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A sketch of practical theology of youth ministry, with emphasis on young people with difficult questions or/and difficult personalities

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ABSTRAK

Artikel ini menyajikan teologi praktis pelayanan kaum muda yang dirancang untuk mendukung para praktisi yang bekerja dengan kaum muda, khususnya mereka yang menunjukkan kepribadian yang sulit atau mengajukan pertanyaan teologis yang sulit. Seringkali, pelayanan kepada kaum muda yang menolak "pendekatan normal" tersebut dapat dilihat sebagai "perjalanan menembus semak belukar yang lebat," yang menyebabkan kelelahan, penarikan diri secara emosional, dan patologisasi yang tidak disengaja terhadap remaja sebagai "masalah." Penulis berpendapat bahwa pendekatan yang berkelanjutan membutuhkan reorientasi mendasar pada perspektif hamba Tuhan, beralih dari hierarki "penolong dan yang ditolong" ke sikap solidaritas spiritual. Dengan meneliti kondisi manusia melalui lensa Roma 5:8, artikel ini menegaskan bahwa setiap orang percaya, di mata Tuhan, adalah "*orang yang sulit*" yang dikejar oleh kasih karunia sementara masih dalam keadaan jauh dari Tuhan. Dengan mendasarkan praktik pastoral pada realitas kerapuhan kita bersama, artikel ini menyediakan kerangka kerja (meski bersifat sementara) untuk mengubah pelayanan yang melelahkan menjadi refleksi yang sangat bermakna tentang penebusan sabar Bapa terhadap semua orang yang sulit. Pada akhirnya, yang penulis uraikan secara serba ringkas di sini bukanlah jawaban definitif, namun suatu sketsa awal.

ABSTRACT

This article presents a practical theology of youth ministry designed to sustain practitioners working with young people who exhibit difficult personalities or present challenging theological questions. Often, ministry

Kata kunci:

Pelayanan kaum muda, orang-orang sulit, konselor Kristen, Roma 5:8, kasih karunia Tuhan, masyarakat shalom

to resistant or defiant youth is viewed as a "trek through thick brush," leading to burnout, emotional withdrawal, and the unintentional pathologizing of the teenager as "the problem." The author argues that a sustainable approach requires a grounded reorientation of the minister's perspective, moving from a hierarchy of "helper and helped" to a posture of spiritual solidarity. By examining the human condition through the lens of Romans 5:8, the article asserts that every believer is, in God's sight, a "difficult person" who was pursued by grace while still in a state of rebellion. By grounding pastoral practice in the reality of our common brokenness, this article provides a framework for transforming exhausting ministry into a deeply meaningful reflection of the Father's patient redemption of all difficult people. In the end, what the author presents here is not a definitive answer, but rather a preliminary sketch.

Keywords:

Youth ministry, difficult people, counsellor, Romans 5:8, Grace of God, shalom society

Introduction

The landscape of modern youth ministry is at a critical juncture. As noted by scholars like Dr. Young Woon Lee and P. Strong (2015), we are witnessing a shift where ministry has become "skill-driven" and "activity-based" rather than "theology-driven." This crisis is punctuated by the recent 2025 Barna data, which highlights a staggering rise in religious disaffiliation among Generation Z, particularly young women (cf. Blair, 2025).

For an Asian minister, this challenge is doubled. While the theological resources—the Bible, denominational traditions, and developmental psychology—are universal, the application within the high-pressure, and rapidly secularizing urban centres of Asia requires a distinct approach. To reach those with "difficult questions" and "difficult personalities," we must move beyond entertainment and return to a robust, practical theology that addresses the core of human existence.

One thing to remember, a key principle to make your ministry to difficult young people a bit more bearable. Working with "difficult" young people—those who are defiant, unresponsive, or struggling with deep-seated trauma—is less of a sprint and more of a gruelling trek through thick brush. It is exhausting. It tests your patience, your theology, and your sanity.

In the end, difficult young people are a gift to the minister. They are the "sandpaper" God uses to smooth our own rough edges. They force us to abandon our reliance on our own charisma or cleverness and drive us back to the only thing that actually works: **unmerited grace**.

By remembering that we were redeemed while we were still "difficult," we find the strength to stay in the room, to keep the door open, and to offer a love that doesn't make sense to the world—but makes perfect sense to the Kingdom. In the end, what the author presents here is not a definitive answer, but rather a preliminary sketch.

Motivation

In a previous article,¹ I've told a story when I was invited to a conference of philosophy research, a few years ago. And now, allow me to tell several stories

¹ Victor Christianto. A story of night blooming cereus flower. *Jurnal Igreja*, Vol. 2 No. 1, 2025. url: [A story of Night Blooming Cereus Flower \(Bunga Wijaya Kusuma\) | Jurnal Igreja](#)

which I should say here, --I would tell not because I've sorted out all these problems --, but stories that started from my own brokenness. From a few years ago, I served in several occasions in a youth ministry, but aside of that, there are instances that I got a role more like a freelance servant of God, where I met people in different situations and then after listening to their stories, I pray to the Holy Spirit, how should I respond to them? For instance, in last few years especially after the Covid-19 pandemic event, there is a practicing doctor (he is a Christian) whom serves in remote location in Japan, and he told me frequently how most of young people there lost their ways, most of them don't know God, and they don't care. He once wrote to me as follows, among other things:

"This pollution is very unlikely to be removed.

The minds of the young people in Japan today are totally materialistic, material supremacy.

I am resigned to the devastation of the minds of today's Japanese youth who have lost their religion.

They judge whether they are happy or not by comparing themselves with others.

It seems that it is impossible to make them understand.

I have given up..."

That reminds me to the story of Ezekiel who faced a horrific situation of a land consisting of scattered bones, to whom he should prophesy (see Ezekiel chapter 37:1-14). I told him, the colleague from Japan, that I am not sure indeed if I will be able to visit there and minister to a crowd of young people there; but thanks God

Almighty, one of these recent years eventually I met with a Malaysian young guy who works in Japan, and after a few hours of discussing things with him, I remembered that I brought with me an old book by Minister Kosuke Koyama, with title: "*50 meditations*."² Then I gave that copy of old book to this young guy. I hope that occasional conversation may eventually lead him to read that book by Minister Koyama (a renown theologian at the time, born in Japan).

And similar little stories like the one above, that I met people here and there, that God put me along my journey. And yes, I believe in the so-called "Divine alignment".

Methodology

To bridge the gap between abstract doctrine and the "thick brush" that sometimes can be found in daily youth work, this study employs a **Practical Theological Reflection** model. This methodology acknowledges that theology is not merely a top-down application of theory to practice, but a reciprocal dialogue where experience informs our understanding of the Divine, and the Divine provides the lens through which we interpret experience.

The research for this article is structured around two primary methodological movements:

² Kosuke Koyama, *50 meditations*. (Orbis Books, Feb. 1979). url: [50 Meditations: Amazon.co.uk: Koyama, Kosuke: 9780883441343: Books](https://www.amazon.co.uk/Kosuke-Koyama/dp/9780883441343)

1. Thematic Literature Survey

The theoretical foundation of this study is built upon a cross-disciplinary literature review.

- Theological Footing: A reflection of Pauline message in Romans 5:8, focusing on the concept of *simul iustus et peccator* (simultaneously saint and sinner) as a leveling mechanism for the minister-student hierarchy.
- Pastoral Theology: Drawing on the "theology of the cross" as discussed by contemporary scholars, in contrast to "skill-driven" models identified by Lee and Strong (cf. Lee, 2004; Strong, 2015).
- Sociological Context: Incorporating 2025 Barna Group data (Blair, 2025) and Asian-specific cultural studies to contextualize the "difficult" labeling of young people that sometimes can be found in urban Asian centers (while most of them still can be deemed more or less, as normal youth).

2. Practice-to-Theory Dialectic

This article utilizes **autoethnographic reflection** based on more than five years of hands-on ministry experience in several locations. Rather than treating ministry successes as the primary data, this methodology prioritizes moments of exhaustion, resistance, and emotional difficulties which often put several ministers at hold. These experiences serve as the "raw data" for theological reflection, allowing the

author to test the resilience of grace-based frameworks against the reality of burnout.

Results

1. The Theological Foundation: Beyond the "Activity-Centred-Ministry"

To address youth with difficult questions, we must first repent of the "Activity Centred-Ministry." When ministry is measured by attendance at "pizza nights" rather than the depth of biblical engagement, we signal to youth that the church is a social club rather than a place of ultimate truth.

The "God Who Acts" (Purves' Perspective)

A practical theology must begin with who God is and what God does. If we do not present a God who is sovereign over suffering, science, and sexuality, youth will find Him irrelevant. For the student asking "Does God exist?", a theology of *Presence* and *Logos* is required—showing that God is not just a moral teacher, but the very ground of being (cf. Pattison, 2001).

Key components of this practical theology include:

- The Gospel as Equalizer: Challenging the "righteous vs. wayward" dichotomy and recognizing shared resistance to grace.
- Redefining Success: Shifting focus from behavioural compliance or intellectual agreement to a "pre-reconciliation" model of unconditional love.

- **Conflict as Refinement:** Viewing difficult questions and personalities not as obstacles to ministry, but as vital catalysts for the minister's own sanctification and empathy.

2. Addressing the "Difficult Questions": The Theology of Lament and Logic

In many Asian contexts, questioning authority—including religious authority—is often discouraged. However, a healthy youth theology views "difficult questions" not as rebellion, but as a sign of spiritual hunger.

The Existence of God and Science

Asian cities like Jakarta and Seoul are hubs of academic excellence. Youth are taught rigorous empirical logic. If the church offers "just have faith" as an answer to questions about the Big Bang or evolution, it loses intellectual credibility.

- **The Approach:** Adopt a theology of "General Revelation." Show that the laws of physics and the complexity of the genome are "maps" pointing toward a Creator.
- **The Sub-Ministry: "The Veritas Forum" Model.** Create a safe space for high schoolers to debate philosophy and science. Instead of a sermon, use a Q&A format where doubt is validated but met with intellectual rigor.

The Problem of Evil and Suffering

In the wake of academic pressure and rising mental health crises in Asian cities, the question "Where is God when it hurts?" is paramount.

- **The Approach:** Utilize the **Theology of the Cross**. God is not distant from suffering; He entered it.
- **Example:** In an urban Asian church, a small group focusing on "Theology and Mental Health" can help youth see their struggles not as a lack of faith, but as a space where they encounter the "Man of Sorrows."

3. Addressing "Difficult Personalities": The Theology of Imago Dei

"Difficult personalities"—those who are disruptive, withdrawn, or socially maladaptive—are often marginalized in activity-driven ministries because they "spoil the fun." A practical theology recognizes that these youth are made in the *Imago Dei* (Image of God) and often carry unspoken trauma.

The Disruptive Youth

Often, "problematic" behavior is a defense mechanism against the high-pressure expectations of Asian households.

- **The Approach: Theology of Adoption.** These youth need to know their status in the Kingdom is not based on their performance or behavior, but on Christ's merit.
- **Sub-Ministry Example: "The Creative Collective."** Instead of forcing a disruptive youth into a standard Bible study, engage them through an arts or media ministry. Allow their "edge" to be channeled into creating content for instance, teaching them that their passion has a place in God's mission.

The Withdrawn or "Socially Awkward" Youth

With the rise of digital isolation, many youth (although not all) probably struggle with interpersonal connections.

- **The Approach: Theology of the Body (Ecclesiology).** The church is a body where every part is necessary.
- **Sub-Ministry Example: Mentorship-Based "Guilds."** In cities like Tokyo or Taipei, where "Hikikomori" (social withdrawal) is a concern, traditional youth groups are terrifying. A sub-ministry that focuses on 1-on-1 mentorship around shared interests (music, gaming, literature, sports – to name a few) allows the "difficult" personality to build trust in a low-stakes environment.

4. Contextualizing for the Asian City: Honor, Shame, and Grace

Dr. Young Woon Lee (Lee, 2004) emphasizes that Asian youth ministry must account for the unique cultural context. In many Asian cultures, a "difficult question" brings shame to the family or the teacher.

Breaking the Shame Cycle

A practical theology for Asian youth must replace "Face-Saving" with "Grace-Giving."

- **Plausible method to grace giving approach:** The youth pastor must model vulnerability. By admitting their own doubts or past "difficult" behaviours, the minister deconstructs the hierarchy that prevents youth from being honest.
- **Intergenerational Connection:** Address the 2025 Barna finding regarding disconnection from parents (Blair, 2025). A specific sub-ministry called **"Bridge Builders"** can facilitate moderated dialogues between Gen Z and their immigrant or traditionalist parents, using the Bible to mediate cultural clashes.

Table 1. Possible ways to Sub-Segment Approaches

| Sub-Segment | Essential Question/Issue | Theological Emphasis | Practical Sub-Ministry |
|--------------------------|------------------------------------|----------------------------|------------------------------------|
| The Intellectual Skeptic | "How do we know God is real?" | Logos & General Revelation | Apologetics Cafés / Veritas Forums |
| The Socially Disruptive | "I don't fit the 'good kid' mold." | Adoption & Grace | Creative Media & Arts Collectives |

| | | | |
|-------------------------|---------------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| The Suffering/Withdrawn | "Why is life so hard/lonely?" | Theology of the Cross | Mental Health Support Circles |
| The Culturally Torn | "My parents' faith isn't mine." | Theology of the New Covenant | Intergenerational Dialogue Groups |

A few examples

- a. Sample of lesson plan, in the context of ministry to young people

To move from a "skill-driven" ministry to a "theology-driven" one, we must present these classic doctrines not as dry lectures, but as lenses through which youth can view their specific urban Asian realities.

Below is an outline for a **high-engagement lesson plan series** titled *"Deep Roots, Urban Soil."* This plan is specifically designed to address those with difficult questions and "difficult" personalities by inviting them into the process of theological inquiry.

Series Title: Deep Roots, Urban Soil

Target Audience: Gen Z youth in urban Asian contexts (High School/Young Adult). **Pedagogical Goal:** To translate Systematic Theology into Practical Living.

Table 2. Module 1: The Essence of Identity

| Theme | Content (Lee, 2004) | The "Difficult Question" Approach | Asian Contextualization |
|-------------------|------------------------------|--|---|
| Who Am I? | Man as Sinner & God's People | Address "difficult personalities" by reframing "sin" as "brokenness" and "original dignity" (Imago Dei). | Deconstruct the "Perfectionist" culture. Discuss the pressure of being the "good son/daughter" vs. being God's child. |
| Who is in Charge? | God as Father & Creator | Use the "Fine-Tuning" argument for God's existence to engage the Intellectual Skeptic. | Contrast the "Distant Bureaucrat" view of God with the "Loving Father" who values the individual over the collective. |

Table 3. Module 2: The Logic of Redemption

| Theme | Content (Lee, 2004) | The "Difficult Question" Approach | Asian Contextualization |
|------------|--------------------------|---|--|
| The Savior | Jesus as Redeemer | Address the "difficult question" of why a bloody sacrifice was necessary. Discuss the theology of the Cross as God's protest against injustice. | Frame the Gospel in terms of Honor and Shame. Jesus takes our shame so we can share His honor. |
| The Helper | Holy Spirit as Comforter | Address those with "difficult personalities" (anxiety/depression) by introducing the Spirit as the "Paraclete" (One who walks alongside). | Discuss the Spirit's power in a culture that often emphasizes self-reliance and "grinding" (hustle culture). |

Table 4. Module 3: Authority and The Future

| Theme | Content (Lee, 2004) | The "Difficult Question" Approach | Asian Contextualization |
|-----------|----------------------|--|--|
| The Truth | Bible as Living Word | Tackle the "Difficult Question": "Is the Bible a tool of colonial/patriarchal oppression?" | Show the Bible as a "Subversive Script" that gave hope to the oppressed in Asian history (e.g., the Korean Independence movement). |
| The End | Eschatology | Use the "Difficult Question" of climate change or global instability to discuss the New Heavens and New Earth. | Move from "Escapism" (leaving the world) to "Restoration" (fixing the world), appealing to Gen Z's desire for social impact. |

b. A few stories: Our past experience with youth people with difficult personalities

In the high-pressure corridors of urban Asian life, "difficult personalities" are often the only way young people know how to signal that their souls are under siege. As a counsellor who has walked alongside these youth for many years, I have learned that what we label as "problematic" is frequently a defensive wall built to protect a fragile inner soul.

Developing a practical theology of youth ministry means moving beyond the pulpit and into the quiet, often messy rooms where life actually happens. It requires a shift from "skill-driven" efficiency to "theology-driven" presence. Over the years, the Father in Heaven has allowed me to witness the

transformation of several young people who were once considered "difficult," but were actually just waiting to be truly seen.

Key principle to make your ministry to difficult young people a bit more bearable.

Working with "difficult" young people—those who are defiant, unresponsive, or struggling with deep-seated trauma—is less of a sprint and more of a gruelling trek through thick brush. It is exhausting. It tests your patience, your theology, and your sanity. When you have poured your heart into a teenager only to be met with a cynical remark, or another self-destructive choice, the natural human response is to withdraw, harden your heart, or label them as "the problem."

However, there is a transformative principle that can make this burden not just bearable, but deeply meaningful. It requires a shift in perspective that moves the focus away from the "troubled youth" and onto the common ground we all share. To sustain a ministry to the difficult, we must regularly remind ourselves of a humbling reality: **In God's sight, we are all difficult people.** (Read again and again, Letters to Romans 5:8).

1. The Great Equalizer: Our Shared Difficulty

The moment we categorize a young person as "difficult," we inadvertently create a hierarchy. We become the "healthy" helping the "sick," or the "righteous" reaching out to the "wayward." While there are functional differences in maturity and behavior, the Gospel levels the playing field.

If we look closely at our own internal lives—our stubbornness, our hidden idols, our pride, and our frequent wanderings from God's will—we realize that we are no less "difficult" for a holy God to deal with than a rebellious teenager is for us. We are all, by nature, resistant to grace.

When we acknowledge our own "difficulty," our ministry shifts from a position of condescension to one of **solidarity**. We stop asking, *"Why are they like this?"* and start remembering, *"I am like this too."* This doesn't excuse bad behavior, but it evaporates the self-righteousness that often leads to burnout and resentment.

2. The Romans 5:8 (KJV)

The cornerstone of this perspective is found in the timing of God's love.

Romans 5:8 states:

"But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

This verse shatters the idea that we must become "easy" or "lovable" before God moves toward us. In the economy of Heaven, the investment was made while the "client" was still an enemy.

In youth ministry, we often wait for signs of progress before we feel motivated to keep giving. We look for a "thank you," a softened heart, or a change in habits as the "fuel" for our service. But the message of Romans 5:8 is that **God's greatest act of ministry happened while we were at our worst.**

To make ministry bearable, we must adopt this "Pre-Reconciliation" mindset. We love the difficult young person not because they are responding, but because we were loved (by Jesus) even when we were unresponsive. Our service becomes a response to what Christ has done for us, rather than a transaction based on how the teenager treats us.

3. From Resentment to Empathy

When we forget our own need for grace, we become "Elder Brothers" (from the Parable of the Prodigal Son)—bitter that our hard work isn't being rewarded and resentful of the "messy" ones who take up all the resources.

Reminding ourselves of our own difficulty produces a specific kind of empathy. It allows us to see that the teenager's defiance is often a clumsy,

broken shield for pain, just as our own "polite" sins are often shields for our lack of trust in God.

4. Practical Endurance: How to Practice This

How do we keep this principle at the front of our minds when a session goes poorly?

- **Preach the Gospel to Yourself:** Before entering a difficult environment, spend five minutes reflecting on a time God was patient with your own stubbornness.
- **Reframe the Narrative:** Instead of saying, "This kid is impossible," try saying, "This kid is a mirror of my own need for Christ."
- **Separate Worth from Work:** Remind yourself that your standing with God is not based on your "success rate" with youth, but on Christ's finished work. This lowers the stakes and allows you to love without the pressure of needing to "fix" them.

The Shadow of Guilt: The Young Widow's Journey

Among other things, like young people who suffer occasionally from epilepsy, one of cases I once encountered involved a young widow whose husband had passed away following a severe illness. She was "stuck"—a

difficult personality trait characterized by a frozen, repetitive cycle of self-blame. She carried a crushing weight of guilt, convinced that she had failed to do enough to save him.

Guilt is a theological problem that requires a theological solution. She saw herself as a **Sinner** who had failed a cosmic test. To address this, we gathered along with a few close friends and a counsellor colleague. We didn't just meet for a quick "condolence visit"; we spent hours together, talking through the layers of her grief.

We had to gently point her back to **Jesus Christ as Savior and Redeemer**. We discussed how Christ carries the ultimate weight of life and death so that we don't have to. We sat with her in her "Lament," a practice often lost in our activity-driven churches. It took time—real, unhurried time—until the issue of guilt was resolved by the realization that she was not the sovereign over life; God was.

The Tension of Ties: Ministry and the In-Laws

In another instance, I pray for a young Christian couple who were deeply committed to ministry. However, they were being crushed by a classic "difficult personality" conflict: a painful struggle with their parents-in-law. In many Asian cultures, the hierarchy of the family can create a theological crisis

for a young couple trying to "leave and cleave" while still "honouring their father and mother."

The couple was quite exhausted. They were trying to serve the Church while their home life was a battlefield of expectations and perceived failures. Their "difficulty" was a mounting bitterness that threatened to derail their ministry entirely.

My approach here was not to give them a "to-do" list of communication skills. Instead, I gave them **time** and **attention**. We looked at the theology of **Church and Christian Life**, recognizing that one's primary ministry is often the peace within one's own home. I decided to simply be available—to lend a hand whenever they needed it and to spend hours in prayer with them. We asked the Father to intervene in the hearts of the older generation while giving the couple the "spirit of a sound mind" to set healthy boundaries.

Hidden Frontline: Shielding the Marriages of Young Ministers

Other than that, there are other kind of issues with young Christian people....

In the high-stakes environment of youth ministry, we often focus our theological resources on the "flock"—the students, the skeptics, and the

struggling young people.³ However, in my years of counselling and befriending those in the trenches, this writer discovered a hidden frontline that is under constant siege: the marriages of the young ministers themselves (cf. Dobson, 2007).

While their marital issues may appear "ordinary" on the surface—miscommunication, financial stress, or disagreements over ministry boundaries—we must view them through a lens of **spiritual awareness**. As Dr. Young Woon Lee and other scholars suggest, the context of our ministry is not just cultural, but spiritual. To the couple involved, these "ordinary" frictions often feel like a dismantling of their very foundation. If we think in terms of spiritual matters, we recognize that dark forces frequently target the union of those serving the Kingdom, seeking to strike the shepherd and scatter the sheep.

1. The Theology of Covenantal Perseverance

When I engage with a young minister couple on the brink of exhaustion, I return to the foundational doctrine of **Church and Christian Life**, specifically the sanctity of the marital covenant.

³ In certain instance, there is a young minister, who admits he had a problem to figure out how he can marry her fiancé, because the in-laws would not accept his profession as a minister in church, which to them is deemed "not promising." (in Asian culture, a promising career includes: bankers, finance consultants etc.)

In Asian urban contexts, the pressure to "perform" in ministry can lead couples to neglect the "oneness" God established. We must remind them that their marriage is not a social contract, but a divine unification. As the Scripture declares, *"What God has joined together, let no one separate"* (Matthew 19:6). This is not just a command; it is a theological reality that provides the power for **perseverance**.

We encourage them to see that their marriage is their primary "sub-ministry." If the enemy can perish the union, he can disqualify the minister. Therefore, staying together is an act of spiritual warfare and theological fidelity.

2. The Intercession is necessary: Praying Against Forces

My role in these instances has often been to stand as a "watchman" for these couples. When issues arise that seem to lead toward the dismantling of the home, we must move beyond mere "advice-giving" and enter into deep intercession.

- **3. A call to keep the faith firm**
- To the young minister couple reading this, it should be known that: do not be deceived into thinking your struggle is purely "human." The Father in Heaven is deeply invested in the health of your home.
- Our guide for approaching these couples includes three vital steps:

- **Validation:** Acknowledging that their pain is real and the spiritual stakes are high.
- **Encouragement:** Reminding them that God's grace is sufficient to heal even the most wounded hearts.
- **Community Protection:** Ensuring they have a safe space—away from the prying eyes of their own congregants—where they can be "processed" by the Holy Spirit and find restoration.
- Thanks be to God, through the years, we have seen that when we prioritize prayer and perseverance, what was unified by Him remains unshakable. The "ordinary" issues do not have to lead to a perishing of the union; instead, they can become the fire that forges a more mature, spiritually resilient Christian life.

Discussion

Acknowledging the role of The Father in Heaven's Hand

Reflecting on these stories, it is clear that none of these "difficult" situations could have been handled through human skill alone. The 2025 Barna data warns us that young people are disconnecting because they feel a profound lack of support in their real-life struggles (cf. Blair, 2025).

These cases outlined above show that a **Practical Theology of Youth Ministry** should better include:

1. **Collaborative:** do not hesitate to ask for assistance from Christian friends, counsellors, parents.
2. **Patient:** Valuing "time and attention" over programs.
3. **Theologically Grounded:** Addressing guilt, mental health, and family conflict through the lens of Grace and *the Imago Dei*.

Over the years, the Father in Heaven has been the true Counsellor. Our role has simply been to remain available, to befriend the "difficult," and to trust that the Holy Spirit is already at work in the lives of these precious young people.

A tentative guide to ministering to young people with gender dysphoria/LGBTQ tendencies with trust and grace

In the contemporary landscape of youth ministry, particularly within the fast-paced, high-pressure urban centers of Asia, few topics are as sensitive or as critical as gender identity and same-sex attraction (cf. Nicolosi *et al*). As ministers and counsellors, we are witnessing a generation of young people navigating a profound "disconnection" (as noted in recent Barna data) between their internal experiences and the traditional structures of the church.

Several principles: Reclaiming Identity Through *Racham* and Divine Acceptance

The contemporary discourse surrounding gender dysphoria and LGBTQ+ tendencies is often polarized between rigid moralism and secular liberalism. However, a deeper look at the theology of love and the restorative power of divine grace offers a third way. By integrating the Hebrew concept of *Racham* with the "Healing by Grace" model proposed by renowned counselor David Seamands, we find a transformative framework for young people seeking to navigate their identities through the lens of faith.

Beyond the Four Loves: The Recovery of *Racham*

In his seminal work, Swedish theologian Anders Nygren categorized love into four distinct Greek types: *Agape* (unconditional divine love), *Philia* (friendship), *Storge* (familial affection), and *Eros* (romantic or sexual desire). While this scheme is helpful, it is often insufficient for explaining the deep, non-sexual emotional bonds found in Scripture—bonds that are frequently misinterpreted by liberal scholars as evidence of same-sex orientation.

The Hebrew language offers a richer nuance through the word **Racham**. Often translated as "compassion" or "mercy," *Racham* is etymologically linked to the word for *rechem*. It describes a love that is visceral, protective, and deeply communal. It is a "brotherhood of the soul" that transcends mere friendship (*Philia*) but remains distinct from the sexualized nature of *Eros*.

We see this clearly in the biblical narrative of (young) David and Jonathan, and similarly in the relationship between Jesus and "the disciple whom He loved." Liberal interpretations often attempt to retroactively apply modern LGBTQ+ identities to these figures. However, these were stories of *Racham*—a covenantal, selfless intimacy that provided emotional wholeness without crossing into the sexual. For a young person struggling with gender identity or same-sex attraction, understanding *Racham* is revolutionary: it suggests that their deep longing for connection with the same sex is not inherently a sexual "orientation," but perhaps a misplaced hunger for a profound, non-

sexual "brotherhood" or "sisterhood" that the modern world has forgotten how to provide.

The Reality of the LGBTQ+ Struggle

The experience of several among us whom started Yayasan Sukma Kawula Mahardika highlights a sobering reality: the patterns of LGBTQ+ behavior are not easily unlearned. The journey toward restoration is often hindered by a "locked door" of self-defense and self-justification.

Many young people today operate within a reversed worldview. To them, heterosexuality feels foreign or "weird," while LGBTQ+ identifies feel like an existential norm. This deep interiorization of identity means that traditional "fire and brimstone" preaching often fails. When a person's very sense of self is tied to their orientation, an attack on that orientation is felt as an attack on their existence. This leads to the thick walls of resistance that many counselors encounter.

The Seamands Model: Healing by Grace

The turning point for many does not come through theological debate, but through a radical encounter with grace. A powerful testimony from a formerly

LGBTQ-identified individual mentions that the walls only crumbled when a pastor, moving in the opposite spirit of judgment, simply said: **"Your Father in Heaven loves you."**

This simple declaration, spoken with authority, bypassed the intellectual defenses and touched the "inner child" that D.A. Seamands discusses in his classic work, *Healing for Damaged Emotions* (and *Healing by Grace*). Seamands posits that many psychological struggles, including identity confusion, are rooted in deep emotional wounds and a lack of perceived grace.⁴

Seamands famously quoted a psychiatrist who noted that half of his patients could be discharged within a week if they could simply believe that God truly forgives them. In the context of gender dysphoria and LGBTQ+ tendencies, the "Healing by Grace" model suggests that these struggles are often "symptoms" of a deeper fracture in the soul—a failure to internalize the unconditional acceptance of the Father.

Applying the Grace Alternative

If grace has the power to heal mental infirmity, how do we apply it to those struggling with their sexuality?

⁴ Seamands, D.A. *Kesembuhan Kasih Karunia. Cet-2.* (Bandung: Yayasan Kalam Hidup, 2001.)

1. **Prioritizing Acceptance over Argument:** The "Healing by Grace" approach begins by establishing the person's value as a child of God before addressing their behavior. This mirrors the "Grace-First" ministry of Jesus.
2. **Healing the "Basal" Wound:** Seamands teaches that we must go back to the original hurts—rejections, father-wounds, or traumas—that may have caused a young person to seek refuge in a different identity.
3. **Redefining Intimacy through *Racham*:** Counselors can help young people redirect their desires for intimacy toward healthy, covenantal friendships, teaching them that they can have their emotional needs met without sexualizing those needs.

Few things we shall note here:

The "Grace Alternative" does not minimize the biblical standard of holiness, but it recognizes that holiness is a fruit of healing, not the prerequisite for it. By moving away from the "four loves" and embracing the deep, compassionate *Racham* of God, we offer young people more than just a set of rules. We offer them a return to their true identity—not as a collection of preferences or dysphorias, but as beloved children of a Father whose grace is sufficient to mend even the most complex fractures of the human heart.

To address this sub-segment of youth, we must move away from a skill-driven, reactive posture and toward a theology-driven, proactive approach. Our objective is to create a community where the "difficult personality" or the "confused identity" is not a barrier to entry, but a starting point for a journey with the Living God.

1. The Open Door: Invitation Without Prejudice

The first step in a practical theology of youth ministry is the **Theology of Invitation**. Many youth struggling with gender dysphoria or LGBTQ tendencies assume the church is a place of immediate condemnation. To reach them, we must establish a clear "threshold of trust."

- **The Foundation:** Our invitation is based solely on a willingness to **trust and follow Jesus Christ**. We do not demand "identity alignment" before "community belonging."
- **The Approach:** We invite these young people to join our Christian youth community as they are. In an Asian context, where "shame" often prevents honesty, we must explicitly state that the church is a hospital for the broken, not a museum for the perfect.
- **The Objective:** We seek to move them from an identity found in their "tendencies" to an identity found in being **God's People**.

2. The Process: The Holy Spirit as the Lead Agent

Once a young person joins the community, we resist the urge to "fix" them through human skill or psychological manipulation. Instead, we return to the **Essence of Youth Ministry Theology**: *the Holy Spirit as Comforter*.

- **Bible Engagement as Usual:** We do not create a "special" Bible for those with LGBTQ tendencies. We engage them in the whole counsel of God. As they encounter the **Bible as Revelation**, we allow the Word to act as a mirror.
- **Allowing the "Process":** We give the Holy Spirit space to work. It is the Spirit's role to define sin and lead a person to repentance. Our job is to walk alongside them, providing the theological framework (Man as Sinner vs. God's Grace) while the Spirit does the internal work of transformation.
- **Maturation:** We trust that as they grow in their relationship with **Jesus Christ as Savior**, their desires and identities will be increasingly submitted to His Lordship.

- **3. Healing the Wounded Heart: Grace and Spiritual Warfare**

- Many young people navigating gender dysphoria or LGBTQ tendencies carry deep, unspoken wounds. These wounds often manifest as "difficult personalities"—defensiveness, anger, or extreme withdrawal. A seasoned counselor recognizes that behind the "tendency" is often a "trauma."

- **Addressing Shame and Guilt**
- Using the insights of Prof. D.R. Hawkins in *Letting Go*, we recognize that many of these young people could be trapped in lower emotional frequencies of **shame and guilt**.⁵
- **The Remedy:** We apply the **Blood of Jesus Christ**. We teach that the Blood does not just forgive "acts"; it cleanses the "person" and lifts the heaviness of shame. We facilitate sessions where the youth can "let go" of the labels the world has placed on them and receive the "honor" found in Christ.
- **Conquering the Spirit of Death**
- As Becky Dvorak explores in *Conquering the Spirit of Death*, some identity struggles are linked to a spiritual heaviness that rejects life and embraces self-destruction or "death" to one's true biological and spiritual self.⁶
- **Spiritual Treatment:** In cases where the struggle feels oppressive or "stuck," we consider "special treatments." This includes designated seasons of **prayer and fasting**.
- **The Goal:** To break the spiritual strongholds of self-hatred and to speak life over their Imago Dei. We pray for the "Spirit of Life" to replace the "Spirit of

⁵ Hawkins, D.R. *Letting Go*. (Jogyakarta: Javanica.) Note: According to Hawkins' consciousness scale, shame and guilty emotions are among the lowest emotions, near to level zero (that is near to *death*). In our interpretation, that fact can be viewed as an indication of lure of the spirit of death (see for instance, cf. Dvorak & Maxwell Whyte).

⁶ Dvorak, Becky. *Conquering the spirit of death*. (New York: Destiny Image.)

Death," allowing the grace of God to reach the deepest parts of their wounded hearts.

- **Few hints to Practical Sub-Ministries in Asian Citi(es)**
- In cities where family honour is paramount, a youth struggling with these issues feels like a "walking shame." Our sub-ministries should be able to address this:

Table 5.

| Step | Focus | Practical Action |
|-----------------------|-------------------|---|
| Step 1: The Sanctuary | Safety & Trust | A small group where "difficult questions" about gender are met with biblical empathy rather than shock. |
| Step 2: The Altar | Spiritual Healing | Long-form prayer sessions specifically targeting the lifting of "Family Shame" and "Personal Guilt." |
| Step 3: The Table | Mentorship | Pairing the youth with a mature Christian mentor who can model "Holiness in the Struggle" without being judgmental. |

Trusting the Father in Heaven

Ultimately, as the aforementioned past experiences with mental issues people and family conflicts have shown, none of these complex issues can be resolved through human effort alone. Whether it is a young man struggling with his mind, a couple fighting for their marriage, or a young person navigating gender dysphoria, the answer remains the same: **The Father in Heaven.**

We provide the community, the prayers, and the fasting, but we can trust God with the "processing" of those young people in the hands of the Holy Spirit. By allowing Jesus Christ to guide them, we watch as the "difficulties" of today become the "testimonies" of tomorrow. Our role is to remain faithful, to lend a hand, and to never stop believing in the power of the Blood of Jesus to heal and restore. Let the Holy Spirit be the Senior pastor, and we are just His junior pastors, as a preacher once wrote.

Concluding remark

In order to encounter the "impending crisis" of disaffiliation, Asian youth ministers are called to begin to move away from being a "sanitized social club." We shall welcome the messiness of difficult personalities, and their hard questions too. By grounding our practice in a robust theology that speaks to the specific pressures of the Asian urban experience, we don't just keep youth in seats — we shall help them find a faith that survives the transition into adulthood.

Indeed, there is a transformative principle that can make this burden not just bearable, but deeply meaningful. It requires a shift in perspective that moves the focus away from the "troubled youth" and onto the common ground we all share. To sustain a ministry to the difficult, we must regularly remind ourselves of a humbling reality: **In God's sight, we are all difficult people.** (Read again and again, Letters to Romans 5:8, KJV).

In the end, difficult young people are a gift to the minister. They are the "sandpaper" God uses to smooth our own rough edges. They force us to abandon our reliance on our own charisma or cleverness and drive us back to the only thing that actually works: **unmerited grace**.

By remembering that we were redeemed while we were still "difficult," we find the strength to stay in the room, to keep the door open, and to offer a love that doesn't make sense to the world—but makes perfect sense to the Kingdom.

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