



Service-Learning and the Spiritual Formation of College Students

MARK WM. RADECKE

Ministry to and with college students abounds with challenges and opportunities. Most pastors find it far easier to affirm the former than the latter. The primary challenge for congregations hoping to minister to their members studying at residential colleges and universities is, of course, access. Students are away at school eight or more months of the year and spend much of the rest of their time working, traveling, and recovering from exhaustion. A second and less obvious challenge is counter-dependence, a psychodynamic that is a hallmark of young adulthood: the developmental need to push away from various expressions of authority, to put some distance between communities and individuals associated with birth, and to nurture the newly emerging adult self.

In more than eighteen years of parish ministry, I participated in a half dozen efforts at the congregational, local, synodical, and regional levels to establish “young adult ministries.” All were well intentioned. Most were well led. A few were even well resourced. None enjoyed more than modest success. All began with the church’s mission-driven desire to reach out to young adults, to involve them in the work and worship of the church, and to help them find and claim their place in the community of the baptized. Who can find fault with these impulses? In retrospect, however, the initiatives’ failure to reckon adequately with the developmental and affiliative needs of emerging adults doomed them from the start. For example, on

Experiences that take emerging adults out of their comfort zone and immerse them in unfamiliar surroundings enable them to view the world, themselves, God, and the things of God in new and refreshing ways.

many residential college campuses, student religious-life organizations meet at least weekly. Some have plenary sessions every week, small-group activities several times a week, and retreats and/or other large-scale events throughout the semester. Even if a congregation had a critical mass of young adult members to populate such ministries, this sort of frequency and intensity would be difficult to sustain. But it corresponds logically to the affiliative needs of emerging adults. They want and need to be in close and frequent proximity with friends and known others with whom they share interests and mutual support. Groups and organizations that meet monthly just won't cut it.

Instead of thinking in terms of the church having a mission to emerging adults, we should think in terms of Jesus Christ having a mission to them, and that mission having a church. Instead of beginning with institutional concerns, then, with a nod to the presumed desires of young adults, the church should focus on the area of intersection between the mission of the Lord Jesus and the developmental needs and assets of young adults. That is where the fertile ground for mission and ministry lies. Campus ministries and college chaplaincy programs specialize in this ministry. Congregational and cooperative ministries face greater challenges, but they too can minister effectively in this arena.

THE SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT OF EMERGING ADULTS

These are fecund years in the formation of emerging adults—intellectually, morally, and spiritually. The disinclination of some, perhaps many, young adults to be involved in traditional congregational ministries does not indicate that they are religiously disaffected or spiritually disengaged. Quite the contrary. A recently published research project, *The Spiritual Life of College Students*, reveals that 77% of college students report that they pray, 78% discuss religious topics with friends, and 70% attended religious services in the last year. Only 27% say that the existence of God is a matter of indifference to them.¹ As Sharon Parks has observed, “The spiritual quest is integral to the developmental process; it is a common work that generations young and old must share in today’s world. Young adults are naturally renegotiating questions of their personal future, happiness, God, the ethical dimensions of their choices, suffering and death....These are religious questions because they touch the whole of life.”²

Parks builds on the work of the pioneers in the field of faith development, James Fowler, Robert Kegan, William Perry, and Carol Gilligan, each of whom is in turn indebted to the constructive-developmental theories of Jean Piaget and Erik Erikson. Acknowledging the tremendous debt all of us owe to these theoreticians,

¹Alexander W. and Helen S. Astin, *The Spiritual Life of College Students: A National Study of College Students' Search for Meaning and Purpose* (Los Angeles: University of California, Los Angeles, Higher Education Research Institute, 2005). Online at <http://www.spirituality.ucla.edu/spirituality/reports/FINAL%20REPORT.pdf> (accessed 20 February 2006).

²Sharon Daloz Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Young Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000) 198.

Parks posits an additional stage that she calls “probing commitment,” a passage between late adolescent experimentation and the “tested commitment” of mature adulthood. She then encourages us to think beyond the *stages* of faith development—a useful framework natural to Piagetians with a cognitive, stage-structure bias—and consider also the *motion* of faith, the dynamic, shifting patterns of meaning-making in individuals and communities. The problem with stage archetypes is their seductive power to persuade us minister-types that our task is to move people from a “lower” to a “higher” stage. We are, after all, shepherds, and shepherds are supposed to *move* the flocks that are their charge. But you don’t get a sheep’s wool to grow by pulling on it. Parks urges those who minister to and with emerging adults to accompany them, to mentor them, individually and within communities; to support, challenge, inspire, listen, talk, and provide places offering the free and fearless space for them to ask the “big questions” to which the title of her book alludes: questions of meaning, purpose, and faith. Movement, if and when it occurs, is the work of the Holy Spirit.

“the disinclination of some young adults to be involved in traditional congregational ministries does not indicate that they are religiously disaffected or spiritually disengaged”

Experiences that take emerging adults out of their comfort zone and immerse them in new and unfamiliar situations contribute to the renegotiating process that Parks chronicles. When such experiences are enriched by life in close community with peers and potential mentors, the participants’ developmental and affiliative needs are addressed, and the potential for expanding young adults’ horizons of meaning is multiplied. Such experiences enable—sometimes even compel—them to adjust the lenses through which they view the world, themselves, God, and the things of God. This corresponds to Parks’s description of the very essence of young adulthood: “The promise and vulnerability of young adulthood lie in the experience of the birth of critical awareness and the dissolution and recomposition of the meaning of self, other, world and ‘God.’”³

SERVICE-LEARNING AS A MINISTRY MODEL

One potentially effective model for ministry to and with traditional college-age students is service-learning. Advocates and practitioners have yet to agree on a unified definition of this “pedagogy of engagement,” but this one adapted from the American Association of Higher Education’s definition of service-learning touches all the requisite bases:

Service-learning refers to educational activity carried out in partnership with a public or nonprofit agency, organization, or project in the community. *Curricu-*

³Ibid, 5.

lar service-learning is integrated into an academic course and carries academic credit; *Cocurricular service-learning* complements academic work but is not directly connected to a course or academic program and does not carry academic credit.

Essential elements of service-learning:

- It is conducted in and meets the needs of a community;
- It is coordinated with an educational institution and with the community;
- It helps foster civic responsibility;
- It includes appropriate assessment; and
- It includes reflection as part of documenting the service experience.⁴

Service-learning is not the same as volunteerism, nor is it a service component or module tacked on to an existing course or curriculum. It is a pedagogical method that enables participants to construct meaning, to “renegotiate the questions” of which Parks speaks, using a praxis model, a cycle of action and reflection. Theoretical knowledge is put into practice. Reflection on both refines and enriches the theory, which enhances the practice, and so the cycle continues.

Congregational and campus ministries frequently involve members in valuable forms of service to and with people in need: working in soup kitchens and homeless shelters, building houses with Habitat for Humanity, and doing short-term mission trips domestically or abroad, to name but a few. Jesus’ followers often have an intuitive, instinctual realization that faith in the incarnate Son of God expresses itself in part in care for the bodily, corporeal needs of those who lack such things as food, shelter, clothing, and access to adequate health care. Loving God and neighbor in such concrete ways is in part what the Eastern Church means by the term *praxis*: the worship and theology of the church (*orthodoxy*) manifests itself not merely in right thinking, but in right acting (*orthopraxy*). When reflection on the practice of faith is minimal or missing, however, or when volunteers do not ruminate on their experiences, do not ponder the situation of those served and relate these to the sacred Scriptures of their community of faith and their own belief system, then we forfeit precious opportunities to make explicit the connections between faith and life, between word and world.

Citing constraints on time or the simple disinclination to expend the mental and spiritual energy, we complete the project, say a prayer, and go our separate ways. So doing, we manifest our kinship to the servant who buried the master’s treasure in order to play it safe. For at some level, we know we have encountered something with the potential to challenge our political convictions, deepen our discipleship, adjust our view of how God and evil are at work in the world, and/or alter our perceptions of the ways race, gender, power, and privilege influence and

⁴Based on the definition in *American Association for Higher Education (AAHE): Series on Service-Learning in the Disciplines* (adapted from the National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993); online at <http://www.compact.org/resources/detail.php?id=19> (accessed 9 February 2006).

shape the contours of our own and other's lives. Such encounters disturb our spiritual status quo. It is one thing to serve and work alongside the poor. It is quite another to ask why the prosperity of a relative few in the world is predicated upon the existence of a permanent global underclass. Reflecting on such matters with open minds and open Bibles is not an activity for those whose goal is to play it safe. We often consent, therefore, to a silent conspiracy to dispense with reflection or at least keep it superficial, preferring the comfort of knowing that we have done a good work (which, in most cases, we have: there is no need to denigrate bona fide acts of loving service) and that those we have served are at least a little better off because of it. Their need is addressed, our guilt is assuaged, and all can return to life as we know it.

“It is one thing to serve and work alongside the poor. It is quite another to ask why the prosperity of a relative few in the world is predicated upon the existence of a permanent global underclass.”

Jesus said that the poor will be with us always (Mark 14:7). Unfortunately, that dominical utterance has been widely misinterpreted and misapplied. This true-even-if-apocryphal story is a case in point: After working in a homeless shelter, a student is reported to have remarked, “I hope this shelter will be here when my children are the age I am now, so that they can have the same eye-opening experience I have had.” Deeper reflection might have led this young adult to hope, pray, work, and lobby for a community where basic, dignified housing was available to all and homeless shelters had gone the way of the poorhouse and the paupers' prison.

THE CENTRAL IMPORTANCE OF REFLECTION

Proponents and practitioners sometimes refer to reflection as “the hyphen in service-learning.” It is the mental, emotional, and spiritual act that connects doing with being. In faith-based programs, it can also connect orthodoxy and orthopraxy. It encourages participants to ponder such questions as, “What did I see? What did I feel? Who am I in this situation? How does my experience correspond to, challenge, alter, deepen, or correct my existing views? How does my faith affect my perceptions and influence my actions? What does my faith community tell me, and how is that the same as or different from what my culture tells me? What is God calling me to do now?” For a long time, I assumed that students would, on their own, make the connections between what they were learning in the classroom (whether college or catechetics) and what they experienced in service-learning events. I have learned that, while some do that, reflection provides the guidance and intentionality required to increase the likelihood that there will be “Aha!” moments for more than a few.

Reflection activities are not all of one sort. Just as there are different learning

styles, there are different varieties of reflection. Those most commonly used are journaling, group discussion, writing integrative papers, and preparing and making a presentation to a class or group. Reflection activities can also include meditating on a passage of Scripture and relating it to the service experience, writing poetry or prayers, recruiting participants for the next similar event, scrapbooking, being interviewed and debriefed, blogging, even dancing and drumming. Different participants will benefit differently from any given type; we do well, therefore, to employ a variety of reflection activities.

SPIRITUAL FORMATION AND SERVICE-LEARNING: A CASE STUDY

Each January since 1999, I have organized, led, and taught a two-week service-learning course in Costa Rica and Nicaragua. Called SU CASA for “Susquehanna University Central America Service Adventure,” the program is a two-credit religion course. Laboring and learning as a team, participants live and work among the poor, combining

- service: work with local residents on construction, education, and medical projects identified as needs by pastors and congregational leaders in the areas we visit;
- academic learning: lectures, presentations, reading, discussions, and visits to churches and museums; and
- reflection: a daily journal, group processing, an integrative paper, and a presentation to a church or community group.

For the last four years, the academic topic of study has been “Images of Jesus in Central America,” an examination of how Jesus is “imagined” in art, liturgy, iconography, hymnody, preaching, theology, and congregational life.

One hundred twenty-nine young adult students have participated in the program over the years, and in their journals and conversations most describe their participation as a deeply meaningful and significant experience. About 40% use the term “life-changing experience.” For the first few years, I rejoiced that it was so, but I had a poor understanding of what they meant when they said that. I needed to hear the student participants describe, in their own words, what the experience meant to them, what they believed to be its significance for their faith and life, and how this corresponded to the observations of faith-development theorists. These questions became a research project. Data were gathered from the students’ journals, reflection papers, in-depth interviews conducted by a student assistant, and my own observations of and conversations with the students. Analyzing more than 1,700 pages of transcripts, papers, and journals, I have drawn a few modest conclusions.

We need to exercise restraint and caution when it comes to making claims about the impact of such short-term experiences, however intensive they may be. Establishing a causal relationship between a service-learning event and, for example, patterns of worship attendance is tenuous at best. Human beings are not lab rats. Researchers do not control their ambient environments, and there are other

things going on in their lives. Nevertheless, even if we cannot measure impact quantitatively, we can listen deeply as students describe their perceptions of the impact on their life and faith, and we can observe their actions. Using SU CASA as an example, we can group these under the headings of vocation, behavior, and transformation of perspective.

Vocation

A few participants (4 out of 129) report that they changed their occupational track as a direct result of their participation in SU CASA. All four described that change in terms of coming to a better understanding of “what God is calling me to do with my life.” Three members who worked in free medical clinics have chosen to go to nursing school after completing their bachelor’s degree (Susquehanna University does not have a nursing program), and one moved to Costa Rica after graduation to teach at an elementary school there. More commonly, 32% of participants indicate that the experience has caused them to reexamine what they intend to do with their life, professionally and avocationally, as they seek to weave the thread of this experience into the developing tapestry of their young lives. About the same number look into a year of volunteer service after college; that only one has actually done such service relates to the next category.

“I know I’ll never be able to pay \$40 for an Abercrombie & Fitch T-shirt again now that I know that that sum would feed a Nicaraguan family for a month”

Behavior

This is the most elusive of the three, and the most disappointing for leaders who harbor hopes that young adults’ involvement in a church-related, short-term service-learning experience will result in their becoming more active in congregational life or campus ministry. That happens in fewer cases than one might expect. In fact, it is difficult to attribute any immediate behavioral changes to the students’ participation. One student said, “I know I’ll never be able to pay \$40 for an Abercrombie & Fitch T-shirt again now that I know that that sum would feed a Nicaraguan family for a month.” Others, after meeting coffee pickers whose daily wage is less than the cost of a Starbucks Espresso Macchiato, have returned to promote awareness and purchase of fair trade coffee. Approximately 15% repeat the experience and/or participate in other short-term missions. If these results seem underwhelming, we need to remember that service-learning is primarily a pedagogical method; its goal is learning through service. In that arena, researchers Dwight Giles and Janet Eyler have demonstrated an efficacy consistent with my own experience.⁵

⁵Janet Eyler and Dwight Giles Jr., *Where’s the Learning in Service-Learning?* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999).

Transformation of perspective

Here students report and demonstrate the greatest impact, consistent with the research of Eyler and Giles. Perspective transformation “occurs as we struggle to solve a problem where our usual ways of doing or seeing do not work, and we are called to question the validity of what we think we know or critically examine the very premises of our perception of the problem.”⁶ Immersion in unfamiliar surroundings and situations disorients people. I have come to appreciate that this is a good thing: students apprehend best when they are a little apprehensive.

“Immersion in unfamiliar surroundings and situations disorients people. I have come to appreciate that this is a good thing.”

For SU CASA students, the language is strange, the currencies unfamiliar, the liturgy and hymns unusual, the customs different, the living conditions in the *precarious* (shantytowns) far worse than most have ever seen, and white students find themselves in a racial minority yet still treated preferentially. The cumulative effect of all this disorientation is that it can force students to question their fundamental, often ethnocentric, assumptions about “the way things are.” In Parks’s language of faith development, it becomes a material part of the process of renegotiating, deconstructing, and reconstructing meaning and worldview.

Consider these three areas in which students experience the transformation of perspective:

Individual versus systemic/structural view: When students meet hardworking, intelligent, honest, and caring people who are poor beyond their imagination, they have to conclude that the poverty of their new acquaintances is the result of more than a series of bad choices and a string of bad luck. Their perspective begins to shift from the individual to the structural or systemic. In theological terms, they grapple with the reality of sin so expertly woven into the fabric of social structures that its presence becomes virtually undetectable to the untrained eye. It is simply “the way things are.” Some students begin to question that assumption, however: “Why should bananas grown in Central America retail at US\$.49/lb. back home while apples grown in our own state fetch US\$1.49/lb.?” That arrangement guarantees the permanent impoverishment of workers who show up at the medical clinics where the students serve, twenty-five-year-olds with the backs of men thrice their age, chronically aching from ten-hour days of harvesting and hauling bananas. Discussions with local pastors and laypeople versed in theologies of liberation open the students to discover new dimensions of meaning to the word “sin.” It no longer refers only to the misdeeds of individuals, but to the destructive ways in which we order our common life. The voice of the prophets, of Jesus in Matt 25:31–46, of Lu-

⁶Ibid., 133.

ther in his explanation to the commandments against killing and stealing: all are heard in new ways that are strange but wonderful.

Images of Jesus: Reared in a culture whose dominant image of Jesus is Warner Sallman's *Head of Christ*, students find Central American images of Jesus jarring. From the Black Christ of Esquipulas, Guatemala, to *campesino* manger scenes by primitivistic Nicaraguan painters; from Jesus in overalls and leather gloves in the *Misa Campesina Nicaragüense* (Nicaraguan Peasant Mass) to the dolorous, dying, and dead Christ depicted on crucifixes and in glass sarcophagi in various churches, students are startled at some of the ways Jesus is imagined in the countries we visit. Readings have helped them understand that such images are culturally conditioned constructs. The most valuable learning, however, comes when a student says, "Wait a minute. My image of Jesus is a cultural construct, too!" Now, christology and soteriology are up for grabs, and the stage is set for another renegotiation of meaning.

Xenophobia yields to philoxenos: Something approaching 100% of the participants report that they are amazed by the immediately loving manner in which they are received into the homes, hearts, and churches of our friends and partners in Central America. More than this, students are humbled by their hosts' willingness, even eagerness, to share what little they have. A little girl gives a departing student her only bracelet and asks not to be forgotten. Rice and beans are shared with all who are hungry. The perspectives of visiting *gringos* and *gringas* are welcomed in discussions. In biblical language, students experience the power of *philoxenos*, literally "love of the stranger," a word we translate as hospitality. This biblical hospitality allows them to shed the burden of their xenophobia, their fear of the stranger. Reflection helps integrate this new chapter in the unfolding narrative of their faith and life.

In a remarkable little essay, Dean Brackley, who teaches in El Salvador, writes of visitors to that country,

A sweet shame comes over them, not bitter remorse but more like the shame one feels when falling in love. The visitors feel themselves losing their grip; or better, they feel the world losing its grip on them. What world? The world made up of important people like them and unimportant poor people like their hosts. As the poet Yeats says, "things fall apart"; the visitors' world is coming unhinged. They feel resistance, naturally, to a current that threatens to sweep them out of control. They feel a little confused—again—like the disorientation of falling in love. In fact, that is what is happening, a kind of falling in love. The earth trembles. My horizon is opening up. I'm on unfamiliar ground, entering a richer, more real world.⁷

Critically aware of emerging adults' developmental and affiliative needs, those who design and lead faith-based service-learning events can provide rich and

⁷Dean Brackley, S.J., "Meeting the Victims, Falling in Love," *Salvanet* (Jan/Feb 2000) 6–7; available online at http://www.rtfcam.org/solidarity/reflections/dean_brackley.htm (accessed 20 February 2006).

potentially transformative experiences. These can be curricular (one could envision a partnership between a congregation and a college so that academic credit could be awarded) or cocurricular. The precise results are unknowable in advance; that is part of the wonder and excitement of it all. Changes in the areas of behavior and clarification of vocation are likely to be modest. With regard to perspective transformation, however, the research is clear: participants in service-learning events where service, learning, and reflection are highly integrated routinely report epiphanies great and small as their perspectives are transformed. This contributes to the “dissolution and recomposition of the meaning of self, other, world and ‘God’”⁸ that is the hallmark of young adult faith.

I often say that students go on these trips expecting to change the world; they return and discover that their world has changed. The Holy Spirit is moving. ☩

MARK WM. RADECKE is chaplain to Susquehanna University, Selinsgrove, Pennsylvania, a college of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. His doctor of ministry research project at Princeton Theological Seminary focused on undergraduate students’ perceptions of the impact of service-learning on their spiritual formation.

⁸Parks, *Big Questions*, 5.