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BOB MAYO

Training Youth Workers at Theological College: the Principles behind the New Course at Ridley Hall

Bob Mayo describes some of the frustrations of Christian Youth Work. Short-term volunteers are not matched by long-term theologically-trained professionals. The new Centre for Youth Ministry will offer a carefully structured vocational training. Using a praxiological method, course members will learn to cultivate a theology from below among the young people with whom they will work.

Introduction

Ridley Hall, now well over one hundred years old, is, these days, a good deal more than a simple clergy training college. It is home to a variety of projects dealing with different aspects of contemporary culture – Theology and the Arts, Theology and Business and now Theology and Youth Work. Graham Cray, the Principal, has a catch-phrase; ‘evangelicals should have their walls down and roots down’. This is reflected in the variety of projects housed at Ridley Hall. However, is Ridley a place of radical thinking and innovation? Is it the right place to train youth workers? If so, what are the theological principles upon which the new course will be run?

Ridley Hall has a culture all of its own. People’s stereotypes die hard. I am a long way off the latest thing in fashion, verve and creativity. I am a clothes-conscious, gym-going, healthy-eating thirty-six year old clergyman. At the end of my second week, I introduced myself in the lunch queue to a stranger. ‘Oh yes, my husband told me about you’, she replied to my introduction, ‘He said that you dress in a really way out manner – a typical youth worker’. On another occasion, I was greeted at the entrance to the college by the wife of an ordinand. ‘Isn’t it a lovely day’, she said. ‘I can’t disagree with that’, I thought. ‘God is so good; it is such a lovely day’, she then said. ‘What if it were raining?’, I thought, sliding past slightly bemused.

I have grown used to living in places that people want to get away from. I have never lived in a place where people actually thank God for the privilege of

being there for a few years. I felt very lonely when I arrived but people were kind and I began to settle. The consummation to my arrival came on the night when I finally put a cat flap into the window of my college flat, by sawing through the forty year old iron framework of the window. The cat woke me up at three o'clock in the morning bringing me a pigeon with a broken wing to say "thank you". Crouched in my dressing gown, in the quad at Ridley Hall, at three in the morning, bashing a half-dead pigeon with a brick in order to put it out of its misery, must in some way qualify as arrival.

In reality I am a tired man, and the process of transforming myself from a jaded, weather beaten street-level clergyman into a fluent, coherent and plausible youth work academic has been hard fought. It has emerged through dream, grit, vision, determination and hope. This process was born of a fury that Christian youth work has relied on burning up the oxygen of people's energy and commitment to Christ in order to sustain a programme of 'one hit' presentationally-based evangelism and outreach work with young people. The picture has been skewed for the church by an imbalance in resources; a decent supply of volunteers to meet a dwindling set of contacts with young people. There are a clutch of volunteering opportunities for six months to a year offering a steady supply of fresh faced, keen and eager people who will work flat out for a period but then be gone as quickly as they arrived. There are fewer people and also fewer opportunities for close, careful, long term cultivation of relationships with young people.

Agent and victim

My transformation was born of a frustration that the precision and lightness of touch taught as informal social education has so often been lacking from Christian youth work. While Paul might play down the importance of motive in presenting the Gospel, Jesus still emphasises the importance of method. Paul might say from prison,

The others do not proclaim Christ sincerely, but from a spirit of selfish ambition: they think that they will make more trouble for me while I am in prison. It does not matter. I am happy about it so long as Christ is preached in every way possible (Phil. 1:17-18).

Yet Jesus will talk about not casting your pearl before swine. In other words there is a time and a place for everything; don't reveal too much too quickly. The idea that people can make a crude assumption that the fact that they have invited young people to come and play in their church hall for forty-five minutes gives them an automatic right to talk about Jesus for ten minutes is at best clumsy and at worst blackmail. Within Christian youth work clear-sighted, level-headed insight, intelligence, diligence and application in work with young people can often be most conspicuous by its absence.

The steady drip, drip of liberal secular humanism has left the church stranded in the corner shouting for attention. There has been a division within youth work that mirrors the division our society has drawn between believing and knowing, between value and fact, between private and public, subjective and objective, feeling and knowing. Christian youth work has been trivialised as being solely to do with

a personal belief system, whereas secular youth work has been lionised as objectively pursuing the needs of the young people – the youth worker enables and facilitates but does not guide and facilitate the young person in their self-development.

Thousands of Christians have faithfully tried to work within and alongside the secular youth work ethos and have tried to communicate the absolute truth of Christ within this liberal, humanist framework – ultimately it is like trying to transport water with a sieve. Never mind the 90% of young people who never come near to a church door, we can't even look after our own people. The situation has been that anyone wanting to combine a professional youth work qualification with a Christian training has needed to do two separate courses: one course to secure their professional qualification and one to learn their theology.

Yet, despite this situation 50% of the all the voluntary hours spent building relationships with young people are done by Christians, compared to only 8% of professionally qualified youth workers as Christians. The church has been both agent and victim within its own marginalisation. The church is providing the energy but not the direction. The church might have the message but it has not got the methods. You either get someone good at youth work who has to mug up on their theology, or else you get the theological thinker who will have a go at the youth work.

Partnership

Thus emerges the Centre for Youth Ministry, a partnership made up from Frontier Youth Trust, Youth for Christ, Oxford Youth Works and Ridley Hall, all determined to give the Christian constituency the training that it deserves. The new degree course in Applied Theology and Youth and Community Work has been validated by Oxford Brookes. It is unique in that it provides both an academic and a professional qualification. It breaks down the sometime paralysis of higher education in that it is akin to a law degree, that qualifies the student as a lawyer. This package is gift wrapped for the Christian Church in that it is all taught within a framework of applied theology. Students are to be taught to apply a good educational methodology to their theological thinking and also to use their theology as an educational framework for their work with young people.

Youth workers will no longer simply be the scruffy, dishevelled characters, accountable only to themselves and not expected to stay in the job for longer than two or three years since by then they will either be too tired, or else too confused to continue. The Youth worker will have a theological grounding akin to the Church minister and a professional grounding equivalent to their peers in the secular sphere. Youth culture will be analysed; group work will be 'methodised' and working one to one will be systematised. If still not yet a profession, professional practice will be put in place – good practice will be good news.

Applied theology

The clearest sounding bell of the course lies within its title. Applied Theology and Youth and Community Work is disingenuous. It hints at a divide between theology and its subsequent application. What Christian theology is not applied? A sign in the window saying 'Fresh cream cakes for sale' does not mean that on a different day they revert to selling stale cream cakes. However a box of Danish pastries advertised as 95% fat free can too often mean that the remaining 5% are so full of fat that it more than makes up for the rest. In the same way our choice of title is a recognition that all too easily the study of theology can become something solely concerned with the acquisition of information.

Bishop Lesslie Newbigin would speak of 'theology's Babylonian captivity to the Universities'. A purely dry, detached, rigorously academic Theology can turn the concept of the incarnation on its head, intimating flesh becoming word rather than the other way round. The title 'Applied Theology' is indicative of our determination to break down the dichotomy between believing and knowing and to establish Christian youth workers as educators rather than as just informers.

The key principle of the Youth Work Course at Ridley is that Christian theology is defined by application. Applied theology is not like the driving test where you learn the theory to pass the test but only after that do you learn to drive. The Christian story is of God becoming a man and therefore interaction, intervention and involvement is integral to the process of learning, discovering and knowing God. This is foundational to Christian youth work and to Christian youth work training. In basic terms building relationships between staff, students and young people mirrors the relationship building nature of God's incarnation.

Praxis

This operational principle translates itself into a procedural practice through the weight given to the face-to-face youth work placements within the course. The distinctive nature of the course is that it offers both an honours degree and a professional qualification. Therefore the course has a praxis paradigm – theory and practice reflect off each other and are constantly related, formed and reformed. What is taught on the Monday in the lecture hall may be practised on the Thursday and reflected back the following week. It is a careful and determined initiative to break the mould of academics dictating the tone and nature of education by ensuring that the placement has at the least equal significance, equal influence and ultimately equal power over the student's learning experience. Traditionally acquisition of academic knowledge has been considered more important than developing interpersonal and professional skills. The course framework outlines the learning required of the students in a detailed list of twelve competencies each with another twelve criteria. This ensures that the youth work practice does not fall behind academic learning and that face-to-face work and academic study remain strung together through out the course in a dialectical tension.

Role modelling and mentoring are integral to our understanding of incarnational education. Each student is linked with a field work tutor whose role is to help them to identify and then to evidence the different competencies. The field work tutor, the line manager and the year tutor triangulate the students learning. With three

other people significant to the student involved in the course delivery there is a measure of certainty that the student will form a close bond with at least one of them. The course does not see learning as an isolated, individualistic activity but something done best with and through close relationships. This is both between students and also between staff and students.

The learning experience for the student does not have the seclusion of residential training nor does it have the isolation of a distance learning course. Ultimately the delivery centres will span the country with the course being taught in Bristol and Nottingham as well as Oxford and Cambridge. The system of regional delivery centres mean that people coming on the course can receive their professional qualification while remaining committed to their local area.

Theology from below

Another of the foundational principles to the course is that 'process' and 'product' mirror each other in the same way as do theory and practice. In working with young people and also in teaching others how to work with young people it is not just what you do but also how you do it that counts. It is like taking an exam where you are given the answer and you get the marks for working out the question.

The answer for Christian youth work is easy. It is Jesus Christ. However what is the process that leads to this conclusion? A two hour lecture on the philosophy of education and the doctrine of the atonement will not prepare a youth worker to demonstrate the range of skills and awareness needed to start a conversation with a group of young people on the basis of some casual contact at a bus stop. The youth worker's ultimate method of teaching young people will mirror their initial method of learning. We will teach people in a manner which reflects the way in which we then expect them to go and teach other people. A learning culture that is interactive and peer engendered is fuel and energy to the course learning.

This is not just an excuse for sloppy thinking where it does not matter how woolly and unformed the conclusion might be as long as it has been worked out by the students and the young people themselves. It points the way towards a new 'bottom up' way of theological learning that offers an opportunity to transform our current ways of doing theology. Creative and disciplined, well rooted and applied theological thinking could yet prove the church's evangelistic viagra.

'Bottom up' is the opposite of the current practice of 'trickle down theology'. The 'trickle down' approach to economics relies on ensuring that people with money spend their money for the benefit of the whole community. Similarly the 'trickle down' approach to theology relies on ensuring that the theologically trained people spread their knowledge for the edification of the whole church. The epitome of this can easily be the theological college where people are trained to be professionals at disseminating gospel information.

However, theological knowledge is unlike money in that it is not a limited commodity needing to be controlled by raising interest rates or by ensuring that wage rises don't go beyond the annual rate of inflation. An economy relies on matching supply with demand and ensuring a balance between creators and consumers. The theological ideal is for an endless supply of knowledge and

understanding of God. If believers and young people alike are creators and not simply consumers of knowledge then knowledge of God is not something you need to receive passively from a trained professional but something that you can work out for yourself.

This ethos will integrate within the course initially by presenting the minimum set of facts and encouraging the student to draw the fullest set of implications. The essence of Applied Theology and Youth and Community Work is to work from the specific to the general rather than from the general to the specific; to think small and work things out rather than think big and then apply; to work from the microcosm to the macrocosm. This is not inductive analysis of circumstance at the expense of deductive application of ideas but rather a balance between the two.

Open and closed learning styles

The church is locked into a deductive conceptual way of thinking about God. The unspoken assumption behind most Christian teaching is that you understand a concept first and only then do you apply that concept to your particular set of circumstances:

A lack of willingness to be involved in an intellectual conversion decision and an educative discipleship package is seen as a rejection of the faith as opposed to the way in which it is presented.¹

Applied Theology and Youth and Community Work takes the framework of Christian principles and ideas as a springboard to discovery and learning. In educational terms there is a constant interaction between the new and the familiar. The child with too much freedom and too little direction feels unloved and insecure. The child with too much direction and security feels stifled and resentful. Too much that is routine or habit and one feels lethargic and bored; too much that is sudden or unexpected and one feels confused or on edge. Variety is only ever the spice of life if it happens within a framework of order and regularity. Creativity needs practice; spontaneity needs discipline; inspiration needs perspiration; intelligence needs energy.

It is a feature of human behaviour that there is simultaneously a need to understand and a desire to experience. It is an instinct to want to make sense of things and to place them into some sort of order, while at the same time to be seeking new experiences and fresh insights. Human openness carries its own paradox, a desire for definition.

The work of the youth worker engages most directly with the process of learning that emerges out of this interplay between openness and closure. If too much information and direction is supplied by the youth worker then the young person's potential for initiative and self directed learning becomes swamped by an overdose of adult information and they are left as passive consumers of knowledge. If too little information and direction is provided then the young person is left stranded denied the framework and stimulus needed to develop their own

1 C. Rose, 1995

thinking. The optimum level of information and direction enables the young person to become the active agent in their own learning. A young person will always have more loyalty towards ideas that he has been allowed to work out for himself.

This optimum level of information and direction provides a rationale that offers a theological perspective as suggestion rather than direction. The methodology is descriptive rather than prescriptive and propositional rather than instructional. It allows an opportunity to interact with people and ideas by offering an insight into and an involvement within a framework of thought.

The pendulum is designed to ensure that the clearer the structure of ideas are presented the more one is encouraged to explore and to discover things for oneself. Definition does not mean restriction. Conviction of purpose does not equal exclusive practice. Commitment does not preclude impartiality. Rather these become the raw material used to enable a young person to reach their own conclusion. The work of the Christian youth worker comes within the process of the young person's learning rather than in the spooning out of the product of other people's thinking. The skill of the educator is not in persuasion or manipulation but in illustration or illumination.

This participative, interactive model of learning challenges the rigid dichotomies of objective reality and subjective experience; specifically it challenges the distinction between knowing (facts) and believing (values). It picks apart the idea of value neutrality recognising the presuppositional nature of knowledge. It is an invitation to participate in the process of learning; to see knowledge as something to be created and value, truth and meaning as something to be discovered. Knowledge emerges through invention and reinvention, through restless, impatient, continuing and hopeful enquiry, interaction and engagement.

Conclusion

Graduates from this course will be working with young people with little or no background or information about the church or the Christian faith. Circumstances shift but the task remains. I like the picture of how in the 1960s the youth worker might have said that the goalkeeper was like Jesus in the 1990s they are more likely to reverse the order and say that Jesus is like the goalkeeper. This is because they can no longer make assumptions of knowledge that the young people have about Jesus.

Applied Theology and Youth and Community Work is about making connections initially between belief and choice and ultimately between the lives of the young people and the promise of eternal life in Jesus Christ. The essence of the activity is to take some of Christian thinking and some of the young people's thinking and to look for connections. In this activity the English language serves us strangely badly. 'Compromise' is the only word available to describe the process where each can learn from the other and reach a mutually formed agreement. Compromise has too many negative connotations to be a satisfactory word to describe this essentially creative process. Maybe the first student to get a distinction will be the person to think of another word to replace it.

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