Anticipating the Kingdom: Engaging Students in Missional Faith Formation

By Todd Hobart

Introduction

Xavier was an immediately likeable student.[1] He was bright, funny, eccentric, and talented, as well as a natural leader of his peers. In my first year as a youth coordinator at a new church I had met him about halfway through the year. I had heard stories about him from others and was immediately impressed upon meeting him. He was part of a special confirmation class at our church. While other classes tended to be cliquey, and the students tended to drift away from church involvement after their 8th grade year, this class took it upon themselves to meet together on their own to continue their friendships. I recognized a good thing when I saw it and made it my special goal to invite this class to be a part of our high school spring retreat, as well as our first ever summer mission trip experience.

Xavier and many of his friends attended both events with wonderful results. Friendships were strengthened, faith was deepened, and the students were stretched as they served together and experienced a completely foreign culture than what they were used to. However, for Xavier, the mission trip had some unintended side-effects. In the days and weeks immediately following the trip, he fell into a deep malaise. His parents worried about him and took him to a counselor who diagnosed him with depression.

Though there were likely many contributing factors, I believe that the intensity of the relational connections on the mission trip had a profound effect on Xavier. Removed from that intense experience and back in the everyday doldrums of suburban summer life, Xavier found

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[1] The names of all students have been made anonymous in this essay.

himself deeply longing for the close friendships and special togetherness that can only come from powerful shared experiences as a group.

Coinciding with the depression came testing in Xavier's relationship with God. Where was God in this dark time? Why was Xavier in this place? Xavier had always been a bit unconventional in his faith, combining deep philosophical speculation and a passionate cry for justice for those in need while other high school freshmen sought a high kill to death ratio in Call of Duty games.

Slowly during this time, I saw and heard from Xavier less and less. I missed our old relationship and was saddened to see his eventual turn to a militant brand of atheism. He announced it via a tweet a little over a year after our first mission trip together. Xavier's atheism was difficult for me to take: why hadn't he talked more with me? I wished that he had felt free to explore his growing doubts with me before he abandoned his faith. Of course it was worse for his family. I learned again via tweet over his mom's tears in the kitchen when Xavier "came out" to her as an atheist.

Ultimately, the story that Xavier had learned about God during confirmation and his time growing up was insufficient for Xavier's later experiences and subsequent questions that arose. Instead he found that a different story best explained his life and the world he inhabits - a story that is very different from the Christianity that Xavier had been taught and experienced for his life until that time.

The Power of Story

Psychologists and researchers in human cognition have found that stories are the primary way that we make sense of the world and our place in it.[2] In fact, it is through using the aspects of story that information is stored and recalled in our minds. Through evolutionary adaptations and the parenting environment that humans are surrounded with as children, story becomes the way we think through, understand, and organize our world. Though facts and numbers can be persuasive on their own, they cannot compare to the power of a story to influence a person and stay lodged in that person's memory.

Fortunately, this accords well with our task in Christian faith formation. Missiologist Lesslie Newbigin reminds us that,

> The dogma, the thing given for our acceptance in faith, is not a set of timeless propositions: it is a story. Moreover, it is a story which is not yet finished, a story in which we are still awaiting the end when all becomes clear."[3]

This is a story in which we are called to participate in significant ways. Recognizing this and imagining our role in the story is a crucial part of faith formation.

There are many different powerful narratives in American culture that have the potential to capture the hearts and minds of men and women. Each tells a unique story about the world that helps men, women, and youth to find their place in it. Consumer capitalism, liberal or conservative politics, Moralistic Therapeutic Deism,[4] an astounding variety of religions, or some combination thereof are just some of the many choices that each have the possibility of capturing

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[2]See: Kendall Haven, *Story Proof: The Science Behind the Startling Power of Story* (Libraries Unlimited, 2007).

[3] Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 12.

[4] This term will be explained below. It is found in: Christian Smith and Melina Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, Reprint. (Oxford University Press, USA, 2009).

adherents to their cause. Christianity competes with these philosophies in the marketplace of ideas and must tell its story in a compelling way by the power of the Spirit to engage its adherents in missional faith formation.

Faith formation intimately involves this idea of story. It is the story that we inhabit, that gives our lives shape, and helps us understand who we are. Faith formation is the process of helping students live into this story, understand its past, present, and future, and understand how their story fits into this larger story.

Left to our own devices, we often pursue counterfeit stories that our culture values which lack the power of something original. Of what worth is "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" compared to the Kingdom of God? Why is spending money and purchasing goods the answer to terrorist threats? Why is the thought of dying with the most toys such an empty proposition?

Counterfeit Stories?

Among these many questions regarding counterfeit stories leading to happiness is one regarding the nature of the Christian "story" that teens in United States churches are learning today. Does it resemble the Christian story that has been handed down over thousands of years through various theological traditions, or is it another one entirely? The National Study of Youth and Religion offers one answer to this question, and it is a disturbing one. This study is the most comprehensive research on teen spirituality and religious belief in recent years.[5] After sifting through and analyzing the survey and interview data, the researchers proposed a tentative hypothesis that the majority of teens in the United States practice a faith that has colonized

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[5] It included 3,370 telephone surveys and 267 in-depth interviews with youth between 13 and 17 years old in 45 different states.   Ibid., 292, 302.

traditional religions without respect for denominational boundaries. Though this faith may bear

some similarities to each religious tradition, it is markedly different from each one and does not

resemble the traditional teachings of the Christian faith within the United States. The researchers

labeled this colonizing force: "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism" (MTD).[6]

The problem with MTD for Christianity is that it closely mimics traditional versions of

the faith, but it leaves out crucial pieces that are important for its functioning as a whole. The

moralistic part of MTD places an importance on being good, nice, responsible, pleasant, and

getting along with people. Most people would likely agree that these are better character traits

than being unpleasant, rude, disrespectful, lazy, and incorrigible. However, Christianity is about

far more than "fulfilling one's personal potential, and not being socially disruptive or

interpersonally obnoxious."[7] Sometimes Christians are called to take difficult stands on issues

that are important to them. Sojourners CEO Jim Wallis has been arrested 22 times for peaceful

demonstrations on issues that mattered deeply to him because of his faith.[8] Consider Jesus'

radical actions in the temple to drive out the money-changers.[9] In a world filled with injustice

and persecution, being *nice* is not good enough.

The therapeutic aspect of MTD has an individualistic emphasis that places an importance

on, "feeling good, happy, secure, at peace."[10] Again, it is hard to argue that these are bad

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[6] Ibid., 162-171.

[7] Ibid., 163.

[8] Dan Gilgoff, "Evangelical Minister Jim Wallis is in Demand in Obama's Washington," *US News and World Report*, March 31, 2009, http://www.usnews.com/news/religion/articles/2009/03/31/evangelical-minister-jim-wallis-is-in-demand-in-obamas-washington.

[9] Matthew 21:12-13.

[10] Ibid., 164.

qualities to possess. Yet, this stands in stark contrast to Jesus' call to take up the cross and follow him.

The way of Jesus and the cross is one of suffering, temptation, and trial. It is about being involved in the messiest and dirtiest parts of life, facing the reality that we are all at once both saint and sinner, and coming to grips with who we really are as people. Solidarity and identification with those who are suffering most often does not lead to feeling good, happy and secure. It can be profoundly unsettling to not only face the ravaging effects of sin in the lives of others, but also to see it in one's own life. This therapeutic part of MTD flies in the face of the cross and the way of Jesus in the world.

The final part of MTD, deism, involves the knowledge that a god exists who is watching over the world. However, this god is not very personal, nor is this god trinitarian. This god is profoundly distant and mostly uninvolved with the world, except during the rare times when the MTD practitioners may call on that god to restore a sense of personal well-being. In contrast, the God of the Christian scriptures in known through Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This God is active in the world, creating, healing, reconciling, and has called a people to join with him in that work.

What, then, is the antidote to this counterfeit story that many Christian U.S. teens have subscribed to? It is clear that there is no easy answer to this question; however, the idea of *missional faith formation* is raised in this essay as a part of the solution. To do this, it is first necessary to understand what *missional* has to do with *faith formation*.

Missional

The 20th century began with the audacious thought that the world could be evangelized by Christians within a generation.[11] This was a time of optimism and faith in progress by human effort. The World Missionary Conference of 1910 in Edinburgh, Scotland, exemplified this kind of thinking. However, through two world wars and a greater understanding of peoples around the world, these views were chastened, and thinking around a theology of mission continued to change with these new insights.

One of the groups that made significant contributions to a theology of mission in the 20th century was the International Missionary Council (IMC). This council began in 1921 as a continuation of the work began at the Edinburgh Conference in 1910. The IMC met every few years in different locations around the globe to discuss innovations and issues in Christian mission.

At the 1938 IMC conference in Tambaram, India, and at the 1952 conference in Willingen, Germany, significant questions were raised about the nature of the church and its obligation to the world and around the concept of the *missio Dei*.[12] Is Christian mission primarily an activity of the church, or does it originate from the activity of the triune God? These issues and questions would factor significantly in missiologist and theologian Lesslie Newbigin's later contributions to a missiological ecclesiology, which in turn would significantly influence the authors of the seminal volume *Missional Church*.[13]

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[11] For a more detailed history of this period, see: Craig Van Gelder and Dwight J. Zscheile, *The Missional Church in Perspective: Mapping Trends and Shaping the Conversation* (Baker Academic, 2011), 21–22.

[12] M.W. Goheen, "'As the Father has sent me, I am sending you': J.E. Lesslie Newbigin's Missionary Ecclesiology" (University of Utrecht, 2000), 22–24, 49–51.

[13] Gelder and Zscheile, *The Missional Church in Perspective*, 5.

Craig Van Gelder and Dwight Zscheile have recently created a helpful resource that charts the history of the missional church conversation, while also providing suggestions for future directions.[14] In their book, the authors note several important theological concepts that underlie the missional church conversation. Among them are the ideas of the *missio Dei* and the reign of God.[15] These two ideas will be covered here as they are important to understanding what missional faith formation looks like.

The *Missio Dei* and the Reign of God

The *missio Dei* concept has been important in missiology since the middle of the 20th century. The 1952 meeting of the IMC in Willingen, Germany, marked an important shift from an ecclesiocentric to a theocentric understanding of mission.[16] This meant that instead of mission being seen primarily as an activity of the church, it was instead understood first as God's activity, and secondarily as something the church participates in. After this meeting, the term, *missio Dei*, took hold as a means to conceptualize the shift that had taken place. During the 1960s, the meaning of the term was expanded and often used to marginalize the role of the church in God's mission.[17] During this radical period, some mission theologians doubted that the church had much of a place at all in what God was doing in the world. Though the term has been used to promote different agendas, it has played a key role in relating mission to the

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[14] Gelder and Zscheile, *The Missional Church in Perspective*.

[15] Ibid., 5-7. Also included are: connecting ecclesiology and missiology, the church's missionary nature, Trinitarian missiology, and a missional hermeneutic. While not specifically addressed in this essay, each of these ideas are important concepts that inform the proposal being made here.

[16] J. Verkuyl, *Contemporary Missiology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978), 3.

[17] D.J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 392.

doctrine of the Trinity and in reinforcing that mission is to be understood as part of the nature of

God before it is understood as an activity of the church.

An understanding of the *missio Dei* holds that mission is first of all derived from the

sending nature of God:

> The classical doctrine on the *missio Dei* as God the Father sending the Son, and God the
> Father and the Son sending the Spirit was expanded to include yet another "movement":
> Father, Son, and Holy Spirit sending the church into the world.[18]

The church's call to mission thus follows from the sending nature of God, and it involves

participation in the mission that God is already engaged in. Thus, the *missio ecclesiae* is

secondary to and derived from the *missio Dei*.[19] The sending emphasis from the doctrine of the

Trinity has also recently been supplemented by insights from social doctrines of the Trinity,

which help to shed light on what participating in God's mission could look like for

congregations.[20]

The church's participation in the *missio Dei* must also include in its focus the New

Testament concept of the reign of God, as the *missio Dei* is the means through which God's reign

is made evident in this world. So what is God about in the world? This is no small matter.

Jesus' death and resurrection fulfilled a cosmic purpose: the redemption of the entire creation.[21]

We anticipate a kingdom one day in which swords are beaten into plowshares, nation no longer

rises against nation, and wolves and lambs eat together.[22] As the church, we have the privilege

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[18] Ibid., 390.

[19] J.A. Kirk, *What is Mission? Theological Explorations* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000), 31.

[20] J. Swart et al., "Toward a Missional Theology of Participation: Ecumenical Reflections on Contributions
to Trinity, Mission, and Church," *Missiology: An International Review* 37, no. 1 (2009): 77-84.

[21] Colossians 1:16-23.

[22] Isaiah 2:1-4, 65:17-25.

to live right now as if that kingdom were present right now. And it is – in part. "For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known."[23] With his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus inaugurated, or brought this future kingdom crashing into the present. We, as the church, live into God's mission as we represent and anticipate this now and future kingdom.

So, what does this look like? It is as broad and cosmic as the redemption of the entire creation. J. Andrew Kirk describes many facets to mission, including: announcing good news, justice for the poor, encountering other religions, overcoming violence and building peace, care for creation, and sharing in partnership, among others.[24] Mission is as broad and comprehensive as our ability to discern the Spirit's movement in redeeming and restoring the world.

<div align="center">Missional Faith Formation</div>

Missional faith formation takes place by joining in the life of the triune God in accomplishing God's mission in the world: the work of restoring and redeeming all of creation. One might think: "all of that is well and good, but what does mission have to do with faith formation?" At first glance, one could wonder what they have to do with one another at all. Faith formation, it would seem, involves the intentional processes of guiding, equipping, supporting, and teaching those who have already professed faith in Christ. Mission seems to be about joining with the triune God in God's work in redeeming and restoring the broken creation. One seems to be a centrifugal activity, focused inside the congregation, and the other seems to be a centripetal activity, focused outside the congregation. So, what do those have to do with one another?

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[23] 1 Corinthians 13:12 (NRSV).

[24] Kirk, *What is Mission? Theological Explorations*.

The contention of this essay is that all true faith formation involves joining in mission. This seems to be the natural process for each person that shapes his or her faith and helps in understanding God better. It is as we engage in mission that our faith is shaped, we know and love God more, and our relationships with one another are deepened. This process of engaging with God in mission involves seeing where our story fits in with God's story, and the story of the redemption of the entire world. It brings our story in contact with the stories of others, those whom we serve and witness to God's reality and work in the world. This intermingling of stories: God's story, our story, and the story of others, is part of the key work in faith formation. I believe that this can be seen through the stories in Christian scripture itself.

A Missional Hermeneutic

Though the popularity of the word *missional* may be of recent vintage, it is important to note that the ideas behind it are as old as the story of God's work in redeeming the whole world. The story of God's work to call a people out of the world for God's own purposes begins in the book of Genesis with the call of Abraham to be a blessing to all of the nations.[25] Abraham is immediately sent on his journey to the promised land – a land to belong to his descendants though he would never be able to claim it as his own. Abraham's faith is shaped as he responds to God's missional call to leave his comfortable surroundings and engage with God's work in the world. It is on this journey of being sent out by God that Abraham encounters the many challenges that would shape his character and earn him the distinction of being the father of faith.[26]

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[25] Genesis 12:1-3.

[26] Romans 4.

Abraham's future daughter-in-law Rebekah encountered the call to participate in God's mission at the unlikely place of a city well.[27] For Rebekah, this meant a journey to a far-off land and marriage to a relative stranger. It later meant some familiar family tasks like being a mother to twins and dealing with exasperating relatives.[28] The events no doubt shaped her faith as she responded to God's missional call. However, like youth and their adult mentors, Rebekah shows herself as a flawed, imperfect example of faith as Rebekah's later deception led to her son Jacob receiving Isaac's blessing over Esau.

Even Isaac's brother Ishmael and his mother Hagar had their faith shaped by God's missional call. Perplexing as this story is, God's call involved being sent into the desert, potentially to die. How is this participating in God's redemptive work to restore and renew the world? Yet the end of the story shows that Ishmael, too, was to be made into a great nation as he and Hagar were sent out and sustained by God in the desert.[29]

Stories like these are repeated throughout the whole of scripture as men, women, and communities of people respond to God's missional call and are sent out to participate in God's mission to restore and renew the world. Consider Joseph being sent by God to Egypt, the Hebrews being sent out of Egypt, Paul's journeys in the New Testament, and many more.[30] It is on the way of responding to God's missional call to participate in the renewing and restoring of this world that the faith of men, women, and even teens is shaped. Sometimes this journey may be to far away and exotic places. Other times, it may be as simple as crossing the street. But this

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[27] Genesis 24.

[28] Genesis 26:35.

[29] Genesis 21.

[30] For an excellent theological description of God's missional call to Abraham and Israel in the Hebrew scriptures, and the church in the New Testament, see: Michael W. Goheen, *A Light to the Nations: The Missional Church and the Biblical Story* (Baker Academic, 2011).

journey always means participating in God's ongoing redemptive work in the world, wherever that may be located.

Missional Faith Formation and Youth Ministry

So, how does this relate to youth ministry? What does this mean for youth workers and volunteers who shape programs and who serve as mentors and guides to youth? How does responding to this missional call relate to a confirmation program, Sunday school, or youth group? These are the questions that will be addressed in this section.

How can we help students engage in missional faith formation (recognizing that all authentic experiences of faith formation are actually missional in nature)?

- Help students discern their personal missional call from God. How are they uniquely equipped and wired to participate in God's redemptive mission in the world? How does their story fit in with God's story?

- Help students to see themselves as a part of a larger church community in mission. As well as possessing a personal call, students are also part of a larger church community that is (hopefully!) engaging its surrounding community and participating in God's mission in that particular context.

- Keep the surrounding community in view as the horizon of God's work in mission. This is true whether it is local and next door, or all the way around the world. Likewise it is true whether it is the congregation doing direct work in the community through an after school program or related activity, or whether it is through engaging with the students in the congregation by providing opportunities locally and around the world to participate in God's redemptive work.

- Engage with God's mission as a part of faith formation programs. Too often it seems that the purpose of Sunday school, confirmation, and occasionally youth group programs is simply to impart information to students. While this has its place in faith formation programs, imparting knowledge ideally takes place in the form of reflection upon shared experiences that come from engaging in mission together. There, in the aftermath of serving and forming community together, the difficult questions can be asked and tackled that can lead to an understanding of theological ideas that help shape faith formation.

The Context for Faith Formation: Ethnic Diversity, Consumer Choice, and User-Generated Content

Ethnic Diversity

Times have changed since I graduated from high school in 1991. I grew up in the same 3200 square foot home for my entire childhood in a suburb just north of Seattle, Washington. In my high school, I recall various discernible groups of students: popular kids, jocks, stoners, goths, losers, a few gang members, and then the vast expanse of "the rest of us." We were not popular, not outcast socially, not particularly good at sports, and not into heavy metal music - just plain old mostly white kids from the suburbs. The 1990 census in my small suburb found that nearly 90% of the population was White, with the remainder consisting mostly Asians and Pacific Islanders, along with small percentages of Blacks, Hispanics, American Indian and Alaska Natives.[31]

But how times have changed. The 2010 census for that same suburb found that the overall White population had decreased by 3,000 people, while the total population for the town

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[31] The 1990 census data used here came from the 1990 Official (Unadjusted) and Adjusted Census Data, which can be found here: http://www.census.gov/main/www/cen1990.html.

increased by 7,000 people. [32] Whites now comprise just 64% of the total population, with Asian

and Pacific Islanders next at 18%, and significant and growing Black and Hispanic populations.

The town in which I currently serve as youth coordinator has also seen dramatic changes

in that same 20 years: the percentage of Whites to the total population shrank from 83% to 55%,

while the Asian and Pacific Islander population grew sixfold, the Black population tripled, and

the percentage identifying as Hispanic grew almost tenfold. [33] The students in the high schools I

now serve report a greater diversity of potential affiliations, including divisions among

racial/ethnic lines. Gone are the stoners and goths, but now a student could hang out with the

geeks/gamers, Hispanics, Blacks, Asians, ravers, Otakus, preppy kids, or still be a loser, popular

kid, gang member, or just plain old white suburban kid (or plain old Hispanic suburban kid, or

plain old Black suburban kid, or plain old Asian suburban kid – whatever that means).

Seth Godin describes some of the changes in affiliation that have taken place in the past

20 years in his book, *Tribes*. [34] Whereas the idea of tribes has always been a part of human

culture, the internet now has eliminated issues regarding geography and it is easier to connect

with fellow tribe members than ever before. Moreover, there is a multiplicity of options for

tribes:

> …smaller tribes, influential tribes, horizontal and vertical tribes, and tribes that could
> never have existed before. Tribes you work with, tribes you travel with, tribes you buy
> with. Tribes that vote, that discuss, that fight. [35]

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[32] The 2010 census data came from the Profile of General Population and Housing Characteristics: 2010, which can be found here: http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/index.xhtml.

[33] Ibid.

[34] Seth Godin, *Tribes: We Need You to Lead Us*, 1st ed. (Portfolio, 2008), 4-5.

[35] Ibid., 4.

Leading and connecting these tribes is made easier than ever before through social networking sites and technology. No doubt this diversification of options has made it easier for youth to find their place in several different niches at once, and affiliate with certain groups at their own school as well as with other non-geographical tribes. It seems likely that many other locations around the United States are experiencing similar radical changes in ethnic diversity and increasing tribal affiliational options, with all of the accompanying implications for youth ministry in a dramatically changed context.

Consumer choice

Increasing ethnic diversity also mirrors the increasing diversity in choice in popular American consumer culture. In early 20th century, Henry Ford famously quipped that his customers could choose any color they liked for their Model T – as long as it was black.[36] By the mid-twentieth century, that same consumer likely had the same limited choices in washing machines. Today, however, that same consumer must confront an endless and always increasing variety of questions for an automobile: Import or domestic? Car, truck, or SUV? Hybrid, electric, or gas? Color? Options? And so on. A similar proliferation of questions could be asked for a washing machine purchase. This same issue of proliferation of choice can be seen across the board: in clothing, phones, computers and electronic devices, espresso and coffee, television channels, and more. A consumer today has more choices than ever before in what he or she wishes to purchase and what options come with the purchase.

It is likely that this ubiquitous choice available to consumers naturally finds itself being worked out in youth ministries. This can be true with respect to the large number of choices for

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[36] Jeremy Rifkin, *The End of Work: The Decline of the Global Labor Force and the Dawn of the Post-Market Era*, Updated. (Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, 2004), 95.

many suburban adolescents in which church or youth group to attend, but it also likely is being felt within ministries themselves.

<div align="center">User-generated content</div>

Accompanying increasing ethnic diversity and an expanding range of consumer choices has been what Thomas Friedman has described as the flattening of the world that has taken place in the past 20 years.[37] For the purposes of this essay, this "flattening" essentially describes a world where individuals have greater access to information, the ability to create their own information, and where communication is faster and more direct than ever, thus empowering individuals to do things they could not do before.

The flattening forces that Friedman describes include the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989, which effectively meant the end of Europe's centrally-planned communist economies and the triumph of global consumer capitalism. Students today have grown up in this entrepreneurial world, in which they must compete in a global economy. Another flattening force has been the growth of the World Wide Web and its associated technologies. This well-documented change has forever changed communication, commerce, research, and many other human endeavors.

Friedman also mentions *uploading* as a flattening force. Included in this idea are the rise of community-developed software programs, distributed freely on the internet, and other forms of user-generated content, like blogging. Students today no doubt expect to be part of the planning and execution of youth ministry, just as they have greater access to create content in other parts of their lives.

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[37] Thomas L. Friedman, *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-first Century*, Further updated and expanded edition. (Picador, 2007).

Friedman's *in-forming* flattener also describes the greater access that students now possess. He describes Google's lofty goal to easily make available all the world's knowledge in every language, with access available to everyone with a cell phone.[38] People can not only search out information relevant to their needs in ways that were previously not possible, but they can also search for collaborators and others who share their common interests. Friedman's final flattener involves the digitizing of previously analog content and processes, things like photography, entertainment, communication, and word processing.[39] This content is available quickly and easily through wireless means, giving men and women greater access than ever before to large amounts of knowledge.

First published in 2005, Friedman's ideas about a flat world are now essentially old news. The flat world is the sea in which we all swim. His initial observations have continued apace with the exponential rise of social networks. A recent report from the Pew Research Center noted that 50% of all adults in the United States (whether connected to the internet or not) are a part of social networks.[40] Of those adults who are internet-users, 65% report using social networking sites.[41] The flattening of the world continues. What is important for youth ministry faith formation is to step back and note the incredible changes that have taken place in the past 20 years. The world is truly a different place for students today, and no doubt this will be

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[38] Ibid., 178.

[39] Ibid., 187. The flatteners not mentioned in this essay are work-flow software, outsourcing, offshoring, supply-chaining, and insourcing. These also affect the lives of youth, but likely more indirectly than the others.

[40] Mary Madden and Kathryn Zickuhr, "65% of online adults use social networking sites | Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project," http://pewinternet.org/Reports/2011/Social-Networking-Sites.aspx. Accessed: August 29, 2011.

[41] Ibid.

worked out in the ways that students approach their youth ministries and associated ideas about faith formation.

Structure

The world for many students today is more diverse, flatter, more open and participatory, and with more options available to them. This is the context in which missional faith formation takes place today. So, what kind of structure can best facilitate missional faith formation in this changed context? It is a structure that must accommodate these realities of a changed context. These realities demand a structure that allows for greater options for involvement and that is open and invites participation, where hierarchy is flattened and students are empowered to make a difference in their congregations and communities.

This type of structure, however, has not been the dominant one over the past century in American culture. Perhaps the quintessential mode of organization over the 20th century was bureaucracy. Founded upon highly rational principles that sought to bring order to large, unwieldy organizations, modern bureaucracies first grew in the railroad industry, but soon spread across many different industries and the face of American business. Bureaucracy served to enforce clear boundaries between fellow employees, employee and employer, and between ranks of employees. It made simple and direct processes for standardizing company procedures and work flow.

Clearly, bureaucracy has benefitted many companies and organizations in the past century or so. It was certainly a step forward in organizing to lessen the effects of employees treating company property as their own, ambiguity around chain of command and accountability, and haphazard work environments. Yet, in this changed context that demands openness,

participation, and flattened hierarchies, organizations and ministries must find new alternatives to old bureaucratic principles.

The type of structure that emphasizes openness, involvement, participation, and empowerment is not simply a good idea because of contextual and cultural changes. In fact, research from the Exemplary Youth Ministry study has shown that congregations with high percentages of committed Christian youth invite participation from students, parents, staff, pastors, and volunteers in significant aspects of ministry decision-making.[42]

A Social Doctrine of the Trinity

This type of structure also better corresponds to the openness and participatory nature of the Trinitarian life of God. Through the life of the church, the world is able to see in a provisional way the life of the Triune God. Zscheile and Van Gelder put it this way:

> …the church as a communion of persons sharing an interdependent, reciprocal life of mutuality, reconciled in Christ and united by the Spirit, shows forth something of God's own nature to the world.[43]

Thus, church organization and the church's life together are important. So how can the relationship between the divine persons of the Trinity be understood?

One way of answering this question comes via Jurgen Moltmann. In, *Trinity and the Kingdom*, Moltmann proposes his social doctrine of the Trinity. In this view, God's unity comes from the communion of the three divine persons of the Trinity. Unity is based on the concept of *perichoresis*, which involves the mutual interrelatedness and circulation of the divine life

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[42] Roland Martinson, Wes Black, and John Roberto, *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry: Leading Congregations toward Exemplary Youth Ministry* (St. Paul, MN: EYM Publishing, 2010), 205-216.

[43] Gelder and Zscheile, *The Missional Church in Perspective*, 121.

between the three persons.[44] This view supports a non-hierarchical view of the Trinity, which

corresponds to, "a human fellowship of people without privileges and without subordinances."[45]

Miroslav Volf further elaborates on what a social doctrine of the Trinity could mean for

organization in churches with his understanding of a nonhierarchical Trinity. In doing so, Volf

carefully notes the limits of the Trinity-ecclesiology analogy.[46] However, he holds that such an

analogy is possible because of the "*this-worldly character* of God's self-revelation."[47]

Instead of dominance or hierarchy, Volf believes the best way to characterize the

relations between the persons of the Trinity is, "polycentric and symmetrical reciprocity of the

many."[48] This leads to a collegial understanding and practice of ministry which opens up the

possibility of participation to many in the church and local community. Volf further affirms that,

"the more a church is characterized by symmetrical and decentralized distribution of power and

freely affirmed interaction, the more it will correspond to the trinitarian communion."[49] So, what

are some possibilities for structure that would enable that kind of correspondence?

Open-Source Leadership

One way of conceptualizing how youth ministries can change the way they are organized

is to consider an analogy from open-source software creation (a part of Friedman's uploading

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[44] Jurgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 174–176.

[45] Ibid., 157.

[46] Miroslav Volf, *After our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 198–204, 08–13.

[47] Ibid., 199.

[48] Ibid., 217.

[49] Ibid., 236.

flattener). It is helpful to picture two ideal types: the first as 20th century bureaucratic leadership, and the second as an open-source type of leadership.[50] Of course, ideal-types do not exist in actuality; no pattern of leadership is entirely of one type or the other. However, it is helpful to consider these types when trying to understand what a social doctrine of the Trinity and recent organizational and sociological changes could mean for the organization of youth ministries.

Bureaucratic leadership	Open source leadership
Youth ministers are the source of vision and ministry ideas for the church	Students, volunteers, and parents are the source for vision and ministry ideas
Youth ministers require many decisions to run through them	Youth ministers require relatively few decisions to be made by them
Youth ministers use chaperones and students to accomplish goals	Volunteers are not "chaperones" who are recruited by the youth minister, but are instead participants and innovators with students who create and implement ministry themselves
Youth ministers seek to persuade people to give their time/talents/treasures to the youth ministry	People give their time, talents, and treasures because they are invested participants, instead of disengaged consumers who must be persuaded
Excellence, efficiency, and control are valued	Openness, participation, and freedom to create are valued
Consumers are made through this model	Invested participants are made through this model

Youth ministry has always been an innovative part of the local church that has invited student participation, and there likely have been few ministries that have approximated the bureaucratic ideal type. However, this table begins to chart a direction for leadership that can move ministries away from hierarchical models of leadership and toward more open and participatory practices.

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[50] These types were inspired by, and partially adapted from: J.R. Kerr, "Open Source Activists: The surprising impact when leaders tap the power of a generation of influencers," *Leadershipjournal.net*, October 1, 2009, http://www.christianitytoday.com/le/2009/summer/opensourceactivists.html.

St. Matthew's Youth Ministry

Open-source approaches to ministry are in their infancy at St. Matthew Lutheran Church; however, the previously described cultural changes can be clearly seen in how youth relate to St. Matthew's as an organization. There is little interest among a broad spectrum of students with being involved in a one-size-fits-all youth group. Instead, they look for ways to connect and plug-in at SMLC that are customized for them. Before we look at the specifics of how this happens at St. Matthew's, it is important to take a brief look at the background of the church.

Background

St. Matthew Lutheran Church (SMLC) was founded in 1955 in the Renton Highlands neighborhood (near Seattle, Washington). Like many churches of this age, St. Matthew's has seen its share of both struggles and successes over its many years. During its first 25 years, many pastors led the congregation in effective ministry; however they also transitioned in and out every 4-7 years. Though struggling early with space and facility issues, land was eventually purchased and a permanent facility was constructed that continues to be a physical presence in the community for SMLC. The next 30 years witnessed periods of growth in membership and ministry, with one pastor serving for that entire period and providing some much needed stability. As of 2011, St. Matthew's employed two full time pastors with six additional staff, and averaged around 400 people in worship attendance each Sunday. In 2010, SMLC helped to found Luther's Table, a ministry to downtown Renton that is both a coffee shop and beer and wine bar.

Success and Goals in Youth Ministry

St. Matthew's history and context provides the environment in which youth ministry is understood and practiced at SMLC. The unique history and context of each church makes it

difficult to compare attributes of their youth and children's ministries with those of other

churches. However, in talking with other youth ministers, the question inevitably comes up

about the size of the church youth group. I admit, I often have the same question rattling around

in my head about other youth leaders and their ministries. It's a common way to try to assess the

overall health of a ministry. The thought is: if you have a lot of people coming to youth group –

then you must be doing something right.

The question of youth group size is associated with complicated issues like what success

looks like in youth ministry. Is success more students coming to youth group? Greater student

participation in a Sunday School program? More students getting confirmed? Or does it have to

do with deeper relationships between students and adults, greater attention to social justice

issues, and a greater love for God? Another common suggestion is that youth ministry success is

best measured in what happens in students' lives after they leave the youth ministry and go off to

college or to work.

These are difficult and very subjective questions without stock answers to fit every

situation. No doubt, each youth minister, pastor, family, and student will have a different version

of what they most want to see happening in their congregation's youth ministry. St. Matthew's

has approached the idea of success in youth ministry from the standpoint of involving the

greatest number of students possible within St. Matthew's, and also in the Renton highlands

community, in the overall life of the church. So St. Matthew's does not attempt to have the

biggest youth group in town, and it doesn't worry about the inevitable changes that happen when

students go off to college. Instead, St. Matthew's takes an approach that emphasizes many

options instead of one or two very important programs. Rather than committing the majority of

available time and resources into attracting students to be a part of one high school or middle

school youth group or Sunday school class, SMLC instead works to provide multiple ways for students to connect with the church.

This does not mean that St. Matthew's has necessarily pioneered programs or ministry ideas that are any different than any other church. The difference is more in the focus of the youth ministry and how it is evaluated. SMLC includes activities like youth group, Sunday school, and confirmation, but also goes beyond these activities with others like a yearly mission trip, weekly after school programming, quarterly Nerf nights, and regular service activities. This is no doubt similar to many other churches. Again, the main difference is in the framework of how it all fits together, and what the goals of the ministry are.

Framework

St. Matthew's utilizes ten different opportunities to involve students from SMLC and the surrounding community in the life of the church: confirmation, Sunday school, youth group, service opportunities, monthly fun events, a middle school before and after school program, Nerf nights, lock-ins, a yearly retreat to Holden Village,[51] and a yearly mission trip. Some of these programs happen mostly on a weekly basis, like confirmation, Sunday School, youth group, and the before and after school program, while others happen just once a year, like the Holden retreat weekend and the mission trip. The others occur each month or several times per year.

The students at St. Matthew's and in the surrounding community are invited to take part in any of these activities that are appropriate for them or that appeal to them. These options purposefully span a large range of ages, spiritual learning options, and opportunities for Christian community. The before and after school program is only for middle school students at the local middle school across the street from the church. It has no religious content and is operated in

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[51] A former mining camp, now Lutheran retreat center in the Cascade mountains of Washington.

partnership with the school. The program is allowed to make morning announcements at the school about the weekly activities in the program each Tuesday. The school also helps with the occasional difficult discipline issues that arise when problems from the school are transferred to St. Matthew's and vice-versa. St. Matthew's, through community grants and a small budget, completely funds the program, solicits volunteers to supervise the students, and plans all the activities.

Other activities at St. Matthew's offer greater opportunities for spiritual enrichment and faith formation. Confirmation at St. Matthew's is a year long program for 8th graders that offers opportunities for service, mission, learning, and building Christian community. Sunday school is for both middle school and high school students, and usually involves prayer, a scripture reading, discussion of a spiritually-related topic, and time for getting to know one another.

Other explanations could be offered for the mission trip, Holden retreat weekend, and the other activities that St. Matthew's offers. However, the point is that students are allowed to choose the options that best work for them in being a part of the life of St. Matthew's. Some students choose to be a part of as many activities as possible, and are intimately involved in many aspects of the life of the church. Others just participate in the mission trip and some service opportunities, and they rarely attend worship services, and never attend youth group, Sunday school, or other activities. Still other students only participate in the after school program. Most students end up choosing a few ways out of the ten that they use to participate in the life of St. Matthew's. Each student can then uniquely participate in the ways that make sense to him or her and are appropriate for his or her age and place in his or her spiritual journey. Students are not expected in any way to participate in any one or two key programs, like Sunday

School or the youth group. It is recognized and expected that these programs will not appeal to every student.

Evaluation

How, then, is success evaluated in this framework? SMLC is successful when it offers the greatest number of students the greatest number of opportunities to be a part of the life of the church, and when students engage those opportunities and even suggest new ways for involvement in St. Matthew's. Initiative for finding new ways of being involved has taken place in the past two years with the addition of Nerf night to the activities available at St. Matthew's. This is an event that is offered several times each year. It began through the initiative of five students and one after school program volunteer. It has grown since that time to about 40 people participating in one Nerf night, many of whom had never been a part of St. Matthew's before.

Again, students being creative or taking initiative is unique to St. Matthew's. Nor are the programs of SMLC in any way superior to what might be found at any other church. The importance of this model comes through avoiding the emphasis on singular important programs that students must be funneled into in order to achieve success in youth ministry.

The programs and evaluation are made possible through the personal relationships with students by the Life Stage Youth Coordinator. Through these relationships, involvement in the different activities at St. Matthew's is possible and students are connected to the wider church body.

Weaknesses

Though this framework allows for great diversity, one could argue that it lacks the unity that is called for in the church. While each student is allowed to choose from multiple options, there is little that draws students together and crosses dividing lines. Also, a model like this can

inadvertently feed into consumer tendencies in students. They are offered a buffet of programs, but perhaps not the opportunities to become producers or counteract consumerism through building a strong, unified Christian community.   Where Christian community exists in this model, it is fragmentary, and there are not ready opportunities to bring disparate groups together into a whole.

Strengths

At first glance, this model may seem like a call to focus on programming at the expense of relationships. Instead, it is a call to recognize the uniqueness of each individual student and his or her faith journey. It is an attempt to take seriously his or her story and how that story intersects with God's story, and that of the faith community.

Envisioning St. Matthew's programs according to this model fits well with the changes in American culture over the past 20 years. Increasing consumer choice, ethnic diversity, and the flattening of the world have produced students who are not satisfied with one choice of program, but rather who prefer multiple ways of connecting with the church. St. Matthew's youth ministry framework and evaluation corresponds well with this new social reality. Likewise, new social realities call for new ways of organizing, and St. Matthew's open and participatory structure that invites new ideas and ways of connecting with the church fits in well with this.

One could also argue that it is not realistic to expect unity through attendance in a common program. If 90 students are involved in the overall life of the church, can it realistically be expected that they would all enjoy or choose to participate in the same slate of programs? Unity in this model must come from other sources, either a common baptism that unites all, or participation in a common mission.

Summary and Conclusion

The St. Matthew's youth ministry model takes some pieces that are common to many youth ministries, but envisions them fitting together in a different way. It has its strengths and weaknesses like any other model, but it is well-contextualized for students in a changed world.

Though Xavier's story of Christian faith formation, told at the beginning of this essay, does not necessarily have a happy conclusion at this point, the story with the rest of his class is fortunately different. The first mission trip that Xavier and his class attended had a powerful impact on the entire group. Though ultimately for Xavier it meant deserting his faith, for several others it meant greater participation in God's mission. Three other students from Xavier's class have returned to Mexico several times on further mission trips, with profound, life-changing effects. Each one has decided through their participation in these trips that they would like to pursue a life of service: one in social work, one in international business, and one in nursing.

These students have been captured by the importance of what God is doing in the world, and how they can be a part of it. Missional faith formation does not have a simple, precise ending. It involves the messy work of being involved with what God is doing in the world. For some, like Xavier, it can lead away from God and into greater doubt; however, for others, it can mean being swept up in a story that helps to shape the lives and future of students. It is not always simple or predictable, but it is always life-changing.