Youth Ministry in Modern America, by Jon Pahl

reviewed by David F. White in the March 13, 2002 issue

If we pay attention solely to popular media's portrayals of youth, we might be tempted to believe that adolescents are more free and powerful today than ever before. But some have detected a cultural hostility toward young people, manifested as blaming them for everything from rising crime rates to cultural decline. Since the early 1970s the real earning power of youth has diminished by approximately 30 percent, while requirements for securing middle-class employment have escalated, leaving the young less free to explore vocation and make their mark on history.

This marginalization of youth is reflected in recent legislation in which over 15 states have criminalized what were once considered experimental behaviors--public mischief, minor vandalism and gang affiliation. And the church has relegated youth to the periphery of congregational ministry. Theological scholarship has, with few exceptions, failed to offer critical perspectives or constructive approaches.

In his groundbreaking *Youth Ministry in Modern America*, Jon Pahl, associate professor of American religious history at Lutheran Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, addresses this problem. He describes four youth movements that he calls "the most significant groups of Christian believers in the second half of the twentieth century": Walther Youth League (Lutheran), Young Christian Workers (Roman Catholic), Youth for Christ (Evangelical Protestant) and African-American congregational youth ministries (Methodist, Baptist and United Church of Christ). Pahl traces these movements from 1930 to the present, focusing on them through the lenses of *purity* and *practices*. He argues that during the past 70 years youth ministry has moved from an emphasis on purity, centered on protective enclaves of like-minded individuals emphasizing Christian knowledge, to practices, consisting of active Christian service and engagement in the adult roles, risks and contradictions of the modern world.

Pahl celebrates the ways in which youth and youth ministry have shaped the 20th century. "Youth groups and organizations are among the most notable 20th-century examples of the institutional creativity of Christianity in the United States," he says. He argues that, rather than being passively shaped by social forces, youth ministry

has played a significant role in shaping history. Youth have moved beyond close-knit religious communities into educational institutions, service agencies and new social institutions that have contributed to the end of the "Puritan Epoch" in America. For example, as the U.S. moved from isolationist to internationalist policies, youth programs adapted by engaging in missions, social action and ecumenical and feminist movements. They developed a deeper social awareness.

Not only did exogenous social factors draw youth beyond Christian particularity, but endogenous factors, well-reasoned articulations of theological traditions and religious practices also compelled them to engage in active experiments with adult roles and responsibilities in the larger social world. Pahl notes the theological rationales, intrinsic to each of the four movements, that prompted them to cooperate across denominational lines in missions, Bible studies, worship forms and social activism. This cooperation and convergence produced a plurality of forms and opened public roles for women and youth. Emerging public values drew Christians beyond narrow concerns for purity.

Pahl also observes that as the state and marketplace competed with churches in forming youth, adult rites of passage became scattered across the larger culture. In reaction to the perceived hypocrisy of Christian purity preaching, youth created their own rites of passage--using adolescent rituals of sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll. He argues that these rites of passage receive their validation from a society that employs them to prepare youth for adulthood in a violent culture. To counter this diffusion and strengthen the roles of youth in the church, Pahl proposes that churches confer power on youth through their own rites-of-passage programs. He also proposes that both purity and practices become more balanced in Christian youth ministry, grounded in the depths of Christian theological thought. For this grounding, he recommends René Girard's understanding of a nonviolent gospel of Christ.

> For Girard, this is what Christianity means: Christ came to save us from violence by exposing its sway over us and by showing us a better way. Christians affirm that on the cross God incarnate was crucified by legitimated violence. This event means that no one is immune; all share responsibility for the desires to dominate and for the scapegoating at the root of violence. The cross means further that God identifies with those who suffer and who are victimized by violence. Through the cross comes the Christian affirmation of the resurrection. The resurrection means that love is stronger than death. Violence fails; love prevails.

It takes courage to be the first to write a history of a marginalized population. Raising youth and ministry to consciousness is a prophetic act that challenges our distorted perceptions of both. As women and minorities are reclaiming their suppressed histories, Pahl reminds us that youth and youth ministry also played important roles in shaping American culture. He does not merely describe the past but identifies ways the church can be more faithful in its work with youth and more attentive to the call of the gospel. His attention to how the U.S. church and its youth ministries have related to violence is key, as is his call to deeper theological reflection on the issue. Also important is Pahl's focus on alternative rites of passage as a means to resist and counter the forces that would marginalize youth. If the church is to be a force for life and liberation for young people, it must risk engaging in scandalous ways to empower youth.

However, as important as Pahl's work may be, it is limited by its middle-class bias. Pahl doesn't attend to the historical construction of the institution of adolescence and its role in the logic of the middle class. His observation that youth have been historical agents throughout this century fails to acknowledge that this agency has largely been limited to the middle class. His work could be extended through a deeper consideration of the relation of youth ministry to the middle-class institution of adolescence.

There have been times when the contradictions of adolescence were not felt so starkly as today. In preindustrial American villages, youth worked alongside adults, exploring adult roles, values and norms, and making their mark in the world in valued social roles. Industrial capitalism necessitated new and different forms of work and social relations, including a contradictory mix of freedom and oppression. It gave rise to the need to protect vulnerable children and youth from meaningless and brutal work. Adolescence with all of its concomitant structures--family, high school, church youth group, scouting, sports, YMCA and YWCA--became a key institution for protecting youth and containing life threatened by industrialization.

The fundamental contradiction of the institution of adolescence is that while it temporarily protects life and meaning, it simultaneously exists to support, prepare people for and thus make possible alienating structures of work that strip away life and meaning. Moreover, in some cases adolescence was used deliberately to stall progressive politics. For example, during the Great Depression, with the specter of the Bolshevik revolution still looming in people's minds, and a growing civil discontent among youth displaced from their failed family farms, Franklin D.

Roosevelt created youth camps for promoting middle-class values and funneling many malcontent youth into high schools. Though these structures distracted youth from their alienation and offered them some sense of purpose, they also inhibited more significant social change that would have created greater opportunity for the young and poor.

Since its inception adolescence has borne the values, norms, hopes and fears of the emergent middle class. The fear of destitution experienced during the Depression and the desire for greater security nudged the middle class into dependence on large corporations, a shift away from their former independent agricultural life and early entrepreneurial capitalism. The middle class had sufficient resources to forego the work of young people long enough to allow them to attend high school--and used high school as a means of segregating their young from working-class youth. The middle class sought to protect its young people from harsh industrial work, but it also removed them from significant social roles. It sought for its children professional employment demanding extensive education--thus creating a context for what is now considered normal parent-youth conflict.

Today, middle-class values and norms are predominant in the media, in the rhetoric of politicians, in religious discussions of morality and in our theories of human development. They have so permeated our consciousness that we view the middle class as the universal class. It has come to represent puritanical religious values, rugged self-reliance, education, hard work, family, charity and patriotism. But it has also embraced an odd set of contradictory values--market values, competition, accommodation to corporate power, unreflective common sense and reliance on the media. Adolescence focuses these values and contradictions in particular ways.

Few of the congregations that try to address the ever-shifting question of how to engage youth in ministry have a deep understanding of the history of adolescence. But without understanding the social forces that shape adolescence, youth ministry risks becoming domesticated by those forces. Pahl's limited perspective fails to account for the simultaneous rise of adolescence and the middle class and the resulting diminished power of youth. In his constructive suggestions, he fails to consider that a mere ritual conferring of power, unaccompanied by real social power, risks creating yet another contradiction that feeds youth resentment and rebellion. Many congregations have struggled with ways to confer symbolic power through rites of passage, yet congregations and their youth inevitably face barriers posed by largely middle-class expectations about the appropriate roles and abilities of youth.

Unless congregations learn to question, resist or transform these cultural expectations and realities, the rites of passage they offer risk domestication by interests finally hostile to youth.

Questions for the church to consider are: In whose interests are youth warehoused in educational institutions with less than full power for longer than any age cohort in the world's history? In whose interest are youth targeted as passive consumers, muting their historical role as agents of justice? In whose interest do the media construct caricatures of youth, as incapable, irresponsible or violent? In whose interest are 15 states writing legislation trying adolescents as adults? How has the need to create market niches among adolescents contributed to the alienation of youth from family, church and local and community authorities? How have the needs of the market done violence to the call of vocation among youth--who must deny their deepest yearnings for the good and holy in order to become marketable? These questions seething beneath the realities of adolescence and ministry are pivotal, and beg a whole range of other questions about class and power, insufficiently addressed in this volume.

Pahl's argument that youth ministry has been a source of social awareness has merit in a limited sense, yet one could hardly say with confidence that youth ministry has been a major force for structural change. While youth groups may be building homes with Habitat for Humanity and helping to staff local food banks, few have thought about the economic-political structures that create poverty, and fewer still have challenged these with religious fervor. Indeed, the forays into social service made by Christian youth groups have at times sufficiently salved middle-class consciences to allow us to maintain our acquisitive lifestyles. The church has at times perpetuated domesticating images and roles for youth more fitting of middle-class norms than the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Pahl's work goes some distance toward revealing youthful yearnings for justice, compassion and fullness. He presents a shadowy outline of youth in a prophetic role, calling the church and society to God's reign. But ultimately Pahl has the same limited perspectives that inhibit youth, the church and the academy. He does, however, recognize the provisional nature of his work and issues a challenge for further research on behalf of youth and ministry. Will the church and academy be able to reconsider its assumptions about adolescent gifts and abilities? Will it bring its resources to bear on these issues to clarify for the church its call to nurture young people in their holy vocation, even in ways that are scandalous to its own middle-

class assumptions? Faith requires no less.