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POTENTIAL ECCLESIOLOGY:
A VISION FOR ADOLESCENT CONTRIBUTION

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POTENTIAL ECCLESIOLOGY:
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Abstract:

This dissertation argues that adults need to develop a potential ecclesiology of youth such that adults envision, anticipate, and empower adolescent contribution to the faith community. A potential ecclesiology begins when adults see adolescents for what he or she may contribute and invite them to join the church’s work in the world for the reign of God. Relationships are understood as the primary location for Christ’s transforming activity among people and communities. Christianity is an ecclesial faith, and the mark of maturity includes learning to move from being with others to being for others, a shift from me to we. Therefore, belonging to a community where adolescents can learn to live as Christians with others, cultivating both knowledge and competence, is vital to a maturing faith in Christ. In light of this, a potential ecclesiology compels adults to invite adolescents into the unfolding drama as growing contributors to God’s redeeming work in the world.

A potential ecclesiology is somewhat antithetical to a service-based youth ministry, which is a dominant model among contemporary Protestant churches characterized by adults providing a service (both content and experiences of faith) for adolescents to passively receive. Individual faith formation is the primary objective. Research verifies a disparity between increased efforts and resources allocated to support adolescent faith formation and the high attrition of post-high school participation in faith communities. When reconciled, this assumed problem of retention is actually a problem
of integration, revealing that the service-based model resists inviting adolescents to join with a local community of faith as contributors to God’s redemptive purposes in the world.

Built on a biblical and theological foundation, this dissertation argues that fostering a maturing Christian faith is bound to the vital relationship between the person and the community where maturity is both personal and communal. Positive Youth Development literature affirms the central role of others in adolescent development broadly, which includes changes in knowing who I am (independence) alongside who I am with others (interdependence). Adolescents who are “thriving” are those who contribute to the larger purposes of the community. Additionally, a social theory of learning takes seriously doing the faith with others as a means of learning, which includes exposure to and engagement with the larger purpose of the faith community. Faith communities support a maturing faith by contextually enacting five values: communal memory, responsible mutuality, burgeoning maturity, generative relationships, and imaginative contribution. Attending to the adolescent’s experience with the community and creating avenues for authentic contribution should guide a church’s vision and practices and thus enact a potential ecclesiology of youth.
POTENTIAL ECCLESIOLOGY:
A VISION FOR ADOLESCENT CONTRIBUTION
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## CHAPTER ONE: SERVICE-PROVIDER MODEL OF YOUTH MINISTRY

- **INTRODUCTION** ........................................................................................................... 1
- **THE ANTITHESIS: YOUTH MINISTRY AS A SERVICE-PROVIDER** ........................................ 7
  - Language: “Passing on the Faith” in Consumer Culture .................................................. 7
  - One-Way Relational Flow .............................................................................................. 11
  - Personal Religion ......................................................................................................... 17
- **THE GROWTH OF A SERVICE INDUSTRY: OUR HISTORY SHEDS LIGHT ON OUR PRESENT** .................................................. 26
  - Specialized Care ............................................................................................................ 26
  - Voluntary Association ................................................................................................. 31
- **MOVING FORWARD** ..................................................................................................... 32

## CHAPTER TWO: A PERSON’S RELATIONSHIP TO THE COMMUNITY OF FAITH – BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL INQUIRY

- **INTRODUCTION** ........................................................................................................... 36
- **A COMMUNAL VISION: INSIGHTS FROM AN EARLY CHURCH** ........................................... 38
  - Colossians 3:1-17 ............................................................................................................ 38
  - Galatians 5:16-26 ............................................................................................................. 43
  - I Corinthians ................................................................................................................... 45
- **SUMMARY** .................................................................................................................... 46
- **BONHOEFFER: THE ACTIVITY OF GOD** ............................................................................ 47
  - The Person and the I-You-Relation ............................................................................... 50
  - Primal State ................................................................................................................... 51
  - Sin .................................................................................................................................. 52
  - Sanctorum Communio .................................................................................................... 53
  - Theological Implications ............................................................................................... 57
- **VOLF: THE ACTIVITY OF PERSONS** ................................................................................ 59
  - Christ with the Assembled, Confessing Community ....................................................... 60
  - Giving and Receiving Faith ........................................................................................... 63
  - Mutually Determinative Relations ................................................................................ 64
  - Theological Implications ............................................................................................... 66
- **CHAPTER SUMMARY** ................................................................................................... 68

## CHAPTER THREE: FOSTERING A MATURING CHRISTIAN FAITH - INSIGHTS FROM DEVELOPMENTAL THEORY

- **PRELIMINARY STATEMENTS** ....................................................................................... 71
  - Turn Toward Interdependence ...................................................................................... 72
  - Study of Religiosity and Spirituality in Development .................................................... 74
- **DEVELOPMENT AND PERSON↔CONTEXT RELATIONSHIP** ............................................ 75
- **INTRODUCTION TO POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT** ................................................. 77
- **PYD CORE VALUES AND THE CHRISTIAN FAITH** ......................................................... 79
  - Assets ............................................................................................................................. 88
  - Sparks ............................................................................................................................. 95
  - Purpose ........................................................................................................................... 98
- **CHAPTER SUMMARY** ................................................................................................... 103

## CHAPTER FOUR: VALUES TO FOSTER A MATURING CHRISTIAN FAITH

- **COMMUNAL MEMORY** ................................................................................................ 105
  - Memory As Tether and Floodlight ............................................................................... 106
Chapter One: Service-Provider Model of Youth Ministry

Introduction

Adults in America are committed to meeting the needs of adolescents and exert a tremendous amount of energy doing so. Adults work hard to reform education, expand enrichment programs in the arts, open opportunities through sports, and run ad-campaigns on the dangers of drinking and driving, smoking, and STDs. There is a proliferation of youth advocacy organizations in recent decades: Big Brother/Big Sister serve at-risk adolescents through mentoring programs; Search Institute helps build communities that provide the assets young people need; Monitoring the Future studies “attitudes, behaviors, and values” of young people to help shape national policies and improve health;¹ the Youth Advocacy Program seeks to increase support for families and neighborhoods by working alongside social service agencies; and there are many others.

Parents act similarly. The phrase “soccer mom” evolved to describe the committed parent who was extensively involved in her son or daughter’s activities. Recently educators and those working in college admissions use the phrase “helicopter parent”² to describe their experience of parents whose hovering activity, for good or ill, seeks to ensure their child’s success. The genuine intent of adult effort in its various forms is clear—they want the best for youth and will work hard to provide it.

Churches have acted consistently with this broader societal interest by investing unprecedented amounts of resources toward the care and nurture of adolescent faith development. Over the past century, these intentions led to rapid growth in the field of youth ministry evidenced by the explosion of church and parachurch ministries, the rising status of the professional youth minister, an increase of published curricula and training events, the creation of undergraduate and graduate specialized degrees, and the establishment of scholarly journals. Research confirms this massive adult effort brought youth into youth programs, saying that seven out of ten U.S. adolescents have been involved in a youth group at some time. At the turn of the century, we view youth ministry not just as another aspect of the church’s mission but an essential one.

In the wake of such success, there appears to be a disconnect between increased effort on the part of adults resulting in high rates of participation in youth ministries and another body of research that demonstrates a post-high school decline in youth participation in church. Do present practices in youth ministry foster a sustainable or long-lasting faith? Research confirms the popularly held perception that graduating from high school may be synonymous with graduating from church. The National Study for Youth and Religion (NSYR) tracked a sampling of teenagers in their transition from ages 13-17 to 18-23. This research indicates a general decline in religiosity as adolescents

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3 Smith and Lundquist, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 50-54. This statistic needs to be understood in light of other research such as four out of ten adolescents claim involvement in a religious youth group for a number of years. The high number of people who have attended youth programs needs to be reconciled with the low number of regular attendees.

4 DeVries, *Family-Based Youth Ministry*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004). DeVries includes an older collection of data that demonstrates a lack of retention of adolescents after they graduate from high school.
transition into a period presently being described as “emerging adulthood.” Religious services are “fine and people are friendly” but the religious community is not perceived as a place of “belonging.” Teenagers who regularly attended religious services dropped in attendance as emerging adults by 24.7% and the “not attending” category increased by 24.5%. Gallup polls confirm this trend stating, “data consistently show teens attending church or synagogue at higher levels than adults, and religious service attendance among 18 to 29-year-olds tends to be much lower than among older adults and teens.”

Similarly, Barna Research indicates 61% of people presently in the twenties age bracket who had participated in a church at one point during the teen years are now “spiritually disengaged (i.e., not actively attending church, reading the Bible, or praying).” Only one-fifth of this age group maintained spiritual activity similar to that of their teen years. A lead researcher for Barna surmises, "Much of the ministry to teenagers in America needs an overhaul - not because churches fail to attract significant numbers of young people, but because so much of those efforts are not creating a sustainable faith beyond high school.”

The first refute of this data is to claim that emerging adulthood is a unique phase of spiritual growth where a person needs to separate from the institutional faith in order

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5 The term emerging adults is growing in use in literature in sociology, psychology, education, and spiritual formation. It refers to the lengthening of adolescence in our society, delaying entry into adulthood, and presenting a phase of life with distinct challenges.


7 Smith and Snell, 113. Regular attendance is defined as attending religious services two - three times a month or more.

8 Lions, "Open the Door and See All the Teenagers?" http://www.gallup.com/poll/8635 (accessed October 20, 2010).


10 Barna Group."
to personally appropriate faith. The NSYR research refutes this conjecture naming it the myth of “internal without external religion.” The findings indicate a strong association between those of high religiosity and regular attendance in a worship service. Similarly, those who decreased in religiosity also decreased in worship attendance. Private religion is less sustainable as adolescents transition into adulthood.

The juxtaposition between increased adult efforts to nurture faith in youth, and the decline in active faith post-high school needs to be addressed. Current research projects provide some important direction. Each maintains that an adolescent’s relationship with an adult in the faith community is an essential contributor to sustained faith post-high school. For example, Wesley Black leads a research project that collects data from high school youth involved in youth ministries in order to determine the factors that influence a “lasting faith” such as personal faith, mother’s faith, father’s faith, church influences, friends’ faith, mentoring relationships, and home and family influences. Preliminary results reveal that relationships with non-parental adults are an important aspect influencing ongoing participation.

Similarly, Kara Ekman Powell leads the College Transition Project through the Fuller Youth Institute (FYI). They are tracking 400 youth group alumni in their first three years of college to see which factors contribute to a successful faith transition in college. Again, one of the preliminary results suggests a connection between high

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11 Smith and Lundquist, 251-252.
religiosity in college and feeling supported by adults from the home church.\textsuperscript{14} In addition, NYSR data note that for emerging adults who maintain high religiosity, relationships with adults in the faith community are “clearly important.”\textsuperscript{15}

These voices are not the first to explore the need to reconnect youth to the adult faith community. In 1994, Mark DeVries wrote in \textit{Family-Based Youth Ministry}, “Whatever new models for youth ministry we develop must take seriously the fact that teenagers grow toward mature Christian adulthood as they are connected to the total body of Christ, not isolated from it.”\textsuperscript{16} Similarly in 2001, Malan Nel outlines the “Inclusive Congregational Approach” that involves two tasks: “to sensitize every discipline of ministry for its relevancy to the youths (as part of the whole) and to rediscover and define the place of the youths as part of the congregation.”\textsuperscript{17} The vision for connecting youth and adults in the church is evident, but the factors that move youth toward such connections still require clarity.

The apparent disconnect between increased adult effort and a lack of sustainable faith begs these questions: How are connections with adults or the broader community of faith presently expressed in youth ministries? Is fostering connections with the community of faith part of the explicit purpose of youth ministries? A review of sample

\textsuperscript{14} Powell, "High School Youth Group Seniors Transitioning to College: Risk Behavior, Social Support, Religiosity, and Attitude toward Youth Group," \textit{Christian Education Journal} 5, no. 1 (2008): 57. In response, FYI is developing resources for churches to begin intergenerational ministries that provide a platform for connecting members of a church across the age spectrum.

\textsuperscript{15} Smith and Lundquist, 231. This is never a lone contributor factor, but consistently part of the combination of factors in the religious emerging adult.

\textsuperscript{16} DeVries, 43.

purpose statements common to youth ministries offers a preliminary answer to these queries.¹⁸

- Helping youth know Christ as their Lord and Savior
- Creating an environment where youth can develop a personal faith that will remain active after high school
- Enabling a young person to understand and recognize who Jesus is for them, and what it is to live for Him only

Each statement views the purpose of youth ministry as supporting an individual, sustained relationship with Jesus Christ expressed through the phrases, to “know Christ,” “develop a personal faith,” and “recognize who Jesus is for them.” The second example even shows the need to create an “environment,” which presumes the broader community is an insufficient location for faith formation. If engaging with a community of faith is not an essential part of the purposes of youth ministries, neither will it be a result.

One can conclude that there is not actually a retention problem among post-high school adolescents, for this would mean these individuals were once part of the faith community and then left or disengaged. Instead, there is an integration problem. Youth ministries, broadly speaking, do not appear to foster a commitment to the larger faith community. This elicits a significant question for theological consideration: How should churches understand the relationship between the individual and the community of faith? Before exploring this central question in Chapter Two, the following provides a thick description of the present terrain by reviewing current youth ministry literature in order to, 1) identify a dominant model of youth ministry, 2) analyze characteristics of this

¹⁸ These mission statements are taken from a large mainline church in the south, an active evangelical church in New England, and a nondenominational church on the west coast.
model, 3) explore the historical roots of this model, and 4) outline the research trajectory for the dissertation.

**The Antithesis: Youth Ministry as a Service-Provider**

In the church in particular, there is an unanticipated outcome of this extensive adult effort to care for youth: a service-provider approach to youth ministry. *A service is a work done to assist, help, and benefit another.* Providing a service to someone establishes roles, namely the person providing and the person receiving. In many expressions of youth ministry, adults in the church provide a service to adolescents by establishing youth ministry programs specifically tailored to meet the needs and interests of youth with the objective of youth internalizing a personal faith. The only role allotted youth is to be consumers of the services adults provide. This role disregards the communal nature of the Christian faith, denies youth access to contribute to the living tradition of a faith community, and ultimately does not embed youth into the faith community. A service-provider model of youth ministry exists in the language, manner of nurturing relationships, and emphasis on personal religion typical of youth ministries.

*Language: “Passing on the Faith” in Consumer Culture*

Postmodern philosophers remind us that language is never static; nor do words directly correspond to what they signify. Instead, words are in a dynamic relationship with their environment. The social context shapes the types of words one uses. For example, during the middle of the 2008-2009 financial crisis in America, many described the situation using disaster metaphors such as “the ground is shifting” or “our foundations are crumbling.” Then on January 12, 2010, a massive earthquake devastated the people
and land of Haiti. Afterward, one news commentator rightly received a great deal of criticism for continuing to use earthquake-analogous language to describe the financial crisis. Words once deemed helpful to describe reality required a change due to the shifting social context.

Conversely, words influence social context. People who work to change attitudes about gender, race, and ethnic groups spend a great deal of time and energy promoting change in language. Words used to describe a minority group (either in number or in lack of access to power) possess connotations that emerge out of a social context and continuing to use such words can perpetuate the mistreatment or marginalization of this group. Hence, people harness new words in the hope of reshaping reality. Words are bound to culture, people, and experience. Thus, the language used to speak of youth ministry influences its very practices and perceptions. In this vein, some of the language used functions to perpetuate a reality contrary to the aim of embedding youth in the community of faith.

For example, people use a variety of words to describe the desire to invite the next generation into the Christian faith. Some use relational language such as “sharing the faith” and others use authoritarian language stemming from parental and ecclesial responsibility like “training a child in the way they should go.” The most common of these phrases, “passing on the faith,” will be used here because it best encompasses the aim involved in the variety of phrases.

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19 Studying the various words used for blacks throughout American history is a helpful example of the influential role of language in how words used shaped mistreatment of a race.

20 For example, Merton Strommen and Richard Hardel propose a “radical new model” for youth and family ministry. Although I agree with the idea that we need to reemphasize the role of family and faith
As a point of clarification, there is nothing wrong with the intent of this phrase. People easily pass on recommendations about less important parts of life: a good restaurant, a vacation spot, or a bargain at a favorite store. Something would be dreadfully wrong if adults did not possess a desire to pass or share with others their deep experiences of faith and theological commitments. Certainly, the impulse to pass one’s faith to the next generation is noble and right. It is necessary and appropriate to provide the grounding of faith for the young. And yet, how does “passing” language function?

Passing language presently functions to support a service-provider approach to youth ministry in two ways. First, passing language designates roles consistent with a service provider: 1) the person who is passing on the service and 2) the person who is receiving the service. In the context of youth ministry, this means that adults are the passers of faith and the youth are the receivers of faith. There is a significant problem with these roles. If a youth’s role is only to receive faith, they are not being welcomed into a faith in which they are expected to participate and contribute. People are not empty vessels into which we pour knowledge about the faith and certainly not faith itself. Passing language ignores the agency of the receiver. Might the expectations of an adult who seeks to “pass faith” underestimate the need to engage with youth in conversation, dialogue, and exchange that will further shape mutual understanding and experience of God? At worst, passing language can degenerate to adults controlling a youth’s

community in youth ministry, “passing” language narrowly invests in increasing effectiveness in what is passed rather than inviting youth to be contributors to the faith community. See Strommen and Hardel, *Passing on the Faith: A Radical New Model for Youth and Family Ministry* (Winona: St. Mary's Press, 2000). Even while Kenda Creasy Dean is an advocate of youth contribution to the church, she uses passing language that may function to counter her intent. “Godbearing youth ministry embraces all the formal...and informal...ways of passing on faith.” Dean, *The Godbearing Life: The Art of Soul Tending for Youth Ministry* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1998), 99.
knowledge and experience of faith, neglecting to invite youth to join with the community. Although unintended, adult passer/youth receiver roles may lead to a misunderstanding of the Christian faith and the church as a product for personal consumption. Living in a consumer culture increases the likelihood of this outcome.\textsuperscript{21} Vincent Miller describes consumer culture not as a set of beliefs and values that one adopts or rejects in contrast to Christianity; rather, consumer culture influences our interpretation of Christian faith and belief.\textsuperscript{22} He is describing epistemology—one sees and acts through the lens of consumption resulting in religious symbols and beliefs morphing into a commodity to be consumed. The phrase “passing on the faith” in a consumer culture can function to create a context where faith is seen as a consumable commodity passed from one to another. Place this in the realm of youth ministry: If faith is something to consume, it makes sense for adults, the passers, to provide a consumable faith for youth, the receivers.

Building on these roles, the second way passing language feeds a service-provider mentality is that a service implies a product, which fits in a neat box called “the Christian faith”, that is sealed, wrapped, and ready to be passed. The tradition of the church, meaning the ongoing search to know and understand the actions of God, is evidence that the Christian faith is a continued dialogue across history and cultures that actively


\textsuperscript{22} This is only the preface to Miller’s argument that addresses the commodification of culture and its influence on the behaviors and practices of Christians.
discerns God’s activity in the world and the best possible response to this activity. Simply said, Christians get things right, and Christians get things wrong. There is no final version of the Christian faith to pass; instead, there is a dynamic tradition in which to participate. The greatest hope is that one will introduce the next generation to the ongoing dialogue found in the Christian tradition and provide needed knowledge and understanding that become essential resources for discerning God’s activity and creating a faithful response today. This is an invitation to being active contributors, not passive recipients. In the end, passing language contributes to service-provider youth ministry by treating faith as a product that can be passed and limits a youth’s contribution to the community of faith. Instead, language intended to describe the act of welcoming youth into the Christian faith needs to become invitational. The invitation is to “join with the community of faith” or “journey with the community of faith” or welcoming youth to “contribute to” the Christian story.

One-Way Relational Flow

Imagine walking into a local coffee shop and placing an order. The salesperson kindly greets you, asks what you would like in your coffee, takes your money, and hands you a full, steaming mug. The exchange ends with a smile and a wish for you to have a good day. Both you and the salesperson remain in the roles appropriate to the goal of purchasing coffee. What if you enjoyed the coffee so much that you wanted the salesperson to have the same experience? You offer to come behind the counter and fix it for him or her. Such a gesture may receive a chuckle, but if you were persistent, the manager may escort you from the store. The roles of salesperson and customer have
parameters grounded in the aim to sell coffee—one provides the coffee and one receives it. The exchange between the salesperson and customer is bound by this aim, which creates a one-way flow from passer to receiver.

The relationship between adults and youth in a service-based youth ministry model follow a similar pattern. As noted above, adults provide a service and youth receive it. The product being “sold” is the Christian tradition. The danger inherent to this paradigm is that relationships, which by nature involve exchange and a degree of mutuality, are limited to a one-way flow from passer to receiver in order to sell the product or, in youth ministry, to ‘pass the faith.’

Belief that the adult/youth relation can have a positive impact on adolescent faith formation dominates youth ministry literature and practice since Jim Rayburn’s vision for incarnational ministry in the 1940s. In the past five years, this commonly held view has come under the scrutiny of scholars. These critiques do not question the potential impact of such relations; most deem Rayburn accurate on this point. Rather, they query the form of the relation itself, which scholars describe as something akin to the one-way relational flow that characterizes service-provider youth ministry.

For example, Andrew Root proposes that adults have a misguided view of relationships with youth concurrent with a cultural dynamic of self-selecting.

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24 Meier, In Schools We Trust: Creating Communities of Learning in an Era of Testing and Standardization (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003), 13. The field of youth ministry is not the only location for this discussion. In the field of education, Meier laments that schools have undergone a structural shift to meet the goals of education, resulting in a loss of multiage communities such that “the nearer [youth] get to being adults the less and less likely they are to know any adults” Education is a good example of this. Standardized tests as a means of ensuring students receive a good education. They begin as a benefit for students, but often result is teachers consumed with teaching requirements that supplant the student/teacher relationship.
relationships, meaning there is an emphasis on choosing one’s relationships rather than accepting the relationships that are given in a particular context, e.g. parents or neighborhood. Root interviewed youth pastors and students at five churches in southern California and discovered the dominant understanding of adult/youth relations to be “personal influence relationalism.”

Adults enact this philosophy by building relationships with youth in order to influence adolescents to make a commitment to Christ. Root described one youth pastor who said adults should provide “modeling that could lead students into deeper committed faith and participation in the congregation.”

The relationship itself is secondary to the objective held for the youth—a mere means to an end. Another youth pastor hoped adult modeling of the Christian life would influence youth to view their peer relationships as opportunities to exert influence. Root rightly questions relationships that focus on influencing another person rather than the person themselves. He admits his own adoption of this “strategy of influence,” saying,

I had been working so hard to make things better by influencing adolescents to do this or do that, to believe this or know that. But in the process I was more concerned with their decision, behavior or commitment than with their broken humanity that desired someone to share in their deepest sufferings through relationship. When I tried to influence them, I had neither the patience nor the vision to truly share in their suffering, to make it my own and to join my own broken humanity with theirs.

Root redefines relational youth ministry by developing a theology of incarnation, shifting adults from exerting influence to accompanying youth amidst life’s journey.

26 Root, 74.
27 Root, 73.
28 Root, 79.
Root’s critique calls attention to the one-way relational flow prevalent in service-
provider youth ministry. Focusing on personal influence limits youth to a receiver role
and minimizes their personhood as adults exert influence over them. Because the aim is
to sell the product called Christian faith, the relation itself is only a tool and not an
integral aspect. Root’s call for adults to accompany youth on life’s journey breaks the
one-way relational flow inherent in the passer/receiver roles. Accompaniment means
joining with another. Joining involves the activity of two parties, encompasses mutuality,
and generates a two-way relational flow. Root is describing a relational exchange by
defining the incarnation as a model for adult/youth relations in youth ministry. He says,
“The incarnation is about a God who desires to be with us so fully that God becomes one
of us in order to join us [emphasis added] in the darkness of our personal and corporate
hells. God became human to be with and for us, not to simply influence us toward this or
that end.”

Similarly, Chap Clark’s ethnographic research illustrates the negative impact of a
one-way relational flow. He focuses on adolescent subculture and asserts that the
breakdown of internal and external systems established to nurture youth in American
culture cause the dominant adolescent experience to be one of “abandonment.” Internal
systems involve family structure. According to Clark, the instability of the family system
in our society and the increase in parent self-focus do not provide a safe, nurturing

29 Root, 79. Further exploration of this definition of relationship will occur in chapter five.
environment that supports an adolescent’s transition into adulthood. External systems are those organizations whose leaders seek to assist youth by fostering skills and experiences needed for the transition into adulthood (e.g., Boy/Girl Scouts, sports, music, and faith-based programs). As these organizations developed, their focus shifted from the person to the perpetuation of the organization such that “the good of the unique individual has been supplanted by the commitment to the good of the [organization].” Clark criticizes youth ministries of engaging in the same self-perpetuating activity saying, “…Often the demands and expectations of executing a program become the central driving focus.” The intended aim of caring for youth is lost amidst the focus on program and organization resulting in youth living in a “culture of isolation.”

Whereas Root critiques adults for using relationships to exert influence, Clark declares that adult effort to care for youth is relationally ineffective. Adults might feel like they are offering loving care to adolescents, but this does not correlate with youth who feel abandoned. Again, a one-way relational flow exists as adult effort misses relational exchange by focusing on the program or organization instead of the person. It is not deemed sufficient for adults to simply pass care to youth recipients; in fact, Clark’s study warns that such relational flow may be damaging. One of Clark’s strategies for change is to ask communities to make sure that each young person has “a few adult advocates who know and care about him or her.” Although Clark does not explicitly define the characteristics of these relationships, mutual exchange is implicit in his

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31 Clark, 50. Although Clark focuses the primary discussion around parents, he does discuss broader societal influences such as a highly mobile society, increased technology, demand for both parents to work full-time, loss of contact with extended family, and decline of neighborhoods.
32 Clark, 186.
33 Clark, 55.
proposals. Altering the felt experience of abandonment requires authentic relational encounter between adults and youth.

Mark Yaconelli’s evaluation of youth ministry practices introduces one final example of the one-way relational flow. He reproaches adult leaders in youth ministries for forgetting how merely to be with young people, substituting activity that benefits youth for being present with youth. He writes:

We know how to entertain them, market to them, test them, and statistically measure them. But we’ve forgotten how to be with them. As a result today’s youth have become more and more isolated, alienated, and left to fend for themselves within the molesting arms of the corporate media culture.34

Yaconelli suggests that the consequence of this pattern is more than an absence of adult relationship; it also disrupts an encounter with God. When we “keep youth distracted from the deeper rhythms and practices of the Christian faith”, we are actually disrupting God’s own activity. In 1997, Yaconelli formed the Lilly endowed Youth and Spirituality Project. He sought to renew youth ministry in the church by fostering “Christian communities that are attentive to God’s presence and discerning of the Spirit, so that these communities might better accompany young people in the way of Jesus.”35 Ultimately, the relational flow he seeks to create includes God’s presence in the midst of an adult/youth relationship.36

35 Yaconelli, 45. For more information on the Youth and Spirituality Project see http://www.ymsp.org.
36 Root also concludes that there is more than mutual exchange between adults and youth and sees the incarnation as the presence of God between us.
Root aptly shows a prevalent adult view of relationships that views the relationship merely as a means to the end of influencing youth. Clark reveals the irony of adult effort intended to care for youth that leaves youth with the felt experience of abandonment. Yaconelli points to the danger of entertaining youth that results in youth missing the very presence of God. This discussion calls for adult/youth relations to shift away from a one-way relational flow and move toward relational dynamics that foster mutuality and exchange.

*Personal Religion*

The coffee shop illustration noted above describes roles appropriate to the service industry. It also directs attention to the most important person in the room: the customer. In order to meet the aim of selling coffee, the salesperson directs his or her service to the individual waiting to be served. The intent is not to please everyone in line at the same time but to meet the desires of the next person in line and make a sale. This parallels emphasis on personal religion. A service-provider approach to youth ministry promotes a personal religion. Emphasis on individual religious experience is not isolated to either youth ministry or the Christian church but is part of a broader cultural shift that minimizes organized religious activity.

Over ten years ago noted sociologist Robert Putnam effectively demonstrated that American investment and participation in social networks, including religious organizations, were in decline. For example, in the last three to four decades, Americans were 10% less likely to “claim church membership, while our actual attendance and
involvement in religious activities has fallen by roughly 25 to 50 percent.”

Simultaneously, personal beliefs did not alter. This research indicated that an increasing number of Americans deemed belonging to religious communities as unessential to maintaining a personal belief system. A youth ministry model that prioritizes individual faith experience aligns with this trend.

There is recent evidence that the shift toward personalizing religious faith is also taking root in religious attitudes and practices of emerging adults. As noted above, the findings of the National Study for Youth and Religion (NSYR) indicate a lack of value attributed to religious service attendance and participation. Even though the historic practice and theology of all the religious traditions represented in the NSYR study involve the essential aspect of gathering as a community, significant numbers of those surveyed do not hold this value. When asked if “religious believers need to be involved in a religious congregation to be truly religious and spiritual…three-quarters disagree…Clearly, personal involvement in actual religious communities is not for the most of the emerging adults of any tradition examined here a necessary part of a life of

38 Putnam, 19-22. Putnam concludes that a lack of commitment to social organizations results in a loss of social capital. He gives examples of social capital as extended families, Sunday school classes, poker groups, civic organizations, and internet groups. “Just as a screwdriver (physical capital) or a college education (human capital) can increase productivity (both individual and corporate), so too social contacts affect the productivity of individuals and groups [social capital].” A society deficient in social capital will experience a reduction of “mutual support, cooperation, trust, and institutional effectiveness.” Putnam recognizes that not all social capital produces good as in the social networks surrounding Timothy McVeigh, convicted of bombing the a federal building in Oklahoma City. In its best form, social capital can provide “mutual support, cooperation, trust, institutional effectiveness.” At its worst, social capital produces “sectarianism, ethnocentrism, corruption.”
faith.”

Instead, religious participation is “external and incidental” such that the role of religion is reduced to “support individuals” and “take and leave the rest.”

NYSR’s findings may be explained by research in the field of psychology. Dr. Jean Twenge contends that generational attitudes increasingly focus on self, which subsequently validate emphasis on personal religion. She studies cultural changes and personality by analyzing shifts in responses to standard survey questions taken from different generations. The title of her first two books explain the results—Generation Me: Why Today’s Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled—and More Miserable Than Ever Before and The Narcissism Epidemic. Twenge contends that there is a distinct difference between how Baby Boomers (born post-World War 2) and Generation Me (born from 1970 to the present) manifest concern for self. Self-reflection and exploration mark a Boomer’s individualism. They may have rebelled against social norms and institutions, most notably in the social discord of the 1960s and 1970s, but they did so in groups taking the form of protest rallies, marches, and organizations. Ultimately, Boomers invested in self-discovery alongside others.

Unlike the Baby Boomers, Generation Me had no need to reincarnate themselves; they were born into a world that already celebrated the individual. For example, one survey given to college freshman asked them to respond to the statement that,

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39 Smith and Snell, 136.
40 Smith and Snell, 146.
41 Smith and Snell, 157.
42 Putnam also attributes the decline of participation in religious institution to a generational shift. Putnam, 74.
44 Twenge, 46.
45 Twenge, 49.
“developing a meaningful philosophy of life was an essential life goal.” In 1967, 86% indicated this was important; in 2004 only 42% saw this as vital.\textsuperscript{46} Twenge attributes this shift to the rise of the “self-esteem movement” that infiltrated school curriculum and parenting practices in the last two decades, creating an unmerited image of self as positive. She cites the widely used measure of self-esteem, the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, to demonstrate the increase. From 1968 to the mid-1990s, there was an 86% increase in self-esteem in men and 71% in women.\textsuperscript{47} Emphasizing self-esteem as an end in itself negates the natural adulations that come from doing well. Quoting a second grade teacher, Twenge says this is a “cotton candy sense of self with no basis in reality.” Hence, the person who is constantly told they are special and receives accolades and achievements regardless of merit can develop a self-perception of being entitled.

Twenge and others contend that our culture faces a “narcissism epidemic” such that Generation Me lacks the disposition to care for others and relinquish the rule of self. Religions are not immune. “Originally, religions could enforce narcissism-reducing practices because they didn’t have to compete for adherents: if you were born into a religion, you usually stayed. Now, however, people can select the religion that works for them…To compete, religions have to give people what they want.”\textsuperscript{48} If Twenge is accurate in her assessment that narcissistic traits are part of a generational alteration in personality characteristics, a service-provider model based solely in a personal experience of faith is a likely outcome. The larger faith community becomes secondary at

\textsuperscript{46} Twenge, 48.  
\textsuperscript{47} Twenge, 52.  
\textsuperscript{48} Twenge and Campbell, 246.
best and superfluous at worst. How then do the practices within youth ministries emphasize personal religion?

The Jesus and Me Gospel

A service-based approach to youth ministry prioritizes personal faith appropriation, which is often enacted through making personal decisions. The Christian story morphs from a story for a community and into a story for a person. The prominence of influencing personal faith is clear in the sample youth ministry mission statements noted at the beginning of the chapter:

- Helping youth know Christ as their Lord and Savior
- Creating an environment where youth can develop a personal faith that will remain active after high school
- To enable a young person to understand and recognize who Jesus is for them, and what it is to live for Him only

Such mission statements, intended or unintended, view the gospel message exclusively as a personal gift for a person to receive. The central focus is on Jesus’ life and death and describes God’s activity in the Christ event through the lens of a first person pronoun—Jesus died for me. Jesus and me theology creates an image of God who should be on my side and work in my best interests.

An extreme example of over-personalizing the Christian faith is in the book Holy Wow. The author claims that we can no longer view youth ministry as a one-size-fits-all program, declaring, “homogeneity must die” due to its ineffectiveness at keeping the attention of youth. Just as Paul and Jesus customized the gospel for the different people they encountered, “We absolutely must individualize, customize, and personalize our
youth ministries. The book includes methods to help youth workers tailor ministry for each individual. It appears that the Christian call to be transformed into the image of Christ is reversing. According to this author, Jesus should now be transformed for each individual!

Although the Christian faith does involve a personal encounter with God and does require personal response, this is not the entirety of the gospel message. Personal encounter is not the telos. Jesus’ message continually caused people to reflect on themselves and be transformed. Personal and corporate transformation becomes transformation for and toward others. Similarly, an image of God whose interest is narrowly defined as “for me” is incompatible with real life experiences that will inevitably include events where God does not move the world to work in a person’s favor and can lead to disillusionment with the Christian faith. Chapter Two will develop a theological framework that moves beyond the Jesus and me theology. For now, the following examples demonstrate how a service-provider approach to youth ministry that emphasizes personal faith coincides with a broader cultural perception that the individual should be the central focus.

Creating Barriers

Isolating youth from the larger community of faith is justifiable when the priority revolves around providing a service to the individual. A service-provider approach to youth ministry creates youth programs, youth centers, and youth worship services with the intention of narrowing the audience so that the message can be tailored to meet the

needs and interests of youth. Although it is true that instruction in the Christian faith should be age-appropriate, generating programs that act as physical barriers between youth and other age groups in a congregation implicitly teach that a youth’s only role in the community is to receive a service. This critique is not new. In 1989 Stuart Cummings-Bond declared, “Churches with strong youth programs have usually controlled adolescence by corralling it, by institutionalizing it—and not within the daily rhythm of the church, but outside of it, in a smaller circle that is tangent to the larger one, like a one-eared Mickey Mouse.”

King critiques the age segregation practice by juxtaposing it with the promise to help raise the child in the Christian faith made by the congregation at an infant’s baptism or dedication. Age segregation not only denies youth the wisdom and experience of those older than they are, but the entire church misses out on the unique role youth can play in the church. In the end, this pattern of ministry does not foster the community necessary for faith to mature. Chapter Two will explore the essential role community plays in faith formation based on the biblical text and theological inquiry.

Worship as Personal Encounter

In a service-provider approach, worship is narrowly defined as a person singing praise songs to God. Root argues that the emphasis on personal worship experience was a result of the underlying assumption of individualism and the free choice of faith. “The

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50 Cummings-Bond, "The One-Eared Mickey Mouse," *Youth Worker Journal*, no. Fall (1989): 77. Cummings-Bond is responding to the decline of the mainline church and the statistical research that demonstrates the loss of membership is not transfer to more conservative denominations, but dropping out of church.

individual actions of raising hands, clapping and tearful singing have become the markers of serious faith.”\textsuperscript{52} This understanding of worship magnifies the individual and intends to foster an emotional encounter between the young person and Jesus. A more comprehensive view of worship sees the person as joining with the action of the community. For example, worship in the Presbyterian Church (USA) is defined as:

Christian worship joyfully ascribes all praise and honor, glory and power to the triune God. In worship the people of God acknowledge God present in the world and in their lives. As they respond to God’s claim and redemptive action in Jesus Christ, believers are transformed and renewed. In worship the faithful offer themselves to God and are equipped for God’s service in the world.\textsuperscript{53}

This definition views worship as a response to God’s initiative resulting in transformation and service to others. You Tube is full of national and international “worship concerts.” Some of these show 25,000 young people gathered together and singing, “Lord I give you my heart, I give you my soul.” Singing these words in the first person singular appears counterproductive to the intent of gathering a large number of Christians together. The lyrics of many praise songs create walls between people by using language bound to an individual’s worship of God rather than enhancing the communal worship activity. “A Christian’s personal response to God is in community.”\textsuperscript{54} Creating an environment that fosters personal worship epitomizes the service-based approach to youth ministry.

\textsuperscript{52} Root, 75.
Serving as Personal Fulfillment

It is a regular practice in youth ministries to include local service projects and global short-term mission trips among the group’s activities. At its core, these activities are appropriate since serving others is at the heart of the Christian story. When youth ministry practices focus on the individual, the aim of serving others shifts from the one served to the one doing the serving.

A common discussion between youth ministers and church leaders is whether spending a significant amount of money on short-term global mission trips is necessary when there are an abundance of local community projects in which youth can participate. Youth ministry practices that seek to serve the individuals would defend the expensive global projects based on the need to take youth out of their comfortable environment in order to better influence personal faith. The end becomes personal fulfillment rather than meeting the needs of people.

Emphasizing personal religion coincides with research showing a decline in participation in religious activities among Americans in general. Similarly, attitudes among emerging adults indicate that external aspects of faith are inconsequential to the personal faith experience. In addition, a heightened view of self among recent generations creates an environment where a personal religion can flourish. Youth ministry practices revolve around the individual when a Jesus and me theology minimizes the gospel message, age-segregated programs act as barriers between adults and youth,
personal encounter is the central purpose of worship, and personal fulfillment is the goal for serving others.

The Christian faith is in danger of being understood by youth as a commodity to consume like a good cup of coffee, not a community in which to belong and participate. Service-provider youth ministry is not likely to embed youth in the larger faith community. Chap Clark laments on the years he spent propagating the goal of youth ministry as “personal, authentic faith in Christ.” Instead, “the goal of youth ministry should be to make disciples of Jesus Christ who are authentically walking with God within the context of intimate Christian community.”

A brief historical overview of the emergence of youth ministry out of the evangelical movement in America further explains how the service-provider model emerged.

The growth of a service industry: our history sheds light on our present

Specialized Care

There are many societal changes that influenced the evolution of youth ministry. Two factors in particular contribute to the turn toward service-provider youth ministry. The first is historical and occurred in the early twentieth century when youth fellowships emerged in response to faltering youth societies. This era revealed the need for adolescents to receive specialized care.

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55 Clark, 188.
Prior to the late nineteenth century emergence of adolescence, young people transitioned into adulthood in the context of close-knit, family systems. In this environment, young people learned a trade, developed the skill of farming, or had responsibility for carrying on the family name or business. Young people had few options in life because the environment included an expected path for their future and equipped them with the necessary skills and resources to follow this path. The Industrial Revolution, which prompted the movement from rural to urban living, eroded this structure, fostered a new adolescent subculture, and created options for young people. In light of this shift, the church faced the challenge of ministering to a growing youth subculture beyond the transitional family pastoral care model. Youth societies mark the first step toward the emergence of specialized care for adolescents.

Historians credit Francis E. Clark’s creation of the Young People’s Society of Christian Endeavor (1881) as the catalyst for the explosion of youth societies across America. Clark saw young people disappearing from the church and sought to respond to the growing needs and interests of youth. The society’s primary aim was to “reinforce the desire of young people to grow in their walk with God—to strengthen their Christian endeavor.” According to Mark Senter, Clark based the approach on the idea of “accountability” that revolved around six features: 1) taking a pledge to “endeavor to know God,” 2) sharing in the leadership responsibilities of the society by serving on a

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57 Senter, 159. For example, Senter reports that in 1895 there was a gathering at a Boston conference that included over 56,000 Christian Endeavors in attendance.
58 Senter, 157.
committee, 3) attending weekly prayer meetings and monthly roll calls where each person gave a report on their progress in the Christian life, 4) practicing private prayer and bible readings daily, 5) retaining denominational loyalty and support the local church, and 6) valuing interdenominational loyalty.\(^{59}\)

Although the Christian Endeavor Societies and their denominational counterparts\(^{60}\) were pervasive and influential, they had a short life span.\(^{61}\) They offered a location for young people in the church, but the church’s primary aim was self-perpetuation and survival of the tradition. The church did not change with youth culture; rather they specialized in care for them thus beginning to be service-providers. At the same time, the strict nature of the societies could not compete with the magnetic draw of the growing adolescent sub-culture and “youth societies lost their ability to attract and hold young people, especially young men.”\(^{62}\) There was no turning back, the “center of adolescent society no longer in the church, the high school society began to trump church activities on virtually every front.”\(^{63}\) Youth fellowships emerged at this juncture.

Amidst the diverse proliferation of youth fellowship programs in the twentieth century, four features are relevant to understanding the rise of specialized care.\(^{64}\) First, the mantle of leadership changes from young people to adults.\(^{65}\) Young people were the leaders of the youth societies and now adults surmised that young people needed more

\(\text{\textsuperscript{59}}\) Senter, 161-165.
\(\text{\textsuperscript{60}}\) Senter, 172. Such as the Methodist Episcopal Epworth League, Young People’s Baptist Union, Lutheran Walther League and Presbyterian youth fellowship.
\(\text{\textsuperscript{61}}\) Senter, 167-8. The first 10 years were the most influential period. After 30 years and denomination duplication of the model, the movement diminished significantly.
\(\text{\textsuperscript{62}}\) Senter, 191.
\(\text{\textsuperscript{63}}\) Senter, 192.
\(\text{\textsuperscript{64}}\) Cannister, 66-72. This includes a well-documented account of different forms of youth fellowships.
\(\text{\textsuperscript{65}}\) This feature is noted by Senter. Cannister. Pahl, *Youth Ministry in Modern America: 1930 to the Present* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2000).
than peer leadership offered. Senter states, “Yet the inability of churches to find adults who would put up with the social immaturity and unreliability of student leadership caused churches to move toward employing youth specialists…This in turn, moved young people into a more passive role.”66 There is also a swell of concern from parents and churches surrounding the emergence of the public high school and removal of religious instruction from this domain. Adults wanted young people to receive moral instruction and stepped into new roles in the church and nondenominational organizations to meet this desire. Shifting from youth to adult leadership led to the creation of the youth ministry professional whose task is to specialize in care of adolescents.

Secondly, adults recognized the need for young people to have a place for Christian fellowship since, “the school replaced the church as the location where young people gathered.”67 Hence, adults developed programs that would foster such fellowship. Thirdly, adults initially aimed their specialized care at youth in the church, but youth fellowships expanded this to young people outside of the church. Evelyn McCluskey’s Miracle Bible Clubs (1933) exemplifies this change in emphasis. Mark Cannister describes two aspects of McCluskey’s unique approach. She used storytelling combined with a “conversationalist” style of teaching that was attractive to young people. She also assumed that those in attendance at the meetings had not grown up in the church.68 The purposes of the clubs include: “1) to invite high school students to salvation in Christ, 2) to help converts realize and understand the true meaning of Christ living in them, 3) to enable converts successfully implement a new Christian lifestyle, and 4) to teach students

66 Senter, 192.
67 Senter, 199.
68 Cannister, 6.
how to become Christian conversationalist in witnessing to their peers.”

Drawing young people to churches that were not previously involved is a distinct shift away from youth societies who focused on the membership of youth already included in the church. This represents a broadening of specialized care for adolescence because it moves beyond the church membership with an evangelistic emphasis.

The final feature reinforcing specialized care is the relational ministry model. Jim Rayburn, founder of the parachurch organization Young Life (1940), discovered a way to bridge the growing chasm between adult and youth culture that left youth alienated from the adult church and subsequently the Christian faith. Rayburn created programs and events as avenues for his evangelistic intent, but quickly surmised that young people showed up and brought their friends when he had made a personal connection with them. This realization birthed the commonly held philosophy of youth ministry called incarnational ministry.

Andrew Roots evaluates this approach, saying:

Rayburn’s theological justification for this approach to ministry is the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Because God, in the person of Jesus Christ entered a foreign cosmos to save it from destruction, so Rayburn (and the Young Life leaders after him) entered a foreign world of youth culture to save it for Christ. Using the incarnation as a pattern…Rayburn positioned the incarnation as ministerial justification (rather than theological explication) of ministry.

Root’s description of the relational model as a pattern people emulated in youth ministry practices exemplifies the growth of specialized care. Similarly, Rayburn prescribed a ministry method that was specific to this particular subculture and this

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69 From McCluskey’s *Torch and Sword* printed in 1937 as quoted in Cannister, 6-7.
70 This shift in practice lead by youth fellowships also demonstrates the budding evangelical impulse that carried Protestant youth ministry into our present day.
71 Andy Root develops an historical argument around the success of relational ministry occurring because of the cultural shift toward the self-chosen relationship. For expanded discussion, see Root, chapter two.
72 Root, 53.
approach is imbedded in service-provider youth ministry that sees relationships as a means to an end.\textsuperscript{73}

Youth fellowships continue to blossom and diversify across American soil alongside the growing youth subculture. By transferring leadership from youth to adults, recognizing the need for young people to participate in Christian fellowship, expanding ministry to include those not presently part of the church, and designing a relational pattern of ministry, adults create avenues to specialize in care for adolescents. As specialization increases, the norm for youth ministry practices emulates a service-provider approach, which relegates youth to a passive role.

\textit{Voluntary Association}

The second factor contributing to a service-provider approach to youth ministry is the rise of volunteerism. Jon Pahl traces the history of youth ministry by examining four twentieth century movements.\textsuperscript{74} One of the problems each of these movements faced was the transition to voluntary association, meaning participation was a personal choice. When each movement began, the leadership could depend upon a strong base of participants already committed to the denomination or organization.\textsuperscript{75} Pahl argues that by the 1960s, “all four movements felt the strain as the stable neighborhoods and ethnic identities of the middle years of the twentieth century gave way to the mobility and

\textsuperscript{73} The field of youth ministry is indebted to Root’s work that raises invaluable questions about nature of relationships that are based on an adult’s goal or objective. He proposes a more authentic theology of relational ministry rooted in the care of the person as primary to an adult’s objective for him or her.

\textsuperscript{74} The Lutheran Walter’s League, the Catholic Young Christian Workers, the evangelical Youth for Christ, and the Methodist, Baptist, United Church of Christ African American churches.

\textsuperscript{75} Pahl uses the phrase “life-path” to describe the normative path each organization offered to young people. Even though the parachurch organization Youth for Christ was nondenominational, the organization provided a normative life-path through which programs were built to foster.
blurring boundaries of the latter years of the millennium.⁷⁶ Increased options and choices for young people diminished each movement’s core base of participants. Pragmatically, this change required that programs become more appealing. Many denominationally or nationally anchored organizations turned toward local initiatives, which tried to build appeal in a given geographic context. In Pahl’s analysis, needing to discover ways to lure young people led to each movement losing its distinct theological character.⁷⁷ The impetus for program development shifted from shaping young people through the unique expression of a theological tradition to appealing to desire. Attendance was a choice and the measuring stick for success became the number of young people swayed to participate. Both choice and subsequent competition for attention made voluntary association a significant contributor to service-provider youth ministry.

A service-provider model of youth ministry certainly did not develop overnight; rather, this brief review shows the programmatic shift toward specialized care and accommodation to the rise in voluntary association.

**Moving Forward**

A growing body of literature exists that explores the limited role of youth in both the church and society. Scholars differ in their critique of this problem. A decade ago, Jon Pahl declared that historians had not noted the contributions of youth. In his history of youth ministry in America, he traced four twentieth century youth movements in the

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⁷⁶ Pahl, 10.
⁷⁷ Pahl, 111. Pahl continues this train of thought by suggesting that there are aspects of Christian theology that simply cannot be programmed such as compassion and identification with suffering.
church and accused each of failing to “recognize the critical abilities of youth, their intellectual gifts and their constructive potential.” Although Pahl admits the “ephemerality of youth in the flow of time makes writing their history difficult,” his own historical investigation outlines youth contributions to America. He writes, “Youth and youth ministries helped to end the great Puritan epoch in American religious history.” Similarly, Alvin Reid describes the crucial leadership roles youth played in English and American revivals and contrasts this with the entertainment focus of youth ministry today.

Others declare youth ministries guilty of minimizing youth. For example, David White accuses youth ministries of being complicit with the broader culture in the “domestication of youth.” Domestication involves taming natural instincts toward compliance. According to White, we domesticate adolescents in response to cultural forces that view adolescents as monsters needing to be tamed for adulthood. These forces shape our understanding of, and actions toward, adolescents resulting in “gradually removing young people from significant roles…and relegated them to passive roles as students, service workers, and consumers.” Similar to White, Mark Yaconelli critiques youth ministries for developing programs intended to control and conform youth in order to ease adult anxiety over adolescence in general. Such programs are typically

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78 Pahl, 115.
79 Pahl, 117.
80 Pahl, 167.
81 Reid, Raising the Bar: Ministry to Youth in the New Millennium (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2004), 63-71.
83 White, 35.
84 See chart in Yaconelli, 240.
entertainment-based and “keep youth distracted from the deeper rhythms and practices of the Christian faith.”

Still others offer constructive proposals for broadening a youth’s role in the church. Kenda Creasy Dean develops a practical theology in which she establishes a connection between the Passion of Christ with the unique passion that epitomizes adolescence and discovers a cure for a passionless church. Her work carves out a specific location in the church for youth to be contributors.

This dissertation seeks to add to this growing body of literature delineating the relationship between a young person and the broader community of faith. How might this relationship foster in adolescents a maturing faith in Christ? Chapter Two is a normative inquiry and uses a biblical and theological lens to define this relationship by examining letters to the early churches and exploring the writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Miroslav Volf. Chapter Three investigates adolescent development through Positive Youth Development (PYD) literature, which focuses on the person-context relationship as the locus for development. Chapter Four establishes five “vital values” a church enacts when the relationship between the person and the community is understood as vital to a maturing Christian faith. Insights gained from chapters one through three, religious education literature, and theology, form the basis of the values. In Chapter Five, an examination of Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger’s social theory of learning leads to an expanded definition of faith formation in the social realm. The chapter identifies key elements that characterize communities of practice (CoPs), which when supported help

85 Yaconelli, 45.
86 Dean, Practicing Passion: Youth and the Quest for a Passionate Church (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2004).
adults enact the vital values. Chapter Six proposes an alternative vision for youth ministries and strategies to move away from the service-provider model and toward welcoming youth as contributors to the mission of the church.
Chapter Two: A Person’s Relationship to the Community of Faith – Biblical and Theological Inquiry

Introduction

David Augsburger defines three forms of spirituality within the Christian tradition. Each draws on a different number of potential poles involved in the spiritual life, these being God, self, and others.¹ The first form is monopolar spirituality, which focuses solely on the single pole of self. Neither God nor other people are essential to the spiritual life and should not impose themselves upon the individual; rather, spirituality is an existential search for self-discovery. Values such as freedom, creativity, exploration, and care for human life and nature characterize monopolar spirituality. Due to the exclusion of God as a participant in the spiritual life, monopolar spirituality does not fall within the Judeo-Christian tradition. The second form is bipolar spirituality and includes the poles of God and self. Augsburger contends that this form dominates Roman Catholic and Protestant traditions because of the focus on personal redemption. *I come to know myself as I come to know God.* God is a divine reference point outside of self, beckoning people toward wholeness through a relational encounter with God. Other people are either an additional benefit to the primary relationship between God and self or the recipients of care offered solely out of obedience to God. But others are not integral to the spiritual life. The Anabaptist tradition represents the third form of spirituality, integrating all three poles God, self, and others. God is reflected in other

¹ Augsburger, *Dissident Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006), 7-22.
people, and therefore, an encounter with God through another is integral to the spiritual life. The telos of spirituality is the transformation of persons and the community such that the community becomes the context for living out the practices of the Christian life. “Love of God transcends and transforms love of self, love of God and love of neighbor become one…”

Although Augsburger’s analysis is an overly broad characterization of different Christian traditions, the paradigm raises valuable questions regarding the nature of the relationship between individuals and the larger community of faith. Is a bipolar perspective on the Christian life sufficient? Is the God/self relationship always primary to the secondary relationship between self and other people? For Augsburger, the answer to both of these questions is a resounding, “No.” Instead, he is promoting a distinct vision of the Christian life that claims other people as integral to a maturing Christian faith. This chapter affirms Augsburger’s proposal and expands upon it by: 1) examining how an early church community envisioned the relationship between the person and the community of faith through the lens of Colossians 3:1-17, and confirming this interpretation in two other letters to the early churches; 2) utilizing Bonhoeffer’s theology of sociality to further define God’s activity within this relationship; and 3) drawing from Volf’s ecclesiology, exploring both the person’s and the community’s activity that join with God’s activity to produce a maturing Christian faith.

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2 The word “reflected” is key to this statement in that the other points toward God, but the other cannot be God.
3 In the Anabaptist tradition, Augsburger argues that living out the practices of the Christian life in a community context required some degree of withdrawal that can result in a segregated community to varying degrees.
4 Augsburger, 13.
A Communal Vision: Insights from an Early Church

Constructing a vision for an individual’s relationship with the community of faith begins with the biblical narrative. How was an individual’s relationship to the community understood in early Christian communities? A study of Colossians 3:1-17 provides a helpful perspective because the author is giving the recipients of this letter a pragmatic explanation of how they should participate in the maturing Christian life.5 Exegetical insights will be compared to two other texts from another early church community, Galatians 5:16-26, and an overview of 1 Corinthians, both of which confirm and expand upon the vision presented by the author of Colossians. The exploration of these biblical texts will provide a framework for further theological considerations.

*Sacred Heart Colloquium*

*To the 3rd and 4th Year Theologians*

Colossians 3:1-17

The Christ hymn (1:15-20) plays as background music throughout the letter to Colossae and creates a Christocentric orientation. Christ is Creator and all things are created for Christ’s glory (15-17); Christ is omnipotent and acts as sustainer (17, 18); Christ is head of the church (18), Christ is where God dwells (19); and Christ is the path for the reconciliation of all things (20). According to the author of the hymn, the recipients need nothing additional to deal with their external or internal problems than

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what Christ has already done. These are significant claims that act as a Christological lens for the remainder of the letter and are intended to inspire action toward the ethical appeal that follows in chapter three.

Prior to 3:1-17, the letter begins with a common greeting to the people of Colossae. The author establishes the authority of the contents of the letter by appealing to their shared experience in Christ (1:12-23) and his own authority as a servant of Christ (1:24-2:5). Next, there is a warning against listening to “deceptive philosophies” that are based on “human tradition” and not from God (2:8). Reasons to avoid these philosophies include: 1) In Christ the “fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form” and this now fills you (2:9-10); 2) The readers share with Christ in his death and are made alive with him (2:11-12); 3) Christ erased the law with all its demands thus providing forgiveness (2:13-14); and 4) Christ disarmed the powers and authorities (2:15). The readers are reminded not to let people condemn their actions based on ceremonial law of the Old Testament (2:16-17, 21-23): these were just “shadows” of what was to come (17). They now belong to Christ (2:20). The first word in 3:1 creates a shift in the argument. It is translated as “since then” or “therefore” and connotes an if/then argument. If all these pronouncements exist, then your behavior should be different from those around

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6 O’Brien, xxxi. Much scholarly work focused on naming the “Colossian heresy”. First noted in 1875 by Lightfoot and by 1973 Gunther lists forty-four different descriptions of this heresy asserted in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which also includes Hooker who claimed there was no heresy. Recently scholars are less concerned with putting forward a new heresy; rather, they name the most probable of those already asserted. For example, O’Brien provides these options: Essene Judaism, a Pagan Mystery cult, a syncretism of Gnosticized Judaism and pagan elements, Judaizing Syncretism, Jewish/Christian Mystical Asceticism. O’Brien, 6.

7 This summary is an adaption of material in Talbert, 13-17.

8 This reference to the Colossian heresy hinges on the translation of the word “philosophies.”
Colossians 3:1-17 calls for action marked by taking off certain vices and putting on specified virtues.

Beginning in 3:1, the author focuses the readers’ attention away from the prior reference to the dual actions of Christ “who died” and “was raised” (2:11-13) by dropping ‘died’ and retaining ‘raised.’ This shift emphasizes the results of being raised with Christ. As O’Brien says, “If their death with him severed the links that bound them to the old order then their resurrection with him established links with a new and heavenly order.” Because they “have been raised,” their strivings should focus on making what is “above” actualized in the life of the community. Combine this raised language with the Christocentric core of the letter. The “hope is for believers to share Christ’s resurrection life in transformed bodily form” evidenced in the behavior of the Colossian people.

The original readers of this letter interpreted these words from a different social environment than our own. Members of the early church were part of a collectivist environment. This view is important for understanding the social world of the biblical writers.

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9 O’Brien, 160.
10 O’Brien, 161. The focus of their striving is found in images and language of the “above”. One image in 3:2 includes Christ seated with God, an illusion to Psalm 110:1, and points the reader to what is already accomplished, hence directing their eyes above. Likewise, verses 3-4 include language that compares what was “hidden” in Christ to what will “appear” with Christ, opening a vision of the Parousia when Christ will be revealed in “glory”. Talbert, 226. Again, the language is directional, pointing to what is presently above. Because the Colossians are presently being raised, Paul is bringing the world “above” into the vision of what should exist “below”. They need to direct their hearts and minds above by shifting their eyes in that direction, in turn, revealing the possibilities for what is below. Witherington refers to this as a vertical eschatology, the influence of what is above in the here and now. See Witherington III, 121. Talbert names it the inaugurated eschatology because the arrival of what will be has started. See Talbert, 226. O’Brien retains the above/below language in the passage. See O'Brien, 161ff.
12 Malina, The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology, 3rd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001). Bruce Malina and Jerome Neyrey’s research on the broader Mediterranean culture is a significant contribution to our understanding of the New Testament world. Drawing from cultural anthropology, this growing area of biblical criticism examines the social environment of the biblical writers. The social world is part of a culture’s shared patterns of “meaning,
society, meaning a group-oriented personality dominated such that a person is “inextricably embedded” to others. The group gives a person their identity, which is primarily kinship-based. Belonging is an organizing principle in such a society where maintaining and nurturing the bonds with people in the group is essential. A collectivist mindset shaped both the author and recipients of this letter. Hence, the list of vices and virtues in Chapter Three address the community.

Contrast this community mindset with the American social environment, which is individualistic and thus prize measurable successes in an individual, like the acquisition of material goods and achievement. Consequently, cultivating individual ability is highly valued. When a person from an individualistic social setting interprets the list of virtues and vices, these may be misinterpreted as a call for individual piety and miss the explicit communal emphasis in the passage. Additionally, unlike the Greek language’s inclusion of number in its endings, the English language does not distinguish between the singular and plural ‘you’. Without careful attention to the context to determine singular or plural usage, a member of an individualistic society is likely to default to a singular ‘you’ interpretation. Colossians 3 is not a call for a bunch of individuals to develop personal piety. When the author of Colossians 3 asks the people to take off vices and put on feelings, and values” that emerge as people create structures to help make sense of their surroundings.

Malina, 9. Social patterns act as a lens for interpreting life experiences and values. They also shape the meaning of language. Words themselves do not hold meaning, but gain meaning when people use them to within a particular social environment. In Malina’s words, “Meaning inevitably derives from the general social system of the speakers of a language.” Malina, 1. Therefore, understanding the biblical text (letting it stand on its own prior to a hermeneutical turn) requires knowledge of these social patterns to avoid (or at least minimize) imposing one’s own cultural patterns onto the text.

Malina, 62.

14 Malina calls this American emphasis “instrumental mastery.” Malina, 28.
virtues, it is not a request to the ‘you-singular’ person to remove his or her sins; rather, it is a call to a ‘you-plural’ community to remove the sins that are between them.\(^{15}\)

A communal interpretation is also expressed through the expected results of “being raised” with Christ: behavioral transformation in the community.\(^{16}\) More than being a prescriptive list of proper and improper behaviors, the list of vices and virtues themselves hinge on community. The vices are behaviors that disrupt community. They come in two sets; the first includes sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires, and greed. Talbert describes this list as “sexual evils”\(^{17}\) and Witherington goes one step further classifying the vices as “self-centeredness.”\(^{18}\) The second list includes sins of speech: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and filthy language.\(^{19}\) One vice stands alone—do not lie. None of these vices is a solo act—sexual sins, self-centeredness, damaging speech, and lying all require another to commit these sins. Even more, they all undermine the peace and unity of a community.

In the same way, the virtues are behaviors that enhance community. Note how each virtue requires human interaction: compassion and kindness direct our way of relating to others; humility suggests a posture of service and self-sacrifice; gentleness and patience require bearing with each other; forgiveness entails the presence of someone to forgive. The pinnacle virtue that “binds them all together” is love for others (3:14). The

\(^{15}\) The passage also contains communal language describing the Colossians as “God’s chosen people”. The author establishes at the beginning of the letter who he thinks these people are through “exalted language” such as “God’s holy people”, “chosen and set apart for him”, “brothers brought into a relationship”. He is defining their identity as a communal identity. See O’Brien, 6.

\(^{16}\) Talbert, 230-231. Taking off vices and putting on virtues is conventional speech in this historical context used by others such as Philo, Chrysostom and the mystery religions. This particular list was not unique, but was consistent with a Mediterranean emphasis on social accord.

\(^{17}\) Talbert, 227.

\(^{18}\) Witherington III, 176.

\(^{19}\) Witherington III, 176.
result is a description of what the individuals in the community should exhibit to each other. Relationships among them are intended to transform. Changed relationships are the location for the manifested power of Christ as asserted in the Christ hymn. To be raised with Christ is to behave differently toward each other by removing the sins that exist between them and acting in ways that enhance community. According to the author of this text, relationships among Christians are integral to the maturing Christian life and the setting for Christ to bring about transformation. Christian transformation does not find its end solely in the person, but in the person amidst the faith community.

*Galatians 5:16-26*

Other letters from the early church also see one’s relationship with the Christian community as essential to the maturing Christian life. The contrast between the fruit of the flesh and fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:16-26 confirms this assertion. This letter intends to resolve conflict in some of the early churches. There are some among them strongly advocating that Gentiles must continue practicing aspects of the Jewish law, such as circumcision, because the law was perceived by some as a means of eradicating sin. In an emphatic response, the author declares this a perversion of the gospel of Christ (1:7)! A major theological theme and interpretive lens of the letter is a believer’s liberty in Christ that results in an ability to carry out the original intent of the law—to love others. Liberty is only realized in community. A communal vision of the gospel unfolds in the letter, uniting all under Christ and claiming all are “Abraham’s seed, and

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20 Sampley, 183-184.
heirs according to the promise” (3:29). The author envisions the gospel message resulting in changed social relationships. In this historical environment, the author names particular relationships that should be transformed: the ethnic division amidst Jews and Greeks, the economic and social separation between slave and free, and the gender barrier among males and females (3:28).

Against this relational backdrop, Galatians 5:16-26 explicitly identifies what such transformation would look like. The author employs a cosmic vision, defining a battle between the flesh (or sinful nature) and the Spirit (5:17).22 The introduction of the cross is a liberating event that resolves this battle by breaking the “power of forces that held humanity captive.”23 This does not result in mere individual freedom or “untrammeled personal autonomy,” but provides opportunity for improved human relationships.24 And more, the believers are to use their freedom to “serve one another in love” (5:13). The acts of the flesh are compared to the fruit of the Spirit. These groupings should be read differently than the vice/virtue list in Colossians 3 because the list is not a description of certain behaviors in which to participate. Rather, they are marks of what the flesh versus the Spirit produce.25 What remains consistent between the Galatians text and Colossians 3 is the emphasis on a transforming community. The acts of the flesh are those characteristics that destroy community: sexual immorality, hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, and factions among groups… (5:19-20). Fruit, representing both growth and nourishment, is the analogous term used to name that which the Spirit

23 Sampley, 187.
24 Martyn, 147.
25 Martyn, 484.
produces: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Each of these is a community-building characteristic. The fruit of the Spirit is not only expressed as actions in community life, but they are “more oriented toward the impact they have in community than in the individual.” The people are exhorted to reflect the glory of God to each other. In sum, the absence of the Spirit is a broken community and the mark of the Spirit is a transformed community. Relationships between Christians are integral to the Christian life in this letter because Christ’s work among them is made manifest through transformed relationships.

_I Corinthians_

A brief overview of I Corinthians explicates the same communal emphasis. The author is responding to factions that exist in the church, immediately asking the readers the rhetorical question, “Is Christ divided?” (1:13). In the first chapter, the author avoids any dualistic perception that being united in Christ only exists in a spiritual or mystical realm and urges them to form relationships that tangibly represent this reality. “Relational involvement within the community is essential to maintain unity within the church.”

The letter includes advice on how to live in relational harmony based on the specific conflicts among them. People appear to be self-focused in a way that is causing disruption and the author calls them toward a “give-and-receive transaction between

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26 Howard, 143.
27 Howard, 148.
individuals and the community.”28 Howard argues that the Corinthian letter includes a movement from the individual to community. For example, the question of whether believers should eat food sacrificed to idols is resolved by asking the individual exercising his or her freedom in Christ by eating the meat to refrain from this practice and defer to the needs of the “weaker” of conscience among them. The solution to the chaos present around the Lord’s Supper is to “wait for each other” (11:33) or eat at home first if you are hungry (11:34) in order for all to partake. Similarly, the readers receive instruction on the exercising of spiritual gifts. They are to correct the present manner of using the gifts for personal edification and only use them for “the common good.” (12:7) The community is built up when the individual uses his or her gifts.29 The result of the movement from the individual to the community is transformation for the whole community.

Summary

The biblical texts explored above offer significant insights regarding the relationship between the individual and the community of faith. Colossians 3 implicitly demonstrates how the relationships themselves are the setting for transformation as believers remove the sins that exist between them. They should cease behaviors that disrupt community and act in ways that enhance community. To be raised in Christ is to participate in a transforming community. The Galatians text confirms the essential role of community in a person’s maturing faith in Christ. Amidst the broader argument of the

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29 Howard, 151.
gospel’s power to transform relationships, the fruit of the Spirit is community-enhancing characteristics. The list includes ways of being with others that nourish growth among them. A similar theme is in 1 Corinthians as the author advises a fractured community. The letter articulates a movement from the individual to the community—from “me” to “we.” When this movement occurs, people are transformed. One can conclude that these texts demonstrate the essential relationship between the individual and the community of faith to a maturing faith in Christ. They also designate the relationship itself as a location for both individual and community transformation. To explore the conclusion further, two theological questions need to be explored. How is God active among the community and for what purpose?

**Bonhoeffer: the Activity of God**

Exploration of the biblical text affirms that the relationship between the individual and the community of faith is integral to a maturing Christian faith. And yet, how is God active between the person and community? Further, what is the intention of such activity? Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s earliest publication, *Sanctorum Communio*, provides a helpful response. Historically, theologians perceived it as Bonhoeffer’s less-developed work and concentrated on his later, more mature theological works. And yet Clifford Green contends that *Sanctorum Communio* is foundational for interpreting Bonhoeffer’s theology because his “theology of sociality” sheds light on his ethic, ecclesiology, anthropology, and Christology. According to Green, a theology of sociality declares, “all human life as essentially social…[Bonhoeffer] develops a theological phenomenology of

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the human person in relation to other persons and to various types of corporate communities and institutions, and...he interprets the Christian gospel within this matrix."\textsuperscript{31}

Bonhoeffer lived amidst Germany’s changing political landscape. His later publications offer more explicit reaction to the political scene, yet Bonhoeffer’s first theological project is not immune. The first publication of \textit{Sanctorum Communio} was in 1930, just prior to the rise of the National Socialist Party in Germany and the formation of the Confessing Church. Historical locations influence all theological discourse and for Bonhoeffer this is evident in two ways. First, Bonhoeffer depicts the insufficiency of various philosophical concepts of person, i.e., Aristotle, Stoic, Epicureanism, Descartes, and Kant. He critiques the epistemological discussion about person (\textit{Daesin}) among his contemporaries as a narrow epistemological orientation toward the individual that neglects the social aspect of a person.\textsuperscript{32} Bonhoeffer asserts that describing a person in isolation is inadequate for Christian theology. Concurrently, social philosophy of his day did acknowledge the social aspect of person, but Bonhoeffer also found this analysis deficient because it denied the transcendent.\textsuperscript{33} Bonhoeffer combines the philosophical quest of the former with the insights of the later to explore the relationality among God, self, and other people. By placing theology in dialogue with sociology and social philosophy, Bonhoeffer forges new territory.

\textsuperscript{32} Bonhoeffer, 36-45.
Secondly, Bonhoeffer separates himself from the majority of his German theological contemporaries. At the time most drew on Luther’s doctrines of the two kingdoms and emphasized God’s dual ruling in the realm of the state and the realm of the church. Bonhoeffer feared this doctrine would produce a view of the state synonymous with the rule of God, rendering the church unable to critique actions of the state. Bonhoeffer’s desire to separate from this doctrine arose when he experienced the actions of the state as being in opposition with the very identity of the Christian gospel. The church must remain distinct in order to voice critique against the state. His conceptualization avoids abstract “metaphysical speculation;” rather, he begins with the concrete experience of people who gather as the Christian church and explains why sociality is paramount to his definition of the church.

A caveat pertaining to Bonhoeffer’s understanding of church is necessary before proceeding. Bonhoeffer does not describe the church as it exists during his lifetime. He sought to describe how the church is the sanctorum communio even in its present “impoverished” state. Belief in the church is an act of faith, not in what is visible and tangible to us, but through what is revealed in the incarnate Christ. It is only in faith that the church knows its own identity. Similarly, social scientific inquiry that studies the “structural distinctive of religious communities” cannot reach a full understanding; this is

34 Moses, "Bonhoeffer's Germany: The Political Context," in Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer ed. John W. de Gruchy, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 18-22. Examples of these theologians include Harnack, Seeberg and Deissmann. Many scholars contend that this doctrine made theologians unable to criticize the Third Reich. Bonhoeffer’s exposure to other European interpretations of Luther’s doctrine, especially that of Karl Barth, set him apart from his contemporaries.


36 Bonhoeffer, 31.
only available to those who are part of the church.\textsuperscript{37} Therefore, defining the church is the work of theologians, and more, the Christian community itself. In \textit{Sanctorum Communio}, Bonhoeffer articulates four themes that comprise a theology of sociality: person, primal state, sin, and \textit{sanctorum communio}. What emerges is a theology where “the concepts of person, community, and God are inseparably and essentially interrelated.”\textsuperscript{38} These four themes are fundamental to the further understanding of a person’s relationship with the community of faith.

\textit{The Person and the I-You-Relation}

Bonhoeffer’s theological anthropology revolves around the “I-You-Relation” and becomes the foundation for his theology of sociality.\textsuperscript{39} Personhood is ontologically relational and cannot exist apart from experiencing another person as distinct from self, I versus You. This distinction is not a mere abstract, philosophical assertion, but it comes through the concrete experience of encountering others. When I and You meet, distinct “wills” act as a barrier and subsequently reveals what is I and what is You. I and You are always separate, yet they can only come into existence, in an epistemological sense, through relational encounter. Two absolutes rise out of Bonhoeffer’s argument. \textit{We are absolutely and uniquely separate from each other}. The I can never fully know the You and neither can the I be conflated or minimized into the You. The I and the You are always distinct. Simultaneously, \textit{we are relationally interdependent}. The I can never be

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Bonhoeffer, 31.
\item Bonhoeffer, 34.
\item Green, 29. The I-You-Relation should not be confused with Martin Buber’s I-Thou philosophical argument. Although Bonhoeffer and Buber were contemporaries, scholars agree that even in the unlikely event that Bonhoeffer was familiar with Buber’s work when he wrote \textit{Sanctorum Communio}, the interpretations are distinct. Green argues that Buber’s conclusion comprises an end being the individual, whereas Bonhoeffer’s intent is corporate.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
known without experiencing the difference of the You. Hence, “individual does not mean solitary.”
I do not live and subsequently cannot live autonomous or isolated from You. “God does not want a community that absorbs the individual into itself, but a community of human beings. In God’s eyes, community and individual exist in the same moment and rest in one another.”
The person and community live in three states.

Primal State

Sociality is clearly the basis of Bonhoeffer’s primal state. This is not a portrayal of humanity in its pre-fall state of Genesis 1-2; rather, humans in the primal state are created, sinful, and redeemed as the new creation. Bonhoeffer presses an eschatological vision of God’s redemptive purpose. God’s love, experienced by each person, becomes the power to transform a community of diverse wills into a place of “mutual love.” In Bonhoeffer’s words, “The miracle of the Christian concept of community is that love for God involves submission, but that God’s love, in ruling, serves.”

This epitomizes the primal state. God’s love is made evident to us as Christ empowers a community to serve each other. “Love and service of God in community with God is not an individualistic possibility; the divine community takes form in human sociality.” Green emphasizes the importance of understanding the primal state as a human reality, not a “privileged

40 Bonhoeffer, 51.
41 Bonhoeffer, 80. Retaining the tension between individual and community will become important in avoiding a pendulum swing response to overcoming individualistic tendencies in theology and implications for youth ministry practices.
42 Green, 46-47.
43 Green, 47.
44 Bonhoeffer, 63.
45 Green, 48.
Christian domain. All of creation is made whole when humans live in community with God and others. The primal state is a community of individuals that live in an unbroken relationship with God and others. Bonhoeffer focuses on the telos of a person’s relationship with the others that is bound up with one’s relationship with God, elevating mutuality and service.

**Sin**

Bonhoeffer continues to weave the thread of sociality into his understanding of sin, saying, “…the fall replaced love with selfishness. This gave rise to the break in immediate community with God, and likewise in human community.” He raises the social consequences of sin to the forefront. Compare his definition to others who define sin according to its character such as missing the mark, perversion, transgression, or iniquity. Each of these may still include social consequence, but in such definitions, the result is secondary to understanding the nature of sin. For Bonhoeffer, sin is its consequence in relationships with God and others. Guilt that results from sin is more than a psychological or spiritual state; it is the concrete experience of a broken relationship. Even more, the tenor of the relationship shifts from “giving” in the primal state to “demanding” in the sinful state. People sin by acting in self-interest with

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46 Green, 47.
47 Bonhoeffer, 107.
48 For example, Millard Erickson includes an extensive list of the various qualities of sin and then develops a list of the consequences of sin. Bonhoeffer does not separate the character from the consequence. See Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 586-595.
49 Bonhoeffer, 145.
50 Bonhoeffer, 108.
flagrant disregard for others. “Everyone lives their own life, rather than all living the same life in God.”

Just as Bonhoeffer defines person as both completely separate from others and completely interrelated to others, individual sin exists simultaneously with the universal sin of humanity. Referring to a person’s specific sin act, he says, “Every deed is at once an individual act and one that reawakens the total sin of humanity.” The sin of Adam is the universal sin of humanity and each individual sin exists within the whole. Adam is “a collected person, yet infinitely fragmented.” Bonhoeffer is elaborating on the social ramifications of sin (i.e., acts of individuals against individuals versus acts of communities against communities). He is paving the way for Christ to act in response to the sin of humanity in a manner that includes the sins of individuals. The result is a new form of community—the sanctorum communio.

Sanctorum Communio

God reconciles the disparity between the primal state and the sinful state by acting in history through the incarnation of Jesus Christ—God revealing Godself in human form and thus in social relationship with humanity. This extends beyond an idea, a doctrine, or past event. Jesus Christ is a person who presently exists in “personal-communal form.” Bonhoeffer uses the German word “Stellvertretung” translated as “vicarious representative action” to describe the action of God in Christ.

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51 Bonhoeffer, 108.
52 Bonhoeffer, 116.
53 Bonhoeffer, 121.
54 Green, 53.
“Stellvertretung is one of Bonhoeffer’s fundamental theological concepts throughout his writings. Literally it means to represent in place of another—to act, advocate, intercede on behalf of another; we translate this as “vicarious representative action.” As a theological concept in the strict sense it is rooted in Christology and refers to the free initiative and responsibility that Christ takes for the sake of humanity in his incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection—it is not just a soteriological concept applied only to the cross (as “vicarious” might suggest). By anthropological analogy, Stellvertretung involves acting responsibly on behalf of others and on behalf of communities to which one belongs.”

Hence, solidarity with humanity in its sinful state is an insufficient description of the work of Christ. Christ did for humans what they could not do for themselves, an action that overcame human limitation. This theological construct evolves into a “life-principle” for the church-community. Christ is present and active in the formation of the sanctorum communio, continuing to act vicariously on our behalf. Christ’s presence is the unifying element that establishes the structure of the church, literally drawing individuals to be “with-each-other” when the church assembles together to worship God, receive the sacrament, make intercession, and hear the Word, being Christ, preached. Drawing on Ephesians 4:4, Bonhoeffer describes this unity as being in spirit, in the body, in baptism…but not in the differing wills of those gathered together. Unity does not mean sameness. Bonhoeffer’s commitment to retaining both the individual and relational aspect of person is evident in this assertion. Differing wills become the place for God’s activity in Christ. Christ is active in the community when people live in mutual surrender of selfless love where “the You is willed while giving up the I.”

The vicarious action demonstrated in Christ thus exists in the community when people take the same posture

55 Bonhoeffer, 120, #29.
56 Bonhoeffer, 146ff.
57 One of the primary locations for the presence of Christ is in the act of preaching. Bonhoeffer declares that when the word is preached, Christ is there.
58 Bonhoeffer, 176.
in their relations with each other so that “being-with-each-other” can transform into “being-for-each-other.” Green summarizes this concept saying, “The Spirit through the Word [Christ] actualizes the divine love in human hearts…the love of people for each other makes this lordship a social reality.” The result of people encountering Christ and experiencing the self-giving love of God is the increased capacity, empowered by Christ, to love selflessly. At this point, the sanctorum communio comes into existence.

Green interprets Bonhoeffer’s description of Christ as revelation, which is a socially grounded activity governed by the I-You-Relation. “Revelation, that is, the person of Christ, exists in a social form: the church.” The church never possesses nor dispenses Christ, but continually encounters Christ as the divine You, separate from the church-community, I, with whom Christ is in a relationship. Since Christ’s presence exists in the assembled church, Bonhoeffer concludes that the church-community and the person are inseparable and avoids any concept or expression of an individualized Christian faith. “A person who is not in the church has no real living-community with Christ; but a person who is in Christ, is also in the church-community.”

Transformation is not solely a future eschatological hope, but it occurs in history. Neither is transformation of relationships, between persons and God and among people, an instantaneous or miraculous event; rather, the Holy Spirit works with the person and community to enact the love of Christ. Activity is an underlying characteristic of

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59 Bonhoeffer, 176-180. The church only becomes the sanctorum communio as it changes from the community of sinners into the sanctorum communio. This is an ongoing task for the church.
60 Green, 58.
61 For Bonhoeffer, the church community is always the sanctorum communio amidst the community of sin. Fully eradicating sin is not possible in this world. The community seeks to become the sanctorum communio through their self-giving love of God and others.
62 Green, 53.
63 Bonhoeffer, 161.
revelation as expressed in Christ as *Stellvertretung*. God is actively revealing Christ in the church and people are active as they participate with Christ to transform relationships. The church is never a passive domain where a mystical power governs reality. The church is a tangible reality that is actualizing Christ’s love by responding in real love to others. In doing so, the church becomes the new humanity. Revelation is the activity of a person (Christ) restoring people (Christ’s church).\(^{64}\) Making these assertions is an act of faith by the church, for often a transformed people is not the lived experience of the church. Bonhoeffer could certainly attest to this! He declares that those outside can only speak to what is seen, but the church in faith relies on what remains unseen.\(^{65}\) The *sanctorum communio* is the hope of the community of faith in which they presently participate.

Therefore, in light of Bonhoeffer’s definition of person as both separate and only existing in relation with God and others, and his juxtaposition of the primal state with the sinful state, the *sanctorum communio* becomes the place for God’s will to be carried out for persons and community. This is his theology of sociality. The *sanctorum communio* is a particular fellowship of Christians (called a church) where Christ is present in self-giving love that transforms relationships between persons and the community resulting in the new humanity.

What does Bonheoffer’s theology of sociality reveal about the nature of the relationship between individuals and the community of faith? Bonhoeffer demonstrates that relationships are fundamental to Christian faith and life beginning with his

\(^{64}\) Green, 63.
\(^{65}\) Bonhoeffer, 209-213.
ontological view of person and carried into the definition of *sanctorum communio*.

Personhood arises from an encounter between I and You and recognition of difference. The primal state is the community of people in redeemed relationship. Sin is its consequence on relationships with God and other people. The *sanctorum communio* is the result of Christ’s vicarious self-giving manifest in real relations as people act in mutual love. The individual is *integrally* related to the community of faith, as these relationships are the site for Christ’s active transforming work.

*Theological Implications*

First, Bonhoeffer unites faith and life. Faith understood primarily as anticipation of another time and place is incomplete. Faith defined as a private, self-enclosed union between God and self is insufficient. God’s love, Christ’s life, death, and resurrection, and the hope of new life are more than abstract beliefs that remain in a realm apart from daily living. This hope joins with us in our present joys and sorrows, dreams and activity, living and dying. Bonhoeffer’s words join the chorus of postmodern thought that refutes modernity’s attempt to create a rational and dispassionate faith that prefers proposition to encounter. Faith is the acceptance of God’s daily activity among, within, and between us.

Second, the relationships among members of the community of faith are the location for Christ to be made manifest. This is an act of revelation as God breaks into the community of sin through a person’s act of love and service to another. Christ’s vicarious representative action empowers people toward these acts in a manner they are unable to carry out themselves. Christ’s love becomes a concrete experience in the midst
of relationships with others. This echoes the communal characteristics found in the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5. The Spirit produces what a person cannot do alone: to be treated with kindness is an avenue for encountering Christ; the practice of self-control opens one to Christ’s serving love; working toward peace exposes people to Christ’s compassion. God reveals Christ amidst the activity of the community of faith.

Third, transformation for Bonhoeffer has a specific definition: people move from being-with-each-other to being-for-each-other. Compare this to the image of two young children who are only able to play in parallel. They are with each other, side-by-side, but as they grow and develop this play should become interaction and exchange. Christian growth entails learning to respond in love and service to one’s neighbor, those who one is “with” and called to be “for.” Transformation in this sense declares Christian community as essential to the Christian life. God’s redeeming work is not limited to a metaphysical realm, but through Christ seeks to redeem the concrete interactions of people. The church is the unique outworking of Christ’s vicarious love that empowers people to live rightly with one another. As outlined at the beginning of the chapter, this concept is congruent with the appeal of Colossians 3 to remove the sins that are between them. Transformed relationships are evidence of the work of Christ. Christ’s vicarious act is not completed upon restoration of the God-self relation because it is intended to be the location for transformed relationships among people.

A chasm exists between this vision of a transforming community and American fascination with individual progress and growth. Bonhoeffer describes the Christian life as encounters with other people who have differing wills, and Christ’s activity of self-
giving that holds the possibility of helping us be for-the-other. The other person is essential to any form of personal transformation. Even more, the description of the sanctorum communio that exists alongside and amidst the community of sin reveals Bonhoeffer’s vision for a communal transformation—a people becoming a reflection of the new creation. The sanctorum communio lives united before Christ and, through the active love of Christ, is empowered to live for each other. Christ is active between us changing both the individuals and the community.

**Volf: the Activity of Persons**

Bonhoeffer provides a theological response to the inquiry of God’s activity in the community of faith. What role do the people themselves play in this process? Miroslav Volf’s Free Church Ecclesiology assists in constructing a response. Volf was born in 1956 in what was then communist-ruled Yugoslavia. He lived amidst horrific violence due to the civil war between two ethnic groups, the Croatians and Serbians. While writing about the need for Christians to embrace their enemies, his mentor Jürgen Motlmann inquired of his ability to forgive his Serbian enemies. Volf’s response was, “I can’t, not quite yet. But I wish that I could.” Volf’s writing on reconciliation includes the same essential participatory elements present in his ecclesiology. God joins with the actions of the person to enable them to do what they cannot do themselves. Having earned his doctorate in systematic theology from the University of Tübingen in Germany, Volf is currently Henry B. Wright Professor of Theology at Yale Divinity School and director of Yale Center for Faith and Culture. Volf is a political theologian and writes on

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the intersection of faith and action, paying special attention to the role of the local church as a reconciling agent in the world.

More germane to this project, Volf’s ecclesiology intends to expand the underdeveloped Free Church tradition rooted in the historic voice of John Smyth. He compares and contrasts ecclesiology of the Roman Catholic tradition demonstrated in the writing of Pope Benedict XVI and the Orthodox tradition articulated by John Zizioulas to the Free Churches. What emerges is an ecclesiology that holds the individual emphasis of the Free Church in tension with the communal orientation of both the Catholic and Orthodox ecclesiologies. In his estimation, among the churches that are part of the Free Churches today, “faith lived ecclesially is being replaced by faith lived individualistically.” His work intends to offer ecclesial categories for the church in its communal form without denying individual faith appropriation.

*Christ with the Assembled, Confessing Community*

While Bonhoeffer conveys the nature of God’s activity between the person and community, Volf concentrates on the activity of the person and community involved in the transmission of the faith. Three dominant themes in Volf’s ecclesiology define the relationship between a person and the community of faith. First, Volf contends that a church emerges when the presence of Christ joins with the activity of a believing community. He grounds his definition of church on the words of Christ in Matthew

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68 Volf, 11.
69 Volf, 15-16. Volf contends that theology must speak out of the Christian faith when describing its social form and not depend on the social environment to create the turn.
18:20, “Where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.”⁷⁰ This statement names two activities constitutive of the church where Christ promises his presence: assembling and confessing. To begin with, the church assembles when people come together at an appointed time and place. Emphasis is on the local and particular church, the concrete community of people who gather. Christ’s indwelling of each person forms the basis of the community’s unity, for they exist as one body of Christ.⁷¹ All local churches are equally church, joined with other churches by the same presence of Christ.⁷² This unity among the churches is analogous to the communion shared by the Triune God and includes both an eschatological hope and present experience. “The Spirit-mediated relationship with the triune God and with the entire history of God’s people…constitutes an assembly into a church.” When the church assembles, it becomes a participant in God’s salvation history.

Next, the church exists where Christians confess “in my name.”⁷³ Christ is the reference point among them, the person around whom they gather and confess. When the gathered church confesses Christ, it makes a doctrinal claim about him. This is a cognitive belief; the church cannot exist without such an assertion. It is also an affective ascription that includes “personal identification” with Christ as Lord.⁷⁴ Confessing Christ produces two conditions of ecclesiality common to those who gather: faith in Christ and

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⁷⁰ Volf joins a long tradition of using Matthew 18:20 as the grounds for ecclesiology, which includes Ignatius, Tertullian, Cyprian, as well as, free church theologian John Smyth.⁷¹ Volf, 145. In assembling, they are not a “collective subject” where personhood disappears; rather, they are a “communion of persons” united by Christ and existing as a “differentiated unity.” Volf echoes Bonhoeffer’s intent to maintain the integrity of both the individual and the community.⁷² Volf, 140ff. Volf departs from Catholic and Orthodox traditions by naming the local church as a sign of the eschatological church versus the local church’s aim being to reveal the universal church.⁷³ Volf, 145-146.⁷⁴ Volf, 147.
commitment to being transformed according to Christ’s desires, “allowing the new creation to shine in the midst of the old.” Volf understands that Christ’s promise includes an expectation that people gather with others in order to act upon their faith. This is an anthropological assertion emphasizing personal and corporate agency; hence, both the person and the community are active participants in forming the community of faith.

Volf expands this participatory assertion by claiming the essential nature of the faith community. “To experience faith means to become an ecclesial being.” For example, in Volf’s explanation of salvation, individuals accept salvation as a gift from God, but never remain alone with God. At this moment they are “simultaneously constituted into the communion of believers.” Volf moves away from the Free Churches at this point since their individualization of a person’s salvation is essentially “asocial,” viewing the church merely as an “external aid” to salvation or to edify “pious individuals.” Instead, Volf contends that faith places us within a divine community. “One cannot have a self-enclosed communion with the triune God—a ‘foursome’ as it were—for the Christian God is not a private deity. Communion with God is at once also communion with those who have entrusted themselves in faith to the same God.”

Volf asserts that a community of people becomes a church when they assemble and confess and Jesus promises his presence to the gathered, confessing people.

Reminiscent of Bonhoeffer’s theology of sociality and the biblical text as explicated

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75 Volf, 147.
76 Volf, 174.
77 Volf, 172.
78 Volf, 173.
above, Volf implicitly defines the nature of the relationship between the person and the community as integral to faith. He also depicts these relationships as active participants, having both personal and communal agency.

_Giving and Receiving Faith_

A second theme in Volf’s ecclesiology relates specifically to the transmission of faith between the person and the community. Confession, as described above, has multiple dimensions. It is _performative_ in that it is an action carried out _by_ the individual _with_ the community. Confession does not exist in passive observance, nor can it remain solely as a doctrinal assertion. Volf contends it is an objective performance always accompanied by the subjective faith of individuals. Confession is also _commissive_ because it is an individual act of the will that requires belief in, and submission to, the one confessed. Such a commitment is _social and public_ as it “takes place _between_ persons.” Christians confess before others and with others comprising a shared and mutual endeavor where, “I am both communicating something to them and inviting them into something.” Confession is what the assembled community does when it sings, preaches, fellowships, and receives the sacraments. Those gathered give to the community and receive from the community as they act out of their individual and communal faith commitment.

Confession flows into _proclamation_. Proclamation is not merely the spoken words the church declares about itself or about Christ. It is the act of “doing” or “being”

79 Volf, 149ff.  
80 Volf, 149.  
81 Volf, 149.  
82 Volf, 150. This list is not exhaustive of the confessing acts of the church.
church. The church proclaims Christ as it assembles and confesses. The act of proclaiming elicits faith in those who join with the confessing community as well as those outside, since “the confession of faith of one person leads to that of others, thereby constituting church.” The mutual experience of giving and receiving is foundational to the church in its assembly and confession. The transmission of faith for Volf occurs through exchange and mutuality.

*Mutually Determinative Relations*

A third theme present in Volf’s ecclesiology is the “mutually determinative” relationship between church and person. How is it that people come to faith? Faith is both received *through* the church community (never *from*) and claimed independently by the person. He avoids two extreme paradigms. The first claims the church as mediator of the faith, even giving birth to faith in the person, “person-church-Christ.” The second claims the person mediates faith from a direct encounter with Christ and the church is an addition, or consequence of, this encounter, “person-Christ-Church.” Volf’s alternative is “interpersonal ecclesial interaction,” where Christ’s presence is first promised to the community (based on Matthew 18:20) and then to the individual. Faith is always mediated through the traditions, language, and practices of the community. A person has relationships with “significant others” in the church community who mediate faith by acting as “plausibility structures” that are then reaffirmed by the chorus of “remaining

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83 Volf, 150.
84 Volf, 4. Volf explicit interest is to define the manner in which faith is transmitted in the church. His usage of the word leads the reader to interpret “faith” broadly as both justification and sanctification.
85 Ratzinger’s ecclesiology
86 Smyth ecclesiology
others.” Just as a person cannot administer the sacraments to his or herself but receives them from another, the church always gives faith. “It is from the church that one receives the content of faith, and it is in the church that one learns how faith is to be understood and lived.” But the church’s mediation ceases at this juncture for the church cannot be the faith of the person; it is a gift of the Spirit and the church is not the Spirit.

Similarly, the church never dispenses Christ; rather, the church points to Christ. The church is a sign of the new creation when it acts as a sign of hope directing people, both within the community and beyond, to faith in Christ. Volf describes the church as a sign analogous to the light of the moon whose light is only a reflection of the light of the sun. Likewise, the church reflects the light of Christ, but is not itself the light. “The purpose of the sign is to point to the reality it signifies, not to itself; the sign confirms itself as a sign by pointing away from itself.” The church reflects the light of Christ in order to strengthen the faith of those within, and to elicit faith in those beyond, the community. Volf confirms this by defining the Johannine use of “sign” that juxtaposes those who believe in the sign itself with a call to believe in the one who did the sign.

For example, after the feeding of the 5,000, Jesus accuses those who follow him of misappropriating the miracle. “I tell you the truth, you are looking for me not because you saw miraculous signs, but because you ate the loaves and had your fill (John 6:26).” The function of the sign is to elicit faith in Christ, not faith in the sign. Hence, the church, as sign, plays an essential role in the mediation of faith, but cannot generate faith.

87 Volf, 167.
88 Volf, 163.
90 Volf, "The Church as a Prophetic Community and a Sign of Hope," 20.
This inherent limitation of the church leads to the necessity of a person’s participation in the mutually determinative relationship of church and person. Volf aligns with the Free Churches’ assertion that faith received from the church must be claimed personally. Faith is always a receptive activity and comes as a gift from God. A person must accept the gift as a volitional act. Volf utilizes two New Testament metaphors for the church to explore the distinction between the activities of the church versus the person. First, early church writers use sibling language when they refer to each other as brother and sister. A sibling relationship is one you are born into and belong to—and, to some degree, it determines you. This is analogous to a person’s relationship to the church and emphasizes the socializing aspect of faith transmission. Second, the metaphor of friends is also used in early church writings. To be a friend involves choice, a voluntary act of the will to align with another. This metaphor corresponds to the person’s individual reception of faith and subsequent choice to align with the church. Both the church and the individual play indispensable roles in the transmission of faith. This relationship is mutually determinative such that the “transmission of faith occurs through interpersonal ecclesial interaction.”

Theological Implications

First, Christ’s presence joins with the activity of the community as they become ‘church’ by assembling and confessing. Ecclesiology grounded in Matthew 18:20 includes an expectation of personal and corporate agency. Faith communities are participatory such that the person joins with the activity of the community. Individual

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agency is not lost in this process, but it is united with others in Christ as a “differentiated
unity.”92 Hence, faith communities should invite persons to engage with and add to the
organization and practices of the community.

Second, similar to Bonhoeffer, Volf demonstrates that a person’s relationship with
the community of faith is integral to faith itself. An ecclesial vision of faith should
permeate doctrinal claims and become explicit in teaching. For example, an aspect of a
person’s vertical commitment to Christ is expressed through his or her horizontal
commitment to the community. Similarly, to be transformed by Christ is more than an
internal experience, but is concretely realized in relationships with the community.

Third, the various aspects of confession outlined by Volf ground faith
transmission in mutuality. Giving and receiving of faith among the members of a
community again maintains participation as essential to a maturing faith in Christ. Even
more, a person’s contribution to the community as they ‘give faith’ through personal
confession is necessary in order to ‘receive faith.’ A person’s participation and
contribution is both an “encounter with grace and a means of grace” that elicits faith.93
To be a passive recipient of faith is nonexistent; rather, mutuality governs the
transmission of faith.

Fourth, the idea that church and person are in a mutually determinative
relationship coincides with Augsberger’s tripolar spirituality explicated at the beginning
of this chapter and Bonhoeffer’s theology of sociality. Imagine the three participants in
the spiritual life as distinct spheres of God, self, and others.

92 Volf, After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity, 145.
93 Volf, After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity, 174.
Each sphere is autonomous from the other, never conflated or diminished as a participating agent. Simultaneously, each participant joins with the other participants. There remains a distinct relationship and site for activity between God and self, as well as God and others. Note the increased richness in color at the God-self and God-other intersections in the diagram. The community of faith emerges as self and others overlap. Volf’s description of the church acting as a sign that points to Christ and reflects the light of Christ is an essential activity of others (being the community of faith) in a person’s maturing faith. It is through this community that one gives and receives faith. The center of the diagram is the richest in color. The fullest expression and experience of faith occurs when all three participants unite. This union is the place for a person and community to develop a maturing faith in Christ.

Chapter Summary

This chapter affirms and expands upon Augsburger’s description of tripolar spirituality by exploring a person’s relationship to the community of faith. A person’s growing encounters with Jesus Christ and the community of faith that results in personal and communal transformation characterize a maturing faith. He or she is an active
participant in this community and utilizes his or her gifts by joining them with the
community and aligning them with God’s redeeming activity in service to the world. The
biblical text confirms the integral nature of a person’s relationship to the community of
faith by describing this relationship as the setting for transformation. Acting in ways that
nurture the community affects personal and communal transformation. The Spirit
produces fruit in people that enhances community, thus these early churches are exhorted
to make their unity in Christ a lived reality. Bonhoeffer describes God’s activity in the
community of faith. He unites faith and life and anticipates God’s redemptive work
between people. Christ is manifest in the community by empowering persons to act in
love and service to others. Transformation means moving from being-with-each-other to
being-for-each-other. The church is a community of sin being transformed by Christ into
a *sanctorum communio*, a reflection of the new creation. Volf describes the person’s
activity in the community of faith. Communities become a ‘church’ when they
participate together by assembling and confessing Christ. A person expresses
commitment to Christ through a commitment to the community. Mutuality characterizes
faith transmission. As a each person participates with the community, he or she gives
and receives faith. There are three participants in the life of faith: God, self, and others.
Each is a distinct, active agent, and the fullest expression and experience of faith occurs
when the three unite. This union is the place for a person and community to develop a
maturing faith in Christ. The following chapter explores developmental theory to
describe the processes between a person and the community that foster a person’s
development.
Preliminary Statements

The study of human development naturally intersects with the inquiry of this dissertation by providing a social science lens to help determine under what conditions a community of faith might nurture a maturing faith in youth. Following some preliminary statements and foundations, this chapter will examine the field of study called Positive Youth Development (PYD). Due to the multiple research avenues in PYD, the chapter focuses on three areas: asset-building, sparks, and purpose. The intended outcome is to delineate specific conditions under which a maturing faith might be nurtured in youth.

Shifting Away from Traditional Developmental Models

Historically, scholars interested in faith formation have used developmental theory as a helpful interpretive lens.¹ For example, consideration of Jean Piaget’s theory of cognitive development provides a lens by which the youth minister can distinguish between a child’s ability to grasp concrete events and characters of the Christian story and an adolescent’s growing capacity to think abstractly in interpreting the meaning of such stories.² Similarly, Erik Erikson’s proposal that the primary task of adolescence is identity formation is appropriated into the language and epistemology of youth workers.

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¹ For an example of a recent publication see Estep and Kim, eds., Christian Formation: Integrating Theology and Human Development (Nashville: B and H Publishing, 2010).
who commonly refer to adolescence as a time to ‘take faith on as their own.’

James Fowler’s theory of faith development helps frame distinct transformations in the tone and texture of faith and even suggests ways in which a person’s relationship with the community changes at various stages of faith. Such inquiries are a helpful guide, but they do not directly address the question of this dissertation because they focus their attention on the individual rather than uncovering the relational processes between the individual and the community. Hence, the following inquiry moves away from these traditional theorists and toward developmental research that studies the processes between a person and his or her context.

Turn Toward Interdependence

Focusing on the processes between a person and the community corresponds to advances in the study of adolescent development. In the 2006 edition of the Handbook of Child Psychology, Collins and Steinberg demonstrate how recent research trends expand the historical conception of the adolescent developmental tasks. They characterize research in the twentieth century as a focus on the individual and the influence of the primary parental relationship. The earliest example of this is in the seminal work on adolescence by G. Stanley Hall. Hall was interested in both the individual and the

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5 Collins and Steinberg, "Adolescent Development in Interpersonal Context," in Handbook of Child Psychology: Theoretical Models of Human Development, ed. William Damon and Richard M. Lerner, (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2006). The article demonstrates how recent research has expanded the adolescent developmental task to include interrelationship changes. In particular, Collins and Steinberg examine the inclusion of interdependence in the research on biological, cognitive and social change.
context in which one lived, but his research demonstrated preference for the individual over the context. Even when context was considered, the focus was limited to the primary influence of parents. This framework inaugurated by Hall was also propelled by, “…Western views of mental health and maturity, which emphasize the development of personal agency and self-definition over the growth of interpersonal competence and social interconnectedness.”\(^7\) Achieving independence was the hallmark of adolescent development and was measured through categories such as achievement, competence, and self-esteem.\(^8\) Such conceptions focus on how adolescents separate themselves from others without noting how they are simultaneously forming connections with others. The two cannot be separated. “The development of autonomy almost always implies independence from or in relation to some person (e.g., a parent), group, or institution.”\(^9\) Consequently, both independence and interdependence are mutually influential developmental tasks of adolescence.

An adolescent’s growing capacity for interdependence includes a growing social circle. Research measurements have appropriately expanded beyond the parent/child relationship and pay attention to the social context in which these changes occur.\(^10\) Collins and Steinberg note that this expanded understanding of adolescence resulted in

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\(^{7}\) Collins and Steinberg, 1033. This assertion made in reference to the work of Baumeister and Tice. See Baumeister and Tice, ”How Adolescence Became the Struggle for Self: A Historical Transformation of Psychological Development,” in *Psychological Perspectives on Self*, ed. J. Suls and A. Greenewald, (Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1986).

\(^{8}\) Collins and Steinberg, 1003.

\(^{9}\) Collins and Steinberg, 1034.

revised research measurements to include relational processes such as the ability to affiliate, cooperate, and seek support. Ultimately, the adolescent tasks include discovering who I am (independence) as well as who I am with others (interdependence). This expansion affirms biblical and theological assertions made in Chapter Two: the relationship between the person and the community of faith is vital to a maturing faith in adolescents.

Study of Religiosity and Spirituality in Development

There is growing consensus in adolescent developmental literature that recognizes the historical disregard for, and even bias against, studying the role of spirituality and religiosity in development. In the words of PYD researchers, “When the field of human development marginalizes spiritual development, it does a great disservice, for it builds theories and, by extension, practices of development on an incomplete understanding of our humanness.” Presently, the majority of work in this area examines how spirituality and religiosity influence adolescent behavior, attitudes, and life outcomes. For example, the positive influences of religion include overall well being, positive life attitudes, satisfaction, hope for the future, resiliency and coping, and school success.

11 Collins and Steinberg, 1003.
Additionally, religiosity is associated with mitigating health-compromising behaviors such as alcohol and drug use, crime, violence, delinquency, depression, risk-taking, and early sexual activity.\textsuperscript{15} PYD literature is presently working to expand this field of inquiry by defining terminology and generating theoretical frameworks to undergird research methodology.\textsuperscript{16} This work is not yet to a stage that helps answer the question of this chapter, but as this research matures, scholars and practitioners in the field of youth ministry will need to create intersections with this important empirical work.

**Development and Person ↔ Context Relationship**

Developmental theorists have divergent approaches to the study of human development. Richard Lerner contends there is agreement in the field of adolescent development regarding an overarching definition of development and outlines two trajectories stemming from this definition. The following section summarizes Lerner’s thesis in order to locate Positive Youth Development (PYD) literature in the larger field of developmental theory and explain how the PYD approach supports the intent of this chapter.

According to Lerner, developmental change is characterized by systematic or organizational alteration that is successive, meaning earlier changes are influential, at least in part, on later changes.\textsuperscript{17} Erikson’s theory of social development illustrates this point since what is negotiated at the earliest stage of trust versus mistrust has implications

\textsuperscript{15} Benson et al., 211.
throughout later developmental stages. Development speaks of more than moments in time; rather, it involves holding an extended view of the person over time. Therefore, broadly understood, development involves “systematic and successive changes over time.”

Lerner argues that following this definition, theorists fall into one of two trajectories. The first envisions change comparable to biological growth and defines development based on a progressive structure for making meaning that follows a particular sequence common to all human beings. Most of the stage theorists fit into this group. Structural changes are facilitated by biological growth and interactions with one’s context. Robert Kegan’s constructive developmental work exemplifies this first trajectory. He asserts that a person gives shape to or creates structures of meaning from his or her experiences and this determines his or her present manner of making meaning. A person’s context has certain expectations for how he or she is making meaning and oftentimes these expectations differ from the person’s present structure. When this tension occurs, the person is challenged to form a new structure for making meaning to meet these expectations. According to Kegan, this form of structural change is considered developmental. Theorists in this trajectory are interested in articulating the evolving structural changes in individuals.

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18 Erikson, *Childhood and Society*.
19 Lerner, 16.
20 Examples of stage theorists include Robert Kegan, Jean Piaget, and James Fowler.
22 Kegan uses the word environment in his work, but means something akin to Bronfenbrenner’s and PYD literature’s use of context. For consistency, the word context is used.
A second trajectory taken by theorists is rooted in developmental systems theory and defines development based on changes occurring as a matter of adaptation in response to a person’s contexts. PYD literature and the theoretical work of Urie Bronfenbrenner typify this group. Both explore the bidirectional nature of the person↔context interaction and emphasize how persons and contexts adapt or regulate their own development. Distinct from the individual focus among the structuralists, these theorists study the person↔context relation in order to understand the processes between them and describe optimal conditions for development. In Bronfenbrenner’s words, development is “lasting change in which a person perceives and deals with his environment.” This adaptation trajectory, specifically the research on PYD, coincides with the intent of this chapter to explore specific conditions that nurture a maturing faith in youth.

**Introduction to Positive Youth Development**

The PYD movement represents a paradigm shift in the study of adolescence and maybe of greatest consequence in the perception of youth. Historically, the dominant manner of studying adolescence was problem-centered or deficit-based. Scholars agree the deficit framework began with G. Stanley Hall. For example, Lerner commends Hall’s significant contribution to the field while criticizing Hall’s use of deficit language that

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23 Lerner uses the word adaption instead of adaptation, the more commonly used word in the field. Adaptation is used here for clarity since it is synonymous to Lerner’s intended meaning of the word adaption.


became the scaffolding for the field’s conceptual framework. Hall follows theories of evolutionary change by describing adolescents as moving out of their “beast-like impulses” to being civilized, and he characterized normal adolescent development as a time of “storm and stress.” The evolutionary assumptions had little life in the field after Hall, but the connection between adolescence, stress, and overcoming shortfalls is evident in the work of many including Erik Erikson’s 1960s description of the adolescent identity crisis needing to be resolved. Lerner argues that this paradigm results in viewing adolescents as “at risk” to themselves and others, and their “uncivilized behavior” was a part of their deficiency for adults to help them overcome.

This characterization of adolescence persists to this day, and, subsequently, supporting adolescent development typically means identifying problems early in order to intervene and assist the adolescent shortfall. For example, youth advocates survey the deficits and then develop supplementary programs to provide solutions to problems such as learning disabilities, affective disorders, self-esteem, poverty, and high-risk behaviors to name a few. Researchers of adolescent development perpetuate the stigma of adolescence by measuring successful development through the “nots”—not using drugs or alcohol, not dropping out of school, or not getting pregnant. Mass media similarly depicts adolescents as problems to be managed, broken, and even potentially dangerous. For instance, news headlines highlight juvenile delinquents, sit-coms portray rebellious

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26 Lerner, Promoting Positive Youth Development: Theoretical and Empirical Bases (Washington, DC: National Research Council/Institute of Medicine, 2005), 4-12.
27 Lerner, Promoting Positive Youth Development: Theoretical and Empirical Bases, 4.
29 Lerner, Promoting Positive Youth Development: Theoretical and Empirical Bases, 5.
30 Damon, 14.
teenagers, and parenting books claim to help families “survive the teen years.” In this paradigm, adolescence in American culture is something to be feared, straightened out, or simply survived.

Practitioners and researchers alike questioned this embedded epistemology resulting in the emergence of the field Positive Youth Development. PYD seeks to disembed this epistemic stronghold in American society. PYD researchers and practitioners see youth through the lens of “unique ‘talents, strengths, and interests’ that are markers of their potential for a bright future.” The developmental task is not to overcome deficits and risks, but to “explore the world, gain competence, and acquire the capacity to contribute importantly to the world.” Young people are not problems for adults to solve; rather they are invaluable resources for society whose potential to contribute needs fostering. This outlook intends to shift away from diagnosing and treating youth’s “maladaptive tendencies” and moving toward “engaging them in productive activities.”

**PYD Core Values and the Christian Faith**

Peter Benson summarizes six core principles where there is considerable consensus in the field of PYD. The following section will explain these principles while defining PYD theory and terminology. Many of these principles hold values that

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31 Damon, 15.
32 Damon, 15.
34 Damon, 15.
35 Benson et al., 896.
intersect with Christian theology and, when appropriate, this section makes these connections explicit.\textsuperscript{36}

1) \textit{All youth have the inherent capacity for positive growth and development}. As noted above, the intentional shift away from a deficit or problem-based approach to adolescent development begins with a positive premise. PYD is working to refocus our attention on the positive capacities of adolescents and creating paths that support such growth. During a 2010 presentation, Peter Benson captures this impulse when he imagines a day when the news headlines are not filled with the most recent deviant behavior of youth, but overflow with stories of youth who are contributing to their communities.\textsuperscript{37}

To describe the inherent capacity of an adolescent addresses claims of core tenets of theological anthropology. A positive view of the human person harmonizes with Genesis 1:26-31 and God’s declaration that humans are “very good.” There is an essential goodness in all humans because they are part of God’s creation, and, moreover, are created uniquely to reflect the \textit{imago dei}.\textsuperscript{38} This ontological assertion resembles the PYD premise of a positive capacity shared by all youth. Humans are created as good with the inherent potential for good. Although human fallenness and disposition toward sin persists, the goodness of God’s creation gives hope to human potential.

\textsuperscript{36} Claiming intersections between PYD principles and Christian theology is not an attempt to baptize science for Christian use; rather, the implicit connections make utilizing this research invaluable.


\textsuperscript{38} Whether one understands this as structural or relational, humans are related to the likeness of God. For description of the historical renders of the \textit{imago dei} in Christian theology see Grenz, \textit{Theology for the Community of God} (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1994).
2) *A positive developmental trajectory is enabled when youth are embedded in relationships, contexts, and ecologies that nurture their development.* This principle locates the developmental process in the bidirectional person ↔ context relation. Urie Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model of development was a catalyst for shifting developmental research toward studying this relation.\(^1\) His work is only one among many developmental theorists who shaped the theoretical framework for PYD, yet he provides a sufficient lens through which to explain this PYD principle.\(^2\)

Prior to the 1970s and 1980s, developmental scientists were in general agreement that development was a “product of interaction between the growing human organism and its environment.” However, research typically neglected the environment by focusing on the person who was placed in an unnatural laboratory for observation. The scant research that did investigate the environment neither examined the interaction between the person and the environment nor the multiple environments in which a person lived. Bronfenbrenner sought to examine the interaction between the person and the environment by clarifying theoretical foundations and proposing a new research model.\(^3\)

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\(^3\) Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 995. In the 1998, Bronfenbrenner leveled a critique against his own work and subsequent research. His original proposal sought to shift away from studying the isolated person without regard for context and now he claimed the result was a pendulum swing toward studying context without the person. Studying the process between person and context remained unrealized. To correct this, he revised his research model and highlighted the contribution of the person to the context. Bronfenbrenner defines three characteristics that are most influential in a person’s developmental trajectory: one’s disposition, resources (such as ability, experiences, knowledge, and skill), and demand characteristics.
In his words, “Human development takes place through processes of progressively more complex, reciprocal interaction between an active, evolving biopsychological human organism and the persons, objects, and symbols in its immediate external environment.”

Following Bronfenbrenner’s theory, PYD researchers claim youth have the potential for positive change through the person ↔ context interactions. This principle includes an assumption: people and contexts can change as they interact. Lerner defines such potential for change as “relative plasticity.” Changes are relative since both person and contexts have constraints. For example, a person may have social anxiety and a context may include certain threats – but the potential for change, plasticity, remains.

Hence, PYD researchers inquire as to what person ↔ context interactions best contribute to positive growth and development.

Potential for positive change aligns with an understanding of Christian growth. Chapter Two highlights Bonhoeffer’s description of Christ’s vicarious representative action on the cross that is presently active among us assisting our ability to do what we cannot do for ourselves. We are in the process of being redeemed. Bonhoeffer reminds us the *sanctorum communio* is not a reversal back into the primal state, but the sinful community taken through a process of being redeemed. There is an expectation of positive growth that will occur in the *sanctorum communio* in anticipation of all being full redemption. Christian theology calls such progress sanctification. The holiness

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“which invite or discourage reactions from the social environment” that either disrupt or encourage proximal process.

43 Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 996.

tradition carries a similar perspective as represented by John Wesley. He views progress in the Christian life to be part of our salvation. After we are “born again, the gradual work of sanctification takes place…enabled by the Spirit…as we are more and more dead to sin, we are more and more alive to God…”45 The definition of a maturing Christian faith used in this dissertation focuses on growth defined through an eschatological vision that includes God’s redemptive activity in the present, a sign which anticipates completion or fulfillment. Growth in the Christian life is akin to the belief in a positive developmental trajectory in the PYD literature.

3) The promotion of positive development is further enabled when youth participate in multiple, nutrient-rich relationships, contexts, and ecologies. The idea that ‘more is better’ is prevalent throughout PYD literature. However, what is central to this PYD principle is the idea of multiplicity. Bronfenbrenner’s work elaborates on the significance of multiplicity by underscoring the varied contexts that comprise a person’s ecological environment and comparing this organization to a set of Russian dolls which act as “nesting structures, each inside the next.”46 The innermost context is the microsystem and entails “a pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations” that occur amidst regular face to face interaction.47 A microsystem includes one’s relationship with a parent, school, or sports team. Specific to a faith community, an adolescent’s microsystem may include a youth group, a particular church body, and denominational affiliations. Relationships among the microsystems form the next layer.

46 Bronfenbrenner, 3.
47 Bronfenbrenner, 22.
of the ecological environment, the mesosystem. Bronfenbrenner contends that increased interaction in the mesosystem results in greater developmental potential.\textsuperscript{48} There are also events and circumstances, which do not directly involve the person, but influence his or her ecological environment. This layer is the exosystem and includes factors such as a parent’s work, a sibling’s family, or a church’s method of governing. The final layer is the macrosystem, or cultural context, comprising influences from government, media, economics, and societal values. Bronfenbrenner argues that human development occurs amidst these multiple, interrelated contexts and is the “progressive accommodation between a growing human organism and its immediate environment, and the way in which this relation is mediated by forces emanating from more remote regions in the larger physical and social milieu.”\textsuperscript{49}

Positive youth development occurs when the multiple contexts of a youth’s life are “nutrient-rich.” Therefore, PYD is interested in bringing change on many fronts: to influence state and federal policy, to support a variety of community initiatives, to support families, and to stimulate a positive attitude about youth at a societal level.

4) All youth benefit from these relationships, contexts, and ecologies. Support, empowerment, and engagement, for example, are important developmental assets for all youth, generalizing across race, ethnicity, gender and family income. However, the strategies and tactics for promoting these developmental assets may vary significantly as

\textsuperscript{48} Bronfenbrenner, 6.
a function of the social location. PYD researchers claim there are generalizable developmental assets that benefit all youth. There may be differences in how a community provides these assets as well as a particular context needing to emphasize some assets over others, but the assets represent what generally benefit all youth. The assets themselves are discussed in more detail later in the chapter. For now, this PYD principle makes the dual claim that assets are identifiable even as the delivery systems vary. This means that integrating asset development into a context begins with the particular people and communities that comprise a youth’s context. Universal programs and applications are not as viable as contextual evaluation and creative implementation. This principle highlights that the process between the person and the context is what holds potential for positive development.

This PYD emphasis on process echoes the vital relationship between the person and the community of faith as defined in letters from the early church. The biblical survey in Chapter Two deemed this relationship as the location for transformation in the Christian life to occur. Similarly, Bonhoeffer’s definition of the sinful community is broken relationships and the sanctorum communio at its core intends redeemed relationships. The process between people and their contexts is the location for the redemptive work of Christ. Looking through this theological lens, it is of no surprise to see empirical research locate the root of positive development in the processes between youth and their varied relationships.

5) Community is a viable and critical “delivery system” for positive youth development. 6) Youth are major actors in their own development and are significant
resources for creating the kinds of relationships, contexts, ecologies, and communities that enable positive youth development. These final two PYD principles can be examined simultaneously to best express their interrelationship. A community cannot solely deliver what is needed for positive development; likewise, a person is not the only actor in his or her development. Historically, there is a sharp divide between which plays a more dominant role in development, nature or nurture. PYD joins a movement in developmental psychology that resists this and other false dichotomies.\textsuperscript{50} Nature/nurture, being person/context, are simultaneously actors and contributors to human development. An adolescent is a growing contributor to the context with a “growing capacity to discover, sustain, or alter [the context’s] properties.”\textsuperscript{51} A community can assess their activity and become a better “delivery system” in response to a person’s contribution. Each is an actor in the process while concurrently being acted upon. Reciprocity is understood as mutuality, even while there may be “degrees of reciprocity in the exchange,” and is an identifying feature of process.\textsuperscript{52} Adaptive developmental regulation assumes both the person and context are changing in a manner that supports development.\textsuperscript{53} According to Bronfenbrenner, the greatest potential for development exists when the person and context regulate or adapt to each other in ways that are active, reciprocal, enduring, regular, and increasing in complexity.\textsuperscript{54}

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{50} Lerner, Concept and Theories of Human Development, 18ff. There are other traditional dichotomies bridged by developmental systems theory such as continuity versus discontinuity.
  \item \textsuperscript{51} Bronfenbrenner, 9.
  \item \textsuperscript{52} Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 997.
  \item \textsuperscript{53} Lerner, Concept and Theories of Human Development, 227.
  \item \textsuperscript{54} Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 997. Bronfenbrenner’s work goes into more details regarding the process of development that produces the optimal conditions for development.
\end{itemize}
Understanding this reciprocal and adaptive interaction leads to a last feature of these final two PYD principles. Youth who are on a positive developmental trajectory are described as thriving. “Thriving is a developmental concept that denotes a healthy change process linking youth with an adulthood status enabling society to be populated by healthy individuals oriented to integratively serve self and civil society.”

At its core, PYD intends for youth to become adult contributors to society, and when they do so youth are described as *thriving*. Thriving is an essential feature of the person ↔ context relation because it describes a person’s ability to self-transcend, to invest in something beyond oneself, and is often described as a moral virtue propelling development. The reciprocating person ↔ context relation should elicit the growing contribution of a young person to “self, family, community and civil society” that in turn builds a society which contributes to the positive development of the person.

Youth acting as agents of their own development is a significant aspect in the PYD literature. Even more, youth are viewed as resources and subsequent PYD practices invite youth participation and contribution. This idea corresponds to Volf’s understanding of the giving and receiving of faith. God is active amidst these relations, moving people

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55 Lerner, Fisher, and Weinberg, "Toward a Science for and of the People: Promoting Civil Society through the Application of Developmental Science," *Child Development* 71, no. 1 (2000). Thriving is a theory in PYD literature. It is often referred to as the 6th C of the named 5 C’s needed for positive youth development. Thriving is fundamentally an outcome of the other 5 C’s the aim for PYD.

56 Lerner extends this idea to a more particular form of society—contributors as citizens of a democratic society. He argues that this is essential to maintain the value of liberty in America and without developing adults who actively participate in the civil process, the core of our democratic ideals are at stake. See Lerner, Dowling, and Anderson, "Positive Youth Development: Thriving as the Basis of Personhood and Civil Society," *Applied Developmental Science* 7, no. 3 (2003). Lerner, *Liberty: Thriving and Civic Engagement among America’s Youth* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2004).
from being “with” others to being “for” others. The person is an active agent in this process, giving and receiving faith as they participate with the community.

In conclusion, PYD research focuses on the positive potential inherent to all youth. The process between person and context is the primary location for developmental support. These areas coincide with a Christian vision of growth and maturation.

The following sections review three subsets of PYD literature, developmental assets, sparks, and purpose, to determine specific conditions under which a community might nurture a maturing faith in youth.

**Assets**

In the 1980s and 1990s the work of Peter Benson and his colleagues with the Search Institute summarized their research findings through a theoretical framework called developmental assets.\(^{57}\) Like other branches of PYD research, the asset-based focus is rooted in developmental systems theory that locates the study of human development in person ↔ context relations. Based on human plasticity (relative ability of both the person and context to change), positive development is characterized by adaptive developmental regulation where the person and context are actors involved in “mutually beneficial and sustaining exchanges.”\(^{58}\) Benson and his colleagues identified specific assets that define what youth need to gain from these exchanges.

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58 Lerner et al., 174.
The assets are broken into two groups, external and internal assets. The external assets describe what the context or community can provide the person, and the internal assets designate the personal strengths that a person needs to acquire. External and internal assets each have four primary categories (with multiple building blocks totaling forty assets). These categories include:59

**External**

- **Support:** Supported young people know they can rely on positive, fulfilling relationships with many adults in their families, schools, and communities.
- **Empowerment:** Young people are empowered to the extent that others see them as resources, make contribution to society, and feel free of threats to their safety.
- **Boundaries and Expectations:** Boundaries and expectations are the rules, standards, and norms in families, schools, neighborhoods, and communities that guide young people’s choices and regulate their behavior.
- **Constructive Use of Time:** A healthy community offers a rich array of constructive, engaging opportunities and activities to all young people.

**Internal**

- **Commitment to Learning:** A young person’s commitment to learning is strongly influenced by relationships with family, peers and others, as well as by the school environment.
- **Positive Value:** Positive values become deep commitments that guide how young people think and act.
- **Social Competencies:** Social competencies are the skills young people need to confront new situations, face hard decisions, and interact effectively with others.
- **Positive Identity:** Shaping one’s self-concept, beliefs, capacitates, roles, and personal history is one of the central tasks of adolescence.

Adaptive developmental regulation is optimized when the external assets of the community are fused with the internal assets the person needs to acquire. The work of Search Institute and other organizations that adopt the asset-based approach intend to

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strengthen the “human development infrastructure”\textsuperscript{60} by joining research with mobilization strategies to activate a community’s “asset-building potential”\textsuperscript{61} and create “developmentally attentive communities.”\textsuperscript{62}

Asset-based research includes faith communities as part of a community’s infrastructure. This research indicates three conditions under which a community nurtures a maturing faith in youth. First, \textit{faith is nurtured when a community intentionally cares for youth holistically as a developing person}. One of the external assets under “constructive use of time” is participation in religious activities. As noted above, researchers have long held that participation in faith communities has positive health outcomes including being less likely to participate in high-risk behaviors. Even more, youth involved in faith communities have 21.4 assets compared to those with 15.9 assets who are not involved.\textsuperscript{63} Faith communities are shown to be an effective delivery system for building assets in youth. Search Institute has numerous resources available to help mobilize faith communities to support external and internal assets.

But do the assets themselves support faith formation? The scant research available to date indicates that youth with a higher number of assets are more likely to value faith. Among those with 1-10 assets, 9\% think “being religious or spiritual is important” compared to 52\% of those with 31-40 assets. The same increase exists when measuring participation in religious activities. Among those with 1-10 assets only 34\%

\textsuperscript{61} Benson, "Developmental Assets: An Overview of Theory, Research, and Practice," 51.
\textsuperscript{62} Benson, "Developmental Assets: An Overview of Theory, Research, and Practice," 53.
participate an hour or more a week in religious activities compared to 88% of those with 31-40 assets. Search Institute summarizes the data claiming: “Young people who report having more Developmental Assets are more likely to say that faith or spirituality is important. The more assets young people experience, the more likely they are to be active in a congregation.”

This research challenges leaders in youth ministry programs to expand their care of youth toward whole-person development. Faith is not an aspect of the person that is segmented out as an isolated area in which the community invests, but faith is viewed in light of the developing person. The sample of mission statements in Chapter One were critiqued for a myopic focus on the person’s faith formation and lack of emphasis on integration into the whole community of faith. A similar critique of these statements arises in light of the current discussion. These statements are silent in regard to the overall development of youth as human beings. This is not a suggestion that developmental assets supplant explicit interest in faith formation; rather, faith formation is seen in light of the larger developing person. For example, a mission statement from a mid-size, mainline church on the east coast shows intention of caring for youth holistically by stating the aim of the youth ministry is to “see middle and high school students mature into the people God has made them to be.” Utilizing theological language such as human flourishing to describe the aim of youth ministry would also support this turn toward the developing person. Ultimately, faith is nurtured when a

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community intentionally shapes youth ministry practices in support of the developmental assets.

Secondly, faith is nurtured when youth receive the support and care offered to them by adults. The external asset category of support evaluates potential support networks including family, non-parental adults, neighborhoods (which would include faith communities), and schools. Support only becomes an asset when a youth “experiences” the support and care offered. This qualifying definition of support claims that “to support” is more than an objective, measurable adult action—it occurs when a youth receives it as care. As argued in Chapter One, a gap exists between adults and youth in a service-based youth ministry paradigm perpetuated by one-way relationships. Adults provide support and care for youth that is not being received or experienced. In Clark’s words, such experiences send youth into a “culture of isolation.” How can well-intended support and care become what a youth receives?

Nel Noddings is an educational philosopher who advocates for public education reform and her insights help resolve the present question. Noddings describes a disconnect similar to Clark’s assertions where teachers claim to care for students and students, simultaneously, claim that no one cares. To bridge this gap she begins by redefining caring as the activity of both the one-caring and the one cared-for. She then suggests two changes to move education forward. First, a mistake is made when the “one-caring” sees others only as what I desire for them because students are merely an object to manipulate for the teacher’s interest. This is not done out of ill intent; just the

66 Clark, 49-55.
opposite is true because the teacher acts for the best interest of the student. The problem surfaces as the teacher’s desire unknowingly becomes the pre-condition of caring. Teachers need to expand their prescriptive care to also include being responsive to individuals. Caring becomes “other-centered” when teachers practice engrossment. Engrossment includes being reactive, responsive, and receptive to the person, not to the degree that the teacher’s identity, hope, and interests for the student are lost, but that the teacher becomes a “duality,” seeing from both sets of eyes at once. Caring now includes a commitment to act on behalf of the student, not just out of the teacher’s desires.

Secondly, Noddings claims that teachers must acknowledge the role of the “cared-for” characterized by “receptivity” which receives, acknowledges, and accepts the caring. Research in the field of mentoring coincides with Noddings’ definition of receptivity. A study conducted through the Big Brother/Big Sister program in 2006 interviewed twenty-four pairs of successful adolescent/adult mentoring relationships. Drawing on relational theory, the study named four relational processes and examined a mentee’s self-reported experience of them. Of the twenty-four pairs, all but one claimed experiencing the relational qualities that included authenticity, empathy, collaboration, and companionship. For example, authenticity includes a mentee choosing to be “open and vulnerable.” The researcher noted empathy when a mentee said their mentor “understands or gets them.” Companionship existed as the pairs described experiencing pleasure in each other’s company. Each of these relational qualities prompted the mentee’s receptivity to the mentor’s care.

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68 Spencer, "Understanding the Mentoring Process between Adolescents and Adults," Youth and Society 37, no. 3 (2006).
69 Spencer, 298.
This research highlights the need for youth workers to pay attention to a youth’s receptivity of adult care and support and not presume that because the adult acted in care, care was experienced. The relational qualities of authenticity, empathy, collaboration, and companionship should be put into practice. This also poses a challenge for adults to hold their desires for youth in tension with, or at least alongside, what youth envision for themselves. Taking these insights seriously leads to the third condition from asset-building literature.

*Nurturing a maturing faith requires enabling youth contribution.* The external asset of “empowerment” inherently views youth as resources and provides opportunities for youth to make contributions. There is a tension between viewing youth as resources and the premise of service-based youth ministry, which treats youth as recipients of a service. As argued in Chapter One, the role relegated to youth in this model is that of a passive recipient—the antithesis of being a resource. Passive recipients are neither agents of their own faith nor need to contribute to the community. Similarly, the oft-quoted claim that “youth are the future of the church” ignores the fact that youth possess the capacity to be actors in the life of the community faith now. Seeing youth as resources requires that adults shift toward an open posture that anticipates and expects genuine contribution. Many may feel this as a threat to the established norms or claim that youth are neither knowledgeable nor possess sufficient life experience to be resources. And yet, according to the asset-building literature, contribution is a key external asset needed to support the development of adolescents. Chapters Four and Five

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expand upon what this contribution may entail. Insights from asset-building literature compel adults to intentionally care for youth holistically as developing people, demonstrate relational qualities that foster youth receptivity of adult support and care, and view youth as valuable resources by creating opportunities for youth contribution to the community.

Sparks

A second subset of PYD literature describes the power of *sparks*. Researchers of asset-based development note that at age fifteen youth appear to be most vulnerable to missing a trajectory toward positive development. They arrive at this conclusion because this age experiences the least number of assets. Scales and colleagues hypothesized the “additive power” that sparks could play at this age by nurturing self-identity through the asset categories of supportive relationships and empowering opportunities.\(^71\) *Sparks* are defined as, “a fire in an adolescent’s life, providing energy, joy, purpose, and direction.”\(^72\) They are the innate passions and interests that are intrinsically motivating, provide life-orientation, nurture meaning, and become “a way of being present in the world.”\(^73\) This discerning process is distinct from determining a specific career path; rather, to experience one’s spark is to identify the best of who one is and what one might bring to the world. The research findings confirm that sparks (internal assets) are nurtured through relationships and opportunities (external assets). Igniting a spark occurs

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\(^{72}\) Scales et al., 264.

\(^{73}\) Benson, "Sparks: How Youth Thrive."
when an adult helps youth identify, name, and discover ways to use the spark to contribute to society.

Scales also notes that among the middle and high school youth sampled in the study the concept of sparks was well known. In fact, once the idea was defined, all youth in the sample were able to identify with the concept including being able to name someone in his or her school that has a spark. Presently, researches have categorized 220 different kinds of sparks, the most dominant being: helping/serving/volunteering, leading, learning a subject matter, serving the globe/earth, participating in athletics, and participating in the creative life and the arts.74

Identifying one’s spark is beneficial for youth, but when identification is fused with supportive relationships and empowering opportunities, youth are said to be thriving. With this in mind, it is disheartening to note that some 66-80% of youth can name a personal spark, but less then half “experience relational opportunities to develop” this spark.75 These statistics become more alarming when compared to other research that indicates only 10% of adults have a “strongly favorable personal attitude toward engaging adolescents outside of their families.”76 Researchers and practitioners of PYD suggest that adults need to be mobilized to understand and work toward helping youth name their spark and ignite it by empowering them to discover opportunities to use it to contribute to society.

74 Benson, "Sparks: How Youth Thrive."
75 Scales et al., 274.
76 Scales et al., 274. See also Scales, Other People's Kids : Social Expectations and American Adults' Involvement with Children and Adolescents, The Search Institute Series on Developmentally Attentive Community and Society (New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum, 2003).
The field of youth ministry needs to hear two messages from this research. *First, youth possess potential needing to be fostered.* This impulse is consistent across all PYD literature. Ultimately, this research challenges adults to reverse the impulse to pour into young people from the outside in; instead it indicates that thriving occurs when we ignite them from the inside and provide opportunities and support for the inside to find its way out. “Youth are not vessels to be filled but fires to be lit.”

To declare that youth are resources for the community of faith shifts present youth ministry practices away from a ‘passing on the faith’ paradigm and moves toward anticipating youth contribution to the faith. In her book *Practicing Passion*, Kenda Creasy Dean identifies a specific strength that youth bring to the church community—passion! To ignite such passion requires adults who are willing to help youth identify their spark and create authentic space in the faith community for youth to practice and utilize it. Benson says that we should recognize youth “by their spark.” In the community of faith, we will know youth for the ways in which this spark is used to carry forth the mission of Jesus Christ.

*Secondly, there is a key aspect in the PYD formula for igniting sparks: adult support.* Adults at large may not want to invest in youth outside their family, but historically youth ministry practices have always included enabling adults to invest in youth outside their family. Maybe these adults are the 10% cited above! That said, these adults must carve out opportunities for youth to use their spark in the community and this requires flexibility and openness in the community itself. For youth to be true contributors, they must be given the power to reshape the practices in the faith

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77 Benson, "Sparks: How Youth Thrive."
78 Dean.
79 Benson, "Sparks: How Youth Thrive."
community. Traditions can cap youth contribution by becoming boundaries rather than openings. There are two ingredients in such a paradigm: the community practices the tradition and youth reshape it. When this occurs, sparks can become flames of faith. Sparks become the avenue for inviting youth to join God’s unfolding purpose in the world. Additionally, sparks are an aspect of the final subset examined called purpose.

**Purpose**

William Damon and Jenni Menon Mariano are lead researchers and advocates for promoting the vital role of purpose in PYD. Their work contributes to a historic turn in developmental psychology away from studying basic human drives and defense mechanisms as the primary root of intrinsic motivation. Instead, they assert that people act out of great values and goals. Enabling a person’s values and goals acts as a catalyst for positive development.  

The evolving definition of purpose in PYD literature differentiates between meaning and purpose. Research models and methodology have generally conflated the two. Although meaning is as aspect of purpose, they are not equivalent. The generally agreed upon definition of purpose submitted by Damon and colleagues is, “a stable and generalized intention to accomplish something that is at once meaningful to the self and of consequence to the world beyond self.”

This definition delineates four aspects of purpose:

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81 Damon et al., 121.
82 Damon et al., 121.
• Purpose includes a goal, the kind of goal that is far reaching rather than a goal with an immediate outcome (like going to a movie).

• Purpose is part of one’s personal discovery of meaning, but its end is found in something outside of self.

• Purpose is directed toward something that can be accomplished or to which progress can be made.

• Purpose is as a sense of direction, even if overly idealistic, which is more important than concreteness and attainment.

In Damon’s words, “A true purpose is an ultimate concern. It is the final answer to the question of Why?” There are two characteristics among youth who demonstrate purpose that coincide with PYD’s emphasis on person ↔ context relations: “forward movement toward a fulfilling purpose” and a “structure of social support consistent with that effort.”

A sense of purpose is like the wind that animates the sails and directs the speed of its movement, while the valence and content of one’s chosen purposes is the rudder that provides direction. This metaphor underscores the deeply internal nature of purpose emphasized by many thinkers while giving attention to the inextricable connection between the person and the resources and opportunities proffered by his or her environment.

Beginning in 2003, the Stanford Center for Adolescence launched a longitudinal study surveying 1200 youth ages 12-26 in an attempt to find out what if any purpose they have discovered. One of the most significant findings in this research is that almost all young people need more “attention and guidance” than they are presently receiving. This relates directly to the concern raised first in Chapter One and again in the review of asset

83 Damon, The Path to Purpose: Helping Our Children Find Their Calling in Life (New York: Free Press, 2008), 33-34.
84 Damon, The Path to Purpose: Helping Our Children Find Their Calling in Life, 39-40. Damon expands upon the difference between noble and ignoble purposes.
literature. Adults care for youth in increased measureable ways, but this support and care is not providing the developmental support needed. Next, the research generated a list of purposes that youth identified. Topping this list is family, career, and academic achievement. Both religious faith/spirituality and political aspirations were present, but in small numbers. Researchers categorized the four expressions or sense of purpose revealed in the study.

**Disengaged (25%)**: These individuals are neither active in purposeful pursuit nor interested in looking. Instead they are either apathetic and detached or only interested in hedonistic or ego-boosting pursuits.

**Dreamers (25%)**: Expressing ideas about purpose but not having done anything to pursue the purpose characterize these individuals.

**Dabblers (31%)**: Many are potentially purposeful because of the types of activities in which they participate, but they did not demonstrate an ability to see the meaning behind the activity and show few signs of committing for the long term.

**Purposeful (20%)**: Some individuals found something meaningful to dedicate themselves to and demonstrate a sustained interest over time. They can express why they are dedicated as well as how they have taken action or how they will take action in response.

An additional study surveyed 444 young people from four regions of the United States. They found that few youth today are “choosing purposes of religious faith and spiritually, at least not central objects worthy of their dedication.” Researchers summarized the findings by creating five models to explain how spirituality was found to support purpose. In four of these models, spirituality supports purpose by helping them

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86 Damon, *The Path to Purpose: Helping Our Children Find Their Calling in Life*, 57-58. Damon discusses the consequence of faith and political aspiration on a civic society.

87 Damon, *The Path to Purpose: Helping Our Children Find Their Calling in Life*, 58-76.

persevere through obstacles. Only one model describes the spirituality as playing an essential role in determining purpose. This final model is the one intended for a maturing Christian faith, yet “relatively few young people are choosing” this purpose.

There are three implications from this material for a community wishing to nurture a maturing faith in youth. The first is a challenge to identify and articulate the purpose inherent to the Christian faith that directs a person outside of self. This question brings back the critique of present youth ministry practices that reduce the gospel message to ‘Jesus and Me’ and sell it to youth as a commodity to be consumed. The story of the Christian faith includes personal transformation, but only as a means of a greater end of God’s reign. The idea of purpose being promoted by PYD literature resonates with the explicit message of the Christian story. Purpose is a sense of direction that propels a person toward an end outside self. Historically, the Christian story does not find its end in self; rather, the crucial moment in this story is found in the other-centered work of God in Jesus Christ. To join the Christian faith is an invitation to participate in the present outworking of the reign of God—this is the purpose that extends beyond ones personal experience of faith. It is a story larger than me and large enough to hold my story. This is the opposite of the popularized way of expressing questions of purpose that make self the subject of inquiry: What is God’s purpose for my life? Instead, God becomes the center asking: what is God’s purpose and how do I join it?

The variety of Christian traditions will nuance the purpose of the Christian faith. One of Damon’s examples of a purposeful youth was a conservative evangelical motivated by the purpose to evangelize. Other examples include youth groups who
sponsor a child in an underdeveloped country or work to implement a recycling program in the church. When these activities are appropriated by youth as part of the larger purpose of the Christian faith, they become natural locations for nurturing a maturing Christian faith.

Secondly, the PYD literature suggests that purpose “arises from adolescents’ inherent interests” but that these interests are inspired by what they are exposed to in their context.\textsuperscript{89} Youth need to hear clear explanations and examples regarding the explicit purposes inherent to the Christian faith. Mariano describes the need for “trigger” experiences that produce interest or generate awareness.\textsuperscript{90} Trigger experiences might include information, activities, or exposure, and adults can assist youths’ interpretation of these experiences by exploring potential avenues for participation. Such experiences can also assist a youth’s discovery of his or her sparks. Purpose gives sparks direction. Instead of designing a use for one’s spark in a void, a community of faith’s articulated purpose opens up avenues for a youth to contribute with their spark.

Thirdly, research on purpose reflects the value of modeling. Very purposeful youth frequently mentioned role models or examples that stimulated their own purpose. When members of the community live lives oriented toward Christian purposes, youth catch this vision. One of the most striking findings from the first wave of the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR) was that the religious faith of youth is a direct reflection of the religious life of adults, especially their parents.\textsuperscript{91} In the end, youth

\textsuperscript{89} Mariano, "Promoting Youth Purpose: Toward a Theory and Practice of Social Supports," in Evelyn Duvall Family Studies Conference (Sarasota, FL: Stanford Center on Adolescence, 2011), Slide 23. \textsuperscript{90} Mariano, Slide 24. \textsuperscript{91} Smith and Lundquist, 260.
become what they see. This information should stimulate the community of faith to expose youth to examples of adults whose lives reflect Christian purposes.

In sum, purpose is inherent to the Christian faith and this message needs to be articulated theologically by the community of faith. Youth ministry practices should create trigger experiences that explain the purposes of the Christian story to youth and expose them to models whose lives emulate the community’s best hopes.

Chapter Summary

The present research trajectory in adolescent development expands the adolescent developmental tasks to include both independence and interdependence. This shift parallels a biblical and theological perspective that the community of faith is vital to a maturing Christian faith. Positive Youth Development is part of a pathway in developmental theory that studies the optimal conditions in the person ↔ context relation that support development. PYD principles affirm adolescent development as positive progress toward thriving gained from multiple nutrient-rich person ↔ context relations and these assertions are consistent with a Christian vision of the human person and God’s sanctifying activity. The PYD literature thus provides a scientific basis for determining the conditions that nurture maturing Christian faith in youth. An asset-based approach challenges adults to care for adolescents as whole-persons, to provide support and care that is received by youth, and to empower youth contribution. Adults should assist youth in identifying their spark and discover ways to use this in the community of faith. To do this a community must invite contribution that is formative to the community. Purpose
literature reminds the community of faith of the inherent purpose bound to the Christian story. This purpose needs to be made explicit through trigger experiences that involve explanation, information, and modeling.
Chapter Four: Values To Foster A Maturing Christian Faith

As previously argued, the aim of youth ministries is to integrate youth with the community of faith. Based on the preceding analysis of the present state of youth ministry, the biblical and theological argument for a vital relationship between the person and the community of faith, and insights from PYD literature, this chapter constructs specific values needed to foster a maturing faith in Christ and integrate youth into the church. These include: communal memory, responsible mutuality, burgeoning maturity, generative relationships, and imaginative contribution.

Communal Memory

When families or friends reunite, it will not take long for the group to begin recounting stories from their shared history. The phrase “remember the time” designates the group’s unique bond created through these shared stories. It is not necessary that each person in the group lived through the story; rather, he or she participates in this shared history by knowing and experiencing how these stories constitute the group. Shared histories create an identity and provide a lens through which one sees the world.¹ In order for others to join this group, they would need to take on the stories as their own. This occurs when the group relives, reenacts, and reshapes stories in a way that orients their lives.

Memory As Tether and Floodlight

Why is a communal memory important? First, a communal memory tethers a person to the Christian story. Imagine a tetherball on a children’s playground. It is held by a string to the pole and remains connected (or at least should do so) despite the wild flights it takes around the pole. A communal memory similarly tethers a person by shaping identity and providing a sense of belonging.

Remembering is a biblical theme. According to Allen Verhey, the Old Testament consistently recounts the need to remember from two perspectives. First, remembering is a response to God’s own remembering as the Psalmist declares God “remembers his covenant forever” (105:8). God’s actions are defined by this memory and therefore trustworthy for the past, present and future. God’s memory is key to redemption and a mark of God’s faithfulness. Imagine the opposite - a God who forgot or did not keep the covenant would be neither trustworthy nor dependable. To value memory is to teach about a God who remembers. Additionally, Verhey declares that when a community remembers the ways God acted faithfully (e.g. Deut. 5:15, 7:18, 8:2, 9:7) it compels them to be faithful to God. “Be careful that you do not forget the Lord your God, failing to observe his commands, his laws and his decrees that I am giving you this day” (Deut. 8:11). Similarly, the Gospel writers tell of their experience with Jesus to remind their readers of the object of their worship. Hence, today we participate in the Lord’s Supper “in remembrance” (1 Cor. 11:24-25) of Jesus Christ. As the community remembers, identity is formed and subsequently conduct is informed.

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Remembering is also the historic practice of the Judeo-Christian faith. For example, in the Jewish tradition the yearly reenactment of the Seder meal gives children the pivotal role of asking, “Why is this night different from all nights?” This question signals the host to recount God’s “redemptive dealings with Israel that led to deliverance from Egypt.” Similarly, in the Christian tradition, the church year is divided into seasons that correspond to the major events marking the history of salvation in Christ. The church remembers the birth of Christ in the Christmas season and tastes of the future trials of Christ during Epiphany. Lent and Easter are periods of reflection as the church remembers Christ’s death, resurrection, and ascension. Fostering a communal memory tethers a person in a way that informs who one is and to whom one belongs, orienting the person in the present based on a vision of the past.

Second, a communal memory awakens a vision for the future. A floodlight along a dark road helps a person visualize what is ahead. It does not erase the surrounding darkness but provides enough light to discern a way forward. The biblical story intends to shine into the future in the same manner. Having a communal memory is essential to mission of the church for the mission is bound to the biblical story itself. New Testament scholar and theologian N.T. Wright’s analogy of a “fifth act play” demonstrates this. Wright proposes a scenario where the fifth act of Shakespeare’s great plays is lost and a group of actors are asked to “work out the fifth act for themselves.”

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3 Wilson, Our Father Abraham: Jewish Roots of the Christian Faith (Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmans, 1989), 244-5.
5 Wright, "How Can the Bible Be Authoritative?," Vox Evangelica (1991). http://ntwrightpage.com/Wright_Bible_Authoritative.htm (accessed December 10, 2013). Wright’s fifth act analogy is part of a larger discussion on the authority of the Bible. He is addressing an interpretation of
The first four acts, existing as they did, would be the undoubted ‘authority’ for the task in hand. That is, anyone could properly object to the new improvisation on the grounds that this or that character was now behaving inconsistently, or that this or that sub-plot or theme, adumbrated earlier, had not reached its proper resolution. This ‘authority’ of the first four acts would not consist in an implicit command that the actors should repeat the earlier pans of the play over and over again. It would consist in the fact of an as yet unfinished drama, which contained its own impetus, its own forward movement, which demanded to be concluded in the proper manner but which required of the actors a responsible entering into the story as it stood, in order first to understand how the threads could appropriately be drawn together, and then to put that understanding into effect by speaking and acting with both innovation and consistency.6

Youth need a communal memory because the Christian life requires innovation, the ability to create, construct, and design in a changing world. The bible is not a handbook that provides specific answers to every tension found in matters of faith and life. Christian communities must discern together how to respond faithfully in a particular culture context that is distinct from the biblical context, and this requires innovation. Yet these communities do not create ex nihilo, they respond in a manner consistent with the Christian story. Fostering a communal memory tethers youth to the Christian story and acts as a floodlight for the future, enabling youth to see themselves as faithful actors in the unfolding drama of the Christian story.

*Potential Obstacles*

Valuing a communal memory faces significant ecclesial and cultural obstacles. Within the Christian evangelical context, the habit of remembering has dissipated in

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6 Wright.
recent years in part because of the rise of church growth models.\(^7\) The intent of this movement is to draw people into the community by marketing to their interests and needs. These movements are driven by an admirable sensitivity for the outsider and desire to share the Christian hope. To reach this goal, leaders remove everything from a worship service that requires knowledge of the Christian tradition, because this is perceived as a barrier to participation. One of the unintended consequences is a Christian worship service deprived of a communal memory. Rather than participating in the Christian story, people participate in a service that looks familiar or more like one’s own life.

Additionally, many rightly decry the ever-increasing problem of biblical illiteracy, which has greater consequence than a lack of knowledge or grasp of doctrine.\(^8\) It results in a community identity crisis. Without a memory of the Christian story, Christian communities lack the resources to reflect meaningfully on their lives in light of the Christian story. Even when memory is fostered, the stories are frequently minimized as moral lessons or a means to teach right doctrine rather than being explored as the

\(^7\) Pritchard, Willow Creek Seeker Services: Evaluating a New Way of Doing Church (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 26-29. The most influential church growth model is the seeker sensitive model adopted by the Willow Creek Church led by Bill Hybels. The intent of this model is to evangelize those who are not Christians. To do this, the leaders removed perceived “roadblocks” in a worship service, being all the aspects of a church service that require knowing the Christian tradition. Instead, they create a “neutral” place and offer a service that is relevant to the “unchurched” and teaches the basics of the Christian faith. Many offer substantial critiques of the seeker sensitive model of church and the church growth movement. For example, see Towns, ed. Evaluating the Church Growth Movement: 5 Views, ed. Paul Engle, Counter Points: Church Life (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004). In recent years, advocates of church growth models offer revised perspectives. For example, see Stanley, Deep and Wide: Creating Churches Unchurched People Love to Attend (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012).

The stories from scripture are the “remember the time” moments that should be woven into the fabric of the community’s present identity. Just like at one’s family gatherings, the biblical witness includes stories of hope, failure, tragedy, and passion. Engaging these stories requires more than literacy; it requires becoming innovative actors.

Memory is also counter cultural value. Images surround young people compelling them to create themselves in existential fashion. Apple’s iTunes advertisements display a shadowed person, ear buds in, alone, and freed for self-expression. Natasha Bedingfield’s song “Unwritten” bids people to write their story on a blank slate:

I am unwritten, can't read my mind, I'm undefined
I'm just beginning, the pen's in my hand, ending unplanned

Staring at the blank page before you
Open up the dirty window
Let the sun illuminate the words that you could not find

Reaching for something in the distance
So close you can almost taste it
Release your inhibitions
Feel the rain on your skin
No one else can feel it for you
Only you can let it in
No one else, no one else
Can speak the words on your lips
Drench yourself in words unspoken
Live your life with arms wide open
Today is where your book begins
The rest is still unwritten

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9 For a more extended critique on the negative impact of moralizing the Bible see Wilhoit and Ryken, *Effective Bible Teaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1988), 81-84.
These examples call for individualized creation and becoming, unhindered by the expectations or voices of others. The demand to discover oneself in isolation from others places undue stress on adolescents who are swimming in a large pool of competing, ready-made identities to be purchased in the marketplace. Youth do not need more freedom or independence to create themselves, they need an anchor—a story in which they can participate. In the words of theologian and ethicist Stanley Hauerwas, “We need a story to locate ourselves in relation to others, our society, and the universe.”¹¹ Extreme expectations for individuation are actually working against the developmental tasks of adolescents. Independence is always intertwined with interdependence. Identity development occurs amidst relationships, which needs a community’s memory.¹²

Youth who develop memories with the community of faith are more than individual Christians; they are embedded in the living story of God’s covenant with God’s people. They join an ecclesial faith, a people’s story. The writings from the early church are full of communal metaphors (a building, a temple, a household) used to describe the community of faith, the most common being the body of Christ. When Paul describes the body in 1 Corinthians 12, he is not describing what the Corinthians should work toward; he is naming who they are ontologically—a body. Imagine an individualistic rendering of this passage: If the ear should say to the foot, ‘Christianity is my faith,’ and the foot should say to the eye, ‘Jesus is my Savior’. Each body part would live disconnected from the whole body. Instead, Christianity is the faith of a community

¹² See Chapter Three discussion of expansion of developmental task of adolescence to include both growth in independence and interdependence, pp. 76-77.
and Jesus is our Savior. Even more, Paul includes the plural “you” to describe the communal identity of the new Christ followers, “You too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit” (Ephesians 2:22). The Christian faith is a common faith shared by individuals resulting in a communal memory. When the church values a communal memory it seeks continuity between the story of the past that finds meaning in the present and a vision for the future that it awakens. A communal memory will tether youth to the Christian story and provide a floodlight for improvisation consistent with this story in the future.

**Responsible Mutuality**

If the community of faith is vital for Christian formation because a person gives and receives faith in this context,\(^{13}\) then mutuality will be a core value of the community and both adults and youth become responsible for their own growth in faith and the growth of others. Responsible mutuality does not conflate self and other; instead, it respects the relationship between God, self, and other where people remain absolutely distinct or separate from each other while simultaneously interdependent.\(^{14}\) This is akin to John Westerhoff’s description of the corporate self.

The self as actor is not an isolated individual. Our existence is dependent upon interactions with God and other persons. The isolated individual self is a fiction, but so is the social self. To affirm only a social self is to overemphasize the role of nurturer and socializing play in framing us. To affirm only the individual self, naked and responsible before God, is to underestimate the significance of other historical actors in our lives. In truth we *are corporate selves who live in a continual dynamic relationship with all others and with God* [emphasis added].\(^{15}\)

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\(^{13}\) See Chapter Two for an expanded discussion of Volf’s ecclesiological discussion of mutuality in confession, p. 61-62.

\(^{14}\) See Chapter Two for an explanation of Bonhoeffer’s I-You-Relation, p. 48-49.

Valuing responsible mutuality enacts three affirmations that explicate the importance of this value in an adolescent’s experience with a church.

*Shared Endeavor*

First, responsible mutuality affirms that faith formation is always shared. From a Christian education perspective, Thomas Groome defines shared as a partnership where each person is responsible for the “teaching-learning” event and juxtaposes this vision with a traditional education model that defines teaching as what the teacher alone does.\(^{16}\) Applied to faith formation, a shared event declares that regardless of the role each person holds, each is responsible for his or her own faith formation AND that of others. This requires a willingness to receive from others and an expectation to care for the faith of others. The characterization of one-way relationships critiqued in Chapter One can transform into shared exchanges of faith.\(^{17}\)

Similar to Bonhoeffer’s description of the I-You encounter, Groome also stresses how the shared “teaching-learning” event includes both affirmation and confrontation. As a person encounters another there is possibility for an “event of mutual discovery and discernment.”\(^{18}\) When “I” encounter “you,” two complimentary experiences unfold: what is similar affirms who I am, what I believe, and how I see the world; what is different confronts who I am, what I believe, and how I see the world. Applied to faith

\(^{17}\) See Chapter One for an expanded argument regarding the one-way relationship in a service-provider model of youth ministry, pp. 11-15.
\(^{18}\) Groome, 144.
formation, affirmation is a significant experience because it confirms one’s own self as well as provides a way to see and describe one’s faith more fully.

Encounter with others also leads to confrontation. Knowing who one is, how one believes, and how one sees the world is realized when a person encounters what is dissimilar. Bonhoeffer’s ontology similarly requires confrontation since recognition of self emerges when a person encounters difference — not just between self and other but also between self and God. This is true experientially. Most people can describe a moment where they encountered difference, and it made them stop and think, reconsider, or believe more fully. Confrontation is often met with resistance, because it is deemed a threat to what is currently established, known, or experienced. This is especially true in a pluralistic culture where multiple and often competing ideas are the norm, and people look (and possibly need) to find affirmation of themselves amidst the multiplicity. Embracing confrontation teaches people how to navigate difference rather than withdraw, avoid, or fight against it. Such ability to engage a shared faith experience is necessary for fostering faith in a pluralistic culture.

Over thirty years ago, John Westerhoff declared that Christian education errs by focusing on the explicit curriculum or the information taught. He criticizes the Christian educator’s indiscriminate use of new techniques and excessive trust in the work of behavioral scientists that suggest one can greatly control educational outcomes. Instead, Westerhoff declares, “To be a Christian is to ask: What can I bring another? Not: What do I want that person to know or be? It means being open to learn from another person
(even a child) as well as to share one’s understandings and ways.”\textsuperscript{19} Westerhoff is describing a shared endeavor between people that is the heartbeat of youth ministry. When adults value responsible mutuality, they will avoid treating youth as passive recipients and attempting to control a young person’s faith. Instead, adults gain the opportunity to share faith with youth and receive faith from youth. Of equal importance, when youth understand their responsibility to contribute to the faith of adults and are given opportunity to do so, faith becomes more than a personal quest, frees the gospel from being yet another consumable product, and becomes an invitation to join the Christian journey with others where faith can be affirmed and confronted. The intent is not to promote a false egalitarianism where one minimizes appropriate roles of adults and youth; rather, responsible mutuality views faith formation as a shared endeavor and shapes the tenor of the adult-youth relationship.

\textit{Youth As Agents}

Second, responsible mutuality affirms the agency of both adults and youth. Although agency is akin to the description of responsibility above, its distinctiveness needs highlighting. To claim the community is vital for the faith formation of adolescents may appear reminiscent of other epochs in the history of religious education where some deemed socialization the operative means for faith formation.\textsuperscript{20} Claiming youth as agents makes this argument distinct. Agency means action and suggests that

\textsuperscript{19} Westerhoff, 17.
\textsuperscript{20} These historic voices in religious education range from 1888 when Horace Bushnell that children should not know anything apart from being a Christian because they could be fully socialized into the faith in their homes, to 1967 and Carl Nelson contending the church socializes people into the faith. There is also a range in emphasis placed on the socializing process amongst these theorists. Bushnell, \textit{Christian Nurture} (New Haven: Yale University Press). Nelson, \textit{Where Faith Begins}, The James Sprunt Lectures, 1965 (Atlanta, GA.: John Knox Press, 1967).
the person acts out of his or her very self. This dissertation asserts there are three agents in the spiritual life, God, self, and other. Two questions related to faith formation rise to the surface, the first being foundational to the second: 1) How does the agency of God interact with the agency of the person? 2) How does the agency of one person interact with the agency of another?

First, God is the only source for faith and spiritual growth. God gives the gift of grace to all and “no one can boast” (Eph 2:10). The Christ hymn in Colossians describes Christ as the source of all (1:15-16), sustainer of all (1:17-18), and reconciler of all (1:20). One can claim nothing of one’s own doing, but only the “Spirit” gives the person life (2 Cor. 3:6). God is both initiator of faith and the one who transforms the person for “where the Spirit of the Lord is there is freedom” (2 Cor. 3:17b). Just as a branch cannot live disconnected from the tree, faith and spiritual growth depend on God to give them life. If this is true, how does a person’s agency interact with God who is the source of growth?

Faith always includes personal commitment as a person acts on his or her own. Rather than imposing Godself on people, the working of God’s grace provides all that is needed for people to respond to God and a person can act as agent in response. A familiar pattern in the Pauline corpus is to acknowledge the work of God in Christ that compels the people of God to shape their lives accordingly.\(^\text{21}\) The person is asked to act. Personal faith commitment resonates with the Judeo-Christian understanding of a personal, relational God. Beginning with God’s footsteps in the garden seeking a relationship with the guilty, to the raising up of prophets so that the nation of Israel might

\(^{21}\) For example, see Colossians 3:1-5, Ephesians 2:11, and Philippians 2:1-4.
return to God, to God taking on human flesh in Jesus Christ, salvation history is the story of God in pursuit of a relationship with people. A personal God desires a personal response and hence an affirmation of human agency.

John Wesley sought to articulate the necessary role of human agency without minimizing God as the author and first actor of salvation. In the wake of the Calvinist emphasis on God’s grace, Wesley feared people would become lazy in their pursuit of holiness if faith did not require the activity of the person. He argues that God is always the first cause of faith by “enlightening” and “opening” the person to see the “spiritual world.” This opening results in justification only when the person responds in belief. “No man is justified till he believes; every man when he believes is justified.” God and human agency coexist and work cooperatively.

Coexistence also characterizes a person’s and community’s agency. Thomas Groome recounts the history of religious education theory in America. Drawing on the work of Horace Bushnell, George Albert Coe, and C. Ellis Nelson, he points to an over-emphasis on socialization such that the family or community of faith is the sole actor who socializes people into faith. Groome declares that socialization is never enough, because people are also actors on their own. Instead, there is a “dialectical relationship” between the community of faith and individuals. This parallels the person ↔ context relationship in PYD literature. Both the community and the young person are actors in

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their development.\(^{25}\) Paulo Freire expands on the critical need for personal agency in education by saying education, and in this case religious education, must free people’s “critical consciousness” and enable people to act of their own accord.\(^{26}\) Freire’s educational model addresses educating those who are oppressed by political leaders and resultant societal structures. The form of education he promotes is one that frees the oppressed to become participants in the democratic process, but not all education does this. Freire critiques education that tells, dictates, or imposes even when intended for the good of the people because it does not provide for “a means of authentic thought…to re-create and re-invent.”\(^{27}\) Instead, education should aim to empower human agency and develop in people the critical capacity to choose for oneself ways to transform society. Freeing people’s voices is paramount to reforming. Empowering a person’s agency in a community of faith means they are thought of as an actor in their own formation. A person chooses, reframes, and images for him or herself. This is what Volf intends to depict when he asserts that the person, the church, and Christ are in a “mutually determinative relationship.”\(^{28}\)

Recognizing the agency of youth and claiming that they too are actors of their own formation frees adolescents from being merely the objects of adults’ desires, respects their unique personhood as persons created in the image of God, and opens a path for youth to be valued as emerging adults. Faith formation is not something one

\(^{25}\) See Chapter Three for a discussion of the branch of developmental theory that researches the person↔context relationship, pp. 71-82.


\(^{27}\) Freire, 33.

\(^{28}\) See Chapter Two for an expanded discussion of Volf’s term “mutually determinative relationship,” pp. 61-63.
does to another; it involves responsible mutuality and where the agency of each participant in faith formation – God, self, and other – joins.

Beneficial

Valuing responsible mutuality affirms adult-youth relationships as beneficial to the life of faith for both youth and adults. Mutual benefit marks Volf’s definition of confession as the act of confessing faith with a community means the confessing person gives faith while simultaneously receiving faith from the confession of others. The intent of the exchange is encouragement and empowerment for the person and the community. Developmental psychologist Richard Lerner describes thriving as the person and the context experiencing “mutually beneficial and sustaining exchanges.” Anecdotally, this resonates with experience in ministry settings. Those that work with youth often declare that they receive more from the youth than they give. Such statements are generally said as if this was a surprise rather than an expectation. Yet this should be what one comes to expect if mutual benefit defines relationships in the community of faith. One would expect to gain from the insight of students while teaching a class. To reach out and care for hurting youth should simultaneously nurture an adult’s faith. A community values responsible mutuality by affirming the benefit to both youth and adults.

Responsible mutuality is a community’s value when both adults and youth discover they are responsible for their own faith and the faith of another. The Christian

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29 See Chapter Two for Volf’s depiction of confession as central to the giving and receiving of faith, pp. 60-61.
30 See Chapter Three for an expanded definition of thriving according to Learner, pp. 81-83.
faith is a shared endeavor where all experience needed affirmation and confirmation. This community treats youth as agents of their own faith formation alongside honoring the agency of God and others. Responsible mutuality creates an expectation that relationships should be beneficial to the spiritual life of both youth and adults.

**Burgeoning Maturity**

The phrase “a maturing faith in Christ” utilizes the present participle form of the word mature to hold in tension the aim that one-day Christians will be mature and a present appeal to be maturing. Similarly, “burgeoning” modifies maturity to imply the process of growth, budding, or flourishing. A community of faith makes dual claims when they value burgeoning maturity (individual and corporate): there is hope for actualization and recognition of incompleteness. A review of mature is Pauline letters and insights from Robert Kegan’s theory of development reveal the significance of this value for youth in a community of faith.

**Word Study of Telion**

A study of *telion* in the Pauline letters nuances the meaning of mature. In that context, the Greek word *telion* is translated “mature” as well as “complete” or “perfect.” It describes a state of existence (completeness) or growth of mental or moral character (perfection).\(^{31}\) In the LXX, *telion* is sometimes used to describe a person who is “wholeheartedly devoted to God” or “blameless before God.”\(^{32}\) Most commonly, the word connotes an eschatological vision of God’s redeeming work that will one day be

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\(^{32}\) Examples include Genesis 6:9 and Deuteronomy 18:13.
made complete and perfect. At the same time, use of telion includes implications in the present. Letters to the early church include exhortations to become mature (telion) by putting into practice now what will one day be made perfect (telion). Valuing burgeoning maturity establishes two expectations for faith formation: to be maturing and to not be fully mature. This might appear obvious, but it does highlight the “becoming” aspect of faith development by neither expecting full maturity nor minimizing the need for progress in the Christian life. In this vain, Paul uses telion to describe specific attributes of maturing.

First, to be mature implies growth. In 1 Corinthians 13:9-11, the author utilizes the metaphor of a child growing into an adult. “When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me.” This verse is contained in a passage that defines the eternal nature of God’s love, which will one day be made perfect (telion) in followers of Christ. It is important to note how the use of telion often includes the interaction between the person and the community. As the Corinthians’ ability to love each other grows, they are moving toward an eternal hope as individuals and as a community. Similar to the natural process of physical maturation, a maturing faith in Christ is one that is growing toward adulthood as stated in 14:20, “stop thinking like children...but in your thinking be adults.”

Second, maturing implies changed behavior. Philippians 3:12-16 contrasts the “prize” or eschatological hope awarded in the future with the call to “press on” in the present. The church at Philippi is to “put into practice what they have already learned” (12), and those that do are called “the mature” (15). Behavioral transformation is an

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33 Sampley, 534.
expectation for those belonging to the community of faith and includes both the personal and communal changes in behavior. This is apparent in 1 Corinthians 13. Since God’s love will “never fail,” the Corinthians should demonstrate love for each other now.

Growth is made manifest in a person’s ability to love others.

Third, the ability to stand firm in faith characterizes the mature. In Colossians 4:12, a leader in the church at Colossae prays that they would “stand firm.” The occasion of this letter is generally understood as the author’s desire to correct a false teaching about Christ that has permeated the community. In this context, standing firm implies not being swayed by such teachings, and those who do stand firm are the “mature.” The author of Ephesians 4 heralds the same ability needed to stand firm in faith by contrasting the “mature” with the “infant” being “tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching” (vs. 14). A person’s “maturing faith” involves being confident in what he or she believes about Christ. Such confidence is also qualified in Philippians 3:15 by defining the “mature” as those whose thinking about God may some day be more clear. In sum, a maturing faith includes being confident of what one believes while holding these beliefs in humility and openness such that God can bring further clarity through the community of faith.

Finally, to be mature describes the activity of the community of faith itself. The author of 1 Corinthians 12 utilizes the metaphor of a body to define the church. “You are the body of Christ, and each of you is part of it” (12:27). This is an identity statement indicating the church is more than each person. The letter to the Ephesians also includes

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34 Sampley, 534. This assertion is confirmed by the Christological focus portrayed in the Christ hymn in 1:15-20.
imagery of the body and uses the word mature (*telion*) to describe a church that acts well together. Ephesians 4 includes Paul’s appeal for the church to learn to live united *just as* they are united in Christ. This involves discerning how to combine their gifts so that they produce “works of service” (12). When they accomplish this task, they will become “mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (13). Colossians 3 similarly includes an exhortation to take off particular vices (those that distract from community) and put on a set of virtues (those that enhance community). The goal is the formation of persons who live well in community, a people who are, in the words of Thomas Groome, “becoming Christian together.” A community who values burgeoning maturity expects to experience personal and corporate transformation akin to growth, changed behavior, firmness in beliefs, and acting as the body of Christ. Supporting a maturing Christian youth sees what is maturing alongside what one-day will be made complete. In a sense this is asking youth ministries to be communities that accept a person as they are while providing opportunities to mature. How does a community support burgeoning maturity?

*Kegan and the Community*

The theoretical work of developmental theorist Robert Kegan suggests people need their “environment,” or the community in which they are part, to possess three

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35 See Chapter Two for the exegesis of Colossians 3:1-17, pp. 36-40.
37 Robert Kegan asserts that human development involves an inseparable relationship between a person and environment. It includes a process of differentiating self from the environment in order to integrate self anew with the same environment. Such negotiation between self and the environment describes human growth in general. Because of this parallel, this outline of Kegan’s work does not draw specifically on Kegan’s established orders of consciousness; rather, this section explores Kegan’s proposed environmental elements that support development. If the negotiation between self and the environment is consistent with
characteristics that support development: confirmation, contradiction, and continuity. These characteristics are a helpful guide for imagining how a community might provide space for people to be as they are while challenging them to grow and change. Although described separately to depict each characteristic’s distinct function, they operate simultaneously, and all are essential.

Confirmation is the act of seeing the person as he or she presently is and recognizing the value of this current existence. This characteristic asks others to direct attention to the person and not to the end or goal desired for the person. There is a danger of seeing a person only as lacking or having places where there needs to be growth. Such a perspective can lead to treating the person as an object of one’s own desires, rather than as a whole human being as evidenced in some youth ministry practices. Confirmation responds to the person’s particular experience rather than seeking relief of a problem.


Using the word “community” is an adaption from Kegan’s term “holding environment.” Kegan’s definition of a holding environment draws from a small portion of Winnicott’s psychoanalytical work with children. First, there is never just a person. Winnicott criticizes psychoanalysis for only focusing on the person and not recognizing the contribution of the environment. He explores how the parental environment of an infant has clinical significance for affective and character disorders. Winnicott, “The Theory of the Parent-Infant Relationship,” in The Maturational Processes and the Facilitating Environment: Studies in the Theory of Emotional Development, (New York: International Universities Press, 1965). Winnicott asserts that there is never “just an infant” as she always exists in an environment. Kegan draws on Winnicott’s phrase to describe human existence in general claiming there is never “just an individual.”

Kegan, The Evolving Self: Problem and Process in Human Development, 115. Second, a “holding environment” determines our tendency toward growth and development. Winnicott states that good parental care increases an infant’s “inherited potential” defined as the “tendency toward growth and development.” Winnicott, 43. Holding is the first of three stages of good parental care. “Holding is used to denote not only the actual physical holding of the infant, but also the total environmental provision prior to the concept of living with” Winnicott, 43-44. Winnicott’s description of the holding environment is limited to infancy. Kegan adapts the phrase as fundamental for all of life. “There is not just one holding environment, but a succession of holding environments” Kegan, The Evolving Self: Problem and Process in Human Development, 116.

See Chapter One for an expanded discussion of the service-provider youth ministry model, pp. 6-24.

Kegan aptly points out how expectations from other people to be, think, or act differently people surround a person. These experiences can be disorienting, causing anxiety and stress. Confirmation provides needed security for a person’s present way of being in the world and says, “I value you – not for what you might be but for who you are.” In this sense, confirmation respects and welcomes the burgeoning maturity of a person who is not yet mature.

Kegan uses the phrase “letting go” to describe the second characteristic, contradiction. Picture a parent holding on to the back of a child’s bike recently stripped of training wheels. If the parent never lets go, the child will not learn to balance. If the community only confirms the person’s present state of maturity—it impedes growth. Contradiction “raises questions about the adequacy of confirmation” by exposing the person to the limits or inadequacies of one’s way of being in the world. In Christian educator Sharon Parks’ words, these “limit-setting experiences” require encounters with otherness, which cannot be avoided when engaging with a community of people. Encountering others acts as a limit for the person when the community provides a vision for something new, which the person does not presently fulfill. Educator Laurent Daloz provides many helpful phrases to further delineate contradiction: offering a map for the journey, providing a new language, or holding up a mirror that expands the view. In Park’s words, the community needs to provide “worthy dreams” that include

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43 Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Young Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 139.
44 Daloz, 233-234, 241.
transforming images big enough to live into.\textsuperscript{45} Such moments unlock a view that was unimaginable before – a vision of potential burgeoning maturity for the person and the community.

Kegan’s final characteristic is continuity. A parent-child relationship continues even when a child can walk without assistance, but the relationship transforms. Providing continuity claims that a community sees the person as persisting through time even while he or she grows and changes. The community remains with the person as they are maturing. Parks describes this as a community providing space for people to practice what they dream.\textsuperscript{46}

Use of the word mature (\textit{telion}) in the Pauline letters illuminates the meaning of “a maturing faith in Christ” as burgeoning maturity: a person can mature in the present while not yet being fully mature. Maturity of this kind implies growth, changed behavior, firmness of faith, and acting well together. Kegan’s characteristics act as a reference point for a community who values burgeoning maturity. The community confirms a person’s present maturity while simultaneously contradicting it by showing why or how the person is not yet fully mature. Additionally, the community is a place of continuity as it welcomes the maturing person who is growing and changing in his or her relationship with the community. Adults who value burgeoning maturity will enact these characteristics and support an adolescent’s maturing faith in Christ.

\textsuperscript{45} Parks, 146-154.
\textsuperscript{46} Parks, 154-157.
Generative Relationships

Most people in the field of youth ministry would agree that relationships are important for adolescents.⁴⁷ Yet what characterizes a relationship that supports a maturing faith in Christ? According to Methodist Pastors Mary Sellon and Daniel Smith, to be personally satisfied or fulfilled is what people most commonly expect from relationships; however, this is only part of God’s intent for human relationships.⁴⁸ Based on the command to “be fruitful and multiply” (Genesis 1:28) relationships should also be generative where “life-giving things are produced.”⁴⁹ Generative relationships have the capacity to produce or birth transformation both in the person and in the community.⁵⁰ And yet, they do not do this simply because one believes in Christ or lives in community with other Christians. It requires paying attention to the processes between the person and the community of faith and developing what Gordon T. Smith calls “social holiness.”⁵¹ Social holiness finds its impetus in John 13:34-35. “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all [people] will know that you are my disciples.” When a person experiences God’s love, this love compels him or her to love others. Learning how to demonstrate love within the Christian community is THE sign of being a follower of Christ. This makes God’s love for people more than an abstract ideal; rather, generative relationships enact the love of

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⁴⁷ Chapter One outlines the recent work in the field of youth ministry that intends to redefine relationships, see pp. 19-24.
⁴⁹ Sellon and Smith, 7.
⁵⁰ The generative emphasis is compatible to PYD literature’s focus on the process between the person and the community. See Chapter Three for an expanded discussion, pp. 79-81.
⁵¹ Smith, Transforming Conversion: Rethinking the Language and Contours of Christian Initiation (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010). Smith intends to expand the present understanding of conversion especially among evangelicals but unfolding the roots of its meaning in American revivalist history.
God for the world. Paying attention to the person ↔ community of faith relationship is consistent with Bonhoeffer’s claim that this encounter is the location for the work of Christ where God breaks into a community of sin through our acts of love and service to one another.\(^{52}\) Explicating Bonhoeffer’s argument will highlight three shifts that occur in a community when it values generative relationships.

**Bonhoeffer and *Life Together***

Even though Bonhoeffer does not use this phrase, generative relationships are at the core of his theology and practice and apparent when he introduces the foundation of all Christian community. Redemption for Bonhoeffer always and only comes from the outside – Jesus proclaimed in God’s Word. This outside help not only came once in the moment of the incarnation but comes “daily and anew” to redeem. And how does Christ come? “God put this Word into the mouth of human beings so that it may be passed on to others.”\(^{53}\) When something good happens, a person wants to tell another so he or she might share in the experience. Likewise, God intends the testimony of one Christian as the opportunity for Christ to come to another. Bonhoeffer contends that the Christ in a person’s heart is weak and an encounter with a brother and sister is essential for hearing God and eliciting faith. He says, “This also clarifies that the goal of all Christian community is to encounter one another as bringers of the message of salvation. As such, God allows Christians to come together and grants them community.”\(^{54}\)

\(^{52}\) See Chapter Two for a description of Bonhoeffer’s depiction of Christ as “vicarious representative action,” pp. 51-53.


\(^{54}\) Bonhoeffer, *Life Together and Prayerbook of the Bible*. 128
However, Christian communities do not often emulate this vision and Bonhoeffer proposes why this is. A person who imposes a dream or vision of community on others will destroy community. This dream or vision might include a specific tenet, a particular type of experience, or a certain behavior that the person insists must define the community and thus becomes a destructive force.

Because God has already laid out the only foundation of our community, because God has united us in one body with other Christians in Jesus Christ long before we entered into common life with them, we enter into that life together with other Christians, not as those who make demands, but as those who thankfully receive [emphasis added].”

Such people are “dreamers” who impose how things should be rather than receiving things as they are in Christ.

Bonhoeffer illuminates this problem by juxtaposing the spiritual community with the emotional community, the former based on the Word that has come from God in Jesus Christ and the latter from human desire (similar to Pauline contrasting the Spirit and the flesh). The following table outlines a portion of this contrast:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spiritual community</th>
<th>Emotional community</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Basis is the manifested “Word of God in Jesus Christ”</td>
<td>Basis is human self-centered desire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Light</td>
<td>Darkness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humble submission to others</td>
<td>Haughty subjection of others to one’s desires</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word of God rules</td>
<td>Personal abilities rule</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>God’s Word binds people</td>
<td>Person binds others to him/herself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power surrendered to the Holy Spirit</td>
<td>Power sought and cultivated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simple and humble service to others</td>
<td>Strangers treated in calculating fashion for self-benefit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love for the sake of Christ</td>
<td>Love for the sake of self</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

55 Bonhoeffer, Life Together and Prayerbook of the Bible, 36.
The emotional community makes self-interest and self-benefit the foundation for community, while the spiritual community surrenders to others in humility and depends on God’s activity in Christ among them. How does one retain the spiritual foundation?

Bonhoeffer’s attention to practice answers this question. Christians in community have “mediated relationships.” An emotional community based on self-interest desires unmediated relationships with person-to-person interaction. In contrast, mediated relationships include three progressive assertions. First, Christian community is “in and through Jesus Christ.” This community exists only because of what Christ has done for each person. Second, Christ has made peace between the person and God AND between people. This is an objective statement of what exists in the present, because Christ is actively doing for people what they cannot do for themselves. Third, this community that Christ brings together is for all eternity; hence, scripture is replete with expectations for community conduct.

When God had mercy on us, when God revealed Jesus Christ to use as our brother, when God won our hearts by God’s own love, our instruction in Christian love began at the same time. When God was merciful to us, we learned to be merciful with one another. When we received forgiveness instead of judgment, we too were made ready to forgive each other. What God did to us, we then owed to others.

Therefore, in a mediated relationship, a person is not just oneself, but “redeemed by Christ, absolved from sin, and called to faith and eternal life.” A person’s ability to act well with another is never the foundation of a community, “Our community is based

57 Bonhoeffer, Life Together and Prayerbook of the Bible, 31.
58 Bonhoeffer, Life Together and Prayerbook of the Bible, 32.
59 Bonhoeffer, Life Together and Prayerbook of the Bible, 33.
60 Bonhoeffer, Life Together and Prayerbook of the Bible, 34.
solely in what Christ has done to both of us.”61 What is between people should recede, and they only see through Jesus Christ who mediates the relationship.

What changes occur in a community that values this form of generative relationship Bonhoeffer describes? The following three shifts place Bonhoeffer’s theology in dialogue with Smith’s three practices of social holiness.62

*From Dreamer to Welcomer*63

Bonhoeffer seeks to turn the dreamer’s eyes away from an ideal imposed on another and toward thankfulness for what Christ has done for the person and likewise for one’s brothers and sisters. This change in posture will produce relationships that welcome and receive others rather than making demands upon them. The author of Romans 14-15 argues similarly by addressing how to respond to “disputable matters” in the evolving Christian community (14:1). The answer throughout this section consistently calls the community to accept others “whose faith is weak” (14:1) by not “passing judgment” (14:13). Instead, do what brings “peace” (14:19). The impetus for this action comes from one’s own experience of being accepted by Christ. “Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God” (15:7). Shifting our posture from the dreamer who imposes demands on others to the welcomer who receives others is the beginning point of a generative relationship.

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61 Bonhoeffer, *Life Together and Prayerbook of the Bible*, 34.
62 Smith, 103-105. Bonhoeffer’s work is obviously in the background of Smith’s thinking and mentioned briefly, but it is underdeveloped and supplemented here. Similarly, Smith draws from Romans 12-16 and his work is developed further here.
63 Smith, 104. Smith uses the phrase “welcome of the other.”
Bonhoeffer’s description of the emotional community where self is central epitomizes the consumer who comes to a community of faith and judges its worthiness based on self-interest and self-promotion. Other people are always secondary to personal desires in this paradigm. While the consumer wants self, generosity extends self for others. This shift parallels Bonhoeffer’s description of Christ’s vicarious representative action between us that moves us from being with each other to being for each other. A person who places Christ at the center of the community also acts in generosity by deferring to the needs of others and pursues service in humility as suggested by Bonhoeffer’s spiritual community.

John Wesley’s early eighteenth century Methodist societies offer an example of a way Christians structured their relationships in order to develop a posture of generosity. Wesley gathered together ordinary men and women with a common purpose: the pursuit of holiness. Following the path of the Protestant Reformation, he believed in justification by faith alone, but he also wanted to offer a corrective to what he saw as an extreme emphasis on God’s activity to the neglect of human responsibility. For Wesley, justification includes three activities: God’s in offering mercy and grace, Christ’s in offering himself for the forgiveness of sins, and a person’s that produces a “living faith.” The Methodist societies were established to assist people’s living of the faith and movement toward holiness. One grouping within the societies was the class meeting

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64 See Chapter Two for an expanded discussion of Bonhoeffer’s depiction of Christ’s active role between people, pp. 51-53.
and attendance at these meetings was required weekly for all members of the society.\textsuperscript{66} The classes consisted of 10 to 12 people with a leader, arranged geographically, and mixed by sex and social class. When they gathered, each person described how he or she was progressing and failing toward holiness. They made these judgments according to the General Rules established for the societies and included lists of things to avoid (doing evil, taking the Lord’s name in vain, buying and selling alcohol, and adorning oneself) and things they should do. An examination of the things that people should be doing all define a posture of generosity and include doing good, being merciful, giving food to the hungry, providing clothes to the needy, and supporting another person’s growth toward holiness.\textsuperscript{67}

Christians living in generosity also marks Romans 12. The chapter begins by grounding the Christian life in humility. “Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment,” (12:3) because one person is only one piece of the body of Christ. This reality should govern their behavior; therefore, the author instructs them to love with sincerity (9), “be devoted to one another…honor one another above yourselves” (10), and “share with God’s people who are in need (13).” Each of these descriptions makes room for others, the key to shifting away from being a consumer and toward generosity. To live generously is a mark of a generative relationship.

\textsuperscript{66} Henderson, \textit{A Model for Making Disciples: John Wesley’s Class Meeting} (Nappanee: Francis Asbury Press, 1997), 83-126. Henderson refers to the structure of societies as an interlocking system that worked together to support the pursuit of holiness. The societies include the whole society, class meetings, bands, select societies, and penitent bands.

\textsuperscript{67} Wesley, “The Principles of a Methodist,” 70-73. The words instruct, reprove, exhort used in the General Rules are summarized as holiness.
From Passive to Active Forgiveness

In Romans 12-16, the author repeatedly calls on Christian communities to “live in harmony” (12:16), “live at peace” (12:18), act for “mutual edification” (14:19), demonstrate a “spirit of unity” (15:5) and “accept one another” (15:7). Each of these phrases intends to prompt action and remind the reader that active engagement is what brings about peace, harmony, edification, and unity. The author is not naïve about the difficulty of this call and includes among these lofty ideals a caveat, “as long as it depends on you” (12:18). What is at the core of turning a passive wish for peace into the action of the community?

According to Bonhoeffer, this occurs when people’s acceptance and forgiveness of one another shifts from a passive acknowledgment based on a theological proposition to an active practice of learning to see another person in light of Jesus Christ. An unmediated relationship demands that another person meet one’s expectations. A mediated relationship recognizes that the person joins with the present activity of Christ, which makes forgiveness of another possible.

Smith affirms that community is essential for fostering faith since people “learn how to love the other by being in community.” In community, people are moved to thankfulness for what God has done through Christ. Seeing another’s need for Christ reminds a person of his or her own need and results in thankfulness for Christ’s work that does what a person cannot do alone. Generative relationships emerge when people work toward allowing Christ to be the mediator between them.

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68 Smith, 105.
Bonhoeffer’s description of Christ’s work amidst the Christian community highlights three shifts that will comprise generative relationships: dreamers become welcomers, consumers begin to live in generosity, and passive ideals become active forgiveness. Generative relationships produce life-giving transformation because they pay attention to the process between the person and the community of faith. When a community holds this value, they enact the love of God for the world and adolescents will be the beneficiaries as they are welcomed, extended generosity, and actively forgiven.

**Imaginative Contribution**

When a community values imaginative contribution, they invite youth into the mission of the church. Exploring the definition of this value begins by defining the words themselves. First, there is a considerable distinction between participation and contribution. Participation with the community of faith merely requires undertaking what the community is already doing such as attending a worship service or joining a class. However, at the root of contribution is causation. Valuing contribution asks people to cause a change by bringing, adding, creating, endeavoring, improving, and enhancing the mission of the community of faith. Second, there are two common renderings of the word imaginative. One implies falsehood akin to being not real, made-up, or fabricated. The other denotes an ability to see what is not currently accessible to the senses and implies creation or originality. This latter definition is at the root of imaginative contribution, which invites people to see beyond the present, imagine the world as God intends it, and contribute to making this vision a present reality. Imaginative contribution is an

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important value in a community that seeks to integrate youth into the church because of two outcomes.

_Freeing the Voices of Youth_

First, imaginative contribution will free the voices of youth in the community. Some declare that youth are the ‘future of the church’ and others believe youth are the ‘church of the present.’ Both perspectives miss the mark. The first puts youth on hold for another day and prepares them to replicate the church as a way of safeguarding doctrines, rituals, or traditions. In Freire’s words, it is the difference between education that imposes, tells and dictates in order to produce an “I do” and an education that invites discussion and causes people to respond with “I wonder.”

Imaginative contribution moves beyond duplicating what already exists to wonderment about what can be.

The second phrase, youth are the church of the present, asks youth to be miniature adults by giving them adult roles on committees, allowing youth to be elders, or singing in the adult choir. This is an invitation to participate but in ways that are not always suitable to youth. A church that values imaginative contribution inspires and welcomes the voices of youth as youth are presently constituted. Kenda Creasy Dean asserts that youth are uniquely wired with deep passion and freeing this passion in the church will simultaneously meet a great need for vitality in many struggling churches. How does a church tap into this passion, free the voices of youth, and inspire imaginative contribution?

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70 Freire, 32.
71 Dean.
Pastor Skye Jethani suggests the answer is to foster imaginations. He writes about the “slumber of the imagination” in American culture and proposes that imaginations in our cultural milieu need to be cultivated, developed, and stimulated. Imagination is lulled to sleep, because people are over-saturated with images. Couple this with a consumption epistemology where people are reduced to passive consumers and a person’s imagination may actually atrophy from a lack of exercise.\textsuperscript{72} Additionally, Jethani condemns the church’s present understanding of discipleship, because it is based on receiving knowledge and skill rather than cultivating imagination to learn to see the world as it should be—“saturated with the presence and love of God.”\textsuperscript{73} To neglect imagination traps people in a “delusive reality”\textsuperscript{74} instead of setting people free in order to participate in God’s redemptive activity.

Practical theologian David White’s discussion of dreaming confirms the necessity of fostering imaginative contribution. White claims the Christian story should form our identity and way of seeing the world. When a person knows the Christian story, it enables him or her to “cultivate an alternative perspective of the world, a dream in which the world is being reconciled.”\textsuperscript{75} This enables one’s prophetic voice, because he or she sees “the gaps between God’s promises and the disturbing actualities of the world,” dreams a new dream, and “creates an alternative context” for this dream to take hold.\textsuperscript{76}

In essence, Jethani and White contend that churches need to spend time and effort teaching youth how to imagine and how to see beyond what exists before contribution.
can happen. If this is not done, participation as replication of what presently exists in the church will be the only role allotted to youth. Giving youth a seat at the table is insufficient. Adults must foster an imaginative vision for God’s redemptive activity and free their voices to contribute to making this a reality.

Assists Navigating A Multi-Vocal Culture

Diana Eck is a religious scholar and Director of The Pluralism Project at Harvard University. Based on the plurality of religious voices in America, she asserts that, “Articulating one’s own faith anew in a world of many faiths is a task for every religious tradition today.”77 Passing on the Christian faith as a static entity is inadequate for this task because engagement with difference in a multi-vocal environment raises new questions asked prior. Such engagement necessitates the first value discussed above – a communal memory. When youth are tethered to a story, one to which they belong and participate, they are able to navigate a multi-vocal world. What does such engagement look like and how does this lead to imaginative contribution? Religious educator Maria Harris’s description of religious imagination provides insights for this inquiry.78

Drawing on work of philosopher Paul Ricoeur, she defines imagination as a highest human quality that holds the power to change both human beings and subsequently the world we inhabit. Imagination in this sense holds redemptive possibilities for altering what one imagines or sees, and Harris contends this is the beginning point of changing human experience. “Paul Ricoeur assures us that people are

not motivated by direct appeals to the will. People are moved by experiencing their imaginations touched by someone or something that excites them into hoping and acting.” If the aim of imagination is to see beyond one’s present sight of vision, then examining how one responds to “other” is key to exercising imagination. Engagement with what is “other” can be a person, God, an idea, an experience, etc. Harris denotes four ways imagination might operate.80

First, contemplative imagination assists one’s ability to hear. A person discovers other because of an experience of something that is not he or she. In this sense, it is an experience of confrontation noted in Kegan’s theory above. The practices of the contemplative life, “attending, listening, being-with,” allow one to engage with what is other by providing “cleanness of mind and clarity of sight which enables awareness of the other.”81 An opening to hear from the other holds possibilities of seeing more fully.

Second, self-denial and detachment mark ascetic imagination and suggest the giving up of one’s rights or power over the other by “standing back.” Ultimately, this is an act of restraint and engenders respect for the other. Similar to the definition of generosity noted above, ascetic imagination makes room for the other and asks the person to pause.

Third, encountering other frees a person’s creative imagination to see and create new possibilities to “reform and recreate.” Since each person is made in the image of a

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79 Harris, 20.
80 Harris is adapting the work of Wheelwright, The Burning Fountain (Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1968).
81 Harris, 20.
creative God, he or she then holds the “potential” to be creative. The aim of all creative imagination is “service of one another in the world.”

Finally, sacramental imagination is bound to Harris’ definition of mystery as, “the power to reveal the presence of the holy, the gracious, the divine.” Imagination in this sense is anticipation and waiting for God to reveal Godself, even while God remains “unfathomable.” Sacramental imagination asks a person to hope and to wait. How does imagination operate when a person engages what is “other?” Imagination asks one to hear, to pause, to see and create, and to hope and wait.

As a value, imaginative contribution is inherently invitational because it asks people to cause something by creating or originating beyond the community of faith’s present way of seeing. If Harris’ proposal is true and awakening a person’s imagination is a catalyst for acting and hoping, then demonstrating imaginative contribution becomes the evidence of an adolescent who has truly taken on the mission of the community of faith. And more, imaginative contribution enables youth to engage with what is other in a manner that can contribute to this mission.

A warning is in order: If a community of faith values imaginative contribution, they must discover ways to embrace the contributions of youth and create places for imaginations to play and practice. To not follow through with the invitation by rejecting contribution, the community may actually be more damaging than never inviting in the first place.

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82 Harris, 22.
83 Harris, 23.
84 Harris, 13.
Thriving in the PYD literature is the aim for all adolescents and extends a traditional understanding of adolescent development beyond a person’s achievement.\textsuperscript{85} Rather, an adolescent is considered to be thriving when he or she is contributing to their context in a manner that supports a better society. This echoes the community of faith’s desire for youth—to become active contributors to the faith community. If this is the aim, then inviting participation is an insufficient means to this end. Valuing contribution means expecting the person to be a cause of something beyond the community’s present constitution even while remaining tethered to the Christian story. This is not a call for dismantling the Christian faith or a relativistic rendering of contribution as the essential value of the church; rather contribution stems from an understanding of faith as an active engagement in matters of faith and life. Thomas Groome captures this idea with the phrase “critical memory” whereby he describes the person’s posture amidst the faith tradition—“remembering the past to create the best present with a creative focus on the future.”\textsuperscript{86}

Ephesians 4 offers an image of the body that captures valuing imaginative contribution in a community of faith. Christ gives each person gifts intended for service “so that the body of Christ may be built up” (4:11-12). The passage culminates with imagery of a body “joined and held together by every supporting ligament” that is growing up into the “Head,” which is Christ. The author calls the Ephesians to contribute their gifts in such a way that they function like a body and are able to carry out

\textsuperscript{85} See Chapter Three for an expanded definition of thriving according to Learner, pp. 81-83.

\textsuperscript{86} Groome, \textit{Christian Religious Education: Sharing Our Story and Vision}, 186.
the ministry of the Christ, and when this is done the church (not the individual) is described as “mature” (vs. 13).

The recipients of this letter are also exhorted in Ephesians 4:1 to “live a life worthy of the calling you have received” and compelled to follow specific behaviors necessary to do so: be “humble”, “gentle”, “patient”, “bearing with one another in love”, and maintaining “unity of the Spirit” (4:2). To value imaginative contribution is not a wishful idea where people’s contribution will always fit together like a simple puzzle. Adults must learn to create space for youth to be imaginative contributors by fostering imagination that frees the voices of youth and leads them to better navigate a multi-vocal world.

**Chapter Summary**

Imaginative contribution, like thriving in PYD literature, can measure whether youth are integrating with the community of faith, because it is the culmination of all the other values. When youth contribute, they see themselves as actors in an ongoing drama based on their communal memory. Responsible mutuality comprised of shared care for one’s own faith and the faith of others demands that youth be contributors. A youth’s burgeoning maturity is sustained by and within a community who is “becoming Christian together” and offers a place a youth’s contribution to grow and change. Generative relationships welcome youth to join with Christ’s redemptive activity within relationship. Inviting imaginative contribution integrates youth into the community of faith by freeing their voices for the church’s mission in a multi-vocal world.
Chapter Five: Youth Ministries As Communities of Practice

Chapter One addresses the disparity between increased resources allocated to youth ministries and attrition of post-high school participation in faith communities. It concludes that this is not a problem of retention but one of integration. A way forward builds on biblical and theological foundations promoting other people as vital to an adolescent’s maturing Christian faith, and the PYD literature similarly affirms the central role of others in adolescent development. These conclusions lead to a further question: How might churches support the self-other relationship that fosters integration with a faith community as essential to a maturing Christian faith? This chapter utilizes a social theory of learning as developed primarily by Etienne Wenger1 in order to: 1) draw from the theoretical framework to define learning in the social realm and provide a more robust definition of faith formation to include others as vital for a maturing Christian faith; 2) explain the communities of practice (CoPs) model and its three constitutive elements to show how people learn in a social environment; and 3) explore how CoPs enact the values described in Chapter Four. Focusing on a social theory of learning invites adults to view faith formation through the lens of the social environment, to talk about learning as engagement with others, and to discover distinct ways to support youth in the social realm.

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A Social Theory of Learning

Wenger’s definition of social learning has four components. Although it is necessary to describe what is distinct about each component, such separation can result in minimizing their interdependence. Hence, explanation of each component includes demonstrating how these are “interconnected and mutually defining.”

Learning as doing

Wenger resists traditional definitions in education that focus on individual process, cognition, and acquisition of information as the measurement of knowledge. Learning in this realm separates the internal from the external by wrongly assuming the individual can internalize a replica of the external information while ignoring what is done with the knowledge, what it becomes, or how it is used. Wenger instead proposes using the lens of the social realm to define learning, because it enables one to see the interaction between the internal and external by holding together knowing and doing, the objective and subjective.

Learning in the social realm involves being actively engaged in the practices of a community. Practice is mutual engagement in a joint enterprise or “sustained mutual engagement in action.” Practices are what people in the social realm gather around and what provides a source of coherence and meaning for a community.

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2 Wenger, 5.
3 Wenger, 47-48. Some of the results of this overemphasis include teaching becoming the focus of learning, separation from the outside world, overuse of individual drills and testing, and teaching material out of context.
4 Lave and Wenger, 47.
5 Wenger, 4.
6 Wenger, 5.
7 Wenger, 72.
doing a practice together grow in both understanding (what one knows) and competence (what one is able to do).\textsuperscript{8} Hence, the doing of a practice with others is an indispensable component of learning.

\textit{Learning as experiencing}

Learning as experience is bound to doing a practice with others. The focus is on the process of learning and whole person engagement – the subjective along with the objective and the affective along with the cognitive. When a group of people gathers around a practice, their individual and collective experience includes negotiating how to do the practice, what it means, and what one needs to know. Such experience involves the negotiation of meaning. Negotiation for Wenger is similar to the idea of appropriation, which involves taking in, forming, and constructing, contrasted with assimilation, which involves absorbing or becoming. Both the individual and the group are actors who negotiate meaning in order to carry out a practice.

Meaning in this sense is produced through active negotiation with others. Others do not give meaning to experiences for the person; and yet, experiences with others lead to the production of collectively negotiated meaning that enables a practice to be carried out.\textsuperscript{9} “We produce meanings that extend, redirect, dismiss, reinterpret, modify or confirm – in a word, negotiate anew – the histories of meanings of which they are part.”\textsuperscript{10}

Meaning produced in the social realm is dynamic, requiring active engagement due to the

\textsuperscript{8} Wenger, 214.  
\textsuperscript{9} Wenger, 52.  
\textsuperscript{10} Wenger, 52.
particular historical moment in which meaning is negotiated.\textsuperscript{11} Such meaning-negotiated experiences shape how this particular group does the practice of the community. Therefore, negotiating meaning through experiences with others is an essential component of learning.

\textit{Learning as belonging}

Learning in the social realm is built upon belonging to a community. Neither a social grouping based on proximity (all are on the same team) nor people having similar interests (Red Sox fans) define belonging. To belong is to be integral to the group and exists when a person’s participation contributes meaningfully to the practice of the community. Such contribution demonstrates a person’s growing understanding (knowing) and competence (doing) of the community’s practice.\textsuperscript{12}

The community legitimizes the contribution by incorporating it into their practice resulting in a sense of belonging shared by the person and the community. Belonging evolves as the person actively participates in doing the community’s practice while negotiating the meaning of these cumulative experiences with others. As a result, belonging to a community is a necessary component of learning.

\textit{Learning as becoming}

Becoming is a further component of learning with others. Wenger describes becoming as identity-shaping and is “produced as a lived experience of participation in

\textsuperscript{11} Wenger, 53.
\textsuperscript{12} Wenger, 5.
specific communities.”\textsuperscript{13} He is not implying pure socialization where the community is the only agent forming the person. Rather, through joint participation in the community’s practice, the person and the community form each other. The focus is on process and their “mutual constitution.”\textsuperscript{14}

Identity in this sense is more than self-image (how one sees oneself), because becoming also involves seeing oneself in connection with others. To participate in this community’s practice means encountering what is familiar (areas of understanding and competence) and what is unfamiliar (other people’s areas of understanding and competence).\textsuperscript{15} Self is understood as only a part, albeit a necessary part, of the whole. Such experiences shape a person’s perspective and provide a lens for interpreting the world outside of the practice. Belonging to this community shapes the identity of the person just as the person shapes the community. For this reason, becoming is a key component of learning.

The essence of learning captured in the social realm involves participation in a community’s practice, growing in understanding and competence by doing a practice with others, collectively negotiating meaning from experiences, belonging to the community as a legitimate contributor, and becoming oneself in the company of others. Each of these components is essential to define learning in the social realm.

\textsuperscript{13} Wenger, 151.
\textsuperscript{14} Wenger, 146.
\textsuperscript{15} Wenger, 153.
Social Learning and Faith Formation

Understanding the social nature of learning sheds light on one’s understanding of faith formation, because it brings together the person and the community. When integration with a community is deemed vital to a maturing faith in Christ, it is insufficient to define faith formation merely as an autonomous endeavor, a measurement of a person’s achievement, or an affirmation of propositions. Central to faith formation is living the Christian faith with others. In many ways, Wenger’s components of learning parallel what is constitutive of faith formation and are useful for constructing a more robust definition of faith formation itself.

First, faith formation includes growing in knowledge and competence by “doing” with others. In 1976 Christian educator John Westerhoff warned of the inherent danger in the dominant “schooling instruction-model.”\textsuperscript{16} He argued that in past historical contexts, focusing on foundational knowledge was sufficient. People lived in homogenous communities and daily encountered and lived expressions of the Christian faith through natural connections with friends and family members. In today’s increasingly pluralistic culture, Westerhoff’s critique of this model is even more accurate. When social encounter is removed from the learning equation, a disconnect will exist between the ideas of Christianity and the formative power of this story in people’s lives. Information-based teaching alone is insufficient for faith formation, because it lacks necessary interaction with those living the faith. Stanley Hauerwas affirms this by defining the teleology of the Christian story as formative rather than informative, saying,

\textsuperscript{16} Westerhoff, 2-12.
“Like the early Christians, we must learn that understanding Jesus’ life is inseparable from learning how to live our own.”¹⁷

Others have also sought to expand perceptions of faith formation beyond cognition and information acquisition. For example, Thomas Groome defines the realized purpose of all Christian education as “lived Christian faith” and describes how education transforms three aspects of a person: the cognitive, affective, and volition or will.¹⁸ Dallas Willard defines spiritual formation as transforming a person’s “inner world” which includes our thoughts, feelings, will, body, soul, and social world.¹⁹ Dykstra defines the “life of faith” as a new freedom, fresh seeing, and consecrated service and emphasizes a new orientation to the world that is bound to a lived experience. Each of these authors describes faith formation as whole person transformation in valuable ways. Yet the emphasis remains on the person rather than interactions with others that become a location for faith formation. Wenger’s focus on the process between the person and the community while doing a practice is an additional insight into faith formation. Hence, supporting a maturing Christian faith includes growing in core biblical and theological knowledge, watching how other people live Christianly, and trying to live as a Christian with this community. *Faith formation occurs when we are “doing” the Christian faith with others.*

¹⁷ Hauerwas, 52. This statement is part of a larger argument regarding how to read the four gospels. Hauerwas is responding to the overemphasis on discovering the historical Jesus instead of reading the gospels for what they are – multiple stories of people describing how a community was formed by this story of Jesus.


Second, faith formation occurs amidst experiences with others. Wenger defines experience as active engagement with others where the group negotiates meaning or decides together how best to carry out the practice. Experience in this sense is more than a person’s affective or existential moment; it is what one does with others. Wenger challenges the common conception of faith formation that relegates appropriation to the individual sphere. For example, Thomas Groome’s “Shared Praxis” approach includes an explicit movement for appropriation. He rightly seeks to expand general conceptions of appropriation such as asking the learner to repeat material back to the teacher or to raise questions for clarification. Groome suggests an approach of “critical appropriation” where people “judge and come to see for themselves how their lives are to be shaped.” This is a personal endeavor where people are in dialogue with a community and then decide for themselves. This is certainly a necessary element in faith formation, but Wenger’s definition of experience moves the locus of appropriation to the group. As they join in a practice, they appropriate together how to carry out the practice in a meaningful way. Personal appropriation is not gone, but it is more intricately connected to doing the practice of the group. Experience is bound to both a person’s and the

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20 Another common approach in Christian education is to begin with the person’s experience and create an “avenue for learning” called “identification.” The teacher’s role is to build a bridge between past experiences or prior knowledge and connect this with the material presented. The isolation of individual experience pays little attention to the present learning experience in the social realm as Wenger defines. For an example, see Issler and Habermas, *How We Learn: A Christian Teacher’s Guide to Educational Psychology* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2002).
22 Groome, *Sharing Faith: A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry, the Way of Shared Praxis*, 250. Groome does view the community as essential for input into the person’s appropriation. Even more, after people appropriate for themselves they should, “be reshapers of its historical realization in their place and time.” This recognition still does not pay attention to the process as the location for appropriation.
group’s growing knowledge and competence, and, in this sense, faith formation occurs amidst experiences of negotiating meaning with others.

A third insight from a social lens of learning highlights how belonging to a community facilitates faith formation. For Wenger, a sense of belonging occurs when a person’s contribution is welcomed as a legitimate part of the practice. The reciprocity between a person contributing and the community’s acknowledgement of the contribution is paramount to belonging and affirms the vital relationship between God, self, and others. Nancy Pineda-Madrid’s definition of “traditioning” captures this idea of reciprocal contribution. Drawing from the philosophy of American pragmatist Josiah Royce, Pineda-Madrid asserts how the word tradition historically includes an “intrinsic relation of process and content.” By this she means tradition is both the teachings of the church and the church’s lived faith. Hence, “a tradition is only a tradition to the extent that it has been received and internalized through some practice.” Since the Christian faith is both an individual and social event, it is the “process of interpretation that necessarily and invariable creates community.” When people interpret a tradition together, this facilitates the formation of community. This is parallel to Wenger’s understanding of belonging. As people interpret the faith together by doing a practice and this group receives a person’s contribution, the result is a reciprocal affirmation of belonging – community is formed. Pineda-Madrid calls this traditioning, “a process of

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24 Pineda-Madrid, 204.
25 Pineda-Madrid, 205.
26 Pineda-Madrid, 215.
interpreting our past toward a hope-filled future in the context of our present, and through our willingness to risk believing that our life has some higher purpose, some wider significance.”

Traditioning and reciprocal contribution toward the reign of God is significant in the current cultural milieu where self is often the subject of the existential question, “What is God’s purpose for my life?” Instead, the question becomes, “How might we join in God’s reign?” The subject shifts from self to God and from an individual endeavor to a community’s shared journey. To see oneself as belonging to the Christian faith is significant to the Pauline corpus replete with adoption (God predestined us to be adopted as his sons and daughters through Jesus Christ. Ephesians 1:5) and kinship metaphors (If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to this promise. Galatians 3:29). Faith formation occurs when a person’s contribution leads to belonging to the community.

Wenger’s description of learning as becoming is a familiar rendering of faith formation – transformation. The person takes on a Christian identity and begins seeing life through this lens. In many ways, an identity forming, vision fostering, and life shaping description is synonymous with faith itself. C. Ellis Nelson refers to faith as the “residue of experience with God” that produces a “confidence that one is related to an unseen holy Will that is concerned for the conditions of human life everywhere. As such, faith is an underlying mood, outlook, or stance toward everything.” Similarly, Craig Dykstra refers to faith as a “personal knowing” and a grounding force in a person’s life.

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27 Pineda-Madrid, 222.
that provides orientation. Faith shapes who a person is becoming when, “faith functions in persons, causing them to seek and understand God’s will for the world and their responsibility to bring it about.”

Wenger offers one further insight to these definitions. A person’s identity forms while doing a practice with others. Doing the practice, negotiating meaning with others, and belonging to the group are all grounded in social exchange. In Wenger’s words, “The focus must be on their process of mutual constitution.” The person is becoming and the group is becoming as they engage together in a practice. This paradigm resists isolating the individual and welcomes an active encounter with others as a transformative opportunity for both the persons and the community.

Wenger’s learning components act as a window into the social environment of faith formation, and insights from this theory inform a more robust definition of faith formation that incorporate a person’s vital relationship with the community of faith. Neither the person nor the community is the focus; rather, the emphasis is on the process between people. Faith formation occurs as people join together to “do” the Christian faith and requires active engagement in order to determine how one might live Christianly in their particular context. Because doing the Christian faith is bound to practices done with others, the group determines how the faith is appropriated. The process between the person and the group informs individual and corporate appropriation.

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31 Wenger, 146.
and can be seen in the practice itself. When a group receives a person’s contribution, this confirms that he or she belongs to the community. Ultimately, as a person joins with others to produce a lived faith, the person and the group become people of faith. In this sense, adults can support faith formation in adolescents by enabling contribution to the life of the community. How might a church best provide such support? By defining Wenger’s communities of practice model, one can craft a feasible way forward.

Communities of Practice

Wenger’s research seeks to define through real relationships (community, family, work) the informal manner in which people learn in the social realm. The community of practice (CoP) paradigm frames this exploration. This phrase should be heard in its entirety rather than defined by the words from which it is comprised. In Wenger’s words, “By associating practice with community, I am not arguing that everything anybody might call a community is defined by practice or has a practice that is specific to it; nor that everything anybody might call practice is the defining property of a clearly specifiable community.”32 This phrase distinguishes a CoP from being just any group of people. In this vein, just because a group of teenagers is part of the same youth ministry does not make the group a CoP. Youth ministries as a whole are not CoPs. Yet there is the potential for a number of CoPs to exist within a youth ministry and teenagers might also participate in a CoP in the larger church. A CoP defines a particular way of being with others that supports learning, and similarly faith formation, in the social realm.

32 Wenger, 72.
Wenger defines a CoP by delineating the characteristics of such a community whose practice acts as a source of coherence.\textsuperscript{33} These characteristics include: joint enterprise, mutual engagement, and shared repertoire. When all three are present, a CoP exists and supports learning in the social realm. The following three examples explicate the elements constitutive of a CoP and provide a window into how a CoP functions in a youth ministry context.

\textit{The Bible Study}

Two years ago, Faith Community Church hired Leah as a part-time youth minister. When she arrived, Leah began a high school summer bible study that continues to this day. The group meets every Wednesday for about an hour. Tonight the room is filled with ten students, two of whom just started coming a few weeks ago. They spend the first few minutes lamenting the absence of Jason and Erin who graduated last spring. Jon shares a story about the time Erin brought her pet anole to bible study, and the whole group laughs as he folds his hands together to replicate the “praying lizard.” Judging from the knowing smiles around the room, this story is part of the group’s folklore, even for those who were not there when it actually happened. Leah announces it is time to begin and offers a word of prayer. Many have their own bibles, and others grab one from the well-used stack on the table. They are studying the Gospel of John, and, after helping each other find the right place, they take turns reading aloud the story of Jesus changing the water into wine. Leah helps navigate the discussion by asking questions and providing some background information and interpretation of the text. Jennifer, who

\textsuperscript{33} Wenger, 49.
grew up going to Sunday school, tells everyone that she thinks this is the first miracle Jesus ever did. Some conversation about this “fact” ensues. Kyle wonders if, as a boy, Jesus ever changed his vegetables into chocolate and, if he had, “Would that be a miracle?” Everyone laughs, and others imagine miracles performed by a young Jesus. Leah invites the group to look at each of the four gospels and determine what miracles are recorded first. While they do this, Mike pulls out his phone and does a search online for the first miracle of Jesus. A bible dictionary says that changing the water to wine was the first public miracle. The group looks through the other gospels and rereads John’s account; they agree this was likely a record of Jesus’ first public miracle. Jennifer is pleased, and Mike pokes fun at her saying, “You still hope to get on the honor role in Sunday school!”

Jenna tends to be the quiet one in the room, laughing at the jokes and taking it all in. Yet when Leah asks if they see miracles today, Jenna says she wishes so. “My dad has been sick for awhile and the doctors don’t seem to help.” Greg grabs the group’s prayer notebook and writes down, “Please help the doctors find the right medicine for Jenna’s dad.” They all agree to pray for him. The discussion about miracles, water, and wine continues as people look at the text and wonder about its meaning in their lives. When it is almost time to go, the group shares other prayer requests, writes them in the notebook, and reviews older requests to see how their prayers are being answered. Bibles are restacked, a couple of people hug Jenna, and all bid farewell until next week.
Worship Team

Hope Presbyterian Church youth group meets every Sunday night. There is an adult leader named Skip who has a passion for teaching young people how to worship through song. Every year he gathers students for a youth worship team to lead the youth group on Sunday evenings. Skip also leads an adult worship team on Sunday morning during the church’s worship service. On a regular basis, he rotates kids from the youth band into the adult worship team. Will is going to play drums next week, and this requires getting up early on Sunday for an 8:00 a.m. rehearsal. His parents tell Skip how easy it is to rouse him on these mornings compared to a school day! “In fact, Will often comes home early on Saturday night because he wants to be alert on Sunday morning. He just loves playing drums!”

Today the team is meeting for practice as they typically do an hour before youth group starts. The team is made up of three acoustic guitarists (of various skill levels), a base player, a drummer, a keyboardist, a violinist, and a girl hoping to play her flute. After they run the chords, set the microphones, and complete a sound check, Skip leads them in a run through of the first song, “Let Everything That Has Breath.” A few chords into the song, everyone stops because of the foul noise coming from Greg who is playing the keyboard in the wrong key. “This is the only sheet music I have!” he grumbles and promptly calls Anna the violinist over to transpose it for him. She’s really good at this and transposing takes him forever! Will stops them a verse into their second attempt at the song, because it feels slow and labored; he wants to try a different beat to get the right rhythm. The base player, Fran, plucks out a beat, and Will follows her lead. Everyone
agrees this sounds better. The run through is a success and this song is ready to go - except there isn’t a natural role for Sarah who plays the flute. Skip suggests she wait for the next song, which is a hymn they all know, and she can play the melody. Sarah perks up at this idea and flips to the song. As they play, Anna notices that all of the other instruments drown out the sound of the flute. “How about Sarah and Greg play the chorus together once as an introduction?” Anna suggests. After another run through, this song is ready. Skip tells the group that he’s not sure about the final song. “At youth group tonight we will be talking about unity and this song begins with the phrase, ‘My Jesus, My Savior.’ It seems contradictory.” The team agrees, discusses other possibilities, and decides to play a contemporary version of “We Are One In the Spirit.” They pray together and focus on their role for the evening.

Playground Renovations

Grace Methodist Church has a passion for service in the community. The tagline on the church sign captures this vision, “Extending God’s grace to our neighbors.” Every few years the leaders in the church assess the needs of a specific area in the community and assign projects to various groups in the church. Right now the youth assignment is to clean up a community playground. The youth minister invites interested youth to meet at the playground and make a plan for the upcoming year. Twenty-five people show up and immediately start assessing the situation. The posts for the swings lift out of the ground; the slide is metal and hot to touch; trash is scattered about including broken glass and discarded drug paraphernalia; the see-saw’s bolts are loose; and the ground is full of deep holes that would be easy to fall into. What a mess!
Ideas rapidly flow through the group. “Let’s have a clean up day.” “We need to raise money for new playground equipment.” “There should be rules about who can be in this place!” A list of initial jobs emerges. Ryan wants to create a Facebook page to create awareness in the community. Jill says she will work on a flyer to hand out to local businesses asking for their support. “It’s important to contact the city,” says Debbie, “to know what permission we might need.” Matt remembers the church has a shed full of tools and equipment, and he volunteers to look through it and see what they can use.

“Hey!” says Rachel, “Let’s create a logo based on the church motto, ‘Extending God’s Grace To Our Neighbors’ so people know why we are doing this.” The group agrees and everyone looks at Nick who is very good at creating computer graphics. He smiles and says, “I will make a few designs as long as we get to print a t-shirt.” Deal! Debbie is responsible for taking notes. She’s been part of community projects with the youth group for five years and draws from this experience to begin to organize the energy of the crowd. She wonders out loud, “Maybe the types of groups they broke up into for the last project are a good starting point…”

**Joint Enterprise**

The first element characterizing a CoP is joint enterprise. The word enterprise suggests a venture, project, mission, or task and implies it is new, emerging, or requiring innovation. To call an enterprise “joint” delineates involvement to be a group of people. According to Wenger, a joint enterprise is owned and created by the group, because it is...

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34 Wenger, 77-82.
always negotiated rather than received from an external source.\textsuperscript{35} A joint enterprise takes form not in its objectified existence as declared by others; rather those involved in the enterprise determine the contour of the enterprise. This is not to say that there are no outside influences. Being a joint enterprise does include the influence of the group’s faith community, parents, or youth leaders. In the bible study illustration, Leah, the youth minister, initiated the study group; it is possible that doing so was part of her job description or that parents were eager for their teenagers to participate. There could be a number of objectives in mind for this group from learning the content of the bible to developing Christian friendships. Leah certainly presents some parameters for the enterprise such as declaring a time to begin, presenting a passage they will study, and bringing insights and questions for discussion. These act as a fence around the enterprise and give shape to it - yet alone these do not comprise the enterprise. In the bible study, Kyle’s challenge of Jennifer’s assertion of “fact” about the first miracle and the group’s subsequent search for an answer was likely not included in Leah’s lesson plan, yet it remained within the bounds she established. This group is negotiating a specific enterprise within the given task of being in a bible study. The worship team also has parameters established by Skip and potentially other adults. Skip holds them to a particular purpose – to lead worship. Yet, to become a CoP, the group must negotiate how they will carry out this venture. This is also true for the youth service project. They are not allowed to choose just any project, but when the group arrives at the playground, they negotiate together how (and if) this task will be carried out. Adults have objectives for programs for teenagers that influence what teenagers think, say, or do, but learning in

\textsuperscript{35} Wenger, 80.
the social realm must also include supporting the group’s negotiation and subsequent creation of a joint enterprise.\textsuperscript{36}

To negotiate means to discern together the form of the enterprise and requires those involved to take ownership of the enterprise itself. It is only in this negotiated state that people in the group become agents of the enterprise. The bible study group’s joint enterprise is inquiring of a biblical text’s meaning and the import of this in their lives. This is apparent when Jenna connects the reading with her dad’s illness and the way the group welcomes the inquiry. Anna’s inclusion of Sarah as a flute player suggests the enterprise is playing good music as well as including others in the process. Anna could have declared that Sarah’s flute did not fit the type of music they were playing, and, if the group agreed, the enterprise would be negotiated differently. This means that joint enterprises are always indigenous. The faith community’s particular historical location, theological understanding, symbols and rituals, use of biblical stories, and manner of

\textsuperscript{36}What is included in the negotiation of meaning in a faith community? Are there parameters to such meaning making? Can a person or community construct any meaning that is meaningful or helpful for completing a practice? Negotiation is not limitless or relative. There is a tension between negotiation and stability – what can change and what remains the same. Although a discussion regarding hermeneutics would be helpful since interpretation is certainly an aspect of negotiation of meaning, a more fundamental question regarding revelation provides a framework for understanding negotiation of meaning in a Christian context. Revelation should not be reduced to doctrines of the faith; however, one cannot fully bracket out the objective doctrines bound to a discussion on negotiating meaning. Donald Bloesch’s definition of revelation helps resolve this tension. Bloesch, \textit{Holy Scripture: Revelation, Inspiration, and Interpretation} (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2005). He challenges two streams in the theological discourse surrounding revelation. The first posits revelation as propositional, rational in nature, and an overemphasis on the cognitive dimension of human existence often ending in rationalism. The second focuses on the affective, often a mystical experience, and concludes that revelation is an “immediate experience with the divine” or “heightened human awareness.” Bloesch, 46-47. Bloesch seeks a middle ground in the discussion holding together both knowledge and experience and thus defines revelation as a “truth-event.” “Revelation is indeed cognitive, but it is much more than this. It is an act of communication by which God confronts the whole person with his redeeming mercy and glorious presence. It therefore involved not only the mind, but the will and the affections.” Bloesch, 48. This definition claims revelation is what one understands (truth) through an encounter (event). “Revelation is the conjunction of divine revealing action and human response.” Bloesch, 50. Revelation requires people to negotiate meaning (response to what is revealed) and establishes parameters for what might be revealed (God is the revealer).
being together will influence the enterprise since they are part of the enterprise’s context. Yet the form these influences take in the enterprise is indigenous to the group of people involved. In Wenger’s words, “members produce a practice to deal with what they understand to be their enterprise.” Hence, the practice belongs to the group.

Since all are involved in the negotiation of the enterprise, they are also responsible for it and accountable to each other for its practices. If Debbie forgoes her plan to organize the service project, the others will either have to pick up this job or the group may function without organization: both avenues are the negotiated enterprise. This is most obvious with the worship team. If Anna misses rehearsal, Greg would be left without someone to transpose. Will is accountable to the adult worship team on Sunday morning. When he arrives, the group is responsible for incorporating his style with their own in order to produce a song.

In sum, a key element of a CoP is the way in which the group negotiates the joint enterprise and makes it their own. They do this amidst given parameters established by the larger church or adult leaders involved and are responsible to each other for carrying out the enterprise. The joint enterprise is always indigenous or, in Wenger’s term, “situated,” because it is bound to the particular people involved and the context in which they are part.

*Mutual Engagement*

The second element necessary for a CoP to emerge is mutual engagement and necessitates that individual members of the group be active agents. Mutual engagement
exists when each person is contributing (in various degrees) and growing in competence (in various ways) to the enterprise.\textsuperscript{38} When the teenagers gather at the playground, instead of jobs being doled out to them, they are invited to engage in finding a solution and to do so with this particular group of people. They construct a list of initial jobs, volunteer to carry these out, and build on each other’s ideas in light of the emerging enterprise. In the youth band, Skip, Anna, and Greg all work to invite the contribution of Sarah, the young flutist, by opening up space for a new and different type of contribution.

All contributions in a CoP are necessary, diverse, and partial such that each person brings something needed for the enterprise, and one person cannot complete the enterprise alone.\textsuperscript{39} Among the case studies, the most explicit example of this is the band whose unique sound is dependent not on one instrument but on finding how the various instruments combine to produce the best sound. Partial and necessary contribution is expressed in the service group when Nick’s artistic skills join with Debbie’s love for organizing people and projects. Even in the Bible study, Jennifer brings a basic knowledge of the Bible to the group that helps them interpret the readings. Kyle’s inquisitive nature reads each story with fresh eyes of wonder that awakens new awe and inquiry in others. Mike’s resourcefulness provides clarity and opportunities to resolve questions. The different members of the group combine their contributions with the “overlapping forms of competence” of others in service to the joint enterprise.\textsuperscript{40} This mutual engagement is consistent with the negotiated, indigenous character of a CoP.

\textsuperscript{38} Wenger, 76.
\textsuperscript{39} Wenger, 75.
\textsuperscript{40} Wenger, 76.
Each group must discern how the diverse contributions interact (for good and ill) as they negotiate their joint enterprise.

To be engaged in this manner is to have the experience of being included. Will’s parents mistakenly attribute Will’s ease of rising early to his love for playing drums. Might his eagerness to contribute stem from being in a group where his contribution is deemed by himself and others as essential? The group itself must enable engagement, because it does not depend on one person for its existence. Relationships and meaningful connections develop based on shared experiences that extend beyond merely shared interests of teenagers (a group of athletes) or social groupings (those who go to the same school). This is not an idealized relationship but has the potential for real conflict and tension. Yet the degree of energy with which a person is willing to participate in the joint enterprise amidst conflict is in direct proportion to his or her level of engagement. At the Bible study, remembering Erin’s praying lizard is part of the group’s folklore. Whether those present actually saw Erin do this is inconsequential – knowing the story joins the shared history and proves one belongs in the group. At the end of the band’s rehearsal, they gather to pray “and focus on their role for the evening.” CoP’s birth relationships based on the shared experience of mutual engagement.

**Shared Repertoire**

The third component of a CoP is a shared repertoire comprised of the resources generated by the group’s mutual engagement as they negotiate the joint enterprise. In the bible study, a shared repertoire might consist of bringing their own bibles (symbols),

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41 Wenger, 76-79.
using a phone to look up definitions (tools), beginning with prayer (routine), discovering implications for their lives (ways of doing things), memorizing a verse (actions), and repeating phrases that had poignant meaning for the group at prior moments in their study (words).  This collection of “activities, symbols, or artifacts” may be created or adapted from the larger faith community, but they are always “new” in the sense that the group negotiates the resource’s meaning as part of the joint enterprise. Rachel suggests the group create a logo for the playground project based on the church’s motto. She finds meaning in these words, which the others affirm, and Nick offers to reinterpret the motto for the playground project through graphic design. The bible study uses a prayer notebook to carry out their enterprise. This is not activity of their own creation, for surely they learned to pray at home and in a church service. Yet this artifact is their own interpretation of this activity that assists them in their enterprise. The band’s collection of songs likely includes hymns from the past, some of which they interpreted anew. The richer the traditions/repertoire a church community has to offer, the greater the potential for reimagining them in a new context.

It is important to note that a shared repertoire develops over time and through sustained interactions. The number of songs and interpretations of these songs will only grow over time and be passed to new members of the worship team. A bible study that meets for two months has less potential for developing a meaningful repertoire than one that has met for two years. The youth service group is gathering for the first time and is

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42 Wenger, 83.
43 Wenger, 82.
44 Wenger, 84.
45 Wenger, 82-85.
able to draw on past experiences such as Matt’s knowledge of the church shed or Debbie’s division of labor but have yet to create the repertoire that will enable them to carry out this new enterprise – Nick’s logo might be the first. This repertoire is what they gather around to carry out their enterprise, is a mark of belonging to the group, and supports their mutual engagement; thus, it is the third necessary element of a CoP.

**Community of Practice Elements Representative of the Core Values**

Does supporting the three elements of a CoP enable a community to enact the core values that foster a maturing Christian faith? This includes: communal memory, responsible mutuality, burgeoning maturing, generative relationships, and imaginative contribution. The CoP elements have some inherent characteristics consistent with the values. When youth participate in a CoP and carry out a practice to which they are responsible and accountable by mutually engaging with others, this can become an expression of responsible mutuality. The bible study enterprise includes caring for others by writing prayer requests in a prayer notebook. Greg’s act of grabbing the notebook in response to Jenna’s concern for her father demonstrates that this group views faith as a shared endeavor (at least to some degree). As long as Leah continues to bring needed information to the bible study and encourages Kyle’s wondering, Jennifer’s assertions, and Mike’s explorations, there is ample opportunity in the bible study for affirmation and contradiction needed for faith formation. Seth’s invitation for Will to play drums with the Sunday morning worship team can be a mutually beneficial encounter.

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46 For a full discussion of the core values that support the vital relationship between adults and youth for a maturing Christian faith, see Chapter Four.
The negotiated nature of a CoP asks youth to combine the group’s ideas, interests, and gifts in order to carry out the practice together. This supports active engagement in the faith with others, which is key for a community that values burgeoning maturity. The playground renovation project and the youth worship team have explicit ways for youth to join their gifts together for ministry essential to their personal and communal growth. The bible study is an occasion to learn about the faith that may foster growth, changed behavior, and a youth’s ability to stand firm in faith.

Since a group defines the joint enterprise, contributes to it, and develops needed repertoire, imaginative contribution is integral to a CoP. Asking youth to design and execute the playground renovation project frees the voices of youth to contribute. It appears this group of youth is creatively engaging their imaginations such as Rachel suggesting they reinterpret the church logo and Ryan volunteering to create a Facebook page.

There are many openings and expectations for generative relationships to develop in a CoP. Successfully carrying out an enterprise requires welcoming others and extending generosity since each person’s contribution is both partial and necessary. Anna’s interest in incorporating Sarah’s flute into the worship team and the group’s solicitation of Nick’s computer graphic skills at the playground renovation meeting exemplify these qualities. Certainly the act of combining efforts in any CoP will result in needing to practice active forgiveness. The CoP elements do not ensure generative relationships will evolve, but they do become an avenue for teaching and modeling this value.
There is one value that the CoP elements do not provide natural occasion to enact: communal memory. The elements themselves ensure mutual engagement in an enterprise that utilizes a shared repertoire and place the CoP within the parameters established by adults in the church. Yet there is nothing in the CoP elements that necessitates youth engage with the larger community of faith, experience being tethered to a story of the past, awakened to a vision for the future, or join with the greater purpose of the church. Additionally, the four values noted above that do find opportunities to be enacted through a CoP all also include overt connections between adults and youth that the elements themselves do not ensure. Wenger includes three additional descriptions of how multiple CoPs relate to one another. These create an opening for a CoP to portray the value of a communal memory and enable youth to integrate with the larger faith community.

First, Wenger describes a potential relationship among the CoP’s akin to a constellation. Just as a constellation of stars exists as a whole without minimizing each distinct star, each CoP has its own practice and focus while maintaining an internal relation to the constellation of CoPs. Wenger asserts that a constellation of communities of practices can exist where each CoP “contributes in its own way to the constitution of the overall constellation.” Multiple factors can constitute a constellation of practices and many of these define the manner in which CoPs function in a church. CoPs that are part of a common constellation share a history of origin, have similarities across the enterprises, share a cause and belong to the same institution, face similar cultural conditions, have members in common and share artifacts, and, in many cases, even

47 Wenger, 127.
compete for the same resources. The CoP does not get absorbed into the constellation because of the indigenous, negotiated character of the CoP. It involves doing a practice with others where mutual engagement allows the group to negotiate the enterprise and develop a repertoire to support this venture. Nor does the CoP live independent of the constellation because of the shared experience and common ends. In all three examples above, the teenagers carry out their enterprise within the parameters established by the church.

Wenger also suggests that the larger constellation “may or may not be recognized by participants.” For the church, a point of departure from Wenger’s ambivalence is necessary because the church’s existence is bound to Christ and called to carry out a specific purpose - for the reign of God. If adults intend to integrate youth into the life of the church, youth must understand how the multiple CoPs are contributing to the overall mission of the church (the constellation of CoPs). Just like a person’s contribution to a CoP is both necessary and partial, so is the contribution of each CoP to the mission of the church. Doing the faith with others then includes both a person’s activity in a various CoPs as well as the complimentary work of multiple CoPs in the church’s constellation. In this paradigm, a teenager’s sense of belonging to this community has the potential to emerge, thus enacting the value of a communal memory.

Second, CoPs are a location for integrating youth into the church when youth become legitimate peripheral participants (LPP) amidst the constellation of CoPs. Lave

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48 Wenger, 127.
49 Wenger, 128.
50 Wenger uses the term participation in accord with the definition of contribution in Chapter Four of this dissertation. For Wenger, participation is “a process of taking part and also to the relations with others that
and Wenger propose this self-defined “unwieldy term” to highlight the two essential conditions a group must provide in order to give access to “information, resources, and opportunities” needed to open a CoP to newcomers. The first condition requires exposing the person to the actual practice so he or she becomes a *peripheral participant*. Wenger claims, “There is a big difference between a lesson that is about the practice but takes place outside of it, and explanations and stories that are part of the practice and take place within it.” Peripheral in this sense means being along the edges of the practice – able to look in and examine the practice itself even while he or she participates. The CoP must admit people who can see and experience the practice in operation. For example, there are two new people in the bible study. There is no test requirement for admission into the study or time in the study where they must leave in order for the CoP to continue. Instead, they are exposed to the whole of the practice – the way the group facilities a bible study, how they interact with one another, and the use of the prayer journal. Yet they are not asked to be in charge of the prayer journal or know the role they will play in the bible study. This is peripheral participation and intends exposure to the practice.

In contrast, Lave and Wenger present a case study of a meat cutter apprenticeship program that fails to produce master butchers. Apprentices were given tasks to do that belong to the practice like wrapping the cut meat, but they were not provided access to the full practice or even the crucial task of cutting the meat. They were given “jobs that

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51 Wenger, 101. 
52 Wenger, 100.
were removed from activities rather than peripheral to them.” The failure is attributed to master butchers. “Sequestering newcomers” by the master butchers instead of allowing them to be peripheral participants in the whole practice resulted in under-skilled apprentices. A peripheral participant experiences all three elements of a CoP, mutual engagement, negotiation of the enterprise, and use of repertoire. In essence, peripheral access exposes the person to the community and its practice as well as provides an opportunity for him or her to imagine doing this practice with these people and thus opening the possibility for full membership in the CoP.

Peripheral participation emphasizes exposure while the second condition, legitimate participation, emphasizes engagement. Lave and Wenger’s research on apprenticeship suggests, “the issue of conferring legitimacy is more important than the issue of providing teaching.” The midwifery case study exemplifies this. Young girls learn to become midwives from their mothers. A girl’s role in the practice evolves from playing quietly in the room during an exam to running errands to listening to the stories told when local midwives gather. Eventually, she engages in more central aspects of the practice but this initial legitimate participation provides appropriate engagement in the

53 Lave and Wenger, 103-104. Chapter One suggests ways adolescents are “sequestered” in churches including physical barriers, see pp. 21-23.
54 Wenger defines multiple trajectories related to membership in the CoP as not all trajectories lead to a person becoming a central participant in the practice. This is especially important in his discussion on “learning as identity” with a focus on renegotiation of identity throughout one’s life and as one participates in multiple, varied CoPs. He articulates five trajectories all of which are legitimate: peripheral (never leading to full membership), inbound (moving toward full membership), insider (within the CoP and evolving as the practice evolves), boundary (linking CoPs), and outbound (moving out of the community). Wenger, 153-158.
55 Lave and Wenger highlight the distinction between learning-by-doing and situated learning since the situatedness of all practices is based on the indigenous nature of negotiation. For further discussion see Lave and Wenger, 31.
56 Lave and Wenger, 92.
practice and develops needed knowledge and competence.\textsuperscript{57} This example illustrates learning as belonging. To treat a person as a legitimate participant by allowing engagement in the practice demonstrates he or she has the potential for becoming a member. Opening up the opportunity to engage in the practice also recognizes that the “learning curriculum” of the practice is bound to the practice itself.\textsuperscript{58} In other words, what a person needs to learn in order to do the practice is apparent as the person does the practice with others. The word potential is key to this condition, because conferring legitimacy is neither making the person central to the practice nor acknowledging their participation as complete. Instead, legitimate combined with peripheral participation acknowledges the person is new and needs to learn while still providing an “opening, a way of gaining access to sources for understanding through growing involvement.”\textsuperscript{59}

If these conditions exist within the peer-isolated culture of a youth ministry, can a sense of belonging to the larger community of faith be instilled? Yes, but only when the members of the CoP know they join with a constellation of practices to carry out the mission of the church. In the youth service example, Rachel suggests using the church’s motto in their publicity, because she understands how her new and evolving CoP/playground renovation group is part of a larger constellation of practices in the church. When a CoP affords a person legitimate peripheral participation, the community extends an invitation to belong. Integrating youth into the life of the church begins with such opportunities, and, through exposure and engagement, a vision of himself or herself as belonging among these people unfolds.

\textsuperscript{57} Lave and Wenger, 67-69. 
\textsuperscript{58} Lave and Wenger, 93. 
\textsuperscript{59} Lave and Wenger, 37.
Third, Wenger creates a specific role for a person whose job is to create intersections between CoPs called a boundary broker. One might generally think clear boundaries around a group are a detriment to welcoming new people. However, for a CoP, boundaries are essential since the group determines who belongs to the practice, who is engaged, and who is negotiating the practice. In a sense, boundaries keep insiders in and outsiders out. A CoP develops what Wenger calls “boundary objects” such as shared terms, concepts, knowledge, and artifacts ranging from religious symbols to rituals to a group T-shirt. According to Wenger, a “broker” is a person who builds connections between one CoP and another. A broker involves “multi-membership” where members of different CoPs view him or her as a member of their practice. When a broker participates in multiple practices, he or she contributes, influences the negotiating of meaning, and knows at least some of the repertoire. For example, Skip is a broker with multi-member status and demonstrates “brokering” in two ways. First, he regularly brings Will the drummer and other students to play with the Sunday morning worship team, and it is likely Skip must do some translation between the CoPs. Imagine Will who is used to playing a song at a certain tempo that is different than the Sunday morning team. Skip might “align perspectives” of the two groups by asking the Sunday morning team to follow Will, or Skip might ask Will to adjust to the tempo because of the skills of this group. Either way, Skip facilitates connections between two practices through translation, coordination, or alignment. Brokers create links that allow

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60 Wenger, 113.  
61 Wenger, 105.  
62 Wenger, 110.  
63 Wenger, 109.
practices to influence each other. In the best scenario, the broker is able to find ways for mutual exchange. Remember Rachel’s idea to create a logo based on the church logo? What if an adult group working at a soup kitchen adopts Nick’s design and this stimulates other groups to adopt the logo until it becomes part of the working repertoire across all the service groups? “Brokers are able to make new connections across communities of practice, enable coordination, and – if they are good brokers - open new possibilities for meaning.”

Integrating youth into the church will require some adults to intentionally serve as brokers who know and support essential boundaries of multiple CoPs while creating mutual connections between them.

Chapter Summary

A social theory of learning defines learning as what one does with others and becomes an avenue to uphold the vital role other people play in a person’s faith formation. Wenger’s learning components inform a more robust definition of faith formation and emphasize doing the faith with others, experiencing individual and corporate appropriation, belonging through received contribution, and becoming a person of faith alongside a people of faith. The CoP model underscores the indigenous and negotiated character of a practice. A practice is what people gather around to do with others; it provides coherence; and it leads to the formation of a community. A CoP exists

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64 Wenger, 109.
65 Wenger articulates three ways a practice itself can be a catalyst for connection to those outside the practice or a “practice-based connection.” 1) A “boundary practice” develops between two practices when the practices include a forum for “mutual exchange” with another practice and hold the possibility of forming an additional “third” practice. 2) The “overlap” evolves when two practices have a natural connection, and their practices have a “direct and sustained overlap” without dissolving the two practices. 3) A “periphery” occurs when the practice provides an opening for those outside to be exposed to the practice. For further discussion see Wenger, 113-121.
in a church setting when a group of people negotiates a joint enterprise, engage with recognized contributors, and develop needed repertoire. When a CoP exists, there are inherent possibilities to enact the values discussed in Chapter Four. And yet, *communal memory* can only be enacted when the CoP experiences participating in a larger constellation of practices in the church where they are treated as legitimate peripheral participants through exposure to and engagement with the mission of the church, and there are adults who act as brokers creating connections between CoPs through interpretation, coordination, and alignment.
Chapter Six: Potential Ecclesiology - Envisioning Contribution

Dissertation Summary

The research in this dissertation seeks to reconcile the disparity between demonstrated success in youth ministries and attrition of post-high school participation in faith communities and concludes this is not a problem of retention but one of integration. While integrating youth into the church is not part of the explicit purposes of a youth ministry, building such connections are ancillary to the primary concern for individual formation. Chapter Two develops a biblical and theological vision for the vital relationship between the person and the community of faith. The community of faith is more than a means to benefit a person’s maturing faith; rather, encounters with others in the church is the location for Christ’s transforming activity where both a person and the community might experience a maturing faith in Christ. Positive Youth Development (PYD) literature affirms the central role of others in adolescent development as articulated in Chapter Three. Adolescent development includes changes in knowing who I am (independence) alongside who I am with others (interdependence), which means attending to the person ↔ context relationship is key to fostering development. There is potential for development when adults: 1) value the whole-person, 2) know, articulate, and model the purpose of the church, and 3) help adolescents identify and develop their spark. Based on the biblical and theological vision, conclusions from PYD literature, and religious education theory, Chapter Four includes a construction of five core values held by communities who intend to support self-other faith formation and thus foster
integration with a faith community. These core values include: communal memory, responsible mutuality, burgeoning maturity, generative relationships, and imaginative contributions. Chapter Five draws on a social theory of learning to formulate a more robust view of faith formation that takes seriously a person’s contribution to doing the faith with others. When a church supports the elements of a community of practice, joint enterprise, mutual engagement, and shared repertoire, there is potential to foster faith in the social realm. Additionally, supporting these elements is a means to enact the core values described in Chapter Four. This is especially effective when youth understand how the CoP is part of the larger constellation of CoPs in the church, youth experience both exposure to and engagement with the larger purpose of the church, and specific adults act as brokers who create intersections between adult and youth CoPs. The final chapter will provide a way forward by articulating a succinct purpose, mission, and corresponding core values as well as proposing strategic steps for moving youth ministries away from a service-based model of youth ministry and into a community-based model that invites youth into the life of the church.

**Community-Based Youth Ministry**

**Purpose**

Churches who adopt a community-based youth ministry believe relationships are a primary location for Christ’s transforming activity among us. The result is two-fold: both individuals and the community experience being raised in Christ. Christianity is an ecclesial faith, and the mark of maturity includes learning to move from *being with* others to *being for* others, a shift from me to we. Therefore,
belonging to a community where teenagers can learn to live as a Christian with others, cultivating both knowledge and competence, is vital to a maturing faith in Christ. In light of this, adults invite teenagers to join the unfolding drama as growing contributors to God’s redeeming work in the world.

Mission

Youth ministries foster in teenagers a maturing faith in Christ by inviting them to join the church’s work in the world for the reign of God.

Core Values

• Communal Memory: The Bible and Christian tradition are explicitly taught as an ecclesial faith and a people’s story to which all Christians join. This will tether youth to the story of the past such that remembering the Christian story forms identity and shapes conduct. It also awakens in youth a vision for the future, acting as a floodlight that enables the community to discern how to act consistently with the story while innovating what the story becomes in their particular context.

• Responsible Mutuality: Faith formation is a shared endeavor. Adults and youth are both responsible for their own faith formation and the faith formation of others. All should benefit from the experience. An expectation of faith needing to be both affirmed and contradicted in both teaching and encounters with each other permeates the community.

• Burgeoning Maturity: A community anticipates and supports growth in a youth’s life and sees this budding growth as a glimpse of what will one day be made complete. Such maturing faith includes changes in behavior, the ability to stand firm in faith, and learning to do the faith with others. The community works to welcome the young person as they are, challenge them toward further growth in the life of faith, and allow the youth’s relationship with the community to change as he or she matures.

• Generative Relationships: Encounters with others are life-giving and become an avenue for personal and communal transformation. Adults and youth work to make Christ the beginning point of community rather than one’s ideals. As a result, the community will welcome and receive each other, live generously and graciously together, and learn how to actively forgive.

• Imaginative Contribution: Adults invite youth to creatively contribute to the mission of the church, and youth recognize they too are responsible for this mission. By
fostering their imaginations, youth can learn and practice how to see beyond the present state and create possibilities for the future consistent with God’s redemptive activity.

Strategies

_Devolve Purpose and Story Fluency_

In 1995 pastor Rick Warren tapped into a need among American churches with the publication of _The Purpose-Driven Church_. He sought to turn church leaders away from a myopic focus on church growth based on numbers by providing a framework for churches to craft their particular purpose. This sparked a purpose-driven movement including publication of multiple books such as _The Purpose-Driven Youth Ministry_ and _The Purpose-Driven Life_. Although the book makes theological assertions many would seek to debate, one cannot deny the widespread response to this publication. Book sales reaching beyond one million copies demonstrate Warren’s work was igniting a spark among the American church leaders that warrants attention.

The focus on articulating purpose is important for two reasons. First, in a post-denominational age where people are less bound to a specific Christian tradition, there is more fluidity between traditions due to increased pluralism. Further, with the

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1 Warren, _The Purpose-Driven Church: Every Church Is Big in God’s Eyes_ (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995).
3 The primary being the subject of the search for purpose being individual fulfillment rather than joining God’s redemptive work.
5 Eck.
postmodern impulse toward context as the locus of meaning, there is increased need to articulate the purpose of a church. Even Christian traditions with well-formulated doctrines of ecclesiology need to reflect and articulate a local church’s specific reason for existence. Second, purpose arises uniquely in each historical context, and articulating it anew is the responsibility of each generation. Thomas Groome defines the purpose of all Christian education as “lived Christian faith” which is inextricably bound to the greater purpose of the church that takes form only in historical context.

This is not an appeal to join the purpose-driven movement, but it is a challenge to churches to develop their purpose fluency. When a person becomes fluent in a language, they are able to express themselves to others, think in the language, and function with ease. Purpose fluency carries a similar connotation; that is, people within the church can articulate why their church exists with ease and clarity and practice ordering the church’s work toward this purpose. In order for youth to know, understand, and participate in the purpose of the church, there must be a community of people who have purpose fluency.

Having purpose fluency requires a community to also have story fluency. This enacts the communal memory value. The Christian story tethers the church’s purpose and provides a floodlight for the church’s construction of purpose in their particular historical location. Distinct from a call to biblical literacy, which focuses on the details of the biblical text, story fluency means knowing the movements and themes of the whole biblical witness. Knowing how the story begins and ends provides a framework for understanding the details of specific stories. When people have story fluency, crafting

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the purpose of the church flows in a manner consistent with the story and becomes a springboard for innovation necessary in their context. Story fluency requires a commitment by the church to teach the Bible in its entire context by regularly connecting the pieces of individual stories and teachings to the whole. This will develop among their members a communal memory and enable them to see how they are called to continue this story today.

Expand Language

Since Christianity is a community’s story and faith is ecclesial, then how might this shape one’s language? As argued in Chapter One, language possesses the power to shape reality as well as be shaped by reality, thus language functions. Adult use of the phrase “passing the faith” to describe sharing faith creates a minimal role for teenagers, relegating them to be passive recipients of the faith passed by adults. Similarly, the common phrase “ministry to youth” validates the one-way relationship of the service-based youth ministry and makes youth the object of adult intentions. Such language lacks mutuality and once again places youth in the role of passive receiver of the faith tradition. Conversely, the mission of community-based youth ministry is to invite youth into the work of the church; therefore, invitational language should permeate the community. For example, “ministry to youth” expands to “ministry with youth.” This phrase beckons youth to join with the mission of the church and treats youth as valued persons. Invitational language uses phrases such as “extending an offer,” “creating an

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7 See Chapter Four for an expanded discussion on N. T. Wright’s description of biblical interpretation as consistent and innovation, pp. 101-102.
8 Examples of the phrases used to describe the intent for adolescents to participate in the Christian faith are discussed in Chapter One, pp. 15-19.
9 See Chapter One for an expanded discussion of the service-based youth ministry, pp. 6-24.
opening,” “encouraging to join,” and “requesting to come alongside.” By shaping language in this manner, adult volunteers and youth workers will construct a bridge between adults and the peer-isolated world of adolescence.\(^\text{10}\) Invitational language enacts the value \textit{responsible mutuality} by communicating to youth their responsibility for their own faith formation and that of others in the church. To embed invitation into the language adult’s use also enacts the value \textit{imaginative contribution} by establishing an ethos of expectation and hospitality for youth to join and contribute to the purpose of the church.

\textit{Embrace Potential Ecclesiology}

Researchers in PYD literature describe the dominant conception of adolescence as a time to fear and overcome. In this paradigm, adults protect youth from potential dangers and develop systems to save those who are high-risk. Youth who avoid at-risk behavior or redirecting high-risk youth are the measurements of success. A fear epistemology ignores the inherent potential of all young people to contribute to their communities.\(^\text{11}\)

Adults in churches often possess a similar fear epistemology that can also inform ecclesiology. For example, a pastor in a local church earnestly prayed for the teenagers in the congregation to be confident in their salvation so that they would be protected from the world’s attempt to thwart their allegiance to Christ. His prayer claimed that they could do this by remaining bound to the word of God and remembering the love this

\(^{10}\) See Chapter One for a description of the societal chasm between adolescents and adults, pp. 14-15.

\(^{11}\) See Chapter Three for a complete summary of the PYD shift toward valuing youth as resources to develop, pp. 73-82.
community held for them. With a tone of desperation, he called upon God to raise up adults in the congregation who would help young people know Jesus and build a strong foundation of faith because, “Youth are not the church of the future but the church of the present.”

Although well intentioned, the pastor’s prayer echoed the fear mentality described by PYD researchers. The role of adults in the church is to shore up faith in adolescents so they avoid the dangers of “the world.” If adults pass on the faith effectively through ministry to youth, the measurement of success will be youth who are able to withstand the external threats to faith. This is a defensive position. A community-based vision for youth ministry intends to place youth on the offensive team where they can contribute to the faith tradition and the church’s mission.

The prayer is also contradictory. The often-used declaration that youth are the church of the present asserts that youth are called to engage in the mission of the church now and not just in the future. On what basis are youth “the church of the present?” Is it merely allegiance to a common doctrine or ability to stand firm amidst the attacks from outside? To be “the church” finds basis only in Jesus Christ and the mission he inaugurated. As theologian Emil Bruner enumerates, the Body of Christ is, “A fellowship of persons…where fellowship or koinonia signifies a common participation, a togetherness, a community life. The faithful are bound to each other through their common sharing in Christ and in the Holy Ghost, but that which they have in common is precisely no “thing”, no “it”, but a “he”, Christ and His Holy Spirit.”

Christ, he or she is part of the one body, and this rightly affirms how youth are the church of the present. To be the church also means joining with the mission Christ inaugurated. According to theologian Stanley Grenz, the contemporary emphasis in ecclesiology speaks of the church in “dynamic terms according to its mission.”

Nothing in this pastor’s prayer calls upon the agency of adolescents to join the mission of the church. To envision youth as the church of the present is to empower them to carry out the church’s purpose. In order to do this, adults must develop a potential ecclesiology in which they see youth as valuable resources to develop. An article written on the outcomes of intergenerational ministry describes adults who were amazed by the young voices. Adults were “humbled by their level of understanding, text-to-text comparisons, and sheer memory for detail. The children's comments sometimes simply ‘silenced’ the adults…”

A church can claim a potential ecclesiology exists when the contributions of young people no longer come as a surprise in which adults stand amazed. Rather, contributions are expected, anticipated, and fostered, because adults see youth as valuable resources necessary to fulfill the purpose of the church.

**Increase Accessibility By Emphasizing Practice**

In his book *How Faith Matures*, C. Ellis Nelson argues for the potential power of the community to educate. “Community is more than an inevitable concomitant of

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13 Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, 464-464. Grenz contends this is a change from historic ecclesiology, which defined the church as static by emphasizing its “theoretical essence.”

beliefs: community, in Christian terms, must take on the character of the religion it embraces.”

This character is worked out in the community as a person, in the company of others (and the Christian tradition), develop practices that form the lived faith of the church. This move toward lived Christian faith is inevitably a focus on practice – what one does with others – and is at the core of faith formation. Adults in a community-based youth ministry subsequently pay attention to learning in the social realm.

Wenger points to two essential aspects needed to ensure a person is a “legitimate peripheral participant” in a given social learning environment: exposure to and engagement in the practices of the community. By emphasizing practice and a church’s constellation of practices, a teenager’s access to the whole of the church increases. What does it look like for a church to give attention to the practices in its community? This is invariably an ecclesiological question. Historically, ecclesiology primarily focused on theoretical questions such as the true nature of the church or the relationship between the mystical, universal, and local church. As important as these questions may be, they also distract from the primary purpose of the church: to glorify God through worship, edification, and proclamation (in word and deed). These categories comprise the concrete ministries of the church in which people engage together and potentially form

15 Nelson, How Faith Matures, 156.
16 See Chapter Five for an expanded definition of faith formation that takes seriously learning in the social environment, pp. 140-145.
17 Conversely, in a service-based youth ministry model, youth are “sequestered” from the community when adults create programs and buildings that isolate youth into age groups without continuing to nurture connections with the broader community of faith. Teenagers have neither exposure to nor engagement in the practices of the community. See Chapter Five for a full discussion of legitimate peripheral participation, pp. 161-164.
18 Grenz, Theology for the Community of God, 463-464.
19 Grenz, Theology for the Community of God, 465-468. The word proclamation is substituted for the word outreach used by Grenz. In an evangelical subculture, the word outreach is bound to a debate that divided evangelism and service. Using the phrase “proclamation in word and deed” intends to hold this two categories together.
communities of practice based on mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire. This ecclesiological framework increases a church’s emphasis on how people might carry out these ministries and calls upon churches to support the indigenous development of communities of practice to carry out the purpose of the particular church.

Emphasizing practices allows teenagers to see (exposure to) and do (engagement with) by providing concrete ways for youth to join with the community outside their peer group. When a church emphasizes practices, they will enact the value imaginative contribution and provide an avenue for exposure and engagement.

*Additional Job Descriptions: Brokers, Spark Identifiers, and Space Makers*

When a vision for youth ministry includes embedding youth in the church, the job description of youth workers and adults must be revised to include three additional responsibilities. First, “brokering” becomes a crucial responsibility. The role of a broker is to discover creative intersections between adults and youth in the church. This is distinct from placing youth in mentoring relationships with adults, although this would be a potential byproduct. Brokering can only be done in a church where communities of practice are identifiable. What are groups of adults and groups of youth doing to carry out the purpose of the church? Adults would need to identify these groups and understand their enterprise in order to recommend organic ways for adult and youth communities of practices to overlap or identify specific adults or youth that might contribute to an ongoing practice.

Brokering leads to the second addition to the job description – spark identifiers. The research in PYD literature identifies a relatively high number of young people who
know they have a spark – something special about them. Among those who know they have a spark, a surprising low number report having a place to practice using it or experience how their spark might be used for a greater purpose.\textsuperscript{20} A church with purpose fluency is poised to welcome the sparks of young people and thus enact the values responsible mutuality and imaginative contribution. Sparks might be a natural talent such as playing an instrument, being artistic, or interacting well with children. Natural talents are easy to identify. Adults who are spark identifiers will also need to point out dominant characteristics in a youth such as compassionate, willing, gentle, energetic, or peacemaker.

Being a spark identifier leads directly to the third job description addition, being a space maker. PYD literature is clear. When adults assist youth in identifying their spark and create a space for them to practice using this spark, a youth’s potential to thrive increases. Thriving is defined as contributing to something outside oneself.\textsuperscript{21} The church is perfectly poised to play this role since its existence is bound to the greater purposes of God. Adults who work with youth must be space makers by finding creative locations within the church for youth to practice using their spark to contribute to the local purpose of the church.

**Conclusion**

The impetus for this dissertation came out of the field of youth ministry, but the problem attended to in these pages is not limited to those involved with youth. This

\textsuperscript{20} See Chapter Three for a review of the research on sparks and purpose in adolescents, pp. 90-97.
\textsuperscript{21} See Chapter Three for an expanded definition of the relationship between using one’s spark and thriving, pp. 90-92.
dissertation addresses a situation in the American, evangelical church and calls for broad ecclesiological transformation. Pastoral and lay leaders need to expand their theological premises that currently prioritize the God-self relationship to also include the vital relationship between the person and the church community. In Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s words, “A Christian comes into being and exists only in Christ’s church-community and is dependent on it, which means on the other human being.”

Faith formation entails transformation in a person’s relationship with God and transformation in one’s relationship with the local church. God is raising both persons and a people (Col 3:1). Inviting people to confess faith in Christ simultaneously invites them into a community of fellow Christ-confessors. Such profession of faith is merely the beginning, for the ultimate purpose of the church is to join with the purposes of God. The church is a local community of Christ-confessors who join with God’s redemptive activity in the world by being a sign pointing toward the reign of God. This compels leaders to foster a maturing faith (individual and communal) by enacting five formative values in their community, and thus invites people of all ages and phases of faith development to contribute to God’s redemptive purposes in their context.

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Lions, Lynda, "Open the Door and See All the Teenagers?" [http://www.gallup.com/poll/8635](http://www.gallup.com/poll/8635) (accessed October 20, 2010).


Musixmatch, "Natasha Bedingfield Lyrics, Unwritten"


