Theology Becoming Flesh: A Trinitarian Model for Youth Ministry

Association of Youth Ministry Educators

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Anyone attending presentations at recent Association of Youth Ministry Educators conferences or reading articles in The Journal of Youth Ministry would recognize two strong currents within the discipline of youth ministry; first, the melding together of practical theology and youth ministry in a strong symbiotic relationship of mutual understanding and guidance, and second, the attraction of building models by which to account for all the multiple variables encountered in the practice of youth ministry.

Youth ministry and practical theology are not an “odd-couple.” They fit very comfortably together. For the discipline of youth ministry, the recognition that youth ministry cannot be sustained over the long haul with a foundation built on activity and entertainment is one of the drivers of the movement designed to provide stronger theological foundations for youth ministry (Root, 2007). The discipline of youth ministry looks to the “practical” side of practical theology to provide the connection to academia as youth ministry studies become more research based and youth ministry practice more empirical. Youth ministry looks to the “theology” side of practical theology for depth and insight for drawing biblical, systematic, and historical components of the Christian faith into play (Dykstra & Bass, 2008).

There is movement in the other direction, too. The discipline of practical theology finds in youth ministry a natural field for study and application, with a population of youth and adults that is accessible and often more willing to grow, explore and learn than other groups within the church. What could be better for practical theologians considering the interaction of faith and culture than a close association with the rapidly changing – yet always within discernable developmental categories – lives of Christian adolescents (Smith & Denton, 2005; Smith & Snell, 2009)?

The second current has to do with constructing working models that describe the task of practical theology, and do so from the perspective of youth ministry. Examples are readily available from Ray Anderson (2001), Chap Clark (2008), Cheryl Crawford (2010), Kendra Dean (2001), and Richard Osmer (2008). Models of practical theology applied to youth ministry are helpful because they arrange multiple variables in patterns that reveal relationships. Pathways of possible response are exposed, and from models curricula can be constructed that focus on essentials while leaving out as little of value as possible.

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1 Portions of this paper were taken from Eutychus Youth: Applied Theology for Youth Ministry. (Oberdeck 2010).
2 Christian Smith would not identify himself as a practical theology, but as a practicing sociologist. Nevertheless his candid appraisals of his research offered in the books border provide conclusions well within the range of practical theology.
3 See Appendix for samples.
The history of the relationship between practical theology and youth ministry goes farther back than what might first be imagined (Cannister, 2010) but for many the term “strategic” and “fundamental” (Browning, 1991) mark the place to begin. Crawford’s careful review of several models is most helpful in pointing out strengths and weaknesses of each as the model builders work to bring practical theology and youth ministry into closer relationship (Crawford, 2010).

The models have several things in common. One notices immediately the iterative nature of model building – that is to say, models tend to be cyclical – working with an assumed action/reflection pattern of application. With whatever initial resources are available a course of action is taken, and the consequences are then examined against standard criteria to determine the effectiveness, authenticity, and faithfulness of the enacted decision. From that analysis the subsequent action is derived. One would expect, therefore, that a good working model of practical theology and youth ministry will be dynamic in nature rather than simply a static description.

Another common element found among the models is a concrete situation. While not described in detail, there is an assumed situation or event that requires action on the part of the youth minister. The models revolve (circular models), plough through (linear models), or encapsulate (rectangular models) the event, gathering data for a response (faithful action, Christopraxis).

A third common characteristic among the models is the list of sources for information to be drawn into play for arriving at faithful action. In general these can be divided into two categories – one drawn from within the community of faith involving terms such as “Biblical Exegesis” and one drawn from the world outside the community of faith involving the social sciences and cultural studies.

Theology Becoming Flesh

These elements appear as prerequisites for a useful model. Examining the models of Osmer, Dean, Anderson, Clark and Crawford raises an interesting set of questions quite pertinent to practical theology. Do the models in themselves reflect a theological grounding or are they theologically neutral? Since they are not coming out of a void, one might assume that there are traces of theological presuppositions that can be identified. For example, how does the model depict the relationship between input from Scripture and input from the social sciences? Are they given equal weight or does one serve the other? Is there evidence of certain Christian beliefs within the model, revealed perhaps by what role, if any, is played by the Holy Spirit or through sacraments? The question can then be asked whether or not a given model will be found more helpful in one denominational setting than in another.

If we grant this to be the case, then the more generically constructed the model, the more generalizable it will be across denominational boundaries. Likewise, the more a model reflects a set of doctrinal beliefs, the less generalizable it will be. Would this make the more specific model less helpful? Such a conclusion would be premature. As a depiction of a theological
orientation played out in practical theological terms, the more specific the model, the more “incarnational” it becomes – that is, as an example of theology taking on flesh, it reveals theology addressing a concrete circumstance with a specific set of beliefs resulting in an action derived from those beliefs.

Now we have something to talk about! Beliefs have consequences in practical action, and our actions in practice can be the source of rich dialog. A deeper understanding and appreciation of diverse theological confessions would be a positive result from exploring models of youth ministry seen through the lens of practical theology. We may come to a better comprehension of why faithful action – Christopraxis – in response to the same situation can be so different among practitioners committed to the same calling of youth ministry.

Challenges for Model Builders

How do we go about building models? There is tension between academic respectability and congregational utility. Gary Parrett explains; “Is Practical Theology the most helpful way to frame the task of doing youth ministry and/or of preparing future youth ministers? It may be. But if it is, I would urge that our approach be one of simplicity, rather than of sophistication. In particular, I would urge that the language and concepts in which we school our students be language that is familiar to (or at least, within the reasonable grasp of) both our fellow professors – who labor in other disciplines – and our fellow parishioners.” (Parrett 2008, 62).

Cheryl Crawford expresses the same concern. “If we are to serve the Church, we need to come up with a language and models that are clearly understandable and easy to put into practice. Otherwise...they’re useless as a ‘rudder’...except in the academy.” (Crawford 2010, 7-8). Chap Clark sums up the tension. “Therefore practical theology, and youth ministry as one of its expressions, must be accessible to the church and its leaders. At the same time, any practical theology model must be contextually and theologically robust.” (Clark 2008, 26).

A Trinitarian Model for Youth Ministry: The Ministry Moment

My attempt at a model for youth ministry draws on a foundation of practical theology that seeks to be simple, understandable, and accessible while at the same time theologically robust. Like other models, it attempts to account for as many variables as possible, yet do so in language more common to the church than the academy. The model is drawn from a specific theological confession – Lutheran – and from a specific branch of Lutheranism at that! This makes the model at the same time less generalizable but perhaps more open to dialog.

The model begins with an event that requires a response by those in ministry. By starting with an event the model initiates the “action/reflection” cycle of learning. But that action isn’t coming out of a void, and the process doesn’t start in neutral. There are theological presuppositions and commitments that I bring to the event from its beginning.
When I’m teaching youth ministry students I instruct them to take direction from the Scriptures (exegetical theology) as accurately interpreted (systematic theology) within the framework of what has the church has confessed in the past (historical theology). The next step is to apply the insights gained from such reflection to a concrete circumstance. Of course, in real life this works backwards. The concrete circumstance suddenly erupts, and in a flash we find ourselves responding as best we can. The manner of that response, however, will differ between the youth leader who reacts from the gut and the youth leader who reacts from an informed practical theology.

What will go into that “moment of ministry?” Of what do I want to be aware when the opportunity for Christian care giving arises and I am the care giver? From my theological commitments to Lutheran theology I draw on two key doctrines; the doctrine of the Trinity and the doctrine of justification by grace through faith. The relationship between these two doctrines is that of gift giver and gift receiver. God – the Father, Son and Holy Spirit – out of pure grace and mercy, gives gifts, the greatest of which is the gift of saving faith in Jesus Christ.

Australian Lutheran theologian John Kleinig calls this emphasis on gift reception as a focal point for theology “receptive spirituality.” He relates it to the Trinity this way. “… By this reception of life from Christ we are drawn into the life of the Holy Trinity. Receptive spirituality embeds the life of the believer in the family of God and in the church” (Kleinig, 9). The body of Christ that is the Church recognizes that it constantly receives all that sustains it as gifts from God. The Church answers Paul’s rhetorical question “What do you have that you did not receive?” (I Corinthians 4:7 ESV), with “We have received everything, all is gift.”

Gifts of the Trinity – Framework for the Model

What kinds of gifts are received? God’s gifts divide into two categories according to the two ways in which human beings relate to God – God as our creator and God as our savior. In the first category are all those things received by all human beings because God is the creator of all. These are what we call “First Article” gifts (Standing Committee, 1989) referring to the division of the Apostles’ Creed into three articles. Luther’s definition for the First Article from the Small Catechism defines what is meant by First Article gifts. God has “given me my body and soul, eyes, ears and all my members; my reason and all my senses, and still preserves them. Also clothing and shoes, meat and drink, house and home, fields, cattle and all my goods, that he richly and daily supplies me with all that I need to support this body and life…” (Luther, 9). For reasons that will become apparent in a moment, I like to call First Article gifts “gifts from below.” Everyone receives these gifts, whether they acknowledge God as their creator and father or not, these gifts are given in various measures to all.

The second kind of gifts is Third Article gifts. Third Article gifts are the result of the work of the Holy Spirit. Again, drawing on the language of Luther, the Holy Spirit has “called me by the gospel, enlightened with his gifts, sanctified and kept me in the one true faith, even as he calls, gathers, enlightens and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth…” (Luther, 11). These
gifts I like to call “gifts from above.” They belong to those who have saving faith in Jesus Christ. Whereas all have First Article gifts, only believers have received Third Article gifts.

So far in the construction of this model we have First Article gifts from below because God is the creator and Third Article gifts from above because the Holy Spirit is the sanctifier. There are four ways in which this distinction will be helpful in developing a practical theology model for youth ministry.

- By recognizing the First Article gifts we create a bridge of common experience for ministry not only to our own youth, but also to their friends outside the church
- By recognizing the First Article gifts we open the door for fruitful use of empirical data and research on adolescents as a theologically legitimate source of information
- By recognizing the Third Article gifts we acknowledge the Holy Spirit as the power at work through the Word and the Sacraments establishing restored relationships with God
- By recognizing the Third Article gifts we understand our own role as tools in the hands of the Holy Spirit bringing the message of God’s presence into moments of ministry

The practical application between First Article and Third Article gifts comes in handy when we observe how these gifts relate to the ministry moment. In youth ministry we recognize that the gifts from above (Third Article – Means of Grace) are received within the context of the gifts from below (First Article – Created Order) as the environment in which maturity in faith in Jesus Christ (Second Article – Faith in Jesus Christ) takes place.

Gifts From Below: First Article Gifts

What belongs to the adolescent because he or she is a created being? Because God sees fit to continue giving the gift of physical life generation after generation, we have, through God’s gift of our intellect, come to understand how we change as we go through the stages of life. We change...

- Physically – from infancy through early, middle, and late childhood and adolescence, and then into physical maturity
- Cognitively – from limited concrete thought processes to deep abstract concepts
- Morally – from decision making based on punishment or approval to decisions based on universal principles
- Emotionally – from being controlled by our emotions to have some management of our own emotions
- Socially – from being the center of our own little universes to being integrated members of functioning communities
The purpose of identifying these categories of development is to tie each one to our condition as created beings. God created us in such a way that we grow, develop and change. Not only, therefore, is it legitimate in doing practical theology in youth ministry, to study the issues surrounding ourselves as created beings, it is absolutely necessary. I can’t adequately comprehend the spiritual needs of a mid-adolescent struggling with sexual identity issues if I don’t have a grasp of adolescent development, and how that development is taking place in the life of the adolescent in front of me. Studying these developmental issues doesn’t mean that I’ve wandered from my theological roots, or that somehow I have supplanted the authority of scripture with the social sciences. Rather, it means that I’m adequately accounting for God’s work as creator, and incorporating what I know of human beings as creations of God into my ministry.

Gifts from Below: Life Experience

The next layer of gifts from below is the life experience of the adolescent. Life experience is the context in which we find ourselves guided, shaped and formed. From early on we experience life through several concentric circles of influence. As a child grows it learns about the world and itself through multiple filters, the concentric circles of influence. These also are gifts from below that the child receives, and each one is significant for youth ministry. The first and most powerful filter through which experience is mediated is the family.

Now, rather than work with these concepts in a psychological framework, let’s put them in a theological worldview. What do we see? We see the First Article gifts placed within the family circumstances where those gifts will either be enhanced through nurture or atrophy through inattention. But the family circumstance itself is a gift; that is to say, it is received by child and the child out of necessity adapts.

The next filters through which the child views reality are school and peers. The order of effects will vary depending on the individual child; for some the teacher’s influence is immediate and only later do peers enter the picture while for others it is reversed. But each in its own way colors how the young person sees the world, relates to the world, and engages the world. At this point one might wonder about the wisdom of calling the child’s social context a gift. There are too many examples of family and community circumstances that could hardly be called a gift for the child – one deficit after another, creating intolerable obstacles for the child to overcome. Much of the heart-break in ministry for youth directors and youth leaders comes from watching families and communities fail to function as Christ centered places of nurture, but instead are places of hurt and pain.

There are two ways, paradoxically, to comprehend the social context. First comes the acknowledgment that humans are fallen beings in a fallen world. What did we expect? Don’t we know that sin and death has infected this world (Genesis 2:17), that the first death ever
recorded was fratricide (Genesis 4:8), and that creation itself cries out in eager longing for the restoration that is to come (Romans 8:22)? Recognizing the effects of sin (original, actual, committed, omitted, involuntary, etc.,) we are the best equipped, theologically, to engage a sinful social context because we are fully aware that we are not fighting against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers (Ephesians 6:12). We aren’t at all surprised when the social context – the families – with which we minister (and our own families, for that matter) show signs of extreme dysfunction. The patriarchal domiciles were not always happy places either (Genesis 37:28). This isn’t to deny that there are many wonderful homes. Many if not most in our congregations are affirming, God-fearing incubators of faith and Christian virtue. But we won’t find any perfect ones, no matter how hard we search or how long we wait. And we aren’t devastated when the household we thought most sound cracks and falls. That’s what happens in a fallen world.

Moreover, the social contexts from which our teens come are not a surprise to God. This is the paradox. Families made up of sinful people nevertheless are gifts of God. How? We could say that it is in the same way that God “sends rain on the just and the unjust” (Matthew 5:45). God as the creator of all and “father” of all provides family for all. While it is true that social contexts vary in quality, every child receives its family and its social context as a gift. Our role in ministry may very well be to take up the slack when the family life is unable to provide a nurturing environment where faith can grow.

Life experience includes more than just social context, especially by the time the child has entered adolescence. Along with the influences of family, peers, and school we find the imprint of the surrounding culture. In fact, we can embed the social context within the cultural setting and present a new set of filters mediating the world to the teenager.

Take the first circle above the social context. How does ethnicity influence and color one’s view of the world and one’s place in it? In the United States today, ethnicity may play a huge role if an adolescent is a first generation immigrant child who, because he or she can master the language more easily than the parents, has become the family link to the outside world; while on the other hand, third generation and beyond may have little or no influence. We are moving rapidly to the day when we will be part of a plurality culture – when no ethnic or racial group will have a majority. A possible result might be a shift in our understanding of what divides groups from one another; with less emphasis on race and more recognition of social/economic status. Whatever the outcome of these population shifts, we can’t ignore ethnicity when talking about the gifts from below received by the adolescent.

Nor can we, or will we, fail to notice the powerful influence of media, and how it is constantly changing the playing field of human relationships, communication, and what is meant by entertainment. Today television is interactive, entertainment is self-created, and communication is ubiquitous.
Finally, the large canopy filter that sets the context on a global scale is the nation. What people are we a part of? What beliefs about ourselves are communicated over and over again to young and old alike that define who we are as a people and what we stand for? Americans see themselves as guardians and helpers within the world. Americans have a “can do” spirit. Americans live in the land of the free and the home of the brave. How these predispositions play out in the life of the adolescent will range from wholesale acceptance to rejection.

Gifts from Below: Needs

The capstone on the gifts from below is constructed out of the creative mixture of First Article gifts and life experiences; what the teen has received as a created being and what the teen has experienced by way of close social contexts and more distant cultural influences. What does the teen do with all this? Doesn’t it just look like a soup, with every ingredient available in the kitchen thrown in? Who is going to risk tasting this?

But that is what the teen must do. Teens now take what has been filtered to them, and in their own individual and unique ways, construe it into a picture of the world. From that picture they establish what they need. This is their opportunity to respond, and within the youth ministry context, along with their own First Article gifts and their life experience, they bring the gift of their needs. Everything else from below has been from the outside coming in; self-expression is the inside coming out.

But clarity is in order here. I’m not including wants among the gifts from below; I’m only talking about needs, and I’m limiting this aspect of the gifts from below for one simple reason. Wants can have no limits, whereas needs can to some degree be met. Wants can soar off into fantasy, whereas needs are found in requirements that ought to be fulfilled. Wants satisfy the human hearts desire to curve in on itself, whereas needs can be understood and rewarded within well-meaning and God-centered relationships.

So what kind of needs are possible? Needs fall into four categories that can be expressed as follows:

• Felt Needs – the unsettled feeling that things are not right, that life is confused; felt needs drive behaviors that mystify adults and are unexplainable by teens. “Why did you do that?” is answered honestly by “I don’t know!”
• Expressed Needs – subsurface felt needs that rise to full awareness and find expression with peers and parents. These aren’t simply the “I wants...” of a consumer society, but the awareness of why the object is wanted – what does it mean to have the desired object.
• Comparative Needs – needs that are discovered by comparison. More often than not, comparative wants (“I want what he’s got!”) is mistaken for comparative needs (“Why am I not like others?”). Comparative needs focus less on objects and more on characteristics, and are often the source of teens’ low self-esteem and depression.
• Normative Needs – knowledge and behaviors not necessarily desired by teens, but required in order to fit into the social and global contexts. While the other kinds of needs come from within, normative needs are imposed from the outside. Much of what passes for curriculum throughout one’s schooling is normative rather than desired.

Could there be more included among the First Article gifts received by teens? I’m sure there would be if we think more deeply of the life circumstances of the teens in our youth ministries, but this is sufficient for us to understand the enormous range of helpful information that is available to us through sacred and secular sources for our youth ministries. We can better understand the youth and their friends as we serve them, and we can serve with full comprehension that no aspect of youth ministry is a-theological.

Gifts from Above: Third Article Gifts

In the receptive spirituality of Lutheran theology, what constitutes gifts from above? Three areas immediately come to mind. The work of the Holy Spirit through the Means of Grace, the work of the Holy Spirit through the creation and preservation of the church, and the work of the Holy Spirit in forwarding the gospel into the world through the Office of the Holy Ministry. In the gifts from above we see the Spirit at work as the Spirit “calls, gathers, enlightens and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth.”

Unlike the First Article gifts from below that are received in varying degrees by every human being, the Third Article gifts from above belong to believers in Jesus Christ alone. In Lutheran theology these involve the work of the Holy Spirit. Every Third Article gift is predicated on the work that Jesus Christ has completed on our behalf through his life, death and resurrection. Faith in Jesus Christ is a Third Article gift received through the applied word of God in the water of Baptism (Acts 2:38-39).

Faith is a Third Article gift received by hearing the Word as it is preached, taught, and read (Romans 10:14-17). Faith is a Third Article gift that is strengthened through the forgiveness of sins received in the Sacrament of the Altar (Matthew 26:26-28). These are the gifts that bring saving faith, and strengthen and nurture that faith.

Gifts from Above: The Christian Community

Third Article gifts are received within the Christian community. The congregation is a gift for teenagers, and I like to think of it as a gift from above. Others may find fault with our congregations for the many ways in which they fall short of fulfilling all they could be. Perturbed parishioners and frustrated church workers may, more often than they wish, begin to disparage the congregation and point out its flaws.
Nevertheless, the congregation is a gift for teens through the many ways the congregation nurtures faith and gives teens opportunities to exercise faith and grow in sanctification. The congregation is the church in the eyes of adolescents. The home congregation defines for teens what church is all about and what it is supposed to do. This is why the congregation needs to be very much aware of its place in the lives of adolescents. Whereas the gift from below of family nurtures faith in the private life, the gift from above of congregation nurtures faith in the public life by providing non-parental examples of Christian adulthood. Teens learn that their own parents aren’t so weird, other adults do the same things!

The ministry to youth by the congregation is extremely important, yet it is often overlooked and underestimated. The congregation is where the Christian life is observed, absorbed, and absolved by teens. The life is observed as teens see adults living out their Christian commitments. The life is absorbed as teens participate in the worship life of the congregation gathered around word and sacrament. The life is absolved as teens are drawn into the ebb and flow of a life lived in confession and absolution.

Gifts from Above: Servant Skill

The third and final gift from above consists of the youth leader who has taken upon herself or himself the challenging task of guiding, molding and shaping youth. These persons might be Master’s Degree holding pastors, teachers in the parish school who have youth ministry attached to their portfolio though youth ministry was not in their undergraduate curriculum, the Director of Christian Education who has had more youth ministry courses and youth ministry experience than all who preceded on this list, the young lay couple who so enjoyed their own youth ministry experiences that they’ve volunteered to replicate the experience for the youth of the congregation, or the parent who passionately wants his children to grow up in the faith and since no one else was willing to work with the youth volunteered, much to the chagrin of his own teens.

Regardless of the category under which this service is rendered, God uses the gift of youth workers. Youth ministers are a gift from above because they demonstrate faith-filled lives of service, and in that service they use God’s word – the Gospel –the power of God for salvation (Romans 1:16). In the model servant skill forms the touch point of the gifts from above with gifts from below because the youth minister is the point of contact where personal ministry touches teens. Servant skill is everything God has made the leaders to be in service to those entrusted to their spiritual care. This involves their training, faith, public witness in word and deed for Jesus Christ, and theological wisdom.

What, then, is required of the leader in youth ministry for servant skill? We might begin with a heart for teens as a prerequisite. If a volunteer or professional youth worker finds it difficult to love teens, then perhaps their servant skill points to a different group of God’s people. But what is also required is a desire to improve one’s ministry skills. Effective and efficient youth ministry includes organizational skills, planning skills, and a repertoire of ice-breaker games and activities.
By sharpening our awareness of these gifts we multiply our own ability to take notice. Third Article gifts use First Article gifts for the purpose of Second Article faith. The gifts from above (Third Article – Means of Grace) are received within the context of the gifts from below (First Article – Created Order) as the environment in which maturity in faith in Jesus Christ (Second Article – Faith in Jesus Christ) takes place. The place where gifts from above and gifts from below meet is the ministry moment.

Matching the Triangles: The Trinitarian Model

The ministry moment brings together all of our training and gifted ability with the life experience of the person to whom we minister. The ministry moment connects the two triangles, thereby initiating a powerful interaction. The gifts from above and the gifts from below meet in the ministry moment, the place where practical theology happens.

First, notice that the component parts of the two triangles each have a special connection to its counterpart. As was mentioned earlier, God is the giver of the First Article gifts through creation and the giver of the Third Article gifts through the work of the Holy Spirit. The connection is the giver, the one God who is the Trinity. When we receive these gifts we comprehend the Third Article gifts through our First Article gifts. Our “reason and all our senses” (Luther, 11) allow us to recognize the spiritual gifts that we receive, without which we would be unaware of God’s work on our behalf.
The second layer of each triangle is also linked. Christian communities are all different, a fact hinted at by the differences in letters Paul writes congregations. Congregations are as unique as the fingerprints, and the qualities of each congregation become even more pronounced when youth ministry is the salient variable. How many youth does the congregation have? To what degree is the congregation committed to youth ministry? What resources of time, staff, money and space are dedicated to youth ministry? What is the history of youth ministry within this fellowship, and to what degree has that background enhanced or inhibited the spiritual growth of the teens now in the church? The gift of the congregation to teens is the gift of a community faith environment in which to grow. The characteristics of the congregation will fall anywhere along a broad spectrum of possibilities.

If the environment provided by the congregation was the only variable involved in the spiritual growth and development of teens, then the responsibility for the teen outcomes would rest squarely on the congregation and its leaders. Of course, the influence of the congregation on the lives of teens compared to the teens’ life experiences is not balanced, but heavily weighted on the side of adolescent life experiences. Those life experiences include the influences for good or ill from family, community, school, media and culture – the gifts of God from below.

The points of the triangles meet through the interaction of the servant’s skill and the teens’ needs. We might say this interface is the moment of truth for youth leaders, as their gifts, knowledge, and preparation come into direct alignment with the felt, expressed, comparative and normative needs of adolescents. But care needs to be taken to sort out which needs the youth leader is gifted to fulfill. Youth leaders study adolescent psychology and adolescent culture in order to be prepared, but they are not psychologists or sociologists.

Rather, the vocation of the youth leader is to be the Gospel presence, and not just presence but articulation, of the love of God in Jesus Christ for teens in the ministry moment. Therefore, as significant and important as teens’ felt, expressed and comparative needs are, the needs don’t control the moment. We will be aware of those needs, identify the implications for the individual and for the group created by those needs, and assess our own capacity to meet those needs, but we will remember that our calling in ministry includes the normative needs. What do the teens need to know, understand, and believe as a result of this lesson, event, or life experience that they may not have known, understood, and believed beforehand? Normative needs aren’t always comfortable, but they are always necessary or they wouldn’t be normative.

Ministry Moment Foci

Bringing the triangles of gifts from above and gifts from below into relationship for ministry leads inevitably into the development of a comprehensive approach to youth ministry, and does so in a three-fold manner.

• When we consider the work of God in creation including information from developmental adolescent psychology, sociology, and even the most recent research into neurological brain development, and connect this information with a confessional commitment
to the work of God in salvation as the Holy Spirit works through the means of grace to bring, nurture and sustain faith in the heart and mind, we have the makings of a holistic approach within a Trinitarian framework. We are able to see God’s involvement everywhere.

• When we consider the Christian community – the bride of Christ – having all its glory through worship and the preaching of the Gospel as well as all its flaws through the everyday interaction of saints/sinners in the administering and receiving of Christian education and pastoral care, and connect this community with the formative experiences adolescents bring to the community by virtue of their family life, school environment, peer influences, and media formed worldview, we have the foundation from which a comprehensive understanding of adolescence emerges.

• And finally, as I continue to construct incredibly long sentences, when we evaluate our own roles as servants called to bring the gifts from above as they have been mediated to us through our own training, life experience, and spiritual maturity, and connect those gifts to real flesh and blood teens who have tremendous needs – some of which they are aware and many of which they are not – and who also have gifts to offer the community, we have the core components of a mentoring relationship.

When we put gifts from below and gifts from above together we have a way to describe the variables of a growing commitment in faith to Jesus Christ that is simple, understandable, and accessible and at the same time theologically robust – which was the goal for the model at the start. We have a way of looking at youth ministry that prepares us for ministry moments we encounter.

Problems with the Model.

Models tend to be dynamic. Where is the dynamic quality of this model? Where is the “action/reflection” cycle to be found? The ministry moment itself is the action upon which reflection follows. The youth leader asks, “What did I learn from this?” Yet each ministry moment has a uniqueness all its own, and the lesson learned may not be generalizable to other settings. Reflection on what might have been done doesn’t permit us to go back and have a do-over with the initial incident. Instead we go forward a little wiser than before, ready for the next unique encounter.

Other problems with the model exist. How can we measure servant skill? I suspect that answer to that question will depend upon the theology of the servant. As a Lutheran there are a set of questions that I can train myself to ask – a template that I can apply – as a ministry moment is unfolding.

• Are any gifts from below at issue? (family, culture, development)
• Are any gifts from above at issue? (faith, means of grace, church)
• How are Law and Gospel expressed in this ministry moment?
• How are God’s promises in the sacraments applicable?
• Are youth directed to their condition as both saints and sinners?
• Is there a place for absolution?
• Is the hiddenness of God (Theology of the Cross) recognized?
• Are youth challenged in their vocation as masks of God by this event?

Others will have a different template from which to assess their skill as they reflect before taking the next action in the action/reflection cycle.

Another difficulty for the model is the lack of generalizability. Do all theologies give the same power to the concept of gift? How do other theological orientations approach the ministry moment? What can I learn from other models as models become more specific in their relationship to theology? Can this be a fruitful avenue for dialog?

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Appendix

Osmer’s Model for Practical Theology:

The Four Tasks of Practical Theological Interpretation

Descriptive
Empirical

Pragmatic

Interpretive

Normative

(1) Understand
What's going on?

(2) Reflect
What are we doing?

(3) Detect and Evaluate
How well are we doing it by God standards?

(4) Project
How can we do it better?

CONCRETE SITUATION CALLING FOR CHRISTIAN ACTION

The Tasks of Practical Theology

(Dean 20)

Dean’s Model for Practical Theology:
Chap Clark’s First Model for Practical Theology

![Diagram of context, issue, biblical exegesis, and christopraxis]

(Clark 21)

Chap Clark’s Second Model for Practical Theology

![Diagram of context, issue, biblical exegesis, and christopraxis]

(Crawford 6)
Anderson’s Model for Practical Theology

Oberdeck’s Model for Practical Theology

(Anderson 29)

(Oberdeck 190)