



Reexamining Relational Youth Ministry: Implications from the Theology of Bonhoeffer

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Jason has just graduated from college and has been asked to become the youth director at his home congregation. He has been away for five years but is still remembered for his devotion to his faith and his commitment to the church's youth ministry. Jason spent the last two summers volunteering at his denominational camp and enjoyed it greatly. He had been a lifeguard but also led worship and facilitated small-group discussions with senior and junior high students. Jason's greatest asset is his ability to build relationships with campers. Adolescents flock to Jason because he is young, handsome, outgoing, funny, and athletic. Witnessing Jason's qualities, members brought his name to the search committee at his home congregation. Though he has a degree in biology and his only ministry experience was as a lifeguard, the congregation believes that his commitment to Christ and relational magnetism qualify him to be the church's youth director. The search committee believes that Jason is just the person who could convince their children to participate in the congregation and take their faith more seriously.

For at least the last sixty years youth ministry and relationships have been indelibly linked. While congregations may look for a senior pastor who can preach,

Youth ministry often focuses on building relationships between youth ministers and adolescents. But to what end? A relationship designed to influence the other is no relationship and is unworthy of Christ. In a true relationship Christians must be willing fully to share the place of another.

an associate pastor who can counsel, or a music director who can conduct, most congregations look for a youth director who can build relationships with their adolescent children. This focus on relationship may be just what is needed. It can be argued that in these same sixty years our culture has confronted a relational crisis felt most forcefully by adolescents. But we rarely recognize that relationships between two persons are innately complicated. We fail to stop and ask: What are relationships and what are they for in the context of ministry? Is a relationship simply a tool used to earn leverage with another in order to influence him or her in the direction one desires? This may be the unconscious perspective of Jason's church. But are not relationships something more (or at least something different)? According to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, relationships in which human persons are with and for each other (sociality) are the place of God's transcendent presence in the world. Therefore, for Bonhoeffer, relationships are not simply about earning leverage for influence, but rather about sharing in each other's existence, in each other's suffering, as one shares in the other's place (*Stellvertretung*) and in so doing stands with Christ.¹

There is then a great difference between a relational youth ministry of influence and relational youth ministry of "place-sharing." I will look to draw out this distinction by explicating more fully a relational youth ministry of influence, and contrast this, using Bonhoeffer's theology, with a relational youth ministry of place-sharing.

ADOLESCENCE AND RELATIONSHIPS

It may be surprising to learn that the developmental category of adolescence (referring to those who are no longer children, but not yet adults) did not become part of our cultural consciousness until 1904, with the publication of Stanley Hall's *Adolescence*.² Before this, young people were thought to be adults when they were able to do a man's or woman's work. Historians, social theorists, and even some psychologists have argued that adolescence was the result of our cultural transitions as we moved into a modernized and globalized world. Adolescence, they assert, is a construction of cultural change more than strict biological or psychological realities.³ These same cultural transitions thrust a relational crisis upon our culture, not surprisingly affecting young people (now known as adolescents, or teenagers) greatly.

¹See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Christ, Reality, and Good," in *Ethics*, ed. Clifford J. Green, trans. Reinhard Krauss et al. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005) 47–75.

²G. Stanley Hall, *Adolescence: Its Psychology and Its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion, and Education* (New York: D. Appleton, 1904).

³See Joseph Adelson, *Inventing Adolescence: The Political Psychology of Everyday Schooling* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1986); John Demos, *Past, Present, and Personal: The Family and the Life Course in American History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Thomas Hine, *The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager* (New York: Bard, 1999); Joseph F. Kett, *Rites of Passage: Adolescence in America, 1790 to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1977).

In the 1920s the high school became “the” location of the American adolescent. Facing a depressed economy it became important to slim the workforce as much as possible. To eliminate from the workforce young people who would work ambitiously for low wages, the high school opened its doors to all adolescents (rich/poor, naturalized/immigrant). The high school meant that young people lived under their parents’ roofs longer than they had in agrarian culture but that most meaningful hours were spent with peers. The relational world of the adolescent became peer-based, and the high school became the cultural location where an adolescent’s human need for intimacy sought to be filled.

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Modernization brought with it pluralization. According to social theorist Anthony Giddens this pluralization was so extensive that it even confronted the area of intimacy in sexuality and friendship.⁴ Where just years earlier one’s friends and one’s spouse were almost predetermined (one was friends with cousins and neighbors, one married the daughter or son of a family friend), in the modernized high school the doors of possible relational intimacy were thrown wide open. All intimate relationships became self-chosen (by the individual). Therefore, the high school was more than an educational institution; even more important, it was the place where adolescents chose and experienced intimate relationships. This is why the homecoming queen has always been more esteemed than the valedictorian.

The peer world, solidified by the high school, became the place to find the intimate relationships that all human beings desire. But confronted with hundreds of peers, how could one choose whom to befriend and whom to despise? The expectations of tradition and family no longer ruled in the halls of the high school; it was up to the individual to make his or her own choice. With the help of a burgeoning youth-centered consumer culture (which not coincidentally also allowed for self-choice outside the strictures of tradition and family expectations), a highly rigid status system emerged within high school life.⁵ Quickly individuals received labels, at their most basic “cool” versus “uncool.” If one was termed “cool,” he or she was labeled as someone with whom a relationship was desired. But if one was labeled “uncool,” he or she was “untouchable,” and being seen with this student would be to risk being labeled uncool as well and therefore hazard estrangement from any significant intimate relationships.

⁴See Anthony Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love, and Eroticism in Modern Societies* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992).

⁵See Murray Milner, *Freaks, Geeks, and Cool Kids: American Teenagers, Schools, and the Culture of Consumption* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

A RELATIONAL MINISTRY OF INFLUENCE

Intuitively sensing the palpable power of the relational dance of adolescents on high school campuses, youth ministries turned their attention to relationships. Of course, pastors and missionaries have always recognized the importance of becoming trusted by those to and with whom they minister. But the turn toward a relationship-focused youth ministry in the mid-twentieth century became strategic. Conservative Protestant groups within the American religious landscape began engaging culture directly in the middle of the twentieth century, leading segments of these groups to focus their attention on the adolescent population. The objective of their engagement was to “win” individuals by convincing them that they should seek a “personal relationship” with Jesus Christ, language that no doubt sounded persuasive in a culture in a crisis of relational intimacy. Personal relationships were not only the objective (personal relationship with Jesus) but also the strategy of engagement; that is, personal relationships were used to influence people to seek a personal relationship with Jesus. Sociologist Christian Smith, who has done extensive studies on conservative Protestants, has called this the “personal influence strategy.” He explains, “This method is strategic in that it consciously attempts to influence others. It is relational in that it relies on interpersonal relationships as the primary medium of influence.”⁶

Therefore, relationship, at least person to person, was never truly the objective, but was rather a tool to influence the adolescent toward a faith commitment. It was hoped that being in relationship the adult leader could model the benefits of being a Christian. To be in relationship with an adolescent (one should read, to get close enough to influence him or her) one needed to enter the adolescent’s world, taking on the marks of “cool” and therefore being seen as someone with whom to risk relational contact. Youth workers began calling this strategy not only relational but incarnational, for they believed they followed Jesus’ example by leaving one world and entering another.

This relational youth ministry of personal influence has continued to define youth ministry today. With the arrival of the pluralism of globalization and the many perceived threats to our adolescents living in a postindustrial world it has been seen as all the more important to build relationships with adolescents so that we might influence them in the direction we desire. Conservative Protestants have often stuck to this strategy because of their belief that the world is a dangerous and hostile place to their faith commitments; therefore relationships are used to move adolescents out of the ways of the world and into a life committed to Christ. In the last several decades, mainline Protestants have also been using this same strategy of influence. While they may not use it because of fear of a hostile, evil world, they have begun to fear the depletion and obvious absence of young people within their

⁶Christian Smith, *Christian America? What Evangelicals Really Want* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002) 45. See also Christian Smith, *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

communities. They have followed the conservative influence approach, using it to convince their children to stay committed to their faith tradition and local congregation.

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The problem with a youth ministry of influence is that, though it purports to be relational, it ironically destroys the possibility of relationality. When influence becomes the objective it is no longer the person (the adolescent) that matters but his or her will to choose (to be saved or keep attending church after confirmation). If after a time the adolescent cannot be influenced, because of stubbornness or personal suffering, one is released to abandon the relationship and therefore the adolescent. The relationship is only a means to another end. One only needs to be with and for the adolescent to the point of gaining and maintaining the leverage to influence him or her. Therefore, innate within a youth ministry of influence is a theology of glory (a triumphalism that presents itself “as [a] full and complete account of reality, leaving little if any room for debate or difference of opinion”⁷), which has no room for a theology of the cross; it has no room or reason to suffer for and with the adolescent. The objective is not sharing in his or her broken humanity, but winning his or her commitment. In such a perspective one is not for the adolescent but for his or her decision.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer has reminded us that the incarnation of Christ is not about influencing humanity, winning us over to a certain perspective or commitment. If this were the case there would be little reason for God to empty Godself and take on our humanity, suffering death and estrangement (a fabulous act would be enough; the hiddenness of the cross would be unneeded and could be seen as poor planning).⁸ Rather, the humanity of Christ reveals that God desires more than influence. God desires to represent us, to stand fully in our place, to share our place in the fullness of its ugliness, tragedy, and death. It is only in representing us, in being human for us, that we can ourselves be human and therefore in relationship with God.⁹ Relationships are more than a tool, a means, but rather are the end, the objective of God’s ministry of enfleshment.

Following Bonhoeffer, there is a need to replace our relational youth ministry of influence with a relational youth ministry of place-sharing. In so doing we are much closer to the incarnational shape we desire for our ministries and that our adolescents desperately need in our modernized and globalized world.

⁷Douglas John Hall, *The Cross in Our Context: Jesus and the Suffering World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003) 17.

⁸See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966) 71–118.

⁹For further discussion on a christology of representation, see Douglas John Hall, *Professing the Faith: Christian Theology in a North American Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996) 440–548.

A RELATIONAL YOUTH MINISTRY OF PLACE-SHARING

For Bonhoeffer all theology and ministry begin with the question “Who?” “Who is this man, Jesus Christ?” This is the question, says Bonhoeffer, of faith and discipleship for it is the question of encounter; it is the question that assumes the meeting of a person (a relationship). For Bonhoeffer, Jesus Christ is the person who encounters all humanity as incarnate, crucified, and resurrected Lord. Incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection are inseparable. Because Jesus Christ is incarnate (entered the world), crucified (suffered the fullness of the human condition), and resurrected (overcame the human condition and is alive), Bonhoeffer asserts that he is concretely present.¹⁰ But where is he present?

Jesus Christ is concretely present, according to Bonhoeffer, within the collective community of human persons meeting human persons; this collective community is the church. But as Bonhoeffer develops his theology he takes pains to show that the church is only the church when it finds itself in the world. Therefore, Jesus Christ is not only present within the space of the church, but is found in the world in the same collective encounter of persons meeting persons. Of ultimate concern for Bonhoeffer is that human persons encounter human persons in the mystery of the incarnate, crucified, and resurrected human God.¹¹ In this encountering of the person of Christ in the mystery of the human other, what shall one do?

Bonhoeffer explains that one must become the other’s “place-sharer” (*Stellvertreter*).¹² He means that one must stand in the place of the other, acting fully on his or her behalf, like a noble leader for her citizens, a thoughtful teacher for his students, or a loving father for his children. Place-sharing happens when one places himself or herself fully in the reality of the other, refusing to turn away even from its horror. In doing so, one takes on the other’s guilt, sharing deeply in the reservoirs of the other’s suffering to the point of shared culpability. But, according to Bonhoeffer, one enters and continues in such a relationship of place-sharing in freedom, realizing that the more deeply one enters the humanity of the other, standing on his or her behalf, the more free one becomes. He believes that this is true because we were created to be free *for* one another as opposed to being free *from* each other.¹³ But what might a relational youth ministry of place-sharing look like? It is one that is open and closed, mutual, confrontational, and therefore transformative.

The search committee at Jason’s church has rightly sensed their adolescents’ need for relational connection. But have they chosen to pursue Jason because he possesses the qualities to influence their children (outgoing, handsome, funny, and athletic) or because he possesses the bravery and maturity to be a place-sharer, to

¹⁰See Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center*, 43–67.

¹¹See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1988).

¹²See Bonhoeffer, “Christ, Reality, and Good.”

¹³See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall: A Theological Exposition on Genesis 1–3* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997).

gently walk into an adolescent's suffering and to care for his or her humanity? To discern whether Jason is able to minister as a place-sharer they could ask three questions.

First, "With students can he be open (identify with them) and closed (differentiated from them)?" It is too often assumed that the good relational youth worker is always open to the adolescents in his or her congregation. He or she is always available at any time to take a phone call, to attend a concert, to provide a ride. But for relationships to be healthy, identification needs differentiation. Relationality is forfeited if one person is swallowed up by the needs and desires of another. True relational bonds demand that each person recognize that a boundary of mystery separates one from the other. This boundary of mystery must be upheld. If it is crossed the relationship is broken, for the other is no longer my limit but my possession—no longer a person, but an object. While Jason can identify with what it means to be an adolescent, can he also claim his independent adulthood?

To share in the place of the adolescent the youth worker must not only recognize that the adolescent is closed to him or her, that the adolescent is a mystery that cannot be coerced (influenced), but the youth worker must himself or herself be closed to the adolescent. The youth worker must be able to say, "I'm on vacation," "Call me tomorrow morning," or "I would prefer if you didn't stop over during the dinner hour." Such statements do not destroy the relationship but make the relationship possible, for the youth worker as both open and closed becomes a person to the adolescent and not a possession existing simply to meet his or her needs. By being open and closed the youth worker asserts that ministry will be human person to human person and will be more than consumers fulfilling their desires.

Second, the search committee might ask, "Is Jason able to mutually and appropriately share his own suffering with our adolescents?" When influence is the objective, mutuality is ignored or is used as a device. One may either avoid being mutual for fear that, in expressing one's suffering, the weakness will not be persuasive, or one may use the guise of mutuality to gain leverage over another. From the open and closed freedom of relationality, mutuality is honest sharing of our own suffering and questions. The relational youth worker then not only meets adolescents in order to know them, but does this so adolescents might also know the youth worker, seeing his or her own humanity in the youth worker's distinct sufferings and joys.

Martin Buber states, "Relation is reciprocity."¹⁴ I am free to open my humanity at the pace I desire, but at some point I must make myself known if I desire true relationality. Too often, relational ministry has been a one-way street. In a relational youth ministry of influence, adolescents are expected to let us come close and know them, but youth workers are not required to reciprocate. Place-sharing demands that in freedom I make myself known to the other by being with and for

¹⁴Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (New York: Scribner, 1958) 67.

the other. The other may choose to remain closed to me due to his or her harsh reality or developmental location, but this is of secondary concern to the place-sharer. The youth worker's primary concern is freely to make his or her humanity available to the adolescent, inviting the adolescent to respect and honor the youth worker's distinct boundaries while sharing in his or her unique suffering and joys.

Third, the search committee may ask, "Can he confront our children in the love of committed presence, or does he threaten to abandon the relationship when his expectations are not met?" In a ministry of personal influence a relational youth worker will often feel he or she cannot confront an adolescent for bad behavior for fear that in so doing the relationship will be destroyed. But this is nonsense. Rather, it is only by confrontation that a relationship can be maintained. Caring presence (place-sharing) demands judgment; if the youth worker cares for the true humanity of the adolescent he or she is not only obligated but desires (sees it as his or her responsibility) to directly face any actions and attitudes that are dehumanizing. In confronting the adolescent the relationship becomes the justification for judgment. The youth worker may assert, "Listen, Amanda, I've heard some strange stories about you; are they true? Look at me, I'm your friend, I love you. To continue to do what you are doing will really hurt you! It has to stop!"

In a relational youth ministry of place-sharing the adolescent is drawn into transformation. Transformation occurs not through the adolescent's own power or the power of the youth worker but through encounter with the living Christ who meets us in the relationality of "I and you." It is in this relationship that the adolescent is given a context to live out a life of discipleship and be a place-sharer for another.

Ultimately, the search committee must ask, "Is Jason willing to suffer with and for our children?" When the youth worker suffers with and for them as place-sharer, adolescents encounter the concrete presence of Christ in the world. In place-sharing, adolescents recognize that it is Christ on the cross, and it is their own suffering that he bears.

In this short article, I have made a case for the importance of relational youth ministry but have warned that relational youth ministry must be based on place-sharing and not on influence. As globalization continues to impact our culture the search for relational intimacy will endure (and possibly escalate) for adolescents. The church, then, is confronted with the question: Will we seek to hire young, magnetic individuals who can use relationships as a means to an end, or will we, all of us (youth workers, volunteers, and congregation members), bravely take the initiative to walk into the center of adolescents' deepest sufferings and joys, standing with and for them, sharing their place? In this way relationships are an end, the concrete presence of Christ in the world. ☩

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