

Youth Ministry: Crafting a Theological Map from Unworthiness to Dignity for the Adolescent¹

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Abstract

Human dignity is a fundamental right of every citizen, according to the South African constitution. Not having access to these fundamental rights, such as education, housing and employment, to name a few, have resulted in Communities in Tension (CiT's)², which is a product of systemic societal abandonment of young people and have eroded and undermined the human dignity of young people. It is one of many tasks of youth ministry to address the systemic abandonment of society as manifested in CiT's which ultimately will address the human dignity of young people. It is further argued that addressing this matter can only be achieved through "belovedness".

1. Introduction

Human dignity is the cornerstone of South African³ society and, according to the constitution of South Africa (1996:1245, 1247), everyone - which would include every adolescent - is entitled to access to resources that would protect them from relationships and situations which would undermine their human dignity. In South Africa, often the experience of a majority of adolescents living in "Communities in Tension" (CiT's) is precisely the opposite of the ideal where their human dignity is constantly being undermined or even eroded by external circumstances. It can often be problematic for adolescents to be or remain cognisant of their human dignity when they find themselves in conditions of extreme poverty, in abusive and violent relationships, in relationships where the primary caregivers are absent, or where there is restriction of access to quality and meaningful education. It becomes even more problematic where these occur during the adolescent period that is characterised by transition and meaning-making.

The human dignity of adolescents living in CiT's are constantly undermined and results in a life that is lived below the ideal and leads to various sorts of social problems. This article argues when adolescents are aware of their intrinsic values of human dignity they will determine methods to have access to meaningful experiences to which they are entitled. Youth ministry can help adolescents encounter these meaningful experiences by supplying a 'mapping' of their journey, regardless of being immersed in CiT's.

Human dignity, in theological circles, is often attached to Liberation Theology⁴ as its focus is generally on the freedom and liberation of the individual or community from various social problems and injustices. Human dignity is more than merely

a social concern with the emphasis on the individual and community's liberation or well-being, it too has to be of theological concern. Even as an Evangelical⁵, and more specifically, within the Baptist⁶ tradition, one has to acknowledge that human dignity cannot be detached from any theological discussion, as human dignity cannot be divorced from God.

This article has a threefold focus. First, this article will argue that human dignity is bestowed upon an individual by God, a belovedness – it is not based on inherent qualities based on the *Imago Dei*. Second, this article will argue that CiT's are ultimately the result of a systemic abandonment by a society that has been designed to nurture and protect young people. Finally, this article will reveal how youth ministry can be instrumental in addressing this systemic abandonment by supplying a theological map of “belovedness” that will allow young people to understand the significance of their human dignity.

2. The Nature of Human Dignity

Human dignity, a “core value of the South African constitution” (Vorster 2007:322), allows an individual access to land, education and the right of self-preservation. Ironically, human dignity does not only afford one access to land, education and the right of self-preservation but this very human dignity, which should afford such access, is also derived and receives meaning from these various external resources. However, when individuals do not have access to these necessary facilities, human dignity becomes an elusive reality that is often the experience of many South African adolescents. Human dignity should not be, and is not, dependent on access to land, education and the right of self-preservation as these are afforded to people as a result of their human dignity. Dignity is not derived from constitutional rights. However, the Constitution is to uphold dignity.

Human dignity should be expressed through work and social justice – a responsibility in civic duties to fellow human beings (Werpehowski 2012:82) - as work and social justice, according to Vorster (2007:326), is inextricably linked to human dignity. “Inhumane work circumstances, economic exploitation, restraint of access to natural resources, etc. is an essential impairment of the human's likeness to God” (Vorster 2007:326). Vorster (2007:327) argues that human dignity is further impaired when human interaction is limited or prohibited.

Human dignity is not based on inherent qualities as usually discussed in the *Imago Dei*. Instead, human dignity is bestowed upon the individual by God (Vorster 2007:325). If human dignity was tied to the inherent qualities and perceptions of a person, or to the psychological or physical qualities of a person, then human dignity will vary from one person to the next and in some cases even be absent as people have different perceptions of themselves, as well as different psychological and physical needs and limitations. Human dignity is

also not dependent upon age, ethnicity, class or gender (Werpehowski 2012:81). Human dignity, therefore, is not derived, affirmed, nor has its meaning from these various internal and external circumstances, instead, it is a “relational concept that expresses the human’s creational status in relation to God, his fellow man, and the non-human creation” (Vorster 2007:322).

Highveld (2010:30) states that there are three ways that humans possess dignity, namely: “as excellence of nature, as moral excellence and as belovedness.” Highveld (2010:27) argues though that the first two ways are limited and “finite” as these will vary from one person to another, “being loved by God bestows a dignity on us that surpasses the excellence of our nature or our moral performances.” Highveld (2010:28-29) further argues that dignity, or human worth, has its ultimate value found in another person’s love. While human love is relative and finite it cannot serve as foundational for human dignity, therefore, human dignity has to be founded in God’s love which is “unchanging, universal and relational.” This kind of dignity that is based upon a relationship with God is established in his love and compels individuals to recognise dignity in everyone. It is a dignity that is more than merely being created in God’s image, or having moral freedom; it is found relationally in that God loves people. Our response to recognising people’s dignity should, therefore, be a love that is expressed relationally. It is in this relational expression of love between people that human dignity is realised. Human dignity is intrinsic and theological and is expressed, acknowledged, and affirmed in and through love and not through any internal or external circumstances.

Black (1991:81) asserts that “teenagers are first and foremost human beings,” as all people are created equal in the image of God (Vorster 2007:327). Teenagers are no less worthy than adults of human dignity and respect; their value likewise is intrinsic and theological (Werpehowski 2012:81). Scripture references often used to argue for children’s dignity include, but are not limited to, Genesis 1:27; Matthew 10:30 and Psalm 139:13 (Bunge 2012:65). Bunge (2008:353; see also Bunge 2012:65) argues that apart from children [or adolescents] being gifts of God and signs of God’s blessing, they are also:

Made in the image of God and are worthy of human dignity and respect from the start...children, like adults, possess the fullness of humanity. Regardless of race, gender, or class, they have intrinsic value.

Bunge (2006:552) cautions against “simplistic and ambivalent views of children” by reducing them to “pure and innocent beings whom we adore and teenagers as hidden and dark creatures whom we must fear.” Clark (2011:31) points out that young people learn that they are only as valuable as their contributions to society. The results are often perceiving children and adolescents merely as “commodities, consumers, or even economic burdens” (Bunge 2006:552). Yet

being the vulnerable in society, adolescents require the adult community to take care of them, to protect them and to allow them access to all that is due to them as full humans (Bunge 2008:352). Werpehowski (2012:80) argues that when the dignity of children is not recognised, we open up the possibilities of abuse and neglect. “Christians have understood that caring for children is an integral part of seeking justice and loving the neighbor [sic]” (Bunge 2012:68). Bunge (2008:354) argues that in the absence of the primary caregivers, the community ought to take responsibility for those vulnerable in society.

Human dignity, a status that is bestowed upon the individual – the adolescent – by God and expressed through belovedness, requires the same response from one person to the next. It is through belovedness between individuals and ultimately a community that human dignity is realised.

3. Communities in Tension (CiT’s) Described

A CiT is a term coined by Parker, Wills & Wills (2008:4-5) which reflects a community where the welfare of its inhabitants are under threat by tensions that exist within the community. Parker et al (2008:5) lists four causes of tension within such communities, namely, “lack of economic development, social inequality, lack of education and lack of appropriateness and use of technology”. This type of community could also fit a description as described by Bray, Gooskens, Kahn, Moses & Seekings (2010:27, 41, 99) which has all the typical elements of a CiT, namely a lack of housing which leads to overcrowding, is “economically and socially impoverished” and has violence as a regular occurrence. This community is also plagued with high unemployment. Baleka (2011:87), too, mentions similar factors that have an impact on adolescents, namely, “family breakdown, HIV/AIDS, globalisation, poverty and corruption.” The breakdown of the family on the Cape Flats, which is also a typical threat that exists in a CiT (Aziz 2014). A helpful description of a CiT would be the Coloured⁷ community on the Cape Flats of the Western Cape. A typical coloured community on the Cape Flats has elements of violence, substance abuse, poverty, lack of housing and overcrowding (Aziz 2014:231-232). CiT’s usually involves more than just one threat at a time, which causes this tension to exist. A CiT is an environment that undermines and even attempts to negate the human dignity of its citizens; by denying them access to basic constitutional rights and privileges has grave effects on the well-being and human dignity of its young people.

Youth, in any community but more especially in CiT’s, are often grouped into clusters of disenfranchised youth, youth on the margins, high-risk youth and youth who are ‘stable’. These various disenfranchised youth usually include but are not limited to “drug use, eating disorders, physical and other kinds of abuse, date rape, sexual addiction, and cutting” (Clark 2011: xvii-xviii). Atkinson (1997:7-15) contends that adolescents are not only more vulnerable to risk, but this is “a generation at risk...they are involved in activity or situations that

may lead to more destructive behaviors [sic] or activities”. Atkinson (1997:11) continues by declaring that;

Growing up is clearly a risky business today. Issues such as sexuality, dating, self-image, peer pressure, vocational decisions, school, and parents still typify the worries of teenagers. But a host of new concerns frightens and bring anxiety to many adolescents. The quality of family life is negatively impacting this generation of young people, as a majority of them are growing up in broken homes or dysfunctional families. Child abuse, date rape, AIDS, drive-by shootings, crime, suicide, and substance abuse are a few of these additional issues many of today’s youth are confronted with. Furthermore, teenagers are burdened by broader domestic and worldwide issues such as nuclear wars, homelessness, and pollution ... indeed, in a world that is experiencing change and transformation at a breathtaking rate, teenagers are suffering the stressful and often damaging consequences.

Further factors that contribute to the generation at risk, according to Atkinson (1997:15-18) include the breakdown of the family, the diminishing role of religion, a crumbling public education system, and the increasing influence of television and other mass media. One can even go as far in arguing that every adolescent is a youth at risk. While it is helpful having these various demarcations, we find all of these categories of youth within a community at any given time, and these youths often interact with each other, whether directly or indirectly. To focus on one such group would call for special study, hence, to focus on all these groups would be to concentrate on a community in tension where all groups share the same or similar experiences yet at different individual interpretations. Whilst a CiT is a large area to focus upon – as one could easily miss smaller cultures or sub-cultures of the adolescent world - I prefer using the term CiT, as Creasy Dean (2010:47) argues that ultimately the health of a community is determined by the health of its youth.

Clark (2011:15) argues that a primary cause or factor that has contributed to this generation being a generation at risk is due to systemic societal abandonment, where “as society in general moved from being a relatively stable and cohesive adult community intent on caring for the needs of the young to a free-for-all independent and fragmented adults seeking their own survival”. Systemic societal abandonment is when primary caregivers, adults, and institutions which were designed to protect adolescents have abandoned adolescents and forced them to withdraw from society or at worst create their own worlds to grant them that which they seek in the adult world whether through recreation or retreat (Clark 2011:15). It is then acceptable to argue that CiT’s exist because of systemic societal abandonment.

While the subject of CiT's is complex with more than one possible reason or cause, I conclude that one of the reasons or causes for the existence of CiT's is because of systemic adult and societal abandonment of adolescents. What we see in CiT's are symptoms of this abandonment. The causes of this neglect is due to structures, as previously mentioned, which were once designed for the well-being and protection of adolescents have become an interest in themselves, "adolescents have been abandoned" (Clark 2011:34).

4. Defining Youth Ministry

Strong (2014:1) defines youth ministry as the "spiritual ministry of leading young people, who find themselves in this transition period from childhood to adulthood...it is mainly a ministry where it is attempted to cultivate a relationship with God". On another occasion, I have argued that "youth ministry attempts to facilitate youth into a deep and meaningful relationship with God" (Aziz 2014:237; cf. Black 1991:82-84). I further argue (Aziz 2014:237) that youth ministry "serves as a hermeneutical exercise in assisting adolescents to experience God and his plan for salvation as well as meaning and understanding within their contexts". Creasy Dean (2010:9), however, cautions against youth ministry seeing and using adolescents merely as commodities with the aim only of conversion. A holistic response from youth ministry should consider leading adolescents to a personal and meaningful faith-relationship with God; being a guide toward the spiritual maturity of faith formation of these adolescents; and assisting them in finding meaning and purpose in life's tasks.

Youth ministry is described as a sub-discipline of practical theology (Nel 2005:13; Clark 2008:10; Strong 2014:1) and as practical theology, it has the purpose of a "reflection on Christian life. In other words, practical theology [of which youth ministry is a sub-discipline⁸] studies those moments, contexts, situations and practices in which God's action intersects with our action, and transforms paltry human effort into something holy and life-giving" (Creasy Dean 2011:17). Practical theology reflects upon, studies and analyses those situations in which humans find themselves, and where they respond in concrete ways to a God who reaches out to them. Youth ministry, therefore, reflects upon, studies and analyses those situations in which adolescents find themselves, and where adolescents respond in concrete ways to a God who reaches out to them. Youth ministry as practical theology has to begin in a "specific reality, context, and moves from those to reflexive conversation with the Scriptures that leads us to new action...the process of a continual back-and-forth interaction between our current praxis and the struggle to respond in new ways as the environment around us shifts is at the core of the youth ministry education" (Clark 2008:15). With theology being central to youth ministry practice, youth ministers and pastors, therefore, serve as practical theologians which allows for "an intentional process that allows for considered, creative pastoral responses to the particular situations facing adolescents" (Creasy Dean 2011:19). Nel (2005:13) argues that

ministry is practical theology, which further qualifies youth ministry as practical theology. Clark (2008:14) argues that the goal of practical theology is to able people to make decisions that are “kingdom-driven” that will translate into successful living in a dynamic world. Youth ministry, therefore, has as its goals the same as that of practical theology.

Youth ministry has to begin in the concrete lives of adolescents within and outside of the church and should be cognisant of all the areas that affect the adolescent’s life and not merely the spiritual. Creasy Dean (2010:26) is of the opinion that “churches can no longer afford to limit youth ministry [sic] to teenagers who gather in the church basement.” Youth ministry should have a holistic rationale of the adolescent, their worlds and their plights to affirm the dignity intrinsic to them.

5. Crafting a Theological Map for Adolescents

Youth ministry has a vital role to play in addressing the human dignity of adolescents. Considering the previous sections, I would recommend three tasks that youth ministry has in crafting a theological map that would assist adolescents in their journey from unworthiness to dignity. These tasks could be developed for further research.

The first task of youth ministry in this endeavour is to consider methods of helping adolescents become aware of their human dignity. This can be achieved by intentionally creating environments that will validate the worth of every adolescent through a mutual and relational love, knowing that each adolescent has something positive to contribute. As Bunge (2008:353) argues that “the Bible also depicts children as models of faith for adults, sources of revelation, and representatives of Jesus; and therefore adults are to listen to children and learn from them”. Parents, caregivers, churches and communities should take seriously the voice and opinions of adolescents as they “can positively influence the community and the moral and spiritual lives of adults.” (Bunge 2008:354). Adolescents should be validated as individuals, each with a valuable and unique contribution to make. It is through intentional and relational love that human dignity is affirmed.

The second task of youth ministry is to create an environment where there is mutual love and interdependency between adolescents and adults in addressing the systemic societal abandonment of adolescents. The task is not to design more institutions or programs for retreat but to take an active interest in the lives and well-being of every adolescent present. Proper and thorough practical theological research and reflection should start in the realities of adolescents and be geared to assist adult caregivers and stakeholders with appropriate understanding and skills in helping adolescents on this journey. In this environment, it is vital to have adult caregivers and volunteers as this would once again negate the systemic

societal abandonment experienced by adolescents. It is important to consider the nature of the church at this point. It is only in the comprehensive environment of the church expressing mutual love and care that adolescents can experience the ideal during this struggling stage of adolescence. Youth ministry is inextricably part and responsibility of the church and was not designed or meant to exist alone or alongside the church, as Grenz cites Milne “the Christian life is inescapably corporate” (Grenz 2003:9). We need to let young people know that the adult community has once more made them a priority and not abandon them.

Finally, youth ministry should at all occasions serve as a hermeneutical tool that would allow young people to see and understand the working of God in their lives. There is a direct link between the religiosity of young people and their response to civil society. The health of the society has a dependency upon the religious lives and views of its youth (Kageler 2015:6). Youth ministry should strive beyond just mere spiritual outreach and commitment. “A balanced church-based youth ministry often has an additional broad component of ministry beyond spiritual growth and beyond fellowship or outreach” (Kageler 2015:10), there should be a form of social service. As already mentioned, youth ministry should be more than spiritual commitments, youth ministry should aim to help equip youth with fundamental skills that will assist them in life. Youth ministry has to involve every aspect of the lives of adolescents.

6. Conclusion

This article recognises some of the issues that constitute systemic societal abandonment, which will only escalate with time. It is for this reason that it is argued that youth ministry can and must develop strategies to address this phenomenon. While I have attempted to highlight some areas where youth ministry can address this systemic societal abandonment, this area remains under-researched and requires further research. This article has emphasized that the systemic societal abandonment of adolescents is one of the chief causes for CiT’s, environments which threatens and undermines the human dignity of every adolescent. Human dignity that is not derived from any internal or external factors or circumstances. Nor is human dignity defined by what the adolescent can contribute to society.

Furthermore, this article has argued that ultimately human dignity, which is intrinsic and theological, is affirmed through a love that is based upon the love of God and is expressed relationally between people. Youth ministry can, therefore, map a theological journey from unworthiness to dignity by creating an environment where every adolescent is loved and valued without any expectation of what they can contribute to society or what they have.

7. Notes

1. In this article, I use the terms children and adolescent interchangeably, with adolescent being the scientific term for youth. It is also inclusive of young adults, age 35, as defined

and limited by the National Youth Policy of South Africa (2008:11). Strong (2014:1) defines youth as a “fluid category” as it is characterised by a transition “from the dependence of childhood to the independence of adulthood”. This definition somehow challenges the parameters of the National Youth Policy of South Africa, as independence of adulthood cannot be predicted to be achieved at the age of 35

2. Communities in Tension (CiT) is a phrase penned by Parker, Wills & Wills (2008:4-5) which reflects a community where the welfare of its inhabitants are under threat and yet it is this threat that keeps the community in tension as the glue that binds.

3. The United Nations, too, recognizes the primacy of human dignity as expressed in Article 1 of the “The Universal Declaration of Human Rights” which reads “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood,” which was adopted 10 December 1948 and can be accessed at <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/index.shtml#a1>.

4. Liberation Theology was developed in Latin America, and made popular by Gustavo Gutiérrez in his book, *A Theology of Liberation*, 1988, Orbis. The praxis of Liberation Theology has as its focus of the Christian tradition in relation to political activism, specifically, poverty, social justice and human rights. Liberation Theology also includes and is not limited to Black Liberation Theology and Feminist Liberation Theology

5. When referring to evangelicalism, I will be utilising the definition supplied by George Marsden (1991:4-5) which includes (1) “the Reformation doctrine of the final authority of the Bible, (2) the real historical character of God’s saving work recorded in Scripture, (3) salvation to eternal life based on the redemptive work of Christ, (4) the importance of evangelism and missions, (5) the importance of a spiritually transformed life.” Marsden G 1991. *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism*. Wm: Eerdmans Publishing

6. I acknowledge that within the Baptist tradition in the Union of Southern Africa exist various degrees of religious freedom as expressed in the Baptist Principles and Statements of Faith. However, one can summarise the “main doctrinal distinctives” of the Baptist movement as “the primacy of scripture, local church autonomy and liberty of conscience” with the authority of scripture is most fundamental as it governs all faith and life practices and remains the final authority on all matters (Aucamp 2011:61-67). Aucamp CA 2011. “A comparative evaluation and theological analysis of the denominational practices of the Baptist Union of Southern Africa, SOLA 5 and the fellowship of Baptist churches in Southern Africa”, Unpublished Doctoral Thesis: North West University.

7. South Africa, as a society, uses categories to identify people’s groupings and cultures which has a historical significance since the inauguration of the apartheid system. While I acknowledge, classifying people according to certain groupings may raise emotive responses, I however, do not use these categories to signify any superiority or inferiority of people, merely because the South African society continues to use these classifications in their various discourses. The Coloured community exists in its current form due to policies of mass relocations under the apartheid system in South Africa (Aziz 2014:232-237). Theories of the Origins of the Coloured population include Miscegenation between the European settlers and the indigenous people, brought over as part of the slave trade, descendants of the KhoiSan. Adhikari, however, argues the Coloured identity is not as simplistic as the above arguments and offers a good theory accordingly, see, Adhikari M 2008. “From Narratives of Miscegenation to Post-Modernist Re-Imagining: Toward a Historiography of Coloured Identity in South Africa”, *African Historical Review*, 40:1, 77-

100, DOI: 10.1080/17532520802249472 accessed on 12/12/2014.

8. My inclusion to further elaborate that youth ministry serves the same function as practical theology.

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Author's Declaration

The author declares that there is no financial or personal relationship(s) that inappropriately influenced him in the writing of this article.

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