Christ in students allows one to realize that God is already at work in their life, which Wesley would call prevenient grace. With prevenient grace, there is a realization that all young people carry with them gifts and blessings of their own. There is greater receptivity to what a teenager is bringing to the ministry, to what God might be saying or doing through him or her. Most youth ministers would not consider their relationships with youth as being the place where they meet God's presence. However, relational ministry is a reminder that God is concretely present in the youth minister's relationships with teenagers. God's goodness and presence is found in the midst of these relationships (Root "Incarnation" 105). It is in relationships that both the youth and the youth minister encounter God's presence and grace.

The second theme to emerge is the importance of thinking theologically about youth ministry. Even though youth ministry has now been around for many decades, it has not always been concerned with theological reflection (Dean and Root 15). Again, Moral Therapeutic Deism is being learned in the church. Thus, the church must rethink how it is teaching and communicating the gospel. The church must step back and think theologically about its' ministry to students. Youth ministers need to remember that practical ministry and practical theology are closely connected to one another. Research shows that ministry to youth is often disconnected from what the church believes about God. This is where John Wesley's approach to practical theology can be extremely helpful. Wesley's theology is a good reminder that theology should always inform praxis. Theology and ministry should never be disconnected (Borgman 3; Steele x)

In addition, there is an increasing amount of literature discussing the importance of youth ministers being in tune to how God is already working in the lives of young people. The term *prevenient grace* is not often used, but they are pointing to that exact Wesleyan doctrine. Youth ministry programs must not begin with the question, “What can I get going here that would be good for these kids?” The first question needs to be, “What is Christ already doing in the lives of teenagers that I can join?” God is already at work in seeking out reconciliation with teenagers. It is not the youth minister’s job to save or transform teenagers but to join in on God’s redemptive work (Dean 61; Jacober 149). Youth ministry, in this context, starts with the assumption that God is already working on earth, bringing redemption and the transformation of all creation. Therefore, the youth minister seeks to discern, observe, and identify where God is already at work. Therefore, the beginning of youth ministry is rooted in prayer. Before looking at the latest programs and curriculum, youth leaders must commit themselves to the hard work of intercessory prayer (Vickers *Minding the Good Ground* 44). The foundation of youth ministry is about paying attention to what God is already doing.

Furthermore, youth ministry programs need to be restructured in such a way that more opportunities are created for youth to discern how God is working in their lives. An essential task of youth ministers is simply to help teenagers notice their experiences with God because at the end of the day it is not the youth minister who fixes teenagers or brings them into a relationship with Christ. In one sense, this takes the pressure off of youth workers. Youth leaders are not saviors. They are co-workers with Christ. Their role is secondary. *Prevenient grace* allows the youth leader to relax and to realize that the failure or success of the youth ministry is not in their hands. In a second sense, this means

that the most important thing for youth ministers to do is to help young people recognize the presence of Christ in their life. Too often the focus has been getting youth attached to the youth group or youth leader. As noted above, this is not making disciples of Christ, and it is not sustainable. Once the teenagers graduate from high school they are leaving their faith behind. The youth minister must get out of the center of the ministry and allow God to do the ministering. Youth leaders are there to help youth notice God's presence in their lives. It is God who loved them long before the youth leader, and it is God who will be with them long after they leave the youth group (Oestreicher 75; Mike Yaconelli 126; Mark Yaconelli 185-191).

In her book, *Saying is Believing*, Dr. Drury points out that research shows that when young people are able to identify and articulate God's work in their lives, they are much more likely to have a strong faith. She points that the NSYR study shows that the majority of teenagers not only have an inadequate belief system but also have trouble even speaking about their own faith (Drury 15-16). When asked to articulate their faith, many of the young people interviewed gave the following responses: "Um, I haven't really thought about that. [pause] I don't know;" "I believe in the [pause], I, ohhh [pause], I don't think I'd really like to talk about that," and "Um, I guess I believe...[laughs], um, I don't really know. I don't really know how to answer it." (Smith and Denton 131)

The church, therefore, must do a better job of giving young people a vocabulary for their faith. Drury suggests that the church must help young people live in perpetual advent. Youth ministers help students to be attentive to God's work around them and through them, knowing that God is constantly manifesting Himself in their lives and in the lives of others (Drury 219). This sort of awareness develops a rich faith that goes well

beyond moral therapeutic deism. She writes, “Perpetual advent means we are always seeking out and hoping for the sanctifying presence of God” (129). Churches need to help young people become aware of God’s work and then create space where they can share how God is working in their lives. Youth leaders must exemplify this in their own lives by constantly sharing how God is working in their lives and by encouraging young people to share their stories as well. Often, teenagers do not know how to articulate their faith simply because no one has asked them about their faith.

Prevenient grace is a reminder that good ministry must begin with good theology. What a youth ministry *does* must begin with God and what He is already doing. Prevenient grace reminds youth leaders that God is already working in the lives of young people, and it is the church’s job to help them become more aware of that work. Ultimately, it is God who saves and God who sanctifies. The role of the church is to be in tune to where God is moving.

Training Youth Leaders

Part of the project will require a training workshop for the youth leaders. Researching the latest studies done on adult learning were helpful to the overall project. Much has changed over the past twenty years in terms of how people learn. Only fifty percent of adults are considered proficient readers. The millennial generation overwhelmingly prefers oral ways of learning like videos, music, and social networks. The quantity of information an individual person receives each day has increased dramatically. Each of these changes point to a learning style that is now shifted toward non-print media and a non-linear style of learning (Willis and Snowden 17-17). This means that stories, dialogue, and visuals are much more helpful in adult learning. The workshop on prevenient

grace will include these tools. Stories from the Bible will be shared, along with personal stories. There will be an opportunity for the leaders to dialogue and ask questions. There will be videos and visual objects to help make the communication clear and meaningful. In addition, the six-week span in-between the first and second focus group will give the participants an opportunity for further learning and reflection within the actual practice of ministry (Kompf and Barer-Stein 80-82).

Research Design Literature

The project was participatory action research because it introduced an intervention with the intention to enhance the youth ministry leadership for the overall effectiveness of the student ministry program at Frazer United Methodist Church (Sensing 58). The intervention was designed to improve the participants' understanding of youth ministry. The project requested the participation of youth leaders who have been involved with the student ministry at Frazer Church for over a year. The project also included the three members of the youth staff. Each leader participated in two workshops that took place in the student ministry gathering area.

Each participant completed a youth ministry questionnaire before the workshop and then completed the same questionnaire after the workshop. The curriculum for the workshop was based largely on the literature review, which included the latest research on youth ministry and the biblical and theological foundations for understanding prevent grace and the order of salvation. After the workshop, the youth leaders were asked to complete the post-workshop questionnaire. The youth leaders took a ten-minute break for snacks and refreshments. After the break, the youth leaders participated in a focus group interview to give further reflections on the workshop and the possible implications for the

youth ministry. The focus group allowed respondents to offer an open and individual perspective on the questions without prompting. This research tool gathers more nuanced and varied data because “the group responds to a series of questions that allows the researcher to quickly gather from several points of view” (Sensing 120).

After the workshop and first focus group, each participant was given instructions to keep a reflection journal so that they could record any thoughts or ideas. After six weeks, the youth leaders were brought back for a second focus group interview to get further thoughts and reflections. The data was then collected with the youth ministry questionnaire and follow up interviews in order to discern whether or not the intervention accomplished its goal (Sensing 64).

The overall conclusions and evaluation from the study were done in collaboration with the participants. The workshop and the follow-up focus group interviews were done in such a way where the participants gave input and suggestions. The pastor-researcher acted as a facilitator and as a participator. Each participant was encouraged to provide his or her own input and expertise to each discussion (Patton 185).

Summary of Literature

Prevenient grace is not a term used in the scriptures. However, it is a term used to describe a scriptural truth seen throughout the Old and New Testament. God’s covenant relationship with Israelites is established because of God’s prior grace. They did not earn or deserve this grace. God did not choose them because of their knowledge or power. God frees them from Egyptian slavery and provides for them every day and then later gives the law. Throughout the prophets, God is described as a “seeking” God. God is active and working despite the sin and rebellion of the people. In the gospels, prevenient

grace is seen in the life and ministry of Jesus. Jesus is continually seeking out the lost. One specific example is the story of Zacchaeus. As Jesus is walking through a crowd, Zacchaeus is in a tree trying to get a glimpse of Christ. Jesus sees Zacchaeus and invites him to dinner. The fact that Zacchaeus is even in a tree and that Christ initiates the relationship points to prevenient grace. Throughout the New Testament letters, the early apostles speak about God's prior love for humanity, "But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). "We love him (God), because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Much later, John Wesley would spend considerable time writing about prevenient grace, but his writing was not speculative academic work. Wesley was a practical theologian. He wrote about theology in the context of the ministry and mission of the church. Wesley's theology of redemption begins with God's prevenient grace, given to humanity to make salvation possible for everyone. Undergirding Wesleyan hope is belief in the unlimited atonement of Christ, a certainty that God wills for all people to be saved. This grace is the work of the Holy Spirit in bringing a sinful humanity and the world into the experience of the "new creation." While this divine work can be and is resisted, the Spirit continues to work and draw humanity and the larger world to this end. According to Wesley, prevenient grace makes possible the recognition of general revelation, enabling discernment from the natural order that there is a God exercising power over the world; giving humanity a moral conscience, helping to understand what is right and wrong, and pre-

paring humanity for saving and sanctifying grace in Jesus Christ. Prevenient grace hopefully leads one to justifying grace and then to sanctifying grace, for the end goal is holiness of heart and life.

Interestingly, the current culture is very similar to that of John Wesley. Wesley was in a culture where most people described themselves as Christians, but the church was not effective in actually forming people as disciples of Christ. The National Study of Youth and Religion paints a similar problem with today's young people. On the whole most teenagers adhere to what researchers call Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, which means they believe in God, but God has little impact on their everyday life and their core understanding of God has little resemblance to the gospel. The good news is that most teenagers have a favorable view of God and the church. The bad news is that these beliefs are not impacting their daily lives and teenagers are dropping out of church at staggering rates. In addition, teenagers are dealing with a variety of other issues due to what is perceived as adult abandonment of young people. Today's teenagers have less adult interaction than any previous generation.

Youth ministers and youth ministry professors recognize the problem and are seeking solutions by rethinking youth ministry through theology. First, youth ministers and youth ministry programs need to reinvest in the lives of young people. Relational ministry, mentoring, and small group discipling is going to be key moving forward. Second, the belief that God is already at work in every teenager will be essential as well. The foundation of ministry begins with God and His prevenient grace for all people. The task for youth ministers is to discern God's activity and join in God's saving work. The task

for youth programs is to help teenagers to discern God's saving work in their own lives and the lives of those around them.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY FOR THE PROJECT

Overview of the Chapter

This chapter includes the research methodology for the project. This section describes the different quantitative and qualitative tools used to answer the research questions. The chapter will also provide information regarding the participants of the project, the context in which the project took place, and how the data was collected and analyzed afterwards. In addition, the reliability and validity of the project will be addressed as well.

Nature and Purpose of the Project

The purpose of the research was to evaluate workshops on John Wesley's theology of prevenient grace and its impact on the ministry of the youth leaders at Frazer United Methodist Church. The latest research shows that what churches are currently doing in terms of youth discipleship is not effective. The majority of young people are graduating with a belief system labeled Moral Therapeutic Deism." The challenge for youth leaders is to rethink youth ministry and the way churches disciple students.

This project was put together to see how a workshop on Wesley's theology of prevenient grace might impact the youth leaders at Frazer United Methodist Church. The project included the key leaders of the youth ministry and used a mixed-method approach in order to gain data. The project was an intervention that used pre- and post-assessment

questionnaires along with post-assessment focus groups. The participants were also asked to use a reflection journal in the six weeks in between the first and second focus group interview.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study in measuring the effectiveness of the workshop.

Research Question #1

What did the youth leadership know about prevenient grace and its significance for ministry before the workshop?

The data collected for this question provided a baseline that measures the participants' understanding of prevenient grace and its importance for youth ministry. The youth leader (YL) pre-workshop questionnaire fulfilled the purpose of answering this question.

Research Question #2

What did the youth leadership know about prevenient grace and its significance for ministry after the workshop?

The purpose of the research was to evaluate workshops on John Wesley's theology of prevenient grace and its impact on the ministry of the youth leaders at Frazer United Methodist Church. This question seeks to evaluate whether or not the workshop impacted the youth leaders' understanding of youth ministry. The YL post-workshop questionnaire and focus groups provided quantitative and qualitative data. The post-assessment questionnaires were compared to the data in the pre-assessment questionnaires.

Both the quantitative and qualitative data revealed the impact of the workshop for the youth staff and lay leaders.

Research Question #3

What were the significant influences from the workshop that most impacted the youth leaders in terms of leading their ministry area?

The purpose of this question was to collect qualitative data to facilitate a broader and deeper understanding of the workshop's impact. The questions from the first and second focus groups allowed the youth leaders to give their reflections about whether or not the workshop had significantly changed their ministry. The second focus group took place six weeks after the workshop.

Ministry Context

The church context for this project is Frazer Memorial United Methodist Church. Frazer is located in Montgomery, Alabama, which provides the setting for its ministry. Montgomery is the second largest city in Alabama. However, over the past six years, the city of Montgomery's population has slowly declined. Since 2013, the city has lost around 3,000 residents. The cities around Montgomery (Wetumpka, Prattville, and Millbrook) have increased in population. This city's population is also aging as the median age has increased by two years. Montgomery has always been diverse and has increased in diversity over the past 20 years. From year 2000 to 2016, there was an increase of 20,000 African American residents and an increase of 2,500 Asian residents. The fastest growth is among the Hispanic population, which saw an increase of 182 percent. Meanwhile, there was a 30,000 person decrease in white residents during that same time.

The residents of Montgomery are still predominantly Christian. However, church attendance has been in decline, like most cities in the United States. About sixty percent of the population is considered unchurched at this point (EnvisionMontgomery2040.org).

Frazer Memorial United Methodist Church has been a part of the city for over a hundred years. Frazer is a mega-church with close to 3,000 people in attendance each Sunday. Since Easter Sunday 2000, Frazer has increased the number of Sunday morning worship services to six by starting three contemporary worship services. In 2003, a seventh service, completely in Spanish, was begun, and a full-time Hispanic minister was hired. Today a Chinese language service also meets every week, and the contemporary worship service is translated into Korean. In 2016, Frazer planted a site in the Pike Road community, which was launched as Century United Methodist Church in 2017 and has several mission partnerships in Cuba, Kenya, and Haiti.

The student ministry consists of 200-plus active students. The student ministry over the past few years is beginning to reflect the diversity of the community. In addition, there is an increase in students attending that did not grow up in the church. The student ministry includes teenagers from 6th grade through 12th grade.

Participants

Criteria for Selection

The three youth pastors on the Frazer youth staff and three key youth lay leaders were invited to participate in the project. Each participant was chosen due to his or her leadership in the youth ministry at Frazer United Methodist Church. The purpose of the project was to evaluate workshops on John Wesley's theology of prevenient grace and its

impact on the ministry of the youth leaders. Thus, the focus of the workshop is specific to those who have a leadership role and are not simply volunteers.

Description of Participants

The youth staff consists of two females and one male. Each youth pastor holds a college degree. The male youth pastor is twenty-six years old and has been working in student ministry for eight years. One of the female youth pastors is thirty years old and has been a youth minister for nine years. The other female youth pastor is twenty-four years old and has been involved in youth ministry for six years.

The youth lay leaders consist of two males and one female. The female is forty years old and has been volunteering in the student ministry for seven years. One of the male lay leaders is thirty-four years old and has been serving with Frazer students for three years but has been involved in youth ministry for fifteen years. The other male lay leader is thirty-six years old and has been serving in the student ministry for ten years. Each of the lay leaders has a college degree as well.

Ethical Considerations

The emotional and psychological well-being of the youth leader participants were protected throughout the study. The project was reviewed and approved both by the dissertation coach and the Institutional Review Board at Asbury Theological Seminary. A consent form that explained the purpose of the study and guaranteed confidentiality was given to and signed by each participant (see Appendix D). By signing the form, participants also understood that completing the questionnaires and participating in the workshop and focus groups were completely voluntary. The identity of the youth leaders remained confidential during data collection. Random numbers were given to each of the

pre- and post-questionnaire forms for analysis purposes. When transcribing the audio recording of the focus group interview, random numbers were used to represent each interviewee instead of names. All survey forms, along with the recording and transcriptions, were destroyed after the project was completed.

Instrumentation

Two researcher-designed instruments collected data for the project. The first instrument was a pre- and post-workshop questionnaire, and the second instrument was focus group interviews. The multi-method approach was used in order to enhance and cross-validate the findings of the research (Gillham 102).

The first set of questions asked participants to rank different skills needed for youth ministry in order of importance, with 1 as the “least important” and 5 as the “most important.” The next set of questions asked the participants to share their own sense of confidence in the different skills of youth ministry. The scale used 1 for “not confident” and 4 for “very confident.” The two sets of questions were used in order to see both the priorities and confidence of the youth workers and to see if they are consistent with previous research. The same questionnaire was used after the workshop to see if the priorities and confidence of the youth workers were impacted by the workshop. The questionnaires allowed participants to answer questions with anonymity and without the pressure of an immediate response (Morgan 6).

The first focus group interview was conducted directly after the workshop and the post-workshop questionnaire. The goal of the focus group was to create a dialogue that would produce data and conclusions that would be less available without the group interaction (Morgan 2). The focus group also allowed the researcher to quickly gain data from

several points of view (Sensing 121). The five open-ended questions allowed the research questions to be explored and discussed in broader ways than those limited by a questionnaire.

The second focus group interview included the same participants and was conducted six weeks after the workshop. Participants were asked to keep a reflection journal in that six weeks in order to record their thoughts and observations. The three open-ended questions were focused on the impact of the workshop on the youth worker's practice of ministry and if any changes, positive or negative, had been made to the overall youth ministry.

Expert Review

Both instruments for the project were researcher-designed assessments. Therefore, both instruments were submitted to the following three experts for review: Dr. Ellen Marmion, Professor of Christian Discipleship at Asbury Theological Seminary, provided feedback from the perspective of discipleship and spiritual formation; Dr. Milton Lowe, Associate Director of the Doctor of Ministry Program at Asbury Theological Seminary, gave comments based on his experience of being a doctorate mentor, and Dr. Jason Vickers, Professor of Theology at Asbury Theological Seminary, provided feedback based on his expertise on Wesleyan theology and church renewal.

Each reviewer received a document that included a description of the project, purpose statement, research questions, and the two instruments. An evaluation form was also included that allowed each reviewer to give feedback and suggestions on each question of the instrument (see Appendix C). After receiving the evaluation forms, the researcher made several changes to improve both the questionnaire and the focus group interview.

One reviewer suggested that question “L” on the questionnaire should be adjusted to be less intimidating. The question asked the participants to “Describe God’s nature.” The suggestion was made to ask the question differently, “If you were describing God’s nature, what would you highlight?” The suggestion was adopted, and the wording of the question was changed. The goal of the questionnaire was to get honest answers, and the less intimidating the question, the better the chance for an honest answer. The change also made the question less abstract and more practical for the youth leaders.

The same reviewer also suggested that one of the focus group questions be re-worded. Originally, the second question for the first focus group interview was, “How did the workshop change the way you think about youth ministry?” The reviewer suggested that the wording of the question be changed to, “Can you identify any changes in your thinking about youth ministry after the workshop?” This suggestion was also adopted because the original wording of the question assumed there was a change. This change in the question allows it to be less leading and more open to an honest response.

Another reviewer suggested adding a follow up question to questions one and two in the focus group interview. Question one asks, “Have you noticed any changes in your own youth leadership in the month since the workshop?” The reviewer suggested adding, “If so, what changes?” Question two asks, “Has an understanding of Wesley’s prevenient grace had an impact on the youth ministry at Frazer Church?” The reviewer suggested adding, “If so, how?” Both suggestions were adopted because they ask the group to elaborate on their answers and to give more specific responses which is in line with the goals

of a focus group interview. All other parts of the questionnaire and focus group interviews were approved for the project. The revised instruments were submitted to the researcher's mentor for final approval and were accepted.

Reliability & Validity of Project Design

The reliability of the results was ensured through the consistency of the design and administration procedures of the instruments. The pre- and post-workshop questionnaires were completely identical as were the participants who took the questionnaires. The pre-workshop questionnaire was given at the beginning of the session, and the post-workshop questionnaire was given after a break so that the participants were not fatigued. The same instructions were given before the pre- and post-workshop questionnaires. The same instructions and procedures were given before each focus group interview, and the same participants attended both focus groups.

All questions on the questionnaire and focus group interviews were consistent with the research questions of the project. In addition, three expert reviewers approved each question on the questionnaire and for the focus groups. They approved the clarity of the wording and the necessity of each question.

Internal validity, especially in qualitative research, "relies on the logical analysis of the results... [and is enhanced by] verifying results and conclusions from two or more sources or perspectives" (Wiersma 215). In this project a mixed-method for collecting data was used in order to increase the reliability of the data. Internal validity was also enhanced by having only one researcher collect and evaluate the data. In addition, to increase the consistency of the qualitative aspect of the research, the researcher served as

the proctor for both focus group interviews. These factors all worked to strengthen the internal validity of the dissertation project.

The question of external validity is impacted by the qualitative nature of the study as well. Due to the small number of participants in the study, broad generalizations would be unwarranted. However, the homogeneous sampling group does have generalizability among youth leaders who fit the basic criteria outlined for the sampling group.

Data Collection

The youth leader workshop consisted of a one-hour teaching session. Before the workshop, each youth leader was given a pre-workshop questionnaire. The pre-workshop questionnaire included an identifying number so that the pre-workshop questionnaire could be compared to the post-workshop questionnaire without using the participant's name. Each participant was given instructions for the questionnaire, and it was announced that they could ask questions at any point. Completed questionnaires were returned via a collection folder. After the workshop the same process was used for the post-workshop questionnaire. The questionnaires were used to collect both quantitative data and qualitative data.

After the post-workshop questionnaire, there was a ten-minute break for refreshments. Once the break concluded, there was a focus group that included all six of the youth leaders. The focus group was conducted in a classroom with chairs formed in a circle. The focus group was recorded on video. At the beginning of the interview, issues in regard to confidentiality were specified along with ground rules, in order to set a tone of safety and kindness. Five discussion questions were used, and the recorded answers were

then transcribed and coded by theme for further analysis. A second focus group was conducted with the same leaders six weeks later. The same confidentiality and ground rules were used again. The second focus group consisted of only three discussion questions. The interview was recorded, transcribed, and coded by theme for further analysis.

Data Analysis

The pre- and post-workshop questionnaire provided the quantitative data for this study. The data was organized in Microsoft Excel and analyzed by comparative analysis using both descriptive and inferential statistics. The t-test was used to compare individual variances between the pre- and post-workshop questionnaires.

The focus group interviews provided the qualitative data for the project. Both the focus group after the workshop and the one conducted six weeks later were recorded in their entirety and later transcribed. The transcribed data was then read with a focus on data that related directly to the research questions. After several readings, reoccurring themes were coded and divided into groups for content analysis.

CHAPTER 4

EVIDENCE FOR THE PROJECT

Overview of the Chapter

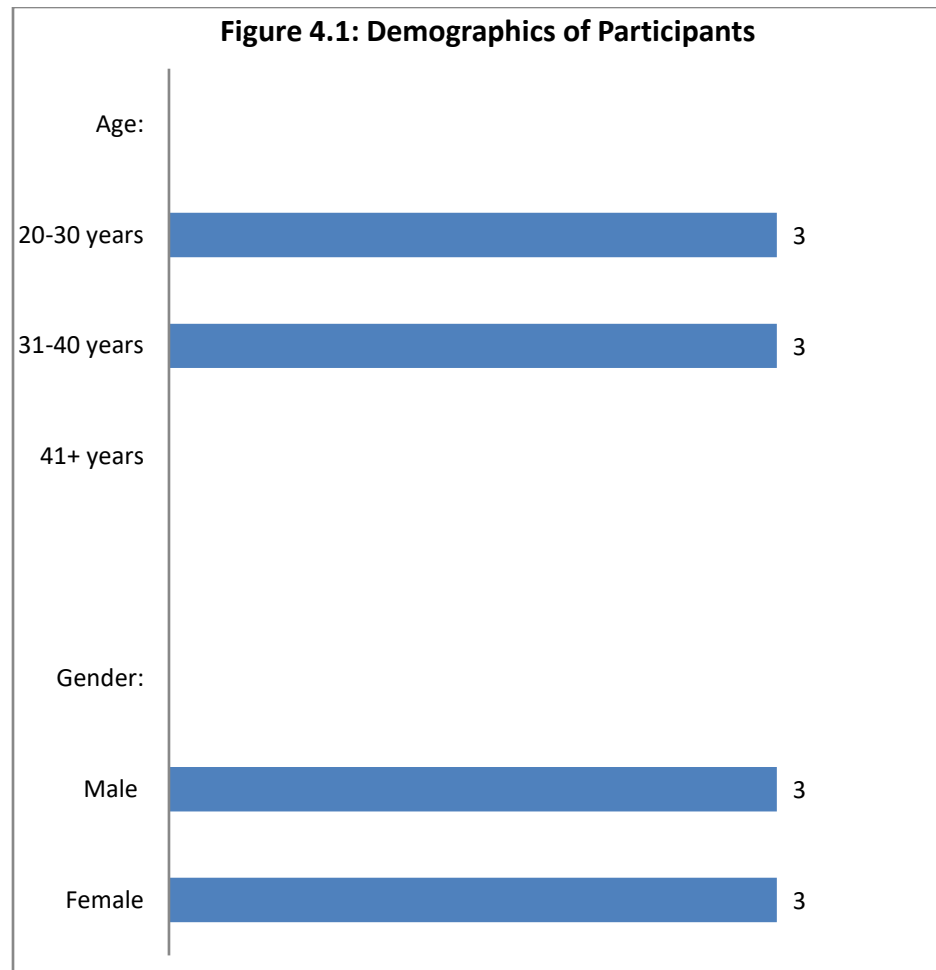
Current models for youth ministry are not effective in reaching and discipling young people. Results from a 2009 National Study of Youth and Religion indicate an approximate thirty percent drop in weekly religious attendance across multiple Protestant denominations (Snell and Smith 213-214). The same study also revealed most teenagers gravitating toward a belief system called Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. Within this

worldview, young people inside the church tend to understand God as good, yet do not see God as directly involved in their lives (Smith and Denton 262). These trends call for a more effective theologically equipping for youth leaders in order to enhance the discipleship of young people.

The purpose of the research was to evaluate workshops on John Wesley's theology of prevenient grace and its impact on the ministry of the youth leaders at Frazer United Methodist Church. The project included the key leaders of the youth ministry and used a mixed-method approach in order to gain both quantitative and qualitative data. The project was an intervention that used pre- and post-assessment questionnaires along with post-assessment focus groups, which provided opportunities for clarification and additional insight. The participants were also asked to use a reflection journal in the six weeks in-between the first and second focus group interviews.

Participants

Six leaders from the student ministry at Frazer UMC participated in the project. Three of the youth leaders were paid staff, one male and two females, each holding a college degree and ranging in age from 24-30 years old. Youth ministry experience ranged from 6-9 years. The other three youth leaders were volunteer lay leaders. The lay leaders consisted of two males and one female; all had college degrees and ranged in age from 34-40 years old. Amount of experience in working with youth ministry programs varied, with one serving for seven years, a second for ten years, and the third for fifteen years. This local church was fortunate to have not only an experienced paid and lay leadership, but one that was reasonably educated as well (see figure 4.1 for participant demographic).



Research Question #1

What did the youth leadership know about prevenient grace and its significance for ministry before the workshop?

The data collected for this research question provided a baseline that measures the participants' understanding of prevenient grace and its importance for youth ministry. The youth leader (YL) pre-workshop questionnaire fulfilled the purpose of answering this question.

The first set of pre-workshop questions asked the youth leaders to rank certain youth ministry skills in order of importance. Of particular interest to this study was to see

where the youth leaders would place skill (B) in their list of importance. To do this, the youth leaders ranked five skills on a scale using descriptive anchors with 1 for “least important” and 5 for “most important” (table 4.1 provides ranking results). The ability to study theology and apply it youth ministry (B) ranked as least important by two participants and was given a score of 3 by three of the participants with one participant giving it a score of 4. Overall, this skill set had the second lowest score among the other skill sets. The ability to equip and communicate with volunteers and parents (D) was rated as relatively less important compared to the other skills. The ability to relate and connect to teenagers (A) was rated as the most important skill.

The next set of questions asked the participants to share their own sense of confidence in the different skills of youth ministry (table 4.2). The scale used 1 for “not confident” and 4 for “very confident.” The youth leaders felt the most confidence in their ability to relate to teenagers and in their ability to teach teenagers the Bible. Their ability to understand Methodist history and Wesleyan theology was rated the lowest score in terms of their own confidence.

Table 4.1 – Responses to Pre-Workshop Questionnaire (Skill Importance Rankings)

	Please rank the following skills for youth ministry in order of importance	N	Least Important (1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	Most Important (5)
A.	The ability to relate and connect to teenagers.	6	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	16.7%	83.3%

B.	The ability to study theology and apply it to youth ministry.	6	33%	0%	50%	16.7%	0%
C.	The ability to select and teach biblical curriculum.	6	0%	16.7%	16.7%	50.0%	16.7%
D.	The ability to equip and communicate with volunteers and parents	6	33%	16.7%	33%	16.7%	0%
E.	The administrative ability to construct programs and navigate media.	6	33%	67%	0%	0%	0%

Table 4.2 – Responses to Pre-Workshop Questionnaire (Skills Confidence)

	Use the following scale for the next set of questions.	N	Not Confident (1)	Somewhat Confident (2)	Confident (3)	Very Confident (4)
F.	I have a good understanding of teenagers and how to minister to them.	6	0.0%	0.0%	83.3%	16.7%
G.	I feel confident in being able to offer counseling and care to teenagers.	6	0.0%	33.3%	50%	16.7%
H.	I have a good understanding of theology and how it applies to youth ministry.	6	0.0%	50.0%	50.0%	0.0%
I.	I feel confident in the crafting of programs, games, and events for the youth ministry.	6	0.0%	0.0%	33.3%	66.7%
J.	I have a good understanding of our Methodist history and Wesleyan theology.	6	16.7%	50.0%	33.3%	0%
K.	I have confidence in my ability in teaching the Bible to students.	6	0.0%	0.0%	33.3%	66.7%

Research Question #2

What did the youth leadership know about prevenient grace and its significance for ministry after the workshop?

This research question evaluated whether or not the workshop impacted youth leader understanding of youth ministry. The YL post-workshop questionnaire and focus

groups provided quantitative and qualitative data for this research question. The post-assessment questionnaires were compared to the data in the pre-assessment questionnaires. Both the quantitative and qualitative data revealed the impact of the workshop in terms of youth leader understanding of prevenient grace and its significance for youth ministry.

In terms of skills importance, two of the youth leaders ranked the ability to study theology and apply it to youth ministry (B) as the least important skill before the workshop. After the workshop, none of the youth leaders gave this skill a 1 or 2 in terms of least important. In fact, five out of six of the youth leaders ranked it as the most important skill after the workshop, whereas none of them had it ranked that high before the workshop.

In addition, youth leader confidence in the ability to understand and apply theology to the youth ministry (H) also increased as well. Each leader was either confident or very confident in their ability to understand and apply theology to the youth ministry after completing the workshop. Remarkably, there were zero youth leaders who felt very confident in this area before the workshop. There was also an increase in confidence with regard to having a good understanding of Wesleyan theology (J). Before the workshop, all but one of the youth leaders felt confident in understanding Wesleyan theology. After the workshop, youth leaders ranked themselves as confident or very confident in this same area. Overall, the quantitative data indicated that the workshop increased the level of importance and confidence in youth leaders' perspectives on theology.

Table 4.3 – Comparison of Responses to Pre-Test/Post-test Workshop Questions (Skills Importance)

Pre-test responses in blue
Post-test responses in rose

	Please rank the following skills for youth ministry in order of importance	N	Least Important (1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	Most Important (5)
A	The ability to relate and connect to teenagers	6	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	16.7%	83.3%
		6	0.0%	0.00%	0.0%	88.3%	16.7%
B	The ability to study theology and apply it to youth ministry	6	33.3%	0.0%	50%	16.7%	0%
		6	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	16.7%	83.3%
C	The ability to select and teach biblical curriculum	6	0.0%	16.7%	16.7%	50.0%	16.7%
		6	0.0%	33.3%	67.7%	0.0%	0.0%
D	The ability to equip and communicate with volunteers and parents	6	33%	16.7%	33%	16.7%	0.0%
		6	50.0%	33.3%	16.7%		0.00%
E	The administrative ability to construct programs and navigate media	6	33%	67%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
		6	66.7%	16.7%	16.7%	0.0%	0.0%

Table 4.4 – Comparison of Responses to Pre-Test/Post-test Workshop Questions (Skills Confidence)

Pre-test responses in blue

Post-test responses in rose

	Use the following scale for the next set of questions	N	Not Confident (1)	Somewhat Confident (2)	Confident (3)	Very Confident (4)
F	I have a good understanding of teenagers and how to minister to them	6	0.0%	0.0%	83.3%	16.7%
		6	0.0%	0.0%	66.7%	33.3%
G	I feel confident in being able to offer counseling and care to teenagers	6	0.0%	33.3%	50.0%	16.7%
		6	0.0%	33.3%	33.3%	33.3%
H	I have a good understanding of theology and how it applies to youth ministry	6	0.0%	50.0%	50.0%	0.0%
		6	0.0%	0.0%	50.0%	50.0%
I	I feel confident in the crafting of programs, games, and events for the youth ministry	6	0.0%	0.0%	33.3%	66.7%
		6	0.0%	0.0%	33.3%	66.7%
J	I have a good understanding of our Methodist history and Wesleyan theology	6	16.7%	50.0%	33.3%	0.00%
		6	0.0%	0.0%	66.7%	33.3%

The pre- and post-workshop questionnaires also provided participants with short answer questions to explicate their understanding of God and of the nature of youth ministry. Youth leaders' answers about the nature of youth ministry shifted greatly. One common theme in the post-workshop answers was an understanding of youth ministry that centered around God's activity and work. Participant quotes from the post-workshop questionnaire revealed this shift: "Youth ministry is about loving students and helping them see how God is working in their lives;" "Giving students opportunities to see and reflect on how God is working in their lives," and "Youth ministry is about helping students encounter and recognize God's presence in their lives." Before the workshop, participant answers about youth ministry did not address God's work or presence. Instead, answers centered around the activity of the youth ministry and the importance of building relationships with students and helping them enter into a relationship with God.

Research Question #3

What were the significant influences from the workshop that most impacted the youth leaders in terms of their ministry area?

The purpose of this question was to collect qualitative data to facilitate a broader and deeper understanding of the workshop's impact. The questions from the first and second focus groups allowed youth leaders to provide reflections about whether or not the workshop had significantly changed their ministry. The first focus group occurred immediately following the workshop, while the second focus group took place six weeks after the workshop. The first focus group involved five discussion questions designed to elicit

immediate thoughts and ideas about the workshop (see Appendix C). Several themes emerged from the first focus group.

One theme that emerged was the concept of applying an understanding of God (theology) to the practice of youth ministry (praxis). Most of the youth leaders had a prior understanding of grace, and even prevenient grace, before the workshop. However, most of them had not thought about those concepts in terms of how they do ministry. One participant responded to discussion question (1) with these words:

I've had a pretty good understanding of prevenient grace going through confirmation and helping teach it. But thinking of it [prevenient grace] in terms of ministry, and whenever you're talking about us as being a means to prevenient grace for a student, it's a cool eyeopening concept for us. Like, we can be ushering the presence of God through the way that we communicate with students in a way of hopefully if the Lord's working through us, that we can lead them to Jesus. God using us as a means to His grace is a really cool concept and it takes some of the weight off of our shoulders.

For this participant, seeing self as a part of God's grace and work in the world was something not previously considered. Another participant put it this way, "Understanding that we get to demonstrate God's grace and extend God's grace to young people is a very exciting way of thinking about student ministry." Several youth leaders mentioned that most of what they knew about youth ministry was learned through what they have seen from others. They had never really considered rethinking their practice of youth ministry through a keen understanding of God.

A second theme that emerged through the first focus group interview was the importance of recognizing God's presence. The understanding of prevenient grace means that God is always working and active in the youth leaders' lives and the lives of their students. Student ministry begins with God and not the leaders. The first part of this realization begins in the leader's life and ministry. Participants provided these insights during the discussion: "If we're not experiencing the presence of God on our own, we can't lead them into the presence of God," and "Being aware of God's prevenient grace in my own life could change the ministry, because we are the ones leading these kids." Thus, the youth leaders are now seeing the importance of modeling a life that is in tune to God's presence and allowing God's Spirit to guide decisions and actions as youth leaders. Furthermore, they acknowledge the need for an openness to God's activity in the events they plan and the curriculum they teach. One participant noted the following, "If God is always moving and active, and if we are more receptive to that activity, that may impact how we teach our curriculum. It will certainly affect the applications we draw out of the teaching. We will be more aware of what God wants to speak to these particular students at this particular time."

This idea led into a greater discussion about providing students with the opportunity to experience and reflect on God's presence in their lives. If God is always active in their lives, there is a clear imperative to help students be more aware and responsive to God's presence. One participant shared, "One thing we could do more is provide students with more opportunities to share their testimony. We could do this through videos or instagram posts and verbally during our worship services." Another participant said:

Any time we have teaching, we also need to give students the chance to engage God. Like, when I'm teaching on the Lord's Prayer in a few weeks, I could also have the students say the Lord's Prayer together. Or ask them to do it on their own everyday for a week, and report back on how it changed their attitude for that week. We need to try to collaborate with them instead of just having them listen to a teaching every week.

The participants pointed out that the student ministry does a good job of giving students interactive experiences on retreats and missions trips, while also providing the opportunity to share those experiences. However, some participants noted the need to be more intentional in providing these opportunities. As one participant put it:

I actually think our youth ministry does a pretty good job of providing good experiences. I think that's something we can take away from this discussion. We're able to say, "Hey, that's something we're doing right. We are creating experiences that give kids a positive remembrance of church and God." But we need to think of ways we can do that on a regular basis and not just a few times a year.

A final theme that emerged from the first focus group was how prevenient grace reshapes the way youth leaders see students. Participants noted that the teenagers they ministered to are more than their outward facade or what the culture says about them. Each teenager is made in the image of God and each has God's grace working in his or her life. Again, from the participant discussion:

I think prevenient grace should help us have an optimism that's not always there. We can fall into that cynical dark place about our teenagers where believe they are just the way they are and there's not much hope. Hopefully this helps us have

an optimism of grace, that no matter what *front* a teenager's putting on, that we know that God is working in there, and we know that there's potential for goodness and holiness inside each person.

Another participant concluded, "Prevenient grace makes me excited to work with students. Knowing that God is working in their life and that I get to be a part of that is pretty exciting."

The second focus group (Appendix C) took place six weeks after the workshop. Each youth leader was given a reflection journal in order to record any changes or insights that may have occurred during those six weeks of youth ministry. They were asked to write down any notes about how their understanding of prevenient grace impacted the way they taught, led small groups, or related to teenagers.

One major theme that emerged in the second focus group was how an understanding of prevenient grace brought a sense of freedom and joy into youth leadership. Youth leaders mentioned they felt less pressure and more grateful in their youth leadership since the workshop. One participant reported the following:

I think it's made me grateful just to think about God's grace. Again, my limited knowledge of it for so many years being just a salvation moment, and then broadening that and thinking about God's grace in terms of the students that are coming through the doors, and having little conversations, and even just thinking like, Man, it's God's grace that we're here. It's God's grace that we have the privilege of being with this specific student for this period of time.

Another said, “It's made me stop and be a little bit more grateful for that grace. Just to recognize it in my own life and then recognize it hopefully at work in the lives of these students as well.”

Several of the youth leaders also mentioned how they have more patience as they work with students. For them, prevenient grace is a reminder that God is working even when they cannot see it and even when everything does not go as planned. God's grace has given them a change in perspective in their leadership. One participant shared how prevenient grace helped while leading a mission trip:

In our mission trip to Kenya, I was getting really frustrated with some of the students because I didn't feel like they were really paying attention and getting something out of the trip. But then when we got back, one of those students wrote me a note expressing all that they got out of the trip and it was this awesome reminder that God is working even when I can't see it.

A second theme centered around being more open to the Holy Spirit in ministry with teenagers. In casual conversations with teenagers, youth leaders expressed greater sensitivity to how God was working in the midst of those conversations. They had more of a willingness to share how God was working in their lives. They shared how they now give more response time during the worship services to give students space to reflect and pray. The youth leaders also mentioned how prevenient grace gives them great encouragement as they prepare to teach. They assert that knowing that God is already working in their lives gives them a great sense of peace as they write their messages. They also mentioned how they are being more intentional in noticing where God is already working

and adjusting as needed. One participant shared about a conversation he had with a student shortly after the workshop:

I remember the Wednesday after we met here, I was talking with a student and I felt a little nudge from God to share about how God is working in my life and that led to a really great conversation with this student. Just being open to God's activity and being responsive to that has really helped even in those casual conversations. I don't have to manufacture anything; I just need to be open to God's work.

The youth leader who leads the youth praise band shared how prevenient grace impacted the way she leads worship with students:

Prevenient grace has helped me step back a little and allow the students to lead more of the worship. Sometimes I can get caught up in everything being perfect musically that I can miss out on teaching the kids about how they can encounter God even in the midst of practice. God is there with us and working even before the worship service and that's really awesome to think about.

A third theme to emerge from the second focus group was creating more space for reflection and dialogue within the student ministry. The youth leaders mentioned how they are teaching less and giving more time for questions and discussion. Youth leaders expressed a desire to give students more opportunities to share about what they are learning and experiencing. One participant stated, "The workshop really changed my emphasis in youth ministry. My goal is not simply to teach them a bunch of things about faith. My goal is to help them be able to talk about their faith and understand it for themselves." Another participant added, "We need to equip and empower students to notice how God is working in their lives and then be able to share that experience with others."

Furthermore, youth leaders are shifting *how* they ask questions. One youth leader said, “Instead of asking, ‘What did you get out of the message today?’ I am now asking, ‘What did God speak to you through the message?’ This is a subtle shift, but I think it’s an important one.” Another leader added, “Speaking about how God is working in my life and helping students do the same has been the greatest game changer for me. I was not doing that near enough.”

Summary of Major Findings

Several major findings emerged based on the analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data. The findings are listed here in summary form and will be further discussed in the next chapter.

1. Prevenient grace enables youth leaders to see the connection between theology and ministry.
2. Prevenient grace places the focus of youth ministry on God’s actions and not on the actions of the youth leaders.
3. Prevenient grace changes the way youth leaders see and relate to students.
4. Prevenient grace places a greater emphasis on student reflection and testimony.

CHAPTER 5

LEARNING REPORT FOR THE PROJECT

Overview of the Chapter

The purpose of the research was to evaluate workshops on John Wesley's theology of prevenient grace and its impact on the ministry of the youth leaders at Frazer United Methodist Church. Current models for youth ministry are not effective in reaching and discipling young people. Results from a 2009 National Study of Youth and Religion indicate an approximate thirty percent drop in weekly religious attendance across multiple Protestant denominations (Snell and Smith 213-214). The same study also revealed most teenagers gravitating toward a belief system called Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. Within this worldview, young people inside the church tend to understand God as good, yet do not see God as directly involved in their lives (Smith and Denton 262).

These trends call for a more effective theologically equipping for youth leaders in order to enhance the discipleship of young people. The hope of the project and research was to see the impact prevenient grace might have in shaping the way the youth leaders think about youth ministry to address the problems noted above. The result of the project and research suggests the following findings.

Major Findings

Prevenient grace enables youth leaders to see the connection between theology and ministry.

The researcher has been involved with student ministry for almost eighteen years. Early on in that ministry, he realized that most youth ministry books were primarily about curriculum, games, and recruiting volunteers and that very few books discussed youth ministry as a theological practice and there were even fewer youth ministry books written from a specifically Wesleyan perspective. In addition, the results from a 2009 National

Study of Youth and Religion sent shock waves through the student ministry world. It became clear that the “How To” books were not helping youth leaders disciple students in ways that were effective long term.

Fortunately, more and more youth leaders are writing about the importance of thinking theologically about youth ministry (See Kenda Creasy Dean and Andrew Root). Too often the practice of ministry has been separated from the theology behind ministry. This research project was an attempt to add to this much needed discussion and to do so from distinctively Wesleyan perspective.

The process of teaching youth leaders about prevenient grace was very helpful. Thinking about youth ministry through the lens of prevenient grace led to some great conversations and new insights about ministry. The discussions were also fun and encouraging. Remembering the numerous ways that God has been active in the youth leaders’ lives and seeking to see how God is working in teenager’s lives, was a reminder of how amazing it is to be in ministry and to partner with God in the spread of God’s grace to others.

As the literature review in Chapter Two suggests, theology and ministry should never be disconnected (Borgman 3; Steele x). Again, Moral Therapeutic Deism is being learned in the church. Thus, the church must rethink how it is teaching and communicating the gospel. The church must step back and think theologically about its ministry to students. John Wesley is a great example of practical theology shaping the practice of ministry. Ministry (praxis) must always aligned with what the church believes (doctrine) about God. Good theology being the foundation for good ministry is supported both by the literature review and in the results of the ministry project.

The Biblical foundation for theology and praxis is seen in the ministry of the early church. Many of the New Testament epistles follow a pattern where the writer discusses doctrine (what Christians believe) and then follows it with a call to certain actions (what Christians should do). Paul's letter to the Romans is a great example of theology leading to praxis. In Romans chapters 1-11, Paul lays out the theological groundwork for unity and reconciliation in the church and then transitions to practical applications of how this unity should be lived out in Romans 12 (Keener *Background Commentary* 448). There is a similar pattern in other epistles like Ephesians and Colossians.

Prevenient grace places the focus of youth ministry on God's actions and not the actions of the youth leaders.

The study of Wesley's prevenient grace has completely reshaped my understanding of ministry. Placing the ministry emphasis on God's activity is critical for longevity in student ministry. When ministry is primarily about me and what I am doing, then it will inevitably lead to either pride or burnout. When the ministry is going well, I will be puffed up by my own performance and work. When the ministry is struggling, I will experience doubt and shame because it's all my fault. Prevenient grace centers ministry in the activity of God. The student ministry is about what God is doing and how I can be attentive and responsive to God's presence as one of the leaders. This approach takes the pressure off. When the ministry is going well, I am simply grateful for what God is doing in our midst. When the ministry is struggling, I seek to understand where God is working and align the ministry accordingly. The ministry is not primarily about me, which protects me from pride and burnout as a result. The other youth leaders who participated in

the project also noted how understanding prevenient grace caused them to be more joyful and grateful in their student ministry leadership.

As noted in the literature review, there is an increasing amount of research discussing the importance of youth leaders being in tune to how God is already working in the lives of young people. The term prevenient grace is not often used, but they are pointing to that exact Wesleyan doctrine. Youth ministry programs should not start with what the youth leaders can create for the students. The first question needs to be, “What is Christ already doing in the lives of teenagers that our leadership can join?” God is already at work in seeking out reconciliation with teenagers. It is not the youth minister’s job to save or transform teenagers, but to join God’s redemptive work (Dean 61; Jacober 149). Youth ministry, in this context, starts with the assumption that God is already working on earth, bringing redemption and the transformation of all creation. The foundation of youth ministry is about paying attention to what God is already doing.

The scriptures, likewise, point to the importance of God’s prior actions as the foundation for ministry and the Christian life. The whole of the biblical story points to God’s redemptive work as being primary. Everything that Christians do is in response to what God has done for them first (Dodds 31). God’s love is the source and foundation for love and service to others. Thus, ministry to students is about being responsive and attentive to God’s redemptive love among young people.

Prevenient grace changes the way youth leaders see and relate to students.

Before my research, I did not consider my relationships with youth as being the place where I meet God’s presence. In fact, as an introvert, I believed that I needed to get away from students in order to seek God’s presence. In one sense, as an introvert, I do

need to be alone in order to refuel spiritually and emotionally. However, in another sense, prevenient grace reminds me that God is present with me in my relationships with teenagers. When we begin to see Jesus in youth, we come to realize that God is already at work in their lives. We realize that all young people carry with them gifts and blessings of their own. We become more perceptive to what a teenager is bringing to us, to what God might be saying or doing through him or her. God's blessings and presence is in these relationships and my faith can increase through these relationships (Root, "Incarnation 105).

Furthermore, prevenient grace has given me greater perseverance when dealing with students who seem difficult or stubborn or where little fruit is being produced in their life. Prevenient grace is a great reminder that God is working in these types of students as well. God's grace is always operating regardless of whether I (or the student) can see it. Prevenient grace gives me hope and encouragement even in the midst of serving troubled youth.

As the literature review pointed out, John Wesley believed God's prevenient grace is given to all people. God is constantly active in the pursuit to redeem humanity. God's love and presence is always working in people's life in order to redeem and sanctify (Langford 20). Thus, Wesley truly believed that the world was his parish. He ministered wherever and to whomever because he believed that all people could be saved and sanctified. Student leaders can have an optimism about student ministry and students themselves because God is working in every person and in every situation.

From the Biblical perspective, in Matthew 25:31-46, Jesus connects relationships with the final judgment. He states that people will be separated into two groups, sheep or

goats. Those who welcomed strangers and have helped those in need have welcomed Jesus himself. In addition, the people who have served “the least of these” will be welcomed into the Kingdom of God. In contrast, those who have rejected “the least of these” have rejected Jesus himself and will consequently be left out of the Kingdom. Thus, a person’s ministry to others, or lack of it, will one day be judged by God. Moreover, this ministry, or lack of it, is experienced by Christ himself. Prevenient grace reminds youth leaders that God is present in the lives of young people. Recognizing this presence in the lives of students provides both the motivation for youth ministry and the ability to sustain it. Every young person is worthy of care because loving them is to love Christ, who is already with them.

Prevenient grace places a greater emphasis on student reflection and testimony.

In my many years of serving students, I have truly enjoyed working with students. I have had the opportunity to see many young people come to Christ and seen many others accept a call into the ministry. I am extremely thankful for my calling. However, the results from the National Study of Youth and Religion published in 2009 was a gut-punch to the student ministry world. While there are exceptions to the findings, the overall research shows that churches are failing in their attempts to disciple young people. The majority of students are exiting the church upon high school graduation. In addition, most young people do not have a belief system that reflects the gospel and many have trouble articulating any belief system at all (Smith and Denton 262).

Through the research project, I have learned that one of the most important things I can do as a leader is to help young people recognize the presence of Christ in their life.

My main job is to help youth notice God's presence in their lives. Prevenient grace is a great reminder that it is God who loved them long before me and it is God who will be with them long after they leave the youth group (Oestreicher 75; Mike Yaconelli 126; Mark Yaconelli 185-191). Thus, I have been much more intentional in giving students opportunities to share their testimony. I do less teaching/lecturing and much more discussion in my discipleship groups.

In the literature review, Drury points out that research shows that when young people are able to identify and articulate God's work in their lives, they are much more likely to have strong faith. She points out that the NSYR study shows that the majority of teenagers not only have an inadequate belief system but also have trouble even speaking about their own faith (Drury 15-16). When asked to articulate their faith, many of the young people interviewed were unable to do so (Smith and Denton 131). Drury then suggests that the church be more intentional in giving young people a vocabulary for their faith. Youth ministers should help students be attentive to God's work around them and through them, knowing that God's prevenient grace is constantly working in their lives and in the lives of others (Drury 219). This sort of awareness develops a rich faith that goes well beyond Moral Therapeutic Deism. Churches need to help young people become aware of God's work and then create space where they can share how God is working in their lives. In addition, youth leaders must exemplify this in their own lives by constantly sharing how God is working in their lives as well. The more youth leaders articulate their own faith and their own growth, the more they will model a vocabulary of faith. In addition, youth leaders should constantly encourage young people to share their stories. Often teenagers do not know how to articulate their faith simply because no one has

asked them about their faith. The importance of allowing young people to testify came up often in the focus group interviews with the youth leader participants. Each leader agreed that the student ministry needs to give more opportunities and formats for students to share what God is teaching them. These opportunities can take place through written testimonies, social media posts, videos, and small group sharing.

In terms of scripture, God's prevenient grace is seen in the ministry of the early church as the disciples spread the good news about Jesus across the world. As noted by scholars like James Dunn and Craig Keener, the early church, as seen in the book of Acts, is empowered, sustained, and directed by God's presence through the Holy Spirit. It is a story of people being led and inspired to do actions far beyond their own ability (Dunn xix; Keener *Acts* 642-662). The leaders in the early church were primarily witnesses to what God has done and is doing through Jesus Christ. They were constantly testifying to what God had done for them and for the world. The early church was obedient and surrendered to where God was working and where God was leading them.

Ministry Implications of the Findings

This research project along with its results provide two implications for student ministry. First, this project contributes to the other studies that are attempting to rethink student ministry through a theological lens. As mentioned in the literature review, several leaders in youth ministry like Kenda Creasy Dean and Andrew Root have already provided great theological reflection over the past few years. This study adds to their work but does so from a specifically Wesleyan perspective. There is not much theological research yet about student ministry from a distinctively Wesleyan point of view. Hopefully,

this study will encourage more research and reflection from youth leaders who are rooted in a Wesleyan heritage.

Second, this research places the central focus of student ministry on God's prior activity and work. Often student ministries simply imitate the programs and ministries of other churches. They repeat the practical suggestions from "how-to" youth ministry books. Certainly, learning from other churches and applying best practices learned from others is good. However, every context and every youth group are different. Thus, it is essential for youth leaders to be attentive to how God is working in their location and in their students. Prevenient grace is the beautiful truth that God is always working for the redemption of people. God is always out front loving others first. Thus, the primary work for youth leaders is to discern God's presence and to partner in what God is already doing. Furthermore, the best way youth leaders can disciple students is to help them be more attentive to God's activity and to give them a vocabulary for describing God's grace in their lives. The shift in student ministry from teaching and lecture to more discussion and testimony will be an important one in the coming years (Drury 10-15).

Limitations of the Study

The hope is this project will be challenging and informative to youth leaders whatever their tradition or location. However, this study focused on 6th-12th grade students living in the United States. As such, the results of the study may not apply to adolescents in other countries who carry different cultural and religious experiences. The challenges and opportunities facing young people may be different in those places. The project should be applicable and helpful for youth leaders in the United States.

Furthermore, the focus of the research project was John Wesley's understanding of prevenient grace because Frazer Church has a Wesleyan heritage due to being a part of the United Methodist Church. Thus, the specific results of the research are more valuable for denominations that also come from a Wesleyan background.

However, even if the culture and theological heritage are similar, those who want to generalize this project will need to consider the fact that this intervention did not use a standard curriculum. The researcher designed the project based on his own research and taught the workshop in a way that was specific for the context. Even if the subject matter is the same, different teachers with different styles may lead to slightly different results.

Nevertheless, the same methodology could be used in a variety of settings. For example, youth leaders from a Lutheran church could create an intervention based on one of Martin Luther's key doctrines as a way of looking at their student ministry through a theological lens. The data and findings will obviously be different but thinking theologically about student ministry in an attempt to better disciple students would be similar in scope.

Unexpected Observations

Most of the unexpected observation came from the focus group interviews. The data in the pre- and post-workshop questionnaires was not surprising. However, the discussions after the workshop and then again six weeks later were illuminating.

First, the youth leaders were very engaged and excited about the research material. It was not clear how much the youth leaders would enjoy discussions about theology and terms like prevenient grace. The workshop was not a normal student ministry semi-

nar or class. However, the youth leaders really enjoyed the workshop and were very engaged in the follow-up interviews. In fact, each leader enjoyed the discussions so much they decided to continue these discussions and reflections on a regular basis. Furthermore, they lamented the fact that they grew up in Methodist Churches, but never learned many of these important truths. Pastors often underestimate people's ability and desire to engage theologically weighty discussions.

Second, the youth leader participants appreciated being given a reflection journal. After the workshop and the first focus group interview, each participant was given a reflection journal in order to document how the workshop changed their approach to student ministry. They were to use the journal for six weeks leading up to the second focus group interview. The researcher's advisor suggested their use, and they ended up being an extremely useful tool for the project. The journals not only helped participants keep up with their reflections, but they also provided a tool that will be used in the future. Each participant, including the researcher, commented on how the journal made them more attentive to God and to their relationships with students.

Recommendations

The purpose of the research was to evaluate workshops on John Wesley's theology of prevenient grace and its impact on the ministry of the youth leaders at Frazer United Methodist Church. The results from the project were encouraging and have helped the youth staff in several different ways. However, there are several recommendations that could possibly enhance the results even more that were outside the scope of this particular project:

1. As noted above, the same methodology used in this project could be used in a variety of theological settings. The leader of the project could examine a theological doctrine that is important in their own faith tradition and use it as a way for their team to reflect theologically on their student ministry. Much of the data would be different from this project, but it would align with the finding that thinking theologically about student ministry is essential in discipling young people.

2. In order to collect more qualitative data, the researcher could provide a written option form in addition to the focus group interviews. The focus group interviews were extremely valuable as they allowed dialogue and discussion that furthered reflection. However, for those who are introverts and may not like voicing their opinion in front of others, a written form would provide an additional place to get feedback and therefore increase the amount of data collected.

3. Researchers who would like to extend beyond this project may want to consider producing a small group format that puts some of these results into practice. The purpose of this project was not to create a new ministry program and then measure the results. However, the next step of this project would be to create student ministries that apply this data to the actual practice of youth ministry. For instance, a student ministry could redesign small group questions that place more of an emphasis on God's actions and ask students to reflect on how God is working in their life. Those who train youth leaders could design a curriculum that helps youth leaders be more attentive to God's presence. The training could spend more time on spiritual disciplines like solitude, sabbath, and centering prayer. Likewise, student ministries may create more space in their ministry programs for silence, reflection, and testimony. Another idea may be to create

a small group curriculum based on Wesley's order of salvation as a method for helping students better articulate their faith journey. There are numerous possibilities in terms of future research directions in student ministry.

Postscript

The journey of completing this research project has been both difficult and rewarding. Completing a project of this length, while also being in full-time ministry and having three young children, has been a challenge to say the least. However, I have truly enjoyed the process, and I have learned many valuable lessons along the way.

First, the research project has taught me the value and necessity of research within the local church. We need more pastors and leaders who are willing to do this difficult work in order to help the mission of the broader church. Most theological research is primarily done in the academy, which is needed and good. I am very thankful for professors who dedicate their vocation to writing and research. However, we also need local pastors to do theological research within the local church. We have a specific context and knowledge that is needed in the broader church. As was the case with John Wesley, pastors can bring a practical theology to the church that enhances both doctrine and mission. Completing this research project gave me the opportunity to contribute in this way and has given me the tools to continue theological research in the local church.

Second, reading John Wesley's writings and spending considerable time studying about prevenient grace has truly changed my own spiritual life. Over the past few years, I have become much more attentive to God's grace and much more reliant on the Holy Spirit. When you really believe that God is always working for good in every situation, it really increases your faith and optimism.

I am not immune to the realities facing the American church. Most denominations are in decline and much of what we are doing in student ministry is not effectively discipling young people. The results from the National Study of Youth and Religion cannot be ignored or dismissed. Drove of young people are walking away from the church, but I do not think they are walking away from God. They are walking away from religious systems that do not work, but I have hope, because we have an alternative and the alternative does not have to be walking away from faith or following the ways of this world. The alternative found in the scriptures and in my own Wesleyan heritage is a spirit-filled, grace-saturated kind of faith. We begin to live a faith that is not about us and what we can do (external regulations), but we begin to live a life that is tapped into God's presence that transforms us from the inside out. We live a faith that no longer revolves around our performance for God, but we live a faith that revolves around God's performance (Christ's work) in us. There is no room now for boasting or condemnation or judgment because we now see all of life as a gift of grace. Prevenient grace reminds us that everything good in us has been brought through Christ in us. Prevenient grace reminds us that God is working and active. God initiates the relationship. God's prior activity is the root cause of every stage in salvation and sanctification (Collins *Holy Love* 40; Maddox *Responsible Grace* 84). Ministry is simply our response and attentiveness to that activity. We gain a new joy because what was once a tired, defeated, superficial Christian life has now become an actual relationship with God, walking with him, knowing him, and experiencing his presence each and every day.

APPENDIXES

A. Letter for Expert Review

B. Ministry Intervention Documents

C. Ethical Considerations

APPENDIX A

Letter for Expert Review

Reverend Brandon Dasinger
Doctoral Candidate
Asbury Theological Seminary
Wilmore, Kentucky 40390

School Address:
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Local address:
3843 Marie Cook Drive
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Dear _____

I am Doctor of Ministry student at Asbury Theological Seminary. The topic of my dissertation is: *Grace that Goes Before: John Wesley's Doctrine of Prevenient Grace and its Significance for Youth Ministry*. The purpose of this study is to evaluate workshops on John Wesley's theology of prevenient grace and its impact on the ministry of the youth leaders at Frazer United Methodist Church. My research questions have been approved by my Dissertation Committee. They are:

Research Question #1

What did the youth leadership know about prevenient grace and its significance for ministry before the workshop?

Research Question #2

What did the youth leadership know about prevenient grace and its significance for ministry after the workshop?

Research Question #3

What were the significant influences from the workshop that most impacted the youth leaders in terms of leading their ministry area?

The dissertation project is using two researcher-designed instruments to collect data. The project includes the key leaders of the youth ministry and will use a mixed-method approach. The project is an intervention that will use pre and post assessment questionnaires along with post-assessment focus groups. Before using the questionnaires and focus group questions, I am in need of an expert review. I am asking you to serve as one of my reviewers. I have included a copy of the abstract of my dissertation proposal. The questionnaire and focus group questions are included in this document. Please evaluate these documents using the evaluation forms located directly after the documents. You are certainly free to share any narrative that you wish. Please return the evaluation by email or mail as soon as you can. Thank you very much for your help!

Sincerely,

Brandon Wilson Dasinger
Doctor of Ministry Candidate
Asbury Theological Seminary

ABSTRACT

Student Ministry has advanced in many ways over the past couple of decades. There are more theological degrees that focus on youth ministry and there are more theologically trained youth ministers than ever before. However, recent research shows the church is largely failing in its attempts to disciple young people:

- The majority of teenagers who have spent years attending church activities [have not integrated their faith] into who they are and how they live. (Barna, 2003).
- Religious congregations and communities of faith in the United States are failing in religiously engaging and educating youth. Most young people have a view of God that is not consistent with the Scriptures. (Smith, 2004)
- Emerging adults' religious beliefs have little connection to their religious training in childhood and adolescence. (Arnett, 2004).
- The levels of disconnection among twentysomethings suggest that youth ministry fails too often at discipleship and spiritual formation. The discipleship they receive in their youth ministries is not sticking with them once they leave for college. (Kinnaman, 2006).

This study challenges youth leaders to rethink their approach to youth ministry based on John Wesley's theology of prevenient grace. The challenges facing youth ministry and an understanding of Wesley's prevenient grace were garnered from the literature review. The information from the literature will then be taught and discussed during a series of workshops with the youth leaders at Frazer United Methodist Church. The youth leaders will take what they learned in their workshops and apply them to their current ministries with students. Employing a pre- and post youth ministry questionnaire as well as a focus group interviews will gather the data necessary to see the impact of the workshop.

APPENDIX B

Ministry Intervention Documents

Youth Ministry Pre- and Post-Workshop Questionnaire

Please rank the following skills for youth ministry in order of importance, where 1 is the least important and 5 is the most important.

Rank 1-5

- A. The ability to relate and connect to teenagers _____
- B. The ability to study theology and apply it to youth ministry _____
- C. The ability to select and teach biblical curriculum _____
- D. The ability to equip and communicate with volunteers and parents _____
- E. The administrative ability to construct programs and navigate media _____

Use the following scale for the next set of questions:

- 4 = Very Confident
- 3 = Confident
- 2 = Somewhat Confident
- 1 = Not Confident

F. I have a good understanding of teenagers and how to minister to them. _____

G. I feel confident in being able to offer counseling and care to teenagers. ____

H. I have a good understanding of theology and how it applies to youth ministry. ____

I. I feel confident in the crafting of programs, games, and events for the youth ministry.

J. I have a good understanding of our Methodist history and Wesleyan theology. ____

K. I have confidence in my ability in teaching the Bible to students. ____

Short Answer Questions:

L. If you were describing God's nature, what would you highlight?

M. What is theology? How does theology inform the way we practice youth ministry?

N. How would you describe the nature and practice of youth ministry? What is the main role and responsibilities of a youth leader/staff?

Focus Group Interview 1
(Conducted Directly After the Workshop)

1. What did you learn from the workshop that you did not know before?

2. Can you identify any changes in your thinking about youth ministry after the workshop?

3. What are some ways we can apply Wesley's understanding of prevenient grace to the way we practice youth ministry here at Frazer Church?

4. What was it you found most useful about the workshop?

5. What is one thing you might change about the workshop?

Focus Group Interview 2
(Conducted Six Weeks after the Workshop)

1. Have you noticed any changes in your own youth leadership in the month since the workshop? If so, what changes?

2. Has an understanding of Wesley's prevenient grace had an impact on your preparation and teaching? youth ministry at Frazer Church? If so, how?

3. Did the workshop change the way you relate and minister to students in the youth ministry? If so, how? If not, why?

APPENDIX C

Ethical Considerations

Informed Consent Letter

Grace that Goes Before: John Wesley's Doctrine of Prevenient Grace and its Significance for Youth Ministry

You are invited to be in a research study being done by Brandon Dasinger from the Asbury Theological Seminary. You are invited because you are one of the key youth leaders in the student ministry at Frazer United Methodist Church. The purpose of this study is to evaluate workshops on John Wesley's theology of prevenient grace and its impact on the ministry of the youth leaders at Frazer United Methodist Church.

If you agree to be in the study, you will be asked to attend a one-hour workshop that will include pre-workshop questionnaire and a post-workshop questionnaire. The questionnaires will only take about 10-15 minutes. Following the post-workshop questionnaire, there will be a 10-minute break with snacks and then a 45 minute focus group. The entire program will require two and half-hours. In addition, there will be another focus group six weeks after the focus that will also be 45 minutes. The workshop and focus groups will take place in Brandon Dasinger's office.

The focus group interviews will be recorded. However, the dialogue will be transcribed and coded for data in a way that all comments will be anonymous. The pre and post-workshop questionnaires will use ID numbers and will be anonymous as well. The recordings and questionnaires will be kept in a locked safe and then destroyed at the conclusion of the research project.

If something makes you feel uncomfortable in any way while you are in the study, please tell Brandon Dasinger who can be reached at bdasinger@frazer.church. You can refuse to respond to any or all of the questions, and you will be able to withdrawal from the process at any time. If you have any questions about the research study please contact Brandon Dasinger at bdasinger@frazer.church.

Signing this paper means that you have read this or had it read to you, and that you want to be in the study. If you do not want to be in the study, do not sign the paper. Being in the study is up to you, and no one will be mad if you do not sign this paper or even if you change your mind later. You agree that you have been told about this study and why it is being done and what to do.

Signature of Person Agreeing to be in the Study_____

Date Signed_____

Confidentiality Agreement for use with Transcription Services

Research Study Title: Grace That Goes Before
Principle Researcher: Reverend Brandon Dasinger

1. We, Go Transcript, agree to maintain full confidentiality of all research data received from the research team related to this research study.
2. I will hold in strictest confidence the identity of any individual that may be revealed during the transcription of interviews or in any associated documents.
3. I will not make copies of any audio-recordings, video-recordings, or other research data, unless specifically requested to do so by the researcher.
4. I will not provide the research data to any third parties without the client's consent.
5. I will store all study-related data in a safe, secure location as long as they are in my possession. All video and audio recordings will be stored in an encrypted format.
6. All data provided or created for purposes of this agreement, including any back-up records, will be returned to the research team or permanently deleted. When I have received confirmation that the transcription work I performed has been satisfactorily completed, any of the research data that remains with me will be returned to the research team or destroyed, pursuant to the instructions of the research team.

Transcriber's name (printed)

Transcriber's signature _____

Date _____

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