

## **The 1999 Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture**

An Unexpected Prophet: What the 21st-Century Church Can Learn from Youth Ministry

### Introduction

Youth ministry is not just about youth. It's about ministry, period. By its very nature, adolescence embodies, sometimes acutely, fundamental concerns about being human: Who am I? Whom can I trust? What does it mean to be in communion with others? As a result, youth ministry invites transformation for the entire church and not for youth alone. As we look for ways to renew the church in Christ's name, we can't afford to overlook a prophet in our hometown: ministry for, by, and with the young people among us.

The 1999 Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture have significant implications for ministry with youth, but they are no less important for the church at large. Kenda Creasy Dean suggests that youth ministry is the point at which Christians should reclaim a theology of desire—not for the sake of youth ministry, but for the sake of the church. Dean then posits that the postmodern crisis of fidelity calls the contemporary church to reclaim holy friendship as central to the life of faith.

Jürgen Moltmann reflects on Jacob's struggle with God at the Brook Jabbok, on his own journey to faith as a young prisoner-of-war, and on prayer as watchful expectation. He calls Christians to watch for the hidden "yes" in the suffered "no" of God. Moltmann also addresses how one becomes a "true" theologian, exploring the personal side of theology and its existential depths.

Cynthia Rigby unpacks the practical implications of the doctrine of the Trinity for youth ministry and for the church and demonstrates how this doctrine can help us understand the mystery of our friendships with God and with one another. She then looks at the doctrine of the incarnation from the perspective of young people seeking relevance for today and arrives at timeless truths for all God's people.

Eugene Rivers calls the church to move from a ministry of church maintenance to a ministry of true reconciliation and justice. He challenges us to listen to those beyond our comfort zone that we might serve as faithful witnesses to Christ in the new millennium.

May you find these lectures to be unexpected prophets, calling you to new understandings and new forms of ministry.

Faithfully yours,

Amy Scott Vaughn  
Director of Leadership Development  
Institute for Youth Ministry

## **1999 Lectures**

Kenda Creasy Dean  
Holding On to Our Kisses: The Hormonal Theology of Adolescence  
The Sacrament of One Another: Practicing Fidelity through Holy Friendship

Jürgen Moltmann  
Praying and Watching  
What Is a Theologian?

Cynthia L. Rigby  
More Than a Mystery: The Practical Implications of the Trinity in Ministry with Youth  
More Than a Hero: The Practical Implications of the Incarnation in Ministry with Youth

Eugene Rivers  
Youth Ministry for the World in Which We Live  
New Wineskins, New Models, and Visions for a New Century

## NEW WINESKINS, NEW MODELS, AND VISIONS FOR A NEW CENTURY

I'd like to begin with a passage that is fairly familiar to many. In the ninth chapter of Matthew, Jesus is being questioned about a whole variety of things by the religious establishment, who challenge his theological and political credentials. At a certain point in the course of the dialogue, Jesus makes a very profound point that I think is most appropriate for us as we think about youth ministry and what that means.

Youth ministry in the religious, faith-centered community is like youth development policy in the secular community. Which is to say that it has become a fairly robust industry; there is substantial money and there are many resources to be circulated in the youth ministry industry, as is the case in the secular, liberal, youth development policy industry. Jesus says, "No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. For the patch will pull away from the garment, making the tear worse. Neither do men pour new wine into old wineskins. If they do, the wineskins will burst, the wine will run out, and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved." (Matthew 9:16-17)

I submit that as we approach a new century, we are challenged to develop new wineskins that will absorb the wine of new visions to provide new possibilities for youth ministry. These new possibilities for new visions of ministry will be animated by a burden for the lost and those that are in need. As a result, we will move from the ministry of church maintenance and mere retention to a ministry that addresses the needs of those in pain. In too many contexts what masquerades as ministry is

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really maintenance of the institutional status quo. The goal is to reduce the hemorrhaging of members from the church. It's not really about ministry.

In connection with this idea, I would like to do two things. I would like first to delineate my understanding of the current historical context, and then to explain my understanding of this notion and vision of new ministry. I will refer in passing to what the empirical evidence suggests and then outline the extraordinary opportunities that exist. The church now is in a position to do what no other agencies in secular society have the imagination or moral vocabulary to do: to promote rational visions of reconciliation connected to authentic demonstrations of justice.

Consider the following historical, cultural, and political context. Today in the United States more than ten million Americans face a crisis of catastrophic proportions. Life in the major postindustrial centers in the United States is genuinely poor, nasty, brutish, and short. It is often, for too many, a choice between suffering and abject misery. The prospects for black males are perhaps a bit more exciting. There is, of course, death due to homicide, or drug-related HIV infection. And then there is incarceration, which provides an opportunity to refine the skills required for a career in criminality. In all this horror, however, there is a certain depraved consistency. For the present poverty of blacks and other ethnic poor serves a variety of important ideological functions. Conservative policy elites, whether Republican or Democrat, perceive correctly that poor blacks are a politically disposable population. In fact, the suffering, nihilism, and decay associated with the tragic circumstances of the urban poor can and, in the view of a few conservatives, should be exploited to ensure continued political dominance. The logic is very simple. Because inner-city poor are politically vulnerable, they can be blamed for anti-Semitism, crime, riots, the Republicans, the Democrats, David Duke, Newt Gingrich, sin, sex, and AIDS. Because the American political arena is in such an advanced state of decomposition—and is there any question about this?—the absurdity of the argument will carry no political costs.

Assume, then, that current conditions for the poor in the inner cities persist. Two developments will follow. First, we can safely assume that young mothers and fathers will not transmit to their progeny the values and norms associated with intellectual and cultural achievement. Second, as entry into labor markets is increasingly dependent on education and high skills, we will see, perhaps for the first time in the history of the United States, a generation of economically obsolete Americans.

Remarkably, the tragedy we face is still worse. Unlike many of their ancestors who came out of slavery and entered this century with strong backs, discipline, a thirst for literacy, deep religious faith, and hope in the face of monumental adversity, the new black generation is ill-equipped to secure gainful employment even as

productive slaves. We have produced a generation that does not know the ways of the Lord. This generation, which would be ineligible to qualify for slavery, provides a unique insight into the nature of economic opportunity in contemporary capitalist democracy. Consider this achievement: a generation of poor black women and children may reach the end of this century in an economically and politically inferior position to their ancestors who entered this century in the shadow of formal slavery.

Unable to see a more rational future through the eyes of faith, they lack the hope that sustained their forebears. Lacking hope, they experience what Orlando Patterson, a professor of sociology at Harvard University, has called “social death.” Unlike the social death of formal slavery, this new social death is fundamentally spiritual, rooted in the destruction of faith and hope. In a world without faith and hope, history and identity are themselves divested of meaning. And so, as the Christian philosopher Cornel West has in this instance correctly argued, the future is transformed into a spectacle of nihilism and decay.

It is, in the end, this profoundly spiritual nature of the current crisis that gives it its unique historical character. It is in the context of what has been described that God is doing something new. God is doing something new among people of faith because of the unique historical circumstances in which we find ourselves.

We know from all kinds of data that has been circulated in the mainstream press that by the year 2005 this country will experience a dramatic demographic increase in the number of children between the ages of fifteen and nineteen. Between now and the year 2010, the number of juveniles in the population will increase substantially. For example, the United States is now home to roughly seven-and-a-half million boys ages fourteen to seventeen. Professor James Q. Wilson of UCLA has estimated that by the year 2000 there will be a million more people in that age bracket than there were in 1995, half of them male. Based on well-replicated longitudinal studies, he predicts that six percent of these boys will become high-rate repeat offenders—thirty thousand more young muggers and killers and thieves than we have now. Following the same basic calculus, by the year 2010 there will be roughly four-and-a-half million more males ages seventeen and under than there were in 1990. Since, as Professor Wilson has suggested, about six percent of young males in each birth cohort go on to commit serious crimes, this increase will put an estimated 270,000 or so more young potential criminals on the streets than we had in 1990. This we can reasonably expect to be the case over the next two decades.

That is why what we are engaged in, in terms of models and visions of youth ministry, is so important. And I want to talk about this from two perspectives.

The white conservative Protestant community is in a unique position in that

it is here that the needs for youth ministry as a function of a fairly clearly defined understanding of the biblical mandate to promote and develop faith evolves. You are in a position—we are in a position—to make a critical difference as we develop models of ministry that move beyond maintenance to affecting the lives of the poor. Many such discussions usually become counterproductive because the speaker will scold the predominantly white audience, saying that they have been terribly insensitive and indifferent to the needs of the poor and listing a whole litany of other sins for which they attempt to atone in some cathartic way.

Well, I'm not going to do that. What I'm going to suggest is something infinitely more realistic. I suggest that we in the faith community come to terms with the fact that in this country the only place where there is any possibility for authentic reconciliation and dialogue around issues of inequality and justice, which invariably influence youth ministry, is in the faith community. You, ladies and gentleman, are the only people in this country who have the potential to build bridges across various barriers, because the secular community is not in a position to do that. We can see from the political circus in Washington that there are no possibilities for any form of rational political discourse from any ideological corner. It is therefore clear that we must, as the people of God, commit ourselves to transcending the rhetoric of reconciliation and moving to the realities of what it means to be the people of God in realistic ways. We must put the needs of children, not simply in our churches, but beyond the borders of our churches, on the agenda. And we must do that in new and realistic ways.

What do I mean? One of the traditional evangelical models of youth ministry is what I call the "Tarzan model of ministry." I mean by this a model of ministry that is committed to an utterly superficial notion of reconciliation, which simply means that white folk and black folk will be polite to one another. We will skirt the issues in hope that we can do some periodic events together and move on about our business. There is never authentic reconciliation because there is never an authentic discussion about the historical realities that created the breach.

Beyond that, in too many cases the liberal community experiences what I call the "whips and leather" routine, where the minority person of choice comes in and engages in the somewhat pathological exercise of attempting to inflict as much guilt as possible on the audience. The recipients, in a masochistic way, engage in this bizarre exercise, resulting in nothing of durable substance to alleviate the conditions of the poor or to produce an agenda that will generate measurable outcomes for the young.

God is calling his people to transcend the hypocrisy of the rhetoric of reconciliation or the therapeutic rituals and exercises of the politically correct liberal elite who engage in a series of rituals that again have no tangible bearing on the needs of

the poor. We need to develop models of ministry that reflect the interests of the poor.

I will segue now to a model. In 1988, a group of former Harvard/MIT Christian students and I determined that we would try to put our hips where our lips were in terms of our commitment to the poor. We moved from Harvard University to a low-income area in North Dorchester, Boston. That year we were evangelized by crack cocaine dealers. They reached out to the Christians, who were very good at preaching but had an underdeveloped skill in terms of listening. For one year we were invited into crack houses and introduced to drug dealers, guns, and the drug game.

From 1988 to 1990, we engaged in a dialogue, attempting to listen to the needs of the poor as opposed to pontificating about them. Instead of creating self-serving, patronizing relationships, we attempted to interface with these young people to learn what their needs were. A young heroin dealer summarized it beautifully. He said, "I'm going to explain to you Christians, who are such good preachers, why you are losing an entire generation. Listen, this is really all about being there." "What do you mean?" I asked. He said, "When Johnny goes to school in the morning, I'm there, you're not. When Johnny comes home from school in the afternoon, I'm there, you're not. When Johnny goes out for a loaf of bread for grandma for dinner, I'm there, you're not. I win, you lose."

We have failed to be incarnational; we have failed to be there, so that in too many cases it is easier for a young pregnant girl who is at risk to find refuge in a crack house, a bar, or a speakeasy than it is for her to find refuge in a church, where the youth ministry model runs from nine to five. That young heroin dealer said, "Once you make the decision that you are going to make yourself available and to listen and to be there, the book says, 'the Word was made flesh and dwelled among us, and we beheld Him as the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.'" Once we are willing to make the word flesh and to let the world behold us, we can function as the salt. We can make a difference in the lives of young people who are desperately looking for the church to be the body of Christ.

More fundamentally, I want to conclude with this: We are morally obligated as the body of Christ to do what our Savior has called us to do. "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13:35) We will never be a credible witness to the world, despite all the money in our denominational coffers. We will never be credible witnesses to young people despite all our institutional programming and elaborate theories and theologies unless we are willing to take the words of our Lord and Savior seriously. "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples"—not because you have great programs, not because you have fancy theories and great retreat centers, but because

you demonstrate the Word being made flesh by loving one another, and loving one another through the hard times.

One of the remarkable things that struck me is that I saw more collegial love and fraternity and sorority among unsaved gang members than I found among Christians who happened to be of different colors. And yet we're mystified because the world finds us to be a joke. We must determine in our hearts that we will move beyond the rhetoric of reconciliation and beyond our racially selective concerns with maintenance masquerading as ministry to minister to the needs of the poor.

You will recall that there was a religious leader once who in his inaugural address for his public ministry stated that "the Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach the Gospel to the poor." (Luke 4:18) God has provided a unique opportunity for the church to engage not in games but in rigorous, sensitive, thoughtful, and reflective interrogation of the reality of the culture of the young so that we might more effectively respond to the needs of those who suffer. As a consequence, we will be blessed so that we, in turn, can be a blessing to others. 