**AN ECCLESIOLOGY OF ADOLESCENT SPIRITUAL DISCERNMENT: UTILIZING RICHARD OSMER’S APPROACH TO PRACTICAL THEOLOGY TO HELP HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS DEVELOP A MISSIONAL PRACTICE FOR LUBBOCK CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY’S VOCATI PROGRAM**

*Jeremy D. Smith, DMin; JoAnn D. Long, PhD, MA, RN*

jeremy@sunset.cc; [joann.long@lcu.edu](mailto:joann.long@lcu.edu)

***Abstract: Theoretically guided, evidence-based approaches to fostering spiritual discernment among adolescents are limited. In this study, LCU’s Vocati program utilized Richard Osmer’s model of practical theology to engage students in the crafting a missional practice. Analysis of qualitative findings suggest that as an ecclesiology, Vocati’s missional practice may be a framework that could be modeled in youth ministry programs as a way to guide students in spiritual discernment.***

In 2015, around 120 colleges and universities were selected by the Youth Theology Network in partnership with the Lilly Endowment, Inc. to create experimental programs that sought to develop new ways of fostering spiritual growth among high school students. The project aims to create spaces where young people can go to cultivate their intellectual curiosity, explore deeper questions about God and faith, and make sense of their place and purpose in an increasingly complex, global world. In 2016, Lubbock Christian University established the program Vocati: A Missional Youth Theology Institute. The term *vocati* is the Latin root word for “calling” and is from where the modern concept of vocation comes. As a program, then, one of the main goals of Vocati has been to help students discern their spiritual calling as Christians. Recently, we have utilized the practical theological framework of Richard Osmer to help students develop a missional practice.[[1]](#footnote-1) The process of developing missional practices guides students in a personal and contextual discernment process that helps them reflect on God’s work in their lives and learn how to respond appropriately as disciples. As an ecclesiology, it is upon the church to help the next generation discern their role in the kingdom of God and discover their spiritual giftedness. However, theoretically guided, evidence-based approaches to fostering spiritual discernment among youth are limited. Therefore, this study sought to explore the question “Can the crafting of a missional practice that uses Richard Osmer’s approach to practical theology help teens develop spiritual discernment?” After crafting a missional practice, students were asked to reflect on and articulate what they believe is God’s mission for their lives. Narrative responses and missional practice presentations were collected and analyzed by the research team. Findings suggest that the crafting of a missional practice that uses Osmer’s approach to practical theology may be a useful model for youth ministry programs seeking to help students in the process of developing spiritual discernment.

**Background**

Adolescent Development and Cultural Realities

Like many of her peers, senior year was both exciting and stressful for this student as she navigated school, work, prom, and extracurricular activities, all while wrestling with questions that would determine the rest of her life: What college should she attend? What would her major be? What type of career should she pursue? As she struggled throughout the year to answer these questions, she began to wonder what would be pleasing to God. During her high school career, she had developed a strong passion for the deaf ministry at her church. She started attending the deaf church and taking classes until she became fluent in American Sign Language. Now that her senior year was here, she began to wonder if God might be calling her to minister to this group whom she had come to love. She wanted to pursue a career that was both pleasing to God and brought her joy, but she was stuck trying to discern what God wanted for her life. How could she know if God was actually calling her to this life of ministry?

The adolescent process is a period of significant physical, psychological, social, and developmental transformation. The World Health Organization identifies adolescence as individuals between 10-19 years of age. The term “youth” refers to individuals that are ages 15-24 years. [[2]](#footnote-2) A central task of adolescent development is the solidification of identity. However, American psychologist Erik Erikson argued that an identity crisis is at the heart of the adolescent experience.[[3]](#footnote-3) Likewise, Susan Harter develops the concept of multiple selves, where adolescents interact differently based on their social settings, as an ever-present reality during adolescence. A primary concern for adolescents, then, is to discover one’s true self.[[4]](#footnote-4) On the other hand, Randolph Lucente suggests that a developmental marker of adolescent maturation in the construction of the self is the ability to display a somewhat consistent identity in diverse personal and social situations.[[5]](#footnote-5) Harter suggests that the construction of the self during adolescences is both a cognitive and social construction.[[6]](#footnote-6) Community, then, becomes a significant contributor to the construction of the self during adolescences.

As an ecclesiology, youth ministry programs are a vital part of church communities and are positioned to help the next generation discern their identity as it relates to their role in the kingdom of God. When students see God as active and ask questions relating to their participation in with his mission in the world, they are engaging in the process of spiritual and vocational discernment, and identity formation. However, the 2001-2005 *National Study of Youth and Religion* interview findings on the religious and spiritual lives of American teens, summarized as moralistic therapeutic deism (MTD). According to MTD, instead of believing in the personal and active God of scripture, today’s young people tend to have a deistic view of God.[[7]](#footnote-7)

In addition, the best ways to help youth in the process of spiritual discernment within the shifting cultural context of adolescence is not fully understood. Youth theology programs are among the first programs to engage adolescents in an intentional vocational discernment process. However, while the importance of these programs for youth ministry scholarship and education have been outlined in great detail by Kenda Dean and Christy Hearlson,[[8]](#footnote-8) there seems to be an overwhelming gap in youth ministry practice when it comes to spiritual discernment among youth. The lack of spiritual discernment in youth ministry, especially vocational discernment, is particularly surprising since the adolescent context seems to demand it as students struggle towards adulthood by solidifying their identity and character traits through decisions such as which college to attend and what career to pursue.

Vocati students self-select into the program after being nominated by a minister or church leader to ensure they are spiritually mature enough to complete the program. Vocati students, then, are perceived to be above their peers in spiritual maturity by spiritual mentors who work closely with youth. Nonetheless, from our observations Vocati students, like their peers, continue to struggle with the deism side of MTD. Of particular concern is the tendency toward deism as students reflect on their spiritual calling as disciples. Specifically, we asked students to describe what they believed was God's mission for their life. From our observations, while Vocati students from cohorts 1-3 showed significant growth (full manuscript in review), they struggled to identify God in active ways, suggesting an unfamiliarity with the process of spiritual discernment on behalf of the students.

The Process of Spiritual Discernment

Spiritual discernment is not something that comes natural to disciples and can be especially challenging for adolescents. This is due largely in part to a rudimentary definition that reduces spiritual discernment to vocational discernment, which is then equated with occupational ministry. Likewise, the process of spiritual discernment is not a common topic in youth ministry programs or churches, leaving the discernment process to happen haphazardly. Therefore, it is important that we both clarify the definition of vocation and outline the process of spiritual discernment.

One of the most helpful examples of vocational discernment that has happened in recent times is the calling of Mother Teresa. In her early years as a nun, she was a teacher at the Loreto convent school in Entally, eastern Calcutta. It was during this time that God began to grow in her a deep desire to serve the poor of Calcutta which would eventually lead to the founding of the Missionaries of Charity. In her own words, she describes that God gave her a “call within a call” on a train ride to Darjeeling in 1946.[[9]](#footnote-9) From this perspective, then, we can gather that vocation flows out of the life of a disciple in which motivations and desires are set towards working to bring about the kingdom of God. Towards this end, Mother Teresa wrote:

Our spiritual life is a life of reliance on God. Our work is our prayer because we carry it out through Jesus, in Jesus, and for the sake of Jesus. A vocation is a gift from Christ. He has said, “I have chosen you.” Every vocation must really belong to Christ. The work that we are called to accomplish is just a means to give concrete substance to our love for God. Our vocation is nothing else but to belong to Christ. The work that we do is only a means to put our love for Christ into living action.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Paul, on more than one occasion, highlights the importance of the diversity of spiritual giftedness which leads to a particular type of work we are to do for the sake of the kingdom of God (i.e., Rom 12:6-8, 1 Cor 12:4-11). When listing out spiritual gifts that are to be used for the kingdom of God in Romans 12:3-8, Paul does not distinguish between gifts that relate to the office of ministry (i.e., prophesying, teaching) with that of the ordinary gifts of discipleship (i.e., giving, showing mercy, serving). In his writings to the Colossians, he reminds his readers that “whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus” (Col 3:17). Vocation, then, should not be understood as only relating to a call towards occupational ministry, but simply a calling towards a specific type of work for the kingdom of God, whether ministerial or secular in nature.

Understanding vocation simply as the concrete ways in which we utilize our spiritual giftedness to put our love for God into action means that vocational discernment is not a singular activity in the life of a disciple as they discern their occupation. Instead, vocation belongs to the broader praxis of spiritual discernment. For adolescents, it is not simply discerning whether they will attend college or not, what major they might pursue, and, ultimately, what career they will assume. Spiritual discernment is better understood in the practical theological sense as occurring when we determine how God’s kingdom is unfolding (or not unfolding) in our world and discern how we might participate with God in his mission. Towards this end, Ruth Haley Barton writes:

Discernment in the most general sense, is the capacity to recognize and respond to the presence and the activity of God—both in the ordinary moments and in the large decisions of our lives.... Spiritual discernment is the ability to distinguish or discriminate between good (that which is of God and draws us closer to God) and evil (that which is not of God and draws us away from God).[[11]](#footnote-11)

If spiritual discernment includes both the ordinary moments and the large decisions of our lives, then we will engage in the discernment process almost every day as we work out what God is up to in our world and how we might respond appropriately as disciples. For adolescents, then, spiritual discernment goes beyond a career choice and becomes the basic framework for discipleship. As an action of practical theology, spiritual discernment primarily happens in the midst of the Christian community. In an article on the role of practical theology in youth ministry, Chap Clark explains that “there can be no theology that is ‘practical’ that does not have as its sole product a community submitted to Jesus Christ and his kingdom prompting.”[[12]](#footnote-12) In regard to vocational discernment, Kenda Dean and Christy Hearlson write

Vocation does not belong to or happen inside of individuals, nor is it a static object to be discovered, decided upon, and owned. Vocation and vocational practices reflect an unfolding dialogue among the spirit of God, the Christian community, the individual, and, importantly, the cultural setting or society where individuals live.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Returning to the story of Mother Teresa’s train ride to Darjeeling, it is easy to assume that once Mother Teresa received her call to serve the poor in Calcutta, she immediately went to work. However, it would be two years after her train ride until she would leave the covenant to serve the poor and six years until the Missionary of Charities would be founded. Mother Teresa relied heavily on the wisdom of the church and, though she pushed heavily, she waited for the churches confirmation before beginning her work among the poor.

For adolescents, it is incumbent on the church to walk alongside young people in the spiritual discernment process. As a community of faith, the Vocati leadership, with partners from the students’ contexts, offered support and confirmation in the discernment process. We created an intervention for cohorts 4-5, which included Richard Osmer’s model of practical theology as a framework for crafting a missional practice to better help Vocati students engage in the process of spiritual discernment.

**Methodology**

Intervention: Crafting a Missional Practice

The Vocati program at Lubbock Christian University has been experimenting with spiritual discernment among adolescents by creating a community for high school students to discern God’s working in their experiences and ways they might respond as followers of Jesus. In the 2019-2021 timeframe, we implemented the practical theological approach of Richard Osmer as a framework to help students craft a missional practice. Though students participate in spiritual discernment every day, crafting a missional practice allows students to intentionally reflect on and articulate the process while being guided by a community made up of faithful disciples of Christ who understand the students’ contexts.

Osmer’s approach to practical theology focuses on four key tasks or questions.[[14]](#footnote-14) Throughout the semester, students spend a month reflecting on each question in their personal experiences and processing their answers with the rest of the community online who offer feedback, suggestions, and direction [APPENDIX I]. The first task is the descriptive-empirical task which asks the question, “What is going on?” During this month students spend time prayerfully listening to their contexts (e.g., family, friends, school) as they try to discern areas where the kingdom of God is being fulfilled and where there seems to be a lapse in the kingdom of God. Once they have narrowed down their list to one area, they move to the normative task, which asks the question, “What ought to be going on?”[[15]](#footnote-15) In the normative task, students focus on crafting a guiding theology using scripture and the writings of primary theologians. This guiding theology becomes the basis for the final task, the pragmatic task, which asks the question, “How might we respond?” At this time, the students are called to action as they think about how they will embody their theology in this particular context.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Participants

Twenty-one youths, ranging in ages from 16-20 years (*M*=17.8, *SD*=1.07) completed cohorts 4 and 5. Of these, 52% (11) were male and 48% (10) were female. Students reported their ethnicity as 90% (19) Caucasian and 10% (2) Hispanic. At the time of application to the program, 71% (15) reported being in grades 10-12 and 29% (6) reporting having completed grade 12.

Data Collection

Permission from the Lubbock Christian University Institutional Review Board was obtained to conduct the study. Informed consent (parental consent and child assent) was obtained prior to the start of the summer intensive. At program end, video and audio recordings of students articulating their missional practice and narrative responses to the open-ended question, “What do I believe God’s mission for my life to be,” from the Vocati Institute Questionnaire (VIQ) were collected from *N=*21 students completing cohorts 4 and 5 from 2019-2021.

Qualitative Analysis and Findings

The methodology used in this study was a *Qualitative Interpretive Approach.*[[17]](#footnote-17)Open-ended narrative responses from the VIQ were transcribed by a trained study research assistant to an encrypted Excel file. Data entry was cross-checked for accuracy by a second team member. Responses were aggregated and moved to Word documents. Word clouds and word counts for most frequently occurring words were created using www.wordclouds.com to aid with data visualization. Content analysis of participant responses was conducted as narrative data were independently read, highlighted, and reflected on by two senior members of the research team.[[18]](#footnote-18) Participant responses were examined within the narrative context and clustered into like concepts. Themes emerging from the narrative responses were identified and named.[[19]](#footnote-19) Narrative themes and language characteristic of the practice of spiritual discernment were then examined. We developed five questions for what we considered to be indicators for the presence of, or movement toward growth in spiritual discernment: 1) Do they talk about God actively? 2) Do their responses highlight their giftedness? 3) Do they identify a specific vocational calling? 4) Do they stress participation in practices of spiritual discernment? and 5) Do they allow theology to guide their actions? In response to the VIQ question about understanding God’s call in their life, the more specific the articulation, we hypothesized, the stronger concept the student has of God’s calling and working in their particular context. Recordings from the missional practice video presentations were likewise reviewed, analyzed and grouped into themes with the VIQ responses. For confirmability of analysis, a follow-up focus group was held in which a sub-group of six participants reviewed the data analysis, themes, and interpretation. Feedback from the focus group confirmed the trustworthiness of study findings thus providing preliminary evidence for the use of Richard Osmer’s approach to practical theology as a guide for the development of missional practices from which teens may develop spiritual discernment.Table 1 offers examples of narrative responses, suggesting that students who crafted a missional practice using Osmer’s theological framework showed signs of growth in their engagement in the process of spiritual discernment and seemed to develop a more active view of God.

**Discussion**

Returning to the story of the Vocati senior, in 2019 she attended Vocati and participated in the crafting of a missional practice. As she prayerfully listened to her context, it became clear to her that she wanted to focus her missional practice on the deaf community in her church. She began thinking theologically about how God’s kingdom belongs to people from all different backgrounds. Drawing from the image of the Church found in Revelation 7 and a theology of new creation, she came to believe that every person is invited to participate

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| Table 1: Narrative responses categorized into themes and compared with indicators of spiritual discernment | | |
| Themes | Examples | Indicators of Spiritual Discernment |
| Listening to God | *“I was expecting for Vocati to be a lot more challenging this year but thankfully this was probably the best year I had for Vocati, I think God really showed me and gave me more opportunity to do good things and I saw a better vision than I had in other years.” “I think God is definitely using [my practice] to benefit especially me. It has helped me to be a lot more theologically minded throughout my week and in just everyday reading of the bible…it has shifted my mindset to think about what the author or what God is saying to me personally and what call to action comes from [different verses of the Bible].”* | **Comments reflect an active perception of God in personal, spiritual discernment** |
| Allowing theology to guide spiritual discernment | *“[I want] to be a minister of reconciliation to the world.” “This idea of gifting our belovedness is so foundational in our relationships not only with other people but also with God. If I believe that I am beloved then I will not allow myself to be walked on and if I equally believe that others are beloved then I naturally will become more aware of that and treat them as such.” “The theology behind my missional living is the intentionality Jesus had towards others in both friends and strangers, in my life it would look like finding time to talk with friends and deepen our relationships as well as acting and showing them that I care and listen to them. Being intentional with our relationships, showing them the deepness that Christ's love can bring.” “Concepts that motivated…[my] practice included the imago Dei concept, which is being the image of God and reaching out to others. The mission of God ties in as well, focusing that we live [faith]out and not just inside the Church walls…Some theologians that really speak to my context are Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Francis Chan and Kyle Idleman. They touch especially on using each individual's gifts and really valuing the members of our group.” “I can stand here and know that I am already the beloved, I am already a masterpiece, I am already made in the image of God…My practice shifted from something I was trying to become and now I am more focused on being the person that God already created me to be, the masterpiece that I am.” “We can’t know everything, we can’t be perfect, we become broken and that’s okay. God uses all of us for his glory…God uses me…even if I can’t see how in the moment.” “I wanted to live intentionally and live in the moment and be present for somebody…I wanted to be intentional, in the moment with them so that they knew I was there for them I was listening I was being attentive I was being Christlike towards them by loving them and listening to them.”* | **Comments reflect an active participation in practical theology wherein students express a deeper intentionality of theological embodiment** |
| Listing Specific vocational callings | *“I feel that God is calling me to be a children’s minister. I felt this after doing one of my Vocati projects where I worked with the children’s ministry program.” “Missional counselor” “To work in the Deaf community- to teach and to be taught, to love and to give a voice to these people” “Joining the mission field and ministry.”* | **Comments highlight how the process of crafting a missional practice has help students discern their specific vocational callings** |
| Participation in spiritual practices that help students listen to God | *“Scripture is one of God’s ways to talk to us…We were just taking turns reading a paragraph at a time and just asking each other, ‘What does this mean to you?’” “I had a dual purpose in my practice, not only to claim belovedness but to share it with others. In order to do that I practiced yoga, gratefulness journaling, meditation and I was really more aware of the times I needed to stop and rest. One of the biggest things I did was post some sticky notes around my room with affirmations like ‘you’re allowed to just be today.’” “...after spending time in prayer about this, I felt called [toward]...increasing relationships between high schoolers and younger kids in my church.” “One of the best experiences I’ve had...is practicing the presence of God...trying to focus on the good things God has blessed me with...you just sit and you're aware of ‘oh, hey, God’s here. He’s got this under control.’”* | **Comments reflect a wider engagement in practices that help students discern and listen to God’s voice** |

in God’s new creation regardless of their background or apparent shortcomings. This new theological perspective, however, was in tension with her experience as she found herself living in two worlds. She had developed both a relationship with the students her age in the deaf congregation and many hearing friends in the youth ministry program, but the two worlds did not intersect. Therefore, after a time of prayer, she decided that she would focus her missional practice on mending this gap. In the months that followed, she organized a group of hearing students who had some training in American Sign Language to help interpret classes and events so that her hearing-impaired friends could fully participate in youth group activities. While the process was not easy and fraught with many challenges, she approached the entire missional practice as an experiment in what it would be like to pursue ministry to deaf students as a career. When she was asked to reflect on God’s mission in her life at the end of the program, she was able to clearly say that God’s mission in her life was “to work in the Deaf community—to teach and to be taught, to love and to give a voice to these people.”

The narrative findings of both the VIQ and the mission practice presentation videos from cohorts 4-5 suggest that the crafting of a missional practice utilizing the practical theological framework of Richard Osmer helps students develop a deeper understanding of the spiritual discernment process. In many cases, the process seems to help students discern their specific vocational calling towards ministry, whether occupational or secular in nature. The language from the narrative findings also suggests a more personal and active view of God as students speak about listening to God and discerning his will, as well as the expression of an increased participation in practices of spiritual discernment.

**Limitations**

This small, qualitative study has several limitations. Qualitative responses were limited to students choosing to participate in Vocati in 2019-2021 and to the students volunteering to take part in the research. Great care was taken to ensure methodological rigor by following conventionally accepted standards for conducting, analyzing, and reporting qualitative research.[[20]](#footnote-20) The inherent nature of qualitative research does not allow for claims of causality; yet, taken together, the exploration of data reflecting student perspectives from both narrative and missional practices suggest important personal shifts in student perspectives took place. A suggestion for future research would be to interview Vocati scholars to explore their spiritually formative practices in the years following participation in Vocati.

**Conclusion**

In a work reflecting on insights the church can gain from Youth Theology Programs, Kenda Dean and Christy Hearlson reminds church leaders that “the task of Christian community on behalf of young people … is to help them discern and name their gifts, and to commission them to use those gifts to serve God and others.”[[21]](#footnote-21) Our findings suggest the crafting of a missional practice that utilizes the work of Osmer may provide a theological model for guiding students in the spiritual discernment process. Positioned with the positive youth development and synthesized research from ecclesiastical research, findings from our study suggest a movement toward more active verbalization of God’s activity, his call, and their own spiritual giftedness and vocational leanings. It seems, therefore, that Vocati’s missional practice, guided by Osmer’s theological model, could be a useful tool for youth ministry programs to help students learn how to see God in their experiences and participate with him as he works to fulfill his kingdom.

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Appendix I:

**Crafting A Missional Practice**

**First Month**

**The descriptive-empirical task**

***Main Question: “What’s going on?”***

Before the first meeting: Spend some time examining your different contexts (e.g., school, community, family, church, youth group, etc.). Prayerfully listen to key people in the context. What do they see? What are their experiences? What specific challenges do you see? What healthy and unhealthy patterns do you see?

Artifact: Identify 1) the areas in your contexts where God is working and 2) the areas in your context where it seems like God’s mission is not being fulfilled. Create a list with all the different things you are seeing. This list should develop out of the practice of prayerful listening to your context.

First meeting on Zoom: Share your list with your group. Get their input. What guidance or insight can they share with you about this particular context or area of need? How does their insight connect with and/or expand your thoughts?

Before the second meeting: Spend time praying about your list and pick **ONE** area on which you want to focus.

Second meeting on Zoom: Share with your group the area on which you will focus and why you chose that area? Allow them to help you start thinking of theologians, books, or Bible verses you might look into to help you develop a guiding theology.

**Second Month**

**The normative task**

***Main question: “What ought to be going on?”***

Before your meeting: Spend some time reflecting theologically about your context and focus area. Specifically think about what scriptures, theologians, or books, speak towards your context.

Artifact: Using scripture, begin to craft a theological pattern that explains what ought to be going on theologically in your context.

First meeting on Zoom: Share your theological pattern with your group. Get their input. How does their insight connect with and/or expand your thoughts? Is there anything you might be missing?

Before the second meeting: Write down your guiding theology in detail (around one paragraph).

Second Meeting: Share your finalized theological discoveries or ideas with your group. Brainstorm with your group ways you might respond as you start to think about your practice.

**Third Month**

**The pragmatic task**

***Main question: “How might I respond?”***

Before your meeting: Spend some time reflecting and praying on how you will respond to your context. Begin to identify a practical way you will engage your context that aligns with your theological pattern. How can you embody your theology in your context? Try to stay away from a single, big event. Think about what you personally can do to encourage your context over an extended period of time as a way to create “ruts in your soul.” What specific gifts do you have that you could use (i.e., teaching, encouraging, befriending, etc.). Be careful not to see yourself as a savior. Your goal is not to transform your context. Rather, your goal is to be incarnational by modeling the principles of God that you described in your theological pattern.

Artifact: Begin to craft a practice: What specific practice(s) are you going to engage in over the next few months? Be specific about what you are going to do but be realistic with your time. Be prepared that your initial practice may evolve over time. The purpose is not to get it “right.” The purpose is to engage your context with intentional, incarnational practices. Do not be afraid to respectfully experiment and reflect on what you have learned.

*Special note: You may think that your idea is too small or simple, but oftentimes the smaller or simpler the ideas the better. We are not asking you to do a big event or some grand gesture. We simply want you to live into your context with more theological intentionality.*

First meeting on Zoom: Share your practice with your group. Get their input. How does their insight connect with and/or expand your thoughts?

Before the second meeting: Start your practice. How is it going? What do you need to adapt/change?

Second meeting on Zoom: Share your experience with your group. Get their input. How does their insight connect with and/or expand your thoughts?

**General Notes on your Practice:**

1. Do not be afraid! This practice is part of your lifelong journey of faith. This is not a one-time project or task; it is an ever-evolving practice of living incarnationally and missionally in the world. You do not have to get it “right” or “perfect.” You should take what you have been learning and, with humility and love, and see what can be done in a context when you engage people relationally.
2. Do not get discouraged! There will be parts of your practice that do not go the way you expected. Rather than feeling discouraged, see this as an opportunity to learn and grow.
3. Do not do this alone! Utilize the community God has surrounded you with–your mentor, your family, your friends, your church, your Vocati community. Rely on that community for support, prayer, insight, and encouragement.
4. Build your practice in a feasible way. Sometimes, when we are excited about something new, we set enormous goals that we can achieve only a few times and then our engagement falls away until we are doing little to nothing to achieve those goals. This practice ought to be simple enough that you can sustain engagement with it for a long period of time. So perhaps it starts with one or two simple commitments. Once that commitment has become part of your regular practice, think about adding another commitment (if relevant) to continue growing.
5. Stay involved in the process! Do not let your life get so busy that you cannot find time to be engaged.
6. Ask for help! If you are afraid, stuck, confused, worried…ask someone to help you! Christian life and practice are intended to be relational. You are not alone!

***Jeremy D. Smith*** *(DMin, Abilene Christian University) has served as the co-youth and family minister at Sunset Church of Christ in Lubbock, Texas since 2012. He has almost 15 years of experience in student ministry programs (children’s, youth, and college ministry). Dr. Smith is also the program coordinator of Vocati, a Youth Theology Institute for Lubbock Christian University funded by the Lilly Endowment that is seeking creative ways to help high school students develop faith through theological orientation, creativity, and embodiment as well as helping youth develop a missional practice. He holds a Masters of Divinity from Abilene Christian University and a Masters of Biblical Studies from Lubbock Christian University. His thesis project was titled “Adolescent Spiritual Formation: Practical Theology as Filter for Youth Ministry.” Dr. Smith lives in Lubbock, Texas with his wife Leah Smith.*

***JoAnn D. Long*** *(PhD, The University of Texas Health Sciences Center San Antonio) is a Professor of Nursing, Program Director and Principal Investigator of Vocati. She has been engaged in adolescent research and health promotion for the past 25 years. She serves as a mentor and teacher in her local congregation’s Single Mothers Ministry. She holds a Masters in Biblical Interpretation from Lubbock Christian University and Masters in Nursing from Troy State University in AL, BSN from Georgia State University. She is a licensed registered nurse and board-certified nursing executive. Dr. JoAnn Long is married to Dr. Jesse Long, Professor of Old Testament and Archaeology at LCU. They have two grown daughters, Laurel Littlefield and Leah Blackwell, two sons-in-law, Brad & Brett and three grandsons: Griffin, Reid and Nolan.*

1. Richard Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. World Health Organization, “Adolescent Health,” January 2021, https://www.who.int/health-topics/ adolescent-health#tab=tab\_1; Centers for Disease Control, “Child Development: Teenagers (15-17 years of age),” March 2020, https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/childdevelopment/positiveparenting/adolescence2.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Joseph LaVoie, “Identity Crisis,” in *Magill’s Encyclopedia of Social Science*, ed. Nancy Piotrowski (Pasadena, CA: Salem Press, 2003), 2:785-89. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Susan Harter, *The Construction of the Self: Developmental and Sociocultural Foundations* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2012) 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Randolph L. Lucente, *Character Formation and Identity in Adolescence: Clinical and Developmental Issues* (Chicago: Lyceum Books, 2016), p. 16-20. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Susan Harter, *The Construction of the Self,* 1*.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 118-171. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Kenda Creasy Dean and Christy Lang Hearlson ed., *How Youth Ministry Can Change Theological Education--If We Let It* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Brain Kolodiejchuk, ed., *Mother Teresa: Come be my Light: The Private Writings of the Saint of Calcutta* (New York: Doubleday Religion, 2006), 40. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Teresa, *No Greater Love* (Novato: New World Library, 1997), 147. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ruth Haley Barton, *Pursuing God’s Will Together: A Discernment Practice for Leadership Groups* (Downers Grove: InterVaristy Press, 2012), 10, 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Chap Clark, “Youth Ministry as Practical Theology,” *The Journal of Youth Ministry* 7.1 (2008): 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Kenda Creasy Dean and Christy Lang Hearlson ed., *How Youth Ministry Can Change Theological Education—If We Let It* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Richard Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. In Richard Osmer’s approach, the second task is the interpretative task, which asks the question, “Why is this going on?” This question focuses on the social dimensions beneath the surface of daily life that causes people to react in unhealthy ways (e.g., socio-economics, psychology). In our experience, this task is a little too difficult for high school students to grasp. While Vocati has the students reflect deeply on the systemic issues facing our world today, we do not expect them to understand the complexity of all the issues beneath their missional practices. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. When we first developed the missional practice, it was labeled a mission project, but we quickly realized that the term missional project unintentionally conveyed a fundamental flaw. From our experience, often during the pragmatic task, students consider centering their missional practices on one-time big events. We believe that such responses can have a negative effect on spiritual discernment because it encourages students to think about spiritual discernment as a one-time response. Likewise, a big event also gives the false impression that we have somehow fixed the problem and can thus move on. The term missional practice, on the other hand, encourages students to think about spiritual discernment as a conscious effort of theological embodiment in a particular context which takes place within the wisdom of Christian community. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln ed., *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research,* (Grand Rapids: Sage, 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. JoAnn D. Long, Samara Silva, and Carol Boswell, “Qualitative and Mixed Research Methods,” in *Introduction to Nursing Research: Incorporating Evidence-based Practice* 5th edition, ed. C. Boswell and S. Cannon (Burlington, MA: Jones & Bartlett Learning, 2020), 198-211. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Barney G. Glaser, “The Constant Comparison Method of Qualitative Analysis,” *Social Problems* 12, no. 4 (1965), 436-45. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Bridget C. O’Brien, Illene B. Harris, Thomas J. Beckman, Darcy A. Reed, and David A. Cook, “Standards for Reporting Qualitative Research: A Synthesis of Recommendations” in *Academic Medicine* 89 (2014), 1-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Kenda Creasy Dean and Christy Lang Hearlson ed., *How Youth Ministry Can Change Theological Education—If We Let It.* 117. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)