

Introduction to this Issue

We have devoted this issue of *Reformed Review* to the spirituality of late adolescents and young adults. The idea for this theme was conceived in the college classroom. Last year, those we know who teach religion and theology courses to undergraduates shared with us their observations about how their students existentially relate to the subjects taught in these courses. They reported that students tend to reduce the specific truth claims of Christianity (or any other religion) to so many variations on a common theme. Indeed, it is not even enough to say that for these students truth claims are “relative;” rather, they are substitutable. One can pick and choose from any of them on offer. The assumption is that none of them communicate anything definite about God, human nature, life after death, etc. More than once has a professor we know heard a student comment: “all religions are more or less saying the same thing.”

What explains this perspective toward spirituality that young people have increasingly adopted in recent years? How has it influenced how they frame their moral and spiritual lives, or how they arrive at their belief and value commitments? How can the churches responsibly and intelligently enter into the contemporary cultural milieu that shapes—or distorts—how young people perceive the message of the grace and truth that come through Jesus Christ? How can the churches create ministries that support and guide young people in their search for vital resources by which to develop a healthy and integrated self with purpose and direction?

These are fundamental questions that our contributors see as urgent in our time. And we think our readers will agree that in very few places is one likely to find these questions formulated as precisely and as cogently as they are in Michael D. Langford’s essay on contemporary adolescence in the West. Carefully researched, Langford’s essay is comprehensive in scope. He masterfully integrates insights from a wide range of disciplines, including developmental psychology, modern history, philosophy and theology to provide a “theological diagnosis” of the current issues that adolescents have to negotiate in order to achieve proper “identity formation.” Langford demonstrates that this developmental task is complicated in a world that is undergoing change so rapidly that it is hard to adapt. Due to the social and cultural disruptions resulting from globalization and the technological advances that have driven it, many adolescents find themselves in conditions of “isolation,” “cultural groundlessness” and “relativism.” Langford outlines theological responses to each of these conditions, confident that the churches can help adolescents understand the “need for community” in a world of solitary individuals, the

“need for theological analysis” in a world of a plurality of beliefs and values, and the “need for truth and humility” in a world characterized by relativism.

It is no accident that we offer Langford’s essay first. We see in it a strong theoretical foundation on which practitioners can build their own youth ministries. To this end, we are pleased to present two contributions from a practitioner who has been involved in building youth ministries for more than 25 years. Because of this long experience, Duane Smith is exceptionally qualified to instruct the churches on what they need to do to form and sustain effective youth ministries in which to make disciples of Christ.

In his first article, Smith discusses the “The Exemplary Youth Ministry Project” carried out under the auspices of the Lily Foundation. That study identified 44 “faith assets” that constitute a set of criteria by which to measure the health of a church’s youth ministry. These assets are organized into eight groupings, which Smith helpfully lays out. He concludes with the observation that while the assets are generally valid, individual churches must adapt them to their own particular contexts to ensure their applicability.

It is to one of these churches that Smith turns in his second article. Smith has done extensive consulting work with congregations in the Reformed Church in America (RCA), especially in the Great Lakes region. He has seen youth ministries succeed as well as fail in these congregations. His concern is that if churches perpetuate “business as usual” approaches, the RCA will see more failure than success in the area of youth ministry. There are signs of hope, however. Smith notes that several congregations are making the investments in the kind of personnel and resources and strategic planning necessary for creating and sustaining vibrant youth ministries. In this connection, Smith provides practical recommendations. Smith concludes the second of his two articles by pointing out that the ministry to youth concerns the entire church. Not only should every member of the church be willing to contribute something to the “spiritual nurture” of the youth, but also to value the gifts that youth can contribute to the whole church. In too many churches, youth are ignored or isolated, consigned to their own space. Smith warns that if the churches don’t recognize and embrace their youth today, preferring to relegate them to the church of tomorrow, they won’t be here tomorrow.

We hope that the churches will take seriously what both our authors say in the pages to follow.

-Christopher Dorn