



How Youth Ministry Can Change Theological Education - If We Let It

Dean, Kenda Creasy, and Hearlson, Christy Lang, eds.
Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2016

Book Review

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Reviewed by: Sunder John Boopalan, *Episcopal Divinity School*

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Acutely aware of the North American religious landscape, the editors introduce the volume by noting two ironies – a vast majority of young people subscribe to a superficial understanding of self, God, and the world, and those who are more complexly informed are often mistakenly considered by youth ministries to be “already won” (8). With this awareness, the editors bring together a diverse set of essays that intentionally make an effort to overcome this irony. By making critical references to High School Theology Programs, the different authors weigh in on the matter by treating high school students as full persons who desire and invite serious mentorship, challenge conventionally held notions, and are ready to hit the spiritual formation ball out of the park.

Several authors highlight how young people are often liturgically formed by dominant social conventions that impact their behavior and their ability to articulate the meaning of self and world. If young people are thus culturally tutored, how can those in youth ministry enable a different way of theologically framing lived experiences? How can they creatively disrupt unhelpful naming systems, for example, that young people are enculturated into in such a way that naming the issue could become a means to rethink and rename ways of being in the world? What would this take and what would it cost?

Each author presents arguments and perspectival interventions that are based on hard evidence and long-term work with high school students. Work with youth, in the end, affects youth and those who work with them. The book argues that such giving and receiving offers grounds for holy friendship and mutual companionship that can and will positively change self and world. Faculty members in theological schools are encouraged to actively seek out for themselves and others opportunities to teach age groups that they may not otherwise readily

engage. No age is “too young.” While the difficulty of the task is not underestimated, the rewards, the authors argue, are many. Church workers are called to focus not so much on saving churches but rather on “saving lives” (275). Both may eventually be saved in the process.

The subtitle “If We Let It” captures the philosophical framework of this book. Readers interested in learning how youth ministry can change theological education – if we let it – will learn a great deal from this work that serves as a well-researched handbook, an indictment of theological malnourishment, and a mirror that poses hard and important questions to those interested in more than a cosmetic makeover of theological education today.

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