

Understanding the Excited Imaginations and Existential Struggles of Early Adolescent Males and the Ministry Implications for the Church

By

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This thesis explores the imaginations and struggles of early adolescent males for the purpose of providing a research foundation for future missiological strategies to and with this age cohort. The method used to access the excited imaginations and existential struggles of early adolescent males is to report and compare two ethnographic studies, the Early Adolescent Male Study and the Lutheran Men in Mission Male Spirituality Study.

These studies show that there are five factors that excite the imaginations and five factors that describe the existential struggles of early adolescent males. These factors reflect the first two uses of the Law. In addition, five congregational practices are significant in engaging the faith life of the cohort.

Interpreting these data from the perspective of brain research and evolutionary psychology shows that three factors in particular, the Relationship Factor, the Action Factor and the Achievement Factor, are neural-biologically determined.

Ministry to and with this cohort calls for cross-generational relationships with adult males who are authentic, available, affirming, action and achievement-oriented (AAAAA).

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iii
INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER ONE: FINDINGS OF THE EARLY ADOLESCENT MALE STUDY	12
Summary of the chapter	12
Methodology of the Study	13
Demographics of the cohort	15
The Excited Imaginations of Early Adolescent Males	19
The Existential Struggles of Early Adolescent Males	34
The Religio-Spiritual Experience of Early Adolescent Males	42
CHAPTER TWO: COMPARING THE EARLY ADOLESCENT MALE STUDY WITH THE LUHERAN MEN IN MISSION MALE SPIRITUALITY STUDY	55
Summary of the Lutheran Men in Mission Male Spirituality Study	56
Comparing the LMM Study with the EAM Study	63
Reflective Comments on Early Adolescent Males taken from the LMM Study	65
CHAPTER THREE: BRAIN SCIENCE, EVOLUTIONARY PSYCHOLOGY AND THE EARLY ADOLESCENT MALE	75
Summary of Early Adolescent Male Brain Development	78
CHAPTER FOUR: LAW AND GOSPEL AND EARLY ADOLESCENT MALES: A THEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION	103
Orders of Creation	103
Law and Gospel and Early Adolescent Males	105
APPENDIX	132
BIBLIOGRAPHY	

INTRODUCTION

Thesis Purpose

The purpose of this thesis is to report on the designing, implementing, analyzing and comparing of two ethnographic studies, the Early Adolescent Male Study and the Lutheran Men in Mission Male Spirituality Study, in order to address the thesis question, “What excites the imaginations and causes existential struggles in early adolescent males, and what are the implications for ministry in the church?” I assume that there are some identifiable and generically similar interests and struggles across the early adolescent male population. I will use the technique of coding or factor analysis to determine internal categories of commonality between the two studies. The theological grounding for the two studies is based in a theology of the incarnation that recognizes and values the importance of serious and attentive listening to the cohort. God’s incarnation in Jesus informs us that it is in the immediate, the personal, the relational and the physical that ministry and good ethnographic research takes shape and place.

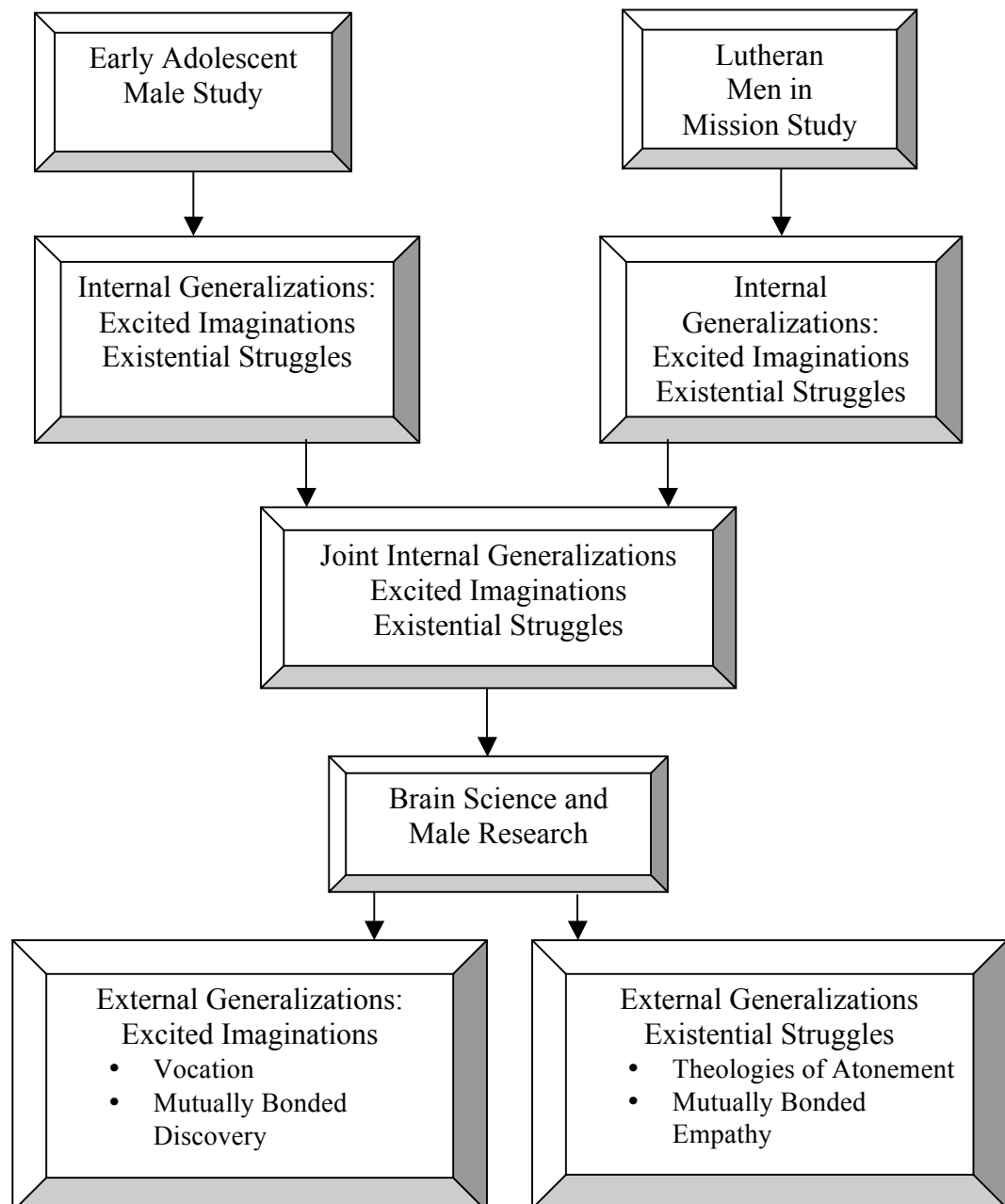
Secondly, I will apply these data of the two studies with recent findings in the field of brain science. The recent insights in the brain sciences regarding adolescent brains and human development will deepen the understanding of the factors identified in the two studies. By referencing these data with adolescent brain science findings, I will demonstrate causal links that can be applied to more external generalizations regarding the thesis question.

Thirdly, I will interpret these findings from the perspective of Luther’s understanding of Law and Gospel. This theological lens serves both as an interpretive

and correlative tool. The intention of this is to connect these data with relevant and appropriate portions of the biblical narrative and gospel proclamation.

Finally, I will map out in preliminary and broad form, proposals for ministry based upon this study, and I will suggest avenues for further study and research. It is my hope that this research contributes to a larger dialogue regarding ecclesiological practices.

Figure #1 shows the flow of this thesis study.



This Thesis is an Extension of a Life-Long Call

Nearly thirty-five years ago, as a seventeen-year old assistant canoe guide at Wilderness Canoe Base in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area, I began doing ministry with adolescent males. It was difficult, challenging, physical, sometimes delightful, and occasionally, dangerous work. Many of the campers came from extremely difficult situations such as Red Wing State Training School, the poor and violent neighborhoods of Minneapolis, and abusive or neglected homes.

As a sheltered boy from the wooded mining town of Hibbing, Minnesota, I was not really prepared for the challenges these young males presented. Early on, I struggled to gain understanding and confidence in this work. The affectionate, maybe even accurate, title given to staffers like me was “swamper”. Like a canoe floundering in the current, this swamper floundered to remain upright and stable in the rapids of adolescent male ministry. Slowly, I began to “get it” and embrace it wholeheartedly.

I had never heard of the word “call”. I certainly didn’t know what it meant. Yet, in retrospect, it was during these early summers working as a teenage swamper that a call did surface and emerge for me. I distinctly remember walking down the camp trail one evening and thinking to myself, “I really like this work. I like being here”. It was the first time I had ever clearly identified a passion and place for myself outside of my own home. Thirty-five years later, I now look upon that moment as my call to ministry. Surrounded by an incredibly youthful and committed camp staff, challenged to do things I thought impossible, expected to engage young males who, frankly, scared me to death, and nurtured in a worshipping and reflective atmosphere, I received my call. As a sure

sign of confirmation of this, on the few occasions when I have tried other things in ministry I confess to having become miserable.

Perhaps excessively or romantically overstated, nevertheless, this thesis is an extension of that original call. Since that time I have served in many capacities in and outside the church. Nearly all of this work is related to issues of adolescence, especially male adolescence. As parish pastor, camp director, national youth gathering leader, volunteer, adjunct faculty instructor, writer and parent, my life has addressed the world of adolescence. In a very real sense, I am engaged in a life-long ethnographic study of adolescence. This thesis study represents a piece of that larger, life-long experience of ethnographic living.

This Thesis Addresses a Seemingly Intractable Problem: The Male Exodus

This thesis study focuses on early adolescent males. Specifically, I will examine the question, “What excites the imagination and what are the existential struggles of early adolescent males, and what are the implications for ministry in the church?” The motivation to focus on males grows partly out of my own experience as a male, as well as, this being the group with whom I have spent much of my ministry. Secondly, it is this group that represents a seemingly intractable problem that reoccurs in the life of the church, namely their exodus.

In the Lutheran Church fully 70% of 7th-9th graders are involved in Christian education, primarily through confirmation.¹ This represents the highest percentage of involvement of youth in Christian education as compared to all Protestant churches in

¹*Effective Christian Education: A National Study of Protestant Congregations-A Report for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America* (Minneapolis: Search Institute, 1990) 53.

America. Yet only 32% of these youth remain active in Christian education beyond confirmation.² The majority of the remnant is female.

The exodus is not simply a matter of males leaving Christian education classes or the institution of the Lutheran Church, disconcerting as that is. The exodus is symptomatic of a larger spiritual departure or lack of engagement. Search Institute researcher Eugene Roehlkepartain notes, “Levels of undeveloped faith stay relatively constant between the seventh and twelfth grades...(faith maturity) actually declines in the 9th and 10th grades...the decline for girls is less pronounced”.³ This undeveloped faith is more pronounced in males and extends into adulthood with only 21% demonstrating an integrated faith while 38% of women demonstrate an integrated faith.⁴

Within the Lutheran Church we have placed great weight and responsibility upon confirmation. Clearly the studies noted above show that the Church’s expectations far exceed the ability of this particular ministry to produce satisfactory results in terms of faith development and retention of early adolescent males. The exodus of males happens year after year and it most often takes place during or after confirmation.

Nevertheless, we are bound up in a history of confirmation that both hinders us and holds out avenues of flexibility and promise for the future. It goes beyond the scope of this thesis to thoroughly review the varied history of confirmation. A brief survey, however, will help provide context for this study.

² Ibid. , 53

³ Eugene Roehlkepartain, *The Teaching Church: Moving Christian Education to Center Stage*. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993) 47.

⁴ Ibid., p.42

A Brief History of Confirmation: Precedence for Innovation

Over the centuries confirmation has come to be identified as a prerequisite for admission to Communion (until very recently) and functionally serves as the Christian equivalent of an adolescent rite of passage.⁵ In the 13th century, Thomas Aquinas equated confirmation with “spiritual maturity”.⁶ During the time of the Reformation confirmation became more fully established as part of an adolescent rite. Erasmus, in particular, set the tone for what was to come by proposing, “Boys at puberty should receive instruction in the meaning of their baptismal commitment”.⁷

The often-ambiguous meaning and purpose of confirmation within the Lutheran Church reflect the thoughts of Martin Luther himself. “Luther vigorously attacked confirmation on the grounds that it lacked a clear warrant in the New Testament and that it had been devised to ‘embellish the duties of bishops, lest they be entirely without function in the church’.”⁸ Calling it “monkey business” Luther never composed a rite of confirmation although he did see great value in catechesis for children and youth.⁹

Building upon Calvin’s thought, it was Martin Bucer in 1538, who connected confirmation to a public profession of faith and the Lord’s Supper.¹⁰ This is significant because it was through Bucer that the theological and ritualistic bridge was built connecting confirmation with functional adulthood. Confirmation became a form of

⁵ Ruth A. Meyers, *Life Cycles in Jewish and Christian Worship*. Paul F. Bradshaw and Lawrence A. Hoffman, editors. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996) 55.

⁶ Ibid., p.58

⁷ Ibid., p. 60

⁸ Ibid., p. 61

⁹ Ibid., p. 61

¹⁰Ibid., p. 62

adolescent rite of passage. Bucer's intent was to train adolescents to become adult Christians publicly professing their faith. He states, "I would wish...that adolescents and all young people, male and female, should attend the catechizing until they are so proficient in the doctrine of Christ that they may be excused (as adults are) from the requirements of (attendance at catechetical instruction)."¹¹

Ruth Meyers summarizes this period stating, "Thus in the Roman Catholic as well as the Lutheran, Anglican, and Reformed traditions rites of adolescence emerged during the 16th century. The Lutheran tradition...emphasized instruction in the essentials of the faith...followed by reception into adult membership in the church and admission to communion."¹²

In the following centuries, social and economic circumstances, as well as theological debates and piety movements, have defined and redefined the age at which confirmation instruction should take place. The age of confirmation has varied within the continental Lutheran Church from thirteen to twenty-two. Notes Meyers; "As the country became more settled, confirmation once again became primarily a rite of adolescence, usually administered at age fourteen or fifteen".¹³

The significance of making this brief survey is to illustrate the loop that has developed over time between confirmation and adolescent profession of faith, adolescent passage, and adult rights and privileges. Much weight rests upon this catechetical program that now stands as the primary pedagogical tool for passing on the faith to early

¹¹Ibid., p. 64

¹² Ibid., p. 66-67

¹³ Ibid., p. 69

adolescent males and females within the Lutheran Church. In the western world, where rites of passage to adulthood are either non-existent or culturally ceremonial with little functional meaning, confirmation stands as somewhat of an icon. It is an icon burdened by an ambiguous history, now residing in a post-modern culture, expected to shape early adolescent youth in the faith, and showing poor results in terms of church retention and faith maturity. John Westerhoff has rightly noted that given the “complexities of adolescence in contemporary society...that confirmation as a rite of maturity, is inappropriate for adolescents”.¹⁴ The exodus is caused in part by unreal expectations of what confirmation can do in transforming the lives of early adolescent males.

The good news is that within this history there is much flexibility and experimentation. The history of confirmation in the Lutheran Church is a history not carved in stone. It is a fluid, diverse and multi-faceted record and, in this sense, gives permission and authority for exploring new options and designing new methods based upon evaluating varied congregational contexts and rooted in the most current understandings of early adolescent male development. Our history gives us flexibility in ministry to explore ways to be effective and transformational so that the Gospel can take deeper root in these young humans. However, in choosing options and designing ministries, we must be grounded in good research. Providing some of this grounded research for future ministry is one of the purposes for this thesis. I maintain that it begins by listening for what excites the imaginations of early adolescent males and by tending their existential struggles. I now turn to the essence of this research thesis.

¹⁴ Ibid., 76

This Thesis Will Identify the Excited Imaginations of Early Adolescent Males

It is an assumption in this thesis that determining and accessing the excited imaginations of early adolescent males is one of two excellent entry points for conversation with early adolescent males and for informing missional strategizing. Excited imaginations represent the core of curiosities and passions of early adolescent males. Theologically speaking, excited imaginations represent the charismas or emerging charismas of the young person. As a Christian, I understand excited imaginations of early adolescent males as more than simply talents or interests. They are God-given gifts, passions and energies placed within them for God's purposes and plan. The easiest way to understand my point is to reflect on the question often asked of many youth, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" From a Christian perspective this is an insufficient question. Christians should ask the young person, "What has God given you, and how is God moving and motivating you to use these gifts for God's purposes?" It is this theological perspective that stands behind the phrase "excited imaginations".

Excited imaginations also have to do with identifying what is, externally speaking, contributing positively to or motivating the early adolescent male. For example, in this study I will demonstrate the vital role that fathers play in the lives of early adolescent males. This relationship contributes a tremendous amount to both the content of their imaginations and to the energy with which they pursue their interests. Factors contributing to excited imaginations are not simply internal characteristics. There are external factors that make up the ecology of a fully excited imagination in an early adolescent male.

As stated earlier, in connecting with this emerging, excited imagination we access the core of the young person. Often early adolescent males are only vaguely aware of what excites their imagination. For example, they may know they like football, or drawing, or reading, but they don't know what it means. By accessing it with them, and framing it theologically, two things happen through the guidance of the Holy Spirit: 1) We help them understand their God given vocation, and 2) We create a bonded relationship of mutual discovery rooted in the energy of youth. I will demonstrate that these two processes, framing the excited imagination as vocation and establishing bonded relationships of mutual discovery, are critical for faith development and involvement in the life of the Church for early adolescent males.

This Thesis Will Identify the Existential Struggles of Early Adolescent Males

It is an assumption in this thesis that determining and accessing the existential struggles of early adolescent males is one of two excellent entry points for conversation with early adolescent males and for informing missional strategizing (see above). Early adolescence is a time of change and flux, which sometimes creates enormous personal and communal stress. These struggles are driven by biological processes and can be managed or confounded by cultural responses.

While often framed in therapeutic, developmental or sociological terms, I prefer the theological reference of Paul who speaks of these existential human struggles as the experiences of living in the "flesh" (Romans 7:14).¹⁵ By identifying and pastorally relating to these personal predicaments, two things happen through the guidance of the Holy Spirit: 1) We begin to help them understand their lives in the context of sin or

¹⁵ *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1990.

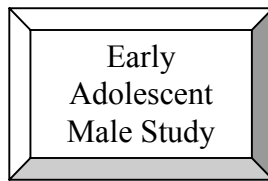
brokenness, and justification or healing, and 2) We create a bonded relationship of mutual empathy, understanding and transformation. I will demonstrate that these two processes of acknowledging and appreciating the brokenness of life and mutual empathy and understanding are critical for faith development and involvement in the life of the Church for early adolescent males.

Final Note of Guidance

To understand where we are in the flow of this thesis I will refer back to Figure #1 identifying which box we are working within. Hopefully this will help you mentally structure your reading.

CHAPTER #1

FINDINGS OF THE EARLY ADOLESCENT MALE STUDY

*Summary of the Chapter*

Five factors contribute to describe and define the excited imagination of early adolescent males.

- Action Factor
- Relationship Factor
- Male Factor
- Father Factor
- Friendship Factor

Five factors contribute to describe and define the existential struggles of early adolescent males.

- Schoolwork Factor
- Achievement Factor
- Family Issues Factor
- Annoyance Factor
- Self-coping Factor

Early adolescent males identify five congregational practices as invitational to being involved in the church. Within these five practices the ten factors of the excited imagination and the existential struggles of early adolescent males are identified.

- Worship that Relates Factor
- Friend/peer Connections Factor
- Caring staff/Adults Factor (i.e. pastor or youth worker)
- Fun Activities Factor
- Family Religious Practices Factor

Methodology of the Study

The Early Adolescent Male Study was conducted in Dubuque, Iowa in November 2003. All interviews were held at Washington Junior High School. Washington is a 7th and 8th grade junior high of approximately 700 students. Working in cooperation with the school principal, Mr. Dale Lass, fifty male students were randomly selected from the roles of the school. The students met directly with Mr. Lass and were personally invited to be part of the study. A release form was given to the students in order to receive parental permission. Of the fifty invited, thirty received permission and took part in the study.

The research tool, or questionnaire, used in this study was adapted from the Lutheran Men in Mission Male Spirituality Study. This was done so that comparisons could be made between the two studies. The tool was adapted, however, to address the early adolescent male audience. For example, when discussing television viewing the question regarding parental monitoring was added to the interview. I was curious to know how much supervision parents provided regarding television, computer, and music usage.

In piloting this interview tool, I practiced with a group of junior high youth involved in a nearby after-school program. This helped me refine my questioning

technique. For example, it helped me find appropriate language they understood, such as asking, “What do you do when you want to chill?” or “Where do you like to hang out?” vs. “How do you like to relax?” Through this rehearsal I also determined that using a circling technique in questioning was most helpful. This means that I would explore a topic, such as spiritual interests, from a number of perspectives. I would initially inquire about the interests or hobbies of the young person. This triggered immediate and enthusiastic responses from the interviewees. It was a quick way to break the ice and to begin to access their excited imaginations. I would then circle back to this question later in the interview by asking how they enjoy spending their free time. They most often repeated their answers regarding interests or hobbies, but often they would expand on the earlier conversation. Addressing the question from a different angle generated deeper and more complete responses.

Towards the end of the interview I would circle their interests once again by asking, “What makes you feel really alive?” or “When you are feeling great, at peace and energized what has happened or what have you been doing?” Often the responses would refer back to interests or hobbies, but again more was shared. For example, one interviewee commented that he enjoyed rock climbing as a hobby or interest. When I asked him what made him feel really alive he again mentioned rock climbing, but then he added that he felt alive when he did it with his father. His comments led to a much deeper and truly wonderful conversation regarding this young man’s respect and love for his father. I was accessing his excited imagination in a way that many would describe as spiritual, or certainly most meaningful. Thus the questionnaire served as a starting point and outline for the interviews, but I did not let the interviews become so regimented by

the tool that it did not serve the larger purposes of the study. See Appendix A for a sample of the interview tool.

The Demographics of the Cohort

The research cohort was primarily Caucasian with only three of the thirty being African-American. In the initial sampling, no ethnic minorities were drawn and so I went back and intentionally selected from the African-American community in order to get broader representation. This lack of diversity in the cohort accurately reflects the population of Dubuque, which is predominantly a white, Roman Catholic, Irish or German community. Significantly, the cohort did represent a variety of economic classes. The predominant number of interviewees came from working class or blue-collar families (18). Seven interviewees came from what could be called white-collar homes and three came from professional households such as physicians. It was difficult to determine or categorize two of the interviewees whose parents were either in jail or absent.

The interviewees were categorized according to religious affiliation. Category #1 represents interviewees who are not and never have been active in the life of a religious organization. Category #2 represents interviewees who were active, but are no longer active in any religious organization. Category #3 is made up of interviewees who were not active, but have recently (the last five years) become active in the life of a religious organization. Category #4 represents interviewees who have been and remain active in the life of a religious organization.

It soon became apparent to me that a fifth category needed to be added to address the unique culture of the Dubuque community. I call this Category #4-CCD. This

category is made up of interviewees who are fully active in the life of the congregation through Catholic religious instruction (CCD), but as a matter of practical participation in the life of the church are otherwise totally unengaged. In this regard they are more like those in Category #2.

More than half of this random sample fell into Category #4 or Category #4-CCD. While this may seem like a surprisingly high amount, it actually confirms the strong presence of the Roman Catholic Church in this community. As I will point out later, it does not necessarily reflect a great level of religious interest or faith commitment. One key finding of this study is that, with this cohort, one cannot necessarily equate a developing faith or spiritual passion with physical involvement in a religious organization.

Figure #2: Religious Affiliation of Cohort by Category

Category #1	2 interviewees
Category #2	9 interviewees
Category #3	2 interviewees
Category #4:	9 interviewees
Category #4-CCD	8 interviewees

The age of the cohort ranged from 12-14 years old.

Figure #3: Age of the Cohort

12 years old	8
13 years old	10
14 years old	12

Significantly, the vast majority of the cohort came from homes where intact marriages are the norm. The vast majority of the cohort came from families of two or more siblings; and this is not surprising given the Catholic influences on the community.

While I did not intentionally track the number of cohort who shares meals with their family each day, an informal review of these data shows that 18 of the cohort have at least one sit-down meal with their family every day.

Figure #4: Parental Marital Status

Parents Married	20
Parents Divorced	6
Divorced and Remarried	3
Single Parent	1

Figure #5: Birth Order of Cohort

First Born	6
Second Born	10
Third Born	7
Fourth Born	4
Blended Family	3

I was very curious to know how much money these early adolescent males had access to and was quite surprised by the responses. For the most part they are a poor lot. Few had jobs outside the home. Their primary source of income was by doing chores at home, receiving an allowance, or asking (i.e., begging) for money from their parents when they wanted something. I was also quite surprised by how many of them intentionally save a portion of their income. When asked what they like to spend their money on, nearly all of them referred to buying a video game or a piece of sports equipment. Often they would comment that they would pool their resources with a friend to buy a video game.

Figure #6: Allowance/Income

\$0-\$5/week	19
\$6-\$10/week	4
\$11-\$15/week	2
\$16-\$20/week	1
More	1
Unknown	3

This age cohort spends a lot of time watching TV or playing video games. Nearly all spend a minimum of two hours watching TV every day, plus they spend additional time playing video games or working on a computer. Their favorite TV shows or video games range widely. The Simpsons, the Disney Channel, the Discovery Channel, Nintendo, PlayStation 2, and cartoons of a wide variety were included on most lists. I was intrigued by how many of them are familiar with shows that fall into the Monster Garage/Junkyard Wars genre. These shows appeal, in particular, to a male audience. Motorcycles, crazy cars, and new metal inventions are constructed during each episode. In essence, one can become a virtual mechanic. The shows are physical and spatial and feature men with power tools, wrenches and crazy ideas. Further comment will be made on this later in this thesis, but the viewing habits of the cohort provide a huge clue to the excited imaginations of early adolescent males.

It is astounding how little time they spend on homework or reading. Whereas nine of the cohort responded by commenting on reading, perhaps only two or three were enthusiastic when making this reference. The genre of reading they prefer is fantasy, such as Harry Potter, Lord of the Rings, or action/adventure writers. This is significant and will be expanded upon when we correlate these data with the brain science review. Their parents monitor a little less than half of the cohort's TV/video games/computer time. These boys also listen to music, but it was not a major item on their screen. Music interests drive them less than their interests in TV/video games/computers. In other words they are more likely to be stimulated visually than auditorily. Their visual stimulation is enhanced when they can physically interact with the visual cues. This is a significant insight and will be expanded upon when relating this study to the brain

science review. The entire cohort has interests in more than one style of music and this is reflected in Figure #7.

Figure #7: Time spent on TV/Computer/Music and Monitoring

Television		Parental Monitoring
0-2 hours	21	11
3-4 hours	5	2
Video games/Computer		
0-2 hours	19	14
3-4 hours	3	0
Music Interests		
Rap	11	
Classic Rock	9	8 over-all categories
Country	4	
Alternative/Punk	3	
Metal	3	
Pop	2	
Jazz	2	
Christian Rap	1	
Other	1	

Figure #8: Daily Homework and Reading

Homework/day	
0-30 minutes	4
31-60 minutes	8
61-90 minutes	3
Varied	15
Reading/daily	9

The Excited Imaginations of Early Adolescent Males

Having reviewed the demographics of the research cohort, I now turn our attention to one of the two key questions of this study: “What excites the imagination of early adolescent males?” This question will be answered by using the circling technique described earlier and then triangulating in on some common themes. I begin by looking at their interests. Having already noted the enormous role of TV/video games, one is

tempted to conclude that imaginations are excited, or at least well entertained, by what is on the screen or interactive game. It was difficult to determine in the interviews when the cohort was simply describing being entertained, and when I felt we were tapping into a much deeper and profound vein of interest and imagination.

One way to determine the impact and value of TV/video games on the creative imagination of the cohort is to review the answers regarding the question, “Is there a hobby or interest you’d like to explore?” I often needed to rephrase this question to state, “If you had the time and the money, what dream or hobby would you like to pursue, or what interest would you like to explore?” Significantly, only one of the cohort responded they would like more video games. This tells me that whereas TV/video games are entertaining and even a hobby, they serve as entertainment or distraction rather than as a core piece of their imagination. This conclusion needs to remain tentative, however. My suspicion is that similar areas of the brain are stimulated by some video games as when the youth is playing a sport or experiencing an adventure. As will be shown, both of these latter activities do make up part of the excited imagination of early adolescent males. If indeed brain stimulation is similar (i.e., amygdala, right hemisphere, cerebellum and hypothalamus) it would not come as a complete surprise to me because there are similar elements of adventure, competition, and hand/eye coordination involved in many video games, as in sports adventure outings. Currently, this is simply not known. Secondly, this would raise the question of whether brain stimulation is identical to excited imagination. These are questions that would require further research. For the present, the evidence presented in this study does not merit validating video games as a significant part of the excited imagination of early adolescent males.

Figure #9 shows the responses to the question, “If you had the time and the money what dream or hobby would you like to pursue?”

Figure #9: Imaginative dream or hobby

Collect cars	3
Go skiing	2
Yu-Gi Cards	1
Go to Montana and dig for dinosaurs	1
Go to warm places like Florida or California	1
Travel and snowboarding	1
Travel to exotic places	1
Skydiving	1
Motor sports	1
Hunting	1
Collect memorabilia of famous people	1
Build hot rods	1
All-pro football player	1
Buy a basketball stadium	1
Climb K-2	1
Travel and camp in the national parks	1
Travel to Vietnam and poor countries	1
Basketball and gymnastics	1
Fly model airplane	1
Camp in Wisconsin	1
Give to the poor	1

In reviewing these responses, a number of significant items surface. Nearly all the cohort responded by wanting to act in some way. This response may be due partly to the way I asked the question. As we shall see, however, when looking at other responses from the cohort, this “action factor” continues to resurface throughout the study. Within the over-arching theme of action, seven of the respondents want to try a sport; five want to travel; three want to collect something; three have to do with engines, cars or motors; two relate to camping and only two speak of doing charity or works of compassion. We are beginning to see the outlines of an excited imagination, and it has to do with acting, moving, exploring, traveling, collecting, motoring or adventuring. Only one of

the responses could conceivably fall into the category of entertainment that being the Yu-Gi Card game player.

The minimal interest in charity or benevolent activities tells us that either they did not think of it or this kind of imagination requires more input from other sources within the culture such as parents, teachers or churches. When I discuss the male adolescent brain, I will also propose that there are some neurological predispositions built into the brain of these youth that do not readily lend themselves towards benevolent activity at this age.

Figure #10: Free Time Responses

Basketball	12
Reading	9
Biking	7
Football	7
Soccer	5
Baseball	4
Skateboarding	3
Snowboarding	3
Drawing	3
Bowling	2
Golf	2
Wrestling	2
Boy Scouts	2
Camping	1
Track	1
Bow hunting	1
Weight lifting	1
Karate	1
Skiing	1
Tennis	1
Rodeo	1
Go-Carts	1
4 Wheeling	1
Restoring tractors	1
Gymnastics	1

Let us circle, once again, the action factor referenced previously. When asked the question, “How do you like to spend your free time, weekends, or evenings?” the cohort generated a long list of activities as illustrated in Figure #10.

It is incredibly obvious from reviewing this list that, with few exceptions, the cohort wants to be active when given free time. The list reads like an activities sheet for the YMCA or the Boy Scouts. These data reinforce the shadow impression I called the action factor earlier. Clearly, the majority of adolescent males are active, sports-minded, adventuresome and physical.

Conclusion #1: The Action Factor

- Excited imaginations of early adolescent males often take a kinesthetic form.

Whereas a more reflective imagination is present in the form of reading, one would have to acknowledge that it is not the predominant theme. As will be shown later, there are significant neural-physiological reasons for this.

Through the circling interview process we have discovered a theme regarding the excited imagination. Continuing on, when asked the question, “What makes you happy?” we detect other elements of the excited imagination. This is seen in Figure #11.

The new element that surfaces is that of relationships. Eight responses relate to family members, four refer to friends, and one refers to a pet. As in the previous analysis, this is only a shadow impression at this point, but it will soon be shown that this is, indeed, a second major element that makes up the excited imagination of early adolescent males. In addition, there are specific relationships that are particularly identified as significant.

Figure #11: What makes you happy?

Friends	4
Vacations	3
Winning the game	3
Family	2
Snowboarding	2
Doing good in school	2
Models from my dad	1
Reading	1
Bowling tournaments	1
Play with pets	1
Family reunions	1
Laughing	1
Hanging with dad	1
Don't know	1
Laptop	1
Birthday	1
Christmas	1
Hanging in room alone	1
Funny Simpsons episode	1
Don't think it's possible	1
Schools over	1
Being alone	1
Video games	1

Reviewing the rest of the list, the element of sports activities again surfaces.

Secondly, reinforcing the earlier conjecture that TV/video games have more to do with entertainment and distraction rather than accessing the excited imaginations of early adolescent males, only two of the responses make reference to either TV or video games. The remainder of the comments seem somewhat diverse and idiosyncratic, but they provide hints for future correlations. Specifically, the comments regarding school achievement, time alone and “happiness is not possible” will be referenced when we discuss the existential struggles of early adolescent males.

When asked the question, “What makes you feel alive?” (Figure # 12) more correlations relating to the action factor and relationships factor become evident. Ten

responses relate to sports activities. Significantly, relationships surface in two forms, family (three responses) and friends (five responses). A cluster of responses relating to stress surface in the data such as adequate sleep, no hassles and escape fantasies. We'll revisit these themes when we discuss the existential struggles of the cohort.

Figure #12: What makes you feel alive?

Friends	5
Good night's sleep	3
A day without hassles	3
A good hit in football	2
Birthday	2
Ride bike outside	2
Family vacations	2
Skateboarding	2
Get away from work	1
Read	1
Bowl a good game	1
Rock climbing with dad	1
Doing sports	1
Good grade	1
Early dismissal	1
Video game	1
Going for a run	1
If I won the lottery	1
Hunting	1
Fixing tractors	1
Looking forward to the day	1
Getting an "A"	1
Doing something you've never done	1
Not sure	1
Weekends	1

Three of the responses speak of personal achievement such as doing well in school. This is significant, for the dynamic of achievement correlates well with both the action factor and with one of the key existential struggles to be discussed later, i.e., schoolwork. Mastery of a sport or activity is indeed driven by the desire to achieve. The

cohort spoke often of the thrill of winning, of accomplishing a new feat, or of mastering a skill such as karate or a jump shot.

While this conclusion is tentative at the present, the reader will see that the need to achieve does appear to be a part of the excited imagination of the cohort. Part of the reason I came to this conclusion will be shown when we begin to discuss the question, “What are your greatest struggles?” The top item mentioned is schoolwork. School is an achievement-oriented enterprise, perhaps most often imposed from the outside rather than internally driven; so the need to achieve addresses both the excited imagination and the existential struggles of the cohort.

I’ve strongly hinted that relationships make up a key part of the excited imagination of early adolescent males. It is time to state this definitively. Responses to the question, “What really matters to you most?” (Figure #13) solidify earlier impressions. Family received fifteen positive responses and friends received ten. No other categories came close to matching the volume of these two responses.

Conclusion #2: The Relationship Factor

- Excited imaginations of early adolescent males are energized by and shaped by relationships with family members, especially parents, and peer friends.

The value of family and peer relationships appears obvious. Seventeen of the responses mention family or extended family being of most value. Ten responses refer to friends. The rest of the responses cluster in only small ways, but again please note that school, as a shadow factor at this point, once again is mentioned. Also, the kinesthetic action factor clearly surfaces again in these responses.

Figure #13: What really matters to you the most?

Family	15
Friends	10
School	2
Baseball trophies	1
Books	1
Good health	1
CD's	1
Pets	1
"Life, just being here."	1
Grandma's stuff she gives	1
The family farm	1
Basketball	1
Thinking	1

Relationships play a key role in the lives of early adolescent males. They value and are influenced by a number of them. These relationships play a critical role not only in capturing the attention of their excited imaginations, but, as we shall see, they provide significant input into shaping their excited imaginations. First, however, we need to identify which relationships are considered most significant. The question asked was, "Tell me about some people who have strongly influenced you?"

Figure #14: People of Influence

Dad	19
Mom	10
Friends	8
Family	5
Teacher	4
Grandma	4
Older brother	3
Grandpa	2
Uncle	2
Cousin	2
Stepfather	1
Heroes:	
Video programmer	1
Sammy Sosa	1
Author DJ McDaniels	1
Emmit Smith	1
Deacon Dave	1
Michael Jordan	1

It comes as no surprise that family and extended family remain the primary relational influence upon early adolescent males. Forty-two of the responses refer to primary or extended family. Thirty-seven of the responses identify males as the most significant influence as compared to 14 females. Fathers get the largest single vote for the person of most significant influence. Only five responses refer to celebrities or sports figures.

Conclusion #3: The Male Factor

- Excited imaginations of early adolescent males are likely to be shaped by adult males.

It is not enough to speak only in generic terms in regard to males. A specific male clearly plays a predominant role in the lives of early adolescent males. When asked the question, “What relationships do you value or not value?” the significance of fathers becomes abundantly clear.

Figure #15: What relationships do you value the most? Not value?

Value the Most		Not Valued	
Dad	18	Younger Sibling	5
Friends	16	Mom	4
Mom	12	Older Sibling	2
Family	12	Twin Sibling	1
Older Sibling	9	Dad	0
Younger Sibling	2	Friends	0
Cousin	2		
Other Relatives	2		

At first glance, the results shown in Figure #15 will surely break the hearts of many mothers. While they receive many positive votes, they are the only adult group to receive negative votes as well. The circumstances described by the interviewees relating to these negative votes were quite extreme, such as the mother leaving the family or

moving to another state after a divorce and breaking off contact with the family. Stated constructively, mothers must reject their sons in exceptional ways before they are considered a negative influence.

Fathers, on the other hand, are given great leeway regarding their behavior and are unanimously viewed as a significant factor in the lives of early adolescent males. Some interviewees reported that their fathers got in many fistfights, or were in jail, or lived in another house or town, yet none of them were condemned by their sons. It is difficult to overstate how important fathers are in the eyes of their sons, no matter how roguish the behavior

Throughout the interview process I heard a number of incredibly touching and loving stories about their fathers. One father would take his son camping and sleep in caves. The youth thought this was incredibly cool. Many commented on the excitement of being on vacation with their fathers. A great number spoke of no specific event so much as the easy access they have to their fathers. The interview narratives are rich with comments such as, "He's there when I need him". "We do crazy stuff together". "I don't know, I just know I can talk to him anytime". Others commented on activities they enjoy doing with their fathers such as, "He shows me how to do stuff". "We are fixing up a tractor together". "We're remodeling my room together". These boys love their fathers and respect them. There is great power in this relationship.

Perhaps the single most powerful and significant interview, which makes this point, was with one of the African-American youth named Josh. His family structure is quite jumbled and complex. At various times he has lived in foster homes because both his parents were in jail. His current father is his step-father who recently got out of jail

after less than a year. Josh spoke of this man's anticipated arrival home with awe and excitement. I asked him about his biological father and he said he didn't really know him much. He had been in jail for eight years. At earlier points in his life he said he was angry with his father. With insight beyond his years he noted, "I didn't have a good male influence. I can't stand being with girls". (He lives in a house full of sisters.) At some point in the past he finally met his biological father and commented how wonderful that was. Josh said, "I found out that he really does care". His eyes moistened with emotion at this point. Josh's story is the story of many of these boys. They value, adore, and look up to their fathers and seem to tolerate their behaviors well. It is nearly impossible to overstate the importance of fathers as an important factor in accessing, stimulating and shaping the excited imaginations of early adolescent males.

Conclusion #4: The Father Factor

- Excited imaginations of early adolescent males are significantly shaped by their fathers.

This is not to say that mothers do not play a vital role; they clearly do. The result of the study could justify creating a Mother Factor as well. However, the cohort does not speak of them with the same volume and intensity as they do of their fathers. It would seem that at this stage of their lives it is the father, or father figure, who is sought and with whom they identify. Developmental psychology has noted this phenomenon for years.

To illustrate this point, one of those interviewed who is living in a single-parent home with his mother, spoke very positively about her. "She'll pile on with me," he commented in speaking of a wrestling, rolling and tussling game they play on the carpet

of the living room floor. His mother is vitally important to him and he loves her dearly. However, when speaking of his absent father his demeanor became even more intense and his conversation hovered on this topic for a long period of time. Fathers, even at a nostalgic distance, are on the minds of their sons.

Figure #15 demonstrates another significant factor in the lives of early adolescent males that contributes to their excited imaginations, namely friends. We've seen this category surface in a number of the responses. At this age establishing social networks is perhaps the single most important task. Biologists would say they are of the age where they are driven to enter into the gene pool. One would hope not too soon, but this is a factor. According to Peter Scales, however, it is more complicated than that. He posits that they are driven by their need to know the answer to four questions: 1) Am I competent? (achievement), 2) Am I normal? 2) Am I lovable? 3) Can I love others?¹⁶ One of the interviewees summarized this point quite succinctly when he stated, "If you don't have friends, you don't have a life".

Nearly all the respondents reported that their friendship clusters do include females as well as males. Survey time did not allow for an in-depth discussion of females and female friendships. I made the conscious decision that a deeper level of trust was required between the cohort, their parents and me before we could explore this intimate topic. In a very general way, I did ask whether relating to girls was a concern or challenge and nearly all commented that it was either "no big deal", "not a concern", or "done in larger friendship clusters". Most seemed more interested in connecting with their male buddies.

¹⁶ Laura Sessions Stepp, *Our Last Best Shot*, (New York, Riverhead Books, 2000) 12.

Conclusion #5: The Friend Factor

- Excited imaginations of early adolescent males are driven to establish peer friendship networks.

We are coming to the close of our analysis of factors that support and spark excited imaginations of early adolescent males. One question remains. I asked the cohort to identify any significant life-shaping experiences. Figure # 16 shows the results of this question.

Figure #16: Identify significant life shaping experiences?

Vacations:	5
9/11	4
Suicide of my cousin	2
None	2
Adoption of baby cousin	1
Mom went to seminary	1
Death of grandmother	1
Rock climbing with dad	1
Earning black belt	1
Mom's battle with cancer	1
Fell and broke bones	1
Walk-off victory shot	1
Columbia crash	1
War in Iraq	1
Confirmation	1
Boy Scouts at Philmont	1
Overcame fear at waterpark	1
Playing in basketball league	1
Nearly falling off a cliff	1
Seeing real father for first time	1
Repeating 3 rd grade	1
Camping	1
Going out for wrestling	1
Family reunion	1

It should be noted that a number of the respondents struggled to answer this question. I often had to provide examples. (I used 9/11). This certainly influenced their

responses. Thus, we have a number of 9/11 responses. The clusters (Figure #17) do illustrate a number of the factors we have identified as significant to the excited imaginations of early adolescent males. We can identify the action factor, the relationship factor (especially family relationships), the father factor, and we again can hear references to achievement.

Figure #17: Clusters of Significant Events

Family activities		8
Current events		6
Personal achievement	5	
Death		3
Activities		3
Change of family circumstances		2
Personal injury or threat		2
Time with father		2
Illness		1
Religious instruction		1

Despite the great number of the cohort involved in a religious community, it is discouraging to note that only one response mentioned the religious life.

This completes our review of these data regarding the question, “What excites the imagination of early adolescent males?” I have identified five factors that play a key role in igniting the personal energy and imaginations of early adolescent males. These five factors are:

- Action Factor: Excited imaginations of early adolescent males often take a kinesthetic form.
- Relationship Factor: Excited imaginations of early adolescent males are energized by and shaped by relationships with family members, especially parents and peer friends.

- Male Factor: Excited imaginations of early adolescent males are more likely to be shaped by adult males
- Father Factor: Excited imaginations of early adolescent males are significantly shaped by their fathers.
- Friendship Factor: Excited imaginations of early adolescent males are driven to establish friendship networks.

In reviewing these five factors I conclude that in regards to three there are no real surprises. However, the powerful role of father's is not often appreciated, nor is the action factor. These boys have a need to connect with their fathers. These boys have a need to move their bodies. More will be said about this later. The critical question to be explored at the end of this thesis is whether these factors are regularly incorporated into the educational curriculum of any early adolescent ministry within the Church.

The Existential Struggles of Early Adolescent Males

We now turn our attention to the second half of the thesis question, "What are the existential struggles of early adolescent males?" I asked this question quite directly as shown in Figure #18.

The responses cluster around a number of themes, but it is obvious that two of the clusters are schoolwork (18 responses) and family issues (7 responses). Frankly, I was surprised by how many responses related to school. School is a source of significant stress; however, it does not seem to be predominantly stressful in the sense of violence or peer problems since only two respondents mentioned these issues (and their stories of persecution were terrible to hear). These kinds of problems have been well documented and are referred to daily in the news media. Rather, the stress more often comes from the

academic challenge itself. Many of those interviewed were good students, but these successful achievers report school as a significant struggle. We have to ask whether this should be a concern. Meeting high expectations and achieving academic excellence are good goals for this age cohort. I was not able to determine whether those expectations were excessive. Since I am familiar with the school, the teachers, the principal and many of the students, my intuition is that expectations are not excessive. Both of my children attended this school, and I found it to be balanced. One must be careful, however, not to discount the perception of the cohort that school is a significant struggle for them. If this is how they perceive school, then this is what they are feeling. It is their feelings and perceptions that are relevant to this discussion. I do wonder whether the location of the interviews influenced these responses.

We have identified two factors relating to the existential struggles of early adolescent males.

Conclusion #6: Schoolwork Factor

- The existential struggles of early adolescent males are often rooted in the academic challenges and expectations of their schools.

Conclusion #7: Achievement Factor

- The existential struggles of early adolescent males are often rooted in their hope for success and fear of failure.

Figure #18: What are your biggest struggles?

Schoolwork	17
Death of grandparent	6
Death of pets	4
Suicide/death of a cousin	3
Getting picked on at school	2
When uncle died	2
House fire	1
House flooded	1
Being short	1
Moved to a new town	1
Bad coach who showed favoritism	1
Mother's battle with cancer	1
Bi-polar violent brother	1
Not as smart as my siblings	1
Abusive ex-boyfriend	1
Divorce of parents	1
Getting hit by a car	1
Dad's surgeries	1
Stepfather in prison	1
Father in prison and didn't think he cared	1
Going into foster care	1
Trying to stay out of trouble	1

Earlier in this study I referenced the issue of achievement. Specifically, I noted that it is a shadow factor residing behind the dynamics of the action factor and the friendship factor. Regarding action, this population for the most part, enthusiastically embraces competing against one another and against themselves. They strive to improve, to win, and to excel. They are testing and feeling their own emerging powers and abilities. However, I've listed this drive to achieve as an existential struggle rather than as part of the excited imagination because the downside of this factor poses grave psychological concerns for the cohort. When they strive to achieve through an action or sport, for example, and it is perceived as play, then I categorize this as part of their excited imagination. When they strive to achieve through an action or sport, for example,

and it is perceived as a matter of success or failure, then I categorize this as a part of their existential struggle. The dynamics are so intertwined on this particular point that we are speaking of two sides of the same coin.

In like manner, the establishing of social networks is all about achievement. As Peter Scales points out, they need to know if they can love and be loved. I've identified achievement as a significant factor because of the many different ways it surfaces throughout the study as a whole.

An eighth factor to surface from Figure #18 refers to family issues. I heard many heartbreaking stories regarding the family cluster. One interviewee reported that his mother, who suffers from a severe illness, left a candle burning in the home, which the cat knocked over. The fire destroyed their home. They moved to temporary housing in East Dubuque only to have that home flooded by the Mississippi River in the early spring.

Another interviewee reported that his bi-polar stepbrother tried to stab his five-year-old stepbrother and his mother. This student tackled and disarmed the assailant who is now in a mental institution.

Yet another boy from a family of five children told of his mother's struggle with a serious cancer. He talked of how scared he was and how everyone in his house was working so hard to help her and to continue functioning as a family.

The existential struggles of early adolescent males are as varied as the unavoidable calamities and tragedies of life. They are difficult to categorize. Nevertheless, there is enough evidence present to identify another significant factor.

Conclusion #8: The Family Issues Factor

- The existential struggles of early adolescent males are often rooted in the vagarious and capricious mayhem that strikes or emerges from their families.

Before leaving this portion of the study, two more segments of data must be addressed relating to their anger, sadness and coping mechanisms. Figure #19 illustrates the responses to the question, “What makes you mad/sad?”

Figure #19: What makes you mad/sad?

Brother	7
Sister	4
Stupid people	5
Just about everything	2
When I'm right, but not really	2
Bad grades	2
Being called short	1
Sharing a room with my brother	1
Talking in class	1
Adults who show favoritism	1
Fear of death in the family	1
Getting grounded	1
Insults	1
Friend dying of cancer	1
Getting made fun of	1
War	1
Dad having a bad day	1

The data seem to cluster most significantly around siblings as Figure #20 demonstrates.

Figure #20: Clustering of Mad/Sad Responses

Siblings	12
People in general	7
Achievement concerns	4
Persecution	3
Adults	3
Fear of death	2
War	1

As noted earlier, a major challenge for early adolescent males is navigating the social waters. Nearly all of these responses (siblings, people, persecution, adults) address social or interactive concerns. Twenty-five of the thirty-two responses have to do with interpersonal contact. This comes as no real surprise, especially those relating to sibling rivalry. What these data do not show are the faces and gestures that surfaced when the interviewees spoke of siblings or “stupid people”. Together these responses represent a basket collection of wrinkled faces, rolled eyes, sighs and groans. Early adolescent males get annoyed with others. Rarely do they become violent, but siblings, people who seem to get in their way or thwart their plans, and those who say hurtful things annoy them.

Conclusion #9: The Annoyance Factor

- The existential struggles of early adolescent males cluster around a number of annoying relational challenges.

Existential challenges and struggles require human responses. I’ve identified a number of items that impact the existential life of early adolescent males. The final question to ask is, “How do they cope?” Figure #21 shows their responses to the question, “What keeps you going when things are difficult?”

In clustering the responses (Figure #22) we note that eight of the respondents have developed self-motivation or self-coping skills. In addition to these eight, five others have developed distracting skills. Not surprisingly, six respondents turned to important relationships, and significantly, six were unable to identify a methodology for coping.

It’s difficult to determine the meaning of these responses; however, it seems developmentally appropriate at this age that the dominant numbers of responses are self-

generated. This would support Peter Scales point that this age cohort has a need to feel personally capable. Learning to cope with life's struggles certainly addresses this need.

It seems surprising that few responses related to friends. Given that this is such a powerful drive in this age cohort, these data may seem incongruous. I speculate that in males, friendships are not necessarily perceived as relationships of intimacy, as much as relationships of sharing of similar interests. My experience in working with this cohort over many years also leads me to speculate that it is often friendships that are causing their existential struggles. Therefore, withdrawal or internalized coping responses make sense as appropriate responses to what are essentially social problems. I also speculate that the dominant culture does not encourage males to externalize their personal struggles with others. This can be perceived as unmanly.

It does seem significant, given that more than half of this cohort is categorized as #3 or #4 in terms of religious participation, that no responses mention a religious factor. When the question of "keeping going" is before them, they do not turn to the church for assistance.

Figure #21: What keeps you going when things are difficult?

Read	3
Try to relax	3
Don't know	3
Just keep going	3
Turn to friends	2
Go home	2
Accept it	1
Draw	1
Talk to my dad	1
Talk to my mom	1
Rely on myself	1
Take a deep breath	1
Let it blow over	1
Family	1
Music	1

Figure #22: Cluster of Responses Regarding Addressing Struggles

Self coping strategies	8
Distraction strategies	5
Undeveloped strategies	5
Turn to family	4
Turn to friends	2

There does seem to be enough evidence to posit another factor, although this one does not seem as self-evident as some of those mentioned earlier.

Conclusion #10: The Self-Coping Factor

- Early adolescent males tend to develop internal rather than external strategies for addressing existential struggles.

This completes our review of these data regarding the question, “What are the existential struggles of early adolescent males?” I have identified five factors that are significant as the cohort encounters and navigates life. Cultural, economic, ethnic and familial circumstances strongly dictate the responses one might hear. Each individual has a unique story to tell. If one were to interview thirty teens from the inner city, Iraq, or Africa one might hear different, and most likely, more serious responses. Nevertheless, these are the existential factors identified in this study.

- **Schoolwork Factor:** The existential struggles of early adolescent males are often rooted in the academic challenges and expectations of their schools.
- **Achievement Factor:** The existential struggles of early adolescent males are often rooted in their hope for success and fear of failure.
- **The Family Issues Factor:** The existential struggles of early adolescent males are often rooted in the vagarious and capricious mayhem that strikes or emerges from their families.

- The Annoyance Factor: The existential struggles of early adolescent males cluster around a number of annoying relational challenges.
- The Self-Coping Factor: Early adolescent males tend to develop internal rather than external strategies for addressing existential struggles.

The Religio-Spiritual Experience of Early Adolescent Males

We conclude our analysis of this study by reviewing the data relating to religious involvement and spiritual development. These data will be helpful when we come to positing ministry strategies with and for early adolescent males. A number of questions cluster around this topic. Figure #23 shows the responses to the question, “Have you ever had any spiritual/religious experiences?” Many of the respondents did not understand the question and so I would often rephrase it by saying, “Have you ever felt close to God?”

Figure #23: Religious Experiences

None	15
In daily prayer	5
Reading the Bible	4
When I act better	2
God called me in the park	1
God is at our Y group	1
Ghost in our house	1
Rock climbing with dad	1
Saturday mass	1
Communion	1
Receive praise from others	1
Church camp/campfire	1
Confirmation	1
Almost in car crash	1
Pray when angry	1
Saying “amen” in church	1

In clustering these responses we see in Figure #24 that half the group has not had a religious experience. This reflects the demographics of the group and a significant number of those involved in CCD. By combining the clusters of religious practices, church activities, and events, what does seem significant is that spirituality plays a role in the lives of the cohort (21 responses). In addition, personal daily practices contribute the most to their sense of spirituality.

Figure #24: Clustering of Religious Experiences

None	15
Religious practices	10
Church	6
Event	5
Improve behavior	2

I was very curious to correlate their experiences of spirituality with their religious category. Figure #25 shows the results of that correlation.

Figure #25: Spirituality Correlated with Religious Category

	Spiritual Experience	No Spiritual Experience
Category 3 or 4	10	4
Category 4-CCD	1	5
Category 2	3	4

It is not surprising to see that the predominant number of interviewees in Categories 3 or 4 reported having had a spiritual experience or have felt close to God. What must come as disconcerting news to the Roman Catholic Church is that the vast majority of interviewees enrolled in CCD do not report having had any kind of spiritual experience. As mentioned earlier and now confirmed, involvement in the life of a religious organization does not necessarily causally correlate with spiritual growth or

excitement. Momentarily, I will identify what activities do causally correlate with stimulating spiritual curiosity and encounters. However, it is important to circle this question of spirituality in another way, and thus I asked the question, “Where or when do you have a sense of peace?”

Figure #26: Sense of Peace

Sitting in my room	7
When I sleep	4
Reading	2
Finish my homework	2
Playing basketball	1
Vacations	1
At Home	1
When dad is in a good mood	1
In the shower	1
When problems have blown over	1
When no one is bugging me	1
At confession	1
When my sister and I get along	1
Watching TV	1
When on the farm	1
Playing in the backyard	1
Walking	1
When in the woods up north	1

Figure #27 below shows the clustering of these responses. The conclusion to be drawn from these data is that as the excited imagination factors are engaged, early adolescent males experience a sense of peace. However, the responses also show that other factors beyond those identified as making up the five excited imagination factors may also contribute to their sense of peace.

An important caveat must be made at this point. One must not confuse or solely identify a “sense of peace” with spirituality; however, a “sense of peace” is certainly one of the characteristics often identified as a part of the spiritual experience. For example,

four respondents noted that sleeping gave them a sense of peace. While rest is peaceful it is not necessarily the same experience as encountering or trusting God. Sleep does not address the spiritual issues of meaning, purpose, community, and place in the cosmos. Thus “a sense of peace” is not the same as spirituality or faith. Nevertheless, the question does provide some hints about the way early adolescent males understand spirituality and the sources they access. Sadly and significantly, only one response identified an activity within the life of a church. This is particularly profound given the number of the cohort who are involved in a religious organization.

Figure #27: Clustering of Peace Responses

Cluster	Responses	Excited Imagination Factor Correlation
Home and family	11	Relationship Father
Resolved conflict	3	Relationship Father
Kinesthetic outlet	4	Action
Hobbies (reading)	2	
Accomplishment	2	
Other	2	
Church	1	

Earlier I referenced that I would explore the religious practices the cohort does identify as having significant impact on their spiritual growth and faith development. This information will be significant for informing ministry strategies. As will be shown in the next chapter, the Lutheran Men in Mission Study was particularly helpful in addressing this question. For the present, figure #28 reports the responses in this study to the question, “What makes church interesting to you”? The correlating of these

responses with the excited imagination factors and the existential struggle factors shows that early adolescent male's interest in the church is more likely when one of these factors is engaged.

Figure #28: What makes the church interesting to you? (Clustered responses)

Response		E.I. Factor	E.S. Factor
Worship that relates • Singing • Prayer • Communion	13	Relationship, Action	Family Issues Annoyance Achievement Schoolwork
Friends • Sit and talk • Hanging Out • Fellowship	11	Friendship Relationship Action	Achievement
Pastor was interesting	6	Relationship Male	
Fun Activities	6	Action	
Family Practices • Parents teach me • Sister takes me	5	Relationship Father Action	Family Issues Achievement
Youth worker who spent time w/ me	3	Relationship Male Action	Family Issues Annoyance Achievement Schoolwork
Given leadership	1		Achievement

By clustering the responses it is significant that “worship that relates” receives the most responses. Not coincidentally, this cluster also touches upon six of the factors.

Early adolescent males are not averse to worship, per se; rather, these data show that they are receptive when there is an intentional effort made to speak to them in ways that touch

their imaginations and their life struggles. As we will see, however, one needs to be careful in assuming that early adolescent males are eagerly waiting to engage a religious life.

The power of the relationship factor in attracting the attention of early adolescent males to life in the church is obvious and well documented. In like manner positive peer relationships are strongly lifted up. This is consistent with the social navigation agenda of the cohort at this age. In addition, by clustering both the “pastor is interesting” category with the “youth worker who spent time with me” category, we identify a total of nine responses showing the important role of significant caring staff/adults when connecting with early adolescent males. The “fun activities” cluster along with “family prays” cluster round out the top responses. Looking at these five key clusters, 1) relevant worship, 2) friends, 3) pastor/youth worker, 4) activities, and 5) family practices, it is evident that these five clusters have the potential to touch upon the five factors that excite the imagination of early adolescent males. In addition these five clusters touch upon four of the five factors relating to the existential struggles of early adolescent males.

The one factor not necessarily addressed is the Self-coping Factor. This is not surprising since this particular factor is individualistic in nature, whereas religious life is generally community oriented. One way in which this factor could be addressed is by teaching the early adolescent male the role of private prayer. Cohort responses generally showed that private prayer is not a regular practice. A positive engagement of the cohort tendency to cope in solitude by teaching or practicing private prayer is not currently considered an option to them.

Significant Conclusions

These data show that early adolescent males who are active in a religious community have self-identified strategies or ministry methods that relate directly to factors they have self-identified regarding their excited imaginations and their existential struggles. *One must conclude, therefore, that as religious organizations attend to these nine factors relating to the excited imaginations and existential struggles of early adolescent males, it is more likely this cohort will be receptive to and engage the religious organization.* The work of the Holy Spirit utilizes these factors to engage early adolescent males in the life of the church. An expansion of this conclusion will be demonstrated when these data are compared with the Lutheran Men in Mission Male Spirituality Study.

The key words stated in this conclusion underlined above are “more likely”. Earlier I made the important caveat that we must not assume that this cohort is eagerly waiting to engage a religious life. In expanding upon this remark it is important to review the comments to the question, “What do you think about God”? Eleven responses said they “do not care” or “never think about it”. This represents the largest number of responses relating to this question shown in Figure #29. In addition, only three others reported that they pray, and none did regularly. It would be encouraging and false to conclude that by tending these ten factors, early adolescent males will eagerly embrace a religious life. It is not that simple. These data show the ways of wisdom when engaging this audience, but they do not guarantee results. Faith development and religious curiosity are not nurtured solely by formulaic strategies and group generalizations.

Figure #29: Thoughts on God

Don't care or think about God	11
I think about him daily	6
I believe in Him and wonder what He's like	4
I pray, but not regularly	3
I believe what my parents taught	2
Created the earth	1
He died for me	1
He is influencing things	1
A kind, loving man who makes me act better	1
I believe and have no questions	1
We pray at mealtime	1
Is the Bible actually true?	1
Why is this happening to me?	1
Does He have a lot of powers He uses?	1
Kind and loving	1
I try and lead a good life	1
Why did You make this universe and not keep it for Your friends?	1
Jesus is a smaller version of God, more real.	1
Everything is a gift from God	1
God is a creation of people's minds	1
The devil was made to scare children	1

Examining the theological content of these responses could justify the writing of another dissertation. Some of the responses are formulaic while others raise intriguing and ageless questions. It is reassuring and exciting that many responses represent an emerging faith, and I emphasize the word “emerging”.

What the data does not show is the general lack of energy exhibited by the cohort when asked this question. The cohort was not particularly engaged in this question. Some acted as if the question was new, while others seemed unenthused. Sometimes I thought they worried I would break out in a sermon at any moment. As the responses show, some of them equate this question with moral behavior. One interviewee in

particular noted that he felt like two people, the one who behaves in church and the regular guy he is. In his “regular life” he is not a troublemaker or a problem student. Yet, he felt he couldn’t really be himself when talking about God or attending church. In Lutheran terms some of these responses reflect that they know only the law of God, and none of the freeing Gospel. Developmentally, this more legal and less inquisitive understanding of God seems appropriate. These data show that early adolescent males are not necessarily eager to engage the larger, abstract questions of God, human existence and theology. Certainly, these data do not support the practice of affirmation of faith at the age of 13 or 14.

These data show that early adolescent males are busy navigating puberty, social networks, family dynamics and personal insecurities by means of an emerging, but far from complete, consciousness. Either because they are not curious or because they are overwhelmed with other issues, interest in the questions of God, faith and theology seem less important to them; especially when they understand these issues primarily in terms of a demand for moral behavior. *However, and this is a vitally important point, matters of faith and life in the church can bridge to their existential situation when worship practices, staff/adults, peers, activities and family practices connect in relevant ways.* These relevant means have to do with engaging and tending the ten factors identified in this study.

What Does Not Work

Earlier I stated the case positively by identifying things that seem to work in terms of engaging early adolescent males. In the interviews I was also interested to know what

doesn't work. Figure #30 reflects their responses to the question, "What makes church boring or uninteresting to you"?

Figure #30: The Boring or Uninteresting Church

Sunday School	1
Old people who don't talk	1
No adult relationships	1
Singing the same songs	1
Long services	1
No relationships	1
Long sermons	1
Talking about money	1
Visiting shut-ins	1

The number of responses is small; nevertheless, they cluster around poor relationships (mostly with adults), and irrelevant or boring worship. In a backhanded or inverted way these responses reaffirm two clusters listed in Figure #28 as being significant to engaging early adolescent males in the life of the church; "worship that is relevant" and "caring older staff/adults". Certainly, if one wishes to push away this age cohort, inhospitable adults and irrelevant worship will clearly help in reaching the goal.

Advice to Adults

I conclude the summary and analysis of the Early Adolescent Male Study by reporting their responses to the question, "What do you think the adult world needs to know about you, your friends and your life?" In Figure #30 I illustrated that inattentive adults will quickly push this group away. Therefore, their words shared here provide poignant insights to our study, and they provide flesh to our skeletal structure of 10 factors. Figure #31 lists the cohort responses and links them to one or more of the ten factors. I suspect the nature of the question lent itself to relating more to the existential struggle of early adolescent males. Many of the cohort seemed to take the question as an

opportunity to “take a shot” at the adults around them (annoyance factor). Nevertheless, there is much to be learned from such an open ended concluding question. In their own words we hear them express how they are navigating this most challenging time of life called early adolescence.

Figure #31: Advice to Adults

Advice		E.I./E.S. Factor
No response	8	
We're not that clueless or the evil teenager.		Achievement Annoyance Family Issues
I'm a nice kid, avoid your first impressions.		Achievement Relationship
Don't make us do as much work. Let us do what we want.		Annoyance Family Issues
I'm a content kid who makes mistakes. Don't just tell us "not to".		Family Issues Annoyance
Teachers, take it slow.		Schoolwork Achievement Annoyance
It's not easy growing up. It's hard to befriend girls. Homework is a big stressor and it's hard to keep it all straight. We have some problems.		Achievement Relationships Schoolwork
Don't show favoritism.		Achievement Relationships Annoyance
I'm not always the greatest kid, but I come out in the end and do everything.		Family Issues Achievement

Figure #31 continued

Be quiet and don't talk about bills. Girls ask too many questions.	Family Issues Annoyance
Leave me alone.	Annoyance Self-coping
My best friend is a girl.	Relationship
We're not all irresponsible. Hire us and I'll show up for work regularly.	Achievement Action
I'm not always crazy and aggressive. I can control myself.	Action Achievement
I'm kinda thinking about girls.	Relationships
I lead a good life. I get stuff done right and quick.	Achievement Action
I'm just a kid, don't stare at me.	Annoyance
If you don't have friends, you don't have a life.	Relationships
It's tough, school and your growing up, homework is tough.	Schoolwork Achievement
We're jokers but we get our schoolwork done. We like a good time, bad jokes make us laugh.	Schoolwork Achievement
Don't expect too much out of me. I hate doing homework. Intramurals and homework is too much.	Family Issues Action Schoolwork Achievement Annoyance
People my age are not clueless. Don't make it all look so nice and pretty. Tell us the truth the way it is.	Achievement Family Issues

Figure #31 shows the clustering of factors based upon their comments. Labeling these remarks according to the ten factors is somewhat subjective; however, I did review

these comments in the context of the larger interview to help determine which factor was being referenced. As noted earlier, most of the responses fall into the existential struggle factors. Of most significance is that the Achievement Factor received the highest score nearly doubling the second highest factor, Annoyance Factor. Clearly, early adolescent males are struggling and striving for competency and as any parent, youth worker or teacher will report, they are often getting annoyed as they go through this experience. Finally, as I have shown earlier, this striving for achievement and competency is often expressed through action activities such as a sport.

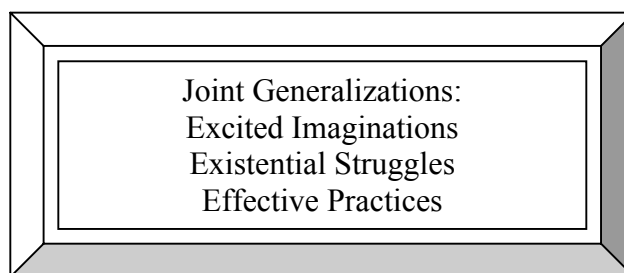
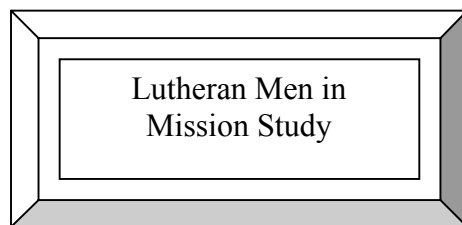
Figure #32: Advice to Adults Cluster of Factors

Achievement	14
Annoyance	9
Family Issues	7
Schoolwork	6
Relationships	6
Action	4
Self-coping	1

It is time to turn our attention to the Lutheran Men in Mission study and compare the results of the two studies. The Early Adolescent Male Study described in detail above will come to life in new, deeper and more meaningful ways through this comparative analysis.

CHAPTER #2

COMPARING THE EARLY ADOLESCENT MALE STUDY WITH THE
LUTHERAN MEN IN MISSION MALE SPIRITUALITY STUDY



The Lutheran Men in Mission Study (LMM) was conducted during the winter and spring of 2003. The purpose of this study was threefold; 1) to determine the character and shape of young adult male spirituality, 2) to identify practices in ministry relating to young adult males that help them to develop a life of faith within the church, and 3) to access the world of young adult males. In this sense, it served as a window into their cultures and experiences. Working in cooperation with the Lutheran Men in Mission organization of the ELCA, which also funded the project, a team of three researcher (of which I was one) conducted interviews in cities throughout the United States. The cities included Seattle, Sacramento, New York, San Antonio, Charlotte, Philadelphia, and the Twin Cities areas. Those interviewed ranged in age from 18-35. The average age was 24.8. The interview tools and methodology used in the survey were very similar to that used in the Early Adolescent Male Study.

It goes beyond the scope of this thesis to fully summarize the LMM study. A more thorough summary and analysis was provided in Project #3 by this writer. For the purpose of this thesis it is important to perform three tasks: 1) briefly summarize the results of the study, 2) compare these results with the EAM study, and 3) review the interview data for reflective comments on the early adolescent years.

Task #1: A Summary of the LMM Results

The results of the study show that eleven factors or clusters of items contribute to describe the character and shape of young adult male spirituality and the missiological practices that help them connect with a life of faith in the church.

1) *As was the case in the EAM study it all begins with relationships.* It is clear that young adult male spirituality is affected by the character, power and shape of a wide variety of relationships. The types of relationships identified vary widely. I was struck by the many references to two significant factors: fathers and the marriage/divorce of parents. The impact of fathers and the character of the parental marriage relationship on these young men strongly shape 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 rather than any benefits that might come from a divorce. In like manner, young men coming from homes where a healthy marriage exists commented on how helpful it was to see such a marriage modeled for them. It served as a source of strength for them while

they were discovering their place in the world and settling upon a belief/value system.

- *Spouse and children*: Marriage of a young adult male and the advent of children often play a significant “domesticating” role for these young men. This finding is consistent with cross-cultural studies reported by Stewart Van Leeuwen and Coltrane. “Cultural practices most strongly associated with a decrease in men’s adherence to...codes of honor (a source of violence and disruption in most cultures)...was men’s routine, nurturing involvement in childcare.”¹⁷ The domestication of males through spouses and child rearing is good for boys as well. “When young boys have primary caretakers of both sexes, they are less likely as adults to engage in women-devaluing activities and in self-aggrandizing, cruel or overly competitive male cults.”¹⁸ A spouse often led them into a life of spirituality. Spouses often introduced these young men 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 were not immune to having heard the expectations of their parents for them. Whether they are testing these hopes, rebelling or conforming to them, they shape the nature of their spiritual journey.

¹⁷ Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen, *My Brother’s Keeper: What the Social Sciences Do (and don’t) Tell Us About Masculinity*, (Downers Grove, Illinois, Intervarsity Press, 2002) 121.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

- *Role of extended family*: In a time of high divorce rates it was 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 journeys of these young men are strongly influenced by their friends and peer culture.

Each of these key relationships can serve as a significant entry point to explore questions of faith, spirituality and church.

2) *Male mentors play an enormous role in shaping young adult males*. While relationships play a key role in the spiritual development of young adult males, two types of relationships are very significant and deserve to be identified as separate factors. The reference to fathers has already been alluded to and I underscore that factor here.

- *Fathers*: I often heard the voice of “father respect” and a wishing that fathers were more available and accessible because there is great adoration for 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, or coach. Young adult males need to see older men living spiritual lives in order for them to “get it”.

3) *The experience of a crisis serves as a significant factor*. A crisis often presents an opportunity for spiritual growth and religious formation and this proved true in these interviews. When significant Christian male figures engaged these young men at these points of crisis, then their faith life was enhanced. It is important to note what the young men identify as significant crises. Three types of crises surface over and again in

our interviews. These crisis fall into the larger category of existential struggles as identified in the EAM study.

- *Vocation/job*: The search for meaningful work and gainful employment was often interpreted as a crisis and a source of great personal anxiety (Achievement Factor in the EAM study).
- *Void after high school*: Many respondents identified 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, or entering the military and new jobs all created a crisis of transition, dislocation, wilderness and economic insecurity. Many reported entering a “wild child” phase indulging in parties, alcohol and some drugs.
- *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.

4) *The allocation and management of time is a critical struggle for these young men*. This is a specific kind of crisis that surfaced often enough to merit its own category. 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 time or worship time. It requires flexibility and innovation in worship schedules to attract these young men (i.e., worship on a non-Sunday morning schedule). The young men also reported they found it difficult to find time for themselves. Finding time for themselves meant they wanted to do some recreational activities, most often active sports.

5) *Nodal experiences play a significant role in shaping these young men; they especially serve as a vital bridge to a life of faith.* 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:

- Men's retreats (where they were given the opportunity to share as well as lead)
- Crisis
- Divorce
- Move to a new location
- New Job
- Spiritual events (i.e., Promise Keepers)
- Fights
- Awakenings (i.e., involvement in a recovery program)
- Birth of a child
- Mission trips
- Opportunities to lead

6) *Immersion in nature and the out-of-doors is deeply meaningful and spiritual to these young men.* Nature serves as a specific type of nodal experience. The spiritual vitality of these young men is strongly enhanced by experiences in nature and by doing things in nature. Nature allows them to be kinesthetic in their faith. In nature they make some cosmological connections. These young men are more likely to claim a spirituality that is pantheistic in character rather than transcendental. Their immersion in nature takes some specific forms and meets a number of goals.

- Mastery of skills in nature: (i.e., hunting or snowboarding)
- Just doing things: (mountain biking, canoeing or kayaking, snowboarding, running, etc.)
- “I’m Alive”: There is a sensate connection of being alive when in touch with life in nature.
- Contemplation: Simply 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.
- Peak experience: They need and want to test themselves, take risks and be on the edge.

7) *As was the case in the EAM study, sports play a huge role in the life of young adult men.* Young adult males are enormously kinesthetic. Their spirituality goes through their bodies, it has a physical character. Through sports they bond, feel the power of themselves, push their limits, learn about themselves as physical men and test their character. Sports provide a discipline for them that they often desire. Most of the young men interviewed see sports as more than a physical outlet; sports touch who they are. Specific sports include running, basketball and weight training. When they do sports in nature, they report having a great sense of satisfaction and joy. Other benefits of sports they identified include:

- Mastery of skills
- Power of self
- Experience
- Chemistry of sport

- Discipline/ritual/story
- Fun
- Friendship
- Connect with nature

8) *These young men recognize that they have a spiritual hunger.* 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, living with integrity, and showing respect. Many reported that when they do a good job at work they feel great amounts of satisfaction. This spiritual hunger needs to be eminently practical. 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 need or connection between prayer life and congregational life. A guaranteed turn-off is to force spirituality upon them. They unanimously report that 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 comfortable in worship. “Comfortable” is defined as “come as you are at a time when I don’t miss sleep and be informal in style”. This response echoes some of the five Effective Practices Factors identified in the EAM study as being attractive to those early adolescent males who do attend church.

9) *These young men are willing to do service and they report a sense of great satisfaction when they do service.* Given their tendency to be physical and kinesthetic, service projects that require movement, construction, tools and group activity are most desirable. However, it may require a number of invitations before a young man

will engage in a service project. It is 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. This more parochial understanding of service can be expanded to include mission trips if significant mentors invite them in. Often they will not use the language of service, rather they’ll talk about “giving something back” and that is what it means to be a good person.

10) *To understand the spiritual nature of these young men one must connect with their passions and avocations.* 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 permission to pursue their passions. The church needs to recognize these avocations and creatively connect them to the larger mission of the church. This means that helping young men identify their gifts, and naming and framing these gifts theologically will be very significant if they are to engage in the spiritual life of the church.

11) *Music and media serve as “white noise” in their lives.* The wide variety of interests in music and media was surprising. There does not seem to be one form or style that dominates over another. Music and the media are very important to them, but it is an importance much like white noise. It is simply the background sound and milieu in which they live their lives and it is a given. This finding is consistent with what one would expect in a post-modern culture.

Task #2: Comparing the LMM Study with the EAM Study

A close comparison of the two studies reveals many points of contact and common ground. Specifically the six factors that excite the imaginations of early adolescent males are nearly identical with those of their older counterparts. I have

included the achievement factor as a part of the excited imagination as well as the existential struggles of early adolescent males as described earlier.

- The power and influence of relationships are very important in their lives.
- The role of males as mentors and role models is identified in both cohorts.
- The power and influence of fathers in their lives is recognized. Fathers have the potential to do great harm or great good, but they are never neutral.
- Friendships are vitally important to both groups. The shape and character of these friendships will vary (peer buddies, spouse), but no matter the age, friends are important.
- Action and kinesthetic opportunities serve both as recreational and spiritual outlets in both groups. It is difficult to overstate the importance of this action factor in the lives of early adolescent males and young men. Congregational practices that do not provide appropriate outlets for this factor bias their ministries against early adolescent males and young men. As a part of this action factor, the role of nature is also very important. Congregational practices that do not incorporate First Article opportunities bias their ministries against the incorporation of early adolescent males and young men.
- Opportunities to explore their avocations and to experience achievement play a critical role in the personal and spiritual development of these cohorts. Congregational practices that are not sensitive to these avocations (i.e., hunting or singing in the choir) bias their ministries against this cohort.

How these six factors take shape will be quite varied; however, all congeal to provide multiple nodal moments that have the potential to awaken, nurture, and shape faith formation in early adolescent males and young adult males.

In regard to existential struggles, the two groups share much common ground. Under the general rubric of personal crises, we see many of the five factors identified in the EAM study. I note the following as examples.

- In the LMM study, finding new jobs, moving to a new location, deciding a career, managing and allocating time, and establishing a good marriage/family are equivalent to the Achievement Factor in the EAM study.
- In the LMM study, divorce is equivalent to the Family Issues Factor of the EAM study.
- In the LMM study, fighting is equivalent to the Annoyance Factor in the EAM study.
- The void after high school identified in the LMM study could be equivalency to the Self-Coping Factor in the EAM study.
- The stresses of college, tech school, and developing a career in the LMM study are equivalent to the Schoolwork Factor in the EAM study.

As noted earlier, the Achievement Factor serves as a two edge sword/factor for this group. It is both exciting and represents new opportunity, but it can also be a great source of anxiety, frustration and uncertainty.

Task #3: Reflective Comments on Early Adolescence taken from the LMM Study

Rear view mirrors are wonderful things because they show us where we have been. In many ways they are our only source of wisdom and insight. In scouring the

interview data from the LMM study, I looked for rear view mirror reflections and observations made by the cohort to determine what further insights they might provide to our inquiry regarding the excited imaginations and existential struggles of early adolescent males. I have organized these data by congregational participation category as described earlier in this thesis. I will report the responses that surfaced in the LMM study and then I will comment on what they might mean in understanding early adolescent males.

Responses from Category #1 of the LMM Study:

- His mother and father shoot archery, go camping and shoot rifles with him.
- He dropped out of school in 9th grade. His family often moved. His mother divorced twice. He experienced many different religions.

Commentary:

With only two responses no real conclusions can be drawn; however they are indicative of two factors: the Action Factor and the Family Issues Factor.

Responses from Category #2 of the LMM Study:

- He saw the hypocrisy of the church up through age 15 and so he left the church.
- He was close to his father and grandfather and they were shamed by the Catholic Church.
- He is a pastor's kid and dad was a big influence on him as a man of faith.
- His family formerly went to church every Sunday with grandparents.
- His mother died when he was in fifth grade and then he had step-relations.
- Church, Sunday School and confirmation were good, but then he left after a pastor

alienated him. He liked his SS teachers, but their own son murdered them.

- He liked youth group and finds fishing with his father as central to him.
- His parents took him to church.
- His best friend was active and this friend's father mentored him. He left when the friend and father moved and were no longer a part of his life.

Commentary:

Three of the respondents left the church in early adolescence because of the lack of caring adults or perceived insults from church leaders.

- Caring Adult Factor: 3

Three of the responses point to the power and influence of the family, especially the father, in shaping the faith life of early adolescent males.

- Father Factor: 3

Two of the responses show how the disruption of vital relationships can negatively impact early adolescent male participation in the life of the church.

- Relationship Factor, Male Factor: 2

Responses from Category #3 of the LMM Study:

- He was hyperactive so he did sports with his father and older brother.
- His parents divorced when he was 15.
- A friend took him to confirmation and he loved the intellectual inquiry. His youth worker was influential as was the church peer group and the surrogate Christian family he joined.
- His parents divorced when he was 12 and he was an angry teen who was in many fights.

- His mother was abusive and beat him nearly daily. He was locked out of the house. He hasn't seen his father since he was 15, but they talk on the phone.
- He became a writer at eleven and was strongly influenced by his teachers.
- He said his father was an "M and M" (hard on the outside and soft on the inside).
- His father, youth group and grandfather influenced him.
- The youth group, youth leader and mission trips grabbed his attention.
- He attended a parochial school and decided at age 9 he would live by the Golden Rule.
- At age 14 he decided to be an artist; this was his call. His father supported him in this decision.
- He spent time in a juvenile detention center. A pastor became a life changer for him by visiting him in juvenile hall and sharing the faith.
- His parents divorced when he was in junior high.
- He grew up in a Christian home and the youth group really helped him.
- He went to CCD and was one of the few kids from the tough part of town who went. His grandmother shaped his faith when he was young.
- His family went to church and he was "the black sheep". He lived on the streets.
- He went to church through confirmation and then quit. He said a bridging ministry between confirmation and adulthood is critical.
- He was Christian because his parents are Christian. It never went beyond Sunday attendance.

- His family went to a large Catholic Church and he never felt a part of it.

Commentary:

Confirmation of the results from the EAM study is clearly noted from these data.

A summary of the various responses falling under the rubric of excited imaginations shows the following:

- Action Factor: 2
- Friendship Factor: 1
- Father Factor: 4
- Male Factor: 3

A summary of the various responses falling under the rubric of existential struggles shows the following:

- Family Issues Factor: 4
- Annoyance Factor: 2
- Achievement Factor: 3
- Self-coping Factor: 1

Finally, a summary of the responses falling under the rubric of effective practices shows the following:

- Caring Adult Factor: 2
- Family Practices: 3
- Friends/Peers Factor: 4

Some of the individual responses contain more than one factor and have been counted more than once when this occurs.

Responses from Category #4 of the LMM Study:

- He is active because he has ADD and his family supports him. He liked going on a retreat with old people. His father is influential.
- His family attended church regularly.
- His drum teacher engaged him in the church where he plays. He went to a Lutheran school and his family is active.
- He went to a Lutheran camp at 13 and saw an avalanche. He concluded God was in the avalanche. The youth gathering was also significant to him.
- His parents divorced when he was in 7th grade and the church became his surrogate home. He had mentors and good peer friends.
- He has a real sense of family at his home church.
- He is a pastor's kid and has no sense of passion for the church. He goes out of habit.
- He was strongly affirmed in his church in 6th grade. He is part of the youth group, enjoys the contemporary music, camp, Bible study and his mentor.
- He was raised Lutheran but knocked heads with his dad after his divorce. The Baptist pastor visited him and welcomed him back to church.
- He went on mission trips, was a youth group leader and led worship.
- His family regularly attended. He was an Eagle Scout and two teachers pulled him in.
- His uncle brought him in.
- When he was in 8th grade his mother had an affair and left the family. Church became his sanctuary and it energized him.

- His parents are part of the John Birch Society and he attended a private Christian school.
- He was made a deacon in 9th grade and his grandfather strongly influenced him.
- He was affirmed as having the gift of language and was made a deacon. His SS teacher was influential, plus he went to a Quaker school in a ghetto neighborhood. Others saw his gifts and lifted them up to him.
- He grew up in a Christian home with a good environment.
- He accepted Christ in 7th grade because of the “campaigners” group.
- He is a pastor’s kid who grew up in church.
- He grew up as the good son. Prayer was a regular part of his upbringing. His mother died when he was four, and he became part of a step-family of seven. He has so much respect for his dad that he weeps.
- He was strongly influenced by the Boy Scouts where he was given a Bible and he read it. This became a turning point for him. His pastor was also a big influence.
- His family raised him in the church. It has always been a part of their life.
- His parents divorced when he was 11 ending a stressful marriage. His father was absent when he was growing up. His father is on the fourth marriage. He is very close to his mother. He went to church a lot with his mother. Confirmation camp was particularly influential on him.

- He grew up very close to his father. They used to work on cars together. His grandparents were key as well. He has been in church his whole life. Confirmation didn't mean anything to him.
- He grew up in a family that attended church and he went to SS. Involvement in the youth program was critical for his faith. He felt he could talk to his pastors anytime. Camp helped him pull his faith together.
- Bible camps have been a spiritual high for him. Confirmation helped him own his faith. Being able to talk to his parents really helped him in his faith. He was involved in dramas and productions of the church from 4th grade on. His pastor is an important faith role model to him.
- Confirmation taught him a lot and helped him understand the Lutheran church. Drama projects have also been very helpful. Discussions with him as a young person were important.
- He did a lot of things with his grandfather and father in the woods including hunting. He attended the Catholic Church and remembers confirmation and first communion as significant. He really liked the priest as well.
- His family insisted he go to church. Confirmation was important to him. He made good friends who were Christians and they talked about faith a lot. He felt he could talk to his pastor a lot as well.

Commentary:

The responses from this group are particularly helpful and reinforcing of the conclusions drawn from the EAM study. The reader should note, once again, that an

individual respondent may make responses that fall into more than one factor category. Therefore, there are more responses recorded than there are respondents in the cohort.

Under the rubric of excited imaginations the responses show the following:

- Relationship Factor: 2 (Many of the other responses could have fallen into this factor category as well.)
- Father Factor: 5
- Male Factor: 8
- Achievement Factor (in the positive sense): 7
- Action Factor: 8

Under the rubric of existential struggles the responses show the following:

- Family Issues Factor: 4
- Annoyance Factor: 1

Under the rubric of effective congregational practices the responses show the following:

- Family Practices Factor: 14
- Caring Adults Factor: 17
- Friends/Peer Factor: 6
- Worship that Relates Factor: 1

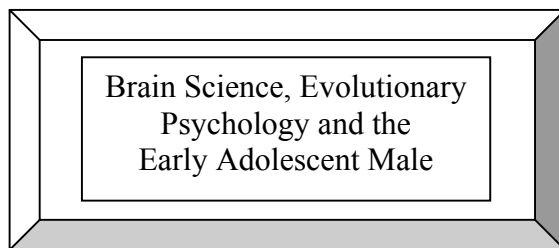
Summary:

The LMM study clearly reinforces the conclusions drawn from the EAM study. The ten factors that identify the excited imaginations and existential struggles of early adolescent males are legitimate insights into their world. The comparison of the two

studies also clearly demonstrates that the factors identifying effective church practices are evangelical and faith formative.

CHAPTER #3

BRAIN SCIENCE AND THE EARLY ADOLESCENT MALE



The ethnographic research presented in these two studies provides insights about the context, concerns and characteristics of early adolescent males. To those engaged in ministry with this age cohort, I suspect that much of what has been said would be more reinforcing than surprising. These data confirm anecdotal and intuitive insights. They provide legitimacy and wisdom for ministry.

What makes these data far richer and more exciting is interpreting them with a new lens i.e., the perspective of brain science and evolutionary psychology. These rapidly expanding areas of human research are shedding new light upon what is actually happening within an early adolescent boy's brain and represent the cutting edge in adolescent youth ministry research. Barbara Strauch, author of *THE PRIMAL TEEN* fairly gushes when she says, "What neuroscientists are finding about the neural development of the adolescent brain is absolutely fascinating, even awesome. Ten years ago there was nothing. Now I think it will be the frontier of the field for the next ten years. It will change the whole debate about adolescents. It will have huge implications for policy, for laws. It will change the whole way we think about kids. Forever".¹⁹ I fully agree with Strauch. The study of brain neurology in early adolescence has ushered

¹⁹ Barbara Strauch, *The Primal Teen* (New York: Doubleday, 2003) 86.

in a personal renaissance of learning for me over the past two years. It has been the most exciting, interesting and helpful part of my entire Doctor of Ministry study.

By applying some of these insights in brain neurology and evolutionary psychology, I will show in this chapter that a significant basis for the factors identified in the EAM study are rooted in the way God is forming the early adolescent brain. In other words, some of these factors are more than cultural phenomenon unique to one study in one context. I will argue that God has biologically hardwired some of these factors into most early adolescent males. Specifically, I will demonstrate that the Relationship Factor (serving as a meta-factor that includes those factors that fall under this general rubric), the Action Factor and the Achievement Factor are more than cultural expressions of maleness; rather they are rooted deep in our human evolution and are part of the intrinsic nature of most early adolescent males. These factors have ancient roots that are relevant today and cannot be ignored as one considers ministry with early adolescent males.

This chapter has two purposes: 1) to provide a summary of God's design of the early adolescent brain and how it is developing during this period, and 2) to demonstrate how early adolescent males are bio-neurologically predisposed for the Relationship Factor, the Action Factor and the Achievement Factor by outlining a case based upon evolutionary psychology theory.

To assist the reader in what is to ensue the following serves as a
Summary:

- The human brain has a phylogenetic/evolutionary past that, while not deterministic of ontogeny, does recapitulate itself in individual humans even today.
- The human brain is adaptive to social interaction for that is how it will survive and grow.
- The human brain works from bottom to top, back to front and right to left.
- The human brain grows in an exuberant manner in infancy and in puberty. Exuberance is biologically adaptive to survival in the case of infancy and reproduction in the case of puberty. Early adolescence is best described as the sequel to infancy from a brain neurology perspective. This exuberant growth begins to slow down around the age of 16.²⁰
- The early adolescent human brain sits atop two older brain structures that regulate body functions and drives, and formulates emotions and feelings. These ancient structures operate reflexively and are not easily controlled; they are primal, generating survival drives and energy.
- The early adolescent male brain tends to operate from the right hemisphere which includes a part of the brain responsible for impulse control (frontal lobes region), but is late in completing its growth process. This part of the brain helps us in our spatial orientation, systemizing and is the novelty center of the brain. It is less verbal. It serves as a short term memory bank.

²⁰ Ibid., 46

- While the marvel of the human brain is its plasticity or flexibility to adapt, during adolescence it would and may feel nearly liquid rather than plastic because the changes are so dramatic; as dramatic as the brain growth of a baby.
- During puberty and early adolescence, testosterone serves as a “super-charger” in the male brain encouraging action, competition and achievement, and discouraging impulse control.

Summary of early adolescent brain development

The psalmist says, “What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor” (Psalm 8: 4-5 NRSV). More than a quaint sentiment, this Psalm speaks of power, complexity, and genius in the creative act. “Glory and honor” are not just terms of endearment; they describe a staggering miracle; the human brain. In understanding the human brain, one is overwhelmed by awe. The phrase “made them a little lower than God” takes on a power, depth and meaning never imagined until only recently.

The brain within the early adolescent male that sits before us in our confirmation class, attends youth group, spends untold hours playing video games, runs breathlessly and enthusiastically playing paintball, or stands on the street corner smoking a cigarette is “100,000 years old”.²¹ His brain, which is the sum of those who came before him as well as who he is and will be, has not changed in the past 100,000 years. While this may seem like an old brain, from the long view of evolution his is a very new brain indeed.

We humans and our pre-human predecessors have walked this earth for approximately 5-

²¹ David F. Bjorklund and Anthony D. Pellegrini, *The Origins of Human Nature* (Washington, DC, American Psychological Association, 2002) 24.

7 million years. From our distant past we share 99% of our genetic material with chimps, “making humans and chimpanzees closer genetically than horses and zebras”.²² Yet only in the last 100,000 years has our brain evolved to what we all carry around in our skulls today.

Approximately 35,000 years ago, this new, human brain began to develop culture in the form of language, art, religion, extensive tools and dynamic community life. Twelve thousand years ago our human ancestors and their new brains began living in stationary communities and practiced primitive agriculture.²³ Since those ancient times humans have come to be the dominant species of the planet. We have adapted, invented, created, and utilized (some would say exploited) this planet for our own well-being and advancement. We have fulfilled our evolutionary destiny as God intended. Yet, while we may consider ourselves moderns our ancient phylogenetic background travels with us, influences us and sets a semi-predestined course before us. In the case of humans, ontogeny does not recapitulate phylogeny, but phylogeny certainly does influence our individual, ontogenetic expressions of being human.²⁴ This is particularly true when we consider the development which takes place in the early adolescent male.

To understand this development we must first speak of infants. When a human is born, the brain is about a third the size of what an adult brain will be. This is of great benefit to females since it is through their birth canal that this brain must pass. Humans are born completely dependent and essentially helpless. The trade off for having the

²² Ibid., 22

²³ Ibid., 24

²⁴ Ibid., 11.

most complex brain on the planet is that it takes a full 20 years for it to come to maturity. In describing an infant, Robert Sylwester unsentimentally states, “It is a wet, noisy pet, at least 20 years from a clear sense of how it will turn out”.²⁵ In the meantime, humans are dependent upon other humans, especially their mothers, in order to survive. Some evolutionary psychologists argue that this is the reason human babies are generally quite cute and adorable. They postulate that if you are going to be needy of others for a long period of time, you had better be lovable. Adorability may be an evolutionary adaptation.

In other words, humans are hardwired for social relationships (Relationship Factor, Family Issues Factor, Family Practices Factor, Father Factor, Friends Factor, Caring Adults Factor, and Male Factor). To put a fine point on it, humans have forty-four muscles in their faces of which four are used for eating, the rest are for expression.²⁶ Humans can exhibit 412 discrete (mutually exclusive, semantically distinct) human emotions.²⁷ Experiments with newborns show that when given the option of looking at a picture of a face or an object such as mobile they look more to the face, with girls being the more social (face picture) than the boys.²⁸ The point here is that from an evolutionary standpoint, possessing hardwiring for social interaction is adaptive when life depends upon the strength of social connections. We can conclude that most of the

²⁵ Robert Sylwester, *The Biological Brain in a Cultural Classroom*, (Thousand Oaks, CA, Corwin Press, 2000) 3.

²⁶ James Ashbrook and Carol Rausch Albright, *The Humanizing Brain* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1997) 22.

²⁷ Simon Baron-Cohen, *The Essential Difference* (New York: Basic Books, 2003) 22

²⁸Ibid., 55-56.

factors identified in our two studies relating to a wide spectrum of relationships and social connections have a neural-evolutionary basis for them.

From birth through age three, the human brain explodes in growth through the phenomenon called *exuberance*. During this time the brain is growing literally billions of brain neurons with trillions of synapses forming between neuron cells. We have more neurons in our heads than there are stars in the Milky Way.²⁹ At four weeks old the brain of an infant is creating 500,000 neuron cells every minute. These cells will not reproduce themselves and they will not ever be replaced.³⁰ By 24 weeks old the infant is growing a staggering two million neuron connections per second.³¹ It is a rather inefficient process that begins to slow down around 3 or 4 years of age through neural pruning. Having grown exuberantly, the brain needs to trim and prune these neural connections and make them more efficient. What is left in the wake of this great exuberance is a brain of such complexity that a piece of the brain the size of a grain of rice holds 10,000 nerve cells each capable of 1,000 to 10,000 neural connections.³²

Efficiency happens through the brain process of pruning and myelination. Myelin is a fatty casing manufactured from glial cells in the brain that coats an axon, thus making the neural passage and synapse more efficient and considerably faster.³³ Without myelin our brains would be slower and function in a more chaotic manner.

²⁹ Michael Gurian, *Boys and Girls Learn Differently*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001) 18

³⁰The Discovery Channel, *The Secret Life of the Brain*, (New York: PBS Home Video, 2002)

³¹Ibid.

³²Ibid.

³³ Strauch, *The Primal Teen*, 52

Throughout the rest of childhood our brains continue to grow and develop, but it is not exuberant growth such as that seen in an infant or toddler.

Exuberance is rare in humans and it happens only twice. Evolutionary psychologists speculate that the reason for the initial exuberance is so that the infant can survive into childhood. Growing a brain quickly that can learn rapidly helps one survive and survival is the point of childhood from an evolutionary point of view.

The second time the human brain becomes exuberant happens during puberty and early adolescence. Having survived childhood, the next evolutionary step for the human is to enter the gene pool, which is the biological purpose of puberty and adolescence. Puberty is simply nature's adaptation to death. In this sense, puberty is the means by which God refreshes, renews and restores the human community over time. To assist in this process the brain becomes exuberant once again growing billions of neurons, dedicating 3,000 of its genes to the process, using 20% of all food energy and utilizing more than 50% of the human genetic material over any other organ.³⁴ And like the early infant, the brain prunes and performs myelination even as it is exuberant, creating neural passageways that will serve a lifetime.

For our purposes it is important to note that the early adolescent brain functions much more like that of an exuberant infant brain than that of a young adult. This is a vitally important insight. In early adolescence we are actually observing a sequel to infancy in terms of brain development. Exuberant brain growth drives the evolutionary imperative of survivability and social connectedness in early adolescent males even as it is the biological priority for an infant. We see the energy of this exuberance in our two studies. The early adolescent males are intensely interested and engaged in finding

³⁴ Sylwester, *The Biological Brain in the Cultural Classroom*, 8

friends and connecting with adult males, most hopefully their fathers. “The survival advantage of having good friends is that you have social alliances and help when the going gets tough.”³⁵

A Caveat into Evolutionary Psychology to Explain the Action Factor and the Achievement Factor

The above conclusion regarding the Relationship Factor is consistent with the assumption behind evolutionary psychology. “Mainstream evolutionary psychology is primarily concerned with how selective pressures in our species’ past led to adaptive cognitions and behavior and how such adaptations influence contemporary people.”³⁶ Evolutionary psychologists postulate that in our ancient, mystical past this search for peers/tribes and men was vital for survival of the early human. Life depended upon working in cooperative tribes for hunting. “Hunting was most likely the work of men...and our current genetic makeup most likely reflects adaptations to our hunter-gatherer past.”³⁷ The physical strength and wisdom of older hunters would be of great value to the younger, emerging male. This provides, at least in part, an explanation for why early adolescent males value their fathers and other males so highly and why making friends is critical, or as one student reported, “or you don’t have a life”.

Evolutionary psychology and its summary conclusions of our ancient past are not without its critics. It is difficult to prove or disprove these claims. Nevertheless, I find

³⁵ Baron-Cohen, *The Essential Difference*, 127.

³⁶ Bjorkland and Pelligrini, *The Origins of Human Nature*, 6.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 26-27

them to be helpful insights in understanding the incredible energy that stands behind the early adolescent male's quest for friends and male models.

In addition, this perspective sheds insight on the Achievement Factor. Human males bring with them the evolutionary demand that they must achieve, most often working in groups in order to survive. Success in hunting was not an option it was a necessity. The goals of achievement have changed over time. Fortunately we are not banding together as men in order to slay a mastodon. Nevertheless, the vestiges of the drive to achieve, and to achieve in the context of other males, remain with us.

Secondly, competition or competing is an assumption which stands behind the activity of achievement. One does not achieve in a vacuum; rather, there are challenges to be met and obstacles to be overcome. Again, following the logic of evolutionary psychology in our ancient past, the challenge of the early hunter/gatherers was to achieve a successful hunt. Males most often performed the hunting function since they were not able to nurse infants nor bound to nurturing them. In order to be successful these males learned to work cooperatively and were structured hierarchically with older, stronger, dominant males leading the hunt and younger inexperienced males following and learning; a phenomenon observed in most primates. This male group competed against the elements and worked cooperatively to be successful thus making competition and a competitive atmosphere part of the context for deep male bonding.

We have now closed the early adolescent male circle as understood by evolutionary psychology and as illustrated in our two studies; *the need to survive (enter the gene pool or get along in junior high) leads to the formation of social groups (Friends Factor, Relationship Factor, Father Factor, Male Factor, Caring Adults*

Factor), in order to achieve the survival goal (kill the mastodon or succeed in school, sports or career) and this is achieved in a competitive atmosphere. Competition is both a challenge and a context serving as a tool of bonding for human males and early adolescent males.

Early humans bonded through the challenge of the competition of the hunt in ancient times. Inter-male and intra-male competition is an evolutionary remnant of male bonding as well as male self-survival. In today's early adolescent males we see the vestiges of this evolutionary heritage through personal and group competitions, most likely through a sports activity (Action Factor).

There seems to be significant correlation between the explanations of evolutionary psychology for how we came to be male humans and the behaviors we see in early adolescent males. The Relationship Factor (as a meta-factor for many others that are relational and communal), the Achievement Factor and the Action Factor have deep roots in our past. In doing ministry with early adolescent males it is important to recognize that whereas each boy is unique, and not all males fit the norm, a significant number of them are innately driven by these factors and must be engaged at this level of their being. For example, to discourage healthy competition between boys, as is often done within the church, is to deprive them of one of their key methods for bonding socially. At the same time, one must not fall into the trap of social Darwinism and use these arguments as instruments for excessive hierarchy, oppressive patriarchy, or unjust and unfair "winner-take-all" attitudes. These evolutionary explanations for early adolescent male behavior are just that, explanations, not prescriptions for future behavior and cultural structures.

Continuing the Summary of Early Adolescent Male Brain Development

Having made some connections between evolutionary psychology theory and our two studies, it is now important to continue our discussion of the human brain by turning our attention to how the brain is structured and how it functions. Obviously, this is an enormously complex subject and I will provide only a brief summary, but it is necessary if we are to fully understand the roots and power of the Relationship Factor, the Action Factor and the Achievement Factor in early adolescent males.

The human part of the human brain rests upon some very ancient and non-human brain structures. For simplicity's sake the human brain can be divided into three groups: the brain stem (sometimes called the reptilian brain for that is its evolutionary antecedent), the limbic brain (sometimes called the mammalian brain for that is its evolutionary antecedent) and the neo-cortex. The primary functions of the brain stem and the limbic brain are to regulate body functions, nurture body needs, create and direct emotions and feelings, record deep emotional memories, initiate and fulfill the urge to have sex, and guarantee organism survival.

The neo-cortex, which sits atop the brain stem and limbic brain, is organized into four major groupings: frontal, parietal, temporal and occipital lobes. The neo-cortex makes us uniquely human. Whereas the brain stem/limbic structures are reflexive and generally not accessible to our consciousness, the neo-cortex is reflective and is accessible to our thought processes. Sylwester describes the neo-cortex as the equivalent of six pieces of paper laid on top of one another and then crinkled up repeatedly. Our neo-cortex takes up 85% of our brain area.³⁸ Consciousness, however, cannot exist

³⁸ Sylwester, *Biological Brain in a Cultural Classroom*, 11

without all three brain systems functioning in concert. Consciousness grows out of the sum of their interactions and functions.

Until recently it was thought that the brain worked in a modular fashion, meaning certain areas of the brain had specific functions and those functions were found only in that area and were not integrated into other areas. This phrenological approach was considered orthodoxy until very recently, and to some extent this modular hermeneutic is still true. For example, the brain stem or reptilian brain is a reflexive brain and it has specific tasks that separate it from other brain functions. We do not think with it; we can not even access it. Its job is primarily regulatory. It makes our heart beat, our lungs breath, and monitors our body systems from temperature to hunger demands. It is a primal brain shared with our lizard ancestors. It is the source of our most primal, base drives including our sexual drives. It operates with two purposes and they are to maintain positive homeostasis within the organism and to enter the gene pool.

The limbic brain which we share with most mammals on this planet, also works in a somewhat modular fashion. For example, the amygdala (there are actually two, one on the right and one on the left hemisphere) is a powerful brain area with important survival responsibilities. It is the source of attention-fear-fight or flight responses. The amygdala, working in cooperation with other parts of the limbic brain, the hippocampus in particular, makes up much of the emotional center of our brain. What we feel, how we feel, and memories of a feeling come, to a significant extent, from this part of our brain. Again, the purpose of the limbic brain is to maintain the survivability of the organism and to enter the gene pool. These parts of our brain work in a modular fashion,

although not completely, for they also work in concert with one another and the upper brain areas.

What is significant for our study is to recognize that the neo-cortex, this massive brain structure unique to humans, works in a gradient rather than a modular way.³⁹ It works like a system of systems gathering data from many places within the neural network. The gradient brain relies on the brain stem to maintain body functions and the limbic brain to organize emotion so that a feeling can take cognitive form in the neo-cortex (likely the cingulate cortex)⁴⁰. This contributes to consciousness which becomes a thought, which in turn is given language and an autobiographical/historical context lending meaning to the thought language. The progression and interactive nature of the process is critical to understand because *the move from reflexive to reflective brain activity is what essentially makes us human*. The move from reflexive to reflective brain activity requires that the neo-cortex, especially the frontal lobes, is fully engaged in the brain functioning process. Impulse control develops through the frontal lobes, thus controlling the reptilian/mammalian reflexive brain whose purpose is to survive and maintain a pleasurable state whether it is good for other members of the species or not. Impulse control is foundational for human culture, empathy and all moral/ethical systems. “There is perhaps no psychological skill (or task) more fundamental than resisting impulse.”⁴¹

³⁹ Elkhonon Goldberg, *The Executive Brain: Frontal Lobes and the Civilized Mind* (Oxford, Oxford Press, 2001) 58.

⁴⁰ Antonio Damasio, *Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow and the Feeling Brain* (New York, Harvest Books, 2003) 97.

⁴¹ Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence*, (New York, Bantam Books, 1995) 81.

It is this process of moving from reflexive to reflective brain development that we are observing in early adolescent males. Secondly, it is the drives of the reptilian and mammalian brains that energize early adolescent males to relationships, action and achievement and an obsessive focus on sex. The process is made all the more complicated by at least two things: the flow of the brain and testosterone.

The Flow of the Brain

In regard to the flow of the brain, Robert Sylwester pointed out in a speech given in Phoenix, January 2001, that the brain works from bottom to top, back to front and right to left. By this he means that all learning or input to the human organism enters via our lower brain structures where it is first processed. The thalamus, located in the limbic brain, is the central receiving area for visual and auditory information. The brain stem receives messages of touch and temperature. Either way, our brain must process data working from the bottom up. This means that all information that we may later cognitively reflect upon has reflexive, emotional content attached to it.

There is no receiving or learning of information without going through these lower brain structures. To understand the profundity of this dynamic of the flow of the brain we must understand that it essentially debunks the anthropologies of Descartes, Rousseau, and Locke. Brain scientist Antonio Damasio, in his book *Descartes Error*,⁴² has noted that Descartes was wrong. Descartes is famous for his statement, “I think therefore I am” (a decidedly frontal lobe approach to human nature). We now know that it is better stated as “I feel-think, therefore I am” (a bottom to top approach to human nature). Psychologist Stephen Pinker, in critiquing Descartes adds that he was also in

⁴² Antonio Damasio, *Descartes Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain* (New York: Harper Collins, 1994)

error to separate the mind (or the soul) from the body.⁴³ Descartes' anthropology was not much different from that of early church Gnostics who were strongly influenced by Greek metaphysics. Three centuries after Descartes, philosopher Gilbert Ryle famously described this anthropological understanding as "the dogma of the Ghost in the Machine"⁴⁴ Pinker also has strong criticism of Rousseau's concept of the noble savage in which "humans in their natural state are selfless, peaceable, and untroubled".⁴⁵ Even in its day this seems a foolish understanding of human nature thickly steeped in denial, but for those of us looking back into the murderous abyss called the 20th century this understanding of human nature seems ludicrous. We now know that it is ludicrous not only because of the evidence that shows otherwise, but because, as brain scientists such as Pinker point out, our brain functions with ancient reptilian and mammalian antecedents which are far from selfless and peaceable. Finally, according to Pinker, John Locke was also wrong and I concur.⁴⁶ Our brains are not blank slates (*tabula rasa*) upon which to write our lives. Rather, they are in part, ancient structures that bring to the present our primal past with all its raw impulses. Descartes, Rousseau, and Locke have strongly shaped and influenced our understanding of human nature and in many circles are still thought to accurately describe the human condition. Brain science and evolutionary psychology, along with a Christian understanding of anthropology show them to be in error.

⁴³ Steven Pinker, *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature* (New York, Viking, 2002) 8.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

Our personhood, our soul, and our essence are not a spiritual or ethereal hitchhiker residing temporarily within our biological heads (Descartes). Our ancient nature is certainly darker than selfless (Rousseau). We are born encumbered with a neural-evolutionary heritage not a brain as clean as an unused CD disk (Locke). Brain imaging technology shows we are our brains and what happens in our heads. Evolutionary psychology explains that our brains have a past and as to its intent we can conclude it is, at best, ambiguous.

Far before the aid of brain imaging or evolutionary psychology, a Christian anthropological understanding of human nature came closest to the truth. We are of the earth's dust and dirt. We are fully of this world and God's creation. Although often separated out in Scripture for poetic purposes, the body, the mind, and the soul are one integrated organism rooted in our physical selves. A Christian anthropological understanding has it right in recognizing that the material world is the real world. It is through the material that God works and communicates with us both as Savior and as Voice to and through our brains and the communion of brains. Finally, to say that the brain flows from the bottom to the top is to define sin because our brain is curved in upon itself to serve itself. Sin is not only a theological construction; it is an apt description of the biological reality of our brain.

Returning to discussing the flow of the brain, secondly, the brain process moves from back to front. By this is meant that visual and auditory signals having been passed on by the thalamus enter the backs of our heads to the occipital lobe or other neo-cortical areas. We then get an image. Interpretation and meaning of that image comes from the frontal parts of our neo-cortex. The neural signals literally move forward to access the

language, the meaning, the history and the response from the frontal lobes and other parts of the neo-cortex.

Thirdly, our brains work from right to left. In a very general sense the right side of our brain is the processing area and novelty shop of the brain. This part of the brain works as short term memory. Spatial orientation and systemizing thought take place on the right side. Emotion becomes feeling on the right side of our brains. The left side of the brain is the locus of language and routinization.⁴⁷ When we are learning something for the first time or experiencing something that is new and novel, we use our right hemisphere. “With repeated exposure to task, however...the left hemisphere emerges as the more accomplished one.”⁴⁸ For example, “musically naïve people process music mostly with the right hemisphere. Trained musicians, however, process music mostly with the left hemisphere”.⁴⁹ “The right-to-left shift of hemispheric control appears to be a universal phenomenon which can be demonstrated for a broad range of learning tasks, nonverbal and verbal alike.”⁵⁰ Perhaps it is not just coincidence that the image of “sitting at the right hand of God” is considered the premium location since the right side is the source of creativity, novelty, and systemization; characteristics we often attribute to God.

In regard to this right to left movement there seem to be gender differences regarding how these two hemispheres interact. “It is highly probable that the frontal

⁴⁷ Elkhonon Goldberg, *The Executive Brain*, 48.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

lobes are functionally different in males and females.”⁵¹ Females tend to use both sides of their brain (right and left hemispheres), whereas males tend to work more off the right side only. For example, “boys use the right side of brain to work on abstract problems, girls use both sides”.⁵² If the reader is now tempted to conclude what they have always suspected, that males are only half-wits, they would be partially (and cynically) accurate. These morphological gender differences are significant and begin to explain why action and achievement are so important to early adolescent males. Boys predominantly utilize the novelty part of their brain and the systemizing part of their brain. Both novelty and systematization come from the right side and can manifest themselves through action and achievement. The right frontal lobes are larger in males due in part to the Yakovlevian torque which is a protrusion of the right frontal pole over the left. This torque is also present in fossil man.⁵³

As noted earlier, the right side of the brain works on spatial matters, it is the novelty center, and it does systemizing. The left side of the brain processes language and is our verbal center. We learn to read using this part of our brain. What connects the two sides is a brain structure called the corpus callosum made up of 200 million fibers.⁵⁴ It is smaller in males than females and brain scientists speculate this is why boys learn verbal skills and reading skills later than girls. During adolescence most males are significantly less skilled in these areas when compared to females of the same

⁵¹ Ibid., 94

⁵² Gurian, *Boys and Girls Learn Differently*, 24.

⁵³ Goldberg, *The Executive Mind*, 94.

⁵⁴ Strauch, *The Primal Teen*, 55.

age. In fact, as a whole, boy's brains mature more slowly than girls.⁵⁵ They catch up in their early to mid-twenties. Since a major task of brain development is impulse control, it should come as no great surprise that boys seem to be less capable of this. *An early adolescent male is really a baby brain in an emerging man's body captivated by novelty with limited self-regulation.*

These gender differences in brain structure and functioning represent a cutting edge of learning in the field of brain science. One must be careful not to make “men-are-from-Mars and women-are-from-Venus” conclusions based upon brain structures alone. Nevertheless, one author, Simon Baron-Cohen, recently wrote “the female brain is predominantly hard-wired for empathy. The male brain is predominantly hard-wired for understanding building systems”.⁵⁶ Baron-Cohen makes a strong case sure to trigger great debate and arouse the ire of many feminists. Baron-Cohen does couch his conclusion with the word “predominantly”. His case would be even stronger were he to also note the distinction of “between vs. within”. Robert Sylwester has pointed out to me in e-mail conversations that in human biology the difference between the genders is less than the difference within the genders. For example, the difference in height within the early adolescent male population is greater than the difference in height between boys and girls of the early adolescent age. The same could be said for how we think of gender differences and the human brain. Certainly boys more than girls seem to be hardwired for novelty and risk taking (because they use the right side of their brains more),

⁵⁵ Gurian, *Boys and Girls Learn Differently*, 19.

⁵⁶ Simon Baron-Cohen, *The Essential Difference*, 1.

however, there are plenty of boys who do not do this behavior and plenty of girls who do. Brain science shows us tendencies of a gender, not destiny.

For purposes of our larger discussion it is most significant to note that early adolescent male brains are exuberant and, generally, these male brains are working from the right hemisphere. This part of the brain is less verbal, more novel, more creative, more spontaneous, more willing to take risks, and used in spatial organization. Secondly, and this is a crucial insight, the second to last parts of the brain to complete its growth maturing are the frontal lobes, those areas of the brain responsible for impulse control. Ironically, the last part of the brain to complete its growth process is the cerebellum, a rather nondescript brain mass sitting at the base of the skull and responsible for motor coordination. Only recently have we learned that it helps us read social cues including getting jokes.⁵⁷ Thus, when a teenager begins to understand irony, their brain is completing its growth process.

The Role of Testosterone in Early Adolescent Males

Testosterone is a hormone found in males and females. Many are surprised to hear that both sexes have it; estrogen is a derivative of it (the androgen equivalent of coming from Adam's rib), but males have more of it. During puberty and early adolescence, males will generate seven to ten times more testosterone than females.⁵⁸

The results of this surge in testosterone are truly amazing. Early adolescent males grow rapidly, as much as eleven inches of height in one year, and they grow from the outside in. First their feet and hands grow, then their forearms and leg bones and so

⁵⁷ Strauch, *The Primal Teen*, 43.

⁵⁸ The Learning ChannelVideo, *Teen Species: Boys*, (Bethesda, Maryland, Discovery Communications, 1999)

on.⁵⁹ (I recall once meeting a junior high boy in Illinois who had size 18 feet and he was 5'2" tall!) During this time the nose and jaw of the early adolescent male grows twice as fast as the rest of the face.⁶⁰ Sperm production increases to the point where 1,000 sperm are produced in the male testes EVERY SECOND!⁶¹ Not surprisingly, early adolescent males get erections frequently, daily and at the least opportune times. Testosterone also causes muscle fibers and cells in males to get larger.

Testosterone works on the middle and lower sections of the brain; those identified more with reflexive behavior.⁶² Not surprisingly testosterone is the hormone of aggression and rambunctious behavior.⁶³ Lawyers, actors and athletes (male and female alike) have higher levels of testosterone than farmers and pastors; professions that do not necessarily require aggressive behavior.⁶⁴ Like all things, however, too much of anything is not necessarily good. Excessively high levels of testosterone do not make humans more aggressive, adaptive or assertive. At some point on the scale it becomes less adaptive and helpful. For example, homeless people have, on average, higher levels of testosterone than the general population, and people with high testosterone levels tend not to live as long. People with exceedingly high levels of testosterone are more likely to be poor and portray at-risk behaviors.⁶⁵ In fact, too much testosterone correlates with

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² James McBride Dabbs, *Heroes, Rogues and Lovers: Testosterone and Behavior* (New York, McGraw Hill, 2000) 20.

⁶³ Ibid., 84, 86, 90.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 129, 149.

lower status in our society.⁶⁶ Testosterone, while necessary, can make it more difficult to be a male, or early adolescent male, in our society today. “High-testosterone individuals are energetic, but impatient; they do poorly in school and end up with fewer years of education; they can dominate others in face-to-face meetings, but they have trouble handling the complexities of business; they lean toward harsh and competitive activities and away from subdued and thoughtful ones. High testosterone is a drawback...and does not correlate to financial success.”⁶⁷

Depending upon the individual genetic time clock, testosterone is launched in early adolescent males (around age 10) on a massive scale by the hypothalamus which “jump starts the pituitary gland”.⁶⁸ The testes are awakened and they begin to crank out large volumes of testosterone.⁶⁹

For the purpose of this thesis it is most important to note that testosterone is the hormone of systemizing (Achievement Factor) and, rough and tumble or aggressive behavior (Action Factor). Regarding the latter Strauch notes, “one of the most robust differences found between males and females, from rats to humans, is the level of rough-and-tumble play. Males simply do more of it”.⁷⁰ Evolutionary psychologists suggest that rough and tumble behavior (R&T) serves perhaps three functions. One is that R&T

⁶⁵ Ibid., 78, 151.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 150.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 150.

⁶⁸ Strauch, *The Primal Teen*, 130

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 143.

is an incomplete form of adult fighting, thus preparation for future adult conflict.⁷¹ A second function and I think more likely, is that R&T and play generally helps boys “learn and practice social signaling...and it is a way for boys to establish leadership in peer groups and assess one another’s strength”.⁷² A third purpose of R&T is that it “provides opportunities for the vigorous physical exercise that is important for skeletal and muscle development”.⁷³ All three explanations from the evolutionary perspective have some merit and all three reinforce the idea that the Action Factor in males is both a cultural and biological phenomenon driven by the hormone testosterone.

The effects of testosterone are seen early in childhood. Simon Baron-Cohen notes that “children as young as nineteen months tend to prefer a playmate of the same sex, which is believed by some people to reflect different social styles of the two sexes.”⁷⁴ Baron-Cohen goes on to note that these different styles represent a linear line with empathy (female) and systemizing (male) connoting the poles. As mentioned earlier, he makes a powerful case that women are *predominantly* more empathetic and men are *predominantly* more systemizing in their thinking. These different styles of social interaction between the sexes are striking. Men tend to value power, politics and competition (all forms of systemizing and aggression), whereas women tend to value altruism and reciprocal relationships.⁷⁵ All of these male behaviors are related to aggression and thus, testosterone. Again, even in small children “girls are more likely to

⁷¹ Bjorkland and Pellegrini, *The Origins of Human Nature*, 39.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Baron-Cohen, *The Essential Difference*, 29.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 32

endorse cooperative items...boys are more likely than girls to endorse competitive items...females are more likely to value empathizing in friendships, while males are more likely to value shared interests (Achievement Factor, Action Factor)".⁷⁶

Systemizing is a function of the right side of the brain and, as has been noted; males generally function using the right neo-cortical hemisphere. I also remind the reader that the frontal lobes function, in part, provides impulse control to the reflexive brain stem and limbic brain structures. Testosterone strongly impacts this right side. "The more testosterone you have the faster your right hemisphere develops and, correspondingly, the slower your left hemisphere develops."⁷⁷ Testosterone not only encourages right brain growth, but it inhibits impulse control. In early adolescence, testosterone functions to prevent inhibition of impulses. From an evolutionary point of view, this is indeed adaptive to encouraging young males to take risks, to explore and search out, to enter the gene pool early and often, and to willingly engage in rough and tumble behavior. From the perspective of the 21st century this behavior has caused countless generations to ask, "What's wrong with these boys?" In fact, nothing is wrong with them. However, because this systemizing, rough and tumble early adolescent male is what he is, culture needs to intercede in very intentional ways to become the frontal lobes for them while they are still developing. In males more so than females, cultural intervention is demanded in order to shape appropriate behavior. Their brains dictate this to be so. Not surprisingly, this has indeed been the historical case as I demonstrated in my course work on the history of young humans.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 33

⁷⁷ Ibid., 99

I conclude this section on testosterone by lifting up an astonishing fact quoted by Baron-Cohen. “Of 122 societies studied, weapon-making (a clear example of a systemizing skill) is an exclusively male activity in 121 of these.”⁷⁸ Weapon-making is a systemizing activity and correlates in this study with the Achievement Factor and the Action Factor. Across cultures and time, these factors have played themselves out in males and early adolescent males in particular. It is a part of the male evolutionary heritage. It is the males making the weapons and delivering them. From as early as two years old, males clearly demonstrate a much greater ability to throw. “Being good at systemizing projectile weapons (such as throwing rocks, stones and spears, or shooting arrows) may explain male superiority in throwing (in terms of accuracy, distance and velocity). Using and defending oneself against projectile weapons could have been a major advantage in male versus male competition.”⁷⁹

Summary

This chapter was written to demonstrate that the Relationship Factor, the Action Factor and the Achievement Factor are manifestations of an ancient, evolutionary anthropology. Early adolescent males are working from a biological script or inheritance that needs to be recognized and understood in order that appropriate ministry strategies are developed.

This script is determinative, but it is not predestined. *Most early adolescent males will be action, achievement, competitively oriented humans who value relationships of peers and older men as they undergo tasks, sports, activities, and*

⁷⁸ Baron-Cohen, *The Essential Difference*, 93.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 118.

challenges. They will be impulsive, seemingly less caring and empathetic, and competitive. Their imaginations are excited by these relationships, by action, and by the opportunity to achieve. Their existential struggles will also grow out of these relationships, these actions and their anxiety or ability to achieve. This is how God has made them.

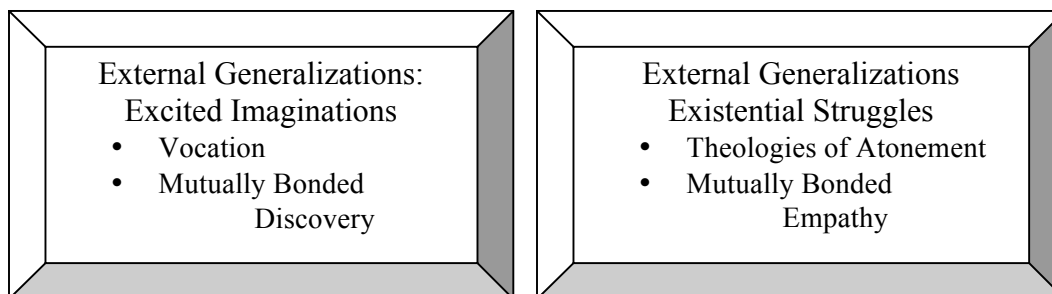
This review provides background wisdom for working with early adolescent males. It can be quite playful and fun to apply. For example, based upon this analysis it is now possible to define the word “cool” as understood by early adolescent males. “Cool” is when we have engaged their limbic brain through sight or sound which sends a signal to the thalamus. The thalamus passes this signal onto other emotional centers of the limbic brain including the amygdala and the hypothalamus. The hippocampus gives factual meaning to what is being seen or heard. This emotional message moves up and forward to the neo-cortex where, most likely, the right hemisphere notes that the sight or sound is novel, creative, action oriented and challenging. As a result the right hemisphere passes the message along through the corpus callosum to the left hemisphere where words and language are formulated and the young man looks at us and says, “That’s cool”.

One more example of a playful application of what has been outlined relates to the terminal and discouraging words so many early adolescent males say, “This is boring”. What is really behind this three word sentence which seems so toxic to all adults? Here is what the young man is telling us. “You have tried to connect with me, but you have bypassed the emotional centers of my brain such as my limbic brain. You’ve misunderstood to think that I care deeply about feelings and empathy. You are

trying to speak directly to my neo-cortex, my frontal lobes in particular, and I'm not really there yet. In fact, my left frontal lobe, for all practical purposes, is not even engaged at this time. That which you have placed before me involves no action, no invitation to bond with my buddies through competition, no older males to emulate, no opportunities to test myself and to achieve something of which I can be proud, and no opportunities to build, construct or organize something, preferably with my hands. Therefore, 'This is boring'".

The question will surely surface that not all early adolescent males are like this. This is true. One of the mysteries of brain science studies is understanding temperament. No one knows why some early adolescent males are aggressive and others less so. No one really understands how some early adolescent males have a temperament to push themselves and achieve, while others less so. Human temperament is a continuum along which early adolescent males reside. Understanding that continuum remains a mystery to be solved. This study focuses on what can be said about the early adolescent male population *in general*. In general, the fifteen factors identified and the bio-evolutionary-neurological explanations provided describe early adolescent males. Ministry is best done not in the general, but in the particular. These data serve as reference background and generalized wisdom for a ministry with early adolescent males that requires continual adaptation and adjustment to the unique human that stands before us.

CHAPTER FOUR

LAW AND GOSPEL AND EARLY ADOLESCENT MALES: A THEOLOGICAL
INTERPRETATION*Orders of Creation*

In Luther's explanation of the First Article of the Apostles Creed he states, "I hold and believe that I am a creature of God; that is, that He (God) has given and constantly sustains my body, soul and life, my members great and small, *all the faculties of my mind, my reason and understanding*, (italics added) and so forth."⁸⁰ Luther's references to the functions of the brain are particularly insightful and poignant. While Luther did not know of the science and functioning of the human brain, he clearly understood that the human brain played a central role in God's creative work. He seems to hint at what we now know, namely that the mind of humans is the most complex, fascinating, intriguing, potentially dangerous and central feature of homo sapiens. Our "faculties of mind, reason and understanding" represent perhaps some of God's finest handiwork, at least from our anthropological perspective.

The theological interpretive task of early adolescent males begins from this starting point. What God has done and is doing in the brains and minds of early adolescent males is indeed miraculous and a sign of God's ongoing creative work. To

⁸⁰ BC, 13, 412.

witness and contemplate the activity of neural *exuberance* in early adolescent males is to stand in the presence of God-the artistic, delicate, innovative and humorous creator.

In the previous chapter, I provided some depth of understanding of the workings of the early adolescent brain by exploring the disciplines of brain science and evolutionary psychology. Like Luther, Christians before and since his time have faithfully confessed of the work of God in creation. We have boldly proclaimed the “who” of creation. Chapter Three gave a glimpse into the “how” of the “who” of creation and it is, at least to this writer, staggering to contemplate all that God has done and is doing. On occasion, when I look into the eyes of an early adolescent male and recall what I know of what is happening in his brain, I feel I am looking into the fog and mist of humanity’s deep and unrecorded past, the tumult of humanity’s present and the promise of God’s humanity for the future. Frankly, I never imagined that the first article meant so much.

The moment in male human time we call early adolescence reveals God’s creative work in some very specific ways. I have demonstrated, through ethnographic research and a review of brain science and evolutionary psychology, that early adolescent males are phylogenetically oriented to the Relationship Factor (understood in its broadest sense as a meta-factor), the Action Factor and the Achievement Factor. Ontogeny does not always completely recapitulate phylogeny, but the evidence shows that these three factors most often make up a great part of the fundamental nature of early adolescent males. These are the “givens” of early adolescent males and lead to an important question: “What does the Christian faith have to say about and to these young humans?” To address this question I will utilize Luther’s Doctrine of Law and Gospel.

Law and Gospel and Early Adolescent Males

The First Use of the Law

The functioning of the frontal lobes in human society as manifested in human culture is the biological equivalent of speaking of the first use of the law. As noted earlier, the frontal lobes are the loci of impulse control within the brain and serve as the basis for moral and ethical decision-making or, as Lutheran theology would state it, civil order. Across time and cultures, societies have developed methods, practices and rituals that function as frontal lobes for their early adolescent males in order to shape them according to the norms and values of the dominant culture. These practices have not been uniquely Christian and, in fact, have occasionally exploited early adolescent males and, even more often, females. The recruitment and training of a street gang member would be one example of the misuse of adult frontal lobe control over early adolescent males. The recruitment, training and development of the Hitler Jugend would be an example of cultural frontal lobe abuse and manipulation of early adolescent males. Nevertheless, this is where we begin to address our question, “What does the Christian faith have to say about and to these young humans?”

From the perspective of the first use of the law, the Christian faith recognizes that early adolescent male nature requires the use of the surrogate frontal lobes of the larger society to help guide, and, if necessary, restrain their behavior as well as to shape their values, goals and aspirations. This civil use of the law is achievable, to a great extent, for society and the early adolescent male. “Man (humans) is basically able to fulfill

these laws and therefore also God's law in its civil sense, that is, he can produce civil righteousness, acceptable to the world."⁸¹

The Christian faith is saying two things through the first use of the law. First of all, the nature of early adolescent males requires intentional and attentive effort from the larger society. It is not a nature to be left unattended and uncared for because it is an ancient nature capable of base, primal and self-oriented activity. Secondly, the Christian faith is saying, through the first use of the law, that we, along with others, will be the loving and firm frontal lobes they need in order to grow into this society as healthy and productive members. In this capacity, Christians offer or provide a natural kind of grace made up of friends, family, and a caring community. While this activity is not necessarily evangelical or salvific in nature, it can serve as a precursor to a wider, Christ-centered conversation. The work of the Search Institute and their advocacy for Asset Building is an example of this frontal lobe activity where partnerships between Christians and non-Christians are forged for the benefit of raising healthy early adolescent youth.

Mutually-Bonded Discovery and the "AAAAA" Adult

In a previous writing I have spoken of the need for AAA adults in the lives of young humans.⁸² "AAA" adults are authentic, available, and affirming of early adolescent males and females. Authenticity has to do not with perfection, but with integrity of character and consistency in personal and public life. Availability has to do with giving time to young humans not according to the adult schedule, but according to the schedule of the young. Affirming adults help young humans see the gifts, abilities

⁸¹ Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Luther*, (Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1966) 254.

⁸² Paul Hill, David Anderson, *Frogs Without Legs Can't Hear: Nurturing Disciples in Home and Congregation* (Minneapolis, Augsburg Fortress Books, 2003)

and talents that lay within that they cannot see. In reviewing the excited imagination factors and the effective church practices factors we can easily discern that there is a larger, meta-factor behind many of these practices, and that is an authentic, available, affirming adult.

Building upon this earlier work and based upon the research set forth in this study, two more “A’s” need to be added to the list. Under the rubric of the first use of the law early adolescent males benefit from adults who are *active*, or help them find constructive outlets for their action-oriented nature, and who help them in the area of personal and social *achievement*. To the question raised regarding the Christian faith and early adolescent males, part of the answer lies in Christians being “AAAAA” adults to and with these young humans and calling the larger society to be and do the same. *This research shows that to assist early adolescent males to civil righteousness they need authentic, available, affirming, active, and achievement-oriented adults (AAAAA).* The additional caveat to add is that some of these adults are men and, ideally, one of these men would be his father.

“AAAAA” adults and societies provide an intervention of sorts in the lives of early adolescent males. In many tribal and agrarian cultures this work has been done through various forms of rites-of-passage or through apprenticeships. Unfortunately, with the advent of industrial societies these more traditional practices have been abandoned or destroyed. Yet, intuitively, leaders and organizations have emerged in the West that have tried to address this critical civil concern, such as George Williams the founder of the YMCA and John Mott who made it an international organization. The Boy Scouts and Big Brothers are of the same genre. When examining these

organizations from within, I find “AAAAA” adults as part of the foundational philosophy. I also find the Relational Factor, the Action Factor and the Achievement Factor incorporated into the organizational vision and program. Often called, and occasionally ridiculed, as “muscular Christianity” there is, nevertheless, certain wisdom to these approaches as this study confirms.

“AAAAA” adults enter into life with early adolescent males in a *mutually-bonded discovery* process. The research provides multiple examples of the value of this kind of relationship. In the EAM study, one young man spoke of the power of rock climbing with his dad, another of fixing up a tractor with his dad, a third going fishing with his grandfather, a fourth doing activities with a youth worker. From the perspective of evolutionary psychology, these tutorials in life with a caring older male are ancient and invaluable. If we listen to these data carefully we will hear early adolescent males tell us what they need and want in order to excite their imaginations and to help them with their existential struggles. *They want to be mutually-bonded with an “AAAAA” male adult discovering and learning about life together.* This makes research sense, brain sense, evolutionary sense, and First Article sense.

Framing the Achievement Factor Properly as Vocational Discernment

As noted earlier, there is a sense of ambiguity attached to the Achievement Factor. On the one hand, early adolescent males have a dominant need to know they can do well, they can perform, and they can achieve goals and accomplish tasks well. This excites their imaginations. At the same time the demand to perform and to be effective or successful creates an existential struggle within them. These kinds of expectations,

coming from the culture of hyper-performance capitalism, can indeed be stressful and anxiety producing.

However, we can help early adolescent males with the Achievement Factor if it is framed in the language of vocation and vocational discernment by an “AAAAA” adult. Luther and his pedagogical followers spoke of vocation from the perspective of the first and the third use of the law. (This writer acknowledges that to speak of the third use of the law is to open a much larger debate. That debate is not germane to the subject before us and for the purpose of this thesis I will assume that there is a legitimate understanding of the third use of the law within Lutheran theology. This position is consistent with that taken in the book I co-authored, *FROGS WITHOUT LEGS CAN'T HEAR: NURTURING DISCIPLES IN HOME AND CONGREGATION*.)

Article XV of the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, a section of the Confessions that rightly falls under the general category of first use of the law, states; “...the works that God commands (are)...the tasks of one’s calling, the administration of public affairs, the administration of the household, married life and the rearing of children”.⁸³ God commands, through the first use of the law, a civil righteousness and recognizes that doing “one’s calling” can fulfill this command. This is a particularly appropriate insight regarding the Achievement Factor for the following reason. Only rarely in the LMM study and never in the EAM study was the striving to achieve framed in this theological manner. Both study groups understood life in the church as separate from and irrelevant to understanding or meeting one of their most human, primal needs. Despite their involvement in the life of the church, rarely was anyone helping them interpret that their greatest yearnings and passions to achieve were a God-given

⁸³ BC, 25, 219.

vocational calling. As a result, the Achievement Factor easily became a demand for machismo grit and determination. This is a lonely way, indeed, to look at the demands of life and the need for humans to accomplish activities effectively.

One fine exception to what has been said and an example of how the insights of this study can nurture faith and a life in the church came forth in an interview in Camden, New Jersey. The interviewee was a 24 year-old Caucasian who decided, at the age of 14, (early adolescent male) that he wanted to be a musical artist. He recognized that his life would be one of poverty, but this was his calling. His father strongly affirmed his interests and calling by encouraging him to pursue his passion. His father was also an amateur musician and performer when not working as a school teacher. Along with his passion in music this young man, who was small in stature, became an accomplished martial artist. (He stated, “because I got tired of getting my a__ kicked”.) When not working on his music he was working out in the martial disciplines and teaching classes. His musical abilities were considerable including keyboard, pipe organ, drums and many wind instruments. He also was a composer. In order to keep alive financially he became the church organist and musical director at a Lutheran parish in Camden, located in one of the most impoverished and dangerous neighborhoods in America. The local pastor was an extraordinary man who quickly appreciated all that this young man was about. Within six months this young man had become a full and enthusiastic member of the congregation as well as its musical director. He stated, “I initially came here for the job and I had no idea I would be joining this family, this community, this worship life”.

Within this story we can find the Relationship Factor, the Action Factor and the Achievement Factor. In addition, at least two “AAAAA” adults engaged him in timely

ways, walked with him in a mutually-bonded discovery of his gifts, helped him name and pursue his vocation and then connected him to a worshipping community where sharing his gifts became a spontaneous (third use of the law) expression of his love of God and neighbor. His achievement drives had been framed properly as vocation and call by people who entered into a mutually-bonded discovery process with him.

Asymmetry: Helping EAM's to Civil Righteousness Requires Extra Effort

The necessity for Christians to engage early adolescent males to nurture civil righteousness becomes even more imperative in the context of *asymmetry*. Boys and early adolescent males experience asymmetrical caretaking in industrialized and post-industrial societies.⁸⁴ Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen makes this case noting, “most boys have much less access than girls to same-sex role models...girls tend to feel reasonably confident that they are ‘getting it right’ in terms of learning their gender script...but with asymmetrical caretaking boys get double messages”.⁸⁵ Van Leeuwen goes on to point out that most boys and early adolescent males are raised and nurtured by females thus they do not have ready access to “getting it right” as a male or emerging man. “For much of his childhood he lacks close, regular contact with male mentors (“AAAAA” adults) who can help him on this path or encourage him to seek an alternate one.”⁸⁶

To address this asymmetrical caretaking problem in much of our society, Christians can demonstrate and advocate for helping early adolescent males “get it right” in terms of their maleness. Sadly, as is often the case, the more ambiguous early

⁸⁴ Stewart Van Leeuwen, *My Brother's Keeper*, 91.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

adolescent males feel about their gender role and definition the more likely they are to overcompensate in super-machismo forms of behavior, aggression and acting out. This Christian advocacy role and program to address asymmetry could mean intentionally using male Sunday school teachers with boys eight-years-old on up, or male mentors in confirmation, or father/grandfather/uncle/surrogate male/son Bible study groups, retreats, mission trips and adventure immersions, or cross-generational male choirs, or cross-generational male work projects such as Cars for Christ or Computers for Christ. In addition, congregations could expand their understanding of the church building itself to include things like a gym, a wood shop and/or a car hoist and mechanical area. These are but a few ideas and examples to address the problem of asymmetry where early adolescent males could work in mutually-bonded discovery with other “AAAAA” Christian men in order to experience what “maleness” means and looks like.

The Second Use of the Law

Our Intractable Nature

In a conversation discussing evolutionary psychology with Dr. Dan Olson, Professor of Pastoral Care at Wartburg Seminary, he commented that one of the things we learn from this field of study is how “intractable” human nature is. Our nature is grounded in ancient brain structures bent on self maintenance and self survival. Even our emergence into human community is motivated by the quid pro quo of mutual back scratching. While the neo-cortex makes us human, it doesn’t necessarily make us less self absorbed. The development of frontal lobes is, to a great extent, for the purposes of learning to control impulse, but there is nothing inherently holy about impulse control for

it can be used for even greater sorrow and evil, as well as, empathetic advancement of the human community.

Dr. Olson and I were commiserating that one of the things we learn from evolutionary psychology is something Lutherans should already know, human nature can be dark indeed and this is the terrible, yet honest, knowledge we gain through the second use of the law. The reformers knew this truth and clearly stated it in bold and bald fashion in the Formula of Concord.

“It is an established truth that Christians must regard and recognize as sin...the abominable and dreadful inherited (evolution) disease which has corrupted our entire nature. In fact, we must consider this as the chief sin, the root and fountain of all actual sin. Dr. Luther calls this sin ‘nature sin’ or ‘person sin’ in order to indicate...man’s nature and person (to be) sinful. This means that in the sight of God original sin...which has thoroughly and entirely poisoned and corrupted human nature...our nature is under the accusation and condemnation of the (second) law of God...original sin is transmitted through our carnal conception and birth out of sinful seed from our father and mother.”⁸⁷

In previous sections of this thesis I have waxed in awe at the miracle of the human brain in early adolescence. Now is the time to acknowledge that while the human brain is marvelous to behold it is also permanently broken or warped. It is not a brain capable of achieving holiness, righteousness or purity of thought. As a species, evolution got us here; unfortunately “here” is not the parousia or nirvana. Dr. Olson was right: our nature is “intractable”.

While not using the language of “sin”, the interviewees in both studies referred to and addressed this intractable character of themselves and their lives. The early adolescent males would speak of “not doing what I was supposed to do”, or “feeling annoyed and I don’t know why”, or “stealing because it was there”. The LMM interviewees would comment, “I did some things I know I shouldn’t have”, or “I just got

⁸⁷ BC, 5-7, 509-510.

into the wild-child phase and it hurt my parents and those around me”, or “I feel just so abandoned”. These are just samples revealing that they are living under the law either by sins of commission, victimizing or victimization, or confusion about why they think and do what they do.

The early adolescent males revealed, through the five existential struggle factors, how they experience law. *Schoolwork* feels like a constant demand. Their need to *achieve* brings in the element of fear of failure and the shame of failure. The *family issues* they are experiencing include divorce, abuse, alcoholism, sibling rivalry, grinding poverty, or neglect. They are *annoyed* by others and even by themselves and they struggle to articulate why. And during these struggles they tend to isolate themselves using *self-coping* mechanisms perhaps aimed more at avoidance than resolution.

Framing the Reality of Sin through Mutually-Bonded Empathy

In the discussion on vocation I pointed out that significant ministry with early adolescent males has to do with the proper framing of the issue by “AAAAA” adults. This framing is done in the context of a mutually-bonded discovery process because of the high value that early adolescent males place on a wide variety of relationships, especially older males. I noted that the Achievement Factor can be framed as either an inhuman demand from the excesses of an overly competition-oriented culture, or it can be seen as a discernment and fulfillment of vocation as God has gifted and called them.

In like manner, ministry with early adolescent males and their existential struggles has to do, in part, with the proper framing of the issues by an “AAAAA” adult through mutually-bonded empathy. It can be difficult to speak of personal sin, or having a sinful nature, with this age cohort when they are most interested in discovering who they are

and will be. They want to know what works about themselves, not what doesn't work or is flawed, broken or warped. Out of the context of mutually-bonded empathy these messages will serve only to alienate and discourage them. Whereas I do not have data to support this idea, my conjecture is that this is one of the reasons why the category 4-CCD youth were so unengaged in the life of the church. I wonder whether they were hearing that the meaning of being a Christian is to tend to a moral code while curbing their human instincts. If so, there is little that is transformative and empowering about such a gospel.

The five factors of effective congregational practices are particularly helpful at this juncture as we think about framing sin and the truth revealed in the second use of the law. Recall that these five factors are: Worship That Relates Factor, Caring Staff/Adults Factor, Family Practices Factor, Friend/Peer Factor and Fun Factor. Those that identified the Worship That Relates Factor spoke often of how the preacher spoke at a level they could understand and talked about things that related directly to them. They felt included in the conversation and their issues were being addressed. Actually, what was happening is that their lives were being framed properly in worship and preaching. Perhaps one lesson to be learned from this is that good preaching speaks directly to 7th and 8th graders.

A number of them also spoke of the power of prayer and that they liked to pray. I must confess to being quite surprised by this. I did not expect to hear early adolescent males speak of the importance and power of contemplative prayer. Nevertheless, they have been taught or discovered that prayer in a corporate worship context is meaningful

and important to them. These kinds of worship practices helped frame their existential struggles in a Christian context.

Most significantly, what made this framing work or what enabled this cohort to place themselves into the larger Christian story of sin and redemption were the support systems surrounding worship. Under the general category of *mutually-bonded empathy* the cohort identified the factors Caring Staff/Adults, Family Practices, Friends and Peer Relationships and Fun. Whereas each one of these factors alone was identified by various members of the cohort as an effective congregational practice, combinations of them enhance the mutually-bonded empathy necessary to help an early adolescent male understand his nature as sinful and to hear the Good News.

One interview in particular stands out as an excellent example of this framing of the second use of the law leading to receptivity to hear the Gospel. The young man was from a very fractured family setting. Both his father and step-father were in jail. His mother moved him and his sisters to Dubuque to try and get away from the violence and grinding poverty and decay of Chicago. A girlfriend of the mother invited his mother to attend a local Baptist church. She attended and within a short period of time experienced a transformational new beginning through a life in Christ. The young man was also taken to this church where he met an interesting and accessible pastor. Other males his age were involved in the church. At the same time, he was beginning to enjoy his after school time at the local Boys Club. He especially enjoyed playing basketball and doing gymnastics. The combination of his involvement at the Boys Club along with his emerging relationship with a local pastor and worshipping community led him to conclude that he needed to quit stealing. He said, "I used to go into a store with my

friends and we'd steal something every time. I don't do that no more". I asked him what made him change his behavior. He commented that he realized that it was wrong and would only lead to further trouble. Plus, he now had a community, pastor, Boys Club, friends and a parent who were calling him in another direction. I asked him if he believed in Jesus. He responded enthusiastically, "We ALL Christians in our house and I like that". This is a good illustration of how an early adolescent male comes to recognize the law that convicts him as unrighteous, and how the Gospel is heard and begins to take root.

Sharing the Gospel with Early Adolescent Males

One of the most disturbing discoveries of this research, especially noted in the LMM study, was to learn how little these cohorts know about and understand who Jesus is. With only a few exceptions none of those interviewed had any clear comprehension of Jesus nor could they articulate any theology of the atonement. For the most part, when asked how they understood who Jesus is, their response would circle around what I like to call "the good, moral guy, Jesus" theology. Jesus was a decent man, someone who lived what he believed and spoke his mind freely; he was a good teacher and lived a noble, moral life. He was an example for us to follow. The other response often heard, I call "mini-me Christology". Jesus was God only smaller, or he was a stripped down version of God, or God visible to us (which is true but hardly adequate). With few exceptions, it did not seem to really matter much whether the interviewee was active in a church or not; Jesus was unknown, underrated, unappreciated, or unexamined.

The challenge in ministry to early adolescent males and males in general, is to introduce Christ to them. They know little of the work of Christ as prophet, priest and

king, or vicar, victor and victim. Dr. Ralph Quere, Emeritus Professor of Reformation History of Wartburg Seminary, has recently written of labeling these Christological descriptors as hero, friend and brother.⁸⁸ Quere is doing this work in an attempt to develop Christological language for teen ministry with males. His is one attempt to build a Gospel bridge to adolescent males and represents the challenge of ministry to this cohort.

Quere's efforts reflect the approach of Martin Luther on this subject. In Luther's explanation of the Fourth Commandment in the Large Catechism he states, "With childish and playful methods like these we may bring up our youth in fear and honor of God so that the First and Second Commandments may become familiar and be constantly practiced...this would be the right way to bring up children so long as they can be trained with kind and pleasant methods...*for when we preach to children, we must also speak their language* (italics added)";⁸⁹ To update Luther, "for when we preach to early adolescent males we must also speak their language".

Throughout this study we have heard the language of early adolescent males; specifically the five factors that excite their imaginations and the five factors that serve as a source of their existential struggles. Even in knowing this language it is still quite possible, however, that any "AAAAA" adult ministering to an early adolescent male could lead them to Buddha, Allah, or the dark side of the Force. There is nothing uniquely Christian, or Christological, about what has been said so far in terms of ministry. The Relational Factor in its "Meta" form, the Action Factor and the Achievement Factor manifested in an "AAAAA" adult are not Christian, in and of

⁸⁸ Ralph Quere, unpublished manuscript, (reference used with permission).

⁸⁹BC, 75-76, 375.

themselves. There is a vital content piece to which Christians are anchored and which serves as their point of reference: the person, purpose and power of Jesus Christ. Thus, the final challenge of this thesis is to outline which factors are best addressed by which theologies of atonement and Scriptural references. For Lutherans, the Law resides *a priori* and is a presupposition of the Gospel. The law that kills, the second use of the law, serves as cause, backdrop and diagnostic tool for the speaking and hearing of the Gospel. Therefore, I will address the five existential struggle factors of early adolescent males, for they are the experiences of the second use of the law, and I will identify theologies of atonement and Scripture that relate to and address them.

The method to be followed flows in this manner. I will first identify the existential struggle factor being addressed and provide a brief description of the human condition it represents. Secondly, I will link one or more theologies of atonement that relates best to the factor. Thirdly I will lift up a sampling of Biblical references (most often a story) that speaks to the factor, and finally I will provide a brief narrative of how the Gospel can be shared. This method of correlation is a common practice of theologians (i.e. Tillich, Barth) and preachers alike.

Theories of Atonement and the Existential Struggles of Early Adolescent Males

Before we begin it is important to briefly review the various types of theories of atonement. To aid in this process I am borrowing from a well conceived training manual developed by Dr. Duane Priebe, Senior Fellow, Professor of Systematics, and former academic dean, of Wartburg Seminary. Dr. Priebe's manual was written to explain the atonement to seminary students at Martin Luther Seminary in Papua New Guinea. His document is extremely well organized and particularly relevant, for like early adolescent

males and young adult males, there is little if any understanding of the person of Jesus Christ in many parts of Papua New Guinea. His manual serves as a primer for those who will speak of Christ to an uninformed and unaware audience.⁹⁰

Priebe begins by noting that theories of atonement do three things: 1) they describe the human situation (one of the five factors), 2) they describe what God has done in Christ to address the situation, and 3) they say something about what the consequences are for the future for humans. Priebe outlines four types of theories of atonement. For the purposes of understanding the matrix to follow I will briefly summarize these four theories.

Christ as Victor:

Human Situation: Enslaved by demonic powers, bondage to sin and death, fear, the law, flesh, and God's wrath.

Christ's Action: Christ became human to make us divine, Christ defeats the powers.

Consequences: Freedom from fear, sin and death, life in God's love.⁹¹

Substitution/Satisfaction:

Human Situation: Sin has an objective quality beyond our ability to repair or fix, a debt to God is owed.

Christ's Action: Christ's undeserved death pays the penalty for us.

Consequences: The damage is repaired; we are free of guilt and obligation, and we are at peace with God.⁹²

⁹⁰ Duane Priebe, *Jesus Died for Our Sins According to Scripture: The Atonement, Bible, Tradition and the PNG Culture*. 1997.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 2-3.

Transforming Power:

Human Situation: Sin distorts us leading to fear and self doubt. We must create our worth through what we do and we judge ourselves and others harshly.

Christ's Action: In the incarnation and his death, Jesus reveals the depth, breadth and wonder of God's love toward sinners and the lost. We are freed from fear and self doubt and the need to achieve to prove our worth.

Consequences: We are a new creation seeing ourselves and others in the light of God's love.⁹³

Presence

Human Situation: Life is dark, empty, meaningless, and God feels absent. We are lost and have nowhere to turn; we are overwhelmed by our sin, death and anxiety.

Christ's Action: Jesus dies in solidarity with the lost and forsaken and he meets us in our darkness filling the void with God's presence.

Consequences: Our lives are transformed from darkness to light and death into life.⁹⁴

Relating these theories of atonement to the five existential struggles of early males makes for a rich matrix and interface which is shown as follows. I have also added a fictitious narration spoken to a youth who represents a composite of what a

⁹²Ibid., 3.

⁹³Ibid., 4.

⁹⁴Ibid., 5.

number of the cohort spoke. I must be honest in stating that such narrations can come off, especially on the written page, as particularly doltish. I truly hesitated to put them into this thesis. Nevertheless, I think it important to demonstrate the integration of what has been shared throughout this thesis for the purpose of proclaiming the Gospel. While each narration is a composite, each narration does represent actual conversations I have had with early adolescent males over the years.

<u>Factor</u>	<u>Human Situation</u>	<u>Atonement Theory</u>	<u>Text</u>
Schoolwork	Demands to be met, Perform or die, Grades equal self-worth, Failure is sin, Individual effort is key	Transformation or Presence	Matt. 19:16-30

Narration to Chad explaining ‘Jesus’ math’:

“Hey, Chad. School is really a stressor for you, huh? Why is that? No matter what you do you’ll never keep up with your smarter older brother and younger sister. It sounds like you can’t win, because even though you are passing your classes it’ll never be good enough in your parent’s eyes. School and teachers are making life difficult for you too. Let me tell you something about teachers; some of them can suck the fun out of recess can’t they? Good to hear you laugh. But you told me that there were some teachers at your school you really enjoy like Mr. S. You said he seemed to care about you and made Biology interesting. Chad, Jesus was a teacher too, one of the good ones. How come I’m always talking about God? It’s life changing, that’s why. Let me tell you what kind of teacher Jesus was. One of his brightest students came to him and said, ‘I think I’ve covered all the course work and I deserve an ‘A’. This guy was a real suck-up too because he called Jesus ‘good teacher’. Jesus sniffed out his brown nosing and

quickly set him straight telling him that only God is good. Does this guy sound like people you know? I thought so too. Well, Jesus was a tough teacher, so he tested him. He asked him about everything they had studied and this young man got all the answers right, except one. The last question he asked him had to do with his money. Yes, that's right; he was smart AND rich. He asked him to give a big chunk of his money to poor people, and then he'd get an 'A'. The rich young man failed the test. He wouldn't part with his money. Jesus saw through him; he knew the guy was smart, but he wanted to know how much he cared about others and was committed to what God wanted of him. You're right. This seems like a rather harsh lesson, and if this guy couldn't pass how could anyone? That was the reaction everyone else had in Jesus' class that day. But you and they have missed the point of the story. Jesus doesn't really work in the same way that your school does. In school you're only as good as your last grade, right? Jesus does a different kind of math, it's called "the grades don't matter" math. Yeah, now you're smiling, I can tell you like hearing this. Well, don't get your hopes up too much, you still have to study and work hard in school. Welcome to life, Chad. My point is, however, that you are not just what you can produce in school. And Jesus will not judge you based upon your performance. It's called "Jesus' math". It works like the TV show "*Whose Line Is It?*" You know the show with Drew Carey, Ryan Styles and that Wayne Brady guy? How does the show open every time? Drew Carey comes in and says "Welcome to the show where everything is made up and the points don't matter". That's "Jesus' math". The points don't matter. In Jesus' eyes you matter all the time, no matter what your school performance. Chad, even if you were the last in the class you would still be considered the first in Jesus' class. I hope you hear what I'm

saying to you because it'll change how you think about yourself and others. You don't need to doubt yourself. Using 'Jesus' math' you are always accepted in God's eyes, you don't have to prove anything, just celebrate that it's true! It's what I believe and how I live. Now, how can I help you with your homework?"

<u>Factor</u>	<u>Human Situation</u>	<u>Atonement Theory</u>	<u>Text</u>
Achievement	Make it on my own Rebellion Shame in failure	Transformation or Presence	Luke 15: 11-32

Narration with Rob explaining a father's love:

"Hey, Rob. I heard you got really mad at your parents and left the house in a storm. How do I know? They called me and they are worried. They said you were really upset over your bad track performance and then you just went off when your dad was asking you to do some work at home. How did I find you? Well, I called Aaron and he told me you had camped out at Eric's house for the night. You OK? You want to come over and stay at my house? If you change your mind you are welcome. I'm concerned about you. Look, tell me something, what music are you listening to tonight? *Rage Against the Machine*. Is that how you feel? How come? You suck in track and you want your freedom and you are tired of the demands of working for your dad. Say, Eric's house sounds kind of noisy, you doing any weed? You know how I feel about that. Even if you are angry, it's not an excuse. So what's your plan? You've got your checkbook and you're moving out? Rob, I'm really concerned about you. These things don't usually come out well. After all, you're not the first young man to lose it with his dad. You know, in confirmation how I'm always telling you stories about Jesus' life? Well I got another one so just indulge me a little bit. Yeah, Yeah, I know it's the price of having me as a friend. Well listen, Jesus once spoke of a guy just like you. He told the

story of a young man, who wanted to go out and make his own way. He wanted to achieve things, see things, party, and be on his own. Besides, he felt he really didn't match up well when compared with his older brother. So he took his share of the family business' money and off he went. It was good for a while, too. And then the money ran out and he realized he had really screwed up. It got so bad he was begging on the streets. I know, you are telling me that won't happen to you, but just hear me out. So, he got up his nerve and he went home and asked for a job from his dad. Nothing fancy, just a low-life job so he could stay alive. You know what his dad did? No he did not tell him to f___ off. He hugged his son and gave him fresh clothes and threw a monster party. He welcomed him back. It is an incredible love this father had for his son. No, I don't know how your dad is going to react, but I think he's a pretty good guy. Rob, when you are at Eric's tonight, I just want you to remember that the father's love in the story is much like God's love for you. Yeah, you always tease me about my God talk, but it's true, Rob. God's always going to be there for you, Rob, in failure and success. You can always go back to Him. Look, promise me you'll stay at Eric's tonight OK? Can I come get you in the morning? Great. Look, I'm going to call your parents and reassure them that you are alright. We'll talk more about going home tomorrow. Good night...and hey, no weed!"

<u>Factor</u>	<u>Human Situation</u>	<u>Atonement Theory</u>	<u>Text</u>
Family Issues	Broken relationships, Poor communication, Victim of abuse or neglect, Abandonment	Christ as Victor or Transformation or Presence	Matt. 27:45-54

Narration with Jeremy while on a retreat:

Hey, Jeremy, you seemed pretty intense when we listened to that song *Father of Mine* in this morning's devotion. We had a similar song back in the 70s for my generation called *Cat's In the Cradle*. It's the same idea about fathers leaving their sons behind or abandoning them. That hits home for you too right? I don't know why your dad left your family. I don't blame you for being mad and sad. Have you heard from him? Well, maybe he was hurt by his dad once. I don't know. It's OK; you can cry with me, we'll just sit here. Do you remember the Bible passage we read this morning that went with the song? Now this is no quick fix I'm trying to give you, but I just want you to remember that text for a moment. Jesus was just about to die and he yelled out at his father, "My God, My God, why have you left me?" Sounds like a Jesus version of *Father of Mine*. I would guess that you, more than anyone in our group, understand what Jesus was feeling at that moment. Have you ever thought that Jesus, more than anyone else, understands what you are feeling at this moment? You both have some father issues right? Jeremy, Jesus experienced what you are experiencing for a reason. Jesus knows your pain, Jeremy. Your worst feelings he has felt, but there is more. Jesus went through that experience so that when he rose we would know there is new life to come. Jeremy, what has happened to you is terrible, but it's not where life ends for you. Jesus' dying and rising creates new life for you and even your dad. I don't know how or whether your relationship with your dad will get fixed, but I do know that Jesus understands your problem and His resurrection offers new life and hope to you, who feels so abandoned. Well, let's just sit here some more. Jeremy, I'd like to pray for you, OK? "Dear Jesus, Jeremy feels abandoned by his dad. When he's not angry he just feels so bad. We know you understand these feelings. Comfort him in your love and presence.

Assure him that you will never leave him, that you are with him always. Help him trust in you. Help him discover the new life you offer him through your resurrection. Give him hope for the future. We ask this in your name, Amen.” Sometime in the future Jeremy I want to share with you how forgiveness is a part of this new life, but that’s for later.

<u>Factor</u>	<u>Human Situation</u>	<u>Atonement Theory</u>	<u>Text</u>
Annoyance	Communal Conflict Sibling Rivalry	Presence or Transformation	Mark 11:12-14, 20-25

Narration with Chris at the pop machine⁹⁵

Hey, Chris, you are beating up on that pop machine pretty good. You put your money in and nothing came out? That’s annoying. Here, try my dollar. Speaking of annoying, how are you and your sister getting along? Annoying, huh? What does she do that bugs you so much? Takes your stuff, goes into your room, plays on your Nintendo, and steals the remote. Doesn’t sound like the end of the world, but your mom told me the battle between you two is driving her crazy.

Well, at least you got your soda. Hey, I got a trivia question for you. What’s the Biblical equivalent to a pop machine that takes your money? A fig tree! Yeah, I know you think I’m weird, but let me explain. Like you, Jesus was out early, before school and was hungry. He saw a fig tree and went to get some figs. There weren’t any. So he cursed the tree, which is kind of like the way you were kicking that machine. Jesus was annoyed. Later in the day he and his disciples were walking past that same tree and it was dead. He killed it!! And no, that is not permission for you to go and kill that pop machine. So what’s the point? Well, maybe he regretted killing the tree, but Jesus then

⁹⁵ Part of the inspiration for this narrative comes from a sermon preached by Dr. Dan Olson in the fall of 2003 at Wartburg Seminary.

went on to talk about how important it is to forgive those who annoy us, even as God the Father forgives us. Have you ever gone to your sister and tried to work things out? It's not easy, but I've got some ideas about how to do that. It's called a family meeting and I think your mom would be interested too. I'll show you during our peer training time.

By the way, you want a Fig Newton?

<u>Factor</u>	<u>Human Situation</u>	<u>Atonement Theory</u>	<u>Text</u>
Self-Coping	Isolation, Broken Friendships	Presence	Matt. 26:36-46

Online chat room conversation with Michael:

AAAAA: Hi Michael, what are you doing?

Michael: I'm in my room doing nothing.

AAAAA: You seem down.

Michael: Keith really p___ me off today.

AAAAA: I thought he was your best friend.

Michael: Was.

AAAAA: Was? What happened?

Michael: He's an idiot, that's all.

AAAAA: What makes him an idiot?

Michael: We were supposed to be boarding after school but then Carrie told me he had said I suck at boarding.

AAAAA: How do you know Carrie was telling the truth? Did you ask him?

Michael: No.

AAAAA: So you are home alone feeling betrayed by your best friend?

Michael: Yeah. I'd rather just forget it.

AAAAA: Well I don't know what the truth is here, but even if he did say it, don't we all say things we regret?

Michael: He's an idiot.

AAAAA: Whatever. Hey, want to do one of my goofy Bible stories?

Michael: Sure, why not?

AAAAA: Read Matthew 26: 36-46.

Michael: Ok, wait. (Read) And your point is....

AAAAA: What's Jesus trying to do in the story?

Michael: Get away from it all.

AAAAA: Like you.

Michael: Well his friends were idiots too.

AAAAA: 2b sure. What did his friends do?

Michael: Fell asleep.

AAAAA: You think Jesus was disappointed and hurt by them?

Michael: Well, yeah!

AAAAA: Just like you are disappointed and hurt by Keith. What's the name of the place where this all took place?

Michael: Gethsemane.

AAAAA: Sounds like you got your own little Gethsemane in your basement room.

Michael: That's a good one.

AAAAA: Look Michael, whether he said it or not, friends let us down sometimes.

Jesus had the same problem. What happened to Jesus after this story?

Michael: He got killed and then he rose. So are you saying I'm going to get killed?

AAAAA: NO!!! That's where the similarities end. I'm saying that Jesus totally understands your feelings of betrayal and loneliness. He is with you now in your dark basement of Gethsemane.

Michael: I've got to make a sign and put that on my door. THE BASEMENT OF GETHSEMANE.

AAAAA: You do that, but you have to add one more line.

Michael: What's that?

AAAAA: THE OPEN TOMB

Michael: Whoa, I've got to think about that? What do you mean?

AAAAA: Read the rest of the story and we'll talk later. And give Keith a call.

Michael: I'll check it out.

AAAAA: God's blessings my friend.

Closing Remark

This concludes the work of this thesis. This writer trusts that the themes that have been developed including the importance of the Relational Factor, the Action Factor, the Achievement Factor and the role of AAAAA adults will serve as wisdom and guidance to those who do ministry with this age cohort.

Ministry with early adolescent males, like all ministries, is an art form. It calls us to engage their world while respecting their boundaries and emerging independence. It challenges us to speak at a level they can understand without talking down to them. It demands patience of us when behaviors and attitudes are less than respectful. It asks us to be firm and set good boundaries without being rigid and inflexible. It pushes us to see the emerging young man residing within the awkward boy. It calls us to be wise enough

to know when to speak and when to observe. It demands the best of us in our role modeling and in our own faith walk. Most significantly, ministry with early adolescent males recognizes that the window is open to the hearts, souls and minds of these young humans and that the Gospel can be shared, and believed. Ministry with early adolescent males, when done with savvy wisdom and insight (and sometimes without), can capture and free them for a lifetime of joy and service to God in Jesus Christ. Such a ministry, at this juncture in the life cycle, is a blessing to behold and to be a part.

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