Title: Experience and Christian Nurture in Youth Ministry
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Abstract: To what extent might experiential learning theory find a home in youth groups, in post-Christian North America? This paper initially explores what is theological about the experiences of young people at Christian summer camps; a setting where attention to experience is a significant part of ministry practice. Thereafter a theology of experience is developed. Finally, practical vision is offered, situating experience within theological teaching in church-based youth ministries.

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In the face of documented faith attrition among young people, a growing body of recent scholarship identifies Christian summer camps as significant settings for spiritual growth. In conversation with such scholarship, the case can be made that part of the apparent success of the Christian summer camp is on account of the Christian nurture it provides in the mode of experiential learning. In the camp setting, the Christian life is nurtured from a base of shared experience, and age-appropriate theological reflection about these experiences. By comparison, church-based youth ministries can tend toward instruction in Christian ideas. In such church-based settings, Christian truth is being articulated, but young people may not find the message compelling if they struggle to see its relevance in lived experience.¹ Where camps have come to nurture the Christian life—a life lived in response to Christ—by attending to experience, churches may have assumed interest in the Christian life would arise from predominately from Christian instruction. Yet the future of youth ministry appears to exist in a post-Christian North American culture, where individual interest and preference are valued over instruction from an authority.² Following the intuitions of summer camps, the youth group of the future will do well

¹ Dykstra, Growing in the Life of Faith, 154–55.
in attending to the theological dimension of young people’s lived experiences. Through shared experience in the Christian life together, and the theological exploration of experience, the youth ministry of the future might aim to awaken young people’s desire for the Christian life through revealing God’s actions in the midst of young people’s lives.

A starting point for reflection on experience can be the Christian summer camp, but reformatting church into the style of camp is not the aim of this discussion. Rather, cues for church-based ministry might be taken from the experiential orientation camp ministries have discovered intuitively. The foundational conviction arising from this exploration is this: Christian instruction finds greatest reception among those whose experience requires Christian theology to be made intelligible. In this frame, the Christian nurture of young people depends as much on Christian instruction, as it does upon a set of experiences in which Christian instruction may find a home. In describing the significance of attention to experience for youth ministry, three movements will be made. First, a survey of studies on the Christian summer camp context will explored, with interest on why summer camp experiences are such a rich setting of Christian nurture. Second, a theology of experience will be developed in conversation with John Dewey’s educational philosophy. Third, practical vision for youth ministry will be articulated, based on these explorations.

**The Unique Ministry of Summer Camp**

Summer camp programs offer “a wide range of experiences supporting positive growth and development” among campers. The program among camps vary, but summer camps offer a mix of fun and educational activities that both campers and staff participate in. In the early twentieth century, summer camping for young people began to flourish across North America.

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4 Thurber et al, “Inspirations,” 1.
The summer camping movement originated in Ontario, Canada, and the New England states of the U.S.\(^5\) Summer camps were generally residential, often located in close-to-nature settings.\(^6\) These camps aimed at the development of character and social skills of campers.\(^7\) Given the religious landscape of Canadian and U.S. society in the early twentieth century, many camps also sought to nurture camper’s spiritual development as well.\(^8\) In contemporary times, the number of overtly religious camps has declined. Among residential camps accredited with the Ontario Camp Association, 41 of 172 camps are Christian faith-based.\(^9\)

A small but growing body of contemporary research has observed the unique role Christian summer camps can play in the nurture of young people’s faith lives. A Canadian study finds 52% of committed Christians who have attended a summer camp, felt their faith came alive while in the camp setting.\(^10\) This study specifically mentions the successes of camp ministry as a hopeful opportunity among an otherwise worrisome church-wide “hemorrhaging” of young people.\(^11\) Another Canadian study records 36.7% of former camp participants, who have kept their faith into adulthood, report camp being an important part of their sustained Christian faith.\(^12\) Two Presbyterian U.S.A. studies record pastors and congregation member’s thoughts about the significance of summer camp. An initial study found 20% of church members, and 25% of pastors felt that a camp experience was singularly important in their Christian development.\(^13\) In a follow-up study, between 10% of members and 15% of pastors felt camp was the setting where

\(^{6}\) Wall, *Nurture of Nature*, 41.
\(^{10}\) Penner et al., “Hemorrhaging Faith,” 99.
\(^{11}\) Penner et al., “Hemorrhaging Faith,” 96.
\(^{13}\) Presbyterian Church U.S.A., “Church Camps and Retreats,” 2.
“one particular learning or spiritual growth experience” occurred.\textsuperscript{14} One study, concerned with development outcomes from camp participation, renders more moderate results concerning spiritual development in the camp setting. This study of American camps indicates campers and staff more readily affirmed that they “have a close relationship with God” after time spent at camp.\textsuperscript{15} Data arising from this research finds statistical significance between time spent at camp and feelings of being close with God.

The studies cited here have aimed to demonstrate that Christian summer camps are finding success in nurturing the faith of young people. Yet prior to reflection on why this might be, it is prudent to grant that summer camps are not a theological “magic bullet;” singularly able to reverse declining interest in church among young people. Not all young people who attend a summer camp embrace or deepen the Christian life as a result of summer camp ministries. However, in keeping with conclusions presented within these studies, Christian summer camps inhabit a unique situation. In seeking wisdom for church-based youth ministry, it is therefore worth asking: what is theological about the apparent successes of Christian summer camp ministry?

This is an important question, for a summer camp can also function as a means of socialization. A non-faith based study finds that campers who participated in religious camps were more inclined to attend church, synagogue or mosque after their time at camp.\textsuperscript{16} This study recognizes that a camp’s religious practices, regardless of the theology behind the practice, hold a socializing value. While socializing effects produce results, Christians confess that whatever else occurs in the practice of ministry, Christian ministry is theological because in ministry, God

\textsuperscript{14} Presbyterian Church U.S.A., “Spiritual Growth Experiences,” 1.
\textsuperscript{15} Thurber et al., “Youth Development Outcomes,” 245.
\textsuperscript{16} Burkhard et al., “Directions,” 15.
acts. Do the Holy Spirit’s actions lead people to synagogues or mosques? While this is a debate best suited for another setting, I respond in short with no, for synagogues and mosques are not intended for worshipping Jesus. With this consideration, we see it is possible to have sociological practices that stimulate spiritual awareness or desire, but which are not theologically Christian. Rather, in Christian ministry, the source of ministry practice is Christ himself. With this distinction, the discussion of camp practices here aims specifically at the theological dimension of ministry.

What then is theological about the reported probability of a significant encounter with Christ at Christian summer camps, by comparison to Christian church-based youth groups? A theology of election could be explored, but it seems unfounded to suggest that God prefers to reveal himself to people who are at summer camp. All ministry is practiced in Christ’s power, and to claim that camps are somehow a local of God’s favour, requires making the point that ministry practices occurring outside of a camp context participate to a lesser extent in Christ’s actions. Attempting to make such a claim would be misled. Further, knowledge of God available in both the scriptures and through natural revelation can be presumed to be constant between both church and camp contexts. Neither Christian scripture, nor the “speech” of the created order (see Psalm 19) differ between camp and non-camp contexts. Given this, the human ability to respond to God is presumed to be constant in both contexts. Therefore, the greater likelihood of a significant religious experience occurring in a camp setting must be a result of more acute perceptions of God’s actions among young people, with such perceptions being nurtured by the camp’s ministry practices. The immersion of the young person (as staff or camper) in the camp environment provides a set of often novel experiences. These novel experiences provide grounds for new theological perception and spur the will to create meaning out of these observations.

17 Purves, The Crucifixion of Ministry, 52.
While camps vary in program and setting, religious activities at a Christian summer camp might include programmed activities such as morning lauds or evening vespers by a lake or in a forest setting; worship songs around a campfire; cabin-group bible studies; or testimonial addresses by camp staff. Un-programmed religious activities also occur in the camp environment: a faith discussion with a counsellor; quiet time on a canoe trip; giving and receiving forgiveness as campers learn to live together; moments of awe at the created world; or experiencing God’s own love through the servant-natured camp staff. While not an exhaustive list of potential camp experiences, such experiences suggest the flavour of the experience of Christian summer camps. As is indicated in the previously cited studies, such settings are fertile ground for the Christian life to take root. Yet why is it that theological experience is such an essential part of nurturing the Christian life? Moving to address this question, attention is now turned to a theology of experience and the place experience holds in giving rise to the Christian life.

A Theology of Experience

Having glanced into what is theological about Christian summer camp experiences, attention is now directed to developing a theology of experience more generally. This exploration is framed first in dialogue with theological thought, and thereafter, in conversation with the educational theory of John Dewey. In this dialogue, the perspective that experience provides a base of reception for Christian theology will be highlighted.

Evangelicals have generally regard scripture as the primary source of theological authority in the Christian life. But in addition to scripture, the Wesleyan quadrilateral recognizes reason, tradition and experience as sources of theological truth. Explicating the role of experience in the Christian life, John Wesley’s commentator – Albert Outlier, has remarked that
“Christian experience adds nothing to the substance of Christian truth; its distinctive role is to energize the heart so as to enable the believer to speak and do the truth in love.”

Outlier’s comments reflect a particular theological outlook that is inclined to prioritize reason over experience. Outlier is right to be suspicious of experience, for experience is subjective, and therefore prone to misinterpretation. However, there is space, particularly in youth ministry, to elevate the value and role of experience in the Christian life. For Outlier, experience shapes one’s desires, but not one’s understanding. This perspective may not be wholly true.

Pentecostal theologian Terry Cross has argued for the importance of theological experience. Cross argues that God with us—Emmanuel—expresses the truth that God is with us, not only transcendently, but immanently in the person of Jesus Christ. Cross continues, arguing that the Christian does not “know” Jesus only through historical claims about Christ’s incarnation, but through the Holy-Spirit’s action of “re-presenting Christ to us.” Cross’ theology of experience affirms the importance of inward witness of God’s Spirit. For Cross, experience plays a role in giving the Christian assurance of their adoption by God, and assurance that the scriptures are true.

In addition to the inward experience of Christ, knowledge of God and his grace comes to the Christian through creation (see Psalm 19). To elaborate on this point, I turn to the Orthodox tradition of Christianity. While officially recognizing seven sacraments, a caveat is given by Orthodox theologian Bradley Nassif, saying: a sacrament “happens whenever God’s grace is communicated through the created order.” Continuing, Nassif argues that sacraments do not mechanically dispense grace. Rather, “it is up to each Christian to make the sacraments bear fruit

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in their lives.” While intending first to represent the Orthodox tradition, Nassif’s discussion of sacrament lends itself none-the-less to constructing a theology of experience. A sacrament, or an experience of a sacramental nature, represents a theological reality and therefore can be instructive for the Christian life. This instruction is a grace if the one who undergoes the experience is attentive to the theological meaning of the experience which they have either undergone, or participated in.

Presbyterian minister and theologian James E. Loder has written about the process through which individuals are transformed into deeper Christlikeness in the Christian life. Loder has aimed at describing a process through which the Holy Spirit “teaches, comforts, afflicts, and leads into ‘all truth.’” This process in Loder’s view begins with conflict. A conflict occurs when one’s settled theological understandings are challenged. This challenge arises when the way things are, does not agree with the way one has anticipated things should be. In the state of conflict, the world, the self, the Holy, and the void (which is absence and silence), converge. In this convergence, the self searches under the guidance of the Holy for a response to the void. For Loder, the experience of conflict begins a process of seeking what is true. In Loder’s perspective, one’s seeking, and the transformation that occurs in seeking, cannot occur without the impetus of an experience of conflict, and a void of meaning.

Experience is thus observed as the starting point for theological reflection. A portrait of reflection upon experience can be observed in Luke 10 as Jesus chooses seventy-two “other followers” to send ahead of him. Prior to dismissing these seventy two others to their task, Jesus gives a set of instructions: these other followers were to pray for a harvest (Luke 10:2); take no

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money or sandals (10:3); offer a blessing for homes they enter (10:5–7); eat what is given them (10:8); heal the sick and announce God’s kingdom (10:9); but leave towns who do not receive their message (10:10). Embarking upon the task given them, these seventy-two others undergo a set of experiences which appear to surprise them, as well as fill them with confidence in Jesus’ power. Completing their task, they return to Jesus “with joy and said, ‘Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name” (10:17, NIV).

After the return of the seventy-two, Jesus teaches these disciples using their experiences as a point of theological reflection. Jesus affirms that he has power over the enemy, and that his disciples ought not to fear being harmed (10:19). Jesus also wishes to orient the seventy-two to a reality more important than their ability to rebuke demons; that their names are written in heaven (10:20). Finally, Jesus identifies himself as the one who reveals the Father (10:22). Without undervaluing the real ministry the seventy-two undertook, one might also notice that Jesus purposes the experiences of the seventy-two as a foundation for teaching. His teaching is in the mode of theological reflection upon experience. Jesus does not offer abstracted principles about ministry—but rather—he leads the seventy-two in theological reflection, employing their recent experiences as a starting point for reflection. As indicated by their surprise, the experience of the seventy-two demands interpretation; and such interpretation is supplied by Jesus upon their return.

The idea that experience serves a foundation for knowledge has been notably developed by John Dewey (1859–1952), a philosophical pragmatist and educational theorist. Dewey writes out of his humanist convictions, but his philosophical commitments do not explicitly disqualify his views from informing Christian practice. If Dewey is correct about how human beings

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27 A response to Dewey’s more outspoken critics has been given by Alan G. Phillips in his article “John Dewey and His Religious Critics.” Phillips argues that critics who seek to rid religious education of his influence “are using a
come to hold knowledge, his insight may be extended into how human beings come to any sort of personal knowledge, including personal knowledge of God. For John Dewey, knowledge is the perception of “connections” (or relations) within reality.\textsuperscript{28} As knowledge supplies a set of understandings about reality, these understandings inform how an individual responds to reality. For Dewey, knowledge arises from the right interpretation of experience. He says “An ounce of experience is better than a ton of theory simply because it is only in experience that any theory has vital and verifiable significance. An experience, a very humble experience, is capable of generating and carrying out any amount of theory (or intellectual content), but a theory apart from an experience cannot be definitely grasped even as a theory.”\textsuperscript{29}

It is right to recognize that the extent to which Dewey’s thought may speak to the task of Christian education has been debated. Christian scholars have received Dewey’s system with both caution and curiosity. The caution in their reception comes on account of Dewey’s humanistic philosophy and his rejection of religious authority and absolute truth claims.\textsuperscript{30} His naturalistic optimism concerning the basic goodness of the human spirit, and his faith in human reason, are incompatible with the witness of the scriptures. However, Dewey remains sympathetic to religious experience as a source of understanding, citing the importance of religious experience in his own life.\textsuperscript{31} Dewey rejects atheism, and while skeptical of appeals to revelation as a source of truth, appears to present himself as a theist.\textsuperscript{32} On this account Dewey has not been overtly dismissed by Christian scholarship, for his educational theory lends insight to religious education, particularly on account of his interest in religious experience. Recognizing prominent thinker as a convenient scapegoat for a multitude of excesses in … education.” (p.37) Phillips does allow that Dewey’s theology is not congruent with the theology represented in scripture, but contends that repudiating Dewey’s educational thought is unnecessary in critiquing his theology. (p.38)

\textsuperscript{28} Dewey, Democracy and Education, 340.
\textsuperscript{29} Dewey, Democracy and Education, 144.
\textsuperscript{31} Knight, “John Dewey and the Reality of God,” 16.
\textsuperscript{32} Knight, “John Dewey and the Reality of God,” 20.
his contribution, Christian scholars have (generally) taken to developing the theological implications within his writing for use in Christian education and the practice of Christian ministry.\footnote{Ghiloni, \textit{John Dewey Among the Theologians}, 3.}

As a theorist, John Dewey explored the concepts of control, direction and guidance between teacher and student. He sought to articulate a manner in which control, direction and guidance might mutually aid a teacher’s teaching, and a student’s learning.\footnote{Fenstermacher, “Rediscovering the Student,” 99.} Dewey believed that the often present tension between the educational aims of a teacher, and the learning interests of a student, could be overcome. For Dewey, this tension occurs when a student is required to meet knowledge expectations set by an educational institution.\footnote{Fenstermacher, “Rediscovering the Student,” 103.} In such a circumstance, a student is not a learner, but a repository of information expected of them.

Dewey’s solution was not to abandon the teacher and educational institution, but to articulate a way forward in which a teacher and institution might facilitate students as learners.\footnote{Fenstermacher, “Rediscovering the Student,” 104.} Dewey observes that “we take interest. To be interested in any matter is to be actively concerned with it.”\footnote{Dewey, \textit{Interest and Effort}, 16.} The decision to take interest cannot be cajoled, but is a product of the learner’s desire. Says Dewey, “there is not only the thing which is projected as valuable or worth while, but there is also appreciation of its worth.”\footnote{Dewey, \textit{Interest and Effort}, 16.} Appreciation of a lesson’s worth cannot be enhanced by enticing a student’s attention through what Dewey terms “attractive wrappings.”\footnote{Dewey, \textit{Interest and Effort}, 5.} For Dewey, “attention is never directed to the essential and important facts, but simply to the attractive wrappings with which the facts are surrounded.”\footnote{Dewey, \textit{Interest and Effort}, 5.}

This critique of the educational orientation of early twentieth-century school systems
could also be directed at contemporary Christian education efforts in youth groups. Just as a
teacher might hold educational aims for students, youth ministers (lay and otherwise) hold
discipleship aims for young Christians in their care. Such aims are indeed rightly held, but
foisting content upon otherwise disinterested students does not help meet these aims, and might
hinder a student’s movement toward these aims, should young people resent the minister’s
efforts. Rather, for Dewey, it is experience that awakens interest. Dewey’s observation that a
student becomes a learner when interest is taken is important. For Christian theology to inform
Christian living, interest in Christ and the Christian life is required. Even as Christian theology is
packaged in the language of young people, and presented with culturally significant sensibilities,
the meanings of Christian theology may become lost to those who have not yet chosen to love
Jesus, or who are not interested in the Christian life.

In Dewey’s view, experience holds the capacity to awaken interest, for experience
fundamentally engages the learner. Dewey envisions experience that is suitable for learning as
having an active and a passive component. Experience is active as something is tried out and
experience is passive as something is undergone.\footnote{Dewey, \textit{Democracy and Education}, 139.}
To elaborate on this view, Dewey calls to
mind the example of a child learning that a flame is warm.\footnote{Dewey, \textit{Democracy and Education}, 140.}
A child is active in their learning experience as they reach toward the warm flame. As a child’s finger passes through a flame, the
warmth of the flame results in the consequence of a burning sensation. The action of the flame
producing a burning sensation is a moment of passivity on the part of the child learner.
Combining the ideas of activity and passivity in experience, Dewey remarks that “every
experience is a moving force.”\footnote{Dewey, \textit{Experience and Education}, 31.} Dewey allows that not all experiences begin with an active
component. Many of life’s situations are thrust upon the individual, and the individual is not
given the opportunity to be an agent in shaping their experience. Such experiences for Dewey remain potentially instructive, as a learner may discover a relation between events in reality through attention to the experience. Yet a situation in which a potential learner is initially passive requires a response if learning is to occur. If a child feels the warmth of a flame, yet does not respond in any way, sensation has occurred, but learning has not.

Thus Dewey makes a differentiation between experience, and experiential learning. Experience, with its active and passive components is present in experiential learning. However, experiential learning does not automatically result from experience. In experiential learning, two movements are undertaken by the learner. The first movement is “primary experience.” A primary experience is an event that may be interpreted by the senses, but has not yet been reflected upon with higher thinking. The second movement of a learning experience is “secondary experience;” occurring when one reflects on primary experience to organize, interpret and give meaning to primary experience. While Dewey holds that the learning process must begin with experience, he also notes that not all experiences are educative. Some experiences, he postulates, can be mis-educative. Experience could lead to mis-education (incorrect learning) if the learner is disengaged, if the set experiences being reflected upon do not relate to one another, or if the interpretation given to an experience is ultimately incorrect. Dewey also argues that experiences have differing capacity to generate new learning. In his view, experiences must be of a high quality in order to produce learning. The quality of an experience is determined by the effect it has on later experiences; if a particular experience can

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44 Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 140.
49 Dewey, *Experience and Education*, 16.
alter how individuals interact with subsequent experiences, the experience offers a high potential of learning and is therefore of high quality.\textsuperscript{50} Because Dewey believed that experience is the starting point of education, he therefore argues that education which does not stem from experience is of a lower quality. Learning that focuses memory and recall, or is presented in abstraction from concrete events, has little meaning to learners, and therefore students lack the motivation to attempt to learn.\textsuperscript{51}

Conversely, learning occurring in the form of reflection upon experience fundamentally engages a learner in the subject. The motivation for the engagement of the learner derives from their status as an agent within their experiences. Experience piques the learner’s interest in the subject at hand. For example, the child who experiences the warmth of a flame may become curious as to the effects of the flame on other objects. Though a child’s playing with fire is almost always discouraged by responsible adults, the playful curiosity a flame inspires in a child may be easily observed. Theologian Aaron Ghiloni summarises Dewey’s perspective as such: “The goal is not to use interest to reach the mountaintop, but to be interested in the mountain itself. The entire mountain—peaks, gullies, cliffs, and everything inbetween—is of interest to the hiker. Upon reaching the mountaintop, the hiker’s love for mountains is heightened, not replaced.”\textsuperscript{52} Following this observation, Christian instruction within church-based youth programs will be most accessible to those who have a set of experiences which Christian theology may both interpret and speak to. Given this, Ghiloni encourages “wider space to appreciate human experience as theological source material,” for theological reflection and the

\textsuperscript{50} Dewey, \textit{Experience and Education}, 16. Dewey also argues that the quality of an experience is determined by whether or not the learner enjoyed the experience. The case could be made however, that significant learning can occur as a result of disagreeable experiences, just as it occurs from enjoyable experiences.

\textsuperscript{51} Dewey, \textit{Experience and Education}, 14–15.

\textsuperscript{52} Ghiloni, \textit{John Dewey Among the Theologians}, 25.
nurture of the Christian life.  

Attention to experience is a mode of learning observable in the scriptures. Jesus conducts his own ministry in the tangible and concrete situations of life around him. Jesus offers the crowd a theology of grace as a woman caught in adultery is brought before him (John 8:1–11). Jesus washes his disciples’ feet, explaining his actions by giving a theology of servanthood (John 13:1–17). Jesus appears beside two disciples on the road to Emmaus, who were discussing the events of the crucifixion. Jesus teaches them to understand “everything that happened,” offering a theology of atonement (Luke 24:13–35). However, though scripture in these instances serves to substantiate Dewey’s claims, scripture does not affirm Dewey’s enthusiasm for experiential learning unequivocally. Scripture attests that knowing may also occur through revelation. For example, though many had interacted with Jesus, it is only through revelation that Peter rightly understood Jesus was the messiah (Matt 16:17). In this case Peter’s knowledge could be said to have arisen in part from his experiences, but not generated from his own interpretation of his experiences. Dewey is suspicious of relying upon revelation as a form of knowledge, with such a disposition being contrary to his humanist commitments. Thus Dewey is not to be given unmediated privilege in a Christian theology of experience. However, his reluctance to embrace revelation apart from reason as a form of knowing does not render his broader insight about the place of experience in learning, incompatible with Christian theology.

Situating Dewey’s perspective within Christian ministry, his emphases may be compared to, and differentiated from, what is commonly understood as theological praxis. Thomas Groome has offered a nuanced exposition of what praxis is, and its pedagogical function. Groome views praxis as consisting of three movements: *the active, the reflective, and the creative*. For Groome,

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pedagogical praxis is *active* in attending to a present action, an action’s social location, historical precedents, and future implications.\(^55\) Praxis is *reflective* in constructing theoretical perspectives concerning what is “going on” in a given present action.\(^56\) And praxis is *creative* as reflection awakens desire and imagination concerning one’s being within the world. For Groome, Christian practice is to be shared between student and teacher in exploratory dialogue—a dialogue that is faithful to the story and teachings of scripture.\(^57\) This approach to religious education is “a participative and dialogical pedagogy in which people reflect critically on their own historical agency in time and place and on their sociocultural reality, have access together to Christian Story/Vision, and personally appropriate it in community with the creative intent of renewed praxis in Christian faith toward God’s reign for all creation.”\(^58\)

Obvious similarities exist between something like Groome’s shared Christian praxis, and Dewey’s pedagogical implications for Christian ministry. Both begin in lived experience, move to reflective interpretation of these experiences, and invite responsive action. Yet there is a nuanced distinction in orientation between Dewey and Groome. Don Browning has read Groome’s approach to be more aligned with refining current practice for action in a current situation. Browning cites Groome’s “shared Christian praxis” as a means of refining the practice of pastoral care, for Browning’s interests, through reflecting upon religious ethics.\(^59\) Groome’s shared Christian praxis approach to nurturing the Christian life, assumes a level of knowledge that has informed a commitment to Christian practices in the first place. Conversely, Dewey’s emphasis is toward the cultivation of experiences that awaken the desire for reflection, and provide a base for such knowledge in the first place. Groome’s approach that refines Christian

\(^{55}\) Groome, *Sharing Faith*, 137.

\(^{56}\) Groome, *Sharing Faith*, 137.

\(^{57}\) Groome, *Sharing Faith*, 143.

\(^{58}\) Groome, *Sharing Faith*, 135.

\(^{59}\) Browning, *Religious Ethics and Pastoral Care*, 49–52.
practice is entirely appropriate for ministry among individuals who hold Christian interests. By contrast Dewey’s approach is better suited for situations where prior interest in theological reflection has not yet arisen, or only token interest is given.

It is Dewey’s perspective that describes why theological interest awakens at the Christian summer camp. The residential Christian summer camp is a setting rich in novel experiences. Immersion in an environment of new people, places and activities provides the ground for exploring new meanings. The Christian camp promotes counsellor-camper friendship and mentorship, corporate prayer and worship, seeks to inspire a sense of awe of God through the creation, encourages Christian practices such as forgiveness and patience, studies scripture together, and ties the day together with a range of fun activities for campers.\textsuperscript{60} A young person’s interest in their experience leads to interest in the theological interpretation the camp community is giving to the set of common experiences being shared in the camp community. In contrast, church-based youth group meetings might occur once a week. Group leaders and members gather from their diverse contexts, often for games, worship and a scripture message. Either because of an absence of a shared base of novel experience from the week, or the standards of common practice, youth workers can tend toward offering bible studies or messages that aim at Christian principles. There is of course truth that is being presented, but the problem is that this truth may be abstracted from listeners lived experiences. The Christian life is not an exercise in fitting together religious ideas, but indeed, experiencing and following the person of Jesus Christ.\textsuperscript{61}

\textbf{A Constructive Proposal}

How might a theology of experience inform ministry practices? In this section I propose a

\textsuperscript{60} Venable and Joy, \textit{Camping Experiences}, 5–8.
\textsuperscript{61} Root, \textit{Bonhoeffer as Youth Worker}, 179.
manner of construing Dewey’s thought that creates a guiding framework for youth group ministry. First, I attend to a conceptualization of how faith is formed, as inspired by Dewey’s theory. Second, I highlight the ministry responses that this conceptualization of faith formation entails. My aim in arranging Dewey’s educational convictions into a diagram is not in making a statement about the psychology of religious experience and religious thought. Rather, the intention is to provide vision for the practice of youth ministry, in concert with John Dewey’s thought. The proposal at hand intends to guide ministry by rendering the theological implications of Dewey’s thought in simple terms, though not terms that do away with the complexity of the learning process.

A vision of faith formation is seen in figure 1 below. In this construal, Dewey’s two basic movements in experience (activity and passivity) and learning (primary and secondary experience) are placed upon the two axes of a Cartesian plane. The movements of experience have been placed along the X axis of figure 1. And the movements Dewey observes in the learning processes are placed on the Y axis of Figure 1. On the Y axis, I have taken a small liberty, and changed Dewey’s terminology from “primary” and “secondary” experience to “experience” and “interpretation.”
In the relation of the poles to one another, four quadrants are created. The quadrants represent rough categories of activity that come together in establishing and maturing one’s Christian life. Each quadrant represents a particular type of activity, even though quadrants at times flow naturally into one another. Some activities will also span multiple quadrants, yet this does not weaken this vision of faith formation. Rather, activity that spans multiple quadrants simply means some practices promote activity in more than one quadrant at a time. The question of how these quadrants relate to each other in faith formation will be addressed shortly. Presently however, a description of each quadrant will be offered.

In the upper left is the active experience quadrant. Activity in this quadrant is in the form of one who ventures an action. More potent learning environments would feature actions and settings novel to the learner. Yet one who is familiar with both action and setting still ventures an action within a setting, creating a feedback loop as a response returns from the setting in which the action is ventured. For example, the Christian practices of compassion and care belong to this quadrant. Perhaps a young camp counsellor discovers caring for his or her campers to be a means of participating in Christ’s love. Where once the call to love unconditionally was an idea given mental assent during the young counsellor’s Sunday school years, the charge of enacting Christ’s teaching about unconditional love causes this love to become manifest to the young counsellor. In “trying out” acts of compassion, the counsellor takes practical interest in the theology of God’s steadfast love.

In the upper right of figure 1 is the passive experience quadrant. Activity in this quadrant

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62 Dewey, *Experience and Education*, 47. Dewey believes that experiences build upon one another toward a learning objective. He says: “In a certain sense every experience should do something to prepare a person for later experiences of a deeper and more expansive quality. That is the very meaning of growth, continuity, reconstruction of experience.”
occurs when one’s environment acts upon oneself – exposing an individual to some aspect of reality. In some cases, an experience may be routine, and simply reinforce settled convictions about the nature of reality and one’s relations within reality. In other cases, the unanticipated force of an experience may entail a shift in one’s perceptions of reality, or one’s own being. Karl Rahner’s oft-cited quote may be called to mind here. He argues “the Christian of the future will be a mystic or he or she will not exist at all. If by mysticism we mean, not singular parapsychological phenomena, but a genuine experience of God.”\textsuperscript{63} Such experiences of God may not need to be rapturous, though certainly some are. Examples of theological experiences are beholding the beauty of creation, Christian fellowship, or more remarkable divine actions, such as the miraculous. Other experiences have a theological component, even if they do not immediately present as theological. While receiving a visit while on bed rest may be initially a relief for the lonely, closer inspection later reveals the love of God displayed in the visitor’s actions and intentions.

In the lower right of figure 1 is the passive interpretation quadrant. This quadrant represents one’s awareness of possible interpretations that could be given to one’s experiences. Possible interpretations may come from scripture, mentors, social or cultural influences, or abstract reasoning processes. Further, the Spirit of God also may work through any for his purposes, including directly revealing truth to an individual (Matt 16:17). Teaching ministries naturally tend to inhabit action this quadrant, centering upon conveying a theological idea. Yet activity in this quadrant functions as transferring information, until an orientation of one’s being toward the theological meanings of this information occurs. For example, a young person being aware of an idea, is not the same as a young person perceiving and confessing theological truth. As this paper has been arguing, activity in this quadrant is essential to the Christian life, but not

\textsuperscript{63} Rahner, \textit{The Practice of Faith}, 22.
solely and finally constitutive of the Christian life.

The final quadrant on the lower left is the action of choosing. The basic response to God is in choosing to love him, or as must be allowed, choosing not to love him. Such a choice is informed by one’s perceptions of what reality is like, and which stories one chooses to guide one’s actions. Loving Jesus, or not loving Jesus, remains related to, but also separate event, from understanding. To elaborate, one may understand many things about who God is, yet one must still decide how one feels about these facts (James 2:19). Loving Jesus is not an act that is reasoned and therefore obliged, but an act that is desired, and therefore chosen. Ministry that does well in providing opportunity in the other quadrants, but does not invite a choice, misunderstands the nature of the will. The Christian life takes form in the movement of the will, for the Christian life is the expression of one’s willful response to Christ.

When activity in each quadrant can mutually affirm one another, a state of equilibrium arises between quadrants, and faith in the form of an ultimate concern arises. That which ultimately concerns a person is treated as holy, and informs the shape of one’s life. In the case of the Christian life, activity in each quadrant has been organized by the Christian story and the person of Christ. Conversely, dissonance between quadrants creates a cascading effect, and the system exists in a measure of uncertainty as a new ultimate concern is formulated, or the content of a current concern is refined. As dissonance resolves itself and subsides, an ultimate concern, able to integrate activity of the quadrants in a coherent manner, arises in the individual. Again for the Christian life, this ultimate concern is Christ himself.

As a conception of how faith is formed, the construct offered in Figure 1 is at first descriptive of the movements occurring in those who are coming to confess Jesus as Lord. However, a description of faith formation is not specifically the intent of this discussion. This

64 Tillich, Dynamics of Faith, 14.
proposal ultimately aims at informing the practice of youth ministry. This conceptualization of a learning process holds implications for the practice of youth ministry. The main implication pressed by this paper is that the tendency to offer theological instruction at a distance from lived experience is a missed opportunity in youth ministry. Following Dewey’s emphases, the nurture of the Christian life in youth ministry, properly extends into involvement of young people in Christian life together, the practices of the Christian community, the theological interpretation of the experiences of this shared life, and the invitation to respond.

**Conclusion**

Arranging youth ministry for the possibility of experiential learning is a response to what is known about how young people learn. Secondly though, shaping youth ministry in this fashion is a theological move, made in the understanding that God reveals himself in and through lived experience, and has given Christian scripture to interpret such experience. In a post-Christian North America, young people’s interest in the Christian life wears thin when such a life is advocated for in the conceptual arena alone. But the experiential knowledge of Christ remains compelling, and the Christian life flourishes as scripture and experience are brought together in interpretive dialogue. Influenced by observations about Christian summer camps, and drawing upon John Dewey, I have a critiqued youth ministry that centers on the passive theological instruction of young people. In response, a vision of Christian nurture through the Christian life together is offered as a correction.
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