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# Friendship

## *The Joy of Befriending Youth*

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I've (Kenda) said it too, with the best of intentions. I remember taking a deep breath and putting on my grown-up-youth-leader pants to say it: "Kim, I love you, but I am your youth leader, which means I can't be your friend. I'm sorry."<sup>1</sup>

We were in the hallway outside my office, standing under a spluttering fluorescent ceiling light. All these years later, I still remember the look on her face. I wasn't sure what emotion flickered across it—was it hurt? Confusion? Disbelief? Betrayal? I do remember one thing: I wondered if I would ever see Kim again.

The written advice against youth worker friendship with adolescents is sizable. A quick Google search is all it takes to find some:

- A blogger writes: "Students don't need youth workers to be their friends, they need adults who will lead them to God and invest in their lives. Unfortunately, many of us have bought into the lie that we need to be 'friends' with our students in order to have influence in their lives."

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<sup>1</sup> Names of youths in this chapter have been changed to protect their identities.

- A whole training session titled “Friend vs. Youth Worker” is available to “help your adults move from friendship to being effective youth workers.”
- An online author (whose byline says he “reeks with passion”) calls befriending youth one of the top mistakes youth leaders make: “Students don’t need any more ‘friends.’ They actually really don’t want your friendship. They need adults passionately following Jesus.”<sup>2</sup>

All these admonitions assume a definition of friendship that is an undifferentiated peer relationship of equals, in which all friendships are the same, in which “equals” implies equal maturity levels, equal power of authority, equal access to information, equal levels of affection, and so on. These definitions also seem to imply that a caring adult who spends time with an adolescent while maintaining his or her role and status as an adult is not a friend.

All these assumptions are false.

Leaf through your high school yearbook, and you’ll recall that, in practice, you never defined friendship this way. You were friends with people in different grades. You shared some information with some friends but not with others, simply because the nature of your friendship shaped the kind of conversations that were appropriately shared. You enjoyed Anton more than you enjoyed Greg, and you shared your deepest secrets with Tamar but not Michelle—yet Anton and Greg and Tamar and Michelle were all genuinely your friends. Friends come in all sorts of flavors, with different norms and expectations governing each relationship. That is why, as an adult, you can be friends with

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2 Phil Bell, “Youth Ministry Leadership: Friend or Leader?” (March 13, 2012), <http://philbell.me/2012/03/13/youth-ministry-leadership-friend-or-leader/>; Doug Franklin, “Friend vs. Youth Worker,” <https://www.leadertreks.org/store/friend-vs-youth-worker/>; (both accessed April 29, 2017); Jeremy Zach, “9 Mistakes Made by Youth Pastors,” *ChurchLeaders.com* (n.d.), <http://www.churchleaders.com/youth/youth-leaders-articles/146054-9-mistakes-made-by-youth-pastors.html> (accessed October 30, 2016).

your neighbor, your spouse, and your sister, but you don't mix them up (without serious consequences).

For far too long we youth workers have—either by distortion or conscious decision—withheld our friendship from young people. We have either entered into friendship under the false assumption that we need to be like a young person to befriend a young person (thus distorting friendship). Or, under the same assumption, in order to avoid the distortion, we have consciously withheld friendship from young people. The problem is that, in withholding our friendship, we're also missing out on the joy of youth ministry. More important, the young people closest to us miss out on joy as well, for in a world haunted by transactional relationships and bound by an obsession with achievement, there's perhaps nothing young people need more from us than our free and joyful friendship. We need to restore friendship in youth ministry because we need to restore joy to youth ministry!

## **The Theological Necessity of Christian Friendship**

Let's be clear at the outset that no adult who acts like an adolescent should be working in youth ministry at all, for reasons that include and go well beyond the potential to misunderstand Christian friendship. It's not because there's anything wrong with adolescence or acting young, as such; it's just that an adult who cannot bear the responsibilities adults have toward young people should not be given those responsibilities. An adult who acts like an adolescent fails to discern roles properly—a key sign of the inability to know when one's own needs are getting in the way of making decisions based on the needs of others. I understand the motivation behind the scores of web pages' advising against becoming friends with adolescents, because I share their concerns—concerns about appropriate boundaries, unhealthy need fulfillment, immature decision making, and flat-out failure to launch among youth workers who are often young, inexperienced, and eager to please.

These are crucial concerns that we must take seriously. The problem is that they have nothing to do with friendship—in fact advising youth workers to avoid befriending youths demonstrates a serious misunderstanding of Christian friendship that is both theologically deficient and pastorally ill-advised. The fact is that compelling data underscores the importance of appropriate, faithful, nurturing friendships between adults and young people for adolescent faith formation, including friendships between teenagers and their pastors.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore none of these concerns take into account the theological necessity of Christian friendship: to follow Christ is to extend friendship to one another, as Christ extended friendship to us.

The issue, of course, is that what often passes for friendship in our culture is not friendship at all—it's a transactional, tit-for-tat, self-interested relationship that, at best, turns young people into relational consumers and exhausts youth workers who try to deliver the most flashy and relevant youth ministry program possible. Even Jesus recognized this transactionalism as a substitute for friendship, not as the real thing. This surrogate friendship has no place in youth ministry. On the heartbreaking evening before his arrest, Jesus told his disciples: "I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father" (John 15:15b, NRSV). The Greek word for friend in that sentence is *philos*, a word used to connote someone who is dearly loved, suggesting a relationship brimming with personal affection. In Matthew 26:50, however, Jesus says to Judas, just before his seizure: "Friend, do what you are here to do" (NRSV), using the much less common Greek word *hetairos*, or "supposed friend," someone acting in his or her own interest. These kinds of friendships are transactional,

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3 Teenagers mentioned with special affection their relationships with their pastors. The more supportive, faithful adult-teen relationships a teenager had during adolescence, the more likely he or she was to have durable and highly devoted faith. Cf. Christian Smith and Melinda Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Christian Smith and Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

useful—limited by how much I might benefit another and vice versa. Such friendships must be constantly earned. They're exhausting and dehumanizing, and they wind up being a form of entrapment, like a genie in a bottle—a relationship based on wish fulfillment, not love.

We don't need to eliminate adult-youth friendships in youth ministry; we need to understand and enact them in light of Jesus's friendship toward us. Christian friendships honor the uniqueness—including (in youth ministry) age, role, and life experience—of the persons involved. Jesus befriended the disciples without relinquishing his divinity or his salvific role toward them; the disciples loved Jesus without fully comprehending the nature of his love for them. Their friendship was a mutual, loving relationship between people who were not equal in the sense of being peers or even in the sense of what they brought to the relationship, but they were—astonishingly—equally loved by God. Friendships that stand in the tradition of Christ honor difference while maintaining the equality and humanity of all persons in the eyes of God. In the context of a robust theology of friendship—one that honors and celebrates the uniqueness of each person in a relationship as an embodiment of God's love in Jesus Christ—youth ministry should encourage youth worker–young person friendships and find ways to cultivate them creatively, appropriately, and robustly.

### **“You Ain't Never Had a Friend Like Me”**

I (Wes) was seven years old when Disney released its classic film *Aladdin*, but I can't remember a time when it didn't exist. For my generation it seems to be just one of those movies, like *Cinderella* or *The Wizard of Oz*, that you can't imagine the world without. I remember watching it as a kid and feeling like Aladdin was a friend of mine. After all, his story is not unlike every kid's story in his struggle to become something more and his deep conviction that we are or should be more than meets the eye, a diamond in the rough. I remember that magical moment when Aladdin meets the genie. Having been abandoned by the one who

promised him liberation, stuck in the Cave of Wonders with no way out, he accidentally summons the genie from a lamp. The genie wastes little time before marketing himself to Aladdin in the classic song “Friend Like Me.”<sup>4</sup> The genie, voiced by the late Robin Williams, lays before Aladdin a smorgasbord of appealing possibilities in a spectacular display of attractions. “Can your friends do this? . . . You ain’t never had a friend like me!”

I’ve always loved this song and the magic of that moment. I think just about everyone who has watched *Aladdin* has been enchanted by the relationship between the genie and Aladdin. But only recently did it occur to me that there is a tragic irony in their relationship. Despite the song’s title, the relationship between the genie and Aladdin is anything but a friendship. Good humor and kindness aside—and even though a friendship does eventually unfold (more on that later)—the genie is essentially enslaved to Aladdin, not befriended by him. He is bound to Aladdin in a relationship of necessity. The genie’s whole purpose, his very existence, depends on his ability to produce, create, offer something nobody else can, and ultimately help Aladdin achieve a respectable adulthood.

When Aladdin meets the genie, he is a diamond in the rough, shouldering the weight of social pressure to find his place in life, to ascend out of his deficiency, and to become somebody. In other words, he’s an adolescent. He’s gotten himself into some trouble and is in obvious need of help. But rather than help Aladdin realize that he, in fact, does not need to become something or someone else in order to be fulfilled, the genie comes along and says, “Look what I can do! Certainly, I can help you!” It turns out that Aladdin needs the genie, and the genie needs to be needed.<sup>5</sup> And that need turns out to be the true basis of

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4 Howard Ashman, “Friend Like Me” on the original movie soundtrack for *Aladdin*, directed by Guy Ritchie (Disney Films, 2019), <https://www.lyrics.com/album/3836409/Aladdin-%5B2019%5D-%5BOriginal-Motion-Picture-Soundtrack%5D>.

5 In this, in a sense, the Genie truly represents the “generativity” that has traditionally defined the adult in their relationship to young people. As Erik Erikson has written, “mature man needs to be needed, and maturity is guided by the

their relationship. It's not a friendship; it's a transaction, a contractual partnership. They are bound to one another and (quite literally for the genie, who wears shackles on his wrists) shackled by necessity and obligation rather than liberated by joy.

## Youth Worker Genies

As youth workers most of us can relate to the genie. We find ourselves doing all sorts of stunts to get young people to realize how much they need us and our ministries. Of course our tricks aren't as cool as the genie's; we can't really do magic. But we've got camps and worship bands and T-shirts with our church logo on them (that's still cool, right?) and evangelistic rock concerts and even have a Facebook page (oh yeah!). Thankfully it seems that the "attractional" approach to youth ministry is on its way out,<sup>6</sup> but we often replace it with what Andrew Zirschky has referred to as the "moth myth"—the myth that young people, like moths, are drawn to any flashing screen. Zirschky writes, "The notion that youth, like moths, are

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attracted to things that plug-in and light up is truly a myth. None of these approaches are relevant to the heart cry of contemporary teenagers."<sup>7</sup> The temptation to become a youth worker genie lurks behind the moth myth as well: the illusion that if we can just be cool enough and flashy enough, young people will flock to us.

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nature of that which must be cared for. *Generativity*, then, is primarily the concern for establishing and guiding the next generation." Erik Erikson, *Identity Youth and Crisis* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1968), 138.

6 Mark Ostreicher, *Youth Ministry 3.0* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008).

7 Andrew Zirschky, *Youth Ministry for the Connected but Alone Generation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2015), 13.

We've mostly discovered that there's really no point in trying to compete with Snapchat or a Katy Perry concert, and we're learning that we shouldn't want to, either. Young people don't really want tricks or flashy gimmicks—at least not in their heart of hearts.<sup>8</sup> Relationship is the “heart cry” Zirschky is talking about. Young people need enduring relationships that aren't just about rewards and benefits. They are crying out for friendships that demonstrate what developmental psychologist Erik Erikson called fidelity.

## Fidelity Failure

Fidelity is the ability to be faithful to something or someone. It's the vital strength, believed Erikson, that adolescents “need to have the opportunity to develop, to employ, to evoke—and *to die for*” (emphasis added).<sup>9</sup> According to Erikson, “‘the cornerstone’ of adolescence [is] the strength of being utterly true to oneself and others amid competing and contradictory value systems.”<sup>10</sup> He wrote, “The adolescent looks most fervently for [people] and ideas to have faith in, which also means [people] and ideas in whose service it would seem worthwhile to prove oneself trustworthy.”<sup>11</sup>

But there's a catch. As a teenager you don't wake up one day and decide to put your faith in someone. You only learn fidelity from someone who has put their faith in you. For young people to establish their own fidelity—for them to commit themselves to something or someone—they need first to experience the faithfulness of others. In

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8 Of course, because of the reality of sin, we are all drawn, from time to time, to that which glimmers. But in our experience, when young people are given the chance to reflect on it, they have confessed that they really want something more than just a flashy screen.

9 Erik Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1968), 232–33.

10 Kenda Creasy Dean, *Practicing Passion: Youth and the Quest for a Passionate Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 76.

11 Erikson, *Identity: Youth*, 128–29.



other words young people need people to demonstrate unconditional relationships that endure in the face of whatever may come. Fidelity is the “even if” kind of relationship.<sup>12</sup> To establish their own fidelity and to construct identity, young people are looking for relationships of fidelity, people who will be true to them even if all others fall away.

Largely society does not seem to be meeting young people’s need for fidelity. As I’ve written elsewhere, “many contemporary young people simply have not experienced enough fidelity on their behalf to acquire it themselves.”<sup>13</sup> As a society we have become so bent on progress, achievement, and accomplishment that our social structures tend to demand fidelity from young people without demonstrating it to them. The upshot is that American young people shoulder the weight of a culture that values them for their potential to become full human beings (namely, adults) and generative participants in economic and social life but not for who they are as young people right now. Since the dawn of the industrial age, when we learned to see life as a linear progression on a scale of improvement and to view time as a commodity in the service of progressive achievement,<sup>14</sup> we have viewed children and young people as in transition and on their way to adulthood.<sup>15</sup> These conditions gave rise to stage theories of human development and eventually to the social construction of adolescence as our chief descriptor of young people’s experience.<sup>16</sup> In other words, as the ideal

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12 “For Erikson, fidelity is an unflagging commitment to an ideology that transcends the self and brings about genuineness, sincerity and a sense of duty to others.” Jack O. Balswick, Pamela Ebstyn King, and Kevin S Reimer, *The Reciprocating Self* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2005), 179.

13 Kenda Creasy Dean, *Practicing Passion*, 77.

14 See John Swinton, *Becoming Friends of Time* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2016).

15 See Chris Jenks, *Childhood*, Second Edition (New York: Routledge, 2005), 8.

16 We consider “adolescence” a social construct, despite recent attempts to destabilize this theory. For instance, Crystal Kirgiss has shown us that the term “adolescence” was not a post-industrial invention, as some have suggested, nor is the social distinction of youth between childhood and adulthood an exclusively modern Western phenomenon (Crystal Kirgiss, *In Search*

of industrial progress and achievement captured our imagination in the West, it captured the way we imagined human development, too.<sup>17</sup> Because we were captivated by the idea of progress in the markets and in society, we began to interpret human life likewise—as proceeding through stages “from simplicity to complexity of thought, from irrational to rational behavior.”<sup>18</sup>

North American young people are thrust into this process, pressured to achieve adulthood but often stuck in the Cave of Wonders. We expect them to become adults but afford them few adequate resources to fulfill this expectation.<sup>19</sup> As adults in society, we are still wrestling with how best to aid our young people in this transition and guide them through it. Unsure of what else to do, because of our penchant for progress, we hold maturity out like a carrot on a stick. It is all about improvement and expediency. What has developed through all of this is what we might call a culture of achievement and a perpetual search for affirmation. As Amy Jacober describes it, “The identification of adolescents as feeling first lost and then the almost palpable feeling

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*of Adolescence: A New Look at an Old Idea* (San Diego: Youth Cartel, 2015). In our view, Kirgiss’ historical work helps recontextualize the use of the term “adolescent” but does not refute the social construction argument sufficiently enough for us to abandon it. We maintain that youth, like childhood or any other social identity in the life course, serves as an interpretive framework and not just a nominative category, and in fact that “adolescence” began to operate as a distinctly modern interpretive framework in social science (especially developmental psychology) in the early twentieth century (Allison James and Alan Prout, eds, *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood: Contemporary Issues in the sociological Study of Childhood* (New York: Routledge, 1997); Jenny Hockey and Allison James, *Social Identities Across the Life Course* (New York: McMillan, 2003); also see Andrew Root, “Adolescence and The Secular Age of Unbelief,” *Perspectives* (<https://perspectivesjournal.org/blog/2017/01/09/adolescence-creation-secular-age-unbelief-2/> accessed 3/8/2017).

17 See Erica Burman, *Deconstructing Developmental Psychology* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 15.

18 James and Prout, *Constructing and Reconstructing* (London: Routledge, 2015), 9.

19 See Chap Clark’s concept of “systemic abandonment.” Chap Clark, *Hurt* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004).

of being abandoned drives them into a frenetic push for affirmation, loyalty and solid relationships.”<sup>20</sup> Almost every young person in America has this in common: whether they are successful or not, whether they embrace it or not, they are all responding to the enormous pressure of achievement and affirmation. Many of them, like Aladdin, find themselves stuck in the dirt with no way to achieve what is expected of them . . . until along comes a genie. Or, in our case, youth ministry.

## Why Can’t We Be Friends?

Youth ministry, of course, is not immune to our culture’s progress/achievement narrative, and most of us have unwittingly done our share to fuel young people’s (and our own) search for affirmation. Congregations tend to support youth ministry as a recruitment op, a means of ensuring that another generation of well-formed church members will one day populate the pews. Youth ministers have been infamously accused of abusing relationships with young people as a means to their own social fulfillment. But even at our best, as Andrew Root has convincingly shown, youth ministry often instrumentalizes friendships, teaching youth workers to make our relationships with teenagers a means to an end—for example, a way to earn trust until we have earned the right to ask teenagers to do something we want them to do, like come to church or youth group, or, more subtly, until we can convince them that they should become more like us. In so doing we sever the relationship between fidelity and friendship in youth ministry, making friendship in youth ministry look like relationships in so many other parts of our culture: transactions, relationships of expectation and necessity.<sup>21</sup>

The concept of fidelity should come naturally to the church. After all, we confess faith in a God who is there whether we “ascend to heaven”

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20 Amy Jacober, *The Adolescent Journey: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Practical Youth Ministry* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2011), 88.

21 Andrew Root, *Revisiting Relational Youth Ministry: From a Strategy of Influence to a Theology of Incarnation* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2009).

or “make [our] bed in the depths” (Ps. 139:8), a God who will never leave us nor forsake us (Heb. 13:5) and promises that “neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (NASB, Rom. 8:38–39). With this core conviction, we should be different! The church should offer an alternative to the culture of achievement.

But instead of offering an alternative, youth ministry—like the genie—often markets the church as the next best way to achieve the goal. In discovering young people’s need for adult relationships (and longing for professional legitimization), youth ministers got a little too excited about our own generativity, our neededness. A quick scan of the youth ministry literature of the last thirty years reveals how thoroughly we latched onto our own importance as contributors to young people’s development;<sup>22</sup> youth ministers could be helpful mirrors through which teenagers could see their future selves and maybe (on our best days) a glimpse of Jesus to boot. So we marketed adult-youth friendship in youth ministry as a means to an end, a path to adulthood, a way for young people to get what they need. With the best of intentions, we offered teenagers the transactional bargain of a lifetime: if you (metaphorically) sign our church’s contract, meet our expectations, come on

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22 While we believe we have overemphasized young people’s developmental need for adult relationships, we acknowledge the importance of this move in helping us see our shortcomings in meeting the needs of young people and we are indebted to those who have highlighted them. The examples are too numerous for thorough citation. But see, for example, Duffy Robbins, *The Ministry of Nurture: (how to build real-life faith into your kids)* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990); Richard R. Dunn and Mark H. Senter III, ed. *Reaching a Generation for Christ: A Comprehensive Guide to Youth Ministry* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1997); Jim Burns and Mike DeVries, *The Youth Builder: Today’s Resource for Relational Youth Ministry* (Ventura: Gospel Light, 2001); and Wayne Rice, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue* (Cincinnati: Standard, 2010).

our mission trips, become the people we want you to be—the church will be there for you. Ta-da! Fidelity!

As a result, rather than offering an escape from the pressure to achieve, youth ministry often became a set of new achievements that purpose-driven young people could pursue. And for a set of young people (the purpose-driven ones), it worked. But as youth ministers themselves have slowly realized—and as less driven young people, who were essentially driven away from youth ministry, have always told us, in so many words—young people in our achievement-driven culture do not need another achievement to conquer. What they need, and what they long for, is friendship—relationships with people who genuinely delight in them and thereby help them discover and enjoy God’s delight (*philos*) in them.

No one in youth ministry would disagree that young people—especially in our culture of contractual, conditional, and fleeting relationships—desperately need free, unconditional, and enduring human bonds. We call those relationships friendship. Since these are the kinds of relationships Jesus offered his friends, we’re going to go out on a limb and suggest that they should set the bar for the kinds of relationships the church offers to young people. What’s more, we’re pretty sure these are the kinds of relationships most youth workers long to offer teenagers (even when they’re critiquing friendship as the way to do it). So what would it look like to get our terms straight and call these relationships what Jesus called them—friendships?

## **The Joy of Friendship: Minimizing Distance, Not Difference**

Some philosophers and theologians have constructed a view of friendship exclusively around the concepts of mutuality and reciprocity. These are important dimensions of friendship, but on their own they produce a definition of friendship bound to what John Swinton calls “the principle of likeness”—the idea that mutuality and reciprocity in friendship

must mean the abolition of difference.<sup>23</sup> Even though his contributions to our understanding of friendship can hardly be limited to this, we owe Aristotle for this idea. In Aristotle’s view, because of the centrality of mutuality and reciprocity, friends must be equals—“two good people serving to actualize the virtue of goodness within their friendship relationship.”<sup>24</sup> This would mean that young people cannot really be friends with adult youth workers. Youth will be youth and adults will be adults, so likeness is impossible. The difference will never really go away. And it is precisely when we have tried to resolve or minimize this difference that we have run into some real disasters in youth ministry. As an adult you have distinct responsibilities toward youths, just as they have their own respective responsibilities. If there is no room for difference in friendship, then adults certainly can’t be friends with youths without putting their adult responsibilities at risk. But mutuality and reciprocity are not all there is to friendship. Difference is to be expected in friendship, not excepted from it. It’s not social difference that must be minimized but social distance.<sup>25</sup>

So mutuality and reciprocity need to be oriented around another, more fundamental concept in friendship: freedom. Part of what makes friendship special is that it is freely and voluntarily chosen.<sup>26</sup> This freedom, in fact, is why friendship is so closely linked to joy, because joy also has freedom at its heart. Joy is essentially about delighting in God and, more important, enjoying God’s delight in us. As we see it, friendship is what joy looks like in the form of a relationship. It is enduring because

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23 John Swinton, *From Bedlam to Shalom Towards a Practical Theology of Human Nature, Interpersonal Relationships, and Mental Health Care* (New York: Peter Lang, 2000), 79.

24 Ibid, 83. Also see Reinders, *Receiving the Gift*, 358-362.

25 Erin Raffety creatively applied this distinction in academic research with children, but we find the distinction equally helpful for thinking about youth ministry. See Erin L. Raffety, “Minimizing Social Distance: Participatory Research with Children” in *Childhood* 22, No. 3 (2014): 409-422.

26 Reinders, *Receiving the Gift*, 5.

it is rooted in delight and, therefore, necessarily noninstrumental.<sup>27</sup> This goes all the way back to creation itself. Creation is God's free and voluntary act of making something instead of nothing—not to achieve anything but just to delight in it. Creation is not an act of necessity. Creation is an act of joy! But if we were to ask "Why did God create the world?" from the perspective of our culture of achievement, we would probably be asking, "What was God trying to achieve, or what did God want to accomplish, by creating the world?" When our mode of self-understanding is so instrumental, it makes sense that we would assume creation to be an instrument of achievement rather than an act of joy.

But if our perspective is one of freedom—if we believe that God really was free to create the world for no good reason other than the fact that it delighted God to do so<sup>28</sup>—then, as theologian Jürgen Moltmann reminds us, "our existence is justified and made beautiful before we are able to do or fail to do anything." The act of creation, as God's free act of joy, is the act of God befriending the world.<sup>29</sup> As Hans Reinders has put it, "Our being, at every moment of existence, originates from the gift of God's friendship."<sup>30</sup> This is the relationship that makes human and divine passion possible. It is only out of God's friendship with the world that God goes to the cross in Christ. Jesus said, "No one has greater love than

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27 As Aelred of Rievaulx, the great Cistercian abbot wrote, "spiritual friendship, which we call true, should be desired, not for consideration of any worldly advantage or for any extrinsic cause, but from the dignity of its own nature and the feelings of the human heart, so that its fruition and reward is nothing other than itself." Aelred of Rievaulx, *Spiritual Friendship* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria, 2008), 41.

28 As Moltmann points out, this is the position of the Westminster Catechism (1647): "What is the chief end of [humankind]?" "... To glorify God and enjoy [God] forever." Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology and Joy* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1973), 42.

29 "[God's] freedom... lies in the *friendship* which he offers men and women, and through which he makes them his friends." Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 56.

30 Hans Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship: Profound Disability, Theological Anthropology, and Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 320.

this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. I do not call you servants. . . . I have called you friends"<sup>31</sup> (AMP, John 15:13–15).

## Striving for Joy—or Not

We want to suggest that all this makes a practical and not just a theoretical difference in the way we approach ministry with young people. If God's joy in creation is expressed through friendship, then grounding our relationships with young people in a theology of friendship ought to free us from doing somersaults to create joy in youth ministry and allow us to enjoy young people instead—and help them to enjoy one another and, especially, to name and experience God's delight in them. When we spend all our time and energy striving to achieve joy, accomplishing friendships, helping young people achieve adulthood, investing in an endless stream of antics designed to win young people's allegiance, affection, and loyalty to the church, we obscure and miss out on God's presence in the actuality of young people's concrete and lived experience.<sup>32</sup> We fall into a kind of works-righteousness youth ministry—which is seldom joyful and almost always exhausting. In such ministry the adult-youth friendship becomes just another professional tool that we leverage to get the job done, the way Aladdin used the genie to escape the Cave of Wonders.

But if it is true that “identity is ours by redemption, not by development,”<sup>33</sup> then we need a radical change of trajectory—from our orientation toward God to God's orientation toward us. Human flourishing is grounded in God's joyous action toward us, not our actions

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31 As John Swinton writes, “Sacrificial friendship is the definition of love.” John Swinton, *Resurrecting the Person* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000), 43.

32 Andrew Root has described the theological turn in youth ministry as seeking “to share in the concrete and lived experience of young people as the very place to share in the act and being of God.” Andrew Root, *Bonhoeffer as Youth Worker* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 7.

33 Kenda Creasy Dean, *Practicing Passion*, 84.



that lead to joy.<sup>34</sup> God's friendship offered to us, and God's love for us "does not depend on the desirability of its object," to use the words of Thomas Merton, "but loves for love's sake."<sup>35</sup> It is the kind of relationship that is not grounded on our need for a relationship. As Swinton puts it, "The commitment to the other . . . is not enforced by obligation, custom or law, but by a desire to be with the other."<sup>36</sup> In other words friendship brings joy to life, undermines the culture of achievement, and refuses to be merely an instrument of pragmatic purposes—even Christian ones. Through friendship creation is revealed as God's creation and we are revealed as persons. "In friendship," Moltmann writes, "we experience ourselves for what we are, respected and accepted in our own freedom."<sup>37</sup>

## Genie, You're Free

That's why we think Jesus grounded his ministry in friendship—and it's why we believe friendship in youth ministry is not just allowed but (ironically, perhaps) necessary. In friendship both the youths and the adults in youth ministry are invited to get beyond just trying to escape the Cave of Wonders—we are liberated from the vicious cycle of moving from one achievement to another. Remember that in Aladdin's story, real friendship isn't really revealed through the genie's tricks and gimmicks, no matter how much the song-and-dance routine portends otherwise. In the end it is Aladdin who demonstrates true friendship to the genie, not by binding the genie to himself in mutuality and reciprocity but by

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34 This trajectory shift relates closely Moltmann's distinction between *futurum* ". . . what will be . . ." and *adventus* ". . . what is coming" and the eschatological shift from the progress of history to the coming of God in the world. See Jürgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 25–26.

35 Thomas Merton, "The Good Samaritan" in Thomas P. McDonnell, ed. *A Thomas Merton Reader* (New York: Doubleday, 1989), 349.

36 Swinton, *From Bedlam*, 79.

37 Jürgen Moltmann, *Church in the Power of the Spirit* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 115.

setting him free. Just one wish away from achieving his wish fulfillment, Aladdin chooses instead to set the genie free.

The genie responds, having anticipated exactly where the path they have been following should lead, “One bona fide prince pedigree coming up. I—what?”

“Genie, you’re free!”

At that a transformation begins. The genie’s shackles fall from his wrists; the lamp that once imprisoned him falls to the ground.

Disbelieving, the genie tests his luck. “Quick, quick,” he says to Aladdin. “Wish for something outrageous. Say ‘I want the Nile.’ Wish for the Nile. Try that!”

“I wish for the Nile.”

“No way!!” The genie exalts in his new self-determination. “Oh, does that feel good! I’m free! I’m free at last! I’m hittin’ the road. I’m off to see the world!”

After a somber benediction, the genie leaves his new friend. Ironic, isn’t it? No sooner does the friendship begin than they part ways.<sup>38</sup> This does not mean that friendship always means leaving one another, but this is a symbol of what sits at the heart of true friendship. As Moltmann notes, “Friends open up free spaces for one another. One element in this free human relationship is that we can also leave each other in peace. We do not constantly need to assure ourselves of our friendship. What friends do for us are not services that have to be paid back.”<sup>39</sup> In other words only through friendship can we rightfully call youth ministry a ministry by participating in God’s self-giving in the world: a self-giving offered out of joy, free of charge.

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38 Not to draw too strong a connection here, but it’s reminiscent of the story of the road to Emmaus in Luke 24:13-35. Just after he’s revealed to his friends “in the breaking of the bread,” the resurrected Jesus disappears from their sight.

39 Jürgen Moltmann, *The Living God and The Fullness of Life* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015), 119.

## Setting Our Own Genie Free

So what might youth ministry look like if the church offered young people friendship with no strings attached? What would youth ministry be if youth workers did not have to accomplish joy—if we did not need to achieve anything through our relationships with young people but rather could approach the church as a community where young people experienced God’s delight in them and could practice God’s delight in others? Here are a few steps that might help us start sowing fidelity.

### *If Friendships Matter, Measure Them.*

It’s been said that you measure what matters, or what matters is what you measure. If you’re the kind of person who likes clear goals and outcomes in youth ministry, friendship may seem like a counterintuitive objective. We’re all for clear outcomes and metrics that help assess the success and failure of ministry programs (we use them too). We suggest adding a metric for friendship into your goals for youth ministry. But instead of asking a linear question like “Am I creating mature Christian adults in my youth ministry?” (which is another way of saying, “Am I getting these young people from point A to point B?”), we can simply ask, “Where are young people in this ministry experiencing friendship: the friendship of God? The friendship of adults? Friendships with their peers?” To be even more precise, we can ask, “Are these young people experiencing and enjoying God’s delight in them?” This metric helps us remember to include the all-important relational dimension when measuring success in youth ministry, without suggesting that those friendships need to move them toward a certain goal.

### *Include Other People’s Youths in Youth Ministry.*

If youth ministry is going to help young people experience and enjoy God’s delight in them, it means that we can no longer limit this opportunity to youths in our own churches. If divine joy and friendship truly stand at the beginning and not just the end of our work, then

membership cannot be our criteria for inclusion in ministry. All youths need to experience God's delight in them—maybe especially those who aren't churchgoers (which, if we're honest, is most of them).

There are two exciting, growing edges of youth ministry right now. One is youth ministry in church communities overflowing with young people (yes, there are many): immigrant churches, new Christian communities, Southern Hemisphere churches—all of these, largely off the radar of North America's dominant youth ministry culture, are our next teachers of ecclesial vitality and adolescent mentoring. On the other end of the spectrum are inventive-mission churches where young people are altogether absent. These congregations also have the potential for vital youth ministries; the youths they serve just might not belong to anybody in the congregation. For churches accustomed to paying youth workers to serve congregants' children, this is a perplexing scenario—but for the majority of youth workers who are volunteers, we suspect that this is already happening, and naming it is a liberating reality.

Every youth worker can think of dozens of ways to befriend young people that demonstrate God's delight in them. If we stretch to include young people beyond our congregations, youth ministry expands to include things like adopting a school or a team, celebrating those in our community who work with young people, and taking congregants to cheer and support Sunday soccer players (instead of complaining that they're not in worship). After-school programs, bus stop hot chocolate stands, community-based SAT prep courses, pop-up cafes for studying during final exams—the list is endless for ways the Body of Christ can champion young people in our communities, extending the hand of Christian friendship to them. The point is that reaching beyond young people in our own congregations expands not only the youth roster but also the possibilities for the practice of friendship in youth ministry as well.

*Make the Church a Playful Space Where God's Wonder and Delight Can Be Experienced.*

Sometimes we treat play and playfulness as pesky things we have to do to keep kids interested before we do the real ministry. But if joy and friendship really motivate ministry, then church should be playful. Play is itself ministry (after all, in its most ancient form, worship was a play performed for the gods). By definition play creates a space where the only expectations are created by the game itself, which is why we get lost in games, lose track of time in a good conversation or a good book, or forget our feet in the joy of the dance. We're not performing to meet others' expectations—we are simply delighting in the play itself. When youth ministry is truly playful, it liberates young people from the need to be useful, from the need to worry constantly about status, from the constant pressure to improve and mature. Instead youth ministry invites young people to come before God in the worthlessness of free joy and friendship with the God who is joyful in God's very being.<sup>40</sup>

*Make Church a "Practice Field" for Delight-Filled Intergenerational Friendship.*

At our little church in Kingston, New Jersey, a beautiful thing happens every week. One of the families of our church opens their barn loft, which they've converted into a fully operational woodworking shop, to anyone who wants to come create things with wood. They provide the tools, support, and even the wood itself. All you have to do is come with an idea, and the Kane family helps you see it to completion. It's actually a fairly low-key activity and might sound a little mundane. But what has happened there is incredible. Each week young people gather alongside older adults. There are snacks and conversations. Together people

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40 For a more extended treatment of this topic, see Wes Ellis, "Youth Ministry Games: Play as Ministry," *Kindred Youth Ministry* (November 3, 2016): <http://kindredyouthministry.com/youth-ministry-games-play-as-ministry/> (accessed March 18, 2017).

create picture frames, peg shelves, lazy Susans, cutting boards, wooden spoons. They even break for a short devotional. And, most important, everyone enjoys each other's company. All it took for this beautiful ministry to happen was for one family to share what they love with some young people in their church.

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**Rethinking  
friendship in youth  
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extending fidelity.**

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Many adults are convinced that they don't know enough to work with young people. But the stuff of friendship is sharing what we love, not what we know. Churches are one of the few intergenerational communities left where young and old naturally intermingle. It may not be woodworking—maybe it's cooking, quilting, or gardening—but cultivating spaces where adults practice intergenerational friendships by sharing their

passions with youths not only expands youth ministry, but it also begins to sow relationships of fidelity throughout the congregation.

## **Conclusion**

For the record, Kim—that young person with whom I thought I couldn't be friends—did come back. In fact she remained a key member of our group until she graduated. But what I wish I would have said was not "I can't be your friend" but "Because I'm your friend, we're going to take some boundaries seriously—because you're sixteen, and I'm not. Having some rules will free us to be the people God brought together in this relationship: a young person and an adult. And that is a beautiful thing." Rethinking the practice of friendship in youth ministry not only gives young people a way out of the culture of achievement's Cave of Wonders, but it also frees youth workers to stop using our relationships with young people as means to accomplish certain goals and frees us to delight in youth as God delights in them, recognizing our differences

## FRIENDSHIP

while extending fidelity to them. There are rules to the game—especially in a world that has been so broken by sin and injustice—and we need to take them seriously. But we are invited to play. We are invited to stop instrumentalizing our relationships, instrumentalizing ourselves, and start delighting in young people, inviting them to delight in the joy of God's friendship with them. Friendship is not a mistake. Friendship—true friendship—is the heart of youth ministry.





