A (South) African voice on youth ministry research: Powerful or powerless?

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Research on youth ministry in Africa and specifically South Africa traces its origin to much research conducted in America and Europe. Many African scholars also draw on research and practices within these international spheres. Empirical research on youth ministry in Africa is however of great importance. For this purpose, comparative analysis research provides a research methodology in the social sciences that aims to make comparisons across different countries or cultures. A major problem in comparative research is that the data sets in different countries may not use the same categories, or define categories differently. This article makes use of a faith formation case study conducted in South Africa to highlight the value of this methodology when reflecting on international research from an African perspective. The main argument of this article is that international research on youth ministry is valuable in an African context but this research needs to be culturally contextualised through using comparative analysis as a research tool. This will reflect that there are many similarities between international youth ministry and the African context but there are also many cross-cultural disparities. After comparison, differences that are unique to the African context are noted. The article focuses on South Africa as a reflection of youth ministry within the broader African context.

Introduction

Youth ministry practice in Africa (and more so South Africa) has relied heavily on international principles and concepts. Books and Internet sources on youth ministry practice (e.g. programming, organisation, planning) are primarily from American (Clark 1997; Dean 2010; DeVries 2008; Powell, Griffin & Crawford 2011; Root 2015) and English or German (Faix 2015; Roebben 2009) scholars and practitioners. International mission-focused youth ministry organisations, such as Youth for Christ, Scripture Union, Youth with a Mission and others, have taken root and have been flourishing in Africa for decades. Youth ministry practice is included in the broader practice of youth work in South Africa. The professionalisation of youth work in South Africa (through the South African presidency, Commonwealth Youth Desk and National Youth Development Agency) is gaining momentum when it is reportedly declining on the international front. Colleagues from America and the United Kingdom are increasingly reporting a decrease in funding and paid jobs within youth ministry. South Africa should reflect on research conducted by local scholars as well as local practices to enhance international discussions and discourses on youth ministry.

Many international youth ministry principles and concepts have been practised in Africa, but these have not been contextualised to ensure succession of local youth ministries. This is also evidenced in varying responses received during postgraduate student oral examinations at Stellenbosch University. Upon being asked what the relevance of the required reading material is for their specific contexts, many African students report that application of the theories in question would be difficult in their local contexts. The need to better understand and contextualise these international practices and theories has resulted in African scholars (e.g. Chiroma 2012; Cloete 2012a; Dreyer 2004; Nel [2001] 2008; Thesnaar 2003) increasingly engaging in international research through attending conferences and associations and also through postgraduate supervision of African scholars. More universities in Africa are offering academically accredited programs and courses in youth ministry.

The main aim of this article is to argue that international research on youth ministry is valuable in an African context, but this research needs to be culturally contextualised. The value of the international discourse is highlighted by comparing international research with local research in efforts to emphasise the need for the inculturation of international research in a (South) African context. A brief reflection on a recent study (Weber 2014) on faith formation of youth in an evangelical context is given in order to highlight some important similarities and differences in

youth ministry research in (South) African and international contexts. This article is concluded by highlighting some of South Africa's contextual youth ministry challenges in order to affirm that more empirical research on this continent is still needed.

Problem statement

International research and praxis on youth ministry has not been contextualised and made relevant within a diverse African continent. This problem has increased distorted notions of powerlessness about this continent. (South) African scholars in the fields of practical theology and missiology have begun exploring contextualised ways of doing research in this regard that contributes to the global discussion on youth ministry.

Faith formation of youth in a South African evangelical context

As mentioned in the introduction, I will begin by discussing a recent comparative study I conducted (Weber 2014). This study will form the basis of my argument that Africa is actively involved in academic research in youth ministry but also that there is an increased need for contextualised studies of this kind through empirical research.

Practical theologian Richard Osmer (2008:153) notes that one way in which sound theological and ethical interpretation within practical theology is found is within transformational practices. These practices are found in faith communities and contexts in which youth faith formation processes have worked. Interaction with these communities enables new ideas that could enrich the faith formation processes of youth. I conducted a research study on youth faith formation of 14 to 17-year-old youth from an evangelical denomination in South Africa and compared its results with three similar studies, in search of the most suitable practice model on youth faith formation. Two of these studies were conducted in America (by the Fuller Youth Institute and Princeton Theological Institute) and one in South Africa (by the University of South Africa). These studies were selected because they focused on the faith formation of youth within practical theology within different contexts. The key areas that these studies compared were: type of study conducted, timeframes in which they were conducted, methodologies used, type of participants and the core content included in each study. These are important to specify the need for a variety of interdisciplinary research methods in youth ministry.

Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton (2005:3–8, 291–307), two American sociology professors at the University of North Carolina, conducted a survey on the character of youth religion in America in 2001–2005. This was done under the National Study of Youth and Religion in an effort to discover the extent to which youth seek spirituality and how religion affects the moral reasoning and risk behaviours of these youth. This survey included all major religious traditions (Protestants, Catholics, Jehovah's Witnesses, Buddhists, Muslims, Hinduism, Christian Science, Mormonism and Judaism) in America. The initial survey was conducted telephonically and included at least one parent or guardian. The second phase included interviews with the youth. These youth were between 13 and 17 years old. This was a large study that spanned across America (Northeast, Midwest, South and West) and included 3290 telephonic interviews with English and Spanish speaking participants and 267 individual face-to-face interviews. These interviews followed up on central themes discovered during the telephonic interviews. Interview content included familial backgrounds, stresses and socioeconomic situations, importance of faith to these youth, moral beliefs, youth group attendance and risk behaviours. Interviews were conducted in public spaces (coffee shops, libraries, restaurants, malls, parks and schools). Informed consent was obtained verbally and in written form from parents and youth. Participants were given monetary incentives for their participation. Data was analysed using comparative tests from similar studies conducted in America and the United Kingdom.

The College Transition Project was conducted by practical theologians Kara Powell, Brad Griffin and Cheryl Crawford (2011:29–33, 199–204) of the Fuller Youth Institute from 2004 to 2010. This study was aimed at understanding the dynamics of youth transition to college and also how the church (including youth leaders), parents and youth can maintain a mature ('sticky') faith. The project included 28 interdenominational churches (Presbyterian, Christ Church, Community Church, United Methodist, Baptist, Lutheran, Mars Hill Bible church, Nazarene) in America. A longitudinal research study was conducted through online and paper questionnaires with 500 professional youth pastors who were employed on a full-time basis and with the youth. Focus groups, summits and national seminars were also conducted with these youth pastors. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with 45 of these youth and individual consultations were conducted with youth leaders. A 'sticky' faith cohort comprised the congregations mentioned above, which were included through summits and monthly webinars. The youth were 18 years old and above, and were mainly from intact families. These youth had to be part of a church youth group and intending to attend college or university. They were selected through youth leader contacts. Participants of this study were mainly English speaking. This, too, was a large study that spanned across America (Southwest, Northwest, Southeast and Northeast). Informed consent was obtained in written form from youth. Data was analysed through reference to parallel studies, exploration of theology (faith and youth group experience measuring instruments) and Scripture. Some of the content analysed in these instruments were how frequent these youth engaged in communal and individual church practices, why they went to a youth group and what they wanted to see happening in their youth groups. A sociologist was also consulted to confirm the national trends noted. This project was conducted outside the age parameters required for the present research study but was found relevant because these young people's

faith trajectories are formed long before they are 16 years old (Powell *et al.* 2011:23).

Practical theologians Hendrik Pieterse, Johannes van der Ven, and Jaco Dreyer, from Radboud University in Nijmegen, the Netherlands, and the University of South Africa (UNISA), respectively, jointly conducted an ongoing quantitative large-scale empirical-theological research project on 'Religion and Human Rights among South African Youth'. Two surveys were completed at selected (private and public) schools in the Pretoria and Johannesburg area in 1995–1996 and in 2000–2002, each time involving the same schools. This project looks at the images of Jesus and the belief in salvation of Grade 11 learners (approximately 15–16 years old) from English speaking private school learners and Afrikaans speaking public school learners, in order to obtain a more prolific picture of the belief of the Afrikaans speaking youth. It focused on the question of what these teenagers' views are regarding a central aspect of our Christian belief, namely their belief in Jesus and their belief in salvation, and how this belief (in salvation) influences their attitudes towards human rights. The effect that their belief in salvation has on their views regarding human rights was also examined. Questionnaires were used, but only the data of the self-confessed Christian respondents was analysed. The research question posed in this project was: 'Are different images of Jesus to be found in the consciousness of this group of the South African youth?' The content included various themes like God, Jesus, salvation, the church, their personal religious practice, the degree of secularisation and the influence of their faith on their decisions of various kinds, but greater emphasis was placed on testing various dimensions of Christological attitudes of these youth. The measuring instrument was thus constructed with reference to three criteria: Christology, pastoral experience and methodology. A factor analysis confirmed three attitudes towards Jesus – the orthodox or Neo-Scholastic attitude, the dialectical attitude and the liberation-theological attitude. An interesting finding, however, was what could be described as a combination in one factor of the liberal-theological, the secular-theological and the Jesulogical attitudes moulding into a single image of Jesus that can be termed: Jesus as a model of true humanity. What then could the reason for this be? All three attitudes developed from the humanity of Jesus as its base (Pieterse 2003:1090).

The focus of my (Weber 2014) research study was to understand youth faith formation in light of possible factors that could hinder and enhance this faith formation process. It started in 2008 with the empirical study being conducted during March–May of 2012. One evangelical denomination was used as a case within South Africa. Face-to-face interviews and focus groups were conducted with 14–17 years old youth, their youth leaders and pastors. In most instances these youth leaders are volunteers who have other jobs or are studying at university or college. The pastors interviewed are employed on a full-time basis. The youth were from nuclear, single-parent and guardian-parent families. These youth are all part of a church youth group and were selected through

youth leaders and pastors (or church boards). Participants of this study were mainly English speaking. This was a not as large a study as the three mentioned and was restricted to 8 local congregations of the same denomination across South Africa (Cape Town, Port Elizabeth, Gauteng, and KwaZulu-Natal). Informed consent was obtained in written form from youth, their parents and the church leadership. Data was analysed using thematic analysis, through consulting interdisciplinary and intradisciplinary research and Scripture. The latter is mentioned as part of theoretical framework employed in this study (interpretive, normative and pragmatic tasks). Thematic analysis is a method for identifying and reporting patterns (themes) within data in an attempt to interpret various aspects of the research question (Braun & Clarke 2006:79; Ezzy 2002:88). This form of analysis has been considered one of the simplest forms of analysis that can be used by developing researchers. It is a method of analysis used for reporting the experiences, meanings and realities of participants and also for acknowledging the ways in which meaning is made within participants' social contexts (Braun & Clarke 2006:81). It is considered most valuable in contexts where new theories and interpretations are required (Ezzy 2002:85). It is not restricted to one specific theoretical framework, which makes it attractive in a theological study. Thematic analysis is flexible in that the researcher could either gain a rich description of the entire data set or give a more detailed account of one particular theme or group of themes (Silverman 2001:83). Some of the content analysed was church membership, involvement and frequency of involvement in communal and individual church practices and why this is the case, how they experienced their faith positively and negatively, and what they wanted to see happening in their youth ministries.

Key findings of comparative analysis conducted

In discussing the power that religion has or does not have on the faith of youth between 14 to 17 years old, both in South Africa and internationally, the comparative analysis of the four above-mentioned studies revealed important differences in context and methodology that impact how each is perceived. The similarities include that each of these research studies were conducted with youth and included at least one other influential voice in their lives (parents or leaders). Each of these looked at the faith of these youth on various levels: relevance, practice and experience. The following key findings relevant to the faith formation of youth were discovered (Dean 2010:201–205; Pieterse 2003:1081–1105; Powell *et al.* 2011:29–100; Smith & Denton 2005:26–29; Weber 2014:211–237):

1. Christian faith has little connection to God's redemptive work.
2. Youth struggle to articulate their faith because of lack of understanding it.
3. Youth identity and faith formation are connected.
4. A Christian identity is formed through the process of socialisation.
5. Youth moral and faith formation are connected.

Christian faith has little connection to God's redemptive work

The Christian faith of the youth in the four studies above, had very little to do with God's redemptive work in the world. Instead, faith is evidenced as being externally well-behaved and loving others (Setran & Kiesling 2013:22). Correlating to Smith and Denton's phrase; MTD (Monotheistic Therapeutic Deism), Pieterse (2003:1088) discusses the secular-theological attitude towards Jesus in which the transcendent dimension of Christ does not feature in the God-images of these youth. This relationship between faith and morality is also reflected in the youth's openness and respect for other faith traditions at the expense of fully understanding and grappling with their own. This was evidenced in their views on salvation and being a Christian.

Youth struggle to articulate their faith because of lack of understanding it

Young people struggle to articulate their faith. The church has developed the tradition of using Christian language (Christianise) around youth without explaining it to them. This could be true for any visitor to the Christian context. Traditionally, doctrinally-loaded terms (like salvation, redemption, righteousness, and so forth) become part of daily language of those within this context. Youth have in turn felt that because they cannot grasp or sometimes even understand this language, the Christian faith is not something they can own (Powell *et al.* 2011:37–38). It is important at this age (14–17) that young people take ownership of what they believe. Without this happening, many are open to the risk of falling in and out of faith according to life circumstances. Post-modern society has added to this tension by influencing an individualistic spirituality in these youth. This kind of spiritual identity could be described as moving away from a theological understanding to a humanistic view of spirituality. The church cannot assume that youth will merely join the dogmatic perspectives (core to fundamentalism) Christian churches used to have on life issues. The technological and information era we live in has resulted in these youth being more informed about different religious traditions and life in general from a very early stage of life (Cloete 2012a:72–73).

Youth identity and faith formation are connected

Each of these studies is connected to youth identity, moral and faith formation in some way. Most of the youth are interested in getting involved in Christian practices (like youth groups) that are found most relevant to their lifestyles in terms of socialisation and time. These youth become involved in activities that are connected to moral values that they adhere or aspire to. Most of them desire authentic and consistent relationships with their peers, parents, youth leaders and pastors. As a result, common trends in increased usage of social media, increased school sport activities and large crowds that evoke specific youth subcultures have become popular, because not being part of these detracts from a youthful socialisation process. An alarming finding is the voice of the older cohort (18 and up) who connect their lack of involvement in church practices to the lack of support from adult Christians. This connection between identity formation and faith formation, as well as the community seeking character of Christian faith formation, is vital for youth ministry today (Cloete 2012b:70). Malan Nel ([2001] 2008:147) confirms that identity formation and faith formation are interrelated processes necessary for becoming who we already are in Christ. Youth ministry sometimes neglects this connection and tries to focus on the spiritual without recognising how these two processes are interrelated. Youth ministry could help to focus on real life issues and experiences of young people and not only on cognitive processes of knowing or behavioural changes, by creating spaces where these youth can discover themselves in the face of God (Cloete 2012b:70).

A Christian identity is formed through the process of socialisation

This requires a Christian social context that stresses the importance of a faith relationship with God. The faith community can be this context through its learned behaviour patterns, values, beliefs, symbols, traditions and shared worldviews. Young people should be empowered to critically reflect on these patterns, values, beliefs, symbols, traditions and worldviews if they are to own their faith and take responsibility for it (Groome 1980:115). Socialisation of African people has been infused with how they view God. Colonisation brought with it different ways in which church should be practised, which in turn influenced how African people worship, dress, relate and interpret theological concepts. Perhaps, a reflection on various traditional black or coloured or Indian or white cultural practices could be compared with the various denominational cultures in an effort to better understand how young people's Christian identities are being formed today. It seems at present that there is a constant tension between these seemingly opposing voices in their lives.

Youth moral and faith formation are connected

These studies also confirmed that moral and faith formation are connected and interdependent on each other and should not be neglected as such. Youth faith formation should thus not be contemplated without taking their identity and moral formation into consideration. All four studies show that youth are not rigid in their thinking and consider interaction with other faiths and belief systems helpful to their faith formation process. This alerts the church to the importance of exposing these youth to different viewpoints within the safe environments (church) they have come to. The importance of moral formation within the context of relationship cannot be overstressed. In this regard, youth faith formation should also not be contemplated without taking their individual and communal contexts into account (Van der Ven 1998:30). Young people need to be confronted with the plurality of values, beliefs and cultures they encounter daily and should not be coerced into only one perspective to the situation. Their families and churches should enable them to develop the discernment they need to make their own life choices.

The importance of the faith community, their educational and societal community, and their familial community lies in them being able to listen to the opinions of others and also share their opinions with others as they process their faith. Good motivations and intentions must be embodied in right practices.

The need for more empirical research in (South) Africa

I realise that the underlying motivations of each of the above-mentioned studies have not been fully described resulting in certain criteria of these studies not being investigated. None of the above-mentioned research studies took careful cognisance of the role that culture plays within the lives of these youth. The process of inculturation in which the gospel message is explained as relevant to the cultural context these youth find themselves in, has not been emphasised (Bujo & Muya 2008:191; Kiaziku 2009:19). It is in the differences of the four studies (and contexts) that the 'otherness' of the youth comes to the fore. It is here that new ways of doing theology can also be discovered. Amidst the importance of a universal Christian faith grounded in the redemptive work of Christ, lies the uniqueness of individuals' contextually grounded and influenced faith. This is the inextricable role culture has to play in this discussion. This article focuses on the South African context, but the challenge of youth ministry not being contextualised is true within a broader African context as well. Africa and its youth are often negatively portrayed by the media to the outside world. These negative perceptions about Africa have had such an impact that they have become entrenched in African culture, religion, science, philosophy and history (Swart & Yates 2012:5). In contrast, Western culture has mostly been portrayed in a favourable light and associated with freedom, justice, equality and emancipation. Two African theologians' research is worth mentioning at this point. Abid Rangoonwala (2008) attempted to address this challenge by conducting an empirical study (interviews with youth and pastors) on community based discipleship among urban African youth in Nairobi, Kenya. In this study he addresses the dualistic reality of the church not addressing the social needs young people in Nairobi have when sharing the Christian faith with these youth. These social needs include those cultural experiences within African communities that these youth encounter daily. Consequently, Rangoonwala proposed that a theology of the covenant of God be considered in this regard. Nathan Chiroma (2012) conducted an empirical study (interviews and focus groups) in which he investigated the impact that mentoring within theological seminaries has on its students in Nigeria. He discovered that mentoring plays an important role in the faith formation (inclusive of character and ministry) of these students.

Malan Nel (1998) traced youth ministry in South Africa to a time when youth were already living and working outside their homes (Industrial Revolution). During this time, Sunday schools placed strong emphasis on transferring manners and morals to these youth who did not learn these from their families. This was also a time when the need for youth leaders to guide these youth became evident. At the time youth development work was not considered the work of the church but pastoral care to these youth was. This has changed in a post-modern context. Faith-based organisations are also involved in youth development work. As youth became an established and recognised group in society, their way of living and new ideas as part of the youth subculture were seen both as sources of social change and as a potential threat to the existing social order (Cloete 2012a:2). The reality in South Africa is that the divisions, conflicting presuppositions and contradictory worldviews that divided the country in the past, continue to undermine the present. The most recent government elections in South Africa (May 2014) marked the year that the first generation born after the apartheid regime (post 1994) could democratically vote. All of these youth have not been physically involved in the apartheid struggles but many still feel the after effects thereof through their families. The distress experienced by the youth in a country such as South Africa at this point in history is not only problematic but lodges an urgent request for new practice theories. In the current South African context this comment is of more than academic significance. The timeous but radical changes of the early 1990s have far-reaching implications for the youth of this country, and their consequences will be felt for many years to come. Youth ministry in this country will have to integrate ways of addressing the social challenges these youth face alongside their faith formation process (Nel 2003:75–76). According to the South African National Development Plan 2030 (n.d.:14), young people in this country still face inequalities with regard to education and economic opportunities. This report also stresses the need for South Africa to increase its cooperation with its neighbouring African countries in addressing these needs (National Development Plan 2030:22). It is my belief that this cooperation should include addressing the spiritual well-being of these youth alongside these social needs. This should then include research concerning and with these youth.

The above-mentioned comparative study conducted by Weber (2014), the African-based studies and also the continuing challenges that South African youth face, highlight the increased need for research studies in which the local contexts (and faith experiences) of youth are given specific attention. (South) Africa is becoming increasingly rich in its academic discourses around youth, the existing youth ministry practices and also has an increasing number of scholars focusing on this area of ministry.

Conclusion

My aim in this article was to express the need for a (South) African voice in youth ministry research through highlighting the need for increased culturally relevant empirical work in this region. I used a comparative study from two American and two South African universities, two African scholars' research and also the recent social challenges young people in South Africa face, to elaborate

this expression. This comparative study highlighted the following five factors concerning youth faith formation: (1) the Christian faith has little connection to God's redemptive work; (2) youth struggle to articulate their faith because of lack of understanding it; (3) youth identity and faith formation are connected; (4) a Christian identity is formed through the process of socialisation; and (5) youth moral and faith formation are connected. None of these emphasised the need for critically looking at how culture influences the faith formation of these youth.

I conclude by saying that (South) Africa is developing its youth ministry research base even within international arenas but the strength thereof will lie in more empirical research being conducted in which the local voices of youth and the influential voices around them are taken into account.

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Competing interests

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