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Tapping Into the Power of Mentoring And Service Learning

TIM DEFOR

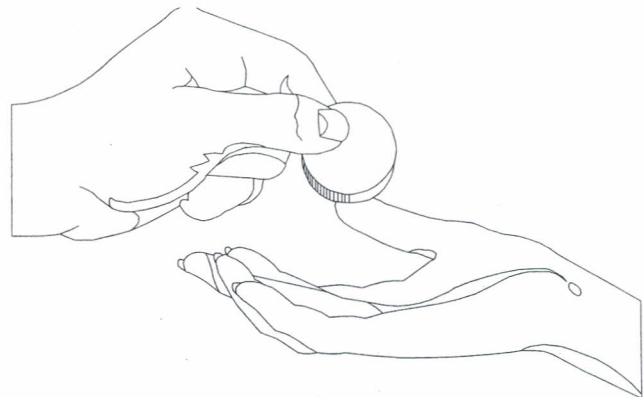
Many youth workers agree that working with youth can be both challenging and rewarding. Adolescents discover the world in new ways through new experiences. The adventure is like a rediscovery of their environment, only this time in color. Physical, mental, emotional, and social abilities are stretched by the challenges of moving from childhood to adulthood. All these ingredients can rival anything in Betty Crocker's cookbook, but they need to be combined in the right way for the best results. Mentoring and service learning can help combine the growth, experience, and adult interaction needed to provide positive power in the life of adolescents.

STAGES OF FAITH DEVELOPMENT

Adolescents are advancing in their potential for faith, ability to reason, cognition, values, interpersonal relationships, and careers. Theologian James Fowler, influenced by Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg, identified stages of faith development. Children between four and eight years of age are usually found in the first stage, intuitive-projective. The child relies on parents and other family members for nearly everything important in his or her life, including religion. Symbols, for the child, mirror the reality they represent. A drawing of a flower actually is a flower.¹

Children enter the second stage, mythical-literal, between ages six and seven and remain there until about age twelve—the threshold of adolescence. This stage is marked by the ability to distinguish reality from fantasy and to function at the concrete operations level cognitively. Children still find it very difficult to think abstractly or reflect on deeper meanings. Authorities in the child's life, in addition to parents and family members, now include teachers, religious leaders, customs, and traditions. Though they may have an opinion, they will usually yield to adult authorities because of their lack of ability for deeper reflection. Children envision a sense of order, dependability, and future. They involve themselves in religion and ritual to find security and please authority figures.²

Stage three, synthetic-conventional, encompasses most of adolescence and sometimes beyond. "The average age of entry into this stage varies from 12 years to adulthood; departure from the Synthetic-Conventional stage can begin as early as 17 or 18, but a person can remain in this stage through middle or even late adulthood."³ In stage three is the best time for young people to be involved in mentoring and service programs. Their development is ready for another adult to befriend, guide, and love them



to maturity. Adolescents also begin to see the world through the eyes of others. This can become powerful if the youngster is faced with ways their efforts can positively effect others' circumstances. "The salient characteristic of this stage, which coincides with the emergence of adolescence, is concern with the interpersonal."⁴ Life is about relationships.

VIEWING THE WORLD IN INTERPERSONAL TERMS

Adolescents view the world in interpersonal terms. When speaking of organizations and systems, such as the government, the adolescent in this stage often refers to a specific leader's name. This is true for religious organizations as well. When talking about the church, adolescents usually speak of a specific person within their world related to the church. Mentors can have a tremendous impact by being a positive person by which the adolescent can relate to the church. Likewise, serving—especially directly with people in need—connects actual names and faces with the needs young people are helping to meet. When references are made to "the needy," adolescents think of Jim and Mary who live above the liquor store instead of a mass of people very different from them.

Adolescents are shaped in large part by the views of those around them. "The adolescent . . . acts in a conforming manner, that is to say, the ideas, expectations, and views of others are internalized in order to foster a growing identity."⁵ That is, their own value systems are constructed by questioning and relying on the views of significant others. The roles that adolescents are expected to play begin to multiply, thus complicating their world. They are beginning to formulate their roles in societal structures, such as family, church, school, and local community.

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THE IMPORTANCE OF CHRISTIAN MENTORS

A Christian mentor can reinforce the values passed on by Christian parents, or challenge the negative values passed on by parents who do not support their child's Christian beliefs. "Mutual expectations of self and others emerge along with deepening relationships with significant others."⁶ George Barna's research reveals that the dominant influences on the spiritual views of young people are parents, friends, the music industry, and pop culture. These are "largely responsible for the errant theological views of teens."⁷ Because of this, Barna believes that "the depth of the problem is beyond what churches, by themselves can address. To overcome the spiritual distortions so common in our society requires a more comprehensive and long-term solution."⁸ Adolescents are primed for a significant Christian relationship outside their families.

Teenagers realize the lack of consensus between authority figures and significant others and try to defend themselves. One strategy is "compartmentalization." Adolescents behave differently in different company, thus compartmentalizing their lives and behaviors among various groups. Another defensive strategy is called "hierarchy." "In this strategy, they place one group or authority figure in a dominant category of influence and relegate all others to a secondary role."⁹ When the peer group becomes dominant in the lives of adolescents, by default it will exert more influence than other authority figures. However, when more than one authority figure agrees in values, they reinforce one another. This is especially true when they are combined with powerful interactive experiences like that of a mentor relationship or serving with others, such as at a local soup kitchen.

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A caring adult outside of the immediate family determines the impact that other relationships have on the young person. One might think that the relationship with the mentor would diminish the relationship the young person has with his/her own parents. This is not so. A 1995 study of Big Brothers/Big Sisters of America revealed that, compared to nonmentored adolescents, mentored teens were "more likely to have more trusting and higher-quality relationships with their parents."¹⁰ Relationships with mentors provides a

way to limit the influence of peers. Adolescents tend to listen to the oldest person who shows them respect. Interpersonal relationships with caring Christian adults are the most powerful tools for ministering to adolescents:

These relationships are the experiences that more than all others can become the approaches to the supreme religious experience of relationships with God. Through forming relationships, the adolescent's emerging self comes to understand more deeply what it means to be human. And the deepening experience of relationships, most readily realized in friendship, provides the foundation for a relationship with God through Christ.¹¹

At one time, almost everyone understood his/her role in society. A stronger sense of identity and community existed within families, churches, schools, and cities. This is no longer true. Today, more adolescents are asking questions that would have seemed out of place in previous times. One such question is, "How do I belong to this faith community?"¹² Adolescents feel an increase in alienation from institutional religion that can be counteracted relationally. The more personal the interaction with the "institution," the greater the adolescent's understanding of his or her place in it will be.¹³

TWO COLLIDING FORCES

The alienation young people feel from the church most likely is the result of two colliding forces. The two forces are idealism and institutional internalization. The adolescent is becoming increasingly idealistic about the way things should be and how people should act towards one another. The other force, internalization, is the tendency of churches and other religious organizations to focus internally to the limitation of external service. Even churches that are actively evangelistic might not be reaching out to the down-and-out as much as idealistic young people think they should. George Barna notes that 86% of teenagers claim that they are Christian and "have positive impressions of Christianity, faith and local churches."¹⁴ However, one-third noted that they feel "most adult Christians are hypocrites."¹⁵ Add to this judgmental attitude the uneasiness many adults feel in the presence of teens—truly from a different culture—and the separation between young people and adults becomes more difficult to overcome. Sadly, this separation is exactly the opposite of what young people need.

"One of the primary influences in the development of the adolescent's faith is the presence of adult relationships."¹⁶ Adolescents are more interested in personal stories than they are in doctrines and dogmas. They would much rather hear what a particular significant person believes and see how it is lived out than to know a specific creed. "An adult who can prudently convey his or her own struggles, questions, joys, beliefs, and commitments becomes a tremendous ratifying force in the young person's life."¹⁷

Adolescent spirituality might even be viewed in a triangular fashion. Foremost in this triangle is Jesus, who invites the adolescent to follow him. Second, there is an adult, whose role to witness in a distinctive way to Jesus' grace and love is inseparable from personal strengths and weaknesses. Finally, there is the adolescent, whose life encompasses a unique set of experiences.¹⁸

With this in mind, a mentor who lives out his/her faith with the young person can have an eternal and profound impact. Service learning can add to the experiences of the adolescent, reinforcing the triangle of faith development.

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AT-RISK BEHAVIORS

Along with faith development, relationships with adults can help young people develop resilience in the face of at-risk behaviors. This becomes clearer when observing the lives of adolescents in urban America who face high levels of risk factors such as poverty and economic status. Resilience is the ability of some to achieve in the face of risk factors. One of the clear characteristics found in resilient adolescents is help-seeking behavior. "Help-seeking is a student's way of not only seeking help, but also establishing interpersonal contact with another adult."¹⁹ These young people approach complex social problem-solving by using help-seeking behavior and participating in a kinship network that is "not just extended family members but also friends and neighbors in a network that is multi-generational."²⁰ Among the highest academically achieving urban youths who do not go to college, a large number do not have "purposeful role models."²¹ Mentoring can actively connect young people into a network of relationships with purposeful role models.

Big Brothers/Big Sisters is a wonderful example. "Among children who spent 18 months or more in the program, initial drug use was cut by 46% and initial alcohol use by 27%, according to a 1995 Public/Private Ventures survey."²² Participating children skipped half as many days of school and were a third less likely to hit another person.

SERVICE LEARNING DONE RIGHT

I am currently remodeling my basement. I am what my wife would call "not that careful" when it comes to building. One area that I am extra cautious with, however, is the electrical work. Though electrical power has become a staple of modern living, tapping into that power in the wrong way can be very dangerous. When tapping into the power of service learning, one sees the positive power that can be used to change the world for the better. However, one must also be aware of several dangers.

Becoming involved in charity work is not the same as providing handouts. It is about relationships and helping others to reach a level that is very difficult or impossible to achieve alone. Some argue that providing people with food, clothing, and shelter perpetuates the cycle of the open hand extending towards resources instead of extending towards work. However, volunteering to serve others in need "builds community by connecting relationships . . . with hands-on charity, it's in the personal connection . . . that change takes place and miracles happen."²³ Today 13.3% of Americans live in poverty. Service to the recipients, providers, and our culture in general is imperative—and its gifts are material and spiritual alike. Most Christians agree that serving the needy is important to do, but only 34% gave any time and money to serve the poor in the past year.²⁴ Barna claims that "unprecedented change in ministry methods . . . [is] required if the Church is to emerge as a player."²⁵ I believe the unprecedented change is really a response to the call of Christ to be servants of all. The power of service learning, or volunteerism, is great, as evidenced by several studies.

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When seeing what the power of involving young people in serving can do, it becomes tempting to require serving. In 1997 "The Presidents' Summit on America's Future," more popularly known as "The Summit on Volunteerism," gathered in Philadelphia. Big businesses and local, regional,

and national governments joined to discuss and plan for volunteer action. Mixed into the discussion was the idea that finding ways to require people to serve would reap great benefits. Patricia Jones, SC Executive Assistant to the President of the National Catholic Education Association, proudly asserted that the Catholic Church has been and is still heavily promoting volunteerism through their educational system. She asserted that 89% of all Catholic schools require some kind of volunteer work in order for students to graduate.²⁶

Many municipal governments are also establishing community service requirements for all students, or for students involved in negative behaviors, in order to graduate.

This reflects the volunteerism trends in the U.S. According to Independent Sector, a group that represents nonprofit organizations, estimated that 93 million U.S. citizens volunteer. However, only 8.4% of those volunteers serve in “human services,” a broad category that includes aiding the homeless, family counseling, and helping the Red Cross.²⁷ The majority of volunteering included sitting on boards of museums, theaters, and other “clean hands” types of serving. Lester Salamon, director of the Institute for Policy Studies at Johns Hopkins University, claimed, “Roughly 7 to 15 percent of volunteering done through churches goes outside the walls of the sanctuary into the community.”²⁸ Among Christian circles, the primary forms of volunteering include sitting on committees, singing in the choir, helping the men’s club and other similar activities. The types of volunteering people do impact the way they see themselves fitting into society. If a young man serves on a committee for a museum, he is likely to value the arts or perhaps history. A young woman who sings in the church choir is likely to continue to value internal service for the church. Both of these activities are commendable and valuable, but they do not have the power to impact a young person as much as directly serving the most needy. It is when young people are exposed to the most needed kinds of service that attitudes change and the greatest growth occurs.

Informal social control theories have long suggested that voluntary service gradually draws persons to virtue. Are young people involved in service less likely to be involved in socially destructive behaviors? Many studies find this to be true. Among these are increased self-acceptance (King, Walder and Pavey, 1970), civic identity (Johnson et al., 1998; Serow, 1990), and helping behavior (Oesterle, Johnson & Mortimer, 1998). Does volunteerism and the beneficial effects translate into decreased negative behaviors? Research supports that young people who volunteer are less likely to become pregnant as teenagers or to drop out of school (Allen et al., 1994; Moore & Allen, 1996). Since adolescents and young adults make up a heavily disproportionate part of criminal offenders, it is valuable to look at the effects of volunteering on criminal activity. A 1995 study of released criminal offenders found that religious volunteer programming curbed recidivism. Another study in 1997 found that prisoners were 1.7 times more likely to reoffend than those who were involved in volunteering. Volunteering also influences adolescents’ choices to become involved in minor criminal activity. Young people frequently involved in volunteer service are dramatically less likely to be involved in marijuana use (Youniss, Yates, and Su, 1997). Overall, involving young people in volunteer service reduces the chance that they will be involved in criminal activity.²⁹

The way that one goes about involving young people is as important as what it is they are involved in doing. . . . Forcing experienced volunteers to serve is likely to affect negatively the likelihood that they will serve in the future.

Service learning is so valuable that all young people should be encouraged, if not required to do it. Or should they? Some studies indicate forced volunteerism reduces one’s desire to volunteer in the future. One study reports that blood donors who gave blood for the first time under coercion expressed less interest in continuing to donate.³⁰ The report stated, “Requirements may also engender psychological reactance; limiting an individual’s freedom to act may lead to desires to reestablish that freedom, which can be accomplished by derogating the forced activity and by refusing to perform it once the mandate has been lifted.”³¹ The way that one goes about involving young people is as important as what it is they are involved in doing. This is also true for experienced volunteers. Forcing experienced volunteers to serve is likely to affect negatively the likelihood that they will serve in the future.³² This negative outcome can be limited and even overcome by reducing the sense of external control and increasing the adolescent’s sense of ownership.

Requiring service may also influence the type of service that young people may choose to be involved in and the value they place on serving. In order to keep up with the hectic schedules of students and fulfill requirements, some schools are extending volunteering to include chorus, band, and other school activities. When service is seen as a hurdle to jump or an obstacle to get around, the true values of caring, sharing, and selflessness are replaced with self-interested problem solving at the least personal cost. This also leads to a decreased desire to serve.

COMBINING SERVICE LEARNING AND MENTORING RELATIONSHIPS

Studies indicate that both service learning and mentoring relationships increase the chances that young people will be involved in constructive, future-looking behavior and decrease the involvement in at-risk behaviors. At-risk behaviors are identified as smoking, drinking, pre-marital sex, drug use, and illegal activity. The Search Institute, a private research institute devoted to young people, provides what is perhaps the broadest analysis in which they identified 40 "assets." Their research suggests that the greater number of the 40 assets that a young person has in his or her life, the less likely that young person is to be involved in at-risk behaviors. The assets range from societal support structures to personal perceptions.

Ten of the assets are either developed by or reflect participation in formal or informal mentoring and/or commitment to serving others. These include:

1. Other adult relationships (besides parents)
2. Caring neighborhood (supportive, encouraging neighbors)
3. Youth as resources (i.e., the community provides useful roles and meaningful things for youth to do in the community)
4. Service to others (for at least one hour per week)
5. Neighborhood boundaries (neighbors help by monitoring behavior)
6. Adult role models (adults model positive, responsible behavior)
7. Caring (believing that helping others is really important)
8. Equality and social justice (helping to promote equality and reduce world poverty and hunger)
9. Integrity (acting upon convictions and standing up for beliefs)
10. Sense of purpose (believing one's life has a purpose)

These and the other 30 assets form more of an interlinking safety net than they do a checklist. If one is caring, he or she is more likely to be involved in service to others and so on. In addition, the other assets convey communication skills, self-esteem, and positive family and school involvement and interactions.

CONCLUSION

Involving young people in meaningful mentoring relationships and powerful service learning can lead to an unequalled positive chain reaction that will not only change young people but will change our churches and the world.

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ENDNOTES

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