Mentoring the Next Generation in Our Churches: A Call to Christian Citizenship

Gary L. Welton Ph.D., Kevin S. Seybold Ph.D., Joseph J. Horton Ph.D.

Abstract

A four-year longitudinal study found small significant declines in religiosity among conservative teens and emerging adults. The decline was present in all measures of religiosity, including public, private, and intrinsic religiosity. A series of hierarchical regression analyses suggested that the decline could be explained in part by identity commitment and social capital. The social capital results were linked to both social interactions and shared values, and were seen primarily in terms of relationships with significant adults. The results suggest a need for more intentional investment in social relationships with the next generation.

Is the American church losing the next generation? Is there a massive secularization in America, or is religiosity stable among American teens and emerging adults?

A leading analysis of cultural change in the religious faith of American youth and emerging adults has been conducted by Smith and his colleagues (Smith, 2005, 2009). From interviews with hundreds of randomly selected teens and emerging adults, he has concluded that there is no massive secularization movement in America (Smith, 2009). The notion of massive religious decline among emerging adults is termed a myth that must be dispelled. Certainly there are individual changes that occur, but religious continuity is stronger than religious shift or decline (Putnam & Campbell, 2010). Very rarely do teens at one extreme of religious faith (or non-faith) move to the other extreme (Hood, Hill, & Spilka, 2009).

Others, however, have observed marked increases in the percentage of teens and young adults who have no religious affiliation (Putnam & Campbell, 2010). Zuckerman (2012) concluded that the recent increase in the number of Americans who eschew religion is one of the most important trends on the American religious scene. In contrast to Smith's (2009) conclusion, he stated that secularity among young Americans has skyrocketed, and that when individuals make such a change, it almost always occurs during the teen or early adult years. Putnam and Campbell (2010), however, concluded that very few of these people who do not identify with any religious tradition actually refer to themselves as atheists or agnostics; instead, many of them say that religion is important in their lives.

How should we understand these divergent claims of Smith (2009) and Zuckerman (2012)? Putnam (2000; Putnam & Campbell, 2010) concluded that declines in religiosity tend to be in the middle of the theological spectrum. There are growing numbers at both ends (the most orthodox and the most secular), but a collapse in the middle. If those with little faith are moving toward no faith, and those with moderate faith are moving toward higher faith, then the overall average might remain fairly constant, while the standard deviation would increase.

Nevertheless, whether there is a large secularization trend, as suggested by Zuckerman (2012), or not, as suggested by Smith (2009), there is evidence that the trend line is in a downward direction. Even Smith (2005) recognized modest drops in religiosity between the ages of 13 and 17. This small decline is consistent with various reviews (Hood et al., 2009; Ozorak, 1989). Stoppa and Lefkowitz (2010) suggested that these declines tend to represent declines in public religiosity, such as decreased service attendance, but that intrinsic religiosity and importance of religiosity tend to resist such declines. Smith (2009) supported this analysis,

indicating that the practice of religion generally declines from the teen to the emerging adults years, but that this decline does not seem to threaten their overall sense of being religious.

Hood et al. (2009) indicated that the majority of people who drop out of the church do so between the ages of 16 and 25, and that this occurs across denominations, including Catholics, Presbyterians, Mormons, and broader religious groupings. Putnam and Campbell (2010), however, concluded that evangelicals have done a better job of keeping their offspring in the family's religious tradition.

Others have warned against making too much of such religious declines during the teen and emerging adult years, as such declines are somewhat counterbalanced by an increase in religiosity that often accompanies marriage and parenthood (Hood et al., 2009; Stolzenberg, Blair-Loy, & Waite, 1995).

Influences on Religious Stability and Decline

To the extent that declines in religiosity are occurring, it behooves us to understand the dynamics involved in such declines, because religiosity predicts many positive outcomes. The research evidence suggests that those teens who are more religiously active make better choices (Smith, 2005), score higher on sense of purpose, gratitude, locus of control, and life satisfaction (Smith, 2009), have better family relationships (Mahoney, Pargament, Tarakeshwar, & Swank, 2001), and better fulfill norms of civic responsibility (Graham & Haidt, 2010; Putnam, 2000; Putnam & Campbell, 2010).

The Role of Parents

The first key to understanding the religiosity of children, teens, and emerging adults is to consider their parents as a source of influence. It is not surprising that parents are the single most important source of religious influence (King, Furrow, & Roth, 2002), whether you are

evaluating children (Zuckerman, 2012), high school students, or college students (Ozorak, 1989). Ozorak concluded that 60% of the variance in the religious beliefs and practices of high school students was accounted for by the parental level of religious participation. Although this represents a very large effect size, it is clear that teens do not always reflect the beliefs of their parents. It has been suggested that when parents use a more authoritative style of parenting, communicating more warmth and support, then the intergenerational transmission of religious beliefs is stronger (Assor, Cohen-Malayev, Kaplan, & Friedman, 2005). Religiously devoted teens and emerging adults have noticeably better relationships with their parents. The causal relationship is likely reciprocal, as relationships affect religiosity, and religiosity affects relationships (Smith, 2009). In particular, stable parent-teen relationships predict more religious stability (Assor et al., 2005; Ozorak, 1989; Smith, 2009).

Authoritative parenting also supports the basic psychological needs of autonomy and competence, which facilitate identity formation (Desrosiers, Kelley, & Miller, 2011) and the internalizing of values which are often consistent with parental values (Assor et al., 2005). Authoritative parents serve as facilitators of spiritual development by offering spiritual support throughout the adolescent identity process (Desrosiers et al., 2011). Such parents provide a critical cognitive anchor (Ozorak, 1989) and encourage critical religious thinking and exploration (Assor et al., 2005). Hence, teens with authoritative parents are better able to develop a mature sense of commitment to various roles and values, and consequently, establish a mature identity. Overall, decades of research have verified that parental influence is one of the most important (or perhaps the singular most important) determinant of religious or irreligious identity (Zuckerman, 2012).

The Role of Peers

Yet parenting is not the entire story. The social context of our lives also includes both peer influence and the role of other adults. One factor that potentially impacts peer influence is attending a religious high school. This school setting would increase the likelihood of establishing friendships with religious peers. Smith (2009) found, however, that attending a religious high school was not an important predictor of religious internalization.

As teens mature, it is natural that direct parental influence will decrease as peer influence increases. Gunnoe and Moore (2002) found that for 17 to 22 year olds, peer influence was a better predictor of religiosity than parental influence, but the variables were measured retrospectively, and might indicate more about teenage assumptions rather than actual influences. Other research demonstrated that the decline of religious service attendance attributable to age disappeared when controlling for the friends' attendance patterns (Regnerus, Smith, & Smith, 2004).

The Role of Other Adults

Non-family adults also play critical roles. Smith (2009) argued that it is virtually impossible for those religious teens without religious parents to maintain religious stability unless they have the presence of other adults for help and support. Some are able to work through religious struggles, but only when there is at least one other adult who can help overcome problems and obstacles. They need at least one stable, loving, mature adult who cares and who will not give up on them. Strong personal relationships with adults are critical.

The Role of Identity Formation

Using Erikson's model of the adolescent identity process (1968), Marcia (2002) concluded that identity achievement requires that an individual work through an exploration or

questioning period (termed the identity crisis), and then develop a commitment to certain career choices, values, ideals, and beliefs (Assor et al., 2005). This model has been related to the development of a religious identity, as an individual makes a critical examination of beliefs and establishes a set of internalized autonomous values and beliefs (Hood et al., 2009).

Marcia's (2002) development of Erikson's model assumes that it is a healthy process to explore and question one's beliefs. This is supported by Ozorak (1989), who found that youth who engaged in more questioning were more orthodox in their religious beliefs, engaged in more personal religious activities, and rated themselves higher on religiousness. Most research, however, has not found any relationship (positive or negative) between this exploration process and religious identity achievement (Hunsberger, Pratt, & Pancer, 2001).

In contrast to the analysis of crisis, the concept of commitment has been more fully supported by theory and research, with most literature suggesting that high commitment levels are associated with more religious stability (Hood et al., 2009; Hunsberger et al., 2001; Neyrinck, Vansteenkiste, Lens, Duriez, & Hutsebaut, 2006; Smith, 2009).

Ironically, the values and beliefs of the identity achieved individually tend to be very similar to those of one's parents, especially when the values and beliefs relate to internal religiosity, though not always in religious practice (Smith, 2009). Putnam and Campbell (2010) suggested that religion is as much about identity as about faith.

Assor et al. (2005) suggested that identity achievement tends to be associated with religiosity, and thus, can be treated as a remote indicator of religious internalization and integration. Zuckerman (2012), however, argued that identity commitment could take the form of an apostasy-based identity rather than a faith-based identity. This argument is not supported by Putnam and Campbell (2010), who noted that most Americans who indicate they are not

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affiliated with any religious tradition still indicate that religion is important in their lives. Also, Hood et al. (2009) concluded that apostates should not be seen as a homogeneous group; although some might have an apostasy-based identity, others are exhibiting a moratorium state of rebellion against parents or other aspects of society.

Identity status has often been measured with the Objective Measure of Ego Identity Status (Adams, Bennion, & Huh, 1989). The full version includes 64 items, but eight of these directly measure identity status in a religious realm. Hood et al. (2009) suggested that identity status measures used in religiosity research should not be contaminated by questions that ask explicitly about religion. Hunsberger et al. (2001) used only 24 items from this scale, but this shorter scale had low reliability.

Finally, it should be noted that Erikson's concept of identity is rooted in Western individualism. Hence, results that deal with identity development should not necessarily be generalized beyond individualistic societies. Note, however, that one of these reviewed studies (Assor et al., 2005) summarized data collected in Israel and another (Neyrinck et al., 2006) summarized data collected in Belgium.

The Role of Social Capital

As just reviewed, there has been a fair amount of research on the impact of identity achievement on religiosity. In contrast, there has been less research focus on the matter of social context and how social relationships impact religiosity and religious stability (Regnerus et al., 2004), though some data have been published (King et al., 2002). In Zuckerman's (2012) analysis of apostasy, he assumed that social context is a powerful aspect of religious stability. He noted that the rejection of religion can involve the loss of one's community and one's personal relationships with both family and friends.

Social capital refers to the connections and networks among individuals (Putnam, 2000) and the norms of trust and reciprocity that arise out of these social networks (Putnam & Campbell, 2010). These networks provide the linkages which add value and productivity to our lives. Although social networks exist in all areas of life, more Americans are involved in a religious congregation than in any other type of association, group, or club.

Social capital stands in marked contrast to the extreme individualism of Western society. The modern American often leaves the greater society to look after itself. The young worker thinks primarily of self. Putnam (2000) claims that we are experiencing the cult of the individual. Smith (2009) suggests that the observed decline in religiosity parallels a general decline in our social and institutional concerns and involvements.

Of all the dimensions on which forms of social capital vary, perhaps the most important is the distinction between bonding and bridging (Putnam, 2000). Bonding describes strong social ties with a small number of intimate friends. Bonding, at its worst, involves the development of cliques; at its best, bonding involves family care and compassion. Bridging, by contrast, involves weaker ties with a large number of distant acquaintances. At its best, bridging provides networks for finding new jobs and needed resources. Bridging and bonding are valuable in different situations and contexts. Bonding is more likely to get you the care package in the mail; bridging is more likely to help you find the new job. Both types provide for a richer life.

Putnam's (2000) book was a lament for the decline of social capital at the end of the 20th century. He suggested, however, that conservative churches (along with their conservative counterparts among Jewish and other traditions) represented one of the most notable exceptions to the general decline in social capital. Religious congregations provide adherents with readily available social networks (Zuckerman, 2012). Putnam (2000) argued that this religious

membership encouraged bridging rather than just bonding, by concluding that membership in religious groups is closely associated with other forms of civic engagement. He went on to conclude that religious people were unusually active social capitalists; religiously involved individuals simply knew more people; their bridging networks were larger. Religious people tended to experience better or higher levels of well-being than nonreligious people because of the social communal aspects of religious involvement.

Putnam (2000) suggested that social capital is the single most powerful predictor of life satisfaction. Some have suggested that social capital is a primary means (or perhaps *the* primary means) by which religious people experience health benefits (Hood et al., 2009; Putnam, 2000; Seybold & Hill, 2001). Oman and Thoresen (2003) suggested that the effectiveness of twelve-step programs is primarily due to their provision of spiritual social support.

Laser and Leibowitz (2009) described two aspects of social capital: social interaction and shared values. In a church setting, social interaction represents the functional community of the church in which church relationships foster community links, social support, and social activities. Shared values represent the substantive element which is the core system of beliefs and practices (Mahoney et al., 2001).

Although both social interactions and shared values provide potential benefits, most research suggests that the social interactions are more important than the shared values, essentially claiming that the benefits of religiosity are primarily due to the social structure of the church (Putnam & Campbell, 2010). Regnerus (2003) concluded that the most influential aspect in curbing drug and alcohol abuse was public religiosity rather than private religiosity. Graham and Haidt (2010) concluded that 1) social networks played a larger role than religious beliefs in explaining why religious people gave more money to charity; 2) frequency of church attendance

predicted health outcomes whereas depth of religious belief did not; 3) attendance at communal worship services was a better predictor for attitudes and behaviors than individual practices such as prayer; and 4) shared social practice was a more important determinant of religious conversions than specific beliefs. Putman (2000) noted that the frequency of church attendance was one of the strongest predictors of whether inner-city youths would become gainfully employed; the youth's religious beliefs had almost no impact. He concluded that social ties embodied in religious communities were at least as important as the beliefs per se. These results suggest that connectedness, not merely faith, is responsible for the benefits that are experienced by religious people.

This paper will test whether religious decline in conservative teens and emerging adults, over a four-year time frame, can be predicted on the basis of school venue (public vs. private), identity achievement, and social capital. Of particular interest is the question, does social capital provide a unique contribution to predicting religious decline above and beyond what can be predicted by school venue and identity achievement? In addition, this paper will try to pull apart the importance of various aspects of social capital. Are social interactions more critical than shared values? Also, is there a difference among the three domains of social capital relationships: parents, friends, and other adults?

Method

Participants

A convenience sample (N = 237) of 7th and 10th grade participants was generated in 2005-06, using four strategies. The first group (N = 68) was recruited from the local public school. The second group (N = 59) was recruited through three Catholic middle schools and one Catholic high school located within our county. The third group (N = 14) included public school

students who were recruited in an adjacent county, using newspaper advertisements. The fourth group (N = 96) was recruited from home school email contacts in our four-state area. Participants were compensated for their participation.

Participants were surveyed again two years later (N = 224), but these results are not included in this analysis. Of relevance to this report, a third survey (N = 191) was completed in 2009-10, four years after the original data collection. At this time, the participants were either in their second year beyond high school or else in 11th grade. This sample included 56 students from the local public school sample, 34 students from the Catholic school sample, 13 students from the newspaper recruits, and 88 students from the home school sample. All reasonable efforts were made in the follow-up surveys to contact all members of the original sample.

The younger cohort group included 54 females and 41 males. The older cohort group included 55 females and 41 males.

This sample represents a convenience sample of rather conservative families. Although some were nonreligious, and some were of minority status, the convenience sample largely reflects the conservative white protestant and Catholic population of Western Pennsylvania. As a result, this paper does not seek to generalize about American teens, but seeks rather to explore hypotheses about conservative American families.

Measures

Religiosity. Participant religiosity was measured using the same items in the two surveys. Public religiosity was measured using a single item from the Duke University Religion Index (Koenig, Parkerson, & Meador, 1997), which asked about frequency of attending religious services. Students responded using a six-point scale from 1 (*Never*) to 6 (*More than once a week*), but all scales were later rescaled to a five-point range for the sake of consistency.

Private religiosity was also measured using a single item from the Duke University Religion Index (Koenig et al., 1997), which asked about frequency of private religious activities, such as prayer, meditation, or study of Scripture. Students responded using a six-point scale from 1 (*Rarely or never*) to 6 (*More than once a day*).

Intrinsic religiosity was measured using the ten items of the Intrinsic Religious Motivation Scale (Hoge, 1972). Students responded using a five-point scale from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly agree*). The three measures of religiosity were averaged to form a general measure of religiosity.

School venue. Students were coded as having attended a public school or a private school (Catholic or home school) at the time of the first survey. Although not all home school participants were from religious families, most of them were (N = 84 of 88); therefore, the private school group primarily represents a faith-based education.

Crisis and commitment. Ego identity status was assessed in the 2010 survey using the Objective Measure of Ego Identity Status (Adams et al., 1989). Students responded using a six-point scale from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 6 (*Strongly agree*). In the first step, responses were averaged to generate scores for identity diffusion, foreclosure, moratorium, and identity achievement. In the second step, crisis scores were generated by summing moratorium and achievement scores, and subtracting diffusion and foreclosure scores. Commitment scores were generated by summing foreclosure and achievement scores, and subtracting diffusion and moratorium scores.

Social capital. Social capital was assessed in the 2010 survey using items that focused on both social interactions and shared values. Social interactions were measured using modified versions (King, 2001; King & Furrow, 2004) of the Family-Child Shared Activity Scale and the

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Communication Scale (Furstenberg, Cook, Eccles, Elder, & Sameroff, 1999). Seven core items about frequency of social interactions were repeated three times, once in reference to one's parents, again in reference to one's closest friends, and finally in reference to other significant adults. These were assessed on a five-point scale from 1 (*Almost never*) to 5 (*Most every day*).

Items assessing shared values were adapted (King, 2001; King & Furrow, 2004) from a subscale of the American Institutes for Research's Community Assessment Instrument (Royal & Rossi, 1996). Eight core items about the similarity of goals, values, and beliefs were repeated three times, once in reference to one's parents, again in reference to one's closest friends, and finally in reference to other significant adults. These were assessed on a five-point scale from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly agree*).

Results

There were no significant main effects for gender on the measures of religiosity in 2006, 2010, or in religiosity change. Likewise there were no interactions between gender and cohort group. Thus, the gender variable will not be reported or discussed. This is consistent with Putnam and Campbell (2010).

The mean religiosity score in 2006 was 3.85 (*sd* = 0.93); the mean religiosity score in 2010 was 3.57 (*sd* = 1.12). This decline of -0.28 is statistically significant (repeated measures $t(190) = 5.32, p < .001$). This decline represents a small effect size, *Cohen's d* = 0.38. In absolute terms, the decline was somewhat steeper for the older cohort group (change from $M = 3.88$ to 3.50) than the younger group (change from $M = 3.81$ to 3.63), but the interaction did not achieve statistical significance, multivariate $F(1,189) = 3.52, p = .062$. This trend suggests that the decline might be steeper for one group than the other, but does not threaten the interpretation of

the main effect, because both trend lines are in the same direction. The nonsignificant

interaction, therefore, will not be discussed or interpreted.

The decline in religiosity was significant in all three measured domains of religiosity. In

public religiosity, the change was -0.49, repeated measures $t(190) = 6.82$, $p < .001$; *Cohens's d =*

0.49. In private religiosity, the change was -0.23, repeated measures $t(190) = 2.57$, $p = .011$;

Cohens's d = 0.19. In intrinsic religiosity, the change was -0.12, repeated measures $t(190) =$

2.40, $p = .017$; *Cohens's d =* 0.17.

The decline in religiosity was present in both the private and public school samples, but

was steeper in the public school sample. The decline in the private school sample was from $M =$

4.11 to 3.92; the decline in the public school sample was from $M = 3.38$ to 2.95, multivariate

$F(1,189) = 4.99$, $p = .027$. Once again, the nature of this interaction does not threaten the

interpretation of the main effect, because both trend lines are in the same direction.

A series of hierarchical regression analyses were conducted to determine which variables

predicted 2010 levels of religiosity. The first variable entered into the equation in all cases was

the 2006 religiosity variable. Because religiosity is fairly constant over time, it is not surprising

that 2006 religiosity is a significant predictor of 2010 religiosity, representing a large effect size

(see Table 1). Using the 2006 measure of religiosity as a control variable statistically equates the

youth on their preexisting levels of religiosity; consequently, all subsequent predictor variables

will be focusing on the change in religiosity level from 2006 to 2010. Which variables predict

the decline of religiosity?

The next variable entered into the model represented a private vs. public school venue.

This was a significant predictor, adding 1.9% predictability to the model. The sign of the

regression coefficient indicates that students who received a private school education declined less in their religiosity.

The next variables entered (simultaneously) into the model were the measures of crisis ($M = 3.32$, $sd = 0.25$) and commitment ($M = 3.17$, $sd = 0.33$), to assess the role of identity development in religiosity. The experience of crisis did not significantly predict religious change. The experience of commitment, however, did increase the predictability of the model by 2.7%. Those who evidenced commitment (as measured in nonreligious domains) tended to have less decline of religiosity. To more precisely test Erikson's (1968) model, which suggests that the combination of experiencing crisis and achieving commitment represents an achieved identity, the interaction of the two variables was added to the model. The interaction term did not significantly improve the predictability. As a result, the interaction term was dropped from subsequent analyses. The model 1 analyses were repeated three times, using public religiosity, private religiosity, and intrinsic religiosity measures rather than using the global measure of religiosity. The pattern of significant and nonsignificant results for each domain was the same pattern as reported for the global measure.

Model 2 dropped the interaction term from the model and added global social capital ($M = 2.99$, $sd = 0.42$) as a predictor. This variable significantly improved the predictability of the model by 4.4%. Individuals who perceived higher levels of social capital had less of a decline in their religiosity. This same finding was observed when applied to public, private, and intrinsic religiosity measures.

In order to assess whether the impact of social capital depended on its being centered in parents ($M = 3.19$, $sd = 0.58$), friends ($M = 3.17$, $sd = 0.51$), or other adults ($M = 2.60$, $sd = 0.52$), model 3 removed the global measure of social capital and instead simultaneously entered

variables that represented social capital resting in these three domains. The use of this model, social capital that focused on friends did not improve the predictability of the model. Social capital resting in other adults did significantly improve the predictability of the model, such that those indicating a larger social capital resting in other adults evidenced less religious decline. The parent variable indicated a nonsignificant trend in the same direction. This pattern of results for friends and other adults was replicated in the analysis of public, private, and intrinsic religiosity. The trend for the parent variable was statistically significant for the measure of intrinsic religiosity ($p = .002$), but not for the measures of public ($p = .28$) or private ($p = .20$) religiosity.

In order to assess whether the impact of social capital depended on the social interactions ($M = 2.31$, $sd = 0.46$) or the shared values ($M = 3.66$, $sd = 0.52$), model 4 removed the global measure of social capital from model 2 and instead simultaneously entered variables that represented social interactions and shared values. Using this model, both aspects significantly improved the predictability of the model, such that those indicating more frequent social interactions and those indicating more shared values evidenced less religious decline. This pattern of results was replicated in the analysis of public, private, and intrinsic religiosity.

Discussion

Smith (2005) called for more research on teen religiosity, research using different techniques and perspectives, to achieve a more complete understanding. This study focused in greater depth on several potential predictors of religious decline and stability. This work replicates many of his findings and takes some perspectives and analyses in new directions. King et al. (2002) suggested that the particulars of social capital need to be broken apart to ascertain which aspects are most critical. This research has answered that call.

Using a conservative sample of teens and emerging adults, this study finds little evidence of massive secularization, but nevertheless finds some cause for concern about subtle declines in religiosity. The trend line is down. Although the decline is more pronounced in public religiosity than in private or intrinsic religiosity, the pattern of results was consistent across the various measures of religiosity.

Although Smith (2009) indicated that attending a religious school was not important for the internalization of religious beliefs, these data indicate that religious stability increases when students participate in faith-based schooling. Faith-based schooling does seem to reduce the amount of religious decline.

The measure of crisis was not a significant predictor of religious stability or decline. This might be seen as an indication that parents need not fear the questioning process of their teens, as this questioning process is not predictive of religious decline. Another interpretation is that the types of questioning used by teens vary in important ways, ways not assessed in this study.

This inconsistence and absence of findings associated with the exploration stage might be due to the failure to recognize that not all questioning is of equal merit or benefit. In fact, it may be that most questioning is a subjective process in which individuals unconsciously or subconsciously seek to verify their preexisting conceptions. This self-verification strategy has been documented in the field of social psychology (Brooks, Swann, & Mehta, 2011). This approach suggests that people often seek to confirm their existing concepts rather than objectively seek new information which might challenge their conceptions of the self.

Hunsberger et al. (2001) suggested that this exploration process can involve two very different approaches, termed belief-confirming consultation and belief-threatening consultation. In belief-confirming consultation, individuals seek out sources that would be likely to confirm

their personal conceptions, using a self-verification approach. Using a belief-confirming approach, those with a more spiritual perspective would tend to seek spiritual answers, and those with a more secular perspective would tend to seek secular answers. In belief-threatening consultation, individuals seek out sources that could potentially threaten their personal conceptions and cause a healthy disequilibrium. The mature exploration, as discussed by Erikson (1968), assumes that individuals are engaged in a more objective approach that allows for both belief-confirming and belief-threatening consultation. Theoretically, this is the sort of exploration that would result in a mature identity achievement.

Assor et al. (2005) provided a parallel analysis of this questioning process. They distinguished between a cognitive questioning and an emotive questioning, approaches that are very different in process and consequence. A cognitive questioning process involves synthesis and integration, and results in identity achievement. Emotive questioning is often unsystematic and simplistic, resulting in an extended moratorium. Although this is a somewhat different analysis than that of Hunsberger et al. (2001), the two perspectives are not antithetical. They both suggest that theory and research need to do a better job of analyzing the type of exploration or questioning that is being used.

It would be useful to research these different types of questioning strategies that teens use, and ascertain whether some of them are predictive of religious decline, whereas others might be predictive of religious stability. What is the impact of using a belief-confirming approach rather than a belief-threatening approach? What is the difference between an emotion-based questioning and a cognitive-based questioning?

The commitment measure in this study asked about occupational choice, politics, philosophy, friendship choices, dating, sex roles, and recreation (Adams et al., 1989). Even

though the questions focused on these seven different themes, the measure had reasonable reliability, and was a significant predictor of religious stability. Although many have warned that commitment levels can be quite different in various content domains (Hood et al., 2009), the consistency and unity of the construct comes through in this particular application. Those who have achieved a commitment level in nonreligious areas seem to be more stable in the religious areas of their lives.

Social connections within a congregation provide people with a means of connecting with one another, motivating them to return. This reinforces and stabilizes their beliefs (Putnam & Campbell, 2010). The social capital results of this study emphasize the important role of other adults in the religious lives of our teens and emerging adults. The social capital associated with friends was predictive of neither religious decline nor stability. Instead, the role of other adults seems to be most critical. Although the parent variable did not always achieve statistical significance, this result might be due to the nature of the analysis. The impact of parents is likely rather consistent during the childhood and teen years. Whatever impact parents have, therefore, is likely already important at the time of the first measure of religiosity. Thus, when the first measure of religiosity is held constant, much of the parent impact is being partialled out of the equation.

Although some have argued and provided evidence that the church's primary impact depends upon social relationships rather than core beliefs, these data paint a different picture. According to these results it is both social interactions and shared beliefs that predict religious stability. In fact, it is likely that social capital works best only when these two aspects are kept in balance. If the focus becomes one of social interactions without the core beliefs, then the church loses its *raison d'être*. If the focus is on shared values without the social interactions, then the

church easily becomes legalistic, uncompassionate, and can appear to be irrelevant. It is only when social interactions and shared values are kept in balance that the church remains a vital and vibrant religious institution.

To the extent that social interactions and shared values with other adults enable religious stability, adults in the church need to be very active in conversing, modeling, interacting, and investing in the next generation. To the extent that this does not happen, we should expect that teens will experience more religious decline. Every generation experiences its own challenge of teaching and leading the next generation. Social capital, as experienced with adults in the church, is an essential element of strengthening the church in the next generation.

Based upon these results, there would seem to be three problematic trends in the modern church that erode the potential stabilizing benefits of social capital. First, some families worship alone, using a house church model. Second, others frequently switch churches, moving frequently from one congregation to another (Putnam, 2000). Third, many churches segregate their youth, developing so many youth programs that there is little opportunity for social interaction between the youth and the adults. These practices limit the development and benefits of social capital.

One of the strengths of this study is the 4-year longitudinal design. It would be a valuable exercise to return to these individuals as young adults and continue to test their religious stability.

In addition to the need for more research on the crisis and questioning process, research on religious stability and decline needs to be repeated in other cultures. The findings relating to commitment and identity might be unique to Western societies. It would be instructive to gather similar data in nonwestern cultures.

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Table 1

Predictors of 2010 Religiosity

	Predictor	ΔR^2	F	df	p
Model 1:					
Step 1	2006 religiosity	.583	263.85	(1,189)	<.001
Step 2	School venue	.019	9.18	(1,188)	.003
Step 3	Crisis	.003	1.41	(1,186)	.24
	Commitment	.027	13.32	(1,186)	<.001
Step 4	Interaction	.001	0.59	(1,185)	.44
Model 2:					
Step 4	Social capital	.044	25.58	(1,185)	<.001
Model 3:					
Step 4	Parents	.006	3.46	(1,183)	.064
	Friends	.000	0.03	(1,183)	.95
	Other adults	.025	14.49	(1,183)	<.001
Model 4:					
Step 4	Social interaction	.009	5.31	(1,184)	.022
	Shared values	.019	10.63	(1,184)	.001