



## *The 2013–2014 Essay Prize for Doctoral Candidates*

# The Church's Mission to Youth

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**F**oreign missions at the beginning of the twentieth century accomplished much in bringing education, basic technologies, and—of course—the gospel to many parts of the world. Yet the approach to missions at this time had serious flaws and, as Roland Allen argued in his important 1912 book *Missionary Methods*, it differed in many ways from the exceedingly successful methods that St. Paul employed in the early decades of the Christian church.<sup>1</sup>

### LEARNING FROM ROLAND ALLEN

Many elements of Allen's critique of world missions a century ago can be applied today to the mainstream American church's mission to its own youth, a demographic with a culture (or cultures) nearly as different from the "adult" church culture of many denominations as are the cultures of some foreign mission fields. Paul's missionary methods allowed him to establish several self-sufficient churches in a short period of time. Allen contrasted the apostle's successful missionary efforts with the foreign missions of Allen's own day, which accepted "as an

<sup>1</sup>Roland Allen, *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours?* 6th ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962) 141–142.

*Roland Allen's voice from a century ago still rings out today as we look at the church's mission to its youth. Too close an association of the gospel with "adult" culture has kept many kids from the church. Their lack of a voice in discussing ecclesial matters has made the church an unnecessarily alien experience for some youth, and the paucity of opportunities for them to use their gifts has hampered their ability to live out their vocation and has shut a prophetic voice out of the church.*

axiom of missionary work that converts in a new country must be submitted to a very long probation...before they [could] be expected to be able to stand alone,"<sup>2</sup> and he attributed this unfortunate axiom to a Western cultural bias, a missionary-centric foundation, and a hesitancy to establish native leadership.

To modern sensibilities, the ideological framework for much of the missionary work at the turn of the twentieth century is deeply uncomfortable, ranging from openly racist to patronizingly paternalistic. Samuel Hill Chester, who visited Presbyterian missionaries in Asia in 1897 while serving as the Secretary of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), disparaged the Chinese natives as a people "much addicted to lying, as all Orientals are,"<sup>3</sup> and lamented China's "stolid and immovable opposition...to the enlightenment and improvements" that the West had for decades generously offered to bestow upon it.<sup>4</sup> With many Westerners in the age of Darwin, Chester viewed non-Westerners as a less evolved people, their association with the "infancy of our race" providing an "added charm" to interactions with them.<sup>5</sup> Even approaches that eschewed such embarrassing racism and cultural hubris rarely escaped the paternalistic assumption of a necessary dependence of indigenous converts upon Westerners. Kenneth Scott Latourette, in his 1932 account of later nineteenth-century Protestant missions in China, while affirming the value of Chinese culture and of native Christian leadership, vested with the *missionary* the responsibility for the "delicate task of adjusting"<sup>6</sup> a Western form of Christianity to a Chinese setting—a top-down, externally imposed indigenization that Allen criticized as inauthentic.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, Latourette argued that the dearth of native leadership was due to natives leaning "too heavily on the missionary,"<sup>8</sup> an interpretation that ran counter to Allen's criticism of the usurpation of authority by missionaries.<sup>9</sup> Such problems were perhaps inevitable at a time when the missionary endeavor was connected so organically to Western imperialism. Nineteenth-century missionary efforts in China were poisoned by the fact that Western imperialist powers had forced China to allow missionaries into the country and then used the threat of military intervention to ensure their safety.<sup>10</sup> The imperialist and the missionary each profited from an unholy symbiosis in which

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 3.

<sup>3</sup>Samuel Hall Chester, *Lights and Shadows of Mission Work in the Far East* (Richmond, VA: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1899) 78.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 46.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 9.

<sup>6</sup>Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christian Missions in China* (New York: Macmillan, 1932) 428.

<sup>7</sup>Charles Chaney, "Roland Allen: The Basis of His Missionary Principles and His Influence Today," *Occasional Bulletin from the Missionary Research Library* 14/5 (1963) 4.

<sup>8</sup>Latourette, *Missions in China*, 429.

<sup>9</sup>Allen, *Missionary Methods*, 81. Cf. Allen's parallel criticism of domestic professional clergy usurping important ministry tasks from the laity in Charles Henry Long and Anne Rowthorn, "The Legacy of Roland Allen," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 13/2 (1989) 67.

<sup>10</sup>Richard P. Madsen, "Discipleship and Domination: Mission, Power, and the Christian Encounter with China," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 5/2 (1981) 56.

the missionary gained access and the imperialist power enjoyed an easier colonization process, finding it cheaper to subdue a people with the gospel than with the gun.<sup>11</sup> It is hardly surprising that this admixture rendered the Christian message of love, service, and sacrifice incredible to many Chinese.<sup>12</sup>

As a prophetic voice who spoke pointedly to this situation, Roland Allen has had an enduring influence on subsequent mission work that defies what one might have expected from a missiologist who spent less than a decade as an active missionary and only a few years as a parish priest, and who never held an academic position. Having felt called to missionary work from his youth, Allen entered the mission field at the age of twenty-six, when he was sent to China by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel.<sup>13</sup> The Boxer Rebellion in 1900 disrupted Allen's ministry, and its anti-Western fervor understandably helped to shape his views on the delicate interplay of different cultural influences in foreign missions.<sup>14</sup> After a post-Rebellion furlough, Allen returned to China briefly in 1902, but was forced to return to England because of health issues.<sup>15</sup> His next venture, as an Anglican priest, was similarly short-lived, this due to his resignation in conscientious objection to the Church of England's bestowal of its "privileges," such as marriage and burial, more as British birthrights than as sacred religious rites.<sup>16</sup>

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Not yet forty when he resigned from his parish position, Allen spent his remaining forty years serving as a "voluntary priest" in England and Kenya, advocating a greater role for voluntary clergy both domestically and abroad, and writing provocatively about mission practices.<sup>17</sup> His works, the most widely read of which today is *Missionary Methods*, emphasized trusting the Holy Spirit as the effective agent in missions, spiritual unity over organizational uniformity, the importance of the sacraments, and the establishment of self-supporting (or perhaps more accurately "Holy Spirit-supported") churches.<sup>18</sup> He argued that a missionary-dependent church was not only methodologically unsound, but that it embedded in the earliest fibers of the church a heretical reliance on something other than God.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>11</sup>Jon Bonk, "All Things to All Persons? — The Missionary as a Racist-Imperialist, 1860–1918," *Missiology: An International Review* 8/3 (1980) 290.

<sup>12</sup>Madsen, "Discipleship and Domination," 57.

<sup>13</sup>Long and Rowthorn, "Legacy of Roland Allen," 65.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid. A more detailed account of the influence of the Boxer Rebellion on Allen's thought can be found in Hubert J. B. Allen, *Roland Allen: Pioneer, Priest, and Prophet* (Cincinnati: Forward Movement Publications, 1995) 33–65 and in Roland Allen's own account of the event in his *The Siege of the Peking Legations* (London: Smith, Elder, & Co., 1901).

<sup>15</sup>Allen, *Roland Allen*, 70–71.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 184–185.

<sup>17</sup>Chaney, "Roland Allen," 5; Long and Rowthorn, "Legacy of Roland Allen," 66.

<sup>18</sup>Allen, *Missionary Methods*, 125, 136–137; Allen, *Roland Allen*, 3, 171, 174.

<sup>19</sup>Chaney, "Roland Allen," 4.

As he himself had predicted—once even to his preteen grandson and future biographer—Allen has experienced his greatest influence posthumously.<sup>20</sup> Like many radical thinkers, Allen was during his lifetime often refuted or dismissed, but by the early 1960s it had become an “oft repeated truism” that his influence on the field of missions had exceeded his impact in life.<sup>21</sup> Following his death in 1947, various factors such as rising nationalism<sup>22</sup> and the exposing of “the myth of Christendom”<sup>23</sup> converged to make Allen’s supposedly impractical methodology seem suddenly relevant to those engaged in foreign mission work.<sup>24</sup> Within five years of Allen’s passing, his writings were inspiring a young Lesslie Newbigin in India,<sup>25</sup> and in subsequent decades he has been required reading in missions courses from Moody Bible Institute<sup>26</sup> to Princeton Theological Seminary and has found advocates in traditions as disparate as Pentecostalism<sup>27</sup> and the Christian Reformed Church.<sup>28</sup>

The parallels between elements of missions in Allen’s day and many current youth ministry practices are striking. Like foreign missions a century ago, many wonderful things are accomplished in youth ministry programs today. But there are also similar factors that prevent young people from participating in the life of the church and from developing fully into faithful and mature followers of Christ. We have a tendency to coddle our youth instead of challenging them, forcing a “long probation” before they are “able to stand alone.” A bias against youth culture often forces youth to endure a presentation of the gospel that is enmeshed in and encumbered by a long-established church culture. Youth pastors design programs that showcase their own gifts for ministry, rather than training and empowering the youth to use their own ministry gifts. These factors result in young Christians who are lukewarm about their faith and skeptical about their place in the church, who take their gifts exclusively to other, secular, arenas—and the church suffers from missing out on the gifts, energy, and insight that youth have to offer.

## STRAYING FROM ST. PAUL

### *Accidentals vs. essentials (culture or gospel?)*

Allen attacked the Western church’s assumption of superiority over Eastern cultures as inconsistent with the Apostle Paul’s approach. “We cannot imagine,” Allen wrote, “any Christianity worthy of the name existing without the elaborate

<sup>20</sup>Allen, *Roland Allen*, vii.

<sup>21</sup>Chaney, “Roland Allen,” 1.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>23</sup>Long and Rowthorn, “Legacy of Roland Allen,” 67.

<sup>24</sup>Chaney, “Roland Allen,” 1.

<sup>25</sup>Lesslie Newbigin, foreword to *Roland Allen: Pioneer, Priest, and Prophet*, by Hubert J. B. Allen, xiii.

<sup>26</sup>Chaney, “Roland Allen,” 10.

<sup>27</sup>Long and Rowthorn, “Legacy of Roland Allen,” 68.

<sup>28</sup>John E. Branner, “Roland Allen: Pioneer in a Spirit-Centered Theology of Mission,” *Missiology: An International Review* 5/2 (1977) 183.

machinery which we have invented. We naturally expect our converts to adopt from us not only essentials but accidentals.”<sup>29</sup> Similarly, many today have trouble imagining a Christianity worthy of the name existing without the cultural formalities of the adult church. Hymnals, “church attire,” unison prayers, and sitting still during the service are sometimes implied to be elements as essential to worship as is the gospel itself. The energy, spontaneity, and creativity of youth are too often suppressed in order to impose the order and solemnity of adult worship practices.

The irrelevance of church to many adolescents evinces a misguided attempt to communicate the gospel to them. The gospel’s “unchanging story...must be proclaimed afresh in each generation.”<sup>30</sup> When the gospel is expressed exclusively through a single, unfamiliar cultural context, the message soon becomes obscured by that culture. When faith in Christ comes to be equated with “fitting into a Christian middle-class stereotype,”<sup>31</sup> we have robbed the gospel of its power to bring life to those who receive it. Naturally, correcting this mistake involves discernment: an uncritical attempt to make the gospel “relevant” to a new generation can easily lead not to a disencumbered, but rather a relativized gospel. Yet, as with the first-century mission to the earliest Gentile converts, we must take care not to force young people to “convert” to an alien culture before they can hear the gospel’s message.

#### *“Native” leadership*

The Holy Spirit was unequivocally the source of strength in Paul’s missions, but Allen frequently saw that, in cross-cultural missions, the native people instead sought their power “in the missionary. They put him in the place of Christ, they depend[ed] upon him.”<sup>32</sup> This same dangerous pattern is seen in youth ministry programs today. Youth workers, either from a desire to feel important, a lack of trust in the Holy Spirit to work through youth, or simple ignorance, often build programs around their own gifts instead of around the Spirit working in the youth. This causes, as Allen noted in his context, an unhealthy and misguided dependence on a pastor, as well as a stifling of the natural gifts of those being ministered to. Problems arise in youth groups that follow this model when the youth and the leader eventually part ways. The Christian faith has come to be so associated with one individual that the youth have not had the opportunity to make their faith and their ministry their own. This is in stark contrast to Paul’s practice of preaching in a city for a matter of months, and then leaving it as an established, if not fully mature, church.<sup>33</sup> Pete Ward addresses this principle in the context of youth ministry, saying that “youthwork has as its goal the desire for young people to become independent of the youthworker...[and] if the youthworker is too directive, independ-

<sup>29</sup>Allen, *Missionary Methods*, 6.

<sup>30</sup>Pete Ward, *Youthwork and the Mission of God* (London: SPCK, 1997) 26.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 111.

<sup>32</sup>Allen, *Missionary Methods*, 81.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., 84.

ence may well be delayed or may not even be achieved.”<sup>34</sup> This leader-centric model will also tend to foster burnout among leaders and a failure to help youth discern and develop their vocation.

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Many youth come to understand and value their faith through their experiences of active ministry. As Reinhold Niebuhr queried during his days in parish ministry, “Aren’t we preachers talking altogether too much about what can be proved and justified only in experience?”<sup>35</sup> Ward notes that indigenous youth theologies emerge “when groups of young people begin to speak of their encounter with God.”<sup>36</sup> That is to say, a theology that truly belongs to a young person comes not from her receiving instruction from a leader, but from her internalizing that instruction and passing it on to others. This utilization of young people in active leadership reaps great benefits both for their own faith and for the church’s ministry.

Moreover, “native” leadership tends to be more effective than leadership from an outside party. Allen explained the practical problems with foreign leadership in a church: “the result is often deplorable. The catechists, teachers, deacons, and priests...are wholly independent of the one authority which they really understand, native public opinion; solely dependent upon the one authority which they seldom can understand, the foreign missionary.”<sup>37</sup> Likewise, the positive impact that youth can have on their peers can hardly be overestimated. The language that youth speak, the idioms they use, their allegories, their understanding of the challenges they face—these comprise the “native public opinion” of youth, the one authority they really understand. The church, *in addition* to ministering to and mentoring youths, needs to equip them to witness and minister to their peers.

This concept is corroborated by missions studies: the most “potent” evangelism is when “a person communicates to his own people. . . . People need to hear the gospel in their own language.”<sup>38</sup> This is not to diminish the important mentoring role that adult leaders play in evangelism and leadership of a youth group, but rather to emphasize how young people themselves can reach areas and groups of their peers that are inaccessible in many ways to adult leaders.

<sup>34</sup>Ward, *Youthwork*, 66.

<sup>35</sup>Reinhold Niebuhr, *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1929) 108.

<sup>36</sup>Ward, *Youthwork*, 25.

<sup>37</sup>Allen, *Missionary Methods*, 101.

<sup>38</sup>Dave Rahn and Terry Linhart, *Contagious Faith: Empowering Student Leadership in Youth Evangelism* (Loveland, CO: Group, 2000) 19.

*Vocation and stewardship*

A failure to encourage young people to use their gifts in ministry restricts their ability to live out their vocation. There is a tendency to think of youth as merely the “future members or leaders” of the church, which denies the present-tense understanding of vocation that calls all of God’s people to use their gifts in God’s service.<sup>39</sup> When young people are forced to use these gifts solely in secular endeavors, we individualize what is intended for the faith community. Paul insists that a Christian’s spiritual gifts are to be used for the edification of the whole community. Thus, “in order to be faithful to their vocations, [youth] need to be able to offer their gifts for the common good.”<sup>40</sup> This is difficult to do when youth are not afforded the opportunities to use their gifts within the church. Too little is asked of most young people in the church. Tony Campolo has argued that the faith of young people is kindled not by an easy, comfortable message, but by presenting them with “seemingly impossible challenges” to make a real difference.<sup>41</sup> This cannot be accomplished if young people are viewed as second-class or future leaders—as “Christians-in-training.”

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In addition to limiting young people’s ability to live out their vocation, neglecting to incorporate the gifts that youth have to offer in the life and mission of the church demonstrates a poor stewardship of the church’s resources. Roland Allen lamented the effects that the neglect of native people’s gifts had on the mission field: “the natural teacher, the divinely gifted preacher, is silenced...the prophet is in danger either of losing his gift or of leaving the church in order to find opportunity for its exercise.”<sup>42</sup> We see this all too often with youth in the church, and we lose much when they develop their gifts exclusively in the context of secular organizations that value these gifts more highly.

This highlights the importance, too, of youth having some ownership of their youth group and of their church as a whole. Allen wrote that the natives in mission fields “always speak of ‘the Mission’ as something which is not their own.”<sup>43</sup> If youth feel that they are attending a show or yet another class, they too will feel like it is not their own. If they are not allowed to be active agents of the group—teaching

<sup>39</sup>Joyce Ann Mercer, “Call Forwarding: Putting Vocation in the Present Tense with Youth,” in *Compass Points: Navigating Vocation—The 2002 Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church and Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Institute for Youth Ministry, Princeton Theological Seminary, 2002) 32.

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>41</sup>Tony Campolo, *The Church and the American Teenager* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989) 28.

<sup>42</sup>Allen, *Missionary Methods*, 106.

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*, 83.

and leading worship and assisting in decision-making and program development—then the youth group and the church will be a foreign agency to them, and potential leaders will naturally look for other outlets where they can offer their gifts. And while young Christians using their abilities in secular contexts certainly is not a bad thing—indeed, these endeavors form an important part of a Christian youth's mission field—a lack of ecclesial opportunities can easily lead to a monopolizing of youths' time and energy by secular activities.

A youth group designed and run without student leadership also risks having the artificial feel of a poorly written sitcom. "In an effort to make the Church more accessible [to youth] there is a temptation for those in the Church to see young people's culture from the outside and try to imitate this." This attempt to construct an adult perception of youth culture is bound to fail, especially with the plurality of youth cultures.<sup>44</sup> In order to have a youth group that relates to youth and is claimed by youth as their own, they must have an integral role in its leadership and ministry.

*"Re-evangelizing" the adult church*

Still, even when a youth ministry does a good job of involving students in leadership and decision-making, rarely will a church give the youth a voice in the larger worship of the church (save, perhaps, for an annual "Youth Sunday"). Youth are often expected to be passive participants in Sunday worship (if they are expected to be present in corporate worship at all), and their voice is rarely sought or heard in setting the goals and vision of the larger congregation. When this is the case, the church misses out on one of the most valuable resources that youth have to offer—a fresh perspective on some possibly stale traditions and habits that, when taken seriously, can serve to re-evangelize the adult church.

Karl Barth—no stranger to ecclesiological matters—wrote of this unique perspective that youth have in the church: "That the young person is still relatively without experience means that he is not in such danger of already being the slave of habit, chained to a routine and therefore traditionalistic, sophisticated, relativistic or sceptical. . . . He should not be the victim of boredom because everything is so familiar."<sup>45</sup> Since youth are not as familiar with or tied to the routines of the adult church (not to mention unscriptural cultural mores—worldly conceptions of success and power, for instance—that over time amalgamate into a congregation's ethos), they are in a prime position to recognize inconsistencies and problems with the church. Joyce Ann Mercer speaks of this special call of youth, saying that "we in the church cannot afford to ignore youth's prophetic acts of resistance that invite us all to another way."<sup>46</sup> Whereas an adult who is immersed in her culture might be unable to recognize that her church's presentation of the gospel is actually an alloy

<sup>44</sup>Central Board of Finance of the Church of England, *Youth A Part: Young People and the Church* (London: National Society/Church House Publishing, 1996) 16.

<sup>45</sup>Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III/4, trans. A. T. Mackay et al. (London: T & T Clark, 1961) 612.

<sup>46</sup>Mercer, "Call Forwarding," 38–39.



of gospel and cultural influences, a youth outside of the dominant culture will be quick to notice hypocrisy and variations from the gospel message.

Youth have the ability to shake up a church that is overly dependent on its traditions. There is thus a “responsibility to be open to change, as the Church listens to the Spirit of Christ in the young. Youth work needs to give young people opportunities to hold a mirror up to the Church, so that the Church can look at itself and not fall into complacency.”<sup>47</sup> Refusing to listen to the prophetic voice of youth is a sign of hubris, sending the message that we’ve figured everything out and know the right way to do things. Young people can alert the church to elements of idolatry within particular structures, traditions, or emphases that may overshadow the gospel’s message.

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This is similar to the process of re-evangelization that Philip Jenkins has predicted as the church in the Southern hemisphere continues to grow and thrive, while the Western church stagnates and shrinks. In his book *The Next Christendom*, Jenkins demonstrates how “looking at Christianity as a planetary phenomenon, not merely a Western one, makes it impossible to read the New Testament in quite the same way ever again. The Christianity we see through this exercise looks like a very exotic beast indeed, intriguing, exciting, and a little frightening.”<sup>48</sup> Just as the Southern church may help the Western church that once evangelized it to escape from a stale cultural Christianity and return it to a purer gospel, so the youth of the church can reverse the traditional direction of missions and call adults in the church back to a vibrant and unalloyed faith. Not yet being “slaves of habit,” young people offer the church insights that otherwise might not be raised. In order to benefit from the “spirit of Christ in the young” we must encourage them to speak their mind and then take their insights seriously.

#### SOME CAVEATS

While Roland Allen’s assessment of foreign missions a century ago can shed light on similar issues faced in youth ministry today, there are of course many differences between our situation with young people in the church and Allen’s experience in North China and St. Paul’s among first-century Gentiles. Proximity affects

<sup>47</sup>Church of England, *Youth A Part*, 25–26.

<sup>48</sup>Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002) 220. See also Darrell L. Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).

the approach: the culture of youth in the church is quite different from adult church culture, but it is still a subsection of the same local church culture. Churches in foreign mission fields can be established so that they are unified with the missionary's church in Spirit, but separate in practical matters. Youth groups, on the other hand, need to pursue an active connection and integration with the larger congregations of which they are a part.

Adolescence is also different from foreign cultures in that it is a transitory stage of life. Members of the church Paul planted in Philippi did not grow out of being Philippians, and Allen's charges in China did not cease to be Chinese, but the young people in the church do eventually grow to be the old people in the church. Thus, to speak of a "youth culture" is quite different than speaking of a long-established foreign culture, and the needs and dreams of a young person will change more rapidly than those of an adult. Adults are also more mature, more experienced, more knowledgeable, and in some ways more capable than youths, so more extended supervision and guidance is required with youth than with adults in a cross-cultural context. Additionally, there is a degree to which one generation is called to pass its traditions on to the next to provide continuity within the community, and some of these hallowed traditions can serve as a stable element within the ever-changing stage of adolescence.

#### *Unity of the church*

It is important to stress the essential unity of the church in this model of youth ministry, for if youth are given more power over how the youth group is run and adult leaders take a less directive approach, there is a danger of establishing an entirely separate "youth church" if the interconnections with the larger body are not emphasized and facilitated. There is already a noticeable division between the youth and adults in many churches. Many kids who have given much to the youth group and feel as though it is their own have invested very little in the larger church. And sometimes it seems as though the larger church invests little in the youth, leaving that entirely to the youth ministry department.

The danger of fostering a "schism" between the youth and adults in a congregation can be tempered by giving the youth a voice in matters that affect the whole church body, engaging them actively in the church's ministry, and encouraging meaningful friendships between youth and older members of the congregation. This sends the message that youth members are as valued as adult members in the life of the entire congregation. Unlike the distant geographical relationship between a missionary church and a "missionized" church, the youth and adults of a single church are yoked together and have the responsibility and privilege of relationship together.

#### *The transitory nature of youth*

Despite the efforts of modern Peter Pans to keep from having to grow up, it remains true that adolescence extends for a limited period of time that is not only

relatively brief, but also filled with transitions and changes. The church's mission to youth is thus directed at a target that is always in flux, a tremendous challenge not unlike Werner Heisenberg endeavoring to ascertain the precise position and momentum of an atomic particle. As difficult as it is to "master" a foreign culture—with its own language and speech patterns, customs and values, these things at least remain fairly constant. Youth culture (and youths themselves) are like the rivers that Disney's Pocahontas sings of: "always changing, always flowing."<sup>49</sup>

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This makes it all the more difficult for an adult working with young people to understand their culture, and it underscores the importance of having youths themselves in leadership positions as they seek to discover together how the gospel is speaking to them in their particular situations. But it also serves as a balancing measure to keep from embedding the gospel *too rigidly* in youth culture and to ensure the connection with the full congregation, since youth culture and adolescence lack the permanence of foreign cultures.

Adults also have certain intellectual and emotional advantages over youth that are not applicable in other missions contexts. Adults have the intellectual development, the life experience, and the maturity to make decisions more effectively than youth: "teenagers are typically in the 'test-drive' stage of their maturity level. Judgments are often erratic, decision-making is impulsive, and raging hormones wield too much influence."<sup>50</sup> Thus, youth ownership of and investment in a ministry do not nullify the shepherding role of adult guides (as Paul continued to steer and assist his congregations through his epistles). If the "youthworker places the responsibility of the work in the hands of the young people the church may well descend into chaos. A balance between these two approaches [too little and too much responsibility resting with the youth] is the best policy."<sup>51</sup>

There is certainly also a need to pass on some of the traditions of past Christian cultures in order to maintain a sense of historical identity and continuity with the family of faith that has come before. "The Church has a delicate balance to keep between its responsibility to pass on the faith it has received, and its responsibility to listen as each new generation makes its own response to Christ."<sup>52</sup> St. Paul's sole concern in this matter was that particular local and temporal cultural traditions

<sup>49</sup>Carol de Giere, *Defying Gravity: The Creative Career of Stephen Schwartz from Godspell to Wicked* (Milwaukee: Applause Theatre & Cinema Books, 2008) 229.

<sup>50</sup>Rahn and Linhart, *Contagious Faith*, 21–22.

<sup>51</sup>Ward, *Youthwork*, 66.

<sup>52</sup>Church of England, *Youth A Part*, 26.

not become a barrier to those outside those traditions. Traditions are valuable so long as they do not obscure or hinder the gospel message.

Roland Allen's voice from a century ago still rings out today as we look at the church's mission to its youth. Too close an association of the gospel with "adult" culture has kept many young people from the church. Their lack of a voice in discussing ecclesial matters has made the church an unnecessarily alien experience for some youth, and the paucity of opportunities for them to use their gifts has hampered their ability to live out their vocation and has shut a prophetic voice out of the church. While not parallel situations at every point, the practical theology of youth ministry stands to gain much by incorporating insights gleaned from centuries of reflection on foreign mission practices. By working to disentangle core gospel truths from the comfortable context of "adult" culture, raising up young people into leadership roles with their peers and in the larger church, helping youth to discern their gifts for ministry, and encouraging them to share their passion and insights with older congregation members, untapped blessings may be freed to flow into the lives of our youth and into the church at large. ⊕



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