Several years ago, our family attended a church with multiple services every Sunday. Each week, in the so-called “contemporary” service at 9:30 at Hopewell United Methodist Church, worshippers sang songs projected onto a screen, led by a worship band—and an hour later, congregants in the so-called “traditional” service used a bulletin and sang hymns from a hymnal, accompanied by an organ.

One week, the worship band for the “contemporary” service planned to lead with a song called “Micah 6:8”—a simple canticle I once taught teenagers at a work camp, hoping to familiarize them with the scripture passage. I perked up when I learned it was on the docket, and came to the 9:30 service expectantly.

The band never sang it. Between services, I asked the pastor why. “Oh, that’s a camp song for kids,” he said dismissively. “It really isn’t appropriate for worship.” Peeved, I slid into the pew next to my husband Kevin, who burst out laughing when he opened the bulletin for the traditional 11:00 service. He pointed to the closing hymn: “Pass It On.” If American youth ministry had had an anthem in the 1970s and 1980s—when Kevin and I were teenagers—“Pass It On” was it. Yet within a generation, “Pass It On” was sitting comfortably beside “Amazing Grace” and “O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing” in the United Methodist hymnal.

In his study of Christian Endeavor, the first widespread model of American youth ministry, Christopher Coble observed that, historically, youth ministry has had a “church-changing effect” on American congregations. Because youth ministries tend to be hospitable places for ecclesial critique and experimentation as well as crucibles that form future church leaders, youth ministry often functions as an informal “research and development” laboratory.


laboratory for the broader church. When I call youth ministry a “laboratory,” I do not mean that adults are performing ecclesial experiments on children. It is youth, not adults (and certainly not pastors), who typically drive youth ministry’s experimental impulse. By definition, young people are relative newcomers to faith communities, and their participation in these communities makes them “spiritual apprentices” of sorts—people who test-drive the church’s practices, self-understandings, and worldviews in search of those that ring true for the world(s) they inhabit. In the process, like generations before them, youth inevitably adapt and reinterpret these practices, definitions, and outlooks to make them more salient for the situation at hand.

Despite the relative recency of the adolescent lifestage (a concept with complicating assumptions of its own), young people have long been associated with religious renewal. From Josiah to Jeremiah, from the medieval monastic movements to the Reformation, from the Great Awakenings to the Pentecostal, charismatic and emerging church movements of the twentieth century, young people have frequently compelled, if not led, ecclesial change. As an abbott, Benedict of Nursia—who himself entered monastic life before the age of twenty—insisted that the youngest monks in the community must be included in the community’s decision-making, for “the Lord often reveals what is better to the younger.”

This essay suggests that youth ministry’s “research and development” impulse benefits the broader Christian community. As practices often associated with youth work find their way into other domains of Christian life, the church’s formation of the young turns out to be formative for the church as a whole. Furthermore, I argue with Jürgen Moltmann that this role has theological warrant, since youth ministry’s implicit “hermeneutic of hope” demonstrates for the broader Christian community a theological, and not just a chronological, understanding of what it means to be young. Drawing on Moltmann’s eschatological understanding of youthfulness, this essay explores ways in which young people—and youth ministry in particular—

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