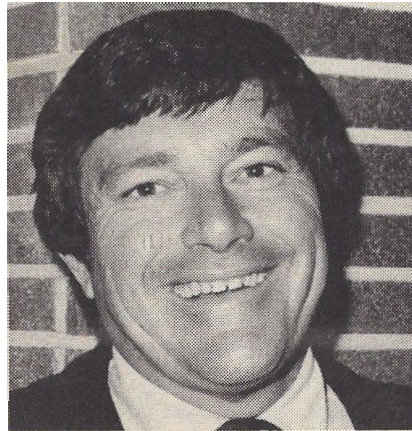


EARL PALMER: A Pastor Considers Why the Church Needs Young Life - and Vice Versa

As a sophomore at the University of California at Berkeley, Earl Palmer was headed toward a career in law when some guys in his dorm invited him to a Bible Study. This was his first encounter with the Christian faith and what he discovered changed the direction of his life. "I came to trust Jesus Christ and His faithfulness and love," Earl recalled, "then I became very active in the college group at First Presbyterian Church in Berkeley I became so excited about relating the Christian faith to people my own age that I decided to pursue the ministry."

After graduating from Princeton Theological Seminary in 1956 Earl served as Minister of Students at a church in Seattle, University Presbyterian Church, with his



Pastor Earl Palmer

occasions Bob Mitchell and Bill Starr invited me to speak to the national staff conferences of Young Life. I had chances to be with almost all the national staff members at one time or another over the years. So I became pastorally related to Young Life staff people, and became more intimately acquainted with the

adults, for instance through the local church, and where the young people are being brought into the fellowship of church.

Outlook: So you would urge Young Life workers and volunteers to be in the fellowship of a church. Do you experience isolation as a pastor?

Palmer: Yes. Young Life's weaknesses and strengths would be the same as those of other pastors and ministers. The Christian worker can tend to become a lonely prophet, a lonely servant, and when that happens, then there's a tendency towards burn-out. There isn't enough feedback and support for that person. My advice to Young Life leaders is to keep growing biblically and theologically, through an on-going program of study so that their minds are being filled and they're growing as Christians. Also get nourished spiritually and interpersonally.

And then, surround yourselves with a mixture of gifted people, so that everything isn't on your shoulders — all the organizing, the fund-raising, the logistics of the area. Let other people express their gifts, too. If a staff person is married and has a family, then he or she should also want to make sure

other. Then there's a "fright or flight" reaction. Either they become aggressively hostile or they withdraw. The fear of another Christian organization is usually based on hearsay or half-truths. The pastor and the parachurch leader simply don't know each other and haven't really found their common anchorage in Christ.

Outlook: Tell us again how you see the role of Young Life in the life of the Church at large?

Palmer: I see it as a renewal movement in the life of the whole church. Renewal movements tend to have a special emphasis; they aren't as whole as the local churches. They're not, for instance, involved with people from birth to death. The renewal movement can center in on areas the church has neglected. That's why the Church needs the renewal movements and the renewal movements need the Christian church. The renewal movements tend to be more narrow in their focus. A Young Life leader can give all his time to addressing the high school generation with the Gospel of Christ. No pastor can do that. So that's the greatness of the renewal movement and also its weakness. And that's

the midst of understanding their own sexuality and making decisions about their self-worth, and at the same time are being assaulted by all these temptations and pressures.

It's not only negative pressures that are applied to teenagers to a greater degree; it's positive pressures, too. Now eighth and ninth graders are worried about whether they can get into Princeton or Harvard. A father told me just this week, "I told my son that with these C grades he's getting, he's never going to get into Stanford." All through the conversation I thought he was talking about a high school senior. Finally it came out that his son was nine years old. I didn't even think about what college I was going to until I was a senior.

What you've got are children robbed of their childhood. They haven't been able to sit around and play. They've been robbed of "child" adventures. We have a lot of overstimulated kids who don't have the resources to process all these things.

It's possible that the Young Life camp could take on a whole new meaning for kids who have been deprived of just a fun week — a week to be a kid.

wife, Shirley. Then the Palmers served six years at Union Church of Manila, the Philippines.

Today Earl is back where he first heard his call to the ministry. As senior pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Berkeley for 14 years Earl has sought to guide its members in “understanding the implications of Christ’s reign where they live, where they work, where they relate.” Through the years Earl has developed a close relationship with Young Life on several levels. In this interview, he talks about the role of groups like Young Life within the larger body of the Church.

Outlook: What has been your connection with Young Life?

Palmer: I have two connections with Young Life that are personal. First, my wife, Shirley, was deeply involved with Young Life in Tacoma, Washington. As a high-schooler, she went to Frontier Ranch the first year it was opened, and then she went to the University of Washington and was active in Young Life leadership. Also when I went to Seattle and started my ministry, I met young people in our student group who were Young Life leaders and then got to know the area director in Seattle. I became a supporter of Young Life just by watching the results it was having in students’ lives. Then when I came to Berkeley in 1970, on numerous

Outlook: What do you like about Young Life’s approach to kids? Are there weaknesses?

Palmer: I feel that the original mandate that Jim Rayburn felt in his bones, and the mandate that Young Life has stayed true to is that evangelism and sharing of the Christian faith takes time, and we have to take the time to do it. That means spending time with young people, getting to know them, to really love them, to allow them to get to know a caring, committed Christian adult. To have that kind of journey evangelism experience and journey discipleship experience is fundamental to Young Life. It takes time to help a young person grow as a Christian and you have to allow them to experience the Christian faith. I would say that’s the gift Young Life has given to the whole Christian church — understanding youth evangelism and how to disciple young Christians.

The main problem I’ve observed in Young Life is the tendency toward isolation of the Young Life leader. When there’s not a strong area committee or a group of adults surrounding a leader, that’s a problem. There’s a need for cultivation, growth and nourishment of staff members. Young Life has been strongest where its staff has been nourished by caring

the family’s growing spiritually and feeling secure enough financially, so they’re not deeply troubled all the time.

Outlook: Have you experienced any conflicts between a church you pastored and parachurch groups like Young Life.

Palmer: I personally have not experienced what I call problems. One of the reasons I haven’t is because my philosophy as a pastor is to stay warmly encouraging toward parachurch organizations. If we agree with the parachurch organization’s basic theology, but differ on points of strategy emphasis, then I feel we should try to be financially helpful, spiritually helpful, and also be a check and balance to them and give them counsel. In my experience, when a local church takes that stance toward a parachurch organization it has a wonderful relationship; the church benefits and the parachurch groups benefits, too. As I see it, the parachurch group is like a renewal movement within the life of the whole church. All renewal movements need the checks and balances of the whole body. But the whole body needs the renewal movement.

Outlook: What specifically causes conflicts between churches and parachurch groups?

Palmer: Usually conflicts arise because the pastor and the parachurch leaders don’t know each

why the parachurch organization must see itself as only part of the whole body of Christ in any community.

Outlook: In your experience as pastor and father have the needs of kids changed in recent years? What are the new issues and what are kids looking for?

Palmer: The fundamental needs of kids haven’t changed — to be loved, to be taken seriously, and to be introduced to the love and faithfulness of Jesus Christ. That is a need that is the same today as when Jim Rayburn started his first club in Dallas. It’s as old as the Christian church itself. But, the cultural atmosphere and the cultural pressures on kids tends to change. Right now there are several things happening that must be taken seriously by anybody who works with youth. For one, younger children are facing the kinds of temptations that maybe 20 years ago they would not have faced until they’re older. The challenge of drugs is being felt by seventh and eighth graders, and even sixth and fifth graders. A few years ago chemical dependency was mainly a high school phenomenon. Now it’s a junior high school phenomenon. Yet the junior high age youngster has fewer resources to work with in terms of their own maturation. They’re not as able to stand free of their peer group. They’re in

a kid.

Outlook: How do you as a full-time minister stay fresh spiritually?

Palmer: You can’t do it alone. I guess I stay fresh spiritually through the input of people in my life, by the input of books, reading and study, and just the challenge of what I’m doing. I can say there’s never been a dull day.

I think my work nourishes me most when I’m really doing what I’m gifted at and not trying to be what I’m not gifted at. When I major in the majors and minor in the minors, in terms of my gifts, then I stay fresh in my work. I try not to be involved in a lot of administrative type committees, because that’s not my strong gift. I like to relate to people; that’s where my gifts are, so I try to major in those areas.

There’s no getting around the fact that I keep fresh because people are helping me keep fresh — my wife, my children, my colleagues and staff, people I’ve met in Young Life and other organizations where I’ve had a chance to have a pastoral and friendship relationship. When you see other people growing especially when you love people in the midst of a crisis in their lives, that’s a very refreshing experience. That’s part of the adventure of life, just to be with people.