Reflective Youth Ministry

Youth Ministry as Critical, Ongoing, Communal Reflection

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Adoptive Youth Ministry is committed to creating a theological base from which to engage and nurture the young into the life and practice of faith. Dr. Almeda Wright, from Yale Divinity School, provides an insightful, personal, and applicable description of what it means to help young people become critical theologians. Her understanding of youth ministry takes us far beyond traditional programming and practices and what has become for many an individualistic personal piety that promotes an “add quiet time, a small group, and a mission trip and stir” type of faith. Her approach provides us with a theological foundation for the practice of participating in adopting young people into the community of faith by helping them to become reflective participants in God’s kingdom work, even as they are nurtured and welcomed by adults who model critical reflection.

Wright’s ultimate goal is to help youth workers ensure that our young people learn how to become critical thinkers and theologians. She breaks down critical reflection into three parts, each of which is an essential element to growing mature faith: reflection on our tradition and practices of faith, reflection on our lives and calling, and reflection on the needs of the world. Thus youth ministry is centrally about calling forth and helping to develop a young person’s perspective and voice in terms of how faith interacts not only with our “spiritual lives” but also with our daily practices and our understanding of and interaction with the world at large. She reminds us that when young people are encouraged and led to actively engage in critical reflection, it will inevitably spill over into the greater church community, possibly upsetting those committed to the status quo. When this happens, leaders must be ready to create a safe space and proactively receive these young people as they grow, reflect, and invest in God’s mission in the church and the world. Wright makes clear what seasoned youth ministry people know and frequently talk to one another about: many if not most churches may say they want mature, growing disciples of Jesus Christ, but to give them voice and conscience is another matter altogether. As Wright states, “Critically reflective youth
ministry is transformative youth ministry, or ministry that changes how we see and live in the world." This is vital as church communities are led to embrace and empower young people to participate in God’s household, which is the essence of Adoptive Youth Ministry.

As you read this chapter, consider these questions:

1. What does “critical reflection” look like in youth ministry? How could it result in people becoming upset? When is this good, even important? When is disruption a destructive force?

2. Wright talks about encouraging kids to question. What are a few ways that questioning can be done poorly or even destructively? How can it be done in a way that encourages and fosters relationship and community and even enhances the movement toward adoptive youth ministry?

3. Wright talks about youth ministry needing to encompass three aspects of our faith: tradition and practices, personal response, and what it means to engage the world in God’s name. Which of these do you see as the most common or prominent way of thinking about youth ministry? Which is the weakest? What could be done in your context to integrate all three aspects of faith development in order to help kids become theologians?

4. Respond to this statement: “Missions and service projects are almost always not a critical engagement with what God intends for the world. Participating as an agent of the kingdom of God is what it means to live the Lord’s Prayer (‘thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven’).

A Tale of Two Abnormal Communities

The Sacred Canopy of Church Communities

Every Sunday since before I can remember, my family has gone to church. Our first church was a small, rural congregation. It consisted primarily of my extended family and generations of people who had lived in that part of Virginia forever. I am and have always been the “overly churched” kid. My parents dragged me to church before I knew to kick or scream. I never thought to challenge this practice until it was too late, until church had become such an essential part of my social and spiritual life that I would not have had any friends without it. So I happily came to church to see my friends and get “loved on” by all the “aunty’s” and “uncles” gathered there each Sunday.

My earliest memories of my family are connected with church—with a community of people who came together weekly to reaffirm their faith and its power to shape their daily lives. In this community, the foundations of my faith were established and nurtured. I learned about a God who loves us, cares for us, and would go to some pretty strange lengths for us. I have innumerable memories of learning Scripture and hymns, reciting Easter poems, and attending classes and conferences. In this small church, we did not always have a large number of youth, so I spent a great deal of time in adult Sunday school, Bible study, and church meetings. I observed adults in the serious work of church and as they often struggled to articulate what Scripture and faith meant to them.

Though it surprises me a little now, this community also taught me that faith and
questions are more than compatible; they actually enhance each other. Even as this community formed me to take as a matter of fact that God is great, that we were religious, and that we would consistently fellowship, it also granted me the space to question. One of the unique gifts of this community and my family is that we talked a lot. We asked questions. We studied. We reflected critically and remained committed to the community and the life of faith through many transitions in leadership and conflicts among members. My parents modeled for me the art of asking tough questions in Bible study, sometimes playing devil’s advocate and sometimes vulnerably sharing the deep inner musings of their hearts. As I watched them teach and participate in this community, I learned the nuanced and complex nature of community. I learned that community is essential for faith development; it is the ecosystem within which people, young and old, can try on, question, and live into religious practices and ideas.

However, I have to pause often and remember that my experiences in a small, family-based church in the rural South are not normal. Today, most young people do not grow up in a community that is so small that church is the event of the week. This type of connection and community—while it is no longer (or maybe never was) normal—has tremendous value. In some ways it reflects the legacy of Horace Bushnell, who advocated “Christian nurture” as the primary model of religious education and formation in the mid-1800s. It also reflects many of the world-constructing and world-maintaining characteristics of the “sacred canopy,” described by sociologist Peter Berger. Berger argues that religion plays a crucial role in creating a nomos, or normative worldview, which offers humanity a way to make sense of the world around us. According to Berger, humans create and maintain this sacred canopy under which we live in such a way that we are unaware of its constructed nature. In many ways, my family and church community not only created a sacred canopy that helped shield me against terror and not knowing but also created an environment in which I was shaped in faith (from birth through college) as I learned the norms of the community.

In other ways, this community offers youth a paradigm for faith that expands far beyond orthodoxy (believing the right thing) or orthopraxy (doing the right thing) to include critical, communal reflection on faith. It offers a paradigm of youth ministry and faith development that esteems community and connection as a goal of faith development and holds communal formation in tension with critical reflection on the faith. In other words, from my experience what sustained my faith was not simply good people (because all church folks were not), harmony (as an overly churched child, I endured way too many raucous church meetings and conversations), or even common beliefs. Instead, I was sustained by the enduring power of that community, which demonstrated that regardless of who showed up or what arguments we got into we would come, pray together, and trust God to make a way out of no way.

To be very clear, I cannot foresee a time or a place when we will be able to force young people back into the model of my religious upbringing. I do not romanticize this community or attempt to map it onto our present realities. However, I am left to ponder what we can learn about young people and their growth in faith from this small, rural community and the ideals it instilled in me.
A Community of Questioning

As I fast forward a few decades, my faith and ministry journey encountered a different but equally transformative community. During my doctoral studies, I was privileged to work with the Youth Theological Initiative (YTI) at Emory University. YTI stands in direct contrast to my rural church in that it exists for only a few weeks each summer, after which the youth and leaders return to other communities, but during these few weeks a type of metamorphosis occurs in the lives of most participants.

YTI is a place where the religious lives and questions of young people are taken seriously and nurtured. The motto of YTI is “exploring questions that shape us.” Youth participate in classes, covenant groups, and service projects, and the goal is always the same: to create the space for them to explore their faith and ask tough questions. Many questions emerge as youth engage the course readings and their classmates. Some youth raise the expected questions about the existence of God, how God could allow pain and suffering in the world, or whether they were really Christian, as they come to see that they are not exactly like the other Christians in this ecumenical group. Others push deeper and challenge the hypocrisy, sexism, racism, and imperialism that many of them are recognizing within parts of the history of Christianity, while even more youth engage in (sometimes heated) debates about interpretations of Scripture and meanings of particular doctrines of faith. To be honest, even after attending seminary I was not always prepared for the questions raised by young people in this community.

However, the questions and social justice issues are not the only dimensions of the YTI community. At the center of the YTI curriculum is worship. Worship is the unifying and centering ritual that helps the young people and staff remain focused on the larger goals and reasoning behind the daily struggles and challenges. The entire community attends nightly worship services, which means that the community always ends the day together, united around a common purpose and ritual. During my time there I noticed that the nightly worship experience empowered the youth to keep moving, to stay connected to the larger community when they were being challenged by new ideas (contrary to their personal experience of family’s teaching about God and/or the world), and to move beyond feelings of anxiety or animosity to a place of shared practice, shared prayer, shared faith, and shared commitment to God. Worship helped the youth to cope with the immediate community; what’s more, the youth experienced models of Christian theological reflection and practices of social justice. They experienced the power of worship to transform individuals into a community and to give them the support to do the work that they were each called to do.

In the same way that I paused to reflect on the “abnormality” of my rural church family, I must also note that YTI is not normal. It happens over the course of two to four weeks. It is an experience, not a sustained community in a traditional sense. And while I was amazed at the power of worship in this community and its ability to help youth explore questions that shape us, one of the potential pitfalls of programs like YTI is that it could leave an entire group of young people without the ongoing supports needed to remain faithful as they continue to ask big questions. In some cases youth leave with their religious foundations completely shaken only to go home as if nothing

The Call of Adoptive Youth Ministry

has changed. There is so much to talk about, including questions of home and home-ness. And yet our current context is so different in nature that the work we do can’t be separated from the experience. It is a community of questions such as: Why do we even care about照顾 others?

But can I encourage you to consider the ministry of the model we just discussed? Can we start there?

Critique

With YTI as a model, when we consider our ministry as a whole, we see the need to go beyond a one-size-fits-all approach. Not all young people are alike, and we need a more intentional and deliberate theology to help us navigate through these questions. The call to adopt is to recognize that the young people in our communities are not just passive observers. They are active participants in the process of faith formation. And while the work of worship and education is crucial, it is only through dialogue and meaningful relationships that young people can truly be challenged and transformed. It is here that we see the importance of community and relationships in our youth ministry work.
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has changed about them. To be fair, there are myriad experiences like this for adolescents—including mission trips, a journey away from home, an encounter with a friend of a different culture, or a world history project about different religious traditions. The disruptive nature of these experiences points to the fact that as adolescents grow and expand their worlds they have to learn to incorporate new experiences and knowledge into their current experiences. Questions and reflection are the hallmarks of adolescent maturation. And as such they should become part and parcel of congregation-based youth ministries.

But what would it look like for questions and reflection to be the norm of youth ministry? What would happen if congregations modeled critical reflection rather than resisted it? Can communities shape youth in a shared praxis of faith and support youth in their questions of faith?

Critically Reflective Youth Ministry

Within recent decades, writings about youth ministry have more fully situated its identity as a theological enterprise. Varied examples across the theological spectrum invite youth and youth workers to embrace their roles as theologians and to offer practical theological reflection on their ministries with youth. This turn initially excited me and has more recently disheartened me. For example, I celebrated the reminder that youth and youth workers are theologians. I encouraged youth to define for themselves and embrace the title of the theologian. I argued along with many, including authors Howard Stone and James Duke (How to Think Theologically) that to “be a Christian is to be a theologian.” And while that adage makes for a great T-shirt or bumper sticker, I didn’t slow down to invite people into a fuller process of what that really means.

Beyond the limited practical instructions of living into this idea of theological youth ministry, I began to notice that in some ways we have now “routinized” theological reflection. As a side of effect of this routinization, theological reflection on youth ministry and with youth is no longer the thing that enlivens young people or calls our ministries to a higher level. This is not simply a critique that theological reflection has become blase; it is that we have failed to fully realize the implications of making ongoing theological reflection and reflection in general part of the habitus of our congregational life together with youth.

In other words, we have attempted to domesticate theological reflection. We have attempted to ignore the prophetic and often disruptive nature of theological reflections and proclamations. For example, I recently encountered a youth ministry curriculum that purported to lead youth in theological reflection on a host of youth issues. As I gazed at the shiny cover and glossy pages, I was amazed (in a bad way). The editors offer their theological reflection on certain issues, but only a very limited number of ways are offered for youth to engage in the process. And there is a predetermined outcome (cr foregone conclusion) that youth are supposed to reach. To be certain, the best any one person can do is to offer his or her individual theological assessment of a situation. But is that all that we can hope for as a community of faith? Can we live into what it means to critically reflect within communities, even if this leads to different answers? For a season I wholeheartedly embraced the naive idea that if we all just go through the same process of theological reflection and rational thought, we will all reach the
same conclusions. Like so many, I presumed that right process led to right beliefs (or at least same beliefs), only to encounter time and again that this was not the case and that I was often not prepared for the conclusions that were reached.

Instead of a process of leading youth to the right answers, theological reflection primarily means having an ongoing dialogue. It is wrestling with tough questions: Where is God? What is God doing? What is God calling us to do? How is God calling us to act in response to this particular situation? Asking these questions is not a one-time exercise. Youth (and adults) must continuously ask these questions and struggle with the answers that emerge. In some cases, we struggle because we feel that no answers emerge. At other times, too many answers emerge. We have to learn the art of communal discernment, seeking wise counsel, and other practices, which have evolved through the life of faith across the history of Christianity.

In sum, my disenchantment with the “theological turn” in youth ministry is that in some ways we have attempted to short circuit the process and reinscribe fixed answers. Knowing fully who God is and what God is calling us to do in every situation would be lovely, but this is not the case and has never been the case in the history of Christianity. Even biblical, transcendent truths have to be interpreted and applied to our lives and various communities. Being able to offer youth fixed answers to all of life’s questions would also be wonderful, but that isn’t possible either. Therefore, we have to empower young people to wrestle and respond to the questions of their lives and communities. We have to remain open to the onslaught of questions and conclusions that will emerge as we invite them into critically reflective youth ministry, into a community and ministry that values ongoing critical reflection.

Some Definitions

Critically reflective youth ministry points to the essential role of questions and reflection for the life of faith in community. Critically reflective youth ministry, as I am defining it, has two foci interrelated with three tasks. The foci convey the dual meaning of reflective. Reflective describes the ability or capacity to provide a reflection (as in a reflective glass), and it describes someone or a thing that is characterized by deep thought (as in a reflective young person). Therefore reflective youth ministry focuses on nurturing young people to reflect the image and life of Jesus Christ and to think deeply, or reflect on, what it means to be a follower of Christ today. This model of ministry reminds us of the importance of helping youth to develop lives that reflect the imago Dei within them and the ministry of Jesus. It pushes youth toward a thoughtful, intentional way of being in the world. For the most part, we want to emphasize only one of these foci, but truly reflective youth ministry reminds us that young people must grow both in terms of how they follow Christ and in how they love God with their hearts, souls, bodies, and minds (and fully incorporate their God-given skills of thought and reflection into their life of faith).

The threefold task helps us to flesh out our critical reflection on the life of Christ. For many of us theological reflection (and religious practice) ends at the personal level. We often see young people who pray about tests, college, boyfriends, and family. But critical theological reflection is not and cannot be limited to our personal and individual lives. Instead, critically reflective youth ministry includes three areas:

1. CreationCare
2. Justice
3. Love
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1. Critical reflection on our religious traditions (including practices and beliefs)
2. Critical reflection on our individual lives in Christ
3. Critical reflection on the world around us

Ministry with youth, like all Christian ministries, involves walking with young people as they live and grow in the life of faith. It involves pushing youth to think fully about what God is calling them to do and be as part of the body of Christ in the world.

Ongoing Tasks of Critically Reflective Youth Ministry

**Task 1: Critical Reflection on the Tradition, Content, and Practices of Faith**

The first task of ongoing critical reflection is often the hardest to sell, which is not surprising. By nature a tradition or core belief has been around for a long time, or it holds a special place in the life of a community of believers. Our religious traditions are deeply connected to our understanding of the truth of Christianity and not merely with the ways of humanity. However, the traditions, practices, and content of faith cannot be above questioning or critical reflection. Even as we rest on God’s revelation as essential for our being, what we say about God and how we worship God still must be the subject of critical reflection with young people. In every generation, young people emerge who have not been part of the Christian community, and just as we must invite them into the stories of faith, we must also invite them to make the faith their own by fully engaging it. In particular, as reflections of Christ youth must question the traditions that have been handed down and seek to fulfill them like Christ.

If we reflect on the kinds of faith formation that are offered in the Bible and through the life of Jesus, we see Jesus crossing boundaries, questioning the establishment, and hanging out with more sinners than saints. In some ways we see Jesus as the one who questions everything. If we truly want youth to follow in his footsteps, we must create the space for them to question and critically reflect—on the religious tradition as well.

As a tween, Jesus inaugurates his ministry of questions at the age of twelve. He sits in the temple among the teachers inquiring. He not only questions but also begins to amaze those who encounter his preteen zeal for knowledge: “Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers” (Luke 2:47).

In true adolescent fashion, Jesus gets caught up in what he is doing, loses track of time, and fails to tell his parents where he is going to be. When he is chastised for getting left behind, he sasses his mother, saying, “Didn’t you know I had to be in my Father’s house?” (Luke 2:49).

From this starting point, we see numerous examples of Jesus’ direct challenges to the religious practices of his day.

Jesus questions the traditions of not healing on the Sabbath (Mark 3:1–6). Jesus questions social structures by lifting up little children as models for the kingdom of God (Mark 10:14–15) and teaching that “many who are first will be last” (Mark 10:31). He challenges the corruption in the Jerusalem temple when he reminds the people that God’s house is supposed to be a house of prayer but that they have made it into a den of thieves (Matt. 21:12–13). He questions the generational relationships between Samaritans and Jews, and
he esteems the Samaritan as a model of care for one’s neighbor (Luke 10:25–37). He also questions some of the traditions concerning how men and women interact by engaging with the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4). In general, he questions the sociopolitical and religious norms by embodying a compassionate vision of the kingdom of God, which has very little in common with contemporary political structures.

This idea of Jesus having a ministry of “questioning everything” is not simply an intriguing interpretive lens for reading about the life of Jesus. For me it is also a reminder of an essential element of effective youth and young adult spirituality: each generation is involved in a journey of making faith its own.

Young people look at the traditions that have been passed down to them. They strive to see whether or how the tradition works and how it can shape their lives. In my observation, the traditions that hold are not primarily the ones young people take on without question. Instead, the enduring traditions are those that youth are allowed to wrestle with, to try on, and to eventually become shaped by. I often remind students preparing for youth ministry that the last thing they want is a group of young people who take everything they say about God and life without challenge. When youth fail to question, they most often fail to engage and make the tradition their own.9

While we are not asking or hoping that youth will come into the church on Sunday morning and turn over the offering table, what would it look like for us to listen with youth as they imagine how the church can become more faithful to its ministry? I am always amazed at the ways that youth, in an often innocent and carefree manner, push us to think differently and be more faithful to the traditions we have “taught” them.

For example, from time to time I get impassioned calls from my nephew. It is typically after Bible study or Sunday worship. He jumps straight in with an obscure question about a biblical text because he is certain that what they have been discussing is open to multiple interpretations (that is his nice way of saying that he thinks the teacher is wrong). So we walk through the particular biblical passage or topic of the day; I send him links to commentaries and websites where he can study more on his own, and eventually I give him my interpretation of the passage. At first my nephew resisted and wanted me just to affirm or deny that the teacher was right or wrong. But in the process, he learned that “auntie wasn’t going to do that” and that he needed to learn to study and reflect on the content of his faith so that when his heart said something was not right he could check it with his mind.

I share my nephew’s zeal and cell phone Bible sidebars as one example of the ways that young people can and do wrestle with the core of our Christian tradition and critically reflect on the content of their faith. But his story is not unique. I have myriad stories, typically from the youth who have been in church for a long time, who have been shaped in the life and narratives of the community but who perceive that there is more than the superficial answers they are getting in Sunday school. I remember vividly the challenge of a youth who read the book of Job for the first time in senior high Bible study and told me adamantly, “This can’t be right—God doesn’t tempt people. How could we have the devil chatting with God and God letting the devil mess with Job?” In those moments, we can either offer young people platitudes—signaling that
youth group or church is not the place to ask these questions—or we can encourage them in their questions. We can encourage their zeal to know more and to wrestle with texts that many adults and scholars have wrestled with and to see how it does or does not fit into what we understand about the larger story of faith and life in Christ.

**Task 2: Critical Reflection on Our Lives and Our Callings**

Critical reflection as a model of youth ministry also reminds us of the inward work that we must invite young people into. Often we discuss growing in faith and discerning a future path with youth as one of vocation, or calling. Vocation centers on the existential questions of the lives of youth as they struggle to confidently answer the questions concerning who they are and what they are called to do. In particular, these questions entail answering what God is calling youth to do within the purpose and kingdom of God. James Fowler writes that our vocation is to be in reflective partnership with God. As communities of faith, how do we invite youth into this partnership, and what specifically is the task of critically reflecting on their lives and calling?

Quaker educator Parker Palmer invites us to journey with youth as they listen to their lives. In *Let Your Life Speak*, he recounts numerous stories from his own life in which he struggled to figure out what to do with his life and what his purpose in life was supposed to be. At first he attempted to emulate the lives of great leaders like Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., or Mother Teresa, but he then discovered that his calling was not to *live their lives*. His calling did not emerge from the lives of others but from listening and reflecting on what God placed inside him.11

Often I encounter students who are trying to figure out who they want to be or what they want to do with their lives. Pressure comes from every side. Youth experience pressures to be successful, to make good grades and go to a good college, to be a leader, to be a good friend, to be popular, athletic, obedient, professional, rich, famous, cool, and so much more. But the one thing Palmer tries to help us understand is that we need to practice “letting our lives speak” in order for us to be able to make sense of all the pressures and competing messages around us. We have to practice listening *with* youth to their inner passions and to see the things that God has placed inside them. Instead of trying to change youth or their natural abilities so that they can be like someone else, we should ask God to show them how to use what God has given them for God’s glory.

Often, when we invite youth into processes of critical self-reflection, we are inviting them to better themselves or “clean up their act.” While we all need moments of introspection so that we can correct the course of individual behaviors and sins, far more often we need to model for youth the process of seeing their genuine worth and abilities as they reflect the image of God in and around them. Too often youth display a caricature or mask of who they really are. This is because, in part, they are still struggling on their vocational journeys to see themselves as wonderful creations of God.

They are struggling to demonstrate their maturity in faith and to demonstrate their full humanity. Paulo Freire argues that the one vocation of all persons is *humanization*—that is, the process of becoming fully human.12 In the revolutionary contexts in which Freire worked,
the idea that all could be seen as full humans, as men and women—not as mere pawns or workers who have no control over their lives or the direction of their futures—was a truly radical idea. But a calling to become fully human may strike Christian ears as somewhat problematic, especially if we have been shaped in a community that holds a strict dichotomy between humanity, flesh, or carnal natures and the spiritual or sacred sides of our nature. For some Christians, becoming fully human is the last thing we want to do; we’d rather become fully divine. However, the paradox of the Christian faith is that we are offered a savior who is fully human and fully divine—who is God and the Son of God at the same time. This paradox reminds us that we are not inviting youth to a place where they can forget their humanity but rather where they can embrace the unique ways that their bodies are created—even the varied pigments or imperfections that they will invariably obsess over. We are inviting them to a place of living into the fullness that God has created them to be.

Task 3: Critical Reflection on the Needs of the World

Effective youth ministry also compels us to look beyond our individual lives and to reflect critically on the world around us. The world-as-it-is is not the world-as-it-should-be. As people of faith, this simple truth serves as a constant reminder of the work that we are called to do with youth and with ourselves. For many generations we have focused youth ministry inwardly on the development of personal relationships with Jesus and on commitments to congregational or denominational life. While these are important, I cannot help but think through the life and ministry of Jesus and wonder at the power of his life in changing the communities around him. To be certain, he did not run for political office or become an earthly messiah, but his ministry included and addressed the world around him. What does it mean to live a life of faith as the communities around us remain unchanged?

The possibility of transforming the world is designed to be daunting. It is in the best interest of oppressive powers and structures for young people to buy into the idea that “there is nothing that they can do” or that all they can hope for is survival in a world over which they have no control. However, many critical theorists and radical educators have worked for centuries to remind students that the world and humans are interconnected. Looking again at the work of Freire: “Education as the practice of freedom—as opposed to education as the practice of domination—denies that man [woman] is abstract, isolated, independent, and unattached to the world; it also denies that the world exists as a reality apart from people.” The significance of this interconnection is that it reminds us that the world can be changed and influenced by the collective work of individuals. Freire (who is best known for his criticism of the banking model of education in which students are simply the depositaries of expert knowledge and narratives) underscores the ways that critical reflection transforms the world. Freire pushes for “problem-posing education” that builds on the questions and critical reflections of persons in community as the basis for education. This method of education and ministry resists any notion that the world, systems, and society are unchangeable realities.

Allen Moore, in his work Religious Education as Social Transformation, expounds on the interconnections between religious
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education and transformation within society and societal structures. Moore's vision is that religious education is an ethical way of life that serves to transform religious platitudes into concrete social structures that are just and serve the welfare of all people.  In other words, the transformative elements of ministry with youth require inviting youth into the practices of critical reflection—imaging or dreaming of an alternative reality and acting to achieve these alternative visions. Freire outlines the practice of critical consciousness in conjunction with his idea of dialogical education. The process of coming to critical consciousness about the world and being in the position to truly transform the world requires both reflection and action, or what Freire defines as praxis.

Directly connected with the work of transforming the ways that young people see themselves and their vocations is the need to engage youth in the process of conscientization, that is, coming to critical consciousness. Coming to critical consciousness is not simply raising awareness about issues in the lives of young people. Critical consciousness includes transforming how youth perceive the world around them and awakening within youth the ability to critically reflect on and take action in their worlds.

Religious educator Katherine Turpin expands on Freire’s understanding of conscientization and proposes the idea of ongoing conversion, which emphasizes the idea that within each youth there remains a paradox between what one is aware of and how one chooses to act in the world. Ongoing conversion emphasizes that critical reflection, transformation of the world, and how youth act in the world are not a “one time thing”; neither does conversion emerge from simply seeing things differently. Turpin argues that conversion requires a “deeper change” and explains that “conversion, then refers not just to a change in awareness and understanding, but to a change in both our intuitive sense of the way the world is (imagination) and our capacity to act in light of that intuitive sense (agency).”

Building on Freire’s understanding of conscientization and Turpin’s understanding of ongoing conversion, I argue that critically reflective youth ministry must include an ongoing process of critical reflection and action in the world. In other words, critically reflective youth ministry entails both thinking critically about the conditions of the world and taking action to reflect the light of Christ in the world.

Conclusion: Making Space for Disruption

Critically reflective youth ministry is transformative youth ministry—ministry that changes how we see and live in the world. If we are serious about creating the space for youth to critically reflect as well as reflect on the life of Christ and if we are not simply interested in forming youth in our preconceived understandings of the life of faith, then we must always remain open to the ways that youth will stretch us and in many ways speak disruptive, prophetic words into the world around them (particularly into our communities of faith). As we journey with youth and encourage them to constantly listen for and expect God’s new and ongoing revelation, we will recognize that revelation is often revealed in the cries and deep passions of the people—often the passions of young people. Evelyn Parker discusses the ways that African American youth experience rage and anger. These emotions do not fit well within the religious or cultural
norms; however, in many cases this rage is an indication of the passions and outrage of black youth and their responses to perceived and real injustices. Parker argues that youth should not be forced to simply tone down their anger; rather, we should foster listening and encourage youth as they experience these moments of truth within systems of injustice and oppression. Parker outlines a framework of holy indignation, which she defines as a “form of constructive rage. It is the freedom to express anger against injustice in the sacred space of the Christian church.” Parker’s framework opens the sacred space of religious institutions to include the prophetic and sometimes enraged reflections of youth.

As I continue to ponder the lessons from the abnormal communities presented at the beginning of this chapter, I come to understand that the journey of faith and maturity is hard work. It is work that can easily overwhelm us and make us uncomfortable. It is work that disrupts us because we cannot script it or plan it out completely. Yet these communities also remind us that we are joint heirs with Jesus and part of the family of God. They remind us that our response to the ongoing work of God in the world is also to listen and discern how God is speaking and where God is pushing us to work. When what we see overwhelms us we can come together to pray, worship, and hold the disruptions under the sacred canopy of God’s love.

I invite you to begin an inventory to gauge what type of community of faith your congregation and family represents:

- Are you modeling ongoing growth and maturation/journeying in faith?
- Do your actions, images, prayers, and liturgies reflect a place that values critical reflection and aligns people’s lives with the image of Christ?
- Are the questions of youth valued, and can youth learn to critically reflect on their tradition, vocations, and world?
- Can we hold the disruptions that emerge as they share their emotions, passions, or God’s revelations?