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Between and Between: Imagining the Gifts of Middle School Christian Religious Education

I. The Situation

A. Middle school aged learners (MLL) often find themselves “between and between” catechetical “grade school” curricula delivery and Confirmation classes within congregational Christian religious education (CRE) programs.

B. MLLs could benefit from the development of a practical theology (PT) of MLL CRE as well as a methodology with which to employ such a practical theology.

II. Birthing Partners

A. CRE scholars James Fowler, Thomas Groome, Mary Elizabeth Moore, and Paulo Friere bring particularly fruitful theological foundations to the conversation concerning the development of a PT of MLL CRE.

B. William Alexander and his scholarly successors offer an undeniably helpful dialogue with respect to middle school philosophy in the education academy; such philosophical frameworks will be put into dialogue with the CRE academy.

C. In order to develop a methodology for doing a PT of CRE for MLLs, the Parallel Curriculum Model (PCM) from the gifted education academy offers four parallels that lend themselves to a theological dialogue and implementation of such a PT; the authors of the PCM are primarily Joseph Renzulli and Carol Ann Tomlinson, among other notable gifted education scholars.

III. Why Is This Discussion Critical?

A. Developing a PT of CRE for MLLs offers the opportunity for a firmer foundation to teaching MLLs and assisting these young people in developing themselves into the Church of tomorrow – disciples to carry on the faith.

B. Human developmental psychology offers even more conversation partners such as Jean Piaget, Abraham Maslow, and Erik Erickson as to the critical nature in stages or “seasons” of human development within the age bracket of MLLs.

C. Ultimately, the span of years when MLLs are a part of congregations, newly fertile minds offer opportunity for exploration of Christian vocation and identity as these young people move toward Confirmation.

IV. Method and Methodology

A. As a PT of CRE for MLLs emerges, the primary conversation partners who bring possibilities to bear on it are Whitehead and Whitehead.

B. As the methodology of “doing” a PT of CRE for MLLs emerges from a dialogue with the PCM scholars, Holland and Henriot offer a fruitful grounding for the establishment of four parallels of implementation.

C. The method proposed to “deliver on” an emergent PT of CRE builds on the PCM as well as on the theological frameworks that will be built.

1. Building a Catechetical Core: Based on the “core” parallel of the PCM, this facet is the foundation and building blocks of Christian doctrine, history, and tenets of faith that young people would need to learn in order to protect and preserve their faith tradition; engagement in rich pedagogy, rather than a “delivery” model of a catechetical core is essential here.

2. Connecting the Learning Community: Founded on the “connections” parallel of the PCM, this strand of learning is about teaching young people how to build Christian community and be a fruitful, ethical and responsible member of their respective communities of faith and of society at large.

3. Engaging in a Pedagogy of Praxis: Anchored by the PCM’s “engagement in reflective practice,” this parallel offers MLLs a way of engaging in discovering who they are and what the church is – and what they believe it should be in the future – by enabling these young people to be “co-creators” of the once and future church;

4. Employing Christian Identity: Built upon the PCM’s “identity” parallel, this structure is what moves MLLs toward a vocational identity as disciples with gifts and talents complementary within a Christian community and in society in general; it is pivotal to note that the basis of this piece is NOT to create a “fixed” Christian identity and vocation, but, rather, to pedagogically engage young people so that they may embrace the evolutionary opportunities of the seasons of their lives as disciples of Christ.

V. Original Contribution to Scholarship

A. First, the goal is to bring and emergent practical theology of Christian religious education for middle level learners to the forefront of theological consciousness in congregational programs within the Church.

B. Second, the four-part methodology to implement this emergent theology brings opportunities to test, revise, retry, retest and eventually to solidify a new practical theology for doing Christian religious education for middle school level young people in congregational communities.