

ADULTS MINISTERING WITH YOUTH

by Michael Bausch

Youth ministry is a ministry of, by, with, and on behalf of, youth. Both youth and adults share in creating this ministry. While youth are capable of supporting each other, sharing together, providing atmosphere of acceptance, and mustering great energy to organize and carry through a program or activity, adults often wonder how to best join in that ministry.

Many adults do pretty well when it comes to ministering "on behalf of" youth. Adults in countless meetings and conversations advocate the need for a place for youth to meet or the need for an adequate program budget. Many adults are perplexed, however, when it comes to ministry **with** youth. The very term assumes relationship and shared work, which sometimes provokes uncomfortable feelings among adults.

Some adults who work with youth understand their task to be directive in nature, planning, administering, and directing many of the details and making arrangements for youth activities. Other adults give a group the impression that they have very little time to spend with them, forcing the group to do everything themselves. Both of these forms of working with youth can leave the youth very frustrated, for on the one hand they feel as if the adult is taking over their group, and on the other, they feel like there is no support for what they want to do.

Many models for adult ministry with youth are available to us. A model suggested in Mark 6:45-56 supports an adult style which is neither authoritative nor laissez-faire, and is characterized

by a sensitivity to the needs of the youth group to be in charge of their own program.

Jesus and the disciples have just completed the feeding of the 5,000. Jesus is aware that the disciples are perfectly capable of preaching, teaching and healing without his being present. He feels the strength of their ability so strongly that he wants them to try it on their own, and "makes" them get into the boat and head to Bethsaida without him. Jesus then goes into the mountain to pray, presumably for the disciples' safe trip!

Before too long a wind comes up and makes the rowing difficult. The disciples panic as the chaotic winds churn the waters. Jesus sees all this happening and wonders if he should give them a hand. He knows that they are perfectly capable of handling the situation, but also realizes they would appreciate the support he could offer. Finally, at the fourth watch, the deepest and most fearful part of the night, Jesus decides to go to the disciples. While approaching the boat, Jesus changes his mind and decides to pass by and let the disciples handle the situation. He has the confidence that they can handle it.

Just then, the disciples see him and fear they've seen a ghost. Rather than upset them any more, Jesus speaks words of encouragement and support, "Take heart, I **am**, have no fear," and gets into the boat. The storm calms, and before too long they land in Genesaret, thirty miles from their original destination of Bethsaida. Even though they don't make it to their planned des-

tinuation, Jesus and the disciples find themselves among human beings seeking, teaching and healing.

Like Jesus and the disciples, adults and youth groups have their own "miracle stories," sometimes just as magnificent as the feeding of the 5,000! These experiences give youth and adults confidence in the ability of the group to plan and carry out their own programs. This kind of confidence is hard to come by when youth (and adults) are taught to demure to the directions of parents, teachers, and other "authorities," learning that personal initiative and responsibility is unnecessary. Why do anything if you know these "authorities" will do it for you, or if you feel when you do take action, none will appreciate your efforts?

When human beings feel they can say or do little that will make a difference, it's time to provide alternative life models. The church can provide the place and atmosphere where youth and adults can learn new ways to communicate together. Sometimes adults must "make" youth get into the boat by themselves and proceed toward their goal. (Sometimes adults must "allow" that to happen--especially those of us who tend to be overly directive.) Youth are certainly capable of planning and carrying out programs completely without adult input, especially if they know the support is there when they need it. There will be rough times, especially if this is the first time youth have been trusted to do something on their own. For our part, as adults, we can pray for them as they journey, not yielding to the temptation to immediately step into difficult situations and rescue them.

Like Jesus, we must wait until the last possible moment before intervening. Sometimes the chaotic winds and waters will engulf the group, and after great thought and prayer we might choose to intervene. The style of this intervention is not to "take over," but to be present to affirm and support, reminding the group they are capable of carrying on. This intervention occurs with the

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understanding that all of us, youth and adults, are equals in the boat.

Let me share an example to illustrate this. During a meeting of Conference Youth Council, one of the members lost a bus ticket which was to be paid for by the council budget. The adult counselor was asked, "Would the budget pay for the lost ticket and one to replace it?" The adult could easily have made a decision on the spot, given some good "adult advice" or had the person work it out with the youth chairperson. But why should the adult be the one to advise or make decisions? Wasn't this a group responsibility, to deal with the plight of a member? Certainly the group was capable of making a decision, having at the same time a chance to share concerns, ideas, and come up with a solution as a **group**.

The group sat down for thirty minutes and talked over all the details

behind the lost ticket, discussed the individual's personal responsibility, talked about the group's support of individuals in need, and looked at many possible solutions. Finally the group chose the course they felt to be the best. They decided that the council budget could not pay for a member's unfortunate situation, that the budget could not cover the replacement ticket. But the group decided that they had a responsibility to a member in need, and took a free-will collection to help pay for the expense of the ticket to be purchased.

This was a beautiful example of a group of persons struggling together on a question, recognizing they were a caring, concerned, and committed **community**. The "adult intervention" was not to solve the problem, but to turn the group toward its own resources to do that, affirming their responsibility and creativity to come up with a stance on the problem at hand.

When adults enter the boat, their

very presence can say things will work out. The miracle is that things work out even if the group lands thirty miles from the original goal. Ministry still happens wherever groups land, for there is always something to be learned about how they got there, and what to do now that they are there. There is no such thing as an "unsuccessful" program. Individuals and groups have a way of growing in every kind of situation.

Adults and youth are whole persons created in the image of God. The richness of the church's ministry depends largely upon the shared relationship of youth and adults who create and take responsibility for caring communities.

About the Author:

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