Louden Young

Youth Ministry

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Letting God be Greater

"Can God be greater than God was just the moment before I asked you?" It was a cold November night, some years ago, when this question was posed to me at a youth retreat. The keynote speaker, whose name escapes my memory, had spent the first few sessions of the retreat unpacking Psalm 139, focusing on verse 14, which says, " I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made."[[1]](#footnote-1) The theme was about positive body image, loving the body God gave you. It did not come across my mind that there were youth in attendance who were questioning whether their physical body was in line with how they identified themselves. It did not cross my mind that when they heard these words of scripture, they experienced a theology telling them to embrace a body they felt was incorrect.

When I began this course, I felt I had a good understanding about what I thought youth ministry should be. On its worst day, I felt youth ministry should create space for youth to engage with scripture and begin to develop a vocabulary for expressing what they believed and their personal relationship with Christ. On its best day, I felt youth ministry should do that, and be fun, all while developing deep, and meaningful relationships between the youth and the adults in the program. Though this course has not changed my mind about this vision of youth ministry, it has challenged me to consider what theology and practices will be necessary to ensure this is a vision that applies to all the youth who come to my ministry looking for God. It seems to me that scripture is suggesting that any vision of the kingdom of God starts with marginalized communities. In order to fully consider what my theology of Youth ministry might be, my vision must be one that works for the most marginalized youth. It seemed obvious to me that this meant full consideration of transgendered youth, of those, in my youth, I had not thought to consider.

As a Christian in the Reformed tradition, any discussion of theology must begin grounded in scripture. I was well versed in the body positive scriptures that I was directed to as a child and youth. I know that my body is "a temple" (1 Corinthians 6.19). I know that I was "knit together in my mother's womb," and I am "wonderfully made" (Psalm 139).[[2]](#footnote-2) These were the verse I was given to talk about my body and to develop a positive view of my body as a gift from God. These verses in scripture suggest an intentionality that God's creative powers, which translated into a practice of embracing who you are based on the collective understanding of gendered identity. Knowing that transgender youth are a marginalized community that must be fully considered in a vision of youth ministry and the theology it manifests, it is necessary to consider verses that suggest a transgendered image of God. Virginia Ramey Mollenkott suggests that these verses of scripture are just as bountiful as the one's that support positive gender normative understandings of our bodies.

"The Christian Scriptures contain many transsexual images: women are called brothers; men are called the brides of Christ; Jesus and Paul are depicted as mothers (John 16.21; 17.1; and Gal. 4.19); Jesus is depicted as Holy Sophia (Wisdom); the Church is described as a female body with a male head (Eph. 5.23-33), and the female body of Christ is urged to grow up and become the male head (Eph. 4.15)."[[3]](#footnote-3)

The transgendered images in scripture make a need for Christians to engage with these verses. Not only must we engage with these images, it is necessary to provide them to our youth, as much as we push the body positive gender normative verses that feel more familiar. Once it is established that scripture makes it necessary to engage with the perspective of trans people, it is now even more imperative to discuss how a theology of youth ministry reflects the presence of transgender images in scripture and transgender youth in our youth programs, and the practices that reflect acknowledgment of those things.

Before getting to the practical manifestations of a theology of Youth ministry that takes into account the experience and faith of transgender youth, I think its important to identify one very important task for adults involved in youth ministry. Without striving to live into this task, it is impossible to embody the openness of the kingdom of God for all who proclaim Christ their savior. We must take seriously the spiritual revelations of others, especially our youth. We should not dismiss the experiences of our youth with God, even if those experiences push the boundaries of what we accept to be "normal." Often, Christians tend to accept the validity of revelation to be the consent of the majority. The socially normative standards tend to influence how we read the Bible and how we hear the experiences of our youth. If a youth suggests an experience that is counter to how we understand the world and God, we dismiss it or feign tolerance as a means of seeking the opportunity to correct it. Sian Taylder suggests one manifestation of this, in the phrase "love the sinner, hate the sin," is "an exercise in Christian toleration when, it is, of course, anything but."[[4]](#footnote-4) If tolerance is merely a means to draw someone close enough to effectively persuade someone to change who they are, then our God becomes limited to our understanding. As adults facilitating and leading youth ministry programs, we must free ourselves from the privilege of thinking we know more than our youth. We need to stop suggesting the maturity of youth when they affirm our beliefs, and calling youth "lost sheep," when they do not share the experience we consider "normal."

So how do transgender youth challenge my theology of youth ministry, and how can the manifested practices of that theology be adapted to include the experience of transgender youth? Well, lets first identify the underlying systems of space, scripture, and images of God, that reflect the presumption of a gender binary (male and female). Let us begin with the basic structures of youth group. Chap Clark suggest that the desire of adolescents to find "affiliation, support, and security," drive adolescents to create "immediate social structures" he calls "clusters".[[5]](#footnote-5) As a means of creating space in a youth ministry program, leadership either tries to create their own structures based on shared characteristics, or to harness the energy of clusters already established by the youth in the program. In my experience, these clusters have been based on two particular characteristics: age and gender. When it comes to creating small groups, gender has been the primary characteristic. These gender-based clusters are further reinforced by the logistics of group activity. At lock-ins or youth events where the youth sleep somewhere over night, males and females are separated into their own spaces. In the case I discussed in my briefing paper, even when a youth program allows for a youth to decide where to sleep based on which gender they identify with, there is still the underlying issue of suggesting a strict gender binary.

Already discussed earlier, in the youth programs I have been a part of, we commonly use scripture to support positive body image from birth, implying the intention of God in creating the gender one is physically born as. This does not recognize the experience of transgender youth who will physically transition in order to have a body in line with their revealed identity. It also doesn't reflect the experience of Christian transgender youth who are born without clearly defined sexual organs. Just as in the spaces and scriptures we use as foundations for our programs, the images of God we suggest in the youth programs I have been a part of, often fall into the gender binary. The image of God as male is common, as the image of Father and Son are traditional images associated with two of the three persons of the triune God. Never, in my experience of the youth ministry programs I was a part of, were transgender images of God suggested or brought to exposure for the youth. It is obvious that our space, scripture, and images of God have been influenced by the assumption of a gender binary that excludes the experiences of one of our most marginalized groups of youth.

The characteristic of inclusion, which I consider to be paramount to my theology of youth ministry, is dependent on our belief in the experiences of our youth. If the experience of transgender youth is not considered in any aspect of the youth ministry program, the characteristic of inclusion will always be bound to a specific understanding of gender in a binary. So what can be done to address these manifested assumptions of gender as a binary? How can we reach the vision of a youth ministry program that creates space and vocabulary for youth to talk about their faith and develop their personal relationship Christ, while having fun and building meaningful relationships with one another and the adults in the program? I think it is as simple as letting God be greater.

My theology of Youth ministry starts with allowing God to be greater. Mark DeVries makes the claim that to change the culture of a program, one must "cultivate change."[[6]](#footnote-6)This means being willing to expose youth to new ways of thinking and spiritual practices, based on the experiences of others and the perspectives of the marginalized. Knowing that most of the experience of youth in churches is going to be gender normative, why not make youth group a place where youth are exposed to transgender theology? That does not means suggesting one over the other or putting them in tension with one another. Rather, it means giving them both a place in the conversation so that your youth can engage with them. It is perfectly ok to direct youth to engage with scriptures like Psalm 139 and 1 Corinthians. However, we should also be exposing our youth to theologians like Susannah Cornwall, who reads the same scriptures, and suggests that, "since theology points to a God who is not fully known, part of becoming like that God is being prepared to give up part of what we believe we know about ourselves as humans," which "may include gendered identity."[[7]](#footnote-7) If part of what youth ministry should be is giving youth a vocabulary to communicate what they believe, it only makes sense to expose them to as many words and ideas as you can. That is to say, both are needed.

Also, as leaders in a youth ministry program, we need to be creative in the spaces and clusters we create or allow. It is too easy to form groups by age and gender. It is easy to base logistics for any youth event or activity on a gender binary. For the ministry to reflect the theology, we must challenge ourselves to be more creative. This means rethinking the ways in which we organize our groups and the expectations we set for the group. Rather then breaking up small groups by gender, perhaps we can find other points of commonality. Perhaps it is interests, instead of gender. Maybe it is by modeling cooperation between adult leaders of different gender identities. Make sure the activities we design and the roles we assign to youth are not reinforcing a gender binary that excludes the experience of some youth.

It is difficult to envision this type of inclusion. There is a certain desire to put our gender normative beliefs in dialectic tension with any other interpretation or theology. Those of us who have had a good experience in youth ministry programs often look to replicate the programs we think are successful and helpful. Any theology or practices that are not inline with our images of what youth ministry should be feel like a critique of the programs we love. In defense of these programs, we create a duality that does not exist. It does not have to be images of God are gendered or not. It does not have to be "you are wonderfully made by God at birth" and the many transgender images we see in scripture. It can be both at the same time, because Scripture has made room for both.

It is also important to note that helping to create a vocabulary for youth, to express their faith and develop their personal relationship with Christ, does not mean giving youth "answers." It is the easy to think a good theology of Youth ministry means providing answers to the questions that youth have so that they can be confident in what they "know" about God. It is easier to provide "answers" than it is to embrace the mystery of God and to suggest conversations. Exposing youth to new ideas and interpretations does not mean providing them with conclusions as well. Ultimately, any theology of youth ministry cannot be divorced from one's personal theology. As a Christian in the Reformed Tradition, this means accepting that it is God who gives the growth, not us. No theology of youth ministry should suggest creating faith for youth, or "shaping" youth. Youth ministry should give information, not analysis, so that we leave room for the Spirit to be at work in each youth. This is a continuation of believing in the experiences of our youth.

As I have suggested, any theology of Youth ministry should as itself how the experience of transgender youth fits into the vision that theology creates. My theology of youth ministry suggests a vision of a program that provides space and vocabulary for a youth to say what they believe and what their experience with Christ. It is a theology that believes God inspires revelation. As a result, it is our job to expose our youth to the bounty of perspectives of faith that exist in the Christian community, so that the marginalized may feel the richness of the community of faith as clearly as they feel the richness of their own relationship with Christ. Nothing speaks louder to our failure to do this than the remarks of Hannah Buchanan, who says, "My experience as a transsexual has been less disappointing overall than my experience of Christians as a transsexual."[[8]](#footnote-8) A theology of youth ministry is reflected in the practices of the ministry. If we continue to marginalize transgender individuals in the way we read and interpret scripture, we cannot hope to have youth ministry programs characterized as inclusive.

A final insight that the lens of transgender youth has revealed to me about my theology of youth ministry. Just as youth should be exposed to a multitude of voices, youth ministry must be flexible and effected by newly revealed voices. Though it is transgender youth at this moment, with the hope that we might change our theology and practices to consider their experiences, it is possible that new marginalized communities will emerge as we address our failures in inclusion. A theology of youth ministry should have the endurance and flexibility to acknowledge new perspectives and to integrate these newly expressed experiences in the metanarrative[[9]](#footnote-9) of the youth group. In including these marginalized experience in the metanarrative, the marginalized groups then have some ownership in the community. This would be a way of embodying an equality in the position of their experience in the conversation of what the theology and ultimately, the practices of the community should be.

So can God be greater? I certainly think God can. But only if we chose not to limit God for our youth. This means exposing our youth to as many differing perspectives of scripture as we can. In developing that vocabulary, through exposure, our practices with our youth may begin to be more inclusive. It is the experiences of the marginalized, of our transgender youth, that reflect the truth in our theology of youth ministry. Are we to be Christ's loving community? Can transgender youth share in the vision of what youth ministry should and could be? You will find, when letting the Spirit work in you, through exposure to the experiences of the marginalized in the church, that God will be greater and greater with each moment. As it is for you, it should also be for the youth you are serving. That is what youth ministry should be.

1. Attridge, Harold W, et al. *The HarperCollins study Bible New Revised Standard*

   *Version, including the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical books*. Access and Diversity,

   Crane Library, University of British Columbia, 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Attridge, Harold W, et al. *The HarperCollins study Bible New Revised Standard*

   *Version, including the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical books*. Access and Diversity,

   Crane Library, University of British Columbia, 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Mollenkott, Virginia Ramey. "We Come Bearing Gifts." *Trans/Formations*. Edited by Lisa Isherwood, SCM Press, 2009. p.46-58. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Taylder, Sian. "Shot from Both Sides" *Trans/Formations*. Edited by Lisa Isherwood, SCM Press, 2009. p.46-58. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Clark, Chap. *Hurt 2.0: inside the world of todays teenagers*. Baker Academic, 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. DeVries, Mark. *Sustainable Youth Ministry*. IVP Books, 2008. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Cornwall, Susannah. "Apophasis and Ambiguity." *Trans/Formations*. Edited by Lisa Isherwood, SCM Press, 2009. p.46-58. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Buchanan, Hannah. "Christian Experience as a Transsexual." *Trans/Formations*. Edited by Lisa Isherwood, SCM Press, 2009. p.41-45. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Clark, Chap. *Hurt 2.0: inside the world of todays teenagers*. Baker Academic, 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)