

# Seminary for teens: Lilly's Youth Theological Initiative

by [Amy Frykholm](#) in the [November 30, 2010](#) issue



Hannah Breckenridge at Youth Theological Initiative 2009, Candler School of Theology. Photo by [Cindy Brown](#).

Rivonte Moore, 17, doesn't think of himself as a theologian. But he raised his hand in a class at Atlanta's Candler School of Theology last summer to debate the meaning of the term "sentimental nihilism" as used by Cornel West in *Democracy Matters*.

Moore was one of 39 students at Candler who took part in the Youth Theological Initiative (YTI)—three weeks of learning, service and reflection for youth of high school age. Moore, from Jacksonville, Florida, has no plans to enter the ministry but found his time at Candler surprisingly exciting. "I thought it would be cool. I didn't think it would be this cool."

He was moved by the visit to a synagogue, where the singing in Hebrew was very different from his own church experience, yet the prayers were to the same God. He was stunned to learn that Muslims pray five times a day; in his tradition, showing up at church once a week was enough. He enjoyed meeting people from different

backgrounds and figuring out how to express himself and how to listen. He doesn't know what impact all of this will have on his life, but he does not question that he has been changed.

Candler has been bringing high school students to its campus for a summer academy in theology since 1993. More than 500 students have passed through the program. The Lilly Endowment has extended funding for YTI to almost 50 theological schools, reaching more than 11,000 students so far. The brainchild of Lilly religion director Craig Dykstra, YTI was started at Candler as a pilot program in response to concerns about the state of youth ministry. Dykstra remembered reading Bonhoeffer with his minister when he was a teenager and engaging matters of faith in some depth. He worried that after the 1960s, youth ministry turned more to organizing water balloon fights and other kinds of fun and games, as if leaders were convinced that young people would be turned off by more serious activities.

Dykstra and others wanted to give youth a chance to become involved with theology, as well as to give a boost to the next generation of pastors. Don Richter, the founding director of the program at Candler, saw a need to engage teens at a moment when they can "fall in love with theology." He thinks teens are ready for what Alfred North Whitehead called the romance stage of learning, the stage at which a person's passions ignite.

From the beginning, Richter said, "this was about more than the kids. They were important, but we also wanted to reform theological education. We wanted the particular concerns of young people to be on the radar screen of theological educators."

With dozens of theological schools now engaged in programs similar to Candler's, Richter sees evidence of the cultural shift that he had hoped for. Instead of being baffled by why teens would want to attend a summer academy in theology, he said, theological school administrators all over the country are thinking about how to engage young people in creative ways. They have devised programs that include such activities as studying classical texts, participating in service projects, "shadowing" pastors, taking study trips around the world, spending time in wilderness areas and organizing worship services.

Each school that undertakes a youth initiative gives it a particular stamp. At Duke Divinity School, organizers put a strong emphasis on worship and liturgy. At Candler,

the emphasis is on ecumenical and interfaith encounter. At St. John's University in Minnesota, leaders introduce young people to various forms of Christian prayer.

Anabel Proffitt, director of the Leadership Now! program offered by Lancaster Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania, said the program was a response both to Lilly's invitation and to a recurrent challenge identified by local pastors: teaching confirmation. "Pastors were saying that they didn't know what to do about confirmation, how to work with youth and how to help volunteers who wanted to work with youth." Lancaster developed a multifaceted program that includes "confirmation days" held at the seminary, in which young people come to experience worship in a different setting, meet with seminarians and ask questions. The school also hosts retreats and holds youth events.

These developments set the stage for the seminary's summer youth academy and its Summer Global Experience. Youth who have attended the academy are invited to extend their understanding of Christianity by means of an international trip. The results of this program have been rich. The first year, for example, a group traveled to Lesotho, South Africa, and visited an orphanage. A year later, the group found out that the orphanage had burned down. At a Lancaster retreat held to decide how to respond to what had happened, the young people opted to raise money to rebuild the orphanage. Their efforts yielded \$30,000, and they learned many skills in the process.

Despite the unique emphases of the various programs, nearly all have included these three elements: theological and intellectual reflection; service and exposure to the Christian tradition of social justice; and worship. Underlying these activities are two core elements: an experience of intentional community and a consideration of Christian vocation.

In order to build an intentional community, the program leaders carefully recruit and select students. Both Jeffrey Kaster at St. John's and Fred Edie at Duke said that relationships with particular congregations and pastors have been crucial for recruitment. Pastors refer the program to high school seniors who they think have the appropriate skills and interests. Beth Corrie at Candler has built close relationships with youth empowerment organizations and with a Catholic high school in Atlanta that gives her program a steady pool of diverse applicants. Candler receives 60 to 70 applications from young people per year and generally accepts more than half of them.

For the application process, students write four essays. Corrie reasons that by the time the students complete that much work, they are a self-selecting group. "The ones who make this effort are the ones we want," Corrie said. "I am always happy to find a place for as many of them as we can physically accommodate."

One of the crucial queries on the application is: "What questions can you imagine exploring in this context?" From the beginning students are asked to critically examine their own religious tradition. They are asked to do what for many of them is a first-time effort: put church and intellectual pursuits together.

Some programs are undertaken for only a week at a time, some for two. Corrie is committed to allotting her program a minimum of three weeks for the sake of the community experience. "If you know anything about the psychology of intentional community, you know there is a honeymoon phase followed by a crisis phase—which is followed, hopefully, by a movement beyond the crisis to true community." She finds that with high school students, the crisis phase occurs at about two weeks, when their "emotions are raw and their woundedness comes out." Pastoral care becomes critical. If the crises are navigated successfully, the following week can be one of more authentic community.

Intentional Christian community is built through "covenant groups" of students and mentors. Moore said that the covenant groups were his favorite part of YTI because they cultivated deep and ongoing relationships.

Community is also formed through worship. Kim Jackson, an assistant director at Candler, said she has noted a pattern: "The students say things that offend one another. But in the evening, they worship together. In worship, a lot of things are healed."

YTI worship is energetic, diverse, sometimes intense and sometimes playful. Jermaine McDonald, a course leader at Candler, helped the students in his class organize a worship service that represented their diverse backgrounds. They played drums and piano, sang in several languages and preached. After the worship service, the students lingered in the chapel, joking, laughing, singing and talking. They finally had to be kicked out by the leaders, who needed to lock up the building.

Program organizers hope that the cultivation of community will nurture questions of vocation. Candler tries to engage the teenage students actively in "public theology" by offering them a deeper understanding of their place in a diverse world. The young

people are called "scholars" in order to convey an instant respect for their intelligence and their capacities. Scholars choose an exploratory course that focuses on a text that their teacher is fond of. The rationale is that young scholars can become passionate about theology if they have an example of passion in front of them. Even if the text is theologically advanced, they can engage it.

At Candler the entire group takes a course titled "Faith, Ethics and the City," which uses the city of Atlanta as a theological laboratory for examining issues of racism, immigration and environmental justice. The students participate in an Interfaith Youth Service Day with Muslim, Buddhist, Jewish, Baha'i and Sikh young people.

The dynamic that encourages students to gain skills in public theology, build an intentional community and become more mature as Christians is complex. The programs plant seeds that organizers might never see grow. Corrie described her program as a "zip drive that gets downloaded into a scholar's brain. They spend the rest of their lives opening the files."

Studies conducted by YTI over the past decade indicate that 70 percent of the participants go on to study some theology in college and about 20 percent go on to seminary. But from the beginning, leaders recognized that the greatest impacts are difficult to measure.

For Lucia Hulsether, that impact was in mentoring. She came to YTI in 2003 as a restless high school junior who felt that her church youth group in Tennessee was too shallow. She had a passion for social justice and struggled to find an outlet for it. YTI met her needs and expanded her world. She remains close to both mentors and friends from YTI. When she decided to take on a college project dealing with the living wage, her activism came directly out of her YTI experience, and she was able to turn to YTI friends for support and advice.

One young man from Billings, Montana, introduced himself jokingly to his peers by saying, "Don't worry. I'm not armed." When he returned home from YTI after having met Coretta Scott King, he felt he had been given the tools and resources needed to confront a growing problem with neo-Nazism in his community.

Kim Jackson, one of YTI's long-term mentors, came to it as a person in need of support herself. The role of mentor is one that YTI makes available to seminary students. Mentoring involves the ability to engage young people both personally and theologically. The positions are coveted and the candidates carefully chosen.

Jackson has remained with YTI, cultivating her skills and serving as a mentor while pursuing ordination in the Episcopal Church.

One of the goals of YTI is to help young people take more responsibility for their own role in the church. As assistant director at Candler, Jackson, along with Kamasi Hill, convenes the governing council made up of YTI participants, mentors and administrators. During the first week of the academy last summer, a schedule change was proposed that needed to be approved by the council. A YTI alumnus had invited students to a "Take Back Our Park" rally at an Atlanta park, held in response to a violent attack that he and his partner had experienced at the park. The invitation created a problem because the rally was planned for the same time that a mass was scheduled for Catholic YTI students. How would this conflict affect community life?

Jackson posed a question: "Will Catholic students feel like they are less a part of YTI, forced to choose between activities and religious participation?" After the students on the council considered this dilemma for a while, student Courtney Hall said, "We need to start thinking creatively, y'all. We need to think outside the box." The council resolved the matter by asking the priest who was to conduct the mass if he could come earlier so that everyone would have the option of going to the rally.

After the meeting, Hall ran into Corrie, who asked, "How did council meeting go?"

"I can't tell you what we decided until we go before the whole group," Courtney said.

"Well, how was it for you?"

Hall smiled. "Empowering."

The Lilly Endowment's hope is that YTI will not only train and develop youth but will also help seminaries think differently about theological education. Proffitt said that shift has already taken place at Lancaster. "This program is integrated into the life of the seminary. It isn't just for the summer. Seminarians teach in the program. We've converted many to a different understanding of youth ministry. The ripple effect is huge."

St. John's Jeffrey Kaster agrees. His students come for two weeks the summer before their senior year. They develop a project that can be carried out in their home parishes before returning for a follow-up program the next year.

Said Kaster: "They've learned leadership by doing leadership. They come back after a year and say, 'This isn't so easy.' As they've tried to implement their projects, they find that people won't come to planned events—or they make a lot of calls and get no's. At the same time, the youth have amazing successes. They can accomplish more with a few phone calls than someone in a full-time youth position in a church."

Two participants from Kaster's academy went back to their home parish to work on engaging youth in worship. They collaborated with their liturgist and got 30 young vocalists and 20 young instrumentalists involved. The liturgist was inspired to start writing new music to incorporate the youth.

Richter insists that youth academies are not merely pipelines to seminaries, and every director I spoke with emphasized the importance of widening the idea of vocation. Duke Youth Academy director Fred Edie, whose book *Book, Bath, Table, and Time: Christian Worship as Source and Resource for Youth Ministry* has been a landmark in youth ministry, said he leans hard on the question of vocation and weaves it throughout the academy.

"Vocation is what honest, authentic Christian life looks like," said Edie. "We challenge the students with the question: What sorts of vocational possibilities are there for Christians and what is ruled out? We talk about warfare, for example, and serving in the military—is it a viable option for Christians? The bottom line is that by virtue of your baptism, the question is not will it be ministry for me, but what kind of ministry?"

Gerald Daigle, a Catholic student at YTI from Houston, is perhaps not quite ready to accept that challenge, but he is listening. When I asked him what field he intends to pursue in college, he told me—looking at me carefully to see my reaction—that he wants to be "the CEO of a weapons manufacturing company that has contracts with the U.S. government."

Daigle admitted that he likes to tell people that career-ambition story just to shock them. But then he described in detail some of his ideas about ways of conducting warfare that could result in fewer civilian casualties. He came to YTI after seeing a flyer for the program. "I'm an adventurous person. I'm the type of person who doesn't want to say, 'Oh, I wish I had done that.' I like to expose myself to different types of people and experiences."

Giving young people the skills to think critically about their religious tradition can mean giving them skills to think their way out of it. The first response of a young person to the methods of critical exegesis, for example, might be to throw the Bible out completely. The challenge is to guide a young person through the hard questions while also providing a rich context of community, worship and service that conveys a sense of belonging. Richter pointed out that it's hard to do all of that in just a few weeks.

Kaster expressed frustration at the current movement in Catholic circles to emphasize religious literacy. "I have yet to see a study that shows that literacy in itself fosters discipleship. What about emphasizing discipleship? What about challenging young people by asking what an authentic walk with Christ looks like?" Critically thinking congregants, people who have an adult faith, are the "great fear of the indoctrinators," Kaster said. "But our tradition says that even institutions are in need of reform and conversion. Our tradition calls for all of us to be asking how to be more faithful."

One challenge for YTI is to help young people when they return to their congregations. As Richter noted, young people are prone to disillusionment. The bar for Christian community is often set very high in YTI. Edie said that many pastors have taken up the challenge, inviting YTI alumni into leadership roles, discussing theology with them and inviting them to seek service opportunities. The advent of the Internet and social networking has been important to YTI because it enables students to be in immediate contact with one another. YTI leaders recently decided to convene an academy for alumni that would help them keep the relationships alive.

The Lilly Endowment has completed two rounds of funding for the youth academies. Forty-eight institutions received funding in the first round, 27 in the second. Some schools found it hard to fit a youth program into their overall goals and put their own stamp on it. Lilly is asking many of the successful programs to move toward being self-sustaining. So far students have paid about a quarter of the cost of running the academies, and institutions have had to make up the rest.

But the investment is invaluable. Last year at Lancaster, a group of longtime Leadership Now! participants gathered for a summit on justice where they were asked to create a poster about their YTI experience and what it had meant to them. Two young people made a drawing of the globe and then showed it exploding. "We had been living in a bubble," they said. "And then the bubble burst."