

No Ordinary Time

Princeton Forums on Youth Ministry Celebrate 10th Anniversary



Photo: Erin Duminigan

Earl Palmer

by Barbara A. Chaapel

Lattes in hand, iPods plugged into their ears, and toting wireless laptops and Bibles limned with margin notes, an at-first-glance somewhat un-Princetonian group of ministers and church leaders gathered in Seattle in January for a serious conference on ministry. Many jean-clad, some with long hair harkening back to the 1960s, even one with pink locks, these men and women, lay and clergy, Presbyterian, Methodist, nondenominational, had one thing in common: a commitment to effective ministry with young people.

Appearances to the contrary, the assembly of 190 folks at the tenth anniversary meeting of the Princeton Forums on Youth Ministry represented the core of what Princeton Seminary stands for: excellence in scholarship and theological thinking as it affects the church and the world.

“What we do well at Princeton Seminary is scholarly theological education for ministry,” says Kenda Creasy Dean, associate professor of youth, church, and culture, and the first director of the PTS Institute for Youth Ministry (IYM). “Youth ministry is a radically contextualized ministry that takes place with a particular ‘flock’—but at root it is still ministry, and it is part of the overall mission of the church. Since adolescence is expanding to include young adults as well as children entering puberty, that flock can include people anywhere in the first third of life, as well as their families.”

Dean’s goal from the institute’s beginnings in 1995 has been to invite people to understand youth ministry as ministry, and youth as people, not as “a separate species.” She has always seen the Institute for Youth Ministry as a core part of PTS’s mission. “Princeton’s mission statement says that we prepare women and men to serve Christ in ministries marked by faith, integrity, scholarship, competence, compassion, and joy, in a community where Scripture and the Christian tradition are appropriated critically, and where faith and intellect mature. That kind of scholarship is what we do well, and at the time, no one in the country was really thinking about how to apply this to ministry with youth.” Dean saw a vacuum, and then-president Thomas Gillespie determined that Princeton had the resources to fill it.

With the prospect of a donor to fund this new initiative, Gillespie challenged Rick Osmer, PTS’s Thomas W. Synnott Professor of Christian Education, to think about what Princeton could do. Osmer asked Dean, then a Ph.D. student, to come up with a proposal. Dean put together a think tank that included Osmer and practicing youth ministers and alums Amy Vaughn, Dayle Rounds, Arturo Lewis, Mark DeVries, Emily Anderson, and Ron Foster, joined by scholars Evelyn Parker, Robin Maas, and Jack Nelson. Dean remembers that the group met each other for the first time in their pajamas, roused from bed by a fire in Erdman Hall.

The team shaped a movement (a term Dean prefers to “program”) with three key

elements: research, degree programs, and lifelong leadership development.

They tackled degree programs first, encouraging the Tennent School of Christian Education to develop the Seminary’s M.A. in youth ministry, dual-degree M.Div./M.A. in youth ministry, and courses in youth ministry at the Ph.D. level. Rounds, now codirector of IYM, remembers that when she was a PTS student, there was only one course in the curriculum on ministry with youth. “There was almost no literature in the field, no serious theology about youth ministry, and if you couldn’t take that one course, you were out of luck,” she says.

The team then moved on to the question, What would effective continuing education for people doing ministry with youth look like? And the Forum on Youth Ministry was born—a four-day, multiple-format event that brings serious scholars from the fields of biblical studies, ethics, and theology to address participants; preachers and liturgists to lead worship; and teachers and practitioners in youth ministry to teach workshops on myriad topics in the fertile field of ministry with youth. The first forum was held in Daytona Beach, Florida, in 1996, followed every year since by a January forum at an off-campus site and an April forum at PTS.

Key to the forums, says Vaughn, the institute’s other codirector, is the opportunity for participants to learn from each other, and to talk informally over meals and in free time with the forum faculty. “A constant in the forums has been not just youth ministry spe-

cialists, but scholars from a variety of disciplines who bring the best in their fields to our participants. We've had people like Jürgen Moltmann, Miroslav Volf, Martin Marty, and this year PTS's Pat Miller in Old Testament and Barbara Holmes of Memphis Seminary in ethics." Participants have relished the chance to talk with these scholars, and Vaughn says that once she has convinced such leaders who first say they "don't do youth ministry" to come to a forum, "they are thrilled to talk about ministry with the people who are doing it day by day."

Miller and Holmes anchored the Seattle forum, whose theme was "For Such a Time as This," from the Book of Esther. Each gave two lectures. Miller focused on the relationship between time and purpose in Ecclesiastes, explaining that in the biblical view, "time has meaning for us when there is purpose in it, not just in its chronological calendar. Our enjoyment of time is not about pursuit of more, but about the appreciation of what we have, what God has given us, trusting that the future belongs to God."

For Miller, who retired from the PTS faculty last year, being with forum participants amplified his awareness of time. "I have a sense that I'm with the folks out on the frontier of the church, helping to shape the future," he told his audience. "The church's future is very much in your hands and in what you do."

Holmes talked about the oscillation between lament and joy in human experience, including in the experience of young people. Her lectures were sprinkled with references to contemporary culture that youth and those who minister to them would find familiar, from the *Matrix* movies, to cultural icons Michael Jackson and Paris Hilton, to the TV soap opera *Desperate Housewives*, to the communal grief of 9/11. Believing youth are often mired in a search for quick meaning and superficial joy, Holmes said her "call to the next generation is to reclaim the possibility of real joy through the healing practice of lament." Esther's story, she said, "is a wake-up call that reminds us that survival is a communal event," and that "clinging to the myth of radical individualism" provides only "an illusory safety net."

The Seattle forum, held at Plymouth Congregational Church, where PTS alums

David Shinn and Allen Hilton are on the staff, was the first forum held in a church.

Participants worshiped morning and evening (PTS alumna and Luther Seminary assistant professor of preaching Carol Miles was the forum preacher) in the rounded sanctuary with small cross-shaped windows and green doves flying on the banners hung for Ordinary Time in the liturgical year.

But the time was far from ordinary, as participants and leaders used PowerPoint, CDs, the web, and mission visits throughout the city to engage topics like adolescent mental health, post-modern worship practices, poetry and youth, and Christian sexuality. Osmer led a seminar sharing the results of PTS's Faithful Practices, a research project that identifies practices in Christian life that are found in vital congregations. Dean, with Ron Foster, pastor of Bethesda United Methodist Church in Bethesda, Maryland, invited participants in their seminar to view video frames from the Oscar-winning Best Picture *Crash* and to read the biblical story of Jesus' transfiguration to think about "re-framing" faith. "Youth ministers are in the framing business," says Foster. "We want to help young people develop a frame of faith, maybe a faith expressed differently than what they grew up with. We want them to see faith as a frame they can carry around to look at the world through, although ultimately no one frame is adequate to encompass God."

PTS trustee Earl Palmer, also pastor of Seattle's University Presbyterian Church, led a Bible study on the parable of the sons sent into the vineyard in Matthew 21. He urged youth leaders to give their young people "lag time" in their journey from hearing the faith to believing it, as the son who at first resisted going to the vineyard eventually went, while the son who readily agreed to go did not.

Palmer has supported Princeton's efforts in addressing youth ministry for many years. He initiated the Robert Boyd Munger Seminar in Youth Ministry at the Center of Continuing Education before the institute was born, and has been a cheerleader for Princeton's contributions to serious reflection



Photos: Erin Dunigan

Ron Foster (left) and Kenda Dean (far right) with forum participants.

on youth ministry ever since.

"The IYM forums put up the flag for Princeton Seminary better than any other program," he told forum participants.

From their responses to the Seattle forum, participants agree. Seattle was Gonzalo Duarte's third consecutive forum. Duarte directs the Lilly-funded Future Quest summer program for youth at Queen's Theological College in Canada, a program that gives young people the opportunity to explore community, theology, and leadership.

"Ten percent of PTS forum attendees are from Canada, and some make a transcontinental trip to come," Duarte says. "The forum has become a model of bringing people together across denominations for theological discussion, reflection, and worship around youth. Other programs and institutions do more training, but Princeton's, because of its name, quality of faculty, and depth of resources, is a model we're hoping to use in Canada."

Kris Ostrem, one of the associate pastors at Plymouth Church, values the essential equipping for ministry that the forums offer. "What is significant is how the forums feed people biblically, theologically, liturgically, and spiritually," she says. "The lay and clergy



youth leaders who participate are fed substance, and can sink their roots deep again.” She also appreciates the opportunity for networking. “You learn that you’re not on your own. Through conversation you connect with people doing the same ministry. And ordained and nonordained are on equal playing ground at the forums.”

Forum conversations often focus on issues that youth in American culture are facing.

Keith Gunter and Tim Chamberlain, lay participants who lead a church youth group in Marietta, Georgia, say the need for accountability in life is a huge issue for their young people. “So many of our kids have the herd mentality,” Gunter says. “They just follow their peer group, and so can’t say ‘No’—to drugs, for example. We’ve found that they value the discipline that serious Scripture study can offer. We’ve even introduced them to ancient spiritual disciplines.” The two are particularly proud of a young man who wanted to learn Hebrew and studied until he could translate Old Testament texts, and of another who memorized the entire Sermon on the Mount.

Consumerism, drugs, and driven schedules are other problems leaders say their youth struggle with. And the leaders want the church to be part of the solutions.

But youth, and youth culture, have as much to offer the church as the other way around, according to Kenda Dean. Youth can show the church the way into faith in the contemporary culture. “Where youth ministry is going, the church itself is going,” she says. “When youth ministry is important and informative, youth have a radically positive effect on Christian community, on the health of the congregation.”

A new feature of the Seattle forum that brought church and culture together was an offering called City Dives. Participants had an afternoon to visit several mission sites in Seattle for a close-up view of organizations offering services to citizens with special needs. FareStart, a program that teaches homeless people skills in the food service industry while providing them housing and life skills, has placed numerous formerly homeless people in jobs as cooks, waiters, and food preparation workers. A subset of FareStart is barista training for Seattle’s 1,000 homeless youth, who learn to work in the

city’s plentiful coffee bars. In its first year, the barista program graduated 63 youth, 37 of whom got jobs and 16 of whom went back to school.

The forum participants who “dove into” FareStart had a sumptuous meal at FareStart’s restaurant, run by the program trainees, and took away a vision for the importance of mission in working with young people.

In addition to bridging church and culture, the IYM intends to bridge the connection between church and academy. “Youth ministers are excellent interpreters for both sides—the seminary and the church,” explains Dean. “The seminary offers its research, study, and pedagogy to the church through well-grounded youth ministers, and the church in the voice of its youth ministers, who are bilingual, speaking the language of both church and culture, interprets the local congregation back to the seminary.”

This church/academy bridge is the emphasis of the third component of the IYM: research. The institute’s kick-off research project tackled globalization. More recently, the Lilly-funded Building Bridges Project, administered by Leslie Dobbs-Allsopp, is looking at the relationship between effective youth ministers and congregations. The institute also produces *Cloud of Witnesses*, an audiojournal on youth, church, and culture that makes theme-based sermons and interviews with youth, pastors, scholars, and laypeople available to busy practitioners, who can subscribe at no cost and listen to the journal in office or car. (Subscribe at <http://www.ptsem.edu/iym/>)

People keep coming to the Princeton forums because the research brings new insight and ideas about the theology that undergirds ministry with youth. Many participants return each year. For those who have attended three forums and a retreat, the IYM offers a certificate in youth ministry. Some participants, like Marti Reed Hazelrigg, youth minister at Princeton’s Nassau Presbyterian Church and a PTS grad, even decide to attend seminary after experiencing a forum.



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PTS alum Tom Stephen, pastor and head of staff at Monte Vista Presbyterian Church in Newbury Park, California, and a seven-time forum attendee, was the forum pastor in Seattle. He believes that some people keep coming back because they themselves need what youth ministry offers. “As the forum pastor, I pay attention to them, listen to them, let them feel the acceptance and care that a youth minister gives.”

As the IYM undertakes a ten-year review this year, including visits by external evaluators, Vaughn and Rounds look forward to new directions and future partnering with other seminaries and organizations working with youth, including urban and at-risk youth. Gonzalo Duarte hopes that Future Quest will be one of the partners, and looks forward to a collaborative experiment in theological exploration and the experience of community that reaches even wider than the PTS institute.

For her part, Dean hopes that the IYM continues to be integral to students’ experience of theological education at Princeton Seminary. “I would be sad to see youth ministry marginalized at PTS,” she says. “I would love to see everyone who graduates from the Seminary understand all ministry to involve youth in an intentional way.” She envisions a church that “pays attention to youth and invites them to do ministry, a church that offers them space to ask the tough questions. Youth are both the church’s mission and its missionaries.”

Perhaps Pat Miller said it best when he quoted W.H. Auden’s verse play *For the Time Being*. “He is the Way. Follow Him through the Land of Unlikeness. You will see rare beasts and have unique adventures.”

Not a bad calling, for a seminary, for the church, and for youth. ■