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People Require Proximity: What the Church Can Do To Create Wholeness for Adolescents

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ADOLESCENTS

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CARRINGTON PHAUVE WILSON

SEATTLE PACIFIC SEMINARY

PEOPLE REQUIRE PROXIMITY:
WHAT THE CHURCH CAN DO TO CREATE WHOLENESS FOR
ADOLESCENTS

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A PROJECT SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE DEGREE
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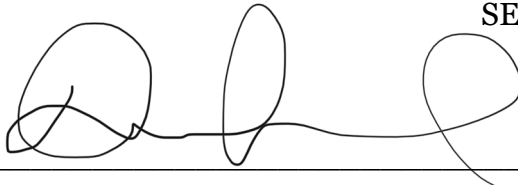
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Abstract:

Historically, many have attempted to advocate for equality by centering an earthly dominant power to bring about likeness to the majority. Unfortunately, even the most noble of causes excludes those furthest from the center source. Therefore, reconciliation must not focus on human structures of power and equality, but God's, centering the One who created all things, to be again returned to their truthful spaces. Thus, for reconciliation to be a realized truth, we must not center the dominant source of human power, but the furthest out, realizing the likeness to God that humanity continuously excludes. For this, womanism gives a unique lens, starting from the margins and folding upwards towards the One who gave all things life.

In my context of youth ministry, terms such as multiethnic, special needs, females, and females of color, were often used to describe the various ministries for "the other" cultures and people groups in the community. These contextual groups were intended to serve people more inclusively, to create a place of belonging and community for every person. In addition, as an African American student, much of my theological education needed to be contextualized or demanded special training to be validated, however this reality was not limited to the academy. In ministry, words such as reconciliation, diversity, unity, inclusion, and belonging were some of the major words used to describe the vision behind the organizational changes being made in the late 2010's. In this context of organizational change, there is ministry and multiethnic ministry to describe the specialty of interacting and preaching to youth of color. The quantifier

“multiethnic” signals that it is different from mainstream because ministry is tailored to dominant culture, thus multiethnic must be created for the experiences and realities of youth of color in hopes to create a belonging among peers that would not necessarily happen otherwise.

Consequently, the narratives perpetuated in youth culture excludes and prevents youth in seeing their fullness as being a part of God's image. Dominant culture theology has made it such that only white males can see their full humanity reflected in God and others cannot. This has caused harm and a mass exodus in churches and the Christian community. Although organizations and para-church spaces are based in the community, it is the church that sets the rules that upholds these limited and exclusive perspectives as being God-ordained. It is my contention that Christian organizations that serve youth are constrained by a theology that closes the doors to those who do not conform.

Therefore, using womanist theology as a lens, we will begin to see the ways reconciliation is made possible because it begins with marginalized communities, bases itself in practical steps towards justice, and centers the fullness of Godself in humanities conditions while transforming unjust systems. By looking at the narrative of Esther through the perspective of black feminists, we will not only learn more about the ways that reconciliation requires an imagination of creativity and experience, but also must lead towards liberation for those beyond oneself, adaptable and inclusive. As reconciliation, unity, and the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven is the prayer of the church, the focus of this thesis is to answer the question: “How can the Church create a culture of belonging where female, non-white, and non-binary dominant culture youth can have their

humanity centered in the imago dei that reflects God's kinship community of wholeness, reconciliation, and unified diversity?"

Chapter One Finding a Missing Generation

An ethnographic study in 2003 recorded a significant absence of millennials in the church.¹ These researchers are asking, “Where are the youth?” and their findings shocked them. The results seemed to imply that there is a missing generation from the body of Christ because they do not attend church. The attendance and participation in church on Sunday for millennials had significantly dropped in comparison to the teenagers and early adolescences, who continue to attend. This perplexed researchers who found that once teenagers turned eighteen, more than half of them discontinued participating in churches. Mr. David Kinnaman, president of the Barna Group, a leading research company, and author of “You Lost Me: Why Young Christians are Leaving the Church,” records that 59% of youth who grew up participating in churches stopped when they turned eighteen.² This alarming fact is the result of many factors, including the result of poor theology that did not equip or translate to the reality that these young people were encountering.³ The issue of their lack of involvement in church membership suggested a deeper problem, namely, that youth were choosing to leave because the faith teachings no longer connected to the truth of their lived experiences. Unfortunately, church participation was perceived as synonymous with being a part of the Body of Christ by the Christian community, which made it difficult to acknowledge the reality that kids were leaving the

¹ Kinnaman, D., & Hawkins, A. (2016). *You lost me: why young Christians are leaving church ... and rethinking faith*. Baker Books. 20.

² Kinnaman, 23.

³ Kinnaman, 22.

church because they no longer found it relevant when they became young adults.

⁴ In reality, the concern for Christian leaders seemed to stem from a fear of the dying institution of the church and the rise of an unbelieving generation.

Dr. Kenda Creasy Dean, author of “Almost Christian: What the faith of our Teenagers is Telling the American Church” speaks about this migrating generation as the emergence of adolescence. She says, “until the early twentieth century, you were either a child or an adult. Adolescence is an invention of the industrial revolution, a social pattern.”⁵ Through an awareness of the secular changes of culture, Dr. Dean helps us see the psychological factors affecting the young people the church is missing. What she identifies as adolescents is the life-stage the church did not account for, serve, or prepare through faithful religious teachings.⁶

Adolescence was not a phase the church understood in its formation as a group that they specifically needed to teach their faith tradition. The stages of life they understood did not account for a transitioning period into adulthood, therefore the church did not preach a transitioning or becoming theology. “Where are the youth they ask?” They are in the world searching for a home that sees and values them for who they are. To explain this, Dr. Dean examines the concept of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (M.T.D.) as the usurping belief among adolescences. Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, coined by Christian Smith and Melissa Denton, is “an alternative faith that feeds on and gradually co-opts, if not

⁴ Dean, Kenda Creasy. (2010). *Almost Christian: what the faith of our teenagers is telling the American church*. Oxford University Press. 10

⁵ Dean, 9.

⁶ Dean, 34

devours, established religious traditions.”⁷ This means that the adolescences have an apathetic view of the church, Christianity, and the overall religious scene; they tolerate it just as they were taught, but do not believe it in. Thus, as adolescences become able to make choices about their time and energy, one of the components on the chopping block is the stagnant religion and façade of faith they no longer use, nor does it fully apply to them.

Kinnaman’s research uncovered the reputation the church had in the community and the feedback they received foreshadowed the end of its lifespan if this problem of reaching adolescents was not addressed. When the Christian teachings do no account and prepare them for the reality and trauma they experience in the world, Christianity no longer serves a purpose. To young people, this theology is only providing tools for managing uncomfortable situations and showing a “neutral niceness.” Dr. Dean also highlights the “muddled ecclesiology of the American church” as not being rooted in an in-depth understanding of its purpose and intended community. Dean believes the result of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (M.T.D.) is what has been sewn into religious traditions and highlights the shortcomings of mainline churches theological and structural framework. She says, “If teenagers lack an articulate faith, maybe it is because the faith we show them is too spineless to merit much in the way of conversation. We have received from teenagers exactly what we have asked them for: assent, not conviction; compliance, not faith.”⁸ The inability to speak about the Gospel highlights the ways that the church has failed to equip

⁷ Dean, 13.

⁸ Dean, 37

youth with practical teachings, thus rendering its own death in the lives of people searching for meaning and identity in the world.

This reality is also reflected in the experiences that women have within the church. As a woman in ministry, I have unfortunately experienced firsthand the limits of my leadership capacity in the church. I have also heard and helped enforce some dehumanizing narratives of what it means to be a female in the Christian community. To illustrate this, Black Feminist theologian, Brittany Cooper recounts the story of her experience with a Black male preacher, who spoke at her graduation. In his commencement address that was directed to parents, he seemed to suggest that Black mothers were responsible for their children's inability to compete in the face of systemic obstacles. Cooper suggests that this correlates to the misogynistic conclusions contained in "The Negro Family: The Case For National Action," also commonly known as the Moynihan Report, written in 1965 by Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who was serving as the Assistant Secretary of Labor under President Lyndon B. Johnson. This was a report on black poverty in the United States, which implied that "[black women] were the source of our deepest, most faulty conditions."⁹ Brittany Cooper maintains that there is a connection between this belief and the graduation experience with her mother, her personal experiences in the Black church, and pervasive misogynoir theological teachings. Cooper strongly critiques this view that women are the cause of worldly problems and are the origin of sin.

⁹ Cooper, B. C. (2019). *Eloquent rage: a black feminist discovers her superpower*. Picador. 162.

However, it is important to note that this theological belief is not limited to Black women. It continues with young girls in youth culture, where it is seen most clearly through Christian camping. During the first week, camp officials explain the rules and expectations to the counselors for the summer. Amidst this introduction, the handbook of conduct is explicit about doctrine-based statements regarding how girls are to behave and dress to protect boys and men from stumbling. Author April D. DeConick explains how history, source criticisms, and scripture is used to reinforce a narrative of woman as evil and the bearers of sin to back this type of misogyny. In her book, “Holy Misogyny,” she writes “Men must beware of the female body which is a distraction for them that can lead to the corruption of their souls...the female body was identified as the major threat to men and their honor.”¹⁰ This message, derived from ancient Jewish text declares that women’s’ bodies are a symbol of lust and perversion that men should withstand unless the intention is procreation under marriage.¹¹ Thus, women’s bodies are regulated and dismissed to help men continue in faithfulness.

The implication of this narrative is that girls must change to protect boys, while the boys are not taught to change or manage themselves. Dr. Tina Schermer Sellers, noted sex educator, author, and therapist, writes in her chapter entitled, “Beloved Sex,” that “the ‘purity message’ resembles the most extreme ascetic movements of the early church, where to serve God required renouncing all

¹⁰ DeConick, A. D. (2013). Holy Misogyny: why the sex and gender conflicts in the early church still matter. Continuum. 40.

¹¹ DeConick, 41

sexual thoughts and actions.”¹² Sellers writes that the effects of this toxic message, given to both men and women, left youth growing up internalizing shame for their natural bodies, objectification of others, and a deep distrust of the body and its capabilities.¹³ The correlation between the shame about their natural bodies being sexualized and fears of immorality and sin combined to leave youth, primarily girls, with a sense of isolation and wrongness about their God-given bodies. The catch phrases of "modest is hottest" and “do not be a stumbling block” echo and highlight the condemnation women receive about their body’s presence in Christian spaces.

The ancient ideology of women covering to protect men from sexual immorality is still present and harming girls in the church. Although these expectations were set for all leaders, there was an undertone of shame and guilt for the females since boys were considered the standard. The true expectation was that guys could reflect Jesus by focus alone, but girls were to be aware of their appearance and what their presence does to the community. Dr. Brian Bantum, the Neal F. and Ila A. Fisher Professor of Theology at Garrett Theological Seminary, says the following:

“...the opposition of maleness and femaleness is articulated within an irrevocable nearness, man over woman, but always man with woman in either household patterns or normative narrations of vocation and place, where women’s lives and behaviors or perpetually bound to male-centric norms and modes of being.”¹⁴

¹² Sellers, T. S. (2017). *Sex, God, and the Conservative Church Erasing Shame from Sexual Intimacy*. Taylor and Francis. 219

¹³ Shermer Sellars, 11.

¹⁴ Pope-Levison, P., & Levison, J. R. (2012). *Sex, gender, and Christianity*. Cascade Books. 147.

Brian Bantum goes on to highlight the standardizing of maleness in culture. The original sin of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden is portrayed as the result of humankind's choices, leading to the consequence of sin. However, the blame is most often attributed to Eve for being the first to sin and being made subordinate to Adam which has been interpreted to create a hierarchy of humankind, using Genesis 3:16b, where God says, "to the woman... your desire will be for your husband and he will rule over you" as scriptural evidence. This theological concept of domination holds true today as young women are taught to surrender to male standards and boys are taught to dominate and control.

Another disturbing and harmful narrative given to girls is that women are meant to rear children, not men. Often with biblical support, girls hear repetitive messages that women are supporting characters, not leaders unless there are children to attend. This relegates women to submissive or not fully authoritative positions, only being offered opportunities to co-lead co-ed communities. This perspective dates back to the efforts of Bishop of Salamis, Epiphanius, who decreed women could not hold the same titles and perform the same sacraments as men, offering females lesser versions of male positions.¹⁵ This prevented women from being formally installed or ordained and were unable to hold office or perform duties reserved for ordained members.

This type of treatment is also experienced by multicultural youth, who receive similar messages in Christian spaces. The separation of groups by similar characteristics impedes youth from being able to see themselves reflected in the

¹⁵ DeConick, 122.

image of God. Author and professor Dr. Christina Cleveland says that churches often reflect the socio-political geography of the culture around them. By that, she means that congregations mirror the people, neighborhoods, and beliefs of their environment, which are often homogenous and not diverse. Unfortunately, these racial dynamics in many Christian communities perpetuate division because adolescences are only exposed to like-minded people from their racial or ethnic group.¹⁶

This is also true of young people who are taught a theology that does not accept them or their journey as being created by God. The consequences of this are deadly. Research shows that nearly 50% of transgender youth have thought about suicide and 25% report they have made a suicide attempt.¹⁷ Not only is the harm in a loss of reflection in the imago dei, but a loss of life. “Violence against gays and the discomfort associated with people who challenge our binary gender categories are signs of anxiety and fear” and this fear leads to dangerous and deadly consequences on the powerless.¹⁸ The violence perpetuated against non-binary teens are astronomical. In 1996, suicide was the third most common cause of death for young people ages fifteen to twenty-five in America, which tripled from the 1950’s.¹⁹ The National Survey on LGBTQ Mental Health in 2020 reports that 43% of adolescents have suicidal ideation over their cis-gender counterparts

¹⁶ Cleveland, C. (2013). *Disunity in Christ: uncovering the hidden forces that keep us apart*. InterVarsity Press. 51.

¹⁷ Taylor, Sonya Renee. *The Body Is Not an Apology: The Power of Radical Self-Love*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2021.30

¹⁹ Shea, S. C. (2011). *The practical art of suicide assessment: a guide for mental health professionals and substance abuse counselors*. Mental Health Presses. 6

at 34%.²⁰ The percentage of youth of color with suicidal ideas and non-binary gender identity is 47% respectively among black and Latinx youth ages thirteen to eighteen.²¹ The harm and danger done to non-binary youth is steadily increasing. Sadly, the church plays a role by enforcing binary categories as well as entrenching God in gendered language and imagery, which excludes all people as created in God's genderless image.

Youth groups often play games in order to help loosen kids up to hear the Gospel. In these games, it is not uncommon for teams to be made by gender, girls on one side, boys on the other. It is also common to encourage same-sex interactions, girls only play with girls and boys only play with boys. Facilitators are told to be aware of the kids who do not participate or stay off to the side because this is a relational opportunity to share the Gospel. As activities are separated by gender, constructed male and female, this structure does not support a young person's fluidity of sexuality or expression.²² Thus, adolescences are told a category and not given a choice or opportunity to identify themselves. The ultimatum is to either conform or be excluded. There is no option for staying if one does not conform to this binary. This is a problem. As young as middle school, adolescents are discouraged from identity formation and expressions in church.

With these realities in mind, it is the position of this thesis project that Christian leaders must ask new questions that will draw us towards community-

²⁰ The Trevor Project National Survey 2020. The Trevor Project - Saving Young LGBTQ Lives. (2020). <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/survey-2020/>.

²¹ The Trevor Project.

based outreach ministry. Instead of asking youth to come to church, this thesis writer has discovered that this generation requires the church to go to them. Our question must change from, “Why are youth not coming to us?” to “Where are the youth going?” The narratives perpetuated in youth cultures exclude and prevent youth from seeing their fullness as being a part of God's image. Dominant culture theology has made it such that only white males can see their full humanity reflected in God and others cannot. This has caused a mass exodus in churches and the Christian community because, although para-church organizations are based in the community, it is the church that upholds these limited and exclusive perspectives as being God-ordained. Christian organizations that serve youth are pigeonholed by a theology that closes the door to those who do not conform.

Therefore, this thesis project will seek to answer the question: “How can the church create a culture of belonging where female, non-white, and non-binary dominant culture youth can have their humanity centered in the imago dei that reflects God’s kinship community of wholeness, reconciliation, and unified diversity?” As reconciliation, unity, and seeing the kingdom of God become a reality on earth as it is in heaven is the prayer of the church, this project is intended to help Christian organizations create places of belonging where all young people can experience true community and unity in diversity.

Chapter Two
A Theology of Reconciliation for Youth from a Womanist Perspective

In youth spaces, the messages of exclusion can be heard through the language we speak about God. Highlighted in traditional interpretations of scripture, the creation story of Genesis is used to demonstrate God's exclusive process of creating *mankind* in *His* image, thus tracing the lineage of life through male origins. Biblical scholarship has evolved over the years due to movements such as feminism, queer, black/liberation and womanist theologies, removing restrictive language from God-speech because there is little evidence to uphold the narrative that maleness or whiteness is the sole indicator of godliness.

Womanist theologian and author, Kelly Brown-Douglas, writes about the impact of a white Christ as a result of a patriarchal theology in her groundbreaking book entitled, "The Black Christ." She notes that, "including [marginalized people] as a part of God's human family is significant [because it refutes] any racist assumptions that people of color are anything less than human, and therefore not due any respect as human beings."²³ This is the power of womanist theology, acknowledging the humanity and createdness in every human being as a part of God's family. By acknowledging the humanity in excluded persons, and aligning them with God in familial createdness, womanism reinstates a level of humanity and kinship in marginalized groups as they strive for their own divine identity.

This theological perspective is rooted in the work of renowned author and theologian, Dr. James Cone, who begins his book, "*God of the Oppressed*," by

²³ Douglas, K. B. (2019). *The Black Christ*. Orbis Books. 33

stating: “The task of Black theology is to analyze the nature of the gospel of Jesus Christ in light of the oppressed,” this is the theological view of a God who is aware of the reality and history of the black community.²⁴ Dr. Cone created the opportunity for black and brown people to identify within the realm of the divine with the radical formation of a non-white God. This construction was created around the experience of particularly black Americans throughout history that brought a new perspective of reconciliation that heals trauma, empowers the oppressed, and stakes communal kinship in the Imago Dei.²⁵ The question of liberation that Black Theology answers is found in the life of Jesus, by contextualizing the story of Christ as a black human being who knows oppression, and tracing Christ’s movements towards those who are suffering.²⁶ The incarnation lets us know that the bodily experience of humanity is important to understand God’s work and relationship to creation.

Dr. Cone grounds theology in the reality of community, asserting that “the weakness of most Christian approaches to anthropology stems from a preoccupation with (and distortion of) the God problem, leaving concrete oppressed human beings unrecognized and degraded.”²⁷ Cone argues that theology must not deny the liberating incarnation of Jesus in the world as God’s act towards freedom. If one is to speak about God, they must not ignore the reality of God’s actions through Jesus among those who face oppression. In laymen’s terms, if theology does not provide an in-depth relationship to history,

²⁴ Cone, J. H. (2020). God of the oppressed. Orbis Books. 5.

²⁵ Cone, 15-35.

²⁶ Cone, J. H., Paris, P. J., & Douglas, K. B. (2020). A black theology of liberation. Orbis Books. 119

²⁷ Cone, Paris, Douglas. 87

bodies, and is not moving towards freedom and liberation for all people, it is reduced to nothing more than an abstract form of deism.

Womanist theology is a corrective to the abstract notion of a creator who does not intervene in the universe. Instead, womanist theology was developed in dialogue with black theology, particularly as articulated by Dr. James Cone as a methodological approach to theology which centers the experience and perspectives of Black women, particularly African-American women. It starts with the intersections of identity, while moving towards justice with practical steps that lead towards reconciliation and unity, centering God and creation in a way that moves towards wholeness. The first step in moving towards wholeness is to dismantle the lies that separate people of color, women, and non-binary people from God. Womanism disrupts the belief that maleness and whiteness are the only persons God identifies with. This hermeneutic, based on the history and everyday experiences of black women, is inclusive of multiple identities and social locations such as race, gender, and sexuality. It is also adaptable to varying human conditions such as ability, age, and social class. Womanist theology makes it a priority to center the intersectional identities of people of color and women who have been excluded and erased in their humanity and likeness to God. It is the contention of this thesis writer that this recreation of kinship, a bonding through relationships that resemble familial alliances, is the way forward towards reconciliation and wholeness. Kinship acknowledges the differences in personhoods and experiences yet creates family through the bond of lived experiences and intersectional embodied realities.

Intersectionality is a term coined by law professor, civil rights activist, and Critical Race theorist, Kimberly Crenshaw, in her book titled "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics." Professor Crenshaw fought against intersectional discrimination, where "overlapping identities of gender and race uniquely shaped black women's experiences" and negatively affected their ability to obtain work.²⁸ Dr. Grace Kim, author of *Intersectional Theology*, goes on to expand upon Crenshaw's definition explaining that "intersectionality is a tool for analysis that takes into account the simultaneously experienced multiple social locations, identities, and institutions that shape individual and collective experience within hierarchal structured systems of power and privilege." Dr. Kim uses this legal definition to articulate the theological necessity for using this method when ministering the word of God.

Historically, theology has been centered on a white-male God that resembles the power and privilege of being human in a way that only represents the white-male experience. This belief has been solidified in government, business, and domestic lifestyles where heterosexual, white, landowning, able-bodied males were the basis of human life. This exclusive standard removes other's ability to identify, speak or relate to God. Dr. Kim says that this limited view of humanity has meant "that our theologies have been partial, a reflection of only a very small slice of the whole human experience." This is what womanist theology seeks to disrupt by centering the experiences of the most marginalized

²⁸ Kim, G. J.-S., & Shaw, S. M. (2018). *Intersectional theology: an introductory guide*. Fortress Press. 1.

communities and their likeness to God. Black women are the centering point of this theological method because this particular people group is the opposite of white-centered personhood and has been excluded from fully seeing themselves in God's family.

Women and gender studies professor Vivian May asserts that "intersectionality is a justice-oriented approach to be taken up for social analysis and critique, or political strategizing and organizing, or generating new ideas, and for excavating suppressed ones, all with an eye towards disrupting dominance and challenging systemic inequality."²⁹ By using intersectionality as the basis for theological reflection, it is evident that not only are people at the margins centered, there are action steps given towards re-orienting the way we understand God and people. Thus, womanist theology is the intersectional view of personhood accounting for race, gender, sexuality, class, ethnicity, age, ability, and nationality. This acknowledges and affirms that human beings do not exist in a vacuum with one singular identity. Oppression felt in one category is connected to all aspects of reality, which is why womanist theology starts with intersectionality as its foundation. As a result, womanism takes seriously the story being told with and through each physical body, which is what makes it the most ideal lens to lead towards reconciliation.

Womanist theology centers the lived experience of the most marginalized in society, black women, and reconciles their reality through Jesus. Women have been marginalized, having the burden of damning the entire world at the fall of

²⁹ Kim, 7.

humanity through Adam and Eve being almost exclusively placed on them.³⁰ This burden creates a separation from God and does violence towards women. The dehumanization of women stripped away their goodness and relationship to God. This posited hatred towards women was grounded in a theological interpretation that harms women's perception of their innate goodness and wholeness as women, causing an isolation from the family of God due to gender. Dr. April D. DeConick, Professor of New Testament and Early Christianity at Rice University, explores the historical structure of society and the church. Her research reveals that the church resembles the internal structure of a household "where the normal laws assigned to "woman": subjugation, humility, and shame apply... because she is a 'woman' and the 'man' is still her 'head'."³¹ This misogynistic narrative of gender terrorizes society because it puts women in the position of having to defend their humanity. Dr. April D. DeConick examines the narrative about gender used to uphold misogyny as seen through historical and traditional interpretations of Pauline texts in the following quote:

The Corinthian church where women were praying without veils symbolized an "invitation [of] sexual impropriety and even violence." In Greek, the term used for veil, krêdemnon, is also used to describe a 'closed uterus of a virgin,' thus a veil represents coverage and the closure women's genitalia. This imagery of veiling highlights the perception of 'the female body [as being] identified by men in power as the vulnerable link in the chain that sustained harmony in their society. Wearing a veil was demonstrative of the woman's modesty and her unwillingness to tempt men into licentious behavior and sexual sin.'"³²

³⁰ Oden, A. G. (1995). In her words: women's writings in the history of Christian thought. Abingdon Press. 10

³¹ DeConick, 111.

³² DeConick, 58.

This excerpt highlights the perspective of the female presence, unattached to a man as being a perversion of male-Godliness. Even women praying in the temple were believed to be an open invitation to immorality and perversion if not “covered.” Thus, misogyny is the result of white-male ideology that has evolved into various forms.³³ This hatred of womanhood is precisely the narrative womanist theology seeks to reject.

Womanist theology reconciles women to God through connecting women to God as co-creators. Womanist theologian and author, Dr. Chanequa Walker-Barnes, states in her book *“I Bring the Voices of My People”* that “reconciliation must take up the even more difficult work of restoring the capacity of [*female*] minorities to view themselves as being made in the image and likeness of the God, who wants us to delight...in their physicality, sexuality, and ways of being in the world-without mediating their love through the gaze of White [males].”³⁴ The experiences of women reveals that God was intentional, creative, and pleased with women as creation. Women create life, restore families and communities, and relate in ways unique to their experiences. Womanism understands this as resembling God as creators and seeking to restore marginalized communities’ likeness as members of God’s family.

Continuing in this perspective, womanist theologian, M. Shawn Copland, and author of *“Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being”* moves beyond a

³⁴ Walker-Barnes, C. (2019). *I bring the voices of my people: a womanist vision for racial reconciliation*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company. 184.

singular expression of God by examining an intersectional perspective of Jesus and the black female experience in her body. Copeland states:

“[the] incarnate Spirit refused to be bound. Escaping to freedom, purchasing one’s own freedom, or that of a loved one, fighting for freedom, offering up one’s own body for the life and freedom of another and dying for freedom were acts of redemption that aimed to restore black bodily and psychic integrity.”³⁵

Copeland is declaring that the fullness of God reveres the bodily experiences, histories, and realities of women. She correlates Jesus on the cross to the lived experiences of black women being surrogate mothers during slavery, women of color working in empires seeking freedom from oppression and being subjected to male domination. Copeland contends that “enslaved black women’s bodies incriminate theological anthropology and imposes praxis of solidarity in the concrete... but Jesus of Nazareth is the paradigm of enfleshing freedom *for all*; he is freedom enfleshed.”³⁶

The significance of Jesus’ embodied experience allows Christians to see what and who is important to God, and how we are to follow the example of Christ’s ministry. By following the life of Jesus, one is able to see what it means to be reconciled to God, just as Paul commands in 2 Corinthians 5:18 when he says that “All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ.” Jesus Christ is the incarnation of Godself, the manifestation of God in the created world, transforming humanity within Christ’s body and reconciling human beings to God. The life of Jesus of Nazareth should inform theological reflections

³⁵ Copeland, M. S. (2009). *Enfleshing freedom: body, race, and human being*. Fortress Press. 46.

³⁶ Copland, 53.

because in bodily form, Christ healed, listened, cast out, redeemed, and freed humanity; thus, redefining the way creation must relate to one another and God.

Jesus Christ reconciles humanity with God, freeing the oppressed through treating the marginalized as human beings, who are created in God's image. Womanist theology can lead to reconciliation by looking at the incarnation of Christ and the embodied experience of the human condition. This is embodied discourse where the message is being communicated through the physical body. Womanism understands that physical human bodies communicate one's story, embodied reality, perceived identity and created-ness by God. By taking the bodily experiences of human beings seriously, namely the most marginalized, one can see the magnitude of the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ—the Word made *flesh* and better understand what it means to live as God's beloved creation.

Womanist theology does not ignore the realities of violence inflicted upon the body. Through locating suffering in God's world and creating community among the outcasts, womanist theology creates participation in God's story. Womanist theology liberates humanity from the suffering, violence, and oppression into a theology of transfiguration/transformation through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. This situates the oppressed as recipients of Gods' work and centers the margins in the kingdom of God by creating community among the marginalized.

This is the concept of the "beloved community," as proposed by philosopher Josiah Royce and theologian and author, Howard Thurman. They assert that the "beloved community [centers] the quality of the human relations

experienced by people who live within it.”³⁷ Thurman’s belief in the beloved community applied to individuals because it sought to align “the human spirit as [persons] seek to fulfill their high destiny as children of God...emphasizing individual well-being and self-actualization.”³⁸ By seeking wholeness and truth for individuals as created in the likeness of God, womanist theology rejects oppression and separation by building solidarity between all people who seek liberation and righteousness in God.

This posture of validating the humanity and dignity of others, despite how different they may seem, is a key element in the biblical narrative of Esther. She acknowledges her own human situation and realizes that her intersectional identity connects her with a broader community. As revealed through Esther, we can see the validation of intersectional identities, solidarity and intentional movement as the key components of womanist theology.

Esther, born Hadassah, was adopted by her uncle, Mordecai, because both of her parents were killed. At this time, the Jews were exiled to Persia and they were captives, treated like outsiders. Esther was young, orphaned, female, and except for Mordecai, she was alone. The world that Esther knew was harsh; being an outcast subject to the rules of a leader who did not care about her well-being or reality, only her submission; living in a constant state of fear and confusion; then taken from the only place she knew as home to be used by the King. Even in the palace, she is not considered valuable until she is called upon. However, through

³⁷ Walker-Barnes, 196.

³⁸ Walker-Barnes, 197.

her actions of solidarity, we can see the power and principles of a womanist theology exemplified through her.

Author, reconciliation leader and professor, Dr. Brenda Salter-McNeil, supports this point when she writes the following in her book, *Becoming Brave*: “Esther is being asked to be the one who connects the poor to the wealthy and to create energy between them...to take on the role of translator and ally who is able to speak into a different socioeconomic reality, culture, language, and ethnic identity to help the king see differently.”³⁹

The multiple social identities of Esther makes her the perfect example of what it means to live into intersectionality and create change. Esther uses her identity as an outcast and her bodily reality to petition the king on behalf of her people. Esther acts in solidarity with those who experience pain and violence, by rallying her community to fast and pray for strength and wisdom. She knows that her safety and life is at risk because the safety of her people, the marginalized, are being threatened. Although she has been given a new identity as a Persian queen, Esther knows that her reality is not her full truth. Instead, her deeper truth is that she is a part of a much large community and her intersecting identities of captive, female, child, royal, Jew, wife, survivor positions her to empathize and advocate on their behalf. From these places, Esther acts in wisdom to be radically subversive, using her influence to invite the King and her nemesis, Haman, to a banquet. Dr. Salter- McNeil asserts that “eating together is a practice that humanizes people by acknowledging and affirming that we all hunger and thirst

³⁹ McNeil, B. S., & Brown, A. C. (2020). *Becoming brave: finding the courage to pursue racial justice now*. Brazos Press, a division of Baker Publishing Group. 128.

for the same things.”⁴⁰ By creating likeness and solidarity with the King, Esther demonstrates that there is a basis of humanity and likeness to all peoples that deserves to be acknowledged and affirmed.

This biblical narrative shows that by acknowledging our various social locations, we can create a community of liberated people as the family of God. In a sermon in 1987, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, affirmed this point when he said:

“I am created by God [who] loves me for myself...If I am so important, if I am so valuable, then it must mean then that every other human being is of equal worth and value. Any policies that make it a matter of principle to separate God’s children into mutually opposing groups is evil, immoral, and unchristian. To oppose such a policy is an obligation placed on us by our faith, by our encounter with God.”⁴¹

Archbishop Tutu affirms that God created him with intention. It is from here that he moves into an in-depth understanding of who he is and who others must be through God’s eyes. This is referred to as “Ubuntu Theology” that means “I am that I am because you are who are.” It is this thesis writer’s belief that a faith like this can only stem from a true understanding of who God says we are as humankind. By acknowledging our createdness by God, experiencing life in the flesh and being a person who embodies the Spirit, one can see their interconnectedness with others despite, but not ignorant of, our differences and real-life experiences. This posture will lead towards liberation, not only for marginalized communities, but it also continuously affirms the interconnectedness of all humanity and creates solidarity with others. Womanist

⁴⁰ Salter-McNeil, 169.

⁴¹ Battle, M. (2009). Reconciliation: the ubuntu theology of Desmond Tutu. Pilgrim Press.122.

theology creates movement for all who seek to be reconciled by aligning the bodily experiences of people to the work of God through Jesus Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit in our human flesh.

Since this bodily, incarnational approach is at the heart of womanism, it will serve as the theological foundation for this thesis project. The goal is to lead towards a reconciliation of humans that starts with God and affirms that all people are created in the Imago Dei. In youth spaces, kids need to understand the way God translates into the world they are traversing and learning to define themselves in. The story of Esther—a young, female, activist, who becomes queen and saves her people—is a very relevant example for youth of womanism in action.

Chapter Three A Sociology of Community for Adolescents

The emergence of adolescents directly correlates to the societal shifts in the late 1960's. Adolescents as a stage of life signified a transition from childhood to adulthood. Social structures affected not only the adults, who had to reimagine ways of living through national depressions, civil rights, wars, and political shifts; but those factors also affected youth. Dr. Chap Clark, author of "Hurt 2.0: Inside the World of Today's Teenagers" and professor of youth, family, and culture at Fuller Theological Seminary, argues that "as society began to unravel, adults found themselves trying to find their own safe place...waging a fight for emotional and relational survival, and this in turn spilled over into the developmental longings of adolescents."⁴² This shift from caring about the development of youth to focusing on basic survival in an unstable world, created a longing in youth for relational attachment in their identity formation. This is significant because a vital component in identity formation is relational connections and community. Due to the economic, relational, and psychological struggles adults were facing in the larger society, the basic needs of youth were met but their emotional and psychosocial development were often unfulfilled by their parents. "This rejection," Clark asserts, "or abandonment, of adolescents is the root of fragmentation and calloused distancing that are the hallmarks of adolescent culture."⁴³ When the family and communal lives of youth are left without intentional guidance and care, they are forced to look elsewhere to understand

⁴² Clark, C. (2011). *Hurt 2.0: inside the world of today's teenagers*. Baker. 15.

⁴³ Clark, 15

who they are, what their purpose is, and who their people will be. The questions adolescents are asking about identity is “Who am I?” and “Do you care about me?” Youth spend a significant portion of their development trying to understand these essential questions that will shape the rest of their lives.

This is extremely true of youth today. The world of adolescents is ever changing. It has been well documented that youth from ages 13 to 25 are experiencing a plethora of emotions and bodily changes as their brains and identities are developing. In this transitional period, identity formation is influenced by the totality of their environment, family, school, community and peers. However, with the rise of technology, some of these formational places have expanded to include a global reach, which makes it much more complex for today’s youth to form a singular identity. In this technological culture, various options for communal affiliation and organizations are available for youth to form and complete their identities. As a result, Dr. Clark observed that:

“The evolving challenges of the twentieth century directly affected how social systems, structures, organizations, and institutions nurture the young, and they indirectly influence the developmental process relating to the psyche and inner security of adolescents.”⁴⁴

In the world of youth, those between the ages of 13-25 form a community due to their “outsiders” status in the larger society. Dr. Clark describes this place where youth participate in identity formation as *the world beneath*. Here adolescents separate from the larger society due to rejection and the need to protect themselves. Again Dr. Clark explains:

⁴⁴ Clark, 13

“Throughout human history, oppressed people groups have often created private subcultures in response to marginalization at the hands of those in power. What is new is that our own young people- by and large- have become marginalized by a neglectful adult culture.”⁴⁵

Adolescents today have done just that, creating their own world of fellow peers who are also on mission to form their identities and find their place in the world. Youth are creating communities due to their common identity as being outsiders to society. The markers of their clusters reveal that youth, for the majority, are searching for meaning, wholeness, and relationships. However, when they are not met with caring and intentional adults, who allow them to explore and experience the fullness of themselves, they retreat and find a place where they can. This sub-society makes it possible for them to explore their experiences among likeminded people, who validate their realities. In the following quote, Dr. Clark describes the bond that is created in this sub-society:

“A cluster is a family with a set of respected and controlled expectations, loyalties, and values. Sometimes the flag for a cluster is a similar interest, but what gives a cluster its power is a common, almost tribalistic bond and unifying social narrative (a grand story that gives meaning and cohesiveness to the cluster and defines who is in and who is not). This bond is the hallmark of the social groups that nearly all mid-adolescence’s will rely on through their life.”⁴⁶

Youth are taking in their institutional circles, extracurricular spaces, and community organizations to find their identity in a place they feel they can truly belong. In their newly formed families of likeminded, committed peers, they create binding structures based on the wholeness they experience in these new

⁴⁵ Clark, 46

⁴⁶ Clark, 60

families. Their identities are interconnected because their communities are based on their likeness as outsiders and the fullness discovered among their peer relationships. These communities are based on their experience and shared interest, while navigating the larger society's perception of them. In addition to their age separating them from majority culture, many young people also discover that their racial identities further create an obstacle for safety and belonging. In her book, "Why Are All The Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?" Dr. Beverly Daniel Tatum, acknowledges the specific challenges that youth experience specifically due to their racialized identity when she notes, "Most children of color, are socialized to develop an identity that integrates competencies for transacting race, ethnicity, and culture in everyday life."⁴⁷ She explains the impact on the racial and ethnic identity development of youth, who are looking for security and belonging among their chosen peers in the following quote:

"During adolescents their understanding evolves to include not just more about themselves but more about their group, including an understanding of a common fate or shared destiny based on ethnic or racial group membership and that these shared experiences differ from the experience of individuals from other groups."⁴⁸

The discovery of racial dynamics further intensifies the process of finding ones' "home group." Although they may have shared interest, they become painfully aware that the larger society creates barriers that treats people differently according to their skin color and not their peer group. Thus, when a

⁴⁷ Tatum, B. (2017). *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?: Revised Edition*. Basic Books. 134

⁴⁸ Tatum, 135

child has found their community in “the world beneath,” but are treated differently by larger society based on skin color, they then must find another group that has shared experiences, thus needing to belong to multiple communities at once. This creates intersecting identities for youth based on their racial identity, age, gender, and interest, thus splitting some young people between different communities.

This intersectional identity forces youth to seek places where they are fully seen, accepted, and able to embrace and express their full self. This developmental process is heightened for adolescences by their race and gender, which can create what Tatum calls an “oppositional social identity.” When youth experience racism, sexism, rejection, and exclusion due to their appearance and social perception, Dr. Tatum explains that, “the anger and resentment adolescences feel is a response towards the systemic exclusion [of marginalized youth] from full participation in US society... a stance that both protects one’s identity from the psychological assault of [marginalization] and keeps the dominant group at a distance.”⁴⁹ This push-pull experience in this critical stage can cause a dissonance in identity development for youth, while they are discovering who they want to be and realize the limits being imposed on them.

These additional questions affect the identity formation process for adolescents, who are thinking more critically about their whole selves and looking for unity in these complex places. Youth are being forced to think about their intersecting identities earlier and forming multifaceted bonds in various

⁴⁹ Tatum 143.

circles to feel complete. Unfortunately, the church has not been helpful in providing space for youth to fully experience a sense of rest and wholeness. As youth are searching for meaning and purpose, the theological method of many churches does not translate the message of God's love to their reality and lived experience. In a survey from the National Study of Youth and Religion that by Dr. Kenda Creasy Dean, professor of Youth, Church and Culture at Princeton Seminary observes that for many churches "the hot lava core of Christianity has been replaced by an ecclesial complacency that convinces youth and parents alike that not much is at stake. In the view of the American teenagers, "God is more object than subject, an Idea but not a companion."⁵⁰ As a result, youth are not being told the fullness of God's love that connects to their lived experience, thus causing them to be apathetic towards the faith. As adolescents are searching for companionship, wholeness, and meaning, God is perceived as not being helpful or concerned about the reality and experiences of youth. Instead, they are criticized for having an inarticulate faith and general hostility towards Christianity.

As an example of this, Dr. Dean recalls a letter written from an upset teen, named Alicia, who said, "the lack of faith [adults] are so worried about is nothing more than a lack of communication; both a lack of words to express the faith that everyone – teens included- has, and a lack of forum to discuss faith besides what we are told to believe."⁵¹

⁵⁰ Dean, 25.

⁵¹ Dean, 26

This students' letter suggests that in many churches there is not a safe space for teens to discuss their feelings about life with caring and articulate adults, who can relate God as a necessary companion on their journey to self-discovery. Youth are being told what it means to be faithful only as long as they are obedient to the adults' cultural expectations and confines. There seems to be no space for youth to participate in dialogue about their world, experiences, and realities in relationship to God. As a result, they are not able to be actively involved in their own faith formation. The church is not providing the space needed nor has the language and understanding to reconcile the two worlds of faith and adolescents.

This presents an extreme challenge for the relevance of the church. Youth are constantly learning the environment, developing identities, and forging familial bonds with others based on their age, gender, race, and experience. Their communities are much more diverse because of their transitional life stage and their common experience as social outsiders. Thus, with a diverse community and interconnected identities, youth are challenging the church to answer the question, "Does the church accept their peers-their chosen community, when the larger society rejects them? The theological teaching that adolescents need must include an open and accepting posture towards their chosen family or the fear of further isolation, loneliness, and abandonment is too great for them to risk.

It is for this reason, that biblical narratives, like the story of Esther, may be the best vehicle to convey spiritual truths and theological teachings to youths in a way that relates to their lived experience. Esther was an adolescent when she became queen. Dr. Brenda Salter McNeil observes, "She was an immigrant living

in a foreign land. Just an ordinary teenager trying to figure out her future.”⁵² Therefore, Esther is an ideal example of a young person who embodies the identity of those from the “world beneath.” She was taken in by a family member because she was orphaned at a young age when her parents were killed. The feelings of being a perpetual stranger must have been palpable; but this does not keep her from using her intersecting communal identities to liberate people. In fact, it is this intersectional identity that allows her to make an inclusive and informed decision about what was best for herself and her community—chosen and given.

Esther, like many adolescents, has the opportunity to observe and analyze the larger society because as a child, a female, and a Jew- she was wholly excluded. She is, therefore, able to use her “outsider-ness” as an advantage to advocate for justice on behalf of others. Esther traversed various cultures, trying to find a place where she could feel whole and was, therefore, able to use the ways she was rejected to build community with others. Again, Dr. Salter-McNeil writes that Esther, “knows how [she] is perceived by society and is aware of her diverse identities as a person, who must learn to navigate ‘the system.’”⁵³

Throughout her story, Esther is tossed and pulled into various groups, claiming pieces of her identity. First, as an orphaned girl, next as an adopted Jew, and finally as the queen of Persia. Esther learns not only what the system is; but also, how it works and how to find unity within herself. She understands the rules of the palace, the culture of the king and the official guards. She also knows

⁵² Salter-McNeil, 42.

⁵³ Salter-McNeil, 71.

the world of the Jewish captives and the painful reality of her youth. All of these elements of her identity come together when she is called upon by her uncle, Mordecai, to speak to the king on behalf of her people. Her response is instructive. She did not choose one identity and shun her other communities that have created space and respite for her. Instead, she unifies her diverse identities for the good of all her people. This demonstrates the reconciling power of knowing ones' intersectional identity and creating communities based on those interconnected parts.

Adolescences, who feel marginalized in society today, can also be encouraged to harness the power of their intersectional identities to create communities of belonging.

Dr. Kenda Creasy Dean says that, “teenagers who mingle daily in a cultural stir-fry of American pluralism... are asking where is the line between identity and openness? Who are my people, and who is the “other”? One slip could offend a friend, risk a label, and box them into a particularistic corner that isolates them from their peers.”⁵⁴ This is their story. However, based on the findings in this chapter, it is the contention of this project that stories can expand our partial understanding of ourselves, others, the world and even our limited understanding of God. Stories can change the way we see other people and sometimes, they can help us to change our core values. Stories are a way to provide a simulated experience that enables people to feel empathy because they engage us both cognitively and emotionally. Therefore, this thesis project will

⁵⁴ Dean, 32.

propose a way to engage female, non-white, and non-binary dominant culture youth, using the liberating and reconciling power of stories, to center and affirm their humanity in the image of God.

Chapter 4 Proposing a L.L.C. Approach for Reclaiming Youth

Adolescents are navigating diverse components of life while attempting to form an identity of wholeness that correlates to their realities. Earlier in this thesis project, it was established that adolescents form sub-cultures and communal connections due to their exclusion from majority society. In addition, they receive messages from society at large regarding their race, gender, and physical bodies that pre-assign them to a specific community. Thus, adolescents are constantly maneuvering through the world operating with pieces of themselves in multiple places, creating their identity and understanding of society alongside their external experiences in the world. Many have been navigating this intersectionality in their identity formation journey their entire lives. This process of identity formation for young people can be instructive to the church about creating safe spaces for diverse experiences without compromising a person's sense of integrity.

Since this is the environment youth are being shaped in, their need for spiritual development must also take into account the intersectionality of their lives. Regrettably, the church has caused much harm by not having the particularities of adolescents firmly centered in their structure or teaching. The harm that has been done is a driving factor for many late adolescents leaving the church once they are able to make decisions about their lives and communities. The world is constantly evolving, and many adolescents are critiquing the church for its inability to grow with them. In her book, "I Bring the Voices of My People,"

womanist theologian, Dr. Chanequa Walker- Barnes, articulates the steps that many adolescents are demanding from their spiritual leaders. She says that in order for youth to be reconciled to the church it will require the following:

- 1-Cofrontational truth-telling
- 2- Liberation and healing for the oppressed,
- 3- Repentance and conversation for the oppressor
- 4- Building beloved community.”⁵⁵

Individual Interviews:

Based on this perspective, the first step of reconciling with young people outside of the church, is to confront the truth in an attempt to understand the various factors affecting their lives. Therefore, for this project 6 participants between the ages of 18-25 were interviewed based on their history with the church, their relationship to the youth, and the truth of their lived experiences. These people were also chosen to be interviewed because of their ability to articulate the lack of intersectionality in their lived experience and the faith-teachings of the church.

Those interviewed were a female and male of color, a white male and female, a non-binary woman, and a queer woman. They are all from the Pacific Northwest, which is significant because it is a diverse area that houses a large number of the youth who have “pushed away” from majority culture. Consequently, the Pacific Northwest is a refuge for the Queer community, people of color, women, and many non-dominant culture youths to exist in the fullness of their identities.

⁵⁵ Walker-Barnes, 163.

All of these participants were active members of youth groups in the church in their younger years. Unfortunately, their experiences in youth groups did not translate to the realities of their lives as adolescents. Therefore, when they were able to decide where they wanted to invest themselves, they chose to leave the church. Instead, they formed communities with youth who had similar interests, passions, and expectations.

Although the church had relationships with youth, their policies and community participation guidelines did not coincide with their needs.

My intention for interviewing these people was to capture the experience of what research calls “late adolescents.” This includes those who have grown up in the church and experienced the exile once they have reached decision-making age. Their stories are reflective of experiences that show what causes young people to leave the church and are unable to decisively rejoin a church community years later.

Methodology:

Once the group was gathered, they were asked to share their journeys of being in the church. After sharing their stories, each interviewee was asked individually to respond to the following three questions:

1. What would it require for you to feel like you belong and are cared for in the church?
2. What do you most deeply want from the church?
3. What would it take for you to trust the church again?

These questions helped to identify the heart of what separated them from the church. In all cases, it was a lack of trust and broken communication that severed the relationship. In individual conversations, each participant could authentically answer for themselves without being influenced by others in the group. Listening to their stories about the ways they were excluded, expressing their hurt and invisibility and the lack of agency for their own self-knowledge was heartbreaking. One white male, who is an ex-pastor and youth director, refused to participate. He explained his reluctance in the message below:

“I do not want to participate because I do not want to skew the results. I’m not even sure I qualify as Christian anymore. I do not think I actually believe in the idea of what I have heard God is and what I’ve been telling kids God wants. I have so much shame and guilt for how I used to manipulate kids, not caring about their emotional and mental wellbeing, but only that they believed. It all feels like a way to prey on the vulnerable without caring what happens to them once they ‘say so.’ I am not a part of that anymore. And I do not believe I ever truly believed at this point.”

This type of honest truth-telling was instructive in clarifying the essential need for the church to lament, listen and create spaces for conversation with youth. Therefore, based on the insights and feedback gathered from these interviews, the following approach is proposed to reclaim our young people, who no longer find the church relevant to them:

Lament:

An intersectional theology requires lament to be the first step in the reconciling process where the oppressor and the oppressed acknowledges

injustice in a way that communes with a God, holding both the pain and hope.

Again, Dr. Walker-Barnes says,

“To recover the voice of lament is to recover the voice of prayer as it has defined the human reality before God. The lament is utterly human and profoundly theological. It arises out of the reality of human existence; it assumes there is something beyond that reality that can transform existence without destroying it. The laments of Scripture make it clear what is present in every human cry for help, the assumption that God is there, God can be present, and God can help.”⁵⁶

The truth that adolescents are requiring from the church is that their teachings do not include their lived experiences. The church must lament its role as a source of power that has caused harm. This occurred by not knowing and ignoring the reality that youth were facing and not adapting to their growth. This took place, while the church continuously claimed truth that did not correlate to the cultural shifts and hurt youth experience in the world.

In addition, adolescents need the church to lament its role in excluding women from power and authority, while denoting their bodies to be potentially perverse. The one exception is a woman’s body being viewed in direct correlation to men and usage for procreation. One of the females interviewed, who is a former long-term church member, requested that a “legitimate effort be made by the church to learn about queerness from a psychological and neurobiological perspective.” She went on to say that, “I also want to see the church acknowledge the deep harm they do to LGBTQ+ individuals. I want to see work towards

⁵⁶ Walker-Barnes, 169.

change.” Combined with gender inequality, the church should also join the larger society in lamenting its silence in not speaking against racial injustice. The palpable silence of the church has continuously allowed political powers to harm black and brown bodies in the name of law and order.

Therefore, the church must lament preaching an exclusive God, relegating non-binary people to being mistakes, sinful, and not created in the image of God. The church has also been complicit in forming various interpretations of a God that does not include diversity in unity but always moves towards sameness. Lamenting exclusion means that the church would repent for its participation in limiting the ability for particular parts of humanity to see their reflection in relationship to God. Sadly, instead of using the gospel as a tool for spiritual formation, the church manipulated it as a weapon that encouraged domination. The church must tell the truth about its role in perpetuating this narrative that has hurt so many people. Author and professor, Dr. Grace Kim rightly states that:

“The contemporary church cannot be understood apart from its history of colonialism, racism, misogyny, homophobia, and violence. An intersectional church must reckon with the oppressive past and its ongoing oppressive legacy in the contemporary church. This legacy is rooted in the intersections of race, gender, class, religion, and nation such that dominant contemporary church is a product of the juncture of white supremacy, western dominance, masculinity, heteronormativity, and economic and political power.”⁵⁷

The church must reckon with the reality that it has been a source of harm because it has been structured so those who are not white, male, heterosexual, or financially stable are not reflected in the Imago Dei. This

⁵⁷ Kim, 85

must be acknowledged, repented of, and corrected for adolescents to feel like they belong in the church.

Listen:

Once the church has reckoned with the harm and pain it has caused, adolescents are requiring space for their realities to be affirmed, their stories to be heard, and empathy to be extended for the particularities of their lives. Their experiences have much to tell the church about what it means to listen openly to those who are different and to hold the tension of complexity. Dr. Grace Kim says that the church should “embrace the opaqueness and incomprehensibility of the knowledge and stories of others in order to faithfully engage with people different than ourselves.”⁵⁸ For the entirety of their lives, adolescents have been invalidated for their knowledge, physical bodies, and power due to their age and inability to productively participate in the larger society. Their age discounted them from the majority system, which seemingly took away their agency to contribute to society.

Conversely, the way they move and interact in the world has a lot to show the majority culture what it means to be intersectionally aware of one’s self and others. This is the way forward to create unified yet diverse communities that can lead to wholeness. Adolescents have an experience, a story, and a lifestyle that is able to navigate floating between various

⁵⁸ Kim, 43.

communities without discounting or ignoring others. They have created places of safety, reprieve and wholeness for one another out of desperation for a place to be seen as themselves. The church can learn what it means to create space, to listen, and engage as a partner rather than in dominance from this group. Now more than ever, adolescents need to know that they have a companion who wants to know them intentionally, as they are, and not abandon them when they reveal who they really are or desire to be. The church must learn how to listen and accept their stories for what they are; not to change them or assign them to new narratives to fit into categories that do not center wholeness. Once youth are heard, then they will more openly engage in conversations about faith.

Conversation:

Once the church has acknowledged the perpetuation of exclusion and has listened to the experiences of those who feel pushed out, this opens the possibility for honest dialogue to take place. The development of empathy is the outgrowth of sincere lamenting and listening.

Conversations become circular in the way that we listen and respond in a growth-oriented space. This type of communication means listening to understand instead of defending the singular way. One of the females interviewed said, “To feel welcomed in the church, I would need to know that people didn’t feel like they had the right to debate whether my identity is valid, or in what capacity I am welcome.” With this agreement, conversations can progress from centering the dominate stance of

exclusion to a flexible and open posture that moves towards justice and wholeness. When conversations shift from “but to both/and,” Dr. Kim says we are able to “understand our social locations and the locations of others across multiple categories of identity within a political context [that] leads to reflection and action for justice in the world. Rather than seeing this sense of identity and social location as divisive and isolating, we see it as an opportunity for creating coalition space.”⁵⁹

These empathetic conversations create space for joining together for the purpose of wholeness. Adolescents have been participating in this work because their environments force this sense of community development due to their removal from the larger society. They need the church to move from stagnancy to openness for dialogue to occur between the teachings of scripture and their lived reality. This is the type of conversation that moves towards wholeness for them and the entire community. When adolescents are included in the conversation, a new community is able to “live out faith and spiritual journeys [where] our entire beings, including the intersecting parts of our identity and our location, ...are embraced, welcome, and accepted.”⁶⁰ These conversations, where all parties are able to show up fully and safely, foster relationships that allow for advocacy, wholeness, and unity. Within the church, the hope is that this community would not remain silent, complicit, or ignorant of

⁵⁹ Kim, 80

⁶⁰ Kim, 81

their counterparts' realities; but will instead reinterpret their understanding of who God is and calls all of us to be.

Results:

The interview responses from those who were former participants in the church reveal that the church is not modeling Jesus but instead it demonstrates patriarchy, racism, sexism, and homophobia. One respondent said, "The church claims to model Jesus—having a hold on who can access him—yet when I read the Bible I see a Jesus who welcomes queer folks, women, and people of color." Adolescents need the church to become aware of their impact, their reputation, and to be honest about their intentions in the community. In the experience of this thesis writer, youth are honest and the world they are experiencing is often gruesome, with technology allowing them to see all that is happening globally. Adolescents need a community that is going to take into account their spiritual journey and an honest understanding of their realities in this environment.

The significant factors revealed through this interview process comprise several key components of reconciliation: lament, listening with empathy and conversations that lead to change. Therefore, based on their responses and my own personal experience as an adolescent, I propose a "Lamenting, Listening, Conversational" (LLC) approach to reclaiming youth who are uninvolved in the church. As the church works to learn its history, laments the harm it has done, and listens to the youth regarding

what they need, this approach could allow both parties to learn and grow together.

Chapter 5 Conclusion: The Essential Need for Proximity

Throughout this project, the focus has been to understand what is necessary for the Church to create a culture of belonging where female, non-white, and non-binary dominant culture youth can have their humanity centered as image bearers that reflect God's kinship community of wholeness, reconciliation, and unified diversity. The need for this clarity has become more urgent for the Church to know because the Coronavirus pandemic has revealed the many ways Christian communities are complicit with the systemic injustice, inequality, and structural issues that plague its participants. Prior to the pandemic, some Churches and Christian organizations were beginning to confront the disparities in its staff between men and women, seeing the ways employment would require significant changes to equally accommodate women and mothers. However, as the world has begun to acknowledge the systemic injustice towards black and brown bodies—namely the murders of Ahmaud Aubrey, George Floyd, and Breonna Taylor—more people are demanding churches and Christian organizations speak out against injustice.

This is of specific concern to me as the Middle School Coordinator for YoungLife, a volunteer-based, non-profit, Christian organization. The mission of the organization is to introduce adolescents to a relationship with Jesus Christ by having caring adults be in their lives, earning the right to share the gospel, and building mentoring friendships that are focused on Jesus. The primary objective

is for adults to go into the world of kids and eventually help them become a part of the local church through trusting relationships.

Once adults build those relationships with kids, leaders invite them to also attend YoungLife events like clubs, camps, or campaigners. Young people in the community are invited into places where they are centered and the fullness of who they are is welcomed by adults and Jesus. The relationships built in the early stages, middle-school and high-school, often last for years because youth remember who invested in and cared for them. These adults are volunteer-leaders who have become a part of the young person's community and are a significant part of their lives.

In my role within the organization, I am also a part of the field staff who recruit community members to lead these youth. These people's love for Jesus and kids is the driving force that makes the organization work. Adult leaders volunteer their time to go to schools, sporting events, activities, community centers, and many other places where youth are. They are in direct contact with young people, getting to know their stories, experiencing their lives, and building relationships. These volunteer-leaders have entered the world of youth, showing their whole selves and inviting teenagers to show themselves as well. These community-based leaders are closest to the realities of kids, knowing what they are going through on a day-to-day basis. As a result, they know the needs of their families, and the language and culture of their neighborhoods. The volunteer-leaders are, therefore, able to collaborate with field staff to identify the needs, and desires of the youth they serve.

This is significant because during the Fall of 2020, a social media campaign was launched against YoungLife for its policies discriminating against the queer community. The campaign highlighted the harm done towards queer people by not allowing them to fully participate as members who see themselves reflected in God's image. In response, YoungLife executives and Board members gathered to clarify the policy which prohibits field staff, volunteer-leaders, and donors from identifying or affirming queerness. Participants cannot participate in same-sex relationships, affirm same-sex attraction, or condone same-sex relationships. The policy uses biblical evidence to denounce queer identities as ungodly markers of sinfulness. This policy does not directly mention kids; however, it implies that queerness is unacceptable in the organization from any level and will not be affirmed.

This clarifying document was released by the executives, who were in the room with the Board of Trustees. When the document was created, the system was structured so upper leadership, divisional and regional directors were able to read, accept, and support the policy before passing it down to their subordinates. Unfortunately, the document was made public earlier than anticipated and the general public saw it in its entirety with many field staff.

There are only two Black members on the Executive board. One person is a Black woman, who is the Chief Operating Officer over human resources and the other person is a Senior Vice President. For an international organization in 104 countries, the fact that YoungLife only has two Black executives on its policy-making Board does not represent a commitment to justice-centered changes for the youth and volunteer-leaders of color. This distance between those with

decision-making power in the organization and those in the communities affected by their policies is very disturbing.

Thus, one of the primary issues identified through this project is the problem of distance. The distance between those in power and adolescents, who are searching for a place that sees and welcomes them, is immense. The sense of longing and displacement that youth feel from the larger society leaves a void in them for community and identity formation. However, instead of being welcomed into Christian communal spaces like YoungLife, they must attach to each other in “the world beneath.” Based on the data collected through interviews, this project writer believes that this is due to the belief that God looks like a white male with resources, representing a singular picture of life that resembles suburban middle-class lifestyles. Conversely, adolescents create diverse communities by bringing their experiences, desires and whole selves to one another for the purpose of bonding. These relationships resemble familial alliances, kinship groups and communities through the bonds of their lived experiences and embodied realities.

This is also how communities of color relate. Feedback from those interviewed for this project suggests that black and brown communities invite people to use their power to acknowledge and lament the reality of their lived experience. During a time of racial unrest in the United States, YoungLife spoke against injustice by standing with the Black community. However, it has not lamented their silence or structural inequality that prohibits black and brown people from achieving success within their organization. When given the

opportunity to denounce injustice or its structural inequality; YoungLife said the right words but did not follow these statements with actual systemic change.

Therefore, this thesis writer is now clear that those who make policies must be in direct contact with the community they seek to serve. There should be a requirement that those who are going to create space and structures for female, non-white, and non-binary youth, must be in relationship with them, engaging in dialogue and seeking to co-create programs that reflect their value and perspective of belonging. In addition, policy should not be made or enforced by those who do not have direct relationship with those who the policy will impact. It is my contention that it is harmful for blanket statements to be made, using biblical evidence, to rule someone else's life. For a church or Christian organization to make policy decisions for people they do not know can negatively affect the identity of that community, destroying the possibility to build trust and understanding. Therefore, it is extremely detrimental to the mission of leading kids to Jesus Christ, when one assumes things about a community, they have no relationship with. This is equivalent to upholding biases from outdated stereotypes that remove the humanity from people, viewing them as objects rather than people to understand, and relate to.

This type of true community is only possible when everyone has a voice. Youth must be able to unapologetically share their stories and trust that adults will listen. Those seeking to genuinely connect with young people must be able to hold space, engage in conversation and build deep, unconditional relationships with them. Together adults and adolescents can collaborate on the centrality of

God's love for humanity and discuss how their lived experiences interact with God.

Volunteer-leaders live in these communities with youth and have daily proximity to them. However, through this project, I have discovered that I am unfortunately too far removed from direct proximity with the kids I seek to advocate for. Thus, there is seemingly no direct contact between those who are making policies and the youth who are affected by them. Therefore, the issue is two-fold; first there is little to no proximity to the youth needing to be reached and the decision-makers. Secondly, the structure of our organizations have not changed to accommodate the increasing diverse world that young people inhabit. This cannot be addressed without acknowledging the lack of our proximity to these youth.

Proximity is essential to reconciliation. By acknowledging our lived experiences, we are able to practically move towards justice as we align our stories with God's story. This project has revealed that people must continuously learn about their identities and the way they intersect with one another. This type of proximate interaction leads to an awareness of our multiple social locations, which can form interconnected communities. The overlapping of multiple social locations and identities, can help the church reach and serve youth, who are already living in the tensions of intersectional communities, creating kinship communities of respect, mutuality, and commitment.

Thus, adolescents are being creative in their identity formation journey. They are holding multiple identities, creating intersectional communities, and being inclusive of other communities. These youth are doing this by listening to

one another, learning to form empathetic bonds and joining together to experience wholeness, belonging, and kinship in their sub-society. These young people have been exhibiting what it means to reconcile diverse pieces into one. Therefore, it is the conclusion of this project that for churches and Christian organizations to create places of belonging for marginalized youth to see themselves in the image of God, relationships and policies must be made in a respectful partnership with them that acknowledges the wealth of communal skill they bring. Practical steps towards this can be taken by using the proposed LLC method: lament, listen, and converse. In this method, the church will lament its role in hurting, excluding, and opposing young people; listening to the stories of individuals to build relationships through empathy; and having conversations that lead towards practical change. To implement the LLC method, leaders must be in direct relationship with the female, non-white, and non-binary dominant culture youth they so desperately need to reconcile with, keeping a posture of humility and respect for this resilient generation.

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