

Seminar IAPT Conference Amsterdam July 2011

“Youth Ministry as a Test Case for Practical Theology”

Format

According to the guidelines of the call for papers, this seminar “format will be given a 90 minute time slot. Typically, it will bring together three or four presenters on a closely related topic. Following their brief presentations (10-15 minutes each), a longer discussion may follow among them and with the audience. Proposals for this option will include a theme, three of four participants and their abstracts” (cfr. website IAPT).

Theme

In this seminar the focus will be on the emerging field of youth ministry and church work with youth and young adults. Social, cultural and religious dynamics in the world of youth radically challenge and change the impact of traditional religious institutions on the lives of the young. Transmitting faith to the next generation, creating evident links between gospel and culture and offering safe spaces for kids to deal playfully with the faith of their parents and ministers, are no longer successful. Things have changed dramatically. Young people create their own religiosity, sampling elements of different religions and worldviews and streamlining their explorations often grounded in a lived theology of “moralistic therapeutic deism” (Smith & Lundquist Denton 2005; Dean 2010).

Practical theologians are focusing on the way religious practices of human beings can be meaningfully discerned and interpreted in the interactive context of church and society. The traditional concept of practical theology as ‘application’ of systematic theology into the daily reality of the human person, i.c. young people and young adults, is more than ever before challenged by a concept of practical theology which deals with the emergence of ‘lived theology’ growing out of ‘lived faith’. This is more than ever the case with youth ministry. New empirical and hermeneutic toolkits are needed to understand what is going on in this field – how young people negotiate between old and new, traditional and progressive, crossing boundaries of denominations and faith communities, and how youth ministries respond to this situation. In the volcanic context of youth cultures today, church, faith and youth ministry are under strong pressure. There is hardly another way or context in which practical theology is so heavily compelled to stretch its original presuppositions and convictions as in youth ministry.

The four participants in this seminar are all professionally involved in the study and research of youth ministry and are members of the ‘International Association for the Study of Youth Ministry’ (www.iasym.net). They invite the IAPT-colleagues to participate in the discussion of their work in practical theological perspective.

Participants and their topics

Kenda Creasy Dean, Professor of Youth, Church and Culture, Princeton Theological Seminary (USA) http://www3.ptsem.edu/Content.aspx?id=1920&menu_id=72

Youth ministry increasingly defines itself as a practical theological enterprise, aiming for a reordering of adolescent desires to make “a place for God” in the communities and identities of young people (Dean 2004; Dean 2010). What we frequently overlook is how this process influences the Christian community as a whole, and especially youth ministry’s potential as a theological laboratory for the broader church. As long ago as 1994, a Lilly Endowment report conceded: “What has become clear. . . is that youth ministry is ultimately about something much more than youth ministry. . . . These [Christian youth] movements are redrawing the ecclesial map of the United States” (White 1994, 7). Particularly around issues of cultural engagement, ecclesiology and theological education, ministry with young people helps illuminate theological themes and practices of importance for contemporary young people—and therefore, for the Christian church. In so doing, youth ministry tends to have a “church-changing effect”, reimagining congregations’ theological priorities and practices for churches in general.

Malan Nel, Director of the Centre for Contextual Ministry, Faculty of Theology, University of Pretoria (South Africa) <http://www.malannel.co.za/>

The focus of this presentation will be on the local faith community as inclusive, accepting children and youth as full ‘members’, participants in the fullness of God’s grace. It will focus on the dynamic and creative tension between inclusivity and differentiation in Youth Ministry as practice of any given faith community. Especially the home (or family) context as relational and basic hermeneutical sphere of Christian life will be discussed (Nel 2001; Nel 2005).

Bert Roebben, Professor of Religious Education, Faculty of Humanities and Theology, TU Dortmund (Germany) and Chair of the International Association for the Study of Youth Ministry www.seekingsense.be

In this presentation different forms of theological reflection in the encounter between youth cultures and religious traditions will be discerned. Not only in congregations with their typical youth ministry programs, but also in schools and on campus young people and young adults are ‘doing theology’. What kind of theology is this? How does it relate to academic theology? And most of all, how can it be critically discerned within learning processes with young people in schools and congregations? The new branch in German practical theology, namely ‘Jugendtheologie’ (youth theology) (Roebben 2009), will be discussed in conjunction with recent developments in ‘Kindertheologie’ (children’s theology) as a possible way of understanding the field of youth ministry as practical theology.

Andrew Root, Associate Professor of Youth and Family Ministry, Luther Seminary, Saint Paul Minnesota (USA) https://www2.luthersem.edu/faculty/fac_home.asp?contact_id=aroot

James Loder (1999) called the core generative problematic of practical theology the association between divine and human action. This core to practical theology is

problematic because the action of God and human agency are, at least in some ways, distinct. However, Loder explains that though this distinction makes for problems, it is, nevertheless, generative. Salvation, healing, and reconciliation are the by-products of the problematic, contradictory encounter between divine and human action. While other contradictions have been central to practical theology (e.g., theory/praxis, church/society, etc.), this central contradiction of imagining forms of divine and human action has been less so. Except in youth ministry literature. This may be because of the direct desire to pass on faith to young people or their developmental openness to transcendence. Therefore, examining the forms of divine and human action in youth ministry literature may be of assistance in moving all of practical theology deeper into reflection on divine and human action (Root 2007; Root & Dean 2011).

References

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