The 1997 Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture
“At-Risk Youth, At-Risk Church: What Jesus Christ and American Teenagers are Saying to the Mainline Church”

Introduction

Webster's has two meanings for the term "mainline." The one teenagers know is the practice of injecting narcotics directly into the bloodstream to get a quick high. The second definition means the principle route a train takes to reach its destination.

Pick your metaphor. The term "mainline church" was coined when trains, like churches, were a principal means of getting somewhere people wanted to go. Today, teenagers' understanding of "mainline" paints an ominous portrait of who we are as a church: once-able bodies who, after years of steady injections of American culture into our veins, have a dulled sense of who, what, and where we are.

We have reared a generation of teenagers to "just say no" to such behavior, and they're saying "no" to mainline Christianity in favor of visions of vitality elsewhere, many that endanger teenagers. According to a 1991 study released by the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, one in four teenagers is "at risk." The church must work with others to create communities of health and hope for young people.

Young people are also making another point. Their exodus from our pews and programs is a form of "tough love" to our denominations, telling us to shape up, to be who we say we are, and to let Jesus be who we say He is - the Savior, even of the mainline church.

In our "I'm dysfunctional, you're dysfunctional" world, it is easy to settle for therapy when resurrection is at stake. Maybe being "at risk" as a church isn't bad if it calls us back to the authenticity young people expect, and the Gospel requires. Maybe mainline churches and teenagers have something in common: a need to be saved.

These assumptions unite the lectures in this volume. The lectures in these pages provide an outline of "what Jesus Christ and American teenagers are saying to the mainline church" from the perspectives of systematic theology, practical theology, sociology, education, and American religious history (and futurism).

These lectures point to a theological foundation for ministry with young people that views youth as part of the mission of Christ and not as objects to be "won" for the propagation of the church. We approach this direction with humility and hope. The future of the church, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer noted when he himself was only twenty-seven years old, depends not on
youth, but on Jesus Christ. Still, we are confident that young people are prophets in our midst, and that by attending to the "risk" that accompanies adolescence in 1997, we will be better prepared to take the risk that accompanies Christian faith in any era.

Godspeed,
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Director, Institute for Youth Ministry
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YOUTH MINISTRY: A CELEBRATION AND A CHALLENGE

Peggy Way

OVERVIEW

This presentation is intended as a celebration of and a challenge to ministers (lay and ordained) who not only value this crucial arena for Christ's ministry with God's people, but who also actually embody this value in their ordinary lives and places of ministry. I value this locus of ministry not only because it touches the lives of often unvalued people, but also because this ministry makes a rich contribution to the theological endeavor itself. Because I value you so much, I am going to risk teasing you, offending you, interpreting who you are and what you do, and, above all, challenging you to claim your vocation as "real theologians." I hope that you find here a heightened sense of your eschatological importance in today's and tomorrow's ecumenical church.

I have three titles for this presentation. After sharing them — which states my intention — I will invite you to consider three constructive areas around which to value yourselves: first, your role as practical theologians; second, your theological contributions; and third, your opportunities for ministries of spirituality. But first — the titles — and remember that I have told you that I will be teasing you!

The first title summarizes my remarks. It is: “A Philosophical, Theological, and Phenomenological Foundation for an Epistomologically Grounded Hermeneutic of Youth Ministry Methodology for Discourse, Praxis, and Contribution for the Post-post-modern World in Preparing Our Youth for the Rapture and the...
Millennium Which Is Coming Knowing That No Presbyterians Will Be Called Up Anyway." Yes, that is really what we are doing here! Wait and see!

The second title makes it a bit clearer. It is: "Youth Ministry: An Exercise in Practical Theology." How is it that you actually put together all of your experiences with and intentions for young people in this messy world? What do you already know? How do you describe your ministries? What are your goals, and what resources do you use in guiding what you hope will be the transforming work you are about? You work within the complexities of historical and multicultural existence that sometimes carries with it the sense that you are simply "muddling through." For history usually refuses to be what philosophy, theology, and ideology tell it that it should be — sort of like young people and, for that matter, local churches. How are you to name, focus, plan, and replan your activities? And how do these activities actually relate to God's intent for a fulfilled humanity — even in the particular places where you actually minister? For you are not primarily about application, but rather creation; not simply using technique, but inviting participation and moral consciousness; not seeking programs to be implemented, but rather conversion and transformation to be lived. Who are you as such practical theologians?

The third title I have borrowed from a poem by Auden, and I use it to urge you to be open to metaphors to help you see the importance of what you are about. The poem's title is "Kids Falling Out of the Sky and Nobody Noticing." It is a reflection on a well-known piece of visual art by Bruegel. Picture this: A boy is falling from the sky and about to hit the water head first. He and his father have flown too close to the sun with their wax wings, and the wings have melted. The boy is falling from the sky! And no one on the boat that is sailing on the peaceful sea below him sees him! Neither the farmer pictured plowing his field nor the farmer's horse nor the farmer's dog notices. Each keeps on with what he is doing. And the boy falls — unseen. The poet's language is telling. The dog goes on with its doggie life, and the torturer's horse scratches its innocent behind on a tree.

Of course the poet communicates this much better than I do; that is why he is a poet and I am a practical theologian! Just listen to these phrases: "About suffering they were never wrong, the old masters. How well they understood its human position — how suffering takes place while someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along."

Surely that matches your experiences with the sufferings of some young people (or the memories of your own youth). Who sees or even wants to see the discarded youth in denominationally related residential treatment centers, without family, vocation, or future and with memories of abuse, continuing realities of not belonging anywhere but with paid attendants, having been nowhere and with nowhere to go? Which of you has not attended to the after-effects of a teenage suicide, or a young person's bad decision that set forces in motion that got out of control, or even the dull, daily feelings of simply not belonging or having no one to go places with, much less to trust with one's soul?
Auden conveys such a situation with intensity: "Everything turns away quite leisurely from the disaster." THERE'S A BOY FALLING OUT OF THE SKY, DAMN IT! "The plowman may have heard the call, the forsaken cry, but for him it wasn't an important thing," and he just keeps plowing in the fields. "The sun shone as it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green water...," and "the expensive, delicate ship that must have seen something amazing — a boy falling out of the sky — had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on."

And so, my third title for this presentation: "Kids Falling out of the Sky and Nobody Noticing." For no matter how many national commissions there are on youth in crisis, or how many task forces work on young people in trouble, or how many Princeton forums on youth ministry are courageously created and funded, the actual everyday work with young people in the many cultures of our society falls upon your shoulders. For you to stick with this commitment — this "impossible possibility," if you will (thanks to Reinhold Niebuhr) — you must come to terms with your own low valuation and the invisibility (which goes with lack of value) of young people in church and culture. For surely you know that you are not highly valued! You work with youth — hardly power brokers within your denominations. If you are "successful," you will "grow out of" youth ministry and become a senior pastor! After all, it is not quite as "in" to advocate for young people as for women, minorities, and even persons of homosexual orientation. For these groups have come to voice and visibility. Have you? Have your young people?

Your value is further compromised because of the long-standing, second-class-citizen status accorded to those who work in education, who work with children and young people, and who work with invisible populations (at least invisible without our primary contexts of mainline Protestant churches) who are at risk.

Let me end this overview, which I have been presenting through three titles to my lecture, with three overwhelmingly positive affirmations. First, the issues of youth transcend the gender-race-ethnic-class issues that so disrupt our church life. Who even "sees" them — and their issues? You do! Second, ministry with young people is a microcosm — a living laboratory, if you will — of the central and critical theological and cultural issues that affect all of Western society. You are living at the creative edge of contemporary discourse! Third, your ministries with youth carry the central issues of contemporary ecclesiology: to whom (Whom?) does the church belong? What is the meaning of inclusivity? What are ecumenical and interfaith ministries? What do goals of conversion and transformation actually look like in local churches? Who are you anyway? Who do you see falling out of the sky?

YOUTH MINISTERS AS PRACTICAL THEOLOGIANS

I challenge you to name yourselves as practical theologians, with intentional ways of gathering, inviting, and using a variety of knowledge and ethical commit-
ments in order to embody and invite processes and dynamics of conversion and transformation, in order that the people with whom you minister move even a wee bit closer to what God intends for God's faithful folk.

Let me try to express this in relation to an exhilarating worship experience. With gusto we sang “With Christ as my vessel I will smile at the storm until he guides me home.” In terms of a practical theology, we seek to clarify our grounding (in this case, “Christ as my vessel”). We seek spiritual grounding and self-awareness to be strong so we can survive in the midst of the intricacies, dynamics, messiness, and paradoxes of our historical places of ministry (in the midst of the storm, the waves that threaten to engulf us, and our own fears and uncertainties). We seek optimism as we move toward the future realization of God's promises even as the storms rage; we seek and invite partnership with others whose guidance we need and whose situations are open to the workings of the Spirit (until He guides us home).

Practical theology is not applied knowledge. For those of you who have gone to seminary, ministry is not the simple application of what you learned there, for what you learned there is not all that there is. A practical theologian must be aware of everything that is going on in his or her own context and alert to the reality of the layers of meaning and interpretation that are affecting his or her ministry. A practical theologian knows that expertise is still emerging, and that some of the knowledge that has been passed on has not been inclusive of all human experience. Not only have seminaries not included perspectives on race, gender, ethnicity, and class, but also they have not included perspectives on the dynamics of power, the illusory expectation of being in control, and the nature of human limitation and finitude. This necessary knowledge may not have included how difficult it is for people to love one another, how hard it is to experience change, how radically differently people understand even words and phrases like “Christ as vessel,” “God's promises,” “a fulfilled humanity,” being guided “home.” The practical theologian forms and frames knowledge that is activated in concrete and particular situations that do not lend themselves readily to — excuse me, Presbyterians — decency and order. Even affirmations of viewing folk as “children of God” or within perspectives of “mutuality and equal regard” are very different ontologically and existentially.

This simply means that youth ministry needs to be creative, constructive, relevant, particular, risk filled, and continually revised. As ministry occurs with people who tend toward invisibility and are without power (young people), it becomes a ministry of partnership and participation whose continuation is not dependent upon your ongoing presence.

Now practical theology used to be “applied knowledge,” that is, the practitioners of ministry (educators, caregivers, etc.) used the formal knowledge of the “real” theological disciplines (biblical studies, theology, doctrine, and church history) but did not contribute to them. But contemporary practical theology, making full use of both the theological and secular knowledge systems, is both critical
of them and contributes to them, even as it embodies trust in Christ as vessel, navigates the storm and negotiates directions and the setting of the sails within it, and embodies the promises already — and not yet.

The practical theologians also claim their own knowledge and the perspectives that they bring to the tasks of ministry. Don Browning calls this “foreknowledge.” To illustrate this, and show the weird workings of my own reflections, let me share with you some of my work with at-risk young people in a residential treatment center that was an agency of the Presbyterian Church (formerly PCUS) in Nashville, Tennessee. Five areas of knowing, which affect my presentation to you, were disclosed to me as I lived among these young people.

First, I learned that these at-risk young people — boys and girls falling out of the sky — were asking and hungering after the central theological issues that we were teaching about at Vanderbilt Divinity School, where I was then a professor. “Who can I trust?” was their cry. With histories of being in and out of foster care, experiences of being in adoptions that did not work, stories of problematic relationships with blood relatives (families of origin) and extended families alike, having someone to trust was their central issue. They did not “fit” within the established youth ministries of Nashville’s Presbyterian church community, although the non-denominational Unity Church was able to receive them. And they were abandoned to work on their issues of trust with paid professionals (houseparents, social workers, psychiatrists, etc.) and not with uncles, aunts, Presbyterian laypersons, or representatives of Nashville’s mainline church communities. Understanding about “basic trust,” mutuality, and equal regard, and perspectives about “receiving strangers” and gathering around God’s table were much easier to say than to embody — or even to “apply”!

These young people were also asking the central question of Christian anthropology: Who am I supposed to be? Without either memory or present experience of belonging to a formative community, they were somehow to achieve an acceptable social identity, vocation, and education in civic virtue and to create their own family structures. Money for social workers far outweighed funding for chaplaincies, and unattached and distant professionals were more available than Christian “brothers and sisters.” “How am I to live with others?” was their continuing cry. They seemed to seek out relationships around sex and drugs, to hit out at each other, to “connect” in the only ways that they knew how, however socially inappropriate. They were invisible unless they were difficult; they were without power except as they “acted out.” They represent a generation. We are not their church, and they are not our people. Yet their cries are our central questions, and their “being” is one of our highest values. Unless, of course, we have to live with them.

Certainly here is a place for the workings of a fully practical theology.

In attempting to educate the board of all Presbyterian laypersons, my second area of learning, I became aware that ministry is a task rather than an accomplishment, and that the church is always in process of becoming rather than sim-
ply being an institution that saves, that is, converts and transforms, others. The board members had no inclination to include these young people within their own ecclesial communities. But they did seem to have some perspective. They were trying to raise money to help a group of damaged young people move from one level of existence toward another. At the time, I phrased it in this way, trying to connect with the laity's own biblical and theological understandings. After all, many of them were ordained elders! They were trying to provide a place where these young people could move from being strangers and sojourners to being fellow citizens of the household of God; from being isolated to being in human community; from being fragmented to becoming whole; and from being "the other" to being on the same continuum of humanity as the members of the board. But even within these phrases, issues of race and class won out over verbal values of shared existence as children of God, mutuality, and equal regard. To see "children falling out of the sky" demands a freedom of presence that far transcends application, technique, and program. That is where the practical theologian is to stand — "knowing" and "seeing" all of this, including the culture of the board members, the limitations of the supporting churches, the operative cultural values and issues of the welfare system, and the family values and importance accorded to those whose vocation it is to work with children and young people.

If you now reread the first title for this presentation you will see that that is what we are doing here!

The third thing I learned through my theological reflections was how hard it is both to invite and to bring about change. Neither prophetic pronouncements, moral imperatives, sentimental slogans, nor announced visions "worked." Young people get lost behind competing theological debates that tear our churches apart, complex civic debates about public policy and the nature of welfare, competing points of view about the nature of the family and, of course, issues of race, class, ethnicity, and sexuality. The practical theologian knows this and sails on anyway, expecting neither correct technique to cure nor right application to heal. Most youth ministers know this, although such knowledge is not welcomed by those who hold that right application will yield the kingdom. Both conservatives and liberals suffer from that illusion, and both sometimes abandon the task altogether, whether from disillusionment or anger. But the tasks of ministry are never ending, and the work of the church is always unfinished.

I also learned much about the realities of both racism and multiculturalism. We are deeply shaped by our own contexts; our quite particular racial and cultural experiences so easily become "true" for all persons. We have hardly begun to ponder these dynamics in our rapidly changing Western culture and its place within the global world. Youth ministry without intentional reflection on these areas avoids, rather than encounters, the present historical context. The theological cries of our young people require ecumenical vision and multicultural perspectives.

Finally, I learned that I cannot fix all things — or, as I sometimes fear, even any one thing. And so we, indeed, need to sing together "with Christ as my vessel I
will smile at the storm [and continue in my faithfulness] until he guides me home."

I close this section with three brief stories. In Davenport, Iowa, I discovered an ecumenical group of churches that offered a dialogue group for high school students who were struggling with issues of sexual identity. No one church could do this, nor did it “fit” within the purview of local church youth programs. But together the group could offer care, dialogue, and spiritual nurture for a particular group of kids.

At a national youth event within the United Church of Christ, a denomination-al executive whose son committed suicide offered a workshop, with his wife, on the issues of teenage suicide for young people and youth leaders.

And — on a somewhat different level — I share my own experiences at Eden in working with the National Baptist male clergy who come for a theological education. During the first week, they will probably hear a woman preach. During the second week, there may be a seminar on homosexuality and an interpretation of what it means to be “more light” or “open and affirming.” This is as difficult for these men to accept as their theologies are for me to receive. Yet with the great number of African American young people at risk, these pastors are my partners. Our mainline Protestant churches are simply not there. I as practical theologian do not have to be there myself. Perhaps my resources and affirmation, however, can forge new and presently unheard of partnerships for the conversion and transformation not only of “them” but also of me — on behalf of the sky fall- ers whom I can “see.” I should at least like to be painted into the picture as one who is not only seeing but is also calling forth others’ resources and supporting them in any way that I can, as invitations toward conversion and transformation get enacted throughout the whole inhabited world.

**Theological Contributions: The Big E**

Being a theologian is easy compared with being a youth minister, yet look who carries the higher value in church and culture! Being a person who writes and lectures about doing youth ministries out of practical theological perspectives carries much more apparent control over historical complexity than being a person daily caught up with the challenges, joys, sufferings, disappointments, and moments of rapture and of despair that attend the ordinary pastoral existence of people like you.

Youth ministers are generally unknown and undervalued in both church and culture; they generally do not chair staff meetings at multiple staff parishes, are seldom asked to lecture on their expertise, are expected to grow out of it or to step back when their own young people leave home, and are frequently viewed in that sweet and sentimental way that Mother’s Day cards used to celebrate motherhood (assuming that mothers knew their proper place).

Yet youth ministries have major substantive theological and ecclesial contributions to make, and the people who developed the Princeton Forums on Youth
Ministry are placing such ministries at the center of theological and cultural dialogue. Here I am not talking techniques and programs or even referring to the literature most familiar to you — developmentalism, identity, young people as church rather than young people as future of the church, and so on. There are seven of these areas crying out for your contribution, and perhaps one of them will touch your own context and creativity.

First. What do you know and how do you know it? These central issues of epistemology are crucial in your ministries if you are not simply applying somebody else’s knowledge. Valued learning is generally found in libraries or comes to you through some well-read person’s lectures. Laboratory knowledge is valued, as we celebrate the workings of the scientific method in Western cultures, and one might sometimes assume a kind of liturgical knowledge as lectionary is applied in worship events. But your experience is much more akin to that suggested by Bonnie Miller-McLemore in her work on “material epistemology” — that is, the knowledge that mothers carry as they embody the feelings, hormonal changes, and experiences of the ordinary tasks of maternal parenting. Such knowledge has not been valued in the past, but it is real wisdom having to do with control or lack of it; with change and the way its pace is connected to bodily possibility; with connection and its irrationality; with the importance of little things, events, and moments in a more lengthy time span; and with being present to catch opportunities for dialogue when they are offered. Now these are not the experiences of applied developmental thought. But human beings — and perhaps particularly young human beings — refuse to be what historians, philosophers, theologians, psychologists, parents, and ministers tell them to be. Theologically, youth workers may sometimes find themselves living in that space between truth and love, grace and good works, ideology and praxis. How we are to live there is what faith in history is all about for all of us. What do you have to contribute?

Second. Do any of you remember Motive magazine? It carried an appealing aesthetic thrust — poetry and photography, possibilities and conversations about real issues. Where are your ministries with youth aesthetic — filled with music and rhythm, story and narrative, the visual arts and penetration into sacred symbols? Where can your understandings be communicated around metaphor (boys and girls falling out of the sky) as well as the statistics of crisis or the reports of task forces? What have you found to help them more deeply understand themselves, or you to more deeply understand yourselves? Let me share with you a poem that helps me to see you:

I am not a Black Goddess
I am not a Black Goddess
Look at me
Look at me
I do what I can
That’s about it
Sometimes I make it Sometimes I don’t...
I still get Night Terrors
And sometimes it takes me weeks to
Answer a letter or make a phone call
I am not a Black Goddess
I am not a Black Goddess

Once though was Harriet Tubman

Donna Kate Rushin

Perhaps those who work unacknowledged, before history has discovered them, are the most faithful and hence most important of all. Rosa Parks perhaps?

Third. This is an ecumenical event. The Princeton Forums on Youth Ministry are not only for Presbyterians! Among the last considerations for ministries with at-risk youth are denominational background and church growth. The issues are conversion and transformation, hearing youth’s theological questions, ministering within their (and our) cultural milieu, and inviting them (slowly and over time to be sure) toward identities that are less racist, classist, sexist, and homophobic than those of our own generations.

The meaning of ecumenism is one of the divisive issues in both the Presbyterian and United Methodist denominations. Even now, somewhere conversations are going on among churches from the Reformed traditions (Presbyterians and the United Church of Christ) as well as Lutherans and Episcopalians. Our denominations that participate in the Consultation on Church Union (COCU) are working toward mutual recognition of membership and ministry. Surely youth ministry — surely your ministry — is at the center of creative praxis for what is emerging.

Fourth: What is your ecclesiology anyway? Whatever you are about in your ministries is an issue of inclusivity, intentionality, and the churches of Jesus Christ. Even the issue of the value accorded to ministers with young people is an ecclesial issue; what leadership roles count and why? Which ones don’t count — and why not? In some traditions, such as the United Church of Christ, the inclusion of children in communion is almost as divisive as the issue of homosexuality! And how does your denomination’s inclusion of women and minorities speak to what your young people are learning about their own future inclusion and leadership? What — and whose — church do you both serve and co-create?

Remember, now, that it is my goal to celebrate you and to challenge you. There is an entire “world of E’s” for you to engage and co-create.

Fifth: What are you doing about inviting ethical discourse among your young people, whether in conversations or in dialogue about sexuality, about their own inclusiveness of kids that don’t “fit,” about their awareness that ethical decision-making is complex, about their sense of responsibility with others? Your work camps are laboratories for ethical reflection; your sex education programs are ethical exercises in ecumenism and ecclesiology, especially as they are inclusive of
parents and other adults; even the ways in which your membership receives and rejects others is at the frontier of the issues of whether or not human community is possible in a world such as ours. As a matter of fact, reflecting upon your own group’s dynamics in how they relate to each other, the in-group and the out-group, the athletes and the scholars, the nerds and the school leaders, is a microcosm of how hard it is for people to live together as equals and with mutual regard. How do you describe and engage that? To what end? With what resources?

Sixth: What is your eschatological hope? Surely it isn’t just that you “like kids” or “have never grown up yourself,” or can avoid in youth ministry the demands of intellectual rigor or complicated/complex theological discourse. What would you tell me if you could say where you find the source of your own hope, the center of your own ministry, the spiritual grounding that minimizes your professional disvaluation and maximizes the world-changing importance of what you are about? And here I choose to differentiate between youth “being the future of the church” (and therefore we should pay attention to them), and youth as human beings with dignity who are important in their own being in the realm of God?

There are many other “E’s” of course — what does it mean to relate to others with equal regard? What about exegesis and defining expected excellencies for people claiming vocation in youth ministries? For the seventh, however, I choose to mention endurance and energy. Now by endurance I do not mean the passive “putting up with” that has defined victims. I refer rather to the energies of endurance that sustain you through the storms about which we sang while Christ guides us home. Much of what I have inferred here calls for a prophetic stance in coping with voicelessness, disvaluation, and powerlessness. But you do this as resident, and not as itinerant, prophets; that is, you do this as participants within historical process, yourselves affected by layers of meaning, competing values, sometimes contradictory points of view, and ambiguity about whether or not what you do makes a difference. Just as being a professor is “easier” than being a pastor or youth worker, so is the image of being an itinerant prophet easier than the reality of living as a resident prophet in community with the people with whom you minister toward conversion and transformation. I know that your ministries are rich in the groundings that allow you to endure with creative energy, to “show up” when it is easier to stay away, to invite when it is easier to impose, and to be present as narratives are lived out rather than to seek to enact a prescripted plot. The Gospel of Mark leaves things pretty open ended; can you live like that? Will I insult you too much to suggest that you are “real” like the velveteen rabbit, and that to find companionship with real people may be what young people most need to experience?

**Spiritualities for Youth and for Youth Ministers**

You are beloved, blessed, burdened, and beautiful. There are no neat ways to tie my presentation together. You might reread the titles. I would prefer that
you would consider your own spirituality. Here are a few questions. What does it mean to be a post-Easter Christian living in a pre-Easter world and singing about this? With Christ as your vessel, how do you interact with people who have other people or principles at the wheel of the ship? How can you both celebrate little things and not let go of the vision of what God intends? What does it mean to be both itinerants and householders, to use Crossan’s felicitous phrase? In a world of multiculturalism, you are already brokers between cultures — what supports your capacity to do this? How do you embody the ridiculous — that is, the foolish — claims of the Gospel with today’s sophisticated despisers, today’s utopian idealists, today’s dreamers or fantasizers seeking wish fulfillment instead of Gospel hope? What does it feel like to be one of God’s motley crew in the midst of those seeking, above all, decency and order? How do you negotiate the non-negotiable and demonstrate that nothing in all creation shall keep you, shall keep me, shall keep us (and the young people falling out of the sky) from the love of God who is in Christ Jesus our Lord? Take even more seriously that which you already are convicted to do: Go for it! Amen.