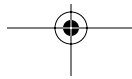
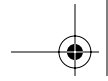


## Introduction

**D**uring seminary, I was invited to join a youth ministry that found itself in a precarious position. To the surprise of the youth pastor, a group of teenagers from the lower-income, ethnically diverse part of Los Angeles had decided to use the church's steps as its new skateboard park and hang-out spot. Recognizing the opportunity for ministry, the church agreed to hire someone to be a "bridge" from the church youth ministry to these "neighborhood kids" (for lack of a better term). Because of my Young Life experience, I was invited to be this bridge person. The ministry team (comprising well-educated, well-read and experienced youth workers) decided that our best strategy for reaching these neighborhood kids (and assimilating them into the program) was through relational or incarnational ministry. The idea was that we would seek to form relationships with them in their own world, believing our relationship of care would give us a platform to speak into their lives. The congregation's leadership stood behind this new ministry initiative, insisting that through our incarnational connection we would influence these unchurched youth.

Soon it was apparent that the incarnational model of ministry was not working. As our team slowly formed relationships with these adolescents, it became clear that they were not only unchurched but at-risk. While spending time with them in their own milieu, we found that each connection we made called us into a depth of suffering we were not trained for. Much of our anguish came from witnessing the adolescents' own severity of suffering—broken families, a violent neighborhood and failing schools. But the suffering we experienced was also the suffering they purposely in-



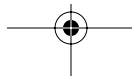


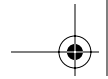
flicted on us. With deep emotional wounds just under their baggy jeans and T-shirts, our offerings of friendship and care were answered with abuse and ridicule. These wounded children had never learned how to allow themselves to be cared for, and we had no idea how to care for those who, on the one hand, refused our care, but on the other, continued to ask for it.

Many of the adults from the congregation who accompanied us in this venture simply could not take it. The kind of youth ministry they were taught had nothing to do with suffering abuse and ridicule; rather it was about mentoring friendships wrapped in fun and games. They had expected the kind of ministry that I had been taught in my Young Life training and from popular youth ministry books, the kind that was easy, that was simply about relationships. We couldn't blame these adults for refusing to participate in the ministry. We too were emotionally ravaged, saddened and hurt by the adolescents' insults, and yet perplexed by their consistent participation. But, as good evangelicals (as I then saw myself to be) we were even more frustrated by the kids' lack of change, by their inability to behave "better" and to understand and accept Jesus. We all felt like failures. Our relationships with and incarnational witness to them, we were taught, would be a means to a greater end, changed lives. Through our relationships with these adolescents we believed we would lead them to the "third thing," that is, we could usher them beyond our relationship and into a relationship with Jesus. It was clear to us that we were not only suffering but also failing.

The leaders in the congregation eventually changed their tune as well. After encountering stolen money, spray-painted walls, sexual harassment and drug dealing, they had had enough. This once-open congregation that freely reached out in ministry had turned into a place where troubled youth had to *earn* the right to participate. Overall, the congregation was not prepared for the suffering that this ministry demanded.

I hit rock bottom; my relational ministry was not working and could not work as it was presented to me by my Young Life mentors. It was during this time, through reading the theological writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the great German twentieth-century theologian and martyr, that I discovered the incarnation was not a model or example, but was the very power of



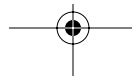
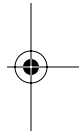


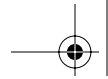
God present in human form among us today. I discovered that Jesus Christ is concretely present to us in our relational lives, in our person-to-person encounters, in the *I* and *you*. Thus there is no “third thing,” no “end” to which the relationship should lead. Bonhoeffer’s theology alerted me to the possibility that the relationship is the “end.” It is the place where Christ is present, the place where the adolescent (and I, for that matter) encounter Christ. What mattered was not the adolescents’ ability to accept and conform to the “third thing,” to become spiritual or Christian, but to be human alongside others, alongside me. And this is only possible, Bonhoeffer stated, through Jesus Christ who died and rose again as our human brother.

Ministry, then, is not about “using” relationships to get individuals to accept a “third thing,” whether that be conservative politics, moral behaviors or even the gospel message. Rather, ministry is about connection, one to another, about sharing in suffering and joy, about persons meeting persons with no pretense or secret motives. It is about shared life, confessing Christ not outside the relationship but within it. This, I learned, was living the gospel.

I realized then that there is no such thing as success or failure with these adolescents. There is only faithfulness, faithfulness to Christ, which calls me to be faithful to these adolescents’ very humanity. Ministry is not about helping these kids be better Christians; it is about helping them be what God created them to be—human. And it is the degradation of their humanity, brought about by broken and abusive families, violent neighborhoods, failing schools and poverty, that caused them to lash out so forcefully. Ministry is about suffering with them in their dehumanization, celebrating their human endeavors and in all things pointing to the true human, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Having reflected on my early ministry experience, I chose to put it into action by taking a job at a nonprofit organization in Los Angeles County where I was responsible for visiting four public schools each week and counseling (one on one) current or potential gang members. Students were referred to me by the school administration because they were in a gang, had a family member in a gang or were manifesting gang-like behavior in the classroom (e.g., violent outbursts, physical threats, etc.). To the disappointment of the administration, I could see only five students per day;

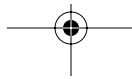


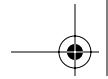


they often remarked that they could give me a hundred names if I wanted them. I had only one hour, once a week, to help each adolescent. Each referral was given to me with a short and traumatic back story. His mother is in jail. We think she is using crystal meth. His brother is a major banger in the neighborhood. She lives with her family in a two-bedroom house with three other large families. He is overweight, has never seen his dad, and his mom is an illegal alien who drives an ice-cream truck. Her father beats her and her mother. He was arrested for prostitution. She cuts herself. He watched his father beat his mother within an inch of death. She's pregnant. He's being investigated for a shooting. And this back story was only the tip of iceberg. Underneath the frigid waters of these adolescents' lives was incident after incident of neglect and abuse. I had one hour each week! I realized that there was nothing I could do: I couldn't change their situation, I couldn't erase the past, and I had no words to awaken them from the perpetual nightmare that was their life. I decided that all I could do for one hour, once a week is share in their nightmare with them. I could be present with them in their personal hell. I couldn't change their situation but I could assure them, through my friendship, that they were not suffering alone; I could in my open friendship witness to God on a cross.

Over checkers, Connect Four, Sorry and other board games I invited them to tell me their stories, and I told them mine. I had no agenda other than to be with them. Slowly we became friends, and I was given permission to be their advocate, to confront negative behavior, asserting, "You can't do that. Listen to me, I am your friend. That is going to hurt you, and as your friend that would hurt me." I was allowed to celebrate their successes: "You did it! See, I told you that you would pass! I know you're smart, you beat me at checkers all the time." In our time together I watched them change. I did not bring answers or change their circumstances. But as I was with and for them, our relationship served as a new perspective from which to see themselves and the world around them.

As I walked into or out of each school, my eyes were drawn to the masses of adolescents huddled in their groups talking and laughing, and I knew that underneath their "throwback" sports jerseys and low-cut jeans was an ocean of pain that they carried alone. I often wondered, *Where is the church?* I wondered if we had forgotten how to be friends to those who are





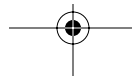
so painfully isolated. I wondered why every member of every congregation couldn't be an adult friend to an adolescent in his or her community. I wondered if the church realized the power and possibility of relationships for transformation, and the theological mandate for action that is demanded of us by the incarnation.

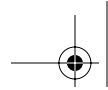
Evangelical youth ministry has historically discussed relationships as if it had the corner on the market. Yet if we are honest, many would admit that we do not understand what we mean by relational or incarnational ministry, and few of us understand how such ministry is connected to the theological reality of the incarnation. Many of us have become frustrated with relational ministry, intuitively recognizing that what we have been taught to see as easy is in fact very complicated and multidimensional, far from simple, straightforward or flat.

In this book I hope to cut through the thin crust of the popular evangelical presentations of relational ministry and into the reservoirs of beauty and possibility that a theological understanding of relationships opens up to us and our ministries. This book promises to provide a rigorous examination of relational/incarnational ministry. It will critically examine how relational forms of ministry have been embedded within evangelicalism's subcultural identity as a strategy of engagement within a pluralistic culture. I will show that incarnational ministry has been formed from the material of cultural engagement rather than from the theological pillars of the work of the incarnate Christ in the world. This, I believe, ultimately has hampered our ministries, leading some within youth ministry to call for a "postrelational youth ministry."<sup>1</sup> I believe that youth ministry has not yet constructed a relational ministry that takes into account the full profundity of human social relations opened up to us by the incarnation. In this work, then, I will *not* issue a call for postrelational ministry, but by turning to the theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer I hope to develop a truly *relational* relational ministry.

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<sup>1</sup>In 2004 *Youthworker Journal* published an article titled "Post-Relational Youth Ministry." The article, though filled with philosophical and theoretical inconsistencies, made some provocative points. Yet I believe, in the end, what the authors meant to call for through their inconsistent cultural philosophy was not a postrelational ministry but a truly relational ministry. See Dave Wright and Dixon Kinser, "Post-Relational Youth Ministry: Beyond Youthwork as We Know it" *Youthworker Journal* (September-October 2004).



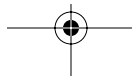
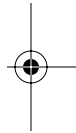


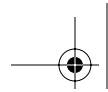
It should not be presumed by the critical cadence of the first half of this work that I assume that no one is doing proper or good relational ministry. Rather, I believe that there are many youth workers doing precisely what I will present in this project. I believe that it is my responsibility to articulate and explain what they intuitively know and are already doing. By explaining the depth of relationships, it is my hope that those already drawing from this depth will recognize themselves and be encouraged and sharpened, and others will be enlivened to reassess and reorient their ministries in this direction.

Some might assume from reading the first chapters of this work that I am anti-evangelical or postevangelical. This is not the case. Rather, my history is heavily indebted to evangelicalism, which was an important part of shaping me. This book's critiques, and at times critical observations, come from a supportive but questioning individual who desires only the best for evangelicalism. Evangelicalism is discussed here because it was within evangelicalism that relational ministry was developed. Understanding it helps direct us as we explore relational/incarnational ministry past and present.

I have already asserted that I hope to drive readers deep into the beauty and possibilities of relationships and their potential for ministry. But this is not my only hope for this book. I also hope that this work can move youth ministry further along in its quest to become a respected field of study. For the last two decades youth ministry has taken leaps and bounds in this direction. But much of the work done in furthering this field (with notable exceptions) has occurred in one of two ways: a stance of *autism* (focused only on youth workers and having little concern for mutual cross-fertilization between disciplines), which is an inevitable response to the second, a stance of *justification* (vigorously asserting why youth ministry matters and is important from a biblical and cultural perspective).

It is time for youth ministry studies to move beyond autism and justification into *construction*, the kind of construction that is helpful to those in other fields (e.g., pastoral care, congregational ministries, Bible, theology and history). For this to happen, those in the field of youth ministry not only need to construct creative and rigorous projects, but they also must locate these projects within the larger field of practical theology. Without lo-





cating ourselves within practical theology we are locked away from further discussion that would allow us to learn from others and vice versa. By locating ourselves within the larger discipline of practical theology, we are forced into cross-disciplinary discussions and moved forward into rigorous construction. Thus this book is a practical theology of youth ministry.

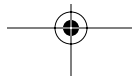
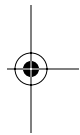
You may be wondering, *What is practical theology?* The unique nature of the discipline of practical theology is seen in the compound that makes up its name. The term *practical* refers in one way or another to human action. Practical theology directs itself toward the experiences of the human agent as he or she is found in many contexts (family, congregation, community, culture, society, etc.). This concentration on human action opens up practical theology to necessary interdisciplinary discussions. Practical theologians are often in dialogue with sociology, psychology, anthropology and their subdisciplines. Systematic theology, biblical studies and historical theology lack this cross-disciplinary necessity. That is not to say that these disciplines are not in dialogue across distinct fields, but that this dialogue is not as essential for the integrity of these disciplines as it is for practical theology. Without concentration on human action, practical theology is no longer practical and thus no different than the other theological disciplines.

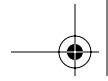
However, without its essential grounding in theology practical theology is only an eclectic social science. Practical theology may be reflection on human action within the church and society, but it is also, in the same breath, theological reflection on God's distinct and unique act of revelation within history and for humanity. Practical theology then is essentially reflection on both divine and human action, discerning and articulating ways that they find association and ways that human communities (and individuals) should respond to God's action in the world.<sup>2</sup>

My own personal narrative of how I became involved in thinking and writing about relational ministry is an example of practical theological reflection. While in ministry with adolescents in Los Angeles, I was brought up short, confronted with new perplexities that challenged my early un-

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<sup>2</sup>This is what James Loder has called the core problematic of the field of practical theology (James Loder, "Normativity and Context in Practical Theology: 'The Interdisciplinary Issue,'" in *Practical Theology: International Perspectives*, ed. Friedrich Schweitzer and Johannes A. van der Ven [Berlin: Peter Lang, 1999], pp. 359-62).





derstanding of both adolescents (human action) and God's movement in their lives (divine action). These new experiences forced me to begin reflecting on what I was doing. I turned to social-scientific literature to help me better understand the adolescents I was ministering to and the contexts they lived in. But, more importantly, I also reexamined my theological understandings, placing myself in dialogue with Bonhoeffer and others. In the midst of my reflection, I moved back into ministry, now as a gang-prevention counselor, with a refined understanding of how to minister to the adolescents I encountered and how God was concretely present and active in their lives. This three-step move from experience to reflection to new action is a continual process; my new action becomes new experience that pushes me into further reflection, and so the cycle continues. This three-step process is what practical theologians have called the praxis-theory-praxis loop.<sup>3</sup>

Practical theologian Richard Osmer has explained that there are four questions that help us to get inside this three-step process.<sup>4</sup> Osmer explains that almost all practical theologians ask an empirical descriptive question ("What is happening?"), an interpretive question ("Why is this happening?"), an explicitly theological or normative question ("What ought to be happening?") and finally a pragmatic question ("How should we act or what should we do in light of what is happening?").

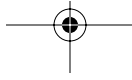
This book, which is broken into two major parts, will follow this practical theological perspective. Part one focuses on the interpretative and empirical tasks, setting up the potential problems of an influence-based relational/incarnational youth ministry. Part two focuses on the normative and pragmatic tasks, directly conversing with Bonhoeffer's theology to rethink and reimagine the practice in the direction of what I will call "place-sharing."

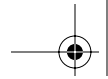
My hope is that this book will contribute to the field of youth ministry a critical examination of relational ministry and a reimagining of the practice from a more rigorous theological perspective.

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<sup>3</sup>By *praxis* I mean simply theory-laden reflection on practice. For further discussion about the praxis-theory-praxis loop, see Don Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), pp. 1-13.

<sup>4</sup>See Richard Osmer, "Johannes van der Ven's Contribution to the New Consensus in Practical Theology," in *Hermeneutics and Empirical Research in Practical Theology: The Contribution of Empirical Theology by Johannes A. van der Ven*, ed. Chris A. M. Hermans and Mary E. Moore (Boston: Brill, 2004).





## PART ONE

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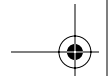
It was in a large ballroom in Hartford that I realized that we youth workers have a problem with our language (and therefore understanding) of relationships. We had all gathered to hear the data results of a national survey on effective youth ministries. The research project was expansive and the conference was unique. Sitting in the room were professors, publishers and youth ministry organizational leaders, but also pastors, youth directors and laypeople. We were all invited to dialogue about the findings.

On this morning the researchers unpacked their finding that relationships were an essential component to young people discovering and maintaining faith. Most people nodded their heads. *Of course*, many thought. The importance of relationships has been understood as a necessary part of youth ministry lore since at least the 1950s.

Yet as the question-and-answer period was coming to an end a young man in his early thirties raised his hand, stood and said, “I get that relationships are important, but relationships are also hurtful. Growing up, I had a strong relationship with my youth director, but in eleventh grade I started to think about other faiths and became interested in Buddhism. At first my youth director tried to convince me that Buddhism was bankrupt and reminded me I was abandoning my faith. Once it was clear that he couldn’t influence me he stopped calling me and soon I never saw him. That experience really hurt me!”

As the young man finished, a professor stood and asked the researcher, “What do you mean by relationships? I think we would all agree that the Hitler Youth did a great job of relational ministry, as we talk about it in youth ministry, but I know none of us would assert that it was the ministry of God.”





So what then do we mean by relational youth ministry? To answer this question, part one of this book will be a critical examination of relational ministry. Like a physician giving a physical exam to a patient it will begin by seeking a historical understanding in chapters one and two. While a physician may ask, is there heart disease or breast cancer common in your family? we will ask, How did relational ministry come to be? What force caused its birth? And how have its youth ministry creators understood incarnational ministry?

Just as a physician asks background questions from within a framework of genetic biology, we will ask our questions in light of modernization/globalization theory and its impact on America's religious consciousness throughout the late ninetieth and twentieth century. History will reveal that evangelicalism deserves a patent for this ministry form in youth ministry. We will see how evangelicalism has been in a constant state of conflict with the forces of modernity (modernization/globalization) and how relational youth ministry was used as a strategy in this battle.

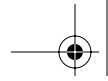
Often after jotting down some history, the physician will ask the patient to hop on the examining table, so that his or her vital signs and a sample of blood can be taken and examined. Chapter three will do much the same; we will take our understanding of the history of relational ministry and put it under the microscope of sociological inspection, seeking to discover if there are hidden problems and deficiencies in our understanding of the practice. To keep us from sliding too deeply into sociological theory I have supplemented this chapter with examples and cases from research I did on five evangelical youth ministries in Southern California.<sup>1</sup> These youth ministries were nominated to be studied because they were known for doing excellent relational youth ministry. While affirming the passionate commitment in their ministry, this chapter will reveal that these ministries' knowingly or unknowingly practiced incarnational ministry for more cultural than theological reasons.

In the end this examination will reveal that relational youth ministry does *not* have a clean bill of health but has a dangerously high reading of

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<sup>1</sup>This research was done as a research fellow for Princeton Theological Seminary's Lilly-funded "Faithful Practices Project." For further information about the project or my research methodology visit [www.faithfulpractices.org](http://www.faithfulpractices.org) or [www.AndrewRoot.net](http://www.AndrewRoot.net).





cultural influence in its blood stream. I will argue that relational ministry is engendered almost solely from cultural changes rather than theological commitments. The practice has been untethered to rigorous theological contemplation. Therefore, relational ministry has had more to do with cultural conflict and fear of adolescent moral decay than sharing in the deep suffering and joy of the adolescent's humanity as the place of God's action in the world. This deficiency has caused youth ministry to see relationships in a goal-oriented rather than a companionship-oriented fashion that is more faithful to a theology of the incarnation.<sup>2</sup>

Yet, if we are willing to see it, there is good in the examination's findings! Though the diagnosis is bleak, it need not be fatal; relational youth ministry can and should survive. But if it is to be healthy it must lower its intake of influence and seek a new course of theological depth (this will be the objective of part two). Because the practice of incarnational ministry has been so dominant within youth ministry, both within and outside of evangelicalism, it is important that critical theological reflection takes place. Otherwise the practice will continue to pass on its limitations and its problematic use of goal-oriented relationships.



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<sup>2</sup>This is what sociologist Murray Milner calls "instrumental associations" versus "expressive associations." For further discussion of these, see his *Freaks, Geeks and Cool Kids* (New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 31, 63-64.

