



EQUAL OPPORTUNITY FOR MISSION AND MINISTRY

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INTERRUPTIONS AND CO-CONSTRUCTION: TOWARDS A THEOLOGY OF EQUAL OPPORTUNITY FOR MISSION AND MINISTRY WITH YOUNG PEOPLE

INTRODUCTION

Jesus was not averse to interruptions. On one occasion he was in a house teaching those around him.¹ There were such a lot of people there that not everyone could get in and the crowd was overflowing out of the house. But the people kept coming. And why not – Jesus was in town. A group of five friends had heard about this Jesus and were excited that he was visiting. The four healthy friends decided this was an opportunity not to be missed so they each took a corner of the mat that the fifth, paralysed, friend spent his life lying on and they carried him to Jesus. Except they didn't, because they couldn't get to Jesus. The crowds were too big. But there was no one on the roof and they could get to the steps. Inside, Jesus felt a little dust fall from the ceiling, then a lot of dust, and then clouds of dust and debris, followed by a paralysed man on a mat being lowered through the hole that had been newly created by four friends who were determined that they wouldn't miss this opportunity. It turned out that Jesus also did not want to miss this opportunity. So he stopped teaching and turned his attention to the man on the mat; before long, he is demonstrating that he has the authority to forgive sins and the power to heal. This is not what he had planned, but it is what happened. This event in the ministry of Jesus was constructed out of a coming together of one man's condition, four friends' determination and Jesus' compassion. The interruption led to ministry. Jesus was not averse to interruptions.

This article seeks to develop a theology of equal opportunity for pioneer youth mission by discussing the

concept of ministry and mission with young people as a co-construction. By this I mean the way that the outcomes of work with young people do not solely depend on what we bring but are constructed out of what we bring, what the young people bring and how we respond to this. As we acknowledge this co-construction inherent in the event of ministry with young people, we begin to develop an approach that naturally honours the equality of opportunity that has been one of the core values of youth work since 1991. In addition, and learning from the life of Jesus, it is by becoming open to interruptions that we make the acknowledgement of co-construction explicit.

The *Youth Work National Occupational Standards* define equality as "treating all individuals equally despite individual differences".² Consequently equality of opportunity holds within it ideas around celebrating diversity and equipping young people to identify and challenge discrimination. While the amount of literature on youth ministry has grown immeasurably in the last 30 years, it is pertinent that there has been little direct reflection on developing a theological vision or critique of these central youth work values. The work of Danny Brierley stands as a notable exception.³ Sadly, it has seemed at times as if the world of youth ministry has felt that it has little to learn from the statutory world of youth work. This is all the more strange given the Christian heritage from which statutory youth work can be traced.⁴

Currently, on their website, the National Youth Agency lists seven values underpinning their concept of youth work.⁵ These develop the four core values in simpler language, with equality of opportunity hovering in the background of four in particular:

- Utilising young people's view of the world.
- Treating young people with respect.
- Respecting and valuing differences.
- Promoting the voice of young people.⁶

It is timely therefore to reflect theologically on these values in order to develop a vision for mission and ministry with young people that is authentic as Christian and as youth work. The theological framework that follows provides the lens through which we might grasp such a vision.

In order to develop this approach, the article moves through three sections. Section one discusses the importance of valuing the ultimate and proximate

¹ Mark 2:1–12.

² National Youth Agency, "Youth Work National Occupational Standards" (2014): 8, accessed 2 May 2018, <http://www.nya.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/National-Occupation-Standards-for-Youth-Work.pdf>.

³ Danny Brierley, *Joined Up: An Introduction to Youth Work and Ministry (Youthwork: The Resources)* (Carlisle: Authentic Lifestyle, 2003).2003

⁴ *Ibid.*, 27–48.

⁵ See "What is Youth Work?", accessed 2 May 2018, <https://nya.org.uk/careers-youth-work/what-is-youth-work/>.

⁶ *Ibid.*

contexts of young people; section two then presents this in terms of a vision for mission and ministry in which all of creation actively participates in the relations of the triune God, meaning that we need to be open to that which others bring to our experience of God's active life in our midst. The final section turns to discuss the importance of taking an ethnographic posture in order to become aware of the contexts of the young people we are with and to welcome the interruptions that these contexts bring. This final section draws on my own ethnographic research of Christian youth groups to highlight the inherent ambiguity within such work and why this ambiguity is to be cultivated if we are to work towards grounding our mission and ministry in a theology of equal opportunity.

THE ULTIMATE AND PROXIMATE CONTEXTS OF YOUNG PEOPLE

In order to move towards this theology of equal opportunity in mission and ministry with young people, we need to take account of two distinct theological contexts. First is the ultimate context of youth; and, second is the proximate context.⁷ The ultimate context claims that the period of life young people are in offers something distinctive to reflecting the image of God and the in-breaking of his kingdom on earth. In contrast, the proximate context refers to the specific circumstances of the young people that we are working with at a particular time and place. The ultimate context is key in remembering that youth is not a problem to be solved but a unique and precious part of the human experience; the proximate context alerts us to the way that the circumstances of young people have something specific to bring to conversation about God and the Christian faith. Consequently both move us towards a theology of equal opportunity for mission and ministry with young people.

We live in a culture that tends to frame youth as a problematic stage of life – something to be survived by both young people and others in their sphere of existence.⁸ This narrative tends to stem from the understanding that adolescence is a period of identity experimentation and formation that will inevitably result in boundary pushing, mood swings and increasingly risky behaviour. This is

however a narrative that tends to be based on newspaper headlines rather than the reality of human experience. The ultimate context of youth understands the adolescent experience as one part of the lifelong human process of identity formation and development, though with a particular focus during the teenage years. Amy Jacober, for example, describes the significance of “individuation” as a key developmental task of this life stage. It is in large part this task of individuation that marks the teenage years as ones in which the key question of “who am I?” begins to be asked.⁹ Asking this question is a distinguishing point between childhood and the development of adolescence. Young people, throughout adolescence, are seeking to identify the kind of people they are going to be and the way that this will set them apart from their family while still being understood within a community context. The journey of individuation “is a process of moving, in community, toward adulthood – realising that this movement itself is part of the larger, lifelong process of differentiation”.¹⁰

Intriguingly these insights about adolescence are increasingly being backed up by neurological research. In a book published earlier this year, neurologist Sarah-Jayne Blakemore suggests that there are common, biological changes to the brain that are a unique part of this process of moving from a child to an adult. It is in the formation of neural pathways through adolescence that young people can be seen to be literally inventing themselves:

The brain undergoes substantial development in adolescence, and this brain development probably contributes to the way adolescents typically behave.¹¹

The remarkable thing that Blakemore is finding through her work is that many of the characteristics and claims about teenagers when research into adolescence was first being conducted by Stanley G. Hall over a hundred years ago can now be correlated to substantial and protracted changes that are taking place in the brain though these years.¹² Blakemore concludes:

Rather than being a period of purely social change, adolescence should be considered a unique stage of biological and psychological development.¹³

⁷ I am indebted to the work of Danish priest and youth ministry theologian Christian Noval for the concept of ultimate and proximate contexts of young people. He recently presented on these themes at the International Association for the Study of Youth Ministry (IASYM) European Conference in Malta. See www.iasym.net.

⁸ For an articulation and refutation of this, see Philip Graham, *The End of Adolescence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁹ Amy E. Jacober, *The Adolescent Journey: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Practical Youth Ministry* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 63. *The Adolescent Journey: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Practical Youth Ministry* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011)

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 61.

¹¹ Sarah-Jayne Blakemore, *Inventing Ourselves: The Secret Life of the Teenage Brain* (London: Doubleday, 2018), 202. *Inventing Ourselves: The Secret Life of the Teenage Brain* (London: Doubleday, 2018) Intriguingly she also claims that similar changes in brain function can be seen in animals transitioning from juvenile to adult (*ibid.*, 4).

¹² *Ibid.*, 201.

¹³ *Ibid.*

The specific experience of youth is therefore not problematic but instead vital to developing an understanding of what it is to be and become human. In the light of this, it is pertinent to ask what might be the particular theological contribution of this ultimate context of young people. In other words, if there is a specific time of human development and identity formation that occurs during the period we call adolescence, roughly the teenage years, then what particular ways of expressing faith and relating to God might be more apparent during this stage as opposed to others? This is the question that Kenda Creasy Dean tries to answer in *Practicing Passion*.¹⁴ For Dean the theology of youth revolves around passion. She argues that unless the church embraces young people and what they naturally bring, our churches will be devoid of the passion that is inherent within this stage of life.¹⁵ Now, all of us who work with young people will, at times, struggle to name passion as a key characteristic of those young people and yet, anecdotally, we recognise the experience of young people being given the opportunity to talk about something they are especially into or when a particular issue becomes vital to them.¹⁶ They see things more clearly, are less prone to inaction due to pre-empting the challenges ahead and can be idealistic. The recent anti-gun “March for Our Lives” protests led by young people in the USA are an excellent example of this.¹⁷

Steve Emery-Wright helps to build on this by encouraging us to ask the question of what young people can bring to our ministry as theologians, liturgists and interpreters.¹⁸ By working from the assumption that young people have something to offer our understanding of God, how we worship him and in discerning what he is saying, we are moved from a position of monopolising the agency in our youth ministry and mission to a place of openness to what the young people themselves bring with them. This is an inherently risky position but it is one in which the young people are valued and invited as equal partners in what we are doing and what God is doing in our midst. It moves us from being the ones constructing events and activities to being explicitly open to the co-construction of mission and ministry. The more we acknowledge that

there is something young people bring simply through the experience of being young, the more naturally we will operate from a theology of equal opportunity. The ultimate context of youth is not problematic; rather, it is an experience through which God is able to show us all something vital of his life and the human experience of being created to reflect the imago Dei.

Alongside this ultimate context of young people, it is important that we are attentive to the proximate context of the particular young people with whom we are working. Alister McGrath has written of the importance of cultivating attentiveness to the theology of the place where we work in mission and ministry.¹⁹ He argues that a move from generalities to particularities is a move towards truth.²⁰ This is of course a vital aspect of the gospel message – in the particular actions of Jesus we see the truth of who this God is. In the words of St Paul, “we look at this Son and see the God who cannot be seen”.²¹ If we want to know what the love of God looks like, we do not try to explain it generally but we point to it in the particular. We look at Jesus with the dust of a broken roof in his hair; we look at him weeping at the tomb of a friend, feeding a hungry crowd, eating with those that no one else would eat with and ultimately carrying the wood of his own execution to the place of his death – this is what the love of God looks like.

McGrath develops this thought by pointing to the way that God is revealed in the narrative of Scripture: not generally in time and space but in place and history.²² Drawing on the work of Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann, McGrath defines “place” as space in which important words have been spoken and events have taken place.²³ Consequently if we are to engage effectively in mission and ministry, we need to attend to the particular place in which we find ourselves. This means listening to the stories and hearing the words that shape the collective and individual experience of those who live their lives where we are operating. Drawing on an image from the wine industry, McGrath uses the concept of the “terroir” to illustrate how the gospel will take on a particular flavour based on the local conditions, in much



¹⁴ Kenda Creasy Dean, *Practicing Passion: Youth and the Quest for a Passionate Church* (Grand Rapids, Michigan and Cambridge: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2004).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 1–26.

¹⁶ I recall, for example, with amusement a very in-depth conversation about mountain biking with a 14-year-old boy at an After School Club one time!

¹⁷ Amanda Holpuch and Paul Owen, “March for Our Lives: hundreds of thousands demand end to gun violence – as it happened,” *The Guardian*, 24 Mar 2018, accessed 27 April 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/live/2018/mar/24/march-for-our-lives-protest-gun-violence-washington>.

¹⁸ Steve Emery-Wright, *Empowering Young People in Church* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 2008).

¹⁹ Alister McGrath, “The Cultivation of Theological Vision: Theological Attentiveness and the Practice of Ministry,” in *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, ed. Pete Ward (Cambridge: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2012), 107–23.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 113.

²¹ Col. 1:15 (The Message).

²² McGrath, “The Cultivation of Theological Vision,” 125.

²³ *Ibid.*, citing Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 2002), 5.

the same way as wine produced by vineyards will take on the particularities of the local climate and soil conditions – meaning that wine made from the same type of grapes will taste distinctive depending on where the grapes have been grown.²⁴ In addition, the same wine produced in that same place across different years will have a distinct flavour as the conditions will vary year by year. This image is helpful as it reminds us that the theology of place is not static; our attentiveness is not a one-time event but an ongoing listening to and learning from the stories and events that shape the lives of those with whom we live and seek to minister. Once again mission and ministry is consequently a co-construction, and this is an ongoing process of openness to the other, their experience and what they bring. If we are to be faithful to the work of God, the values of youth work and the lives of the young people with whom we work we need to be diligent in attending to the terroir of those young people. By doing so we will move again towards a theology of equal opportunity, humble and open-handed with what we bring, knowing that it is only part of the story; and we will be willing to allow the lives and places of young people, in their ultimate and proximate contexts, to interrupt our expectations and our plans.

PARTICIPATION, EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY AND THE TRIUNE LIFE OF GOD

In addition to the way that the ultimate and proximate contexts of young people begin to move us towards a theology of equal opportunity in mission and ministry with young people, the way in which the Christian God is understood as triune is helpful. Indeed, reflecting on the Trinitarian nature of God is intrinsically connected to the idea of ultimate and proximate contexts as it holds in tension the general and particular in our pursuit of the truth of God.

All too often the concept of the Trinity is one in which explanation is attempted in the general. The way in which three can be one and one can be three is illustrated through the use of analogy.²⁵ This is more often than not problematic, however, since the analogies used tend to reduce God to a mathematical formula or fall in to one of

various theological traps; for example, referring to God as one who plays different roles, three individuals that contribute to one task or removing the personhood from God altogether.²⁶

Rather than making these analogous moves in order to understand the triune nature of God in general, Paul Fiddes has developed a pastoral doctrine of God in which his Trinitarian life is grasped as it is participated in.²⁷ Without wanting to veer too much into the theme of participation, though the values of participation and equality of opportunity within youth work are closely interrelated, this idea opens up a helpful line of thinking for the kind of approach for which I am arguing.

The life of God is an interweaving movement of relationships between Father, Son and Spirit into which humans are called – they are movements of relationship that invite participation.²⁸ Rather like a dance, the relations that make up Godself are moving and opening up to invite the participation of others.²⁹ This opening up to the participation of others is seen in the moves in which the Father sends the Son and together the Father and the Son send the Spirit. God is known as God through this participation. In addition, says Fiddes, because there can be nothing outside of Godself, God must have made room within his life for the created order.³⁰ Consequently all of creation is already participating in the life of God, though the people of God have a particular form of participation.³¹ Resultant of this, the practice of mission and ministry can be understood as calling individuals and communities with which we work to recognise the ways in which they already participate in God and strive to deepen that participation.

In addition, this participative understanding of the Trinity helps to hold in tension the ultimate and proximate contexts as they are integral to the life of God. Holding to the understanding that God is Trinity, expressed in interweaving movements of relationship, is to make an ultimate truth claim about the nature of God. It is, one could say, the ontological reality of God. In this way it is possible to hold onto truth claims as Christians, both for ourselves and in our lives and ministry. We do, however, know God insofar as we participate in these interweaving relational moves in the present. Consequently we only ever

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 127.

²⁵ Of these attempts I find myself most drawn to concept of “polyphony” in the work of Cunningham. This refers to the way that distinct musical notes come together to form a single sound when part of a chord. See David S. Cunningham, *These Three Are One: The Practice of Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1997).

²⁶ Paul S. Fiddes, *Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd, 2000), 11–13.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 38.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 51. Fiddes says, “It is into these interweaving currents of mission that the disciples are drawn.”

²⁹ Pete Ward, *Liquid Church* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2002), 49–55.

³⁰ Paul S. Fiddes, “Ecclesiology and Ethnography: Two Discipline, Two Worlds,” in *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, ed. Pete Ward (Cambridge: Wm B Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2012), 26–27.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 27.

possess a limited knowledge of God.³² We can therefore be ontological realists, while operating as epistemological relativists.³³

This balance between ultimate reality and contingent participation in the current again draws us towards a theology of equal opportunity for youth mission and ministry. As we recognise that the young people we work with are already participating in the life of God, we are forced to open ourselves to their experience, their stories, their place and their proximate context. We are drawn to listen as well as speak and we become aware that the generality of the word “youth” hides a plethora of individual experiences and stories that might be unearthed in order to discover their lives in the context of God’s. Through the way these young people, together and individually, participate in the life of God and each other, they will contribute to the construction of the mission and ministry we seek to develop with them. And in turn contribute to developing and deepening our experience of participating in the life of God.

To draw on an image from Scripture we might think of ourselves as Eli with the young boy Samuel running to us to find out what we want.³⁴ We gradually realise that God is revealing himself to Samuel in a way that he hasn’t to us, but Samuel does not yet have the language or experience to name what it is that he is sensing. Eli, in wisdom and humility, with open-handedness to the things of God, equips Samuel to hear from God and to bring that to the conversation, honouring and acting on what he brings even though it does not look like what Eli would have expected. This is something of what equality of opportunity in mission and ministry looks like. It also alludes to the reason why Fiddes, like McGrath, points to the need to attend to the place where we find ourselves in order to be properly faithful to the call of God. For Fiddes, this is framed in terms of ethnography.

CULTIVATING AN AMBIGUOUS APPROACH AND TAKING AN ETHNOGRAPHIC POSTURE

Ethnography is a mode of looking³⁵ that can bring the role of non-elites in the production of meaning to the

fore.³⁶ It is a form of research that seeks to understand the social interactions that construct the world around us from the perspective of participants in that world.³⁷ Specifically in a youth work context it can bring to light the contributions that the young people themselves make to the construction of our mission and ministry with them. This section then is the turn to the practical in this article but that does not make it any less theological – rather, it is a theological imperative of the approach that I have been developing through the previous two sections. It is about moving towards what Nick Shepherd has called a collaborative theology for youth ministry.³⁸ Specifically this section draws on insights from my own ethnographic work with young people while also arguing that taking an ethnographic posture is key to genuinely working towards equality of opportunity for young people, taking into account the ultimate and proximate contexts of young people and life of God.³⁹

My research revolved specifically around extended case studies of two outreach-focused youth groups that were part of the Urban Saints network.⁴⁰ These were groups that sought to communicate the Christian faith to young people through simple Christian practices such as Bible teaching, prayer and pastoral care while also providing a place for young people to enjoy social activities and free time. I spent 18 months with each group and interviewed leaders and young people after being with the groups for six to 12 months. As I was drawing near to the end of my time in the groups, I realised that the word that most accurately defined these groups was “ambiguous”. By this I mean that there was no clear, singular way of defining the groups and the role they played in the lives of the participants.

Both groups defined their purpose as being broadly outreach – by which they meant they hoped to engage young people with the claims of the Christian faith. Central to this hope were simple Christian practices of prayer, Bible study and pastoral care that were key to both groups. While the groups did provide a context through which some young people, and intriguingly many of the leaders, talked of growing in their Christian faith, it became clear that there were a wide variety of ways to express the purpose of the groups and the role the groups played for those who attended.

³² As in 1 Cor. 13:12: “For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known” (NIV).

³³ Mark Scanlan, “Urban Saints: An Interweaving Ecclesiology as a Contribution to the Fresh Expressions Debate” (PhD diss., Durham University, 2017), 78.

³⁴ 1 Sam. 3:1–21.

³⁵ Martyn Hammersley and Paul Atkinson, *Ethnography: Principles in Practice, 3rd revised ed.* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), 230.

³⁶ Kathryn Tanner, “Theological Reflection and Christian Practices,” in *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*, ed. Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C Bass (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2001), 230.

³⁷ Michael H. Agar, *The Professional Stranger: An Informal Introduction to Ethnography, 2nd revised ed.* (San Diego: Academic Press, 1996), 1.1.

³⁸ See Nicholas Shepherd, “Trying to Be Christian: A Qualitative Study of Young People’s Participation in Two Youth Ministry Projects” (PhD diss., King’s College, London, 2009).

³⁹ For more detail on the research behind this section see my doctoral thesis, “Urban Saints”, available via Durham University’s e-thesis store.

⁴⁰ See <https://www.urbansaints.org/> (accessed 2 May 2018).

Both groups were built around key “modes of belonging” that expressed the rationale for young people attending the groups and expressed why participants maintained commitment to them. The modes of belonging saw the groups as social spaces and safe places for young people, while also providing opportunities for young people to contribute and operating as significant places for the leader’s expression of faith. These modes of belonging were in turn cultivated through what I called the “practices of interruption” that opened up the young people to the experiences available in the groups.⁴¹ The practices were the ordinary practices of welcome and encouraging questions in the context of creating fun. In the words of Kathryn Tanner, these are everyday practice “born-again to unpredictable effect”.⁴²

There were times when these practices formed literal interruptions in the groups. I noted on several occasions during my observations that the exuberant welcome of young people into the groups was encouraged even when young people arrived in the midst of an aspect of Bible teaching or prayer. For one leader, this practice of welcome interrupted even her opinion that the Bible teaching was the most important aspect of the group! One 17-year-old reinforced the value of welcome interrupting other core practices when I interviewed her:

If you are late to something people kind of ignore you as if you’re not there, but she is interested in you and she will often ask questions later if she feels she needs to follow it up. But it’s quite nice to know that you’re not just sliding in on the sidelines... No she’s like, hi how are you, how’s your week been, is there anything we need to know? No, good, this is what we’ve been doing and this is what we’re going to do. And she doesn’t really bat an eyelid that I’m late, or if anyone is late.⁴³

Similarly the ambiguous space created by allowing interruptions is demonstrated by a description of a small group time by one of the leaders in which he details a conversation that he allowed to take place in the group:

One conversation, which is probably the best conversation I have ever seen there. One of the kids from the estate, real real tough case, I had him in my small group at the end of the session, and he’s absolute “God doesn’t exist, you know hate him”... and that’s kind of his view on it. And we had another guy who was ¹⁴ or so who comes from a church

background and we were talking about does Jesus exist. And this lad was straightaway “no he doesn’t exist, I can’t see him, I can’t touch him, so how does he exist.” And the other guy was “well I believe he does exist because it says in the Bible” and they ended up having this conversation and the rest of the group were looking at them and waiting for explosions because this lad has a real bad reputation for causing trouble... for five minutes they just had this conversation of yes he does, no he doesn’t and it wasn’t antagonizing or disrespectful or anything, it was just [an] amazing moment to watch and I thought this is why we do this.⁴⁴

Central to this conversation is the way that the leader sat back and allowed it to continue without intervention, concluding that this is why they run the group. By allowing the conversation to run in the way that he did without imposing himself or what he might have considered the correct answer into it, the ambiguity of the group was cultivated.

While the leaders of these groups have an agenda in which they desired to see the young people make the decision to follow Jesus, the ethnographic research brought to light the way that they held this open-handedly in such a way that they were prepared for their agenda to be interrupted through creating space for welcome and encouraging questions. This cultivated the ambiguity that came to define my understanding of the groups. In addition the groups themselves firmly resisted defining themselves as seeking to develop church for the young people. This in itself is an interesting move given the trend of recent years towards developing new forms of church as a missional imperative. However, resisting this gravitational pull of the church is in fact integral to being open to the interruptions that make the co-construction of ministry and therefore the commitment to a theology of equal opportunity explicit.⁴⁵

This does not make the life of the church irrelevant or impossible within such a theological move. On the contrary; resultant of the interplay of these practices and modes of belonging, alongside the outreach focus and non-church identity, an ambiguity around church is a vital part of the discourse of these groups. Within this ambiguity, however, the groups resemble communities of practice for the young people in which some of the core practices are inherently Christian.⁴⁶ Consequently I

⁴¹ Scanlan, “Urban Saints,” 195–99.

⁴² Tanner, “Theological Reflection and Christian Practices,” 230.

⁴³ Young person interview.

⁴⁴ Leader interview.

⁴⁵ See Pete Ward, “Blueprint Ecclesiology and the Lived: Normativity as Perilous Faithfulness,” *Ecclesial Practices*, 2, no. 1 (2015): 74–90.

⁴⁶ Nick Shepherd, “Community Builder,” in *Youth Ministry: A Multi-Faceted Approach*, ed. Sally Nash (London: SPCK, 2011): 34–45. Shepherd describes communities of practice as a helpful way of understanding the task and purpose of the church. In doing so he draws on Elaine

developed an understanding of the groups as potential ecclesial spaces that hold in tension church and not-church elements – they are not church and yet resemble some aspects of the church and allow for ecclesial life to extend into the groups as they operate on some level as communities of Christian practice. There is then a creative tension as the groups are able to respond to the particularities of the lives of the young people they are working with, expressed often in questions and conversations, while retaining a commitment to core simple ecclesial practices that hold within them echoes of the wider life of the church. However, whether the groups express the life of church depends ultimately on the co-construction between what we bring as leader and the contributions of the young people themselves.

My contention then is that to honour a commitment to the core youth work value of equality of opportunity when seeking to develop mission and ministry with young people, we need to be very careful about how we hold our ecclesiological commitments. This does not mean that we have no agenda or desire for young people to meet Jesus, but rather that we intentionally recognise the co-construction of ministry and the role of interruptions in allowing this to be shaped by unexpected voices. This will require us to adopt an ethnographic posture in our work with young people – one that seeks to listen and learn, to be open and humble, to understand and to stand back in order to value the contexts and the lives of the young people themselves.

From my own ethnographic work, I hold that ambiguity cultivated by the core practices of interruption of welcome and encouraging questions in the context of fun need to become our ultimate context of our mission and ministry with young people. By humbly holding to this approach, we will be able to attune to the proximate context of those we seek to work with, as well as their experience of participation in the triune life of God. This is inherently risky and open to misunderstanding, but risk is inherent in the terminology of pioneering. It also flows naturally out of the vision of young people and of God that I proposed

that we might allow ourselves to be interrupted.⁴⁷ It also aligns us with the life and ministry of Jesus – because Jesus was not averse to interruptions.

CONCLUSION

This article has argued that pioneer mission and ministry with young people can operate with a developing theology of equal opportunity. This theology is based on an approach that recognises young people are not a problem to be solved but that the ultimate context of adolescence offers something unique to the Christian community in general – and our mission and ministry specifically. In addition, the proximate context of young people with whom we work is shaped by history and place of that context, and as such requires us to be attentive to these particularities. This approach is founded on a vision of the Trinitarian life of God as one in which all of creation participates in his ongoing relational moves. Consequently we are moved to adopt an ethnographic posture that seeks to be open to the life of God in the place where we are with young people. This means we embrace ambiguity and the interruptions that welcoming young people and encouraging their questions will inevitable bring. We do this in recognition that the life of the church can extend in to this work with young people as they begin to recognise their participation in the life of God as such. This is the heart of my vision for a theology of equal opportunity in pioneer mission and ministry – that the work we do is open to co-construction through the contributions and particularities of the young people themselves and that it is open in this way for good theological reasons.

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Graham, *Transforming Practice: Pastoral Theology in an Age of Uncertainty* (London: Mowbray, 1996).

⁴⁷ See Natalie Wigg-Stevenson, "From Proclamation to Conversation: Ethnographic Disruptions to Theological Normativity," *Palgrave Communications* 1 (2015).

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