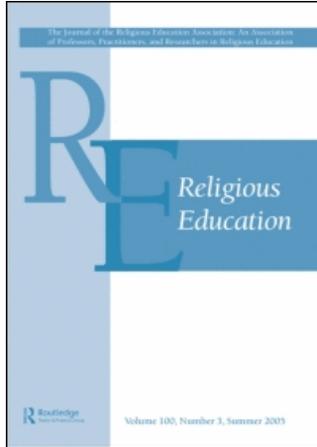


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CREATING SPACE FOR GOD: TOWARD A SPIRITUALITY OF YOUTH MINISTRY

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CREATING SPACE FOR GOD: TOWARD A SPIRITUALITY OF YOUTH MINISTRY

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Abstract

Based on research conducted over seven years by the *Youth Ministry and Spirituality Project* (YMSP), this article offers an overview of the perspectives that have informed the Project's contemplative approach to congregational youth ministry. It begins by examining the context of YMSP through a critical analysis of two other predominant emphases in current approaches to youth ministry: entertainment and catechesis. It then explores the theological rationale for integrating contemplative practices into youth ministry. Finally, it outlines the seven elements of a *spirituality* of youth ministry based on the Charter of YMSP: Sabbath, prayer, covenant community, discernment, accompaniment, hospitality, and authentic action.

I tell you the truth; no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. (John 3:5-6)

Theological reflection on contemporary youth ministry seems to be enjoying a renaissance in the mainline churches. Institutes and forums have formed for the study of youth ministry, textbooks are being published for professional training (Dean, Clark, and Rahn 2001), and many articles and books are now being produced for church leaders in an ongoing effort to re-conceive and renew congregationally based efforts to reach young people with the message of the Gospel (Dean 2004; Bass and Richter 2003; Dean 2000; Dean and Foster 1998; Richter et al. 1998). What has inspired this recent groundswell of interest and concern? Although the answers to this are undoubtedly complex, it is not difficult to discern a mixture of both passionate care and growing anxiety in the voices of laity and professionals alike. Like the parents who bring their children to be blessed by Jesus (Mk 10:13ff.), families, educators, and church leaders are genuinely seeking to bring their young people to an experience of faith that will give them meaning, purpose, and wholeness in their lives. At the same time,

their care seems to be tinged with anxiety rooted in a perception of the increasing power and influence of dominant culture and in the decline of young people's interest in participating in the life of Christian churches (Kauffman 2003a, 2003b).

The recent wave of theological and ecclesial interest in youth ministry seems to be informed by two foundational sets of questions. The first set is theological and concerns the nature and purpose of youth ministry that is faithful to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. What does Jesus' call to re-birth imply for those who minister to young persons? The second set is practical and seeks to explore how churches can respond effectively to the unique challenges of Christian formation and spiritual "re-birth" in the midst of the materialism of contemporary North American culture. In this article, a third set of questions are raised concerning the *spirituality* of youth ministry. In the mode of discernment, it seeks to "test the spirits" and investigate the deeper issue of what impels or "drives" congregational youth ministry.

This investigation is grounded in the findings of the *Youth Ministry and Spirituality Project*. *YMSP* was formed in 1997 as an ecumenical research and teaching initiative and has worked to support the renaissance of congregationally based youth ministry. In the light of the call of the gospel's call to radical "rebirth" in the Spirit and an experience of abiding intimacy with God in the person of Jesus Christ, the mission of *YMSP* has been to teach and promote a *contemplative* approach to youth ministry that places adolescent spiritual formation at the heart of congregational life (Hryniuk 2002, 2005; Yaconelli 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004). It seeks to fulfill its mission by fostering Christian communities that are *attentive to God's presence, discerning of the Spirit, and that accompany young people on the way of Jesus*. This mission has focused not only the spiritual formation of youth, but also on the souls of youth ministers, by supporting a transformation from anxiety-driven to Spirit-led youth ministry. Over the last seven years, in two separate phases, the project has worked with the members of 26 different congregations representing every mainline Protestant denomination, the Roman Catholic Church, as well as the Mennonite and Brethren traditions. These congregations are geographically, racially, and ethnically diverse, are located in both rural and urban settings, and represent a range of socioeconomic backgrounds.

The teaching component of the project has consisted of a series of in-service formation events for senior pastors, youth ministers, adult laypersons, youth from our partner churches, as well as denominational

executives and organizational leaders in the field of youth ministry. The formation events have been carried out over two separate phases with two different cohorts of churches. They have incorporated experiential, practical, and instructional modes of teaching to communicate the principles, practices, and processes of contemplative ministry with young persons. Follow-up research and evaluation has been undertaken through site visits to churches and denominational offices, phone interviews with church and denominational leaders, questionnaires, evaluation retreats, as well as structured consultations with scholars and practitioners in the fields of practical theology and Christian education. Although analysis and evaluation of the project findings is still underway, preliminary study has yielded insight into the value and potential of spiritual formation in the context of contemporary youth ministry.

This article offers an overview of the basic theological and spiritual perspectives that have informed the Project's experimental work as well as its practical efforts to "re-source" congregational youth ministry in the transforming power of contemplative spirituality. It begins by examining the context of *YMSP* and its origins through a brief, critical analysis and discernment of the temptations found in the two predominant emphases in current approaches to youth ministry: entertainment and catechetical instruction. It then explores the theological rationale for a contemplative approach to youth ministry through the lens of a contemporary short story by J. D. Salinger. Finally, it outlines the elements of a *spirituality* of youth ministry. This spirituality is embodied in the Charter of *YMSP*, which has been implemented and evaluated in our second group of partner churches. The aim of the Charter is to "create space for God" at the center of congregational youth ministry through the practice of seven spiritual disciplines. It is through the practice of these disciplines that both ministers and young people are seeking to experience spiritual renewal and faithfulness to the way of Jesus in their lives.

PIZZA AND DOGMA: THE TEMPTATIONS OF CONTEMPORARY YOUTH MINISTRY

It is seven o'clock on a Saturday night and Tim, a 25-year-old seminary student is preparing for the spring lock-in at First Church in Smalltown, Ohio where he works part-time as a youth minister. It's going to be a long night, but Tim is ready for the kids. The itinerary

includes opening games, followed by a bible study and an evening devotion. Then it's time for pizza, popcorn, and at least two scary movies that should get them as far as four a.m. After that, sleep should overtake all but the wildest of the kids. The morning is easy. The crates of croissants and OJ from Costco are stacked in the corner, and after they are finished breakfast, it will be time for a short morning devotion and packing up to get to worship service.

Down the street at Saint Joseph's Parish, Theresa is preparing for her youth ministry meeting as well. She is a single mom of two teenagers and volunteers with a few others to coordinate youth ministry. The meeting won't be until Sunday after the 11:00 mass and coffee hour, but Saturday afternoon is the only time she has for lesson planning. Mary is using the newest material published by Holy Cross Press that lays out the most comprehensive and interesting curriculum available for senior high youth. Based on scripture, church teaching, and hot youth issues, it should inspire a lot of discussion on tomorrow's topic: sexuality and dating.

Tim and Theresa are imaginary youth ministers, but the meetings and activities they are planning in these scenes reflect very real approaches to mainline youth ministry in a middle-class, North American context. The first is an approach that emphasizes entertainment and recreation. It seeks to entice young people into church life through a panoply of exciting events, programs, and activities that often offer pizza or some other delicious food to increase turn out. The second approach emphasizes catechesis. It seeks to offer young people solid doctrinal and moral instruction in the often unconscious hope that church dogma will mysteriously "sink in" and make them good Christians, of whatever denominational type.

Of course, actual youth ministry in both the Catholic and Protestant churches is always a mix of entertainment, recreation, and catechesis along with other components, such as bible study, prayer, mission trips, and service. In the work of *YMSP* with mainline churches, however, we have noticed that entertainment and catechesis are usually the underlying and predominant concerns of most youth ministry. Although both of these emphases have many virtues and have proven effective in faith formation at a certain level, it is becoming clear that as *focal* concerns of ministry, they are clearly inadequate for addressing the deeper spiritual needs of both young people and the ministers who serve them. A brief overview of each approach in terms of their pedagogical emphasis begins to reveal their relative strengths but also their liabilities. The point is not to create

a caricature, but to illumine how resorting to pizza and/or dogma symbolize the two temptations that these approaches face in responding to the complex challenge of forming young persons spiritually in the Christian faith.

The Entertainment Emphasis

Most common among white, suburban, middle-class Protestant churches, the emphasis on *entertainment* focuses its attention largely on the planning and coordination of church-based recreational programs, events, and activities that will attract the largest number of young people into church life. Familiar examples of this are pizza nights, lock-ins, movie nights, ski weekends, and mission trips. Although some formative attention is given to youth through bible study, discussions, and social-service projects, these activities are usually given secondary priority on the assumption that most youth are not ready for or interested in deeper engagement with their faith tradition.

Although acknowledging the goodwill and best intentions of parents and pastoral leaders to “do something for the kids,” emphasis on entertainment is also motivated by an anxious concern on their part to address young people’s complaint that “church is boring” and “irrelevant.” There is an implicit, and occasionally explicit, attempt to compete with the dizzying array of social, recreational, and entertainment possibilities in a young person’s life by offering a set of activities that promise to be “cool,” fun, and exciting. There is a fear that unless the church can offer compelling activities (along with hot pizza) to their young people, they will lose them to the influences of the world. Churches that offer entertaining activities usually engage a youth minister who is a young adult themselves with the energy, dynamism, and charisma to attract and connect to teens. Functionally, their role is usually that of a professional program developer and *manager* as well as a Christian role model (see Myers 1991). As one youth minister in our project put it, “The key factor (in this approach) is numbers. It is to create a program that is more fun, more exciting and more interesting than every other game in town.”

At its best, the core experience of faith offered to youth in this approach is essentially that of a feeling of belonging and *group consciousness* in a community of like-minded peers formed in a common biblical faith communicated through story, song, and the person of the youth minister. It also offers them a relationship to a youth minister, who is usually available to them as a source of care, support, and counsel.

The dangers of the “youth group” approach, however, are equally obvious in many churches that employ it. Our own research indicates that this model often has less than healthy, and occasionally even destructive, consequences for both youth and youth ministers. It produces a form of ecclesial “apartheid,” in which youths are structurally separated from other members of the church body and often viewed, if at all, with anxiety, incomprehension, or patronizing concern. Although hired as charismatic, professional “experts,” many ministers in this model, often seminary or college students, are actually undertrained and unprepared to absorb the expectations of churches that see them as “adolescent saviors” or “Jesus in jeans” for their kids. This arrangement leaves the minister to operate as a “lone ranger” without the active support of the pastor and church members, leading to high levels of stress, frustration, and burn-out. This is not to suggest that all concern for good youth ministry programs is idolatrous. But when creating and sustaining a successful program becomes the center of attention, the ministry risks succumbing to the “numbers game.” Resorting to pizza to increase turn out and program success can be a sign of the more subtle temptation. That temptation is to anxiously rely on gimmicks rather than trust the power of the gospel and committed relationships to attract young persons into the Christian life.

The Catechetical Emphasis

The second dominant emphasis in youth ministry is catechetical instruction. More common in the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches, the focus here is on the faithful transmission of the beliefs and moral values of a given church tradition in the service of increasing *doctrinal consciousness*. There is an overriding concern for doctrinal literacy and sacramental instruction at the appointed age and an anxious concern on the part of parents and church authorities for the inculcation in youth of institutional identity (becoming “good” Catholics, for example) and regular, even if nominal, participation (becoming a regular “attender”). The person of the youth minister is understood more as that of an instructor or coordinator of educational programs for sacramental preparation. Charismatic personality is not as important as commitment to the correct communication of traditional beliefs, norms, and moral teaching. Adult volunteers are recruited annually to assist as classroom aides, small group leaders, or chaperones. Youths are seen, again, as passive

consumers of religious information and potential institutional members. Christian identity is formed more through instruction in the creed, code, and symbols of a religious tradition, as well as liturgical, sacramental, and organizational participation. In many churches, faith consciousness includes a commitment to charity, service, and social justice, but this is not usually considered *constitutive* of Christian formation.

Here again, the catechetical orientation to youth ministry has some obvious virtue. When effective, young persons have the opportunity to engage both the questions of their hearts and the resources of their faith traditions in an atmosphere of genuine inquiry and, when blended with social-service opportunities and spiritual formation, it has the potential to respond to the deepest needs of young persons for meaning, belonging, and a sense of religious identity. The risks and temptations, however, of catechetically oriented programs are also clear. When doctrinal literacy and sacramental preparation become the dominant focus, there is always the risk of real or perceived “indoctrination” that reduces the experience of Christian faith to a set of meaningless answers to questions that are not even being asked. Thomas Groome articulates these risks in terms that are particularly pertinent for youth ministry: “Instead of a narrow cognitivism, informing in Christian faith must reach into the deep heart’s core of people’s very being—into their souls—educating their heads, hearts, and hands . . . Without such informing, the dangers range from fundamentalism to dismissing Christianity as nonsense (Groome and Horell 2004, 7).

The temptation here is to substitute teaching *about* the faith for an experience of the presence of the living God, trusting that the Spirit has the power to awaken hearts and minds of young persons to the truth of the gospel more effectively than anxious human efforts to instruct. This is not to deny the need for information and theological reflection as an integral part of youth ministry, but to discern how a preoccupation with dogma may be an indication of the deeper temptation to substitute the letter for the Spirit in communicating the meaning of faith.

Alternative Approaches to Youth Ministry

The current surge of academic study and attention to the renewal of youth ministry reflects growing critical engagement with the conventional approaches to youth ministry and recognition of the limitations of entertainment and catechesis as focal concerns. A number of

creative and constructive alternatives in Christian formation have been proposed in both the mainline Protestant churches and the Roman Catholic church. In the Catholic church, liberation theology and pedagogy has increased awareness of young persons as an oppressed minority, but also as potential agents of change in the world. Forms of youth ministry have evolved that cultivate greater *critical* consciousness and commitment to social justice as constitutive of the gospel message, focusing the attention of young people and their ministers less on dogma and more on the demands of justice and peace (see White 2001; Warren 1998). In the mainline Protestant churches, the growing recognition of irrationality and confusion of theological aims in youth ministry has led to the establishment of institutes and resources geared specifically towards cultivating *biblical and theological* consciousness on the part of youth and youth ministers. Institutes and forums have been organized to promote the study of theology and other Christian practices with youth. The cultivation of a *practical* consciousness can be seen as a way of becoming what Dorothy Bass and Craig Dykstra have called “partners in God’s reconciling love for the world” (1999, 8).

All of these initiatives respond to a very real need in young people for safe and welcoming places to explore theological issues or Christian practices in the company of caring adults. They flow from important theoretical models of youth ministry that respond effectively to many of the problems and limitations of entertainment and catechetically oriented strategies. Each approach nurtures a particular form of consciousness that is essential for the spiritual growth of the young person in Christ.

The mission of the *Youth Ministry and Spirituality Project* is grounded on the conviction of the necessity, indeed imperative, in youth ministry to emphasize the cultivation of *contemplative* consciousness in young persons. At the heart of this approach is a perception that most young people in post-modern culture, whether affiliated or not with a faith community, are baffled by and suspicious of the archaic language, ritual, and doctrines of traditional institutionalized religion. They are, however, spiritual seekers longing for real and meaningful experiences of the sacred that help them find ultimate meaning, a sense of belonging, and wholeness in their lives. The underlying passion of a contemplative approach to youth ministry is to respond first to young people’s desire for spiritual experience as the foundation of a religious life. The youth minister acts not primarily as a program manager or instructor, but as a spiritual guide in the company

of other adult elders. Rather than reacting in an anxiety-driven way to the desires of youth for more entertainment or the demand of parents and church leaders for more catechesis, the project has sought to promote a communal and Spirit-led response to youth in ministry informed by prayer and discernment.

Pedagogically, the aim of nurturing contemplative consciousness in young people is to help them to name and respond to the power of God's presence within them and around of them in their daily lives. It seeks to support them in integrating the grammar of faith with their experience of the joys and sufferings of human life. By helping them to attend to God's presence, youth ministers are also equipping them to more fully appropriate the riches of biblical, doctrinal, sacramental, and practical consciousness in the Christian tradition. A contemplative approach does not negate the importance of solid catechesis and times of fun and games together in community, but it seeks to "re-source" these aspects of youth ministry in a larger experience of attentiveness to God, discernment of the Spirit, and genuine accompaniment by faithful adults on the way of Jesus. Our observation has been that without the intentional cultivation of an abiding sense of God's presence in themselves, in their relationships with adult elders, and in their daily lives, young people are at risk of being left with cold pizza and even colder dogmatic abstractions that, for them, are only meaningless hearsay and rumor based on the experience of others long ago.

To make these claims about the priority of contemplative formation in youth ministry is to enter necessarily into a complex set of larger issues concerning the nature, purpose, and practice of religious education in general and with adolescents in particular. What is the relationship between religious education, pastoral care, and youth ministry? What is meant by such terms as contemplation, spirituality, and spiritual formation in the context of these three interrelated disciplines? How do we address the role of mysticism and religious experience in relation to the practice of religious education with youth, especially in certain Protestant churches where these notions pose serious theological difficulties? These questions cannot be addressed fully in the context of this discussion (see Confoy 2003; Griffith 2003; Groome and Horell 2003; Harris and Moran 1998), but by describing certain theological, spiritual, and practical aspects of the *Youth Ministry and Spirituality Project* and its formation process, it is hoped that a small contribution can be made to clarifying what is at stake in these issues and their implications for the future practice of youth ministry.

“YOU GET TO SEE GOD”: FRANNY GLASS AS CONTEMPLATIVE PROPHET

The great short story writer J. D. Salinger saw it coming. Almost forty years ago, he published his now iconic short story “Franny” in the *New Yorker* magazine about a spiritually precocious adolescent girl who struggles to convey to her frathouse boyfriend over a lunch date the meaning and power of the Jesus Prayer, which she has just learned about in a seminar and begun to practice (Salinger 1961). The beleaguered but well-meaning boyfriend, Lane Coutell, simply doesn’t get it. Like the rest of us, he wonders why anyone would repeat the name of God incessantly until something *happens*. What is the *result*? he asks. Franny’s response: “You get to see God. Something happens in some absolutely nonphysical part of the heart . . . and you see God, that’s all” (Salinger 1961, 39). Lane is uncomprehending, and his response triggers a deep and painful reaction in Franny, who literally passes out. It is the beginning of a protracted breakdown and spiritual crisis for the young woman, as she tries to cope with the power of the prayer, the religious questions that burn in her, and the soul-killing superficiality that she encounters around her.

Franny’s instinctive impulse to experiment with a spiritual practice, like the Jesus Prayer, is a prophetic sign not only of the teenage religious quest for God, but also of the perennial human need to turn inward to the taproot of spiritual experience, especially in periods of doubt, chaos, and cultural upheaval. In the Christian tradition, the psalms, Gospels, and Pauline letters are replete with references to the search for an experience of the “living God” dwelling in the depths of the human heart. Early patristic, medieval, and modern sources, both Catholic and Reformed, have spelled out in great depth the spiritual disciplines necessary for this transformative quest. Although much of this literature has been marginal to the practice of Christian faith for centuries, there is a renewal of interest and commitment to contemplative practices in both the Catholic and mainline Protestant churches.

Interest in these practices has also inspired a growing desire to explore contemplative consciousness as both the source and goal of Christian *ministry*. The witness of Thomas Merton (1974), Henri Nouwen (1981), Eugene Peterson (1989), and Kenneth Leech (1992) over the last several decades points to a depth dimension, a subtle level of interior experience, that is gradually reorienting the practice of faith and ministry in North American churches. The contemplative dimension of religious education has also been the subject of

increasing attention over the past two decades (O'Hare 1993; Palmer 1985). What are the theological foundations of contemplative spirituality for the practice of *youth* ministry?

Theologically, the work of spiritual formation in the context of *YMSP* has been grounded in a fully Trinitarian framework for understanding the economy of God's love and salvation of the world. The power of God's creative, redemptive, and sanctifying presence and love calls for human participation in what the early church fathers and mothers called "synergy," or cooperative response to grace (Downey 2000). This response involves a process of continuing conversion, or *metanoia*, a transformation of the "heart" understood biblically as the center of the person's being, knowing, and feeling life. Early church writers, such as Origen, Clement, and the Cappadocian fathers, referred to the spirit as "nous," the highest part of the human creature that has the capacity to know and experience God's grace (gnosis). In the context of the desert tradition and later spiritual theology, the process of Christian conversion was expressed in terms of three stages of the spiritual life that opened the heart and spirit to this contemplative knowledge of God's grace: purgation, illumination, and union with God. This spiritual tradition places full emphasis on developing the human capacity for intimate union with God through repentance and conversion—understood as the struggle with sin, the cultivation of virtue, and the gradual transformation of human consciousness in prayer and love (see Clement 1993). This process of transformation presupposed active membership in the church and full participation in its sacramental life.

In the light of this ancient Christian tradition, *YMSP* seeks to foster contemplative awareness as the natural human capacity to perceive and respond to the mystery of divine presence in an attitude of awe, wonder, and reverence. The contemplative approach to youth ministry has two aims related to the cultivation of this level of awareness. The broadest context of this approach is understood in terms of *spiritual formation*—opening and awakening the spirit of the young person to a different way of being, seeing, hearing, and knowing that is sensitive to the divine presence in all creation, beginning with oneself. In St. Paul's words, it is to progressively "enlighten the eyes of the heart" of the young person in order that they might know the hope to which God has called them personally (Ephesians 1:17–19). This approach seeks to focus first, not on the charismatic personality of the youth minister, the developing of an exciting program, or the teaching of core curriculum, but directly on creating space for young persons to

attend to the presence of God naming, claiming, and calling them forth as Beloved (Nouwen 1992).

YMSP acknowledges the need for a multimodal response to the pastoral needs and spiritual formation of young persons. Contemplative formation focuses, more specifically within this project, to awaken the awareness of young persons through specific contemplative practices such as *lectio divina* and centering prayer. Religious education, understood as the *informative* component of spiritual formation, focuses on the process of awakening young persons' minds and hearts to the larger story of their faith and its theological implications for their lives. Pastoral care, construed narrowly, responds more directly to the emotional and spiritual needs of young persons, particularly in times of crisis and pain. All aspects of the formation, education, and care of young persons constitute youth ministry and are viewed as potentially *transformative* in the sense of awakening the heart, mind, and spirit of the young person to a deeper love of God, neighbor, and self.

Contemplative ministry to youth is not to be equated narrowly, therefore, with "contemplative practices" or even "spiritual formation" of youth alone. The second aim of contemplative formation also involves the "re-sourcing" of youth ministers and their ministry in processes of prayer and discernment. This shift is made in order that youth ministers might seek greater fidelity to the Word and Spirit of God, rather than acting compulsively in the spirit of fear and anxiety. It is also meant to reorient the evaluation of ministry in terms of the "fruits of the Spirit" (Galatians 5:22), rather than criteria related to numbers or congregational approval. The formation events conducted by *YMSP* with its partner churches have been focused in the first two phases almost entirely on developing a contemplative spirituality of ministry for pastoral leaders. This is a ministry grounded in attentiveness, discernment, and responsiveness to God's presence and call. It is aimed at forming ministers as spiritual guides to young persons who are able to accompany them on a journey inward toward greater self-awareness and a journey outward as followers of Jesus.

CREATING SPACE FOR GOD: YOUTH MINISTRY AND CONTEMPLATIVE SPIRITUALITY

The story of Franny Glass is a drama that is being played out in the spiritual lives of many young persons in Christian churches. It is a

drama familiar to those who minister as spiritual guides to adolescents and know of their ardent desire to “see God” and to experience God’s presence in an immediate and intimate way. But it is more than that. Not only do young persons feel this desire acutely, but they also need to *do something with it*. Franny uses an ancient practice to turn inward and channel the energy and passion of her desire into the recitation of a constant prayer. But she, like the young people in our project, is not just seeking an experience. She is actually seeking a *spirituality*. Although she mistakenly assumes that she can find that spirituality simply through the recitation of the Jesus Prayer, her instincts lead her toward a more total and integral response to the desire for relatedness to the infinite Presence that she knows lives within her and around her.

A contemplative approach to ministry with youth is founded on the premise that what all young persons ultimately desire, like Franny Glass, is not only an experience of God, but a whole way of life, a spirituality that sustains them in a living relationship to God. *YMSP* has approached the notion of “spirituality” conceptually as that which humans, young or old, *do* with this desire inside of them for relatedness to God. It is about how they respond to and channel this desire, the disciplines and habits they choose in every day life to live by in conscious or unconscious relationship to this “holy longing” (Rolheiser 1999, 7). Spiritual formation, as Parker Palmer reminds us, is an effort to teach and practice these disciplines by which we can resist the “deformations of self and world, recalling and recovering that image of love which seems hidden or beyond reach” (Palmer 1983, 17). As Palmer describes it, it is about “creating a space in which obedience to truth is practiced” (Palmer 1983, 69–106). This “truth” is not only the formulation of doctrinal beliefs, but the truth that is perceived in self-knowledge and self-awareness (Delprete 1990).

What are the practices, processes, and structures that are involved in fostering a contemplative spirituality in ministry to youth? In the context of the *Youth Ministry and Spirituality Project*, these practices and processes have been formulated more concretely in a “charter” that describes seven ways in which youth and youth ministers can grow in attentiveness, discernment, and responsiveness to the power and presence of God. These disciplines are understood in the project as the ways in which persons intentionally open their minds, hearts, and souls in order to “create space for God.” Together, they constitute the practical foundation of contemplative ministry to youth.

The Disciplines of Attentiveness

A contemplative approach to youth ministry focuses its attention on God's presence. There are two disciplines essential to the cultivation of attentiveness to God's presence: Sabbath and prayer. A contemplative approach to youth ministry is grounded in a Christian community committed, first of all, to creating space for God in its schedule through times of *Sabbath*. Just as Jesus led a life with times for rest, solitude, and silence (Mt 14:22–23), companions of the Project are encouraged to practice a weekly day of Sabbath and to maintain a more conscious rhythm of rest and work in their own lives and ministry (Muller 2000).

A contemplative approach to youth ministry is rooted in desire for intimacy with God in Christ through a life of *prayer*. Prayer is simply the creation of space for attending to God in the depths of our selves. Just as Jesus' life and ministry were grounded in a desire to be in complete union with God (Mk 6:46; Jn 17:1ff), we also seek to ground all life and ministry in a prayerful relationship with God in Christ. We practice and teach many forms of prayer, but are particularly committed to regular periods of contemplative prayer in order to be healed, inspired, and guided by the power of the Holy Spirit (May 1991; Nouwen 1981, 1992). Companions of the Project are encouraged to practice ancient Christian prayer forms, such as *lectio divina*, and centering prayer each day as well as at regular times with their community in order to become more fully attentive to God's presence at each moment.

The Disciplines of Discernment

The second element of the mission of YMSP is *discernment* of the Spirit. It recognizes not only the mystery of God's creative presence at the heart of all ministry, but also trusts in the purposeful activity of the Holy Spirit leading, guiding, and transforming persons and situations according to God's plan. Just as Jesus prayed to know and follow God's desire (Lk 22:39ff.), we also seek to discern and respond faithfully to the call of the Holy Spirit in our lives and ministry with youth. Cultivating contemplative awareness through spiritual discipline is intended to lead to a deepened sense of the movement of God's Spirit who is calling to and sanctifying the ministers, elders, youth and the whole faith community in every situation (Farnham et al. 1991, 1999; Hess 1991). It is through this attentiveness and discernment of what is being revealed in the community, particularly through the young, that the

link between contemplative spirituality and ministry is realized in this approach.

A contemplative approach to discernment in youth ministry is practiced within a *covenant community of Christian disciples*. Just as Jesus called and ministered with others in a community of spiritual companions (Mt 10:1–4), we also nurture a vision of youth ministry as the responsibility of the entire faith community guided by the conviction that what young people need and desire most is relationship to adult persons who are spiritually alive. We support the formation of small covenant groups who sense a common call to create space for God in their lives with others through Christian living and ministry to young people. The purpose of the group is to name, claim, and discern together how it is called to serve its young people (O'Connor 1975; Ng 1984; Vanier 1989). These covenant communities offer prophetic witness to a way of life in Christ that is creatively resistant to the seductions of the market culture and the dullness that can inhabit Christian institutions.

THE DISCIPLINES OF ACCOMPANIMENT

A contemplative approach to youth ministry is focused on discipleship through the *accompaniment* of young people. Just as Jesus sought to form disciples through a relationship of love and an invitation to follow Him (Mt. 4:18ff), we also seek to initiate young persons into mature Christian faith through relationships with elders who join them in living the way of authentic discipleship. Young people are searching for spiritual guides who are alive in Christ to help reveal to them their deepest identity and beauty as beloved daughters and sons of God and to assist them in discerning their unique gifts and vocation in the service of God's reign (Mahdi et al. 1996; Hughes 2002). Companions of the Project seek to create space for young people in their lives and help the young to create space for God in their lives. They support their younger sisters and brothers in times of questioning, confusion, and crisis and offer them friendship, guidance, and listening hearts as they make the passage through adolescence into spiritual maturity.

To accompany young persons is also to create a space of care and *hospitality* for them in the larger faith community. A contemplative approach to youth ministry seeks to welcome, bless, and joyfully integrate all young people into the whole church community. Just as Jesus

exhorted his disciples to “let the children come” (Mk 9:35ff; 10:13ff), adult companions of the Project seek not only to accompany young people individually on the way of Jesus, but also to advocate for them in finding their place as fellow ministers of the gospel in the larger community of the church and its mission in the world (Myers 1991; Tournier 1968). Advocacy for them in the faith community means to attend to, discern, and call forth their giftedness as baptized members of that community and find ways of promoting their full participation and integration into the community through play, fellowship, worship, and governance.

The ultimate goal of the contemplative approach to youth ministry is not contemplation, discernment, accompaniment, or even community. These are not ends in themselves, but means to the larger end of inviting and supporting young persons in *authentic action* on the way of Jesus Christ. Just as Jesus came out of solitude, prayer, and community to heal the sick, be-friend the outcast, and dine with “sinners” (Lk 4:18–19), so we also seek to cooperate with the Holy Spirit in a way of life with young people rooted in the Beatitudes and focused on creating space for God in the world. Although a contemplative approach seeks to move beyond mindless activity, it does not promote a pseudo-monastic solemnity that experiences the holy only in labyrinths, silent prayer, and candle light. Nor does it imply a joyless activism or puritanism that makes no space for fun, delight, and celebration. It is action that flows, like that of Jesus, out of attentiveness, discernment, and obedient responsiveness to God’s love.

As Jesus reminds his followers in John’s gospel: What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit (John 3:5–6). There are formidable challenges to authentic action in youth ministry because church cultures and ministry systems have been heavily colonized by what Jesus and Paul call “the flesh”—a business mentality driven by anxiety that leaves little time for prayer, sharing, and discernment. The influences of individualism, consumerism, and competitiveness in the dominant culture make it more difficult than ever to “create space for God” in the lives of young people, but all the more critical. In the face of the anxiety and pressure that young people are now contending with, the *Youth Ministry and Spirituality Project* and its partner churches seek to faithfully lead them and those who accompany them into a direct experience of God’s peace: “Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives” (John 14:27). Companions of the project believe that this abiding peace is born of an awakening to the baptismal identity of every young person through

water and the Spirit. It is the spring and the fruit of contemplative awareness and fidelity to the way of Jesus.

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