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Youth Being Ignored or Sidelined Is Identity Denied

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Abstract: It has happened so many times in history: the youth being ignored or sidelined. Such behaviour was and is often motivated by culture. In most cultures, the youth, children, and adolescents are important and loved; however, in society and churches, they are on the sideline, until culture determines their real belonging. The theological departure point of inclusivity has just not been taken yet. In this article will be argued that however natural cultural behaviour might be, to ignore or sideline children and adolescents is to deny our Christian identity as the church of God. In God's mind, children are included even before they are born. They may be man-and-woman-made, but in fact, they are God-made (Psalm 127 verse 3). They may not even have been part of a man-and-woman-made plan. Coming into being, whether planned or unplanned, does not catch God off-guard. Being is a gift of God, not only to a parent or parents but to the faith community. A theological understanding of our identity as the people of God compels us not and never to ignore or sideline the youth at any stage of life.

Keywords: youth ministry; inclusivity; identity; transforming leadership; servant leadership; emotional intelligence; cultural intelligence; differentiation; cultural behaviour

1. Introduction

In his doctoral thesis, Michael Droege (2024a, 2024b; cf. also Droege and Nel 2024) pointed at the fact that there are cultures where it is more natural to think inclusion when it comes to the youth.[1] But even in such cultures, church-culture so often differs. For some or many reasons, churches have developed a schizophrenic mindset when it comes to the youth. Churches have developed an adult-mindedness and market-driven approach (cf. Nel 2018, p. 129), which is not in line with Scripture. It may even be true that one of the reasons for the development of such a doublemindedness is the incapacity of preachers and liturgists to deal with youth (of all ages) and older adults in the same worship service. Separating youth (and even more so children (cf. Mercer 2005, pp. ix–x) from the body (of which they are a part) is an easy escape from the challenge of dealing with them as part of the whole.

My point in this article developed from a lifelong struggle with my main thesis, namely that ignoring youths and sidelining them is a denial of our identity. The research problem observed over 60 years of conducting, researching, and writing on Youth Ministry can be stated as follows:

Local churches often, because of cultural and even so-called theological and ministerial reasons, ignore, sideline and neglect the youth in worship and other ministries, and when such churches lose the youth, they often blame the loss on the youth or youth-oriented reasons like sports.

To say the least, this is just not fair. To lose them when you have never really made them 'feel' accepted and valued, being a part of 'us', makes the 'us' guilty. The us, we,

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have denied our own identity. I admit that there are traditions where there are at least denominational policies for being inclusive. That should be applauded. However, how it plays out on the local church level is not always as persistent as it should be. Within my own Reformed tradition, this is often the case.

My purpose in this article is to reflect on inclusivity at least one more time. This concept runs like a golden thread through my own academic life. I took the liberty to often refer to work conducted over the years and almost apologise for doing so. The article is, in more than one way, a reflection of work conducted and adds some perspectives to package the core concept of inclusivity again.

2. Inclusivity Non-Negotiable

2.1. Identity

It may be of interest to some readers that my own academic involvement in "*Gemeindeaufbau*", Congregational Studies, was triggered by my doctoral research on youth evangelism (Nel 1982). I tried to determine why many young adults were and are estranged from the church where they were baptised and confirmed. It was clear that however many reasons there may be for such estrangement, one outstanding reason is the church herself. In more than one way this was confirmed in a new research project completed in 2024 and reflected upon in a series of ten articles to be published by the end of February 2025. In my case, my doctoral research changed the direction of my future research. Even my major Youth Ministry publication (1997, revised 2018) reflects a deep rootedness in my basic departure point in Congregational Studies: developing missional congregations is a serious challenge of developing inclusivity in every sense of the word. This research was first published in 1994 under the Afrikaans title "*Gemeentebou*" ("*Gemeindeaufbau*") and revised in 2015. The revised and updated version was published under the title *Identity Driven Churches. Who are we and where are we going*.[2]

The reason for sharing this is to put the core concept of the identity of the church of God on the table. We struggle with our *becoming* because we either do not understand our *being* or do not take our *being* seriously enough. Our challenge lies deeper than just focusing on the purpose of the church. Our purpose as a church is determined by our understanding of our identity. Identity determines purpose. Our *being* informs our *becoming*. In Section 2.3 below are some details on what our identity compels us to be and become. One truth to be mentioned now is that understanding our God-given identity implies understanding our inclusivity as a basic truth and reason for being. When it comes to youth, most churches agree to this 'in principle' but not always in praxis. Using Practical Theological language: theory, in this case, does not inform and lead to new praxis (cf. Heitink 1999, pp. 9, 19). In pious naïveté I sometimes think that the reason may be nothing but "'cultural convenience'-captivity" (cf. Nel 2024, p. 63). In a broad sense, this article works with Kim's (2017, p. 5) definition of culture as "culture is a group's way of living, way of thinking, and way of behaving in the world, for which we need understanding and empathy to guide listeners toward Christian maturity".

2.2. For the Bible Tells Us So

Elsewhere (Nel 2018, pp. 51–63), I tried exploring examples from the Bible as to the importance and inclusion of children and what we now call adolescents. One cannot but refer to the core Biblical text (Deut 6, especially 4–9) in the following way:

"To confess the unique and only one God is indeed the crux of us being who we are as the people of God. This confession 'defines' our being as people created and recreated for him. We are because of him. This very confession is a work of God's grace and of the gift of faith. Left to ourselves, the only 'god' we can confess to ourselves, is an idol. One can only

put one's trust in the One you do not see (one of whom one cannot say, 'I believe in you because I have made you, I see you') when that One and only One graces you with the gift of faith. We are uniquely his because of this grace and gift.

In youth Ministry, I consider this a critical confession and departure point. However aware we might be of the sinfulness of us all, and of the 'opponent' of all that is good, we confess that human beings are created (and recreated) by the only one and true God we worship—even though their making, becoming and birth can be explained in precise medical detail.

This being the case, it is also true for our corporate identity as the people of God, as created and recreated human beings. We are because of God, because God is. We are, however, taking the Trinity, as we confess it, serious, also as God is, we do not only have relationships, we are our relationships" (Nel 2018, p. 25).

Exploring the Bible from this critical departure point, there is little doubt that one can only make one conclusion, namely that "youth are an integral part of God's people" (Nel 2018, p. 64). Some of the most outstanding Biblical examples are how Jesus included them, even in opposition to the culture He came into. They belong, they are held, they are blessed (cf. Mark 10 verse 16.). Not to forget that when Paul said goodbye to the disciples in Tyre the author of Acts (21:5 NIV) reported as follows: 'When it was time to leave, we left and continued on our way. *All of them, including wives and children*, (Ital M Nel) accompanied us out of the city, and there on the beach *we* (Ital M Nel) knelt to pray'. In the Bible, the "we" is inclusive.

And if it is true that they are an integral part of God's people, we are compelled to take three consequences (Nel 2018, p. 65) seriously:

- Though the youth are unique, they should never be 'apart' from the rest of the faith community;
- They should never and nowhere be ignored (not seen or not taken seriously);
- They are the responsibility of the local faith community, of which they are an integral part.

2.3. For Our Identity Tells Us So

Our identity is a "we" identity. When Dan Dick researched 917 congregations in the United Methodist Church in the USA, he found that only 10% are in the quadrant of being stable and growing. In his description of what accounts for such churches, he wrote: "'We' is the word spoken most frequently in vital congregations" (Dick 2007, p. 92). And earlier in the book (Dick 2007, p. 17) already: "... of all the stability criteria, a strong sense of identity—who we are as a congregation of God's people—is perhaps the most important. 'Who are we?' rests at the heart of our entire walk of faith. Individually, we wrestle with this question on a regular basis, but it is every bit as important that we wrestle with it corporately as well".

It is common knowledge that we know of the church (our ecclesiology) almost only by the metaphors used in the Bible to describe us. According to Minear ([1960] 2004, pp. 28–221), there are some 96 such metaphors—or as he calls them, images and even pictures (Minear [1960] 2004, p. 22). By expressing the nature of the church metaphorically, we learn that 'we' are always more than what one metaphor reveals us to be. It is true of the concept 'metaphor' that a metaphor used tells us something of the something it tells us something of—without ever telling us everything of that something it tells us something of. Many of these metaphors are well-known, and most of them (if not almost all of them) are plural in nature. And even the prominent singular one (the "bride" of Christ, cf. Rev 19 verse 4; Rev 21 verse 2, 9. NIV) is never used in a singular way, like "I am the bride of Christ" (cf. Nel 2015, pp. 25–50).

The church is plural in nature, in identity. It goes back to our creation according to the first story. We were created to be in community, to not be alone. There is no place or community on earth where our createdness finds better or fuller expression as in the faith community (cf. McKnight 2014, p. 105). To be the church of God is for creation to come full circle. It is the salvation from being just an individual. We have escaped, being saved from aloneness. We have also become true individuals. In our learning of Christ, we learned that an almost sick individualism never brings peace and joy. As part of the whole, we participate and reap the fruit of true individuation, someone who operates according to our identity (cf. Osmer 1996, pp. 9–26; Nel 2003b, pp. 151–96). In Youth Ministry, this is building on Erikson's findings that adolescents find either identity or role confusion (Erikson 1950, 1965). Erikson (1965, p. 13) wrote that identity formation is the construction "of a sense of sameness, a unity of personality now felt by the individual and recognized by others as having consistence in time". Osmer (1996, p. 21) concludes that individuation "involves the psychological work of disembedding the self from the various roles, relationships, and symbolic meanings that compose an adolescent's world in order to construct a self that is brought to and expresses through the roles, relationships and symbolic meaning".

When individuation does not happen when you grow up and, in your society, this so often finds expression in sick, ego-centred *individualism*. It has become endemic to societies. In pursuing this kind of being, even God is there "for my sake". In the findings of the excellent research project in the USA, it was named Moral Therapeutic Deism (cf. Dean 2010, p. 29). Dean (2010, p. 29) asks: "Why do teenagers practice moralistic therapeutic deism? Not because they misunderstood what we have taught them in church. They practice it, because this is what we have taught them in church. . .In fact, 'American teenagers are barometers of a major theological shift taking place in the United States" (Dean 2010, p. 14).

Is it not still valid to state:

"One may challenge the international generalisation of this paradigm, but one cannot escape the almost obvious validity of such thinking within many church circles. I cannot but agree with Smith and Denton (2005, p. 166) when they wrote: 'Our religious conventional adolescents seem to be merely absorbing and reflecting religiously what the adult world is routinely modelling for and inculcating in its youth'. To this, Dean (2010, p. 30) adds: "To be sure, churches neither intend nor acknowledge this religious position, despite its considerable appeal. Moralistic Therapeutic Deism makes no pretense of changing lives; it is a low commitment, compartmentalized set of attitudes aimed at 'meeting my needs' and 'making me happy' rather than bending my life into a pattern of love and obedience to God" (Nel 2018, p. 113).

Over the many years of being a church, many churches accepted a managerial way of thinking. We tend to think that the church is the total of an X number of individuals. That is how we count. In Biblical thinking, however, the whole precedes the individual. We confess with the Heidelberg Catechism (Q&A 54) (Christan Reformed Church 1989):

"Q. What do you believe concerning "the holy catholic church"?

A. I believe that the Son of God through his Spirit and Word, out of the entire human race, from the beginning of the world to its end, gathers, protects, and preserves for himself a community chosen for eternal life and united in true faith. And of this community I am and always will be a living member".

In what was previously called the ecclesiological, somatic perspective in Youth Ministry (Nel 2018, p. 73) was referred to McKnight (2014, pp. 105–12), who devoted a whole chapter to what he calls 'we is bigger than me'. He argues (p. 105) against the trend where.

"[L]ots of people think following Jesus and fellowshipping at a church are disconnected. I disagree because the NT teaches that the Christian life occurs primarily in and through a local church".[3]

This is how God deals with his people. "[From] the inception of the covenant and all that followed in its wake, it is clear that God begins with one person, but his aim is the many. From the 'One' comes the sand of the sea and the stars of heaven. Out of the One the whole is born. When the whole is established [takes shape], the One is part of the whole. The One is not absorbed by the whole but is taken up into it" (Nel 2001, p. 15)

The 'one' gains its significance and fulfilment from the whole. The importance of the one is related to the whole, and it does not stand detached from, and independent of, the whole. This *corpus* way of thinking in the Bible is striking (Nel 2018, pp. 72–73).

Any church who understands herself as God's people is called to think of herself as inclusive. Our identity is per se inclusive. Add to this another departure point, namely the relational/covenantal character of our being (cf. Nel 2018, pp. 65–73).[4] God has included us all in His covenantal relationship with Abraham and every believer who followed. It is not for nothing that Abraham is called the father of all believers (cf. Gal 3). Probably one of the most profound statements of this "already then" inclusion is found in Ephesians verses 3-14 with specific reference to 4–6:

"4For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love 5he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—6to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves." (NIV)

In my home language of Afrikaans, the 1983 translation, produced by excellent Greek scholars, verse 5 was translated as "5In sy liefde het Hy ons, volgens sy genadige beskikking, toe ook al daarvoor bestem om deur Jesus Christus sy kinders te wees". Directly translated: "In His love, in accordance with His gracious decision, He **then already** (bold MN) predestined us to be His children through Jesus Christ".

In most, if not all denominations, child baptism or the blessing of a child is a sign(al) of this *then already*! In this sense, taking the covenantal relationship seriously, the church is but a faith community of ***then already*** people—in the metaphor of the text above, children of God.

Children do not come in, they are in "in accordance with his pleasure and will" (Ephes 1 verse 5). In the story of God with his people as described in the Old Testament, it is clear that life was seen as a way with a destination, a purpose. As part of the people of God, 'my way' did not start when I was born: "it started with the Exodus" (Firet 1986, p. 54). "My" coming into life is "my" initiation. To quote Firet (1986, pp. 53–54):

The "transfer of dedication" consists especially in the initiation of the child into the story of Yahweh and his people: it implicates him personally so that it becomes his story. The child is initiated into the story with a view to the way he has to go. . . (This Didache) is, first of all, the act of implicating the young Israelite in the story of salvation. He learns to say and to experience "we"—the "we" of the covenant".[5]

Every initiated child discovers, as part of the "we" (who discovered it in the same way), what the fullness of God's salvation in Christ means "me" as a part of God's "we". The non-negotiable focus on family ministry is supposed to build on this premise. Whether acknowledged or not, I would like to assume so. I tried to make a case for **the home** where this basic understanding of a life of learning for Jesus to live life takes place by calling the family the basic hermeneutical space—"The family as a space where understanding is being facilitated" (Nel 2018, pp. 82–89). Dean (Dean and Foster 1998, pp. 99–101) refers to families as 'little congregations'. In the same section where she argues for 'partnering

with youth', she argues a case for 'partnering with parents' in a Godbearing ministry—as 'it takes a whole church to make a Christian'.

2.4. For the Youth Tells Us So

The purpose of this article is in no way to statistically verify the desire of youth, whatever age, to belong. It is part and parcel of being human. Taking Erikson seriously (cf. Richards 1983, p. 92ff.), we develop trust as early as in the first year of life. Without going into any depth, there is but one simple answer to this: "I" belong, "I" am accepted, "I" am safe, and even without knowing it "I" trust. The "we" teaches me, unknowingly so, to trust.

A PhD student has conducted both his master's and PhD research on what one may call "which youth continue to stay involved in active Christian life and membership of a faith community?" In both studies, parents and being accepted in the faith community play a major role (cf. Avenant et al. 2021). In the most recent research conducted in South Africa, which also struggled with the so-called fallout rate after public confession of faith[6], it is as clear as daylight: children, adolescents, and young adults long for acceptance. Even their teaching (whether we call it Catechism or Sunday Schools) should be relational in nature. Those who stay involved after such a period of catechism do so mainly because of their homes, but also because they were and are involved in ministries. They count as being part of and as being important as a part of the whole.[7]

Even though youths in different stages of development go (grow) through normal distant-seeking phases, they, even during such a phase, want to know 'I am a part of this whole, called church and am accepted as am, right now'. It duplicates what happens in families: you are loved, you are part of us, even though you want 'us' to stay at arm's length.

3. Transformative Change

It is difficult to change adult communities. Within the subject field of Practical Theology, change towards an intended goal is, however, part and parcel of any research. Whether the challenge comes from theory or from empirical reality—our research is aways seeking a new Practical Theology praxis. In this so-called strategic dimension of Practical Theology (cf. Heitink 1999, pp. 201–19), it is about this informed and theoretically motivated change. It is my conviction that Youth Ministry is a part of Practical Theology (cf. Nel 2003a, 2018, pp. 3–18).

Change is required and often even inevitable. In this article, I am aligning my understanding of the change required concerning the theory described above with how Osmer describes it in what he calls the fourth task in Practical Theology, the pragmatic task (cf. Osmer 2008, pp. 175–218).[8] Readers who know the work of Osmer will remember that he says that all three forms of the leadership styles he mentioned are needed in congregations. He refers to the following:

- Task competence;
- Transactional leadership;
- Transforming leadership.

He then adds: "But today, especially in mainline congregations, it is transforming leadership that is most needed, leadership that can guide a congregation through a process of deep change" (Osmer 2008, p. 178). He means by "leading an organization through a process of "deep change" in its identity, mission, culture, and operational procedures". It is not my task or intention to reproduce here what Osmer explored in the 40 pages he dedicated to this fourth task (Osmer 2008, pp. 178–218). What I do want to do is to agree with him that this kind of leadership is indeed servant leadership and that we are in need

of what he calls "a spirituality of servant leadership" (Osmer 2008, p. 183 ff.). In my own understanding of such leaders who are comfortable being servant leaders, one may refer to what Firet (1986) calls "selfreliant spiritual functioning". In his research he describes such functioning to be people functioning with openness, discernment, and creativity.

Concerning the research problem at stake in this article, "big change" will probably not happen if pastors/leaders in congregations do not approach inclusivity as to children, adolescents, and young adults with an unreserved openness that our 'cultural convenience'-captivity (cf. Nel 2024, p. 63) is just not right. Servant leaders listen anew with unbridled openness and discern the will of God. Openness and discernment are the basic prerequisites for creativity. And then, whatever the contextual challenges may be, such leaders participate creatively in a deep change of identity, mission, culture, and operational procedures—knowing that changing culture might be the most challenging of them all.

Exactly because this is the case, servant leaders, in the sense of being transforming leaders, need a growing emotional (EQ) and cultural intelligence (CQ). Both are important for leaders who want to transform long-term and well-established behaviour. This is not the place to discuss emotional and cultural intelligence per se or in any depth. It is, however, necessary to refer to it briefly.

Emotional intelligence may even matter more than IQ, as Goleman ([1995] 2020) stated in the subtitle of his book. In the preface to the 25th edition of this book (Goleman [1995] 2020, p. xii), he clarifies and states that there is "a mistaken notion that EI always matters more than IQ". In some cases, it does. He also points out that IQ and emotional intelligence are not opposing competencies—they are simply distinct concepts. Every human being is a unique mix of IQ and EQ". (UP click up). Salovey and Mayer (1990, pp. 185–211) coined the concept and described the four branches of emotional intelligence as follows:

- Perceiving emotions;
- Reasoning with emotions;
- Understanding emotions;
- Managing emotions.

Goleman ([1995] 2020, p. 43) goes on to summarize the research by Salovey and Mayer (1990, p. 189) and presents five components of emotional intelligence:

1. *Knowing one's emotions.* Self-awareness—recognizing a feeling *as it happens*—is the keystone to emotional intelligence.
2. *Managing emotions*. Handling feelings so they are appropriate is an ability that builds on self-awareness.
3. *Motivating oneself*. Marshalling emotions in the service of a goal is essential for paying attention, for self-motivation and mastery, and for creativity. Emotional self-control—delaying gratification and stifling impulsiveness—underlies accomplishment of every sort.
4. *Recognizing emotions in others*. Empathy, another ability that builds on emotional self-awareness, is the fundamental "people skill". (The ability to recognize what other people feel, need, or want. MN)
5. *Handling relationships*. The art of relationships is, in large part, a skill in managing emotions in others: the ability to manage other people's emotions.

In 2006, Goleman wrote the book *Social Intelligence: The New Science of Human Relationships* (and in what is a second subtitle, states Beyond IQ, beyond Emotional Intelligence). Add to this the insights from Livermore's (2009a, 2009b) concept of cultural intelligence. Livermore (2009b, p. 26) portrays Cultural Intelligence Drive as "the motivational dimension of CQ [which] is the leader's level of interest, drive, and energy to adapt

cross-culturally". In research on the impact of worship services, and specifically preaching, on developing inclusive missional congregations (Nel 2021a, p. 165), I have put it this way:

"This (our understanding of CQ) has everything to do with our understanding and willingness to become part of God's dealing with all the cultures represented in his and our world we live in. Cultural sensitivity is part and parcel of a deep awareness of the world God loves so much. . . We are required to develop in our appreciation for the diversity of the world we learn to love. And we do so as we grow in our sense of being sent as part of God's love for his diverse world. When this is not happening, we probably get stuck in prejudice, alienation and even racism (and, if I may add today -generational prejudice and injustice, MN). Kim (2017, pp. 46, 120–21) links up with the understanding of the cultural quotient (CQ) theory as developed by Earley and Ang (2003, p. 12) in the business world. They defined cultural intelligence as 'the capability to deal effectively with other people with whom the person does not share a common cultural background and understanding".

This is obviously necessary when it comes to the inclusion of youth of all ages in worship and ministry.

Kim (2017, p. 5) is right in pointing out that 'Cultural intelligence (CQ) resembles emotional intelligence (EQ), which measures one's capacity for relational and interpersonal skills'.

In my own reflection upon this in the desire for leaders to lead transforming change through worship and preaching, I state the following (Nel 2021a, p. 166):

"Livermore in his 'CQ Map (Figure 1 in Livermore (2009a, p. 13)) had as one of the central dimensions of the development of CQ: 'love: desire -----> ability'. We are 'compelled (cf. 2 Cor 5, pp. 14–21) by a desire to represent God in this culturally diverse world and to do so with cultural intelligence. In this regard, I want to come back to the research by Nieman and Rogers (2001, p. 139). According to them, those: [W]ho wish to take cross-cultural preaching seriously should grasp the importance of recognition. When we use that term, recognition means not only honor (respecting dignity) but also familiarity (developing appreciation) and finally insight (rethinking commitments) [. . .] We were guided, for example, by the theological image of 'neighbor' in order to honor those among whom we preach".

This is an important part of the answer to the research problem at stake in this article. Inclusive thinking in Youth Ministry asks for recognition of the smallest child in every sense of the word. "For many of us in pulpits, this may ask for deep change: a change in our understanding of our own identity, our purpose, our culture and in our operational procedures (Osmer 2008, p. 178; Quinn 1996, p. 201) when we are in the pulpit—becoming and being a changing and changed person, being different. It is this kind of integrity that can never go unnoticed. Our continuing development of cultural intelligence and our continuing conversion towards loving this world (God loves so much that. . .John 3:16) is indeed a spiritual process. This is God's promise in baptism that he will continue to change us towards our purpose. We were ordained in baptism for this kind of desire and love, long before we were ordained to lead in the service of Word and Sacrament" (Nel 2021a, p. 166; cf. also Nel 2021b).[9]

Servant leaders (transforming leaders) who are convinced by the theological reasons and motivation for the inclusive missional identity of the church, whether it concerns youth of all ages or the world out there in its cultural diversity, take on/challenge the current cultural realities with emotional and cultural intelligence. They do so by working on integrating all forms of intelligence. They intentionally focus on transforming identity, mission, culture, and operational procedures (Osmer 2008, p. 178).

Doing so, is, to my understanding, a process of developing an inclusive missional faith community (cf. Nel 2015, p. 203ff.). In this process, I am convinced that rediscovering and

recovering our God-given identity is the core phase (Nel 2015, pp. 223–50). It is entirely a theological endeavour. While it is core to our becoming, it is also motivational, almost as if discovering, "If this is who we are because of God's doing in Christ, let us never stop becoming who we already are in Him! How can we not do so?"

4. A New Christlike Culture for Tomorrow

Becoming the "us" we are in Christ is not always (but so often) counter-cultural as an alternative community (cf. Bosch 1982). But it is indeed satisfying. This is true peace—being who we are and becoming so more and more. In this world, such a counter-cultural "we" stands out as being faithful to God to whom we belong. This is a testimony of integrity and faithfulness. And in doing so, however poorly from time to time, we develop and grow into what might be called a Christlike culture. It flows from our identity in Him, our newly found mission as God's people in this world, doing it differently. Concerning Youth Ministry and the research problem behind this article, we find ourselves holding on to two inescapable truths simultaneously: inclusivity and differentiation (cf. Nel 2018, p. 228ff.). As people who are comfortable in the conjunctive phase of faith (Fowler 1981, p. 198ff.), we "embrace polarities". We do not find one-sided accomplishment and satisfaction in our inclusivity at the cost of the challenge of differentiation AND we do not specialise in our differentiation at the cost of our inclusivity. We learn to balance these two non-negotiables simultaneously. May one say that we change from a culturelike-church to developing a Christlike-culture as and within God's church.

5. Conclusions

In most, if not all, cultures, youth of all ages are appreciated and loved. Changing church-culture towards accepting youth of all ages as an integral part of who we are and in all we do seems to be more troublesome. Churches with money often bought inclusivity by specialising and differentiating to the point that it even looks right. And in the long run, we pay the price. Strangely, when such youth who church-wise grew up separately become parents, they opt for the same 'cultural convenience'-captivity (cf. Nel 2024, p. 63). This is probably because of the power of such cultural convenience. When the family as 'little congregations' (Dean and Foster 1998, pp. 99–101) does not flow over into the congregation as "my" new family, we "lose" them because we have never had them (cf. Nel 2019, pp. xi–xv).

I do not suggest that we change to keep them for our denomination. In my doctoral work I have already tried to argue against such a motive for Youth Ministry—the survival of the denomination (cf. Nel 1982, pp. 131–33). If we do not change for the right reasons, youth in their sensitivity for integrity will pick it up anyway. In this article, I tried arguing a case for a theologically motivated change. Our inclusive, God-given identity compels us. God includes them in His "we". And secondly, their importance as our "equi-humans" (Firet 1986, pp. 138, 156–57, 178, 246–72). As Firet has proven in his research, only when accepting the equi-humanness of any other in life can we participate meaningfully in their becoming self-reliant spiritual functioning humans. And in doing so, we participate in what the Bible calls us to do: handing over faith from generation to generation. We participate in the openness to discern and to become creative as creators on the eighth day (cf. Firet 1986, pp. 225–27).

The article also argues a case for servant leadership by transforming leaders—who with growing EQ and CQ—work towards congregations changing in identity, mission, culture, and operational procedures. Such leaders never rest till something becomes clear: we are becoming, every day, even more so, a Christlike Church.

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Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Notes

1 I will use the concept of youth in this article as including children, adolescents, and emerging adults.
2 This publication was translated into Russian (Нел 2024).
3 Also cf. Sunquist (2019).
4 For a discussion of the church's relational identity, see, among others, Brouwer (2009, pp. 33–118); also cf. Brouwer et al. (2007) and De Roest (1998), where koinonia almost serves as a subtext in his research on Communicative identity.
5 Firet (1986, pp. 53–54) refers especially to Ex 10 verse 1ff; 12 verse 24ff; 13 verse 8ff; Deut 4 verse 9, 6 verse 20ff.
6 What would be called confirmation in many denominations, but not so in the four Afrikaans-speaking Reformed Churches who participated. In all four of them, mainly for historical and societal reasons, the age for such confession is around 17/18.
7 The publication based on this research will be published at the end of February 2025.
8 For those who are interested, I refer to the Festschrift for Osmer published in 2019 (Dean et al. 2019). Of special interest is the contribution by Mikoski (2019, pp. 188–99), Root and Dean (2019, pp. 200–12), and Osmer (2019, pp. 213–37) himself.
9 Had space been available, I would have explored Quinn's (1996) understanding of *Deep Change*. He sees continues personal change as a key to successful leadership. "Personal change is a reflection of our inner growth and empowerment. Empowered leaders are the only ones who can induce real change. They can forcefully communicate at a level beyond telling. By having the courage to change themselves, they model the behavior they are asking of others. *Clearly understood by almost everyone, this message, based in integrity, is incredibly powerful*. It builds trust and credibility and helps others confront the risk of empowering themselves" (Quinn 1996, pp. 34–35 (Ital MN); cf. also Nel 2021a, p. 167).

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