



Episode 1: Everything is Youth Ministry

Part One—Introducing: Disrupting Ministry

Abigail Rusert: So, when we first found out that we were going to have the opportunity to write for this grant, I remember the sage advice of a vice-president at Princeton Seminary. I went into his office, and he looked at me, and he said, “Make sure that whatever you do, make sure that whatever you write, is really about the heartbeat of the mission and vision of the Institute for Youth Ministry and Princeton Theological Seminary.” Well, I took that very seriously, and I think I probably marched right out of that office and right over to the library. And I began to comb through some of the documents, um, connected to Princeton Seminary's origin. And I actually, I, I have known about something about Princeton Seminary's origin since my childhood. I was baptized at Neshaminy Warwick Presbyterian Church on the shores of the Neshaminy River in Bucks County, Pennsylvania. And on my mantle in my household, growing up, for my entire life is a huge tile, a mosaic tile. It hangs there, and it has a picture of like a log, um, structure and a guy, and several young people sitting around that guy like he's teaching them and on it, it says...

Megan DeWald: *When you say log structure, can you be more specific?*

Abigail: Log Cabin

Megan: *There you go.*

Abigail: But see, I don't want to say it because then people are going to call it the Log Cabin Project, Megan, (**Megan:** *sorry, my bad*) which is like the bane of my existence...

Megan: *I know, I know*

Abigail: But, you know this is the tile that sat over the mantelpiece throughout my, my youth and parents used to tell me, ‘Oh, that's William Tennant. He founded the Log College. That's Princeton Seminary.’” That's pretty much what I knew.

Megan: This is a conversation I had with the Rev. Abigail Visco Rusert, Director of the Institute for Youth Ministry at Princeton Theological Seminary, and my boss and friend and fellow dreamer-and-schemer about all things relating to young people, the Church, God, vocation, life. I'm Megan DeWald, the Associate Director of the IYM at PTS, which is how we often abbreviate things around here, like all good Christians. And this is our new podcast, which we've called *Disrupting Ministry*. Now, when I first Googled this title to make sure it wasn't already claimed, I found a whole lot of thought pieces on how to politely discipline people who loudly interrupt worship services in churches. So, at the outset, I figured I should say—that's not the kind of disruption we're talking about here.

Instead, at the Institute for Youth Ministry, we have been talking for many years now about the secret of youth ministry. I should clarify again: I don't mean the secret *to* youth ministry. (Unfortunately, this isn't



going to be that kind of podcast either.) I'm talking about the secret *of* youth ministry, and that is that... it isn't really working? "Working," of course, isn't really the right word either, but if you're still listening, I bet it's because you know what I mean. You've seen the reports from the Pew Research Center, the Gallup polls, and all the debates on and off line about what it all means. Young people seem to be leaving the Church in droves, joining the ranks of the so-called "unaffiliated," losing confidence in religious institutions, and not even returning once they've grown up and had their own kids, like in previous generations.

By now, you've also probably heard the term "moralistic therapeutic deism" that began to circulate among many youth ministry scholars and practitioners well over a decade ago now after the longitudinal research done in the National Study of Youth and Religion, on a generation, by the way, that no longer comprises the teenagers in our pews.

Experientially, I bet you've felt it, too. Perhaps your work in youth ministry lives in the shadow of some glorious and relatively recent past when your church had a thriving youth ministry and probably some amazing youth pastor still spoken of in hushed, reverent tones. Meanwhile, you are doing everything you know how to do, following your job description down to the letter—recruiting the volunteers, planning the mission trips, organizing the Bible studies, teaching confirmation classes, running as fast as you can on the hamster wheel of it all and yet—is this even the work God calls us to be doing with young people?

Or might we need a new way forward, some innovation in this vocation, perhaps? At the Institute for Youth Ministry, we think the answer to that is yes. So, in this podcast, we bring you stories of faith communities that are disrupting the status quo in the Church by developing innovative forms of ministry with young people. We begin this season with stories from friends and colleagues we have made over the past three years through our \$1.2 million grant project funded by the Lilly Endowment that we've called the Log College Project. Welcome to *Disrupting Ministry*.

Part Two—What is the Institute for Youth Ministry—And Why?

Abigail: When I'm, when I'm reading, when I'm in the library, I find this sermon and it's a sermon that's celebrating Princeton Seminary. And I think it was, I have to actually go back and see who is preaching the sermon, but the sermon that was preached recounted the history of the seminary. And it went back to the Log College until William Tennent. So, the story of my childhood, this church, William Tennant, was the pastor, the founding pastor of Neshaminy Warwick Presbyterian Church, the church of my baptism, the founder of the Log College and arguably the Log College is a precursor institution or a founding institution of Princeton University and thereby Princeton Seminary, and really more so Princeton Seminary than even Princeton University. But if you go to Princeton University and you look at, um, at one of their buildings, uh, that, that the Log College is mentioned, uh, on a plaque to tell you basically the history of which of the different versions of Princeton University and all their iterations, and it starts with the Log College.

Megan: Abigail became the Director of the IYM in 2016 after serving as an Associate Pastor at Carmel Presbyterian Church in the suburbs of Philadelphia. It was during her time in ministry there that she began to suspect that the way churches tend to imagine and do youth ministry needs to change.



Abigail: The first day that I set foot on property as the Associate Pastor, they held, like, a welcome dinner for me. And the night of the welcome dinner, uh, all these people came up and shook my hand, tons of them. A countless number of them said, “so nice to meet you. My name is so-and-so. Um, we're so glad you're here, and I just wanted to let you know that you may see my name on a, uh, down on paper as a youth ministry volunteer, but I am going to be stepping back from service. Welcome to Carmel,” you know, so, and I there were two—the faithful two—who came up to me and said, “You know, I’m going to help you out. I'll only help you out for a year. And that took, that took me on this journey over this five years of asking the big question of what is, what is youth ministry and, and how might a recent seminary grad who's very pie-in-the-sky with my theological idealism, um and la--

Megan: And just general optimism, I think.

Abigail: Yeah, general optimism, lack of pragmatism, you know, um do this job really well. And, and I remember I realized pretty early on with the two that I had, uh, they were hanging back quite literally, physically during youth group. Of course, I mean, of course I ran youth group and have run youth group. I'm actually like the person you want to hire if you want to run a very traditional mainline youth ministry, I'm really good at that.

Megan: Right. Yeah.

Abigail: So, you know, so God has pulled me into--

Megan: Fun, dynamic.

Abigail: Gregarious

Megan: Young, the things

Abigail: All the things. I can play, like, the five chords you need to play on the guitar, you know.

Megan: Right, just that C, D, G... throw an A minor in there for effect...

Abigail: Exactly, precisely. Um, and so they were literally physically hanging in the back of rooms. They were chaperones. They viewed themselves as chaperones. They understood themselves as chaperones. So, I realized very early on, ah, my job is to help them see, is to awaken them to the reality that they too are youth ministers, that these volunteers are not just chaperones that are here to be warm bodies, to make sure the kids are safe or fed or have enough leadership on retreats. They need to understand themselves as active participants in the discipleship of these young people's lives. So that was my major—I changed nothing about the youth ministry the first two years, except for pouring into these two incredible volunteers. Um, I took them to like the most youth ministry-y thing I could do with was, which was a big, huge youth ministry conference. And in the course of that conference, they each sat me down individually and said, “Wait a minute, wait a minute, wait a minute. So, I'm a youth minister.” And they had these, you know, these revelatory moments. So, I thank the big, huge conference, you know, for creating that space, I'm very grateful for that. Um, and, uh, and there we go.

So, in that moment was born probably my love for intergenerational ministry because, um, two months before I left that church, the same that one of those leaders who told me that they were going to leave after a year was, um, in the midst of a, of a worship service, uh, contemporary-style type worship service. He was laying on the ground, holding hands with a young man, praying with him, um, uh, appropriately-distanced. But they were crying and they were praying and they were, they were doing God-talk. They were talking about things theological, and I realized that that young man, um, at that point I knew I was, I



was right. It was right around the time I was leaving the church and I knew I was going to leave. And I just looked at this volunteer and thought, 'They don't need me. I've done, I've done at least one small thing here, because this volunteer is doing really meaningful discipleship in the lives of young people in this church.' Um, and, and it was that experience of being an associate pastor at that church that really awakened me to the incredible agency and capacity of lay people in, in ways that I never had really imagined as I was sitting in seminary classrooms, really preparing for the work of ministry, but it just unlocked this, this beautiful understanding of that, of priesthood of all believers with the folks I was surrounded by in this congregation.

Megan: Through a circuitous and fortuitous turn of events, Abigail begins working as the Assistant Director of the Institute for Youth Ministry, and then 18 months later, her boss accepts a position elsewhere, and she's offered the director's chair. She accepted, of course (who wouldn't?), but she stepped into the position with a little bit of fear and trembling (as do most of us who take on jobs here, if we're honest, I think). After all, the IYM was established in 1995 as the brainchild of Abigail's mentor, the Rev. Dr. Kenda Creasy Dean, who is the Professor of Youth, Church, and Culture here at Princeton Seminary and is one of the leading youth ministry scholars in the world. And Kenda really designed the IYM as a bridge between the church and the academy—as a platform that was bringing youth ministry out of the sometimes literal and sometimes theological basement where it often resided in both the academy and the church.

Abigail: We were really set up to take the people who, uh, the Christian leaders who were interested in pouring into the discipleship of young people and take the theological conversation to the next level. That is really why we were set up. I think at the, in 1995, there were tons of resources for people who wanted to do youth ministry. But one thing that was lacking in the field essentially was the deep, um, theological discourse, the, the rigor, academic, theological reflection, and really the permission to invite youth ministers into doing that. Um, and so I think what the IYM did was carve out a space to say, um, on the one hand, if you're not headed to seminary, that's okay. We have something to offer you. Princeton has something to offer you. We are going to help you do that theological reflection that you so crave as a Christian leader. You're noticing that your young people have an aptitude for reflection that maybe you didn't realize when you got into this job of doing youth ministry. And then on the flip side, for somebody who maybe had been through seminary, who has an MDiv under their belt and is going out there to do this work, hey, youth ministry is theological work. It's not, um, some sort of junior league. I think the IYM has helped address, address that as well. Um, and, and the same is true for senior ministers. Hey, this is deeply theological work. This is, uh, this is inviting young people into reflection and communion with the things of God. Um, and with God-talk. And I think the IYM carved out a really unique space.

Megan: So, 15 years later, Abigail finds herself as the director of the IYM. She brings me on staff with a decade of ministry with young people under my belt, and we set to work, asking ourselves the tough questions that the so-called ivory tower of academia affords us the space to ask. Namely, what is youth ministry, why are we called to do it? And since we know the secret about our current models for youth ministry not having a great track record of cultivating lifelong faithful disciples of Jesus Christ—what can we do about that?

All of these questions, conversations, and experiences coalesced for Abigail in some corner of the library when she read that sermon about the origins of Princeton Seminary. Suddenly, it all clicked. William



Tennent, the founding pastor of the church that baptized Abigail, had built the Log College in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, as a place to train young farm boys who showed promise for ministry but didn't have the means or the stature to enroll in a proper theological institution like Yale or Harvard.

But perhaps because he was liberated from those restrictions—and also didn't mind ruffling a few feathers—Tennent created the Log College as a place where the young men all lived together, worked alongside one another, and studied together. And the graduates from the Log College went on help establish the College of New Jersey, which became Princeton University, out of which Princeton Seminary eventually emerged.

Abigail: It's really interesting to me that this, that this project that William Tennant did with young people, to me, it's youth ministry. To me, Princeton Theological Seminary's founding was a youth ministry project. And so, I thought, 'okay, if we're supposed to do something, that's in line with our mission, vision, and values, why not go back to our founding?' Arguably, our founding was via youth ministry. Let's lean into that, and say, hey "William Tennant innovated."

Part Three—What is the Log College Project—and How Does It Work?

Megan: When Abigail was presented with the opportunity to write a grant for a project through the Lilly Endowment, one of the first things she knew was that we were going to need someone who could not only coordinate the various elements of the grant but who had the creative instincts to help us build the boat as we were rowing it, so to speak. And by the grace of God, we found Carmelle Beaugelin, who became the Program Coordinator for the Log College Project and helped turn the words on the page of a grant proposal into a beloved community of learning and growth. Here's Carmelle.

Carmelle: Well, the Log College Project is a, um, innovation, youth ministry innovation initiative, um, through the Institute for Youth Ministry at Princeton Seminary. And the idea of the Log College Project is to walk along congregations as they design, test, and implement new forms of youth ministry in their contexts. So, for our project, we have 12 congregations all across the country, um, that we are working with and we have walked with them through a three-year process in which they walk through, um, a process that's based on design thinking principles, particularly human centered design thinking, allowing them to explore the history of their congregations, you know, the history of innovation, allowing them to learn more about their contexts, employing empathy, alongside ministry. And one of the most important things about it is helping them utilize and lift up the agency of young people from beginning to end all throughout the process. So young people, we require young people to be at the design table, as they design new forms of youth ministry, whatever may look like in their community.

Megan: Within three weeks, we received 165 applications that we had to narrow down—through a grueling process—to just twelve churches. And then through the next year, we took those churches on a journey through various meetings, projects, and deadlines—all geared toward helping the churches design the project that they would pilot as their new form of youth ministry. Each church had to develop an intergenerational Design Team to do this work—requiring senior leadership, lay leadership, and at least two young people. And then a year into the project, we brought all of those teams to Princeton Seminary for a five-day event called the Design Lab, where they settled on their idea, practiced pitching it to an audience, and received a check for \$15,000 as seed money to launch their initiative. And while staying true to the theological conversation that is central to our work as the Institute for Youth Ministry,



we incorporated the language and framework of human-centered design thinking as a tool for discerning how to best serve their communities.

Carmelle: You know, we are heavily influenced by a Stanford's, um, definition of human-centered design thinking. And when we talk about design thinking, being something that, um, that as a, as a process that allows you to explore possible solutions to a challenge or a problem, or an obstacle, human centered design thinking, explores possible solutions to whatever challenge you're facing, keeping the user, or keeping the experience of the person at the center of exploring those solutions...

But what the challenge that we're presenting, um, and we're, you know, holding, uh, our congregations to, as they go through this process is that instead of starting off with the program and seeing how we can get people to come to it and centering the product or centering the technology or centering the program, we want to center the person, the individual that, and what does it look like instead of drawing people to the ministry? What does it look like to center, um, the process in drawing the ministry to the person, the ministry to the people. And so what that requires us as we go through design thinking process is that we seek first and foremost to understand the person. And you look at people, and you observe their behaviors outside of the ministry necessarily, and you observe them. That's what makes it human centered. And then once you've observed them and you've observed their motivations, the things that bring them joy, the things that bring them pain, the things that, you know, cause them to react in certain ways or in, or not in other ways, then you can go to the drawing board and let those observations inform what you think, what you're observing is the actual problem to solve.

Megan: So, rather than developing a product that we could trademark and sell as the next big thing in youth ministry, what human-centered design thinking gave us was a process for innovation. And this process could be learned and replicated in other congregations because it's highly adaptable to any particular context.

Carmelle: What we went into the, this particular project optimistic about is that we would come away with 12 models because we have 12 churches from 12 different places with 12 different styles and socioeconomic, um, backgrounds in their communities and, and a diversity of makeup. So, we knew that what we'd be more interested in, in observing these churches and walking alongside them is how they did it and how other congregations can di-, can discern for themselves using some of the learnings from the experience of the 12, how they can do something different with their youth ministry, how they can create a new form of ministry that's intergenerational, that lifts up the agency of young people, but is also unique to the needs, experiences, um, and makeup of their community in their context.

Megan: In order to learn what we needed to learn from these 12 churches, the IYM *also* needed a process. In other words, we knew we needed to employ a particular methodology for our research. And for that, we turned to one of our brilliant friends and partners in ministry, the Rev. Dr. Erin Raffety who we knew would make a fantastic Research Advisor for the project. Erin is a cultural anthropologist by training and a disciple of Jesus Christ by calling, serving as a research fellow at the Center of Theological Inquiry and as a Research Consultant on another grant project at Princeton Seminary. And she's also a Presbyterian pastor and practical theologian, with expertise in congregational ministry, ministry with people with disabilities, and ministry with families, older adults, and young people.

Megan: When we spoke with Erin about our research goals in this project, she introduced us to the methodology of ethnography, which is a term derived from the Greek word for "culture" (ethnos) and the



word for “writing” (-graphy). So, ethnography means “writing culture,” and it’s a research method developed by anthropologists in order to observe and understand people.

But, she told us, ethnography is more than just a methodology for research. It’s an epistemology, which is a fancy way of saying that it’s a way of knowing, it’s a way of being in the world, and of making knowledge about the world.

Erin Raffety: For a while, when anthropologists were interested in knowing about different groups of people, they like sat in their armchairs and read a bunch of books. And eventually they realized, like, that’s not a great way of getting to understand a people in different parts of the world and different cultures. And so, they moved, one would say, from the armchair, onto “the veranda.” And the veranda, thinking about how, you know, an anthropologist would go to a different part of the world and kind of set up, um, camp among people, but being on the veranda, you can think about that as kind of being at a distance and even at, um, somewhat of like an elite position kind of looking down or into a particular culture.

Um, but one of the major shifts kind of in the way that, uh, people did research, uh, they finally moved off the veranda. So, uh, what happened was people realized that one of the best ways to get to know about different cultures is to go and live amongst different groups of people and to actually spend time with them. And I think to take seriously what they say about themselves and what they do on a daily basis and to, um, not simply make judgements about them.

Megan: When Erin used this metaphor to describe the various turns and moves of the discipline of anthropology—from the armchair, to the veranda, to getting on the ground with people—I couldn’t help but see the parallels with the discipline of theology, or at least the stereotypes or worst-practices of the discipline. You know, when we presume that we can know what God is up to in the world only by sitting in an armchair and reading a stack of books or making theological pronouncements from on high? (Listen, it’s no secret to us here at the seminary that such a reputation sometimes precedes us.) But we all know that that kind of elitist posture—it isn’t gonna get us anywhere in youth ministry, or really any kind of ministry in which the practice of it *is* largely the theological work of it.

Erin: So, in practical theology, we’re saying we value lived human experience as a way of understanding who God is in the world and who God is in the church. And I have felt like ethnography is such a resource in doing better practical theology, because if we’re going to get at experience, we need some way of measuring it. Like we need some way of codifying it. We need some method for going in and understanding and making sense of it.

So, I really look at, um, ethnography as a partner, you know, in terms of making theological knowledge. So, I think that ethnography can make us more honest theologians. I think it can make us better theologians. It’s similar, I think, to contextual theology. So, theology that takes seriously where it’s writing from, who is writing it, what’s going on in the world, right? There’s this critical engagement with the world with contextual theology. But I think that it actually lends something really precise to doing theology because then we can stand with people and be a little bit more, I think, convicted and clear about what it is people have said to us, what we have experienced alongside them. And I think there’s this lovely thing that happens in that reorientation where it’s like, ‘Hey, we theologians, right, we practical theologians—we need people, right? We need the church. We need congregations. We need young people in order to understand God better.’



Megan: I'll say it louder for the people in the back: *We need young people in order to understand God better.* Perhaps part of the secret of youth ministry that I mentioned earlier—that, you know, it isn't really working—perhaps part of its brokenness is that the Church has largely ignored this truth. It's a lot easier for us as adults—and perhaps even easier for us youth ministry professionals—to design a program or develop a curriculum that assumes that young people are merely the recipients or receptacles of our God-knowledge. We teach them that human beings are created in God's image, but then we refuse to behold—and to be challenged by—how God is revealed in and through young people.

We didn't want to make that mistake here. So, with Erin's help—and God's, for that matter—we recruited three Research Fellows, who each have years of youth ministry experience under their belts, trained them in ethnography, and assigned them each to four of the 12 churches that they could walk alongside throughout the journey of the Log College Project. Through many, many conversations with the people on these teams—including, yes, the young people themselves—themes have begun to emerge. Stories of success, failure, transformation, and confusion are bubbling up to the surface. Now, we're trying to stay on the ground with them, to listen deeply to their experiences, their ideas, their observations. In future episodes of this podcast, you'll be hearing directly from these researchers. They're gonna reflect theologically and think critically about just what it is that we're learning.

Part Four—The Big Pivot & the Great Accelerator

Megan: After the Design Lab in the summer of 2019, we started to make plans to get out there and see what these churches had started to launch in their contexts. One of our researchers headed to Minnesota in the dead of winter, another researcher visited a church in the D.C. area. Abigail happened to be in wine country in Northern California with one of our churches in late February/early March of 2020. And then, well... you know what happened next. A novel coronavirus that we had begun to learn about in December 2019/January 2020 made its way across the globe—an invisible, microscopic enemy that just swept across the whole world and brought us all to our knees. Most of the projects—maybe all of them—that our churches were starting to develop were built on a model of people coming together, in person, in a shared space, doing shared activities. Now, look, our plans going awry were hardly a blip on the cosmic radar of everything that was going on in the world, but just like all of you—we had to figure out what came next. What were we gonna do? What was important, what was essential, what did we have to let go and grieve? And maybe—just maybe if we're able to imagine it at all—what might be some of the opportunities or the learnings that have sprung forth in this time? Here's Abigail.

Abigail: 'Cause I think one of the things that COVID has done is it has, it has put to the test, the rails that we've tried to lay down for ministers to do innovation work in their context. I mean, all the tools we've built, all the process we've built around, what it looks like to help congregations design new forms of youth ministry, all of those tools are more relevant than ever before because of COVID-19. Um, so much so that, you know, congregations, I think in the next few months, as we begin to, uh, Lord willing, begin to move into a context where we've begun to manage COVID better, and it's not something that is keeping us away from each other as much, but we've renegotiated what it looks like to gather, et cetera. Um, as we move into that space, the kinds of work that we have done with congregations throughout the Log College Project are, are just primed and ready to help congregations figure out the what's next.

And so, you know, I think, I think we'll know in a year or so, whether or not the kind of rails we've laid down have “worked” around that. But the gift of the innovation process is you get to try again. So, as



time goes on and as we continue to work with congregations, I think one of the gifts that we get to bring to this is, 'Hey, yes, we're going to keep coming up with new ways to address, um, the issues you face in your context.' And I don't mean the issue of not having enough young people, to be clear. I mean, the issue of, um, you know, there are, there are people who are hungry, who are dying, who are lonely, who are suffering from mental health issues, and God is calling the Church to come alongside those people.

Megan: Carmelle put things in perspective by naming some of the obstacles that the Design Teams believed they were facing in the pre-COVID era—things like, is \$15,000 enough? Is our building sufficient? Will we have the permission we need from the decision-makers in our congregations? But in COVID times—and in 2020 as a whole—the real obstacles came sharply into focus.

Carmelle: And I think there's something, there's a gravity to that, that we must wrestle with as ministry leaders that oftentimes in times of peace, we don't realize how much peace we do have. And then in times of great uncertainty—pandemics, issues of climate change, political disagreements amongst families within congregations, the fragility of Black life, racism, these kinds of things—it's telling that these are not usually oftentimes the things that come up as obstacles when one asks. But I think what a lot of us have learned as ministers, and I've seen that even reflected in some of the writings and the conversations with, um, folks who are participating in Log College Project is that they see those things now. And what's even more interesting is that their young people had seen it all along.

And yet, we give them pizza parties and we give them, you know, game nights while the world burns around them. And it finally has caught up to us as adults.

Now, if there's a grace to be named in all of this, it is that we are now all collectively seeing this together. And we're collectively starting to pay attention to our young people in a very serious way, because they had seen this and they were talking about this all along.

Conclusion

Megan: Next week on *Disrupting Ministry*, I'll introduce you to our friends at Coppin Memorial African Methodist Episcopal Church in the Southside of Chicago. You'll learn about their quest to create a "new normal" in their community by disrupting the status quo in the Church and developing an innovative form of ministry with young people.

Today's episode was written and recorded by me, Megan DeWald, and then was edited and made infinitely better by the wonderful and talented Nii Addo Abrahams, a former student worker at the IYM, now doing amazing work at Pres House, a campus ministry at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Special thanks to Brooke Matejka and Tamesha Mills who helped get our ideas flowing for this podcast, and to Maiia Avelino and Christine Toto, for making sure it happened. To find out more about the Institute for Youth Ministry, visit our website at iym.ptsem.edu—and from there, click on the words that say Princeton Theological Seminary or visit us directly at ptsem.edu. Until next week!