

South African youth ministry: A hermeneutical agency in the lives of young people

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Abstract

Youth ministry, as a practical theological discipline, has surpassed the traditional concept of being a department of the church and is no longer satisfied with being fragmented to serve as a program-based babysitting club, department for evangelistic outreach to young people, discipleship class for new believers, or a leadership incubator within the church. Youth ministry, as a legitimate ministry of the church, serves as a hermeneutical agent in the lives of young people. As a hermeneutical agency, youth ministry has the transformation of the individual as its core function by facilitating young people to have and experience a deep and meaningful relationship with God. The implications, therefore, are that youth ministry must reflect on and interpret the lived contexts of young people to reconcile how God is experienced within their lives and lived contexts. This article, therefore, will investigate how youth ministry can serve as a hermeneutical agency in the lives of young people, so that they may recognise and interpret God's actions in their lives. This study employs a *conceptual methodology*, using critical literature analysis, theological reflection on Scripture, tradition, and context, and Osmer's four tasks of practical theology as its guiding method. Based on a practical theology framework, the findings indicate that youth ministry can harmonise orthodoxy and orthopraxy by interpreting the lived experiences of young people, addressing systemic challenges, and cultivating theology that is grounded in African contexts.

Keywords

youth ministry; youth/young person; hermeneutical agency; hermeneutics

1. Introduction

Christian youth ministry in the South African context is not an easy one. The South African history of youth ministry and youth culture cannot be homogenous or generalised as there are various theological traditions

and expressions, such as the reformed churches, mainline churches such as the RCC and Anglican, ATR's, charismatic churches, and many other expressions such as evangelical, liberation, and indigenous theologies (Nel & Thesnaar 2006:93–95). As any theological or ministerial activity, youth ministry can take on many forms and purposes (Nel 2000:63), such as the four philosophies or perspectives as demonstrated by Root and Bertrand (2011:218–236). These four philosophies or perspectives address the faith development and participation of the youth in relation to their faith community, a liberation from themselves and their communities, a reform or revolution of their communities, and a surrender of themselves within their lived realities of hopelessness. This clearly demonstrates that youth ministry cannot merely be discussed with sweeping statements of purpose or activities and is dependent on the perspective and goals of the youth minister.

Additionally, the South African landscape is one of many complexities (Dames 2013:5; Dreyer 1998:15; Dreyer 2009:11) with diversity in religion, language, and struggles inherited from the historic and evil apartheid system. Youth unemployment remains high, gender-based violence is commonplace, and equal and meaningful access to socio-economic resources such as housing, clean water, sanitation, and education remains a distant dream for many youths (RSA 2024). It, therefore, requires the youth minister to be knowledgeable about the country's past but also its contemporary context, as both have relevance to the lived realities of youth. The youth minister, and by extension, the youth ministry, becomes vital in such a context of diversity, not only as a mediator of scripture and context but also as an interpreter of divine and human experience.

Swinton and Mowat (2011:29) argue that “human beings are by definition “interpretative creatures”; that how we make sense of the world and our experiences within it involves a constant process of interpretation and meaning seeking”. People, or in this article, young people, remain beings of interpretation, although to varying degrees of awareness and understanding.

Considering that young people remain interpretive beings of their lived realities and how these realities may contribute to their existential questions, this article will investigate how youth ministry can serve as a

hermeneutical agency to recognise and interpret God's actions in the lives of young people. This will be achieved through a theoretical approach by discussing the hermeneutical function of youth ministry as a practical theological discipline. The suggestions on the way forward for a youth ministry, as this article posits, will be a journey with youth, youth ministry to evolve into a public practical theology, and the need for an indigenous ministry philosophy and approach.

2. Stated framework and method

This study is situated within the discipline of practical theology and adopts a *practical theological framework* to examine youth ministry as a hermeneutical agency in South Africa. The framework is further informed by insights from *public practical theology*. Together, these lenses guide the argument from beginning to end, providing coherence and ensuring that the discussion of youth ministry moves beyond programmatic models to engage with the lived realities of young people.

2.1 Hermeneutical Practical Theology

Following Heitink (1993), practical theology is best understood as an action-oriented discipline that bridges the gap between Scripture, tradition, and the praxis of contemporary life. Youth ministry as practical theology must therefore be hermeneutical in nature: it interprets not only biblical texts but also the lives of young people as “texts” that reveal God's activity. Swinton and Mowat (2011) emphasise that human beings are interpretive creatures, constantly engaged in making meaning of their experiences. Osmer's (2008) four tasks of practical theology – descriptive, interpretive, normative, and pragmatic – provide a methodological structure for this study. Through these tasks, the argument consistently addresses both orthodoxy (right belief) and orthopraxy (right practice) as inseparable dimensions of youth ministry.

2.2 Public Practical Theology

The South African context necessitates that youth ministry does not remain confined to ecclesial spaces but engages with broader societal realities. Public practical theology (Dreyer 2011; Magezi 2019) underscores the church's responsibility to respond to systemic injustices such as inequality,

unemployment, and gender-based violence. By employing this lens, youth ministry is framed as a public witness that integrates theological orthodoxy with orthopraxy, ensuring that faith is both contextually relevant and socially transformative and that emphasises the need for youth ministry to emerge from within African realities rather than being imposed from outside. Theologies must be developed with and by young people in their own cultural settings. This lens makes visible the danger of maintaining orthodoxy without orthopraxy, where theology becomes abstract and detached from lived realities. By rooting youth ministry in indigenous perspectives, the framework ensures that orthodoxy and orthopraxy are held together in a way that honours the voices, struggles, and hopes of South African youth.

2.3 Methodological approach

Although this is not an empirical study, the methodology is *conceptual and hermeneutical*. The research, therefore, proceeds by *analysing literature* in youth ministry and practical theology, with specific focus on a *hermeneutical reflection* on the three sources of theology: Scripture, Christian tradition, and contemporary cultural context (Grenz 1993). The article will also reflect *Osmer's four tasks* to trace how youth ministry can function as a hermeneutical agency.

2.4 Application of framework to orthodoxy and orthopraxy

The theoretical framework ensures that orthodoxy (faith, doctrine, and theological integrity) and orthopraxy (action, practice, and faithful living) are not treated as separate or opposing categories. Rather, they are interpreted as mutually reinforcing. For example:

1. When youth ministry is reduced to orthodoxy alone (e.g., catechism without social engagement), faith risks becoming abstract and irrelevant.
2. When reduced to orthopraxy alone (e.g., activism without theological grounding), ministry risks becoming social work rather than transformative discipleship.
3. A balanced hermeneutical approach would see, for instance, a youth ministry addressing gender-based violence: teaching the theological

conviction of the imago Dei (orthodoxy), while simultaneously equipping youth to advocate, serve, and embody justice in their communities (orthopraxy).

Such examples demonstrate how the theoretical framework undergirds the argument throughout, ensuring that the study is not merely descriptive of youth ministry challenges but prescriptive in charting pathways for reflection on God's activity in the lives of youth.

2.5 Outcomes of the framework

By employing this composite framework, the study will show that:

1. Youth ministry must be a *hermeneutical agency* that interprets the lives of young people alongside, but not replacing, Scripture and tradition.
2. It must embody a public witness, addressing systemic and contextual realities in South Africa.
3. It must develop an indigenous character, shaped by African perspectives such as ubuntu, ensuring theology resonates with the lived experiences of young people.

These outcomes form the central findings of the study and demonstrate a coherent pathway by which youth ministry can balance orthodoxy and orthopraxy in a South African context.

3. Youth ministry as practical theology

It is accepted as fact that youth ministry is a discipline of practical theology (Dean 2001:19; Clark 2008:10; Strong 2014; Jacober 2011:16; Nel 2003:73). As a practical theological discipline, youth ministry then should have the action-theories of youth as its focus (Heitink 1993:129). While these action-theories are numerous, the most relevant is reflected in the action theories of Osmer (2008) and Heitink (1993), where youth ministry should be a meeting place where reflection on the lived realities of young people is interpreted in order that they may see God at work in their lives. Heitink (1993:141) explains it this way: “practical theology as a theological theory of action ... attempts to bridge the gulf between text (Scripture and tradition) and action (the praxis of mediation).” It is the task of practical theology to

reflect and enable faithful practice, although not in isolation from the other theological disciplines, yet Swinton and Mowat (2011:13) argue that practical theology will “challenge and disturb certain accepted assumptions”. Youth ministry as practical theology should be prophetic to enable faithful practice (Swinton & Mowat 2011:13). Some of the assumptions that would be challenged, according to Olsen’s (2007:67–94) argument, include that hermeneutics should not be only about orthodoxy but orthopraxy. While hermeneutics is considered a three-fold communicative process, or a “trialogue,” (Grenz 1993:94), which comprises “the Spirit speaking through Scripture, the theological tradition of Christianity, and the contemporary cultural context,” (Olsen 2007:112), it will have to address more than just the interpretation of scripture. The specific focus in this article is the often-overlooked aspect of context, as evidence of God’s actions.

As a theological task, youth ministry should interpret the situations, or contexts, of young people (Aziz 2024). The interpretation of situations, according to Swinton and Mowat (2011:15), is often a missing dimension in the theological task. While the task of interpreting situations should not be done in isolation from the normative texts of scripture or the Christian tradition, it however, often overlooked or ignored completely. As previously mentioned, the three pillars of the hermeneutical task include scripture, tradition, and context. Once again, Swinton and Mowat (2011:15) argue that “text of human experience in general and the experience of the Church in particular holds interpretive significance for theological development” (Swinton & Mowat 2011:15).

Youth ministry must approach the lives of young people as divine texts that require careful interpretation, a task that does not elevate the lives of young people nor place them on par with scripture but recognises their importance in the hermeneutical process. While Scripture itself remains unchanged, serving as a testament to God’s historical work, its interpretation is a dynamic process that must not only remain relevant to contemporary contexts but also be revealed in contemporary contexts. Interpretation should not be confined to rigid, traditional understandings for the sake of maintaining orthodoxy; rather, it should focus on orthopraxy by reflecting and applying biblical truths in ways that shape faithful living today.

Since young people's realities are constantly evolving, youth ministry must engage in continuous reflection to discern God's active presence in their lives. By doing so, youth ministry ensures that its approach remains responsive and transformative, rather than static and disconnected from the lived experiences of young people.

Youth ministry, therefore, must interpret young people's lives as evolving texts, much like how Scripture remains relevant through ongoing interpretation. Youth ministry, therefore, should emphasise practical application (orthopraxy) that speaks to contemporary realities. Since the lived experiences of youth are constantly changing, ministry must continuously reflect on and assess these experiences to recognise God's presence and work among them.

4. Youth ministry and hermeneutics

Hermeneutics, broadly defined as the study of interpretation, extends beyond theological inquiry to encompass various disciplines. Within theology, traditional hermeneutics has primarily been a one-directional process, bridging the gap between the ancient world of Scripture and contemporary readers by interpreting biblical texts in a way that applies to their time. However, modern perspectives on hermeneutics emphasise a more dynamic approach. Interpretation is not solely about extracting meaning from texts but also about integrating the lived experiences of individuals. In this view, hermeneutics becomes a theory of interpretation that links exegesis, the study of written documents, with the social realities and experiences of the interpreting subject (Heitink 1993:140–141).

While maintaining theological integrity is essential, the goal of biblical interpretation is not simply to accumulate knowledge but to draw individuals into an encounter with the living God (Carson 1996:167) in a transformative way that fosters a right and meaningful relationship with God (Olsen 2007:67–94). This perspective expands hermeneutics beyond textual analysis, incorporating the historical traditions of faith communities, contemporary cultural contexts, and personal experiences to discern God's activity in the world today (Grenz 1993:51).

A crucial task of practical theology, and by extension, youth ministry, is the ability to “read” and interpret life situations. Theologians and ministry practitioners must not only apply theoretical insights to church practices but also engage in deep theological reflection on real-life experiences. This process involves evaluating, critiquing, and reconsidering how faith is lived out in response to different contexts (Swinton & Mowat 2011:12). Osmer (2008:18–24) describes the leader as an interpretive guide who theologically analyses contexts within the hermeneutical circle. Hermeneutics, Osmer (2008:18–24) argues, is never entirely neutral, as it is shaped by past understandings and judgments. Beyond interpreting ancient texts, hermeneutics also involves how people interpret their everyday experiences, with preconceptions being challenged when faced with new insights. Thus, hermeneutics in youth ministry must move beyond doctrinal transmission and become an active dialogue between Scripture, tradition, and contemporary culture. Scripture remains the authoritative foundation, but church tradition and societal realities also serve as significant voices in the interpretative process. The challenge is to ensure that tradition does not become rigid traditionalism, where past interpretations dictate meaning in a way that stifles transformation (Olsen 2007:67–94). For instance, when engaging issues of identity and belonging, Scripture affirms the *imago Dei*, that every young person is created in the image of God (Gen. 1:27). The tradition of the church provides theological depth in affirming human dignity, while the lived reality of South African youth highlights struggles with self-worth, peer pressure, and digital influences. Youth ministry can embody this dialogue by creating safe spaces where young people explore these realities and tensions through Bible study, testimonies, and reflective conversations that affirm their worth in Christ.

If hermeneutics is overlooked in youth ministry, the consequences could be significant. Without a robust interpretative framework, youth ministry may become overly focused on rigid doctrinal instruction rather than fostering a faith that is both meaningful and relevant to young people. A lack of hermeneutical engagement could result in a disconnection between faith and real-life experiences, making Christianity seem abstract or irrelevant in the face of contemporary challenges. Furthermore, if Scripture is presented without considering its historical, social, and cultural contexts,

young people may struggle to see its applicability to their daily lives, potentially leading to disengagement or scepticism.

Additionally, neglecting hermeneutics in youth ministry could reduce faith formation to mere behavioural modification, where the emphasis is placed on external compliance rather than internal transformation. Youth may learn rules and doctrines but lack the ability to critically engage with their faith, leading to either blind acceptance or eventual rejection when faced with difficult questions. Moreover, without an interpretative lens that includes the voices of tradition and contemporary culture, there is a risk of fostering either extreme legalism or uncritical cultural conformity, both of which can hinder authentic spiritual growth.

5. Youth ministry as a hermeneutical agency

Following on the preceding point regarding youth ministry as practical theology, it therefore serves as a hermeneutical agent in the lives of young people, facilitating a meaningful relationship between God and the young person through the interpretive interplay of Scripture, tradition, and context.

Dean (2010:10–11) observes that current youth ministry practices often fail to pass on adequate understandings of God, the church, and the world. Interpreted through a hermeneutical lens, this represents a breakdown in tradition, where inherited catechetical models have become insufficient to nurture deep and transformative faith. Weyel's (2014:156) concern that the church is experiencing a "loss of reality" speaks to a neglect of context, where ministry has become dominated by programmatic control rather than genuine engagement with the lived experiences of young people. Nel (2003:75–76) adds that new practice theories are needed precisely because youth ministry must hold together Scripture (God's self-giving love), tradition (the interpretative community of faith), and context (the diverse realities of South African youth). Together, these critiques confirm that youth ministry as a hermeneutical agency must move beyond static knowledge transfer toward spaces where orthodoxy and orthopraxy are mutually reinforcing.

For youth ministry to be ministry – bearing witness to Christ’s self-giving love in the church and the world – it must provide a context for spiritual engagement where communion between young people and God is nourished through Scripture, tradition, and the lived context of their faith communities (Dean 2010:66). If this threefold dialogue is absent, youth ministry risks reducing young people to passive recipients of religious content. Hermeneutically, ministry leaders must instead walk alongside youth as fellow travellers, engaging in shared meaning-making that integrates doctrinal conviction (Scripture and tradition) with authentic responses to contemporary challenges (context).

A central goal of youth ministry is to help young people discern their God-given purpose and calling (Nel 2003:73). When examined through the three-part hermeneutical framework, this purpose is shaped by the Scriptural witness that affirms divine calling, the tradition of the church that has historically nurtured vocation, and the context of South African youth struggling with identity, belonging, and socio-economic pressures. This balance prevents youth ministry from being reduced to programmatic efforts and instead situates it as a holistic engagement within both church and society.

The diverse and ever-changing context of South African youth – marked by unemployment, poverty, and inequality – demands contextualisation not as an afterthought but as a theological imperative (Dean 2003:13). Here, youth ministry as hermeneutical agency interprets these lived realities alongside Scripture and tradition so that faith becomes both theologically sound and socially relevant. For example, mentoring and discipleship (rooted in tradition) gain transformative meaning when contextualised in peer-led initiatives that address systemic challenges (reflecting context) and grounded in the biblical call to justice and love (Scripture).

Swartz (2004:90) highlights the lack of accurate, up-to-date research on youth and religion in South Africa. Viewed hermeneutically, this gap illustrates how failing to engage context leaves youth ministry at risk of misinterpreting or overlooking young people’s realities. Without integration of empirical insight with Scripture and tradition, ministry efforts may default to a simplistic salvation focus that ignores holistic faith

formation. Hermeneutical youth ministry, therefore, must deliberately integrate these three sources to avoid superficial engagement.

Similarly, Kageler (2015:10) stresses that youth ministry should not limit itself to spiritual growth alone but include social engagement and service. In hermeneutical terms, this balance requires that Scripture's call to discipleship be read alongside tradition's witness of diakonia (service) and contextual realities of community needs. This integration ensures that orthodoxy does not become an abstract belief but is embodied through orthopraxy in the daily lives of young people.

Jacobson (2011:22, 26) reminds us that youth ministry has the unique privilege of responding meaningfully to young people's concerns and reconciling theology with everyday life. Hermeneutically, this requires interpreting those concerns through the lens of Scripture (faith convictions), tradition (the church as interpretive community), and context (the struggles and hopes of today's youth). This threefold integration makes ministry both theologically credible and contextually relevant.

Historically, youth ministry has been reduced to an extension of the church's educational program (Nel 2003:72–89). When assessed against the hermeneutical framework, this reflects an overreliance on tradition without adequate attention to Scripture's dynamic call to discipleship or context's demand for relevance in changing youth cultures. Cloete (2012:74) stresses that youth ministry must instead be a vital expression of the church's mission – providing spaces where young people encounter God in transformative ways. Such encounters embody the full hermeneutical dialogue by ensuring that orthodoxy (belief) and orthopraxy (practice) remain inseparably linked.

Ultimately, as Dean (2011:19–21) concludes, youth ministry must be comprehensive and contextually relevant, addressing the lived struggles, questions, and aspirations of young people. The hermeneutical framework of Scripture, tradition, and context provides the necessary coherence: Scripture as an authoritative foundation, tradition as historical witness, and context as the lived reality that demands engagement. By holding these three together, youth ministry is positioned as a true hermeneutical agency – fostering a faith that is both theologically rooted and socially transformative.

6. A way forward for youth ministry as a hermeneutical agency

This next section will conclude the article by suggesting a way forward for youth ministry to serve as a hermeneutical agency in the lives of the youth by reflecting on the three aspects of the theoretical framework. I would like to suggest that the first step is journeying with the youth through an engagement with scripture. The second step is to recognise their unique situations and contexts through a public practical theology by rethinking church tradition. Finally, to provide young people with the opportunity to express how they envision the youth ministry responding to their spiritual journey and identity in their walk with God through a contextual understanding.

6.1 A journey with youth through an engagement with scripture

For youth ministry to serve adequately as a hermeneutical agency in contemporary South Africa, it must transcend models that emphasise rigid programs and the mere dissemination of information through contextualisation processes. Instead, youth ministry must be descriptive as it journeys with young people by actively responding to their social and spiritual realities (Linhart & Livermore 2011:35) by listening, reflecting, and struggling with God's actions in their lives (Aziz 2019:4). A prescriptive youth ministry merely intends to uphold traditions and theologies at the expense of the lived realities of youth. This shift calls for youth ministry to be more than just a vehicle for teaching biblical knowledge; it must become a lived expression of faith that is deeply embedded in the everyday experiences of young people.

At its core, youth ministry should aim to cultivate a faith that young people can claim as their own in a meaningful relationship with God. Faith formation must extend beyond passive participation in church activities and move toward active ownership, where young individuals are empowered to explore, question, and grow in their Christian journey. The goal is not simply to impart religious knowledge but to nurture spiritual maturity, helping young people integrate their faith into all aspects of life (Burns & DeVries 2001:69).

If youth ministry remains fixated on programmatic structures and information-driven models, it risks becoming ineffective in addressing the real spiritual and personal needs of young people as they wrestle with existential challenges (Nel 2000:101). If youth are not encouraged to wrestle with and internalise their beliefs, there is a higher likelihood that their faith will remain superficial, or something inherited rather than personally embraced.

To be truly transformative, youth ministry must move beyond rigid structures and become a living, breathing presence in the lives of young people. By prioritising relationships, fostering ownership of faith, and engaging holistically with communities, youth ministry can guide young people toward lasting spiritual maturity and a faith that is not only understood but fully lived. This journey with youth, or “place-sharing” as Root (2012:86) calls it, is sharing in their struggles, their hopes, and even their fears as the youth wrestle with God (Gen 32:24–28).

6.2. A public practical theology by rethinking church tradition

While public theologies continue to be the domain of systematic theologies, there has been a phenomenal growth in the discussion of a public practical theology in South Africa (Dreyer 2004, Dreyer 2007, 2011, Dreyer & Pieterse 2010, Magezi 2019, Aziz 2022). This is a necessary growth and development considering the role of the church, and by extension, the youth ministry in society during and post-apartheid South Africa. The youth ministry must be able and willing to respond to the needs of the youth, whether actual or perceived, by being reflective and responsive in their worlds.

In South Africa, youth ministry cannot afford to be a rigid, program-driven initiative. The realities facing South African youth – such as economic hardship, unemployment, crime, systemic inequalities, and the lingering effects of apartheid – necessitate a ministry that is deeply engaged with the lived experiences of young people (Dreyer & Aziz 2020:41). A purely informational youth ministry, focused only on dispensing theological knowledge, fails to address the broader social, emotional, and spiritual challenges that young South Africans navigate daily. This approach of providing information, in turn, could rob the youth of truly experiencing the transforming grace of God.

A relational and holistic approach is particularly crucial in a context where many young people struggle with identity, belonging, and purpose (Nel 2025:2). South African youth are shaped by diverse cultural backgrounds, family structures, and socio-economic realities, meaning that faith cannot simply be taught in a vacuum. Instead, youth ministry must actively journey with them, creating spaces where they can wrestle with faith during their personal and societal struggles. This aligns with the need for young people to take ownership of their faith, ensuring it is not just an inherited belief system but something that speaks into their real-life circumstances.

Furthermore, in a society where trust in institutions, including the church, has been eroded by corruption and historical injustices, youth ministry must be a credible and transformative presence. It must not only provide hope through spiritual guidance but also act as a force for healing, reconciliation, community restoration, and a sense of purpose (Vaughn et al. 2022:3). A ministry that moves beyond rigid structures and engages holistically with youth in their context ensures that faith is not merely an abstract concept but a lived reality that empowers young people to navigate and transform their world.

By embracing this approach, South African youth ministry can become more than just a church activity; it can be a lifeline, equipping young people with the resilience, hope, and faith they need to shape both their own futures and the future of the nation.

6.3. An indigenous ministry through a contextual understanding

While a public practical theology can also be reactive, although the ideal should not be so, there is a need for a local or indigenous ministry approach. In order for youth ministry to fulfil its role as a hermeneutical agency, it must adopt an indigenous ministry model, one that emerges from the South African context to effectively address the specific needs of local youth. While external or adapted – contextual – models may hold value, they are often shaped by concerns that differ significantly from those of South African youth. Indigenous models should be developed by South African youth themselves, ensuring credibility and alignment with their lived experiences (Aziz 2024:19–20). Amenyedzi (2023:5) argues, “African youth research is done by African people who understand the real contextual issues and is within African cultures and researched from

an African (Afrocentric) lens”. This approach facilitates the emergence of theologies that are both unique and contextually relevant, while also enabling youth ministry to recognise, engage with, and affirm the voices and struggles of young people.

But what exactly does an indigenous youth ministry look like? Aziz (2024:14–19) lists at least three ways that this can be achieved. The first and obvious step is the idea of ubuntu, or place-sharing (Root 2012:86), where the daily struggles and challenges of youth must, in fact, matter. There should not be an eschatology that focuses only on eternity with God at the expense of a full or abundant life in the present – a human flourishing (Jn 10:10) (Wright 2012). The youth must be seen! The second step that flows naturally from the first is when we see the youth, we hear them. An indigenous youth ministry must hear and listen to the youth and not impose theologies or answers to questions that are not asked. When the lived experiences of the youth matter to youth ministry, then the stories of the youth should also matter. Flowing from ubuntu, their “humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in what is yours” (Tutu 1999:31). This does mean that not only is youth ministry important to the young person, but the young person is also important to the youth ministry – a mutuality of shaping and informing. The third, and most obvious step, is that every young person matters, whether they are part of the church or not. This is vital to accept, especially in the diverse country of South Africa, as mentioned in the introduction. There can be no “other”.

For youth to cultivate an encounter with God within their diverse cultural settings and engage meaningfully with God, they must be situated in an environment that affirms who they are within both the church and society. By embracing their identity as those “created and recreated in Christ” (Nel 2000:101), this environment should enable the youth to acknowledge and live out their existing identity and purpose in Christ. This envisions a form of Christendom that embodies hope in Jesus Christ, affirms a shared humanity in which individual worth is rooted, and embraces a Christian response characterised by love and acceptance that reflects the heart of the Father as revealed in Jesus Christ and through the Holy Spirit.

7. Conclusion

For youth ministry to be truly effective and contribute meaningfully to the lives of youth, it must move beyond rigid structures and mere information transfer and embrace a holistic and real presence in the lives of young people. Programs and knowledge-based approaches, while valuable, are insufficient on their own. A youth ministry that is truly hermeneutical must actively engage with young people in their contexts, fostering deep relationships that allow them to internalise the actions of God so that they can take ownership of their faith but also of God's presence within their struggles. There must be a balance between orthodoxy and orthopraxy, and it is only through an experience with God that this is realised.

By prioritising ministry, relationships, and journey over programmatic rigidity, youth ministry creates opportunities for young people to wrestle with their faith, reflect on their experiences with God, and integrate their faith into their daily lives, leading to genuine spiritual maturity. When youth ministry is deeply connected to the lived experiences of young people and their families, it becomes a guiding force that equips them for lifelong and deeply meaningful relationships with God. While there may still be existential questions and challenges, the youth will intimately know God's actions. Conversely, a ministry that remains fixated on information without fostering meaningful reflection on faith and context risks disengagement, superficial belief, and perhaps even not realising a relationship with God.

Ultimately, youth ministry is not just about teaching faith; it is about modelling it, living it, and walking alongside young people as they navigate their spiritual journeys. A ministry that embraces this calling ensures that faith is not merely inherited but deeply rooted, resilient, and transformative in the lives of young people and their communities as they experience God.

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