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Ecological Youth Ministry:

Contextualization Via Bronfenbrenner

What have we meant in describing youth ministry as relevant, relational, contextualized and holistic? Is there a biblical and theological base for such terms and ideas? How has systems thinking added to the understanding of our theologies and methodologies of young ministry? This paper and presentation will survey youth ministry theories and explore the bioecological perspectives of Uri Bronfenbrenner as important components of our discipline.

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Ecological Youth Ministry: Contextualization Via Bronfenbrenner

Abstract

The discipline of youth ministry has seen an evolution in our understanding of the way adjectives relevant and relational, contextualized and holistic, describe our field.

Early on, practitioners and professors of urban youth ministry found themselves emphasizing cultural contexts of ministry and the need for the Gospel to impact systems and structures as well as individuals. Although the importance of understanding of human development in social contexts is widespread, little comprehensive theory describes how the Gospel and ministry speak to and transform environment as well as its inhabitants.

Uri Bronfenbrenner wrote his classic The Ecology of Human Development in 1979, but it drew little attention from most youth ministry theorists. His bioecological theory, with attention to micro-, meso-, and macrosystems, has proven important in the fields of human development and social service. Experts such as James Garbarino (Children and Families in the Social Environment, 1992) and Edwin Friedman (Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue, 2011) apply systems thinking and bioecological perspectives to human service and pastoral ministry respectively. How then might we apply these ideas to our ministry with individuals, families, churches, and communities?

Personal Prologue

All theory is autobiographical—culturally expressed and interpreted. So also, to some degree, are theology and ministerial styles. I have been telling my students this for many years. Furthermore, theology is an interpretation of Divine truth as revealed in creation, the written and living Word in thought-modes of human cultures.

Theological colleagues of mine, who have grown from liberal or agnostic roots, have a different perspective on the truths of Scripture and mysteries of theology than I—coming from a Fundamentalist background. Our hermeneutic trajectories seem to have crossed somewhere along the line. There may be no great theological

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1 Pete Ward (2008) Participation and Meditation: A Practical Theology for the Liquid Church, London: SCM Press, p. 3ff. Ward speaks of reflexity as the “intentional and disciplined form of reflection on how the personal, social and cultural context of the researcher not only affects what is researched... but also the way that research is conducted. It is the process of self-examination....”
difference between us—we all sign the same statement of faith—but nuances seem to differ significantly at points.²

My theological home base was dispensational fundamentalism. The “Wordless Book” expressed an outline of the Gospel: “all men are sinners; the blood of Christ cleanses us from sin; and Christ can deliver us from the judgment of this world.” Without any dramatic break from that tradition, my undergraduate study of Jesus in the Gospels, and then the weekly experience of presenting the Gospel to a couple of hundred teenagers, began to stretch expression of the Gospel.

Jim Rayburn’s outline of the Gospel came as a breath of fresh air. It confirmed and clarified a broader outline of the Good News—beginning with the positive rather than negative. It moved from dramatic and winsome presentation of the Person of Christ to our Need of Christ, then, the Work of Christ, and finally our Appropriation of Christ. Inspired by Jim’s refreshing use of Gospel stories and contemporary anecdotes shaped Young Life’s preaching for decades.

Young Life met the inner city in the 1960s. I remember Bill Milliken, Harv Oostdyk, and myself discussing weekly talks to an ethnically diverse Lower East Side crowd. We sensed the context of urban streets and the nature of Black and Latino (along with Italian- and Chinese-American) culture demanded more of God’s whole story. In particular, it seemed necessary to address corporate, as well as individual, sin and need of redemption. Young people needed and deserved the whole story from Creation to Eschatology, emphasizing God’s judgment on a sinful environment as well as individual transgressions. In publically confessing the guilt of a white power system (including racism, classism, and the corruption clearly visible to them and us in education, housing, the police and criminal justice system) we were able to confront powerfully our individual sins and need of Christ as Savior.

This is all to say that I view youth ministries from experience in several decades: from the 1940s to this second decade of the 21st century. My theology includes important contributions from many directions: main-stream Protestant, Roman Catholic, Evangelical, Pentecostal, church and parachurch, from the field and from academia.

Relational, Relevant, Contextualized and Holistic Youth Ministry and its Theological Foundations

Most of us have used the terms relational, relevant, contextualized and holistic as adjectives describing our chosen field of practice and theorizing. These terms

² We might discuss at this point Christian Smith (2011) The Bible Made Impossible: Why Biblicism Is Not a Truly Evangelical Reading of Scripture, Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, but it would be an unfortunate diversion from this paper’s aim.
seemed, at one time or another, to be apt adjectives in describing our ministry and theology. Let us unpack these well-used terms just a bit.

Early on we realized the importance of following the model of Jesus in putting persons before programs, in being relational. Human beings from infancy on, attend to those who care, pay attention to them, and affirm their efforts. It has taken time for us to understand how Ultimate Being (as Triune unity in community) is relational. All creation, therefore—as scientists continue to discover—is relational. I continue to ponder the marvelous mystery of the Trinity and how a Relational Creator established a material, interrelated cosmos.

Down to the smallest physical particle there is relationship, not only between particles, but, within and between systems. Two social scientists (Harvard professors in somewhat different disciplines) discovered an amazing principle among human beings; it seems to reflect a basic principle of the universe. The universe is relational, and we are all related to, and are influenced by, friends’ friends to three degrees of influence:

As we began to study human connections, we encountered engineers studying networks of power stations, neuroscientists studying networks of neurons, geneticists studying networks of genes, and physicists studying networks of darn near everything.³

Using extensive data from public health databases, these scientists discovered physical and emotional effects spread, not only between spouses, but also among networks of friends.

Our own research has shown that the spread of influence in social networks obeys what we call the Three Degrees of Influence Rule. Everything we do or say tends to ripple through our network, having an impact on our friends (one degree), our friends’ friends (two degrees), and even our friends’ friends’ friends (three degrees).⁴

For good reason, youth leaders have found the doctrine of the Incarnation an important motivation for critical relationships with young people. Adolescents in modern society are in a process of individuation—separation from parents and adult authority figures—in order to find their own identities. At the same time, and paradoxically, they need parents and adults in critical ways. Human beings mature,

⁴ Ibid., pp. 27-28.
as Stephen Covey has expressed it, from dependence, to independence, to interdependence.  

The Incarnation describes radical cultural engagement on the part of the Son of God as he left the comfort of divine culture for human culture. The mystery of the Incarnation encourages a youth leader to leave her comfort zone to enter what at first may be a disinterested, or even unfriendly, milieu. Christ’s dramatic and intimate relationships with unlikely, and often socially discredited friends, has given youth ministry a modus operandi. The Incarnation, as described in John 1 and Philippians 3, is highly relational.

Andrew Root’s critiques of incarnational evangelism do not at all undermine the idea of incarnational relationships; he rightly condemns the abuse of this idea—if we use this divine mystery as a means to our own ends for influence over young lives. Root calls us to appreciate the high cost of identifying with Jesus Christ’s sacrificial life and excruciating death for others. I wish here to emphasize the point that incarnational relationships take seriously the culture, the total environment, of any young person who allows us into his or her life.

The adjective relevant continues an emphasis on a young person’s cultural environment, pointing directly to what is affecting, what is attracting, what is oppressing those to whom we minister. We study, without imitating, what youth culture calls cool. We feel the pressure or rejection felt by many and look for the best antidotes being proposed by experts. Ministry and its Gospel must be workable where and how people live. Relevancy allows the Holy Spirit to lead families and youth into authentic living. Consider the many ways Scripture declares itself to be a relevant Word.

Contextualization has become a favorite word of missiologists. It speaks to our entering another culture (youth or ethnic) recognizing our own cultural blinders. Youth ministry, we have often said, is by its nature, cross-cultural ministry (from dominant adult culture to the subculture of youth). We continue to see how all four adjectives are somewhat different pointers to a common idea. Our ministry gains effectiveness as we learn from anthropologists and other behavioral scientists. We gain insights as to the importance and means of accepting different cultural perspectives.

Finally, we speak of holistic ministry as that which touches, not only the spiritual, but the physical, emotional, social, and virtual lives of youth. Evaluation of our ministries includes matters of successful events, numerical growth, faith commitments, discipleship and spiritual formation. But such evaluation should also consider how we affect youthful lives in complex webs of material and social networks over the long term.

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Our preoccupation with youth and youth culture tended to follow the social construction of adolescence by modern, urban society. For youth ministry to be more holistic, it needed the critique of those who began to emphasize youth and family, like Virginia Holderness, Malan Nel, Mark DeVries and others.

More lately (and purporting to be holistic in a more holy way) there has come a conservative and radical insistence on the elimination of youth ministries and Sunday School in favor of generational catechesis and life together. This extreme, many of us believe, fails to understand the “both/and” necessity of being in the world but not of it, in realizing the necessity of adolescent individuation and reality of youth culture, while supporting the lifetime relationships we have as families. (I have further answered this extreme critique in a book to be published in 2013.)

But more to the point of this paper: How can behavioral scientists help us better understand the complexity of our social environments?

**Systems Thinking and Human Development**

From the 1960s on, practitioners and professors of urban youth ministry found themselves emphasizing the context of ministry, the need for the Gospel to impact systems and structures as well as individuals. The message of social action and cultural transformation resonated among urban ministers, and passionate depictions of urban crises elicited sympathy and encouragement from many not directly involved in the city. But somehow little comprehensive theory described the transformation of any environment—as well as its inhabitants.

Donella H. Meadows provides a good introduction to systems thinking. Peter Senge of MIT is better known. Out of consultation from Peter Senge and MIT thinkers, Doug Hall has written about urban ministry in systems perspective.

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Meadows cogently illustrates this paper’s motivation and purpose. Linear, analytic thinking is still important, but intuitive, systemic thought is also needed—for life and ministry.

Ever since the Industrial Revolution, Western society has benefitted from science, logic and reductionism over intuition and holism.... Serious problems have been solved focusing on external agents—preventing small pox, increasing food production, moving large weights and many people rapidly over long distances. Because they are embedded in larger systems, however, some of our “solutions” have created further problems. And some problems, those most rooted in the internal structure of complex systems, the real messes, have refused to go away.

Hunger, poverty, environmental degradation, economic instability, unemployment, chronic disease, drug addiction, and war, for example, persist in spite of the analytical ability and technical brilliance that have been directed toward eradicating them.... They are intrinsically systems problems—undesirable behaviors characteristic of the system structures that produce them. They will yield only as we reclaim our intuition, stop casting blame, see the system as the source of its own problems, and find the courage and wisdom to restructure it.\(^{13}\)

Of course, there is no mention of sin and the fall here. This poses the interesting issue for biblical believers: to what extent are we meant to understand and ameliorate the sinfulness of this world and its systems. That is a matter for discussion beyond this paper. It asks what it means to be salt and light and how we are to work for the Kingdom to come, for God’s will to be done—here and now on earth. Faith-based practice in the secular world seemingly calls us to learn from unbelieving scientists and to collaborate with the secular world in working for the common good. In this paper we are trying to understand a bit more of systems thinking as it may apply to ministry.

Disciplines as diverse as engineering and human development have profited from theories of system thinking. Uri Bronfenbrenner wrote his classic *The Ecology of Human Development* in 1979. It took me too long to discover the work of this Cornell professor. Experts such as James Garbarino (*Children and Families in the Social Environment*, 1992) and Edwin Freedman (*From Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue*, 2011) apply systems thinking and Bronfenbrenner to human service and congregational ministry respectively. Before considering how these ideas apply to ministry with individuals, families, churches, and communities, let’s try to understand Bronfenbrenner a little better.

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\(^{13}\) Donella H. Meadows (2008), p.4.
Bronfenbrenner is seen as changing the direction of human development studies in the 1970s and setting its standard since.\textsuperscript{14} His main thesis is that human beings create the environments which shape human development. There is, in fact, an interaction between the child being shaped and the influence the child has upon its nurturer and environment. The “nature and nurture debate” tends to fade from such a perspective. Human development must be seen as a “… phenomenon of continuity and change in the biopsychological characteristics of human beings, both as individuals and as groups” (emphasis his). Bronfenbrenner describes his “… bioecological theory of human development” as “an evolving theoretical system” (again, emphasis his).\textsuperscript{15}

Bronfenbrenner devised an analysis of the systems with which an individual interacts—more or less directly. Systems thinking sees an integration of systems. A person’s interaction with her environment involves an interaction of other systems at various degrees of proximity to the individual, which may be seen as a hierarchical diagram. Bronfenbrenner summarizes this analysis of systems.

I have proposed a conceptualization of contexts of development in terms of a hierarchy of systems at four progressively more comprehensive levels:

1. The \textit{microsystem}, which involves the structures and processes taking place in an immediate setting containing the developing person (e.g., home, classroom, playground).

2. The \textit{mesosystem}, which comprises the linkages and processes taking place between two or more settings containing the developing person (e.g. the relations between home and school, school and workplace). In other words, a mesosystem is a system of microsystems.

3. The \textit{exosystem}, which encompasses the linkages and processes taking place between two or more settings, at least one of which does not ordinarily contain the developing person, but in which events occur that influence processes within the immediate setting that does contain the person. (e.g. for a child, the relationship between the home and the parent’s workplace; for a parent, the relationship between the school and the neighborhood peer group).

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\textsuperscript{15} Uri Bronfenbrenner, Ibid., p. xxviii.
4. The *macrosystem*, which is defined as the overarching pattern of ideology and organizations of the social institutions common to a particular culture or subculture. In other words, the *macrosystem* comprises the pattern of micro-, meso- and exosystems characteristic of a given society or segment thereof. It may be thought of as a societal blueprint for a particular culture or subculture.16 (pp. 80-81)

We may have observed the impact of systems such as family, peers and media upon a young person, but missed important indirect influences upon more direct influences shaping her life. Failure to understand Bronfenbrenner’s framework, not only limits research, but allows or encourages organizations to operate as separate, redundant and inefficient agencies of human service—in what is called the “silo effect.”

**Systemic Ministry with Youth, Families and Communities**

Let us cautiously take a too-common scene from the evening news. There has been a vicious shooting on a city street. One or more of the victims were mistaken identities or collateral damage. Grief and flowered-memorials are spotlighted by reporters. Suburbanites mistakenly but understandably take this to be the inner city norm, and stereotypes begin to harden. The mayor promises immediate response. Police are baffled; fearful “no snitching” realities provide no information.

Linear, analytic, cause and effect thinking kicks in. Criminals cause mayhem and death; they must be taken off the streets. Guns are to blame; they must be banned. School drop-outs drift into delinquency; they must be kept in school. And so forth.

We might outline successive levels of societal response to urban disasters:

1. **Apprehension**: arrests and incarceration, necessary work of the criminal justice system
2. **Intervention**: the kind of street-work we provided in New York, further attempts to relate to perpetrators, bystanders and victims
3. **Prevention**: various organizations provide services intended to interrupt individual descent into gangs and anti-social activities
4. **Community Development**: moveing from deficit to asset emphases

You can see a greater holistic emphasis as social response moves from 1 to 4. A problem is that responses are departmentalized among various municipal operations and private organizations. Each works within a budget, fights for survival, and highlights its own success.

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16 Ibid., pp. 80-81.
More specifically, the focus is on a delinquent, a gang, a Boys or Girls Club, a community development center, a church, etc. These agencies tend to concentrate on teenage boys or girls, or on families, or on child-care, or on a neighborhood—each with a designated function. Individuals, families and communities are seen in present time as being affected by a primary problem or influence. Churches get caught up in their own survival and growth, as do secular agencies; they become “silos” doing good things, seeking limited resources, without much time and inclination to see the whole picture or to collaborate effectively.

The whole picture recognizes dynamic and ever-changing processes among microsystems, macrosystems and mesosystems. The infant must be seen as a potential student, the teenager as shaped in infancy and becoming, through a complicated process, an adult (perhaps unemployed, incarcerated, or dead). Families need to be understood in terms of Main Street, Wall Street, and Pennsylvania Avenue. Schools cannot be evaluated apart from teachers’ unions, municipal budgets, parental concern or indifference, teacher motivation, administrative skill and diligence, and more. Insights from brain research and studies of early childhood education are important in assessing the needs and quality of urban life if we are to gain a vision of holistic ministry in the city.

Where can we look for any example of such broad societal approach to urban problems and possibilities? You can see limited attempts at holistic systems response in many places. Geoffrey Canada’s Harlem Children’s Zone with its Baby College, Success Academy, its interest in housing, employment and community transformation, is a good example of such comprehensive application.17

Step 5 needs to be added to the four levels of response above. It looks at interaction among many systems along a dynamic timeline (note the Project Pipeline at the Harlem Children’s Zone website). It should call for a shift in a nation’s priorities. It also calls for collaboration among faith-based and secular operations.

I have taken my example from urban life for several reasons. First, it is close to my heart; secondly, we middle-class white suburbanites need constant reminder of our neighbors’ lives and needs; thirdly, the biblical emphasis is on God’s concern for the poor and disadvantaged, and finally, it appears to be a more clear-cut an illustration.


17 http://www.hcz.org/
considerable attention to serious issues among a rising generation. Christian Smith, from the longitudinal National Study of Youth and Religion, has written a third volume, *Lost In Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood* (2011) examining the moral and spiritual vacuum among young adults today. Chap Clark has persistently pointed out how we have stranded adolescents needing our attention in *Hurt* (2005) and *Hurt 2.0* (2011).

Statistics on considered and attempted suicides among the young are striking. Counseling centers at colleges and universities have expanded exponentially over the past three decades. Beginning even before high school, youth leaders are dealing with cutting and eating disorders, risky sex, alcohol and drug abuse. Serious consideration of these issues points to tensions and fault lines in families. Young people complain of being stressed out. How are churches and community agencies dealing with these widespread crises in suburban society?

**Example of the Russian Doll**

Dedicated, compassionate and deeply involved youth ministers often and understandably complain of frustration and burnout. Responding to them, with insights from Uri Bronfenbrenner and others—and also now in conclusion to this paper—I have found helpful an illustration from the Russian doll. (I know this is also being used to explain Hinduism and other ideas.) In brief, the Russian doll is a series of dolls encased together in one another—taking apart the largest doll, you find another slightly smaller doll within, then another and another, down to the smallest doll at the center—all bearing the same likeness in different sizes.

Let the smallest, center doll, represent the young person with whom you are ministering. This smallest central and solid doll is a metaphor for the person with whom you have a one-on-one relationship. You see her potential; you listen to her presenting issues. It is easy to respond in terms of cause-and-effect explanations and proposed solutions. But too often our ministry does not yield long-term success. There is more to her story that goes back to infancy—and beyond infancy to family... and generations. It is more complicated than parental misunderstanding or neglect.

Too often we have responded to young people and their parents from too narrow a framework. We have not taken family history, strengths and weaknesses, resources and pressures, the economic and political situation, the particular blessings and burdens of the digital age, theological and ecclesiastical matters, educational and school issues—and the interaction of these and other systems—into consideration. We have responded to only one level of the person represented in a Russian doll. There is actually a series of dolls, each affected by a variety of systems; we have dealt only with a singular and incomplete aspect of an individual. Hopefully, we have others around us who will contribute unique perspectives to a new consideration of the whole environment influencing any person—an environment that person is influencing in return. Among other system thinkers, Edwin Friedman’s *Generation to
Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue can help us understand the ministerial implications of such thinking.

In Conclusion

How often have we stopped... awestruck by the mystery in words we often quote: “We are created in the image of God”? We are not, as is often assumed, singular creatures, but plural, complex individuals caught up in a fascinating, staggering and dynamic interaction of systems. We are not just a set of genes influenced by external causes, but a growing process, independent to a degree, but even more, interdependent in community, and in a universe, swirling around us.

The very complexity of Ultimate Being, the Divine Trinity in Unity, allows for the mystery of the Incarnation. We are able to get a physical glimpse of ultimate love-in-action as it interacts with a beautiful, and yet fallen, world of humanity. Jesus shows us individuality with boundaries, engagement without absorption, servanthood with leadership, the paradox of judgment and grace. Christ deals effectively with the extremes of humanity because he sees the whole of it all, and the end from the beginning. Interacting with people, Jesus strategically sows seeds which will undermine patriarchal, legalistic and autocratic systems—rabbinic, temple, Herodian and Roman systems. And Jesus tells us we can and must follow his example.

To be such a follower of Christ, to be Christ-in-the-world, staggers my imagination and challenges my commitment. From the Word of God, and then also from behavioral scientists like Uri Bronfenbrenner, I’m convinced I have much to learn and many ways in which to grow. And I need the Body of Christ, in you and in the Eucharist.

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19 John 20:21