

Youth in Mission: Experiencing the Power of the Living God

I. *"I needed to be stretched and taken out of my comfort zone"*

In our discussions I was grateful for the opportunity to share my experiences with youth in mission. These young people are usually 15 years of age or older. By far, the formative power of such experiences convinces me that most of our young people desperately need to have an experience of mission to truly taste and see the joy of believing in the power of God to save, which Confirmation implies. For all the good will and dedication, which we put into the many "discipleship" programs in the recent past, I believe we are spinning our wheels for nothing, in most cases.

I can recall a forum at Christ Church Cathedral, Springfield, MA, in 2000 when the young people, Latinos, African Americans, and others mostly Caucasians – mostly from middle class homes, however – shared their experience with adults who listened eagerly. The young people testified that the mission trip had helped them to know Jesus Christ in a way that they had never before. One adult asked, "Why is it that young people have to go outside their parish – even their own town, state or country – to encounter Jesus Christ?" One youth replied, and the others nodded assent, "Because I needed to be stretched and taken out of my comfort zone." In my view, we need to be with people who fully rely on God on a day to day basis . . . with those whose only hope is God. In that moment, the Gospel becomes real. Our culture is one in which the theology of glory prevails; a culture in which the theology of the cross is difficult to access. That God is for us means precious little in the face of human pain and suffering of which young people are not always aware experientially. Do we preach Christ crucified?

From a theological vantage point, I believe that youth mission trips put us in touch with the distinction between *faith as fiducia* (trust in God) and *faith as assensus* (assent to doctrinal propositions). Theologians are beginning to think that nothing has done more to alienate modern folk from religion – and the decline of Orthodox Protestantism (mainline Protestant churches). Even our own conversation surrounding Confirmation often focuses on curricula and learning what it means to be an Episcopalian – not about experiencing the power of the living God.

II. *Shared deprivation for different reasons*

In conversations we stumbled upon interesting common ground, since our group is comprised of people who serve communities that are residential (towns and suburbs) and urban. We were amazed to discover how similar our struggles are. Communities that are fortunate and less fortunate both face the enormous challenge of dealing with fragmentation. In both cases, family life is seriously threatened by the schedules we keep. I believe that experiencing family life as lively, energizing, and intimate is critical to understanding the Baptismal Covenant. The theological adage rings true: *quicquid recipitur ad modum recipientis recipitur* – in other words, faith is where you find it; each experiences God according to one's context. Our young people sorely lack the sense of community, which is critical to understanding the church and its mission. In the family, one's conduct and moral values are shaped by the norms of the community. Again, religion is caught, not taught.

Interestingly, we learned that the two income family of the more fortunate (not necessarily "wealthy") is fragmented because not enough time is spent together, often because of commitments related to maintaining a lifestyle which justifies one's existence; low, also two income families – predominantly in our urban congregations – share a similar struggle: to survive they need two incomes and several jobs! In fact the two groups have a lot in common. Can something be done to learn from each other? Partner parishes make a lot of sense if undertaken not only for purposes of "helping poorer churches to survive" but also to deepen our sense of Baptismal life. I believe that the opportunity for mutual spiritual enrichment awaits.

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February 26, 2004*