

# Uncovering Youth Ministry's Professional Narrative

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## Abstract

*In the current UK youth work climate, Christian work with young people is a growing discipline. The number of professional practitioners who operate under its banner, the volume of young people with whom it works and the body of literature which informs its practice all suggest it is developing both practically and theoretically. In this piece, I will analyse Christian work with young people through its literature. A close analysis of its writings suggests that, despite its complexity, this work operates within two distinct professional narratives; youth ministry and youth work. Having made this distinction I will focus on youth ministry, analysing aspects of its self-articulation and underpinning theories to reveal a distinctive professional narrative. These observations are not intended as pejorative judgements regarding its validity. Rather, the purpose in writing is to add a perspective to the youth ministry / youth work debate and create a platform for further discussion.*

**Key words:** youth work, youth ministry, Christianity, churches, young people

THE SUBSTANTIAL growth of professionalised Christian work with young people is highlighted by Collins-Mayo et al (2010:23), who suggest there are 8000 'youth workers' employed through churches in England alone. Indeed some have made the claim that there are now more practitioners employed within this Christian environment than are practising within statutory provision (Brierley, 2000:8), although others have suggested a lower figure for Christian faith-based workers, around 5,500 full time equivalence, to that of 8,410 in the local authority (Barrett, 2006). It is worth noting, however, that these figures were calculated before the ongoing substantial cuts to statutory provision since 2010.

Similarly, there are likely to be organisations which self-articulate as 'Christian' but appear to share many of the values and outcomes of the wider youth work community. Indeed some are specifically funded by government to provide a predetermined service. In such an environment it is likely that professional paths will cross, with practitioners who have trained in one discourse practising in another – and in a world of short-term, part-time contracts some, perhaps, practising in both. Understanding youth ministry's relationship to youth work is important here, as many Christian training institutions are professionally accredited as youth work training institutions (Hayter, 2003). Recognising youth work as a professional discourse in its own right suggests that any discussion regarding Christianity's relationship to 'youth work' and the use of the term 'youth work' as a descriptor of a particular form of practice, requires dialogue which includes those from across the youth work profession.

Considering this growth in numbers and concurrent professionalisation, it is no surprise that there has been a burgeoning of specifically Christian literature (Doyle and Smith, 2002). This piece will focus on some of the more significant Christian writings, recognising that while this is illuminating, it is also limiting. However, it does have the advantage of revealing the thinking of leading practitioners and academics and their dominant ideas. Literature is also important as it plays a role in shaping a discourse, providing what Foucault called its 'internal rules' (1972: 220). Consequently, if we are to fully understand Christian work with young people, an analysis of its literature is essential. By publishing within *Youth and Policy* my aim is to promote wider understanding and encourage debate. To that end this piece should be considered as part of the renewed interest of Christian faith-based practice within the wider youth work field (Smith, 2003; Smith et al, 2015).

As previously mentioned, Christian work with young people in the UK can be interpreted as an endeavour functioning in two distinctive professional narratives, youth ministry and youth work. While this may be challenged by some within the field, I believe there is sufficient evidence to advance this perspective. After evidencing this interpretation, the remainder of this piece will focus on developing our understanding of youth ministry, starting with a review of one of its most significant models of practice, Relational Youth Ministry. This will give us a window through which to access other aspects of youth ministry's self-understanding; its internationalist construction, its underpinning theories and suggested philosophies. Finally, by gathering these observations together to present an informed perspective on youth ministry's practice and demonstrate there is sufficient evidence to confirm youth ministry as a unique professional narrative. Our first step towards this is to understand how Christian work with young people self-narrates its practice within the UK.

## Interpreting Christian Work with Young People within the UK

In setting out to uncover the nature of Christian work with young people, we are faced by an array of models and descriptions. Doyle and Smith (2002) suggest five different models, whereas Pugh (1999) suggests four. My own research discovered twenty-six differing job titles from a group of 110 practitioners (Clyne, 2008: 27). These, along with a multiplicity of distinctive descriptions of practice, present the external observer with a confusing repertoire of images.

The internalised nature of the discussion around Christian work with young people has resulted in a number of unique descriptions of practice. For example, Doyle and Smith (2002) suggest that the term 'youthwork' (as one word without spaces) is an exclusively Christian term, as in *Youthwork Magazine*, a Christian publication. This is also used in conjunction with other descriptive terms; Relational Youthwork (Griffiths, 2013; Ward, 1995b), Incarnational Youthwork (Hickford, 2003; Nash, 2008; Pimlott and Pimlott, 2008; Ward, 1996; Ward 1997). Alongside this are other titles; Contemplative Youth Ministry (Yaconelli, 2006), Post-modern Youth Ministry (Jones, 2001), Youth

Work and Ministry (Brierley, 2003), Sacralised Youth Work (Nash, 2011b), Christlike Ministry (Griffiths, 2008), Pioneer Youth Ministry (Dolby and Passmore, 2012) and Symbiotic Youth Work (Passmore et al, 2013). While this variety of models, the list of job titles and the popularity of adjectives is worthy of a paper in its own right, here it serves to highlight the internal debate around Christian work with young people. Often these varying titles are used to create distinction from other forms of Christian practices and from what is sometimes referred to as 'secular youth work' (Bardy et al, 2015: 99; Davies, 2004: 17; Free Church College, 2014; Gregory, 2006: 11; Hayter, 2003: 11; Langdon, 2004: 105).

This multiplicity of definitions might lead the external observer to conclude that it is not a unified profession, but a field of practice operating within a Christian discourse. In addition, this internalised language presents a further challenge, that while expressions look the same, they might mean something completely different. For example the description of Christian Youth Work as it presented in a book of that title, *Christian Youth Work* (Ashton et al, 2007) gives a definition of practice at odds with how youth work is generally interpreted in the UK:

*Christ does not teach us to support the personal development of young people so that they may realise their full potential... The first aim of Christian Youth Work must be to present a young person with the claims of Jesus Christ* (Ashton et al, 2007: 20).

Griffiths also presents a distinctive image of practice when he writes regarding youth ministry, discussing it interchangeably as Christian youth work:

*Youth ministry is, first and foremost, a spiritual ministry. It is out of a rich personal spirituality that we are able to form relationships which make a difference... the primary calling of a Christian youth worker is not to understand theories or management styles or even current legislation. The primary calling of a Christian youth worker is to know the will of the Father and to model his or her ministry on that of Jesus Christ... everything we teach youth workers—the theories, the theology, the good practice, the professional values—must support this primary goal* (Griffiths, 2013: 11).

From these quotations it is clear that a non-Christian youth worker who engages with a 'Christian youth work' project built on Ashton et al's interpretation of 'Christian Youth Work' is likely to encounter an alien endeavour that has little commonality with their understanding of youth work. If they were to encounter a model of practice in-tune with Griffiths' understanding of youth ministry (and, interchangeably, Christian youth work) as laid out below, which includes a commitment to addressing social injustices, they might encounter a form of practice that shares many ideals with Belton's Radical Youth Work (2010):

*The challenge, then, is to recognize that Jesus is interested in the circumstances of those to*

*whom we minister who may be oppressed because of their age or the colour of their skin or the earning potential of their parents... What we need to do is bring Christ to bear on their life circumstances. Injustice is evil. Oppression is evil. Christ will confront sin, evil, poverty, injustice and oppression and a credible salvation ministry is based on a Christology that emphasises this* (Griffiths, 2013: 66).

Griffiths' writing is also indicative of a growing commitment to holistic work within the Christian discourse (Nash, 2011a; Pimlott and Pimlott, 2008: 90). However, he takes time to warn of inadvertently losing its conversionist aspect and becoming a solely 'social work' ministry (2013: 63). It also reveals another prevailing trend, the tendency within Christian writing to use the terms 'youth work' and 'youth ministry' interchangeably (Nash, 2011b; Pimlott and Pimlott, 2008; Saunders, 2013; Ward, 1997). This further complicates any attempt by those in the wider youth work community to understand what is being written about, and limits any attempt to interpret these practices through titles alone. It also makes it difficult to write about without having to continually qualify the terms used. In this article, for reasons presented below, I will paraphrase the subject matter of these writers as 'youth ministry' and reserve the term 'youth work' to express a professional discourse as it is generally understood in the wider sector.

While all the titles used in Christian practice set out above may differ in a number of aspects, they are all broadly in tune with Ward's perspective that youth work has become secular and lost its spiritual direction (Ward, 1996: 2; Ward, 1997: 73).<sup>1</sup> They set out to define a peculiarly Christian practice and are largely confined to practitioners within the Christian youth ministry discourse. For example, Ward suggests that that youth ministry is better understood as being in line with the role of church clergy (Ward, 1997: 3), a perspective echoed in the calls for the ordination of youth ministers (Berry, 2006; Hoskins, 2006). This chimes with Griffiths' (2013) view, which anchors good youth ministry in the spiritual veracity of the worker. In contrast, a number of practitioners have suggested an alternative locus, setting out to implant Christian work with young people within the youth work discourse (Brierley, 2003; Ellis, 1990; Green, 2010; Passmore, 2004; Pugh, 1999; Richards, 1999). For example, Passmore writes 'I fully endorse the fundamental principles of Youth Work: empowerment, participation, equality of opportunity and informal education' (2004:15).

He goes on: 'I want to lose the term "youth ministry" as it has too many connotations and links to the ecclesiocentric position' (2004:20). Brierley takes another approach and suggests he is bringing together the values of youth work and the practice of youth ministry. He terms this 'youth work and ministry'; youth ministry as a specialism within youth work. While he suggests he is reuniting Youth Work to youth ministry, bridging a gap (Savage et al, 2006:17), what Brierley has done is to express youth work from a theistic, rather than secular discourse, what we might term Christian faith-based (CFB) youth work. His focus on what he calls 'the practice of youth work and ministry' (2003:149) through fellowship, worship and mission could all have secular counterparts;

association, personal authenticity and service, for example. That said, his role in re-validating youth work as a Christian endeavour is significant.

By drawing out the narratives within the literature there is sufficient evidence for us to suggest the following conclusions. Firstly, regardless of the variety of descriptions, Christian work with young people engages with the aim of enabling transformation which includes (sometimes exclusively) a turning to Christianity. This focus may be problematic as it appears to be in contrast with an understanding of youth work. Green writes:

*Solving the problems for a young person by offering a single religious or political solution, or the conditional offer of belonging in exchange for membership, is not informal education and is not youth work (Green, 2010: 117).*

In a similar vein we should also consider Sercombe's observation, when he said that youth work, 'is not about telling' (2010a: 33). He also adds that '[i]t is absolutely legitimate for a young person's spiritual life to be one of the questions we pursue in the youth work encounter' (2010a: 33).

Secondly, while we can agree with Nash (2011a: xiii) that youth ministry is a broad discipline, it is misleading to describe all Christian work with young people as ministry. The examples above suggest that there are two distinct disciplines at work, youth ministry and youth work, and while we have highlighted that recently these terms have been used interchangeably, traditionally there have been some attempts to distinguish practice. For example, the idea that youth ministry works inside the church and reaches out; youth work operates outside the church and journeys with young people into faith (Savage et al, 2006: 17; Ward 1997: 1). Including this, if we draw together other differences we can begin to see the framing of two distinctive narrations of practice.

Through the literature an observable distinction emerges, between those who find the locus of their practice in terms of Christian ministry and those who perceive it as youth work (Campbell 2006: 12), between those who articulate their practice as grounded in their own personal spirituality, intentionally shared (Griffiths, 2008: 18; Griffiths, 2013: 11; Nash, 2009; Saunders, 2013: 22), and those who primarily articulate it in accordance with professional youth work values (Brierley, 2003; Passmore, 2004). A related difference might be suggested between those whose practice is led by prioritising the need for generating a Christian commitment (Collins-Mayo et al, 2010; Griffiths, 2013; Nash, 2011b) and those who are more holistic in their interpretation of Christianity (Brierley, 2003; Passmore, 2004). These two different emphases are summed up by Savage et al (2006: 17) who state that 'youth ministry tends to focus on transformative spirituality, whereas youth and community work is primarily working with formative spirituality'. A further suggested characteristic of youth ministry is that its participants generally hold to the same 'Christian' world view (Savage et al, 2006: 17).

While it might be said that these are differences of narrative rather than practice, as with any professional discourse they cannot avoid shaping practice, and are sufficient to enable us to concur with Hall when he writes:

*I would define youth work as work with young people that is based on a professional system of values and skills that are shared beyond Christianity and which (for Christian youth workers) faith is a central motivating factor but it may remain implicit... youth ministry I define as work for a church or Christian organisation in which faith is not just a motivating factor, but the explicit purpose and message of the work (2007: 14).*

Accepting this, it is important to stress a number of caveats. I'm not suggesting CFB youth work practitioners are any less Christian than youth ministers, or that youth ministry is inherently more Christian, than CFB youth work. Also, I am not suggesting that youth work is more 'professional' than youth ministry or that these distinctions are easily discernible in practice. Within the Christian landscape and its menagerie of terms and descriptions, practitioners' job titles are likely to be tied to roles provided by their organisations, which may or may not reflect their actual practice. Other influences such as funding sources and the perceived aims of practice might also play a role. The literature suggests, that within Christian practice, there would appear to be a freedom to adopt 'youth work' or 'youth ministry' in an interchangeable manner. While Brierley (2003) might argue that this is because practitioners are youth workers all the time and youth ministers when the occasion requires, it is equally plausible to suggest the reverse, in that the practitioner sees themselves as being youth minister all of the time and adopts a youth work approach in certain situations. It might be easier to accept that someone who considers themselves to be 'called to ministry' is likely to run an open youth club without setting aside their belief that its success is dependent on their own personal spiritual integrity, rather than the informal approach they adopt. A youth minister may be able to move between providing an open youth club and leading the youth fellowship without troubling too much about their title. Alternatively because of this duality they may take considerable care and trouble over their job descriptor.

With these caveats in place, what I am setting out to do here is to challenge the use of youth ministry and youth work as interchangeable narratives of practice, something which can only lead to an environment where both become devoid of any, but the most superficial of meaning. I am also suggesting that some descriptions of 'Christian youth work', Ashton and Moon's as cited above for example, may be better understood as being youth ministry, regardless of them using the term 'youth work'. What exists at present within the Christian sector is a confusing amalgam of the two professional narratives which inhibits us from gaining a clear understanding of its breadth. In what follows, I will focus on developing an understanding of what might be broadly termed 'youth ministry' (while recognising the nuances within its literature). I have deliberately avoided distinguishing between Christian faith – based youth work and youth work as it is generally understood, acknowledging that the articulation of youth work from within a Christian discourse

is worthy of a paper on its own. Here I am content to distinguish youth work from youth ministry and to acknowledge youth work is a professional narrative with recognised values, methodologies and competences which are rooted in a number of distinctive traditions and discourses (Furlong, 2013: 244; Smith, 1988: 51; Tett, 2010: 5). Accepting this, some attempt has to be made to delineate differences. Therefore at this point it is sufficient to suggest that youth ministry rhetoric is distinctive to that of youth work, and that youth ministry's loci of good practice is the spiritual integrity of the worker. To see this more clearly I will make a more detailed investigation of one of its dominant models of practice, Relational Youth Ministry.

## Relational Youth Ministry

Relational Youth Ministry has recently become synonymous with the more Christian sounding title 'incarnational' youth ministry (Griffiths, 2013: 5). Pimlott and Pimlott suggest that it 'describe[s] the ways in which we as youth workers can endeavour to "be" Jesus to young people, enabling them to see Christ in us' (2008: 75). As a methodology it is meant to mirror the way Christ engaged with his society. Ward has written extensively on this approach (1995b; 1997) suggesting it is a vocation, a calling from God (Ward, 1995a: 15). It's overarching idea is that "'being with" gives the relational base from which evangelism might develop' (1997:13).

Relational Youth Ministry has a number of steps, the first being:

- Contact: 'Contact time is first and foremost about spending time with a particular group of young people' (Ward, 1997: 49). It is low impact engagement as young people live out their daily life.
- Extended contact: This involves moving away from the initial area of contact – going on a trip, or going for a burger with the young people. It can also involve the youth minister joining with the group of young people as they take a trip into town. In this case the youth minister hasn't organised anything they just go along with the group. This extended contact is purposeful as its intention is to deepen the relationship (1997: 52).
- Proclamation: This includes appropriate ways of sharing the Christian message. This also involves a shift in power, where the youth minister claims power back. Ward writes:

*Proclamation involves another crucial change in the dynamics of the relationship between young people and the youth minister. The youthworker needs to come to terms with a movement away from being an adult friend who occasionally organises trips and events to someone who overtly tells the gospel message (1997: 59).*

This changing relationship includes three further aspects:

- Nurture: This 'is when people start to respond to the gospel' (Ward, 1997: 62).
- Church: Attending or establishing church; a worship community is a must (1997: 65).
- Independence: The ultimate aim is for the young person to become independent from the youth

minister. This is to be sensitively judged. Too much dependency is a form of religious abuse (Ward 1997: 66). Too quick and it may lead to confusion and 'chaos'.

More recently, the idea that a good relationship is sufficient to instigate a faith conversation has been challenged (Mayo et al, 2004: 52). Griffiths has also challenged some existing models of Relational Youth Ministry, with its Laissez-faire approach to engaging with young people (2008: 15), branding them 'an excuse for theological and ministerial laziness' (2008: 15; 2013: 3). He set himself the task of refreshing it, by highlighting some positive aspects; its focus on social justice, holistic wellbeing and its commitment to the young person regardless of whether they develop a faith perspective (Griffiths, 2013: 106).

From a youth work perspective there are some aspects of Ward's Relational Youth Ministry which might require further exploration. How does the practitioner balance their professional requirements against their 'friendship'? For example, many youth ministry programmes meet in the homes of the workers, they are more likely to share private telephone numbers, befriend young people on social media and socialise out-with the arena of practice. At an engagement level the opaque nature of certain boundaries may make some youth workers uncomfortable. This ambiguity of roles is touched on by Ward, in response to a potential shop-lifting incident, he advises:

*The youthworker is not saying that shoplifting is wrong, therefore they must stop doing it. The youthworker is saying, however, that shoplifting is wrong and for my sake please don't do it. This is an appeal to relationship.* (Ward, 1997: 55)

This raises the question, of what should happen if the young person shoplifts while the youth minister is in the group. What responsibility does the youthworker have to the shop owner or wider community to ensure appropriate action is taken?

Similarly, there is also a duality of relationship when the youth minister organises trips away; being part worker, part friend. It is far from clear how the worker who is a friend should respond to issues such as, buying alcohol, drug taking, underage sex, without compromising the practitioner as a professional or vice-versa, compromising the friendship with the young people. To rely on the strength of relationship to maintain appropriate behaviour might be thought at best to be naïve. To request an act be stopped for 'my sake' also raises some questions about the youth minister's methodology of presenting clear ethical boundaries. It is precisely this ambiguity that causes Sercombe (2010b: 79) to suggest that friendship is an inadequate professional relationship for ethical youth work.

A similar ethical question arises in developing a 'friendship' with young people and then using their issues, struggles and conversations to acquire funding (Ward 1995a: 25). Selling yourself to the young people as a friend and presenting yourself to funding bodies as a project presents a clear



ethical dubiety, especially if the young people are unaware that this is being done. Can you honestly present yourself to a group of young people as a 'friend' and simultaneously complete a funding application which requires you to categorise them or set out proposed targets and outcomes?

However, perhaps the most serious ethical concern that youth work practitioners may have, is Ward's belief that the youth minister doesn't have to be clear from the outset that they have a conversionist agenda, rather they can choose an appropriate moment (Ward 1997: 58). This would contrast with Sercombe's view where 'If I am working for a faith organisation, they [the young people] should know' (2010a: 33). Ward's approach to Relational Youth Ministry suggests that although he has adopted a holistic understanding of practice, similar to other youth ministry models, he continues to frame it within a conversionist agenda.

Ward's understanding of Relational Youth Ministry juxtaposes it against both church-based youth ministry — 'the youth worker who is locked inside a church context is evangelistically and culturally severely limited' (Ward, 1997: 4), and youth work:

*When youth work becomes a 'profession', young people tend to become a 'client group' or 'cases'. In Christian relational care a high priority is placed on the personal in relationships. Christian youth ministry is not a job, it is a calling. The sense of vocation and personal involvement in building relationships means that young people are treated essentially as friends, not cases or clients. The youth ministers are involved in the local community and in the lives of the young people for reasons which arise from the core of who they are, that is their faith commitment. In a sense Christian relational care rests on personal rather than professional relationships (Ward, 1995a: 23).*

From within youth work this critique is likely to be challenged. The monopolisation of the term 'relational' is questionable. Most, if not all, youth workers would understand relationship to be a core component of their practice. To have that descriptor applied solely to a model of youth ministry is bemusing. As Sercombe (2010a: 12) observes, defining the relational engagement with the young person as client is not about professional distance, it is ensuring that youth workers inhabit a purposeful ethical relationship of mutual respect. Many youth workers would also understand themselves to be involved in a vocational endeavour. What distinguishes youth ministry from youth work is not its commitment to relationship, but its proposal that good practice is first and foremost reliant on the spiritual veracity of the worker, its conversionist agenda and the distinctive professional and ethical boundaries.

US theologian, Andrew Root has influenced understandings of UK youth ministry practice. His text *Revisiting Relational Youth Ministry: From a Strategy of Influence to a Theology of Incarnation* (Root, 2007), in particular, has played a significant role in articulating youth ministry with Root also having been a guest lecturer at the Centre for Youth Ministry, England's largest

Christian youth ministry training programme. Jonny Baker, at the time, an influential voice in youth ministry, blogged in response to Root's book: 'I have just read Andrew Root's revisiting relational youth ministry. It really is an excellent book. If you teach youth ministry or are doing it or both I suggest you get a copy (sic)' (2008: web). Baker recommends this book despite Root using an example, albeit from a movie, of a youth counsellor using violence against a young person when they perceived the young person to have spoken inappropriately (Root, 2007: 181). Root sees this as being a positive act and this appears to have been accepted uncritically within the UK, although Baker does acknowledge some difficult aspects of translating examples of practice into a UK setting.

However, we also find a similar situation in a text from a UK author. In Hickford's (2003) book *Essential Youth: Why the Church Needs Young People*. Described as 'an essential book' (Saunders, 2013: 19), Hickford describes his time at a Boy's Brigade camp, where, because he sensed a failure to engage with the young people in a manner which would enable him to communicate the Christian message, he organised an impromptu assault on a neighbouring Scout camp, of which he writes: 'Crucially though, it completely changed the atmosphere of the camp and the lads' interest in Christianity. No longer was the Christian gospel threatening to their culture —it was actually leading the way' (2003: 148).

Drawing together the above would lead us to conclude that there are approaches within youth ministry which, from an ethical perspective, sit uncomfortably with youth work. Relational Youth Ministry's distinctive narration leads to distinctive boundaries, ethics and models of practice. However, we can also see that while conversion is important for all youth ministry, its relationship to other aspects of human flourishing is understood in a variety of ways. Some writers ignore it (Ashton et al, 2007), others accept it as an intrinsic part (Griffiths, 2013, Nash, 2011a). So to fully appreciate why it is that youth ministry has become shaped in this way we must look more broadly at its influences, some of which come from beyond the UK.

## Youth Ministry's International Context

As we move the discussion forward, it should be understood that youth ministry is not a title indigenous to the UK. It is a global brand, strongly influenced from the USA (Pimlott and Pimlott, 2008: 25; Ward, 1996: 12, 27) and is generally evangelical in flavour. Evangelicalism has always had a transatlantic facet (Bebbington, 1988: 74; Rennie, 1994: 333) and youth ministry is no different (Borgman, 1999: ix; Kett, 1977: 201). Cannister (2001: 82) suggests youth ministry came into existence at the end of the nineteenth century and its continuing transatlantic nature can be seen in the names of agencies which continue to operate internationally. Similarly, within its literature stream, this transatlantic relationship can also be found. For example Fields writes in the acknowledgements in his book, *Purpose Driven Youth Ministry* (1998) of the support he received from Jonny Baker, at the time a leading UK youth ministry specialist. Agenda for Youth

Ministry (Borgman and Cook, 1998) draws together youth ministry specialists from both the USA and Europe, and, in another important publication, *Four Views of Youth Ministry and The Church* (Senter III et al, 2001) we find practitioners from the USA and South Africa comparing models of engagement with little regard for wider geographic or sociological distinctions. Ward's dual publication, *Youthwork and the Mission of God: Frameworks for Relational Outreach* (1997) which was republished in the USA as *God at the Mall: Youth Ministry That Meets Kids Where They're At* (2001), has been described by Doyle and Smith (2002) as a 'very significant book'. The American version includes a foreword by Dean Borgman (a leading USA youth ministry specialist) where he writes:

*Pete [Ward] has had a profound impact on youth ministry in the United Kingdom and around the world... Professors and leaders have all been very impressed with Pete's style and wisdom... [and concludes with the words] you may feel a bit uncomfortable being confronted by this bright and challenging Brit. Please, push through it Don't miss the crucial questions Pete is raising for our profession in these critical times* (Borgman in Ward, 2001: ix-xi).

This global perspective is also evidenced by the existence of the academic organisation which unites youth ministry specialists from around the world, the *International Association for the Study of Youth Ministry* (IASYM).

These observations suggest that to enhance our awareness of the UK's interpretations of youth ministry, its transatlantic nature must be borne in mind. This internationalism has a distinctive theoretical base which we can now move on to explore.

## Youth Ministry's Theoretical Base

Youth ministry's strong theoretical base is reflected in its literature which is infused with a number of distinctive theories. One of its foremost being an interpretation of the 'young person' as 'adolescent' (Adams, 1995; Nash and Palmer, 2011). Borgman considers adolescence to be a 'divine creation' (1999: 9) and views adolescents as 'the largest... unreached people group in the world' (1999: 4). Clark writes of adolescence as being, 'the only real marker available to youth growing up in Western and urbanized societies' (2001a: 47). It is worth noting here that although Adolescent Development contains a breadth of theories (Muuss, 1996), youth ministry literature appears to be committed to its psychological aspects. Gerali writes that:

*Guys are wired differently from girls from the beginning. But when adolescence sets in, it can appear as though their wiring has gone bad... these days we have a better understanding of what makes guys uniquely masculine and how to help him navigate through the storm and stress of adolescence and onto manhood* (2008: 19).

From the UK we get a warning for youth ministers: 'adolescence is a minefield of change. Those who stomp around in minefields are likely to end up maimed' (Tilley 1995:59).

Perhaps we should not be surprised at the relationship between youth ministry and adolescent development theory. Kett writes that 'adolescent psychology came into the field from the direction of religion rather than education or criminology' (1977: 204), and that it was particularly influential in Christian work (1977: 236). This negative interpretation of adolescence chimes with Doyle and Smith (2002) who suggest that it is one of a number of 'dubious concepts' adopted by youth ministry. That said, the emphasis on adolescent theories might also reveal youth ministry's continuing American influence, where American youth work; youth development, is also influenced by these theories (Lerner, 2006) and where there is a strong focus on individual psychological wellbeing (Grotevant and Cooper, 1998: 20; Rattansi and Phoenix, 1997: 125).

More significantly, adolescence has also been accused of being a tool through which to promote middle class qualities in young people (Kett, 1977: 113; Sommer, 1978: 21). Also it is a concept which is understood to contain a number of unhelpful images, e.g. 'Storm and Stress' and biological determinism (Kett, 1977: 243; Wyn and White, 1997: 53-57). Lesko writes that:

*[It]has a legacy that includes racism, sexism and classism and works to reinstate social hierarchies. Another problem with development is that it generally refers to what occurs at the intra-individual, and it is hard to paste on context to what is essentially an individualized phenomenon (2001: 194).*

Equally significant is that it subjectivises young people: 'The use of the term "adolescence" is a signal that the young people being referred to are being objectified, categorised and judged' (Wyn and White, 1997: 57).

Reviewing the above suggests that youth ministry's emphasis on adolescence is in contrast to youth work. Sercombe writes: '[W]hile the concept of adolescence continues to shape public discourse about young people, its rejection by youth work is well founded' (2010a: 17). However, it is worth noting here that as a term it is still used in some youth work literature (Wheal, 1999; Young, 2006).

A second categorisation occurring within youth ministry is in its commitment to generationalism (Codrington and Grant-Marshall, 2004; Kinnaman, 2011; Nash, 2011a) which can also carry negative overtones. Borgman writes: 'How can a generation programmed to act out individual indulgence, violence, and sexual promiscuity move back to responsible behaviour and regard for the common good?' (1999: xxiii). Within Christian literature more generally, Lynch observes that generationalism became influential in the 1990s. It stereotyped young people as being suspicious of institutional religion but yearning after 'meaning and community' (2010: 33). Lynch concludes that, while significant, generationalism is inadequate in aiding understanding of how people engage

with religion. He writes that it tends 'to encourage broad sociological typologies that account for religious and spiritual patterns across the whole of society' (2010: 34). A perspective in tune with Wyn and White's observation:

*The notion of a 'generation X', similarly, has been used to describe a generation without any real features or definitive characteristics except lack of a real presence in the world... [Which at an] analytical level, serve[s] to trivialise and make abstract the lived practices of different categories of youth in a way which distorts the social differences and diversity of experience among young people. Put simply, they provide a picture of young people which is factually incorrect (1997: 77).*

Thirdly, and not unconnected, is an emphasis on youth culture which, within the context of youth ministry can carry negative overtones (Hutchcraft, 2000: 5; Jones, 2001: 46; McDowell, 2000a: xi; McDowell, 2000b: 9). Here again we see youth ministry's transatlantic influence with Giroux observing that in American media youth issues begin to read more like 'dispatches from a combat zone' (1996: 26).

Youth culture is also depicted as something contrasting adult culture (Borgman 1999: 73). Gerali writes: 'Being like an adolescent involves immersing oneself in their culture... A youth worker must understand that she is entering into another (foreign) community' (2001: 288). Equally strident is Gardner's observation that 'youth culture is a construct of our lifetime' which exists in conflict with wider culture, it has led to divisions in families, and 'divided whole nations in opposing political stances and differing definitions of what constitutes the moral consensus' (2008: 12). This confirms Strommen's observation that what he terms the 'fallacy' of the generation gap, has been uncritically accepted by youth ministry (2001a: 147).

In addition, a further problem with the use of 'youth culture' as a tool through which to frame practice is its generalising nature. Wyn and White write that 'the concept of youth culture takes on a descriptive and universalising character in much the same way as the notion of "generational consciousness"' (1997: 75).

Finally, within youth ministry the term post-modernism is widely used (Hickford, 2003; Jones, 2001; Pimlott and Pimlott, 2008). In terms of youth ministry it is often used as an inexact description which has created a new way of looking at the world, adopted by young people of the late twentieth, early twenty-first century (Jones, 2001). Again, within youth ministry it can be seen as negative in much the same way as youth culture (Dean, 2001: 29). However Bruce highlights a potential difficulty with these traumatic interpretations of postmodernity, claiming it to be 'too blunt an instrument,' it's distinctiveness often exaggerated (2002: 232). Kett (1977: 271) observed that 'raising postmodern youth culture to the level of a philosophy' was to place it within the universalising tradition of G. Stanley Hall.

Primarily, what we have uncovered here is that youth ministry has adopted theories to construct a theoretical base which fits a specific world view. Kett (1977: 74) also observed that some of these ideas, the world being a dangerous place, for example, have a long history in youth ministry, while others like youth being a distinct people group, are more recent concepts. This construction is in line with Noll's observation of more general evangelical practice where:

*The distrust of inherited authorities – both ecclesiastical and educational – means that evangelicals have repeatedly attempted to invent first principles for themselves... At its best, much evangelical thought reflects savvy practical wisdom rather than thorough foundational reasoning (Noll, 2004:244).*

From a youth work perspective we can acknowledge that while all these theories contain valid and informative insights, if fused together they create a problematic lens, infused with an attitude of negativity through which to interpret the 'young person'. When used in a populist manner, these theories serve to objectify and generalise 'youth'. They encourage the 'othering' of young people and do not allow for differing social class, home environment, educational experience or regional, cultural or local social and community contexts.

These reflections on youth ministry suggest that its distinctive narration has shaped a peculiar practice, which, when combined with its internationalism, and its commitment to particular theoretical perspectives emphasises its unique nature. Moving on from these theories we now turn to a brief reflection on youth ministry philosophies.

## Youth Ministry's Philosophy

Strommen summarises Field's 'philosophy of youth work', as set out below:

- Recognise God's power through personal humility ...
- Submit your abilities to God and allow his power to work through who you are ...
- Focus on being a person of God before doing the work of God ...

suggesting that it is a 'A philosophy of youth ministry which centres in a partnership with God' (Strommen, 2001b: 121).

In the UK, Sally Nash edited a book, *Youth Ministry: A Multi-Faceted Approach*, where she suggested 'a philosophy for youth ministry' (2011a: xiii) which is framed in terms of Shalom and the desire to spread peace (2011a :xv). She provides a set of Bible verses through which she suggests that this philosophy of Shalom also concurs with the outcomes of the UK's Westminster government's Child safeguarding initiative *Every Child Matters*:

- Be healthy ...
- Stay safe ...
- Enjoy and achieve ...

- Make a positive contribution ...
- Achieve economic well-being ... (HM Government 2003: 6-7)

It might be said these philosophical perspectives would benefit from more detail and that each is quite distinct from the other. However, they are similar in as much as they flow from within a Christian world view, with neither demonstrating any clear appreciation of structural inhibitors to human flourishing. In one sense, along with others (for example Shepherd, 2013) they tend to maintain our perception of youth ministry as having a distinct self-narration. They also differ from youth work whose philosophy has been suggested, by some in the 'secular' field, as *phronēsis* (a form of practical wisdom or praxis) (Ord, 2012; Smith, 1994: 76). At a practice level, these broadly defined philosophies are unlikely to address the universalising tendency of youth ministry theories which have assisted the development of generic product-focused, delivery-orientated approaches (Pimlott and Pimlott, 2008).

### Product Focused Practice.

Within the UK, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that most youth ministry continues to operate within a generalising, product focused framework. Russell, writing from within this context, is perplexed at the '[v]ast resources have been made available for... Franchise Church...' (2007: 106). Other key voices have made similar observations (Pimlott and Pimlott, 2008: 75, Savage et al, 2006: 158).

This combined with a recognised over-abundance of ready-to-use resources (Doyle and Smith, 2002; Mallon, 2008: 63) has perhaps done more to shape youth ministry in the UK than any implicit understanding of the theories which underpin it. Both *Four Models of Youth Ministry* (Senter III et al, 2001) and Fields' (1998) *Purpose Driven Youth Ministry*, (PDYM) pay little heed to social or cultural variations. Programmes dominate and Clark asserts in the book's opening pages, that PDYM was to be 'the standard by which all youth ministry programmes are judged for years to come' (Clark in Fields, 1998: no pagination), with good youth ministry practice revolving around adopting the most appropriate model (Clark, 2001b: 110). The nature of this is compounded by what Oestergaard and Hall (2001: 213) suggest is a preoccupation in youth ministry: the hunt for the new, and the uncritical adoption of other models developed in different contexts. They go on to highlight the difficulty this creates: where practitioners utilise a methodology which is inappropriate for their local situation or the specific needs of young people.

According to Yaconelli (1999: 451), current American youth ministry models were created to engage with post world-war two white, middle class young people. They were built on a normative view of the young person, family and church (Borgman, 1999: 123) a situation, which according to some still persists (Senter III and Senter, 2010). The significance of this is that for UK youth ministry, sociologically speaking, many models adopted here are decades out of date (Clark, 2004:

4). The identification of youth ministry models with a specific social grouping would also appear to be true for the UK (Pimlott and Pimlott, 2008: 22; Savage et al, 2006: 17; Ward, 1996: 41). Ward (1996: 79) wrote that Christian work with young people 'on the edge of society' has generally lacked high levels of support. Simpson's (2008: 147-153) reflection on his work would confirm this. Therefore, in general it might be suggested that while it is not exclusively the case, much of youth ministry operates on a spectrum ranging from entertainment to conversion (Savage et al, 2006: 17) for middle class young people.

Before drawing these threads together I should also take time to acknowledge that there is a growing discomfort being expressed about youth ministry from specialists and researchers from the USA, where critical observations are being made. For example, it has been suggested that youth ministry, rather than supporting young people into adulthood has dumbed down the Church into an adolescent expression of the Christian faith (Bergler, 2012: 174; Senter III and Senter, 2010: 309). Equally serious, from a youth ministry perspective must be Smith and Denton's (2005: 171) suggestion that within the USA a different form of faith is developing unnoticed within religious traditions. What they term Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD), what Dean called 'an imposter faith' (2010: 6). MTD is a world view which accepts the existence of a God who created the universe and watches over humanity. However, it also sees God as being generally distant from every-day life, except when he is called upon to intervene to resolve a particular troubling situation or issue. MTD is built around the belief that what God requires is for people to live a 'good' moral life and in return God will enhance their personal happiness and take them to heaven when they die (Smith and Denton, 2005: 162-171).

Further there is also a growing recognition that while youth ministry may be successful at maintaining contact with Christianised young people, it is failing to create a dynamic where these young people maintain that faith into adulthood (Dean, 2010: 11; DeVries, 2008: 31; Kinnaman and Lyons, 2007: 23). The discussion amongst researchers is not whether this is happening. The discussion is whether this is a new development (Kinnaman, 2011) or has youth ministry always been failing (Smith and Snell, 2009: 5991). Bergler suggests that 'At their best, youth ministries attract and at least temporarily retain teenagers who might otherwise leave the church' (2012: 220).

While only highlighting this in passing, it does raise questions as to youth ministry's effectiveness as a proselytising endeavour, especially in an UK environment where meaningful church connection is significantly less than in the USA and where the secularising discourse creates a distinctive religious environment (Bruce, 2002: 227). For example, in the USA around two thirds of young people have a significant church commitment (Dean, 2010: 10; DeVries, 2008: 32; Kinnaman and Lyons, 2007: 142) (although recently what this means from a faith perspective has been questioned (Smith and Denton, 2005: 21; Smith and Snell, 2009: Loc. 5623). Within the UK those who have a meaningful connection with the church is around ten percent (Ashworth and Farthing, 2007: 9; Brierley, 1993: 90) and only eight percent say they would speak to a youth worker if they wanted



to discuss their worries (Chamberlain and Black, 2008: 20). While I am not in a position to address these criticisms, it should be an important area for youth ministry's own research.

Now drawing all these strands together, I can acknowledge that much of what I've discussed here is not new. It chimes with Ward's (1996) appraisal and with the views of others (Greene, 2010; Pimlott and Pimlott, 2008), who suggest that in general youth ministry tends to other young people. Its methodology turns young people into consumers, creates a Christianized sub-culture, keeps young people childlike and isolates them from the perceived dangers of a forbidding outside culture as well as appearing to excluding 'undesirable' young people from its groups.

All this would lead us to suggest that the influences which shape youth ministry and create its product-based practice are not superficial, they run deep. There is equilibrium between youth ministry's self-narration, its internationalism and the theories and practice which shape and direct it. Taken together the predominant result is a product-focused, delivery-orientated pedagogy.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, we ought to remind ourselves that defining Christian work with young people is a complex issue due to the varieties of titles, names and descriptions used. The sheer volume of publications along with a lack of academic rigour in much of the literature (Doyle and Smith, 2002) can lead to an inevitable element of subjectivity. However, some clear conclusions can be drawn.

Firstly, there is sufficient evidence within the current literature to suggest a distinction between youth ministry and youth work within the Christian discourse. The former understands its practitioners to be ministers, closely related to the clergy, while the latter is a discipline embedded in the professional narrative of youth work. Similarly, youth ministry narrates its practice through the Christian spirituality of the worker, whereas youth work is primarily narrated as a commitment to a set of professional values.

Secondly, youth ministry's self-narration, approaches, theories and practices create a distinctive professional narrative which has constructed stereotypical, negative images of young people and society and culture. As a consequence it generally operates in a distinctive programme based, delivery focused educational pedagogy. Youth work practitioners are likely to struggle with this othering hermeneutic as it conflicts with a commitment to informal education and experiential learning. Youth work may also consider youth ministry to exhibit a controlling agenda with an emphasis towards Christian conversion and the use of ministry models which effectively exclude certain 'types' of young people. There are also aspects of youth ministry's uniqueness that are likely to prove unhelpful, in terms of its self-description, these have included the deliberately juxtaposing of itself to youth work. This may have resulted in isolating a significant proportion of

youth ministry from culturally relevant youth work ideas, theories and educational perspectives.

However, this is not universally so, we have seen that youth ministry is a broader field than this. Despite possible reservations regarding the nature of its boundaries and ethical duality, Relational Youth Ministry with its commitment to holistic wellbeing and stress on social justice clearly shares some ideals familiar to youth work. That it operates in a distinctive Christian discourse may not be inherently problematic. Ultimately, how youth ministry's narrative is viewed will also depend on our perspective on the acceptability of Christianity having a voice within our secularising paradigm.<sup>2</sup>

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## Notes

- 1 Ward acknowledges the complexity of this as Christian practitioners working within youth work may also have a Christian understanding of their practice.
- 2 Williams, R. 2012. *Faith in the Public Square*, London, Bloomsbury. suggests two theories of secularisation; 'programmatic secularism' which aims to exclude certain voices from the public square and 'procedural secularism' which creates a social environment which ensures that all voices can engage in discussion and dialogue. Youth workers may hold with either of these views.