Practicing Discernment with Youth: a Transformative Youth Ministry Approach

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Those of us involved in the academic study of youth ministry find ourselves at the leading edge of a field just now gaining mainstream academic credibility. While being part of such a fledgling venture has its own rewards, having a variety of substantive academic texts specific to the field has been a challenge. When planning courses and doing research, I've typically found myself either relying on the same familiar names or “translating” texts from practical theology, psychology, culture studies, or the like. In light of this, I greeted with great excitement the news of a new series on youth ministry published by The Pilgrim Press.

The goal of the Youth Ministry Alternatives series is to encourage approaches to youth ministry that “embody social awareness and theological reflection and foster the distinctive gifts of youth for the church and the world” (ix). Aligned with current literature on Christian practices, the series intends to encourage the cultivation of youth as theological participants, able to understand the call of Christian discipleship in the particularity of their contexts. In doing so, Youth Ministry Alternatives hopes to address the hunger many of us have for approaches to working with youth that combine the call for social transformation with theological sophistication.

David White inaugurates the new series in fine style with his recent Practicing Discernment with Youth: A Transformative Youth Ministry Approach. He writes as a scholar and youth minister, informed by decades of work with young people in various contexts. The book emerged in response to his concern that youth have been ghettoized as consumers of culture and that youth ministry, in turn, has been co-opted by the marketing approaches typical of large corporate interests. Such an understanding of adolescence, he argues, subverts the unique prophetic voice of youth and disconnects them from “their communities, ... from the wisdom of elders and an awareness of conditions that might challenge and expand faith” (59). Our work among them, then, should help them “evaluate cultural expectations, cultivate their own gifts, and connect their stories to God’s story” (63).
The first half of the book expands his critique of adolescence as a highly problematic social and cultural construct which posits the vocation of youth as one of consumption and leisure. To this end, White offers a substantial historical analysis of its origins and rise in post-industrial North America. Our expectations of adolescents as consumers, without a meaningful and productive place in the social ecology, are not only theologically inadequate, they are also inappropriate to any hopes we have for a vision of social transformation that includes the participation of young people. Furthermore, as an institution, adolescence is under assault by destabilizing forces such as economic uncertainty, detachment from significant adult relationships, and earlier puberty, among other things.

The second half offers a constructive response to this provocative critique, arguing for a return to Christian practices of discernment that enable young people to claim their unique vocations as youth, in all their prophetic potential. This, White insists, should be the primary curriculum for our work with young people, and he offers a number of concrete strategies to help them develop the skills of critical analysis, imagination, and strategic action. In doing so, he draws on the examples of Ignatian discernment, Quaker clearness counsels, and consensus-building to illustrate process and outcome. Those familiar with process and liberation theologies and progressive educators like Freire will recognize the influence of these literatures here.

White’s hopes are lofty. He wants his readers to investigate the theological foundations and practices of their work with youth, ask hard questions about their adequacy, and enact new, more life-giving approaches. Does he succeed? I recently used the book in a course on the vocation of youth. The students, largely youth ministers and religion teachers, found his analysis thought-provoking and the discernment practices exciting; the text sparked lively and generative discussion. At the very least, they found the text accessible and his take on adolescence to be eye-opening. Many found themselves called to renegotiate their intentions – implicit or otherwise – for working with young people. A few took issue with it as too heavy-handed or Western. I would argue that this is part of the value of White’s contribution – that he is willing to put the questionable pillar of capitalist consumer values in his crosshairs and ask important questions about some of the very foundations of our ministerial commitments, which should participate in an alternative vision of how things could be.