

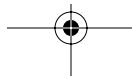
Preface

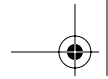
For my high school graduation I was given a guitar. I was thinking about being a religion major in college, and maybe someday being in youth ministry. Therefore, a guitar made sense. I learned the basic chords and soon was able to switch between them, playing what I thought sounded like worship songs and melodies from pop hits. But soon my friends were telling me that although I thought I was playing a particular song, it just didn't sound right. It was too fast or simply weird. I was shocked; it sounded good to me but unfortunately not to anybody else.

I still own that guitar; it sits dusty in the back of a closet. I never thought I would be a rock star, nor even a modest songwriter, but I was drawn to the guitar for its ability to serve as a portal into a world where feeling and thinking combine. I was drawn to how musicians can express themselves in such a way that an inner reality is opened up and those listening see the world in which they live differently (and sometimes, with the best musicians, more truthfully).

Because of my musical insufficiencies, my iPod now serves as this portal. Listening to certain musicians I am taken deep into the big questions of human existence: What is life about? What is love? Why do we suffer? Who am I? How do we deal with disappointment? (To name a few.) Sitting in an uncomfortable airplane seat, with my knees pressed up against the seat in front of me, I am taken by my iPod to another world, or better, taken under the routine social crust of this world, forcing me to think and feel at the same time, forcing me to confront big questions.

Art has a way of doing this, but so should theology. I am not arrogant





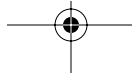
enough to believe that reading this book will be like listening to The Shins or GreenDay (I'm not even arrogant enough to suggest it is like listening to Jessica Simpson). But theology, like good music, should invite us into an inner reality to ask big questions and should provide us with thoughts that touch something deep within us and our world. It is my hope that this book will in some way do this for you.

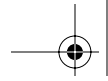
The inner reality that relationships in ministry possess offers us more than we see at first glance; in their inner reality relationships are the concrete location of God's presence in our midst. Therefore, I argue in this project that relationships are not only significant for youth ministry but are transformative to people. Yet unfortunately relationships and youth ministry have been so linked that the profound inner reality of them has become mere background noise, elevator music. Relationships have become so normal and regular that we have stopped noticing them, stopped wondering about the power of relationships in themselves. Instead of seeking to touch the mysterious inner reality of relationships we have too often settled for using relationships as a means to influence kids toward certain ends.

Therefore, in this project I seek to revisit relational youth ministry, calling us beyond seeing relationships as tools for influence and into seeing the beautiful inner reality of relationships as the invitation to share each other's place, to be with each other in both joy and suffering, and in so doing to witness to Christ among us.

Just as no song is written in a vacuum, so too is no theological piece. Therefore, I owe deep thanks to many individuals who have allowed me to "jam" with them, working out these ideas as they critiqued and supported the thoughts that now make up the following pages.

I am most indebted to Kenda Creasy Dean and Richard Osmer. Both allowed me to think deeply and freely when I was under their care as a Ph.D. student at Princeton. Dr. Dean assured me through her own work that rigorous reflection could be done on the practice of youth ministry and that such work should never be divorced from the passion of helping the church be faithful to its children. Dr. Osmer more than anyone else has shown me what it means to be a scholar, and I desire to emulate his model in my own career. I would also like to thank Gordon Mikoski from Princeton for his thoughtful feedback and encouragement as this project took form.





Dear friends have also made this project possible with both direct insight and helpful encouragement. Thanks to Theresa Latini, Matt Skinner, Rolf Jacobson and David Lose. I would most especially like to thank my friend Tony Jones for advocating for the publication of this project. His counsel on publishing has been invaluable. Tony, whether in affirmation or opposition, always pushes me to think; it has been a pleasure to know him.

I also would like to thank my revered colleague Roland Martinson not only for his support in seeing this project to publication but for his affirmation and encouragement of my vocation as teacher and scholar. He is a treasure to the church, and in my short time as a colleague at Luther Seminary, he has been a treasure to me. Thirty plus years of work by Dr. Martinson can be seen in the wonderful Children, Youth and Family team that he has built at Luther; it has been my pleasure to work with them. His work can also be seen in the exceedingly gifted and engaged students that have made and are making their way to Luther. It is a joy and a blessing to work in a world that he has created, I only hope I can add something to it.

I am also indebted to two theologians, now at the end of their careers, that have so generously reached out to me, affirming and supporting a young scholar less than half their age. To me, as well as to many others, these men are giants. Their erudition, and more directly their passion and compassion, will live on in my own scholarship. Great thanks for support and inspiration go to Ray Anderson and Douglas John Hall.

Yet my greatest debts are owed to my family: to my son Owen who was born just days before I read the first page in research or typed the first letters of the dissertation that would become this project. And to my daughter Maisy, who as I write this preface is literally on her way into this world. With the birth of Owen this project began and with the birth of Maisy it will end. I only hope it will make them proud!

And finally to my wife, Kara (to whom this project is dedicated), for being my sounding board, proofreader and fellow thinker, but most important, for being my friend. I am reminded daily of the blessing you are to me. Most literally this project could not have been completed without your support, help and skill.

All glory to the incarnate, crucified and resurrected Person, Jesus the Christ!

