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**The Religious Practices of American Youth:  
Insights and Counsel from the First Public Advisory Board**

**November 16, 2000**

**University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill  
Chapel Hill, North Carolina**

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## Background

On Thursday, November 16, 2000, the planning team for a UNC-Chapel Hill proposal to study the religious practices of American youth convened a diverse group of national leaders representing philanthropy, media, and public policy to serve as a Public Advisory Board for their research project. The meeting was part of a Lilly Endowment planning grant received by Dr. Christian Smith of the Department of Sociology to explore the need for, feasibility of, and potential uses for such a research project.

Participants in the meeting included **Leah Meyer Austin**, Program Director for Youth and Education at the W. K. Kellogg Foundation; **Dorothy Bass**, Project Director for the Valparaiso Project on the Education and Formation of People in Faith; **Carmen Cervantes**, Executive Director of *Instituto Fe y Vida*; **Ian Evison**, Director of Research, Resource Development, and Planning at the Alban Institute; **Robert Franklin**, President of Interdenominational Theological Center; **Bill Jamieson**, President of the Institute for Servant Leadership; **Rick Lawrence**, Editor of *Group* magazine; **Sherry Magill**, President of the Jessie Ball duPont Fund; **George Penick**, President of the Foundation for the Mid South; **Jonathan Sher**, President of the North Carolina Child Advocacy Institute; and **William Treanor**, Publisher of *Youth Today*. Also present at the meeting were members of the UNC team, including: Christian Smith, Mark Regnerus, and doctoral students Kraig Beyerlein, Mark Constantine, Melinda Lundquist Denton, and Heather Kane O-Donovan.

Prior to the Public Advisory Board meeting, the UNC team had interviewed many scholars studying youth about potential research questions and appropriate

methodology for the study and conducted a literature search on thousands of records relating to youth and religion.

After an overview presentation of the project by Smith, the Public Advisory Board focused on three main topics:

1. *Perspectives on the Study's Potential.* Participants described ways they could foresee using the results of a study on the religious practices of American youth in their work and the impact such a study might have on various audiences;
2. *Research/Study Design Input.* Based on their past experiences and desired uses for the study, participants offered insights into the survey design, interview methods, and dissemination plans for the study; and
3. *Potential Pitfalls.* Again, based on their experiences and insights, participants offered advice about where the team might run into obstacles in terms of methodology and dissemination.

## Introductory Remarks

Christian Smith offered the participants a brief description of the proposed project and planning grant as a foundation for the ensuing conversation. Excerpts from his introduction follow:

“There are several reasons why we approached Lilly Endowment about conducting a national study on youth and religion. First, we have discerned a need for a descriptive map of the religious practices, beliefs, and experiences of youth. Existing studies offer valuable insights about the way youth spend their time, their educational achievement, the music they listen to and television shows they watch, and so on.

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What's missing is an intentional and thorough mapping of what's going on in kids' faith lives. What are they doing? What are they thinking? How many are involved in Sunday School? How many are involved in social justice ministries in their churches? What kind of prayer lives do they have? What kind of relationships do they have with adults in the church besides their parents?

We also would like to obtain a better picture of religious education, moral formation, and church programming – from the perspective of youth and their parents. What religious programs are families and youth involved with? What are churches trying to do to attract and retain youth? How many youth are involved in these kinds of activities? How are these activities or programs reaching or not reaching different populations, by race, ethnicity, and social class?

Finally, we would like to move beyond descriptive mapping to developing a more analytical sense of the difference religion, faith, and spirituality does or does not make in the lives of youth. For example, how does it affect risk behaviors, educational attainment, peer relationships, family relationships, whether one thinks of him- or herself as a learner, how one goes about resolving conflicts – all of the developmental aspects that are considered 'virtuous' in people. All of these questions present methodological challenges.

Earlier this year, Lilly Endowment awarded us an 11-month planning grant to conduct background research and determine the feasibility of the study we had envisioned. So far, we have made two 'big-picture' observations from that research:

1. We have reason to believe that religion *is* an important influence in the lives of

youth – that it *is* powerful. Much of the existing literature emphasizes the pro-social, protective influences that religion has on youth. In order to get clarity about the meaning and significance of religion in the lives of youth, as well as the problems and tensions religion can create for young people, we will need to incorporate both surveys and in-depth interviews.

2. Secondly, a study on the religious practices of American youth could have a potentially broad impact on the way parents, youth ministers, churches, and other organizations serve American youth. Academics sometimes have a limited vision or are out of touch with the interests and the concerns of the world beyond the academy, where the rubber hits the road. We perceive a need for a study that is informed by and informs a much broader set of communities, institutions, and people than narrow academic studies. We want to draw on and contribute to, if we can, the work of people and organizations making a difference in the lives of youth, including the kind of organizations that each of you represents.”

## Perspectives on the Study's Potential

**George Penick**, serving as chair of the Public Advisory Board, introduced the protocol for the meeting. “Chris and his group have invited us to help them make sure that what they want to do at the University will have some impact outside of the academy. We are blessed because we have not been asked to come to consensus on anything. This day is for brainstorming, ideas, thoughts.” To that end, Penick invited participants to describe the professional perspectives they bring to this project and to share their insights

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into the need and uses of a potential study on the faith practices of American youth.

Penick explained that the Foundation for the Mid South works with youth and churches in Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi: “We try to adapt the best ideas and best practices from around the country to help the Mid South region. We would benefit greatly from knowing more about what’s affecting youth today and what role foundations, organizations, families, or parents can play in supporting the healthy development of young people.”



*George Penick*

**Bill Jamieson** followed with a description of the Institute for Servant Leadership in Asheville, North Carolina. “Our task is leadership development and spiritual formation, working mostly with mainline denominations across this country and Canada. It is our conviction that our country, and perhaps the world, are positioned at a turning point in time, a hinge time, the likes of which perhaps we haven’t seen since the Renaissance. What this generation of youth does in terms of leadership will set the course of human history for perhaps the next 400-500 years. And unlike my age group, where my own sense of spiritual call was formed into active life through the church, many of

today’s young people feel a sense of spirituality and spiritual call without the church providing a forum for turning that into a structure, and into a life. I hope the UNC project helps us wrestle with what young people are feeling today, and why the church is not helping them transform that into an active life.”



*Bill Jamieson*

**Robert Franklin** spoke about having grown up in Chicago at the time when large street gangs dominated the culture. “I continue to reflect on the parallels that I witnessed being close to but not part of street gang culture in Chicago,” he said. “The parallels between religious communities and gangs, both with an emphasis on ritual behavior, symbolism, caring, protection, security, and financial provisions, are striking and deserve attention.” As President of the nation’s largest African-American seminary, Interdenominational Theological Center, Franklin observed: “We are sending hundreds of leaders out into the nation’s most distressed neighborhoods. One of the disconnects, and this is the case in North America’s 240 graduate accredited seminaries, is that the median age of seminary students increases each year, and youth are not connecting with them. We think of ourselves as pretty good in urban ministry issues, but our curriculum is

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woefully inadequate for naming the issues that young people face. That's one of my keen interests in this UNC project: how do we transform the preparation and leadership development tools in seminaries that have a particular mission to youth who are, as the Annie E. Casey Foundation and others talk about them, 'at risk.' In addition, I am curious as to whether or not religion has a positive effect of discouraging or delaying risky behaviors in youth? Does it have the positive effect of encouraging school attendance and academic achievement? As our national policy becomes increasingly faith-friendly, with charitable choice and increased opportunities for religious communities to provide services to youth and others, we are going to need hard research that informs what religious communities are in fact doing in the public square."



*Robert Franklin*

**Leah Meyer Austin** described her childhood in a small town in Illinois, in which hers was one of only 30 Jewish families. "Identity formation in that situation was an interesting challenge," she said. Describing her present work at the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, Austin said, "An important part of our new plan is a concern for those young people who 'disidentify' themselves as learners. That often comes out of who they are, where they live, what color their skin is. I

am fascinated by the prospect of how religious institutions can be part of an identification of young people as learners. How they can have that same protection that Robert Franklin talks about? I wonder to what extent the study could influence the negative and sometimes hypocritical ways individual congregations behave in relationship to young people – hiring the most inexperienced minister to be the youth minister, for example; or having a youth group, but not involving young people in the actual traditions of the congregation; or having a coming-of-age ritual, but giving youth of that age no role or voice in the context of the church or synagogue."



*Leah Meyer Austin*

**Rick Lawrence**, Editor of *Group* magazine, described his recent participation at a gathering of youth ministry educators in Toronto: "One of the educators presented data showing a need for a longitudinal study that examines the impact of faith practices in the lives of youth." He went on to express an interest in the UNC study's hope to examine the faith *practices* of youth, citing recent media reports that adults are mystified by their children's actions that don't seem to match the youth's professed beliefs. "It has created a different kind of generation gap than we've seen before," he said. "That gap has

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been allowed to grow because of a lack of information and understanding about the way that kids today approach their relationship with God. We've tried in our magazine to bring kids' real world into the church. We have discovered that young people do not feel that they can do so. They are often different people when they walk through the church doors. *Group* tries to provide youth leaders with tools, to engage them in issues, to change their perception of church from a place where they're supposed to act right to a place where they can actually deal with real questions about their lives. Providing valuable, effective tools is our challenge, and I think the UNC study could go a long way toward unveiling more tools and resources."



*Rick Lawrence*

**Bill Treanor**, Publisher and contributing Writer for the newspaper *Youth Today*, discussed the critical division between those people who work with youth from a faith-based or spiritual orientation and those who work on the "secular" side. "These are not clearly divided categories," he said, "but there is something of a mutual denial by both sides that the other exists. There is a tremendous bifurcation or knowledge gap between these two worlds – it's the real Grand Canyon, not class or race. They represent completely different priorities in how people look at life." Treanor went on to say that a study like the one proposed by

UNC would fill a need for credible information: "Currently, while a great deal of interest is stirring in faith-based programs and services, there is very little hard data. Research that would show the importance or the lack of importance of religion in the lives of young people would be very beneficial."



*Bill Treanor*

**Carmen Cervantes**, Executive Director of *Instituto Fe y Vida*, said she was very happy to be invited to participate in the Public Advisory Board *before* an actual research study was undertaken, "because every time that I learn or we learn as Hispanics about research, we learn when it is in the last stages. We usually arrive at the very end yelling for our place in it, like an appendix." Cervantes noted that surveys conducted by the Catholic Church often fail to reach the Hispanic population. "The way they

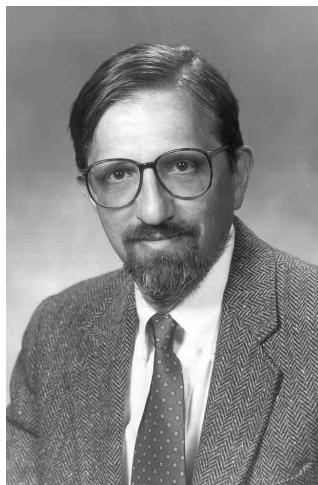


*Carmen Cervantes*

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are handled, the way the samples are done, the research methods, the theoretical frameworks make it impossible for Hispanics to be treated fairly research-wise,” she said. “It is important for your proposed study to look at the Hispanic population, which is now near to 40 percent of the Catholic population in the country. About 50 percent of the youth and young adults, and approximately 60 percent of the 0- to 10-year-olds in the U.S. Catholic population are Hispanic. But many of our Hispanic youth fall between the cracks. They are not being served well in most of the country; we don’t have the sociological, cultural, and pastoral frameworks or enough leaders to open new doorways for them.”

**Ian Evison** explained that the proposed UNC study would relate to a number of the Alban Institute’s endeavors, including a Lilly Endowment-funded project to map the terrain of youth ministry. “It will be very important to keep in focus a double issue,” he said. “One is the service of religious congregations to youth and how they are included and served within churches, synagogues and mosques. The other is the issue of leadership. Religious communities need to connect in each generation with the next generation. Churches and synagogues do a particularly bad job of connecting with



*Ian Evison*

younger people. The growth of second-career ministries and the movement of older people into ministry (which is a very good thing) tend to exacerbate the lack of transition from one generation to the next. We very much want to try to find ways to assist congregations in that double path of serving and connecting.”



*Jonathan Sher*

**Jonathan Sher** raised two issues that flow from his work with the North Carolina Child Advocacy Institute and a statewide lobby group for public policy in the interest of youth. “A lot of our work at the Institute revolves around harm being done to children and ways to stop that harm,” he said. “As you design the study, I want to caution you against starting from the premise that religion exerts a positive influence in the lives of young people. From my experience and my work, I would say that religion exerts a *powerful* influence, which is not necessarily a positive influence. I like to use the analogy of a Kleenex and a knife. A Kleenex is pretty much something good; it is helpful, especially if you have a cold. A knife, in the hands of a skilled surgeon, can save a life. In the hands of somebody wanting to do harm, however, that same knife can destroy a life. I am daily reminded that religion, too, can be powerful in negative as well as positive ways. I hope

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that this project would move forward cognizant of the power of religion, the power of faith, the power of belief, and the ways in which it can play out.”

Sher’s second point was that, in North Carolina at least, religion and religious belief “can be a powerful subtext and occasionally a text in the public policy discourse about what’s appropriate to do for, with, and about children and youth. All of our work as advocates is with adults, trying to change the attitudes and behaviors of the adults in the story who profoundly affect the lives of kids for better or worse. My hope is that this study, in addition to focusing on young people’s attitudes and behaviors, will look at the contexts of their lives, which are lives dominated by adults within and beyond their families.” Sher also underscored the importance of the ‘*so-what?*’ question for the study. “From academic studies on other aspects of child development and adolescent behavior, we have seen a tremendous gap between what we know and what we do – how what we know gets translated into our public lives and public policies and public appropriations. I would urge you to consider ahead of time how this study will be perceived and interpreted. How is it going to be used to make this a better world for children and youth?”

**Sherry Magill** explained that the Jessie Ball duPont Fund is restricted to supporting some 325 institutions that Mrs. duPont funded in her lifetime, including 85 religious institutions (mostly churches) across a number of denominations and eight religious judicatories. “As a funder, I would be interested in understanding how young people articulate their spiritual lives and their spiritual struggles or quests. I suspect that having that kind of information would not change the way we fund churches as much as inform the kinds of requests we get from



*Sherry Magill*

organizations that serve young people.” Magill also expressed curiosity about “the relationship or tension between organized religion and one’s moral education, particularly over time.” Having funded a community study on juvenile delinquency, Magill said she was interested in the part of the UNC briefing paper that suggested that adolescents who grow up in an organized religious setting are less at-risk for delinquent behavior. “Is it the structure of the religious setting that helps them?” she asked, “Or is it religion per se and religious messages?”

**Dorothy Bass** described a Lilly Endowment project that she has directed at Valparaiso University for the last eight years: “Our purpose initially was to listen to the spiritual hunger that is alive in our society, and to address it with some of the substantive resources of Christian faith. Part of our working hypothesis has been that some of the spiritual hunger may be for ways of living as well as for ways of feeling or believing – ways of living that are more coherent than the fragmented forms of living that seem to be available in the current social situation; ways of life that somehow are good because they are attentive in a deep way to ultimate matters, or as we would say, to the presence of God. We think that the historic traditions bear a great deal of wisdom about ways of



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living, and we are trying to make that accessible to people, primarily through books and teaching in churches. I am particularly interested in the proposed study's idea of focusing on practices, which I understand to be a concept that bridges what one thinks and what one does in a very integral way. The work that Chris and his colleagues plan to do would be very important to us in finding out what in fact youth do practice."



*Dorothy Bass*

Bass noted, "Our signature book, *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for Searching People*, sets forth a dozen practices which we think constitute a good way of life, practices like hospitality, forgiveness, keeping Sabbath, healing, and so on. A group of 15 adults and 15 teens is now developing a very similar book, addressed to ninth and tenth graders in high school. Some of the people involved in this work are among the leading youth ministry people in the country, others are more like myself, theological educators who have thought about practices but are only just now learning about youth. Your hunch, Chris, that many of the concerns of youth and adults and the problems of youth and adults are parallel to and in some ways mirror one another is intriguing to me for the sake of developing resources that would be useful to churches and faith communities. Another

matter that concerns me is particularity in religious formation. By particularity I mean, for example, being not just generally a good person or even a spiritual person, but being Catholic or Jewish or Lutheran or Baptist and so on. I wonder how a national study can shed light on this."

## **Research/Study Design Input**

Based on their past experiences and the desired outcomes for the proposed study, participants offered insights into the survey and question design, interview methods, potential partners, and possible dissemination strategies the UNC team might pursue.

### ***Defining Terms and Intentions***

Several Public Advisory Board members expressed a desire to clarify some key concepts and terms used in the UNC proposal. George Penick began this conversation by quoting a statement in the UNC study preliminary proposal materials that read: "We want as much as possible to assess the presence and influence of religion in the lives of youth in terms of the actual religious traditions in which their lives are or are not embedded." Penick asked: "When you talk about religion, how narrow is that?"

Chris Smith explained that the UNC team is aware that "religion" is a "generic and problematic term." He continued, "We want to talk with youth about their faith development, about their struggles, about their experiences, not in terms of generic American religiosity or faith maturity, but in terms, for example, of how being a Muslim frames one's spiritual journey or path. We do not want to bulldoze over the very real differences between groups. In other words, faith maturity in one tradition may look

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different than faith maturity in another tradition. That’s our starting point.”

Smith further explained that the UNC team would want to approach the study from an “inductive nominalist” perspective: “We want to minimize as many preconceptions as possible about religion and spirituality.” At the same time, taking traditions seriously means carrying on conversations entirely conscious of the content of the particular faith tradition as a reference point.

Other distinctions in language and meaning were made in terms of religion and ritual. Penick asked, “If a child benefits from peer fellowship groups, structured confirmation or bar mitzvah classes, being an acolyte, singing in the choir, and so on, what is it that the activity gives him or her in terms of maturation? And how do these opportunities compare to recreational leagues and Boys and Girls Clubs and that sort of thing? Is there a spiritual aspect to what church-ed-youth do that is in addition to or different from the normal, healthy youth activities that churches are also providing?”

Rick Lawrence inquired about the UNC team’s use of the terms *practices* and *traditions*, wondering if they are used synonymously in the proposed study. Smith made the following clarification: “By *traditions* we mean historical tradition, the historical inheritance of a line of thinking and theological framework. By *practices* we mean enacted routines and habits in the context of a tradition, that make moral sense within a tradition. Tradition is the context that makes moral sense of the practice. The practice is a patterned activity that is engaged in.”

### *Survey Sample*

Smith explained that the proposed UNC study would be geared toward youth,

ages 13 to 18. “We are aware that there are arguments for a much wider age range,” he noted, “as wide as 11 to 30. However, a number of survey researchers suggest that the cognitive ability to make sense of questions and to give reasonable answers is substantially different between a 12- and 13-year-old. Also, in many religious traditions, 13 is a significant age, at which adulthood begins.”

Smith explained that in terms of conducting the survey, the larger the number of individuals surveyed, the better positioned the team would be to make claims about the significance of religion in the lives of young people. “Only about 14 percent of American households have people between the ages of 13 and 18 living in them,” Smith said. “To get a sample of 3,000 youth might require screening over 21,000 households and telephone numbers! Another possibility is to work through an institution where concentrated numbers of youth are already located, like schools. But then we fail to capture information on dropouts and those who are home-schooled.”

Smith explained that the study would hope to produce meaningful comparisons about different populations of youth within the general category of 13- to 18-year-olds. “If we did a general cross-section of youth,” he said, “we might not have enough numbers from the populations we want to study to be statistically significant. We would address that by oversampling certain populations – but that leads to the question of which populations we want to oversample. What do we want to be able to compare? Is it inner-city youth vs. suburban youth? American Jews vs. Lutherans, Catholics, or Baptists?”

The Public Advisory Board offered suggestions about which populations should be considered for oversampling. Robert

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Franklin argued for “oversampling African American and Latino or Hispanic urban youth, in part because those populations have been problematized in American policy. We need to hear the truth about these young people, from them, and to understand better the role that religion is playing in their lives.”

Carmen Cervantes suggested that using school-based sampling with African American and Hispanic youth might exacerbate the dropout problem that Smith described, as a higher percentage of dropouts comes from these populations. She also expressed concern that a longitudinal study among certain groups, such as Indo-Chinese and certain Hispanics, may be difficult because these populations are very mobile and inclined to change homes often. “The design for the American mainstream will not be appropriate for these ethnic minority people,” she said. In addition, Cervantes explained that oversampling the Hispanic population might require using different questions in both the survey and interview instruments. “The reality is that we practice Catholicism in a different way in Latin America than it is practiced in the United States.”

Bill Treanor wondered how the survey would address the myriad of youth who come from religiously mixed marriages. “You have teenagers with what would be considered theologically impossible combinations of parents,” he said. “What about youth who say they’re Jewish, Sikh and Catholic! Or Unitarian and Greek Orthodox! You will find these kinds of combinations. And then there is religion-switching, which is well entrenched throughout America, but particularly in California and places where parents are migrating from religion to religion. As the kids become teenagers, they are migrating from religion to religion, often having to do with the appeal of a particular church youth

group or a romantic involvement or other reasons. As a result, sampling specific populations is going to be a very complicated task.”

Treanor also suggested that the UNC team consider including “the roughly one million kids who are in various kinds of public care or foster care, whose average age is about 15, as well as those in mental hospitals, both public and private, and emotional growth schools.” He explained that these youth are often overlooked in studies, and that information on their faith practices might be very instructive.

Cervantes brought up another sampling concern: how to distinguish between “thinking youth” and “feeling youth.” “Today, there is a lot of preaching to the heart without the mind,” she said. “I question how this is affecting the critical judgments and the critical consciousness of adolescents? How is it impeding the advancement of critical thinking in society and the engagement of youth in politics? It’s only ‘what I like’ and ‘what I feel.’ Are youth considered very religious because they have a lot of strong feelings? There are the service-oriented, and there are those who are trying to be critical about the world and approach all of life from that perspective. How will your research identify and deal with that difference?”

Finally, Jonathan Sher made an appeal that the study oversample – or at least fairly sample – youth in rural areas. “There’s such an urban bias in our society,” he explained. “There are many rural kids for whom religion is very important, but rural people tend to be overlooked in ‘national’ studies and to be invisible on America’s cultural radar screen. For instance, when Walter Annenberg announced his \$500 million gift to the nation’s public schools, he interpreted the ‘nation’ as America’s nine largest cities. He

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later broadened the definition and made it more inclusive. The point is simply that if you're going to study all youth, then please include *all* youth."

### ***Research Questions***

Leah Austin offered a concise summary of the Public Advisory Board's discussion of the question, *How can we learn about and support young people's spiritual development?* "I hear three sets of issues coming from that core question. One is how do families structure themselves based on what we know about young people's spiritual development? That has a lot to do with when families give their children, for example, the power to make decisions about their religious practices rather than having to follow family practices. The second is how does religion structure itself? And the third is what are the public practices that can be informed by what we know about young people's spiritual development? Those are three clear bodies of work, some of which the UNC team may delve into and some of which others might take on. Within each of the questions is the notion of protective factors – what are the protective factors in religion that families, religious institutions, and public policy makers need to be aware of when making decisions?"

George Penick suggested that the study might investigate the role of religious media as an influence on youth. Rick Lawrence offered an example by way of agreeing with Penick: "The rock group U2 just released an album, half of which is comprised of Gospel songs. When kids listen to that, they're listening to Christian music, but not on a Christian label. How do we classify religious media that overlap so significantly with mainstream popular culture?" Other pop culture avenues to spirituality mentioned included the television

shows "Touched by an Angel" and "Oprah" and books like those by Deepak Chopra.

Building on this conversation, Ian Evison distinguished between images in the general culture that shape young people's understanding of religion and faith and the way in which certain religious subgroups consciously create a support system for their beliefs. "This second kind of cultural influence is apparent, for example, in the way Jewish culture supports a Jewish life," he said, "or in the way InterVarsity Christian Fellowship encourages youth to listen to Christian radio and to create for themselves a Christian way of life. These differ from general cultural influences on religious practices."

### ***Interviewers***

In considering the kinds of information that would be beneficial for the UNC study to uncover, Bill Treanor said that "who does the asking will make all the difference in what these kids say." He went on to say that "most youth can adjust their answers and their reality based on quickly perceived perceptions of their environment. It took Patricia Hirsch six years of involving herself in the lives of young people to get the truth about their lives for her book *A Tribe Apart*. In a perfect world, the UNC study could do that with every one of the kids that complete the survey. Then you might get the truth. Of course, such an enormous amount of time for a large sample is impossible. The question this raises is how best to get the 'truth' from young people?"

Chris Smith replied that one way to unpack young people's responses to the national survey is to conduct in-depth follow-up interviews with a smaller, representative sample. "Some youth will no doubt hide the truth from us," he said. "It is the human

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condition to construct different presentations of self.” One suggestion for dealing with that reality was to employ interviewers who ‘match’ the interviewees on important characteristics, such as race and sex. Ultimately, however, Smith said that the researchers he has spoken with seem to agree that the interviewer’s skill is more important than matching exactly the person he or she is interviewing. “Youth don’t need people who are just like them; they need people who are open to them and with whom they can build a certain level of rapport,” he said. “The one situation that comes up as a possible problem is cross-racial interviews. We know it will be necessary to employ skilled interviewers of a variety of races to participate in this study.”

Jonathan Sher said that “the crucial issue from his experience with research projects is that young people know that the conversation is confidential and that the interviewer is interested in what they think. If they think you are there with an agenda, hidden or otherwise, they will play to what they think are the ‘right’ answers.”

### *Partners*

The discussion then turned to the ways in which the UNC team might engage partners or collaborators in the proposed study, so as to increase their credibility in different circles, gain access to youth, and create an interested audience for the study’s results. Dorothy Bass described “ways to structure partnerships in advance where you would have people out there poised to receive and to respond to the study.” She used Mark Chaves’s national congregational survey as an example: “I understand that he used a randomly selected sample, and that certain denominations are choosing to pay for oversampling of their own groups. These responses do not become part of the random data set; they are maintained as separate data

sets that can be used comparatively over and against the national sample.” Bass added, “This approach might also serve as a dissemination strategy. Suppose that you invited the Presbyterian Church or the National Federation of Catholic Youth Ministries to identify youth and raise their own funds for the survey. Almost anybody that you want to interest in the study could do this. They could pay for more phone calls to members of their own tradition. They would then receive relevant information about their constituency which could be compared to the national-level data.”

Sherry Magill added youth-serving organizations to the list of potential partners. “At the PACE Center for Girls in Florida, for example,” she said, “at-risk and so-called delinquent young women – girls who have had a brush with the law – are saying that spiritual issues are huge for them. If you partnered with groups like PACE, your audience would grow to include not only those organizations, who could use the results to inform their programming, but also the foundation world that funds them.”

Bill Treanor said that a partner like the Search Institute, one that is already geared toward dissemination of information, might “extend the life of the study and give it ‘legs.’”

### *A Vision of Success*

After discussing logistics such as sample size and population, interviewer characteristics, and possible partners, the members of the Public Advisory Board asked Chris Smith to outline his vision of what a successful study would look like. He offered the following insights:

“In the last 15 years there has been a surge in the realization that academia cannot

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ignore religion; it still matters to people. However, for a variety of other people and organizations whose work influences the lives of young people, the idea that religion is a powerful influence for good or ill in youth's lives is not on their radar screen. It would constitute success, in my mind, if this project as a whole very clearly supported the fact that religion matters and then raised important questions of responsibility. My hope is that the study would create more problems than solutions. For example, I don't expect that our study will be able to tell government agencies the policy implications of various religious practices. But I think these agencies will benefit from understanding that religion is very much a part of many youths' lives and that it should not be ignored.

“This type of success would start at the most basic level with parents. For example, it would be a tremendous gain for parents to know that it really matters what kind of home life they construct for their families and children. The efforts they make to construct and support faith practices can make a difference in their children's lives. A year or two ago a book came out that basically said parents don't matter in the lives of their children: it's all peers. What does that tell parents? Assuming that we find out religious practices *do* matter to youth, I would like to be able to report to parents that their choices matter. At the level of community organizations, the study will not dictate to the YMCA or the Girls Club what they should be doing. But it might clearly and undeniably show that faith and spirituality are parts of young people's lives that matter. In that sense, it might create the problem of how to incorporate that knowledge into their programs.

“On a congregational level, I would hope that the study would create the problem for pastors that they cannot just offer Sunday

School programs aimed at younger children, while ignoring the adolescents in their congregations. They might need to think more clearly and intentionally about the role of youth in the church. I would like to see the effects of the study continue rippling out to denominational leaders and to people who teach in seminaries. Success would mean making people uncomfortable if they have not paid adequate attention to youth and the role of faith, spirituality, and religious organizations in their lives.”

The Public Advisory Board found this insight particularly instructive in terms of informing the advice and support they could offer. They acknowledged that most studies and surveys are framed by the researcher's agenda, but that Smith's passion for the study to have a positive influence on the way youth are nurtured and treated in society was inspiring. Bill Treanor said, “It's clearer to me now that you plan to disagree with the research study that says parents aren't important. Doing that is not just a question of disseminating the study results, but designing the entire survey instrument to accomplish your goal. Your study must be based on a series of agreements and disagreements that get to the root of how families do or do not influence the faith lives of their children, and the effects those practices have on their children's lives.”

Jonathan Sher said that it might be helpful for the UNC team to “frame part of the study as a series of tensions that we face as a society, as opposed to the usual paradigm of here's a problem and here's a solution. If we as a species haven't figured out the solutions in these millennia, I doubt we will figure them out in the next three or four years. The issue, then, is how to make them creative and useful tensions instead of destructive tensions in our society. For example, there are public policy tensions in North Carolina

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around the separation of church and state. As a result, many of the kids who may benefit the most from what religion can offer, may at the same time have the least access to religion because of the way we structure our society. Your study might help identify those tensions between religion and the lives of youth and suggest ways in which those can be creative rather than destructive tensions.”

Leah Austin followed Sher’s insights by asking for clarity about Lilly Endowment’s goals for this effort. “If I put on my foundation hat and were in their shoes, what would I want? With all the work they’ve done in the Religion Division – I might want to be able to effect some policies and structures that affect practices. For instance, I might want to have some impact on seminaries’ curriculum. I might want to have some impact on the rites of passage that many religions have for young people, some of which may be more effective than others in the way they play out.”

Smith responded that from his conversations with staff at Lilly Endowment he had gleaned that they are interested in youth, the welfare of youth, and the effectiveness of religious organizations in dealing with youth. “I think they have a vision for research findings that can inform those interests,” he said.

Robert Franklin asked what impact the proposed study might have on the American Sociological Association. “Are you putting your career or reputation at risk by doing this kind of work?” he asked. “I’m thinking about what Andrew Billingsley, sociologist of Black families, said early in his last book about the kind of intellectual blinders and denial that mainstream sociologists have when it comes to religion. Often when they do pay attention to religion, it’s religion as deviance. Would the findings you hope to uncover be a way to inform that guild?”

## *Dissemination*

In response to the UNC team’s vision that the study might have far-reaching impact on the way youth are treated and nurtured at various levels, the Public Advisory Board offered useful insights about the dissemination of the study’s results.

They suggested that while the findings should have the credibility of an academic study, they should be written in a popular educational format accessible to the lay reader. “For the study to be used by practitioners, you will need to partner with somebody who knows how to take the raw material and develop a practical model in book form,” said Rick Lawrence. Dorothy Bass agreed, saying that “the professionals working in the field of youth ministry by and large do not read as long and difficult books as some of the audiences for this study.”

Smith added that he and Craig Dykstra and Chris Coble from Lilly Endowment had agreed that at least one person involved with the proposed project would be a faculty member at a divinity school or seminary with a strong background in youth ministry. That person or team of persons would be involved with the interviews and would write a publication targeting the appropriate audience.

In addition to book-length byproducts, the Public Advisory Board agreed that the project would benefit from having a public relations or dissemination specialist dedicated to managing the communications angle of the project. This person would maintain contact with the various project partners and provide them with information about the project as it became available. He or she might coordinate conferences or meetings at which the study’s results could be shared and discussed. Bill Treanor said that maintaining a web site for

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the project would be an important dissemination strategy, and that working with television producers from PBS or “In the Mix” in New York to make a television version of the results might be an option to think about early on in the process. “To pursue those kinds of dissemination strategies,” he said, “you really have to have somebody who can focus exclusively on the tasks at hand.”

## Potential Pitfalls

The conversation then turned to potential pitfalls and obstacles the UNC team might face if they proceed with the proposed study. “One of the reasons you’re here today is because you have your fingers on the pulse of diverse publics and people that we don’t normally work with,” said Smith. “From your past experiences and new understanding of the proposed project, what cautionary words do you have for us?”

Before dividing the participants into two small groups to discuss potential pitfalls, George Penick offered one possible example: “If the study is published by a public university as opposed to a seminary or stand-alone author, will that affect the way in which the results are perceived and used? We might need to consider who the messenger is, what kind of partners will be associated with the messenger when the results come out, and whether those parties strengthen or detract from the study’s impact.”

After meeting in small groups, participants compiled the following list of **positive advice** to guide the UNC team:

1. *Arrange in advance for practitioners to write about the research findings in an accessible format.*

2. *Consider soliciting extra “buy-in” from key denominations and youth-serving organizations who can pay for and interpret the research results for themselves. This strategy would produce a wider sample and increase enthusiasm for the end product.*
3. *Dare to think about desired results, and build in specific questions on the survey that will yield information for or against those results. Don’t let key findings be inferences. Ask about them clearly and directly.*
4. *Think about having a conference for gatekeepers, people who have direct access to practitioners in the field of youth ministry, so as to gain their “buy-in” for the results.*

The Public Advisory Board members also generated the following list of **potential pitfalls** for the UNC team:

1. *Don’t underestimate the importance and complexity of training a variety of interviewers to elicit useful responses from a widely diverse group of youth.*
2. *Don’t limit or put off possible audiences by labeling them improperly. For example, clarify your definition of “practitioner.” Most seminary professors are not considered practitioners by average youth ministry folks.*
3. *Don’t try to do too much. The Public Advisory Board advised the team to stick to its core interests and passions and to make strategic choices about what would generate initial energy and interest around the project.*



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4. *Don't make too many alliances with people whose affiliations or background will undermine the credibility of the study.* For example, having a prominent member of one denomination or faith tradition might cause people to discount the results.
  5. *Don't stop after one Public Advisory Board meeting.* An ongoing, diverse advisory board can offer guidance and support, as well as spread the word about the project to other spheres of influence.
  6. *Don't attempt to accomplish a large-scale communications strategy without the appropriate outside help.*
  7. *Don't rely solely on a scholarly book to reach the wide audience you hope to influence.* A variety of impact venues will be critical, such as magazines, pamphlets, and other reader-friendly, user-friendly media. The results should also inspire tool-producing media to build a curriculum that youth ministry practitioners can easily adapt to their work. Think broadly about the ways in which the study's messages will reach the desired audiences effectively.
  8. *Don't put yourselves in the position of comparing the attitudes, practices, and beliefs of denominations.* Consider working across denominations by creating a national report that looks at levels of practice or attitudes that seem to cut across religious faiths – from high levels of observance that separate the family from others who are unlike them, to no observance at all, and all the gradations in between. Looking across religious faiths at these gradations, what can be learned about levels of practice in relation to young peoples' lives?

9. *Don't assume that parents are the adults who will know most about the faith lives of their children.* Consider asking the young people you survey who has been the main religious influence in their lives. It may turn out to be an aunt, a grandmother, a neighbor, or a minister.

The Public Advisory Board concluded by stating that the proposed study should be considered a first step in this field of research on the faith lives of American youth, and that one of the expected outcomes of the grant might even be to identify future areas of research.<sup>f</sup>

### **Project Information**

For more information about the *Religious and Spiritual Practices of American Youth* project, please contact the principal investigator, Dr. Christian Smith, at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, at [cssmith@email.unc.edu](mailto:cssmith@email.unc.edu). Or visit our project website at [www.youthandreligion.org](http://www.youthandreligion.org).

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