DOING

YOUTH MINISTRY

IN

A NAGA CONTEXT
©Project Nehemiah, 2002
NBYF, Nagaland
FORMING A THEOLOGY OF YOUTH MINISTRY

Graham Hill

For fifteen years I have been involved in leading youth ministries but never had an adequate or reflective theology of youth ministry. The world of my theological thinking and reflection was separate from the realm of my youth ministry practice, even though the two enjoyed occasions of mutual confrontation and enrichment. Only when I began to train youth workers and pastors I realized that most of my youth ministry problems were directly related to a poor theology of youth ministry, and a poor ability to match their theology with their practice. This resulted in poor youth ministry practices, personal conflict and dissatisfaction, fear of asking broad questions about the programs and purposes, and adopting practices from overseas without thinking. For these reasons, a well-developed theology of youth ministry is important for effective ministry. This chapter explores some broad theological concepts and applies these to the practice of youth ministry.

Youth Ministry, Theology and Context

Making the gospel relevant to your youth ministry context is a matter of great urgency, since we seem to live in a time when the themes of the gospel and the concerns of our culture are poorly related, and opportunities to build bridges are neglected. The result is poor communication, “running away” from problems, and mistrust. The “outward-looking” foundations of the gospel provide a solid basis for creatively doing youth ministry by reflecting on our own context. This section will initially examine these foundations, what doing youth ministry in a particular context is all about, and the dynamic possibilities that come about when we shape our youth ministries around the relationship between the gospel and culture.

Contextual youth ministry happens when the unchanging message of the gospel connects with the human situations and problems
faced in youth work. Doing theology in context involves taking into account the meanings of the gospel, our Christian history and tradition, our youths' and our own culture, and the changes that are happening within youth culture. Since God reveals who He is not only in the Bible but also in human experience and history, we should recognize that this revelation is ongoing, and get involved in a study of the gospel in the light of our culture, looking for signs of God's presence in our culture, and then adapting our message so it is meaningful to young people. We do this by recognizing that the gospel is meaningful and valid for all cultures and times, and must be communicated in a way that is relevant and able to be understood.2

We understand the gospel more fully when we look at our culture, because the gospel is essentially about God showing who He is to people in culture. Gospel is unchanging but the contexts and cultures in which the gospel is communicated constantly change. Making the gospel genuinely relevant to young people means relating the gospel to every part of young people's lives, including their concrete situation and experiences.3 Young people's life and meaning is shaped by their experiences, so the gospel must be relevant and must make sense to them, connecting with their past, present and future; including their culture, ethnicity, language, gender, fallenness, goodness, and possibility of living a new life. Also the gospel must be meaningful to people's emotions, feelings, work, relationships, and desire.4 Doing this is, therefore, a big and challenging task, and it is based on much more than a simple or relative approach to the Christian faith.

Understanding Culture

The question remains, then, how might we shape our youth ministries by careful consideration of the gospel and our context? Niebuhr, in Christ and Culture,5 tackles this question by asking how gospel and culture might be mutually constructive and critical, and by showing how we might understand ministry and theology done in context as a sound and biblically based process. Niebuhr suggests five possible ways that the church has approached this question, and these are helpful when considering the implications of doing youth ministry in relationship to our own context.
The *Christ-against-culture* position, in its various forms, proposes that Christ is opposed to culture, and therefore rejects the idea that we should do youth ministry in relationship to our context. Upon completing my final examinations at school in 1987, I was accepted into university, took some time out to work, and then finally decided to do a Nursing degree at the University of Western Sydney. The Christian group that I was involved in at the time decided to discipline me, since they considered that university would only pollute and corrupt my mind and spiritual life, being a thoroughly secular and God-dishonouring place in their opinion, and, so, being young and easily persuaded, I did not accept the offer from the university, but continued to work in a field of unskilled labour, feeling intellectually and vocationally frustrated. Another example is an angry email that I received recently from a young man, claiming that my writings about changing and adapting worship forms in the church in order to be relevant to youth contained very liberal, misleading, and bad ideas. After pulling his argument apart using the Bible, and demonstrating the biblical basis for doing mission, worship and theology with regard to culture, this young man almost apologized to me, but not until he had publicly denounced my ‘error’. Without examining the poor thinking in his position too deeply, because of space constraints, it would be fair to say that this position makes the gospel foreign to youth culture, confuses church culture with the gospel, and often combines an unhealthy interest in human sinfulness with an urgency to have people uncritically adopt the lifestyles and values of “churched” people.

In contrast, the position of *Christ-of-culture* involves lifting up culture and its expressions over the gospel; even, in some extreme cases, making the gospel and culture the same thing. I once had a pastor friend who had a picture of a Mercedes Benz on his refrigerator, and every morning he would pray to God, using scriptures out of their original context, and claim that car as his own. I suggested to him that he had lifted up a cultural value (owning a brand new European car), over gospel-formed values. The dangers of this position can be guarded against when we do youth ministry in context carefully.
Clearly doing theology, youth ministry, and evangelism must take both the gospel and culture seriously in order to be of value, and so each of these positions has some worth. Doing youth ministry with regard to context in a thorough way, however, involves taking both the gospel and culture seriously. This avoids the gospel becoming irrelevant and new converts becoming “civilized” (by “civilized” I mean that they have become more like the church culture than the biblical model) (Christ-against-culture), and also avoids the gospel and the culture being seen as the same thing (Christ-of-culture). A more satisfactory position involves a conversation between all of Niebuhr’s five types, with a clear emphasis on Christ-above-culture, and Christ-transforming-culture (while seeing possibilities of describing Christ and culture in paradox). This ongoing conversation between the five types is informing and enriching since all five types are sometimes appropriate, no one of the types is simply and basically correct, and it is impossible to find any one correct answer to this ongoing problem (i.e. the problem of the relationship between Christ and culture).

Doing youth ministry in context, therefore, involves living the gospel within youth culture while showing youth that the gospel message and their culture can communicate, and this allows youth culture to be inserted, engaged, transformed, and validated, and to participate actively in the process. Such a contextual way of doing youth ministry not only involves a conversation between gospel and culture, but also a thorough study of biblical principles and stories, letting youth groups creatively interpret these themes, cross-cultural communication, multi-disciplinary studies, and historical lessons. Often, for example, youth pastors and communicators will use movies and contemporary music to demonstrate how gospel themes are present in the concerns, imaginings, and stories of the culture – the Matrix has been a popular option for some time now. Youth ministry that is culturally sensitive, then, is grounded, enriched, and accountable at many levels - not the least of these being biblical principles and theological themes.

Charles Kraft talks about four principles for understanding the biblical origins of doing ministry and theology in culturally sensitive ways, and how youth ministry and culture interact:

a. Scripture study and contextualization: The Bible is not the answer; it is a question. This must be done in all of our contexts and activities. It is not a formula for life. Often, people learn biblical stories and words poorly because they must engage them in active contexts.

b. God and culture: Knowing what culture is not enough. There is, therefore, a need to understand self-identity in a cultural setting. You must understand the thought culture that is present in your “church congregation” before it even is different from you. You must understand your own thought culture before you can do any thinking.

c. God regarding culture: This is the most important question. The question is not in being able to criticize people, but in being able to understand culture.

d. God regarding the situation: You need to understand that not in ignoring the situation. Australian youth are experiencing life and relationships differently throughout the world.
ways, and these four might also be seen as biblical guidelines for culturally relevant youth ministry and theology:

a. Scripture is concerned with more than just intellectual ideas and concepts — it is also concerned with how truth is communicated. The biblical challenge exists, then, to do youth ministry by living out the gospel, and by careful consideration of the cultural context. This will be done in conversation with young people, considering all of their needs rather than just proposing ideas, respecting God’s activity in young people’s lives that began long before we arrived on the scene, and with humility and mutuality. Such youth ministry often happens when our young people interact with other young people in the ordinary situations of their life - studies, shopping, work, family, and the like – and when we use mass media (movies, music, computer equipment, etc.) to convey the truths of the gospel in accessible and familiar ways.

b. God communicates with human beings through understandable and culturally relevant means. Youth ministry and theology must therefore be culturally understandable and accessible, and deeply self-examining. For it to be of real value, those Christians involved must be self-critical, and aware of the weaknesses in their own culture, jargon, thinking, expectations, agendas, and ways of doing “church”. So, for instance, many unchurched youth have a very different set of words that they use when compared with churched youth, and in order for them to appreciate the gospel we need to examine and modify our language.

c. God reveals who he is in conversation and interaction with human beings. Therefore, mutuality is good, and the culture of our young people needs the freedom to speak into the faults of our adult culture, and the culture of the church.

d. God reveals who he is and what he is going to do in concrete situations, so lives are changed when the gospel and culture meet, not in “ivory tower” or church-based practices. In Perth, Western Australia, some of our innovative leaders run an urban mission experience called AMUC, that gives youth the chance to see God and reflect on their own lives, churches, values, and theologies, through interacting with people who live on the streets of our city.
These leaders know that youth are transformed, or at least challenged, in the explosive encounter of grass-roots mission experiences.

Kraft’s above-mentioned principles for understanding the biblical origins of doing ministry in culturally appropriate ways are even better when put with Richter’s study of the way in which language links theology and culture.10

1. Christian Thinking is Always Shaped by Context. Christian thinking never happens apart from culture – theologies are developed within particular cultures, with the resources at the disposal of those cultures.

2. Theologies and Cultures are Mutually Forming. They confront and enrich each other, and this reality shapes and profoundly influences both.

3. Theologies Point to Things beyond Human Culture. One of their roles, then, is to prophetically challenge the limitations and values of contemporary cultures.

4. Like Language, Our Spiritual Lives are Shaped by Human Communities. Concrete experiences and participation in local communities of faith should enliven and activate our spiritual capacities.

5. Our Language, Person and Culture are Limited, and so Our Theology is also Limited. Since we do theology in interpersonal, cultural, community-specific contexts, they are partial and limited.

6. Like Language in Relation to Worldviews, Extending Our Theological Language Broadens Our Ability to Appreciate God and His Activities. Engaging with other theologies and faith traditions, therefore, broadens our theological vocabulary, understandings, sensitivity, and robustness.

Thinking about the truths in the gospel and the Christian tradition helps to protect us from the dangers that are present when we do youth ministry in culturally sensitive and appropriate ways; especially when married with the approaches mentioned above. We should not, however, undervalue our own experiences and the experiences of our communities. Communication between languages and cultures held up by a group’s perception and nature can create an arena for youth ministry. The need for necessity, in the word, gospel/culture, and faith, is fertile Christian life that shape and change.
communities when doing youth ministry. There is an essential link between language, culture, and theology. Youth ministry needs to be held up by a solid theology of creation, the human condition, the work and nature of Christ, and the nature of the Church and salvation. Doing youth ministry in culturally relevant ways is a theological task and necessity, in the sense that it is simply not possible to understand the gospel/culture relationship without understanding something of the fertile Christian theological tradition, and such theological landscapes shape and critique the entire process.

Making Youth Ministry Relevant to Our Culture

There are four steps in doing ministry and theology with regard to culture. They are as follows:  

1. Study the Local Culture. A deep study of the youth culture you're dealing with is the first step. This study of the culture involves getting young people involved, while gathering as much information about the youth culture as possible, since you are looking for meaning, value, and belief systems. This information might be gathered from a study of youth culture, as expressed in movies, music, magazines, books, social interactions, and Internet exchanges.

2. Study Scripture. In this second step, those involved in the cultural examination undertake a critical study of the scriptures, under the leadership of the theologian or missionary (building bridges between the culture and the bible). The study of the culture and the scriptures often happens at the same time. So a youth leader might ask his or her young people to examine the cultural data (as detailed above) through the lens of Scripture, looking for seeds of the gospel, principles that speak prophetically into the cultural values, and the heart of the gospel message as it relates to the culture under consideration.

3. Critically Evaluate Past Customs in the Light of the Relevant Scriptures. Hiebert suggests a number of ways a group might respond to their historical beliefs and traditions if the process is
carried out successfully: (a). Keeping anything that does not break biblical principles; (b). Rejecting anything that is inappropriate for Christians; (c). Adapting practices so that they might have explicitly Christian meaning, which might include getting rid of current practices and replacing them with borrowed ones, or taking on board practices that that have origins in our Christian tradition; and d. Forming fresh traditions, myths, images, and practices. I spent my formative years, for instance, in a Christian youth ministry that considered listening to secular radio as sinful, and yet over time members of that group had to evaluate that belief, and come to terms with whether that belief could be supported from the biblical evidence at hand.

4. Arrange the Chosen Practices and Theologies so they Express Bible Principles. After participating in the courageous process outlined above, the group, under the leadership of the theologian or missionary, designs the practices and theologies they have developed into a fresh form and system of meanings, practices, and theologies that relevantly portray the Christian message and substance. For me this has meant such things as leaving behind my past habit of merely inviting unchurched people to church, and, instead, holding picnic at our local park where unchurched people can interact and form relationships with Christians. In this instance, I did not have to completely leave behind my old habit, but I did have to evaluate it, and modify it in such a way that it included forming new habits and practices that were aligned with biblical concerns.

This group process will help guard against the dangers we face when trying to design our youth ministries so that they’re relevant to culture.

To be truly effective, our theologies of youth ministry must be at least changed to suit our culture, through the rigorous and self-reflective process of not only studying Scripture but also culture. Youth leaders have a high calling to dedicate themselves to accurately understand their general culture, and their youth culture in particular. While this does not necessarily mean that every offshore model and
theology will have no value for our youth ministry, it is still very important that youth ministries critically analyse these models to determine their appropriateness for our own youth needs, and be willing to adapt these to suit those needs. Merely applying overseas-developed youth ministry thinking and strategies in our own context without making necessary changes is irresponsible and self-defeating. We must go on from there to develop innovative and home grown youth ministry programmes, strategies, and theologies.

Making our youth ministry and theology sensitive to culture is a difficult yet important process, which can be well grounded in the Bible and Christian tradition. It is risky because we run into the undeniable possibility of compromising the gospel, through unexamined thinking or practices, in our attempts to be appropriate to culture. The four-step method outlined by Hiebert, the biblical maps of Kraft, the critique of the gospel/culture relationship by Niebuhr, Richter’s analysis of the ways in which language links theology and culture, Darragh’s practices of examining context, and Arbuckle’s process of preparing spiritual leaders to lead in these environments, have several checks and balances built into them. These need to be complemented by an ongoing exploration of biblical principles and stories, creative ministry practices, cross-cultural studies, and reflecting on Christian history. Such creative youth ministry opens evangelistic doors, inspires relevant worship, and leads to contemporary communication of the gospel, in such a way that the gospel and culture are mutually enriching and examining.

A Theology of God’s Kingdom Shapes Contextual Youth Ministry

An important part of shaping our youth ministry practice and theology to suit our unique culture is to respond to the concerns of the teachings of Jesus in the gospels. The gospels speak of themes that are eternal, and these speak profoundly into our effort to grow youth ministries and theologies that are culturally formed.

The pivotal theme of the teaching of Christ was the kingdom of God, and in this chapter we consider this kingdom of God as the
scope of God’s rule, but because this is a fallen earth, it is also the place in which, at any particular time, his rule is recognised and accepted. The kingdom of God has a place in human history and in the future of the world, and our understanding of it has substantial implications for our understanding of the church, youth ministry, and how we should live our lives. The mystery, life, righteousness, and demand of the kingdom of God must impact our daily lives, the shape of our ministries, and our future hope, and our understandings of the nature of the kingdom of God has profound theological implications for our practice of youth ministry.

The kingdom of God is the scope, or sphere, of God’s rule. The psalmist declares that all the ends of the earth, and all the families of the nations, are under the supreme dominion of the Lord, for he rules over the nations. The King James Version phrases it in this way, ‘for the kingdom is the Lord’s: and he is the governor among the nations.’ The people of God will worship him, telling of the glories of his kingdom, for his kingdom is, an everlasting kingdom, and ‘his dominion, endures through all generations.’ Thus the psalmist affords us a glimpse of the enormous sphere of God’s kingdom, its eternal nature, and its endurance through the stages of human history. Those who acknowledge and submit to his rule cannot help but tell of the nature and largeness of such a kingdom.

Daniel illustrates the extent of God’s kingdom in the story of the great king Nebuchadnezzar. This ruler’s dominion extended to the ends of the earth, but God made him, live in the fields like an animal, eating grass like a cow, his back wet with dew from heaven, for seven years, until he acknowledged that, the Most High dominates the kingdoms of men, and gives power to anyone he chooses. Nebuchadnezzar was forced to honour God, who lives forever, whose rule is everlasting. The song of Mary, the mother of Jesus, confirms this truth, as she proclaims that God, has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree. Paul the Apostle agrees with this understanding of the dominion of God, stating that there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Likewise Jesus before Pontias Pilate tells him that, you would
have no power over me unless it had been given you from above. This earth, however, is marred by rebellion against God. Therefore, the kingdom of God is also the place in which, at any particular time, his rule is recognised and accepted.

The kingdom of God of God is spiritually discerned, and resides at any particular time, where God’s rule is recognized and accepted. This kingdom will ultimately be evident to all for the Son of Man will come to this earth in great glory, and all his angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations. The kingdom of God is both present, in the midst of us and future.

The kingdom of God is present, for, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you. It resides wherever the King is voluntarily submitted to, and its characteristics confront the kingdoms of this world - *My kingship is not of this world; if my kingship were of this world my servants would fight... but my kingdom is not of this world.* Jesus’ kingdom defies the cultural, political, social, ethical, and religious norms of all other kingdoms - thus it may be considered a mystery, defying observation based on natural faculties. Primarily, the King and his dominion are found in the heart and life of the disciple, and then it is found in the churches.

This kingdom is precious, found by those who seek it, and requiring all that a person has, the kingdom of heaven is like a treasure a man discovered in a field. In his joy he goes and sells all that he has to buy that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it. Only through a new birth can anyone enter this kingdom. The kingdom of God is not primarily for the rich, powerful, scholarly, or racially fortunate, rather, it is for the poor in spirit and those who are persecuted for righteousness sake. Those who are great in this kingdom are not those who seek to promote themselves above others; rather, they are those who humble themselves like little children. The kingdom of God is for those who repent and believe, regardless of the condition of their previous lives. It is also for
those who persevere in righteousness, not looking back with longing for their old lives, for no one who puts his hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.

The kingdom of God is also future, for it is a final reward for the obedient and graciously forgiven, when the Son of Man comes in his glory - The King will say to those at his right hand, Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. Only those who do the will of God will enter his future kingdom, and enjoy communion with the heart of the Father.

**Jesus’ Understanding of God’s Kingdom**

Jesus’ teaching on the kingdom of God, its mystery, life, righteousness, and demand, must impact our daily lives and the shape of our youth ministries. We have established that this kingdom challenges and confronts many of the values, structures, ethics, morals, and general norms of the kingdoms of this world, even though these worldly kingdoms often reflect God through their origins in, and permeation by, his image (*Imago Dei*). This has radical implications for our lifestyles and youth ministries. It means that we as youth pastors and leaders must renounce materialism, violence, competition, covetousness, immorality, oppression of the powerless, the lust of the eyes, pride, and social evils, and inspire and guide our young people to do the same. In other words, we must renounce all that is not of the kingdom of God. Instead we must pursue the righteousness, peace and joy, which are some of the crowning characteristics of the kingdom. It also means that we must equip youth with the resources and abilities to discern those things within their culture that are opposed to the values of the Kingdom (without devaluing those things that reflect the beauty and image of God, and that provide a clear portrayal of the contours of the gospel), and to respond to this knowledge with creative change and transition in their behaviours, values, beliefs, and world views.

The kingdom of God certainly demands that we be willing to sacrifice our ambitions, reputations, worldly values, professional advancement. For the sake of the cross, we must Lynch ourselves dying to self and to the things we have, but in exchange, we are not only one of the blest, but come after me and deny ourselves, and free gift from your Lord and Master. we are - and there is no youth ministry nor any leadership sensitive yet.
advancements, relationships, financial securities, and old lives for the sake of the kingdom, and that we guide young people in the process of dying to self and living for God. The kingdom requires all that we are and have. It may not immediately demand that we give up all that we have, but it certainly requires that we be willing to do this. Sacrifice is one of the hallmarks of the kingdom. Jesus said, *If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross.* Such denial of self is complete dedication to Christ, an act of self-surrender to his ownership, and a willingness to give up all for him. Grace is a free gift from God - and yet it will cost us all that we have, and all that we are - and the process of discovering an adequate theology of youth ministry needs to take this into account as we seek to form a culturally sensitive youth ministry theology and practice.

An Example of Applying a Theology of the Kingdom to Contextually Formed Youth Ministry

An example of how a theological understanding of the nature of the kingdom of God might be applied to the practice of youth ministry, may be drawn from the need to formulate a genuine biblical theology in youth ministry in relation to God's concern for the poor, oppressed, orphaned, widowed, and needy. No theology of youth ministry is complete without a substantial emphasis on a biblical response to the social and structural needs of our present age, and when youth realize that they are freed to make an incredible social difference in their world, they often stop focussing on the seemingly restrictive obligations of Christian life and community. We will demonstrate how such a social theology of youth ministry might emerge, by focussing on one area, the biblical concern for the economically and socially poor, and then demonstrate how its implications for youth ministry and young lives are quite profound.

Jesus’ concern for personal and social liberation, freedom from oppression, and displays of genuine justice, as they are articulated in the gospels, emerge partially from the Prophets, which give examples of the manipulation and exploitation of the poor by the rich and powerful. One such example is the bride price demanded of David by
Saul. David was unable to pay this bride price to Saul for his daughter Michal, so Saul required that he kill one hundred Philistines. The rich Saul into a situation of grave peril therefore manipulated David, as a poor man. David, when he ascended the throne, likewise abused his power in the incident with Uriah, when he lusted after Uriah's wife Bathsheba. Nathan the prophet heralded the cause of the poor man who was taken advantage of by the wealthy David. Soon after, David's grandson Rehoboam led the nation to division, by threatening to treat the poor labourers even harsher than his father Solomon had: My father made your yoke heavy, but I will add to your yoke; my father chastised you with whips, but I will chastise you with scorpions. Later, the prophet Elijah was to challenge Ahab over his treachery regarding his relatively poor neighbour Naboth. Such accounts denounce the abuse of the poor and powerless by the wealthy and powerful, and the voice of God calling for justice is clear and unabashed.

The Latter Prophets scathingly condemned the exploitation and neglect of the poor, and were convinced that poverty was the result of the rich oppressing the poor, and the perversion of the judicial system. The message of the Latter Prophets on poverty was manifold: the poor must be shown adequate justice by the city elders who sat at the gate to pass judgement, for to deny them such is a sin; the wrath of the Lord is upon Israel because of the widespread maltreatment of the poor. Those who abuse the poor are regarded by God with fury; God will not forget the rich who crush and rob the poor, and his vengeance upon them will be great; the selfish accumulation of wealth is detestable to God, especially when it is seized or gained unjustly.

Jesus, then, picks up these themes in his descriptions of the nature of the kingdom of God, and is very vocal on these issues. The Gospels have a great deal to teach us on the subject of poverty. Wealth and poverty were substantial themes of Jesus' teachings. On the problematic verse Mark 4:7, John Stott writes, When Jesus said, The poor you will always have with you... he was not acquiescing in the permanence of poverty. He was echoing the Old Testament statement there will always be poor in the land (Deut. 15:11). Yet this was intended not as an excuse for complacency but as an incentive to generosity. (Deut. 15:11).

With regard to the theme, for some suggestions:

1. God has a special care for the poor. Among the luxurious and talented Young, it is necessary to look after the neglected among us: think of the poor, the sick, the disabled, the abandoned.
2. Direct the attention of the community towards the needs of the poor. Let us be vigilant towards the neglect of such things, and let us not be passive to moral change.
3. Christians must show the love of Jesus towards the poor. The example of Jesus is for the agents of God.
4. Christians must be prepared to suffer for the poor faith and the causes of justice and oppressions. Let us not forget that the poor are sometimes neglected, and that the people's duty is to examine the situation in all its social and political dimensions.
5. Generosity is the first step of the Christian walk. Generosity is the fruit of obedience. Think of the poor and the sick, and give generously, remembering that to deny them to others is to deny them to yourself.
6. None of us are what we were some years ago; none of us are what we shall be tomorrow.
generosity, as a result of which there should be no poor among you (Deut. 15:4). 14

What implications might be drawn from this 'kingdom of God' theme, for our practice and theology of youth ministry? Here are some suggestions:

1. God hates selfish accumulation of wealth and indulgence in luxurious living, coupled with neglect of the plight of the poor. Youth, therefore, are to be given opportunities to learn to renounce such behaviour, and practice compassion, and our youth ministry programming should reflect this.

2. Direct oppression of the poor, whether economically or socially, must not occur through God's people. We must examine our lives as the people of God for any contribution to the oppression and neglect of the poor and destitute, and when we find seeds of such things, we should work together toward individual and community change.

3. Christians must not pervert or deny justice to the poor or powerless. What opportunities are we giving young people to be advocates for the poor and powerless, and how are we empowering them to be agents of systemic change?

4. Christians must not indulge in mere religious activities. Genuine faith responds compassionately to the plight of the poor and oppressed. Religious rituals and observances are detestable to God while the poor and powerless are downtrodden and burdened, and the people of God turn a blind eye. So youth need to have chances to examine the religious rituals and observances in their context, to shape and own these for themselves, and to develop passionate, socially aware and involved lives.

5. Generosity must be cultivated among Christians, as an expression of the love and generosity of God, and as an act of cheerful obedience. In what ways are we giving youth the opportunity to give generously, and in proportion to what they have? When we deny them opportunities to give financially, ministerially, and personally, we limit their spiritual formation and missional passion.

6. None of God's chosen people should indulge in greedily desiring what others have, which is an evil that leads to the exploitation
and had treatment of the poor. Are we allowing youth to explore the meaning of contentment and spiritual balance in their contexts, and in the middle of the unique financial and material pressures that they might face?

7. The poor must not be discriminated against in the church, but must be treated with due respect as children of God. Youth can be heralds of peace, equality, and personal dignity, and live prophetic lives that honour the poor and downtrodden in their spiritual, vocational, and interpersonal lives.

In the midst of these incredible demands and possibilities that are presented by the kingdom of God, we are inspired and comforted by the future hope of this kingdom. This age is often characterised by grief, sinfulness, struggle, and evil, but the age to come will be one of joy, holiness, peace, rest, and comfort. Our young people will inevitably wrestle with peer pressure, sexuality, conformity, spiritual apathy, fear of the future, vocational uncertainty, and the like, yet we are compelled to help them see this often titanic struggle in the light of the now-but-not-yet nature of the kingdom of God. We provide such help when we inspire toward righteousness, offer tools of cultural analysis, reach and satisfy their experiential needs, give them opportunities to participate in the work of the kingdom, connect with their image-centeredness, and plug them into genuine Christian community. The kingdom of God in the age to come will be the home of the righteous, the whole created order will be transformed so that it reflects its original glory, we will live a transformed existence characterised by a resurrected life, fellowship will be restored with God, and this restoration will be like a wedding feast. Such descriptions of the future kingdom of God give us hope in the midst of pain and struggle, inform our practice and theology of youth ministry, encourage us to continue proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and to releasing youth to their own kinds of kingdom proclamation, for its coming is a reality established by God, and shown in young lives full of passionate witness to Christ.

Some Considerations

The above considerations are not the only matters of concern for ministry practice. The questions we have considered have been enriched by Christian reflection upon the nature of God, and upon God, as shown in the Bible. Reflecting upon these questions is crucial to understanding how we can engage young people because we face a number of questions today:

1. 'Making the invisible visible': What are the themes of faith and how are they related, and with what values in your own life?
2. What are you doing and thinking about in mind?
3. How might we connect with each other and what elements, if any, is each model to?
4. Do you and others who are engaged with the youth links theology and practice? How might we bring the language of each model?
5. Form and understanding of evangelism: How might we comprehend this, through language or through persons who regard to this your own life face, and others who are engaged with the youth links theology and practice? How might we bring the language of each model?
Some Concluding Questions

Theological formation and reflection in youth ministry does not need to be separate from the practice of youth ministry. Youth ministry practice and theology that is sensitive to youth culture, is enriched by a broad understanding of the nature of the kingdom of God, as shown in the gospels. A maturing theology of youth ministry is crucial to passion, integrity and stability in our desire to see young people become passionate disciples of Jesus Christ. Here are some questions to consider and discuss:

1. ‘Making the gospel relevant to your youth ministry context is a matter of great urgency, since we seem to live in a time when the themes of the gospel and the concerns of our culture are poorly related, and opportunities to build bridges are neglected.’ Do you agree with this thought? Why or why not? If this is a fair reflection in your context, what are its implications for the way you go about youth ministry?

2. What are some of the practical benefits of doing youth ministry, and thinking theologically about youth ministry, with cultural context in mind? What might a poor theology lead to?

3. How might you apply Niebuhr’s five models of the relationship between Christ and culture in your context? Listing the five models, what elements or expressions of your culture would you place in each model?

4. Do you agree with Richter’s analysis of the way in which language links theology and culture? How might you modify these reflections? How might they apply to your specific context – in particular, your language, culture, and theologies? What links do you perceive between these three in your situation?

5. Form a group dedicated to studying culture and to doing evangelistically motivated youth ministry, and as a group work through Hiebert’s four steps in doing ministry and theology with regard to culture in relation to some particular cultural challenges you face. Afterward, ask yourselves, what difficulties did we face, and opportunities did we perceive in this process?

6. How might the themes and parables of the kingdom of God inform and transform the way you contextually formed youth ministry and theology?
7. In what ways might you apply the seven suggested implications regarding God’s concern for the poor and oppressed to your youth ministry? How might these implications be received in your culture?

Notes

1 “Inculturation” is a word that is often used for this process. Arbuckle asserts that inculturation is “a process whereby the Christian life and message become incarnated within a particular culture, in such a way that this experience not only finds expression through elements proper to the culture in question, but becomes a principle that animates, directs and unifies the culture, transforming and remaking it so as to bring about a “new creation.”” Arbuckle, G. (1996). “The Purpose of Formation: To Foster the Art of Inculturation.” In From Chaos to Mission: Refounding Religious Life Formation (Homebush, NSW: St Pauls), 37. Such a process is critical if the gospel of Jesus Christ is to be meaningful to contemporary young people and their cultural realities.


3 Frost, M. Ibid.

4 Frost, M. Ibid.


12 Hiebert, P.G. Ibid., 110.
