Solid Steps on Shifting Sand: Theological Education for Work with Children, Young People and Young Adults

Dr Nick Shepherd, Chief Executive Officer, Centre for Youth Ministry
Dr Sally Nash, Director, Midlands Centre for Youth Ministry

Abstract

This paper focuses on the rationale and pedagogical basis for theological education that the Centre for Youth Ministry (CYM) has developed over the past ten years. It identifies the areas of polity, ecology and integrity as an organising framework with which to discuss the shifting sand and subsequent solid steps which CYM are taking which facilitate us continuing our development as a dynamic learning community offering high quality theological education to equip people to work in the constantly changing landscapes of work with children, young people, young adults and community mission. One of the consequences of this is the reconfiguring of CYM as the Institute for Children, Youth and Mission.

Introduction

The Centre for Youth Ministry (CYM) was established as a partnership between practitioner and higher education organizations including Bristol Baptist College, Frontier Youth Trust, Oxford Youth Works, Ridley Hall Cambridge, St John’s Nottingham and Youth for Christ. Students were first admitted in 1998; in 2011 CYM had nearly 500 learners – 260 undergraduates, 50 postgraduates and others taking further education and professional development courses. This paper will articulate the background, current context and future development of theological education for CYM’s disciplines of work with children, young people and young adults.

In 2002 Revd Dr Bob Mayo, then Director of Cambridge CYM, wrote a short paper for the Journal of Adult Theological Education outlining the rationale and pedagogical basis that CYM had developed for theological education. Mayo did not write a manifesto as such, but his article encapsulates the core motifs behind the establishment of CYM, elements that remain critical to our approach to theological education ten years on.

1) CYM would incorporate the training and mentoring of students to meet the requirements for professional (JNC) status in Youth and Community Work within a curriculum and pastoral framework that views this task as Christian ‘ministerial’ formation.

2) CYM would pioneer a “praxis model of learning theology” built around supervised practice based learning supported by discursive teaching with practitioner-educators and regular participation in a learning community.

3) CYM would encourage an understanding of the task of theology as ‘practical’ – rational thinking and engaged activity connected to ‘wider social and political contexts’; with a commitment to reflective practice as a critical discipline for ‘patterns of belief and commitment’.

1 Correspondence to either author welcomed; Sally Nash – s.nash@stjohns-nottm.ac.uk; Nick Shepherd – nickshepherd@centreforyouthministry.ac.uk
In this ten year journey CYM has negotiated the types of structural issues faced by any institution moving from pioneer to established body. As an organisation committed to partnership this aspect of our journey has required considerable attention. However, our focus for this paper is the broader changes that have affected our field in the last decade. It is these ‘shifting sands’ in our context that make it all the more necessary to identify what ‘solid steps’ can be taken to better engage in the task of theological education for our constituency. The proposal we make is that the three principles upon which CYM was founded above offer ‘planks’ upon which this solid ground can be built in a landscape for practice and education that now appears to be constantly shifting.6

The shifting sands that we are most keenly aware at present relate to the polity, ecology and integrity of our theological education. We examine these aspects of what it means to be theological educators from our experience in preparing and partnering people in youth work, children and family work and community mission. They are though lenses through which the practice of theological education for other forms of ministerial or vocational training can be viewed. We do not extend our discussion to these areas here, though given that a new phase in integrating such training is before many in the UK, this work is deserving of attention. However, we begin with an overview of the perceived crisis in Christian work with children and young people which is the underlying issue and in some contexts the elephant in the room.

Facing a crisis: The context for Christian work with children and young people

A steady stream of research suggests that growing up in a family that espouses and participates in a particular faith tradition does not mean that a young person will automatically adopt their parents’ faith.7 Voas and Crockett propose that at best such young people have 50/50 chance of ‘believing and belonging’ into adulthood. Such disaffiliation marks a ‘failure in religious socialisation [resulting] in whole generations being less active and believing less than the ones that came before’8 Their proposed explanation for this failure in intergenerational transmission of faith is that this is an identifiable fault line where the effect of secularisation is felt within the faith community. Attributing more specific causality is difficult and an ongoing source of enquiry. According to MacLaren, a strong candidate for consideration is ‘choice’ – that having choice over ones identity is an expected operation of late-modern culture.9 MacLaren suggests that traditionally, in pre-Reformation Europe, the ability to choose to believe was not an option, being Christian provided for a ‘general need for identity within a sacred society’. However, in a de-traditionalising society such a choice is available and viable and it is at the juncture of young adulthood such choice is ‘forced upon young people’.10 More than ever young people who are raised in church families have the choice to not believe as the ‘natural’ progression of their faith.

The position for children and young people who do not have a faith background is somewhat different. Without familial connection they do not have a faith to dissociate from, but are no longer raised in a context where faith informs identity in any significant measure. In the same survey that established the ‘failure of transmission between generations’, Voas and Crocket also have statistical data that casts doubt of the veracity of transmission (translation and transformation) to young people outside the church. Their data indicates that the likelihood of a young person becoming a ‘believing and belonging’ Christian with no direct parental influence is chance of a 0.3%.11 Such a small percentage ‘chance’ should not undervalue the potential that ‘choice for a religious identity’ presents to young people in a period of life where identity issues remain pivotal.12

To label this a crisis is apt, emphasised by the recent Evangelical Alliance sponsored debate on children and youth ministry. This event gathered people to discuss the apparent failure of youth and children’s ministry under the, perhaps overly sensationalistic, titles of ‘time to scrap Sunday school’ and ‘time to get rid of the youth worker’. It is true that the shifting sands of the context within which children and young people form (or do not form) faith provokes a variety of responses. However, it is more accurate in our view to understand the emergence and continual evolution of
Children and Youth Work as an intervention into this crisis. This can be clearly seen historically as youth work emerges in the modern period which mirrors the de-traditionalising of society.\textsuperscript{13} For some the answer to apparent failure lies in affirming whole church ministry, re-establishing the role of the family at the heart of the educative and formative task of nurturing faith. This though appears over simplistic, not only in its limited attention to the missional task, but also its lack of attention to influences that are causing this deep crisis in religious transmission.

The conditions that affect religious identity are necessarily complex, which is why Schweitzer argues that rather than looking for explanations for trends in affiliation and disaffiliation in ‘grand theories’, such as secularisation or lifecycle theory, greater attention should be focussed on charting the particular biographical journey each young person faces.\textsuperscript{14} Biographical studies attest to the collision of influences and events that affect faith and identity which become apparent from qualitative investigation of young people’s life courses and lived experiences of faith.\textsuperscript{15}

A focus on biography also individualises the task of negotiating transition to adult faith. From a pastoral perspective Gerkin notes that individuals are required to engage in significant ‘theological work’ and this work is best undertaken within a community of practice.\textsuperscript{16} Gerkin suggests that the task of being ‘interpretive guides’ and building ‘communities of interpretation’ becomes the paramount pastoral focus in late modernity – supporting and structuring individual and communal theological work. Similarly in missional work, the focus on the worker as primary in ‘relational’ youth work has been relocated to a more nuanced communal task of building Christian communities that are accessible and committed to including young people whose biographical journeys are complex and perhaps troubled. Whether a young person actually encounters the people and situations that raise the possibility of faith becomes a key question; as does the continuing contact they might have.\textsuperscript{17}

Those entering youth and children’s work are thus engaged in a field of practice that demands considerable creativity and the capacity to critically examine and evolve personal and corporate practices. The pedagogy Mayo identifies was intended to be benchmarks that CYM would establish in its theological education to provide the best preparation and support those working in these fields. However, as the crisis has not abated continued innovation is required in how we might enhance or extend these values to support and stimulate the interventions required to address the failure in religious transmission across generations and in mission.

**Shifting sand: challenges of polity, ecology and integrity in theological Education**

There are a range of paradoxical tensions inherent in theological education which may make it feel like we are on shifting sands while trying to take solid steps.\textsuperscript{18} In this section we identify the particular challenges in the _polity, ecology and integrity_ of theological education in our context. In so doing we will clarify what dimensions of practice we see as pertinent to these categories. We have adopted this scheme as an organising framework for the challenges we see as prescient. Yet having done so we do venture that such an organising framework has merit in focussing the trajectory of debate on the development of theological education; and that for work with children, young people and community ministry in particular.

**Polity: The challenge of defining uncertain roles**

Farley notes theological education is “a way of conceiving things” and determining the unity and purpose of theological study.\textsuperscript{19} Farley’s focus was the sedimentation of knowledge and practice, but the principle that the nature of theological education is directly connected to the shape of ministerial practices and the life of the church is a theme now well established.\textsuperscript{20} As such, theological education becomes a key site where the outcomes for the type of mission and ministry the church, or sections of the church, desire are played out. This is as true in youth work and children’s ministry as in any other field.
How youth work and children’s ministry is understood, organised and authorised remains in many ways as ill defined as it was when CYM and other training courses were created in the 1990s. Whilst the last ten years has seen a steady rise in the number of such professionally qualified workers being employed by churches, charities and mission agencies, we are still on very shifting sands when it comes to the authorisation and recognition of such roles in relation to other forms of ministry. Choices made in theological education belie, or aim to justify, underlying views of what this practice should look like. One of the aims in this paper is to externalise what the values are that CYM holds to, and in so doing to stimulate a debate that will lead to clearer articulation of opposing or supporting views. The fruits of this activity can generate a more concrete re-imagination of the forms of ministry that might better serve the church in its pastoral, missional and societal roles – so that polity does not become politics.

A further dimension of polity is how the educational merits of our activity are justified – specifically validation and accreditation. This is particularly pertinent in youth work, and increasingly in children and family work, since in these fields the standards and practices for work have, up until this point, resided outside of the paradigms for theological education. How such professional training is contested and the approach CYM has taken, to incorporate professional training with Christian formation, has provoked detractors from a variety of vantage points from representatives of faith, statutory and third sectors. What has been misunderstood by some as a ‘commitment to professionalism over ministry’ is, as stated previously, a deeper commitment to theological education in this field is an iterative task involving a dialogue between differing sources of professional habitus, which are often complementary but at other times compete to undermine the formation of professional identity.21 Yet to engage in this work is difficult when the ground continues to shift around you. As Clayton and Stanton note over the past twenty five years a culture has arisen that is hostile to faith-based work based on the supposed neutrality of secularism and it is now at risk of losing its distinctive.22 Since CYM embarked on its journey the philosophical basis and agreed standards for professional youth work have become a constantly evolving, and largely more complex set of criteria to interpret. In this new dialectic, the notion of ‘faith based’ work is no longer taken by all as a legitimate outworking of professional practice. Christian courses that wish to retain this accreditation are therefore required to meet demands on curricula and modes of delivery that somewhat different than were present. CYM, and others in the field, are therefore required to ‘defend or bend’ what we are seeking to achieve in our training to meet these standards.

Ecology: The challenge of delivering in times of change

If polity refers to an internal driver to ‘sift and shift’ the purpose of theological education, and to collectively act to achieve these goals, in ecology we wish to capture that such action is not isolated from the cultural and social contexts in which it occurs. There are ‘selective pressures’ that inform our practices and in particular the relationships with those who study and train with us. A significant influence in youth work pedagogy, Paulo Freire has a book subtitled “Letters to Those Who Dare Teach”,23 when CYM first began to take students in 1998 this was very much the feeling and on one level this feeling has not diminished as we continue to evolve to meet the complexities of both our practice contexts and the changing world of Further and Higher Education. These include the diversity of backgrounds of students and expecting them to be able to function in a placement from the beginning of the degree course; being able to cope with ambiguity inherent in ministry but needing answers to some of the questions; being a small staff where we are teachers but also have a multiplicity of other roles; we want students to grow in their faith while learning critical academic approaches; we want to support and help students yet have to assess them against professional standards that impact their future careers; in an academic context which encourages specialism we have to teach a diversity of subjects; some of the roles we train students for need maturity yet they feel called when young; we are committed to formation yet students do not have to buy in to this dimension of the course. Students who come to CYM are not *tabula rasa,*
but enter a formational process with experiences, gifts, competencies and struggles that shape their engagement and responses to the challenges they face.

The first CYM strap line incorporated the idea of a seal of excellence. Constantly striving for excellence in a world of limited resourcing and increasing demands is difficult. One of the dilemmas of the usual way that quality assurance is undertaken is that it tends to be retrospective and focused on right paperwork and processes. Biggs helpfully distinguishes between the notions of quality enhancement and quality feasibility. The former involves designing teaching in response to espoused theory but with reflective review integral to it. The latter involves removing the impediments to high quality teaching. Institutional policies from Universities impact the way that we understand and approach quality. Systems can often be resource intensive and undertaken in a way designed to lead to a good report rather than in a spirit of discovery designed to see genuine improvements in practice. One of the particular dilemmas faced by CYM is that for many courses we have ‘dual validation’ – ‘formal’ from academic and professional bodies and ‘functional’ in seeking to meet the requirements and expectation all stakeholders (churches, practice agencies etc). Within this ecology, curriculum and context training can become overloaded. Professional accreditation also leads to competence based approaches which can lead to a tick box mentality that breaks everything down into small pieces of learning which can lead to the neglect of the overall vision of what you are trying to accomplish. This can preclude quality in some areas, yet effecting change to remedy this is also difficult as the processes involved are often lengthy. As such, courses face the danger of stagnating once they are well established.

The ecological pressures placed on the ideal of ‘developing praxis based learning with communities of practice’ – the second of Mayo’s surmised aims for CYM are high. Put bluntly, it is costly when students and systems demand more and more resources! The challenge then is to retain this pedagogy adapting to the types of changes in ecology experienced over the last ten years by being responsive to these resource demands as adaptive pressures.

**Integrity: The challenge of developing fluid learning**

The third theme we consider is integrity. In examining the integrity of our theological education we hope to encapsulate its efficacy for those who partake in it as preparation for, or in support of their vocational calling. In his reflection on the type of theological training CYM would deliver Mayo drew from his own ‘frustrating’ experience of theological education for ordained ministry. This helped him to articulate what others in CYM also valued; that the theological training required for youth ministry needed to be ‘practical’. Approaches to pastoral and practical theology have matured considerably in the last decade and the re-titling of our own courses from ‘Applied Theology’ to ‘Practical Theology’ reflects this. Yet, there are vulnerabilities in this approach to theological education.

First of all, it is less reliant on the transmission of well honed understanding and more involved in a dialogical, constructive task of developing the theological and practical insights into how best to engage in this work in the contexts in which students are placed. As Pattison suggests this renders such theological education as an ‘interrogative discipline’ which does not “provide a solid body of answers which have come to be regarded as incontrovertible, [but] provides questions which need to be asked again and again of theory and practice”. The aim of such education is not therefore to form ‘learned’ theologians, but theologians who can continue to learn. Such an approach does not deny the need for what Farley terms ‘ordered learning’ – the dissemination and exploration of systematised understanding but requires the passing on of interpretive and reflective skills that can help learners themselves ‘integrate’ knowledge and experience; understanding and action. The ability to develop such ‘soft theological skills’ perhaps relies to a large part on the ‘informal learning’ and ‘implicit curriculum’ within the communities of practice in which learning takes place. One learns to be a reflective practitioner from other reflective practitioners; one develops a passion for questioning by learning with those prepared to question. The shifting ground here is that context and experience keep changing. As such, the ‘active management’ of learning becomes a key facet of the role of the theological educator seeking to value the
contributions of learners and the complexity of contexts in which they are actively engaged. To do this effectively faculty need to be highly skilled reflective practitioners themselves and we continue to encourage research and innovative practice development.

Integrity also rightly refers to the way in which theological education helps the identity, character and faith of those involved in its processes ‘to grow into the heart of God’ as Mayo describes ‘formation’. Formation is a dimension that theological education for youth and children’s ministry embraces as being as necessary in these roles as for other ministerial training (lay or ordained). That CYM centres largely operate within institutions that convey this obligation aids this process. However, a challenge is presented in that many who come to CYM do not go through the types of selection processes common to ministerial formation and, as already noted, concepts of a ‘formed’ youth or children’s works are underdeveloped. Further this process occurs in contexts where these young leaders are often expected to perform public roles with high standards of personal and professional conduct from the start of their training.

The integrity of the partnerships CYM establishes with the professional practice agencies in which students are placed become pivotal in this aspect of formation and the policies we employ to set both clear expectations, and restorative pathways in the event of inconsistencies or transgression, become essential elements in this task.

These then are the challenges faced in the polity, ecology and integrity of theological education for work with children and young people. In the next section we will examine how CYM is negotiating these, marking out some solid steps informed by the core motifs of the pedagogical vision articulated by Mayo.

**Solid steps: Negotiating the challenges in the polity, ecology and integrity of theological education for work with children and young people**

To recap, the three key aspects described by Mayo of CYM’s approach to theological education remain significant. In this section we will summarise some of the ways that these principles have influenced, and continue to influence, the solid steps required to negotiate the challenges of polity, ecology and integrity defined above. In this discussion we not only highlight challenges that CYM faces, but those that are faced by many other providers in this field. In this discussion we will argue that the three principles above remain vital to the efficacy of this task, and we outline some of the ways in which they set the agenda for future development.

**Working out where we stand – The identity, accreditation and shape of theological education for youth and children’s work**

As indicated above, CYM was started by people with a vision to combine the best in professional youth work practice and the passion of those involved in serving the church. Managing this aim has led to what some see as an ongoing dilemma of ‘accommodation’. Part of the polity of running courses such as ours is a practical theological challenge of accommodating the theological education required for ministry with children and young people. This happens within the boundaries of academic accreditation, working with faculties in universities that are not involved in theological education, and working towards the validation frameworks of appropriate professional bodies in these fields. This is alongside working within a professional field that already sees itself as engaged in accommodating numerous changes in government policy which has become “increasingly prescriptive, intrusive and controlling”. As Fowler identifies such action is rightly considered as practical theology as it is activity to make ‘ecclesial presence’ known in the world. CYM acts within each of the spheres above to seek to structure a theological education that will serve the church in fulfilling the broad vocation of participating in the mission of God. To do so requires concerted action to accommodate professional and educational aims as the telos of our practice, a difficult task since the ‘ground rules’ for this negotiation keep shifting. Yet, embracing a proper dialectic with professional practices (and the underlying social and human scientific perspectives that inform
these) can enhance approaches to ministry and needs to be pursued. At the same time as being a ‘critical conversation partners’ to not only shape the development of youth and children’s work in the church, but also as an apologetic and prophetic voice in a wider professional world.

A key problem exists in this accommodation not because of the values of the wider field, but because the role of ministerial orientation for children and young people’s work remains unclear. Some have put a ‘stake in the ground’ to claim this identity, but in the main these are ephemeral definitions especially when one considers the denominational accreditation of such roles. The lack of clarity in this area serves only to inhibit the task of accommodation. The question of whether such specialist roles are to be counted as lay or ordained; authorised or unauthorised are important questions of polity that require debate and action. Determining the best ways to theologically educate those involved in children, youth and young adult ministries requires the commitment and capacity to actually be able to determine the shape that this training takes and developing clearer institutional clarity in defining and delivering training in youth and children’s work is part of how the church seeks to act faithfully ‘in the world’. The contemporary situation in Higher Education makes this a pressing issue, and in our view requires a stronger institutional structure for theological education for work with children and young people.

**The polity of institutional strength**

In the decade since its inception CYM has embraced the task of negotiating with universities, representing Christian practice and ethos to professional bodies and developing competency structures for professional practice that adhere to, but are articulated as distinct from the professional criteria upon which they are based. CYM’s reflection on the shifting sands we face has led to a solidifying of our identity and this year we will reconstitute ourselves as the Institute of Children, Youth and Mission, remaining CYM. Our aim remains clearly linked to that which led to the formation of CYM in the late 1990s – to enhance the capacity, confidence and credibility of those working in Christian children, youth and mission work.

There are various trends in relation to higher education where a stronger institutional identity would help CYM take further solid steps in developing professional Christian training. The first are areas which we have already identified which include enhancing mechanisms to include stakeholders in developing relevant provision (adapting curricula or in time-limited short courses). Secondly, taking ownership of the emphasis on student success and wellbeing which is resource intensive and which notionally should in part be provided by the validating university who top slice our fees for such things. A third, which we cannot address in detail here, is in online and blended learning – which we are at early stages of introducing and see as a key development of the contemporary FE & HE institution. Other trends will impact the curriculum content and pedagogical approaches, some we have begun to see or consider, others we need to more consciously focus on as we work towards the next validation of our courses. They include a greater focus on how to process and use information rather than imparting it including developing high level analytic skills; more collaborative working including in assessment to replicate the real world of work more closely; accessing experts in the field online while focusing more on discussion and application in class.

Building on the successful working of our centres and training partnerships, CYM will develop as a collegiate FE and HE institution promoting innovation, quality, creativity, sharing expertise, roles and responsibilities, advocating for children, youth and mission work. However, even as we take these next solid steps we are aware that the sands will always shift and we need to remain flexible and responsive. CYM does not of course act alone in the development of education in the field. This is a strategic choice, a matter of polity. However, a more solid institutional character is a route that we feel is in keeping with the agenda with which we were established, to seek to set the standards for theological education, professional formation and practical training for children, youth and mission work and in providing innovative education, training, research and resources that enhance practice and influence.
Taking steps of faith – Meeting student expectations and managing learning environments for theological education in youth and children’s work

One of the most significant challenges in the ecology of contemporary theological education involves our understanding of and approach to students. It is encouraging for all of us involved in theological education that even those with extensive experience, like Eugene Peterson, believe that most of his students are not there to learn but to do what they need to in order to get the job they want. We have lost count of the number of times we have read in module reviews comments about material needing to be focused on the assignment and in teaching one notices an increase in attention and energy when the relevance of the material to the assessment task is identified. A recent THES Student Survey found that students spent around 30 hours a week in front of a screen but less than a third of this was for study. However, as Freire notes one needs to develop discipline to study as it is a demanding task which brings both pleasure and pain. Student attitudes to study range from seeing it as a privilege and delight to a burden and distraction from the real task. Inculcating a love of study for its own sake rather than as instrumental is a challenge and in some ways has seemed to get more difficult rather than less over the years. One of the dilemmas we thus face is that if informal education is the core skill for our students then their own attitudes towards learning and education will significantly impact how they understand that role and their aptitude for this. However, we hold these observations in tension with our belief that students have abundant resources from their experience which they bring to learning.

When theological educators in our field get together discussions of literacy often arise. Levels of biblical literacy are lamented although some of this perhaps reflects a move towards what some call more entertainment oriented work with children and young people rather than the strong biblical focus of work with earlier generations. There is little theological literacy and one of the dilemmas of an approach which encourages theological reflection is the paucity of tools some students have to engage in the practice. Along with this there are different levels of emotional literacy and self-awareness, both significantly important in ministry. We are increasingly seeing students arrive with significant personal issues that need processing and working through in order for them to be able to engage in effective ministry, we have limited resources to refer students for professional help and lack the facilities available on most campuses for students with mental health and other problems. Addressing this lack of literacy is a challenge for our curriculum development.

Research into Generation Y, who make up the bulk of our students, suggest that friendship parenting is prevalent and that families can tend to be focused around the needs of the children. This can be interesting when considered in the light of tutor roles. In CYM we try to promote autonomy in student learning and encouraging taking personal responsibility. However, there are some students for whom this can be quite difficult and it can feel as if students want to be spoon-fed, this is perhaps also a reflection of higher education being a consumer choice and wanting to get value for money. There is also the tension for staff in wanting to facilitate and encourage those who are making a great leap into the world of higher education and who need additional support, at least in the early stages, to stay.

One of the dilemmas of practice focused courses such as those run by CYM is balancing the different demands of practice, academic study and other dimensions of life such as friends, family, leisure activities etc. For those who want to stay in ministry long term then finding a sustainable rhythm of life is vital and beginning to establish it whilst a student can be important. One of the issues that arise within this is understandings of vocation, with ongoing debates around professionalism and passion and how these two interact part of the role of theological education is to help students explore these areas. Nash and Murray talk about the importance of engaging in meaning making with students and encouraging them towards wholeness and integrity. While within theological education we can expect that most students make some sense of a meaning for life within a Christian worldview, there are still significant issues that need to be explored in the context of a changing world, increasing pluralism and significant debates taking place about the role,
purpose and tenets of religious faith in the public sphere as well as within the church. Here a
deepened commitment to learning communities and how these are ‘constructed’ is required.

**Scaffolding learning communities for integrated education in an unpredictable ecology**

The notion of scaffolding has always been inherent in CYM’s pedagogy, and is crucial to
successful learning communities. However, we have not always articulated it in ways which help
students best understand the importance and role of tutors and peers in their learning. Each
student has an individual professional practice tutor and is part of a tutor led professional formation
group. Theory around scaffolding is linked to Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development (ZPD) and
some of Bruner’s later thinking on the topic. Vygotsky argues that our development and thinking is
shaped and transformed by social interactions. In essence scaffolding involves a tutor, or more
experienced peer, supporting student learning to the point where the student has the confidence to
undertake that particular task independently. This is particularly important in developing reflective
practice and critical thinking but as with elements of informal education what can seem like just a
conversation has so much more within it but sometimes students need their awareness raising
around this. Students will move along the ZPD continuum gradually becoming more independent
and confident and finally needing no scaffolding in a particular context. What is crucial in this
process is developing in students the capacity to ask questions, knowing what to ask is essential in
becoming a reflective practitioner or theologically reflective practitioner and this is what tutors can
model.

Palmer and Zajonc conclude their dialogue on higher education by arguing that “Educate our
students as whole people, and they will bring all of who they are to the demands of being human in
private and public life. The present and future well-being of humankind asks nothing less of us”. Part
of what we need to do is to communicate such values to the wider CYM constituency so that
everyone working with students has an understanding of the approaches that we advocate. We
have begun this process with a document outlining a seven stranded approach to holistic
development. Other conscious practices include building a hospitable space of safety and trust,
creating reflective and silent space as part of the learning experience, facilitating participation,
valuing and affirming diversity and helping students to fulfil their potential. Beyond all of these
practices there is a desire to see students live integrated lives that draw together the different
elements of their identity including vocation, Christian faith and tradition, ministerial practice,
professional practice, culture, and their own unique personhood created in the image of God.

CYM has always sought to create an environment where students can honestly and openly
explore issues around vocation and faith and where together we focus on their holistic development
discipleship. Some may describe this as a constructivist approach to education which “views
teaching, leading, and learning as experiential, conversational, narrativistic, conditional,
developmental, socially and culturally created … and always profoundly personal in nature”. It is
underpinned by views that learning is about meaning making rather than knowledge transmission;
that the meaning making process is social in orientation and that there is a wide locus of meaning
making including the individual, discourses and relationships, artifacts, theories, models, methods,
history and so on. Such education engages the head, hand and heart and engenders passion as
well as skill, knowledge and understanding. This education is offered by faculty who are enthusiastic
about their work and who engage in significant conversation in a non-hierarchical and vulnerable
way. And also a faculty who are reflexive and reflective themselves regularly asking the question
suggested by Parker J Palmer “Who is the self that teaches?” and perhaps resonating with his
response which is to “help education bring more light and life to the world”, in our case within a
Christian worldview.

CYM’s vision is to create dynamic learning communities based on partnership that are
accessible, affordable and appropriate with both geographically diverse locations and virtual
resources that facilitates participation and promotes learning. We have an inclusive approach to our
understanding of what this means realizing that student experience is impacted as much by what the
administrators do as what the faculty does and it has become increasingly important to have a
shared vision and understanding of the vocation of CYM and for everyone to see their role within that. One of the most encouraging elements of CYM is seeing graduates become involved in other roles, as core staff, line managers, and tutors of different kinds. We now have a CYM graduate as a Centre Director, and also as a Board member, demonstrating that the last ten years have genuinely seen the establishment of a community of practice.

**Conclusion: Walking with confidence in theological education for youth and children’s work**

CYM - the Institute of Children, Youth and Mission is well placed to engage with the current and future debates in areas of polity, ecology and integrity as we seek to continue to innovate in response to the shifting sands of work with children, young people and young adults. We remain committed to both missional and professional approaches and hold fast to the original vision of CYM as we evolve to meet the needs of the church and the wider Christian field.

In addition to providing an institutional structure to theological education for work with children, young people and young adults, another way of framing CYM as a movement. CYM is a movement which promotes participation and critical engagement in mission and ministry, supporting practice agencies and practitioners and listening to the voices and interests of children, young people and communities. Key to this is establishing, developing and sustaining communities of practice amongst students, practitioners, staff and the wider field. 2012 sees our twelfth cohort graduate, these communities of practice are growing in size, scope and significance as CYM graduates influence those they work with, alongside, their managers and the wider field as some take on roles of influence.

It is clear that this is a challenging time for mission and ministry and part of what CYM is seeking to do is to equip students to be effective in the context God calls them to. This involves teaching a range of skills, practices, knowledge and understanding that are transferable and which help a student reflect on the *missio Dei* and what their role is within this. We concur with Hirsch and Catchim’s belief that “the ecclesia that Jesus intended was specifically designed with built-in, self-generative capacities and was made for nothing less than world-transforming, lasting and yes, revolutionary impact”.58 Our desire is to equip students to fulfil such a vision, this is not an easy task particularly when we only see glimpses of such churches and despite criticism of what the outcomes have been thus far we always have and continue to want to see students leave CYM with a passion for the Kingdom of God and an understanding of what their role within it might be.

Taking into account the current context and the issues of polity, ecology and integrity that we have discussed, the theological education required for youth and children’s work is one that helps form the qualities and skills of a pastoral theologian. The efficacy of theological education for youth and children’s work lies in its capacity to develop the character and skills that enable people to act in such roles and develop the confidence and creativity to be innovative in practice. Theological education for youth and children’s work is not instrumentalist because it is not focussed on producing people for particular functional roles, but in educating and forming people who have the capacity and capability to wrestle with the theological task of determining what pastoral or missional interventions can be made and who have the skills and self-awareness to critically reflect upon those interventions to determine if they are effective and faithful forms of Christian practice.

**Endnotes**

1 In 2008 Belfast Bible College and Youthlink NI joined CYM to form a teaching centre in Ireland and in 2012 Scripture Union formally joined as a member following many years of informal association.
3 Mayo p. 109,114-115
4 Mayo p. 109, 111
5 Mayo p.113-116
Voas and Crockett p. 20
9 MacLaren, D. Mission Implausible: Restoring Credibility to the Church, Studies in Religion and Culture Series (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2004), especially pp.101-6
10 MacLaren p.101
11 Voas and Crockett p.21
15 Shepherd, N. M. “Christian Youth Groups as Sites for Identity Work.” In Religion and Youth, edited by Sylvia Collins-Mayo and Pink Dandelion, 148-59 (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010).
16 Gerkin, C. V. An Introduction to Pastoral Care (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997).
21 Jo Griffiths, the current Director of Cambridge CYM is currently writing up research into this area as a key theme of her PhD thesis in the professional identity of Christian Youth Work.
22 Clayton and Stanton, p.117.
26 Pattison, S. “Pastoral Studies: Dust Bin or Discipline?” In The Challenge of Practical Theology: Selected Essays, 247-52. (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2007) p.252. We have extended Pattison’s notion of pastoral studies to convey the wider architecture of theological education.
28 Wenger, E. Communities of Practice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) offers one of the clearest examinations of this approach to learning; one that informs the view espoused in this paper. See also Barab, S. and Duffy, T. ‘From Practice Fields to Communities of Practice’ in Jonassen, D. and Land, S. eds Theoretical Foundations of Learning Environments (New York, Routledge, 2012), pp.29-65.
29 Mayo p.109
30 In experience if not always in years.
31 Davies and Merton, p.22.


When Mayo authored his rationale for CYM in 2002 he made note of the possibility that the Anglican Church would join the Baptist Union in providing some form of ministerial recognition for youth specialists. However, this did not materialise and the Baptist Union it seems became nervous of their move to recognise the ministerial role of youth specialists – with the General Assembly in 2010 narrowly rejecting a call to ‘return’ this function to the Diaconate and creating a further complication in ensuring that that specialty ministry among children was firmly placed in this category of ministry.

As protagonists in this debate we would firmly agree with progressive voices in theological education, such as Heywood and Stevens who argue that the general framework for understanding lay and ordained roles needs to be ‘re-imagined’.

37 See www.mycym.info


42 Freire, P. Teachers as Cultural Workers Letters to Those Who Dare Teach. (Cambridge MA, Westview Press, 2005)


45 These occur regularly on blogs and where educators and practitioners meet up.

46 Nash, R. J. and Murray, M. C. Helping College Students Find Purpose (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010). The book contains a list of significant questions and issues that students in Higher Education face.


53 Klimoski, V. J., O'Neil, K. J. and Schuth, K. M. explore some of these issues in greater detail.

54 Nash and Murray, p.106.


56 Nash and Murray, p.107.
