Editorial

As I write this editorial, the world has endured a deadly pandemic. Over the last year and a half people across the world have sheltered in place, practiced social distancing, worn masks, and finally, last spring, began taking vaccines – prompting endless political and theological reflection and debate. Meanwhile, churches, schools, universities, seminaries, and families have discovered creative new uses for technology to reach constituents, students, and friends in efforts to remain sane, effective and productive. Many communities have lost businesses, restaurants, markets, theaters, while some struggle to remain viable as people are slow to venture from their homes. Yet the losses of this crisis have been more than economic or trivial.

Among youth ministry scholars and practitioners, a question lingers about how the pandemic isolation has inhibited the ordinary work of adolescent development, faith development, and vocational identity. Developmental theorists such as Erik Erikson, and theologians such as Hans Urs von Balthasar, commonly imagine the process of development as analogous to the gaze between the mother (sic) and infant, in which something magical happens. Balthasar famously states,

After a mother has smiled at her child for many days and weeks, she finally receives her child's smile in response. She has awakened love in the heart of her child, and as the child awakens to love, it also awakens to knowledge: the initially empty – sense impressions gather meaningfully around the core of the Thou. Knowledge (with its whole complex of intuition and concept) comes into play, because the play of love has already begun beforehand, initiated by the mother, the transcendent. God interprets himself to man (sic) as love in the same way: he radiates love, which kindles the light of love in the heart of man (sic), and it is precisely this light that allows man (sic) to perceive this, the absolute Love... In this face [of Christ], the primary foundation of being smiles at us as a mother and as a father. Insofar as we are his (sic) creatures, the seed of love lies

dormant within us as the image of God (imago). But just as no child can be awakened to love without being loved, so too no human heart can come to an understanding of God without the free gift of his grace – in the image of his Son.¹

For Erikson, the mother-child gaze/smile establishes the child's "basic sense of trust" in the world, key for the child's joy, appreciation, and empowerment as agent in the world. Adolescence later replicates this as a psychosocial process in which youth achieve identity before the gaze of the culture and its forms. For Balthasar, this dynamic field reflects its origins within the Trinity's perichoresis, and later as Israel's "I" in response to God's "Thou", and finally in Jesus Christ, as God's face before which we awaken in faith and mission. These scholars point to the profound significance of the concrete encounter with God incarnate in the Church, and the sacramental beauty of the cosmos, and, as Erikson saw, with socio-cultural forms that constitute a concrete "Thou". Such sacramental encounters with embodied "Thous" distinguish Christian faith from, say, the distant God of deism, the hidden secrets of Gnosticism, or late modern ex-carnation that avoids all forms of risk, trust, and mortality. We can only hope that our creative digital adaptations during this pandemic have been sufficiently concrete and responsive to awaken young people to faith, identity, and flourishing. At the risk of overstatement, everything (personal, social, spiritual flourishing) hangs on how successfully we choreograph the concrete encounters between youth and the gaze that mediates God and human fullness. These are but a few of the theological questions raised by this pandemic, and are appropriate topics for this journal and guild. Interestingly, our authors for this issue take up similar themes of identity and the concrete particularity of history.

In the first article, *Exploring the Theology of Expectation in Relation to Young People and Youth Ministry*, František Štěch introduces the theology of expectation of Czech theologian Vladimír Boublik as a resource for youth ministry. She reminds us that expectation or hope is a pervasive feature of human life, but which is especially intense in adolescence. Drawing from Boublik's theology, she observes that expecting the future is central to Christian faith, and a vital environment for youth ministry efforts and projects.

In the second article, *Cultivating Nonidolatrous Self-Esteem with Youth: Christological Considerations for Peacebuilding Youth Ministry*, Elizabeth W. Corrie confronts the problematic use of the person and work of Jesus Christ to justify violence or passivity in the face of violence. In her article she

1 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Love Alone is Credible* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005).

foregrounds Christology as a key resource for teaching just peacebuilding to youth. She explores five facets of Jesus' personhood and work, his race, gender, religion, suffering and return as clues for theologically grounded peacebuilding youth ministry.

In the third article, *"And the Word was made flesh?" – Exploring young people's situated learning in leadership and spirituality in a secular context*, Katarina Westerlund reveals the findings from a pedagogical experiment in the Lutheran Church of Sweden. She illumines teaching and learning of youth as situated and contextual, not merely cognitive or mental, as participatory rather than analytical. In their experiment, the rhythms of their learning context included worship, pilgrimage, dialogue, and leadership development as means of self-discovery and identity formation.

In the fourth article, *Personal Bible Reading and the Faith Formation of Teenagers in a Digital Age*, Judith Hildebrandt, Jack Barentsen and Jos de Kock report on the findings of two qualitative studies conducted with highly religious Protestant German youth investigating how digitization has influenced how they read and interpret the Bible. The authors explore how digitization alters the conditions of Bible reading, how an authoritative text is understood alongside the digital flux and flow that demands more to be engaged more than a means for delivering content. Their study reveals that although many German youth continue to read the Bible, such regular use has been eroded by the ethic of authenticity. Youth express a preference for more experiential practices and activities for fostering faith.

In the fifth article, *Religious Identity Exploration in the Life Stories of Strictly Reformed-Raised Emerging Adults in the Netherlands*, authors Anne-Marije de Bruin-Wassinkmaat, Jos de Kock, Elsbeth Visser-Vogel, Cok Bakker, and Marcel Barnard utilize qualitative methods to explore the process of religious identity in Reformed emerging adults in the Netherlands. Their study reveals several interesting features of the process of achieving religious identity, including the prominence of exploration and rebelling. They reveal that participants with strong rational belief explored the least while those expressing a trust in God explore alternatives more robustly. Based on their findings they encourage families, schools, and churches to understand, and support the exploration of young adults.

In the sixth article, *The History of Protestant Youth Ministry; a Review*, Ruth Lukabyo highlights the need for ongoing research into the history of Protestant youth ministry. Her review of this literature makes clear that youth ministry is influenced by contexts, theologies, presumptions about conversion and nurture, class, and gender. Varying assumptions about these account for the

constitution of different youth organizations. She concludes that youth ministry benefits from such historical research, by placing goals and methods in context.

In the seventh article, *'On a mission': Christian Youth Workers in Australia in the 1960s–1970s*, David Fagg documents the evolution of youth work from origins in the United Kingdom, in the YMCA, Boy Scouts, and the Wesley social holiness movement, in which youth work and religious aims coincided – to the post WWII disaggregation of youth from religious work now for the purposes of empowerment, rehabilitation and recreation. He documents, for example, the rise of various movements like the Protestant Radical Discipleship, and the Young Christian Worker Movement. A signal contribution of this study is in depth interviews with key figures from these movements. He concludes by issuing a call to learn from these movements, especially for what they suggest for contemporary youth ministry.

These authors, each in their own way, are seeking to clarify how we focus the gaze of youth in response to God's gaze in its many guises. To these articles I invite your gaze, and perhaps your smile.

David F. White