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## FROM ROOTS TO WINGS: RECASTING THE ‘WEDGE MODEL’ OF YOUTH MINISTRY INTO A SACRED PEDAGOGICAL FORM

*“There are only two lasting bequests we can hope to give our children. One of these is roots, the other, wings.”  
Johann Wolfgang von Goethe*

### **Abstract**

Despite their sharing the idea that the primary reason why youth and young adults are leaving Catholicism is largely due to their not encountering Christ and his love within the structures of Church teaching and tradition, tensions between neo-traditional and postmodern religious educational approaches have continued to swell. As Catholic neo-traditionalists continue to press forward a return back to ‘how the Church once was’ postmodern religious educators worry that those who already live in the margins will continue to be pushed further away from opportunities for encountering Christ. This paper will outline the “Wedge Model” of youth ministry, deconstruct it, and then reconstruct it (in conversation with lived experience) as a sacred pedagogy centered upon teaching Catholic youth how to connect to and practice the liberating love of Christ.

Keywords: disaffiliation, neo-traditional, post-modernism, sacred pedagogy, youth ministry

### **1. Introduction**

As disaffiliation continues to swell among young Catholics, the Catholic neo-traditional call to abandon postmodern inspired forms of religious education, like that of Terence McLaughlin’s “openness with roots,” has grown stronger over the last decade. For some Catholic neo-traditionalists, the growing number of young Catholics who have renewed their interest in medieval scholasticism and the Latin Mass indicates that reverting back to ‘how the Church once was’ is the needed answer for solving the current crisis of faith, disaffiliation. Other religious educators, however, worry that a retreat away from postmodern pedagogical methods will only further enflame the rate of disaffiliation among Catholic youth and further delay the building of bridges to the LGBTQ, immigrant, etc. communities. Despite hailing from two different religious educational approaches, however, Catholic neo-traditionalists and postmodern enthusiasts do share one common understating: the primary reason why Catholic youth are leaving the Faith is largely due to their not encountering Christ and his love within the structures of Catholic teaching and Tradition.

Christ does not limit his presence to just the context of Catholicism. Therefore, for Catholic religious education to be successful in reconnecting its young church to Christ and his liberative love, it should seek to employ sacred pedagogies which connect Christ’s presence in the secular culture to the Christian faith tradition. That is, to be successful in re-guiding the disaffiliated or outcast back to their roots and give the young church the wings it needs in order to move its faith tradition forward from division to coexistence, a recasting of a sacred pedagogy is needed.

Through a recasting of the wedge model of youth ministry into an “openness” pedagogy, this paper will present a new sacred pedagogy that religious educators may use to connect young Catholics to Christ and his liberative love. The developed sacred pedagogy presented in this analysis will also offer Catholic, as well as other, religious educators a new tool for creating spaces of coexistence between Catholic neo-traditionalists and postmodernists. Specifically, by looking at the primary stages of the wedge model (relational ministry, evangelization, recognition, catechesis, and service), this paper will recast these stages into conversation with McLaughlin’s “openness with roots” in such a way that a new model, focused upon placing Christ’s liberative love into practice, will spring forward. This refashioned sacred pedagogy will present a new religious educational model for healing the divides which currently hinder Catholicism (as well as other Christian denominations and other faith traditions) from sharing and doing the work of Christ’s liberating love – the love frees persons from political and social discrimination.

### ***1.1 Methodology: A Qualitative Community of Practice***

Developed from an exploration of the past, present, and future, this paper employs a two-fold qualitative method: narrative and grounded theory. The narrative method is used to create a cohesive image of current tensions between Catholic neo-traditional and postmodern religious educational approaches. The narrative method, moreover, offers a clear portraiture of the past and present tensions which exist between neo-traditionalist and postmodern religious educational approaches. The second primary method this paper uses is the qualitative method of grounded theory. Specifically, by using an inductive approach, this paper offers an outlining of the wedge model of youth ministry, deconstruct it, and then reconstruct it (in conversation with lived experience) as a sacred pedagogy centered upon teaching Catholic youth how to connect to and practice the liberating love of Christ.

## **2. “Straw for the Bricks”: Definitions & Understandings**

In a 1989 article for the *Interdisciplinary Journal of Pastoral Studies*, Stephen Pattison offered the observation<sup>1</sup> that students in pastoral studies programs are often asked to partake in the process of Theological Reflection before they are properly prepared to do so; or in the words of Pattison, “students are being asked to make bricks without straws.”<sup>2</sup> Structures made with straw-less bricks crumble easily in challenging climates. Similarly, students and scholars who do not frame a foundational understanding of the words and theories which form the underpinnings of their path of study will also find their research questions, thought experiments, and arguments crumbling around the work that they are trying to achieve. Therefore, before this paper moves forward in its exploration of its proposed thesis it will first offer some “straw for the bricks.” For it will be these “straws” that will bring forth clarity to the re-construction and use of the “Wedge Model of Youth Ministry” as a form of sacred pedagogy practiced in Catholic youth ministry.

### ***2.2 Neo-Traditionalism***

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<sup>1</sup> The root metaphor of Pattison’s observation is derived from the Book of Exodus 5:1-23.

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Pattison, “Some Straw for the Bricks: A Basic Introduction to Theological Reflection,” *Practical Theology* (August 26, 2016): 2-9.

One of the most interesting effects that social media has had upon Catholicism is the organic development of #catholictwitter and “weird Catholic Twitter.” The diversity of thought and lived Catholicism housed in these social media handles is nothing short of prodigious. Anyone who casually scrolls through those who post to these handles will find debates and discussions ranging on whether or not Pope Francis is the legitimate pope of the Catholic church to whether or not it is appropriate to allow a crying baby to stay in the pews during Sunday liturgical celebrations. These “Catholic tribes,” as observed by Michael Warren and Damian Thompson in their *Catholic Herald* article, “Meet America’s Catholic Tribes,” are filled with “noisy groups of priests and laity who disagree on pretty much everything. There are fault lines everywhere, growing wider thanks to a deadly combination of scandals and social media.”<sup>3</sup> Fault lines which have grown in large part to a rapid rise in neo-traditionalism (or “rad-trads”<sup>4</sup> as they like to call themselves on social media) among American Catholics.

One of the reasons why the Catholic neo-traditional movement has successfully moved the fault lines of Catholicism is rooted in their rapid movement away from traditional Catholicism. A decade ago, the writings and teachings of 20<sup>th</sup> century Catholic theologians (e.g., Pope Benedict XVI, Dr. Scott Hahn, Bishop Robert Barron, and George Weigel) worked to reorient Catholics toward placing modern Catholic theologies in continuity with Catholic tradition and its teachings in regard to unchangeable “Truth.” In contrast, neo-traditionalists are suspect of any theological developments formed in postmodernity and they are especially suspect of the postmodern methods currently employed by Catholic academics and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). Neotraditional Catholics, in other words, hold and openly express a deep disgruntlement towards modern Catholicism, an institution that they believe has been infiltrated by secularism. In the compendium work, *Fundamentalism Observed*, theologian William D. Dinges (Catholic University), offers the following observation of what Catholic neo-traditionalism seeks to accomplish in its fervor:

[Neo-traditionalism] seeks to arrest and reverse religious change among Catholics and to preserve the ideological, organizational, and cultic patterns altered, abandoned, or discredited in the post conciliar era. [It] is a protest against the blurring of Catholic identity and the loss of Catholic hegemony in the social, cultural, and political sphere.<sup>5</sup>

In as far as neo-traditional approaches within youth ministry there are some shared similarities between neo-traditional and postmodern youth ministry programs. The neo-traditional Mater Dei parish (Irving, TX), for example, offers the following to the youth of their parish:

*Little Flowers (Young Girls Social & Spiritual Group):* A program for teaching virtues and studying through Scripture, saints’ biographies and the Catechism for girls (9-12).

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<sup>3</sup> Warren Davis, Michael, and Damian Thompson. “Meet America’s Catholic Tribes.” *Catholic Herald*, November 15, 2018. <https://catholicherald.co.uk/magazine/the-time-of-the-tribes/>.

<sup>4</sup> For more information on ‘Rad Trads’ and their use of social media to press forward a return to traditionalism see Mary Meisenzahl, “Inside the World of Weird Catholic Twitter — and the ‘rad Trads’ Keeping the Old Traditions Alive,” *Mel Magazine*, March 2019, <https://melmagazine.com/en-us/story/rad-trad-weird-catholic-twitter>.

<sup>5</sup> William Dinges and James Hitchcock, “Roman Catholic Traditionalism and Activist Conservatism in the United States,” in *Fundamentalisms Observed*, ed. Martin Marty and Scott Appleby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 67.

*Our Lady's Fiat:* For young ladies (13-18). Meeting time consist of a tea party brunch, a short devotion and a talk led by [our pastor], and an activity

*St. John Bosco Boys Group:* A boys' formation program (13-18) which aims to foster the virtues of purity, temperance, prudence, justice, and fortitude along with the development of Christian conviction and true leadership. Courses offered provide spiritual formation alongside intellectual growth.

*Youth Group (13-18):* A meeting of the parish's youth which begins with a rosary and is followed by a group dinner and interactive talk (with a parish pastor), followed by games.

What lies at the fault line between postmodern approaches youth ministry and neo-traditional approaches is the neo-traditional youth's devotion to the Tridentine Mass – the Extraordinary Form of the Roman Rite or The Latin Mass (TLM) – and to intellectual formation.

The international youth movement *Fœderatio Internationalis Juventutem* (FIJ) is a good example of the integrated approach that neo-traditionalists have formed in relation to ministering to the youth of their parishes. According to its website, FIJ is committed to connecting Catholic youth (practicing and disaffiliated) to the “doctrinal presentations of the divine truths so eloquently expressed by” TLM. A feat in which FIJ aims to achieve through their broader commitment in offering opportunities for “prayer, friendship, and learning.”<sup>6</sup> Neo-traditional youth ministry deeply roots itself in the practice of traditional forms of liturgy. Youth not only are encouraged to participate in TLM but are also pressed to use their experiences formed within TLM as a “springboard” into better understanding the teachings of the Catholic faith.

Although one could say that the use of liturgy in youth ministry is an approach shared by postmodern parishes<sup>7</sup>, the approach employed by neo-traditionalists differs in as far as they do not see the liturgy as a place for youth expression. That is, unlike the Roman Rite, TLM does not offer opportunities for the integration of youthful liturgical music and other expressions of faith (e.g. holding hands during the recitation of the Lord's prayer). “Meeting the youth where they are” in relation to liturgy is shuddered as it is seen as a “watering down” of divine worship and tradition.

In relation to the second point, neo-traditional approaches to youth ministry also emphasizes a call to be formed by Catholicism's intellectual tradition. Instead of creating programs which work from the baseline that the youth who participate know little to nothing about their faith, neo-traditionalists press their youth to explore challenging theological teachings, historical developments, and criticisms of the “outside world.” It is not uncommon to find neo-traditional youth debating Aristotle and Plato or St. Thomas Aquinas and Augustine in relation to the ills of the outside world during a youth group gathering. To simply know the catechism or be able to explain how the Ten Commandments can be helpful in “guard railing” teen life, neo-traditional youth programs challenge their youth to deepen their intellectual understandings of the great

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<sup>6</sup> Fœderatio Internationalis Juventutem, “About,” Fœderatio Internationalis Juventutem, accessed July 25th, 2019, <http://juventutem.org/about/>.

<sup>7</sup> A popular program used by many postmodern parishes which emphasizes the use of liturgy and Eucharistic celebrations to be the essential core of youth ministry is Life Teen. For more information about Life Teen and its employed ministerial models, visit <https://lifeteen.com>.

philosophers and theologians who neo-traditionalists believe to have properly interpreted the Deposit of Faith.

Neo-traditionalism's approach to religious education reflects its held suspicions of the outside world. In a 21<sup>st</sup> century, ordinary diocesan school theology class, for example, one will find a plethora of approaches employed by the teacher in his/her attempt to teach their students about their faith and how to place it into practice as they move through their ordinary lives. Neo-traditionalism, in its protest against religious change, approaches religious education through the lens of "regurgitation." Youth should learn theology and the traditions of their faith, but opportunities for questioning are not encouraged in as far as they cause confusion. An example of this form of approach can be found in the use of the Baltimore Catechism in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early-mid 20<sup>th</sup> century catechetical programs. Written in a "Q & A" style, the Baltimore Catechism does not concern itself with explaining the teachings of Catholicism in great detail nor offers opportunities for Catholic teaching in conversation with lived experience.; youth are read the questions and are to recite or regurgitate, verbatim, the answer:

*Lesson Seventh: On the Incarnation and Redemption*

*Q. 318.* What does "incarnation" mean, and what does "redemption" mean?

*A.* "Incarnation" means the act of clothing with flesh. Thus Our Lord clothed His divinity with a human body. "Redemption" means to buy back again.

*Q. 319.* Did God abandon man after he fell into sin?

*A.* God did not abandon man after he fell into sin, but promised him a Redeemer, who was to satisfy for man's sin and reopen to him the gates of heaven.

*Q. 320.* What do we mean by the "gates of heaven"?

*A.* By the "gates of heaven" we mean the divine power by which God keeps us out of heaven or admits us into it, at His pleasure.<sup>8</sup>

In their pursuit of "passing on the Faith" in a way that does not diminish or tarnish Catholic teachings, Neo-traditionalists encourage a return back to religious educational practices that are "fixed" and focused upon a "predetermined content."<sup>9</sup> Any approach that encourages a deconstructing of a teaching or tradition and its reconstruction through a sociological, anthropological, etc. lens is viewed as offering youth an opportunity to open gates towards heresy.

## **2.2 Postmodernists**

Pope John Paul II's thirteenth encyclical, *Fides et Ratio*, explicitly reminded the Catholic church that its relationship with postmodernism is one of great complexity. Postmodernism, according to Poe John Paul II, can also mean a lot of different things as "the term designates the emergence of a complex of new factors." The judgement placed upon it can be "sometimes positive and

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<sup>8</sup> Frances J. Connell. *The New Baltimore Catechism*, No. 3. New York: Benziger, 1941.

<sup>9</sup> For a detailed examination of how catechetical approaches have changed in the last century, see Tommy King, *Can We Say Catechesis?* in "Children and the Church," special issue, *Leaven* 4 (January 1, 1996): 34-38.

sometimes negative.”<sup>10</sup> For many youth ministers in Catholic parishes, postmodernism is and has been a largely positive influence on the work that they do “in the trenches.” Moreover, given the use of inductive models and the ‘public theology’ which organically rises through the practice of youth ministry, one cannot deny the positive presence of postmodernism within many Catholic parishes today. It is in light of this understanding that the use of the term “postmodern parish” has been employed. The next “straw” that this paper will offer will be a broader comprehension of what Catholic postmodernists believe as well as what youth ministry looks like in a postmodern Catholic parish.

For many Catholics who value the spirit of Vatican II, postmodernism is a “fresh wind of the Spirit sent to revitalize the dry bones of the Church.”<sup>11</sup> This is especially true of the “rebuilt” Church movements that have casted new tools to be used for the Church’s mission of reaching the margins of the postmodern world.<sup>12</sup> For postmodernists:

“The fruit of the Spirit emerges in our lives from the seeds planted by the practices of bring in the Spirit, it becomes a witness to a postmodern world (John 17). Nothing is more countercultural than a community serving the Suffering Servant in a world devoted to consumption and violence. But the Church will have this countercultural, prophetic witness only when it jettisons its own modernity...postmodernism [is] another catalyst for the church *to be* the church.”<sup>13</sup>

In her book *Postsecular Catholicism: Relevance and Renewal*, Michele Dillion (Professor of Sociology, University of New Hampshire), offered an exploration of how “Catholicism negotiates the tension between the forces of tradition and those of change,”<sup>14</sup> In her exploration of postmodern Catholicism, Dillion asserts that the “Catholic Church is very much a public religion as it is a “universal institution dedicated to the public common good” that houses teachings on social justice “particular pertinent to the problems of contrite modernity.”<sup>15</sup> For Dillion, “Vatican II’s rejection of a false opposition between religious and social activities and its explicit affirmation of human agency, lay competence, and honest discussion in discerning the issues of modernity marked a highly significant” shift in how the Church approached its expressions of faith. The Church’s relevance in an ever-increasing complex social world is reliant upon whether or not it successfully joins secular practices, understandings and hopes into the delivery of the Church’s teachings.<sup>16</sup> Postmodernists, unlike Traditionalists, embrace this same ideal. For the Church to remain relevant and perceived to be a place for all people, it must remain in conversation with the outside world. Postmodernists do not see the outside world as a imminent threat against Catholicism. Although they proceed with caution, postmodernists understand that there is great truth and beauty worth capturing from secular theories and philosophies. In relation to youth ministry, postmodernists believe that the teachings of the

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<sup>10</sup> Pope John Paul II, “Fides Et Ratio” (lecture, Saint Peter's, Rome, Italy, September 14, 1998), paragraph 9.

<sup>11</sup> James Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism? Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2006), 18.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 30

<sup>14</sup> Michael Dillion, *Postsecular Catholicism: Relevance and Renewal* (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 1.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 5

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 19

Church will only be explored by the youth as long as their presentation are written in a language that youth understand.

“Meet them where they are” is perhaps one of the most famous Jesuit colloquiums of our day. The phrase highlights the belief that God will come into your spiritual home even in the midst of spiritual chaos and in a manner that you understand. “Meet them where they are,” in other words, is a good example of how postmodernists approach the “doing” of ministry. There are many Catholic parishes in the US that have radically transformed their approach to ministry with tools that they have gathered from this ideal. The Church of the Nativity, for example, in Timonium, Maryland is an example of the good that may come from using postmodern approaches in an effort to inform new approaches in ministry. According to the pastor of the Church of the Nativity, Father Michael White, when he first arrived at the parish he found a “languid community aging in place” with 96% of weekly Mass goers reporting that the reason why they chose to be a member of this parish or attend liturgy there was because the church had “convenient parking.” Externally and internally the parish was also a mess, spiritually and physically.<sup>17</sup> Knowing what most likely laid ahead in as far as Mass attendance and low participation in offered ministries, Father Michael created a dynamic strategy to bring the parish back to life. His attention to intentionally bring in the outside culture of his parishioners and those whom he hoped to reconnect to the Faith brought a deep breath of fresh air to the parish and its pastoral leaders.

Refashioned for the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium, the Church of Nativity’s youth ministry program now flourishes with several hundred youth attending parish events on a regular basis. Its long-time youth minister, Christopher Wesley, explains that the primary reason for its success is rooted in the parish’s attentiveness to “the coming together of the present and future of the Church. It [is this type of] movement that takes the Church relevancy and impact to the next level.”<sup>18</sup> By making the youth ministry program “more accessible,” postmodernists have been effective in showing youth that “Faith is not dead,” but very much alive in the midst of their messy lives. God is where they are.

Another example of how postmodernists differs from traditionalists is centered upon the modern approach to “accompaniment” in relation to youth’s spiritual journeys. In the post synodal apostolic exhortation, Pope Francis notes the importance of respecting the freedom of young people as they build their lives and explore the world.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, Pope Francis urges the Church to be more welcoming to youth much in the same way that other secular educational intuitions are. The Church, in the words of Francis, should avoid “rigid criteria for students” since these types of conditions would “deprive many young people of the accompaniment that could help enrich their lives.”<sup>20</sup> That is, the Church must be open for the free flowing of youth culture in and out of its institutions as it too accompanies youth as they walk on their spiritual journeys. Youth culture, which is largely formed out of postmodern thought, is to be cherished

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<sup>17</sup> For more information on the Rebuilt Parish association and to see other success stories in relation to parishes renewing their visions and ministerial plans, visit: <https://rebuiltparish.com> .

<sup>18</sup> Christopher Wesley, *Rebuilding Youth Ministry: Ten Practical Strategies for Catholic Parishes* (South Bend, Indiana: Ave Marie Press, 2015), 3.

<sup>19</sup> Pope Francis. “Christus Vivit,” paragraph 242.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, paragraph 247.

and welcomed in the Church as it offers an opportunity to make meaningful connections to the youth that the Church hopes to connect to the life and love of Christ. Traditionalists approach, as mentioned before, secular youth cultures with great suspicion. Therefore, in ministering to young people they do not see the benefit of inviting the youth culture into conversation with the traditions and teachings of the Church.

As mentioned above, in contrast to traditionalism, postmodernists employ a plethora of approaches in their sharing of Catholic teachings and traditions. Moreover, it is not uncommon to find a Catholic theology or religion teacher or catechists who has not found some form of cultural tools to enliven the lessons that they teach in an effort to bring their students to a better understanding of why their faith teaches what it does. In his blog, [seanmcdowell.org](http://seanmcdowell.org), high school theology teacher, Sean McDowell, posted the question: “How do we make theology come alive for students?” His question, which he did explore in more detail in his April 2019 blog post of the same title, is a good example of the form of questioning that postmodernists begin with in their exploration of how to connect youth to their faith traditions. Sean’s list of answers to his “research question” show a broad snapshot of postmodern religious education “at work:”

1. Use stories
2. Use cultural examples
3. As good questions
4. Connect theology to practical life

At the heart of well-formed postmodern pedagogies, as the above shows, is an explicit attention to what captures the religious imagination of youth: relevancy. Youth, as seen at the 2018 Catholic Youth Synod, want to be seen and heard; they have a deep desire to learn about truth, but only in a manner that is fashioned out of the images that they share. This is one of the essential cores of the postmodernists’ approach to religious education.

### **3. From Roots: Revisiting & Deconstructing a Forgotten Youth Ministerial Model**

If there is one concrete known fact in regard to youth ministry is that practitioners in this field have a plethora of models to choose from in determining the right “fit” for their ministerial context. Often, these models are presented in flashy “boxed programs” marketed with the promise of fun, relevant podcasts, dynamic images, and relevant discussion questions, all easily accessible online or through a downloaded app. Beyond the tree limbs, however, deeply buried beneath the ground lies the forgotten youth ministry models that continue to inspire and support the new models and approaches ministers use today. It is within these roots that the “Wedge Model” situates itself, freely branching out into the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium and sharing its rich wisdom with the next generation of religious educators and youth ministers who long to return the disaffiliated to the feet of Christ and strengthen the faith of those who remain so that they do not ever leave.

Constructed through the research and practical experiences of Southern Californian youth ministers, the “Wedge Model” of youth ministry is a six-stage process that can be used and adapted as a method for the faith and spiritual formation of youth in almost any context. The six stages that outlines this model, as shown below, are as follows: 1. Relational ministry, 2.



Evangelization, 3. The “moment of recognition,” 4. Systematic Catechesis, 5. Service, and 6. Leadership development and peer ministry.

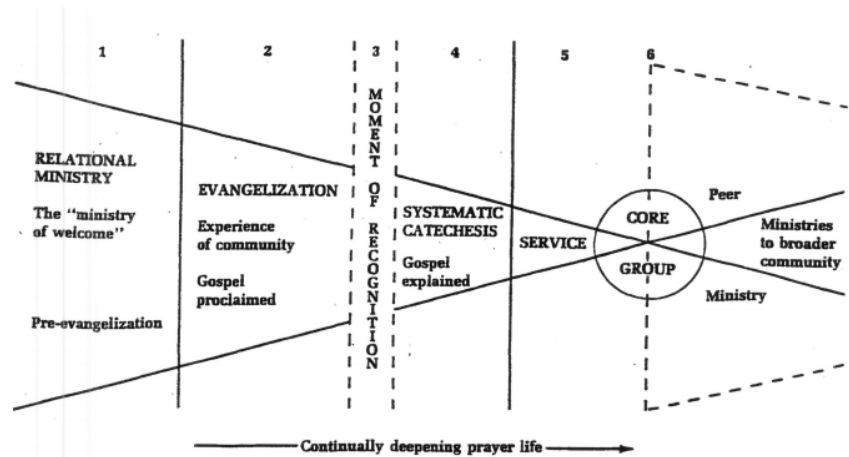


Figure 1.1. Wedge Model in Thomas Zanzig, “Youth Ministry: Directions and Reflections,” in *Readings and Resources in Youth Ministry*, ed. Michael Warren (Winona, Minnesota: Saint Mary's Press, 1987).

### Stage One: Relational Ministry

The first stage of this model, relational ministry, has, in recent years, seen a renewed interest as a result of Pope Francis’s ministerial direction. In a homily (May 8, 2013) at a weekday Mass, Pope Francis reminded the faithful that if Christians are to be effective in proclaiming the Good News of Christ, they must be like Paul and build bridges and not walls. These bridges, Pope Francis added, must reach out to where people are, eager to listen to everyone, to become acquainted with them, and form relationships with them. This is relational ministry at work. Effective youth ministry is not possible without relationships. “Until young people feel welcomed by and into the parish community of faith, there is no reason why they should be open to the message it proclaims.”<sup>21</sup>

Although relational ministry is widely accepted as the first step in youth ministry among many other models, it would be disingenuous to not explore some of its weaknesses as a point of deconstruction. The first weakness of this stage hails from within the current crisis of the Catholic sex abuse scandal. As more dioceses tighten up the processes of how youth ministers interact with the youth that they serve, forming cohesive relational ministries is becoming more difficult. In order for this stage to benefit the youth and not offer additional opportunities for them to be harmed in ill formed relationships, the family will have to take on the role as a guide for this process. The youth minister, on other words, will have to shift their relational ministry to the whole family rather than forming a bridge towards where the youth reside. Without a strong, safe, and secure relationship between the youth minister and the youth the rest of the process risks also being dismantled.

<sup>21</sup> Thomas Zanzig, “Youth Ministry: Directions and Reflections,” in *Readings and Resources in Youth Ministry*, ed. Michael Warren (Winona, Minnesota: Saint Mary's Press, 1987), 45.

Another weakness in the relational ministry stage is that too often overzealous ministers forget to “shut-up” and listen to the youth in front of them. Youth should not have to fight for a place at the table or to be heard.<sup>22</sup> For relational ministry to achieve its goal of “welcoming” youth ministers who use this model must keep in mind that the voice of the youth that they minister to is valuable. By “shutting-up” and listening to what the youth needs, wants, desires, etc. youth ministers will be better positioned to teach them about the faith in a language drawn from what has been shared.

### **Stage Two: Evangelization**

Once youth have formed a healthy connection to the faith community, it will be natural to want to share what they have found with others. At this point, youth ministers should offer social activities and service-learning experiences as they will most likely be eager to share the joy that they have, hopefully, found in the Church. It is at these gatherings that the youth minister will have the best opportunity to evangelize.<sup>23</sup>

The essential elements that youth ministers should incorporate into the stage of evangelization are witness, outreach, proclamation, invitation, conversion, and discipleship. Of these, the most important element of evangelization is proclamation as “there is no true evangelization if the name, teaching, the life, the promises, the Kingdom, and the mystery of Jesus are not proclaimed.” Evangelization, in other words, begins with the sharing of Christ.<sup>24</sup>

In deconstructing this stage, the primary concern that arises is the presence of proselytizing in place of faith sharing. A youth minister or even youth who are excited to share their faith and to proclaim the work of Christ may, at times, press others to accept and believe Church teachings and traditions before they are ready to. This is especially common among traditionalists who, as this paper showed above, see it as their duty to convert non-believers to the Faith and believers to seeing the teachings and the traditions of the Church in the same way that they do.<sup>25</sup> To approach evangelization in this way causes great harm. Youth cannot be pressured to accept Faith teachings and traditions until they are ready to, especially those who struggle with genderism, sexual identity, racism, etc.. Evangelization through youth ministry must allow them the space they need to explore the Good News in light of their social context and understanding. Jesus took his time in evangelizing non-believers, youth ministers must also do the same if they are to be effective in fostering meaningful connections to the life and love of Christ.

### **Stage Three: The “Moment of Recognition”**

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<sup>22</sup> For a more detailed look at the theology of place sharing, see Andrew Root, *Revisiting Relational Youth Ministry: From a Strategy of Influence to a Theology of Incarnation* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2007).

<sup>23</sup> Zanzig, *Youth Ministry*, 46

<sup>24</sup> United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Renewing the Vision: A Framework for Catholic Youth Ministry* (Washington DC: USCCB, 1997).

<sup>25</sup> An example of a traditionalists who has been identified as proselytizing under the name of “evangelization” is Dr. Taylor Marshall. Dr. Marshall is a well-known traditionalists scholar who uses social media platforms to explain the Faith through the lens of rigid traditionalism. To learn more about Dr. Marshall and his ministry, see <https://taylormarshall.com>.

The “moment of recognition” is not the same as “conversion or encounter that a youth in some way was thunderstruck by the faith in some emotional sense overwhelmed by the presence of God.”<sup>26</sup> Although some youth do experience these moments of great conversion, like St. Augustine did as a youth in a garden, not many of them do. The essential goal of this stage is therefore to guide a young person to a new understanding or acceptance of something that they had not thought of before or had previously dismissed or rejected. Moreover, although the youth minister can (and should) offer opportunities to youth in which “the individual might find the faith attractive and worthy of consideration, it cannot force the youth to accept the faith or live it out.”<sup>27</sup> Like the stage of evangelization, youth must feel free to explore, whether through questioning or thought experiments. For it is through the process of exploration that they will find either what they are looking for or what God desires for them. Those are the moments that will bring them to “recognition,” and they will see the Faith fully alive and at work. A weakness in this stage is that youth ministers may be tempted (or feel pressured) to manufacture the perfect opportunities for “moments of recognition.” A good example of this can be seen in the summer teen conferences held across the US. Any youth minister who has taken a group of their youth to one of these conferences often lament that it is hard to keep their youth excited about their faith after they return home. Opportunities like these, which are designed to prompt these types of moments, fail to offer youth suitable, lifelong recognition of faith teachings; youth ministers should be aware of the fleeting theological awakenings that this stage may encourage them to foster.

Lastly, postmodernists who are eager to deconstruct theological insights or guide their students through a process of reflection in an effort to prompt youth towards “moments of recognition,” also may cause harm if they do not adequately prepare the youth for what they experience. Therefore, postmodernists should take the necessary time in providing the necessary foundation that you need in order to “unpack” the experience for which they encounter within and outside the walls of the Church.

#### **Stage Four: Systematic Catechesis**

In stage four, the “Wedge Model” sees that youth are now ready to participate in the systematic teachings of the Faith, its depth and meaning. It is not enough to just have the youth recite the teachings of the faith, for this stage to be effective, youth need a safe space to explore and question the teachings and traditions of the Faith. So that youth stay engaged with what is presented in this stage, this exploration must also be “creative, enjoyable, and interesting.”<sup>28</sup> Youth, that is, should be offered lessons on the Faith written in a language that they understand and in a manner that captures their interest so much so they remain lifelong Truth seekers.

One major weakness this stage has lies at the question of whether or not it should come before the “moment of recognition.” As mentioned above, it is important to provide youth the anchors they need to be able to discern theological teachings and Church history and traditions. With this in mind, it would make better sense to situate this stage of intellectual formation earlier in the

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<sup>26</sup> Zanzig, *Youth Ministry*, 46.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 47-48.

process. A response to this question will be furthered explored in the reconstruction of the “Wedge Model.”

### **Stage Five: Service**

When youth are properly formed it is natural for them to find ways to give back to their community. “This is not only the natural desire of Christians but one of the most attractive characteristics of many young people.”<sup>29</sup> Thus, as youth mature in their faith, they often begin to look for ways to fulfill their desire to live out the Good News. A well-formed youth ministry program offers many service-learning opportunities for youth to explore what they have learned in the classroom. It is these forms of volunteer opportunities that youth will learn about the beauty of their faith practice, informed by their own experience, in an environment that also will offer the opportunity to explore and question what they are now experiencing in their serving of the other.

The weaknesses of this stage are similar to the “moments of recognition” and “evangelization.” Any service opportunity must be constructed with great care and thought if it is to be effective in guiding youth to a deeper appreciation of their faith. A youth leader, for example, should not return home from a service-learning experience without having a plan for their youth in terms of discerning what it is that they encountered. So that the youth experience is not forgotten as soon as they arrive home, group discussions, a review of major events during the time volunteering, and an examination of one’s faith understanding is needed.

### **Stage Six: Leadership Development & Ministry**

The last stage of the “Wedge Model” process is the acceptance of a leadership role within the faith community. Youth who have successfully moved through each of the prior stages and who have a desire to accompany youth on their journey “will respond [to the invitation to lead] as well as seek ways to share and celebrate the Good News with others in the community.”<sup>30</sup> The overarching aim of the “Wedge Model” is to foster this natural process which will guide the formation of strong Christian communities.

Rooted in the theology of friendship and accompaniment this last stage has few weaknesses. It is important to remember, however, that youth are emotional beings and may need additional guidance in forming proper leadership styles. For a faith community can be gravely damaged, as evident in the most recent scandals of the Catholic church, by poorly formed leaders.

### ***3.2 Reconstructing the Wedge Model***

Now that the “Wedge Model” has been deconstructed, it is now time to refashion the pieces into a new cohesive unit that that both traditionalists and postmodernists may use to create effective youth ministry programs. As this model is reconstructed, there are two insights that are worth briefly exploring as theses may serve as good guides for traditionalists and postmodernists in framing the use of this model in their contexts.

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<sup>29</sup> Zanzig, *Youth Ministry*, 41-70.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

## **Lens of Disaffiliation**

The first insight that traditionalists and postmodernists should keep in mind is that this new model is refashioned through the lens of disaffiliation. As mentioned in the introduction, postmodernists and traditionalists both share a common concern in regard to the rapid disaffiliation among Millennials and Generation Z.<sup>31</sup> The disaffiliation lens, therefore, is needed as any new model of youth ministry must keep in mind the youth who live on the margins of faith. Postmodernists and traditionalists must find meaningful ways to reach beyond the youth who regularly attend Mass, youth retreats, and other youth-oriented events as reaching out to the those who live in the faith margins is at the core of missionary discipleship.

## **Lens of Liberation**

The next needed lens for new models of youth ministry is liberation of human dignity. *In the Scandal of Redemption: When God Liberates*, Oscar Romero asserts that the need to liberate human dignity, especially among the oppressed, is paramount. Romero goes further to explain that “salvation begins with the human person, with human dignity, with freeing everyone from sin.”<sup>32</sup> Youth today are oppressed in many ways whether it be due to their gender identity, race, religion, or because of their young age; their voices go unheard and they are often not invited to the table of meaningful dialogue. Therefore, new youth ministry models must also include a liberative lens; it must seek an answer to the question: how may youth ministry liberate youth from objects of oppression?

Arthur Canales explains that “pastorally, liberation involves growth, learning, maturing, and conscious development, and adolescents, as with all people, must continue to struggle toward transformation if authentic liberation is the goal.”<sup>33</sup> For a new model of youth ministry to have liberation as its practicing lens it must include these types of opportunities, youth must be accompanied and freely given the space that need for spiritual, emotional, and physical development. Canales further asserts that “liberation within youth ministry should facilitate the challenge and struggle that young people encounter moving from a naïve consciousness to a critical consciousness.”<sup>34</sup> Youth, therefore, should be challenged to look beyond their ordinary lives and go out to the margins, just as Christ did and continues to do.

## **The “Bridge Model” for Youth Ministry**

The “Bridge Model” for youth ministry is a redacted model drawn from the deconstructed “Wedge Model” of youth ministry. For the purpose of brevity and clarity, this paper will present this new model with some reflective thoughts on what each stage would look like in practice.

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<sup>31</sup> For more information in regard to religious trends in Generation Z, see the Barna Study: Gen Z available at <https://shop.barna.com/products/gen-z>.

<sup>32</sup> Oscar Romero, *The Scandal of Redemption: When God Liberates the Poor, Saves Sinners, and Heals Nations*, Plough Spiritual Guides: Backpack Classics (New York: Plough Publishing House, 2018), 53-54.

<sup>33</sup> Arthur Canales, “Models for Adolescent Ministry: Exploring Eight Ecumenical Examples,” *Religious Education* 100, no. 2 (2006), 214.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

With this in mind, broader future conversations on this model will further assist its development and use within the traditionalist and postmodern Catholic parish.

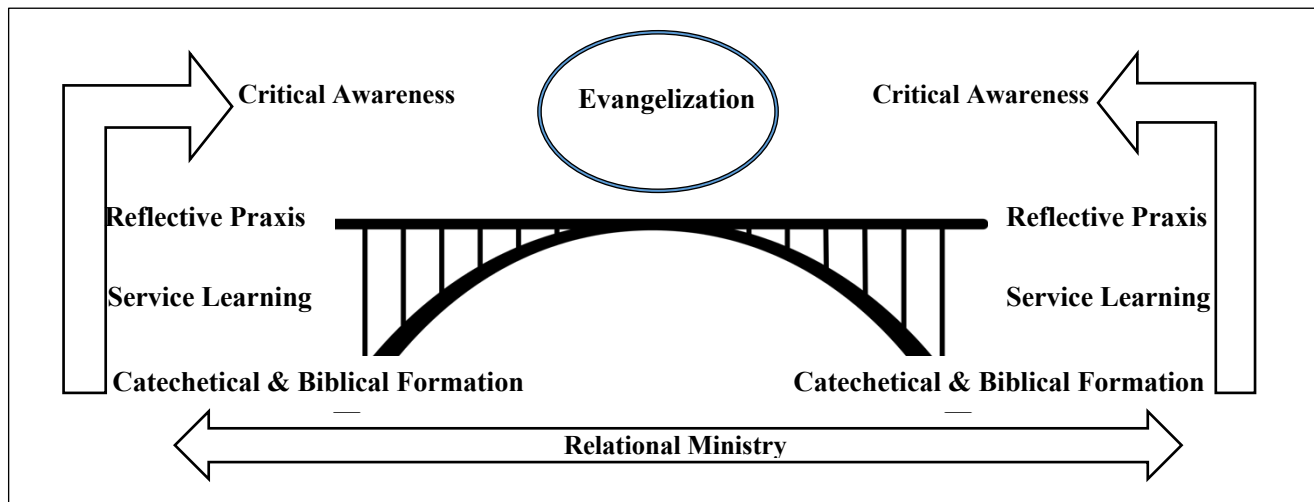


Figure 1.2. illustrated by Dr. Jodi Hunt, PhD

### **Stage One: Catechetical & Biblical Formation (Systematic Catechesis)**

The first stage of the “Bridge Model” of Youth ministry is reflects both of the traditionalist and postmodern belief that youth cannot be properly formed unless they are provided “straw for the bricks.” By offering youth the teachings and traditions of the Church as a first stage in their spiritual journey, they will be well equipped to better understand Christ and his teachings which, in turn, will afford them the opportunity to nurture a relationship with Christ and his teachings.

To add, Biblical formation is also needed as youth can gain valuable insight in studying and contemplating the Scriptures. For it is only when youth have basic knowledge of their faith that they will be inclined to reflect upon this knowledge in dialogue with their everyday lived experience. Intellectual formation, in other words, serves as the catalyst for further inquiry into the teachings and traditions of the faith. Youth who are not intellectually formed remain stagnant in their faith life as they lack the necessary maps to assist them in understanding where they are going and have been while walking on their faith journey.

### **Stage Two: Service Learning (Service)**

Once youth have been instructed about their faith they should then be encouraged to go out and see the world which lies beyond the walls of the Catholic Church. Contrary to what many of today’s youth ministry programs do in relation to service-learning projects (i.e. mission trips, volunteering in soup kitchens, visiting the elderly, etc.), the stage of service learning is not directing youth to spread the message of the Gospel (that will come in the final stage) to those who live on the margins.

Service learning is a chance for youth to “see and to know;” to be challenged in thinking beyond themselves, to connect to their neighbor. It is during this stage that youth should be also provide

ample opportunity to reflect upon what it is they are experiencing in the greater world in conversation with their intellectual formation.

### **Stage Three: Reflective Praxis (“Moment of Recognition”)**

Stage three offers youth the space and freedom to explore what they have seen in their lived experience as well what they have learned about their faith. After experiencing life of the margins, some youth may struggle with reconciling the Faith with the shared experiences of “the other.” Youth, therefore, will need to be made to feel safe in exploring questions like “what does God allow suffering?” As they need to know that judgment will not be past for their questioning of the teachings and traditions of the Church.

In some ministerial contexts, it may be good to guide youth through the reflective process using a specific model of reflections or praxis. These can be helpful in that they allow participants clear guidance in the process of reflection. For traditionalists and postmodernists, reflection can serve as a “springboard” into helping youth better understand why they think the way that they do. This process in its self can be quite liberating as it allows youth to see that their questioning is a valuable expression of their human dignity.

### **Stage Four: Critical Awareness (Leadership Development and Ministry)**

Stage four of the “Bridge Model” is rooted in Paulo Freire’s pedagogical method of critical consciousness or awareness. Working from Freire’s understanding that critical awareness is the act of interjecting into a lived reality in order to transform it, the goal of this stage is to guide youth in unifying what they have learned through their intellectual formation with the experiences they encountered outside the walls of the Church. It is during this stage that youth ministers should continue the process of reflection, but with the added aim to uplift the cries of the voiceless.<sup>35</sup> Youth should, moreover, be challenged to reflect upon their own social and cultural context in light of what they have seen or experienced as doing so will open their hears and eyes to seeing how changes in their immediate surroundings can greatly impact the other. Arriving at the point of critical awareness is an essential step youth will need to take on their journey in becoming part the liberative process of changing the world.

One of the primary concerns of the traditionalist movement and subsequent parishes is that they do not engage in the outside world. Although traditionalists are critical of the outside world, they do little to dialogue with it. Many traditionalist parishes, moreover, are largely insular. Therefore, this stage will press traditionalists to go outside of their immediate faith community and connect to and seek to better understand the secular world.

Stage four offers youth “new eyes” to see their faith as it connects to the greater world in which they are citizens of. A youth’s efforts to evangelize will not be effective if they are not aware of the real needs, spiritually, emotionally, and physically, of the those whom they long to share the Good News with. Much in the same way that Christ intimately knows his people’s needs, wants,

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<sup>35</sup> See Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014).

and desires, youth should also be challenged to get to know their neighbors in the same way for if critical awareness is not pursued, evangelization will remain ineffective.

### **Stage Five: Evangelization (Evangelization)**

The final stage of the “Bridge Model” of youth ministry is evangelization. Once youth have reconciled their faith beliefs and understandings and have a better sense of the needs and faith desires of “the other” will they be ready to go out and share the Good News. The primary reason why evangelization was placed as the final stage is, as mentioned above, the Good News will not be well received if it is not extended out like a bridge to “the other.” Youth should be encouraged to act like engineers of a bridge, to extend the Good News one steel beam at a time, reaching towards where “the other” is. At times, youth may feel discouraged or uncomfortable in sharing the Good News with people with whom they have little in common with, but with solid formed critical awareness these barriers to evangelization will, in time, diminish.

The central goal of evangelization in the “Bridge Model” of youth ministry is to offer Christ’s liberative love to “the other.” With this in mind, this stage must be critical of any method of evangelization that encourages proselyting. Additionally, in sharing the Good News, youth should be encouraged to also seek opportunities to integrate the living of Catholic Social Teaching in fighting for justice and defending human dignity. Traditionalists and postmodernists should reclaim the process of evangelization as it was practiced in the early Church. Although Christ did not avoid teaching the Truth to nonbelievers, no matter how difficult it was to do at times, he was also very clear that his love for God’s children never changed, no matter who the person was and what he/she chose to do; Jesus loved them simply because they were a child of God. If the Catholic Church is to ever move people back to the Faith, this too must be at the heart of how it evangelizes. Once can imagine how well-formed youth evangelizers could change the greater world for the better.

### **Relational Ministry**

In the “Wedge Model” of youth ministry, relational ministry is situated as the first stage, however, in the new model that this paper offers it is intentionally moved from the status of stage to “constant.” The reason why relational ministry is approached this way in the “Bridge Model” is based upon the understanding that relational ministry is not a single stage, but rather a continually foundation for the accompaniment of youth. That is, without strong relationships, youth will flee their faith journeys altogether, whether it be out of fear, confusion, or lack of interest. For this reason, relational ministry should be viewed as a tool for sustaining the context of accompaniment. It is, in other words, the earth in which our bridges are built upon.

## **4. To Wings: A Sacred Pedagogy for Youth Ministry**

The Catholic Church and secular world are both gravely concerned about the social and political chaos that has befallen much of our world today. The Third Millennium has, unfortunately, bred renewed hatred between people of different faiths, genders, sexual identity, and race. Within in the Catholic church, fault lines, as mentioned in the introduction, continue to swell between traditionalists and postmodernists as they fight to show who is “really” Catholic or which



liturgical celebration is going to keep Catholics “Catholic.” In the midst of these tensions, as this paper outlines, are places for unifying different pastoral approaches in one cohesive model that will benefit both in their own quest in bringing the liberating love of Christ to young people. This is what good sacred pedagogy offers, some dirt to repair the fault lines between faith divisions.

At the root of Yves Congar’s “sacred pedagogy” is his understanding that the “world can become sacred; but that this is decidedly not an ontological transformation” of reality so much so that this transformation is a “functional” one. That is, Congar “advocates a sacred pedagogy that can respond to both the loss of a sense of the sacred in culture in general, and to the muddled attempts made by others.”<sup>36</sup> In light of the newly formed “Bridge Model,” the art of refashioning the “Wedge Model” out of the roots of liberative methods creates aims to create this same sacred pedagogy for use within both traditional and postmodern Catholic parishes. For the traditionalist parish who has lost a sense of the culture, this sacred pedagogy will assist in their formation of dialogue between the sacred and the lived experience of the disaffiliated. On the other hand, the sacred pedagogy that arises out of this model will also help the postmodern parish in as far as it will help their youth ministry programs reconnect to the sacred out of their understanding and embracing of the outside world. It is through this sacred pedagogical balance that traditionalism and postmodernism will find unity which, in turn, will benefit the growth and development of the future Catholic church.

What does sacred pedagogy look like in practice? There are numerous ways to incorporate the “Bridge Model” into a youth ministry program as many programs already have the stages in place in some form. Even so, to be effective in deepening youth’s connection to the sacred and their call to express liberative love, these stages should be reformed to reflect how they have been outlined here. To properly achieve this in both traditional and postmodern settings, the primary task that needs to happen is the intellectual, spiritual, emotional formation of youth ministers. That is, if the “Bridge Model” is to be effective in accompanying youth to acting as liberators, the leaders that guide them there (ordained, religious, and laity) must also be at a place of critical awareness. The witness of youth ministers is the necessary step in offering wings to youth so that they may fly out into the world to share the liberative love of Christ.

## 5. Conclusion

Terrence McLaughlin’s work in Catholic education centers upon offering youth pathways “from roots to wings.” Youth, in short, need strong roots for flight; they need to be intellectually formed, religious inspired, and critically aware before they leave the ground. Youth also need the freedom, however, to fly or to go out and place into practice what they have witnessed and learned for if we do not let them fly then we have failed in our own mission of evangelization.

In the post synod exhortation, *Christus Vivit*, Pope Francis urges youth ministry to create opportunities that are “creative and daring” for youth so that they are inspired to “get messy” or involved with the life of the Church. The “Gospel,” Pope Francis points out, “also asks us to be daring, and we want to be so, without presumption and without proselytizing, testifying to the

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<sup>36</sup> Alec Arnold, “How to (Not) Make the World Sacred: Congar’s “Sacred Pedagogy,”” *New Blackfriars* (September), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12411>.

love of the Lord and stretching out our hands to all the young people in the world.”<sup>37</sup> Providing youth with roots through models like that of the refashioned “Wedge Model” will, as this paper has shown, give them the speed and wind that they need to fly out of the tensions which lie between traditional and postmodern approaches to youth ministry – their sharing the liberative love of Christ will see no boundaries. And that in itself is an awesome thing for our future Church.

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<sup>37</sup> Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit*, paragraph 235.

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