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# Youth Participation in Urban Mission and Ministry

## Introduction

Youth participation is a basic concept in the circle of human rights practitioners and advocates. Theories and praxis in the domain of youth participation are generally anchored in two international frameworks—the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which affirm the right of young people to participate in family, social, and political life. Mary Kholer views youth participation as “the involvement of young people in responsible, challenging action that meets a genuine need, with young people having the opportunity for planning and decision-making that affect others in an activity that has an impact on others (people or community), but definitely beyond the young people themselves” (1983:67). Kholer also states in Patricia A. Vardin and Ilene N. Brooks, that “young persons must be given the opportunity to learn through participating in decision making that affects their lives and through performing significant service that affects others” (1979:145). Drawing on these definitions, two criteria for authentic youth participation stand out: (1) being a key player in the planning and implementation of the action, and (2) being among the recipients or beneficiaries of the outcome of the action.

In this paper, I will use the two above criteria to discuss youth participation, not from a human rights perspective, but rather from a mission perspective using the Holy Scripture as the primary framework. I will argue that young people are entitled to meaningful participation in mission, particularly in an urban context, on the basis that they have always been both key players and primary recipients in God’s mission (*missio Dei*), understood by David Bosch as “the movement of God’s love toward people” (2009:390).

## Definition of Terms

A *child* is defined as “every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier” (United Nations 1989: article 1). However, in Judaism during biblical times, girls reached majority at the age of 12 and boys at the age of 13 (Wigoder 1989:159). A *youth* is someone in the period between childhood and maturity (*Webster’s Third New International Dictionary*). *Millennials* (also called Generation Y) are those born from 1980 to 1994. They may remember the pre-Internet era and the time where smartphones did not exist yet (White 2017:37). Although there is no consensus around the dates, *Generation Z* is considered the generation that essentially includes those who were born after Generation Y, so approximately 1995 to around 2010. They are now collectively under the age of twenty-five. “They are growing up in a post-9/11 world. They are experiencing radical changes in technology and understandings of family, sexuality, and gender. They live in multigenerational households, and the fastest-growing demographic within their age group is multiracial” (39).

## Young People as Key Players in Scripture

Scripture points to the fact that God has consistently picked young people and those who are faithful, diligent, and obedient, as his chosen instruments to carry out the work related to redeeming fallen humanity.

### Old Testament Examples

In the Old Testament, God chose Jacob, the younger of the two sons of Isaac, when he was but a little boy under the care of his mother to become the father of the nation of Israel (Gen 25, 27-28). Joseph was also the second youngest son of Jacob, after Benjamin. God called Joseph, not Ruben, the oldest son, to be the means by which he would save Egypt and the surrounding nations from an unprecedented famine. But above all, Joseph witnessed to the greatness, the sovereignty, the wisdom of Jehovah, the God of Abraham, of Isaac and Jacob. Samuel was a child when God called him to become a prophet (1 Sam 3). Gideon was a young man, the youngest in his house, when God called him to become judge in Israel (Judg 6). The young Israelite slave girl at Naaman’s house was the instrument by which the Syrian general came to Israel to be healed from leprosy and took his witness of the greatness of the God of Israel back to his country (2 Kgs 5). Esther, as a beautiful young girl, was God’s chosen one to advocate for the lives of her people and overthrow Haman’s malignant plot to

annihilate all Jews in the nation (Esth 1-10). These stories indicate that it is not age that qualifies one to participate in God's redemptive plan, but a person's obedience and faithfulness.

Joash was seven when he became king (2 Kgs 11:21) and Josiah was eight (2 Kgs 22-23). Among their predecessors was Solomon, whose reign was long, prosperous, and successful. Solomon was David's youngest son when he was anointed as King of Israel, rather than his older brother Adonijah (1 Kgs 1). At his death, Rehoboam, who was also young and inexperienced, replaced him. Unfortunately, Rehoboam relied on advice from inexperienced young men his age, causing the nation of Israel to split into two kingdoms (1 Kgs 12). Later, God called Jeremiah who believed he was too young for the difficult task of bringing the Lord's word of judgment to the corrupt and wicked leaders of Israel. God's response was to rebuke him, "Do not say, 'I am a youth,' For you shall go to all to whom I send you, And whatever I command you, you shall speak" (Jer 1:7.)

God's approval of youth participation transcends cultural barriers and the cultural traditions of biblical times, which was marked by a high degree of gerontocracy whereby leadership was generally reserved for elders. Respect for the aged was a cherished value and the very fact one had grown old conferred merit (Berlin 2011:23). Youthfulness in many contexts was a disadvantage, especially in the context of the administration and leading of a nation's affairs. Being young was viewed as being inexperienced, unstable, and ignorant. Those below twenty were not counted in a census and were not allowed to go into battle (Num 1:45). They were not to teach or hold public meetings. Because of this, all who listened to Jesus "were astonished at His understanding and answers" because he was only twelve (Luke 2:47). King Saul, along with the sons of Jesse (David's older brothers) and Goliath looked down on David because he was but a youth (1 Sam 17:28, 33, 42). A "child in age," according to Flavius Josephus (Caspi and Greene 2012:x), implies that David was thirteen or below (Wigoder 1989:159). It was probably because of the prejudice of society against young people that Paul exhorted Timothy to not let anyone despise his youthfulness by setting "an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity" (1 Tim 4:12). Yet, against such cultural suspicions regarding the youth in biblical days, God kept raising up young people to leadership positions during critical periods in the history of Israel.

### New Testament Examples

In the New Testament, by the time he turned twelve, Jesus was already busy about his Father's business (Luke 2:49). Jesus officially launched his

public ministry at the age of thirty. Jesus offered an opportunity to a little boy to be part of his compassionate ministry when he blessed and multiplied the fish and bread the young lad brought for his lunch, resulting in lunch for 5,000 people, not including children and women (John 6:1-14). Then he called twelve disciples to be with him in ministry. Although Scripture does not reveal their exact age, there exist a significant number of pointers leading many to believe that some of them could have been between thirteen and twenty-nine years old. Here are some hints. First, the disciples often called Jesus *Rabbi* (Matt 23:7, 26:25, 26:49; Mark 9:5, 14:45, etc.). The term was applied to a Jewish teacher in biblical times, and after AD 70 became a technical expression for those ordained in the rabbinic movement (Keener 2014:785). Although no historical data is available on the required age to be a rabbi, the sociology of the New Testament context, in which respect and obedience were due to the eldest, makes it hard to believe that a master could be younger than his followers. Knowing that Jesus started his ministry at age thirty (Luke 3:23), the disciples were probably twenty-nine or younger. Second, traditionally, a young man was expected to marry around his late teens or early twenties (Collins and Harlow 2010:630). Among the disciples, Peter is the only one the Gospels report to have a wife (Matt 8:14-15; Mark 1:29-30; Luke 4:38-39). There is a probability that many among the Twelve, except Peter, were below twenty. Third, a young man needed to be at least thirteen and above to be allowed to leave his house and follow a master (Collins and Harlow 2010:563), because below thirteen he was still considered a child (Berlin 2011:167). Fourth, again, based on the sociology of the New Testament, by calling the disciples "little ones" (Matt 10:42, 11:25) Jesus could have offended them if he was not the oldest among them. Fifth, it is mentioned that James and John, the sons of Zebedee, were fishing with their father as apprentices, which could indicate that they were not mature and experienced enough to go on their own (Matt 24:21-22). Sixth, when Mrs. Zebedee intervened on their behalf, it was probably because she felt it necessary to speak up for her sons requesting that they should be seated, one at Jesus' right and the other on his left (Matt 20:20-21). This was probably because of their teenage status and dependence on their mother's care and protection.

Some young people's actions went unnoticed. One example is Paul's nephew, who remains anonymous, in spite of his heroic act. Without his prompt, tactful, and timely intervention, Paul's mission would have ended prematurely. Luke records the story of a conspiracy by a group of Jews who bound themselves under an oath to not eat nor drink until they killed Paul. The young fellow, the son of Paul's sister, heard about the plot and quickly went to the barracks where Paul was being held while awaiting his court appearance the following day. After listening to him, "Paul

called one of the centurions to him and said, ‘Lead this young man to the commander, for he has something to report to him’” (Acts 23:17). After talking to the boy in private, the commander gave orders to safeguard Paul and made arrangements to transfer Paul to Caesarea early the next morning (Acts 23:12-23). God’s providence positioned the boy to be at the right place and at the right time to prevent Paul’s journey to Rome from failing. His safety also ensured first-century Christians and subsequent generations the benefit from his epistles to the Ephesians, the Philippians, and the Colossians (Swindoll 2005:10). A similar story is found in the Old Testament where Jonathan sent a “little boy” to collect the arrows that he shot and called after him “Hurry! Be quick! Do not stay!” as a signal informing David about Saul’s plot to kill him (1 Sam 20). The dedicated service of this lad, whose name is not even mentioned, and who was unaware of what he did, helped keep the future king alive and the ancestor of our Lord Jesus Christ alive.

The Bible says that in the end time the Holy Spirit will empower young people, both males and females, to work hand-in-hand with adults in the proclamation of the Gospel. “But this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: ‘And it shall come to pass in the last days, says God, That I will pour out of My Spirit on all flesh; Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, Your young men shall see visions, Your old men shall dream dreams’” (Acts 2:16-17).

### **Young People as Recipients of God’s Mission in Scripture**

The above sections illustrated how young men and women have participated as key players in God’s redemptive mission. This section looks at cases where young people are the focus or recipients of God’s salvific work. In Deuteronomy, God shows prominent attention to the formation of children. Patrick Miller (2008) says, “No single book of Scripture attends more directly and so often to the education of the children in the community of faith than Deuteronomy” (cited in Brawley 2014:75). The books of wisdom, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, were written with young people as the primary recipients in the mind of their authors. In the prologue of Proverbs, it is written, “Listen, my son, to your father’s instruction and do not forsake your mother’s teaching” (Prov 1:8). The intention of Solomon was for the youth to acquire wisdom not only by listening to their parents, but also by heeding the Word of God, which was the source of wisdom par excellence. In Proverbs 22:6 he recommends to “start children off on the way they should go, and even when they are old they will not turn from it.” In the same way, Ecclesiastes was primarily addressed to young people, as indicated in the last chapter. “Remember

your Creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come and the years approach when you will say, "I find no pleasure in them" (Eccl 12:1). Jesus reached out to children and youth to bless, heal, and teach them. The disciples were often upset by the presence of children coming into contact with him. They rebuked the kid's parents who brought them; however, the Gospel of Mark reports that Jesus "was greatly displeased and said to them, 'Let the children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of God. . . . And He took them up in His arms, laid His hands on them, and blessed them'" (Mark 10:14-16, cf. Luke 18:15-17). On another occasion, Jesus healed the daughter of a non-Jewish woman, a Canaanite (Matt 15:22-29; Mark 7:25-30). He brought back to life the only son of a woman from Nain, saying, "Young man, I say to you, arise" (Luke 7:11-17). He also restored to life the twelve-year-old daughter of Jairus, the ruler of a synagogue, saying, "'Talitha, cumi,' which is translated, 'Little girl, I say to you, arise'" (Mark 5:21-41). Young people attended Jesus' rallies and were encouraged by his teaching. One day, a young boy, who was in the crowd listening to the Lord's instruction, freely offered his snack—five barley loaves and two small fish—to be multiplied by Jesus (John 6:1-14).

God has set the example as the Promoter of authentic youth participation by calling them to play key roles in his mission and reckoning them as primary recipients of his loving attention and care. No wonder Satan relentlessly attacks young people. The above discussion highlights a few examples that serve as rationale for a theology of mission that seriously advocates a youth-focused approach whereby young people are both key players and recipients in all interventions.

### **Young People in the Cities: An Incentive for Youth-Focused Urban Ministries**

Roughly 55% of the world's population live in urban contexts. In places like the United States, Canada, and Europe—Western countries in general—the urban population rate has in recent years reached peaks as high as 80% and above. Rather than slowing down, urbanization is expanding and increasing at an annual rate of around 2% (CIA World Factbook 2018). The US Environment Protection Agency (EPA) reports that as of 2010, 81% of the U.S. population lived in urban centers. The EPA also indicates that since 1910, the urban population has grown by nearly 500% while the rural population has grown by only 19% (EPA 2018).

Parallel to this trend is the massive migration of young people to the cities. Pete Sanders wrote in *Forbes* that "Millennials, those persons roughly between the ages of 18 and 34 as of 2015, have become the nation's

largest generation cohort, surpassing Baby Boomers in 2016. . . . Many cities are pinning their future hopes on attracting and holding on to Millennials for decades to come” (2017). The UK edition of a renowned newspaper reported that “the number of 22 to 29-year-olds living in large city centres in England and Wales has nearly tripled as young, single, highly educated ‘millennials’ flock back to urban areas, according to analysis by the Centre for Cities” (The Guardian 2015). The Centre for Cities, a specialized group focused on research to help cities in the UK improve their performance, observed that “city centre living has boomed in Britain since the start of the [21st] century, with young people leading the move back into urban areas” (2015). Millennials have a preference for “dense, diverse urban villages where social interaction is just outside their front doors,” according to Nielsen, a global measurement and data analytics company. Nielsen notes that these youngsters are breaking from previous generations and are “transitioning from the white picket fence in the suburbs to the historic brownstone stoop in the heart of the city” (Nielsen 2014).

Life in the cities tends to cut people off from God. In most Western cities, according to Skip Bell, “there are new gods usurping the primacy of Christian faith. Those gods can be thought of in terms such as opportunity, wealth, technology, or art” (Bell 2016). Alejandro Bullon offers a bleak description of life in the mega cities of the world.

People who live in today’s mega cities are sad, lonely, filled with fear and anxiety. They live packed into large ‘sky rises’ and yet they scarcely know each other. They are always on the run, not knowing sometimes, where they are going. Whoever stops is overrun by those who come from behind. The strongest and quickest survive, leaving the rest in a valley of despair. There is no time for anything, and if by chance there should be some free time, this is completely taken by the media, which has placed itself in charge of forming the individual’s opinion of life and the world. Generally, this opinion is full of the relativism and materialism that characterize the period in which we live. (2001)

The context as described above represents a major challenge for every Christian, but particularly for young people, their faith, and their church attendance. Roland Allen notes that “St. Paul established his churches at places which were centres of the world’s commerce” (1969:16). Those cities were not only provincial centers but “through some of them the commerce of the world passed” (17). Following Paul’s methods, the Adventist Church in the twenty-first century needs to be strategic and focus its attention on urban centers where the majority of the world’s population lives, where social and spiritual needs are enormous, and where millennials and Generation Z are concentrated.

## Effects of Youth “Alienation” on the Church and Society

Even as young people seem to flourish in the cities, the Adventist Church seems unable to retain them. Yuri Drumi is concerned by the prospect of an aging church in the Euro-Asia Division. He is nostalgic of the church he knew that was a community of young people. Sadly, today’s churches in all four of Russia’s unions consist of “more and more gray-ing heads and many gloomy faces” (Drumi 2017:2). In 2000, Roger Dudley found that “at least 40 percent to 50 percent of Seventh-day Adventist teenagers in North-America are essentially leaving the church by their middle 20s” (Dudley 2000:35). Loren Seibold deplors that “too many of our young adults aren’t staying: the average age of church members in all but a few areas of Adventist concentration is about 50.2” (Seibold 2010). It is quite possible that in 2019 this figure will be higher and closer to the average age of “ordinary church members” in Japan, which is over 65 (McChesney 2018).

Dudley’s concern went beyond just membership. “It’s one thing to be listed as still a member of the church. It’s quite another to be an *active, participating* member” (2000:35: emphasis by author). Dudley’s research indicated that the percentage of teenagers holding church office, serving on a congregational committee, or participating in outreach activities was less than 25%. He also asked the question, “Why do Adventist youth leave the church?” Four main reasons came out: alienation, irrelevance, intolerance, and convenience. Many young people feel alienated and not trusted or valued. Supporting or promoting youth participation is vital for their self-esteem and their motivation to continue attending a church.

A year and a half ago, I was very active in the church by being chair of the nominating committee, Sabbath school superintendent, and church pianist. I was on the rostrum during the divine service every other week, a Sabbath school teacher, etc. Instead of putting the same clique of older people in all the leadership positions (which occurred as long as I could remember), the nominating committee decided to inject a mixture of older people, youth, and woman into leadership positions. The older clique was infuriated, refused to participate in the position for which they were nominated, and attended other churches. I had supported them for years, and when they had an opportunity to support me, they basically thought I wasn’t ready to be so active. I had gone to an Adventist academy for four years, and my mother raised us strongly in the faith. I had just as much knowledge and desire as they did. (Dudley 2000:62)



A contrasting experience to the previous one is revealing as to how young people's active participation in church life is key to their retention: "I've never dropped out, because a few older people always made sure I was involved while I was younger (teen). I got used to that and had fun, so I stayed while though I thought of leaving" (62). Dudley states that "The disengagement of such a large percentage of well-educated young adults who should now be assuming leadership in the church threatens the future viability of our movement" (2000:36).

Besides its negative effect on church membership and vitality, from a social angle, the alienation or marginalization of children and young people represent a threat for order and stability in society. Numerous studies show that when young people are denied the prospect of effective participation, they often turn to criminality or militarism. Nanette Davis studied the "gang problem" in the United States and found that they represent a parallel pseudo-community, as they replicate the social and economic order of society. Gangs are very attractive to alienated youth, giving them a sense of belonging, but at the same time, they have a "propensity to disruptive, antisocial or criminal behavior" (1999:231). The director of a renowned humanitarian organization focused on children and youths in Haiti noted that "the excitement of armed confrontation and the possibility of looting and kidnapping may be sufficient to mobilize unruly mobs of youth" (Tefamariam 2008:1). When young people's energy is not mobilized for constructive actions and channeled into peace and development, it is easily exploited by unscrupulous adults for violence and destabilizing movements. Tangible examples can readily be found in places like *Cite Soleil*, *Martissant*, and *Bel-Air* in the metropolitan area of Port-au-Prince/Haiti, which have become out-of-control zones. Cynical gang leaders in these places provide frustrated and uneducated youth with weapons and give them access to drugs, thus creating a new class of malignant hordes of armed bandits with no agenda other than to steal, murder, and destroy. The "marginalization [of young people] from mainstream economic life, political acknowledgment, and civic responsibility represents a potential threat to peace and stability in South Sudan" (Ensor and Reinke 2014:85).

### **A Youth-focused Approach for Meaningful Youth Participation**

A child-centered approach is an important concept that has emerged internationally in the context of the movement for the rights of children. It means, "taking the needs of the child into account, stemming from the child's interests when making decisions about the child. It also includes active involvement of the child in planning the activities concerning him/

her and inclusion in the decision-making process” (Toros, Karman, and Koidu 2013). This “theoretical shift in the sociological study of childhood . . . has led to the re-positioning of children from passive recipients of adult socialization to social actors in their own right” (Toros et al. 2013). The concept has been extended to include young people. A blog post defines a youth-centered approach as a process that “involves viewing, listening to and supporting a young person with a barrier based on their strengths, abilities, aspirations and preferences to make decisions to maintain a life which is meaningful to them” (*Youth Special* 2018). Young people become the focus, the actor, and the primary recipient of all actions. Considering that children or young persons do not develop in a vacuum, but belong to a family, a community, a culture, and a nation, it is important to act “in alliance with their family, friends, stakeholders and other experts, but with their permission” (*Youth Special* 2018).

### Youth Ministry Paradigms in Urban Context and Youth Participation

Fernando Arzola (2008) in *Toward a Prophetic Youth Ministry* describes and discusses four paradigms of youth ministry currently operating in urban context: (1) the Traditional Youth Ministry Paradigm, (2) the Liberal Youth Ministry Paradigm, (3) the Activist Youth Ministry Paradigm, and (4) the Prophetic Youth Ministry Paradigm.

The Traditional Youth Ministry Paradigm emphasizes a *youth ministry* in the urban context with no consideration for the specific reality of urban youth. Youth workers in this model are looking for the best and most effective programs/curricula for their youth. The main concern is the ministry program itself and its effectiveness in meeting the spiritual needs of the youth in general. Priority is given to activities such as Bible studies, worship services, evangelism, fellowship, and Sunday school. In evaluating the ministry, leaders ask the following question: How effective are the programs in the youth ministry department? (Arzola 2008:20-21).

The Liberal Youth Ministry Paradigm emphasizes a *compassionate ministry* in the urban context. This paradigm has a psychological focus: the felt-needs of the youth, with particular attention to the personal needs of urban youth. Priority activities include support groups, counseling, mentoring, choirs, trips, family services, music, and art. In evaluating this type of ministry, leaders ask, How are the needs of urban youth being met? (Arzola 2008:22-23)

The Activist Youth Ministry Paradigm stresses an *urban ministry* for youth. This paradigm has a sociological/anthropological focus: the issues experienced by youth. It is interested in knowing how the issues impacting

urban youth are being responded to? The program will include social action, after school tutoring, ethnic celebrations, economic empowerment, food pantry, and job training. In evaluating the ministry, leaders ask, How are the issues which affect urban youth being responded to? (2008:23-25).

The Prophetic Youth Ministry Paradigm emphasizes a *Christian ministry* for urban youth. This paradigm has a holistic focus of Christ in youth. Its concern is more holistic encompassing the spiritual, personal, and social needs of urban youth. But it does not start with programs, personal needs, or the social needs of urban youth. It starts with Christ, and “from Christ the ministry reaches out to address all three of these needs” (2008:24). The ultimate goal is the transformation of young people. In evaluating the ministry, leaders ask, How is Christ growing, deepening, and manifesting in the lives of urban youth? (2008: 25-28).

While acknowledging the important role of the traditional, liberal, and activist urban youth work, Arzola recommends considering a transition toward becoming more prophetic and Christ centered. He wishes that “urban youth ministries in cities around the world [would] transform into dynamic and holistic prophetic youth ministries addressing the spiritual, personal, and social needs of urban youth” (2008:186).

My first critique of Arzola’s analysis is that it is oblivious to the notion of youth participation. Looking at his discussion of the four above paradigms, none of them seems to be concerned by the issue of participation whereby young people are both key players and recipients. They focus more on the content rather than the process in the context of urban youth ministry. They see young people just as recipients but not critical players in all stages of the ministry cycle (planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation). A second critique is the fact that these paradigms operate from a paternalistic ideology. They all seem concerned by the question, “How best can youth ministry leaders address the needs of young people?” Even the prophetic youth ministry paradigm seems only to focus on how leaders can make sure Christ is central in the lives of young people. There is no indication that the youth will be invited to join the initial discussion or be given a voice that could influence the frame of the ministry. In fact, Arzola seems to write from the perspective of the youth worker, as he hopes that, with his proposed framework, “the prophetic youth workers in the urban context feel affirmed, empowered and energized to continue this most holy and important work” (Arzola 2008:186). Finally, I am worried that the paradigms, even the prophetic one, may lead to the implementation of stand-alone youth ministries, with no integration and no synergy with the overall mission strategy of the church. Segregation by age in evangelical churches is a wide-spread problem, according to Mike King (2006).

Another huge problem within evangelical ecclesiological practice is the propensity to segregate youth ministry from the rest of the church. . . . Much of youth ministry practice places value on creating youth centers and programs, resulting—by default or intent—in separated generations. How do we expect to fulfill the biblical model of young women and men learning from older women and men?" (King 2006:33)

Below, I summarize two approaches to youth ministry that seem to better reflect the concept of authentic participation.

### **Youth Ministry Models Promoting Youth Participation**

*Accommodative Youth Ministry.* Gareth Crispin advocates a theology of accommodation that can help integrate youth and children in an inter-generational church. In the same way Christ accommodates us in Christ, Crispin calls those with authority and knowledge in the church to accommodate youth and children. For Crispin, accommodation implies the inclusion of youth and children in all aspects of church life. Young people may not be able to participate in certain ordinances, like the communion service due to their lack of familiarity with the form being used. Yet, "accommodation will imply including young people in the discussion about which forms are appropriate" (Crispin 2017:19).

*Adoptive Accommodative Youth Ministry.* Chap Clark writes on the concept of Adoptive Youth Ministry and provides useful ways to integrate young people in the family of faith. His strategy includes five levels: outreach, welcoming level, engaging level, diverse relationship level, adoption level. In the last level, which is the summit of the Adoptive Youth Ministry model, members gather as an inclusive community, and in whatever they do—worship, missions, and service, both internally and externally—they experience the reality of a family. For example, when worshipping, they do not have only certain songs with a certain flavor because "gathering together is a comprehensive communal opportunity to collectively thank the Father who calls us his own" (Clark 2015:20). Mark Cannister states in Chap Clark that "transformation happens most deeply in the lives of teenagers when they are engaged in the broader life of the church and connected to a network of caring adults" (Clark 2015:136).

### **Best Practices in Urban Youth Participation**

There are several best practices in urban youth ministries that are important when developing an overall approach.

*Understand and meet the social and spiritual needs of urban youth.* Remember that genuine participation requires the participant to be among the primary recipients of the action. This implies that the needs of the participants must be known and understood. Jon Middendorf, in *Worship-centered Youth Ministry*, identifies three characteristics of millennial teens. First, moral relativism. They “tend to believe that the source of moral value judgments lies inside of them” (2000:31). Second, spiritual hunger. “They are starving for personal encounters with the living Christ who makes a difference today, in the real world” (38). Third, desire to belong. “Because our teens feel isolated from and wounded by the adult world around them, they deal with their problems by belonging” (38). Taking these characteristics into account, Middendorf argues that worship is a response to the millennial, postmodern mind-set, a worship inspired and fueled by the stories of God’s faithfulness and love (53). Such worship is not a religious act, but is rather a relationship (55) and a lifestyle (56). Middendorf describes the role of the youth worker as learning the biblical story, telling the story, and inviting participation in the story (2000:107-110).

Skip Bell notes that in the West “cities are dominated by secular culture, and lifestyles are often anything but Christian” (2018:6). He invites the churches located in urban contexts to be more concerned about the basic social needs of the people. “God desires us to seek shalom for the cities of our world today. . . . We are to prayerfully work for the common good of those who gather in urban environments. . . . He [God] does intend for us to transform lives in the city” (6). Bell exhorts the church to build relationships, get involved in the issues of the community, be incarnational by living, working, learning, playing, and engaging in dialogue. He adds, “There is little need for us to judge the effects of secularism in post-Christian culture. Instead, we can serve as advocates for justice, for the poor and abused in our culture” (7).

*Integrate postmodern values.* A youth-centered ministry in an urban context is more likely to be successful if it integrates postmodern values: experiential, spiritual, pluralistic, relative, altruistic, communal, creative, environmental, global, holistic, and authentic (Jones 2001:31-37). Tony Jones emphasizes three major elements where postmodern values can be integrated: community, evangelism, and recovering narrative.

*Community:* “In this postmodern time, youth workers must recover the communal spirit of the Christian faith through worship, a reliance upon the Trinity, and other community-based activities” (80). Jones states that “Salvation is a ‘we thing’ and not a ‘me thing.’ We accomplish God’s dream together. We exist to be a community” (108).

*Evangelism:* “We ought first to evangelize experientially and teach the content of the faith later! After all, Jesus says to his disciples, ‘Follow-me!’—not ‘Do you accept me as your personal Lord and Savior?’” (111).

*Recovering narrative:* “Let’s teach our students whole books of the Bible instead of verses here and there. And let’s teach them the whole story of Scripture by *telling them stories*” (205).

*Let them belong without restriction.* For Mike King, it is okay for young people to belong without a total commitment to Christ. He states, “Allowing youth to belong in our communities without pressuring them results in authentic decisions to follow Jesus” (2006:37).

*A focus on social justice.* Sharon E. Sutton’s study examined programs in America that sought to address issues affecting low-income and minority young people aged 12 to 28 living in oppressive urban conditions who often assumed adult responsibilities as teens. The study shows that urban adolescents encounter multiple forms of oppression, which some respondents describe “as a situation or dynamic in which certain ways of beings (e.g., having certain identities) are privileged in society while others are marginalized” (Sutton 2006:25). Young people need learning opportunities enabling them to “understand, question, and seek to change oppressive social conditions” such as racism, sexism, homophobia, classism, and so on. Sutton recommends applying socially critical pedagogies, which are methods of engaging youth in critical reflection and action, as well as activities that connect young people with their communities and, at the same time, providing them with meaningful opportunities for personal growth (25).

## Conclusion

The God of Scripture consistently called faithful youngsters to participate in his redemptive mission on earth. The mission of God is not only carried out by young men and women but also intentionally aims at reaching out to them. Drawing on biblical examples, this article advocates a youth-focused approach to urban ministry whereby young people are both actors and recipients of all activities. Youth participation is beneficial for society because their alienation is a cause of social and political disruption, of gang formation and criminal behavior in many contexts. Youth participation is beneficial for the church because, as reported in Roger Dudley’s 10-year study published in 2000, youth alienation pushes them away out of the church, while their active involvement enhances their retention. The article argues that a youth urban ministry is more likely to succeed if it integrates best practices such as meeting the social and spiritual needs of urban youth, the integration of postmodern values, a focus on social justice, and allowing the youth to belong without restriction.

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