

Conference Notes

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ABSTRACT

The purposes of Conference Notes are both to inform readers of conference proceedings and to encourage dialogue among interested scholars and practitioners. In some instances, Reviews editors may be able to put readers in touch with conference participants. For more information, please email the editors.

“Pastoral Care for Youth” Conference

Organized and sponsored by the Youth in Mission Program

*Lutheran School of Theology, Chicago, IL
April 20-22, 2009*

After watching dozens of people walk up the aisle of the church sanctuary, I decided to join them. I knew exactly for whom I would light my candle—a student I taught years ago who barely made it to graduation but (I hoped anyway) had made safe passage to a college far, far away where he might have a clean slate and a group of friends that didn’t mind that he was gay and sometimes stuttered, and might even celebrate and affirm his impressive artistic talents and reflective bent. It was striking to me how easily this particular boy came to mind, even though I had not seen him in years. From the pulpit of this church, we were invited to light a candle and pray for someone we knew who has suffered the scars of bullying, and I suspect that everyone in that sanctuary could conjure up someone, if not themselves, with little effort. Everyone knows

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someone who was bullied, and who has bullied others.

We were lighting candles off of a common candle dedicated to Jaheem Herrera, an eleven-year-old boy whose mother, on April 16, 2009, found hanging by a belt in his room, already dead. This child—a boy still attending elementary school—had faced such a degree of bullying that, as his mother later reported him telling his best friend, he was tired of it. He was tired—tired of being harassed and tired of complaining to teachers and tired of seeing nothing being done. So tired that he felt that death was the easiest way out.

As deeply sad as this event was, Jaheem was the second boy in the same month to kill himself for this reason. Another eleven-year-old boy, Carl Joseph Walker-Hoover, also hanged himself. In March 2007, seventeen-year-old Eric Mohat shot himself. In all three cases, the primary taunt used by bullies was “gay.” None of these boys identified as gay, but all of them displayed some sort of characteristic that marked them as “different” from what [Judith Warner](#), in her piece in the *New York Times*, calls “the narrowest, stupidest sort of guy’s guy.”

When I arrived at the altar of the church to light my candle, I decided at the last minute to light it, not only for the particular boy I taught who had so easily come to mind, but for all boys. It has become clear to me that all of our boys need prayers, and more than prayers, our active involvement in finding ways to inoculate them against the poisonous “boy code” that holds both our boys and girls—and, more often than not, ourselves—in its thrall.

Just days after Jaheem’s death in Atlanta, in Chicago, [Robert Dykstra](#) delivered his keynote address, “Subversive Friendship: Pastoral Care with Adolescent Boys” as part of the *Pastoral Care for Youth* conference at the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago, April 20-22, 2009. Beginning with a reference to Jesus’ final words with his disciples before his arrest in John 15, Dykstra reminded us that Jesus characterized discipleship as “friendship,” that Jesus wanted to be known as “friend,” rather than “Lord and Master.” Friendship, it seems, is in fact the goal of Christian discipleship—friendship with each other and with Jesus.

Yet friendship is by no means an easy form of discipleship, particularly for boys. Our virulently homophobic culture makes same-sex friendship between boys an ongoing challenge, even into adulthood. Any hint of emotional vulnerability or intimacy can be taken as a form of weakness, labeled “gay,” and dissolve a friendship before one’s eyes. For Dykstra, whose work draws deeply from Freudian theory, the anxiety boys and men feel about same-sex relationships is unlikely ever to change. He cites Freud’s own unsuccessful attempts to strike down a “heterosexual fundamentalism” that cannot tolerate anything other than over-simplified binary construals of manhood and womanhood, which Freud understood as the particular struggle of boys’ early development as they negotiate their relationships with their mothers and then fathers. This fundamental struggle is at the heart of the “homosocial anxiety” produced by same-sex friendships in subconscious and societal forces, an anxiety too deep-seated to be transformed.

In light of the endurance of this anxiety, Dykstra focused his talk not on the eradication of “heterosexual fundamentalism,” but on subtle and nuanced ways in which youth workers might

help boys negotiate same-sex friendships in the midst of these dangerous waters. Drawing on [Henry Abelow's *Deep Gossip*](#), Dykstra proposed that youth workers consider becoming “curators of funny emotions” that have a “common ear for our deep gossip.” “Curators,” those who “take care,” are not therapists or healers; they do not “cure.” The “funny emotions” are those that are raised for boys as they attempt to forge same-sex friendships while avoiding the ever-present threat of being labeled “gay” or “weak” for enjoying that friendship or seeking too much emotional intimacy within it. In order to be a sensitive curator, however, one has to have a “common ear”—a sensitivity and awareness—for the “deep gossip,” or subterranean dynamics taking place (often unnamed) within the social settings in which boys live. Abelow describes “deep gossip” as “illicit speculation, information, [or] knowledge [that is] an indispensable resource for those who are in any sense or measure disempowered.”¹ That is, for boys caught in the impossible and disempowering situation of desiring human connection and affirmation of their true selves yet forbidden by society and their own anxieties to “let down their guard,” a subterranean language develops that communicates what cannot be spoken or named. Youth workers, then, must develop a sensitivity to the complexity of this dynamic in order to “take care” of the boys entrusted to them.

Dykstra offers three recommendations for those who would be “curators of funny emotions” with a “common ear for our deep gossip” in boys’ social settings, all related to the theme of “humus,” the Latin term for “earth” or “soil.” First, curators should avoid and prevent *humiliation* in boys by not saying out loud what you know or are learning from listening to the “deep gossip.” Because the boy code forbids any form of weakness, humiliation can easily destroy the fragile sense of dignity boys must maintain to survive. Dykstra notes that helping boys to avoid humiliation might include “letting boys keep their secrets, even from themselves.” For example, if one notices a friendship developing, one may not want to point this out, for to name it is to expose it to homosocial anxiety and thus kill it. It may also mean that engaging boys’ emotions may need to take indirect routes—through parable and allegory, or through *humor*, Dykstra’s second recommendation. Boys and men often express their “deep gossip” through humor, even through scatological humor and mild “put-downs,” and a curator may be able to use mild humor to diffuse anxiety, to give implicit permission to acknowledge certain realities indirectly, and even to heal by bringing everyone “down a notch” gently, allowing boys to “put down their guard” without humiliation. Third, Dykstra recommends curators cultivate a notion of a *humble, humane Jesus* that boys can befriend. If Jesus’ commandment to his disciples was to “love one another” and become his friends, then Christian discipleship for a boy might involve developing a habit of imagining oneself as Jesus’ “friend” in the same way he is friends with an actual best friend. This might even include an irreverent form of prayer life that talks to Jesus in the “artfully coded mockery” of humor that makes expressions of emotion and intimacy possible in boy friendships.

Dykstra thus offers a radical reinterpretation of what it means to develop a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, and therefore proposing a form of youth ministry that can offer some sort of spiritual and emotional “care”—if not “cure”—for boys navigating the toxic waters of our ho-

mophobic, patriarchal culture. Rather than starting with an abstract, idealized image of Jesus and encouraging boys to think of Jesus as their best friend, a notion that runs the risks either of superficiality (who can really be “friends” with an idealized image?) or of evoking homosocial anxiety (for intentionally to seek out a “friend” raises the specter of weakness or homosexuality), youth workers could instead encourage boys *to think of their best friends as Jesus*.

I take Dykstra’s notion to have two meanings, and therefore two implications for pastoral care. First, if boys think of friendship with Jesus the same way they think of friendship with a best buddy, they stand a greater chance of developing an authentic spiritual life. Talking to Jesus the way one goofs around with a buddy might be the best entrée into real relationship with God for adolescent boys—a relationship that for Christians is itself healing. Second, if boys think of an actual friend as Jesus, they stand a greater chance of forging healthy same sex friendships. Asking a boy to think of a buddy he already has as Jesus made manifest in his life can use the language of “deep gossip” to give permission to value and love that buddy without saying it explicitly and therefore exposing it to the withering force of the boy code. In this way, another healing can take place—the healing of at least some of the woundedness boys suffer from being denied outlets for emotional intimacy and self-affirmation that is at the heart of true friendship.

I do not know if these acts of care taking could have saved Jaheem. Or Carl. Or Eric. From the news reports, it appears that all of these boys did have buddies that truly liked them—and yet these friendships were not enough to stave off the alienation they felt amidst homophobic bullying. Perhaps if there had been some sensitive adults around listening to the deep gossip, they might have found ways to encourage these boys in the friendships they had, to prevent the humiliation they clearly experienced daily, or to find ways to show them solace in humor. These seemingly tiny acts of subtly and indirection seem like meager tools for combating what is clearly a dangerous and deadly phenomenon. And yet, it may be the only tools we have.

The *Pastoral Care for Youth* conference, organized by the Youth in Mission program at Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago, was the first of what appears to be an annual youth ministry conference at LSTC. Next year’s conference, *Sacred Stories: Youth Faith Formation in an Interfaith World*, is scheduled for April 12-14, 2010, and will be done in partnership with the [Interfaith Youth Core](#). This conference, as the one I attended, aims to provide youth ministry practitioners with both the latest research and best practices in youth ministry. Knowing the work of IFYC, and based on the richness of ideas and resources I experienced at this year’s conference, I anticipate an event in 2010 worth attending for both practitioners and scholars in religious education.

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Notes

¹ Quoted by Dykstra. Henry Abelove, *Deep Gossip* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003): xii.