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Youth Ministry Research and the Empirical

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Abstract: The aim of this article is to discuss how one can understand empirical observations as a starting point for practical theological research, which is geared towards developing theological reflection, with a particular focus on the faith practices of children and young people. Three basic skills are suggested as keys in scholarly engagement with children and young people: observation as reception, listening as reception, and the importance of learning language. The authors show what happens theologically when youth ministry scholars apply these skills in practical theological research that focuses on the faith practices of young people.

Keywords: Youth ministry, practical theology, empirical research, faith practices, children, adolescents, theological reflection

Zusammenfassung: Dieser Beitrag diskutiert empirische Beobachtung als einen Ausgangspunkt für praktisch-theologische Forschung mit dem Schwerpunkt Glaubenspraxis von Kindern und Jugendlichen. Drei grundlegende Fähigkeiten werden für den wissenschaftlichen Umgang mit Kindern und Jugendlichen vorgeschlagen: Beobachtung als Rezeption, Zuhören als Rezeption und das Erlernen von Sprache.

Stichwörter: Jugendarbeit, praktische Theologie, empirische Forschung, Glaubenspraxis, Kinder, Jugendliche, theologische Reflexion

1 Introduction

How could working with children and young people and *observing* children and youth *in practice* help researchers to understand the relationship between empirical observations and theological reflections in a more comprehensive manner? In a search for the main features of a process for developing theological reflection

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based on empirical observations for youth ministry, we introduce the central theme of the empirical in relation to theological reflection in youth ministry research somewhat further, reflect on two recent practical theological studies on youth ministry practices, and develop important assumptions about how to best develop theological reflections. We present a vision of the core tasks of practical theologians involved in youth ministry research, focusing on the descriptive-empirical task and the activity of observation and listening. We discuss what happens theologically when youth ministry scholars observe the faith practices of young people, including listening to their experiences. In so doing, we clarify how empirical, practical theological research should be understood as a starting point for theological reflections in youth ministry.

2 The relationship between the empirical and theological reflection in Youth Ministry research

The term *youth ministry* refers to practices in which professionals and volunteers, inspired by the Christian faith, work with children and young people to discover, learn, and practice the gospel. Adults establish meaningful relationships with and among children and young people and may participate in different roles, like the missionary, the social worker or the pastor.¹ Faith practices of children and young people refer to such situations as gatherings, habits, actions, rituals, networks, and communities, in which children or young people are engaged and form their faith, either individually or collectively. Faith practices can be found both within and outside of the church.

Research studies in youth ministry often have theology (practical, systematic, and biblical) as their core discipline. Contributions are frequently interdisciplinary, which implies theological reflection combined with, for example, pedagogical, sociological, cultural, or psychological perspectives. In practical theology in general, and in practical theological research in youth ministry in particular, studying the empirical plays an important role in developing theological reflection. However, the relationship between empirical observations and developing

¹ Cf. Nick Shepherd, "Being a Christian Youth Worker: Finding Ourselves by Losing Ourselves," *Christian Youth Work in Theory and Practice: A Handbook*, ed. Sally Nash and Jo Whitehead (London: SCM Press, 2014), 1–12; Dean Borgman, *Kumbaya Is Not Enough: A Practical Theology for Youth Ministry* (Ada: Baker Books, 1995); Pete Ward, "Christian Relational Care," in *Relational Youthwork*, ed. P. Ward (Oxford: Lynx Communications, 1995), 13–40.

theological reflection is not often reflected on in an explicit or comprehensive manner.

Recently, Friedrich Schweitzer proposed a set of criteria for empirical studies in the field of lived religion among children and adolescents.² Two of these criteria illustrate *why* studying the empirical in faith practices of children and young people is particularly important: first, the understanding of religion must “[...] be open for the special experiences of children and adolescents and should not make the religion its tacit model (‘adultocentrism’);”³ and, second, the understanding of religion must “[...] combine non-religious interpretive perspectives with the openness for the religious self-understandings of believers, particularly of children and adolescents.”⁴ The latter criterion corresponds with the plea of Tobias Faix: “More research needs to be undertaken in the future with regard to the methodological approach of using mixed methods and also in relation to adolescents’ ability to speak about and understand their own faith constructs.”⁵

Studying the empirical in practical theological studies in youth ministry is important to gain insight into both the descriptions and interpretations of religious self-understandings or faith constructs of young people and to be able to build theology and design practices in which these insights are taken seriously. Especially in societies where predefined frameworks of faith, religion, and faith institutes are losing ground, young people’s self-understanding of faith, God, and faith/church community becomes all the more important. In such societal contexts, the special role of the practical theologian is first to observe and then to listen intently. Further, the practical theologian as scholar has to make empirical data interact with both traditional and new, and with theological and non-theological interpretative and normative frameworks, with the ultimate goal to strategically serve contemporary communities of faith. In this particular case the empirical data are generated from the experiences and voices of young people,

We are particularly interested in understanding the possibility of God’s revelation in and through the experiences of children and young people. But how can we best develop theological reflections starting with observing the faith practices of children and young people, including listening to their experiences, and not starting with confessional, biblical, or systematic reflections? We believe

² Friedrich Schweitzer, “Religion in Childhood and Adolescence: How Should It Be Studied? A Critical Review of Problems and Challenges in Methodology and Research,” *Journal of Empirical Theology* 27 (2014): 17–35.

³ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Tobias Faix, “Semantics of Faith: Methodology and Results Regarding Young People’s Ability to Speak about Their Beliefs,” *Journal of Empirical Theology* 27 (2014): 51.

that this meta-theoretical consideration on revelation and experiences can help with understanding how the empirical and theological reflections are interrelated. For example, Dean Borgman, in his recently republished work *Foundations for Youth Ministry*, presents a practical theological perspective on youth ministry practices, which suggests that there is, on the one hand, “a world these days,” and, on the other hand, “God, His perspective on the world, doing something in the world.”⁶ We will suggest and elaborate, however, that the (modern) world in itself has the potential to reveal God.

When it comes to identifying this challenge, we are not alone, but we think it is necessary to explicitly bring this view to the foreground with regard to the field of youth ministry research.⁷ This challenge comes close to that of Bonnie Miller-McLemore, who explains the practical feminist theological method of her book *Let the Children Come* (2003) by stating: “Reflection on children embodies the theological conviction that the divine manifests itself in the mundane [...]”⁸ We find ourselves in the same challenging position as is sketched by Joyce Mercer in *Welcoming Children*: “Practical theology, then, seeks to offer accounts of human experience and of the character and activity of God that are true in the sense of being ‘seriously imaginable’ credible accounts of both.”⁹ Our particular attempt in this article is to show three important skills (observation as reception, listening as reception and learning language) for the practical theologian, the youth ministry researcher in particular, with which to face this challenge, or what we will call this “hermeneutical struggle” (see section 5)

3 Reflection on two cases of youth ministry studies

Two recent practical theological studies, on youth worship and on religious-learning processes in the missionary context, demonstrate how the empirical

⁶ Dean Borgman, *Foundations for Youth Ministry. Theological Engagement with Teen Life and Culture*, 2nd edition (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 79.

⁷ Cf. also Andrew Root, “Regulating the Empirical in Practical Theology: On Critical Realism, Divine Action, and the Place of the Ministerial,” *Journal of Youth and Theology* 15, no. 1 (2016): 44–64.

⁸ Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, *Let the Children Come: Reimagining Childhood from a Christian Perspective* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), xxxii.

⁹ Joyce Ann Mercer, *Welcoming Children: A Practical Theology of Childhood* (St. Louis, Chalice Press, 2005), 12.

provides a starting point for building theology in youth ministry research.¹⁰ From these studies we derive three important assumptions for how we could develop theological reflections based on empirical observations.

3.1 Case 1: Sonnenberg (2014)¹¹

Ronelle Sonnenberg's central research question regarding youth worship is: *How is God mediated in youth worship and interpreted by adolescents?* To answer this question, during the period of 2007–2012, she used ethnographic methods to study eighteen youth worship gatherings in both local congregations and at national and international events. The way adolescents interpreted God and worship varied. For one group of adolescents, God was experienced as present. They were oriented to God in praise, for example, but they also reported on how God moved them in liturgy. These adolescents spoke of God as the one comforting them, guiding them, and giving them direction. Other adolescents spoke with doubt about God in relation to their youth worship experiences. These adolescents expressed an image of God and their faith as a quest. Sonnenberg labeled their experience as "God as a question." However, for yet another group of youths, the relationship between God and worship appeared not to be an issue; they "just joined." Sonnenberg labeled this reflection as "God?" Adolescents who experienced "God as a question" were active and consciously positioning themselves towards God in worship, whereas adolescents with a "God?" reflection did not.

In her interpretation of the results, Sonnenberg reflected further on the relationship between the interpretations of respondents and the denominational backgrounds of adolescents. The starting point of theologizing,¹² however, is *observing* adolescents participating in youth worship (by doing field work) and *listening* to adolescents reflecting on their experiences during youth worship events (by a walk and talk strategy, and sometimes interviewing by the researcher during field work). The result is the observation and description of three categories of experiences: 'God is present' experiences, 'God as a question' experi-

¹⁰ Jos de Kock, "Being a Church through Religious Learning at the Street Level," *Ecclesial Practices* 2 (2015): 217–234.

¹¹ Ronelle Sonnenberg, "God in Youth Worship," *Jaarboek voor Liturgieonderzoek* 30 (2014): 223–241.

¹² The word 'theologizing' here and throughout this article is used as synonymous to what can be called 'theological reflection,' meaning the exploration of how revelations of God and how people's faith can be understood in particular practices.

ences, and ‘God?’ experiences. The next question is *what could these experiences and observations teach practical theologians, practitioners, and scholars about the mediation of God in the lives of young people?* Can we talk about God as the present One? Is there a God as ‘the One to be searched for’? Where is God in the ‘just joining’ experience?

Answers to these questions seem to need another kind of interpretive and normative theological language. Sonnenberg formulates the challenge to help young people name what they do in youth worship. “(New) religious language and skills to name experiences in a religious way have to be developed.”¹³ The point is that not only young people are in need of new language, but even youth ministry scholars need to continuously learn the language with which revelations of God and experiences of faith can be described and theologically reflected on in an appropriate way for the flesh and blood experiences of young people.

3.2 Case 2: De Kock (2015)¹⁴

The second case is de Kock’s recent field study on religious-learning processes in the work of youth workers in a missionary context.¹⁵ This study took the voices of young people who were involved as youth workers in a missionary context – social work in youth centers and theater productions in schools – as a starting point for reflection. The research question for this field study was *how can religious-learning processes found in the missionary context of youth work and the guidance of these learning processes be understood religious-pedagogically?*

The main part of the study was to conduct fieldwork on two types of Christian youth work outside the Church: social work via youth centers in different cities in the Netherlands, and theatre productions for students in secondary schools. Both cases are part of a Dutch evangelical Protestant ministry whose mission is to bring the Gospel to young people who are ten to twenty-three years of age. The organization works with professionals and volunteers on projects in schools, churches, and at the street level

De Kock concluded that processes of religious learning, following the experiences of the youth workers involved, are situated in the *encounter*. This encounter can be understood in various ways: as the encounter between youngster and youth worker, as the encounter by living and acting together, and also as the

¹³ Sonnenberg, “God” (n. 11), 241.

¹⁴ de Kock, “Being a Church” (n. 10).

¹⁵ Cf. de Kock, “Being a Church” (n. 10).

encounter involved in discussing and thinking together about personal, societal, and religious questions. The careful observation in this fieldwork is that learning is experienced and interpreted by these youth workers primarily as a social and relational process.

As an implication, taking the empirical as a starting point for theological reflection, means that if a youth ministry scholar or, for example, a senior youth worker is willing to help these youth workers with strategic considerations, he should start theologizing from the core experience of learning as a social and relational process. This is another starting point for reflection and development on learning processes in comparison to taking learning as a communal quality or as a cognitive information-processing experience, all being mainline interpretations of what learning is about¹⁶. Furthermore, taking learning and the guidance of learning situated in the encounter as the starting point for theological reflection evokes several challenging questions that arise from de Kock's research. For example, *is the ultimate goal of youth ministry the encounter in itself or is it the initiation into a faith community?* Both goal directions can be observed in the discourse on missionary work: on the one hand, organizers may be content with young people experiencing how one *may* look for meaning in life and how one *may* believe; and, on the other hand, organizers may have the ambition to get young people's lives rooted in a faith community, including, for instance, initiation rituals.

A second example of a challenging question: *How are practices of articulating longings and belief related to practices of living one's life and the embodiment of faith in it?* Here, the core means of communicating about God and faith is at stake: *to what extent is it primarily a verbal practice and to what extent is it primarily an embodied, lived-out practice?*

A third example is about what the key, the very starting point for religious learning is: the universal longing of young people for meaning in life or the proclamation of the Gospel. Strategies that start at either of these lines can be observed, but *what is theologically the starting point in the development of learning practices?*

16 Cf. Jos de Kock, "What about Learning in Practical Theological Studies? Toward More Conceptual Clarity," *SAGE Open* 5, no. 2 (2015), DOI: 10.1177/2158244015592682.

3.3 Important assumptions for theological reflection based in the empirical

Based on the short reflections on these cases of practical theological research on two important youth ministry practices, worship and learning, we can sketch out at least three important assumptions for the task of developing theological reflections based on empirical observations. First, God or trajectories of God probably can be found in current reality by good observation and listening. This assumption results from the observation that the young people in both cases report that they experience or expect to encounter God. Youth ministry researchers also involved in studying these practices also expect to encounter God. One of the fundamental questions, then, might be *where is God in the experiences of young people?* At the same time, these experiences are posing a fundamental question toward the observer and listener, and toward the theologian himself: *Where is God in your listening and in your observing?*

Second, people's experiences in the empirical world are full of interpretations of reality and of transcendence; the minds and acts of people are directed by interpretations of all kinds of phenomena, of which God and where God is, and the process of learning are just examples from the two cases discussed. Theologizing, at least if it is a function of strategic proposals for everyday life, should reckon with these interpretations (interpretations at work, so to say). Such interpretations of young people are frameworks within which experiences (words from others, events etc.) are understood. For this reason, one might argue that it is not only important to take these interpretations into account, but to fundamentally *start* from the position of these 'interpretations at work' when developing theological reflection based on empirical observations.

Third, the empirical and the 'flesh and blood' experiences in the empirical world are caught up in language. If the act of theologizing is rooted in the everyday observable world, the theologian should strive for a minimum of correspondence or similarity between the language of people's reflections on God and the world, and the language of the theological discourse on God and the world. This means that observing reality and listening to people's experiences in the world help to find language for conducting the theological discourse on God, the world, and the experiences in it.

These are important assumptions that emerge from reflecting on two particular practical theological, empirical studies in youth ministry practices. In the following study, we attempt to go one step further by asking: *how should these assumptions inform the youth ministry scholar as a practical theologian who aims at developing theological reflections based in the empirical?*

4 Core tasks of the youth ministry scholar as a practical theologian

In this section, we concentrate on practical theological research and how it addresses the relationship between the empirical and theological reflections. Practical Theology, in the words of Ganzevoort, is about “the hermeneutics of lived religion.”¹⁷ Ganzevoort distinguishes between three sorts of hermeneutics: the hermeneutics of religious sources, the hermeneutics of confessed religion, and the hermeneutics of lived religion.¹⁸ Practical theology is the theological discipline directed towards the latter of the three. The hermeneutics of lived religion is about exploring operant voices (what is done in faith) and espoused voices (what is said by faith practitioners) in particular and brings it into the debate with normative voices from scripture, tradition, and formal voices from theology or other intellectual disciplines.¹⁹ As we concluded in section two: for youth ministry scholars, observing reality and listening to people’s experiences (the operant and espoused voices) helps them to find language for conducting the theological discourse on God, the world, and experiences in it (i.e., to bring it in debate with normative and formal voices from theology).

How can we further elaborate on this activity of listening and observing by the youth ministry scholar as a practical theologian? The activity of listening and observing is part of the descriptive-empirical task of the practical theologian. Richard Osmer identifies four core tasks of the practical theologian: (a) the descriptive-empirical task, (b) the interpretive task, (c) the normative task, and (d) the pragmatic task.²⁰ Given the strategic goal of the practical theologian to develop better religious praxis, the efforts of at least the youth ministry practitioners ‘in the field’ are directed towards the *pragmatic task*. Our reflection on the

17 Ruard Ganzevoort, “Forks in the Road When Tracing the Sacred: Practical Theology as Hermeneutics of Lived Religion” (Presidential Address to the International Academy of Practical Theology, Chicago, August 3, 2009), http://www.ruardganzevoort.nl/pdf/2009_Presidential.pdf, accessed April 20, 2018.

18 Cf. Ruard Ganzevoort, *De hand van God en andere verhalen. Over veelkleurige vroomheid en botsende beelden* [The Hand of God and Other Stories. Multicoloured Piety and Clashing Images] (Zoetermeer, NL: Meinema, 2006).

19 Cf. Helen Cameron et al., *Talking about God in Practice. Theological Action Research and Practical Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2010).

20 Cf. Richard R. Osmer, *The Teaching Ministry of Congregations* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005); Richard R. Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

cases of worship and learning revealed strategic proposals are indeed an important focus for the theologizing of youth ministry practitioners and scholars alike.

In addition to pragmatic considerations, the youth minister is often involved in *normative considerations*: Normative positions are found in the youth minister's ideals and in their visions of good and bad practices. This is also true for youth ministry scholars working with normative and formal theological voices. Professional youth ministers are not only trained to put their ideals into practice but are also equipped with *interpretive theories from different disciplines* with which they can analyse and comprehend why practices are as they are. Our reflection in section 2 showed that not only interpretive frameworks from theories are at stake here, but tacit interpretive frameworks 'at work' among participants in youth ministry practices are also at stake.

The descriptive-empirical task is core to the main argument of this article: youth ministers as professionals and scholars are *observers* and *listeners*. The personal theology of youth ministry is not only rooted in pragmatic choices or interpretive and normative frameworks but also in observing and listening to practices of youth ministry. The youth minister as a practical theologian tries to learn more about God, faith, and the faith community by observing the empirical world: whether it be the life world of young people, the church life of a particular faith community, the religious voice of a particular child, or performances in national or local religious youth events. Another question is: *what can we learn from particular experiences, for example the experience of secularization: what does this experience teach about God?*

During our reflection on the two cases of youth ministry research, we posed that there is an expectation among young people and youth ministry scholars alike, that God or trajectories of God can be found in current experiences by observing and listening. This expectation is what Osmer calls a meta-theoretical decision or position.²¹ Osmer also points at the theory-praxis relationship as a meta-theoretical issue: the practical theologian has to make decisions "[...] about the nature of praxis or practice and theory's relationship to it,"²² and he points at so-called sources of justification as an issue: "The way in which a practical theologian draws on and weighs the traditional sources of theological truth – Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience."²³

Meta-theoretically, our theological rationale or theological conviction is that God reveals Himself in Scripture, and through tradition and with the help of

21 Richard R. Osmer, "Practical Theology: A Current International Perspective," *HTS Theologesie Studies/ Theological Studies* 67, no. 2 (2011), <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v67i2.1058>.

22 Osmer, "International Perspective" (n. 21), 3.

23 Osmer, "International Perspective" (n. 21), 3.

reason. But reading Scripture, studying the tradition, and examining reason also open the possibility that God may reveal Himself in the empirical world, even in the particular experiences of young people. This means that the empirical world and, therefore, young people's experiences are important sources for constructing theology in the field of youth ministry. We should be open to the possibility of revelation in the empirical world. This is an important, vital, meta-theoretical consideration for practical theological work in youth ministry.

The practical theologian involved in the study of youth ministry positions himself in the words of Osmer as an artist in his studio. In the artist's studio of the youth ministry scholar, insights deriving from empirical experiences should enter the debate with other sources of justification, such as biblical-theological and systematic theological arguments and interpretive frameworks from other disciplines than theology. The principal starting point for this debate, however, is the youth ministry scholar observing the praxis of young people in faith practices as a basis for constructing youth ministry theories. The youth minister as practical theologian is fundamentally involved in two skills: (a) observing faith practices of young people and (b) listening to the voices of children and young people in those practices. Now, the question is: *what happens theologically when the youth ministry scholar is observing the empirical?* This is the core question of section 5.

5 What happens theologically when observing the empirical?

How can we understand what happens theologically when youth ministry scholars observe the faith practices of young people, including listening to their experiences? To answer this question, we include our present argument and also apply Norheim's argument on the apophatic mode of ecclesiological research to the work of youth ministry research.²⁴ This helps one better understand how empirical, practical, theological research should be understood as a starting point for theological reflections in youth ministry.

Critically one could start by asking how the experience of God's revelation in and through young people should be understood. Is this in any way special or exemplary in comparison to other age groups? There is tendency in theology (see

24 Cf. Bård E. H. Norheim, "Cultivating a Vision of the Unseen?" *Ecclesial Practices 2* (2015): 40–56.

for example reflections on youth theology²⁵) and youth ministry scholarship in particular to view the passionate experience of young people as exemplary.²⁶ Similarly, within child theology, there are tendencies to promote the religious experience of the child as exemplary.²⁷ We leave the discussion to other scholarly accounts regarding what extent of young people's religious experience is interpreted as exemplary. Here we focus on the basic assumption beneath this discussion, that both youth ministry research and child theology tend to depart from the basic theological belief that God reveals himself in the empirical world, not only in Scripture, tradition, or reason, but also in human experience and the experiences of children and young people in particular. We believe, however, it is not unproblematic to boldly claim that God is accessible through human experience.

Throughout the history of theology as science, the terms 'apophatic' and 'cataphatic' have been used as analytical terms to describe the dialectic between positively describing God and God's attributes (cataphatic theology) and being utterly unable to describe the One beyond sensation (apophatic theology). How may this dialectic help one to better understand the relationship between empirical observations of children, young people, and theological reflections? In other words, what kind of methodological *mode* is suitable when researching the experience of the utterly unknowable?

From the point of the cataphatic-apophatic dialectic, practical theological research should be understood as a hermeneutic struggle – i.e., the hermeneutical struggle that follows from interpreting human experience of God, which is actually human *reception* of divine agency through the Incarnation and the ongoing work of the triune God, is always contested. As Norheim (2015) points out "This is the case, both from the perspective of human experience, but also from the perspective of the revelation of divine agency itself, as the revelation of the gospel of the church, God's love in Jesus Christ, is hidden under the cross as a *tentatio*."²⁸ This is a plea to understand all practical theological research as *reception*. The children and young people are in a mode of reception when encountering God. More importantly, the empirical observer, the youth ministry

25 Cf. for example Petra Freudenberger-Lötz, Friedhelm Kraft and Thomas Schlag, ed., 'Wenn man daran noch so glauben kann, ist das gut.' *Grundlagen und Impulse für eine Jugendtheologie*, vol. 1 of *Jahrbuch für Jugendtheologie* (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 2013).

26 Cf. for example Kenda C. Dean, *Practicing Passion: Youth and the Quest for a Passionate Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004); David F. White, *Practicing Discernment with Youth: A Transformative Youth Ministry Approach* (Boston: The Pilgrim Press, 2005).

27 Cf. for example the assessment by Bernhard Dressler, "Zur Kritik der 'Kinder- und Jugendtheologie,'" *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 111 (2014): 332–356.

28 Norheim, "Cultivating" (n. 24), 53.

scholar, is in a mode of reception when encountering and listening to children and young people through practices like worship and learning.

Therefore, letting empirical observations deteriorate into cataphatic absolutism is dangerous. There has to be openness to an apophatic mode in practical theological research that researching the One beyond sensation may result in hesitation, questions, or even silence as an appropriate response. This is the case when doing empirical observations and when developing theological reflections with empirical observations as the starting point. In this case, listening to the experiences of children and young people may serve as reminders of the apophatic and of God as the other, the indescribable. The theological bottom line is: If one wants to develop theological reflections based on empirical observations, one needs the exemplary voices of children and young people, or possibly the infant, who in a particular way lives in a mode of reception. Young people and the researcher are involved in a hermeneutical struggle. This is why insights deriving from empirical experiences should enter the debate with other sources of justification, such as biblical-theological and systematic-theological argumentations and interpretive frameworks from disciplines other than theology. Norheim concludes that “[t]his struggle is not something external to the being of the church, understood as participation in God, but is actually a mark of the church itself. Fundamentally, ecclesiological reflection as cultivation of theological vision is the cultivation of a dialectic struggle [...]”²⁹

Based on these fundamental reflections, we suggest a set of three basic skills that the youth ministry researcher and probably any practical theologian need to develop for the hermeneutical struggle. The first one is the skill of *observation as reception*. The youth minister as practical theologian is fundamentally involved in the skill of observing the faith practices of children and young people, continuously balancing an apophatic and cataphatic mode. The second skills is that of *listening as reception*. The youth minister as practical theologian is fundamentally involved in the skill of listening to the voices of children and young people. Here, too, both an apophatic and cataphatic mode are to be balanced, which makes listening not mere registration of words and expressions but a hermeneutical struggle in itself. A third category skill we suggest, as a result of observation and listening as reception, is *learning language*. The youth ministry scholar and practitioner is continuously learning language with which revelations of God and experiences of faith can be described and theologically reflected on, in a way which is appropriate for the flesh and blood experiences of young people.

²⁹ Norheim, “Cultivating” (n. 24), 40.

These three skills – *observation as reception*, *listening as reception* and *learning language* – operate in what may be called a *hermeneutic triangle*. The final step in this hermeneutic triangle, learning language, means that the researcher must engage with his or her theological convictions to revise and produce language that helps interpret the presence of God in the empirical world, in this case the context of youth ministry practices. However, this also implies that the inevitable filtering of the youth experience through the observation and listening of the practical theological researcher, which may result in learning language, should bring the practical theological researcher back to the mode of observation: being with young people. This is a mode in which the researcher is put in a position of reception, emphasizing that the researcher must examine his or her pre-conditions for reception and reflection – such as a personal biography or theological and political convictions – before, during and after the mode of reception.

6 Conclusion

The aim of this article has been to discuss empirical observations, particularly in the field of faith practices of children and young people as a starting point for practical theological research that is geared towards developing theological reflection. We believe this understanding becomes even more important because of the growing interest in theologizing with children, both as a particular mode of academic research and reflection and as a didactical approach and a particular form of religious communication among children and among children with adults.³⁰ The same is true for a growing interest in youth theology.

We position child and youth theology within the academic discipline of practical theology. Dressler links the growing interest for child theology in religious education with a sharpening of the *subject orientation* in the discipline of religious education.³¹ Our interest for empirical-oriented academic accounts in youth ministry and child theology research is based in particular on an *orientation towards the revelation of God* in the experiences of subjects, as a meta-theoretical assumption. In addition to this meta-theoretical background, there is a practical background for this orientation, this hermeneutical struggle of the theologian involved in faith practices of young people. Especially in societies where predefined frameworks of faith, religion, and faith institutes are losing ground, young people's self-understanding of faith, God, and faith/church community becomes

³⁰ Cf. Dressler, "Zur Kritik" (n. 27).

³¹ Cf. Dressler, "Zur Kritik" (n. 27).

more important, not only because of a better understanding of young people, but also to better understand God.

We believe an academic approach grounded in observing and listening as reception and continuously learning language matches the particular demands of faith communities, youth workers, and young people in those contexts where society and church are secularizing more often. This approach helps young people to develop language to communicate what is essential in their lives. The approach is like what Pete Ward describes as theology being participation in God.³² “Through exercise of theological reflection practical theology may be focused on the social and cultural forms of faith but it is simultaneously seeking God in and through these things.”³³ At the same time, experiences in faith practices do not necessarily fully coincide with ‘how God is’ and ‘how God reveals Godself.’³⁴ “The link between the human communication, the interpretation of messengers, and the God-human communication is theologically anchored in the freedom of God, in his initiative and his being *semper maior*, as well as in the fragmented and particular knowledge and acting of people.”³⁵ In other words, youth ministry theologies are always *under construction*.

32 Pete Ward, *Participation and Mediation. A Practical Theology for the Liquid Church* (London: SCM Press, 2008).

33 Ward, *Participation* (n. 32), 102.

34 Cf. also Sonnenberg, “God” (n. 11).

35 Sonnenberg, “God” (n. 11), 241.