

Spiritual formation as focus of Youth Ministry

ABSTRACT

The article pays attention to spiritual formation as a vital focus in youth ministry. Spiritual formation will be described as a contextual process of meaning making and integration of what we believe into how we live our lives. The individualistic nature of especially postmodern spirituality gets attention. Lastly the article will focus on the connection between identity formation and spiritual formation, as well as the community orientated focus of Christian spirituality, which makes it so valuable for youth ministry today.

ABSTRAK

Die artikel skenk aandag aan geestelike vorming as 'n noodsaaklike fokus in jeugbediening. Geestelike vorming sal beskryf word as 'n kontekstuele proses van sinmaking en integrasie van wat ons glo in hoe ons leef. Die individualistiese aard van veral postmoderne spiritualiteit geniet aandag. Laastens fokus die artikel op die verbintenis tussen identiteitsvorming en geestelike vorming asook die gemeenskap georiënteerde fokus van Christelike spiritualiteit wat dit so waardevol maak vir jeugbediening vandag.

1. INTRODUCTION

The article focuses on the renewed interest in spirituality today and its value for youth ministry. The concept of Christian spirituality is described as a process of spiritual formation. A description is asserted of the postmodern subjective, individualistic view of spirituality and the challenges it poses to Christian spiritual formation, which is understood to be community orientated. It is argued here that the connection between identity formation and spiritual formation, as well as the community seeking character of Christian spiritual formation, is vital for youth ministry today.

2. WHAT IS SPIRITUALITY?

Today there is a renewed interest in spirituality from different platforms and contexts, to the point that it is referred to by some as a new buzzword (Kourie & Ruthenberg 2008:80). One of the characteristics of postmodernism is the need for spiritual experience. Therefore spirituality has become a much-discussed topic under laity and seminary students (Schneiders 1990:17) and is even regarded as a new academic discipline (Schneiders 1990:24). Grenz (2002:87) describes it as follows: "[S]pirituality which seems to have been banned from vocabularies of the people living in a scientific culture, is now not only common parlance but even fashionable. This is the case even among those who eschew organized religion". Despite the fact that the term spirituality is widely used and referred to, there is no conceptual clarity or consensus on what the term means. At the same time it does not mean that there are no indicators developed in academic writing, specifically to describe and define what spirituality could mean. I would like

to mention a few of these in order to have some conceptual understanding of the term as one of the key concepts in this article. Spirituality refers to lived experiences which do not have to be religious experiences, in other words the term “no longer refer exclusively or even primarily to prayer and spiritual exercise, much less to an elite state or superior practice of Christianity” (Schneiders 1990:18). Two basic approaches in defining spirituality could be distinguished, namely the dogmatic position and the anthropologic position. The first approach equates spirituality with the Christian life and the latter engages anthropological questions (Schneiders 1990:21). Christian spirituality could be seen as a very specific and even narrow way of defining spirituality whereas the anthropological view could be regarded as too broad and therefore vague, but could offer the opportunity of creating interreligious and cross-denominational dialogue (Hanson 1990:23). Another valuable distinction in trying to establish a conceptual framework for spirituality is to indicate the difference between spirituality as an academic discipline and a theology of spirituality. Spiritual theology is derived from the more dogmatic and prescriptive position with regards to spirituality already mentioned. Spirituality as an academic discipline functions in partnership and mutuality with theology (Kourie & Ruthenberg 2008:80). Schneiders (1990:23) defines spirituality as “the experience of consciously striving to integrate one’s life in terms not of isolation and self-absorption but of self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives”. In this formulation she tries to exclude orientating one’s life in dysfunctional ways and include potentially any spirituality, religious or secular, Christian or non-Christian. Although this definition attempts to be inclusive, there is not such a thing as ‘generic spirituality’ as spirituality as lived experience is always lived within a specific context and value system. Up till now I tried to give some conceptual clarification with regards to spirituality and opt to work in this article with the concept of Christian spirituality. I would like to employ the concept of Christian spirituality as distinct area of spirituality in an inclusive way, but stay mindful of its limitation and will therefore give a more detailed discussion thereof in the next section.

3. CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY AND SPIRITUAL FORMATION

Christian spirituality includes reference to tradition and is related to theological themes. Furthermore Christian spirituality does not refer to some other kind of life, but is about the whole of human life (Sheldrake 2000:39-40). According to Wilhoit (2008:23) “Christian spiritual formation refers to the intentional communal process in growing in our relationship with God and becoming conformed to Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit”. This definition emphasizes the intentional process and distinguishes Christian spirituality from spirituality in general. In line with this definition I would like to utilize the concept spiritual formation, describing Christian spirituality as ongoing process, something that is holistic and never static. According to Makue-Olwendo (2009:113) “[S]piritual formation has to do with the intentional focus on the development of the inner being, on forming and edifying relationships, and on engaging in spiritual experiences with the intention to deepen one’s faith in God”. Dallas Willard (2002:22) defines it as a “Spirit-driven process of forming the inner world of the human self in such way that it becomes like the inner being of Christ himself”. Barton (2009:28) echoes the same understanding of spiritual formation when she describes it as “an organic process that goes far beyond mere behavioural tweaks to deep fundamental changes at the very core of our being”.

These definitions of spiritual formation describes Christian spiritual formation as a process through which human beings becomes more and more like Jesus in their way of living through the work of the Holy Spirit. Spiritual formation is therefore seen in this article as describing the process of Christian spirituality. Christian spiritual formation is also connected to the concept

of faith formation as the process of Christian spiritual formation refers to the integration of what we believe in all areas of our lives. Therefore Christian spiritual formation is not a self-help project but is grounded in the grace of God through Jesus Christ from whom we received faith as gift and which is not an achievement. Brümmer (2010:1) also argues that faith is a lens through which Christians view and interpret life as we understand the meaning of our lives and the world in light of our faith. Faith is thus understood as interpretation and therefore hermeneutical. Spirituality he describe as a “form of training in religious experience” through which “we are *trained* to see our lives and experience of the world with the eyes of faith”(Brümmer 2010:2). In this description there is a clear connection between Christian spirituality and faith which is not only a way of seeing but also of living, as *what* and *whom* and *how* we see through the eyes of faith transform us accordingly.

4. SPIRITUAL FORMATION IN A POSTMODERN CONTEXT

Spiritual formation is shaped and affected by contextual and cultural changes. Postmodernity refers to such a profound change, accompanied by ambivalence and ambiguity (Engeland 2006:55). Postmodern consciousness entails an awareness of the fragileness of humankind, the relativity of knowledge and capability of humankind to create and destroy at the same time. This situation of ambivalence and ambiguity demands more than what the entertainment and consumer culture can offer and therefore shapes the spiritual quest today. As mentioned earlier the intensity with regards to spirituality is because of the fact that people today search seriously for a living and vital relationship with God because they feel empty (Rice 1991:21). According to Sheldrake (1991:11) “postmodernity allows Christianity to be itself in a way modernity never could”. Howard (2009:14) describes the challenges of postmodernity as the crisis of meaning, a time of uncertainty and re-definition regarding the frameworks within which we understand and live our lives. The quest for meaning is thus one of the central themes in the postmodern context. According to Howard (2009:15) meaning has to do with how things fit together. He explains meaning as the interplay between our perspectives on the nature of things in general, our fundamental values, the social system that surrounds us and the particulars of the life we are living. The interplay of these various factors creates a sense of stability. In a crisis of meaning this stability is not there and we do not know how things fit together. In times when people are looking for meaning they tend to focus on the mystery, otherness or transcendence of God more than what they know about him, find comfort in experience rather than in knowledge. Bramer (2007:356) describes this shift as follows: “Society has been in a reactive shift from modernism with its privileging of rationalism and objectivism to postmodernism with its greater emphasis on subjectivity, connectivity, and the role of subconscious. Historically, Christian education has been embedded in modernism while spiritual formation seems more in tune with postmodernism”.

Spiritual validity and authenticity for the postmodern spiritual seeker are measured by standards of subjectivity and not doctrinal formulations (Engeland 2006:60). It means that individuals want to be free to choose elements of spiritual traditions that are experienced as relevant. Wright (2006:15) confirms that this understanding of spirituality correlates with the postmodernist view that advocates for individuals to have the freedom to follow their own spiritual desires and mould themselves into the people they want or wish to be. According to this view spirituality is not understood in relation to some transcendent or universal essence, but in terms of the concrete existence of the individual. This kind of spiritual identity could be described as moving away from a theological understanding to a humanistic view of spirituality. Therefore we cannot assume that youth will just join the dogmatic positions Christian churches used to have on life issues. Youth are more informed about different religious traditions and life

in general from a very early stage of life because of the technological and information era we live in. For the purpose of this article it is important to point out the complications of such an individualistic view of spirituality. As Wright (2006:18) puts it: “[S]o long as spiritual identity is understood in terms of the subjectivity of personal inner-space and juxtaposed with the radical notion of freedom as emancipation from all forms of constraint, then the thesis that spiritual identity is necessarily bound up with question of ultimate truth will inevitably encounter opposition”. What is however evident is that spiritual formation does not happen in a vacuum but is formed through “...various traditions, communities, language systems, narratives, world-views through which we seek to arrive at a better understanding of ourselves and the world that we indwell” (Wright 2006:19). This implies that spiritual formation is relational in nature. This leads Wright (2006:21) to the understanding of spirituality as the development of relationships of the individual, within community and in tradition.

The more humanistic, subjective and individualistic view of spirituality however brings particular challenges to Christian spiritual formation as Engeland (2006:62) points out, namely “to develop the capacity for *listening awareness and respect* as well as *critical discernment* in context dialogical communities”. Engeland (2006:61) proposes that we need to keep the questions of human nature and identity alive in this postmodern context, where so much change is taking place which places identity formation and spiritual formation under stress. He eloquently describes the postmodern seeker as *wanderer on a journey, characterized by perpetual departure*, which is at home anywhere and nowhere. Grenz (2002:87-93) sees the challenges to a Christian understanding of spiritual formation as follows: a revisiting of what is understood as Christian spirituality and what can form the central point of conversation between Christian theology and its seemingly secular counterpart? Although it seems that the post-modern spiritual seeker (wanderer) differs from the classical Christian pilgrim both are human beings marked by desire and existential uneasiness (Engeland 2006:62). It is in this postmodern context where youth ministry can focus on spiritual formation as an important element. Youth ministry asks for contextual sensitivity almost more than any other kind of ministry. With contextual sensitivity I mean, having knowledge about the local and global context and how it affects human life in the broadest sense of the word and the development stage of the specific target group of ministry. For the purpose of this article it is necessary to outline in the next section why spiritual formation is vital for Youth ministry today.

5. WHY SHOULD SPIRITUAL FORMATION BE CENTRAL TO YOUTH MINISTRY?

Since the establishment of youth as a social category it has been mostly perceived with ambivalence and is most times described as problematic and a group that is in need of intervention (Cloete 2012:2) This becomes even more a case in point as youth culture starts to emerge, a culture in which the youth live their lives differently from how their parents, or the adult culture they were born into, did. Youth culture here refers to a way of living by the youth; in other words their lifestyle, how they talk, dress and the values behind this lifestyle (Cloete 2012:2). As Tapscott cited by Gushiken (2010:3190) explains: “Adolescents are often viewed as immature, lacking focus and direction. This gives concern and condescension on part of parents and teachers that lead to educational approaches that attempt to survive or solve the adolescent’s experience, rather than embrace it...”. Meyers (2012:2) argues that this negative construct of adolescence, namely “the assumption that it [is] primarily a period of life defined by narcissism, storm and stress, moratorium and consumption” is one of the main sources of suffering by adolescence. This narrow view of adolescence also influences youth ministry and can easily lead to a shallow theological appreciation, instead of a view of youth as spiritual beings

with capabilities and dignity. Dallas Willard (1998:79) indicates that spirituality is “something we cannot escape, regardless of how we think and feel about it. It is our nature and our destiny”. We all are spiritual beings – also adolescents. Therefore, spiritual formation is not some kind of trick, tool or strategy that can be employed in youth ministry, but is an integral part of our human existence. Spiritual formation is a process that we should be aware of in youth ministry, not as something that we can accomplish through the ministry, but of which we are a part of and in service of. Spiritual formation gives an opportunity to youth ministry to nurture youth in their distinct developmental phase, as will become clearer in the last part of the article, and in doing so treat them with dignity. In the last section of this article I would outline 2 foci of spiritual formation that makes it so valuable for youth ministry.

6. SPIRITUAL FORMATION’S FOCUS ON INTEGRATION AND IDENTITY FORMATION

Adolescence is described from a psychological perspective as the period where the development task is that of identity formation. According to Engeland (2006:53) there are significant areas of overlap and common challenges between the spiritual quest and personal identity formation, because “the process of working out a personal identity inevitably implies interaction with core issues of spirituality”. These connections he describes as the process of the social culture and the existential web. Engeland (2006:54) summarizes the connections between spiritual formation and identity formation as follows: “[B]oth are dependent on *relational interactions* on a personal level; both are embedded in social *processes and culture traditions* and both are in continuous dialogue with the *language and symbolic universes* that a given culture offers for the project of self-interpretation and life integration.” Gushiken shares this view that identity formation is primarily an internal pursuit for the meaning of life and thus a spiritual endeavour: “The adolescent phase involves a wrestling with personal ideology as youth strive to arrange their beliefs into a cohesive and consistent whole. This pursuit for identity is natural and necessary and often times involves a spiritual pursuit” (2010:319-320). Identity formation is therefore not just about learning to be an adult or life skills, but about fundamental and existential questions concerning life and the meaning thereof. Mcfarlane (2009:40) shares the same line of thought on identity formation “as an essential part of discovering who God is”. Most young people do not get to an integrated and Christ-centred view of themselves because of the lack of opportunity and nurturing context to assist them in this task. Malan Nel (2001:147), in describing the agogical principle of Scripture, echoes the same understanding, namely that identity formation and faith formation (here referred to as spiritual formation) are interrelated processes and result in *becoming* (underscoring the process) who we already are in Christ. Gushiken (2010:323), using the theory of Loder (1998), confirms that identity formation needs a spiritual foundation in order to discover who you are (identity) in the face of God (who God is). Spiritual formation and identity formation are thus not seen as identical processes, nor opposing or competing processes, but rather as interrelated and complementary (Engeland 2006:59). Youth ministry sometimes neglects this connection and tries to focus on the spiritual without recognizing how these two processes are interrelated. Youth ministry could help to focus on real life issues and experiences of teenagers and not only on cognitive processes of knowing or behavioural changes, by creating spaces where teenagers can discover themselves in the face of God.

7. SPIRITUAL FORMATION IS COMMUNITY-ORIENTED AND INTERGENERATIONAL

It was outlined earlier that the postmodern seeker seems to be focused on a more subjective, individualistic spirituality. Christian spiritual formation, however, is an active process whereby

the individual is involved in his/her own development, while taking place together with other human beings, in other words as much as it is an individual journey it is simultaneously always with the other. As Dykstra (2005:39) puts it: "Faith and the life of faith are communal before they are individual". According to Grenz (2002:95) "[t]he claim that spirituality is a communal project is endemic to merely all Christian traditions". In the light of the communal nature of Christian spirituality, I would argue that involvement in communities of faith is crucial in the process of personal identity formation and spiritual formation as two complementary processes in specifically the life of the adolescent. This correlates with the understanding of Christian spirituality as communal and therefore intergenerational. When we meet the other we discover ourselves as well as God. Then we are in a better position to figure out where we fit into life and what contributions we can make to the greater good of creation of which we are part.

Generational fragmentation is very common today, especially within the church. According to Glassford & Barger-Elliott (2011:365) generational fragmentation manifests itself on two levels in the church namely, first in the form of age-specific ministry (where age groups are separated), and secondly, on a spiritual level (where people on different levels of spiritual development are separated). These two forms of fragmentation are interrelated as both have to do with the separation of younger and older people. As mentioned earlier the postmodern view of spirituality is individualistic and thus not geared towards community. Glassford & Barger-Elliott (2011:366) put it as follows: "[P]ostmodernism has fuelled a shift in emphasis from the needs of the community to the primacy of the individual". In this view the church is viewed as a voluntary organization which has to meet the individual's needs, otherwise there is no commitment of the individual. In such a context generational fragmentation is inevitable. Youth ministry could even be seen as one of the ministries that particularly creates generational fragmentation in churches, because of its age specific ministry. Although there were certain positives with regards to age specific ministry, the downside is more severe as it divides people in the church where there should be unity in/amidst diversity. This also fosters the assumption that one generation is so different from the other that it is impossible to be together (Glassford & Barger-Elliott (2011:366)). I would suggest that youth ministry should create spaces of dialogue and intergenerational contact that counter this individualistic approach and foster Christian spiritual formation which is community oriented. If youth ministry really wants to be of value to the youth it must understand the value of community across generational lines. Westerhoff (1976:53) states: "[T] rue community necessitates the presence and interaction of three generations." He describes the third generation as the generation of memory, the second as the generation of the present, and the first as the generation of vision. All three generations are needed in the community of faith. In order to live as a believer, contact with others longer on the road of spiritual formation is not optional, but critical. As Glassford & Barger-Elliott (2011:376) remarks: "Faith formation is not an accident". It will not happen along the way, youth needs to be among believers to "catch" (see and experience) what it is to live as believer in your everyday life, not only in church. The community of faith could be a primary context where youth learn to live within a community and discover themselves and God through belonging. Spiritual formation where community is central helps and guides youth with regards to real life issues and focuses on the presence of God in the ambiguous messiness and beauty of everyday life. It is as being part of the community of believers that youth are given an opportunity to become familiar with the Christian narrative through which they can interpret their own story and see it from a different perspective by the grace of God for which the community of faith exists.

8. CONCLUSION

From literature it seems evident that there is a great interest in spirituality today. This does not

necessarily mean Christian spirituality as the expression “secular spirituality” (Grenz 2002:92) is also used in the discourse on spirituality. Though the main argument of the article is that identity formation – as primarily a developmental task of adolescence – is also a spiritual process, it also became clear, as Grenz (2002:92) indicates, that the postmodern context is marked by identity chaos which causes all people, not only teenagers, to seek personal integration. The challenges posed by the postmodern subjective and individualistic spirituality – especially to Christian understanding of spirituality – are also noteworthy. The focus on spirituality today could help us to appreciate our humanness in new ways as it does not only refer to certain knowledge about a higher power, but in the case of Christian spirituality rather focuses on our experience of life as humans before God. It could potentially counter fragmentation and foster personal integration, especially in teenagers today.

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KEY WORDS

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