
STRATEGY FOR SANITY

Earl Palmer

A baffling phenomenon for child psychologists is the youngster who thrives in spite of a chaotic, abusive family and community. Since much research has been recently devoted to these remarkable children, the October 13 *New York Times* presented some of the data unearthed by these studies.

A woman, a paranoid schizophrenic, ate all her meals in restaurants because she was convinced someone was poisoning her food at home. Her 12-year-old daughter developed the same fears and likewise ate in restaurants. Her 10-year-old daughter would eat at home if her father was there, but otherwise went along with her mother.

But the woman's 7-year-old son always ate at home.

When a psychiatrist asked the boy why, he said with a shrug, "Well, I'm not dead yet."

Whereas the mother and her elder daughter never recovered, the younger two kids—especially the boy, who eventually became a brilliant student and successful adult—did just fine. Although "grinding hardship will leave even children [like these two] with psychological scars . . . by and large they are able to thrive in circumstances that leave other children emotionally disabled."

One factor has emerged from this research as a crucial variable. Each one of these children has found "consistent emotional support—a grandmother, an older sister, a teacher or neighbor." In fact, "the absence of a

supporting adult in a child's life is seen over and over in a range of problems, from delinquency and drug abuse to teen suicide."

Wanted: Adult Friends

Not only youths from disturbed and caustic family settings need this support—every young person needs adult friends. Supportive and encouraging adult mentors, I believe, are invaluable gifts to young people and may be a Christian church group's most important ministry with its youngsters. The kids need individual, one-on-one relationships with adults—adults that the kids themselves perceive to be personally and vitally interested in them. Which means that mentors that are assigned to young people are seldom as successful at getting close to kids as they are when the kids choose them. And that won't happen unless some prerequisites are in place: a supportive atmosphere in the group for friendship building, enough interested and caring adults available for teenagers who want to recruit one, and sufficient time for relationships to age and deepen.

A youth group's atmosphere, first of all, influences all that happens in that ministry. And the kind of atmosphere that's needed, it seems to me, is one that honors the personal worth of each young person because of the love of Christ. This is a ministry in which such care for students shapes a church's and a group's priorities. If teenagers are truly worthy of personal dignity, then we may need to rethink the way we work with them in a more biblical way—

rethink the program, the retreats, the socials, the discipling, the training. The kingdom strategy of our Lord, after all, was decidedly people-oriented. Our ministries with youth should have this same importance-of-people flavor about it.

Spread Too Thin

A second prerequisite before students feel free choosing adult mentors is that there simply must be enough adults to be mentors. One youth worker, however capable, cannot by himself carry on the kind of friendship mentoring kids really need, purely because no one person can cultivate in-depth relationships with several youths. We can occupy only a few circles with integrity and depth. I am convinced that although the team approach to any ministry in the Christian church is the soundest approach, it is especially so in youth ministry. The question is not, "Should we team up?" but "Who should be on the team?" By all means, the team needs Christian adults who genuinely trust the Lord, adults of different ages, adults who have two things in common—respect and affection for youth. The team member needs to consider kids worthy of honor and to like them, too.

Adults like these will be snapped up by teenagers and preteens as friends to journey with through the volatile years of growing up. The task of the youth pastor, then, is to find this adult team and to equip them for the ministry of mentoring. When this happens, kids have the realistic help they need from us in the church. It is amazing how many problems take care of themselves when such a team begins to take shape. The principal reason a youth ministry flounders is a loss of centeredness in

Jesus Christ and in the gospel; the second most common reason, the loss of a clear focus on the importance of people. For when this happens, and as youths consequently feel more and more lonely and isolated, they are forced to look to other places for friendship.

Quantity Before Quality

The third ingredient that is essential for any team ministry with youth is time. Because anything worthwhile takes time—and especially the encouragement of people on their Christian journeys—I urge youth workers to take the long view, to put roots down and decide to stay around for a while. It takes four years, after all, to watch just a single “generation” of high schoolers go through school. Only then are we able to accurately evaluate both our mistakes and the durable contributions of our ministry. And the longer a youth ministry stays in place, the more mentoring can take place—so churches and parachurch organizations should therefore build in that direction with adult leaders who are definitely and seriously devoted to youth ministry.

Without a quantity of time with people, there is no such thing as quality ministry. We should be thinking, therefore, in years, not in months. We should plan on knowing the young persons growing up in our fellowship for the rest of our lives. This means that we don't have to do everything right now or say everything right now. It means that we grow together in a long-term journey with Jesus Christ—and, like all journeys, this kind happens with single steps. ♦

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