Building Young Disciples for the 21st Century: Communities of Practice as a Model of Youth Ministry

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As we approach the fiftieth anniversary of the Second Vatican council there is much about the complexion of the Catholic church that is different. Vatican documents such as Gaudium Et Spes and Lumen Gentium exhorted Catholic Christians to reach out to the new world with the message of the Gospel and to reexamine our sense of church moving from a purely hierarchical structure to a community orientation as the *Body of Christ* and *People of God*. Since the time of the council these new proposed models of church brought about the development of various sodalities or confraternities which sought to fulfill certain ministries. Vatican II also opened the doors to the emergence of diverse ecclesial movements such as Cursillo, Charismatic Renewal and other such evangelizing ministries that have served to bolster the spirit and commitment of believers to the envision the crucial role of the laity in proclaiming the good news through the power of personal witness. Among the many positive outcomes of the council is the burgeoning of small Christian communities as a community-oriented way of being "the church". Avery Dulles describes this process best:

> Since Vatican Council II, the Church in several continents, including Latin America, has been revitalized by the development of thousands of basic ecclesial communities, which at their best promote discipleship in its full range. Something analogous has been occurring in various prayer groups and covenant communities in our own country. **But all too many Christians, deprived of such contacts, still look upon the Church only as a huge, impersonal institution set over against its members.** Even Catholics who are faithful to their religious obligations rarely experience Church as a community of mutual support and stimulation. (Emphasis mine) [1]

It would seem that many individuals today are strangers in their own parishes because the church is too massive, "impersonal" and thus not able to care for their particular spiritual needs. Many parishes have resorted to becoming sacramental filling stations rather than places of renewal, healing and vital Christian discipleship. The Whiteheads articulate the tremendous challenge this "self-serve" modern style of church to poses of the Christian discipleship:

> North Americans are individualist: we prize our independence and flinch at any infringement of our privacy. Often we worship in large, anonymous parishes. We meet our Sunday obligation in staid or rushed liturgies, standing next to each other, unknown individualists. We hear the Word of God but remain unmoved; we take communion but leave unnourished.[2]

In a similar way church youth ministry programs provide yet another service to those families that wish to have their middle-schooler, teen or young adult participate in a positive environment where hopefully they can learn something about their faith in the process. Many pastoral agents consider youth ministry as a bridge ministry to ensure youth participation in church after

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[1] Avery Dulles, *Models of The Church*, (New York, NY: Image/Double Day, 2002) 209-210.
[2] Evelyn Eaton Whitehead & James D. Whitehead, *Community of Faith: Crafting Christian Communities Today*, (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1992) 7.

confirmation while others define it in simpler terms: "keep the kids safe, let them have fun and teach them about the faith in the process." Some pastoral agents go the route of hiring a youth minister with a theology degree while others get the young seminarian or newly ordained minister to lead the youth program in hopes that these individuals will serve the needs of youth in the congregation. But youth are often left with this similar disconnected experience. Yes, they have been thoroughly entertained with the concert style worship music and great ice-breakers, but some leave youth group without a sense of belonging or drawn to relationship with members.

Social science literature on youth and religion reveal that lagging participation in liturgical celebrations and other programs provided in Catholic churches is a symptom of the need for a paradigmatic shift in the way we minister to youth today. There is a legitimate concern that a significant percentage of young people (teens ages 13-19 and young adults 20-35) are not currently active in Catholic communities in the United States. According to findings of the National Study of Youth and Religion, Catholic teens have the lowest participation rate in youth groups (32%) among the denominations surveyed.[3] Soul Searching concludes its chapter on Catholic teens in the following way:

> Getting from where the majority of U.S. Catholic teens currently are with regard to their religious faith and lives to achieving the huge religious potential that appears to exist for them would seem to require that the church invest a great deal more attention, creativity, and institutional resources into its young members—and therefore into its own life. Undeniably, the future shape of the U.S. Catholic church vitality depends on it.[4]

More specifically Smith attributes lack of involvement of Catholic teens to reduced parental religiosity and involvement, the lack of investment in youth ministry programs compared to other Christian traditions and poor preparation of lay ministers compared to religious sisters and priests of 30 years ago who used to be the primary providers of faith formation.[5] Equally troubling is the growth of "Nones" or young millennials (born between 1990-1996) who eschew a particular religious affiliation and begs the question as to why young people increasingly do not want to identify as being Catholic.[6] It goes without saying that these trends are cause for

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[3] See *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2005) 52.

[4] See *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2005) 217.

[5] Ibid, 210-213.

[6] "Nones" or those who identified as non-affiliated represent 36% of those surveyed in the 2014 Religious Landscape Study. See Pew Research Study article: Michael Lipka, "*Millennials Increasingly are Driving Growth of 'Nones'*", May 12, 2015.

concern as pastoral agents evaluate efforts at reaching young people in our churches. While many purported experts provide tips and strategies for bringing youth back to the church and reconnect with the faith, the answer lies in the community itself. The primary claim that will be set forth is that churches already have the resources to draw young people into committed participation in the body of Christ as young disciples.

Impelled by this challenge to devise an alternative approach which will engage the yearnings of modern teens and Millennials[7], this paper proposes small Christian communities or "communities of practice"[8] as a model for effective ministry with young people. In support of my thesis above, we will first turn to the beginnings of "house churches" and explore the historical development of SCCs from the early church and why modern manifestations are an attempt to retrieve these experiences. We will then take a contextual look *what is going on* at St. Edward Catholic Church in Pembroke Pines, Florida through its unique SCCs model called "Evangelizing Cells" developed under the pioneering vision and leadership of Fr. Michael Eivers and the impact it has had on youth ministry through "intentional small groups". As the original "cell group", we will use the Emmaus story found in Luke's Gospel to consider the three elements of effective small group sharing being that of conversation, narrative and insight, while incorporating the contributions of theologians and the implications for youth ministry. By way of conclusion, we will discuss the necessary paradigm shifts that need to occur in order for this vision of young ministry to take shape.

History of Cell Groups (SCCs) – From the New Testament to modern times

We are all aware that the "Jesus movement" began with a small group of twelve. Although many for spiritual purposes would want to make Jesus' selection of his first band of brothers to be divine appointments, most scholars would say that he did not discriminate.[9] There are instances in which a smaller group of Peter, James and John accompany Jesus during pivotal moments in his ministry including the transfiguration and preparation for the passion. Despite

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http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/05/12/millennials-increasingly-are-driving-growth-of-nones/ Accessed April 26, 2016.

[7] This age demographic of this dissertation will focus on High School aged teens (ages 13-18), considered part of "Generation Z" and young millennials (ages 18-25).

[8] See Etienne Wenger, Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning and Identity (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1998). Also see https://www.learning-theories.com/communities-of-practice-lave-and-wenger.html Accessed September 12, 2016.

[9] The lesson from this seemingly random selection for our purposes would be to say that there is no particular profile that needs to be met in order to be part of a small group. We also know that Jesus' first "house church" included a number of women.

being battered by the initial shock of Christ's death, there is substantial Scriptural and extra-testamentary evidence to suggest these disciples continued to meet in homes and to encourage one another. The Acts of the Apostles testifies to the home-church movement that led to the incremental growth of the early church.[10] In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul addresses the individual *ecclesia* which met in the home of Aquila and Priscilla (1 Cor. 16:19) as well as the church as a whole (1 Cor. 1:2; 2Cor. 1:1). Research from New Testament scholars suggests that both the "house church" and "wider community" structures existed and fed into each other. Some go further to suggest that this small group model may have allowed the church to persevere through periods of intense persecution during the first three centuries of Christianity. While these house churches were effective in keeping the church invigorated during these times, they took a secondary position to the larger community gatherings once Christians were granted freedom of religious expression through the Edict of Milan (313 AD).

   Kleissler and Lebert argue that small Christian community experience continued to flourish despite the orientation to the wider community with its new church buildings under Constantine and may have contributed to the emergence of early monastic communities which continued through the middle ages.[11] While it may seem that the SCCs model had taken a back seat to the larger congregation, it was not entirely lost as emerging religious order monastic communities of Benedict, Scholastica, Francis, Dominic, Clare, Ignatius, Teresa and others continued to promote this life of discipleship. There is also strong evidence of house church movements among Protestant circles during the post-Augustinian period of Martin Luther's ministry as well that of the brothers Westley.

   The re-emergence of small Christian communities among the laity or "comunidades de base" occurred in Brazil in the late 1950's according to Leonardo Boff at the lament of a humble old lady who wondered why the people could not pray or share faith together because there was no priest present.[12] These groups spread from the diocese of Rio de Janeiro to many other countries of Latin America and grew to hundreds of thousands.[13] The growth of these groups were strongly

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[10] Acts 5:42 refers to meetings that were held in the temple courts as well as from house to house. In Acts 20:20 Paul says that he held back nothing of value from the believers: "how well I have preached to you, and that I taught you publically and throughout the houses".

[11] See Thomas Kleissler and others, *Small Christian Communities: A Vision of Hope for the 21st Century* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2003), 12.

[12] Leonardo Boff, *Ecclesiogenesis: The Base Communities Reinvent the Church*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986), 6.

[13] See Nestor O. Miguez- "Latin American Readings of the Bible: Experiences, Challenges, and Its Practice" in *Eerdsman Reader in Contemporary Political Theology,* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. Eerdmans, 2012), 60-77. He says

encouraged by several meetings of the Latin American bishops in Medellin (1968), Puebla (1979) and more recently in Santo Domingo (1992). Other important movements of SCCs occurred in the 1970's in Africa and in the United States as the result of the emergence of Charismatic Renewal groups which led to the development of "covenant communities".

There are several reasons individuals seek these types of small group experiences. In a Catholic context, people are yearning for spiritual nourishment that is more than a once-a week 45 minute weekend mass with a 10-15 minute sermon. In his book *Church for the Unchurched*, George Hunter argues that Christians who attend church without having a small group experience are only getting part of the message they should be getting:

> Many people are involved in the congregation, and are thus involved in its proclamational, sacramental, and liturgical life, but not in the cell; they therefore never experience half of what 'church' has to offer. Only in the church's redemptive cells do we really know each other, and support each other, and pull for each other, and draw strength from each other and weep with each other and rejoice with each other, and hold each other accountable, and identify each other's gifts, and experience what it means to be 'members of one another'. [14]

Robert Wuthnow's research shows that 40% of all adults in the United States say they belong to at least one small group which provided them with support and meaningful relationships.[15] Kleissler, Lebert and McGuiness' research in the area of SCCs shows that most participants opine that cell groups are a primary source of spiritual nourishment, a new way of participating in the parish life and a "new way of being church". [16]

My perspective on youth ministry changed and deepened as a result of being appointed coordinator of the IGNITE youth group at St. Edward Catholic Church, the home of the founder of the "Parish Evangelizing Cells". The exposure to the Small Christian community model of cell groups created by Fr. Michael Eivers has led to the development of intentional small group interactions within our youth program that has revitalized the program and in three years has made it one of the most vibrant ministries within the congregation and the Archdiocese of Miami. It is my view that the "evangelizing cell" model of St. Edward Catholic Church is a locus of profound theological reflection and public theology as they integrate an evangelistic focus,

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that one of the greatest contributions of liberation hermeneutics within the Latin American context is its emphasis on the Bible as the "book of the people" and the "memory of the poor". This social-contextual reading of the Bible emerged, according to Miguez in the early 1950's and 60's through the development of inter-denominational youth groups and base communities (*comunidades de base*) in which the Bible was being read within their particular context of struggle and political unrest.

[14] See George Hunter, *Church for the Unchurched* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996) 46.

[15] See Robert Wuthnow, Sharing the Journey, (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1994) 6.

[16] See Thomas Kleissler and others, Small Christian Communities: A Vision of Hope for the 21st Century (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2003), viii.

openness to the gifts of the Holy Spirit with the drive to engage social concerns. Allow me to share in what follows, some of the characteristics that makes the "evangelizing cells" model of small Christian communities so effective and what has led to a re-envisioning of small groups within youth ministry.

"Evangelizing Cells" of St. Edward Catholic Church- A Unique Model of SCCs

Most Catholic scholars writing on the subject of small Christian communities or cell groups credit Monsignor Michael Eivers with bringing the "evangelizing cell" model to the Catholic Church. While Fr. Eivers experienced a deep conversion through Charismatic Renewal prayer groups and life in the spirit seminars he felt that something was missing. He comments, "I was searching for some way to lead my parish into ongoing spiritual growth. My great fear at the time was that we were becoming just a "spiritual filling station" surviving from Sunday to Sunday. Parishioners were crying out for spiritual growth, Bible study and a deeper knowledge of their faith. I had a gut feeling that the answer lay in small groups but did not have "the know how" to establish them."

In 1980 he and his deacon Perry Vitale had both been very impressed by a book called "Building Christian Communities" by Stephen B Clark, and about the same time, they had also been very inspired by lectures given by Jose Marins, an expert on "base communities", which had become very popular in Latin America.[17] Encouraged by this, Fr Michael recruited 70 parishioners and gave them a list of the Catholics in their neighborhood and told them to form neighborhood groups. The project failed dismally. "Nobody came," said Eivers. "and no wonder – we didn't know what we were doing." But the pair did not abandon the idea. Shortly thereafter they discovered Paul Yonggi Cho's book "Successful Home Cell Groups". Fr. Eivers traveled to Seoul South Korea in 1983 to visit the church and be trained in how the cell system worked. This church had experienced unprecedented growth due to the "home church", small Christian community model with over 11,000 cell groups gathering on a weekly basis leading to membership of whopping 700,000 members at that time. In recent estimates, Yoido Full Gospel Church has an excess of 25,000 cell groups and over 1 million members. [18]

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[17] In addition to many talks and workshops, Marins produced some of the earliest training manuals on Base communities with titles including: *Iglesia Local: Comunidad de Base*, *Entrenamiento Intensivo sobre comunidades de base* and others. (Buenos Aires, Argentina:Editorial Bonum, 1971).

[18] I would be remiss if I did not mention that the pastor Pastor David, Yonggi Cho of the largest church in the world was recently convicted of embezzlement according to an article in February 2014 edition of Christianity Today: http://www.christianitytoday.com/gleanings/2014/february/founder-of-worlds-largest-megachurch-convicted-cho-yoido.html?paging=off

This experience sparked the establishing of the cell system in Fr. Eiver's then parish of St. Boniface with 5 cell groups which within a year grew to 15 and then 29 the year after.[19]
Fr. Eivers recalls that the initial campaign was an amazing experience, as they saw a church, where every member from young mothers to grandmothers, seemed to be on fire, determined to spread the gospel to their neighbors and friends. He comments, "The Seoul system is heavily based on prayer, fasting, baptism in the Spirit and evangelization. I felt we could accept and learn from the structure though much of the theology was foreign and even unacceptable to our Catholic tradition." From their Korean experience they also learned that for the parish cell system to work the pastor needed to lead it and couldn't abdicate responsibility for it to others. Fr. Eivers comments, "The system is not just another program but a new or old way of being church." It would seem necessary to pause here to consider what makes the cell system proposed by Eivers so different from many other SCCs around the country. Let us turn now to a definition, meeting mechanics and purpose of cells followed by what makes these groups unique.

Cell groups-What are they?

Pastor Joel Comiskey defines a cell group as "a group of people (5-15), who meet regularly for the purpose of spiritual edification and evangelical outreach with the goal of multiplication, and who are committed to participate in the functions of the local church".[20] Cells in the human body are living, vibrant, multiplying units. They are programmed to multiply or die. This also is an accurate description of Parish Evangelizing Cells. These groups meet weekly or bi-weekly for an hour and a half to two hours with a set agenda which is as follows:

Meeting Mechanics: Parts of a Cell

The agenda for a fruitful meeting was worked out in the school of experience by Pastor David Cho 40 years ago, and is very valuable in keeping a meeting on track.

1. **Prayer and Praise** (15- 20 minutes) – Prayers and hymns or scripture readings (Lectio Divina).

2. **Evangelistic Sharing** (15-20 minutes) – Cell members take turns responding to the question "How have I shared my faith recently, especially by inviting someone to my cell?" This can be simply by not being embarrassed to identify yourself as a Catholic and being open that you practice your faith and go to Church, or by saying "God Bless" and offering to pray for

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[19] In Eiver's most recent pastorate at St. Edward parish in a period of 15 years there have been over 100 cell communities. He shared with much dismay during our interview that since retiring four years ago, the cell groups have dwindled down to little more than half that number as the new pastor is not familiar with system.
[20] Joel Comisky, *How to Lead a Great Cell Group Meeting ...So People Want to Come Back* (Houston, TX: Touch Publications, 2001) 13.

someone's situation; or it might mean giving a person an appropriate spiritual book or inviting them to a church event, or witnessing how God might have helped you in your life.

3. Teaching (on CD or DVD) – (15 minutes) - Usually produced by the pastor who is aware of the spiritual needs of cell members and which covers a variety of topics including Biblical or catechetical teachings, summaries of spiritual books, recent church documents or other lessons as he sees fit.

4. Discussion – (15 minutes) – The teaching is followed by group discussion stemming from questions posed by the pastor and which is typically facilitated by the group leader or co-leader. In some cases, transcriptions of the talks are also available as a reference for participants.

5. Cell Business and Announcements (5-10 minutes) – These might include announcing any upcoming parish events or social needs among the community. As part of their understanding of evangelization, there is a general orientation toward involvement in parish ministries and community outreach as concurring elements of sharing the Gospel.

6. Intercessory and Healing Prayer (5-10 minutes) – Various types of prayers are offered including general intercessions for the community, healing, or physical or spiritual needs voiced by those present in the meeting.

7. The Our Father – A common practice of many groups is the recitation of the Our Father with members of the cell standing in a circle facing outwards as a symbol of their orientation towards the needs of the world.

The formal part of the meeting is now over and afterwards there is a time of refreshments and fellowship.

8. Refreshments and Fellowship - Refreshments are served while there is an informal time of fellowship. The actual length of this time depends on the group, availability of the space and the members.

Purpose and Mission of "Evangelizing Cells"

   Eiver's identifies seven purposes of Parish Evangelizing Cells which are: 1) to grow in an ongoing intimacy with the Lord and love of one another, 2) to evangelize by word and lifestyle, especially by inviting people to join the group, 3) to grow to the point of birthing a new cell, 4) to inspire members to prepare for leadership in the future, 5) to give and receive support, 6) to be involved in parish ministry according to one's gifts and 7) to deepen our Catholic identity. It is important to note that although the members are nurtured spiritually in teaching and sharing, the main focus should always be 'evangelizing'. A distinguishing feature of these groups has to do with the regular exercise of charismatic gifts including intercessory prayer for healing, speaking

in tongues (glossolalia) and baptism in the Holy Spirit, modeled after the Pentecostal style of the Yoido Church.

In parishes where the cell system is most fruitful, it is not just another program, but a parish way of life. This in Fr Michael's estimation is the secret to the cell system's longevity and vitality in responding to the great commission to go and preach. Groups that focus purely on nurturing their members through intercessory prayer or Scripture study, while often very effective, usually have a limited life-span or can take on a life of its own outside of the parish. These would be tantamount to "cancerous cells" for Eivers, who using the biological metaphor, says that as a human cell cannot function without the organism which holds it, so too the cell group cannot function without the pastoral support and guidance of the parish community—one cannot subsist without the other.

The cell system at St. Edward has affected youth ministry in two profound ways. First, small group interactions within the youth night program are prolonged and intentional. These intentional relationship groups (no more than 8-10 students) are typically with many of the same members and leaders so that participants can develop a level of trust in order to facilitate deeper listening, intercessory prayer, support and faith sharing. These groups are lead by upper-classmen or young adults. Two other methods of creating these intentional relationships occurs through one-on-one meetings and Emmaus groups where an adult or peer minister visits with the pair to facilitate discussion with all pairs gathering back to the small group for shared learning and wrap-up of the session. Secondly, the sense of belonging to a family is contagious and leads to additional gatherings outside of church through home Bible studies, gatherings at school and evangelism to the broader community. What started as a group of 15-20 teens has grown to 80-100 thanks in large measure to this emphasis on communities of practice.

The challenge of generating an approach to youth ministry as discipleship for the 21st century is to offer a ministry of openness, "pastoral listening", inclusion and freedom rather than of fear and rejection—a ministry of accompaniment. James and Evelyn Whitehead offer a significant contribution to an effective ministry of accompaniment by their "conversational model" between the faith tradition, culture and personal experience. They ground their convictions two important assumptions that: "(1) God is revealed in all three sources and (2) the religious information available in each source is partial."[21] They propose a method for

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[21] See James D. & Evelyn E. Whitehead, *Method in Ministry: Theological Reflection and Christian Ministry*, (Lanham, NY: Sheed and Ward Publishers, 1995), 13.

theological reflection involving a three-fold process of which takes on the Spirit-led dynamic of 1) *attending*—seeking out the information on a particular pastoral concern that is available in all three conversation partners; 2) *assertion*—bringing the perspectives gathered from these three sources into a lively dialogue of mutual clarification to expand and enrich religious insight; and 3) *pastoral response*—which is "moving from discussion and insight to decision and action."[22] David White affirms this challenge in the following way:

> The future of youth ministry must include equipping youth and congregations with skills for bringing the gospel into creative tension with the particular questions and circumstances of our lives and those of our youth—including questions of lifestyle, vocation and social responsibility. If youth ministries are to resist the cultural influences that dilute the power and hope of the gospel, we need to recover practices of discernment that bring the gospel into conversation with our lives and the culture in which we move.[23]

A helpful metaphor for this dynamic of attending, assertion and pastoral response is experienced by the disciples on the way to Emmaus (Lk. 24:13-15). Thus, youth ministers are invited to be the unnamed companion on the road, who must have the willingness to listen and invite youth to enter into their personal faith quests. What we've learned through these intentional small groups is that the art of pastoral listening. The small group becomes a holding environment for young people to struggle with aspects of the faith they do not understand or agree with but also becomes a place where they can be free to express these concerns. By not providing the answers but the appropriate questions and religious frame of reference, this environment can lead to authentic, heart-felt understanding and experiences of God.[24] Using the Emmaus story as the original "cell" or small group, we now move to explore three elements of conversation, narrative and insight that make small group dynamics effective in creating meaningful relationships and a sense of belonging.

Element #1-"Conversatio" between the Individual and Community

> *Now that very day two of them were going to a village seven miles from Jerusalem called Emmaus, and they were conversing about all the things that had occurred. And it happened that while they were conversing and debating, Jesus himself drew near and walked with them, but their eyes prevented them from recognizing him* (**Luke 24:13-16 {NASB}).**

In the context of small groups, individuals engage in *conversatio* or the interior conversation between the personal lived experience, those of others and the meta-narrative experience of holy

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[22] Ibid, 15.

[23] David F. White, *Practicing Discernment with Youth: A Transformative Youth Ministry Approach*, (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2005), xi-xii.

[24] Selvam, S., "The Unnamed Companion on The Road: Spiritual Accompaniment in the Context of Youth Ministry." The Journal of Youth Ministry 11, No.2 (2013): 41-55. ATLA Religion database with ATLA Serials, EBSCOhost (accessed February 29, 2016).

men and women in Scripture and through church tradition. According to theologian David Tracy "conversation occurs *only* when the conversation partners allow the subject matter to take over. Conversation occurs only when we free ourselves for the common subject matter and free ourselves from the prison of our vaunted individualism."[25] This conversation revolves around what he calls the "religious classic". For Tracy, the "classic" is the "disclosure of reality in a moment which surprises, provokes, challenges, shocks and eventually transforms us: an experience that upsets conventional opinions and expands the sense of the possible; indeed a realized experience of that which is essential, that which endures." [26]

What makes a classic piece of literature, art or music a "classic" is not so much the medium but how this medium affects the reader and interpreter. What then makes a religious classic different from a "classic" work of literature or art? "For the actual moment of response to a religious classic, religious persons are convinced that their values, their style of life, their ethos are in fact grounded in the inherent structure of reality itself."[27] What makes the Christ event a "religious classic" in is its transcendental message, which when grasped, leads to personal transformation. But in order to have a conversation, you need more than one participant. The crucial question is how do we get kids to the table to engage them in understanding and embracing Christ and the relevance of his message for their lives?

One of the challenges with this "conversation model" is the tendency to make Scripture and church teaching the predominant focus of theological reflection over experience and culture young people experience every day. In this way, the message of Christianity can be considered by teens and young adults to be imposing and off putting rather than inviting and attractive. "Many Christians have grown up with an image of our scriptural tradition as absolute and ahistorical… This ahistorical vision of God's presence in human history gave our Scripture and our sacred history a patina of absolute certitude." [28] While no one can deny that the Christian classic of Scripture is always presented as the model for individuals to pattern their experience upon, what if the experience of a youth we minister to is different from the "norm" presented by church teaching? How are we to engage them? Or do we discard them as another "missing voice" that we choose not to hear? An individual's experience is sometimes the place where

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[25] David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism*, (New York, NY: Crossroads, 1991) 101.
[26] Ibid, 108.
[27] Ibid, 163.
[28] James D. & Evelyn E. Whitehead, James D. & Evelyn E., *Method in Ministry: Theological Reflection and Christian Ministry*, (Lanham, NY: Sheed and Ward, 1995) 6-7.

culture and Christian tradition seem to be odds but in order for transformative conversation to take place, it is necessary that groups create an environment for faith to lead to the authentic sharing of personal stories in light of Christian tradition.

Element #2- Narrative- We become who we are by telling Our Story

> *He asked them, "What are you discussing as you walk along?" They stopped looking downcast. One of them, named Cleopas, said to him in reply, "Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know of the things that have taken place there in these days?"* **(Luke 24:17-18 {NASB})**

Small group dynamics can provide a safe holding environment where individuals can openly share their personal struggles and bring about deep healing and closure for certain unresolved emotions. Johann Baptist Metz understands the power of personal memory and narrative as essential to developing our own way of being a discipleship of Jesus. Only through this praxis of discipleship—the way we live our lives everyday—are we able to understand Christ, ourselves, and thus be in solidarity with others.

According to Metz, our memories and narratives are "the fundamental categories for getting a firm grip on one's understanding of identity and for saving it in the midst of the historical struggles and dangers in which persons experience and constitute themselves as subjects."[29] What he means is that through the sharing of our story we become aware that our experience is not an isolated one—we become awakened to the suffering of others—those living and dead— throughout history—what he calls "dangerous memories". The archetypal dangerous memory is that of the death and resurrection of Christ; however, there are other possible dangerous memories. These stories are dangerous and threatening because they bring awareness to the many injustices and suffering that people face. It is in the telling of personal stories that we are able to articulate our experience and find commonalities in the struggles of others.[30]

Getting young people to share their stories, as good, bad or ugly as they may be, is essential to moving them from being perceived as objects needing to be saved to agent-subjects with whom we minister.[31] As objects, youth are told what to do and how to behave in church. As subjects, youth are invited to experience God through vibrant worship and to share their faith journey with

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[29] Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology*, (New York, NY: Crossroads, 2013) 75.

[30] It goes without saying that the sharing of these personal stories must be received with the utmost reverence and respect and requires that an environment of confidentiality be established among the members of the small group.

[31] Frank Mercandante, *Engaging a New Generation: A Vision for Reaching Catholic Teens*, (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor Inc., 2012), 49. Also see Greg Ogden, *Transforming discipleship: Making Disciples a Few at a Time*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 46-47. Ogden provides keen insights into the many obstacles to building communities of disciples that will serve as guideposts to my work.

others in creative and innovative ways. As objects, youth are asked to do menial tasks in the church in exchange for service hours. As subjects, youth are invited to discern their gifts and talents in order to meet the genuine concerns they have for the real world problems they see. As objects, teens are viewed as "young noble savages" who need to be evangelized by acquiescing to a set of propositional claims in order to gain the eternal benefits of heaven. As subjects, youth are protagonists of God's activity in the world by identifying areas where God has acted in their lives. The sharing of these stories in small groups becomes significant as they are shared in the context of the "grand narrative" of salvation history which can lead to moments of deep conversion and personal transformation.

Element #3- Insight- Conversion to the neighbor

> *Then their eyes were opened and they recognized Him; and He vanished from their sight. They said to one another, 'Were not our hearts burning within us while he was speaking on the road, while he was explaining the Scriptures to us?'* (**Luke 24:31-32 {NASB})**

The rich language of Luke's Gospel describing the "eye-opening" experience of the disciples on the way to Emmaus attests to the reality that authentic spiritual insight does not occur in isolation but through the exchange of two or more. Since each individual experience is contextual, the community is a determining factor in how one frames reality and everyday perceptions including religious ones. The great liberation theologian Gustavo Gutierrez provided me two ground-breaking notions on discipleship and conversion that have greatly informed my understanding of how insight emerges in group dynamics and implications for my proposed vision of youth ministry.[32] The first has to do with Gutierrez's definition of disciple and the second has to do with his notion of conversion *to* the neighbor. Discipleship from the lens of Liberation theology is defined as "*learning to see, hear, walk with, share with and remove the poor from anonymity*". "Learning to see" for Gutierrez is more than just the raised awareness of injustices and oppression but the choice to be committed to action; literally to *see inside ourselves* and the world around us. One of Gutierrez's foundational Gospel passages for understanding Liberation theology is the story of the widow's mite in Luke 21:1-4 which is pivotal to this new way of seeing. According to his exegesis, Jesus chose what door of the temple to observe from—he chose his point of view and then taught his disciples this new way of seeing: "for they (referring to the rich) all contributed out of their abundance, but she (the widow) out of her poverty put in all the living that she had" (v.4). Gutierrez goes on to say that

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[32] I had the distinct honor of hearing Gustavo Gutierrez offer a lectures series at the Boston College School of Theology and Ministry course in contextual theologies which I attended in the summer of 2002.

this ability to see clearly is what leads to a healthy spirituality or "the full development of the human person". This type of spirituality requires conversion from our own sense of God through institutions, concepts and doctrine to experiencing God *through* our neighbor.

Likewise, a second informative source for understanding the dynamic of these groups is found in Gutierrez's notion of conversion *to* the neighbor.[33] Corresponding to the theology of neighbor, the life of Christian discipleship is not only to be a follower of Christ but to be a disciple *for* the world and *in* the world; to see the entire world as our teacher. Hence, for Gutierrez the heart of "spirituality of liberation" revolves around conversion *to* rather than *of* the neighbor. Authentic theology of liberation invites Christians to encounter God in the neighbor, not just those who we meet in our churches and neighborhoods, but especially those whom God has preferred: the poor.[34] "Our conversion to the Lord implies this conversion to the neighbor…it means thinking, feeling, and living as Christ—present in exploited and alienated persons". [35] It is in this child-like openness to grace that we encounter God through our neighbor.

The implications of these two profound theological notions are potentially far-reaching for youth ministry as we consider the unfortunate truth that in many churches young people are kept in anonymity. "The youth are the future leaders of the church" is a common phrase that discloses the pervading attitude of most adult congregants that teens and adolescents can contribute in significant ways to the church when they reach adulthood but not now. There is a preconceived notion that because of their lack of theological or ministry training, that they are limited in how they can contribute to the vitality of the church today. The role of the "adult church" is to keep youth involved and provide them the faith formation that will ensure that we have a church for years to come. This collective aspiration that youth become the leaders of tomorrow may not become a reality if we do not seriously consider how they can contribute to the church of today.

Contrary to the popular adage that "children are to be seen and not heard", young people want to be heard and if we don't let them speak, they will surely not be seen. Young people must be added to the list of marginalized voices as their energy, rebelliousness, doubts and questions reveal an inherent and authentic yearning for the "living God" and a hunger for community—they are an untapped resource that can no longer go unnoticed. What is needed are pastoral

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[33] A more thorough exploration of this notion can be found in chapter 10 of his seminal work *A Theology of Liberation*.
[34] James Nickoloff Ed., *Gustavo Gutierrez: Essential Writings*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996) 155.
[35] Ibid, p. 288.

agents with the vision to understand that these gifts are a vital part of our communities that must be celebrated now.

Firstly, effective youth ministry is one which must choose to see from the perspective of the youth in order to walk with them toward Christ. Youth culture is a highly complex world which church leaders should seek to understand in order to translate their realities in light of the Gospel message in the same way we have developed plans of enculturation for various ethnicities. Exposed to a pluralism of worldviews beside the Christian one, young people are no longer passive recipients of doctrine, relying on what they are taught to believe about God. That said, rather than resist and sink our heels insistent that they learn the faith the way we want it to be understood, we need to equip teens with the tools to ask the right questions which can lead to authentic searching for truth in the everyday.

Paradigmatic Shifts

In order for the church to return to the business of making disciples through communities of practice as its primary mission several paradigm shifts will be necessary.

1) To choose people over programs. The implied assertion that has been made is that a programmatic approach will not sufficiently respond to the needs of today's youth. There are no quick fixes, there is no superstar youth minister who will solve the dilemma of how to get teens involved in church. Young people cannot be sufficiently formed with a two hour a week program. This choice to invest time on building of intentional relationships with teens and other adults in the parish can yield many wonderful fruits but is also a major challenge to youth ministers who are evaluated based on numbers and results. In his book *Engaging A New Generation*, Frank Mercandante maintains that "[m]uch of today's parish youth ministry, while espousing in theory the value of significant relationships (with adults), seems, in practice, to operate in large-group programs…Many leaders, primarily operating from a spirit of fear, have sanitized humanity from ministry by prohibiting any meaningful interpersonal contact."[36] To be sure, it is much easier to develop a packaged program which keeps kids entertained instead of engaging them in becoming young disciples.

2) To choose a both/and instead of either/or. Effective programs invite youth to see the Gospel through their everyday lives in conversation with popular culture and their own experience instead of creating an "us against the world" mentality. The tendency in church

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[36] Frank Mercandante, *Engaging a New Generation: A Vision for Reaching Catholic Teens*, (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor Inc., 2012), 52.

circles is to create an antagonistic relationship between the faith tradition and the culture; the religious from the secular. Phrases like "culture of death" seem to give the impression that faith and culture are at odds. The Vatican II document *Gaudium Et Spes* declares that:

> [T]his split between the faith which many profess and their daily lives deserves to be counted among the more serious errors of our age…Christians should rather rejoice that, following the example of Christ Who worked as an artisan, they are free to give proper exercise to all their earthly activities and to their humane, domestic, professional, social and technical enterprises by gathering them into one vital synthesis with religious values, under whose supreme direction all things are harmonized unto God's glory. [37]

This turn toward the world leads to this "synthesis" between our faith tradition, the culture and my experience encouraged by the council documents leading to authentic human flourishing. One of the first "places" where pastoral agents need to engage youth is through social media.

Social media is a burgeoning virtual environment that has enraptured the minds and hearts of many young people—from the hundreds of "selfies" that are taken to the constant need to check in with Twitter or Instagram status updates in order to feel "connected" to friends and acquaintances. According to the 2015 Pew Research Report on "Teens, Social Media and Technology", and aided by the increase in smart phone usage, 92% of teens reported "checking in" daily on social media and 24% said they check their social media status constantly.[38] Countless news reports are heard of cyber-bullying, sexting and adolescents committing suicide due to the many self-esteem issues related to social media. Based on the increased exposure to this media, it can be safely said that youth are being formed in their understandings of faith, religion and God through social media more than in our churches. Pastoral ministers must understand how vital the interfacing of tradition, experience and culture are in making an individual's faith relevant today especially in light of these and other issues facing teens. Through social media, music and other mediums, youth of today can be our best translators of God's revelation through popular culture.

3) *To choose ministry over meetings*. It is very easy for youth ministry programs to get caught up in the everyday tasks of youth programs from meetings, fundraising, trips, speakers, paperwork and other such items. Much of the current youth ministry literature focuses on a shift toward relational ministry as a pastoral priority. Towards this discipleship-oriented ministry vision, it would be helpful to consider how many hours are dedicated to activities such as visits

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[37] Vatican II, *On The Church In The Modern World*, #43.
[38] Amanda Lenhart, "Teens, Social Media and Technology"- Pew Research Report- April 2015 http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/04/09/teens-social-media-technology-2015/ Accessed: December 27, 2015.

to high school events, one-on-one sessions, small group Bible study or other such activities in comparison to the amount of time dedicated to meetings and planning. Many pastoral ministers think that ministry translates to evangelization. Some associate evangelization to catechesis or apologetics and often feel unequipped to answer some difficult or challenging doctrinal or theological questions. Most are unaware that the heart of ministry is personal witness and presence, not canned responses to difficult questions. As Root claims, ministers are called to facilitate spiritual introspection by "being honestly human before and with young people, calling them into their own humanity, inviting them to contemplate and search for God in the barren empty spaces of their own lives."[39] When youth ministers share their personal faith stories, they engender an environment where youth can do the same.

By way of conclusion, in modern times churches have seen their role to be that of service and volunteer-oriented communities or "country club" gatherings of people who share common interests and have thus lost the fundamental mission of making disciples.[40] These churches understand the term "disciple" to be reserved to those who have been immortalized on prayer cards or statues. Bill Hull for example asserts that "the longer we perpetuate the myth that disciple is a secondary identity reserved for the elite, the more we will continue to produce "barcode Christians" who are following after a "non-discipleship" Christianity."[41] David White issues a similar indictment when he comments:

> Popular youth ministry in its worst form leaves young disciples ill equipped to engage the powers and principalities that encompass adolescent life, fostering instead an abstract Christian identity that knows little of the wounds or blessings of their particular world…As long as the gospel remains an abstraction or a mere set of romantic ideas, we risk ignoring the particular ways this world is distorted—including how young people are marginalized, exploited, and alienated by various social structures…".[42]

The challenge of youth ministers today is to provide an environment where youth can ask: how is God speaking to me today and how does that relate to what God has already said? We can no longer present the message of the Gospel in abstractions which are unattainable. Seeking to present the Gospel and the church in the modern world as relevant to the needs of individuals and communities must be a pastoral priority through worship, preaching, outreach, pastoral care

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[39] Andrew Root, *Taking Theology to Youth Ministry,* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 46.
[40] Stanley Hauerwas- "The Politics of the Church: How We Lay Bricks and Make Disciples" in *Eerdmans Reader in Contemporary Political Theology*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2012), 658.
[41] See Bill Hull, *The Complete Book of Discipleship: On Being and Making followers of Christ*, (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2006), 33.
[42] David F. White, *Practicing Discernment with Youth: A Transformative Youth Ministry Approach*, (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2005), 5.

of youth and many other areas. It is imperative that churches adopt this small group "communities of practice" vision in order to reinvigorate current youth ministry programs and make church the "third place". The small group model creates an environment of intentional relationships and pastoral listening where young people can engage in genuine conversation, personal agency through the sharing of their faith journey and insight which in turn brings about Christian maturity.

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Every minister and ministry work toward generational discipleship so that it could be said of your family, He is the God of Abraham, Isaac, & Jacob! From the Back Cover. In Youth Ministry in the 21st Century, Fernando Arzola, Greg Stier, Ron Hunter, Brian Cosby, and Chap Clark present the major contemporary views on youth ministry. They also respond to one another's views, helping readers develop their own approach to youth ministry. "Teenagers need thoughtful, theologically grounded youth leaders more than ever. All these youth specialists are brilliant and have a deep love for young people. There is something to learn on every page and from every viewpoint." - -Jim Burns, HomeWord Center for Youth and Family, Azusa Pacific University. About the Author. The â€œ21st Century Skillsâ€ movement is more than a decade old. Yet, educators still pose important questions about how to move 21st century education forward. NEA has been an advocate of the 21st century education movement from its inception and wants to empower educators to move it forward in their own practice. Learning critical thinking leads students to develop other skills, such as a higher level of concentration, deeper analytical abilities, and improved thought processing. Todayâ€™s citizens must be active critical thinkers if they are to compare evidence, evaluate competing claims, and make sensible decisions. Globalisation, the practice of devotional songs and poems and the linguistic repertoires of young British Muslims. Culture and Religion, Vol. 19, Issue. 1, p. 90. 'Three points will make this volume a strong contribution to the sociolinguistics of youth identities in the twenty-first century: its inclusive approach to structure, practice and ideology as closely intertwined dimensions of linguistic study; its coverage of a broad range of languages, communities, and communicative contexts; and the comparative design of the individual chapters, which reveal fascinating, and sometimes unexpected, patterns of.