

Empowering teen vocation: The effect of theological inquiry on Christian identity and vocational articulation among urban youth.

By Michael K. Severe
mcsevere@taylor.edu
Taylor University
Upland IN

The task of the church is to offer adolescents a faith that captures their minds and imaginations and orders their loves.¹ This vibrant faith will assist in drawing them out of the practical atheism that pervades the American church (Dykstra 1999). High school juniors and seniors have significant capacity to engage in theological inquiry and extended intentional, theological reflection on matters that connect to their lives. What is the result on faith, practices and articulateness of under-resourced youth as they engage in academic theological inquiry? Most surveys are unable to determine students' articulateness in expressing their beliefs and calling. Steven Garber notes that young people are interested in framing a coherent vision of the world that propels them into their calling. To this end, they are searching for teachers who embody their chosen worldview and for a community to which they belong and can actively contribute (Garber 111).

Methodology

This study explored the relationship between theological inquiry, Christian life practices and articulation of vocation. Extensive semi-formal qualitative interviews were conducted among Christian urban students participating in ministry leadership and mentoring (n=14). The research population included all participants of a summer theology institute that engaged academic inquiry and practical ministry application.

¹ As referenced regularly by Augustine, Lewis and other Christian writers.

Students and mentors participated from Chicago, Indianapolis, Miami, and Los Angeles, representing six different ministries. All participants were part of a local church as well as a parachurch ministry in their local neighborhood. Five ethnicities were represented in the study with an even number of males and females participating. Participation in the research and summer programming was based on criterion sampling. The selection criteria were as follows.

- Participation in the local ministry
- Nomination by the ministry leader/director/pastor
- Ongoing involvement with a mentor
- Maturing Christian commitment and character
- Involvement in service
- Participation in a three week theology institute involving academic credit, service learning and leadership development

Instrumentation

The goal of this qualitative research was to “listen well to other’s stories and to interpret and retell the accounts” (Glesne 1999, 1). “Researchers seek out a variety of perspectives; they do not try to reduce the multiple interpretations to a norm” (Glesne 1999, 5). The goal was to allow the individual stories to speak for themselves as much as possible. The focus of this research was to hear the story of each adolescent and understand it as it relates to the study, through the use of recorded and transcribed, semi-structured qualitative interviews. The researcher was “the primary instrument for data collection and data analysis” (Merriam 2002, 5). Each interview was approximately 45 to 90 minutes long.

Human Rights Research Protocol

Each participant and their guardian (if under 18) consented to participation in the study. The human rights research protocol communicated that participation was voluntary and anonymous, how information was handled anonymously, and how information would be gathered. Anonymity was assured through the removal of identifying information in the research and application of codes for individual interviews. A Human Rights and Research Protocol was filed prior to research and was accepted by Taylor University.

Limitations and Delimitations

The response rate of 100% allows for significant reliability for the population of this group. The study is not generalizable with adolescents, urban mentoring programs, or other categories. The purposive and criterion based sampling used here “is not designed to achieve population validity. The intent is to achieve an in-depth understanding of selected individuals” (Gall, Borg, and Borg 2003, 166). The line of questioning provides helpful insights into a specific group of urban adolescent leaders who have mentors and thus has potential for informing future studies.

Major research findings

- Nuance and challenge to the Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD) theory
 - God “behind the scenes”
 - God as therapeutic in a traumatogenic environment
- There is a “lag” in expression of identity and expression of relationship with Christ.
- A durable sense of self was almost always tied to active seeking/journey language and a clear articulation of calling and fidelity to a purpose

- Ministry vocations and movements toward fidelity are closely linked with dialogue, liminal space, mentors and models, program support and structure, and trying on of roles.

“God behind the scenes”

The presence of God is potent for all of these urban teens. God is not a distant deity as MTD would suggest for the American population as a whole.

“God is taking me somewhere.”

“Whatever situation I’m in God is also there.”

There was a striking awareness and perception of the presence of God. An important follow-up concern is whether students can also make sense of or articulate God’s movement in their life. Many of these students attribute the following as a work of God;

Inner voice

Profound “feelings of peace” or “conviction”

Growth in confidence

Growth in a personality trait or characteristic

Joy or happiness

Unfortunately, only some were able to explicate on how “making people happy,” for example, is a Christian act tied to Scripture or the character of God. They just know, intuitively, that happy people represent God’s presence. Being happy ourselves is how we make others happy.

Is God “therapeutic?”

The National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR) found that the central goal of life for most teens, and adults, is to be happy and to feel good about oneself. While not an

explicit line of questioning or intention of the study design, it is very clear that there is a perception among the population that God performs a therapeutic role, as described by Smith and Denton (2005).

“...even when I do something wrong, I know I’m only human and God loves me the way I am.”

“That is what God tries to do – he tries to help keep them uplifted and strong.”

“...helping them and maybe they will feel good, that is all that matters.”

“...try to get along with everybody so that is why I am in the faith because my mom told me that if I have the Holy Spirit in me then I can get – I will do well with other people and get along with them.”

“Jesus said if you want to have friends, be friendly.”

“After those moments of praying or reading the Bible, I get relief from all the pain. I think that is really helpful.”

Much like a parent who desires God to protect their children, these teens want God to give them healthy and enduring relationships. Their focus and concern is developmentally appropriate and reasonable.

Yet, for these teens, Jesus is more than an expedient provider of immediate needs. Believing and following Jesus gives a sense of distinction from a corrupt culture or dangers of “the Streets.” In a very real way, the ambiguity of their family and social situations, compounded by often overwhelming grief or pain, creates significant anxiety which is displaced to God. God keeps these adolescents “on the path,” gives peace, provides “confidence” and promises “a blessing is going to come later on.” The blessing

was occasionally seen as God's response to hard things. A very real potential for eschatological hope exists here, but was also primarily immediate and temporal.

The level of abuse, neglect and risk experienced by these teenagers is astounding. It would be minimizing to the traumatogenic culture they live within to assume that the relief brought by God is shallow or self-serving. Participants in the study are not experiencing "first world problems" or "God as a genie" situations such as "God helps me get good grades on my test so I can have a high GPA."

Some students clearly surmounted a simplistic approach to their pain and saw their suffering as part of God's greater work in their lives, not simply as a test or an experience to endure. These students also found great consolation in the presence of God but could also clearly explicate how their tragedies and poor choices have allowed God to work in them, as well as allowing him to comfort them.

A simply therapeutic interpretation appears anemic and is challenged by the greater depth and sophistication readily apparent in this population. These adolescents need comfort in a very real and tangible way, and can recognize how God provides it through various means. It is possible that other teens are also overwhelmed with systemic abandonment and hurt and yet express their hope in developmentally coded language (relationship) or very simplistic ways. There is a pervasive hope that God will, and does, relieve their pain. A very striking contrast between this population and other studies such as NSYR is that among the population God is actively and personally providing help and relief as opposed to a deistic therapeutic view (Dean 2010).

Expression of identity and expression of relationship with Christ

The study population clearly explicate a set of beliefs about Christ and his influence on their life. The impact of Christ is often assumed to be global, reaching into all areas. He is God after all. One of the most significant findings of the research may be the apparent disconnect between the adolescents' expression of identity and their relationship with Christ. When asked "what is most important for me to know about you," only half of the students shared any explicitly religious, theological or scriptural connection. Identity was expressed primarily as character traits or even as actions taken. These traits were often polar or seemingly paradoxical in the teen's mind such as "Competitive" and "compassionate," or "Loud leader"/"Like to be heard" and "like to listen."

In contrast, some teens were able to express a **durable sense of self and fidelity to a purpose.**

"...find myself and find who God has called me to be. I already have a good grip of that – God has spoken to me so many times and confirmed it to me in so many areas as well."

A significant minority were able to hold a sense of identity that connected in some way with their faith or relationship to Christ. This entire sub group expressed some form of durable sense of self while still **actively seeking their identity.**

"Through that journey and process of being completely down at the lowest level I could possibly be, God just did amazing things and worked amazingly in my life. It helped me mature faster. It helped me grow. Going through tough, hard things, God really formed me into being a stronger man, stronger in my faith and

stronger in my walk with him. It has been a battle, honestly, the past two years of my life.”

Turkle suggests that Western society encourages people to “think of ourselves as fluid, emergent, decentralized, multiplicitous, flexible, and ever in process” (1997). So, these adolescents are not “finished” with themselves nor will their crisis centered contexts allow for their identities to rest unchallenged. To use Marcia’s language, they are experiencing a healthy moratorium filled with crisis and exploration without premature resolution (1980).

More articulate and holistic perspectives on self and God included a measure of explicit humility, an ability to make sense of experiences and often used words like journey and process. This is in direct contrast to a first group of teens who simply listed character traits or qualities that they possessed. This second more articulate group described a sense of self that endured beyond a trait like “being nice” or joining a profession. The second group saw their life in the relief of actual experiences. Christ was not just “helping me through” suffering, but the experience became formative and had meaning in that it revealed something about the self or about God. In contrast, many teens in the study simply saw pain or suffering as a test of dedication to God. “He is going to give us tests to see if we are serious about it. We will just be like I love you, cause he knows anyways if you are serious about it. He wants to make sure you are serious about it.” Adolescents such as this participant almost never had any explicit religious or theological connection to their identity, even when given multiple opportunities to connect traits like “being nice and helping people” more concretely to issues of justice or Christ’s character.

Relationship with Christ

The interviews demonstrated a variety of ways adolescents describe their relationship with Christ and that relationship's impact on behaviors, use of time, and their social dimension. As stated earlier, believing in Jesus was often seen as giving distinction and protection in the social world. When asked about their relationship with Christ, most adolescents immediately began to discuss their peer and family relationships. "Social presentation" versus "ownership," was a very dramatic shift here.

"I can call myself God's child so that puts me in a different place than other people who don't believe."

"He was the ideal person – one wants to strive for. So I want to be like Jesus in my own form."

A theological or familial language, often articulated as being a daughter or son, offers an intensely personalized connection to their identity and often calling. Dean expresses that "youth who do not have a language for Christ have great difficulty imagining an identity in Christ" (2005, 142). This population had begun to explore a theological and familial language that gave them the ability to move beyond the most simplistic expressions of Christian identity (Westerhoff 1976, 89-91).

Two expressions of Christian identity and vocation

Ultimately, there was a clear spectrum of articulation in how the research population expressed their relationship with Christ as well as their identity. While a small sample population, there were still clear clusters regarding their behaviors, expression of identity, articulation of Christian faith and practice, and description of calling.

Adolescents that exclusively defined important aspects of themselves as personal characteristics such as “loyal,” “funny,” or “caring” also often described their relationship with Jesus in terms of acts or obedience. These were expressed in a variety of ways such as “not stumbling,” participation in programs or praying at meals. God had not yet been seen as a foundation for their character traits, traits they were still trying to understand and name in many cases. One group of students shared the following characteristics or perceptions:

- God is actively involved “but not sure how” explicitly.
- God “cares” and brings positive feelings and some assurance of well-being.
- Described Jesus most often as nice, kind and caring.
- Statements such as, “I like to be kind to people because it makes them feel good and that somebody cares” do not make explicit connection to God’s care or being a representative of God’s Care.
- Studying the Bible is equated with living with God and knowing him in a very literal sense.

A second group shared a significantly different cluster of characteristics and articulations:

- God is doing “a work.”
- Sees purpose behind trials and temptations.
- Sees “call” as one to humility and service.
- Described Jesus as a humble servant that Christians are to emulate.
- Relates theological principles such as “new creation in Christ” to direct changes in their actions and relationships.

- Theological principles are used as a summary of actual life purpose and is anchored in direct personal illustrations.
- Platitudes or Christian sayings are rarer and further explained both theologically and experientially.

This second group was nearly unanimous in their inclusion of Jesus, Scripture, a theological point, or a Christian calling as they described themselves. They oriented their answers to the question “what is most important for me to know about you” toward a distinctly Christian identity. Harvey notes that faith articulation among adolescents carries four components: The content of faith, the experience of faith, acts of faith and finally the mission/vocation dimension (2005). The final missional vocational dimension appears to be enabled in this population by an explicit theological content, meaningful experiences and acts of service and participation.

In summary, the left column below outlines four types of self-description found in the research. The second column contains four types of descriptions of their relationship with Christ. Self-description was notably different than the expression of relationship with Christ. A student who described themselves in terms of their actions or preferences were most likely to describe a God as a problem solving judge. Those who described themselves on a journey and mentioned their calling or mission tended to describe their relationship with Christ as a set of character traits. Most interestingly, there appeared to be a “lag” in how they saw themselves and how they expressed their relationship with God.

Self-Description

Actions, likes/dislikes

Character traits

Journey/mission/calling

God's perspective

Relationship with Christ

Solves problems/watching

Actions, likes/dislikes

Character traits

Journey/mission/calling

Relationships are obviously central to the adolescent task. Many students describe their experience at the church, with the person of Christ or religion in general, as having positive impacts upon their relationships.

Theological language gives meaning to relational development

Young people develop scripts that they hear from others, remember and internalize. These scripts give an explanation for their actions and their identity. It was clear that while these teens had heard scripts from significant mature adults and had begun to internalize those ideas, they had rarely been given the opportunity to share a personalized word about their own beliefs, calling or identity. While the frameworks of meaning were easy to recite, they often did not explain why it was important to be a good friend, kind, or to impact others.

Ministry vocation

Almost all of these students seemed above the bar on articulation and commitment. Smith and Denton find that only about 30% of adolescents have been involved in a service project or missions team (2005, 69). All but two of the students in this study were active in a leadership service role in their local congregation or parachurch organization. Their service involvement dramatically overshadowed the typical stories of youth activities such as retreats and conferences. "Christian

organizations have the opportunity to engage the whole person in the service of God but often fail to ignite the passions or harness the talent. Many youth and adults believe that ministry is relegated to church based occupations and a disciple is a special person like a priest or pastor” (Atkinson et al 2016, 58). In contrast, these teens named tasks they were completing and the people who had challenged them to those activities. It is very clear that this population was formed in their vocational trajectories by their ministry participation, shepherded and challenged by a significant adult mentor.

A way forward: Movements toward fidelity

A movement of trust toward harmony without guarantees is the locus of the identity-forming task of adolescence. Erikson’s theory is still a helpful starting point because “it provides a clear picture of identity as a stable formation which at the same time is susceptible to influence, fundamentally developed through a crisis-laden process that is transformative in nature” (Illeris 2003, 10). Mezirow further develops the idea of Identity formation. The final five steps of the Transformative Learning process explicitly demonstrates identity formation paralleled in this study:

- Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions
- Planning of a course of action
- Acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans
- Provisional trying of new roles
- Building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships;
and
- A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective (Mezirow 2000).

The liminal space (McWhinney and Markos 2003), support and structure (Erikson 1987), dialogue (Mezirow 1990, 2000, Weinski 2006), exemplar mentors and models (Geanellos 2002) and trying on of roles (Erikson 1959) are all vital aspects of identity formation among this group. When these best practices were all present, there was a significant effect upon the adolescents' ability to conceptualize their vocation and identity. They were also more likely to see God actively engaged in their lives and avoid a simplistic therapeutic approach to religion.

Conclusions

At-risk populations are underrepresented in ministry-oriented research. The findings of this study suggest a set of potential best practices among under-resourced urban adolescents that, when combined, bring about valuable insights into adolescent leadership and their potential. The study also suggests a potential developmental relationship between Christian practice and identity articulation among these youth. Finally, this research suggest a caution to a simple therapeutic interpretation of adolescents' faith without first taking into account the traumatogenic nature of their environment.

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