Editors Introduction

What is God calling you to do? In this spotlight we feature Melanie Thirion from South Africa. I won’t pre-empt her story too much but Melanie has focussed her contribution on a change in role – a move out of teaching youth ministry and into doing youth ministry. Most of us may very well have started in ministry and gone into teaching or research. In these roles, we might manage a limited connection with hands on ministry, Melanie’s own title sums up the key aspect of her story well – ‘insights from doing it the other way round’. This is a helpful spotlight I think as it shows us that youth ministry is a porous profession – we move in and out of roles and as an association we need to be aware that praxis and theory are both central concerns; thus so are both the practitioner and the academic central to our association. Melanie has written a personal account and my hope is that this piece might provoke all of us to think afresh as to what we are being called to do?

Insights from doing it the other way round

Some in youth ministry study theology or ministry for a couple of years and enter full-time ministry and, after a number of years in ministry, say 5 to 10 years, some return to the academy again, finishing a master’s degree or doctorate. Some even become professors. I did it the other way round. I am a 25 year old woman who has just left the academic world, for the first time enter full-time youth ministry!

In this spotlight, I am honoured to have the opportunity to tell the story of my walk with God in the academic world thus far, and reflect on the valuable lessons I have learnt as I enter a new phase in ministry.

The long walk to...the academy

During the last seven years my work has have evolved into a youth ministry academic. As undergraduate student I majored in practical theology. As an honours student, I worked as a library assistant (a must for every academic) and as post-graduate student, I entered the world of research, lectures and students. However, the South African Government still classifies me as a ‘youth’! My car insurance company classifies me as a ‘youth’! Many of my students are older than me and I often get the response “but you are too young to be a lecturer!” Yes, I am young in relation to my colleagues and
academic peers. I may not yet have the knowledge, experience and wisdom needed to be an excellent academic. But like many ‘young people’ in my stage of life I have a story to tell, a story written by God.

As a little girl I did not dream about the academy as my ultimate occupation, I wanted to become a DJ on the radio and I went through my high school career with the vision of becoming a marine geologist! But during my final school year, I met Jesus Christ and I changed – everything changed. Yet, I did not know where I was heading. I wrote my final school exams without any immediate future plans.

My mother suggested that I take a correspondence course in children’s ministry, just until I sorted out where I was heading. The college offering this course also offered a full-time degree in youth ministry. I said to myself ‘what the heck, I can just as well spend three years of my life doing this degree.’ And that is how it all started. After three years many of my fellow classmates entered full-time ministry. I stayed behind, enrolling for the honours year. After the honours year, the rest of my class were also heading for ministry. I stayed behind, enrolling for a Master’s degree. After my Master’s degree, others took this learning back into ministry; I stayed behind – until now.

As I consider moving from the academic world, albeit concerned with youth ministry, I have given some thought to what I might offer the world of youth ministry as a concerned academic. Here are three lessons that I feel I have learnt from my time in the academic world.

Lesson 1: Have a relationship with the Author

What I learnt the hard way during my walk in the academics thus far, is that Christ is the one it is all about. Without a real relationship with the Author, my own words and arguments become hollow and are of no particular insight. If I don’t have a real relationship with Christ, I tend to view the words and insights of others as competition and not contribution to the common goal we are working for – to further the study of youth ministry. My relationship with Christ also motivates me in times when I am frustrated with ‘writer’s block’. He helps me to push through and not give up. He also gives me the strength to face the (often harsh) critique I receive on my articles and research. He is God Almighty.

This lesson is the most important one to remember when entering full-time ministry. I am now not working with words anymore but with people’s lives. And if I don’t have a real relationship with the Author of my life, I will not be able to bring the life-changing message of Christ effectively. I also realise, just as in the academic