

THE NEW RHETORIC OF YOUTH MINISTRY

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While cleaning out my office recently I finally had to face facts: my shelves were bloated with youth ministry books I would never use: tried-but-discarded strategy books, tie-dye cool gospel vernaculars like *God Is for Real, Man*, outdated youth culture commentaries, game guides and “idea” books that included everything from noncompetitive parachute games to the now-suspect chubby bunny contest.

Equally noticeable were the books that were absent. Almost nothing on ministry with young people outside of suburban, white, middle-class North America. Almost nothing on the globalization of contemporary culture, or on how technology and changing social expectations increasingly challenge the notion of adolescence itself. Despite the throngs of scholars lamenting “problems of American youth,” few mention religion or the church as a possible road to cure.¹ Disturbingly, neither do theologians.

THE LITERATURE OF LAMENT: YOUTH MINISTRY’S RHETORIC OF DESPAIR

The rhetoric of youth ministry in the late twentieth century, especially among mainline Protestants, was born of slippage: declining church memberships, decreasing moral influence and—save for the religious Right’s brief political apex in the 1980s—evaporating social power. As mainline churches gradually admitted their new marginal status in American society, the rhetoric surrounding their ministry with young people could aptly be described as “a rhetoric of despair.” Denominations bemoaned the loss of

young people from their ranks, and ministry analysts launched a new literature of lament that blamed the church's adolescent hemorrhage on everything from inadequate leadership training, poor educational models and dwindling denominational support to demographic shifts, economic cycles and, of course, the onslaught of secular culture.²

Notably absent from these rebukes was any mention of *theology*. For the most part, churches remained naive to their own complicity in the loss of young people from the pews. Liberal Christians blamed conservatives for promising young people easy answers (sometimes true) and conservative Christians blamed liberals for comforting them with cheap grace (also sometimes true). The fact was that most young people had never *been* in the pews to begin with, and their fading voices signaled an increasingly toxic culture and a distressingly impotent church. In 1965, the World Council of Churches called for an end to the segregation of young people into isolated "youth programs," urging congregations to integrate youth into the total mission of the church.³ Financially strapped denominations responded by amputating costly youth departments—yet, as youth staffs and budgets shriveled, no mechanism emerged to help local churches absorb young people into their larger ministries. The Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development declared the 1980s "an era of massive cuts in youth ministry" in terms of denominational personnel and resource deployment.⁴ By the end of the century, young people's absence, not their presence, had become normative for American Christianity.

SIGNS OF HOPE

Surprisingly, despite the litany of crises that ushered in the twenty-first century, the rhetoric of despair that had come to typify the conversation about youth ministry has begun to soften. By the first decade of the twenty-first century, three developments had slowly gathered momentum, setting the stage for a rhetorical change of heart and allowing a "rhetoric of hope" to emerge in the church's conversation about young people, and about youth ministry in particular.

The first development was the late-twentieth-century's renaissance in practical theology. Overwhelmed by the information age's glut of data, modern fractiousness and moral uncertainty, secular scholars and theologians alike welcomed the practical wisdom of local communities as an alternative route to truth, which had the effect of rekindling academic interest in con-

crete communities of faith. Meanwhile, a new generation of students entered Christian colleges and seminaries—students whose coming of age coincided with the demise of many denominational youth ministry programs, which meant they increasingly traced their faith formation to parachurch youth and mission organizations rather than to traditional catechesis in congregations. As schools found themselves preparing candidates for ministry who had little experience in (or affection for) congregations, youth ministry provided a curricular bridge between students and local churches. For many of these young leaders—whose experiences in life-changing youth groups shaped their expectations for Christian community—youth ministry offered a template for how to “do church” with all age groups, and informed their approach to ecclesiology, mission and ministry as well. As a 1994 report to the Lilly Endowment conceded: “What has become clear . . . is that youth ministry is ultimately about something much more than youth ministry. . . . These [Christian youth] movements are redrawing the ecclesial map of the United States.”⁵

The second development that signaled changing attitudes toward youth ministry was the Lilly Endowment’s decision in the late 1980s to seed youth ministry initiatives in colleges and seminaries. Flush with profits from the “irrational exuberance” of the American stock market, Lilly gave innovative youth ministry the financial encouragement once provided by denominations—with a crucial difference. Lilly tendered this financial support primarily through Christian higher education, not denominations or parachurch groups—a decision that created a new “center of gravity” for innovative youth ministry, not in grass-roots ministries or in church bureaucracies, but in theological institutions whose primary focus was Christian vocation, and especially the education of pastors.⁶ Besides spawning curricular changes, the decision to fund youth ministry at the level of theological education gave it new stature as a theological subject, and sent an unmistakable signal to pastors-in-training that their ministries should include young people.

The infusion of Lilly dollars placed youth ministry squarely on the agenda of mainstream Christian colleges and seminaries in the U.S. Before Lilly’s entry into the discussion, youth ministry (widely considered a place to “do time” until a chance for “real”—read: adult—ministry came along) floated on the periphery of the church’s consciousness. Youth ministry classes in higher education, where they were offered at all, were often outsourced to talented pastors instead of taught by regular faculty. Now, however, theological schools actively cultivated youth ministry initiatives in

order to qualify for grant support, and churches responded by adding pastoral positions in youth ministry. While evangelicals had been professionalizing youth ministry throughout the late twentieth century, in the 1990s mainline Protestants began to follow suit. A small but influential number of mainline schools (including Emory, Princeton and Duke) launched youth ministry initiatives and added lines for pedigreed professors who brought theological substance to youth-related coursework. By the mid-1990s, the number of professors of youth ministry reached a critical mass, spawning professional guilds and a serious debate about whether youth ministry should constitute a “discipline” of its own.

Meanwhile, a third development contributed to the rhetoric of hope in youth ministry: a rising interest in spirituality among young people themselves, especially outside the U.S. As young people around the globe turned to religion to interpret cultural shifts and resist globalization’s homogenizing juggernaut, scholars and policymakers took note. Sociologists who had predicted the triumph of secularization recanted;⁷ social and developmental psychologists, once skittish about religious subjects, began to acknowledge religion’s positive impact on healthy communities and adolescents.⁸ Tragedies like the Columbine High School shootings and the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, soldered the connection between young people and faith in the public eye, and in this cultural milieu, youth ministry grew bolder, demanding legitimacy as a ministry of the church.

REDEFINING CHURCH: THEMES IN THE RHETORIC OF HOPE

In short, just as adolescence itself has expanded to include nine-year-olds entering puberty as well as twenty-nine-year-olds struggling to make adult commitments, the rhetoric of hope has expanded youth ministry’s scope. In some ways, this rhetoric underscores long-accepted themes in Christian youth work—the need for relational methods and radical contextualization, for instance. But the new conversation about youth ministry sounds these themes with a new and almost brazen sense of purpose. Because this rhetoric views young people as capable of theological critique, the new conversation sets out to do more than redefine youth ministry. It aims to redefine the *church*, with passionate communities of youth playing a central role, on the premise that young people are reliable barometers of the human condition, and their actions may therefore be considered Exhibit A of humanity’s desire for God. At the same time, this rhetoric is intensely local

and highly personal, echoing the apostolic community's emphasis on personal, even mystical, encounters with Jesus Christ. As in the early church, this rhetoric tends to emphasize informal enclaves of care and spiritual practice that provide fidelity, transcendence and intimacy to young people starved for all three.

For those of us who take more than a casual interest in ministry with young people, this rhetoric offers promise but also invites caution. Youth ministry both challenges existing ecclesiologies and risks making them puerile; indeed, new church movements are frequently accused of being "adolescent." Many visible leaders of today's "alternative" congregations—church movements where pastors intentionally refashion styles of worship, patterns of polity and forms of nurture to attract Baby Boomers and/or their progeny—admit strong roots in youth ministry. A quick scan through their proliferating publications shows that, by and large, these leaders simply adapted the visions, methods and rhetoric of youth ministry to address the adults these youth inevitably became. (As one "alt-church" pastor put it, "I basically do youth ministry for people who can drive and vote and drink.")⁹ At the same time, the rhetoric of hope reveals a broader sense of calling on the part of young people and in youth ministry itself, as youth and their ministers seek to refashion what it means to be "church" in a frankly post-Christian culture. The rhetoric of hope's investment in practical theology, global postmodern culture and communities of faith practice, for instance, suggests an expanding purpose, context and curriculum for ministry with young people. In short, youth ministry is no longer only about youth.

A broader purpose: From Christian education to practical theology.

What is at stake in the rhetoric of hope's interest in practical theology is rescuing youth ministry from decades of foster care in the social sciences in order to return it to its theological home.¹⁰ For more than a century, the church has conceived youth ministry as a "department" (or sometimes as the unruly stepchild) of Christian education. The label never quite fit; youth ministry acts more like a microcosm of the church than as an arm of education—which means that it actually provides a premiere laboratory for engaging laypeople (in this case, teenagers) in practical theological reflection. The perspective of youth ministers themselves also shifted; as they sought more professional credibility, they demanded more substantive training, and therefore began to think of themselves and their vocations theologically.

This did not eliminate a relationship between Christian education and youth ministry; it simply put the relationship in a different perspective, recognizing that education is *one* practice of youth ministry that helps young people discover themselves called by Christ to carry out the church's mission in the world.¹¹ Youth ministry is, after all, *ministry*, and the practicing Christian community is its "curriculum"—a curriculum that is meaningless unless participation accompanies cognition. The language of formation and discipleship stresses the embodiment of faith, as young people encounter and incarnate Christ through the mediating practices of the church. For this reason, the rhetoric of hope stresses spiritual formation over "Christian education," discipleship over membership, small enclaves of community over youth fellowships. On the one hand, these distinctions are largely semantic. Spiritual practices, after all, are enacted beliefs; doctrine inheres in the imitation of Christ in all its forms.¹² On the other hand, religious education's alliance with American pragmatism throughout the twentieth century perverted ancient understandings of *catechesis*. The "handing on of the faith" was never intended to be a dogmatic exercise but rather provided a route for spiritual transformation through practices that demonstrate trust in the risen Christ. Living out such trust sometimes did, and sometimes did not, perpetuate "adult" faith norms.

A broader context: From youth culture to global postmodernity. Like all ministry, youth ministry is highly contextual; what is distinctive about youth ministers' rhetoric of hope is that they view their ministry's "context" as the broader culture of global postmodernity, making adolescents' reactions to culture emblematic of the human condition as a whole. Fifty years ago, it was possible to speak of an emerging "youth culture." The invention of portable technologies like the transistor, the mandatory age-stratification of American high schools following World War II, the growing disposable income of adolescents that allowed advertisers to develop a "teen market"—all of these factors invited young people to create and consume their own subculture away from the watchful eyes of parents. Consequently, the "adolescent society," as James Coleman called it in 1961,¹³ represented a new civilization, as foreign to the American church as any far-flung place on the globe, and as much in need of Jesus.

No more. Youth ministry is still missionary work, and adolescents still need Jesus. But the "adolescent society" no longer exists, not because it has vanished but because it has devoured everything around it. Today, *all* popu-

lar culture is youth culture, and vice versa, and *all* age groups participate in it—forcing young people to turn to increasingly marginal and dangerous alternatives in order to distinguish themselves from adults. Youth ministry no longer focuses on the cultural idiosyncracies of the young as a homogenous group simply because youth culture is no longer idiosyncratic, and because adolescents are not (and have never been) homogenous. The rhetoric of hope assumes that young people live betwixt and between multiple cultures. “Youth culture” theory is supplanted by “generational” theory, the unsurprising (but highly marketable) observation that people are shaped by the events and popular cultures of their youth.

Yet the new rhetoric of youth ministry also assumes that young people’s immersion in broad cultural and ecclesial trends gives them unique resources (cultural literacy and a heightened sense of context come to mind) for navigating culture that could benefit the entire church. Far more important to the contemporary adolescent experience than “youth culture” are the tectonic plates shifting under the weight of globalization and postmodernity, cultural changes that affect adults and youth alike. According to the new rhetoric of youth ministry, cultural upheaval provides opportunities for rediscovering the gospel, even as it threatens to disarm the church. Like cracks in a sidewalk that allow dandelions to push through, the cultural fissures created by global postmodernity give certain themes crushed by post-Enlightenment rationality space to reemerge, find light and blossom.

This point of view is a main feature of the rhetoric of hope, namely, that despite the manipulative nature of popular consumer culture, the church can and should *use* the rips and tears in our cultural fabric as portals to discover more adequate narratives in Jesus Christ. The rhetoric of hope frequently turns to popular culture to amplify revelation, pointing out gospel themes inadvertently revealed in the culture that the modern church overlooked or undervalued. The contemporary insistence on personal experience, mystery and utter connection might illuminate, for instance, the personal, relational nature of faith, the experiential side of Christian community, the suffering of Christ and the need for God’s transcendence, not to mention Christ’s call for solidarity with those who are not like us. In the rhetoric of hope, even post-modern relativism itself is a sign of spiritual unrest, as our restless souls, as Augustine observed, seek their rest in God. These themes are not revealed to adolescents because of any latent Christology lurking underneath the surface of popular culture. Rather, faith enables those also conversant in culture—

teenagers, for instance—to baptize culture for Christ.¹⁴

A broader curriculum: From programs to communities of spiritual practice. Perhaps the most noticeable change in youth ministry in the early twenty-first century is the diminished role of denominations, youth programs and events in favor of relationships and spiritual practices—those ongoing activities of the Christian community that shape us in relationship to God and to one another—as the primary vehicles through which adolescents recognize God encountering them. The popularity of mission trips (inevitably low-tech, limited, human operations) offers a case in point. Youth mission trips typically trade razzmatazz for drama, relying on communities of radical care and belonging that are constructed through shared practices of prayer, service, hospitality and celebration. In the Christian community, practices that imitate the self-giving love of God shape relationships that echo Christ’s love. To be sure, the interest in faith practices and the relationships that emerge from them do not eliminate the need for youth programs; good youth programs are communities of faith practices. But contemporary adolescents—justly suspicious of adult abandonment—distrust the institutional ring and relational sterility suggested by “program” ministries and gravitate to them only insofar as they engage practices that foster personal relationships with God and one another.

Christian practices therefore assume critical importance. They are the curriculum of youth ministry. In the first place, prayer, preaching, tolerance, tithing, living simply, living chastely, conferencing with other Christians, searching Scripture, serving others and so on tether young people to a faith tradition without shackling them to a particular institutional expression of it, giving faith flexibility and portability. In addition, practices shift youth ministry’s attention away from activities and events to communities, which are the fruit of Christian practices. Practices also stress the lived nature of faith, for practices *embody* Christ’s suffering love, thereby preventing Christianity from deteriorating into abstract intellectualism or vapid, generic “feel good-isms.” And, by enfleshing God’s love in word, deed and act, practices offer concrete points of connection that provide a sense of divine accompaniment in daily life. In short, faith practices allow young people a way to encounter God without needing a priest, a program—or, for that matter, an adult—to guide them.¹⁵

Two examples of how youth ministry turned to the historic practices of

the church to foster authentic community are youth ministry's recent passion for worship and identification with mission. Borrowed in part from alternative church movements in Europe and in part from creative young pastors who sought to replicate youth ministry's tight-knit communities and experiential methods with entire congregations, worship in particular became recognized as a context with unparalleled potential to form community. Drawing on practices like praise and lament, preaching and teaching, hospitality and healing, teenagers gathered to experience the presence of God. The term *experience* was important; in both mission and worship, young people sought an *experience* of God in which God inhered even if youth did not "feel" God emotionally. The availability of technology in worship, for instance, allowed for innovative forms of piety (that had been long practiced in youth camps, conferences and fellowship groups) to be played out in a larger chancel as youth ministry began a clear drift toward the sanctuary. By the late 1990s, the prominence of worship as a feature of youth ministry served as a sign of youth workers' desire to locate ministry with young people at the center of the Christian community, just as mission expressed young people's insistence on an active Christianity that tangibly follows Jesus into the world.

IMAGINING CHURCH

The effect of the rhetoric of hope in youth ministry has yet to be calculated. On the one hand, it promises a new sense of vocation for youth ministry, and a theological sense of direction as youth ministry becomes more than a platform for placating teenagers. Indeed, youth ministry's great potential may lie in its ability to reimagine the church on behalf of the wider Christian community, a church in which God has called young people to play an irreplaceable and irreplaceable part.

On the other hand, the rhetoric of hope in youth ministry has risks, not the least of which is hubris and the possibility that it promises more than it can deliver. Will adolescents be able to reimagine the church in ways that are any less jaded than the adults before them? Or will youth ministry's expanded vocation on behalf of the church lead to a loss of focus—an abandonment of the church's mission with young people themselves, returning youth ministry to the "stepping stone" status it has so earnestly tried to shake? Above all, what is the source of the rhetoric of hope in youth ministry? Is it grounded in the optimism and idealism of young people, or in the

hope of Jesus Christ, who somehow manages to save the world daily without our help?

The verdict, of course, will be for another generation to decide. What we can ascertain is that the rhetoric of hope enlarges youth ministry's territory for the twenty-first-century church. Youth ministry's broader sense of purpose, broader view of context and broader understanding of curriculum leave no doubt about its vocation on behalf of the larger church. And if the predicament of adolescents is intimately linked to the predicament of the church, then the transformation of one implies the transformation of both.

• DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION EXERCISE

Tales from the Trenches

This exercise seeks to get you thinking about theology from within your practice and action of ministry in the church.¹⁶ The idea is not to simply remember and retell stories, but to discuss how your experience of youth ministry was influenced by a local congregation. Think about the congregation where you first encountered youth ministry. How did the activity of the larger church affect your understanding of what youth ministry is all about? How did the church's implicit or explicit theology impact the youth ministry (and you in particular)? How did youth ministry lead the church in dealing with cultural transitions?

Each person should come with a tale to tell—one story from his or her experience described above—and be ready to share this narrative in three to five minutes. After each tale allow for discussion.

(Note: It often works best if the leader of the conversation begins by telling a tale. This allows the leader to model the kind of reflection and time use desired—not to mention personal vulnerability.)

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