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A Holistic Approach to Youth Ministry Models in Africa

A Practical Theology for Faith Formation

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Abstract

Youth ministry continues to be a salient focus area in theological research and practical ministry. This paper focuses on faith formation of young people in urban African cities, with a specific focus on Nairobi. Within the urban African context, plural worldviews and religious belonging, technological integration in youth culture, youth marginalization and mental health complexities, especially in a post-COVID context, are critical factors in any meaningful youth engagement. This paper considers the contemporary youth ministry research in Africa, examining the classical youth ministry models that have been proposed and drawing out themes that should be considered for a holistic approach to faith formation among youth in African cities. This research summarizes research findings of the author from his doctoral research in Practical Theology at the University of South Africa, titled *The Influence of Youth Culture on Holistic Faith Formation of Youth in Nairobi City: A Practical Theological Approach.*

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Keywords

faith formation – intergenerational youth ministry – practical theology – youth cultures – youth ministry

1 Research Background

In theological research, youth ministry has historically been situated within the discipline of Christian education. However, in the recent past, various theologians have called the scholarly guild to consider youth ministry as a distinctive theological task (Nel 2018:13). For instance, Root & Dean (2011:16) proposed a "theological turn" to youth ministry, where they argue that young people must be considered as part of the community of the *ekklesia* and hence as crucial stakeholders in all the ministerial aspects of the congregation. Practical theology has emerged as a sort of theological home for this scholarly reflection and praxis. Consequentially, there has been an increasing activity in youth and theology from western scholars such as Kenda Creasy Dean, Andrew Root, Fernando Arzola and Chap Clark. Youth ministry models have arisen from these theologies of youth and youth ministry. These models seek to apply theological reflection to the practical aspects of engaging young people. The foundational literatures in youth ministry models include Senter (2001), *Four views of youth ministry,* Arzola (2008) *Towards a prophetic youth ministry* and Clark (2015) recent *Five views of youth ministry.*

Senter (2001) provides foundational approaches to youth ministry. His work collates various approaches to youth ministry as fellowship and mission, with contrasting time orientations leading to "mission now", "mission later" or "fellowship now", "fellowship later" approaches to youth ministry. These are engaged in section 4.2 of the paper. Arzola (2008) applies youth ministry models to his urban and Latina context, bearing fruitful discussions on how a "prophetic youth ministry" offers a more holistic approach towards youth in light of personal, spiritual, and social needs within urban contexts. In my view, Arzola offers an approach that better aligns with the contextual situation of young people in the majority world context. Clark (2015), together with four other scholars, approach youth ministry models as an appraisal and critique of Senter's seminal work, in light of the contemporary challenges facing the western (North America) context. These challenges include, but are not limited to, globalization, digitization, and secularization. Through this contemporary cultural engagement, a more "theological, psycho-social and ecological" grounding for youth ministry is offered (Clark 2015:xiii). In Africa, much of

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the theoretical base for youth ministry has been engaged in a South African context. One of the scholars, Weber (2017:10) of Stellenbosch University, has for instance looked at the role of international youth organizations (Scripture Union) and issued a challenge to decolonize youth ministry. Much more is however left pending in what that would look like, in light of the pertinent issues she raises for the faith formation of young people. This paper seeks to take her proposal a step further.

2 Research Problem and Aim

This research posits that the aforementioned models of youth ministry have been proposed for a different context. The aim of this research will be to engage these different models and explore elements that would be crucial for a holistic and theological approach to youth ministry within Africa's socio-cultural complexities. As such the research aims are as follows:

1. To engage the classical youth ministry models in the literature.
2. To consider empirical data from an African youth ministry context.
3. To explore various elements for a holistic youth ministry approach.

3 Research Methodology

This paper surveys existing literature on youth ministry models, in order to appropriate, critique and integrate the findings for a relevant African youth ministry model. The researcher first explores the models offered by Malan Nel, Wesley Black, and Chap Clark in Senter (2001). The researcher also explores the unique models proposed by Arzola (2006; and updated in Arzola 2008) and how these offer continuities and discontinuities for the African context.

Since this research is located in the domain of practical theology, an empirical approach is also integrated into the research in order to enrich the theological reflection. In the doctoral work, semi-structured and empirical surveys were used among 15 young people in five Presbyterian Church of East Africa (PCEA) congregations, geographically representative of Nairobi city. The PCEA is a Presbyterian and Reformed Church that was founded in the late 1800s and has gone through a steady phase of Africanization in the last decades. The Church uses a representative model of leadership, with parish courts, presbytery courts and General Assembly courts to make decisions. Each local congregation is led by a session of elders, with a distinction between ruling elders and teaching elders (parish ministers). The church has been one of the earlier

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adopters of youth ministry within the local church context. With 57 presbyteries in Kenya, the researcher targeted the research to the Nairobi region as representative of urban African youth. Five presbyteries were chosen within Nairobi region with the criteria being regional representation. Further, the youth were clustered into three categories: teenagers, campus students and young adults/professionals. The reason was to focus on the differentiated needs of these clusters in light of the research on emerging adulthood.

4 Research Findings

4.1 *Youth Ministry as a Practical Theological Task*

The history of the theological enterprise concerning youth ministry is a recent 20th century phenomenon. Rather than being based on a biblical theological precedence, youth ministry has been engaged from sociological and psychological understandings of "youth" as a transitory stage according to Hall's seminal work on *Adolescence* (1904). Root (2017:17) helps us to see how the initial conceptualization and practice of youth work by organizations such as Youth for Christ and Young Life was based on the socio-political currents of the World wars, the cold war, capitalism, and industrialization. The point is that youth ministry is as contextual as any theological enterprise, and in our case, should therefore consider contemporary African realities and their pertinence for ministry to young people.

In the wider context of international youth studies, Nel (2017:4–7) notes that in addition to "youth cultures" and "youth transitions" in the recent developments in the field, an African theological enterprise must employ a comparative paradigm in light of the "hybrid" cultural realities of young people on the ground – thereby expanding theological reflection beyond the traditional church, seminary, and university contexts. Nel (2017) locates the importance of studying youth cultures and subcultures, and their implication for ministry to young people. Such examples show how youth ministry has been approached from anthropological perspectives.

Within practical theology, Aziz, Nel & Davis (2017) have engaged the issue of professionalizing youth work in local congregations, Cloete (2012) has explored how navigating sexuality and technology are important for African youth ministry, and Chiroma & Muriithi (2019) have explored how youth ministry can be embedded in theological education in Africa. Most recently, Ndereba (2021a) has explored how youth can be included within the church structures of the Presbyterian Church of East Africa. Given the complexities of plural worldviews in contemporary African cities today, Ndereba (2021b) considers how the

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ubuntu concept in African cultures can be utilized in developing an apologetic methodology, that considers both the cognitive and affective aspects of adolescents.

Additionally, considerable linkages between adolescent development and theological reflection have been explored by various scholars. Cannister (2013) has explored how identity formation influences the faith development of young people and suggests that churches must provide spaces where young people can wrestle with their faith questions. However, Aziz (2019:1) questions this assumption of identity formation as a psychological phenomenon, and instead proposes that faith formation as a theological task is embedded in the idea of "identity discovery". This means that rather than viewing adolescent identity as anchored on social sciences, adolescent identity should be explored from a theological understanding. Counted (2016) has explored the intersection of the psychological theory of attachment with faith formation of young people. Aziz (2017) elsewhere also explores the role of religious institutions in the critical role of positive youth development. As such, he contends that the evangelical paradigm in youth ministry is a helpful tool for nurturing the well-being of young people in marginalized urban and slum contexts, where issues such as poverty, violence, drug abuse and abandonment are part of the lived realities. These are some ways in which youth ministry has been approached from a theological perspective among African scholars.

4.2 *Youth Ministry Models in Existing Literature*

As a result, conceptualizing youth within a theological framework consequentially leads to the development of youth ministry models. Senter's (2001) conceptualization of youth ministry as a balance of two critical tasks of fellowship and mission is illustrated in figure 1 below. The horizontal axis represents two contrasting viewpoints on the main role of youth ministry as either training (discipleship) or going (mission). The vertical axis represents two contrasting viewpoints on time, that is, that youth are either part of the church in the present or they will be incorporated into the church in the future.

From this matrix, various approaches to youth ministry have been proposed. Mark Senter's viewing young people as critical for the Church's mission today considers them as key players in the planting and maturing of churches today. Malan Nel representing the "fellowship now" matrix views young people within the covenantal community of faith with the primary role as being involved in the church's formational ministry today. Nel (2018:xviii) has clarified his view on youth ministry by incorporating a missional emphasis in his new book *Youth Ministry: An Inclusive Missional Approach* when he notes "my basic approach to youth ministry, as a ministry to, with and through youth,

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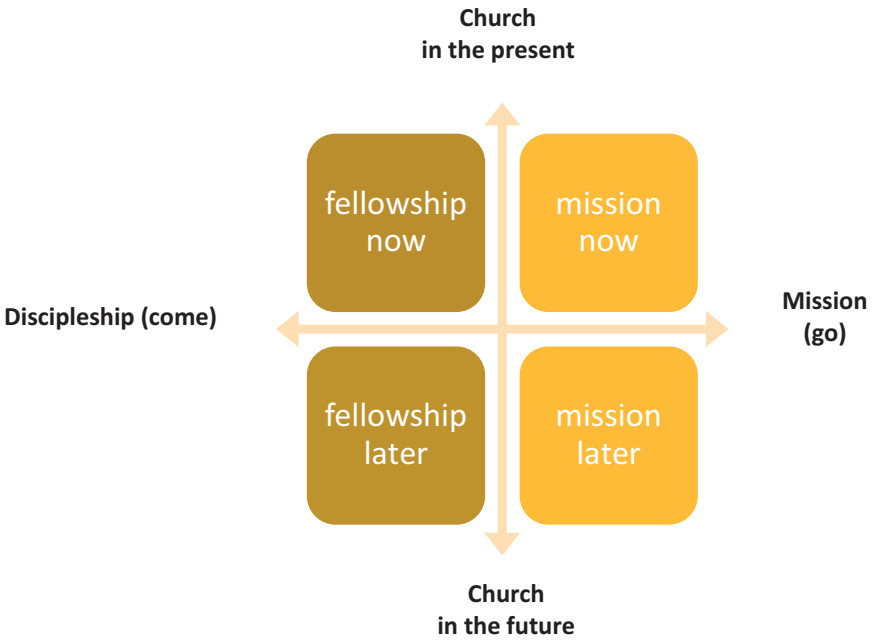


FIGURE 1 Senter's et al (2001) youth ministry matrix

	Mark Senter	Malan Nel	Wesley Black	Chap Clark
Model	Strategic	Inclusive-Congregational	Preparatory	Missional
Aim/Focus	Church-planting	Integrating adolescents	Training disciples	Evangelism

FIGURE 2 Summary of the aims of Youth Ministry

with an understanding that the congregation is in mission. The church is either missional or does not exist." The other two views are future-oriented, with Wesley Black viewing the youth ministry's role as preparing disciples for tomorrow's church and Chap Clark viewing the role of the youth ministry from a future-oriented missional emphasis. These views are represented in figure 2 above.

Senter's (2001) models lay the contours for the task of youth ministry. However, within urban contexts that present complexities of culture, socioeconomics, politics and contrasting religious landscapes, more tools are needed to provide a concrete understanding of localized youth ministry context in a globalized world. Arzola (2008:19) makes use of the sociological theories of Holland and Henriot to offer four paradigms of youth ministry. These are the

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	Model	Aim/focus
Fernando Arzola	*Traditional*	Spiritual formation
	Liberal	Felt needs
	Activist	Social justice
	Prophetic	Liberationist (integrationist)

FIGURE 3 Arzola's four paradigms of youth ministry

traditional paradigm, the liberal paradigm, activist paradigm, and the liberationist (or integrationist paradigm), as is summarized in figure 3 above.

The main focus of the traditional paradigm is the spiritual needs of the young people that a youth ministry is serving. Practically, activities that take this approach include Bible studies, worship services and religious education (Arzola 2006:42). In the liberal approach, the youth ministry is designed in such a way as to respond to the personal and emotional needs of young people, based on their developmental needs. Practically, this approach engages in activities such as arts and crafts, support groups, trips, and intergenerational activities (Arzola 2006:46). The activist approach engages the urban issues or contexts of young people, undergirded by anthropological and sociological theories. Practical activities of this approach include empowerment programmes, job training and justice advocacy, among others (Arzola 2006:47). The last approach utilizes the various strengths of the above paradigms while anchoring them in a Christ-centered approach that is different to the "program-centered, felt-needs centered or urban issues centered" of the aforementioned paradigms (Arzola 2006:49). By beginning from a Christ-centered perspective, urban youth workers can ask "how is Christ manifesting himself in the lives of the young people?" By seeking to answer this question, various approaches and activities can be incorporated in the youth ministry model in a way that is holistic. This integration is key in ensuring that youth ministry holistically nurtures the young person around the three key areas as illustrated in figure 4 below.

4.3 *Key elements for an African Youth Ministry Model*

4.3.1 African Youth Ministry Should Engage African Theological Enterprises

The foregoing conversation illustrates that theological reflection and praxis must always engage the unique contexts of Christian ministry. Within the African context, the post-colonial approaches to systematic and practical theology in the continent have taken a deconstructive perspective of Eurocentric

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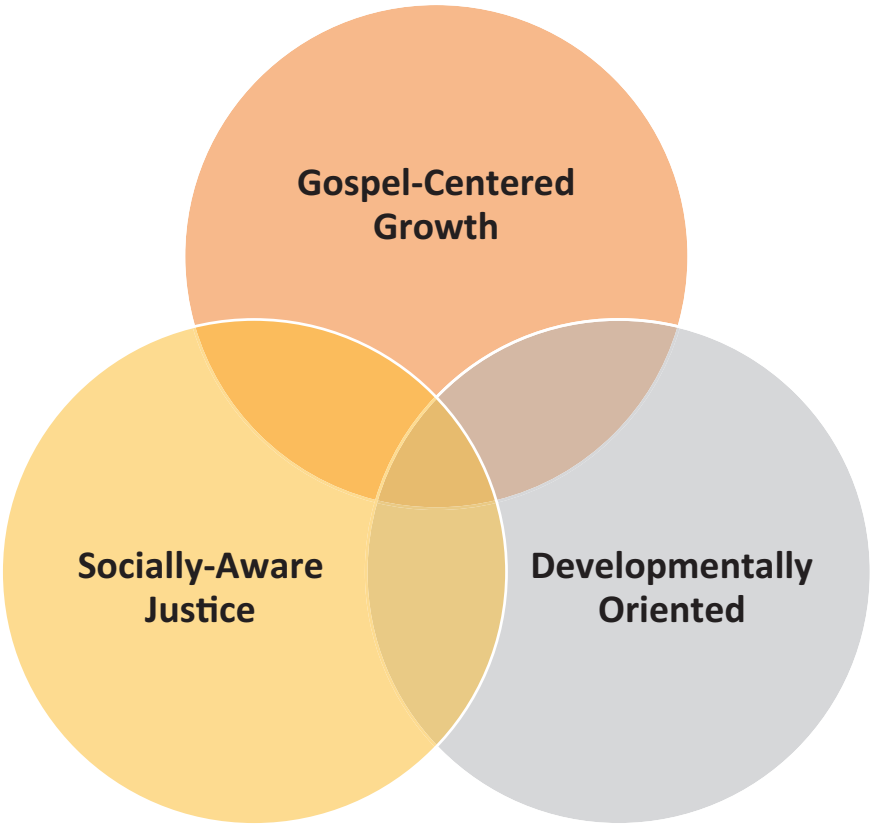


FIGURE 4 Arzola's prophetic model as holistic integration

approaches to theology. These perspectives seek to engage the specific issues that are unique to African communities and societies (Kunhiyop 2011:72; Magezi 2018:2; Mokhoathi 2017:1; Schoeman & Van der Berg 2016:217). These contemporary African theologians build up on the work done by the fathers and mothers of African theology in post-independent Africa such as John Mbiti, Laurenti Magesa, Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Bolaji Idowu and Benezet Bujo, among others. These strands of African theologies, taking various routes such as inculturation, liberation and reconstruction have provided important ways in which Christian theology intersects with African realities including traditional religious worldviews and cultures. Additionally, the conversation on Christian identity in Africa continues to be relevant for young Africans negotiating the question of identity in a postmodern and plural world. In 2022, such theological reflection must also engage the digital natives that comprise the younger generations as well as the postmodern context of youth cultures.

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These theological perspectives are thus foundational in approaches towards youth ministry within the continent today.

4.3.2 African Youth Ministry Should be Biblical

What distinguishes youth work in a not-for-profit and a local congregation is the ultimate foundation of ministry. Engaging young people in the local church must be approached from the foundation of the Scriptures. The protestant tradition has offered the church the understanding that scripture is the ultimate norming norm – to mean that Scripture is the ultimate authority in matters of faith and practice (Calvin 2014:18; Strauss 2021:2; WCF 2018:8–11). From the research among 15 young people, respondents explained that they highly value the Bible in their spiritual formation. Thus, implementing any youth ministry model must seek to be grounded in biblical revelation. Our conceptualizations of young people must also be engaged with the Old and New Testaments, and how they provide a "biblical theology of youth". The researcher explored various themes such as the role of intergenerational communities, youth as a transitory life stage and youth as critical partners with God in his *missio dei*. Formational practices of young people including teaching, preaching, administration, counseling, and missions, must be embedded in the person of Jesus Christ and the redemption that he brings in the lives of people, young and old.

4.3.3 African Youth Ministry Should be Covenantal (and Therefore Intergenerational)

Youth ministry is not a silo ministry, even though it seeks to be sensitive to the developmental needs of young people. First and foremost, biblical youth ministry has a high view of the family. Young people are part of a community of siblings and parents. Secondly, given the realities of family breakdown in urban African communities, the local congregation can function as a covenantal community for the young people. The research revealed that young people value the input of parents, adults, and pastors in the congregation, as they play a critical role in mentoring and discipling them as they wrestle with the unique questions of adolescence and emerging adulthood. Thus, even if youth ministry programming is designed in an age-appropriate manner, intergenerationality in youth ministry is a critical approach in ensuring that both young and old contribute to the church's life, mutual Christian formation, and discipleship as well as the church's mission in the world, in the present and future. The underlying reason, as has been argued, is that God has covenantaly bound himself to his people and creation throughout the generations (Nel 2018:65–73).

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4.3.4 African Youth Ministry Should be Liberative and Transformative in Nature

The literature also surfaced the unique contexts of African communities in urban areas. Realities such as poverty, gender-based-violence, socio-economic inequalities are still part of the continent's societies. Therefore, if the Church's ministry is centered on Jesus Christ, and Christ-centered ministry is a holistic liberation with an eschatological fulfilment in the new heavens and new earth, then Christian ministry is by its very essence transformative in approach. Youth ministry must therefore touch the contextual realities that young people find themselves in. It may take different approaches as explicated by Arzola (2006; 2008) such as economic empowerment programmes, youth development, community transformation and family-based initiatives. All these facets are practical implications of what it means to do Christ-centered ministry in Africa among her young covenant members.

5 Conclusion

This research explored the existing youth ministry models in the literature. While these classical models can be generalized to diverse youth ministry situations, they fall short in contextualizing youth ministry contexts in urban African cities. Arzola's (2006; 2008) paradigms were seen to be closer to the context of youth ministry in Africa in view of the socio-economic, cultural, familial, and religious complexities. Further, this research located the study of youth ministry models as a distinct enterprise in African theology, thereby making use of the theological reflection in post-colonial Africa. By utilizing an empirical methodology, this research offered a robust engagement of theological reflection and praxis, and argued for four major strands of any holistic youth ministry: 1) Youth ministry in Africa should be embedded in African theological discourse; 2) Youth ministry should be anchored to Biblical revelation; 3) Youth ministry should be covenantal, as young people are part of communities of faith, and 4) Youth ministry in the complex African contexts should be Christ-centered, and consequentially, liberative in nature. These are some elements that are critical in any meaningful youth ministry in the continent. In addition to being embedded within practical youth ministry practice, these elements should be explored within theological education, if at all the Church's ministry to Africa's majority population will be effective. After all, societies go where the church's leaders go. If church leaders have a heart for young people and utilize holistic approaches in their engagement with young people, then the future is filled with hope.

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