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Dori Baker: Microcommunities of prayer and action

Rapid change in the church offers an opportunity to try out prototypes of ministry with young people, says a scholar-in-residence at The Fund for Theological Education.

by [Dori Baker](#)



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A team of young people build a house in Tijuana, Mexico.

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Rapid change is the new normal for religion in America, and ministry with youth and young adults seems to be at its crux.

For the first time ever, there are more people identifying as “nones” -- those with no religious preference -- than as Protestants. Denominations are no longer the centrifugal force in structuring Christianity; Christianity from the global south is influencing religion in North America, and digital natives sort and process information without the filters of authority that church and parents once provided.

Alongside these changes in religious life, we are more aware than ever of human-made injustice abroad and at home, from child soldiers in Uganda to a near police state in our public schools and a shockingly disproportionate incarceration rate among African-American males.

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Yet at a time when young people of all races and nationalities are more than aware of diminished possibilities for their own future, the Christian story of hope, abundant life and reconciliation as part of the human-God project seems to be slipping more and more to the margins.

Teenagers who claim to be part of the Christian story can't articulate what that story means -- and they've learned to be just that inarticulate from their parents. Young adults with questions, doubts and still-forming life goals simply direct their hungers elsewhere.

This makes me wonder: Could we imagine a better laboratory in which to practice the multiple ways of Jesus, particularly with those not yet invested in only one way? I began pondering this question in January after attending a gathering on the future of youth ministry sponsored by the Center for Youth Ministry Training.

Rapid change and shifting sites of power present particularly ripe opportunities for youth and young adult ministries -- those singular spaces where the church has always done its best R&D.

Let's encourage 10,000 bloomings -- each one distinctive, yet linked by a rhythm of prayer and action.

Questions to consider:

- Could youth ministry in the coming era be marked by spiritual practice connected to actions for justice? Might vocation be a central theme in such ministry?
- Can those of us who form Christian imagination in youth raise up young people who are able to create for themselves "microcommunities of prayer and action" wherever they find themselves?
- Could such microcommunities have a new kind of authority -- born of their locale, indigenous and contextualized -- but still be integrally connected with global networks that provide challenge, critique and accountability?
- Is there such a thing as "justice evangelism" -- in which "nones" are drawn to the truth and beauty of the acts of justice we Christians practice in partnership with the deepest pockets of need?

Has not youth ministry always been about creating microcommunities -- aka small groups? The added ingredient is action. (I borrow the term from "Longing for Spring" by Elaine A. Heath and Scott T. Kisker.) What if youth ministries directed the gaze of these clustering humans, not away from, but toward all this chaos, rapid change and suffering?

Grounded in spiritual practices such as prayer, silence and eating together, people can remind each other how to read (really read, as Paulo Freire taught us) our reality.

In that same space of intimacy and truthfulness, people can learn to listen (deeply, as Parker Palmer and Howard Thurman teach us). From those dark and fertile places, people can imagine -- actually form images -- of an alternative future that wants to emerge.

One way ministries with young people can lead is by ridding Christianity of its association with success and prosperity. Let's stop pretending God helps us win basketball games.

Let's start accompanying people in linking justice to action in small steps that lead to ever-widening practices of reflection-in-community on the gospel of Jesus -- a story most helpful to folks who live on the margins and those who seek to be in solidarity with them.

This kind of work starts in the neighborhood: a ministry in Chicago invites people to walk the Stations of the Cross through the busy urban center, stopping to read related Scripture and pray at sites of recent violence, temporary homes of the homeless and icons of global injustice. To invite passers-by to reflect on the Easter story in post-Christian Vancouver, a [youth minister](#) prototypes a street version of this ancient practice.

If Christianity once again lives as a movement -- local, diverse, flexible, on-the-ground, responsive -- and less as an arm of empire, does it not offer a balm, if not *the* balm? Would we not see myriad and diverse "upshootings" -- greening expressions of community based on the gospel, interpreted firsthand by those almost newly in possession of it, in a 21st-century Reformation-like return to the vernacular? Don't we see them already?

This might be a future in which contemplative activists and active contemplatives share leadership that bubbles up from each deep center and joins a collective movement of the Spirit. Adding flesh to those

images, we “live in the green” -- shorthand for a vision of flourishing communities that rise up out of the church, like sprouts of new life in an ancient redwood forest.

We’ve been working toward a vision of that sort at [Calling Congregations](#), an initiative of The Fund for Theological Education (FTE). We see people “living in the green” in an approach to congregational life we call [VocationCARE](#).

Through it we are training congregations and campus ministries to envision what God wants to emerge through them. We invite them to design ways to welcome people of all ages into a deep dive of storytelling and holy listening to their lives -- their actual lives, as they happen, in all the messiness of families, violence, poverty, depression, addiction, chaos, truth and beauty.

It is not in tidy environments where identities form, vocations emerge and Christian practices put on flesh and blood. It is almost always gut-wrenching soul work, if we believe the autobiographical writings of Dorothy Day, Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King Jr. and Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

What if we trained people who walk with youth -- youth ministers, parents, volunteers, grandparents -- in that arduous heart work? And then what if we set them loose, not to attract larger crowds, but to form small cells of prayer and discernment wherever young people are? (Starbucks? Prison?)

These cells would always and everywhere be tied to discerning the “next most possible step” toward actions of justice in keeping with Jesus’ life and teaching. They won’t be perfectly orthodox; they’ll be experimental prototypes that evolve over time.

It’s a liberation theology model infused with spiritual formation and given arms and legs through what we’re learning from community organizing, organizational development and sustainability movements.

What if we acted as if churches (or microcommunities launched from them) really are *the* most powerful agent of social change, *the* most hope-offering platform through which young people might offer their lives? I think it might be called “justice evangelism.”

Might “nones” come back to church (or a microcommunity linked to one) if they saw church folk living out lives of justice so compelling that they wanted to be part of it? What if these churches worked alongside mosques, synagogues and other faith communities to create collaborations of microcommunities -- not tied to political agendas or religious exclusivism but bent on human flourishing, the kind of flourishing King so evocatively named the “beloved community”?