

RELATIONAL, EDUCATIONAL FAITH JOURNEY

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This thesis may be duplicated.

Introduction

I was so thrilled! After confirmation class, my ninth grade student agreed to help me with my cell phone. I own an ancient phone without any bells or whistles but I am able to text with it and wanted to learn how. My student took one look at my phone and groaned, “You need a new phone!” I told him I couldn’t work the one I had and that buying a new one would be like putting earrings on a hog. He laughed and said he would help me set up my phone for texting the group and would then help me with my settings so I could “customize that relic.” He was now the teacher and I the student. As we sat in the Narthex adding the group’s phone numbers to the list, we just fell into a natural conversation about school and the kids he hung out with. He told me about his choice to leave one group and start fresh with a different group that was more accepting of him. He told me about his mom and sister and how they were having a hard time getting along lately. He talked easily as his fingers (thumbs) flew across the phone’s keypad. When he had finished entering all my information, we parted as two people changed by our journey with each other. I had needed his help. He had felt comfortable talking to me. The friendship and need was mutual and based on trust. We both had a new view of each other because of it. God was there with us in our trusted relationship with each other. If only all of my confirmation classes were like that holy time.

This story illustrates a transformational moment in intergenerational relationship building. Today’s typical Christian Education is based on a system that’s been basically the same for a hundred years. We are currently focused on Bible-based, head-knowledge learning for youth based mainly on grade levels. Perhaps rethinking our Christian Education process in

congregations could more effectively help nurture a vital, mature faith in our youth and invigorate (or help ignite) Christ's church to be a witness to the gospel in the world today. This intergenerational, and peer based education system would include meaningful, ongoing relationship building based on purposeful servant leadership, ongoing peer mentoring, and caring relationships with adults of all ages within our church and community. Starting at an early age, this intergenerational educational model would expose youth to a servant leadership mentality that would keep them involved in Christ's mission for the sake of the world. In using the hermeneutical lens of Richard Osmer, I will take a look at the current state of Christian education in today's technological culture, look at our original Triune God relational educators, and show how utilizing intergenerational relationships, peer mentoring, and servant leadership opportunities can foster vital faith as youth go through developmental and spiritual stages.

What's Going On?

Traditional Sunday schools and confirmation programs do not fit all young people and the statistics are proving that after youth are confirmed, their attendance drops off. Many youth say they attend confirmation because they have to; once they don't "have to" anymore, they fade away. According to the Barna Research Group, "Sixty one percent of today's young adults had been churched at one point during their teen years but they are now spiritually disengaged (i.e., not actively attending church, reading the Bible, or praying). Only one-fifth of twentysomethings (20%) have maintained a level of spiritual activity consistent with their high school experiences."¹ Simply put: attendance pins have gone out of fashion. The institutional church

¹ "Most Twentysomethings Put Christianity on the Shelf Following Spiritually Active Teen Years," Barna Group, accessed April 19, 2012, <http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/16-teensnext-gen/147-most-twentysomethings-put-christianity-on-the-shelf-following-spiritually-active-teen-years?q=youth+church+attendance>.

has promoted an institution-centered faith, and as the culture has shifted away from organized groups to an individual, participatory culture, the church has paid the price.

Why?

Sunday school, as we now know it, is only about a hundred years old. But those last hundred years have changed exponentially in our culture. Sunday schools were originally literal schools: they were places where poor children could learn to read. The Sunday school movement began in Britain in the 1780s. The Industrial Revolution had resulted in many children spending all week long working in factories. Christian philanthropists wanted to free these children from a life of illiteracy. A man named Robert Raikes from England saw the children acting wild in the streets on their one day off and decided to educate them through a Christian lens. The students learned how to read and write by learning the Bible. The Sunday school was teaching a valuable education to children that they were not getting elsewhere. Within decades, the Sunday schools were filled to the brim not just in England, but America as well; “No wonder such results astonished those who produced them. The rule on which mankind had acted for ages was reversed. This new rule was: the child first!”²

Eventually, those children working long hours in the factories were mandated to attend regular schools instead. Sunday schools were helpful at a time when public schools were not readily available. Now that the public schools have taken over the original role of Sunday school, churches are still teaching the head knowledge, but we are not the main source of education anymore. We are now free to include deeper meaning into our curriculum and provide an education of deep relationships and core love for God and his people. But are we?

² J. Henry Harris, *The Story of Robert Raikes* (Philadelphia, Union Press, 1900). 56.

What are Our Churches Teaching Us?

The National Study on Youth and Religion (NSYR) has found that increasing numbers of youth and parents are engaging in Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD). MTD is characterized by the following criteria:

1. A god exists who created and orders the world and watches over life on earth.
2. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
3. The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
4. God is not involved in my life except when I need God to resolve a problem.
5. Good people go to heaven when they die.³

This is a distant view of a moralistic god. We may have been teaching MTD inadvertently for a long time and it is now catching up with us. This way of thinking is a dead end journey. According to Kenda Creasy Dean author of *Almost Christian*, “In the view of American teenagers, God is more object than subject—an idea but not a companion.”⁴ And most teenagers take the same road their parents do when it comes to the religious journey: thirteen-to-seventeen-year-olds in the NSYR were highly conventional, content to adopt their parents’ religious practices and beliefs.⁵ Dean states, “If desire for God and devotion to our fellow human beings is replaced by a loveless shell of religiosity, then young people who are unable to find consequential faith (faith that grows by confessing a creed, belonging to a community, and pursuing God’s purpose and hope) in the church absolutely should default to something safer. In fact, that is exactly what they are doing.”⁶

³ Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian* (NY: Oxford Press, 2010), 14.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 24.

The Current Social Context

The needs of the youth are changing rapidly—as rapidly as the technology that permeates their world. Technology has advanced at an exponential rate since the invention of the computer. Computer data, once so large that it used to be housed in whole rooms, is now available to fit inside your portable phone. With technology comes freedom, mobility, and individuality.

In terms of a child’s brain development, “Surfing the Net or clicking links from one website to the next actually trains a child’s brain to process information in narrative images. It fragments the child’s thinking, which contributes to loopy or nonlinear thinking patterns. Computer usage also contributes to a child’s ability to multitask.”⁷ We can Google any information we want and Twitter about it or post a Facebook status update giving our opinion. We can become instant celebrities by posting a video on YouTube. If a person needs community, they can talk online in a chat room or text a friend and get an immediate response. People are now judged by how many “followers” or “hits” they have. We have been able to create our own identity through the social media and that identity is the one we want the world to see. Individuality is the fashion of the millennials (those born after 2000).

With the media exposure come advertisements and exposure to pop culture, whether we want it or not. This exposure has changed traditions in our culture. With smaller families children have a larger say in their social and recreational activities. Kids are a force when it comes to purchasing power and influence on their parents’ buying habits, so of course the advertising sector is marketing to them in a powerful way. Their exposure to advertising is so prevalent they have become immune to it, and are able to tune it out with more success than their

⁷ Ivy Beckwith, *Postmodern Children’s Ministry: Ministry to Children in the 21st Century* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 30.

parents' generation. But even they cannot escape the effects of pop culture and media's influence over their spending habits for clothes, hair, sports, and leisure activities.

In this new Global Information Age, the media has permeated almost all of a youth's day. According to Chris Foresman, "The latest research from the Kaiser Family Foundation reveals that consuming various media, including TV, music, books, movies, video games, and websites, takes up nearly every waking hour not spent in school. In 2009, the average 8- to 18-year-old had nearly 11 hours of media exposure per day."⁸ The average teenage boy spends over 13 hours a week on video games, as opposed to 5 hours for girls.⁹

Hardwired to connect, these millennials are a generation of super multi-taskers who will move on quickly to new stimulation when they find boredom creeping in.¹⁰ We almost expect to find our confirmation students checking their phones during our lectures on Wednesday nights! They even sleep with their phones, use them as alarms, calendars, check the weather, sports scores, and receive text messages way into the night. Young people just want to be connected all the time as they develop and grow. According to Ryan Bolger, Associate Professor of Church in Contemporary Culture at Fuller Seminary, "The shift from post modernity to participatory culture has meant that people find their identity through what they create as opposed to what they consume."¹¹ People are identifying who they are through the creation of media such as blogs,

⁸ Victoria J. Rideout, Ulla G. Foehr, and Donald F. Roberts, *Generation M2: Media in the Lives of 8- to 18-Year-Olds: A Kaiser Family Foundation Study* (Menlo Park: Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, 2010), 22. <http://www.kff.org/entmedia/upload/8010>.

⁹ Leonard Sax, M.D., Ph.D., *Boys Adrift* (NY: Basic Books, 2007), 58.

¹⁰ Beckwith, *Postmodern Children's Ministry*, 30.

¹¹ Ryan Bolger, "Following Jesus in Participatory Culture: Faithful Living in a World Mediated by Technology" (Lecture, Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Nov. 4-5, 2011).

shared pictures, and YouTube videos that are cheap and readily available. It has become the way of life that shapes our digital natives (those born into the technological movement) and they have come to relish being an active part of their world. They expect it.¹²

But social networking and media is the most used of all. The Kaiser Family Foundation Study also found 8-18-year-olds who text send an average of 118 messages a day. They spend almost two hours on their cell phones alone.¹³ According to Terri Elton, Associate Professor of Children, Youth, and Family Ministry at Luther Seminary, most of these texts have no real objective. The texts themselves are meaningless but the idea behind them is very meaningful for the teens. Youth want connections. They want to know that they matter to their peers so they text something just to say that they are “out there” to the others. With a “reply” they know that they matter to someone almost immediately.¹⁴ It answers the age-old set of questions teens want to know: am I loved, can I love, am I capable, and do I matter?

What We Want for Our Youth

“Youth development, in its broadest sense, refers to the stages that all children go through to acquire the attitudes, competencies, values, and social skills they need to become successful adults. As children move through their developmental stages they acquire a set of personal assets, or supports, which help them face the challenges and opportunities ahead. Their ability to successfully develop depends to a great extent on the support and assistance they receive from

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Victoria J. Rideout, M.A., Ulla G. Foehr, Ph.D., and Donald F. Roberts, Ph.D. *Generation M2: Media in the Lives of 8- to 18-Year-Olds: A Kaiser Family Foundation Study* (Menlo Park: Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, 2010), 18. <http://www.kff.org/entmedia/upload/8010>.

¹⁴ Terri Elton, “From Television to Twitter: Embracing Technology in Ministry” (Lecture, Luther Seminary, St Paul, MN, October, 2011).

the people and institutions around them.”¹⁵ Eric Erikson (1902–1994), a psychologist, is perhaps the best-known theorist in the field of human development. He discovered eight stages of development that all children go through moving from infant to adult:

1. Trust (which he linked to positive emotional relationships with caring adults)
2. A strong sense of self-sufficiency
3. Ability to exercise initiative
4. Confidence in one’s ability to master skills and navigate one’s world
5. A well-formed sense of personal identity
6. A desire to be productive and contributing for future generations
7. The ability to experience true intimacy
8. A strong sense of personal integrity¹⁶

These traits are still used to assess youth maturity in the world. To develop into a mature and well-rounded person, these traits need to be nurtured. A child’s connection to an older peer or a caring adult will help them maneuver through these stages as they grow and develop. Today’s world is a complicated place for our young people, and in order for them to develop a mature faith, they need trusted connections to others in a stable environment. The church can journey alongside young people as they develop to give them a solid sense of their identity in God.

Roland Martinson, Wes Black, and John Roberto have pinned down seven characteristics of a vital faith in youth in their book *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry: Leading Congregations Toward Exemplary Youth Ministry*. They are:

1. Seeking Spiritual Growth
2. Possessing a Vital Faith
3. Practicing Faith in Community
4. Making Faith a Way of Life
5. Living a Life of Service
6. Exercising Moral Responsibility

¹⁵ U.S. Department of Education, Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools Mentoring Resource Center #13 January 2007, (Folsom: U.S. department of Education Mentoring Resource Center, 2007), 2.

¹⁶ Ibid., 2.

7. Possessing a Positive Spirit¹⁷

Churches that take on a culture of the Spirit tend to see youth with these traits. These youth are committed to their faith and practice it in their daily lives. In their book *A Faith of Their Own*, Lisa Pearce and Melinda Lundquist Denton found that the youth with the highest levels of religiosity (abiders) had more social stability, participated in less risky behaviors, and had the best overall health and well-being.¹⁸ Kenda Creasy Dean states in her book, *Almost Christian*, “While religious youth do not avoid problem behavior and relationships, those who participate in religious communities are more likely to do well in school, have positive relationships with their families, have a positive outlook on life, wear their seatbelts-the list goes on, enumerating an array of outcomes that parents pray for.”¹⁹ Journeying with our youth in their faith is crucial to their very quality of life.

Saturating a child with positive Christian role models who demonstrate integrity, moral responsibility, a life of service, and a positive Spirit will give a child a compass to guide them into both developmental and spiritual maturity and let them reach their potential in Christ.

When children know who they are and “Whose they are” through the Holy Spirit and ongoing, trusted Christian relationships, they can fully develop into the person God created them to be. They can robustly develop their Christian faith and witness to others on their faith journey. According to Kenda Creasy Dean in her book *Almost Christian*, “Adolescents are looking for a soul-shaking, heart-waking, world-changing God to fall in love with, and if they do not find that God in the Christian church, they will most certainly settle for lesser gods

¹⁷ Roland Martinson, Wes Black, and John Roberto, *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry: Leading Congregations Toward Exemplary Youth Ministry* (St. Paul: EYM Publishing, 2010), 58.

¹⁸ Lisa D. Pearce, and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *A Faith of Their Own*. (NY: Oxford University Press, 2011), 71-80.

¹⁹ Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian* (NY: Oxford Press, 2010), 20.

elsewhere. Youth look to the church to show them something. Most of the time we have just offered them pizza.”²⁰

It is important to nurture our youth from the earliest of ages to a life of meaningful, trusting relationships, positive Christian role models, purposeful service to the larger world, and servant leadership skills that they internalize as vital to their Spiritual health. Creating a participatory culture of the Spirit for our church from the Sunday school program on up instead of serving pizza on youth night will bring real relationships centered in Christ back into the church then out again for the sake of the world. Christ will become real and person to youth through their trusted relationships thwarting off MTD. They will learn servant leadership skills by living it out in participatory peer mentoring situations first as mentees and then as mentors. Through practice in Christian education they will live into their faith and gain confidence and leadership skills while learning how to express their faith in words and deeds.

Youth Mentor Relationships as an Effective Educational Tool

As Eric Erickson hypothesizes, youth are learning every day from within the family and through other relationships. Youth today are forming their identity through constant exposure to their peers. For this reason peer mentoring has taken an educational turn from the shadows to the spotlight, showing up across the spectrum in society.

4-H Youth Teaching Youth is a cross-aged teaching program that has proven the success of connecting older and younger youth. 4-H Youth Teaching Youth is a partnership between the University of Minnesota Extension Service and Dakota County 4-H. According to Bryan Willcom, Program Coordinator for the Dakota County 4-H, the program has trained over 5000

²⁰ Ibid., 52.

high school students and reached over 100,000 elementary school students since 1984.²¹ 4-H groups visit elementary school children connecting with them and teaching them about tobacco and peer pressure. Typically, the 4-H Youth Teaching Youth come to the classrooms and show a video to fourth graders and then work through questions with them together. The fourth graders hear the important messages that the teens are presenting and take them seriously. Evaluations from the fourth grade students and classroom teachers reflect the positive bond that develops between younger youth and teen teachers.²²

In the Rosemount/Apple Valley School District 196 south of the Twin Cities, Minnesota , elementary schools have a peer mentoring program where 3-5th graders visit with their K-2nd grade “buddies” regularly. The older kids mentor the younger ones by reading to them and helping them with art projects and games. Gary Anger, the principal at Red Pine Elementary in Rosemount, Minnesota, says, “The students are gradually learning leadership skills as they form friendships with their peers by meeting on a regular basis. The benefits work both ways and are encultured into the school’s curriculum so that by the time a student is in 3rd grade the transition to leader is natural and anticipated with excitement.”²³

Indeed, the mentor leadership role extends to the YMCA where Junior Leaders ages seven to ten can spend time mentoring younger children while they are checked into the childcare facility. Junior Leaders help with crafts, reading and gym time. Karen Roberts Coordinator of Childcare in the Southwest YMCA in Eagan, Minnesota, says, “Junior Leaders

²¹ Bryan Willcom, email message to author, April 16, 2012.

²²Carissa Akpore and Bryan Willcom, 4-H Youth Mentoring Youth – University of Minnesota Extension Service take home letter to parents, Red Pine Elementary School, March 2012.

²³ Interview with Gary Anger, February 9, 2012.

are rewarded by receiving a sticker or treat after ten times helping the little ones. The older kids love coming back to such a familiar place and being the ‘big kid!’ But mainly they keep coming back because they love the feeling of helping out.”²⁴ They are learning how to serve by relating to kids younger than themselves in a positive manner and they are gaining confidence and leadership skills while developing a sense of identity. The desire for youth to help is strong and living in community is hardwired into us from our Creator who exists in relationship within the Triune God and with the world.

God the Father’s Relationship with Us

In a youth ministry centering on God, we are seeking to understand the unique developmental and theological needs and desires of each child in church. Since we are created in the image of God, the basic makeup of humanity is essentially relational with God. The connectedness we all need was first given to us by God through relationships. Indeed, God lives in relationship internally and externally. In John 1:1-3 we have insight to God, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.” The relationship between God and Jesus in the New Testament is stated particularly in the Gospel of John: “I and the Father are one.” (10:30), “The word which you hear is not mine but the Father’s who sent me.” (14:24), “All that the Father has is mine.” (16:15), and “He who has seen me has seen the Father.” (14:9).

God sent Jesus and when the Spirit rests on him, his ministry begins. And John testified, “I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not

²⁴Interview with Karen Roberts Senior Coordinator Childcare Southwest YMCA, March 2012.

know him; but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit’” (Jn 1:32-33). Without our Triune God, we cannot understand the true God and how God works in a loving relationship within God and externally with the world. The Triune God makes the Word real. In the Gospel of John, the Spirit helps foster a relationship with God and Jesus. God has worked in relationship to God’s self from the beginning giving us an example to live by.

Terence Fretheim notes in *The Suffering of God an Old Testament Perspective*, “A survey of Old Testament studies which speak of God-world, God-Israel, or God-individual would reveal that the most common word used is “relationship” or related words.”²⁵ He goes on to state, “As in any relationship of integrity, God will have to give up some things for the sake of the relationship. Thus, God will have to give up some freedom. Moreover, any relationship of integrity will entail a sharing of power. Each party to the relationship must give up any monopoly on power for the sake of the relationship. Neither party to the relationship can be overwhelmed for the relationship to be a true one. For the sake of the relationship, God gives up the exercise of some power. This will, in turn, qualify any talk about divine control or divine sovereignty.”²⁶ The same is true for our relationships with youth. We can help bring about a youth’s developmental and spiritual maturity by coming alongside them not dominating them. Then they can become all God has created them to be, which includes living a life of servant leadership as demonstrated by the life of Jesus.

The Ultimate Servant Leader

²⁵ Terrance Fretheim, *The Suffering of God an Old Testament Perspective* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 36.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 37.

Jesus journeyed with the disciples in their own context for three years as a constant servant leader and trusted friend. In S. Ketcham's paper, "Incarnational Praxis and Community: A Person's Relationship to the Community of Faith," "According to the author of Colossians, relationships among Christians are integral to the maturing Christian life and the setting for the Holy Spirit to bring about transformation. Christian transformation does not find its end in the person, but in the community."²⁷

Jesus was the ultimate servant leader, mentoring to people whether Jew or gentile. Jesus mentored a new kind of teaching even from the start of his ministry. Traditionally, rabbis would have students or disciples come to them to apply for discipleship, but Jesus, as a servant leader, actively went out into the world and called his disciples one by one picking the most unconventional choices. No one was forced into discipleship, but just the words, "follow me" made Matthew, the tax collector, drop everything and follow him. Jesus, in his servant leadership, chose the unlovable tax collector and poor fishermen among others to join him in fishing for people. Their discipleship was a journey. Through the Holy Spirit, they were called upon to follow and they believed. They did not always know what they were doing, however. For the most part, they followed Jesus, not understanding all that he was teaching at the time. We, too, will journey with our youth. We are given a powerful example by Jesus to actively go out into the world and call disciples to Him. We are called to walk alongside the youth of today's culture that includes people with the same basic need to be loved but who have grown up in a society that substitutes technology for real relationships. Like Jesus we will not expect them to understand the relevance of everything they do or see right away.

²⁷ S. Ketcham. "Incarnational Praxis and Community: A Person's Relationship to the Community of Faith." (Paper presented at Luther Seminary Association of Youth Ministry Educators, Seattle, WA, November 2011), 11.

The disciples followed him but did not know what his teachings always meant until after he had returned to his Father. But Jesus, as a leader and mentor to them, was patient. He traveled with them and lived with them for his entire ministry. They watched as he raised Lazarus from the dead and healed the sick. They listened to all of his parables and when he sent them out on their first mission trip in pairs, they went and came back amazed. They witnessed how he walked on the water and, helped them catch an abundance of fish. They were constantly in his presence and they loved him, trusted him, and believed in him. But they didn't really get what he was telling them until they had the perspective of hindsight and the gift of the Holy Spirit. In our walk together we can be thankful that it is the Holy Spirit that comes alongside us to guide our teaching and ignite faith in us all.

As their leader, Jesus demonstrated a love for people that knew no boundaries between Jew or Gentile, man or woman, rich or poor, friend or foe. He healed people and talked about God to thousands. He let the little children come to him despite the wishes of the disciples. As their leader, Jesus demonstrated true servant love by stripping off his outer robe and washing the disciples' feet. This was the job of a servant. But Jesus the leader did this to show his disciples how to live and how to serve each other in love.

Jesus, our teacher, says, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (Jn 13:34-35). Jesus demonstrates with his very life what servant leadership is for us. Jesus has given all of himself for us in love to open a relationship with us and break down the barriers between us. All of these things Jesus did in community. And now Jesus asks us to come along in his journey by loving each other and working in community as well. The joy of the Christian life is to follow Jesus' example of love

and service to each other and the world and to mentor youth through relationships of integrity in how to do the same.

The Work of the Holy Spirit

Those called to youth ministry should foster a maturing faith in our young people like Jesus did with his disciples. Maturing faith can only come from God. God is both initiator of our faith and the one who transforms us for “where the Spirit of the Lord is there is freedom” (2 Cor. 3:17b).²⁸ A maturing, vital faith in Christ is one that is moving toward adulthood by positive changes in lifestyle, firm faith convictions, worship, and living in community that participates with the church in a ministry of service for all.

In Acts, Peter and the disciples started the church after the gift of the Holy Spirit descends upon them, giving them the power to proclaim the word of God and bringing to fullness their maturity in faith and love for God in Jesus. Through Jesus’ love for Peter and the disciples, the world is changed. The disciples learned through their relationship with Jesus what the world needed to know; the love of God. They began to live out what Jesus had first taught them. They healed the sick and proclaimed the Good News to Jew and Gentile alike. They lived in community with each other and made relationships that profoundly changed the world along the way. They continued making new relationships with others in different parts of the world establishing churches and hope to further God’s kingdom on earth. The whole thing started with a Jewish man calling, “Follow me!” and taking the disciples on an amazing relational, educational faith journey that left them transformed and faithful to the end of their lives. They continued what their servant leader Jesus had started through loving relationships of teaching, healing, journeying together, and living together. They were there at Jesus’ ultimate leadership

²⁸ Ibid., 2.

of death on a cross for us all. Clearly, the early disciples matured in their faith because one man, Jesus, our “God in a bod,” journeyed with them despite their own foibles. God is relational and a true friend in good times and in bad, working in community with the disciples to give them their identity and form them spiritually. By journeying with our youth, we will help them develop their identity as a children of God and help them through their stages of maturity developmentally and spiritually, giving them confidence so they may spread the Good News to others through the Holy Spirit, nurturing hope and Life to all.

The Role of Community in Vital Faith

Ketcham defines a maturing faith in Christ for youth as one in which an individual combines their gifts with the gifts of other Christians, learns to behave well in the process, and participates with the church in a ministry of service to the world.²⁹ Ketchum goes on to say, “Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s theology of sociality reveals that relationships are a fundamental part of the Christian faith and life. Transformation happens when we move from being *with each other* to *being for each other*. This is the evidence of the work of Christ in the world for the world. According to Bonhoeffer, “All of creation is made whole when humans live in community with God and others. He focuses on the telos of a person’s relationship with the others that is bound up with one’s relationship with God, elevating mutuality and service. The opposite, sin, is people acting in self-interest with flagrant disregard for others.”³⁰

Ketchum uses Miroslav Volf’s words to highlight the importance of community, “Miroslav Volf stated that to be transformed by Christ is more than an internal experience, but is concretely realized in relationships with the community. A person’s participation and contribution is both

²⁹Ibid., 6.

³⁰ Qtd. in Ketcham, “Incarnational,” 18-19.

an “encounter with grace and a means of grace” that elicits faith. The community of faith emerges as self and others overlap.”³¹

Meeting our youth’s spiritual needs is a relational concept as well. We all want our youth to live out a mature Christian faith formation. The key lies in forming real relationships based on true Christian love and caring. When we develop friendships in the church, especially from mentors we have come to know, we are creating relationships that will last even in hard times. Learning from a mentor is rewarding and fulfilling to both parties. Mutual admiration, learning, and caring for youth, helps them to mature on their faith journey. A person is more likely to come to church if he knows there is someone there who is depending on him. It is also easier to come to church when he has a friend there to work with. That is the true Christian education we need to teach our youth. And by making that journey to church they just might just be a “means of grace” for someone or have an “encounter with grace” that glues us together in community of believers through the Holy Spirit.

Lights, Camera, Action!

In thinking about the relational, educational faith journey of our young people I am proposing to help foster a more mature faith in our young people by participatory servant leadership through peer mentoring, technology-based camps, and service-minded intergenerational events led in part by youth through technology. By keeping in mind Eric Erickson’s stages of growth development and the seven characteristics of youth with vital faith as listed in *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry: Leading Congregations Toward Exemplary Youth Ministry*, the following activities build scaffolding to vital faith transformation primarily

³¹ Qtd. in Ketcham, “Incarnational,” 31.

through participatory learning in genuine relationships. The point is not to get these events perfect but to journey together in relationships of integrity and love while doing them.

A Peer-Mentoring Program

An ongoing journey into a Sunday school peer-mentoring program starting at the preschool level will encourage peer relationships that form organically from continued exposure to each other. The older kids' purpose has changed from coming to church to "doing" for their peers. Their attitude also has changed because now they are the leaders and come to church because they have a needed position in the church. Older kids tend to listen more carefully if they know they have an immediate purpose in learning. They take the responsibility with pride and work harder because they will be working among their peers. Younger ones like the attention they get from the "big kids". By the time the little ones reach the mentoring age, they are at ease with the program and expectations and cannot wait to mentor little ones themselves! It becomes a rite of passage in their faith journey. In the meantime, they have made new friends who are nonjudgmental and just glad to see them in the halls of the church, making it easier to get them to go!

Reel Faith Film Camp

Catch them where they live. This camp pushes technology, the church, and a relational Bible study to the limit! Oh, and throws in a little bit of "me, me, me" in for the youth! Let them use the technology they love and let them be the center of attention that they crave! Give them drama and a Bible story and let them create (because it's what they do best) a video acting out that story during camp. Then their video will be uploaded on to YouTube, evangelizing God to many more than one could imagine! The younger ones are expecting to learn the Bible stories from the older ones. The older ones are expecting to use their servant leadership skills to help

guide and film them as they reenact the story. Students will be reading a Bible story and learning it experientially. They experience first-hand the joy of working in a group where everyone has a role to play...just like in life.

Spring Fashion Show

This show would raise money and awareness for a good cause the youth are promoting, like a clothing drive for those who need assistance in their area. This fashion show at the church would bring together all ages to learn about the different generations from the “thread” that binds them: Clothes! Youth would model the older generations’ donated clothing and they would also model their own fashions such as prom dresses, bridesmaid outfits, and costumes. The youth could practice outreach by advertising the upcoming Fashion Show, using the latest technology, to the larger community as a way to ease non-churchgoers into the pews. The theme of the event would reflect God’s Grace through the years and yet not become overtly preachy. Easing “the other” into church is sometimes tricky and teaching the youth how to advocate for God will be a great help in their willingness to outreach in the future. Leading by example in servant leadership to others is what Christ was all about and now the youth of all ages can practice in a safe environment before being turned loose in the world for the sake of the world. The event combines evangelism, service, intergenerational relationships formed through the common “thread” of fashion, and participatory learning.

Wedding Reception and Dance

How much fun are weddings? It is a joyous time when all generations unite to celebrate! Let everyone come together at the church for a youth-sponsored wedding reception and dance. The youth can have a part in planning or decorating and share responsibilities with adults as well. There could be a good reason to celebrate such as raising money and awareness for a

worthy cause. It is participatory, intergenerational, and relationship building in a fun, nonjudgmental atmosphere. Youth could raise money by charging an entrance fee, erecting a photo booth, and officiating at a “renewing your vows” station. There could even be a “best dressed” winner, giving people freedom to dress in a range of wedding styles from Hawaiian to formal. Participation is enhanced in buying voting tickets for their choice. It is a fun way to unite all ages in raising funds for a worthy cause and creating new connections in church with the youth.

Gobble up the Bible

This event brings families together to bake/make food that relates to Bible stories and is then distributed to others for Thanksgiving. How about eating some of Sampson’s Hairballs or downing Pharaoh’s Chariots? You combine youth and older caring adults toward a common goal of learning the old, old story and experientially working with each other to create a food masterpiece to be shared! An event like this uses experiential, participatory learning to create a lasting memory of the Bible story, and the warmth of being with family in servant leadership creates opportunity for youth to learn the Bible and grow in their faith.

Conclusion: Journey into the Future

By using genuine, caring human relationship building to educate and mentor to youth on a regular basis, youth have examples to follow and friendships to cultivate in church and in daily life for the sake of the world just as Jesus did in his journey with the first disciples. Youth will learn experientially the true God and not the dead end road of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism they have adopted through the usual programming and curriculum that is taught ‘to’ them. In a meaningful, participatory culture of Christian formation, youth learn by doing because they have

other caring youth and adults living in community to journey the road of faith with them. Youth in today's context can use the technological advances they have come to expect to become co-creators in their faith formation utilizing intergenerational relationships, peer mentoring, and servant leadership opportunities. These will foster vital faith as youth go through their developmental and spiritual stages becoming all that God created them to be, thwarting MTD and nourishing vital, consequential faith.

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Chapter XXVI Gethsemane. Chapter XXVII A Formula for Victory. Your Faith Is Your Fortune. By Neville Goddard. Chapter I Before Abraham Was.Â Taking your attention from one state and placing it upon the other, you die to the one from which you have taken it and you live and express the one with which you are united. Man cannot see how it would be possible to express that which he desires to be by so simple a law as acquiring the consciousness of the thing desired. The reason for this lack of faith on the part of man is that he looks at the desired state through the consciousness of his present limitations. Therefore, he naturally sees it as impossible of accomplishment.