

8

YOUTH WORK AND THE CHURCH

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Chapter Outcomes

By the end of this chapter, readers will be able to:

- locate the context of Christian youth work
- critique a theology of relationships as communicative acts
- evaluate the importance of the Christian tradition and Church community for Christian youth work practice.

Locating Context

Faith-based organizations – and, churches in particular – have a long and rich history in youth and community work that represents a significant kernel from which other practice has grown. Indeed, research by Brierley (2003) and Green (2006) suggests that churches and other Christian organizations have long employed more youth workers than other sectors. The current climate of austerity that has attempted to decimate many treasured public services, including youth work, has led to a renewed interest in and reliance on faith-based practices (Stanton, 2012, 2013). The relative *political* independence that Christian youth work enjoys continues to harbour many of youth work's core values from the policy initiatives that have attempted to erode the profession's traditional practices, which are founded on relational principles that seek to promote learning, democracy, justice and action. The New Labour settlement which funded youth work to act as a faceted plaything of social engineering did much to undermine truly relational ways of working. Since the late 1990s, language regarding society in general, and young people in particular, has become sometimes subtly, and more often overtly, rhetorically discoursed: a theme that has become

Developing a Theology for Relational Youth Work

Life is a gift born out of relationship. The poverty or richness of our lives is a reflection of the quality of the relationships in our lives; relationships with present and absent others, relationships with persons of the trinity. (Adams, 1995: 44)

Theologies of relational youth work emphasize the centrality of relationships with young people both 'inside' and 'outside' the Church (Adams, 2014; Ward, 1997). Relationships are communicative acts (Bailey, 2013) – intertwining threads that weave through a youth worker's embodied and lived faith. This is explicit within the evangelical tradition of the church (Ward, 1996) where the youth worker can be seen as the relational agent and driver of work amongst young people: Borgman (1997: 30), Dean (2004: 183), Green and Christian (1998), Pimlott and Pimlott (2008: 75), Root (2007: 62), Savage et al. (2006: 122–35), Senter et al. (2001: 80), Sudworth et al. (2007: 11), Ward (1997: 43) and *Youth Apart* (Church of England, 1996: 36) all have relationships as a pivotal and central theme.

For Sudworth et al., (2007: 10), relational work has become the new paradigm within post-Christendom. However, in advancing a theology for relational youth work, its focus on the missiological task must encompass both pastoral and educative elements of practice. Root (2007, 2009, 2012, 2013) argues that the Church needs to reframe its thinking on relational youth work from strategic influence to incarnational *being*. Root's theology challenges the Church to recognize and mitigate inherent power differentials that result in young people being controlled, and, instead, to foster reciprocal mutuality, in which being, learning and acting can occur. Root's work defies the performative illusion of 'success' in the Church, which, as with other forms of youth work, has become driven in different ways by professionalization, numbers, outcomes and outputs (Clayton and Stanton, 2008; Root, 2012), and, in doing so, calls us to consider honestly our motivations and practices. He suggests:

It may be that we owe a great many [young people] an apology. We may have talked about wanting to be in relationship with them, but on deeper reflection it [becomes] clear we were more concerned with influencing them. We cared more about getting them saved, baptized, confirmed or involved in positive activities than being truly with them in the deepest joys and sufferings of their lives. (Root, 2009: 19)

Such ideas place 'being there' with and for young people at the centre of Christian youth work practice (Dean, 2004). They represent a faithful and living expression of the Kingdom of God *as* both a transformative agent and a social ethic (Hauerwas, 1983: 99–102).

Youth Work and Ministry

Discussion on relational, missiological disciplines often employs the phrase 'youth ministry'. The terms 'youth work' and 'ministry' are debated and sometimes used interchangeably (Ward, 1997) but can be seen as an unnecessary 'dualism' (Brierley, 2003). Thomson (2007: 224–5) offers the most robust critique of this idea – arguing that, while youth ministry does not discount the provision of welfare seen in youth work, its prime focus is in building the Church.

Relationships as Communicative Acts

Empirical 'frame by frame' exploration of youth ministry (Bailey, 2013, 2014) affirms relationships as being a fundamental and overarching theme. Relationships function as communicative acts and as spaces of connection and transmission. They are fundamental threads that run through a Christian youth worker's practice which become circuits of influence and places of sub-cultural engagement (Root, 2007). Relational practice is guided by the normative voice of youth ministry literature (Bailey, 2014) and reverberates with the ethos of informal education (Jeffs and Smith, 1999). Theologies of relational youth work hold that relationships are the *medium* of mission, and central to meaning-making because they carry, transmit and communicate the faith, message and acts of the Christian youth worker amongst young people. Consequently, relationships can be viewed as communicative acts which embody medium, act and message – the vehicle through which the gospel is shared with young people (Borgman, 1997; Dean, 2004; Pimlott and Pimlott, 2008; Sudworth et al., 2007; Ward, 1997).

These complex and nuanced practices can be articulated through the words 'relationship', 'like Jesus', 'being there' and 'time and journey'. These words and motifs act as theological shorthand (Bailey, 2013, 2014). This shorthand reveals an embedded theology that evokes connection with a wider theological picture from the evangelical Christian tradition. This, however, is a 'thin' and insufficient description (Geertz, 1973) of relationship. The complexities of practice, when expressed, must therefore begin to reveal the depth and richness of an enacted theology that makes explicit its connection to a wider, deeper, richer set of beliefs from within the Christian tradition. When expressed as shorthand, description is partial, allowing for only limited theological interpretation of complex Christian youth work practice. The motifs, although limited (and limiting) in one sense, paradoxically have the power to be meaningful in the animation of practice by pointing to a deeper theological reality.

Christian Youth Work as Theological Shorthand

At the centre of this shorthand lies a problem with the theological expression of Christian youth work and its relationship to the church. Existing literature (e.g. Borgman, 1997; Pimlott and Pimlott, 2008; Savage et al., 2006; Sudworth et al., 2007; *Youth Apart*, 1996) tends to present lightweight, thin and shorthanded expressions of theological thought on relationship. Herein, there appears very limited verbalization of relational richness. Much youth ministry canon appears to lack theological depth and ignores the potentialities of relational theological capital within the Christian tradition. However, Ward (1997: 43) begins to offer a deeper definition of relationship – locating it within *Missio Dei* (God's mission to the world). Dean (2004: 91) advances a fuller understanding of relationships through the act of 'being there'. Dean locates relationships beyond an individualized focus, placing them within congregational praxis. It is perhaps Root (2007), by drawing on Bonhoeffer's Christology, who gives the most articulate expression of relationships within Christian youth work. At the level of articulated practice, there remains, however, a disconnect between some of the deeper theological expressions on relationships articulated by Dean, Root and Ward and the reality of praxis (Bailey, 2014).

It is perhaps the theology of incarnation, however, that offers a cornerstone on which such praxis might be advanced. Incarnation, when outworked, enables us to see Jesus as a relational model. This resonates with Pimlott and Pimlott (2008: 66–7, 75), who see youth workers following in and modelling the work of God's grace. For Dean (2004: 46), 'imitating Christ' has long been a staple of Christian youth work. Here, however, 'Jesus as model' again merely acts as theological shorthand, which encompasses a richness of ideas and theological capital, including incarnation and *mimesis* (imitation).

The problem with Christian youth work practice, based on 'like Jesus' as a model, is that the person of Jesus can operate at the level of an idea. It becomes a model for *how* to minister – to fulfil a function (Bailey, 2014). There is a separation between operating 'like Jesus' and participating in the risen reality of Christ's presence as the power of mission and social change. Enacting Christian youth work 'like Jesus' removes us from who he is cosmically; it distances the risen Jesus and the Jesus of History. Here, the question 'Where is Jesus in relation to practice?' (Root, 2007; Cameron et al, 2010) is neither considered nor answered. This, in theological shorthand, might be assumed self-evident. Yet, there are many facets to being like Jesus: political, angry, prophetic, healer and rabbi. Therefore, which aspect of being like Jesus is chosen as a model?

Christian Youth Work and Being There

Many Christian youth workers embody a natural relational affinity with young people – they ‘do relationships well’. In practice, this can be seen in ‘being there’ with and for young people. In the same way that Christ entered the full humanity of the world, youth workers are called to enter the full humanity of young people’s experiencing – to accompany them on their journey (Green and Christian, 2004). Through ‘being there’, the Christian youth worker reflects and points towards God and His care for people. ‘Being there’ is expressed through taking time with young people, as described through the narrative and structure of ‘journey’. Journeying creates a liminal space for God to move and act (Bailey, 2013). ‘Being there’ is an expression of God’s active participation and presence through which grace is expressed (Root, 2014). For Dean (2004: 90), ‘being there’ in Christian youth work represents a fidelity – glimpsed through human interaction, but ultimately found in God. This is what many Christian youth workers hope for: that the compelling witness of ‘presence’ will lead young people whom they work amongst to discover God through a journey of accompaniment (Green and Christian, 2004).

‘Being there’ is the theological outworking of being like Jesus. It becomes an enacted theological moment in time and space through which a youth worker acts as a ‘symbol’ (Tillich, 1962) that embodies and participates in the qualities of that which they point towards. It is journeying which provides time and space for its authentication (Bailey, 2013). Through being there as a ‘symbol’, the Christian youth worker shares a meaningful account of their relationship with Christ. Although being there can be seen as theological shorthand for the complexities of practice, as an expressive ‘symbol’, of relational accompaniment and participation, it represents something profound at the nexus of theology and lived experience in the pursuit of a practical theology for youth work.

God’s Triune life and Communicative Action

Undoubtedly Christian youth work needs to engage more thoroughly with the *theological* task of relationships. The result of years of uncritical practice is that relationships have become the enculturated *tool* of Christian youth work, rather than its essence. The Church has used (or, perhaps more accurately, misused) relational *practices* as a manipulative instrument of religious socialization, rather than seeking to embody relationship as the central expression of God’s Triune communicative being, as relating and acting.

For Vanhoozer (2010: 245), the Triune life of God is made known through His communicative presence and activity in history, and through Biblical

God in Christ. For Vanhoozer (2010: 292), being 'in Christ' is not something that happens to isolated individuals but, rather, to a company of people, the *ecclesia* – the Church. Union with Christ is also a theological union with other Christians – to be 'in Christ' is a corporate existence that becomes lived out and embodied through the Church. This is a particular group of people who *are* a social ethic and are called to be a people of virtue. Not just any virtue, but the virtues necessary for remembering, re-telling and communicating the story of a crucified saviour, virtues necessary to be faithful to the peaceable kingdom through the theological virtues of faith, hope and love (Hauerwas, 1983: 103). Therefore, the Church is to be a people who seek peace and justice – unmasking injustice and violence, to be there for young people, while revealing the insufficiency of politics based on coercion and falsehood. The Church finds its true source of power in servanthood, rather than dominion (Hauerwas, 1983: 102).

This advances a more authentic and faithful expression of 'being there'. First, the location of the idea of the youth minister as 'symbol' of the theological reality of participating 'in Christ' moves us beyond the limits of theological shorthand of 'like Jesus' and 'model'. Second, to understand that being there – 'in Christ' – must include the local Church community (Dean, 2004; Root, 2007), rather than the individualistic understanding of Christian youth work that reverberates through much existing literature. This has the potential to move Christian youth work beyond individual youth workers and to re-tether practice to the Christian tradition in order to re-tell its story. Third, being there – 'in Christ' – contains two important elements: the traditional Christian practices of the *kerygma* – speaking about Jesus, and *diakonia* – the serving of others. Both of these Christian practices need to be made more explicit within Christian youth work, if they are to be more authentic and faithful to the Gospel. Youth workers are living examples of *diakonia*, but this presence, this coming alongside young people as they suffer, in acts of serving and prior mission need to be re-rooted in the traditional practices and fellowship of the Church community.

Christian Youth Work, Relationships and Place Sharing

As this coming alongside suffering young people, through being there, is explored, a rich theology can be seen. Root (2007) invokes the work of Bonhoeffer (1960) to consider the theological nature of the incarnate Christ and what might be learned for contemporary relational practice. In doing so, Root argues the theological and relational centrality of 'place-sharing' in which the youth worker rejects the cursory performance (or theological shorthand) of relationship to share in the deepest, most ethical sense with every aspect of the young person's humanity. Root argues that it is the responsibility of the place-sharer to experience with the young person every

aspect of their poverty or pain, and, without losing their own sense of self to 'stand so close to the other that his or her reality becomes my own, his or her suffering becomes mine' (2007: 127). In doing so, the place-sharer stands with and in the young person's place, becoming their advocate. Such practice calls the youth worker to name and engage critically with the structural forms which oppress and dehumanize, to emphasize and celebrate the young person's humanity and to reconstruct repressive cultural systems in a 'more humanizing fashion' (ibid.: 131). It is here, Root argues, that deep, reciprocal and associative learning occurs. Not only does the young person experience a fuller understanding and acceptance of their own humanity, through relatedness, the youth worker's own sense of self and critical understanding of the world is itself transformed. Work of this nature means responding to a call; it requires deep commitment, in giving of ourselves to young people, or what Root (2013: 135) describes as a '*sharing* of union in personhood' (emphasis in original). This resonates with Cunningham (1998: 183) who contends that, as people are created in the image of God, we are called to participate in one another's lives to a much greater degree than dominant individualistic cultures espouse. These are powerful ideas, especially when connected to the Church community (Dean, 2004; Root, 2007), that lead to the church *being* a social ethic (Hauerwas, 1983) that effects change as a faithful expression of the Kingdom of God.

Over to You

- What guides your understanding of youth work?
- What values underpin this; where do they come from?
- How central are relationships to your practice; how is this evidenced?
- What do you think about the idea of place-sharing?
- How do you seek to bring change amongst the young people and communities you work with?
- What do you think about the Church *being* a social ethic to effect change and bring justice?
- How does this challenge your perception of the Church?

Root's (2007) thoughts are a crucial part of the conversation; yet, through Bonhoeffer (1960), he sees Christ as a fellow sufferer, a perspective that resonates in the work of Fiddes (2000) and Moltmann (1974, 1981). However, although this is attractive, it has the capacity to normalize suffering within God, and is therefore, at least in part, problematic. For God is not just a

fellow sufferer, God withstands suffering, God redeems, transforms and unmask its power (Vanhooser, 2010: 446–9). This requires commanding compassion. Vanhooser sees that divine passion is *kyriotic*; it is not commiserating but commanding – an effectual compassion. This not *only* shares, but transforms the sufferer's situation. It has the capacity to effect change and relieve suffering; divine compassion is an enabling power by which the Triune God shares and communicates His own life. This communicative act of God, His saving grace and goodness, provides comfort and transformation by placing suffering in a new perspective (Rom 8:18; 2 Cor 4:17). In relationships that constitute you and me (Cunningham, 1998: 198), or the Christian youth worker and young person, Christ is present; thus relationships act as spaces of theological communication, and represent liminal spaces for God's communicative action (Bailey, 2013). Through place-sharing and 'being there' – 'in Christ', relationships as communicative acts can be re-imagined: the person of Jesus Christ is present and can be made known. This takes place through relationships of purposeful presence, and the wise contextual witness of the Christian youth worker (Cray, 2007). From the perspective of salvation, suffering may or may not be removed, but it can be reframed, re-orientated and awakened to the hope of the Gospel. In this way, Vanhooser (2010: 283, 495–7) contends that we participate in God as we actively imagine and dramatize *theos* – yet, it is ultimately the Spirit who recreates the image of God, who authors salvation and sustains the Church as a social ethic (Yoder, 1972). The prime task of the Spirit is to communicate Christ – the Triune God freely decides to make what is His – His love – *ours*, extending it towards *others* who are yet to know Him. This moves relationships beyond the theological shorthand outlined above, and reframes them in a rigorous and theologically rich paradigm of communicative acts, which generates a renewed framework for relational Christian youth work praxis.

Conclusion: Christian Youth Work as a Way of Life

The apostle Paul describes his vision of this way of life in Thessalonians 2v8 when he writes: 'Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well'. Such a call means giving ourselves to serve young people. Moreover, it presents significant opportunities to transform practice. Historically, as can be noted from Chapter 1, an 'incarnational' approach of this nature would not have been considered problematic; indeed, Josephine McAllister Brew (1957: 112) seminally described youth work as a 'burning love of humanity'. Yet, contemporary constructions of youth work, and the prescription of particular

ethical codes which are increasingly becoming rigid rulebooks, rather than flexible frameworks for practice, together with the performative professionalization of practice within different arenas including the Church, potentially limit the scope and acceptability of such work. Young people's rights must be safeguarded and their wellbeing must, of course, be of primary concern – boundaries must be appropriated and assured; however, Root (2007), Hauerwas (1983) and Vanhoozer (2010) challenge us to re-imagine relationships as underpinned by a rediscovery of virtue over more prescriptive ethical formulations. The challenge is for the Church to *be* a social ethic (Hauerwas, 1983) that transcends the rigid and performative prescription of contemporary social and policy frameworks, which re-elevates the humanity of relationships and relatedness, and which challenges youth work to be re-imagined in its original image.

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