

Guest Editorial

Generous Orthodoxy and Christian Hospitality

Youth Ministry as a Case Study¹

David K. Delaney

Gary Trudeau once commented on George W. Bush's June 1999 attempt at visionary sloganeering, "Compassionate Conservatism," by saying that phrases like that sometimes reveal the weakness of the primary component, which is, in this case, "conservatism" as the leading idea and Bush's perceived need to add "compassionate" because "conservatism" as a term did not (apparently) automatically encompass that descriptive feature.² What has always been funny about this is that Bush (apparently) knew that the accusation was legitimate—conservatives were, at the time, often thought of by the Left and others as bigoted retro-hierarchy-loving bullies, and it was costing conservatives potential votes. The same might be said of the phrase "Generous Orthodoxy," which could easily be read as a concession that orthodoxy³ needs such a qualifier due to its (apparent) lack of inherent generosity, a problem that costs the Church potential adherents.

"Generous Orthodoxy" traces its coinage to the influential post-liberal theologian Hans Frei,⁴ but it was not popularized until the publication of Brian McLaren's

1. The Virginia Synod of the former LCA and current ELCA, along with youth and adult leadership groups at the church-wide level, are the primary contexts in which I have done more than forty years of my extended work with adolescents and young adults and serves as the main source for what I am referring to as a case study.

2. Thanks to Pastor David Drebes for the reminder of Trudeau's comment. It seems that the phrase was actually coined by political strategist Doug Wead in the late 1970s.

3. "Orthodoxy" is being used here and throughout this essay in its broadest sense as a reference to the desire to remain consistent in confession and practice to the Christian faith as historically received from the Church's earliest era. It is not to be identified here with any specific church body. See comments below regarding the inherent problem of the term.

4. Frei himself acknowledges the influence of his teacher at Yale, Robert Calhoun (d. 1983), who was already hinting at this concept alongside the nomenclature of the better-known

2004 book with that phrase as its title and its, shall we say, generous subtitle, “Why I am a missional, evangelical, post/protestant, liberal/conservative, mystical/poetic, biblical, charismatic/contemplative, fundamentalist/Calvinist, Anabaptist/Anglican, Methodist, catholic, green, incarnational, depressed-yet-hopeful, emergent, unfinished Christian.” The phrase seems to have gained further popularity with its podcast treatment by pop-historian Malcolm Gladwell.⁵ Frei proposed the phrase to summarize his advocacy for a “middle voice” between the liberal and conservative poles of both academic and churchly theology in the 20th century, although—because for many readers he leaves the two parts of the phrase insufficiently defined—it is sometimes unclear what he intended. Did he envision a process of practical compromise among churches based on mutual culling of adiaphora until only the common denominators were left, or was he instead pioneering a third way that would (conveniently) feature his own narrative approach to theology and blend, as he put it, the voices of *The Christian Century* with those of *Christianity Today*?

McLaren’s modified approach could be seen as an attempt at transcending that dialectical process by letting the lessons of the apostle Paul’s Corinthian correspondence have their ecclesiological way with us. In sum, each one brings the Spirit-given gift he has, and everything builds up the whole body. Generous Orthodoxy, in McLaren’s view, is not a matter of negotiating away one’s pet practices in exchange for the other side doing the same thing, although at times one might have to do just that for the sake of peace in the larger body. As an ecclesial strategy, much less a thoroughgoing ecclesiology, doing so would not get us to the full measure of the stature of Christ. Can we imagine Jesus presiding with approval at a conference where conflicting factions come together and say “here’s what we’re willing to sacrifice in exchange for” some desire?⁶ Furthermore, the strategy of exploring all points of agreement among all the factions, thus paring the Christian story down to its two or three truly basic claims, would rob Christianity of its wisdom. There are complexities and nuances and uncertainties that are profitably baked into the articulation of the Christian faith because they are necessary to match the parallel complexities, nuances, uncertainties, and inevitable changes that comprise human life. It is *good* that Christian doctrine (even orthodoxy) can be complicated because life is complicated. Rather, for McLaren, the task is not consensus, but a kind of holy learning, a seeking and then recognizing that this very different kind of Christian facing me probably has something I need. Together, then, we move forward. That, from a certain point of view, is orthodoxy.

Neo-Orthodox movement in the mid-20th century in Calhoun’s unpublished lectures on the History of Christian Doctrine. Frei’s first written use of the phrase is in an essay responding to lectures by the evangelical theologian Carl F. H. Henry in 1987 and he provided additional treatment in various essays (see the posthumous collection *Types of Christian Theology* [1994]).

5. The “Revisionist History” podcast, season 1, episode 9, Aug. 11, 2016.

6. Not that this is what Frei proposed. But the idea of compromise remains the primary mechanism.

Although McLaren does not specifically cite G.K. Chesterton (clearly a stylistic influence) on this particular point, one is reminded of Chesterton's characterization of the development of Christian doctrine.⁷ When a puppy grows into a dog, Chesterton notes, it does not do so by making a series of compromises with a cat. It does so because what the dog was to become was already present in the puppy. In the same way, what was fashionably dismissed by both liberal and conservative Christian thinkers in Chesterton's time as the accrual of philosophical and cultural moss and lichen onto the pure tree of aboriginal Christian truth was, by contrast and in fact, the growth of Christianity into its full stature, organically rather than synthetically.

We might expand on McLaren by saying that in order for the church to get even within *shouting* distance of John 17 or Ephesians 4, we need to practice the kind of generosity that is willing to share *and receive* our Christian love, our various distinctive insights, approaches, discoveries, and gifts with one another across confessional lines and those closely-guarded borders⁸ to grow into the church that we are called to become. To describe this as navigating Scylla and Charybdis falls short of the point because the goal cannot be steering a safe middle path or reducing common witness to whatever gives the least offense around the table. That is simply a continuation of the liberal protestant agenda. For orthodoxy to be both genuine and generous, one must abandon that approach altogether in favor of an ecclesiology that practices a more *expansive* hospitality to the gifts and the physical sinners who bear them of the whole people of God.

If we may return to the Corinthian congregation: despite their reckless approach, they were an extremely instructive and curious bunch. In time, *someone* was going to have to act as pioneer for discovering whether *all* experiences of ecstasy were in fact *divine* experiences of ecstasy, and they unwittingly stepped up to the plate on our behalf. Where would we be if the Corinthians had not been so willing to attempt the outrageous, if only to illustrate that it doesn't really work? As such, they provided the pilot project for welcoming and testing⁹ *all* the gifts of God's people, no matter how weird. To echo Chesterton's language, the tongue-speakers and ecstatic prophets in Corinth were not welcomed by virtue of a series of compromises with those who waited tables. The believers' various gifts were added to one another so that the whole body grew into a singular and magnificent structure *in the Lord* (see Ephesians 2 and 4). This characterization of generous orthodoxy improves on, or at least balances, the assumption that

7. Pace John Cardinal Newman. This image appears in the introduction to Chesterton's biography of Thomas Aquinas.

8. "Confessional" is too specific, but the intent here is to make reference to the almost innumerable distinctive Christian bodies just in North America alone who believe that associating with other Christians who do not share their definitive commitments is tantamount to denying Christ.

9. Cf. 1 John 4:1.

welcoming one another must consist of political negotiations over what might be accepted or conceded.¹⁰

To state the obvious, however, this scheme that hopes to transcend both conflict and compromise is not without its problems. McLaren's book is basically the example of this generous approach working within the life of *one person* (himself), but doing this with a congregation, let alone a denomination or the whole body of believers, will surely be a work in progress until the Lord returns in glory. McLaren is also sometimes accused of advocating a cafeteria-style ecclesiology that may resonate for the arm-chair Christian but may not stand up against the forces that assail us on earth, never mind the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. In addition, the very term "generous orthodoxy" has problems that may be inherent and unavoidable, of which I list just two: first, "orthodoxy" as a term is far too fluid in usage to carry any precise meaning on its own. It gets used for everything from the *regula fidei* of ancient eastern church bodies to the self-authenticating list of fundamentals of every protestant sect under the sun. Second, the very invocation of the term "generous orthodoxy" not only includes the admission that "orthodoxy" as a term tilts toward the exclusive and needs softening, but also implies a critique of other "orthodoxies" that are presumably "not generous," which then risks the very arrogance the term purports to avoid.¹¹

With these and other caveats in mind, we must ask how, in the end, generous orthodoxy as a guiding approach to the furtherance of the Christian mission *a la* Matthew 28:19-20 might actually contribute to our obedience to that dominical command. In *Generous Orthodoxy*, McLaren is at his Chesterton-esque best when he offers a self-effacing, disarming, and non-confrontive presentation of his own journey into this realm of discourse. As such, in 2004 he was completely comfortable presenting himself as a one-man clearing house for doing the kind of work that it seems the whole church should be doing while cautioning the reader that he is by

10. Since McLaren's book put "Generous Orthodoxy" in the public domain, there are now dozens of players—too many to list—who hope to associate with the basic vision. But insofar as it seems to have ecumenism as the goal, it must be acknowledged that "ecumenism" seems to carry baggage that the term cannot shake. Among so many of the various contributions, advances and insights still lurks the residue of a view that does not differ in final practice from a don't-ask-don't-tell approach with respect to actual creedal truth claims among the various church bodies. In other words, these days we are, for example, delighted to share in service projects together across denominational lines—thanks be to God!—but we typically do that with an unspoken awareness that we had still better not start swapping details about the boundaries, shibboleths, litmus tests, and argot of our belief systems, because the risk of fracturing those relationships that provide us with a superficial common ground is too great. In the current season, we find that the fault lines are perhaps even more pronounced than ever, with some individuals pressuring their judicatories to avoid even doing service work together because of this-or-that deal-breaker, such as anti-transgender views or lack of racial justice practices on the part of potential partners.

11. McLaren acknowledges this point near the beginning of his book.

no means prescribing this model for everyone. If we grant that Brian McLaren is by his long journey a more mature and wiser Christian than he would have been otherwise, how then does this model play out more than two decades later in the greater Western world where individuals cling to an even more pronounced sense of individual authority and a sense of duty that values personal authenticity over all things?¹² Furthermore, how does it go beyond individual practice to exercise impact on whatever the things are that make a community a community or a church body a church body?

My contention is that this personal journey that McLaren describes, which can be summarized as observing the distinction between seeing the other (individual and tradition) as *imago Dei* and therefore by definition contributing gifts that God intends to employ for the redemption of the world *versus* bringing settled doctrinal and ecclesial commitments to the table for negotiation, can be enacted on the communal level. If we may, however, envision a typical congregation, we know from anecdotal experiences as well as from vast examples of careful research that there are enormous forces, both seen and unseen, at work to counter any such plans and goals. One would need something akin to the ancient Corinthian congregation to run such an experiment in overcoming those forces.

This brings me to the example of judicatory-level ministry with youth as well as ministry with adolescents in general. Here, I offer a few propositions based on what we have experienced and learned over the course of some 45 years of our particular model of ministry with young people in the Virginia Synod ELCA.¹³

If we begin with some of the well-known features of the adolescent trajectory—such as identity formation and individuation, body stewardship and relational curiosity, navigation of autonomy, authority, cooperation, and tribal loyalty—we describe a psychic environment that is rich in possibilities for exploring generosity of all types, including maturing in the life of faith. Furthermore, when adolescents are gathered in a setting where the opportunity for sharing of one's faith and gifts

12. Cf. Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* and *The Ethics of Authenticity*.

13. Having already had a long legacy of attention to faith and leadership formation for youth and young adults, once the ULCA's, ALC's and LCA's "Luther League" organization ceased its formal operation in the mid-1960's, a group of leaders in the Virginia Synod of the LCA began the process of constructing a successor to Luther League that would provide the same support for those older goals. Drawing from the existing strength of our outdoor ministry programs and the peripheral but rising influence of the Jesus Movement, a paradigm that centered its energy on building faith-sharing relationships among youth and between youth and adults gave rise to what eventually became a deeply Lutheran "theology-from-below" approach to faith formation, committed to starting with the gifts and needs of youth and taking form in the annual cycle of Synod-wide events that continues to the present day. This meant abandoning the still-common "conference" model of gathering (keynote speaker, workshops, performances, vendors, etc.) in favor of a model that made small groups the centerpiece and invited youth to make their own stories the starting point for faith conversation.

is paired with welcoming of faith and gifts from another at some distance from some of the inertial forces of the local context that might unwittingly suppress such exchange, there is an opportunity for generous orthodoxy at its best to be exercised beyond the individual.

What do our youth experience when they find themselves in such a setting? Our decades of long-term observation and participant feedback show a couple of trends that transcend the so-called “generation-fill-in-the-blank” distinctives: when a small group of (mostly) unacquainted youth begins with honest and caring listening to one another’s stories instead of launching into a topical discussion or lecture that ignores everything that participants bring, the first step has been taken toward a conversation that will include each participant’s faith story and the contribution it might make. Additionally, questions, doubts, and insecurities, as well as joys and strengths in those areas where faith and life most intersect, emerge with surprising honesty.¹⁴ Third, young people realize *not only how rare and distinctive it is to be in a setting where their whole selves are received with love and grace, warranted by none other than the God they already know, but also that it is the explicit articulation of the Christian gospel and the call to commit the entire gathered community to this gospel that makes such a community possible at all.* In the main, this does not happen in their daily lives. Next, this ministry model is scalable. With young people and their skilled adult leaders in small group settings, it does not matter whether we are hosting an event of 25 or 500. The same experience remains available. Fifth, the key to achieving mission goals for our events is applying this generosity model to the planning process as well as to the event structure itself; all content-development processes center the voices of the youth. Finally, this model, when implemented correctly, works across generations and generational stereotypes, functioning just as well among upcoming GenAlpha youth as it did in the 1960s for those who were boomers. With appropriate modifications, it also has broad multicultural applications.

When we then step back to ask what lessons might be learned from this particular case study and venture to articulate some generalities about generous orthodoxy, the following ideas emerge.

1. Genuine generosity might be better expressed as distinctively Christian hospitality, even in contrast to normal human hospitality where a guest comes into someone’s home but remains a guest. The Lord of the Church is this absolutely singular being—somehow simultaneously guest, host, servant, and even vendor¹⁵—and we are called to replicate his actions when others come to us in curiosity. There is, then, a moment of enchantment that happens when young people read Matthew 5 and realize that we are doing what Jesus is saying, relocating outsiders to the center of attention as the core constituency of God’s favor. The poor, mourning,

14. It is astonishing how often teens reveal that they do not share honest thoughts with others, especially church adults, because they believe they will be corrected rather than listened to, much less taken seriously.

15. Mark 6:30-44, et al.

meek and persecuted are no longer even guests, and certainly no longer consumables. They arrive as hopeful members of the household.¹⁶ That enchantment swells when we encourage our youth to see those who are new to faith or new to this particular body not just as fresh meat for the youth program but as people whom God has gifted for carrying out God's mission possessing gifts we have heretofore been missing.

Therefore, generosity being qualified just now as Christianly-distinctive hospitality and the eager but orderly elevation of the outsider to the status of belonging precedes orthodoxy both ontologically and practically. Absent the very distinctive practice of Christian welcome, orthodox faith will scarcely have any chance of arising in the seeker.

2. Absolutely fundamental to the soul of Virginia Synod Ministry with Youth and Young Adults are the triple principles of Christ-centeredness, youth-centeredness, and relationship-centeredness. One belongs to Christ by belonging to Christ's family. This means in practice that generosity (read: hospitality) gets expressed at every level where we are tasked with communicating and creating such belonging, from the specification of the faith we hold to how we teach songs, from how we give directions to the dining facility to how we honor pronoun choices, from the boundaries we protect to how we include questionable prayer requests, and from how we give youth veto power over any thematic plans that are made to how they are charged with managing their own group expectations. With all of that being at least attempted, if not always accomplished, there then comes a moment (again, recall Matthew 5) when young people all up and down the spectrum of conventional beauty, popularity, and talent realize what kind of world they could help co-create if they dropped those artificial standards that rule their culture and instead followed the pattern of Jesus's teaching. This is not simply a strategic choice as obviously any organization that gathers strangers into a new place is going to glean positive reviews if everyone is comfortable and knows where the bathrooms are. It is, rather, that the community's practices are an embodied articulation of the community's identity as the very body of Christ.

Therefore, *orthodoxy must precede generosity both ontologically and practically. We must understand in advance that what we are called to and what we are doing is, in its essence, very different from anything else that is happening in the lives of young people and can only happen in God's church. Why? Because only "there"*¹⁷ *is there a community where Jesus is confessed as Lord (as over against the powerful and baffling norms of adolescence), and the people involved absolutely mean it to the extent of willingness to suffer martyrdom for it.*

16. Cf. the entire thrust of Ephesians 2.

17. Stipulating, of course, that the church is not a spatial phenomenon—and yet—as with the sacraments, it is in the gathering where our Lord has promised to be present in a way that can be fully and reliably trusted when all else seems uncertain (Matt. 18:20).

3. Even the casual reader will have noticed the paradox. We would certainly have no awareness of this species of generosity without having embraced the orthodoxy that has instituted it. However, by *far* the most significant way a young person discovers this loving community gathered around a man who is God in the flesh is by experiencing the way in which this community absolutely dissolves and even demolishes the habits, traditions, and structures of stratification and oppression that form the matrix of their daily lives, an action to be impossible. Suddenly, any middle schooler who has had helpless sympathy for that one kid who just seems like a magnet for bullies has a tool that can provide honest-to-God good news. To put an even finer point on it: if there is a place where bullies are powerless because Jesus is in charge, then there is an alternative to suicide even for those who are too exhausted to invent their own meaning.

Therefore, young people (especially those who are leaders) must have in hand the wise consensus of the body of Christ as to what our claims are about the structure of reality in light of Christ's timely death for the ungodly. In short, we *do* have to get our story straight and hope that it serves as a canon to which the average young person can refer when encountering the (sometimes bizarre) musings of a peer who has been wowed by whatever trend has caught his attention or whose internal monologue or external hopelessness is leading him to one-or-another terrible decision.

4. Generosity is achieved not by carving away at orthodoxy to rid it of all potential offenses but by diving ever deeper and more intensely into it. When done with the full attitude of submission and service to God and neighbor, we continually rediscover orthodoxy's powerful heart, which in turn will (or ought to) generate hospitable behaviors toward the world God loves. The task of catechesis not only comes later but can *only* come later. We will never get to that, though, if those who approach our body with fascination over this strangely loving community are not likewise viewed from the get-go as God's beloved whom God has endowed with gifts and for whom God has prepared a vocation within that body that the individual likely does not even realize yet.

Therefore, in our youth ministry, we find that our creeds and other orthodoxies are not barriers to be downplayed but internally compelling toward a desire for the not-yet-included to find a place for the exercise of their God-given calling. To be sure, they often bring wildly fugitive visions for what truth they are willing to embrace, and those of us who are in it for the long haul have regularly invested decades of patience in helping them right their ships. This is a feature, not a bug. Orthodoxy that finds its expression first in such distinctive hospitality does indeed already include the generosity that some feel needs to be added.

Finally, because generosity is only generosity if it is instantiated in the courage and personal formation of young people who have themselves surrendered whatever conventional aspirations they may have had for social glory and associated themselves with the lowly, the annoying, the dangerous, and the different, this is

joyful but not easy. Generous Orthodoxy does not come into activation if it does not cost or at least risk something.

Is it possible for the Church, its leaders, and its ecclesiologists—generous or otherwise—to learn from this one limited example? One wonders, since, as Brian McLaren would likely say, generous orthodoxy as expressed in this model does not represent an innovation or even a strategy, for that matter. Rather, it seems to be the way the church has operated from the beginning, yet this seems to elude leaders and practitioners across the Christian spectrum.

One of the hallmarks of Virginia Synod Youth Events is the (almost absurd) number of songs we sing, to the delight of some and the tedium of others. If we desire to continue the mission of welcome-to-the-least-the-greatest-and-everyone-in-between we believe has been given to us, our repertoire will eventually need to include more selections that articulate this generative fusion of orthodoxy and generosity that manifests itself in the glee that young people feel and show at the encounter with a child of God who has newly come to us bearing the same *imago Dei* that we all do and at the same time is unique among mortals and will finally discover that they can add their distinctive gifts and stories to Jesus's family with a level of receptivity that they never thought possible. Generosity, it seems, is more about what we are willing to receive than about what we are willing to give.

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