SHINING LIGHT ON ACADEMIC-FAITH PARTNERSHIPS: PERSPECTIVES AND TRAINING NEEDS OF COPTIC YOUTH MINISTRY PROVIDERS

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This article highlights an ongoing academic-faith partnership between university scientists and the Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States to strengthen opportunities for healthy youth development via youth ministry programming in parish communities. Partnership goals are to infuse an evidence-based psychological framework to its Diocesan curriculum in a contextually, culturally, and historically responsive way and to assess provider training needs to support youth. Youth ministry providers (N = 197) responded to electronic, and pen and paper survey questions related to providers' (1) attitudes and beliefs toward youth behavior, (2) motivations for serving youth, (3) interpretations of youth disengagement, and (4) training needs. Responses to multiple choice questions were summarized and elaborated responses were coded for thematic analysis. Providers most consistently reported: attitudes of support and compassion toward youth disruptive and withdrawn behaviors, high motivation to serve youth based in spiritual/religious, cultural and contextual understanding of why youth disengaged from Sunday school and church programming, and high need and eagerness for tailored training content related to meeting youth where they are and enhancing

benefits of Sunday school participation for youth development. Findings elevated the literature on (1) the Coptic diaspora, (2) faith-based youth programs and academic-faith collaborations to support youth, and (3) youth ministry provider voices, highlighting their need and opportunities for workforce support and professional development in context of MENA migration and diaspora.

Shining Light on Academic-Faith Partnerships:

Perspectives & Training Needs of

Coptic Diaspora Youth Ministry Providers

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Introduction

Faith-based organizations (FBOs) promote health and wellness through the overlapping and interrelated constructs of religiosity and spirituality (Mishra, et al., 2015), which reflect one's personal and intimate beliefs in and attachment to a transcendent Being, or God (Koenig et al., 2012). Religiosity is multidimensional and includes an organized cultural system of beliefs, behaviors, rituals, symbols, and traditions, developed over time and practiced in private or public, that connect one to the transcendent and to a community (Geertz, 1993). Spirituality encompasses one's innermost relationship with God, and relatedly, one's quest to answer existential questions about life, its sacred meaning and purpose (Koenig, 2012). FBOs also offer organized youth ministry programs that may facilitate positive youth development by their impact on the biopsychosocial-spiritual dimensions of development. Among their mechanisms of impact are most notably youth-adult partnerships, peer relationships and social emotional learning (SEL) skills building. Benefits of these programs for youth rely on well-prepared youth ministry providers to partner with youth, facilitate healthy peer interactions and model, teach, practice, and reinforce SEL skills. Despite their potential benefits, FBOs are often overlooked as youth developmental zones in science (Pickeney et al., 2021) with limited examples of faith-based-academic partnerships existing to promote youth wellness or mental health. This study advances an ongoing academic-faith partnership with the Coptic Orthodox Church of the Southern United States. Diocese focused on strengthening opportunities for healthy youth development through Coptic Sunday school programming.

Spirituality / Religiosity and Health

Substantial evidence demonstrates that spirituality / religiosity (S/R) relate to physiological health outcomes including increased survival rates from chronic diseases (Ironson

et al., 2006; McCullough et al., 2000; Powell et al., 2003), decreased hospitalization and pain (Moreira-Almeida et al., 2014; Snider & McPhedran, 2014), and better functional status (Balbuena & Bowen, 2006). Early studies examining S/R and health primarily assessed church attendance; however, more recent literature points toward one's *personal relationship with* and *view of God* as a key predictor. In a seminal 4-year longitudinal study on HIV, a positive view of God (i.e., benevolent/ forgiving) predicted significantly slower disease progression (via preservation of CD4 count and viral load control), whereas a negative view of God (i.e., harsh/ judgmental/ punishing) predicted faster disease progression when controlling for major factors including initial disease status, age, ethnicity, and antiretroviral medication (Ironson et al., 2011). Importantly, view of God added unique predictive power above all traditionally studied faith-related variables, such as church attendance and social support.

A comprehensive examination of over 3,000 quantitative studies from Western monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) also found that S/R is positively associated with improved mental health (Koenig, 2012). Many clinical studies have found S/R to protect individuals from severe or chronic mental illness (Mosqueiro et al., 2021; Lucchetti & Koenig, 2021), evidenced by lower depressive symptoms and faster remission (Tomita & Ramlall, 2018; VanderWeele et al., 2016; Koenig et al., 1998), lower suicidality (VanderWeele et al., 2016; Kleiman & Liu, 2014), and decreased substance use (Patestos, 2021; Kelly et al., 2020; Kelly et al., 2015; Walton-Moss, 2013; Chitwood et al., 2008; Miller et al., 2000). Furthermore, S/R offers a protective buffer against the emergence or impact of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD; Lucchetti & Koenig, 2021); for example, use of prayer facilitates emotional disclosure from traumatic life events that reduces PTSD symptoms and depression (Tait et al., 2016), catalyzes post-traumatic growth (Prieto-Ursúa & Jódar, 2020; Khursheed & Shahnawaz, 2020;

Glavas, 2012; Blanc et al., 2010; Khamis, 2012) and wisdom (Perry & Winfrey, 2021; Webster & Deng, 2015) and overall encourages healing and resilience (Agaibi & Wilson, 2005).

The religion-as-attachment model helps explain the S/R and mental health link (Granqvist, 2020). Specifically, a secure relationship with a benevolent and merciful God is consistently related to better mental health above and beyond intrinsic religiosity or social support (Cherniak et al., 2021). Moreover, security in one's close relationships (and experiences of responsive and sensitive caregiving) also relate significantly and positively to a loving and compassionate representation (or internal working model) of God (Cassibba et al., 2008; Granqvist, 2002; Granqvist, et al., 2007). Additionally, S/R provides resources for constructive coping (Metaweh et al, 2016) and increases powerful cognitions and positive emotions (Van Cappellen et al., 2021; Koenig, 2012), predicting modestly increased life satisfaction over time (Mancuso & Lorono, 2023). It encourages strong beliefs regarding one's identity, worth, meaning and purpose (Park & Van Tongeren, 2023). Central to S/R practices and rituals is the generation of "self-transcendent positive emotions" (e.g., awe, gratitude, elevation, joy, peace, love, compassion, and reverence) inspired by one's capacity for self-transcendent *experiences*, "transient mental states marked by decreased self-salience and increased feelings of connectedness" (Van Elk & Alleman, 2017) that encourage prosocial behavior and facilitate well-being (Yaden et al., 2017).

Indeed, religiosity also relates positively to perceived social support (Wang et al., 2023; Rambod & Rafii, 2010). Collective religious rituals enhance social integration, particularly in times of elevated adversity (Ladd & Spilka, 2013). Rigorous longitudinal studies with extensive confounding control have established the impact of religious communities on human flourishing measured by physical and mental health, positive social relationships, happiness, life satisfaction,

character and virtue, and meaning and purpose (VanderWeele, 2017). Additional longitudinal evidence has demonstrated that those who participate in religious services are more altruistic and civically engaged than those who do not participate in religious services (Putnam & Campbell, 2012), and that religiosity predicts service, volunteering, and charity donations (Borgonovi, 2008; Kaneez & Imtiaz, 2022).

It is perhaps the combination of social and religious components that explain the strong connection between religious attendance and well-being (Lim & Putnam, 2010). Notably, there is some evidence also to the contrary (VanderWeele, 2017), whereby religious participation was associated with higher depression rates among unwed mothers (Koenig, 2009) and negative congregational interactions related to decreased well-being (Ellison et al., 2009), highlighting that well-documented benefits may vary with, or be diminished by, particular contextual factors. Taken altogether though, the natural benefits inherent to experiences and outcomes from faith, and faith-based participation, make faith-based settings an integral space for youth development.

Faith-Based Opportunities Facilitate Positive Youth Development

There are several well specified and widely cited frameworks of youth development, including Bronfenbrenner's biopsychosocial ecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1977), Garcia-Coll's integrative model (Coll et al., 1996) and developmental systems theory (Lerner, 2002), that accentuate the interface of biology, environment, and ecological systems. Youth development materializes on the physical, psychological, social, and spiritual domains, and faith-based youth programs represent a theanthropic system positioned to impact them, particularly via youth-adult partnerships, peer relationships, and opportunities to build SEL skills.

Youth-adult partnerships are defined by relationships between youth and adults where both parties have equal potential to (1) deliberate and act together, (2) in collective fashion, (3)

over a sustained period, (4) through shared work, (5) intended to strengthen organizations and address community concerns from a social justice framework (Zeldin et al., 2013, p. 388). Youth-adult partnerships in community service engage youth and adults in collaborative decision making, valuing young people as active co-participants in systems that traditionally have treated them as more passive recipients (Dupuis & Mann-Feder, 2013). Robust literature demonstrates that positive youth-adult partnerships characterized by youth agency and voice consistently relate to positive academic, social, and behavioral outcomes *for youth*, better understanding of youth mental health and identity development *for adults* (Ramey et al., 2017; Travis & Leech, 2014; Howe et al., 2011), and more capacity building within community organizations (Blanchet-Cohen et al., 2014; Neely, 2015). On the other hand, youth-adult partnerships characterized by less youth agency and voice have routinely resulted in more negative outcomes and less service engagement overall (Krauss et al., 2014; Ramey et al., 2017). Longitudinal studies have illustrated those adolescents with positive connections to adults beyond their parents or caregivers (e.g., teachers, coaches, mentors, community program staff) more often avoid risky health behaviors while disengaged or disenfranchised youth engage in more violence and risk-taking (e.g., crime, substance use), and report more emotional distress (Sieving et al., 2017).

Youth participation in youth-adult partnerships can also catalyze the development of young people's *peer relationships*, yielding benefits to interpersonal skills (Conner et al., 2014; Howe et al., 2011). Notably, significant evidence illustrates how peers are powerful agents of change; in fact, peer-based interventions (e.g., buddies, tutoring) across several stages of child and adolescent development have harnessed the natural power of peer interactions (e.g., social norms and reinforcement) to support academic and social learning, enhance prosocial behaviors,

and reduce antisocial behaviors particularly among youth with internalizing and externalizing psychopathology (Zhang & Wheeler, 2011; Fantuzzo et al., 2005).

Social-emotional learning (SEL), also referred to in the literature as universal mental health programs, character education (Weare, 2010), mental health promotion (Frazier et al., 2017), or resilience interventions (Flay et al., 2017), encompasses five interrelated cognitive, affective, and behavioral competencies related to self- and social awareness, goal setting, emotion literacy and regulation, and responsible decision making and interpersonal problem solving (Elias et al., 1997; Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2005). These competencies in turn are linked to better adjustment and academic success as reflected in more positive social behaviors, fewer conduct problems, less emotional distress, and better test scores and grades (Greenberg et al., 2003). Mastering these competencies correspond to a developmental shift for youth from acting predominately as a function of external influences to acting more in accord with internalized beliefs and values, empathy, and self- and social responsibility (Bear & Watkins, 2006). Researchers have tried to leverage faith-based settings where opportunities for youth-adult partnerships and positive peer relationships organically occur by bringing in empirically supported content and SEL curricula (e.g., peer assisted social learning; Helseth & Frazier, 2017). Altogether, benefits of youth ministries, like those of other kinds of youth programming (e.g., sports and recreation; afterschool programs; arts/music education), rely on well-prepared adults to partner with youth, facilitate healthy peer interactions, as well as model, teach, practice, and reinforce SEL skills.

Academic-Faith Partnerships to Support Youth Ministries

There is a strong-standing history of academic-faith partnerships to deliver, study, and sustain initiatives focused on public health, health promotion, and healthcare delivery (Levin,

2014), particularly among historically underserved communities (Chatters, 2000), and to support prevention and care for health conditions and healthy lifestyle behaviors among adults (DeHaven et al., 2004; Bopp & Fallen, 2008). There is strong empirical evidence for the power of partnerships to influence health attitudes and behaviors positively (Bopp et al., 2011), such as church-based interventions to reduce risk for chronic diseases by managing stress reduction (Ralston et al., 2017), improving nutritional intake (Resnicow et al., 2005) and augmenting physical activity (as opposed to a sedentary behaviors) (Whitt-Glover et al., 2008; Wilcox et al., 2007)). Fewer examples of faith-based partnerships exist to promote youth health or mental health and they draw inspiration from the adult-focused literature providing psychoeducation (Pottinger et al., 2021), culturally sensitive community-developed interventions to reduce mental health stigma and improve treatment engagement (Breland-Noble et al., 2018) as well as tools to enhance healthy lifestyles (McDole et al., 2013).

For instance, Dinizulu and colleagues (2024) partnered with Black churches in a midwestern metropolitan city training their youth program staff to deliver a social justice service-learning intervention leveraging youth-adult partnerships to target the achievement (opportunity) gap. Adolescents and staff reported high acceptability; additionally, feasibility was demonstrated through consistent attendance, high engagement, and high completion rates of planned sessions by staff and youth. Emergent qualitative themes from adolescent and provider focus groups also indicated that the service-learning curriculum (1) facilitated life skills (e.g., goal setting, SEL and behavioral regulation, and problem solving), (2) shaped perspectives and inspired openness, and (3) created a safe space for all to feel heard and valued while addressing the inequities in education that directly impacted them. In another example, Helseth and Frazier (2017) partnered with a non-profit faith-based organization operating four after-school programs in an urban

Southeastern city. They implemented a peer-assisted social learning model harnessing natural opportunities for peer-mediated problem solving for elementary-school youth, where findings demonstrated strong evidence for implementation adherence and feasibility (attendance, participation, enthusiasm).

These examples demonstrate the growing effort, reach, and potential of academic-faith partnerships to support youth mental health through infusion of empirically supported content and support to youth ministry providers through collaboration, consultation, supervision, resources, and/or trainings. In other youth serving settings (e.g., after-school programs), research has examined the transfer and impact of recommendations for youth development, and the degree to which these resonate for youth care providers and their alignment with provider perceptions of what they need in terms of training and resources to support youth in their care. Generally, youth ministry programs remain largely absent from this literature and untapped spaces for enhancing and examining youth development (Pinckney et al., 2021).

The Current Study

The current study advances an ongoing academic-faith partnership with the Coptic Orthodox Church of the Southern U.S. Diocese, the first in the diocese's history, focused on strengthening opportunities for healthy youth development through Coptic Sunday school programming for youth aged 3 to 19. Youth ministry providers (N = 197) responded to electronic and pen-and-pencil survey questions about youth and service. We summarized multiple choice responses and used thematic analysis to code open-ended responses to examine provider preparation to serve their parish youth and to inform recommendations for enhancing benefits of Sunday school engagement and programming for youth development. Specifically, the following research questions were explored: (1) what are Coptic youth ministry provider attitudes and

beliefs toward youth behaviors, (2) what motivations drive providers to serve youth, (3) what are provider interpretations of youth disengagement, and (4) what are provider endorsed training needs?

Method

The Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States

The Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States (referred hereinafter as the Diocese) is geographically the first and largest Coptic diocese in North America. It comprises 11 states from its Western region (Arizona, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas) to Central region (Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Tennessee), and Florida region. Historically, Coptic diasporic communities began *clustering* in the United States as early as 1955 (Boulos, 2006) after President Gamel Abdel Nasser's implementation of socialist economic policies in Egypt (Yefet, 2016). Emigration accelerated until the present day largely due (but not limited) to Copts' secondary status as Egyptians, religious persecution (Dickinson, 2018; Olmstead, 2013), and search for more economic opportunity (Youssef, 2016). To address the growth and urgent needs of the Coptic diaspora in North America, H.H. Pope Shenouda appointed H.E. Metropolitan Youssef to oversee and establish the Southern Diocese (first in the United States) in 1993. Today it comprises 66 churches, 39 growing communities, 93 priests, a monastery, a convent, and a Christian retreat center altogether serving approximately 18,000+ families through its parish communities.

Primary Author Positionality and Reflexivity

The primary author's dedication in this work reflects a profoundly held value in serving communities and individuals marginalized by systemic inequity. Her personal and professional commitment to this work is multi-dimensionally rooted in her identity as a Believer, Copt or

cultural insider (Genga & Scott, 2006), first-generation diaspora youth within the Diocese, with personal experiences attending Sunday school as a youth as well as serving children and teens in Sunday school as a young adult. During and after college, she served in Sunday school and St Didymus's borrowing library, where she has directly supported dozens of youths across church settings. When she commenced her PhD program, it was with the hope and intention to use scientific theory and knowledge to better serve her community and its youth. It became a calling to collaborate in academic-faith partnership with the Diocese.

Particularly, she is concerned about youth (dis)engagement and identity development and the risk of youth feeling under-supported and becoming marginalized from their communities. Her science and action are informed by social constructivism and transformative paradigms (Creswell et al., 2018). Inspired by conversations with the mental health ministry, curriculum advisors and Coptic youth ministry providers across all levels, about the inextricable ties between S/R and culture in migration as well as how they inform psychological health, she is cognizant of how these themes manifest in daily routine interactions with youth in context of youth identity, development, and well-being.

Academic-Faith Collaboration

The present study advances an ongoing academic-faith partnership that began in October 2021 to strengthen benefits to positive youth development in Coptic diasporic community spaces through faith-based youth programming. The partnership has been sustained by the primary author and chief Sunday school curriculum ministry and mental health ministry advisors for the Diocese, with contributions over time from servant coordinators (across 40 churches) and servants (i.e., youth ministry providers) affiliated with both ministries. Each parish offers the new *Children of Light* curriculum (released in 2021 and adapted "to address the problems youth

face in the lands of immigration", substituting the Diocese's initial *Legacy Curriculum* (focused more solely on spiritual programming), during Sunday school for youth ages 3-19 and with lesson plans from Pre-Kindergarten through 12th grade. Most parishes offer the program (average one hour, abbreviated for pre-K and 1st grade) on Sunday morning after liturgical services. A minority of churches offer it Saturday evening (average 1.5 hours) during traditional hymns and praises.

Collaboration began when the diocese sought to infuse empirically supported mental health kernels into the *Children of Light* curriculum recognizing that spiritual, psychological, and emotional health are intimately intertwined. Broadly, they wanted to better equip providers with skills to foster strong and positive adult-youth and peer connections toward enhancing youth engagement (minimizing attrition) and nurturing youth mental health and psychosocial well-being. Biweekly meetings online over three years shaped the specific aims for the academic-faith collaboration: (1) bring an evidence-based psychological framework to the *Children of Light* curriculum in a contextually relevant, culturally responsive, and historically conscious way; and (2) assess the resource and training needs among youth ministry providers toward supporting youth and identifying those demonstrating need for mental health support.

Participants

The sample consists of 197 Coptic Orthodox youth ministry providers in the Southern US Diocese (73% Sunday School servants, 21% servant coordinators, 6% pre-servant, college, hymns, or summer/monthly camp servants). Providers served an average of 15 years (SD = 10, range: 1-40) in the United States, and those who immigrated from Egypt (n = 32) served an average of 9 years (SD = 5.5, range: 4-29) there prior to immigrating. Some (n = 7) also served in other countries (e.g., Canada, Saudi Arabia, Oman, and Qatar), for an average of 10 years (SD

= 5, range: 2-14). Survey responses were anonymous; therefore, there are no sample characteristics to report. However, from extensive field work, the primary author knows providers are a diverse group regarding immigration history, acculturation, educational background, economic position, age, generation, and gender. Providers are volunteers, typically assigned in groups of four to each Sunday school classroom, taking weekly turns leading lessons. Providers teach their age group for one year and typically are reassigned to a new classroom annually during the Coptic New Year, Feast of Nayrouz (First of the Coptic month of Thout or September 11th).

Procedure

The procedures described below were reviewed by the University's Institutional Review Board and deemed exempt based on anonymous and archived data.

Data Collection. Purposeful sampling contributed to the qualitative rigor and integrity principle of *transferability* (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Providers received a two-page, anonymous, paper-and-pencil questionnaire during the Diocese's first servant coordinators conference on June 24-26, 2022, attended by ~ 40 coordinators who serve in Coptic communities and parishes from Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, Tennessee, Florida, Arizona, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas. Conference leaders asked attendees to take approximately five to ten minutes to complete the eight multiple choice items with one open-ended text box, and nine free response questions as described in the measures below. All servant coordinators in attendance completed the survey. Post-conference, clergy from every Coptic community in the Diocese recommended at least two providers they perceived as dedicated, adequately experienced, and knowledgeable to reflect on youth (dis)engagement and needs from their communities to complete the same questionnaire. Aligned with the Diocese's traditional method

of distributing surveys, the anonymous questionnaire was adapted to Google Forms to ease distribution. Survey distribution ended in May 2023 and responses were received by fall 2023. Among eligible providers who received the survey 85% completed it.

Measures

Attitudes and Beliefs. Questions were inspired by the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB; Ajzen, 1991; Figure 1) and developed (and refined) over many years during other academic-community collaborations with a priority on concision and with the main goal to inform workforce support (Table 1). The theory explains that individuals' intent to enact recommended behaviors are predicted with high accuracy from their attitudes toward behaviors, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control.

Motivations. Providers answered two questions related to personal motivations for serving youth in their parish or community. One multiple-choice question asked why they serve ("Serving/working with kids is my"; response options were "my job", "my career", or "my calling"). One free response question invited elaboration ("Please tell us what you hope to offer the youth you serve?").

Youth Disengagement. One free response question asked why youth disengage from spiritual programming ("Please tell us more about why you think youth are not attending Sunday School / leaving the Church").

Training Needs. One multiple-choice question prompted: "Regarding youth and mental health" with response options "I know enough" or "I wish I knew more". Two additional multiple-choice questions asked to what extent life skills belong in youth programming and how much is adequate to influence youth development. Providers also received a list of common youth concerns they may encounter during routine interactions with youth: friend problems,

bullying / social isolation, school problems, family violence, self-harm / suicide, grief and loss, acculturation, depression / anxiety, drugs / alcohol / opioids / vaping, community violence, anger, aggression, gangs, hunger / homelessness, or "other". Providers were asked to endorse (1) which issues youth present to them, (2) which ones they felt comfortable discussing, and (3) for which ones they were interested in receiving resources or training. Five free response questions followed: 1. "if applicable, please describe the 'other'; 2. " please write the most important issue for training"; 3. "if you could choose two more issues for training (from above), which would they be?"; 4. "if there is anything else you would like to share on the issues above, please do so here"; and 5. "if you have anything else you would like to share with the *Children of Light* curriculum or our mental health awareness ministry, please do so here".

Data Analytic Plan

Quantitative Analysis. Multiple-choice responses were summarized with frequency counts using R Studio.

Qualitative Analysis. Free responses were entered into Excel and coded using a reflexive thematic analysis to provide a thorough and rich description of the dataset. An inductive approach was used given the exploratory nature of the study. The coding team consisted of the primary and second author, a lifelong Believer, Copt, clinician-scientist and academic professor with specialty in resilience and positive psychology and 24 years of national and global service work across several Coptic dioceses bringing mental health awareness through lectures and trainings. She has published and spoken about these topics in 12 countries and 16 states. Contributing to the qualitative integrity and rigor principle of *credibility* (Lincoln & Guva, 1985), the primary and second authors share a combined 35-year experience as front-line providers in the ethno-religious diasporic group.

Thematic analyses were guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework according to the following steps: (a) familiarization with data, (b) initial code generation, (c) illuminating themes, (d) appraising and revising themes, (e) defining and naming themes, and (f) producing a final report. First, the first and second authors conducted a preliminary round of open coding to independently generate initial codes before convening to create a collaborative final set of codes and coding guidelines. Second, the lead coder (primary author) created a structured codebook (available upon request), which included overarching themes, sub-themes, and codes along with definitions and example text to promote intercoder agreement (Fontey et al., 2008). Coding guidelines (i.e., apply a code only once, even if multiple parts of the response reference the code; apply the most specific code) were also described. Third, after aligning on code definitions (inter-rater reliability = 100%), the coding team independently applied this codebook by assigning overarching themes, sub-themes, and codes to all responses. First and second authors independently coded all participant responses. Fourth, agreement was evaluated by the lead coder and author. Initial intercoder agreement (80%) was addressed by reviewing all responses as a team and, through discussion led by the lead coder, 100% consensus was achieved. Fifth, discussion with the senior author informed modifications to the codebook to further clarify and distinguish codes and related responses. Throughout the analytical process, triangulation (i.e., field notes) and documentation (i.e., detailed notes, audio recordings) of all team meetings and consensus on themes were used to ensure qualitative dependability and credibility (Lincoln & Guva, 1985). Moreover, contributing to confirmability (Lincoln & Guva, 1985), we endorsed reflexivity and as principle and practice to acknowledge our own identities and neutralize assumptions as we recognized how interpretation is informed by personal,

contextual, cultural and historical experiences. Overarching themes, sub-themes, and codes were conceptualized as the primary output of these analyses (Tables 3 and 4).

Results

Research Question 1: Provider Attitudes and Beliefs Toward Youth Behaviors

Approximately one-half of providers ($N = 197$) perceived children and adolescents acting *disruptively* as seeking attention (49%). Fewer than half of providers perceived youth as needing their support (43%), while even fewer perceived them as avoiding participation (8%). Most providers reported that youth may need support when they appear *withdrawn* (73%), while fewer reported that these youth may not want to participate (17%), may want attention (10%), or are being dramatic (0.5%). Finally, most providers endorsed that they would ask what is wrong when youth seem *upset* (77%), while some reported they would encourage youth to participate (16%) or suggest they take a few deep breaths (5%). Fewer providers indicated that they would allow youth to sit out of activities (2%).

Research Question 2: Provider Motivations to Serve Youth

Providers ($N = 197$) indicated service was their "calling" (94%), "job" (5%) or "career" (1%). Providers completed the open-ended question: "please tell us why you serve?", to which themes and codes are depicted in Table 2. Providers also completed the open-ended question: "please tell us what you hope to offer the youth you serve?". The following sections present overarching themes, codes, and subcodes, summarized quantitatively (i.e., number of participants who endorsed the code; corresponding percentage of sample; total number of excerpts) in Table 3 and delineated in the text below, accompanied by exemplifying quotes. Overall, most providers spoke to an overarching theme of S/R (108%) and many spoke to contextual themes (68%).

Spirituality/Religiosity

Spiritual Youth Development

This code captures how providers desire to offer youth the internal human capacity for self-transcendence as well as a "strong" and "real" relationship with God in childhood and adolescence (53%, *n* = 120). Providers further reinforced motivations to "know God", "know about God", and "lead others [youth] to God". One provider described, "I hope to participate in building their relationship with God. I want to show them who He is, how wonderful and loving He is, how He wants us to be like Him so that we can be with Him forever". Uniquely, providers also discussed nurturing youth relationships with Abouna, the priest of the Coptic parish community. The distinction between knowing *about* God and *knowing* God is salient to this code.

God's Mercy, Love, & Compassion

This code captures how providers are motivated to offer youth both the knowledge of God's "love", "mercy", and "compassion" and provide an environment that reflects these qualities in how providers and youth treat "each other" (28%, *n* = 64). One provider wrote, "I hope to love them unconditionally as if they were my own physical children. In doing all this I hope to offer them a picture of Christ's boundless love". Salient to this code is how God's love is mirrored in the setting and interactions.

Christ Centered Fellowship

This code captured how providers seek to provide youth with an atmosphere that reflects Christ's teachings and practices in provider-youth, peer-peer, and provider-provider interactions (8%, *n* = 17). Providers discussed offering "a sense of fellowship in Christ and belonging" and "they [youth] may know and see the real Jesus Christ in us!".

Roadmap to Heaven

This code captures how some providers hope to nurture youth skills and resources for "fighting the good fight, finishing the race, and keeping the faith" to receive the heavenly reward of being with God in His eternal kingdom, (7%, *n* = 16). Providers referenced scripture from 2nd Timothy 4:7-8.

Hope

This code captures how some providers seek to strengthen youth expectations of God's promises and His faithfulness, (7%, *n* = 16). One provider wrote, "I want to offer them hope in their spiritual lives because God is willing to forgive us when we search for Him with all our heart."

Heart for Service

This code captures how a few providers want to offer youth a love for serving, which includes seeing the fruit of their service in youth (4%, *n* = 7). One provider wrote, "seeing all of them in the church as deacons and servants".

Context

Connection & Biopsychosocial-Spiritual Support

About one-quarter of providers discussed wanting to provide youth psychological, social, and physical support in addition to spiritual support; they want to bond with youth by giving them "time", "attention", "guidance", "reassurance" and "relational" warmth (30%, *n* = 76). Providers particularly underscored "mental health" and "inclusive instructions" to promote "understanding" and an overall "healthy spiritual life". One provider wrote, "we need to learn how to connect with these youth not only based on their spiritual needs, but also their emotional,

psychological, and social needs". One provider wrote wanting to give youth "a relationship… that is so genuine that they would pursue a relationship with God.".

Safe Space

Some providers yearned to cultivate a "secure" setting, where youth feel heard (21%, *n* = 48). Providers highlighted how they want youth to have a "safe space" to "talk" and feel that the "church [is] a home" or "shelter" to them, where one provider said, "the servants [are] as caring individuals who are always available to them". Another provider indicated, "I would also like to offer them topics that are relevant to today's society and everyday struggles and give them a safe space to share their thoughts and discuss them".

Lasting Impact

This code captures how some providers want to make a significant difference in the lives of the youth they serve, such as being a "role model" or "example" to them, (11%, *n* = 24). Providers mentioned wanting to have a positive effect on their "confidence" as well as other areas of their lives, such as "school", "college", or "work". One provider described wanting to offer youth the "benefit of [learning from] my mistakes".

Resilience

Only a few providers described a priority of instilling in youth the skill to adapt and proceed well from threats and challenges, (6%, *n* = 12). They acknowledged how life has trials and wanted youth to make the conscious decision to navigate these trials in a godly manner by facing them. Providers spoke on "how to handle difficulties", "wisdom to deal with this world", and "how to be steadfast in it in light of what's going on around them". Critical to this code is the distinction of actively facing life challenges, not repressing, denying, or avoiding them as defense mechanisms.

Research Question 3: Provider Interpretations of Youth Disengagement

All providers completed the open-ended question: "Please tell us more about why you think youth are not attending Sunday School and / or leaving the Church?". The following sections present overarching themes, sub-themes, and codes from Coptic youth care providers (*N* = 197), summarized quantitatively in Table 4 and delineated in the text below, accompanied by exemplifying quotes.

Spirituality/Religiosity

Most providers referenced spiritual/religious themes on why youth disengage from Sunday school and church programming. The more elaborated responses point to two sub-themes within the spiritual/religious experience: representation of God and vulnerability zones.

Representation of God

Representation of God was the most discussed sub-theme in the S/R dimension, both by percentage of sample (84%) and number of excerpts (*n* = 230). Providers described how youth's internal working model of God is developed and modeled through the youth services, impacting youth mental representation of who they imagine God to be. The following codes illuminate opportunities for impact and improvement.

Planting a Stronger Spiritual Foundation and Skills. This was the most endorsed code in the overall S/R theme, both by percentage of sample (38%) and number of excerpts (*n* = 98), and it captures provider attributions of youth disengagement to a lack of skills or underdeveloped spiritual foundation, absence of an intimate relationship with God or the church, or ability to endure adversities or worldly enticements. From an early age, planting and nourishing a child's ability to know God and His character is critical, particularly when youth face challenges in life.

> "a child must learn from an early age in life that God loves them *unconditionally* and has a relationship with Him that can never be broken, no matter the mistakes or anything that child does, they can turn to Him. If a child is challenged both at home and in church to grow in his/her relationship with God and apply that relationship in their daily life, that would be amazing".

Skewed Image of God. About one-fifth of providers endorsed a skewed image of God contributing to youth disengagement (number of excerpts = 65). Coded excerpts reflected a spiritual opacity in youth views of God due to how providers both verbally present and behaviorally model God in their interactions with youth. Verbally, providers may communicate an incorrect teaching of who God is or His character description, such as "a servant may say to a child 'Behave or God will not love you'. The understanding now has gone from a God who loves us unconditionally to one that is placing conditions on His love". Behaviorally, one servant remarked how "they [youth] associate God with the servants and their attitudes. There is a dissonance between who they [servants] are and who they pretend to be, and it eventually catches up in their relationship to God."

Need for Agape Love. Some providers introduced the need for service to reflect agape, the highest and sacrificial form of love, to *all* youth to combat disengagement (12% of sample; 38 excerpts). One remarks, "kids can sense love and attention expressed with partiality from servants, abouna, and tasony [providers] and this loses souls". Moreover, the quality of the service is defined by the presence of agape love rather than its quantity or appearance. One provider wrote, "zeal without love, this becomes their false god.. this can [be] very dangerous because it provides a false sense of confidence since programs are thriving and numbers are large."

Sunday School Serves Only the Well. This code captures provider observations where Sunday school programming is biased to serve those youth who appear well or youth who have no need for extra support (8%; *n* = 17). One remarked, "it is almost like we are setting up Sunday school for the well", "they might feel like the Church is an exclusive club for good people"; another, "sometimes Sunday school servants will not want certain kids to attend because those kids are too difficult, too complicated, or ask tough questions".

Serving the Rule, Not the Soul's Needs. This code depicts instances where providers remark how they perceive themselves to serve the literal rules in place rather than the considering the intention (or spirit) behind the rule's implementation (5%, *n* = 12). For instance, "we serve the rule not the soul, I consider the system rather the person."

Vulnerability Zones.

The second sub-theme in the S/R dimension (14%, *n* = 34) demarks areas of perceived vulnerability as part of youth's spiritual development.

Caregiver Nourishment & Engagement Level. Several providers (9%, *n* = 20) discussed that for spiritual youth programming to be effective, caregivers need: (1) to be spiritually fed and educated on parenthood by the Church and (2) to participate in the Sunday school process (e.g., Sunday school open house, parent-provider conferences, and parent reinforcement of Sunday school lesson). One provider wrote, "the church should help by becoming the tribe that supports the parents in raising their children".

Spiritual Development Sensitivity Period. Few providers (5%, *n* = 14) highlighted how the period of adolescence to emerging adulthood is marked by heightened risk to detach from the Church and/or one's S/R. Providers cautioned to treat the source of this issue, where "sometimes

we focus so much on adolescence and by that point we are treating the symptom rather than the root".

Culture

Many providers referenced cultural themes to explain youth disengagement from spiritual programming. The more elaborated responses point to two sub-themes within the cultural experience: cultural clashes and sole focus on socializing.

Cultural Clashes

Providers most endorsed cultural clashes (93%, $n = 293$), where youth-adult partnerships experience unique acculturative processes associated with navigating Egyptian and American cultures based on gender, generation, age, and regional upbringing.

Cross-Cultural Adjustment & Generational Gaps. Providers discussed how regional upbringing pre-migration intersects with generational membership implicating provider cross-cultural adjustment post-migration; these processes give rise to differences in mentality, attitudes, values, and communications styles, which become pronounced in a church's service (or workforce) culture post-migration (27%, $n = 67$). A provider discussed how "servants [providers] deal with youths the way they were dealt with back then [in Egypt]. However, this is a totally different time and place." One described the reason that "youth withdraw from Sunday school class or church altogether is that older church leaders have a traditional way of doing things, and although are open to learning modern techniques, are not really assimilating." Another provider highlighted how these chasms sever understanding and connections with youth, "when the servants are not aware of the culture of the new generation vs their generation or the difference between the culture of their mother country (e.g. Egypt) and the culture in the West, they will simply not understand what the kids are going through".

Imposed Youth Ideal Norm. This code captures illustrations of a norm perceived by some as maladaptive where youth must exude a perfectionistic standard to meet provider (or adult) expectations and pressures (22%, *n* = 68). As a result, providers observe how youth disconnect and guard themselves from being vulnerable to conform to and project ideal norms. "In my experience in the Southern Diocese, the youth have two completely separate lives – projecting a fake image at church while they struggle with addiction and other pressures in hiding. They feed servants the expected answers because servants will not tolerate any other answers and will argue the kids down." Such a norm breeds adult scrutiny and obstructs providers from listening, understanding, and ultimately supporting youth's holistic needs. In turn, youth internalize a process where: (1) they "struggle", (2) experience "shame", (3) "isolate", and (4) cannot catalyze "solutions".

Adult Scrutiny & Need for Non-Judgmental & Respectful Approach. This code represents instances where adults castigate youth, publicly and/or sarcastically, in the broader church context for engaging in behaviors not aligned with cultural expectations (e.g., 20%, *n* = 67). Expectancy violations include their appearance (e.g. haircuts or clothing) or choices (e.g., non-traditional career interest). Providers emphasized how adults (including providers) need to take on a "respectful", "non-judgmental", and "non-alienating" approach in context of expectancy violations with youth. One provider said "[we] concentrate on a lot of the *external* [image] instead of just loving and welcoming our children into the house of God"; another remarked, "we are harsher in our judgements than Christ Himself".

Mishandled Serious Yet Sensitive Topics. This code captures how providers are faced with addressing complex, significant, yet delicate subject matters that youth present in Sunday school class seeking fruitful discussion and guidance (9%, *n* = 36). Responses reflect how these

topics are mishandled when providers either give "shallow" answers, purposefully ignore, or utilize an authoritarian communication style (e.g., one-sided, dictatorial, rule-enforcing). Coupled with other communication barriers (e.g., cross-cultural adjustment and generational gaps), miscommunication and misunderstanding may be exacerbated when handling the serious yet sensitive subject matter (e.g., Black lives matter, women's rights movement, domestic violence). One provider explained "`we don't want to introduce this to them because they are still innocent' has become obsolete. If we don't the world will and that is a much worse outcome". Responses pointed toward meaningful, two-way, responsive communication as critical to adult-youth partnerships.

No Separation Faith & Culture. Providers described how non-Biblical, socio-historical traditions themselves, and use by some providers of non-Biblical, socio-cultural conventions to justify faith, both may alienate American born or Americanized youth (9%, $n = 35$). One provider wrote, "[to] mix up culture to justify faith. As children get older, they begin to recognize the fallacy of the reasons and in turn creates confusion". Providers highlight the need to prioritize the teaching of faith above the surrounding culture.

Provider Misogyny. A few providers discussed how provider prejudices toward the female gender manifest in interactions with youth in church and in Sunday school class (6%, $n = 20$). One participant's experience as a provider and youth in Sunday school illuminated, "I have seen interactions where woman have been told to tolerate abuse in the name of Christianity. To be clear, the church is not teaching this."

Sole Focus on Socializing

A few providers describe a phenomenon where those who appear to be rooted in church may leverage the setting (and religion generally) solely for socio-cultural access and external purposes (as opposed to spiritual development) (6%, *n* = 14). One provider remarked,

> "Although we mean 'Church' as the Body of Christ, our children may see the word church as an institution… parents only focus on making sure they children are 'in' church for the sake of being in that location as opposed to somewhere else. Children only spend time with 'church kids' instead of how to join others [in] that walk with God. This may be construed by the young person that the focus is just about the institution, or worse yet about the culture."

Context.

Many providers described contextual themes affecting youth disengagement from the church setting and Sunday school programming. The more elaborated responses point to four sub-themes impacting engagement quality: psychological climate, youth-adult relationship needs, youth detachments, and village synergy.

Psychological Climate.

Most reported was psychological climate (89%, *n* = 252), reflecting perceptions and attitudes of providers and youth about the impact of the church and Sunday school environment on individual comfort, trust, learning and engagement.

Lack of Belonging, Validation and Voice. This code captures provider accounts of how youth may not feel seen, heard, or accepted by adults and/or peers and thus "don't attach to the church", (38%, *n* = 104). Providers used youth descriptors as "outcasted", "rejected", "isolated", verbally "shut down almost instantly", and the general lack of "understanding" and "connection"

from providers and/or peers in the Sunday school setting. One provider gave insight into major factors at large contributing to this experience,

> "The reasons can vary and tend to differ between different classes. Sometimes it is that the class dynamic has children that are all eager to learn and grow spiritually so someone who lacks this eagerness feels left out… Other times this person is from a different socioeconomic background, perhaps they just moved to the US, their parents are not well off, or their parents are "too well off", they may be the only non-Egyptian in a class of all native Copts, they may be a child of a single parent, or adopted. In some cases, the child may feel like the only one with certain domestic problems like parents going through a divorce or living in a situation where domestic violence is the norm. Other reasons could be individual [struggles], such as thoughts of suicide/self harm."

Finally, another provider wrote, "if they do not show up nor feel like they belong or have a place in church, what good is the curriculum?"

Provider Self-Righteousness & Familial Biases. This code captures depictions of providers exuding entitlement and biases as well as not practicing what they preach or "hypocrisy", (18%, $n = 60$). One provider remarked, "Some servants [providers] who hold a lot of social status within the church can become too proud and form cliques within the servants". Biases toward families also reflect how youth are treated in the Sunday school. One provider remarked, "as servants [providers] we should not be directing any biases we have towards their parents / family (either it be positive or negative) when interacting with our youth".

Lack of Confidentiality & Strong Rapport. This code captures how privacy and trust may be severed between youth and providers when providers share with adults their concerns on

the youth they serve. Providers shared how such breeches impact perceptions of a "safe space" and may promote "gossip" (14%, *n* = 40).

Lack of Caregiver Enthusiasm. This code captures provider responses where parents and caregivers do not prioritize or encourage their children to attend (8%, *n* = 20). If youth do attend, "parents do not bring them regularly".

Psychological Stripes. This code captures verbal or behavioral strikes of social reputation manifesting in overt or covert "ridicule" or microaggressions impacting youth and their families (6%, *n* = 15). These attacks of reputation may result from a difficult or traumatic event experienced in a youth's life that becomes salient in the church setting among peers and adults. Consequently, youth are "judged" or "blamed" for the base trauma, exacerbating a lack of belonging. One provider describes, "they [congregants] notice that their child is interacting with this person they might go and attempt to pull them away by telling them that they have to go or by any other "subtle" means. Of course, they probably don't realize that their behavior is noticed." The provider continues with solutions, "also a big part of it is the priest and if he will immediately take this person under his wing and show them love and attention or this person will not feel that they are a son or daughter because the fatherly [priestly] love is lacking."

Church Trauma. This code captures a distressing and intense emotional scarring experienced in the church context, uprooting individuals from their parish communities (5%, *n* = 13). These are typically secondary traumas experienced from repeated psychological stripes. On the matter of repeated offenses, one provider writes, "All these points put together can cause a deep pain and even trauma in some youth when they think of coming the church. So what do they do? They stop coming.".

Youth-Adult Relationship Needs

Youth-adult relationship needs in the Sunday school and church setting were also highly reported (83%, *n* = 196).

Biopsychosocial-Spiritual Growth Opportunities. Providers endorsed that the service needs to address youth "physical", "psychological", and "social" needs in addition to "spirituality" (30%, *n* = 68). Providers recognized the need for activities beyond Sunday school that help youth grow holistically and combat "boredom" and offered examples of opportunities where youth contribute to other services in the church or other activities that are created for their fellowship outside Sunday school class. One provider remarked, "the youth need bonding activities"; another, "they didn't get to be involved enough in church, they didn't understand why we do what we do".

Tailored Provider Training. This code captures provider responses that demark a need for customized training and continued "education" in serving, understanding, and supporting kids, (20%, *n* = 48). One provider stated, "not all youths servants [providers] are well-equipped to serve youths. I believe many youths servants are not as trained to deal with the psychology of youths. At this age, it is very hard to get youths to come to God without treating souls (psychology)."

One-on-One Approach. This code captures emphasis on the need for providers to meet youth "one-on-one", especially those youth who barely if at all attend, (14%, *n* = 44). One provider wrote, "we need to reach out to those not to blame them but to build a relationship first and listen to why they left church, then address these issue[s] to gain the[m] back and prevent others in the future from leaving."

Lessons Need to Connect to Youth Daily Lives. This code highlights interest in making Sunday school lessons more applicable to youth daily life experiences and problems, (13%, *n* = 36). Providers described that youth do not feel the lessons are "relevant" and "servants [providers] do not understand what the kids go through". One provider further explained, "yes, we need to teach spiritual lessons, but teaching without application and connecting things to their life results in no fruit. We need to connect with the kids".

Youth Detachments.

Some providers described that youth detachments from the Body of Christ (46%, *n* = 115) result in their disengagement.

Disconnected Teaching Style. This code reflects descriptions of a dissonance in the teaching style and method of providers (20%, *n* =52). Providers write about "talking at them [youth]", youth not having a chance "to participate" or "ask questions", and a "below level presentation format" as barriers to engagement and describe why two-way communication styles and discussion are critical. One provider wrote:

> "After all lessons, we need to allow for time and opportunities to discuss the topics instead of concluding and ending on our words. The youth need a chance to clarify things and challenge things in order to understand and be convinced and truly believe in their values. While some operate on blind obedience, I feel others may need a little more discussion than instruction."

Unmet Needs Satisfied Elsewhere. This code captures provider observations for when the church and its services ignore practical issues and needs facing youth, they seek out and find other communities to meet their holistic needs, (15%, *n* = 32). One provider discussed, "[youth] look for a community that is 'practical' (dealing with their real needs and issues)".

No Provider Follow-Up and Time. This code depicts instances where providers lack the "time" or "ability" to "check in" with youth, especially with "visitations", (11%, *n* = 31). One provider writes, "no one is asking about them if they don't show up. They are lost sheep because we as servants neglected them".

Village Synergy.

A few providers discussed the condition of the village synergy to support the rearing and spiritual development of youth. This sub-theme speaks to the number of members in the youth microsystem, the quality of their relationships, and how those members, particularly caregivers, may be under-supported. Respondents further emphasized how the quality of the "servant [provider] and parent relationships" affects the strength of youth mesosystems, (9%, *n* = 24). One provider writes,

> Families are more physically spread apart, with grandparents and cousins living in different states or even different countries, making it difficult for children to have role models from adults and older youth in the family. Role models are instead coming from the internet. The only way to keep more youth in the church is to support families, while providing access to good role models in the community and in the church.

Research Question 4: Provider Endorsed Training Needs.

Providers described serving youth as "My Calling" (94%) but wished they knew more about youth mental health (82%). Most providers agreed that Sunday school programming should teach life skills (88%), while few endorsed that they do not have enough time or training (10%), or perceived it as parents' responsibility (1.5%), or simply not their job (0.5%). Most providers agreed that reflecting on a life skill can be impactful on youth's trajectories (85%), while others endorsed that they would be willing to try using life skills as part of programming

(15%). From a list of common youth concerns providers reported the top three they hear from youth: friend problems (66%), school problems (59%), and bullying / social isolation (51%). Correspondingly, they indicated feeling most comfortable discussing these: friend problems (66%), school problems (58%), and bullying / social isolation (57%). They indicated interest in training and resources related most to family violence (61%); drugs, alcohol, opioids and vaping (60%); depression and anxiety (59%), bullying / social isolation (59%), and self-harm / suicide (59%). Figures 2, 3, and 4 respectively illustrate the frequencies corresponding to the full list of youth disclosures, provider comfort, and endorsements for training and resources.

Additionally, providers ranked their top three issues for training: (1) depression / anxiety and "mental health" (31%, e.g., "implement forms for our Sunday school class to have mental health check-ins, because most of these kids have a lot to say but never have the opportunity to say it"), family violence and problems (28%, e.g., "it happens a lot, especially in our culture. Whether it's getting yelled at from parents for doing the wrong things or getting hit. There should be some type of program for parents about the right way to discipline their kids"), acculturation (17%; e.g., "the ability to assimilate and know the difference between culture and faith. This is very important because we do know the difference, and we may push our culture on them and the youth get frustrated") and bullying / social isolation (17%). Some providers offered other ideas for training: toxic shame and self-compassion, emotional regulation (e.g., "understanding emotions, the lack of awareness [or] acknowledging our emotions as an Egyptian society. We truly need such a program"), identity development, problem solving and practical skills, social media and gaming addiction, atheism, online relationships with strangers, hook up culture, eating disorders, divorce, sexual assault in church, and healthy discipline.

Discussion

Youth ministry providers interact routinely with youth, though faith-based programs remain vastly underrepresented in science as systematic spaces to strengthen youth development (Pickeney et al., 2021). This study extended an ongoing academic-faith partnership with the Coptic Orthodox Church of the Southern United States to augment opportunities for healthy and positive youth development through Sunday school programming. Coptic youth ministry providers reported their attitudes and beliefs toward youth behaviors, motivations to serve youth, interpretations of youth disengagement, and trainings needs. Overall, providers most consistently described: attitudes of support and compassion toward youth disruptive and withdrawn behaviors; high motivation to serve youth mainly as a function of S/R with some contextual themes; a multiplicity of S/R, cultural and contextual experiences on reasons for youth disengagement from Sunday school and church programming; and high need and enthusiasm for tailored training content. Findings advance the literature on faith-based youth programs and academic-faith collaborations to support youth, and elevate Coptic youth ministry provider voices, highlighting need and opportunities for professional development to support youth in context of MENA migration and diaspora.

Attitudes and Beliefs Toward Youth Behaviors

Youth ministry providers most frequently endorsed attitudes of compassion and support for disruptive and withdrawn youth, and high expectations and hopes for engaging them in programming and activities. Although approximately three-quarters of providers indicated that they would lend support to withdrawn youth, more than half of providers interpreted disruptive youth as attention-seeking and avoidant and fewer than half of providers interpreted disruptive

youth as needing their support. These results align with after-school provider attitudes and beliefs toward youth behaviors (Hagan et al., under review).

Motivations to Serve Youth

Nearly all providers described serving youth as their calling, motivated by a strong sense of duty to God and community. Themes emphasized motivations relating to S/R that diverge from those reported in other comparative workforce literatures (e.g., teachers, after-school and out-of-school time staff), which have reflected more the biopsychosocial (rather than spiritual) dimensions of development and support and included more practical knowledge and skillsets, for instance, related to academic enrichment, physical activity, green space, and nutrition (Sallis et al., 1997; Messiah et al., 2017). Motivations reported here were heavily directed toward youth community connection and spiritual development, with less attention toward explicit life skills (e.g., SEL) building. Nonetheless, contextual themes reveal motivations to nurture youth-adult and peer connections through holistic support with emphasis on providing a safe space for encouraging resilience and lasting impact. These contextual results align more (than spiritual motivations) with other youth serving settings where youth-adult partnerships (Hall et al., 2020) and peer relationships (Gowing, 2019) are recognized as critical mechanisms supporting healthy youth development.

Youth Disengagement

God images are the mental representations of God – for instance, as benevolent or punishing, a mother or father figure, or present or far removed– that frame an individual's approach to God in prayer and expectations of God in practicing his or her faith (Krause & Ironson, 2019). Theistic relational spirituality, or the ways in which monotheistic believers view and relate with God, comprises both the *experiential* (primary implicit and affect-laden) and

doctrinal representations of God (primarily explicit and affect-light; Davis et al., 2021). The study's S/R themed results elevate the experiential representation, where interpersonal and relational experiences within the Church and Sunday school setting may generalize to youth internal working models of God, influencing the foundation and trajectory of spiritual youth development. This lends support to the correspondence hypothesis, where interpersonal experiences impact God representations; positive IWMs foster corresponding representations of a benevolent, loving, and compassionate God, whereas negative IWMs foster a harsh and judgmental God (Granqvist, 2020). Efforts and theories to understand associations between image of God and self-image date back many decades. For instance, they include psychodynamic theory (God is a projection of self-beliefs Freud, 1957; moreover, self-beliefs and one's image of God are directly and significantly related Lawrence, 1951) and developmental attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969; caregiver images, God images and self-concepts are directly related, Dickie et al., 2006). Results here call attention to how providers implicitly and explicitly teach and model for youth their own views of God, impacting the mental representations youth consolidate of God. Therefore, provider self-examination of their own view of God (i.e., who God is, His character qualities, and the expression of His benevolent, unconditional (agape) love as opposed to harsh judgement) is recommended as it is essential to how youth will internalize their self-beliefs and views and affect the course of their spiritual development and relationship with church. Providers, including clergy, may leverage the God Image Inventory in pastoral care to evaluate the quality of one's image of God (Lawrence, 1997). In all, providers perceive these important to youth spiritual wellness, and extensive literature demonstrates mental and physical health related benefits from a benevolent, compassionate, nurturing, and merciful God representation (Granquist et al., 2010).

Alongside S/R, cultural themes highlighted provider perceptions that some youth may be navigating complex social interactions that hinder youth-adult partnerships and youth access to biopsychosocial-spiritual support. In turn, results reveal that some youth may struggle, experience a toxic shame related to not projecting ideal expectations (imposed youth ideal norms) and thus self-isolate, exacerbating mental distress that precludes safe and effective problem solving. Our results lend support to previous research findings that culture informs S/R experiences as well as how cultural attitudes toward distress stymie help seeking behaviors in the Coptic Orthodox faith community (Aziz, 2018), which are inextricably tied to the roles of honor and shame in MENA culture (Mechammil et al., 2019).

Sociocultural theory delineates how culture mediates human experience and transforms daily human activity; moreover, its fundamental premise is that the external use of cultural products (e.g., language, tools, symbols, etc.) is internalized into psychological functions (Wertsch & Tulviste, 1992). From this theoretical lens, the cultural community provides youth with developmental pathways inside an ecocultural context (Weisner, 2002). Our contextual results elucidate how proximal processes that occur in community routines of the micro- and mesosystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) impact the health and wellness of those youths' systems, particularly their lived psychological climate. Psychological climate in schools has been conceptualized as a student's perception of their school environment (El Zaatari and Maalouf, 2022), where a positive or safe psychological climate is protective against emotional distress, mitigating the effects of bullying and victimization and enhancing psychological adjustment (Vang & Nishina, 2022). Results reveal provider insight regarding disengagement from ministry programming by youth for whom suffer a negative psychological climate may put them at risk for isolation, disconnection, and diminished psychological wellbeing (Anderman, 2002). A

positive psychological climate characterized by safety, support, belonging, empathy, validation, and privacy is perceived as vital to enhancing Sunday school students' engagement, experience, and wellbeing. In fact, research has shown how psychological safety in the environment characterized by youth and adults to play a significant role in overall engagement levels and experiences (Crawford, 2018).

Notably, diaspora youth who disengage from spiritual programming may lose a significant portion of human activity and socio-cultural access to their ethno-religious identity (see figure 5 Bioecological-Spiritual Model for Coptic Diaspora Sunday School youth). Indeed, empirical findings affirm depicting culture as dynamic and permeating the daily practices of social communities through more proximal systems (Vélez-Agosto et al., 2017). However, youth who disengage, and whose needs are met by other institutions (inhabiting their macrosystem) may still engage with salient systems (e.g., time and spiritual dimensions) in their spiritual-bioecological model. Future research centering youth voice should aim to examine these unique cultural exchanges, developmental processes, and racial/cultural identity negotiations for Coptic youth. Altogether, findings illuminate how sociocultural forces in the church give rise to unique contextual experiences, psychological climates, and God images, and these representations have the power to impact bio-psychosocial-spiritual development course, youth-adult partnership, and peer relationship quality. These results highlight the many interpretations among youth ministry providers about the various reasons youth may disengage from church programming, and alongside, great insight regarding opportunities and changes to elevate engagement, through introspection, relationships, and training.

Training Needs

Many providers expressed interest in learning more about youth mental health, perceived that even small opportunities for practicing life skills may meaningfully impact youth trajectories, and agreed that Sunday school programming should teach them. These results highlight eagerness to receive and infuse training content focused on SEL skills building into routine interactions with youth. Findings lend support to a growing and robust literature applying the theory of planned behavior (TPB; Ajzen, 1991) to the delivery of (and intention to deliver) evidence-based practices by providers (often without advanced training) in human service settings. The theory appraises a person's interpretation of behavior (i.e., attitudes), perception of the social expectation to engage in the recommended behavior (i.e., subjective norms), and their perceived ability to apply the behavior (i.e., perceived behavioral control) as predictive of behavioral intention and, in turn, behavioral change. TPB is supported by decades of research across disciplines examining the implementation of empirically supported innovations and training recommendations (Burgess et al., 2017). Applications of TPB have included, for instance, studies of mental health therapists' intentions and decisions to adopt generalizable practice elements after state-wide training (McLennan et al., 2019), after-school providers' perceived knowledge, confidence, behavioral control, and attitudes associated with elements of health promotion interventions (Elias et al., 2018), as well as after-school providers attitudes, intentions, and behavioral control around adopting and infusing SEL skills (Hagan et al., *under-review*).

Regarding specific training needs, most providers reported feeling comfortable discussing the most disclosed youth concerns, specifically family and school problems as well as bullying and social isolation. Less frequently disclosed by youth but of high interest for training were

family violence, substance use, and self-harm. Given overlapping risk and resilience pathways (Boustani et al., 2015) contributing to these (and other related outcomes), these training interests may benefit from a literature on transdiagnostic elements (problem solving, emotion regulation, and communication skills) common across evidence-based youth prevention and health promotion programs (Boustani et al., 2015). For instance, social problem solving relies on a combination of emotion regulation, problem specification, and cost-benefit evaluation of potential solutions. Such a core set of life skills may significantly mitigate prevalent pathways to risk behaviors, and position youth for healthy developmental trajectories characterized by flourishing relationships, prosocial behaviors, and positive adjustment (i.e., mitigating risk for multiple problem areas).

Academic-Faith Partnership & Practice Implications

This research aligns with increasing attention to faith-based youth programming as a setting for positive youth development. Findings demonstrate high appreciation for infusing life skills into ministry programming, high desire for training related to mental health, and high motivation related to uplifting youth, building their resilience, creating a lasting impact in their lives, nurturing a safe space, and offering holistic biopsychosocial-spiritual support. Coptic youth ministry providers are uniquely and critically positioned to learn and infuse health-promoting and empirically supported life skills within their service and interactions with youth. Honoring the original partnership goals to infuse an evidence-based psychological framework and examine provider training needs to support youth, ongoing collaboration is focused on bringing training content in ways that resonate for providers, expand their learning to align with their role and function, develop them professionally, and raise their self-efficacy, but refrain from over-exerting their service demands or resources. As specified training needs point toward the common

elements of evidence-based prevention programming, skillsets that are central to the Cognitive Triangle and used routinely in psychotherapy. We intend to adapt the cognitive (e.g., cognitive distortions, biases), emotional (e.g., empathy, connection, validation), and behavioral (e.g., cost-benefit problem solving) arms of *Teach the Triangle*, a brief and interactive training for youth serving providers in a self-paced, low-stakes, and accessible online format. Future research will test the learning model and transfer of how well providers use and infuse these psychotherapeutic life skills learned from Teach the Triangle into routine interactions with use (see figure 6 Transportability of Teach the Triangle).

Limitations

Findings should be interpreted in context of the following limitations. First, responses were anonymous; thus, we did not collect or report demographic data. However, the richness and candor of responses suggest that anonymity elicited more comprehensive and complete reporting than perhaps otherwise would have been received. Second, the data was subject to self-selection bias: servant coordinator participants (21%) self-selected to the conference (as opposed to those coordinators who did not attend) and the remaining servants were selected by Coptic Orthodox clergy leaders for their perceived high commitment to the provider role. Although a selection bias, this was also a design feature advantage prioritized by our collaborators to yield rich insight into youth disengagement and service needs. Third, the study design was cross-sectional with surveys administered only at one time point (after the *Children of Light* curriculum was disseminated and implemented); for some youth care providers, their experiences related to youth vary between time points (e.g., beginning versus end of Sunday school year). Finally, the perspectives of Coptic youth, particularly those who have disengaged or are susceptible to it were not represented and are mandatory to consider as the work moves toward training

recommendations designed with their benefits and outcomes in mind. Future research will also elevate youth voices to illuminate their S/R, cultural and contextual experiences with engagement to examine how youth responses converge with or diverge from provider opinions and results, a current priority and aim in our academic-faith collaboration. Given provider insights into the stressful experiences of some individuals, we recommend that this research leverage an experimental disclosure paradigm for its therapeutic benefits (Frattaroli, 2006).

Concluding Remarks

The current study advances the literature on Coptic youth ministry providers and Coptic Orthodox spiritual programming, highlighting need and opportunities for workforce preparation and professional development to benefit youth and their parish communities. Findings are significant given the robust literature from youth serving settings that demonstrate how quality routine experiences contribute to positive youth development and rely on motivated, engaged, well-trained and well-prepared frontline providers as well as the scarcity of research on (1) Copts (2) in diaspora (3) conducted in academic-faith collaboration.

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Tables

Table 1

Theory of planned behavior-inspired questions

Theory of Planned Behavior Component	Questions and Response Options
Attitude toward the behavior	When children are ***disruptive***, most likely: A. They want attention B. They don't want to participate C. They need some support D. They are just being dramatic When children ***withdraw***, most likely: A. They want attention B. They don't want to participate C. They don't feel well, may need support D. They are just being dramatic When a child seems ***upset***, I would: A. Ask them what's wrong B. Allow them to sit out of activities C. Suggest a few deep breaths D. Encourage them to participate
Subjective norm	Sunday school curriculum programing should teach "life skills" A. Yes, I totally agree B. Why aren't parents doing this? C. No, this is not our job D. We don't have enough time or training to do this
Perceived behavioral control	5-10 minutes a day reflecting on life skills can make a meaningful difference to a child's trajectory A. Definitely, every little bit helps B. Maybe, I'm willing to try C. Unlikely, not worth my time

	D. Nope, that's not enough

*

Table 2

Why Providers Serve Youth

THEME	***CODE***	***N***	***% N***	***Excerpts***
Spirituality/ Religiosity	Blessing & Heavenly Inheritance	70	36%	84
	Love for God & His Children	53	27%	68
	God's Calling to Use Talents	42	21%	54
	Spiritual Youth Development	39	20%	50
	I Serve Because Christ First Served Me	36	18%	44
	Modeling Service to the Next Generation	24	12%	37
	Spiritual Altruism	24	12%	35
	"The Harvest is Plentiful"	18	10%	28
	Christian Identity	10	5%	12
	Totals	316	160%	382
Context	To Uplift Youth	42	21%	49
	Provider Development	33	17%	38
	A Flourishing Village	9	5%	14
	Totals	84	43%	101

Table 3

What Providers Hope to Offer Youth (N = 197)

THEME	***CODE***	***N***	***% N***	***Excerpts***
Spirituality/ Religiosity	Spiritual Youth Development	105	53%	120
	God's Mercy, Love, & Compassion	56	28%	64
	Christ Centered Fellowship	17	8%	17
	Roadmap to Heaven	14	7%	16
	Hope	14	7%	16
	Heart for Service	7	4%	7
	Totals	213	108%	240
Context	Connection & Biopsychosocial-Spiritual Support	60	30%	76
	Safe Space	42	21%	48
	Lasting Impact	21	11%	24
	Resilience	11	6%	12
	Totals	134	68%	184

Table 4

Provider Perceptions on Reasons for Youth Disengagement (N = 197)

Theme	*Sub-Theme*	*CODE*	*N*	*% N*	*Excerpts*
Spirituality/ Religiosity	Representation of God	Planting a Stronger Spiritual Foundation & Skills	74	38%	98
		Skewed Image of God	42	21%	65
		Need for Agape Love	24	12%	38
		Sunday School Serves Only the Well	16	8%	17
		Serving the Rule, Not the Soul's Needs	10	5%	12
		Totals	166	84%	230
	Vulnerability Zones	Caregiver Nourishment & Engagement Level	17	9%	20
		Spiritual Development Sensitivity Period	10	5%	14
		Totals	27	14%	34
Culture	Cultural Clashes	Cross-Cultural Adjustment & Generational Gaps	53	27%	67
		Imposed Youth Ideal Norms	43	22%	68
		Adult Scrutiny and Need for a Respectful & Non-Judgmental Approach	39	20%	67
		Mishandled Sensitive Yet Serious Topics	18	9%	36
		No Separation of Faith & Culture	18	9%	35
		Provider Misogyny	11	6%	20
		Totals	182	93%	293
	Sole Focus on Socializing	Sole Focus on Socializing	12	6%	14
		Total	12	6%	14
Context	Psychological Climate	Lack of Belonging, Validation & Voice	75	38%	104
		Provider Self-Righteousness & Familial Biases	36	18%	60
		Lack of Confidentiality & Strong Rapport	27	14%	40
		Lack of Caregiver Enthusiasm	16	8%	20
		Psychological Stripes	11	6%	15
		Church Trauma	10	5%	13
		Totals	175	89%	252
	Youth-Adult Relationship Needs	Biopsychosocial-Spiritual Growth Opportunities	60	30%	68
		Tailored Provider Training	39	20%	48
		One-On-One Approach	28	14%	44
		Lessons Need to Connect to Youth Daily Lives	26	13%	36
		Totals	153	83%	196
	Youth Detachments	Disconnected Teaching Style	39	20%	52
		Unmet Needs Met Elsewhere	30	15%	32
		No Provider Follow Up & Time	21	11%	31
		Totals	90	46%	115
	Village Synergy	Village Synergy	18	9%	24
		Totals	18	9%	24

Figures

Figure 1

Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991)

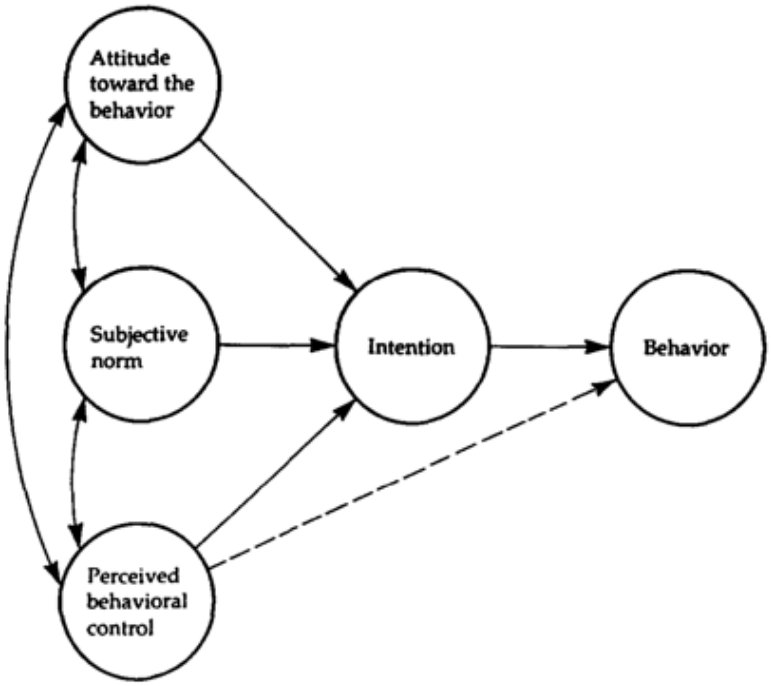
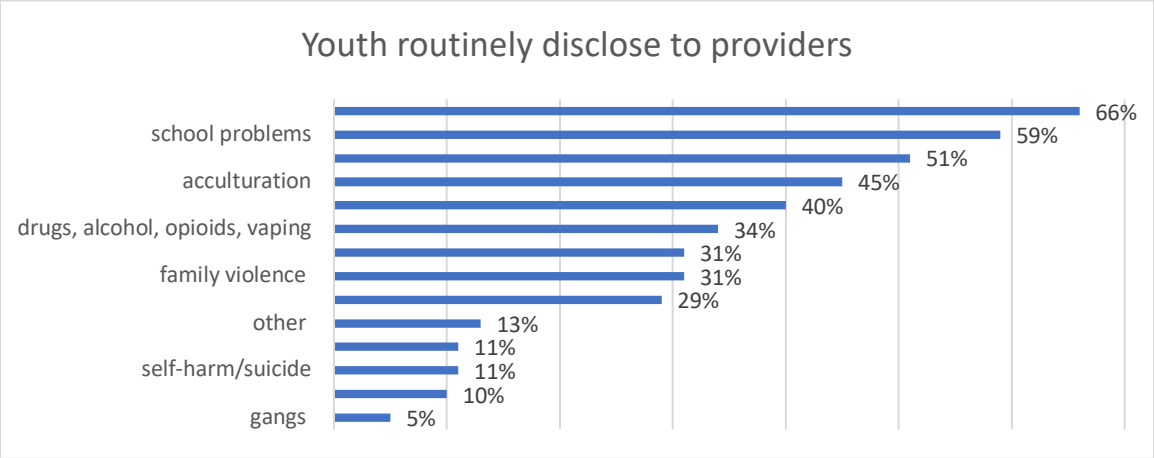
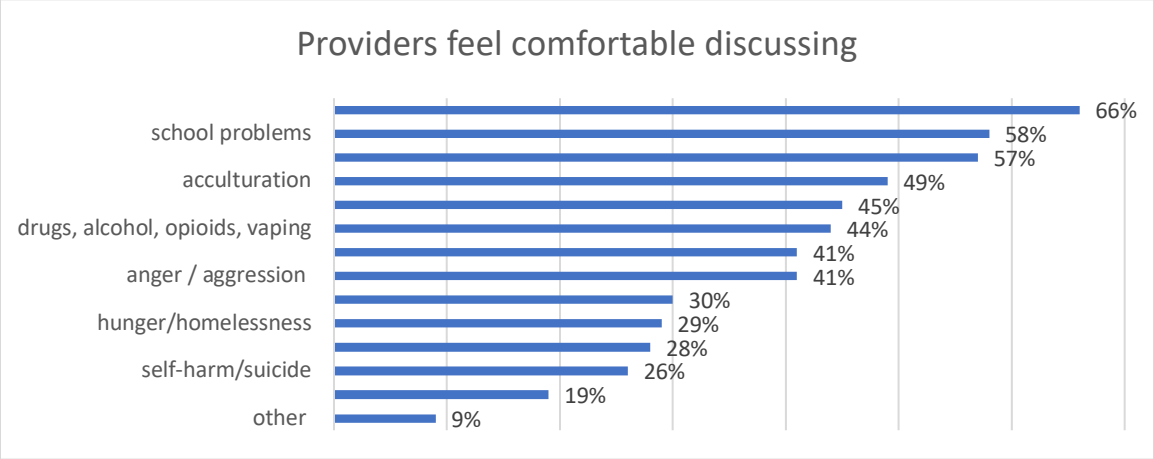


Figure 2-4.

Youth Routine Disclosures to Providers



Providers feel Comfortable Discussing



Top Endorsements for Training & Resources

Figure 5

Bioecological-Spiritual Theoretical Model for Coptic Diaspora Sunday School youth

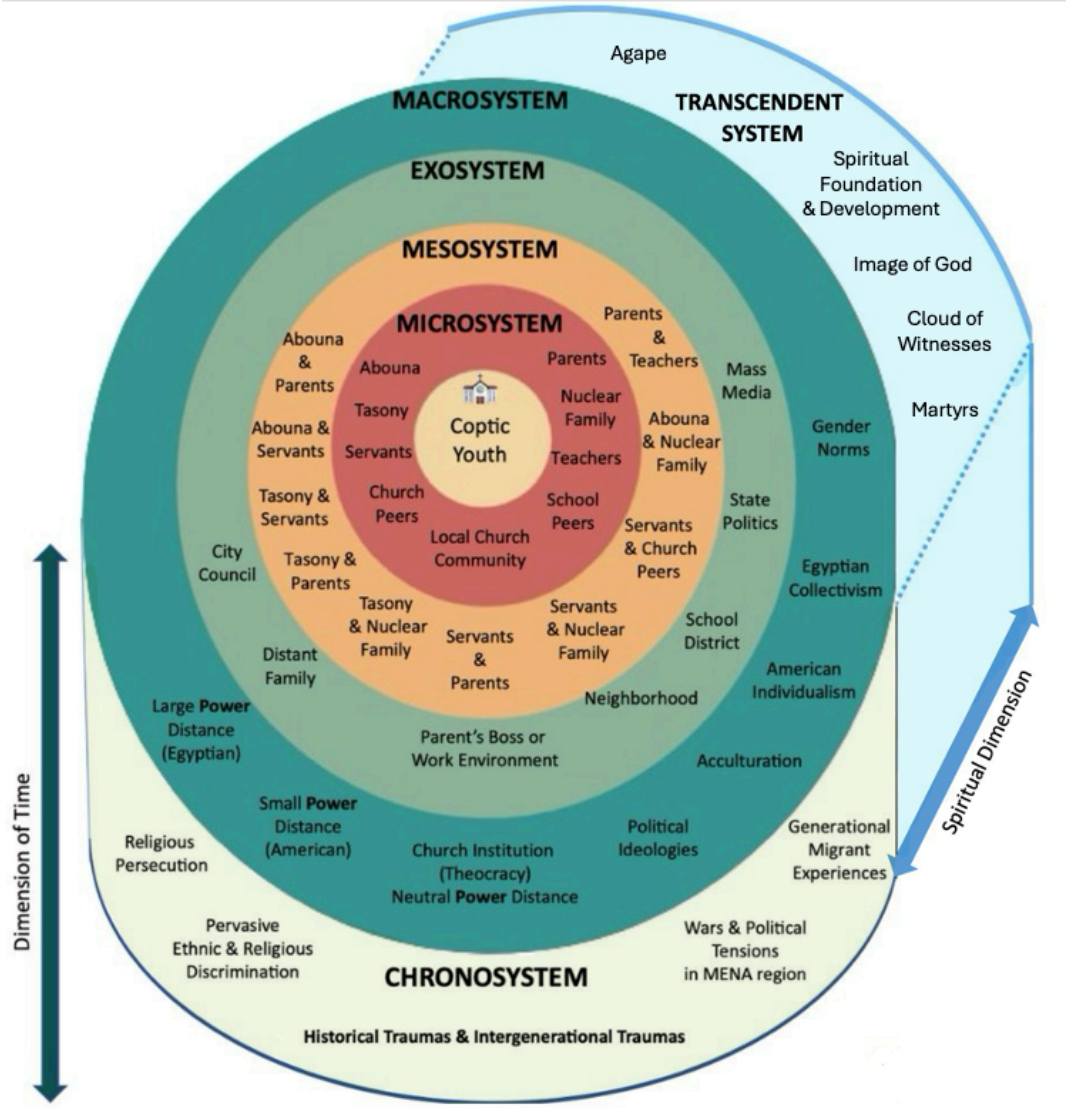


Figure 6

Transportability of Teach the Triangle