

BOOK REVIEW

Smith, Jennifer R. 2023. *A Thematic Analysis of Religious Identity and Volunteer Motivation among Emerging Adult Members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*

Mississippi State University, IN: Institutional Repository¹

Grell, Daniel. 2023. *Pursuing Jesus Christ Until We Meet Him Face-To-Face: A Biblical and Theological Challenge to Retired Baby Boomers to Become Transformed Disciples of Jesus Christ Who Faithfully Serve Him in the Context of Their Local Church*

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Reviewed by Johannes Fröh

Volunteers are the backbone of church life, simultaneously deepening their own spiritual formation while serving their congregation and community. However, in most Western countries, volunteer rates have been steadily declining for the past half-century and are likely to continue doing so as average household working hours increase. This challenge to the church's future is addressed in the recently published dissertations of Jennifer R. Smith and Daniel Grell. Their research focuses on the volunteering potential and motivation of two underexplored age cohorts in the church: emerging adults (Smith), before their time becomes predominantly occupied

1 Available at: <https://scholarsjunction.msstate.edu/td/5979/>

2 Available at: <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2808449826?pq-origsite=gscholar&fromopenview=true&sourcetype=Dissertations%20%20Theses>

by the job market, and Baby Boomers (Grell), as they transition into retirement over the next decade.

Jennifer R. Smith is an adjunct professor of Family Life and Human Development at Southern Utah University (SUU). While earning her advanced degrees from Mississippi State University, she contributed to several studies exploring the intersection of family relationships, religion and aging. Her academic expertise is complemented by her firsthand experience as a religious volunteer. As an active member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), she teaches Primary, Young Women and Relief Society – church programmes for women across different age groups. Additionally, Smith's perspective has been shaped by her exposure to different cultural environments. She grew up in Southern Utah but spent nearly a decade living in Kentucky and Mississippi, providing her with valuable insight into varying societal dynamics. The combination of her academic research, religious volunteer work and cross-cultural experiences led her to identify the central issue of her dissertation: volunteering among emerging adults has largely been overlooked in church contexts, particularly in relation to the cultural factors that influence engagement. Smith's research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between religious identity and volunteer motivation among emerging adult members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. More specifically, she explores how religious identity shapes personal identity development and how it affects both the volunteering experience and the motivation to serve. Her findings offer practical insights into improving church volunteer recruitment and retention.

Daniel Grell is the Executive Director of VOCM-America, a mission organization focused on church planting in Southern India. His current role follows five decades of pastoral service in the Evangelical Free Church, where he ministered in various locations across the United States – including Yuba City, California; Conover, Wisconsin; Austin, Texas; Boone, Iowa; and Illinois – as well as internationally in Austria, Germany and England. After retiring in 2018, Grell served as an adjunct professor at Moody Bible Institute in Chicago for four years before assuming his current position at VOCM-America. As a retired Baby Boomer who has remained actively involved in church service, he is keenly aware of the ongoing decline in church volunteerism. This awareness led him to his central research question: *What would motivate Baby Boomers, upon reaching retirement, to continue serving Jesus Christ through their local church?* His project seeks to explore this issue in depth and provide practical solutions for both Baby Boomers and church leaders.

Both dissertations follow the traditional structure of empirical research projects. They begin with an introductory chapter that provides a concise overview of the study – well suited for informing church leadership about the key perspectives and most significant findings. This is followed by sections covering the theoretical foundation, chosen methodology, analysis of results and a discussion of those results.

Despite their shared structure and common focus on church volunteering, the two dissertations offer complementary perspectives, particularly in the context they provide. Just as their focus on the beginning and end of the working adult population forms a natural complement, their insights together create a more comprehensive understanding of volunteer engagement across different life stages.

Smith's literature review (Chapter II) begins by addressing the decline in volunteer rates. From this starting point, she defines the conceptual framework of volunteering, summarizes current research on volunteer motivation and introduces self-determination theory as the study's guiding research framework. She then examines prior studies on religious volunteers, using the topic of religion as a bridge to the specific research context of the LDS Church. Next, Smith introduces the concept of identity, setting the stage for the missing pieces of the theoretical foundation. She establishes a strong temporal perspective on identity formation by focusing on Erikson's well-known lifespan development model and its adaptation by Marcia. After further contextualizing this model through the lenses of cultural and religious identity, she narrows her focus to the life stage of *emerging adulthood*. With all key concepts now defined, Smith integrates them into a holistic framework that connects emerging adulthood with religion, culture, church membership, and volunteering.

Grell, by contrast, takes a significantly different approach. Like Smith, he begins by addressing the decline in volunteer rates among his target age cohort. However, rather than defining sociological core concepts related to this issue, he lays a biblical-theological foundation that examines its root causes (Chapter 2). He identifies four key factors contributing to Baby Boomers disengaging from Christlike service:

1. He contrasts disengagement theory with a biblical analysis of aging and retirement, concluding that God's view of seniors challenges disengagement theory.
2. He argues that while God has a special calling for seniors, many fail to recognize it.
3. This lack of understanding is shaped by cultural influences that conflict with the theological concept of lifelong discipleship, a perspective he primarily explores through Wilkin's discipleship model.
4. Fully embracing discipleship, in turn, leads to spiritual transformation, as described in Romans 12.2 and Matthew 16.24.

After establishing this biblical-theological foundation, Grell shifts to a review of empirical research on Baby Boomers' perspectives on these issues (Chapter 3). He examines theories of aging – contrasting chronological and agency-based approaches – as well as discussions on retirement, vocation, volunteerism, church life and spiritual formation. In each case, he evaluates these topics against the theological framework he previously outlined.

In their respective methodology chapters – Smith (Chapter III) and Grell (Chapter IV) – both researchers take a fairly similar approach to their topic. They employ a qualitative research methodology, conducting semi-structured interviews that align with their overall goal of exploring motivational factors in depth for their respective age cohorts. For data analysis, Smith uses thematic analysis, while Grell adopts a phenomenological approach with thematic clustering. To ensure transparency and rigor in their analytical perspectives, both researchers supplement their methodology with a section on self-reflexivity and positionality in their data interpretation.

Both dissertations proceed with the analysis and presentation of results. For Smith, this is by far the most extensive chapter of her work (Chapter IV), structured into five sections, each corresponding to one of her research questions. The first section examines key experiences that shaped participants' views on volunteering. Emerging themes include:

1. Family influence and role models.
2. Feelings of comfort, guidance, or peace in church settings, often rooted in childhood.
3. A phase of careful reexamination of the belief system they were raised with.
4. A personal decision to follow church teachings.
5. The experience of community within the congregation.
6. Volunteering role models in church leadership.

The second section explores the connection between church membership and self-perception. Smith finds that participants overwhelmingly see themselves as children of God, a belief that profoundly influences their sense of purpose, confidence, belonging, happiness and self-worth. She concludes that their understanding of God's plan and their relationship with him serves as the foundation for their self-perception. The third section focuses on prior volunteering experiences, revealing that participants engaged in a broad range of volunteer activities from early youth through college, spanning both secular and church-related initiatives. The fourth section analyzes the data through the lens of self-determination theory (SDT). Contrary to prior research, Smith finds it striking that while participants reported experiences reflecting all three psychological needs related to service participation and motivation, *relatedness* was the most frequently mentioned, cited by all 24 participants. The final section examines the influence of religious identity on volunteering behavior. Smith identifies three primary motivators for volunteering:

1. A desire to follow Christ's example.
2. The belief that all people are children of God.
3. Adherence to specific scriptural teachings on service.

Smith concludes her dissertation with a brief discussion of the results (Chapter V), mirroring the structure of her literature review by integrating various theoretical perspectives into a cohesive understanding of emerging adults' volunteer motivation. She then outlines practical implications for both church leadership and nonprofit organizations seeking to improve volunteer recruitment and retention.

Unlike Smith, Grell's presentation of results (Chapter V) is comparatively brief, yet it remains concise and insightful. He structures his findings into two main sections. In the first section, Grell presents the results of his semi-structured interviews with retired Baby Boomers, focusing on their perspectives on church volunteering. Based on his data, he concludes that the primary post-retirement goals for Baby Boomers *serious about pursuing discipleship to Christ* include:

1. Ending well and serving God for the remainder of their lives.
2. Having a meaningful influence on their families and others.
3. Fulfilling God's unique calling for them.
4. Sharing what God has done in their lives, for them, and through them.

These findings suggest that professionals working with Christian Baby Boomers should recognize their strong interest in spiritual growth and development through volunteering. Grell further notes that his interviewees view discipleship – understood as a personal relationship with Jesus – as an ongoing journey. This includes intentionally dedicating more time after retirement to spiritual disciplines, such as prayer and Scripture reading, while also identifying areas of personal struggle and surrendering them to Christ. However, Grell identifies two key barriers to Baby Boomer engagement in church service:

1. A reluctance to step outside their comfort zones.
2. A perception that their contributions are no longer valued by the congregation, which discourages them from taking on new or challenging roles.

In the second section, Grell shares insights from five additional semi-structured interviews with church staff who work with Baby Boomer volunteers. Their responses echo the Baby Boomers' strong commitment to Scripture and acknowledge their ability to offer wisdom shaped by a lifetime of experience. However, church staff also highlight key challenges in managing Baby Boomer volunteers, including:

- A tendency toward comfort and routine.
- Declining physical health.
- The need for transparent communication about evolving church culture to prevent feelings of disconnect.

Grell concludes his analysis with an overview of further remarks from church staff on how to support Baby Boomers in their spiritual transformation, encourage their

service within the church, address the effects of retirement, and explore mentoring as a potential avenue for engagement.

Like Smith, Grell synthesizes the various aspects of his in-depth analysis to form a holistic understanding of what motivates Baby Boomers to continue volunteering after retirement. After summarizing his findings at the end of Chapter V, he concludes his dissertation with a final chapter (Chapter VI), offering a brief project summary and practical implications for church leadership and staff working with Baby Boomers.

Overall, both dissertations address an increasingly critical issue for church leadership and management, focusing on two key age cohorts – one transitioning into full-time work and the other concluding their careers and entering retirement. Both researchers provide a thoughtful reflection on their own connection to their research context, offering transparency regarding their positionality while leveraging their unique contextual knowledge for in-depth qualitative analysis.

Smith's work excels in its nuanced exploration of emerging adults, grounded in the research frameworks she establishes in her literature review. These frameworks allow her to rigorously analyse her data from multiple perspectives, revealing the complex interplay between religious convictions, biographical experiences, cultural influences and interactions with the LDS Church. Additionally, her deep familiarity with LDS teachings enables her to skillfully analyse the religious connotations in her participants' responses, highlighting the central role their belief system plays in their motivation to volunteer. However, a notable weakness of her study is the somewhat associative application of the self-determination theory (SDT) framework. After only briefly introducing the theoretical perspective, neither her interview questions nor her analytical process fully engage with the abstract meta-concepts of SDT in a way that meets the necessary level of rigour.

Grell's study stands out for its practical applicability to church leadership. One of its key strengths is the solid and extensive biblical-theological foundation he establishes, offering a Scripture-based, multifaceted perspective on aging and discipleship. His work is particularly well-suited for church teaching preparation, as it presents theological insights in an accessible and applicable manner. Another major strength is his inclusion of interviews with church staff, which not only contextualizes the perspectives of Baby Boomer participants but also provides valuable insights into the challenges of leading this generation within a church setting. However, Grell's study is less rigorous in its engagement with existing research and theoretical frameworks. His biblical-theological foundation lacks engagement with exegetical and systematic theological scholarship, and his methodological approach is not presented with the same depth and clarity as Smith's. This limits the study's academic integration and theoretical robustness.

Overall, despite their respective weaknesses, I recommend both dissertations. Smith's work is valuable for both church practitioners and academics. Not only does it offer important insights into her target age cohort, but it also provides a strong theoretical foundation that invites further academic inquiry into an SDT-based perspective on emerging adults' motivation – potentially even challenging the framework itself. Grell's work, on the other hand, is particularly useful for church practitioners from non-liberal theological backgrounds. His pastoral intent, shaped by decades of experience, is compelling throughout the text, and he offers solid, practical recommendations for engaging Baby Boomers in church service.

About the Reviewer

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