Enhancing the Voice of Youth Program at the Adventist University of the Philippines: An Appreciative Inquiry

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Abstract: The Voice of Youth (VOY) program at the Adventist University of the Philippines (AUP), part of the global *I Will Go* initiative, empowers youth in evangelism, leadership, and mission. This study examined how to sustain and expand VOY's influence through Appreciative Inquiry and Transformational Leadership Theory. Data were gathered from 11 participants and two focus groups, analyzed thematically with coding, peer debriefing, and triangulation. Findings from the Discovery Phase highlighted VOY's role in fostering spiritual growth, community engagement, teamwork, and missionary influence. The Dream Phase envisioned stronger spiritual foundations, better preparation, and greater faculty involvement, while the Design Phase emphasized training, leadership development, financial sustainability, and inclusivity. The Destiny Phase focused on expansion, resource mobilization, and long-term commitment. Results underscore VOY's contribution to leadership and evangelism. Strengthening leadership, financial sustainability, and institutional support are vital for success. Though centered on AUP, the VOY model holds potential for global adaptability.

Keywords: *Voice of Youth Program, Appreciative Inquiry, Youth Evangelism, Leadership Development, Transformational Leadership.*

INTRODUCTION

Youth are vital to the mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, not only as participants but as emerging leaders shaping its future. To empower them, global initiatives such as *I Will Go* mobilize members, especially youth, for evangelism and discipleship, with the Voice of Youth (VOY) program providing opportunities for leadership, discipleship, and mission work. Despite its global reach, VOY faces challenges, as the 2022–2023 Global Church Member Survey revealed a perception gap: older members often see youth as engaged, while young people themselves report self-doubt, undervaluing their contributions, or feeling excluded from leadership (ASTR, 2023).

This highlights the need for strategies that build confidence, bridge generational divides, and prepare youth for sustained ministry. While VOY's historical and immediate spiritual value is recognized, little is known about its long-term leadership impact. This study,

using Appreciative Inquiry and Transformational Leadership Theory, explores VOY at AUP to identify strengths, best practices, and opportunities for growth, offering insights for leaders, educators, and policymakers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Biblical and Theological Foundations of Youth Ministry

The foundation of effective youth ministry lies in its grounding in biblical principles. The Great Commission (Matthew 28:19–20) affirms the dual responsibility of evangelism and discipleship, making it clear that the mission of the church is both to proclaim the gospel and to nurture believers in faith. Paul's teachings further emphasize the role of spiritual gifts in ministry, as seen in Romans 12 and Ephesians 4:11–13, where believers are called to use their God-given abilities for building up the body of Christ. These texts highlight that young people, like all members of the church, are entrusted with gifts that should be developed and exercised in the service of mission. Rooted in this theological vision, youth ministry must prioritize spiritual formation and discipleship, equipping young people not merely for participation in programs, but for a lifelong commitment to Christ and active involvement in His mission (Darmawan, 2024; Greenway & Powell, 2021).

Theoretical Foundation of Youth Ministry

Transformational leadership, articulated by Burns and Bass, provides a valuable framework for youth ministry by motivating young people and fostering spiritual growth through its four dimensions: influence, inspiration, stimulation, and care. Rooted in biblical principles, this model emphasizes authentic leadership that goes beyond programming to nurture discipleship and identity formation. Recent studies affirm that leadership grounded in spiritual and ethical development, supported by mentoring relationships, produces more resilient and committed youth leaders (Burns, 1978; Bass, 1985; Olaitan et al., 2025; Darmawan, 2024).

Historical Perspectives on Youth Evangelism

Youth ministry in the Seventh-day Adventist Church has gone through various phases, evolving into a more specialized ministry. However, structural changes have led to declining youth involvement. As noted in *Youth Ministry Leadership Handbook*, "Since the introduction, implementation and elimination of the past Church Ministries Department, youth ministry has experienced dramatic changes and challenges. In some churches, our youth were neglected, even before and to the point of closing the Adventist Youth Society… The result has been devastating" (General Conference Youth Ministries, 2015). This historical trend underscores the need for revitalized efforts in youth engagement and evangelism.

Challenges and Opportunities in Youth Evangelism

Traditional program-driven youth ministries often fail to retain young people, as the lack of integration between evangelism and discipleship contributes to high attrition rates

(Morrow, 2023; Ntsanwisi, 2024). Research shows that while older members believe youth are active in mission, younger people often feel undervalued or excluded, revealing a generational perception gap (ASTR, 2023). Addressing this challenge requires shifting from event-based programs to mission-focused, relational discipleship models that emphasize faith formation, mentoring, and meaningful participation, which are more effective in fostering long-term commitment (McMahan, 2024).

Best Practices in Youth Engagement

The Voice of Youth (VOY) provides a structured model for engaging young people in evangelism through training, mentorship, and active participation. Studies show that when youth are intentionally discipled and given leadership opportunities, they view evangelism as a vital expression of faith, leading to deeper spiritual growth and sustained commitment (Gabriel & Catherine, 2025; Ogora, Ogwora, & Rotich, 2025). Research further highlights that structured leadership training and practice-based approaches strengthen teamwork, resilience, and long-term engagement, aligning with VOY's experiential mission focus (Cahyati & Nurhayati, 2024; Oyedare, 2025). Generational perception gaps remain, however, underscoring the need for inclusive strategies to maximize youth involvement (ASTR, 2023).

Towards a Gospel-Centered Youth Ministry

Entertainment-driven youth ministry models often fail to produce lasting faith, prompting a shift toward gospel-centered approaches that emphasize relational discipleship, cultural relevance, and service opportunities (Fuller Youth Institute, 2023; Gabriel & Catherine, 2025). Research further shows that youth-led evangelism, skills development, and digital engagement strategies foster stronger retention and more meaningful participation (Bocala-Wiedemann, 2022; Ogora et al., 2025). Instead of focusing on events, effective ministries integrate mentoring, mission work, and spiritual growth, helping young people see themselves as vital members of the church body. This mission-oriented model cultivates resilient disciples equipped for lifelong faith and leadership (Cahyati & Nurhayati, 2024; McFeeters et al., 2024).

METHODOLOGY Research Design

This study utilized a qualitative research design, specifically using Appreciative Inquiry (AI) to understand youth participation in evangelism. AI focuses on identifying and amplifying existing strengths rather than diagnosing problems (Cooperrider et al., 2008). Given the participatory nature of AI, this design facilitated open and constructive discussions among youth leaders, pastors, and ministry coordinators regarding their experiences with VOY evangelism. AI's 4-D model (Discovery, Dream, Design, Destiny) structured the inquiry process, ensuring a focus on positive transformation and sustainable ministry growth (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010).

Research Setting

The study was conducted at the Adventist University of the Philippines (AUP), a Seventh-day Adventist institution that actively engages students in ministry and evangelism.

AUP serves as an ideal setting for this study because of its strong culture of youth-led missionary programs and leadership training initiatives (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2019).

Population and Sampling Techniques

The study involved 11 participants, including pastors, students, and youth ministry coordinators who are actively engaged in VOY evangelism. We utilized purposive sampling, a technique commonly used in qualitative research to select participants who have specific knowledge and experiences related to the research topic (Palinkas et al., 2015). Additionally, two focus groups were conducted to encourage interactive discussions and collective reflections on youth engagement in evangelism. Focus groups provide deeper insights into social dynamics and shared experiences, enhancing the richness of the data (Krueger & Casey, 2014).

Data Collection Methods

Data was collected using semi-structured appreciative interviews and focus group discussions. Semi-structured interviews provided flexibility, allowing participants to elaborate on their personal experiences and perspectives (Kallio et al., 2016). The focus groups facilitated group reflections, fostering a collaborative discussion environment where participants could build upon each other's insights (Morgan, 1997). The questions were openended and designed to help explore experiences about youth involvement, leadership development, and the effectiveness of VOY evangelism.

Data Analysis

We employed thematic analysis to examine the qualitative data collected. This process involved transcribing, coding, and categorizing responses into key themes that reflect participants' experiences and perceptions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). AI's 4-D model guided data interpretation, focusing on positive aspects and future possibilities in youth evangelism. The coding process was iterative, ensuring that emerging themes were refined and validated through continuous engagement with the data (Nowell et al., 2017).

Evaluative Criteria for Quality

To ensure the trustworthiness of our findings, we applied credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability as evaluative criteria (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Triangulation was conducted by comparing individual interviews with focus group discussions to cross-validate emerging themes (Patton, 1999). Furthermore, member checking was used, where participants reviewed the preliminary findings to confirm accuracy and authenticity (Birt et al., 2016).

Ethical Considerations

Prior to data collection, we obtained ethical approval from the Ethics Review Board of AUP. All participants were informed of the voluntary nature of their involvement, and

informed consent was obtained before participation. To maintain confidentiality, participant identities were anonymized using coded identifiers, and all recordings and transcripts were securely stored with restricted access (Wiles et al., 2008). Ethical considerations were strictly followed to protect participant privacy and ensure compliance with research ethics guidelines (Resnik, 2020).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis generated a total of twenty-four themes from participant interviews and focus group discussions. These include four themes in the Discovery Phase, six in the Dream Phase, seven in the Design Phase, and seven in the Destiny Phase. Together, they reflect the strengths, aspirations, strategies, and future directions of the Voice of Youth (VOY) program. The themes are organized and presented in the four phases of Appreciative Inquiry, which structure the discussion that follows.

Discovery Phase

The Discovery Phase revealed four major outcomes: deepened spiritual growth, strengthened community engagement, teamwork, and a renewed sense of purpose. Students described devotions and worship in the mission field as transformative, noting, *"You return a different person."* They valued the care of local churches that freed them to focus on ministry, and the camaraderie within VOY teams, which created a family-like bond. Many also discovered their calling and spiritual gifts, affirming that mission work clarified life purpose. These findings align with research showing that relational discipleship, service, and mentorship foster long-term commitment and leadership development (Darmawan, 2024; Greenway & Powell, 2021; Gabriel & Catherine, 2025).

Dream Phase

Participants envisioned a VOY program rooted in prayer and preparation, strengthened by team bonding, faculty mentorship, and long-term community relationships. One participant emphasized, *"Every member should be involved in spiritual preparation."* Others called for structured team-building and greater involvement from faculty and church leaders. Aspirations also included innovative mission strategies, such as digital tools and interactive formats, to reach wider audiences. These hopes resonate with scholarship highlighting the importance of intergenerational mentoring, contextual discipleship, and digital ministry for sustainable youth engagement (Greenway & Powell, 2021; Bocala-Wiedemann, 2022).

Design Phase

The Design Phase focused on practical strategies for VOY's effectiveness, emphasizing structured training, stronger leadership models, financial and logistical support, creative recruitment, inclusivity, and diversified mission activities. As one student observed, *"If every*

member knew their role in advance, everything would run more smoothly." Participants also stressed the importance of holistic outreach—community service alongside preaching—and intentional post-mission reflection to sustain momentum. These priorities mirror studies affirming that youth ministry flourishes when leadership is wellstructured, inclusive, and mission-driven, with sustainable resources and opportunities for reflection (Youthscape, 2021; Gabriel & Catherine, 2025).

Destiny Phase

Looking forward, participants emphasized sustained leadership, inclusivity, yearround training, financial planning, and a culture of long-term commitment. One participant noted, *"VOY should not only be an academic requirement—it should be a movement that continues to grow."* Students also envisioned global expansion and deeper fellowship to strengthen mission teams. These aspirations echo findings that continuity, inclusivity, and sustainable resources are essential for effective youth ministry, while global engagement expands faith formation across cultural contexts (Ogora, Ogwora & Rotich, 2025).

Practical Implications

The findings of this study offer several practical applications for youth ministry leaders, church administrators, and educators. The study also offers insights for educational development, showing how mission-focused student programs cultivate transferable leadership skills, teamwork, and resilience. These include:

Enhancing Leadership Development: The study underscores the need for a structured and stable leadership model in VOY. Establishing a consistent leadership framework with clear mentorship and succession planning will ensure program sustainability and continuity.

Strengthening Pre-Mission Training: Participants emphasized the importance of structured training, role assignments, and spiritual preparation before mission deployment.
Implementing year-round training sessions will better equip young missionaries for long-term ministry involvement.

Fostering Financial Sustainability: VOY's long-term impact depends on sufficient funding and resource allocation. Churches and educational institutions should explore fundraising initiatives, sponsorship programs, and strategic partnerships to provide consistent financial support.

Expanding Inclusivity and Participation: Encouraging students from diverse academic backgrounds to join VOY will broaden the program's impact. Offering cross-disciplinary mission opportunities and removing barriers to participation will ensure greater youth engagement in evangelism.

Integrating Post-Mission Reflection and Growth: Establishing post-mission debriefing sessions, testimony-sharing platforms, and alumni engagement programs will sustain participants' commitment and encourage lifelong ministry involvement.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the Voice of Youth (VOY) program at the Adventist University of the Philippines (AUP) through the lens of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) and Transformational Leadership Theory to understand its impact on youth evangelism and leadership development. Findings revealed that VOY significantly contributes to spiritual growth, community engagement, teamwork, and missionary influence, shaping participants into active church leaders and committed disciples. Participants expressed a desire to strengthen spiritual foundations, improve leadership training, enhance faculty involvement, and expand mission opportunities to ensure the sustainability and effectiveness of the program. Additionally, structural leadership consistency, financial sustainability, and inclusive participation emerged as key factors necessary for VOY's long-term success. These insights highlight the transformative power of youth-led evangelism and the need for strategic improvements to maximize its impact. By bridging youth ministry, leadership studies, and educational development, this study contributes to a broader discourse on how institutions can nurture values-driven leaders.

Limitations of the Study

While this study provides valuable insights, it has certain limitations. As a qualitative study, findings are context-specific to VOY at AUP and may not be fully generalized to other institutions. Additionally, self-reported data may be subject to participant bias. Future studies incorporating mixed methods (qualitative and quantitative) could provide a more comprehensive evaluation of VOY's impact.

Recommendations for Future Research

1. Future research could expand beyond AUP by comparing VOY programs across different cultural or institutional contexts, thereby further enhancing originality.
2. VOY's Long-Term Impact – Study its effects on student retention, leadership, and mission commitment.
3. Future research could adopt a mixed-methods design, combining quantitative surveys with qualitative Appreciative Inquiry, to broaden validity and generate deeper insights into VOY's long-term impact.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Dan Namanya served as the main researcher, leading the conceptualization, project administration, integration of sections, and preparation of the final manuscript. Restituto C. Bualoy, Andresito P. Fernando, Jaylord R. Hernando, and Cadao L. Cerelito contributed primarily to the literature review, providing theoretical perspectives, related studies, and critical insights to situate the research within existing scholarship. Danny Endriga assisted in gathering

background resources that supported the framing of the study. The entire process was a collaborative effort, as all authors actively participated in group discussions, reviewed the full manuscript through collaborative exchanges, suggested revisions, and approved the final version for submission.

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