

Young People in Missions and the Mission to Young People

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Members of the faculty, student body, and friends of the Seminary:

Thank you for the invitation to share in your Mission Seminar. When the invitation came, my first reaction was that after 4½ years on the liberal East Coast, I was being recalled for a colloquy. Actually, I did have a lot of questions to ask; but they were answered when Prof. Schuetze and Prof. Habeck published their book, "Everything you wanted to know about Pastoral Theology, but were too dumb to ask at Sem."

When Mark Falck wrote, asking me to speak on youth work in missions, he added the usual flattery about my unique experience and qualifications. So that I am not here under false pretenses, I should point out just how unique are my experience and qualifications. To begin with, I never attended a young peoples' meeting when I was a young person...shy around girls, I guess. A year of tutoring probably taught me more about undercover detective work and life in a fish bowl than how to be everybody's favorite youth counselor. A summer vicar's experience brought me to a youth camp in the Sierras, where my biggest contribution was a sacrifice fly in the camp softball game. During two years of part-time vicaring, I succeeded in building the attendance at youth meetings to an average of four, before my bishop decided that maybe the youth program needed a year's sabbatical rest. My greatest achievement in 4½ years of work with young people in missions has been survival. And if you've ever been to a Canadian outhouse in sub-zero weather or slept on the ground with Connecticut fleas, you understand that survival is an achievement. Just to assure you that my qualifications *are* unique: When I was recently considering a call to an area Lutheran High School, one of my council members urged me to stay with the reason that I didn't know how to relate to or work with young people.

Now you may ask why such monumental failure qualifies me to speak on working with young people. My answer is that if someone hasn't experienced failure with youth work, he either hasn't done anything or has his head in the clouds. One of the biggest roadblocks to working with young people is the failure-fear complex. If you're afraid they won't accept you or your approach, if you become overly concerned about attendance statistics or expressions of gratitude, you've adopted an incapacitating handicap.

A second major roadblock to youth work is a negative approach, viewing this part of your ministry as a problem. We're prone to speaking about the "problem of interesting young people in the church," "the problem of developing a program young people will respond to," "the problem of understanding how young people think." How often is this called the "opportunity of working with young people" or "the privilege of ministering to young?" It's too easy to be sitting on a hay wagon picking the hay out of your hair that the young people are throwing and wonder how many better ways you can be spending your time. It's too easy to look up from your Bible study with young people and see all the empty chairs; and then feel that they have let you down after all the effort you've put in. It's too easy to begin preparing the monthly church calendar with the observation, "I suppose we have to have a youth meeting in here somewhere;" and then jot down "roller-skating party" because Mr. and Mrs. Jones don't mind taking the kids roller-skating. There is no way you can hide from young people the fact that you don't really enjoy working with them, that this part of your ministry ranks with statistical reports

on your “necessary evil” list, or that you feel frustration and disappointment in the youth program.

There are, obviously, some problems in youth work. Any sized congregation faces the “post-confirmation” syndrome when the church seems in competition with the world for a young person’s time and attention. The positive approach is to develop an effective, well-rounded program of spiritual and fellowship activity, publicize it for parents and young people, take time to talk with the young people individually for their input and contributions, then let the program and however few may be involved sell the thing to the others. Move the Bible study out of the church and into a state park to follow it with a canoe trip. Meet at a member’s home and let the spiritual devotion take a more casual format around a fireplace, pizza, and coke. Point out to the non-participants what talents the Lord has given them to use for Him and His Church and world, that young people’s groups aren’t merely societies for pastoral lectures and stodgy children’s games. Don’t give up on young people or their program because your first effort didn’t bring rave notices.

Most congregations experience difficulty in finding effective lay counselors for the youth group. Rather than asking for volunteers, hand pick a husband and wife who have time and interest for young people. Don’t apologize for asking or minimize the responsibilities. Approach them with the challenge and opportunity, the importance of their lay ministry. Show them that you intend to work with them, not dump the job into their laps. Spend time with them developing objectives, long range programs, and scheduling. Provide idea sources to them or put them in touch with experienced lay youth leaders in another congregation. Take one or more of your active young people with you to meet with them and describe why, what, and how they are important in serving the Lord in this area. A positive, enthusiastic ministry with definite objectives and guidelines will enlist people who might be turned off by a “job” they don’t understand. Nothing contributes more to an effective youth program than good lay counselors interested in knowing the young people individually, willing to spend time listening to them, and eager to see them grow with their Lord. Good lay counselors will solve little problems before they become big problems in your office. Good lay counselors will provide continuity and polish to the church’s youth program. It’s worth the time spent in developing your lay leaders.

Most youth groups have their program limited by lack of funds. Monthly dues may put some money in the treasury; but they may also create a negative impression. Free-will contributions or sharing expenses for specific outings keep the treasury from becoming an aimless back account. If specific projects and outings are planned in advance, young people will more readily work and contribute toward them. Without violating stewardship principles, young people can enjoy raising the money to finance their own projects. Paper drives within the church, “Labor Days” on which the young people publicize to the members their willingness to work at odd jobs for a low wage that goes into the youth treasury, and such things as the young people operating a Christian Book Store for the congregation are unobjectionable fund-raisers. It should, however, also be recognized that like the Sunday School or Adult Christian Education, youth work is part of the congregation’s ministry and should be included in the congregation’s budget.

Much is made of the problem that age and maturity differences in a youth group can bring. It’s not often possible to split the group into Junior and Senior levels. It may not even be advisable. A positive approach is to use the situation to develop understanding. Let the older young people learn the responsibility of leadership, example, and selflessness. Foster the spirit of cooperation and understanding in the group, while at the same time encouraging individual interests, character, and identity. Small group projects within the total program may help do this.

More common are personality clashes and differences brought into the youth group from outside. Behind-the-scenes time by pastor and lay counselors can use these problems as opportunities to grow in understanding what Christian love and fellowship are. The pastoral care in a youth program means hours outside the group in one-to-one discussion. It is in casual moments that you learn what doubts and questions, what strengths and gifts, your young people have. Some of your best discussion topics won't have an audience.

Most pastors feel a lack of resources in putting together a youth program. The Publishing House has at least two youth-study booklets for devotional periods, and most adult Bible study materials can be adapted to youth groups. Some time, thought, and imagination can produce a variety of spiritual programs, more of which we'll look at later. It will help to ask the young people themselves what they want to study. A youth program committee can help you put together meaningful topics. Discussion periods don't require sermon-like preparation. Let the young people respond to issues and questions in an informal fashion. You'll find that your neighbors in the ministry have ideas, topics, and presentations you can borrow. You'll find that the newspaper presents current trends that need evaluating. And you'll discover that in the area of organization, recreation, and service projects especially, the heterodox churches have some good ideas that can be borrowed without having to adopt their theology. A pastor can do too much agonizing over making his youth work relevant to young people. They have much more in common with Christians of other age groups than they have idiosyncracies.

Small mission churches have unique problems all their own in youth programming. A small number of young people, distance and transportation difficulties, lack of background in Christian education among new members from diverse religious origins, great distances from sister churches...The mission church needs to be more flexible in the organizing and scheduling of its youth program. Its program should meet the needs of the current situation. The mistake would be to assume that a certain number of young people or a specific level of organization of programming are necessary to make the youth program viable. It is actually a blessing to have this situation, for the pastor has more time to learn to know each young person. He learns to treasure the individual soul. He can more easily meet the spiritual needs of this portion of his flock. And he will probably find greater enthusiasm among parents and young people for the Lord's Word and the Lord's work.

I won't bore you with a psychological evaluation of young people's emotional makeup. I'm not even qualified to bore you. Common sense observation tells you that young adulthood often means emotional sensitivity, rapid changes from elation to depression, self-centeredness, social pressures to conform, sexual awareness and tensions, idealistic viewpoints on the structures and problems of society, agonizing over what future to pursue, and a tendency toward brutal honesty. More important is to realize that, like adults, young people are individuals, each an important and unique person. While deploring the "social herd" concept of conformity in young people, we too often tend to treat them as a social herd, separating them from the rest of the congregation in our thinking and approach.

More important is the psychology of the pastor's role with young people—again less psychology than sanctified common sense, Christian perspective, and genuine love and interest. Identifying with young people doesn't mean being the first one down the hill at a toboggan party or wearing a beard, just to show how "with it" you are. It means being yourself, being natural, being consistent, honest, straightforward. It means listening and patience. It means a genuine interest in what young people are thinking about and a love for them as individuals made precious in the blood of Christ. It means giving them your trust and confidence, involving

them—mind and body—in issues and work that are significant to the church. It means being enthusiastic about their projects, giving praise for effort and achievement and thanks for service to the church. It means avoiding embarrassing one of them in front of others and, under normal circumstances, carrying out discipline in private. It is making your message to them clear and authoritative where Scripture speaks, but not trying to con them or bully them when you can't answer a question. It is being flexible in your approach, but unbending in spiritual and moral issues. It is not being easily or personally offended. It means participating in their recreation and fellowship, not shoving this off entirely on the vicar or lay counselors, so that you can be a personal reminder and example of what Christianity is in every day life and what the word "pastor" really means. A major barrier to this you will likely discover is your own self-consciousness, overly concerned about what the young people think of you, worried about the pastoral image you project, or uncertain whether you should pretend you didn't hear or see something out of line at a youth gathering or pounce on the issue with both feet. I expect that the wisdom and maturity of experience in the ministry tends to temper those fears and uncertainties. At least, I hope so.

Now, I'd like to offer some suggestions for the youth program on the local level. Some of these are field tested; some theoretically sound good at least; some may be impractical in certain situations. All of them call for preparation and effort.

An organizational structure is important to a youth group, whether informally structured in the small church or constitutionalized in the larger church. The organization provides for continuity from year to year. It involves the young people in running things. It teaches responsibility and trains church workers. It sustains interest when the pastor may be too busy. It creates a group identity and spirit. Beyond the normal officers in such a group, two important committees to consider are a "Worship Committee" and "Program Committee." Involving the young people in planning is essential. And it means that pastor and/or lay leaders will have to spend time outside group meetings with the officers and planning committees.

Similarly important is having a planned program, preferably for a whole year in advance. This prevents last minute scheduling confusion, last minute planning that usually brings off a haphazard meeting or activity and leaves the youth leaders out in the cold. This will also insure that the spiritual part of the year's activity will touch different phases of Christian truth and practical application. It will give balance to a variety of recreational and fellowship activities. It will make possible more substantial projects because work toward goals can be timed effectively. Such advance planning, of course, means disciplined effort first by the pastor and lay leaders and then also the youth leaders. And such planning presupposes that you and your youth group have a list of objectives to begin with, to guide the planning of the year's program. After four years of doing this backwards, I have a storehouse of reasons why pre-planned programming is important.

The program should include worship. The pastor may use the sermonette or object lesson format with hymns and prayer for devotions. He should, on occasion, let young people lead devotions. It is healthy spiritual training to help them write their own prayers and short expositions of a Scripture text. A dialog format and responsive reading will vary the method of worship. These brief devotional times are an effective means of acquainting young people with the worship heritage of Christianity, using the forepart of the Hymnal. They can make the church year practical for young people. And they teach methods of personal and family devotions. A yearly worship project may be having the young people lead the congregation's worship,

especially on a festival like Ascension Day. Whether a simple worship program or innovative format, this will be instruction as well as service to the rest of the congregation.

The spiritual growth or study part of the program should make use of the variety of methods available. Ideally, a Sunday morning Bible class will be able to take a systematic approach to Bible study. The pastor can work with a lay teacher on the program, preparing for the class and seeing to it that questions don't go unanswered. The same course the adult Bible class is following can be easily adapted to the youth Bible Hour. The publishing house makes courses available on books of the Bible. You may also use the personal study approach, such as the "Vaestras" method in which the young people study a portion of Scripture at home with specific guidelines to follow, and then share their discoveries, ask their questions, and discuss truths and applications. Because young people want to discuss, starter questions should be prepared by the Bible class leader. An important part of this Bible Class is not only learning more Biblical truths and facts, but learning how to read and study the Bible for themselves and learning to apply to self and situation God's promises, commands, and principles.

In addition to book of the Bible study, and more readily adapted to the youth meeting and its variegated schedule are topical studies. In these one can review Christian doctrine with contemporary application and Scripture reference. While confirmation class usually builds from Bible passages to principles and application, you may want to reverse the order with the young people and discuss issues, then follow with the certainty of God's Word on the subject. Contemporary moral, spiritual, and social issues are discussion topics that help young people see how Christian faith and truth address the totality of their lives. Topics on church history, other religions, synodical missions and programs, or liturgy and Lutheran heritage are among an endless variety of possibilities.

The topical approach presupposes a presentation and hopefully includes stimulating questions. The discussion approach relies on key questions and should be backed by Bible passages at hand to lead to positive, Scriptural conclusions. The goal is that young people learn to see Christianity not just as isolated dogma, but inter-related truths made clear by the cross of Christ and applicable to the way we think and respond to all of life. Posing questions is one way to stimulate discussion. You can outline a problem and ask the group how to solve or answer it. You can pose a situation and ask how they'd deal with it. You can quote statements on religious subjects by others, and tell them to agree or disagree, with an explanation. A related approach is role-playing in which young people at random are given a situation in which they fill a role and act out the situation to a Christian conclusion. You'd be surprised at how well they respond to this. Another method of evaluation we've tried is to listen to something like the rock opera "Godspell" and react, or attend a Billy Graham movie together and return to the church to evaluate it. You can also go to the evening service at a Pentecostal Church as a group and then discuss differences. Another example is to attend the introductory lecture of a group like "Silva Mind Control" and discuss the philosophy and implications involved. First-hand observation of how others differ in their beliefs can best be handled when your young people are able to be reinforced by Scripture under your guidance. Sooner or later they'll have to contend with opposing convictions anyway. I'm sure you'd rather they could come to you with their questions.

I suppose it goes without saying that a young people's program includes recreation. There is the sight-seeing type of recreation, such as group trips to a museum, a ballgame, and so on. Another kind of informative group trip that better fits your program is a tour of the county jail and courthouse, a drug abuse or alcoholism center, an orphanage or other such institution. Your discussions of Christian citizenship and Christian charity become real when the young

people see first hand the opportunities for service and Christian involvement the Lord places before us in our world. The young people will initiate projects of service when they've seen how they can serve, both as individuals and as a group. The other type of recreation involves physical exercise and participation. Bowling and skating parties are common. It's usually easy to rent a gym or swimming pool. But the most successful recreation seems to be outdoors activity, summer and winter sports, hiking and snowshoeing, etc. The challenge is to vary the recreation, use imagination in finding new activities, and try to avoid what didn't go over the first time. The library has any number of idea books adaptable to youth work. Your recreation outings teach the joy of Christian fun and fellowship and provide opportunities to better know the young people individually and gain their confidence. You'll probably discover that combining study and recreation on the same day solves a scheduling problem and avoids the boredom of long business meetings. Even at the church there are recreational possibilities and games to vary the program.

A lot of youth groups break down because there isn't an apparent program of constructive service to harness talent and energy and make the young people feel they are contributing to the church and community. It is worthwhile to have an ongoing service project for the young people. They can operate the church library, book store, or tract rack and bulletin board. They can have an ongoing evangelism program; canvassing, distributing fliers, and brief witness calls are purposeful Christian projects. Other such ideas are making banners for the seasons of the church year or a "Christian Birthday" display board, on which each month the baptism date of the members is remembered. Outdoor displays like a manger scene make good youth projects. And young people can have a program of service to the congregation's shut-ins. Make sure that the committee chairmen on your church council are informed that they should consider the talent pool of the youth group when they plan their aspect of the church's program. The young people can enjoy serving the forgotten in the community as well. Our young people have provided Thanksgiving baskets to the needy, names gotten from the local welfare office. They have made Christmas wreaths and sung carols for a nursing home. Toy collections for an orphanage and clothing drives for the poor are other projects. One year our young people picked all the strawberries sold at the local child-care center's annual bazaar. Such projects not only make the young people feel like they are contributing as a group, but also provide good publicity for the church in the community. Making a float on a Christian theme for a community parade or having an ecological clean-up campaign will likewise show the community that Christian young people are lights to the world.

One final part of the youth program might be loosely called simply "fellowship." Young people need some unstructured time for casual conversation, snacks, and getting to know and appreciate one another. Pastors tend to worry about unscheduled time with the young people, often needlessly. Here is when you can answer the questions that individuals wouldn't raise in front of the group. You can move around among the group and show your interest in them. When you have an informal fellowship gathering, you can use part of the time to present the Synod's work and missions, encourage becoming pastors or teachers. You can have the members of the church council briefly talk to the young people about how the church's program is carried out. Filmstrips fit into this kind of gathering well. You can play Bible games, many of which you make up yourself, that will review Bible facts in an informal, fun sort of way. And you can sing, both hymns and secular ballads. You may discover that some of the recently published religious folk music does have good lyrics; and you can in this setting teach what makes some music objectionable to Christian truth. You'll discover the young people can entertain with talents you

didn't know were there. And you'll have the best possible setting in which young people can develop and understand a Christian boy-girl relationship.

Beyond the parish level, youth work should develop an expanding fellowship awareness by joining with other area congregations. Small youth groups especially benefit in this kind of program. Day-long and overnight rallies and retreats can provide a more substantive and in depth study of Christian issues, as well as providing more elaborate recreation and fellowship possibilities. Youth leader conferences and lay counselor's seminars are as important as Sunday School Teacher's Institutes in helping youth leadership to develop, share ideas, and reinforce one another with the spirit of joy and purpose in this work. The Winona, Minnesota, area is an example of how area youth groups develop a special identity that gives spirit and continuity to the youth program. Joint youth projects, again such as evangelism or property improvement for a small rural church in the circuit, become more effective as more young people are involved.

On the conference or District level the fellowship consciousness is expanded. Once-a-year Bible Camps and retreats bring together all the facets of youth work over an extended period. When you live with the young people for several days, you not only learn to know them best, but you can teach Christian problem-solving in the most practical way possible. A District rally can include seminars and planning sessions for youth leaders as well. A novel approach planned by the South Atlantic District this year is a District Rally in motion. The so-called "Stomp Out" will be a week-long hike along the Appalachian Trail, with the theme of "Christian Witness to Friend and Family" carried out at camp sites along the way. A District level program worth testing is an "idea sharing and exchange" office. One congregation could easily publish a quarterly youth newsletter that would share ideas and activities used in the congregations of the District.

On the Synodical level a recent phenomenon is the "International Youth Rally." Last year's initial rally in Ottawa is being followed by a rally this summer in Winona. And already one is planned for Saginaw next summer. The endless hours of effort and preparation were last year rewarded by an enthusiasm, Christian maturity, and real spiritual growth that convinced even the skeptics. Sadly, hundreds of young people must be turned away by size limitations. I think the young people have demonstrated a desire for greater Synod-wide cooperation in youth work. There are a number of reasons for which a Synod-wide Youth Organization is probably at least some distance off. But there are things that can be done. Last week the Board for Parish Education discussed a memorial to emphasize youth work to a much greater degree through the District BPE office. Till now, we've had little emphasis on youth work in the publication, "The Lutheran Educator." We've published nothing that offers guidelines for setting up a parish youth program. We have a "Junior Northwestern" but nothing resembling a periodical for young people. We have now at least two youth study pamphlets from the Publishing House. We can produce more. One pastor wrote to me suggesting that our Synod has placed all its youth emphasis into synodical and area Lutheran High Schools. No one would dispute the importance of these schools. But there remains a majority of young people for which much more can be done—and, I believe, will be done. The experience and ability in working with young people that our teachers in Lutheran High Schools have are an immediate source for upgrading what is offered to assist parish youth work. A recent questionnaire from the Special Ministries Board on the ministry to the aging suggested things I'd never thought of. To my knowledge, not even such a questionnaire has ever gone out from a synodical board on youth work. Nobody wants a synodical youth organization monster; but the fear of that should not close our eyes to what our

synodical fellowship and its resources can accomplish for the benefit of this important part of the ministry.

When Jesus said, “Feed my lambs. Feed my sheep,” He certainly wasn’t excluding the yearlings of His flock. Our problem seems to be a difficulty in deciding whether young people are lambs or sheep. We don’t have to provide a biological category to feed them.

Bibliography

(Rather than an endorsement, this should be construed as resource material from which one might gain ideas.)

1. "Youth and the Church" by Roy Irving and Roy Zuck. Moody Press of Chicago, 1968. Available through NPH.
2. "You and Youth" by Lawrence Richards (reviewed in the *Quarterly*, January 1975, by Prof. Kuske)
3. "The Luther League Handbook" and "Youth Programs for Lutheran Youth Groups" published by the LCA. (See the local LCA church—and other denominations—for youth materials from which organizational and program ideas can be gleaned.)
4. Nido Qubein and Associates, Inc. P.O. Box 5367 High Point, North Carolina 27262 (They'll send free sample material of their "Adventures with Young" program. The materials are expensive, but some of it is good or adaptable.)
5. Success With Youth, Inc. P.O. Box 27028 Tempe, Arizona 85282 (Free sample material and "Seed Catalog")