

# A CHRIST-CENTERED YOUTH GROUP

by Michael Bausch

There comes a time in the life of many a youth group when the weekly routine of volleyball, jokes, and refreshments just isn't fulfilling anymore. It is then that the questions arise: "Why are we a church group? What makes us different from any other group in the community?"

This kind of reflection is necessary to any group, for it results in the members of the group taking seriously their relationship to each other and to the church. More often than not, it seems, this reflection leads a group to say, even if tentatively, that the unique mark of the church youth group is that it is "Christ-centered."

What does this "Christ-center" mean for youth and adults involved in the youth ministry of our churches? It might be as simple as recognizing that the group is a place where persons are **accepted**, regardless of mood, physical appearance, grades, beliefs, problems, parents, income, or idiosyncrasies. This acceptance is experienced in an atmosphere of care, trust, and love, where individuals are mutually nurtured. Christ as center is radical **acceptance** of the human person regardless of age, ability, color, or sex.

For many groups, a further meaning of the Christ-centeredness is that there is a self-conscious **commitment**, a sense that the group is called as members of the Body of Christ to be active bearers of the Word. This sense of call empowers them to live the truth that transforms the faceless world into human neighborhoods interconnected as members of the same kingdom or realm of God. This Word is born through

group service in the church and larger community.

This lifestyle of acceptance and commitment is nurtured by the truth taught by Miriam, Deborah, Joshua, Amos, Micah, Hananiah, Jesus, Mary, and the whole of the early Hebrew and Christian communities: that it is not enough for the people of God to merely **know** the traditions, **hear** the Word, **speak** the truth. The people of God are to **live** the traditions, **act out** the Word, **embody** love and justice.

In order to receive the energy and confidence to do this, we need to hear and know about the great biblical visions that our forebears in faith have lived, nurtured, and entrusted to us. This requires our studying the Bible to discover those visions and to choose the ones we can live. It means working on a plan of action by which we can begin to make the vision reality in our particular time and place. It means being willing to hold their effectiveness in making the vision reality.

An example of such biblical vision may be found in Micah 4:3-4: "...and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hocks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more; but they shall sit every one under a vine and under a fig tree, and none shall make them afraid..."

The possibilities for any group discussing this vision are endless, as are the possibilities for seeking to live out this vision. This raises a hard question—how can a youth group, or any group, begin to live out this particular vision? Clearly in a time when deadly nuclear



warheads are produced daily, we need to work hard at this vision to make it become real, rather than ignore it because of its difficulty.

With issues like these around, many youth groups intuit that Christian life is more than study, reflection, and a mutual-care society. They understand that group life is complete only as they live the love and justice that is God's image for life on earth—and live it in the midst of all the groups to which they belong.

To live as visionary residents of God's kingdom/realm is to live assuming the sacred worth of all persons and all of God's creation. Translated into group life, this might take form in the following behaviors:

1. **Respect of human persons**—emphasizing that members relate to one another respecting each other's feelings and thoughts, being concerned about one another's life, joys, and problems, actively listening as well as sharing with one another. This also means relating to each member of the group, even the "unpopular."

2. **Respect of the earth's resources**—recognizing how dependent the group is upon the fragile earth ecosystems, the group seeks not to waste the earth's gifts. This would include being aware of ways to conserve fuels, foods, and other resources used by the group. It might mean buying products which are ecologically sound. This might also

(Continued on page 22)



## A CHRIST-CENTERED YOUTH GROUP

(Continued from page 21)

mean being conscious about supporting local businesses and industries as well as being aware how well certain products and companies respect and care for the persons they employ and the resources of the earth they use.

**3. Vision-tested program planning**—that programs and activities of the youth group reflect the group's understanding of its mission and ministry as it is measured against biblical visions. Do the programs/events contribute to the building of the kingdom/realm of God? One can understand how a get-acquainted program can help cultivate the human resources in the group in preparation for engaging in the mission of the

group. Similarly, a project which shares food and clothing with the poor is one way of seeking to redistribute our wealth so as to begin to provide for a more equitable sharing of the earth's resources, in line with the vision that all shall "live under a vine and fig tree." Once the group has articulated its vision, each program/event can be measured as to how well it contributes to making the vision reality.

**4. Group decision-making**—that each person is respected as an equal, expected and encouraged to carry personal responsibility for helping the group function smoothly. Decision-making power does not rest in the hands of a few, with certain cliques, or with all youth or all adults, but is shared equally and enthusiastically among all group members.

The struggle of our Judeo-Christian forebears has been to live as residents of God's kingdom/realm, making real the biblical visions in their economic, political, and social life. For many youth and adults in our churches, the power and excitement of the church is most clearly felt when we are genuinely concerned about the well-being of the human and natural communities in which we live, and are seeking in love, peace, and justice with our neighbors.

To be Christ-centered in our group life is to be accepting persons committed to living the values of love and justice in our relationships with the communities of this earth.

About the Author:

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## I CAN . . . NOT CHOOSE NOT TO BE

(Continued from page 19)

people, for I believe that people are incarnations of God's love. What does your neighbor teach you about God? What do you teach? What does it mean to you and me in our response to the Christ in each person?

I love stories Anthony de Mello tells in *The Song of the Bird*<sup>1</sup>. "Don't Change" speaks to me here and now:

*I was a neurotic for years. I was anxious and depressed and selfish. And everyone kept telling me to change. And everyone kept telling me how neurotic I was.*

*And I resented them, and I agreed with them, and I wanted to change, but I just couldn't bring myself to change, no matter how hard I tried.*

*What hurt the most was that my best friend also kept telling me how neurotic I was. He too kept insisting that I change. And I agreed with him too, though I couldn't bring myself to resent him. And I felt so powerless and so trapped.*

*Then, one day, he said to me, "Don't change. Don't change. Don't change...I love you."*

*Those words sounded like music to my ears: "Don't change. Don't change. Don't change...I love you."*

*And I relaxed. And I came alive. And, oh wondrous marvel, I changed!*

In Revelation 21:5 we read: "He who was seated on the throne said, 'I am making everything new!'"

God loves us as we are and in that love makes us new beings. Make your declaration of who you are. This is your July 4th! You can...not choose not to be.

<sup>1</sup>*The Song of the Bird*, Anthony de Mello. Doubleday, Garden City, N.Y., 1984.

### TO DO:

1. List the things you wish you could change about your body. Behind each of these reflections, list why you would like to change. Now ask yourself, "How can I change what I would like to

change? How important is it to me? Why?

2. In journal writing fashion write what you enjoy most about your "pilgrimage." Then what you enjoy least, when you feel closest to God, what gives you the most hope, and "God says that I am..." "I say that I am..."

3. Enjoy! Play "round-table ping-pong." Up to approximately twenty persons may play. One person at each end of the table picks up a paddle. Later players line up behind these two, facing clockwise around the table, and move around the table clockwise as the next person picks up the paddle and prepares to return the ball. Continue rotating until someone misses. The player missing drops out of the game. When only two are left, each player drops his or her paddle and turns around once on the spot after hitting the ball and before hitting it the second time. It is considered illegal to hit the ball hard.

About the Author:

Elaine M. Ward has been a Christian educator for many years. Her latest book is ATTUNED TO GOD, published by Educational Ministries, Inc.