

Emerging Scholarship on Youth and Religion: Resources for a New Generation of Youth Ministry

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The story of American Christianity includes a longstanding concern for the religious lives of young people. Particularly in the mid-twentieth century, as the idea solidified of adolescence as a separate life stage with its own unique characteristics and needs, scholars and church leaders in search of resources for understanding and working with youth began to utilize studies from psychology, sociology, or education. An important turn, moving into the twenty-first century, can be in an emerging body of research and literature that makes theology, spirituality and faith formation central to such inquiries about youth. This essay reviews a selection of books, edited volumes, and articles by scholars working at the intersections of youth and religion whose work has significant implications for the practice of youth ministry.

The resources under consideration here divide into three categories according to the type of project in which they originated: (1) reports on the findings of research studies; (2) writings arising from the various programs for high school youth; and, (3) works from other projects which, although not primarily about young people, include youth as a key constituency or focus of attention.

I. Writings from Research Projects on Youth and Youth Ministry

Among the thirteen works considered in this essay, two (Strommen, Jones, and Rahn, 2001; Martinson, Black, and Roberto, 2010) are book-length reports detailing the findings of studies specifically aimed at enhancing and supporting the work of youth ministry in the churches. Two others (Powell, Shelley, and O'Brien, 2009; and Powell, King, and Clark, 2005) offer article-length accounts of the preliminary findings of two additional studies.

Together these writings illustrate a growing trend in practical theology toward empirical research in which social science research methods are employed in the service of learning for youth ministry. This trend toward research-based writings represents a particularly significant turn in the scholarship of youth ministry, away from theoretical, anecdotal, or prescriptive work of an earlier era, toward a literature grounded in qualitative and quantitative research studies that takes youth religion as its subject matter and thus expands the range of constructions of youth and youth ministries.

The challenge with this empirical turn, of course, is that many of the practitioners and some scholars of youth ministry who constitute the audience for this literature lack a social science education that would allow them to helpfully engage and make use of such research for their work. Writers working from empirical studies thus find themselves caught in the conundrum of needing to write for a non-technical readership of youth ministry workers and scholars, without either “talking down” to those readers or so diluting the research that its significance for researcher-scholars is diminished.

Merton Strommen, Karen Jones and Dave Rahn. *Youth Ministry that Transforms: A Comprehensive Analysis of the Hopes, Frustrations, and Effectiveness of Today's Youth Workers*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan/Youth Specialities, 2001.

The authors of *Youth Ministry That Transforms* attempt to straddle just this boundary, as they move between reporting on the findings of survey research in a manner that makes the data transparent, while also offering a narrative interpretation of use to those readers whose chief concern lies not in the percentage of respondents to a particular survey item but rather in the meanings and implications of the findings for ministry with youth. What is most unique about their research is its focus: this study is about youth ministry as seen through the work of youth *ministers*. In contrast to other recent, large-scale studies in which the primary research questions concern the religious beliefs and practices of young people (e.g., Smith and Denton, 2005), Strommen, Jones, and Rahn seek to get inside the worlds of those who work with young people in the churches and para-church organizations, in search of changes necessary for youth ministry in the twenty-first century.

This project's research team developed a survey instrument based on input from 2,130 attendees to the 1996 Youth Leadership Conference in Atlanta, sponsored by the National Network of Youth Ministries. The resulting 243-item questionnaire was then administered by mail to full time youth ministers across several denominations, and 2,416 responses became the material for analyzing youth ministry from the point of view of those engaged in it.

The study highlights and explores “Six Concerns Troubling Youth Ministers” (p. 20):

- Time conflicts between personal/family demands and those of the job
- Difficulties balancing time for administrative work with time for face-to-face contact with youth
- Lack of connection between youth and the church to which they belong
- Youth group apathy
- Financial issues, including youth ministry salaries and budgets
- Status issues, described in the report as a lack of respect or personal support for the position of youth minister

The central claim echoed across the book's chapters is that transformational youth ministry happens when “congregational initiative” (an engaged congregation that has

“shared ownership” for youth ministry and makes both tangible and spiritual investments in supporting its youth) meets the inner resources and capacities brought by the youth minister her/himself. They offer a model for transformative youth ministry based on clarity of mission, volunteer training, congregational ownership of the ministry, and the prioritizing of youth spiritual development.

Subsequent chapters evaluate how well churches and their youth ministers are able to carry out this model, as the authors report detailed responses to particular questions and data clusters, ranging from how well various youth ministries achieve the desired outcome of involving youth in service activities (higher among Episcopal, Presbyterian, and United Methodists; lower among Southern Baptists and para-church organizations Young Life and Youth for Christ), to “public witness” defined in terms of evangelistic faith sharing (highest among Assembly of God and Southern Baptists; lowest among Presbyterians and Lutherans). Data analysis allows correlations to be made between the various questions and factors such as a youth worker’s tenure as a youth minister, denominational affiliation, gender, education, youth group size, etc. For example, the study finds that a correlation exists between the age of the youth minister and her/his ability to relate to parent of youth But years of experience as a youth minister (tenure) trumps age when it comes to relating to parents (pp. 231-233).

The most helpful chapters for youth ministers probably are the final three dealing with ministry goals, getting organizational support, and training/education for youth ministry. These chapters move from the more descriptive arena identifying specific findings of the study to make recommendations about what is needed for youth ministers to prosper. For example, the chapters addressing goals suggest concrete ways that youth workers may modify their personal and professional goals toward greater job satisfaction. The final chapter on training for youth ministry identifies the desires of youth workers to be better equipped for their work, particularly in work-immersive ways that do not require them to enroll in expensive or time-intensive degree programs focused more on “why” questions than “how” questions. The book concludes with a suggested curriculum for training that fits the approach to youth ministry advocated by the authors, with considerable similarity to the findings of Powell, et. al. (2005), addressed below.

Roland Martinson, Wes Black and John Roberto. *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry: Leading Congregations Toward Exemplary Youth Ministry*. St. Paul, MN: EYM Publishing, 2010.

The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry similarly takes youth ministry as the focus of attention, but from a rather different point of view, that of the congregation. Is it possible to identify characteristics of congregations that attract and nurture committed Christian young people? The book explores this question as it reports the research findings of the Study of Exemplary Congregations in Youth Ministry (hereafter, EYM), a study of effective youth ministry as seen through the lens of 131 “exemplary congregations” practicing it. In contrast to *Youth Ministry that Transforms*’ focus on the work of youth

ministers, the EYM project sought to discover specifically *congregational* factors contributing to “vital Christian faith” in youth.

Situated within Luther Seminary’s Children, Youth, and Family Ministries program under the direction of veteran youth ministry specialist Roland Martinson, researchers used existing studies on youth ministry (Strommen’s 1974/1988 *Five Cries of Youth*; Peter Benson and Carolyn Elkin’s 1990 report, *Effective Christian Education*) to determine characteristics of “vital Christian faith” in young people. They then sought out (through the nominations of denominational officials) congregations within which “committed Christian youth” were members. The research explores these congregations and their role in nurturing and developing such faith commitments in young people. The EYM research project included both qualitative and quantitative modalities involving surveys, interviews, and site visits to 131 congregations across seven denominations.

Out of this extensive database, researchers identify forty four “faith assets” of congregational cultures that support the faith of young people. They present these in relation to four different aspects affecting youth ministry, which they name in separate chapters as (1) congregational faith and qualities, (2) youth ministry qualities, (3) family and household faith, and (4) leadership in the congregation. Under the category of congregational faith, for example, the following assets describe a congregation’s “capacities to influence the faith and lives of young people” (p. 260):

- Experiences God’s living presence.
- Makes faith central.
- Emphasizes prayer.
- Focuses on discipleship.
- Emphasizes scripture.
- Makes mission central.

Similarly, faith assets related to the qualities of a congregation’s *youth ministry* that matter for influencing the faith of young people include (p. 262):

- Establishes a caring environment.
- Develops quality relationships.
- Focuses on Jesus Christ.
- Considers life issues.
- Uses many approaches
- Is well organized and planned.

The authors underscore that their list of faith assets is not intended to be prescriptive. Rather, they are describing features found in churches with vital youth ministries that leaders may use as guidelines for assessing their own contexts.

The central claim of this book is that the nurture of vital Christian faith in young people is not the product of any single activity or characteristic of youth ministry, but instead is influenced by the culture of the whole church, which these writers term a “culture of the Spirit.” At the same time, they extrapolate from the data a number of specific practices under each of the above four categories that contribute to the congregation’s overall

nurture of young people's faith, for example coming up with nine youth ministry practices visible in virtually all of the congregations to some degree or another. They include, for example, having a on young people outside of the faith community as well as those within it; and "equip[ping] young people for leadership within the congregation and for following Christ in the world" (p 136). These nine elements, assert the authors, form a pattern of youth ministry that moves through a process of "welcoming, instructing, equipping and sending" (p. 136).

The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry identifies a single goal behind the youth ministries of every one of its exemplary congregations: the forming of disciples (p. 254). The authors define youth discipleship as "deepening their relationship with Jesus, helping them understand the Christian faith better, applying their faith to daily life and serious life choices, and sharing their faith with others" (p. 254).

The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry's other findings serve to underscore and amplify claims about youth ministry made by various authors across decades of writing on youth work and young people in the churches. Thus they offer a helpful empirical basis to a number of taken-for-granted assertions about church work with youth. For instance, the EYM study points to the presence of a significant web of strong, high-quality, multi-generational relationships informed by faith as the distinctive congregational context in which young people of vital faith are immersed. This finding underscores a long-held characterization of good youth ministry as relational at its heart, a claim made by scholars and practitioners alike for the better part of the twentieth century (cf. Root, 2007; Senter, 2010). Similarly, the EYM research highlights the importance of family and parents, identifying congregational support for family ministries as crucial to the thriving of the faith of young people. This too is a theme appearing across other youth ministry literature of the past two decades (cf. DeVries, 1994, 2004; Clark, 1997). The EYM study also names youth ministry as a "team effort" involving youth, parents, youth ministers, other adults, and church leadership including pastors, offering a somewhat new twist on a theme that first appeared in youth ministry literature in the early 1980's as an antidote to so-called "lone ranger" models of youth work (cf. Holderness 1981, 1997).

The Spirit and Cultural of Youth Ministry intersperses reporting on the research data and its analysis with narrative case examples drawn from interviews and congregational observation. Tables detailing various dimensions of congregational faith appear alongside numerous "application tools," or resources by which a congregation might map dimensions of its own culture or evaluate its existing faith assets. In this way, the authors intend their book as "a roadmap for promoting youth of vibrant, committed Christian faith for years to come" (p. 17), to contribute to the development of youth ministry in congregations. In its provision of such resources, this work bears some resemblance to the National Initiative for Adolescent Catechesis' web-based Catholic youth ministry revitalization project, which draws on analysis of the National Study of Youth and Religion's Sample of Catholic youth and young adults and provides parishes with tools to assess the strengths and challenges of their ministries with youth (<http://adolescentcatechesis.org/research/completed-research>).

The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry is a significant contribution to the theory and practice of youth ministry. It takes congregations seriously as a primary context for youth ministry. It acknowledges the importance of convergence between the mission and goals of youth ministry with those of the wider congregation. And by offering congregations and their leaders a language and set of tools for assessing and taking steps to transform the congregational culture in which a particular youth ministry is situated, this work unlike many research-based reports provides concrete pathways for action.

Kara Powell, Pamela Ebstyn King, and Chap Clark, "The Needs of Youth Ministry at the Turn of the Century: Hearing the Voice of the People." *Journal of Youth Ministry* 4, no. 1 (September 1, 2005): 85-98.

Kara Powell, Marshall Shelley, and Brandon O'Brien, "Is the Era of Age Segregation Over? after 50 years of student ministry, a researcher argues that the future will require brining the generations together." *Leadership* 30, no. 3 (June 1, 2009): 43-47.

Authors of a 2005 article in the *Journal of Youth Ministry*, Kara Powell, Pamela King, and Chap Clark all serve on the faculty of Fuller Theological Seminary, where Powell also directs Fuller's Center for Youth and Family Ministry. Powell, King, and Clark's article reports on research focused on identifying the perceived needs for training within the field of evangelical youth and family ministries (p. 88). Toward this end, these collaborators borrow their methodology from the business and marketing arena, utilizing "Voice of the Customer" (VOC) research, reported as an effective and efficient means of identifying perceived needs of constituents. Through VOC, they queried thirty-four "experts in the field of faith based youth work" (six educators and twenty eight practitioners) nominated by seminary professors as nationally recognized leaders in the field of youth ministry.

Powell and her collaborators identified specific topical foci as primary training needs in the perceptions of youth ministry professionals, drawn into five categories: a theological and spiritual foundation for ministry; psychological understandings of youth development; family dynamics; the emerging global culture of youth ministry; and multicultural perspectives (p. 94). The authors' strongest interest lies in the implications of these finding for faculty teaching in certificate programs and other modes of training/theological education for youth ministry. Of particular note is their discussion of "the need for creative and innovative delivery systems in academic education" (p. 96) with youth workers who want to be better equipped for their work but face limits of time, money, and geography.

"Is the Era of Age Segregation Over?" is the title of an interview (conducted by Marshall Shelley and Brandon O'Brien) with Kara Powell about her ongoing College Transition Project, a 3-year study of 222 high school seniors and their transition from high school youth group to college settings. The interview, which appears in an issue of the

evangelically oriented journal *Leadership*, describes the research as a study to “understand how parents, churches, and youth ministries can set students on a trajectory of lifelong faith and service” (p. 44).

Preliminary findings highlight the importance of youth participation in a congregation’s life prior to graduation from high school, especially its intergenerational worship. This runs counter to the recent American history of youth ministry in which youth activities often take place separately from those of the rest of the congregation. Powell asserts that such age segregation has run its course, arguing from the responses of high school seniors in her study that churches have underestimated the capacities and needs of youth: “Adults underestimate how much kids want to be with us. Kids are far more interested in talking to caring, trustworthy adults than we think they are” (p. 47).

II. Writings Arising from Theological Programs for High School Youth

Fred Edie. *Book, Bath, Table and Time: Christian Worship as a Source and Resource for Youth Ministry*. Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim, 2007.

Edie teaches youth ministry at Duke Divinity School and directs the Duke Youth Academy (DYA). He wrote *Book, Bath, Table, and Time* out of his deep love for liturgy and his experience leading a youth academy that structures its daily rhythm around the *ordo* – the church’s patterned, liturgical worship tradition through “holy things” of bath (baptism), book (scriptures), table (Eucharist) and time (“the patterning of temporal rhythms in light of the triune God”) (p. 7).

The book asserts three themes about young people and youth ministry across its chapters. The three themes are laced throughout the book but are spelled out in the book’s concluding “postscript”):

1. Youth ministry rightly conceives of adolescents not only as objects of ministry but as agents of ministry.
2. Youth ministry rightly conceives of ministry in theological terms.
3. Youth ministry understands church as an ecological configuration.

Critiquing current practices of youth ministry as individualistic, market-driven and entertainment oriented, Edie offers as medicine for youth ministry’s ills not some outside remedy imported into the church, but rather the church’s own communal worship practices. Edie looks to the *ordo* and a way of life shaped by participation in its embodied practice of worship as key to the renewal of youth ministry. Edie suggests that youth ministry thus may be reconceived through practicing the *ordo* as a way for young people to experience the presence of the living God, a revelation of God’s identity and a invitation to vocational discernment (p. 12). This assertion is possible

because, he notes, there is a deep connection between how Christians worship and how we live our lives in the world and before God.

Edie offers experiences from the Duke Youth Academy as a “case study” in worship’s generative power for youth ministry. Alongside a strong (and beautifully written) dose of liturgical theology throughout these chapters, Edie also scatters numerous resources for pedagogy and practice in youth ministry. He argues for the formational power of frequent participation in the Eucharist, for example, and provides clues for those who work with youth in churches to reflectively engage their community’s Eucharistic practices at a deeper level. Each chapter, in fact, ends with a brief section on implications for youth ministry.

The book’s discussion of aesthetic-artistic forms of knowing and the religious imagination of youth provides a much needed alternative to those parts of the youth ministry canon that continue to overly rely on cognitive articulations of belief as the primary evidence of faith. It is Edie’s contention that “worship becomes a school for the body and the emotions” (p. 86) not only (or even primarily) through the explicitly stated content of its various elements, but through its embodied aesthetics.

Edie proposes a narrative approach to scripture (“the bible as story”) that he sees as already present in lectionary-based worship, as a pedagogical strategy for biblical literacy among youth. Baptism becomes a curriculum for teaching theological reflection. Finally Edie offers DYA’s practices of communal daily prayer as an example of how this worship can form persons into patterns that shape the whole of life as prayerful by structuring the rhythms of time. The book’s latter chapters consider two practices Edie terms *ordo*-nary practices--housekeeping and gardening--as extra liturgical practices of everyday life that are organically related to liturgical practices --e.g., “...the hospitality of our worshiping is purposefully linked with other practices of sharing and receiving hospitality” (p. 210).

Where does all of this finally land? Significantly, Edie ends with a retrieval of Christian baptism’s ties to vocation as the theological grounds for the vocational discernment of youth. Baptism invites young people to “become who they are in Christ,” and to discern God’s call to them into the future, amid a culture adrift in distorted notions of freedom and choice.

David White. *Practicing Discernment with Youth: A Transformative Youth Ministry Approach*. Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim, 2005.

David White worked with two of the Endowment’s programs for high school youth and religion. From the vantage point of these two programs and his own scholarship on contemporary culture and the faith of young people, White advocates for youth ministry oriented around spiritual practices of discernment as a way to redress what he calls the crisis in youth ministry. This crisis principally involves the fragmentation, distortion, and isolation experienced by youth as their lives are constructed toward distraction by a

culture that is hostile to them. Evoking the words of Jesus' Great Commandment, White speaks of discernment as a practice of the heart (the place of compassion and intuition), mind (the place of reasoned analysis), and soul (the place of contemplation and imagination, remembering and dreaming), as well as with one's strength (the place of action). All three are held together because "*the healing needed among youth demands that we introduce them to practices of discernment that engage their whole selves*" (p. 84-5, italics in original).

White's book teaches a simple discernment practice involving four steps, each of which is keyed to this definition.

- Listening, or ortho-pathos, involves loving God with one's heart;
- Understanding, or ortho-optomai, is a way of loving God with one's mind;
- Remembering/dreaming, or ortho-doxo, concerns loving God with one's soul; and
- Acting, or ortho-praxis, embodies loving God with one's strength.

White explores each of these facets of the discernment process, offering practical approaches for building youth ministry around them. For example, in the chapter on listening, White suggests a small group discussion process to encourage listening to the stories of youth in congregations and youth groups, as well as theatre games and improvisation, body sculptures, and journaling, videos, and contemplative prayer practices like Centering Prayer and the Examen. White's book, even more than most under consideration in this essay, lays out a clear program of activities by which his ideas may be enacted in a local congregation and its youth ministry.

Dori Grinenko Baker and Joyce Ann Mercer. *Lives to Offer: Accompanying Youth on Their Vocational Quests*. Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim, 2007.

Baker and Mercer, both research fellows with Youth Theological Initiative at the time they wrote this book together, started out working separately to analyze several years of interviews with youth scholars of YTI. In conversations they discovered they each were drawn to the theme of vocation surfacing repeatedly across these interviews. So they began a lively collaboration resulting in *Lives to Offer*.

What if youth ministry focused on equipping young people to walk in the way of Jesus, and accompanying them in their processes of vocational discovery? The book proposes as the central task of youth ministry accompanying youth on their vocational quests, or walking alongside them as they seek paths for offering their lives and gifts in service. The book then proceeds to consider some ways youth ministry can be responsive to these in relation to youth constructions of gender identity using film; practices of "holy listening;" immersions in nature; and story telling circles.

Baker and Mercer retrieve theological understandings of vocation that seek to uncouple it from its contemporary U.S. associations with paid labor alone. They find within the Christian tradition an alternative "curriculum of vocation" to the wider culture's

consumption- and affluence- oriented, competition-driven vocational trajectory. This alternative curriculum includes counter-narratives for vocation that instead are concerned with care for the earth, curiosity about other religions and about diversity within one's own faith, reconciliation of violent conflict, and compassion for all living things (p. 26).

One theme addressed in this book that does not receive strong attention in many of the other works under consideration here is the construction of gender. Baker and Mercer consider the role of gender in opening and constraining the vocational imaginations of youth. They offer clues about ways youth ministry can pay better attention to this dynamic of identity that participates in shaping the vocational quests of young people. The book ends with an epilogue in which the authors interview James W. Fowler (who participated in the early development of YTI's interview research) on the topic of youth and vocation.

Anne E. Streaty Wimberly, ed. *Keep It Real: Working with Today's Black Youth*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2005.

The Youth Hope-Builders Academy is theological program for black high school youth directed by Anne Streaty Wimberly at Atlanta's Interdenominational Theological Center. *Keep It Real*, a volume edited by Wimberly, contains chapters written by adult scholars who have held leadership roles at the Academy, for adults involved in the lives of youth. Wimberly leads off with the volume's prologue about the realities faced by the present generation of black adolescents: " 'Keeping it real' is a term used to indicate an engaged form of Christian youth ministry that intentionally brings to the forefront the concrete life experiences and concerns of youth," writes Wimberly. In contrast to some of the earlier research surveyed in the present essay – some of which seems to turn a blind eye to the complex and varied realities of family circumstances, income groups, peer groups, neighborhoods, church experiences, and other contexts forming youth and their faith which are not uniformly positive or helpful – Wimberly insists that youth ministry with black teenagers must "keep it real." It does so by acknowledging these realities and bringing them into connection with the message of the gospel. She includes among the complexities of black youths' lives the images of youth constructed by media, and subsequent negative perceptions of youth by many adults. Wimberly calls for youth ministry to be "village environments that counter adults' devaluation of youth" (p. xvi). She names five specific actions necessary on the part of black churches:

- embracing adolescence as a gift;
- making room for a process outlined as "youth-context-story";
- a response of gratitude by adults for youths' critique;
- intentional mentoring in and modeling of Christian faith; and
- including parental figures in ministry with youth.

These called for actions also identify the themes of the subsequent chapters. Taken as a whole, these chapters offer a framework for contemporary youth ministry seen as a “village of hope” for black adolescents.

III. Literature from Other Projects of the Youth and Religion Initiative of the Lilly Endowment

Mark Yaconelli. *Contemplative Youth Ministry: Practicing the Presence of Jesus*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006.

In *Contemplative Youth Ministry*, Mark Yaconelli offers an approach to working with youth grounded in contemplative prayer practices *by adult leaders* in youth ministry. A veteran of evangelical youth ministry in the tradition of his late father Mike’s “Youth Specialties” organization, Mark Yaconelli recounts his experience of finding himself ineffective and “burned out” in his youth work, as he gradually came to the realization that much of the frenetic activity in traditional approaches to youth ministry comes from anxiety rather than love that cultivates young people’s relationships with God.

Introduced to contemplative prayer practices, Yaconelli began to refashion his ministry with youth around the idea of young people’s desire to be with spiritually grounded adults, utilizing contemplative prayer as life-giving practices to get youth leaders focused on the presence and love of God as the source of ministry. The Youth Ministry and Spirituality Project (YMSP), which he directed at San Francisco Theological Seminary from 1996-2004, invited youth leaders (and through their leadership, their congregations) from a diverse group of Christian denominations across the U.S. to experiment with putting covenanted, intentional practices of contemplative prayer at the center of their youth ministries.

Contemplative Youth Ministry thus offers a way out of anxiety-based, program-centered youth ministry. Like Kara Powell and other authors in this review, Yaconelli suggests that the popular notion that youth do not want to be with adults is patently false. Youth want relationships with adults. But, says, Yaconelli, “what youth need most are people who know how to be present to God and present to one another” (p. 24).

The main spiritual questions young people have for adults concern young peoples’ longings to be fully alive: “They’re not looking for safe activities. What they’re seeking is the companionship of adults who embody a different way of being...They are looking for adults who know how to live lives of love” (p. 68). Yaconelli’s approach to youth ministry therefore calls for adults who work with youth to engage in contemplative prayer practices such as Centering Prayer, Lectio Divina, and the Examen, as practices that can school them in graceful, authentic, and loving lives.

The book outlines and teaches these processes, as it illustrates their impact on youth ministries through examples and quotations from youth ministers participating in YMSP.

The book includes questions for reflection and ideas for reframing even the everyday nuts-and-bolts aspects of youth ministries through a contemplative approach. For example, volunteer recruitment gets turned on its head from being a labor of coercion or even manipulation to being a practice of congregational calling and discernment. A slightly more recent companion volume, *Growing Souls: Experiments in Contemplative Youth Ministry* (2007), profiles four congregations engaged in contemplative youth ministry practices, and offers stories, experiences, and interviews with participants in YMSP.

Don Richter. *Mission Trips that Matter: Embodied Faith for the Sake of the World*. Nashville, TN: Upper Room, 2008.

Richter's book, with its introduction by Dorothy Bass (with whom Richter is a frequent collaborator through the Valparaiso "Practices" project), comes as a welcome resource amid the proliferation of "canned mission trip" experiences marketed to youth leaders. He challenges facile, consumer-oriented, and colonialist approaches to mission experiences by retrieving from Christian theology the practice of *pilgrimage* as the orienting framework to shape participation in mission trips.

The book offers an approach through which leaders can "mine the meaning of mission trip experiences," (p. 19), helping groups to engage in reflective practices that promote ongoing transformation. Toward that end, Richter engages the *body* as both a concrete reality requiring attention on mission trips and a metaphor for various aspects of mission-trip experience meriting reflection. He writes,

"Bodies are not incidental to the mission-trip experience... Life in the body lies at the heart of Christian faith. We don't have religious or spiritual experiences apart from our bodies. So we need to pay careful attention to what our own body and the bodies of others are teaching us as we undertake mission trips" (p. 18-19).

The body and its various parts becomes the metaphorical device through which Richter explores the multiple dimensions of mission trips and their formative power for participants, through a series of meditations and prayers on parts of the body.

Chapter titles – attentive eyes, attuned ears, sturdy backs, beautiful feet, open hands, courageous lips, conspiring noses – locate in the body various theological and pragmatic matters germane to mission-trip experiences. In the meditation on "beautiful feet," for example, Richter explores what it means to accompany others, walking with them in faith. The chapter begins with a prayer and a story of a young person volunteering in the foot clinic of her church's homeless ministry, caring for persons by washing and caring for their feet. He develops the notion of mission trip work as standing with others: "With respect to framing mission trips, 'standing with others' and 'walking with others' avoid the problematic image of 'fishing for others,'" (p. 98), a metaphor often used for extending the call to discipleship to others on mission trips.

Richter explores this and other problematic scriptural allusions often used to frame mission trip experiences in ways that disrespect and objectify the people in these settings to which church groups go to serve. He suggests instead activities that help mission trip participants reflect on

- how they want to walk with others;
- what kind of (ecological) footprint they will leave;
- what can be learned from close attention to the feet of others (Do they have shoes? What is the condition of their feet?); and
- what metaphorical “shoes” trip participants might need to remove in order to stand on holy ground in this place of the mission trip.

The book’s final section on “building the body for mission” looks at mission-trip experiences from the perspective of the relationships between so called sending and receiving bodies. He suggests ways for churches in the context of inequalities to engage in mission through partnerships with local groups/churches in the trip locations. Throughout the book Richter emphasizes participation in faith practices as key to participants’ ongoing transformation after the trip is completed. The final chapters offer concrete suggestions for practices by congregations, along with additional resources and prayers for use by trip leaders.

Richter’s book, beautifully written and accessible, throughout its pages invites consideration of many difficult issues embedded in mission trip experiences (e.g., income disparities, power relations, paternalistic mission history, etc.). It does so in a way that simultaneously challenges problematic practices and respects readers’ differing starting points in engaging such matters.

Dorothy Bass and Don Richter, eds. *Way to Live: Christian Practices for Teens*. Nashville, TN: Upper Room, 2002.

Bass and Richter teamed up to produce a unique collaborative work extending the insights of the earlier edited volume edited by Bass, *Practicing Our Faith*, with and for youth. The project underlying *Way to Live* paired youth and adults together, to think and write about 18 different faith practices rendered in plain language. For example, the chapter on practices of stewarding possessions by Mark Yaconelli and Alexx Campbell is entitled “Stuff”, while Joyce Hollyday and Kaitlyn Filar’s chapter on practicing hospitality is called, simply, “Welcome.”

Practices included in this volume mirror many of the same ones addressed in *Practicing Our Faith*. But with its youth orientation, *Way to Live* emphasizes dimensions of these practices more significant in the lives of youth and adds practices situated in the particular needs and concerns of young people. For example, the chapter on “grieving” parallels the earlier volume’s practice, named “dying well,” with its focus on holding together lament and hope. But here, the grieving chapter opens with a young person’s

articulation of the pain, confusion, and struggle to make sense of massive suffering and death in the world, and of personal suffering in the face of individual loss. Writers Cheryl Kirk-Duggan and Tatiana Wilson then introduce the Christian practice of lament as a way to grieve losses:

“The practice of lament gives you time and permission to vent your pent-up anger, your deep sadness, and your self-blame. You allow yourself to grieve in a way that leads to healing and renewal. As you pour out your grief and loss, pain, and anger in the presence of God, you discover that God hears your cries of anguish and comforts you” (p. 251).

Among other practices particularly situated in the everyday life-worlds of youth addressed in *Way to Live* are friendship, listening to music, embodiment/caring for bodies, and playing. There is an interactive web based companion resource (www.waytolive.org) for use by youth and/or youth ministry leaders, which includes ideas for reflection, discussion, and active engagement of the book’s practices.

Dorothy Bass and Susan Briehl, eds. *On Our Way: Christian Practices for Living a Whole Life*. Nashville, TN: Upper Room, 2010.

On Our Way further extends the work of the Valparaiso “Practices” Project headed up by Dorothy Bass. In another edited volume exploring faith practices of everyday life, this time the practices are oriented toward young people entering young adulthood. This book provides a resource for reflection on particular faith practices, which Bass sets within the overarching faith agenda of “living a whole life attentively...together...in the real world...for the good of all...in response to God.” These five characteristics are the volume’s working definition of practicing faith, and they become the rubrics of organizing and ordering the various chapters on particular practices:

- “attentive” (practices of study and discernment);
- “together” (community, friendship and intimacy, singing);
- “in the real world” (creation care; desire, need, and money; honoring the body);
- “for the good of all” (knowing and loving neighbors of other faiths; peacemaking and non-violence; doing justice); and
- “in response to God” (living in the presence of God).

Particularly noteworthy in relation to the intended readership for this book, namely emerging adults who possibly are making the transition from student life to fulltime work, is the chapter by Douglas Hicks called “making a good living.” This practice, defined by the author as “the practice of using one’s economic values, choices, and behaviors, to shape a life focused on those goods that really do matter” (p. 118), uncouples the Christian theological notion of abundance from material prosperity.

One striking feature across the chapters of *On Our Way* is the authenticity and beauty of the stories told by these authors to make real these practices in the minds

and hearts of readers. For instance, Evelyn Parker, writing on honoring the body, tells a beautifully moving story about bathing her father and dressing him in the last moments of his life, to underscore the holiness and significance of practices that honor human embodiment. Co-editor Briehl's concluding chapter provides a theological summary of what it means to "live in the presence of God," through the engagement of practices that together constitute a way of life. On the "Valparaiso Project on the Education and Formation of People in Faith" website [www.practicingourfaith](http://www.practicingourfaith.org) leaders of ministry for emerging adults can also access video conversations with the book's various authors and a related PDF study guide with discussion questions, related scripture passages, and prayers for each author-video (see http://practicingourfaith.org/OOW_video_conversations).

John Roberto, "The Center for Ministry Development: Promoting Innovative Ministry With Adolescents, Young Adults, And Families," *Journal of Family Ministry* 13, no. 2 (June 1, 1999): 59-68.

John Roberto, "Weaving Together Liturgy, Justice, And Catechesis," in *Liturgy and Justice*, edited by Anne Y. Koester, pp. 139-146. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002.

Roberto, now editor of the journal *Lifelong Faith* and founder of an organization called LifelongFaith Associates, was director and co-founder of the Center for Ministry Development (CMD). This organization, established in the late 1970's to equip youth ministries in Catholic parishes and dioceses, developed one of the earliest certificate training programs in youth ministry studies. Over the years, the CMD has expanded its foci to include ministry with families, emerging adults, and lifelong intergenerational faith formation, conducting research and offering training programs in all of these areas.

In his 1999 article, Roberto discusses the Center's approach to nurturing faith in families as two-fold, involving both the development of family-friendly congregations and support for family faith nurture in the home. Roberto first spells out in great detail the set of guiding beliefs behind the Center's work with congregations, offering a vision of the family as the domestic church, and laying out a strength-promoting approach to working with families. The guiding beliefs articulate "the need to respect individual and cultural differences among families," (p. 61), and the importance of flexible outreach to families whose structures vary from past times, and whose priorities and commitments call for varied activities and programs to reach families. Roberto identifies the Center's belief that "ministry with families needs to treat families as partners in ministry" (p. 61) alongside the assertion that "ministry with families needs to work collaboratively with the wider community on behalf of families. Congregations need to work in partnership with other congregations and community organizations" (p. 61).

Roberto names the Center's four strategies for helping congregations become more family friendly and for promoting family faith at home, including ideas for how to

implement the strategy and reflection questions that congregational leaders may use to assess the “family friendliness” of their own contexts (pp. 62-62):

1. Incorporate a family perspective into existing congregational programs or activities, making them more family -friendly or family -sensitive.
2. Design and implement congregational programs or activities for families.
3. Design and implement in-home family activities.
4. Focus congregational programs and ministries around key themes or church events that partner the home and congregation in a common faith formation effort.

Roberto concludes with four pages of “ideas for becoming family friendly.” These include such suggestions as developing a regular family newsletter, or incorporating parent education into existing programming and activities. One of the developing areas of youth ministry continues to be family ministry. Roberto’s background of guiding beliefs about family ministry, along with his strategies and ideas, could be valuable especially for youth ministers seeking help to envision the intersections between youth and family ministries.

Roberto’s 2002 chapter in a multi-authored volume by Catholic writers on liturgy and justice argues for a seamless integration of liturgy, justice, and catechesis for parish-wide faith formation. Roberto shares as an example the story of St. Vincent de Paul parish’s practice of making their justice and service commitment during the month of February (“House the Homeless; Feed the Hungry”). This is the focus of liturgy, preaching, scripture study, and prayer across all age groups throughout the parish.

Using language parallel to Charles Foster’s “event-ful religious education” (Foster, 1994), Roberto outlines the features of such an approach as one developed around events in the life of the faith community and emergent from the Church’s life that comprehensively connects *home* and *parish*. Furthermore it is experiential learning that prepares persons across all generations to participate in the church and bring faith practices and understandings to bear on their everyday lives, bringing people of all ages to “know-how, know-what, know-why” (p. 144).

Some Concluding Reflections: Implications for Youth Ministry

Across the various writings surveyed in this essay some common themes surface that are particularly suggestive for contemporary ministries with youth. *First, a number of these writers point out the important role of congregations in shaping the faith of young people.* This theme presents a strong critique to models of youth ministry that separate young people from the life and work of their congregations. These scholars make clear that youth ministry no longer means constructing a parallel church experience for youth that operates separately and independently of the work, worship, education, and service going on in the rest of the congregation. The corollary point, of course, is that if a new generation of youth ministry highlights young people’s engagement in the congregation, then the rest of the congregation must also come to understand itself as including young

people also *are* the church. Several of the works in this new body of literature indicate both of these as realities in many parts of the church.

Second, the significance of family in the faith formation of young people appears as a theme scattered across these writings. The idea that family play a crucial role in forming the faith of young people goes against the grain of earlier youth ministry models that situate the peer group and (usually) young adult youth ministers as the key influences. This family theme gains even more prominence when seen in relation to some other recent studies on youth and religion which further underscore its importance (cf. National Initiative for Adolescent Catechesis, 2012; Mercer, 2008; Daloz et. al., 1996). An important implication concerns the variety of family types and experiences in which young people today are situated: much of the existing youth ministry literature continues to assume a construct of family life from another social era. If family truly is important in the faith formation of youth, an unavoidable implication for youth ministry is the need more knowledge about working with youth from diverse family types and structures.

Third, nearly all of the writers of the books and articles explored in this overview essay presume the formative power of practice. An important implication for a new generation of youth ministry is that when practice becomes such a central category for formation, the skill of theological reflection on practice also moves into a more central place in formation curricula. Many of the scholars whose works are cited above engage in the work of retrieval from Christian tradition of sometimes-ancient faith practices, along with the utilization of explicitly *theological and spiritual* frameworks for youth ministry, as the core of their ministries with young people. This represents a shift from a previous generation's focus on developmental psychology and group dynamics as key to understanding and working with youth. Youth ministers and other church leaders today certainly are not asked to leave behind the substantive forms of knowledge about young people that come from the study of education, psychology and sociology. But the explicit turn toward spirituality, theology, and religion represented by this body of literature suggests that to work faithfully and effectively with youth in the churches, a new generation of youth ministers will need to become even "more fluent" in the practices, language, and thought world of the Christian tradition into which they seek to form disciples.

Fourth, throughout these works, authors lift up the challenges to living whole and faithful lives presented by contemporary U.S. consumer culture and North American affluence in the culturally diverse, global environment where youth ministry is situated. Some authors address the issue of how to take human embodiment and materiality seriously without fostering materialism, in global contexts of tremendous inequities. Some lift up the role of digital technologies in reshaping ministries with youth. Still others identify the seductiveness of consumerism and its power to distort young people's abilities to discern the vocations to which God calls them. These are different aspects of the same concern about the broader social context in which young people live and are formed as Christians today. What most of these authors have in common as they talk about this matter, however, is the inclusion of consumer culture as a key part in their diagnosis of the problems faced by youth today. This suggests that in the current new generation of

youth ministries, the importance of equipping and inviting young people to critical consciousness about their own social positioning and that of others from the perspectives of Christian theology becomes ever more significant.

Finally, this group of scholars writing books and articles for use by a new generation of youth ministers collectively express an extraordinary optimism about young people and the church.

These resources view young people as active agents in the world, as people with skills and gifts to contribute, and as reasons for hope. They similarly portray congregations as spaces where people across generations interact and participate with each other. On the one hand, such portraits are undoubtedly somewhat simplistic: in a book or article about youth mission trips or catechesis a full-blown and realistic critique of congregational life, much less the limitations and difficulties of adolescents and those who work with them, is not necessarily on the agenda. Other research on religion and young people helpfully fills out some of the important rough edges and underscore the brokenness present in different degrees in all congregations and their failures to support the faith formation of youth (cf. Dean, 2010; Smith, 2009). It is true that the optimistic picture of youth and congregations offered across the scholars' works reviewed here is only a partial portrait. But on the other hand, perhaps the optimistic tone of these writings is proleptic, pointing toward qualities and opportunities for youth and congregations in a new century that can flourish with leadership attentive to the implications of this body of scholarship for ministry with youth.

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