Church Youth Alcohol and Drug Education Programs

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ABSTRACT: This study indicates that pastors believe that their churches should have a role in influencing the alcohol and drug use of their members; that about half of the churches in this study actually had youth alcohol and drug education programs; and that the content of these education programs and church attitudes toward substance use are affected by the degree of fundamentalism-liberalism of the church.

Public concern about the prevalence of youth alcohol and drug use in our society has resulted in substance education programs directed toward the prevention and decrease of alcohol and drug abuse. The public schools have been at the forefront of such education programs. However, other institutions in our society are also involved in the education of young people. One such institution is religion, where shaping the character of its members is of vital concern.

Many research studies have been directed toward finding the relationship between religiosity and youth alcohol and drug use. Some of these have dealt with church affiliation,¹ fundamentalism-liberalism of religious group,² church attendance and participation,³ and importance of religious belief,⁴ and their relationship to youth substance use. However, little research has been directed specifically toward the church and its youth alcohol and drug education programs and attitudes and policies toward youth substance use.

This research study was devised to explore the relationship between the normative structure of the church as measured by its degree of fundamentalism-liberalism, as perceived by its pastor, and the extent and nature of youth alcohol and drug education programs, attitudes toward youth alcohol and drug use, attitudes toward alcoholism and drug addiction, perception of youth alcohol and drug abuse in their own congregations and in the community, and frequency of counseling youth for substance abuse problems.

Methodology

The author and a colleague conducted a survey of all church pastors in a Western city of about 250,000 population in the fall of 1984. The population for the

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survey was obtained from a list of the churches, their addresses, telephone numbers, and pastors for this city and the outlying areas, originally taken from the city's 1984 telephone directory. There were 287 listings. However, 50 of those were eliminated from the population because they were either not in the city limits or were inappropriate religious groups for this study such as adult Bible reading and study groups, other small religious groups having only adult membership, and a gay, adult community church. This left 237 churches and their pastors, all of whom were sent a questionnaire which was to be filled out anonymously. A cover letter and a stamped, addressed, return envelope were included for convenience.

A telephone and mail follow-up was made, after the first round of returns was received, resulting in a total return rate of 60 percent with an N of 143. With rare exceptions, such as that of Jehovah's Witnesses, all of the various types of religious groups or denominations listed in the population were present in the returns.

The questionnaire contained items to obtain information on the following dependent variables: whether the church had an alcohol or drug education program for youth during the past three years; the nature, content, and source of the program, if such existed; church attitudes and policies toward alcohol and drug use, alcoholism, and drug addiction; the pastor's perception of the seriousness of youth alcohol or drug problems in his or her congregation and in the community; and the extent to which the pastor engages in counseling of youth for these problems. Additional information was gathered on the independent variables of religious group, size of church membership, age of pastor, and the pastor's rating of his or her church on a 5-point fundamentalism-liberalism scale. The classification of individual local churches into degree of fundamentalism-liberalism on the basis of their placement into broad religious categories has not proven completely satisfactory in the past, since there is considerable variation on the local level within such groupings. Therefore, in this study the investigator asked the pastors to rate their own churches on the fundamentalism-liberalism scale in order to have more accuracy on the major independent variable in this study. This scale later was broken down into three categories for the statistical analysis with 1 including 1 and 2 at the fundamentalism end of the scale, 2 covering 3 in the middle, and 3 including 4 and 5 at the liberalism end of the scale.

Description of sample

Twenty-four types of religious groups were represented by the respondents in this study. When divided into eight major religious group categories, their representation was as follows: Church of Latter Day Saints—7, Baptist—25, Church of Christ and Disciples of Christ—10, Methodist and Lutheran—25, Episcopal and Presbyterian—11, Catholic—9, Jewish—1, and Others—55. The membership size ranged from below 100 to over 2,000. Nineteen percent were under 100, 32 percent between 100 and 249, 15 percent between 250 and 399, 18 percent between 400 and 749, 7 percent between 750 and 999, 6 percent