

Lutheran Men in Mission  
Young Male  
Spirituality Study  
Summary  
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During 2003, interviews with young men from differing life and faith experiences, four ethnic backgrounds and six regions of the United States revealed high levels of spiritual interest. The Lutheran Men in Mission Male Spirituality Study identified eleven factors in young adult male exploration of meaning and spirituality. Not all eleven factors are significant for each male. The importance of each factor is dependent upon circumstances and the personal temperament of the young man. Nevertheless, the frequency of these eleven factors in the majority of the males interviewed is significant.

Not all of these factors lead to spiritual growth and development. Rather, these are the most significant items of concern or impact upon the spiritual quest of these young men. These factors reflect who these young men are and how best to initiate and sustain a spiritual conversation with them.

Relationships: It is clear that male spirituality is affected by the character, power and shape of a wide variety of relationships. The types of relationships identified vary widely. However, the impact of fathers and the character of the parental marriage relationship on these young men strongly shapes their lives and their spiritual journey. The following is a list of key relationships identified.

*Marriage/divorce in the family:* The wounds incurred during a divorce were more often identified and discussed than any benefits from a divorce. Young men coming from homes where a healthy marriage existed commented about how helpful that was to them as a model and source of strength as they discover their place in the world and settle upon a belief/value system.

*Spouse:* The marriage of a young adult male often played a significant “domesticating” role for these young men. A spouse often led them into a life of spirituality and into the life of the church.

*Centrality of family both in the past and present:* The character of the relationship with their family of origin strongly affects their spiritual journey.

*Parental hopes:* These young men have heard the expectations of their parents for them. Whether they are testing these hopes, rebelling or conforming to them, these expectations shape the nature of their spiritual journey.

*Role of extended family:* It is not unusual for a young man to identify an uncle, grandparent or surrogate father figure playing a significant role in shaping their spiritual journey.

*Male peers:* The lifestyle, aspirations and spiritual journey of these young men is strongly influenced by their friends and peer culture.

Each of these key relationships often serves as a significant entry point to exploration of faith, spirituality and church.

Male Mentors: While relationships in general play a key role in the spiritual development of young adult males, two types of relationships identify as separate factors. The reference to fathers has already been alluded to and we underscore that factor here.

*Fathers:* ... the voice of “father hunger”, wishing fathers were more available and accessible as well as the significant influence of available, generative fathers.

*Older male figures and the opportunity to be an apprentice:* The interviewees often identify in their lives the significant role played by a caring older man such as a grandfather, boss, mentor, coach. Young adult males need to see older men living spiritual lives in order for them to “get it”.

Crisis: A crisis often presents an opportunity for spiritual growth and religious formation for these young men. When significant Christian male figures are engaged with these young men at these points of crisis faith life is enhanced. Three types of crises surface over and again in the interviews.

*Vocation/job:* The search for meaningful work and gainful employment is often interpreted as a crisis and a source of great personal anxiety.

*Void after High School:* Many respondents identify post-high school time as a time of limbo and drifting. The dislocation from the school community, the departure of friends to college, tech schools, the military and new jobs all create a crisis of transition, uprootedness, wilderness and economic insecurity.

*Relationships:* a number of relational crises were identified such as death of a loved one (often a grandparent, parent or mentor), the break up with a girl friend, or their own divorce.

Time management and allocation: These young men struggle with juggling their time between job, school, friends, significant relationships, and sleep. In this context it is difficult for them to find volunteer or worship time. The young men also reported they found it difficult to find time for themselves.

Work: These young men wrestle with getting “good work” i.e., making a “decent living” and finding meaning and purpose in what they do. Finding meaningful work or a career is a multi-staged, long-termed process through which they hope to discover their strengths and passions as well as determine their “place” in the world. Work is a large dimension of their identity and sense of calling.

Nodal Experiences: Male spirituality is often enhanced by significant events and experiences that serve as mountaintop or nodal moments. Young men identify the following kinds of experiences:

*Marriage*

*New job*

*Men's retreats where they were given the opportunity to share as well as lead*

*Awakenings*

*Mission trips*

*Opportunities to lead*  
*Fights*  
*Birth of a child*  
*Divorce*  
*Move to a new location*

Nature and the Out-of-Doors: The spiritual vitality of these young men is strongly enhanced by experiences in nature. Nature allows them to be kinesthetic with their sense of wonder and faith and make some cosmological and theological connections. These young men are more likely to claim a spirituality that is pantheistic rather than transcendental. This “creation focused” spirituality includes:

*Mastery of skills in nature:* (i.e., hunting or snowboarding)

*Doing things:* (mountain biking, canoeing or kayaking, snowboarding, running, etc.)

*Contemplation:* Sitting in parks or natural settings enjoying the view and sounds of nature serves to provide a deep spiritual connection and is a source for releasing stress and tension.

Sports: Young adult males are enormously kinesthetic. Their spirituality goes through their bodies. Through sports they bond, feel the power of themselves, push their limits, learn about themselves as physical beings and test their character. Sports provide a discipline for them. They bond with other men and test themselves through competitive sports. Most of the young men see sports as more than a physical outlet, it touches who they are. When they do sports in nature they report having a great sense of satisfaction and joy. Benefits of sports they identified include:

*Discipline/ritual/story*

*Fun*

*Friendship*

*Connect with nature*

*Mastery*

*Power of self*

*Experience*

*Chemistry of sport*

Spiritual Hunger: Many young men recognize they have a spiritual hunger, although they may not use that language. This hunger takes the form of feeling the need to be on a quest, pursuit or adventure. Many have a yearning for a sense of nobility, defined as living morally, with integrity, and showing respect. Many reported that when they do a good job at work that they feel great satisfaction. This spiritual hunger calls for a practical response. For example, they want serious Bible study wrapped in meaningful communal life. The fruits of this spirituality must show outwardly (i.e., walk the talk). Many report a spiritual life of private prayer. These young men do not necessarily see the connection between prayer life and congregational life. They do not want spirituality forced on them. They want to engage in dialogue not monologue. Interestingly, although some list certain preferences for music in worship life, what seems more critical is that they feel authentic in worship.

Service: These young men are willing to do “stuff for others” and report a sense of great satisfaction when they serve. Given their tendency to be physical and kinesthetic, service projects that require movement, construction, tools and group activity are most desirable.

It's significant to note how they define service. Often they say they want "to be a good person". And a good person does service for family and friends.

Avocation: To understand the spiritual nature of these young men one must "hear" their passions. Nearly all these young men have something they love to do. Often it is related to sports or a hobby such as art or music. They love having time/encouragement to pursue their passions. The church might well recognize these avocations and creatively connect them to the larger mission of the church. This means helping young men identify their gifts, and naming and framing those gifts theologically.

Gaps: As we review these eleven descriptors of young men and their spiritual character we also note some gaps. We are struck by what is not mentioned as significant faith factors as well as by what is mentioned.

*Biblical Narrative:* Few of these young men have any sense of the Biblical story and its meaning.

*Sexuality:* While sexuality came up occasionally in the "life review" portion of the interviews with young men, it was hardly ever mentioned in relationship to spirituality or faith. While sex and sexually-related issues are a large part of their lives, sex does not seem to be connected with their faith life or their expectations of faith communities.

*Global Awareness:* These young men are not particularly aware or even curious about the global world. They are not activists regarding global issues because they seem only vaguely aware of larger global issues.

*Jesus is a Mystery:* With only the rare exception these young men do not have any understanding of who Jesus is and what he does. Jesus is most often perceived as a moral role model rather than a transcendental and incarnate experience of God.

*Political and economic awareness:* These young men are politically indifferent and economically naïve. They have a small sphere of understanding regarding the major political and economic issues of our day. Unless the issue affects them directly they are generally unengaged.

*Institutional Connections:* These young men do not understand or value institutional structures, especially those of a religious nature. Spirituality is personal, individualistic and separate from a corporate, organizational structure.

*Idealism:* Little voice was given to idealistic dreams and aspirations. Their sense of concern circles around the trinity of jobs, family and friends. They are personally concerned to make it in this world, but do not seem particularly interested in structures that might limit others from equal opportunities.

*Challenge:* For the most part these young men have not been challenged by our culture beyond the expectation that they support themselves economically (i.e., find a job). Few significant adults have communicated to them that they expect anything of them.