

2022

Theologia: Quaker Youth Ministry and Theopraxis in a Multicultural Context

Joel Mayward

Roger Nam

Leah Payne

Steve Sherwood

Hannah Souter

See next page for additional authors

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/qrt>



Part of the [Christian Denominations and Sects Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Mayward, Joel; Nam, Roger; Payne, Leah; Sherwood, Steve; Souter, Hannah; and Welstad, Trisha (2022) "Theologia: Quaker Youth Ministry and Theopraxis in a Multicultural Context," *Quaker Religious Thought*. Vol. 135 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/qrt/vol135/iss1/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Quaker Religious Thought by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ George Fox University. For more information, please contact arolfe@georgefox.edu.

Theologia: Quaker Youth Ministry and Theopraxis in a Multicultural Context

Authors

Joel Maynard, Roger Nam, Leah Payne, Steve Sherwood, Hannah Souter, and Trisha Welstad

THEOLOGIA: QUAKER YOUTH MINISTRY AND THEOPRAXIS IN A MULTICULTURAL CONTEXT

JOEL MAYWARD, ROGER NAM, LEAH PAYNE, STEVE
SHERWOOD, HANNAH SOUTER, AND TRISHA WELSTAD

“I am convinced by my own life and by wide observation of children that mystical experience is much more common than is usually supposed. Children are not so absorbed as we are with things and with problems. They are not so completely organized for dealing with the outside world as we older persons are. They do not live by cut-and-dried theories. They have more room for surprise and wonder. They are more sensitive to intimations, flashes, openings. The invisible impinges on their souls and they *feel* its reality as something quite natural.”

—Rufus M. Jones, “Finding the Trail of Life”¹

In 2015, faculty of George Fox University applied for the Lilly Endowment Youth Theology Initiative. The goal of this grant initiative was to deepen the level of theological engagement among young people in ways beyond standard evangelical church youth groups. During that year, a group of faculty and ministry leaders gathered to plan and submit a proposal to build a high school theology camp, hosted by George Fox University, in alignment with our historical heritage as a Quaker institution. We developed the idea of a week-long camp, a summer institute held on campus where a small group of 25 high school students would engage in theology not only in the classroom, but primarily through experiential learning. In accordance with the grant, we were committed to running our camp with the values of our university’s Quaker heritage in two specific ways: an egalitarian structure and the acknowledgement of the “Inner Light” of Christ in everyone. Now having completed three years of the theology camp, “Theologia,” from 2017–2019, this article offers a reflection on these values and experiences as a report of our findings on doing youth ministry in a multicultural context as informed by Quaker values. Each author of this article carried a major role in the design and execution of the camp; though our own theological

and ecclesial backgrounds cover a wide range of traditions, we have endeavored to remain committed to distinctive Quaker values. Following an overview of a typical day in the camp and our reflection on the two specific values, we address the impact of the camp, both for the students and for our vision of how this camp impacts our Christian Ministries department at George Fox University. It is our aim that this paper will catalyze a greater dialogue on Quaker values and the praxis of youth ministry.

A DAY AT THEOLOGIA

Each year we selected one overarching theme to explore over the course of the week-long camp, such as “Shalom” and “Christ and Culture.” Our faculty each led one day of the institute to guide the high school students in a particular aspect of the theme. For example, with “Shalom,” we included teaching, conversation and experience of shalom and poverty, racial reconciliation and creation. For “Christ and Culture,” each day was an exploration of a specific cultural artifact or practice, such as music, film, and social media. In order to demonstrate what this entailed, we shall offer a description of a typical daily schedule at Theologia.

We begin each day with breakfast together, followed by a time of group and individual centering on Christ. A classroom lecture follows as a twenty-minute TED-style talk. The lecture is reflective of biblical content and its application in today’s context, and provides a theological foundation and language to draw from for the remainder of the day. Scholars are invited to engage with content through questions and group dialogue before we proceed to an experience of the content, typically through an off-site experiential field trip. For instance, when teaching on Shalom and poverty, we took scholars to a community center near Oregon’s capital building to meet a community leader and area pastor. The pastor shared how they facilitate community gathering space and transitional housing opportunities for members of the city who are experiencing homelessness. Scholars were then able to take pairs of lightly worn shoes and clean them to prepare them for the local community gathering space hosted at a city park. After cleaning the shoes, our entire Theologia group ventured to the park and community building where the homeless community were given space to dwell by the city. While there, two members of the park community shared their experience of finding support as they

navigated weather, housing, health needs, and daily sustenance of meals and finances. After these conversations on aspects of the theme, scholars gather in groups of four with their college-aged facilitator to debrief their day and converse on personal points of tension, education, and application. Finally, our afternoon and evening are filled with an open-ended “free time,” which includes optional field games and scavenger hunts. This is followed by group reflection and story-telling about the impacts of the content on ourselves and one another.

THEOLOGIA ORGANIZATION AND STRUCTURE

As much as we could, we tried to structure the organizational leadership of Theologia in a way that reflected our Quaker heritage, honoring the Inner Light of Christ in each participant and observing an egalitarian structure between leaders and among students. The leadership of Theologia was and is shared among the four original grant writers: Roger Nam, Steve Sherwood, Trisha Welstad and Leah Payne, as well as the director of Theologia, Hannah Souter. The execution of the grant, as well as the major responsibilities—recruiting, planning, teaching, etc.—was shared amongst us as a team. We initially envisioned that Theologia would provide rising high school juniors and seniors safe spaces with qualified mentors to negotiate their own Christian identity through theological exploration. Through that process, we hoped to model Quaker values of simplicity and egalitarianism by inviting students to address professors by their first names, by sharing meals with students, playing games with them, and even dancing to Taylor Swift songs with them. Although we were adult instructors, we wanted to position ourselves as fellow sojourners, equal before God and to one another. We quickly discovered that for the leadership team, recognizing the Spirit’s gifts among our university student team leaders and mentoring them as they grew as theologians and practitioners was an important role for senior leadership—as much as we were doing youth ministry with and for high school students, we were also doing youth ministry with and for the college-aged camp leaders.

In the actual practice of Theologia, the Quaker principle of “that of God in everyone,” the Inner Light of Christ, was expressed in both the programming structure and the individual experiences of everyone involved. There was a decision early on regarding language: the

teenagers are called “scholars,” not merely “students” or “campers,” which connotes an assumption and expectation that God would speak to and through each individual high school student. The teens were not there as passive consumers but as active and necessary full members of the body of Christ. Whether a high schooler, a college student, or a person with a biblical studies Ph.D., Christ could (and did) speak through anyone. Even as there was an element of up-front teaching or sharing from the faculty members as well as the wide variety of perspectives encountered during the experiential field trips, the scholars were encouraged to both ask questions and share their perspectives as legitimate theologians. The Spirit of God does not have a minimum age requirement when suddenly a person is now capable of awareness and access to the Inner Light, for the presence of Christ is not limited in this way. In this, young people (both high school and college-aged) are viewed as full members of the body of Christ; they aren’t the *future* of the church, they are the *present* church.

In the programming, there were also adequate amounts of stillness and “down time” for scholars to mentally, emotionally, and spiritually process what they were experiencing. Unlike similar Christian evangelical youth ministry summer camps which use every available minute throughout the week to structure programming in order to keep up a sense of energy, we intentionally did not feel the need to fill every minute with activities and programmed elements. There were intentionally de-programmed—or, more appropriately, “unprogrammed”—open spaces in the margins of the daily routine; these were in-between moments meant for reflection and relationship. Every moment in Theologia—from meals to walks in between gatherings to van rides—was filled with an expectancy that God may speak and move. In this way, the programming was structured to be unstructured, allowing for more openness to whatever God might do. As a specific example, in my (Joel) role as both a chaplain and a faculty for the 2017 and 2019 camps, some of the most significant “teaching” moments were not when I was formally up-front in either a classroom or giving a devotional thought at the end of the day, but rather when I was walking alongside teens and college students in between the programmed elements. In those spaces of liminality and movement (both literal and spiritual), the young people would often describe profound insights and “aha!” moments of how they felt God speaking into their particular situation and experience. To allude to the opening epigraph from Rufus Jones, the high school scholars were

open to the surprise and wonder of the divine presence, more sensitive to “intimations, flashes, openings” of transcendence.

Perhaps one of the more profound spiritual experiences at Theologia of “Christ in everyone” was not in a formal setting or with individual insights, but beyond mere words in the form of *dance*. On the final evening of Theologia 2019, following our time of worship in song, we went around the entire circle of scholars, college leaders, and faculty to share our individual insights in a brief six-word phrase or list. We did not need to explain or expound upon these words—they were enough to simply speak them aloud and allow their truth to resonate in our midst. The experience a *sacred* moment, one where listening to each person’s individual reflection was revelatory and transformational for all. Following this experience, there was a spontaneous dance party—people in a circle around the campfire, laughing and dancing with a profound and beautiful freedom. While the early Quakers might have frowned upon the secular music and the loud volume as being opposed to the “plain life” of the Friends, perhaps they might have been open to this experience of “singing (or dancing) in the Spirit” as an organic outgrowth of our worshipful week together, a sort of Christ-led eruption of joy. The expectancy that God can and would speak to and through *everyone* involved, and not just the adults on stage, is a significant value we hope can be adopted and practiced by more youth workers and local churches. What can we, as practitioners and scholars of religion, learn about God from the young people in our midst?

TESTIMONIES FROM COLLEGE-AGED LEADERS

Each summer we had five college students serve as group leaders, living in the dorms and being responsible for a small group of high school scholars. These college-aged students participated in all activities and hosted guided group discussions each night. While the programming and content of Theologia is designed for high school students, our team discovered that the college student staff working with us were equally if not more impacted by the experience. We wish to share some of their first-person testimonies about their experiences.

College students expressed how their hands-on, practical experience with Theologia shaped their own vocational discernment. One college student found a new academic pathway through his work with Theologia. He writes: “Going into Theologia, I was an undeclared

junior. Going through the week alongside the Scholars kindled my interest in the intersection of culture and theology” (Satoshi Seth, 2019 staff). Another student reflected on how Theologia affirmed her passions. She noted, “Being a part of Theologia reminded me how much I love being around others and listening to others’ stories, which is also the very same reason I decided to pursue a role as a nurse practitioner” (Gia Han Nguyen, 2018 Staff). A graduate school-bound student expressed gratitude for the relational context Theologia provided, saying “It was a good segue into my graduate theological education and a good anchor for reckoning with what matters/what is superfluous in theology” (Josh Cayetano, 2018 staff).

College students were also deeply impacted by the egalitarian structure and sense of community that created. One student remarked on how this quality of community impacted him, saying “I was surprised by the level of belonging that I saw the scholars experience and the level of belonging that I experienced” (Satoshi Seth, 2019 staff). Another noted how Theologia not only talked about theology, but embodied it in relationships. She writes, “Working for Theologia helped me realize how much I care about healthy Christian community, both in the topics we cover and in the space we strive to create” (Anna Dirkse, 2017–2019 Intern). As these testimonies demonstrate, the culture of participatory leadership and the opportunities for vocational discernment among the college students provided pathways for meaningful growth and transformation in their own lives.

CONCLUSIONS AND REFLECTIONS ON MULTICULTURAL THEOPRAXIS

These experiences with college staff, seeing them flourish in the team environment of Theologia and listening to them share how those experiences are shaping their visions for future ministry, have given us a vision for a future for Theologia at George Fox University. We hope the summer institute will continue to serve as an ongoing opportunity for high school students to engage theology in a relaxed, relational and experiential way, with an additional focus on the intentional mentoring in ministry for college students. Currently, Christian Ministries majors at GFU do their ministry internships at churches and para-church youth ministries such as Young Life and summer camps in the Portland area. Without limiting or replacing those possible places of service, we imagine having college-age students already sensing

a vocational call to youth ministry doing their ministry internships alongside us in Theologia.

We have also framed the discussion of Theologia as doing youth ministry in a “multicultural context.” While the term “culture” is notoriously difficult to define or pin down, we can identify the “multi” dynamic of Theologia in two ways: (1) theological tradition and (2) ethnicity. These two aspects are characteristic of both the programming staff and the scholars. Even as we are affiliated with George Fox University and committed to the Quaker heritage imbuing our programming structure, we, the authors, come from different theological backgrounds and ecclesial tribes, including Pentecostal, Wesleyan, Presbyterian, and Mennonite, as well as evangelical Friends. Likewise, the high school scholars who attended the camp came from similarly diverse church contexts, both small church plants and large megachurches, mainline/progressive and evangelical/conservative churches. By bringing such theological traditions together under the uniting banner of Quaker spirituality, we were able to imbue Quaker practices and values within the programming without necessarily overtly or directly teaching the content from a particular tradition or viewpoint. In other words, *what* we discussed and taught would not fit squarely into a single theological or ecclesial system, yet *how* we discussed and approached the theological topics was distinctly Quaker. In this way, our Quaker values created a safe space for different (even conflicting) theological views to be shared, explored, and refined in dialogue and discernment.

This multicultural dynamic was also exemplified in the ethnic backgrounds represented by both our programming staff and the high school scholars, which included Black, white, Asian, and Latinx individuals. Moreover, our guest speakers during the afternoon experiential learning sessions have included Black, Native American, Latinx, Asian, and white persons. Yet we also recognize that the majority of participants in Theologia have been white, and we can particularly improve in connecting with local Black church communities in the greater Portland, OR area. Indeed, there is an aspirational quality to our description of Theologia as “multicultural” youth ministry: we are taking intentional steps towards a more robust multiethnic community, yet we have much more work to be done to fully enact such an inclusive vision. Furthermore, in our increasingly globalized world, we will need to expand our understanding of “multicultural” to encompass both global Christianity and fresh forms of Quaker spirituality and practice.²

The fourth Theologia summer institute scheduled for 2020 was cancelled/postponed due to the coronavirus pandemic, but the future remains hopeful as we look ahead to 2021 and beyond. The value of Theologia to young people's spiritual formation has been clearly demonstrated in their responses. Moreover, the value of Theologia is also evidenced in the number of attendees who are now choosing George Fox University for their college education. We believe the value of Theologia for God's church in the Pacific Northwest will be lived out through the staff alumni who go on to serve in ministry roles for years to come, inspired and shaped by their Theologia staff experiences. With these examples in view, the university has come to recognize Theologia's lasting value, and we are optimistic that sustainable funding for several more years of Theologia summer institutes is realistic and doable. We encourage Friends churches, particularly those on the West Coast, to consider sending your young people to experience Theologia with us.

ENDNOTES

1. Rufus M. Jones, "Finding the Trail of Life," in *Quaker Spirituality: Selected Writings*, ed. Douglas V. Steere (Mahwah, Paulist Press, 1984), 262.
2. On engagement with global Christianity, see Jon R. Kershner, "Evangelical Quakerism and Global Christianity," in *The Cambridge Companion to Quakerism*, eds. Stephen W. Angell and Pink Dandelion (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 290–307.