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Art as Church

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Repositories of Art

Her face was glowing, and her words were filled with awe as she whispered enthusiastically, “Have you seen it? Have you seen the Pietà? Isn’t it just gorgeous?” Indeed, I had just spent ten minutes gazing at what is renowned as one of the greatest sculptures ever created, and so I gleefully affirmed the question of the woman I had never seen before. Yet, I should disclose that I was not walking through the celebrated galleries of the Louvre nor pacing the corridors of another famous museum in Europe when I encountered the replica of Michelangelo’s Pietà, an extraordinary depiction in marble of the body of Jesus being held by his mother, Mary, after the crucifixion. Amazingly enough, I happened upon this work of art by chance while visiting the Cathedral of St. Paul, in Minnesota’s capital city. Walking around the rest of the cathedral, I strained my neck to look at beautiful frescos, stained-glass windows, and Lenten banners adorning the walls, and during my time there, I also heard bell-chimes being played in some unseen part of the church. Certainly, in the thirty minutes I spent in the Cathedral of St. Paul, I stumbled upon more art than my mind was able to fully comprehend, and according to Mark Chaves’ findings from the 1998 National Congregations Survey, my encounter of art in this church is not unusual or surprising.

Hoping to unearth an answer to the question, “What *do* congregations do?” Chaves, a Professor of Sociology, Religion, and Divinity at Duke University and author of *Congregations in America*, and his team expected to find American churches proliferating in their abilities to “dispense charity or pursue justice.”¹ Yet, Chaves states “the truth is that neither politics nor social services are significant activities for the vast majority of congregations. Something else is, though, and that is art.”² At first, this may seem surprising, but when given thought, this finding is indisputably true in churches from Seattle to Atlanta. Indeed, while “no one doubts the historical connection between religion and art... today, we mainly think of art and religion as two largely distinct, perhaps even opposed, arenas. This opposition seems plausible if we limit our attention to *high* art. But if we define artistic practice more broadly as the

making, seeing, or listening to music, dance, drama, and objects for display, whatever the venue, the quality of the product, or whether it is pursued as an end in itself, then the intimate connection between art and religion – especially religion as it is practiced in congregations – becomes clear, mainly of course because worship services are constructed in part out of artistic elements like music, drama, poetry, and dance.”³ Further, Chaves contends not only that congregations in America support and facilitate the arts but that they are the public spaces in which most people encounter the arts on a regular basis. Certainly, thinking back on the places of worship I attended as a child, in college, and now as a young adult, it is clear how prevalent the presence of art was and remains in these living museums and repositories of art we call churches. Aside from the architecture of churches themselves, each congregation is, knowingly or not, a major booster of the arts; in displays of stained-glass windows, paintings, statues, banners, and sculptures, Lenten dramas, Christmas programs, and puppet ministries, and praise bands, bell and voice choirs, and even simple hymnody, the arts resound.

Importantly, while Chaves states that people do not just “passively consume art in congregations,”⁴ it is clear that the interaction most people have with art in church is relegated to docile, spectator-based experiences. To be sure, most church-goers sit, look at, listen to, watch, and take in musical performances more often than they sing a solo or play in the brass ensemble. Similarly, most people inertly gaze at works of art from their pews far more frequently than they are invited to create them during a service. Which begs the question, “Is sitting passively in church more often than not enough?”

I can only imagine that youth and young adults would resoundingly cry out, “No!” Indeed, the cultural reality outside the church doors is anything but passive, and today, young people have a voice in society that is unprecedented in contrast to decades past. To be sure, culture outside the church is a fast-paced, non-stop rollercoaster ride that encourages and allows young people to actively engage the world, most notably art, in the making of ‘mash-ups,’ creation of blogs, and posting of ‘statuses’ on websites like YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and Flickr. While the extent to which culture enables young people to engage art may seem irrelevant for American congregations, the mainline church knows all too well that it

is losing youth and young adults at alarming rates. Churches have been and continue to lose this specific demographic at numerically high degrees. In fact, if we look around our church Bible studies, social gatherings, and small group activities, it is undeniably clear that youth and young adults are largely underrepresented across the board. Instead of waking up and going to church, youth spend their Sunday mornings engaged in other activities they have deemed more important, like hockey practice and college prep classes. Similarly, young adults leave their respective pews for years on end and typically choose to return only after they have had kids of their own. With this said, it is of the utmost importance that congregations compassionately attend to why youth and young adults are turning away from the church, because without them, the church cannot fully be the body of Christ.

The Democratization of Art

In today's world, it can be hard to pin down concrete facts about youth and young adults. As their lives tend to be defined by continuous cycles of transition and their lifestyle choices have become abundantly diverse, trends and generalizations are much more conducive ways in which to address this generation we have come to identify as 'millennials,' particularly when it comes to topics like religion and spirituality.⁵ Yet, if only one thing remains clear about young people today, it is that they share in the mutual experience of having grown up in the digital age, a time in which they are allowed to be "both consumers and producers of popular culture."⁶ Importantly, "throughout the 1980s and 90s, questions began to shift from the implications of media consumption to the possibilities of production,"⁷ a reality that has given way to a world of democratic artistic expressions. Indeed, "social networking sites, digital technologies, and other new media weave the fabric of our everyday lives whether we resist or embrace their influence,"⁸ and by and large, millennials have jumped in headfirst to explore the social worlds of Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and the like that are available to them in popular culture. In particular, YouTube is seen as "a new kind of popular space for the representation and creation of adolescent

expression of subjectivity, initiated by adolescents... [It is] a space in which youth increasingly are crafting, reconstituting, and negotiating identities... [and] sites like YouTube... are being staked out by young people for creative expression. Consequently, youth representation of themselves have the capacity to shape the cultural landscape, interrupt and collude with existing discourses of youth, and teach what it means to be a youth in all its complexity, within and across difference, in ways that were not possible until only recently.”⁹ These social arenas then not only become conduits of artistic expression, as young people are allowed to create, mold, and redefine not only their own identities but the world around them, but give youth and young adults the autonomy and freedom to see themselves as creators. In all of this, what is overwhelmingly clear is that young people love art and the openness it allows for self-expression.

Indeed, we live in a world in which young people are allowed to express themselves in limitless ways. From Facebook, Twitter, and blogging to photography, poetry, and practicing karate, the opportunities for millennials are endless. In these activities, youth and young adults are allowed to reflect on their days and assess their own identities; they are enabled to embrace what brings them joy or escape from their sorrows. Further, when they engage in the artistic expression of their choice, they are permitted to dream, imagine, and hope.

All this said, there seems to be a jarring disconnect, perhaps even a tension, between the ways the church and culture at large engage art. While it is true that the church should not use society as its frame of reference or bend with the ways of the world to become culturally relevant, it is clear that the mainline church is losing youth and young adults, a generation that is captivated by and eager to actively engage art, at alarming rates. In this light, it seems that the church is ‘doing art’ the wrong way. Indeed, the church is not consistent with the way youth engage art, and as a result, youth tend to feel distanced from the church’s artistic expression, as it is chiefly a passive, spectator-based approach to art.

While there is some active participation of the arts in church for youth and young adults, namely participation in choirs, plays, praise bands, and dinner/theatre events, and yes, churches are making strides

to better engage technology to reach out to younger generations, the possibility for improving still remains. Certainly, as the church and as youth leaders, we often connect with young people on Facebook, read up on their Twitter posts, and go to their dance performances. We support and show them that they are important with our presence. Yet, as the church, we almost always forget to give youth and young adults a time or a space to express themselves artistically as fully in the church as they are allowed to do in the world. Indeed, youth and young adults view themselves as designers, bloggers, musicians, and artists. But are they given the space and freedom to express themselves as God created in our camping ministries, youth groups, or on retreats?

Some may protest, “What about the craft station at Vacation Bible School? Doesn’t that count as an active participation in the arts?” To this, I would answer, “Perhaps.” Yet, we often limit the artistic imagination and abilities of youth when we give them crafts to copy exactly, ‘paint-by-numbers’ style. Indeed, youth and young adults who are on YouTube ‘crafting, reconstituting, and negotiating’ their identities rarely have an interest in simply copying something exactly as someone else has already made it. They want to nuance, transform, and revolutionize. In a nutshell, they want to create, and, by definition, creating means that something new has been brought into existence by one’s imaginative skill. To this degree, it is my firm opinion that churches strive to find ways to connect with youth and young adults by adopting an approach which empowers them to actively engage art in church settings. Youth and young adults need space for creative expression. They need a place in which to cultivate holy creativity.

Notably, the emergent church¹⁰ seems to be one such place striving to provide an environment in which holy creativity can flourish. Working within a postmodern worldview that values spirituality, community, the experiential, and authenticity, it is no surprise that art is given great significance in the emergent church. Embracing artistic expression, emergent churches emphasize the arts in a plethora of styles, practices, and disciplines. Many display the paintings and photography of members in ‘art galleries’ around their buildings, engage in activities like candle making, and even encourage members to

write the songs, laments, and liturgies that will be used in worship. Indeed, it is not just the passive experience of art that is emphasized but “a high value [is] placed on creating communities built out of the creativity of those who are a part of each local body.”¹¹ These highly creative approaches to worship and community life then give life to indigenous expressions of art and allow people of all ages, young and old, to rework the world around them. To be sure, in emerging churches, members and guests are not merely spectators, but in the blending of visual and tactile experiences at and in their churches, they become a community of faith as co-creators of the worship they will experience.

The popularity among and draw young adults feel toward these ‘openly artistic’ faith communities is incontestable, and regardless of the critiques, queries, and reservations many may have about the emergent church, it cannot be contested that emergent churches are doing something participatory in regard to the arts. Whether or not we agree with the theological principles of the emergent church is beyond the scope of this paper. It is, however, clear that emergent churches are trying to create positive experiences and build a bridge where others have dared not even attempt, or rather, have not attempted with such intensity and tenacity. People of all ages are being encouraged and empowered to actively engage art in emergent churches with the underlying assumption that such participation cannot and should not be the exception in church, but rather more of the norm. With this said, one thing is indisputably clear: the church and its leaders need to think more deeply about and grapple with the theological implications of empowering youth and young adults to actively engage art in church settings.

Grappling with Tillich & Moltmann

Dialogue and debates about art are often left to museum curators, dance choreographers, graphic designers, and art critics. Yet, the work of Paul Tillich,¹² unequivocally the leading theologian who deals with art, reveals a religious mind sincerely devoted to examining the visual arts as well as a spectator’s encounter with art. Indeed, as Tillich deals primarily with visual arts, he contends that “art has the

function of ‘expressing meaning,’ that is to say, it ‘indicates what the character of a spiritual situation is.’”¹³ In this sense, Michelangelo’s Pietà reveals something particularly striking about that which was sacred during the time of the Renaissance, and as such, Tillich maintains “that art is of particular interest to the theologian who wishes to gain an insight into the religious situation of that period.”¹⁴ To be clear, this does not mean that a religious situation can be captured in its entirety by a work of art. Certainly, “There is a gap between that which expresses and that which is expressed. But there is also a point of identity between them,”¹⁵ and it is in this singularity that the power of art remains strong.

Yet, art not only has the ability to reveal insights into the religious state of the time during which it is created but can move its viewers deeply. Zeal, joy, empathy, sorrow – have you ever stood before a work of art and felt your heart or mind melting into a pool of emotions? When I was ten, I remember sitting on the bright orange carpeting in my dad’s office carefully studying the small figurine of the Pietà, a gift he had been given by a friend, which lay in my lap. The passion in the sculpture overwhelmed me just as intensely as the curves and details in the stone captured my attention. Truly, I thought it was beautiful beyond words. Since those days long past sitting on the carpet, I have seen full-sized replicas of the Pietà in cathedrals around the globe, and yet I am still moved by this art in ways it is hard for a book or story to rival. Similarly, my time sitting in St. Chappelle, one of Paris’ hidden yet most radiant cathedrals filled on two sides, floor-to-ceiling with breath-taking stained-glass windows, nearly moved me to tears during my visit. The rich ruddy colors brought to life biblical scenes familiar to me since childhood, yet to a degree I never believed imaginable. To be sure, these experiences expose the power of art at its finest. Tillich affirms, “Painting is a mute revealer and yet often speaks more perceptibly to the interpreting mind than concept-bearing words. For it impresses us with the irrefutable power of immediate intuition.”¹⁶ In regard to his own life, Tillich confesses, “I have not learned from any theological book as much as I learned from these pictures of the great modern artists... So far as my own thinking and preaching are concerned... I have found that my relationship to the visual arts and to drama and poetry and the novel has made it possible for me to offer fresh interpretations of the Christian

symbols.”¹⁷ Notably, in this, Tillich is not merely referring to works of art that portray explicitly religious symbols or scenes, like Christ on the cross or the Spirit descending upon Jesus at his baptism. Indeed, he asserts, “It is not an exaggeration to ascribe more of the quality of sacredness to a still-life by Cezanne or a tree by van Gogh than to a picture of Jesus by Uhde.”¹⁸ It is in such a statement that Tillich defies the norm of what is considered a ‘religious work of art.’

Yet, Tillich underscores the power art contains most radically and poetically in his enthusiastic praise of Picasso’s most famous work, *Guernica*. Painted by Picasso in response to the bombing of the town after which it is named during the Spanish Civil War, *Guernica* portrays in hard lines, black and white tones, abstract shapes, and a superimposed surrealistic style not only the suffering of people, animals, and buildings wretched with chaos but the impossibility and inhumanity of war. There is not a cross, a fish, a dove, an olive branch, or a drop of blood in sight, yet Tillich unabashedly calls “it the best present-day Protestant religious picture ‘because it shows the human situation without any cover... And if Protestantism means that, first of all, we do not have to cover up anything, but have to look at the human situation in its depths of estrangement and despair, then this is one of the most powerful religious pictures. And although it has no religious content, it does have religious style in a very deep and profound sense.”¹⁹ Indeed, according to Tillich, “It is by virtue of its style, and not of its form or content, that an artwork is religious”²⁰ as style is “an encounter of man with his world, in which the whole man in all dimensions of his being is involved.”²¹ To be sure, art is explicitly religious if it includes religious symbols or scenes but is “implicitly religious if it expresses, in whatever fashion, the artist’s sensitive and honest search for ultimate meaning and significance in terms of his own contemporary culture.”²² In this light, though abysmally scathing when a work of art contains religious content but is not painted in a religious style, Tillich maintains that “All art is religious not because all beauty comes from God... but all art is religious because all art brings a *Gehalt* or stance towards the unconditioned to expression.”²³

The ‘unconditioned’ then is what Tillich refers to as ‘ultimate reality.’ According to Tillich, ultimate reality is not another name for God, but “If the idea of God includes ultimate reality, everything

that expresses ultimate reality expresses God whether it intends to do so or not.”²⁴ Additionally, one of Tillich’s chief theological claims, at large, is that “ultimate reality underlies every reality.”²⁵ With this last statement, it is easy to see how Tillich’s circle of understanding in regard to all ‘art being religious’ is complete. Indeed, if ultimate reality underlies every reality, and ultimate reality, whether it intends to do so or not, expresses God, then all art is religious because all art is a form of reality. So, are Norman Rockwell’s portraits of American life, Andy Warhol’s prints of popular art, and Lewis Hine’s photographs of child labor examples of religious art? According to Tillich, of course they are! For it is through a work of art’s style that we can be moved to know God as it expresses the artist’s deep, honest, and fresh search for ultimate meaning and significance.

Yet, for the generation of young people today who actively engage art in society, being a passive spectator of art, no matter how moving the experience, is simply not enough. Youth and young adults want to do more than look at art. They want to create it. Indeed, they are active creators and artists in their own right searching for meaning, crafting their own identities, and reshaping the world around them. In this light, I assert that Tillich’s argument that ‘art itself expresses meaning’ be extended and built upon. Indeed, Tillich’s insights provide a wonderful foundation and are profoundly helpful as they draw us into a proper theological dialogue about religion and visual art. To this degree, if Tillich contends that visual art conveys an honest search for reality, then the artist too has to have experienced an honest search for reality in the act of creating the work of art.

As such, it only makes sense that the church encourage youth and young adults to actively engage in the creation of art because the act of creating itself is for young people an exploration of ultimate reality, whether they intend it to be or not. Maintaining that ‘a picture is worth a thousand words’ and conveys ideas about religion and spirituality to the passive consumer, the church must embrace how important and vital the act of creating art truly is. To be sure, it is not just art in its form as a finished product that expresses the inner realities, struggles, joys, and sorrows of young people, but the act of

creating and engaging art actively does too! In this light, if ‘all art is religious,’ then we can contend that the creation of all art is religious as well.

All in all, the honest search for ultimate meaning that occurs during the creation of art is not futile but is a process of ‘holy creativity.’ Indeed, for youth and young adults growing up in the internet age, the engagement of art is not merely a chance to interpret and reconstruct their individual identities or the happenings of the world around them. It is an expression of voice that involves them in God’s on-going activity in creation as it witnesses to the in-breaking of heaven on earth and proclaims that God’s future is on the way.

Traditionally, the church has retrained God’s creative activity to the ‘creation account’ found in Genesis 1-2. To be sure, we typically teach our children that God is the ultimate Creator who brought life into existence and filled the Garden of Eden, a blissful paradise, with exotic wildlife, luscious vegetation, and the unashamedly nude Adam and Eve. Yet, to reduce God’s creative activity to this alone would be a dreadful oversight. Indeed, Jürgen Moltmann, one of the foremost contemporary theologians, contends “for a long time theological tradition limited God’s creative work to the original bringing into being of creation; [and] his creative activity in history was seen as his preserving and accompanying work. But this picture of creation and preservation is not a biblical one. *Bara*’, the unique word for the divine creation, is used much more frequently in the Bible for God’s creation of liberation and salvation in history than for the initial creation of the world. The New Testament talks about ‘the new creation in Christ’, and about ‘the life-giving Spirit’ and the eschatological promise ‘Behold I make all things new’. So it is theologically inadequate if we restrict the divine creative activity to the beginning and in a historical context talk only about ‘preservation’ and eschatologically only about ‘redemption.’”²⁶ Put more succinctly, Moltmann argues that creation must be understood as an open system that includes “a ‘tripartite’ concept of... *creatio originalis* – *creatio continua* – *creatio nova*.”²⁷

Just as we cannot talk about a bike without mentioning that it is made up of a seat, frame, and tires, and just as knowledge about the seasons is incomplete unless summer, autumn, winter, and spring

are each given fair mention, Moltmann holds that the notion of creation cannot be broken up into different parts and that one aspect of creation should not be given more attention than another. They are each, *creatio originalis*, *creatio continua*, and *creatio nova*, vitally important to understanding the beautiful complexity of God's creative acts. Indeed, *creatio originalis* is understood as 'the original bringing into being of creation,' *creatio continua* at face value points to the unbroken sustaining and preserving of the creation which was once brought into being, and *creatio nova* encompasses the day when there will be "a new heaven and a new earth" (Rev 21:1 NRSV). Taken as a whole, God's initial creative work, *creatio originalis*, is lived out in *creatio continua* as it points to *creatio nova*.

To be sure, God's creative activity cannot be talked about without mentioning that we live in the hope that Christ is coming to 'make all things new' (Rev 21:5) and that we as humans along with the rest of creation long, 'groaning in labor pains,' for the day we will be redeemed (Rom 8:19-23). Yet, for Moltmann, *creatio continua* is not just the activity of God preserving creation as we wait patiently for Christ to come again. Certainly, babies continue to be born, rain showers continue to restore the earth, and crops continue to grow for the next harvest, but "if we discover the *creatio continua* between the *creatio originalis* and the *nova creatio*, we shall perceive the unremitting creative activity of God as an activity that both preserves *and* innovates."²⁸ Indeed, "in prophetic theology, the creative acts of God in history are discerned in the unexpected 'new thing' of liberation and salvation... Here God's historical activity is directed, not towards the preservation of what was once created, but towards the anticipation of the salvation in which creation will be consummated. It is not merely *creatio continua*. It is at the same time *creatio nova*. And as *creatio nova* it is also *creatio anticipative*... [as] God's creative activity in history anticipates"²⁹ the ultimate consummation when all things will be made new!

How glorious is this?! *Creatio nova* is not just a future reality but a present one! Indeed, God's creative acts reveal the in-breaking of heaven on earth today as they are wrapped up in God's continuous creative activity. Though it is not a complete picture of 'a new heaven and a new earth,' we are given glimpses of *creatio nova* every time the hungry are fed, forgiveness is proclaimed, good news is brought

to the poor, and the oppressed are set free (Luk 4:18-19). Every time these things happen, the kingdom of God breaks in, and not just because it is the evolution of the world to do so. The kingdom breaks in because Christ brought us the kingdom in his life, death, and resurrection. *Creatio nova* in the here and now is a celebration and proclamation of these events and points to the day Christ will come again! In this sense, “a detailed doctrine of the *creatio continua* must see God’s historical activity under [two] aspects: the *preservation* of the world he has created, and the *preparation* of its completion and perfecting.”³⁰ God’s creative historical activity then is eschatologically oriented as it anticipates the consummation of creation while also preparing the way for that consummation. As Dr. Tony Campolo proclaims, “It’s Friday... but Sunday is coming!” And though it is ‘Friday’ as we wait for the fulfillment and redemption of creation, it is evident “the kingdom of heaven is at hand” when the glory of God breaks into our sinful and broken world (Matt 3:2 KJV).

Unpacking *creatio continua* even further, it is clear that “God’s preserving activity manifests hope, and his innovating activity, his faithfulness.”³¹ Indeed, through God’s on-going creative activity, it is affirmed that God is not only our Creator but our faithful Creator in whom we can hope. For as God preserves creation, it is clear that He refuses to give up on it. Though we are fallen and continually fail Him, God continues to assert that, as His creation, we matter immensely. To be sure, “we might say that every moment the Creator reiterates his primal Yes”³² it is a glorious testament to God’s faithfulness to all of creation.

Our Creative Activity

Importantly, God’s creative acts not only reveal who God is but who we as humans are and the activity into which we are called to live! As depicted in Genesis 1:27, “God puts himself in a particular relationship to human beings – a relationship in which human beings become his image and his glory on

earth.”³³ Indeed, we are made in the image of God, and as God is Creator, we are called to be co-creators with Him and join in His creative activity in the world.

Without question, this is our identity. Philip Hefner acknowledges that “the human being is created by God to be a co-creator in the creation that God has brought into being and for which God has purposes.”³⁴ He goes on to say, “the affirmation of divine purposes is central to this understanding. Those purposes serve both as an indication that gives substance and a basis for hope to the creation, and also a criterion for determining and assessing the work of the co-creator.”³⁵ As mere human beings, we cannot pretend to know all or even part of God’s purposes for creation. Yet, we can see God’s purposes in his creative activity! Indeed, *creatio continua* reveals glimpses of what ‘life abundantly’ looks like in beautiful, heart-stopping *creatio nova* moments, and when we live into our identity as co-creators, we join in this activity! In this way, we uplift and testify to what God is doing: bringing heaven to earth!

Certainly then, when we empower youth and young adults to engage art in church settings, they not only create meaning and explore their identities as co-creators but witness to the in-breaking of heaven on earth. To be sure, active creativity is much more than an expression of culture, technological abilities, or one’s personality. It is an act of witness that God’s future is on the way as it anticipates the restoration of creation. Indeed, it affirms the hope we have in the promise of Christ’s return! Additionally, as God’s creative activity reveals who we are, our creative activity as co-creators points to who God is as well. When ‘innovating’ through creative acts, we point to the hope we have in God our Creator and to His faithfulness to creation as a whole.

Calling a Thing What It Is

With all this said, it is important to revisit Tillich’s assertion that visual art conveys an honest search for reality and my ensuing extension of his statement: that an artist too experiences an honest search for reality in the act of creating art. Indeed, as revealed in Picasso’s painting *Guernica*, sometimes

one's honest search for reality reveals extreme suffering and pain. Other times, it exposes the beauty, joy, and glorious mysteries of God as they are already breaking into this world. To be sure, the active engagement of art, whether in dance, painting, drama, music, or another creative expression, can uplift an entire spectrum of emotions: from deep-seated sorrow to soul-piercing ecstasy. Importantly, if the emotion and honest search for ultimate reality expressed does not explicitly reveal the in-breaking of heaven on earth, the artistic expression of the co-creator should *not* be discounted.

Our world is filled with broken relationships, hearts, political systems, economies, and much more. Because of these realities, it is important to touch on the veracity of human pain and lived experiences in all its forms, particularly in the engagement of art. To empower youth and young adults to 'name the elephant in the room' or in the words of Dr. Andrew Root 'call a thing what it is'³⁶ not only affirms the presence of grief and suffering but is also a movement that can be the impetus towards healing. Indeed, as we uplift the burdens and crosses we bear by engaging art, God identifies with our suffering in Christ on the cross. In this way, God is with us when we express our deep, haunting questions of reality through dance, painting, drama, or music, whether we realize it or not. As leaders in the church and theologians of the cross, we cannot and should not avoid the suffering and doubts of young people. For the hope we have in Christ-crucified can only be articulated against our deepest realities (1 Cor 1:18-25)! Hope is born in these places of brokenness, and as such, an honest search for ultimate reality through the active engagement of art is an opportunity for Christ-given liberation and redemption.

All in all, when we empower youth and young adults to actively engage art, it is an act of witness that God's future is on the way. This active creativity encourages young people to create meaning, learn about God as their faithful Creator, engage in the continuous creative activity of God, explore, express, and be affirmed in their identity as co-creators with God, and finally gives them the opportunity to move from suffering to hope as they live in the promise of the Gospel.

Where the Paint Hits the Canvas

Personally, art is a big part of my life. Not only do I enjoy sauntering through art galleries and museums, but I am also a passionate pianist, photographer, and painter. Yet, when I first began to seriously consider thesis topics, I did not know how best to blend my love for art and ministry... until, that is, I was inspired by a six-week stay in the South of France.

The South of France is simply breathtaking. It is not fast-paced and glitzy like Paris but serene with its glacial yet gorgeous mountains. Locals sit out on their terraces drinking tea, eating biscuits, soaking in the landscape, and laughing in the warmth of the sun with family and friends. Indeed, the lush scenery alone makes one feel as though they are on set for the *Sound of Music*. It was in this setting that I found myself serving as a camp counselor alongside a group of American missionaries who, during the summers, minister to French high school and college students. Upon my arrival and at staff training, I learned that a portion of our time would be spent leading and engaging the French students in art workshops. Indeed, for the French, art is so embedded in the fabric of their culture it is almost as though it is fixed in their very DNA. As such, the art workshops led at camp are one of the main reasons French students, Christian and non-Christian alike, are attracted to this particular camp and range from professionally taught dance and photography classes to expert-led drama, poetry, newspaper, karate, videography, pottery, watercolor, and sketching lessons. Notably, each art workshop meets three hours a day, every day for two weeks straight, the entirety of each camp session. For the first session during my time in France, I co-facilitated a drama workshop and then participated in a watercolor workshop during the second session. Not only was I excited to have spent an entire month engaging art but I remember leaving my art workshop everyday thinking, “There’s something holy happening here. This is about more than just art.” Indeed, the high school and college students I was working with were changing, growing, and being encouraged during these three hour slots. They were not just becoming artists. They were experiencing true Christian community and love while witnessing to the in-breaking of heaven on earth as co-creators!

As I dive more fully into what I learned from the art workshops in France, it is imperative to understand that this experience was not simply an inspirational platform from which I developed my thesis but an extraordinary example of how I have seen youth and young adults actively engage art in a ministry setting. Indeed, this experience is proof that it is not impossible to empower young people to engage art or just a floating idea left out in the clouds. This is where the rubber meets the road, or rather, where the paint hits the canvas! Importantly, these workshops were specifically designed with this setting and these French students in mind. To be sure, contextualization is essential, and as I expound upon my French experiences and put forth practical ideas for leaders to apply in our American context, remember that what I have in mind is not a one size fits all way to engage young people. I expect you to adapt, nuance, and even reject these ideas completely depending on your specific ministry setting. Use the following as a tool to spark discussion and brainstorming with others about to how engage young people and art!

For the suggestions below, I am imagining an American church in a rural agricultural yet touristy town. As such, the community is a pretty even blend between middle-class and affluent households. The church itself holds a membership of about 1500 people, with 600 worshipping each weekend. There are two full-time pastors and one full-time youth pastor, and the staff, as well as the church on the whole, has a heart and passion for youth. The youth ministry strives to innovate and grow wherever necessary and thrives at ‘breaking out of the box’ to reach youth and their needs. The middle school/Confirmation group averages 50 youth, while the high school youth group averages 40-45 students. Together, the age groups share a rather large youth room that is in the same building as the fellowship hall. The fellowship hall is at their complete disposal and is also used not only for church but community-building events. Parents and other adult volunteers who work with both groups are highly valued in this church and are the pulse by which the ministry builds relationships, mentorships, and prays for the youth. Between 30 and 40 adults are involved in this capacity, with a core group of 15-20 adults and parents. However, the young adult population within the church is splintered and tottering. The church struggles with engaging

the young adult population in the community, as do most other churches in the area. A handful of singles and young married couples attend the church, but there is not a core group around which activities or events revolve. That said, the pastors yearn to better reach and serve the young adults in their midst.

So, what did I learn from my time in France about empowering young people to engage art, and how could the church above apply what I discovered? Three spheres are absolutely essential to highlight: leadership, providing a space for self-discovery, and celebrating.

Leadership: In my drama workshop, the students not only practiced reading famous monologues, learned about different styles of performance, and performed a play they wrote themselves but lived in community with the seven other people in the workshop. Indeed, during the time we brainstormed for and practiced our play, the students watched the other counselor and me react with love in tense moments that could have easily turned to anger and yelling, and likewise, witnessed us apologize and ask for forgiveness when our words or actions wronged another in the group. They were able to see how a man and woman of faith can interact in a platonic yet loving way, and as a group, we engaged in deep discussions about compassion, broken relationships, charity, and even suicide: topics the students brought up as they thought of potential plotlines.

Indeed, actively engaging art is a purposeful tool for discipleship and an opportunity to develop relationships with young people. The goal is not to create world-famous artists but to have youth and young adults grow closer in their relationship with God and those around them. In fact, empowering young people to engage art in a community setting is of the utmost importance as it is an opportunity in which youth and young adults can experience authentic Christian community and is even a chance for non-Christians to see how Christians strive to live and interact with others. As such, leadership must be intentional about prepping the adults and volunteers who will be interacting with youth. Indeed, though those who have chosen to work and volunteer with young people love and receive great joy from doing so, it is often fraught with stressful, confusing, and challenging moments, and for the sake of our own egos, we often strive to quickly by-pass unsettling questions or gloss over less-than-ideal situations for

‘sunnier days.’ Yet, when this happens, adults can miss out on or overlook opportunities for ‘teachable moments,’ that is, lessons and conversations that can have a profound influence on the lives and faith formation of youth and young adults.

For a youth ministry, a ‘training session’ in which the youth pastor addresses authenticity and teachable moments as well as the importance of developing group cohesion, open communication, and how to maintain a safe atmosphere that opens youth up to dialogue during communal art activities would be a must. This ‘training session’ would not just be for the core group of parents and volunteers but any adult brought in to interact with youth during community art activities. The youth minister would need to be intentional about following up these sessions with gentle reminders and encouragement as youth and volunteers began to interact in communal art settings. More than anything, this is a mindset to instill in leaders, adults, and volunteers: that the time spent engaging art is an investment in relational ministry. An open, honest community may not form overnight, and adults are going to be far from perfect in how they interact with young people. Yet, it is important to surround young people with adults who strive to have this loving approach and attitude.

A space for self-discovery: The young people I met in France amazed me as they engaged their art workshops. Indeed, Siri’s face beamed when she told me dancing brought her to life. Though her dance workshop was intense, she called it a beautiful exhaustion. Marta’s charcoal drawings were powerfully gorgeous. As a pre-med student, she sketched out the anatomy of the eye and the hand but somehow twisted each picture with deep theological symbols and themes. When describing her own work, she admitted they epitomized how she viewed the world. Grace came up to me one day and asked if she could sing me a song she had written. Though she was taking the dance class, she told me she had been inspired to put her thoughts about the French Alps into song. Her lyrics spoke of an awesome God and how tiny she felt compared to the vastness of the mountains.

All in all, to provide young people with the ‘space’ for self-discovery does not simply refer to notions of physical space but connotes a freedom and liberty for personal exploration. Indeed, actively

engaging art is often not a process of ‘pouring in’ but ‘drawing out’ what is already within the hearts and minds of youth and young adults. It is a chance for them to express what is important to them, whether great joys or deep sorrows, and even process through a range of events and topics, including but not limited to war, poverty, divorce, illness, family dynamics, hope, and dreams for the future. This honest search and means of expression can even be an opportunity for the natural gifts and talents of young people to be affirmed, though a young person’s ability to actively engage art is not dependent upon artistic inclinations. Anyone can and should be encouraged to create, as it can affirm one’s identity as well as inner struggles and joys, regardless of talent. To give young people the ‘space’ to express and even discover more about themselves by actively engaging art, a church might:

- Encourage young adults to create ‘community art groups’ where 4-5 meet weekly or bi-weekly in each other’s homes. Leading themselves, have each person alternate hosting and guiding the group through an artistic activity of their choice, perhaps making candles or pottery, teaching guitar, creating floral arrangements, painting, going on a photography adventure.
- Plan for an ‘arts night’ to be held in the fellowship hall once a month. Targeted to high school youth, create stations or workshops led by volunteers from the church or within the community who are passionate about a specific art. Recruit the local newspaper photographer, dance instructor, the Sunday school teacher who is an architect or the council member who is soft-spoken but quite the poet. Have the ‘experts’ teach a class or just talk with the youth while they interact with a particular art.
- Take Confirmation-aged students on ‘field trips’ to meet local artists from church or in the community who express their faith in art. Make sure it is an opportunity to not just listen to the artists talk about their faith but that it includes an active engagement of art. Potential artists include potters, woodworkers, painters, and those who make stained-glass windows.
- Create ‘stations’ in the youth room, fellowship hall, or main room when on a retreat. Perhaps have a ‘painting station’ with canvases, paint, and brushes, a ‘writing station’ with a variety of markers, pens, and paper for those who want to write poetry or narratives or music lyrics, and a ‘computer station’ where students can upload and process photography or design graphics. Stations could be created or planned in conjunction with particular Bible studies or Confirmation discussions, and youth could be encouraged to paint or draw what forgiveness, prayer, baptism, communion, or loving their neighbor means to them. The station could also be offered without giving particular parameters or faith-based themes. Such stations would run more along the lines of “What’s on your heart today? Go ahead. Get it out.”

Celebration: In France, each session of camp culminated in an evening where every workshop showcased their art or the projects they had been working on. To name a few, the watercolor and drawing

workshops displayed their work in an ‘art gallery,’ the karate, dance, and music workshops revealed their respective ‘numbers,’ and our drama workshop performed in a ‘theatre.’ Though at first I was suspicious as to why this evening was given so much weight and importance, I soon came to realize that each performance and display uniquely affirmed and celebrated the growth, achievements, and voice of the youth and young adults. When appropriate, churches can do this by:

- Creating a ‘celebration feast’ for the young adult ‘community art groups’ where they can share pictures and stories about their art adventures.
- Displaying the art work of youth and young adults in the church, fellowship hall, or at a local coffee shop.
- Rethinking worship! Perhaps this would be as small as inviting young people to share their poems or dance performance as church liturgy or as big as incorporating communal art practices or stations into the worship life of the church.

Notably, what I have laid bare is just the tip of the iceberg. Indeed, there are many questions and topics that still require further exploration in regard to recreating the engagement of art with youth and young adults. To be sure, it will be worthwhile to further explore the elements and potential for intergenerational ministry. While a few opportunities for intergenerational interaction were named above, it will be important to dive more fully into the implications the active engagement of art by young people has on older generations and a faith community as a whole. A few questions include: Does the engagement of art by young people inspire older generations to actively engage art as well? Is the active engagement of art a catalyst for intergenerational ministry? Is it an intergenerational community-builder? How can churches create a creative art space where young and old can encourage each other? In regard to infants and young children, theologians need to dive into or pair up with leading researchers in the fields of child development and early childhood development to determine how to best include ‘the little ones’ in this holy creativity. Additionally, theologians need to devote time to thinking about how faith communities can avoid critique when actively engaging art.

Furthermore, it will be important to explore if and how the active engagement of art could be utilized as a tool for evangelism or reaching out to those in need. Situations and settings worth considering include short- and long-term mission trips, camping ministries, and retreats as well as engagement at nursing homes, homeless shelters, and in hospitals. Along these same lines, highlighting the moments in people's lives where the active engagement of art could be transformational would be paramount. Examples include: after the loss of a friend or family members, during a divorce, when preparing for a move, before going to college, in light of a terminal illness, or during a pregnancy.

Theologians must also explore the extent to which creating art is sacramental. Indeed, in creating art, we often find ourselves 'on holy ground.' In this sense, what does it mean or even look like to know grace, holiness, and love through the active engagement of art? All in all, there is still much to be studied and employed, and it is my hope that what has been presented here will inspire great conversation and research in not only these areas but many more.

Creating with Gusto

Bono once said, "The music that really turns me on is either running toward God or away from God. Both recognize the pivot, that God is at the center of the jaunt."³⁷ It is the same with the creation of art. Whenever young people actively engage art, heaven either breaks in or the need for liberation and salvation is proclaimed. Importantly, in both cases, God is the crux. This is what Tillich maintains in stating that all art reveals ultimate reality and what Moltmann asserts with regard to *creatio continua*. As such, church leaders are called to open up opportunities and empower youth and young adults to engage in an honest search for ultimate reality in the active engagement of art, and though the practical application of this engagement can take a variety of forms, the challenge for leaders in the church remains clear: we must provide space for young people to create artistically with as much gusto as Michelangelo reveals in his Pietà.

¹ Mark Chaves, "What Do Congregations Do? The Significance to American Civic Life," *Word & World* Vol. 27, No. 3 (Summer 2007): 300.

² Ibid., 299.

³ Ibid., 299.

⁴ Ibid., 303.

⁵ For more information, reference *Soul Searching* and *Souls in Transition* by Christian Smith.

⁶ Kristin Luschen, Lesley Bogad, "Youth, New Media and Education: An Introduction," *Educational Studies* 46 (2010): 451.

⁷ Ibid., 452.

⁸ Ibid., 450.

⁹ Ibid., 454.

¹⁰ In this context, the terms 'emergent church' and 'emerging church' are being used broadly to define the new ways of doing church and expressing spirituality as uplifted by people like Dan Kimball. This is in contrast to the more radical theological formation attempts by those associated with the Emergent Village.

¹¹ "What the Emerging Church is About," *In Plain Sight*. Accessed March 5, 2011.

http://www.inplainsite.org/html/defining_emerging_church.html

¹² Paul Tillich, a German-American, was one of the most significant Protestant theologians of the 20th century. Best known for his three-volume work *Systematic Theology*, Tillich lived from August 20, 1886 – October 22, 1965.

¹³ Russell Re Manning, "Towards a Critical Reconstruction and Defense of Paul Tillich's Theology of Art," *ARTS* Vol. 16, No. 2 (2004): 33.

¹⁴ Ibid., 33.

¹⁵ Paul Tillich, *On Art and Architecture*, ed. John Dillenberger and Jane Dillenberger, trans. Robert P. Scharlemann (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 141.

¹⁶ H. Armin Moellering, "Up From Philistinism," *Concordia Journal* (January 1989): 62.

¹⁷ Ibid., 62.

¹⁸ Ibid., 60.

¹⁹ Ibid., 61.

²⁰ Manning, *ARTS*, 33.

²¹ Tillich, *On Art and Architecture*, 129.

²² Ibid., 232.

²³ Manning, *ARTS*, 34.

²⁴ Tillich, *On Art and Architecture*, 140-141.

²⁵ Ibid., 140.

²⁶ Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1985), 208.

²⁷ Ibid., 208.

²⁸ Ibid., 209.

²⁹ Ibid., 209.

³⁰ Ibid., 209.

³¹ Ibid., 209.

³² Ibid., 209.

³³ Ibid., 220.

³⁴ Philip Hefner, *The Human Factor: Evolution, Culture, and Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 32.

³⁵ Ibid., 37.

³⁶ Andrew Root, "What is Sin and How Do We Discuss It with Kids?" *Children, Youth, and Family Ministry* 4520 *Course Lecture* (Luther Seminary: St. Paul, Minnesota), March 28, 2011.

³⁷ Bono, "The music that really turns me on is either running toward God or away from God"//Rolling Stones Interview with Bono," *New Creation: Student Arts Group at Duke Divinity*. Accessed April 16, 2011. <http://newcreationarts.blogspot.com/2010/04/music-that-really-turns-me-on-is-either.html>