



**PNEUMATOLOGY AS A
THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATION
FOR YOUTH MINISTRY IN
THE 21st CENTURY**

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I. INTRODUCTION

One of my legacies from two years of youth ministry in a small church in southern Idaho was the creation of cool youth group names, specifically **sunago**¹ and THRIVE. I was under the impression that a *good youth ministry* didn't consist of lame names for the youth programs; I didn't want to open up the church bulletin and see *Sunday Night Youth Group* listed. So, within my first few weeks, I changed the name of the youth program to **sunago**. About six months later the high school students grew tired of playing games with the junior high students, and we decided to create an early morning breakfast and Bible study just for the high school students. The first time we met, I began the early morning with the most important item on the agenda: "Okay friends, now we need a cool name." I threw out to them some names I'd seen on youth ministry blogs: Crosspoint, the Well, Breakpoint and the Rock. They came up with Yranimes.² However, we eventually settled on a name we all thought was pretty *cool*: THRIVE.

The name begs the question: Did THRIVE thrive? THRIVE moved from early Thursday mornings to Wednesday evenings, where it still remains on the church calendar as the Senior High youth group. We did some contemplative prayer exercises, read through selections of C.S. Lewis' *The Screwtape Letters*, discussed contemporary issues, prayed together and enjoyed creating deeper bonds between the few high school students who came. As I reflect back on my two years in ministry at Living Waters Presbyterian Church, I find that some of my most fond memories come from evenings at THRIVE. But, did it thrive? Does it continue to thrive? I don't know much more about the current ministry other than that it does continue to meet. One of the questions I should have reflected on during my time in ministry was, "What *does* make a thriving youth ministry?"

¹ This was supposed to be some form of the Greek word for "to gather together." At least that's how I advertised it. We made t-shirts with "this is a youth group shirt" on the front and "sunago" on the back. I think the verb form is incorrect, but the name still lives.

² Yranimes is *seminary* backwards. Wendell, ID is a heavily Mormon-influenced town and the majority of my students' friends had to get up early in the morning for Seminary at the local Mormon church. They thought it would be fun to make our name a play on the word *seminary*: I decided that probably wasn't the best decision.

II. YOUTH MINISTRY EXEMPLAR

As I begin to reflect on that question, I'm tempted to initially begin by following the lead of the ancient Christian mystical tradition of Dionysius the Areopagite and thinking apophatically. What does **not** lead to a thriving youth ministry? As someone who has attended one Youth Specialties National Youth Worker's Convention and numerous other youth ministry training events, I've met plenty of people in youth ministry who start off conversations with, "So, how big is your youth group?" or "That sounds great, but...how many students do you have coming?" The pressure and temptation, many times from parishioners and other staff at one's church, to play into the numbers game is often greater than one can possibly imagine. Youth ministries are often evaluated solely based on the number of students attending (or, even worse, the number of students on a ministry's mailing list). It's interesting to note that even the synonyms for the word *thrive* are words we generally use to imply growth: *flourish*, *bloom*, *increase*. When a youth ministry begins to define itself by their weekly numbers, it's time to reevaluate their mission and focus.³

I am writing as one who is in the process of becoming ordained in the Presbyterian Church (USA). Growing up, I never belonged to any PCUSA youth ministry program; my experience in Presbyterian youth ministry began with working at two Presbyterian summer camps and continued as I spent two years working in a small PCUSA church. From my understanding, Presbyterian youth ministry is a very diverse enterprise. There are active "incarnational ministries," relational ministries and campus ministries, whereas some churches do not even have formal youth ministry programs. The role of community is important in Presbyterianism, and it seems to be one of the two primary focuses of Presbyterian youth ministry: to create a place where students can enjoy fellowship and feel welcomed. Whether that is the sole requirement for creating a youth ministry that is thriving is

³ I should note that this section is not meant to imply that youth ministries can't be large. Some ministries may simply have very large youth groups because it *is* in fact a thriving youth ministry, and by the very careful attention drawn to *not* focusing on numbers and by focusing on the elements of youth ministry addressed in the following section, one may not be ready for the overwhelming amount of students who are drawn to that.

questionable. The other primary focus of Presbyterian youth ministry is catechesis: Presbyterians believe strongly in proper education and that Confirmation and other weekly gatherings, including Sunday School, should have a strong element of teaching involved. In the end, creating community and educating students are important aspects of youth ministry, but I believe young people desire more than that. When it comes to youth ministry, *young people will be drawn to a group that exhibits joy, nurtures passion, creates authentic community, feels safe and is unconditionally loving and embracing.*

III. A PNEUMATOLOGICAL STARTING POINT

Pneumatology (the doctrine of the Holy Spirit) is not necessarily a doctrine that has been given the most attention in Reformed circles in the past. Princeton Theological Seminary professor Daniel Migliore writes that while there has been a recent “resurgence” of interest in the Holy Spirit, it “has seldom received the attention given to other doctrines of the faith such as Christology and ecclesiology.”⁴ Reformed churches tend to pride themselves in being the *sola scriptura* strand of the Reformation; however, with such a strong focus on the Word of God, it could be said that many Presbyterian churches have become logocentric. Reformed churches, like the Presbyterian Church (USA), need to be able to, without giving up their strong emphases on the Word and words of God, be more open to the movement and work of the Holy Spirit.

Since there has been such little work in the realm of pneumatology by Reformed and Presbyterian theologians, I will be looking at both the pneumatologies of a Reformed theologian, Jürgen Moltmann and a Catholic feminist theologian, Elizabeth Johnson. For many, the Holy Spirit is simply the last-minute addition to the end of the Doxology. Perhaps, it is the “thing” that one gets when they ask Jesus into their heart. For yet others, the Holy Spirit (aka Holy *Ghost*) is an ethereal friendly Divine Casper floating around the lives of Christians, helping them when they need it. Moltmann and Johnson, thankfully, see the Spirit much differently.

⁴ Daniel Migliore, Faith Seeking Understanding, 2nd Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 224.

Moltmann's *The Spirit of Life* and *The Source of Life* look critically at a theology of the Holy Spirit and its implications for the world today and for a greater theology of life. Moltmann defines the Holy Spirit as “the loving, self-communicating, out-fanning and out-pouring presence of the eternal divine life of the triune God.”⁵ Moltmann agrees with orthodox theology as he sees the Spirit being a manifestation of the triune God. However, throughout the history of Christian theology, the view of the Holy Spirit has been limited to discussions surrounding charisms: gifts of the Holy Spirit, and the presence of the Holy Spirit being the greatest gift. Moltmann, I believe, wants to help release the Spirit from being linked solely to questions about *gifts*: “The Spirit is more than just one of God’s gifts among others; the Holy Spirit is **the unrestricted presence** of God in which **our life wakes up**, becomes wholly and entirely living, and is endowed with the energies of life.”⁶ With the inclusion of the phrase *unrestricted presence*, Moltmann relies heavily on the idea that we do not have control or true knowledge about the Spirit and where it remains: “The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going.”⁷

Moltmann, following the natural trajectory of this emphasis, wants to focus on the Spirit as the Spirit of life, and free the Spirit from solely being talked about in ecclesiastical circles. “The Holy Spirit’s wave of salvation embraces the whole of life and everything living, and cannot be confined to religion and spirituality.”⁸ This focus on the Spirit as the Spirit of life will help one to understand the deepness and the significance of the life that God has given: “The experience of God deepens the experiences of life. It does not reduce them, for it awakens the unconditional Yes to life. The more I love God the more gladly I exist. The more immediately and wholly I exist, the more I sense the living God, the inexhaustible well of life, and life’s eternity.”⁹

⁵ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992), 289.

⁶ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Source of Life* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992), 10-11, emphasis mine.

⁷ John 3.8, TNIV.

⁸ Moltmann, *The Source of Life*, 22.

⁹ Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life*, 98.

“The Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come! And let those who hear say, ‘Come!’ Let those who are thirsty come; and let all who wish take the free gift of the water of life.”¹⁰ Moltmann clearly emphasizes the role of the Spirit in life, and Johnson continues with this idea as she focuses on the Spirit as the giver of life. “There is no exclusive zone, no special realm, which alone may be called righteous. Rather, since Spirit is the creator and giver of life, life itself with all its complexities, abundance, threat, misery, and joy becomes a primary mediation of the dialectic of presence and absence of divine mystery.”¹¹ Some may think this sounds like a very *liberal* understanding of the Holy Spirit; however, this is a belief that goes back to the fourth century with Athanasius. Athanasius wrote: “Again, the Spirit of the Lord *fills the universe*...the angels and other creatures partake of the Spirit himself...but the Spirit is always the same; he does not belong to those who partake, but *all things* partake of him.”¹² I think this is an important distinction to make: the Holy Spirit is not a Spirit or a being that the Christian church has exclusive rights to. Again, Johnson writes: “So universal in scope is the compassionate, liberating power of Spirit, so broad the outreach of what Scripture calls the finger of God...that there is virtually no nook or cranny of reality potentially untouched.”¹³ Johnson goes on to say that there are primarily three ways in which the Spirit is mediated to humanity: through the natural world, through personal experiences and interpersonal relationships of fidelity, and through macro systems of structure and community.¹⁴ It is my hope that by looking to Moltmann and Johnson’s understandings of the Spirit, we might be able to see how pneumatology should be at the forefront of theological exploration today, especially as it can apply to the area of youth ministry.

¹⁰ Revelation 22.17, TNIV.

¹¹ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1992), 124.

¹² Athanasius’ first letter to Serapion, qtd. in J. Patout Burns and Gerald M. Fagin, eds., *The Holy Spirit* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1984), 107-8.

¹³ Johnson, 126-7.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 125-6.

Adolescents today live in a vastly pluralistic, postmodern global culture. They have friends who are Jews, Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists and other forms of trendy syncretized-religions. To present to them the idea that the Holy Spirit is found only within believers, and is void from the lives of all those they know who wouldn't affiliate themselves with Christianity would be a tragic error. Rather, to allow them to see and learn about the depth and breadth of the Spirit would be a great gift to them. Johnson's hope that we might look for and experience the Holy Spirit in the natural world, through personal and interpersonal relationships and through community fits in well with the cultural location of adolescents as well as their developmental needs. First, as students are learning more about the world in which they live, they can be seeking to "be on the lookout" for the Spirit's presence in the world, in ways others might not be able to see. Second, in adolescence, the desire to learn more about oneself is crucial; presenting them with opportunities to personally experience the Spirit, as well as through relationships of fidelity within a youth program will help them to create an identity. Finally, as they begin to learn more about themselves through the Spirit, adolescents can continue to learn about themselves through relationships in the greater community of the youth group and in their local society. As they are involved in those groups and communities, when true *koinonia* emerges, the Spirit will be there and an encounter with the Divine takes place.

This approach to mediating experiences of the Spirit doesn't seem to fit neatly into categories of communitarian or individualist response, or conversion or nurture. The breadth of opportunities to experience the Spirit cover both experiences of the individual and of the community. Also, the Spirit is experienced through both a focus on creating a nurturing environment where this can take place, and being open to the radical movements and conversions that are expected with the Spirit. I would not say that this approach to youth ministry is solely located in one of these 'camps' or another. It is an attempt to find a middle way, while avoiding the extremes which leads to polarization.

IV. A SPIRIT-CENTERED PHILOSOPHY OF YOUTH MINISTRY: AN ALT.WORSHIP CASE-STUDY¹⁵

I believe that by focusing on the work and role of the Holy Spirit in youth ministry, we will be able to provide students with a more holistic experience of the Divine in their lives. As mentioned above, I believe young people will be drawn to a youth ministry that *exhibits joy, nurtures passion, creates authentic community, feels safe and is unconditionally loving and embracing*. I believe the following three-fold Spirit-centered purpose for youth ministry will help meet those needs:

1. To help students learn how to foster an awareness of the Spirit in all of God's creation.
2. To allow students to experience the Holy Spirit through relationships, both with the Divine through worship and spiritual practices, and with others through relationships marked by fidelity.
3. To create a community which models its love and relationality after that which is found in the triune God, through which students will have another way to encounter the Spirit, the Divine Love that holds *koinonia* together.

During an alt.worship gathering, the differentiation between the roles of *leaders* and *learners* become a bit unclear. Everyone who considers themselves a follower of Christ needs to learn how to become more and more aware of God's presence, through the presence of the Spirit, here on earth.

Christians yearn after finding ways to put themselves into postures where they can feel and experience the Divine, and be in committed relationships with others. Springing from that desire, everyone wants to be part of a greater community that is loving, embracing and caring. Depending on how one facilitates the gathering, there may or may not be a visible person leading at all.

Therefore, both sponsors and students come to place themselves at the feet of Jesus, ready to encounter the Spirit; all come with their own individual experiences, but all come to learn and be changed.

¹⁵ Whether one likes to admit it or not, games will most likely continue to be a part of youth ministry. When facilitated in the proper manner, games can help to create and enhance community and teach students about their fellow peers. They can also just provide a place where students can let out steam and have fun. This ministry will have creative ways to incorporate games, but will also incorporate mentoring, small groups, Bible and book studies, worship gatherings, service and a variety of other meaningful activities into the ministry. However, for this paper, I have chosen to specifically look at the concept of an alt.worship (alternative worship) gathering, and how it would fit into my philosophy of youth ministry.

One of the questions that alt.worship leaders constantly get asked is “But where is the preaching?” Some of the most well-known alt.worship communities¹⁶ don’t have traditional preaching at an alt.worship gathering, and for some from logocentric denominations, that gives reason to pause and reconsider this new approach to worship. In some ways, the content that is being communicated in an alt.worship gathering is whatever the person who attended takes home with them. There is no *main-course* when it comes to the content; rather it is more of an *all-you-can-eat* buffet line. However, as is true with many all-you-can-eat restaurants, often one can find some that have a specific cuisine they focus on. You may go to a Chinese all-you-can-eat restaurant, or a *home-style cookin’* all-you-can-eat restaurant. So it is with an alt.worship gathering; each gathering is centered around a specific theme, for example the Eucharist, the gospels, the Spirit, the minor prophets or prayer. While each of the components that goes into the alt.worship gathering will have something to do with the larger theme, there is not one specific idea being focused on. Many of the prayer stations may be focused on how to become more aware of the presence of God in our world, and many will provide students with individual opportunities for connecting with the Divine. Instead of this being simply an excuse for the leaders to avoid coming up with a lesson plan, I believe this truly allows for the freedom and *unrestricted movement* of the Spirit.

Because students experience the Holy Spirit in a variety of ways, there will be a variety of methods used at an alt.worship gathering to provide ways for students to learn how to seek and connect with God. As a result of this youth ministry’s desire to provide students with both individual and communal ways to feel and experience the Holy Spirit, there will be times throughout the alt.worship gathering that we gather together as a large group and pray and do activities

¹⁶ Grace, the community that alt.worship guru Jonny Baker belongs to, doesn’t have traditional preaching in the service. They believe that the Word and words are communicated through different mediums throughout the evening, whether that be through a variety of different prayer stations, or through a guided prayer.

together,¹⁷ and there will be other times when students will have the freedom to spend time by themselves. The environment that is going to be most conducive to this type of ministry is one that is first and foremost one that feels safe, welcoming and embracing. The practice of being grace-full is something that will be a primary focus on how leaders interact with students. As soon as there is condemnation and judgment, trust leaves and skepticism enters. This is not to say that there is no room for confronting students on certain issues, but the manner in which this is done is completely different in a youth ministry that honors grace over judgment, patience over quick-temperedness and love over all.

Evaluating whether goals are being met in youth ministry is a very difficult venture. As previously mentioned, so often ministries are evaluated solely on growth in numbers. It is very possible to have a youth ministry that is flourishing with only six high school students. I think for this type of ministry, the presence of mentors will be crucial. If students have mentoring relationships with older members of the congregation, being in touch with mentors and hearing how they view the progress of each individual student will be incredibly important. Individually, it will be important to see if students are in fact learning how to become more aware and conscious of the Holy Spirit in their communities, their relationships, themselves and their world. It will also be important to look at the community of the youth group as a whole to evaluate whether students are in fact learning how to be more loving, more grace-filled, more honoring of the movements of the Spirit in others and more committed to the community that exists within the youth ministry. These are by no means easy ways to evaluate a youth ministry, but these are ideas that I think will help with the process.

¹⁷ Quite often, this may be through communal worship through song, or by times of lectio divina or prayers. There may also be times of sharing that will provide another way for students to feel as though they're connecting with others in the group, both fellow peers and those who are involved with leadership. This helps to break down some of the walls that may exist between the two. I know that there still need to exist some boundaries between the two, but because we desire intimacy and fidelity, this will help create an atmosphere where those types of relationships can begin to be formed.

V. CONCLUSION

Is this a perfect model for ministry? No. Does it have its own theological and methodological flaws? Probably. But I think that a youth ministry that is centered and oriented around the unrestricted movement of the Spirit is a welcome alternative to other current models of youth ministry. The Holy Spirit has been avoided for long enough in theology and the church. Incorporating a robust and open theology of the Holy Spirit as a theological foundation for youth ministry will radically change the way youth groups look, act and function in society. Students will become more open to the presence of the Spirit in all people and in the world, more passionate and desiring of personal encounters of the Spirit through spiritual formation and relationships and more willing to work hard for authentic community that seeks to exemplify the community and relationality found in the triune God.

“What is most baffling about forgetfulness of the Spirit is that what is being neglected is nothing less than the mystery of God’s personal engagement with the world in its history of love and disaster; nothing less than God’s empowering presence dialectically active within the world in the beginning, throughout history and to the end, calling forth the praxis of life and freedom. Forgetting the Spirit is not ignoring a faceless, shadow third hypostatis but the mystery of God closer to us than we are to ourselves, drawing near and passing by in quickening, liberating compassion.”¹⁸

¹⁸ Johnson, 131.

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