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Derek J. Tronsgard
Luther Seminary

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Adolescents as Co-Creators in Ministry

By
Derek J. Tronsgard

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Presented to Dr. Andrew Root
Luther Seminary

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On Maundy Thursday our church decided to have a foot washing service to celebrate Jesus' washing of the disciples' feet. I thought that in order to really make Maundy Thursday come alive for my high school students I could conclude the foot washing service with a special Seder meal. This was to take the place of the normal Wednesday night youth group during Holy Week. On the evening of Maundy Thursday, the foot washing service began in the Sanctuary. The overall attendance of the foot washing service was decent (many of the strongly involved members of the congregation were there), yet it didn't have the same volume of attendance as a normal Sunday worship. What was noticeable, however, was the large number of youth present in the worship. Because the youth group had been moved from its normal Wednesday night time to Thursday that week, I encouraged my students to attend the foot washing service before youth group to get the entire Maundy Thursday "experience" - both a foot washing and a Passover meal. Because the actual foot washing service took place immediately before youth group, the youth themselves made up a good portion of the attendance in worship that night.

A few days later, one prominent member of our congregation stopped me in the hall to commend me on my job as youth director. He said that he had never seen so many youth present in worship than he had on Maundy Thursday. He also remarked that I was doing a fabulous job as youth director based on the large number of kids present in worship that night. Needless to say, I was humbled and honored at his compliments. After nearly two years in my position, I was beginning to feel a bit drained from all of my hard work, and this was a great affirmation for me. I believed that the

number of kids present in worship on Maundy Thursday was a clear-cut sign of progress in my ministry. This was exactly the pick me up I needed.

The following Wednesday, however, I was met with shock and surprise when I came to youth group to find a significant portion of my students missing. A few of the youth informed me that many kids had sports and theatre commitments. Another girl informed me that three of my students were absent because American Idol was on that night. She saw the look of disappointment on my face and encouraged me. “Don’t worry, Derek, I would never do that. Loft Talk is way better than any TV show,” she said.

This was an “A-Ha!” moment for me. I realized that I had spent the past two years racking my brain for new and interesting ways to do youth group. I had game nights featuring board games, Nintendo Wii, Rock Band, and a Skittles Texas Hold ‘Em Tournament. I had topic nights where I tried to make Scripture, theology, and other faith-related topics entertaining and accessible. I organized lock-ins, summer trips, major league baseball games, and outdoor Barbeques. For two years I poured my creative energy into events and programming that would get kids through the door.

The moment I realized that I was competing against American Idol was a game-changer for me. While this could be argued as reductionist, it is clear that at on at least some level both the Viacom Corporation (which owns Fox Broadcasting) and myself had something to offer these kids. The real question, then, was which one of us could win that most precious reward of time and attention during the 7:30 – 9:00 p.m. prime-time slot. Under my model of ministry, youth had the choice to come to youth group and experience the content that I was creating or spend their time somewhere else, be it on American Idol, watching another TV show, playing a video game, doing homework, social networking, etc. While youth may lack financial, social, or political capital, what they do have is time, and there are limitless ways in which they can spend it. I believe that it is within this reality that we encounter one of the biggest hurdles for youth ministry today.

Many current forms of youth ministry (including my own) put energy into developing programmatic content that engages and excites youth. While the intentions here are certainly noble, in reality our programmatic content ends up competing against other forms of media for the time and attention of youth. A poll created by the United States Department of Labor found that 96% of Americans over the age of 15 have 5 hours of leisure time or more each day.^[1] It is no surprise, then, that we have seen the emergence of a multi-billion dollar entertainment industry whose sole purpose is to claim a sliver of those five hours each and every day. The video game industry itself pulled in nearly \$18 billion in 2007,^[2] while Hollywood brought in nearly \$10 billion that same year.^[3] Keep in mind that this astronomical amount of money only represents two sub-facets of the entertainment industry. One can hardly imagine the total amount of revenue when all of the other forms of media are added in.

It is clear then, that money is on the line. Competing mediums of this multi-billion dollar entertainment industry duke it out in order to win a slice of that five-hour pie. What is truly humbling for youth directors, then, is the realization that a programmatic-based youth ministry enters the arena alongside these media giants in an effort to wrestle an hour or two away.

As a youth director, I thought that I was channeling my creative energy into engaging and meaningful youth programming. What I failed to consider, however, is the fact that I was also stepping foot inside the ring to compete against these billion dollar industries. With a much smaller budget and limited resources, this exercise proved to be exhausting. I was the content provider and my youth were the consumers. They could choose on a Wednesday night to spend some of their leisure hours on my content or on other content. The way I determined success was measured strictly by the number of youth coming through the church doors.

Dr. Roland Martinson has another way of explaining this model in his book *Effective Youth Ministry*. Martinson explains that this popular praxis of youth ministry is called the “Pied Piper” approach. In this approach, we find “a notion that those who work in youth must be young, energetic, and filled with enthusiasm.” The idea, then, is that the younger youth director attracts youth to their personality and youthful creativity.[4] The Pied Piper youth director creates youth ministry content that attracts youth to the church and takes precious leisure hours away from other forms of entertainment.

While this approach can be effective (and I believe it was to some extent at my own church), the reality is that on some base level, the youth participating in this type of programmatic ministry function as consumers. Attractional, programmatic youth ministry can evolve into simply another product on which to spend the currency of free time. My argument is that within ministry, adolescents need to be pulled out of their role as consumer and be re-imagined into something else entirely. Instead of being simply consumers of content, adolescents involved and engaged in youth ministry should be transformed into the exact opposite of consumers – creators.

The first step, then, in re-imagining adolescents as co-creators in ministry is to understand how they became consumers in the first place. Pete Ward, in his book *Liquid Church*, brings up the notions of solid church and solid modernity. The conception of Solid Modernity, Ward explains, begins with sociologist Zygmunt Bauman. Bauman argues that in our current cultural climate, we, as a society, are stuck in a transition period between solid modernity and the new phase, what he calls liquid modernity. Solid modernity arose, Bauman argues, after society was unyoked from stabilizing social systems such as family, religion, and local community.[5] Bauman argues that in the previous times, these social structures regulated production within society. However in the 19th century, production moved away into the corporate sphere and these social systems were separated from production entirely. At this point, with production firmly out of reach for family and religion, society began to follow a more rational and methodical approach. Bauman, then, calls this methodical and rational approach “solid”, referring to rational, clear-cut boundaries, inflexibility, and rigid structure.

The best example of the rationality of solid modernity is the factory assembly line. The assembly line itself, created by Henry Ford and the Ford motor company, consisted of an entirely rational and machine-like production system made up of smaller processes and parts, much like a machine. When these smaller parts were put together, a larger, more solid system was produced in order to create a product, in this case, a car. Solid modernity was firmly fixed within this rational method of production, that is, smaller parts creating large scale systems of production.[6] During this phase, society moved away from social norms such as religion, family, local community, and heritage. Instead, Solid Modernity found that society operated much like a rational machine. In this case, the smaller parts of the machine were individuals. In a very machine-like way, individuals set the social norms of the system. Individuals were the base unit of society itself.

It is only natural, then, that Solid Modernity’s rationalism and efficiency leaked out of the business sector and spread to the rest of society - affecting labor, government, education, and even the Church. The Church found within the era of Solid Modernity is what Ward calls Solid Church.

Solid church, Ward argues, adopts these rational, machine-like concepts of solid modernity. In the solid church, the weekly Sunday meeting time – the congregation – is the primal mode of operation.[7] In fact, the belief of the Solid Church is that a weekly congregational gathering is a very rational method to determine Church efficiency and success. All you need to do is count the number of people coming through the doors. When you do this, though, Ward argues that your church gives into this rationalism and begins to operate much like a prison – more specifically, Jeremy Bentham’s panopticon.

“The panopticon,” Ward explains, “invented by Jeremy Bentham, is a circular prison with layer upon

layer of cells facing in toward the center of the circle. From one side of this prison the guards can observe the every movement of the prisoners and check to see if they follow the prescribed routine”.[\[8\]](#)

Weekly congregational or youth group meetings in the Solid Church do act, in some ways, like the panopticon. By having a singular event, pastors and youth ministers can get a clear, rational picture of their success in terms of numbers. The health and strength of the ministry can be seen clearly and rationally in the panopticon of a weekly, regular meeting. Within the Solid Church, the congregation and its attendance on Sunday morning is the primary mode of ministry evaluation. The entire existence of the church is wrapped up around a singular meeting on Sunday morning. Likewise, we could argue that Solid youth ministry is wrapped up in a weekly meeting, as well, and that its success, too, is based primarily in rational numbers of youth attendance. While this method of church and youth group was, in fact, very successful during the course of Solid Modernity, a new era has begun. Ward argues that Solid Modernity has come to an end and so now we find ourselves in a great melting period. Currently, we are straddled in a transition phase between Solid Modernity and its successor, Liquid Modernity. The emergence of Liquid Modernity marks another turn in history. Within the last few decades, new technologies have advanced dramatically and rapidly, and as such, the production of capital is no longer dependent on location. In Solid Modernity, fixed, rational production was king. With technology’s divorce of production from location, however, Liquid Modernity experiences consumption as king.[\[9\]](#) Because goods and services are now able to flow unhindered by space or location, the trend of society naturally moves from production into consumption. Now, society finds itself “made up of individual consumers who find their identity in how they live rather than social class” or other previously Solid social norms.[\[10\]](#) Social structures formed meaning and identity in the past. Rationalism formed it in Solid Modernity. Now, however, identity and meaning are created through individual consumerism.[\[11\]](#) Again, we are not completely in Liquid Modernity yet. We are in transition, and this movement from solid to liquid is not easy. With this great melting, “certainties become more fuzzy...personal identity has become a more disputed territory than was previously the case, moral certainties have been shown to be a matter of debate”.[\[12\]](#) Society in general, Ward argues, is less certain and structured. This melting can be extremely alarming to many as “we are now individuals seeking a precarious way forward in an environment of increasing choice with little guidance or direction”.[\[13\]](#) The affects of rapid change, transition, and an environment of unparalleled consumer choice have an effect on all facets of society, including the Church. In light of this, Ward argues, the Solid Church has mutated into several distinct forms to cope with these societal changes, and it is precisely in these mutated forms that many churches (and even youth ministries, for that matter), find themselves, hoping to cope with these unprecedented societal changes.

The first mutation that Ward discusses is the mutation of the Solid Church into a heritage site.[\[14\]](#) The Solid Church in its original form was deeply rooted in former societal norms such as location and ethnic community. In the Anglican tradition, the Common Book of Prayer defined what it was to be English. The Puritan traditions helped to shape what it meant to be a part of colonial New England.[\[15\]](#) Even Lutheranism in the Midwest shaped what it meant to have a Scandinavian heritage in America. Identity was deeply rooted in location, and the Solid Church reflected this. In Liquid Modernity, however, society is increasingly flexible and mobile, both physically and virtually.[\[16\]](#) Because Solid Church was so wrapped up in a physical location, a Solid Church can mutate into a heritage site, hoping to preserve or perhaps even restore this alienation from location found within the melting.

As a heritage site, “worship has become part of the culture industry. The value of church is that it preserves the traditions of the past and makes them accessible to new generations.”[\[17\]](#) Ward argues that in this mutation, the minister transforms from a spiritual leader into a museum curator. The members

of the congregation themselves function much like a preservation society, investing financially and voluntarily into the ministry in order to keep the traditions of the past alive.^[18]

In terms of youth ministry, it could be argued that Confirmation often functions as a preservation of heritage ministry. In many instances, the purpose of confirmation is to preserve and pass down the Confessional tradition of the church to the younger generations in order to “guard the flame”. Clearly there is great value in tradition, and preserving them isn’t bad or harmful on the surface. This mutation does become malignant, however, when a minister transforms from a spiritual leader into simply a historian, archivist, or curator, and the members of the Church turn into nothing more than trustees of a certain, specific tradition.

The second mutation of Solid Church that Ward articulates is the church as a refuge site. In this scenario, the church finds itself in the thick of constant and rapid societal changes. This rapid change along with decaying societal norms understandably leaves people frustrated, confused, and perhaps terrified. In this atmosphere, then, a church can become a refuge “where [individuals] can find a sense of togetherness and safety.”^[19] In the midst of this safe haven from society, a Christian sub-culture emerges as a safe alternative to other forms of culture.^[20] This Christian sub-culture also tends to play a large part in youth ministry as youth are exposed to safe, Christian alternatives to cartoons, books, movies, music, and even schools. The trouble with this, Ward argues, is that the mutation of church into a cultural refuge stops functioning as a sanctuary for the suffering. “No longer does the church give emergency cover in a time of trouble; now it is able to present itself as an attractive place for a vacation. And as is the case in every holiday resort, some people find a way to live there year round”.^[21]

While both of these mutations, church as a heritage site and church as a refuge aren’t necessarily evil, they do prove to be less than ideal. In these mutations, the church has weakened itself in its lack to engage culture in both mission and evangelism.^[22] As both a refuge and a heritage site, the church separates itself from the rest of society and fails to respond to these changes in culture, leaving many alienated from the church. This creates a church that is inwardly focused upon itself, and if the Body of Christ is focused upon itself it will not be effective in affecting culture. As Ward puts it, “as long as the solid church responds to contemporary culture by presenting itself as one of these mutations, it will sell itself short. Isolated on its beach, all it can do is try to entice others to join it. The possibility of engaging in mission within the surrounding culture becomes increasingly problematic because in seeking refuge it has been forced to present itself as in some way separated from ordinary life.”^[23]

Clearly something must be done in the face of this melting from solid to liquid. Ward agrees that the church is currently competing for the leisure time of its members. However, his solution is a commodification of Christianity that mirrors the commodification of Liquid Modernity.^[24] Ward argues that since we live in a society driven by consumption, it is only natural that churches adapt and continue with this model. Ward argues that “commodification is essential for evangelism”.^[25] He provides the example of the WWJD bracelets that spread rapidly around the globe. He claims that these bracelets were an example of incarnating Christ in the Liquid World through commodification.^[26]

While I agree completely with Ward on his thoughts of Solid and Liquid Modernity, I cannot follow his idea of the church being called to a commodification of the faith. To me, the idea of these bracelets incarnating Christ does not add up theologically, as the incarnation of Christ requires both relationality and the suffering of the cross, something a bracelet (or any commodity for that matter) cannot possibly provide or articulate. Instead, I believe that rather than using a model of commodification, the church

and youth ministry can better embrace the melting of society by following a model currently playing itself out within the very place that started the melting in the first place – the Internet.

In its relatively short history, the Internet has undergone a remarkable transition that changed the very structure upon which it operates. The World Wide Web as we know it first came into existence in 1989, although it didn't reach mainstream operation until the mid 1990s. During the Internet's first mainstream phase, web sites were created with a programming language known as HTML. HTML itself was designed to provide individual content and structure for any given website. However, because of this, each individual website had its own unique coding which only worked for that website.

Much like youth ministry content being consumed by youth, HTML distributed web content through top-down model. An Internet user would visit any given website and consume its content. Likewise, the web designer would create the content using the HTML code, but that content could only flow down to the user. It was impossible for the content to interact with other websites as the individual lines of the HTML code prohibited this. In other words, each website was "housed" within its own structure. The HTML code created solid walls that provided the framework for websites, but because they were unique and individual frameworks, there was no interaction or communication between websites. This created a creator/consumer relationship between a website and the user. HTML code dominated the landscape of the Internet throughout the 1990s and into the early 2000s. In 1998, however, a new programming language, XML, was launched and would fundamentally change the structure and function of the Internet.

What differentiated XML from HTML was that XML focused entirely on content, rather than structure. With a homogeneous XML structure, websites were no longer bound by closed walls of unique frameworks and were free to interact with each other, sharing content and allowing user collaboration across the board. XML was the catalyst that gave rise to social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, and YouTube. With content unhinged from structure, individual users without knowledge of structural coding could become the creators of websites. Internet users began creating blogs, YouTube videos, and social networking profiles, all of which were able to interact and integrate with other websites.

The real revolution of XML, however, was that it transformed Internet users from consumers into creators. Instead of consuming content that was distributed through the top/down method of HTML, users could create structure-less content that integrated all across the web. This became the mainstream. By 2007, 64% of American teenagers were engaging in content creation online.^[27] Being a creator rather than solely a consumer was only possible through the structure-less content of XML. Soon social networking, blogging, YouTube, and other forms of content creation became primary modes of communication throughout Internet.

I believe that it is precisely here – in this transition from consumers into creators – that youth ministry is headed. This is where youth ministry needs to go. Through the Internet and other technologies, the majority of youth are engaging in acts of content creation already. Through technology, adolescents have transitioned from simply being consumers to being creators, as well. In the same way, we need adolescents to make this transformation from consumers into creators in our own ministries.

To conceptualize this transition and its effects on our ministries, however, we need a strong theological framework. Because we are encouraging adolescents (and the entire church, for that matter) to become creators themselves, it is only fitting that a Creative Theology is needed. In my mind there is no theologian more helpful in this matter than Jurgen Moltmann and his work found in *God in Creation*. If we are to understand a theology of adolescents as creators, we must first understand a basic theology of

Creation itself.

For Moltmann, the key to understanding God's purpose and action within Creation is wrapped firmly within the idea of a Trinitarian God. The Triune God in Creation is not a strict monotheism. This monotheism, Moltmann argues, would have God as "Creator and Lord over against his creation".[\[28\]](#) Much like the top/down content distribution of HTML, a monotheistic God would be the absolute subject and God's created content the absolute object.[\[29\]](#) This would be a closed system where only the monotheistic God participated in creation, leaving the rest of Creation subject to God's impending rule and dominion. Rather, Moltmann argues, the three persons of the Trinity follow a different model, participating a mutual indwelling within each other called Perichoresis. This indwelling of the Trinity establishes community and relationship as the core identity of who God is. The three persons of the Trinity are bound together through this indwelling. If we believe, then, that community and relationship are at the very center of the Triune God, then it is only logical that community and relationship are at the very core of all Creation.[\[30\]](#)

God's indwelling within creation can be found in the theological notion of the Sabbath. In the Genesis account, God acts as the sole creator during the first six days of the universe. This is, in essence, a top/down method of content distribution similar to my youth ministry or the early Internet days of HTML. God speaks a Word and an aspect of creation comes into existence. During these first six days, God is the absolute subject and creation is the absolute object. During the seventh day of Creation, however, God does something entirely different.

Moltmann explains that on the Sabbath, God rests in order to dwell within Creation itself.[\[31\]](#) Just like the persons of the Trinity mutually dwell within themselves, the Triune God creates the Sabbath to mutually dwell within Creation. The Sabbath, as Moltmann puts it, is when "the resting God begins to experience the beings he has created. The God who rests in the face of his creation does not dominate the world on this day: he feels the world; allows himself to be affected, to be touched by each of his creatures. He adopts the community of creation as his own milieu. In his rest he is close to the movement of them all."[\[32\]](#)

It is the Sabbath, then, that is the definitive creative act of the Triune God. If indwelling is at the very core of the Trinity, then it is only fitting that the completion of Creation would include God's indwelling within that Creation for all time. As Moltmann puts it, the first six days of Creation are "God's work, but the Sabbath is God's present existence".[\[33\]](#) Through this present existence in Creation, God enters into a relationship of mutuality and community with Creation itself. Because of the Sabbath, God no longer functions as absolute ruler and lord over all of Creation. Rather, God enters into a unique and mutual "cosmic community between God and all his created beings".[\[34\]](#) During the first six days of Creation, God is engaged in "making, preserving, maintaining, and perfecting", all of which are top-down structural actions. With the resting of God in Creation through the Sabbath, however, God now finds Godself "indwelling, sympathizing, participating, accompanying, enduring, delighting, and glorifying" alongside of the rest of Creation.[\[35\]](#) Because of the Sabbath, Creation is not a top/down model of content distribution but rather "an intricate web of unilateral, reciprocal, and many-sided relationships" between God, humans, and the rest of Creation.[\[36\]](#)

God's indwelling in Creation could also be seen as analogous to the illustration of HTML and XML. With HTML, web creators found themselves engaged in making, maintaining, and perfecting websites. With XML, however, all users of the Internet enter into a complex system of networks and relationships that feature mass collaboration and participation. Likewise, the participation of God in the community of Creation is unique, Moltmann says, because "God creates the world and at the same time enters into it. He calls it into existence and at the same time manifests himself through its being. It lives from his

creative power, yet he lives in it. So if God as Creator stands over against his creation, he also stands over against himself".[37]

If we consider this theological notion, then, that God dwells within Creation, this has enormous implications for humans (and adolescents) as living beings within that Creation. Because God dwells within Creation in mutuality, humans are able to enter into relationship with God and, in essence, become co-creators in Creation with God, as well. As mutual co-creators, humans are able to enter into the actions of mutuality with God, which include indwelling, sympathizing, participating, accompanying, enduring, delighting, and glorifying.[38] The ability to be co-creators, Moltmann claims, is unique to humans and not shared with any other part of Creation. Humans are, in fact, unique because they are the only part of Creation that receives this special calling and blessing to be co-creators alongside of God.

The first sign of a special calling for humans in Creation can be found in the Genesis account itself. This special calling comes can be seen in God's special resolve in the actual creating of humans. For all other forms of Creation, God creates out of Word. In the Genesis account, God says "Let there be" and there is. With humans, however, God says, "Let us make" which is different from "Let there be". "Let there be" is a statement while "let us make" is, as Moltmann puts it, a self-exhortation. In this single self-exhortation of "let us make" God brings the course of all human history into godself.[39] This self-exhortation of God into the lives of humans is what gives humans their first unique calling and destiny to be co-creators with God. After God proclaims as self-exhortation in creation humans, God also determines that they are to be made in the image of God. No other being in creation receives this blessing; not even the angels.[40] Only humans are given the duty to carry the Image of God through Creation.

What exactly is this image of God, then? In the past some have thought that the Image of God was a distinct characteristic of the human creature. Moltmann points out that in the past some have likened the Image of God to be the soul, the ability to walk upright, humankind's dominion of the Earth, or the ability to be in relationship and community.[41] Moltmann argues, however, that rather than being a singular characteristic, the Image of God instead points to a unique relationship between God and humans.[42] By designating humans as the Image of God, God charges humans to be God's representative in Creation. As Moltmann puts it, "they rule over other earthly creatures as God's representatives and in his name; they are God's counterpart on earth, the counterpart to whom God wants to talk, and who is intended to respond to him; and they are the appearance of God's splendor, and his glory on earth." [43] This applies for adolescents, as well. Youth are given this special duty to rule over earthly creatures and be God's representative in Creation. This is not dependant on age but rather their status as humans. Therefore, this calling to be God's Image on earth is proclaimed for all ages.

Because of their status as the Image of God, "only human beings know God's will, and only they can consciously praise and magnify him".[44] Moltmann argues that as God's Image and representatives, humans are given the calling to protect and maintain Creation. Along with this, humans, as God's Image and Representative, "become the authors of the further history of the earth".[45] With the special designation and relationship as Image of God, human beings, in essence, become co-creators with God. This is a unique destiny, as it is not shared with any other creature. As God's Image in Creation, humans take upon them the task to work alongside God as co-creators.

If we believe, then, that adolescents are co-creators with God as God's Image, it is helpful to determine what this creative process might look like within our ministries. Moltmann believes that as the Image of God and as co-creator, "the human being does not merely live in the world like other living things. He

does not merely dominate the world and use it.” Rather, the human being “[discerns] the world in the full awareness as God’s creation” and “[understands] it as a sacrament to God’s hidden presence” [\[46\]](#) In other words, as God indwells within Creation, so too does the mystery of redemption and the gospel. [\[47\]](#) The creative calling of adolescents, then, is to uncover this mystery and bring to light God’s redemptive work within our broken communities, all the while giving praise and thanksgiving for what God has done within Creation. [\[48\]](#)

This creative process of adolescents and the rest of humanity as co-creators and God’s Image can be likened to the creative work of scientists. The laws that bind and guide the universe are fixed within a set system. Scientists do not create new laws; rather their creative work lies in discovery and exploration. For example, Isaac Newton did not create gravity. Rather, he uncovered its mystery and explored the relationship between gravity and other things within the universe (humans, stars, planets, etc.). Likewise, Einstein did not create relativity. Rather he uncovered its mystery and further articulated its relationship to us. In the same way humans as co-creators are not creating new universes, planets, or creatures. In fact, God finished this work on the sixth day. Rather the creative work of humans is discovering the hidden presence of God indwelling within Creation and creating communities that articulate our relationship to it. Because the core of the Gospel is found within the being of God, the discovery of God’s indwelling among us unleashes the potential for healing and restoration within our own communities. By naming the presence of the Triune God indwelling around us we are unlocking the revealed mystery of Christ’s resurrection. Humans as the Image of God act as a conduit between God’s redemptive power and the rest of Creation. By revealing the hiddenness of God’s indwelling and by offering up our love, praise, adoration, and thanksgiving, humans partake in and become co-creators in the restorative, redemptive, and creative work of God within Creation. [\[49\]](#)

If youth ministers are to take this calling seriously, we must ask ourselves: What does this mean for our own youth ministry? To begin with, I believe that we need to start taking seriously the notion that the adolescent is called to be the Image of God and a co-creator in all of Creation. In my attempts to create fun and interesting youth ministry content, I put the burden of content creation upon myself, making the students in my youth group nothing more than consumers. This hindered my youth group from being a community that bore the Image of God and engaged in co-creation. Instead, I found myself competing against American Idol and other forms of entertainment for a sliver of each youth’s leisure time. While I am certainly not suggesting the dismantling of Wednesday night youth group or Sunday morning worship, I do feel that it is incredibly helpful to come to an understanding that adolescents are being called by God to become co-creators rather than simply consumers. If we come to this understanding, I think it drastically affects the way in which we conduct ministry.

Practically speaking, I believe that Moltmann’s theology of Creation is extremely insightful when cast against the mutations of the Solid Church. When we examine the church as a heritage site, we can see how Moltmann’s theology of Creation affects it. For the heritage church, keeping the tradition alive is seen as a battle against cultural changes. However, if we believe that God indwells within Creation, we must also believe that God indwells within culture, as well. This surely does not mean that all culture is good, and it surely does not mean that all culture is God, for God is other and God is good. This must be differentiated. However, humans (who are the Image of God) create culture. Therefore it could be argued that God indwells within some forms of culture, as well.

Moltmann’s theology is helpful, too, in reconciling traditional culture to more modern expressions. God indwells not only in space but also throughout time. This means that God indwells equally in traditional cultures that are anchored in the past, as well as contemporary cultures that are anchored in the present and future. As co-creators, then, it is up to us to reveal and uncover God’s indwelling presence in past,

present, and future. No specific time or place can claim precedence over others, as God is equally present in all times and in all places.

I believe that this is truly helpful for youth ministry. Often, the temptation is to throw out traditional culture and worship styles to become more “relevant”. On the opposite end, it is also tempting for some (read: Confirmation) to view youth ministry as the passing of the traditional torch. What both views fail to recognize is that God indwells equally within all cultures and times. A youth ministry that encourages adolescents to be co-creators needs to encourage adolescents to participate in the creative act of uncovering God’s presence within both traditional and contemporary cultures. God’s indwelling super-cedes our perception of time, and by partaking of the creative act of uncovering God’s presence both in traditional culture as well as contemporary culture, we are making communal connections to people and communities in the past, present, and future. By articulating God’s presence in the past traditions, we are making relational connections to previous generations and their own articulations of faith. By articulating God’s presence in the contemporary and present, we articulate our own experiences. By articulating God’s presence in our own hopes and dreams, we uncover and experience God’s presence in the future.^[50] The mutation of the church as heritage site fails to consider God’s presence in the present and future. Instead, Church should encourage adolescents to uncover God’s hiddenness and redemptive presence in a variety of cultural contexts. After all, God’s presence within these diverse communities permeates time itself.

Moltmann’s theology can change the refuge church, as well. As mentioned earlier, this mutation of the church sees the world as dangerous and the church as safe. In this notion, however, lies the assumption that God is only present in the safety of the church. This is perhaps a reason why the refuge church creates a Christian sub-culture. Perhaps the refuge church mistakenly believes that God is not present in secular culture and therefore must create for itself a God-safe alternative. If this is the case, than the refuge church is, in essence, attempting to create space for God to inhabit over and against secular society.

In reality, though, Moltmann’s theology speaks strongly against this. It is simply not possible for humans to create space for God to inhabit, as God is already present and indwelling in all of Creation. The notion that the secular world is dangerous may hold truth; however the same Triune God who indwells within the church inhabits it nonetheless. Some of this fear, I think, comes from the human realization of being the Image of God and a sinner simultaneously. Moltmann explains that this is a common confusion, but in reality the Image of God is not a characteristic but rather a relationship. God chooses us to be in this unique relationship as God’s Image. While we could choose to be “godless” and sinful, we cannot lose this unique relationship, as it is God’s designation, not ours.^[51] God chooses to continue this relationship of God’s Image with humans despite our actions. Therefore, the image of God is present in each and every human being. As Moltmann says, “sin can merely pervert something which God has created, but cannot destroy it.”^[52] Therefore, sinful and broken human beings cannot lose their image of God no matter what is done. God chooses to continue this relationship apart from works. “The dignity of human beings is unforfeitable, irrelinquishable, and indestructible, thanks to the abiding presence of God.”^[53]

This fact, then, has huge implications for the refuge church. The Image of God is found within all people and is impossible to take away. Therefore, as humans make up all cultures, in some way, all cultures bear the image of God. True, it may be perverted, depraved, or utterly broken. However, the fact remains. God’s Image is still present. As co-creators it is our calling to uncover God’s hidden presence dwelling in the world, even if it means confronting the most painful, dark aspects of it. The uncovering of God’s hidden presence creates community both among humans and with God. In this

uncovering of God's presence in darkness and pain, both God and Creation suffer in pain alongside. However this suffering brings restoration and healing through the relationship.^[54] If a church or youth ministry simply acts as a refuge, trying to avoid the pain and darkness of the world, then that church or youth ministry is not only failing to see God's healing presence in the brokenness of the world, but also fails to realize their own calling as the Image of God to enter into the darkness, suffer alongside God and each other, and act as co-creators with God in redemptive community through Christ.

A few weeks ago during a lock-in I was talking with one of my confirmation students, Steve. Steve himself is exceptionally bright, but I noticed that he was becoming less and less engaged in confirmation. In a fully articulated way, he explained to me that Confirmation was boring because, in his understanding, God acted much like a math formula. Rather than being a continual and active presence in Steve's life, God could be used once in a while to solve problems. Other than that, Steve thought, the existence of God had no real overlap into his personal circles of school, friends, family, or the culture in which he lived. God's existence was a separate sphere, cut off from his "everyday" life.

Steve's idea of how God relates to Creation is the primary challenge that youth directors face in encouraging adolescents to be co-creators. For Steve, God does not indwell within Creation. God is separate. In order to be co-creators in the Image of God, adolescents must first gain a theological imagination that helps them articulate God's indwelling presence in the world. Practically speaking, how this imagination comes about could look entirely different from context to context. Because the creative call of humans is to reveal God in Creation and give thanks and praise for God's action, the first step would be to help adolescents see the active presence of God not only in their own life, but in the lives of others as well. As youth directors, we must help adolescents discern where God's action lies in their own lives, the lives of others, and within culture. In our youth groups, we must encourage the creation of communities with adolescents that experience God's fullness in Creation, both in rejoicing and suffering. This articulating of God's presence should also engage outside communities that our adolescents find themselves in, be it school, sports, work, friendships, or family. Because we hold that God is present in all of creation, we must be wary of retreating to the mutations of heritage or refuge. Rather we must act as co-creators, entering the world in order to build restorative communities and encourage adolescents to do the same.

In the end, the notion of adolescents as co-creators in ministry centers on the unique calling of the Image of God within Creation. We must take this seriously. If our ministries focus on content creation for youth consumption, then we neglect the special and unique calling of the adolescent as the Image of God. If our ministries become a place dedicated to preserve a heritage or throw out heritage in order to stay relevant, then we fail to see the indwelling of God across time, failing to realize our calling to create relationships, create communities, and uncover God's hidden presence throughout all times and all cultures. If our ministries become a place of refuge and safety, if we try to create a safe space for God to meet us, then we fail to enter into the darkness of Creation to uncover God's indwelling within suffering. If we fail to enter the darkness of the world to uncover God's hiddenness, we fail to create communities of restoration, forgiveness, and hope.

Our calling as co-creators, Moltmann says, is to "find a way into the community of creation, to reawaken the awareness of that community, and to restore it".^[55] By participating with God in Creation, we are called to have communion with the very God who is the source of life, who made Creation, and dwells within it. By participating as co-creators with the Triune God in this Creation, we create communities that witness to the hope of the resurrection, witness to life over death, and witness to God's new Creation that is yet to come. This, quite simply, is God's call in our ministries for the adolescent.

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