

The 1996 Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture

"Christ and the Adolescent: A Theological Approach to Youth Ministry"

Introduction

I am honored to introduce the first volume of the Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture, presented in Daytona Beach, FL, and Princeton, NJ, in the spring of 1996 by James W. Fowler, Robin Maas, and Robert Wuthnow. The Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture are designed to foster original research on youth and the church. As part of a new venture in ministry sponsored by Princeton Theological Seminary, the Institute for Youth Ministry they describe a shift occurring in the churches thinking about youth and ministry. Instead of ghettoizing youth into clubs apart from the congregation, the church's mission with youth views young people as integral to the total mission of the church, and youth ministry as a theological task which is not only about youth ministry, but about youth's ministry as well.

The 1996 lectures, titled "Christ and the Adolescent: A Theological Approach to Youth Ministry," address mainline churches who have suffered grievous losses in their attempts to address teens. These losses come at a time when public institutions are calling attention to the important role churches play in adolescent development. Churches agree: We believe we have something to contribute to youth in the person of Jesus Christ-and therefore Jesus Christ, not age-level education, pastoral counseling, or recreational programs, must be the starting point for youth ministry.

We asked each of our lecturers to approach this theme from the perspective of their own disciplines. James Fowler posits a new shape for youth ministry that recognizes nuances of human development; Robin Maas uses biblical exegesis to redefine the spiritual journey of youth and the adults who mentor them; and Robert Wuthnow analyzes the sociological significance of service learning trends for the church's ministry with teenagers. Together they point to a new direction for ministry with young people.

We approach this direction humbly and with hope. We know that the church's renewal depends not on the church of tomorrow, but the church of today-a church in which youth can be integral missionaries to their elders and world. May this volume challenge and nourish the ministry God has laid before you.

Godspeed,

Kenda Creasy Dean
Director, Institute for Youth Ministry

1996 Lectures

Robin Maas

"Christ and the Adolescent: Piper or Prophet?"

"Christ and the Adolescent: A Decision for Love"

"Christ and the Adolescent: Written in Stone"

James W. Fowler

"Perspectives on Adolescents, Personhood, and Faith"

"Adolescence in the Trinitarian Praxis of God"

"Grace, Repentance, and Commitment: Youth Initiation in Care
and Formation"

Robert Wuthnow

"Youth and Culture in American Society: The Social Context
of Ministry to Teenagers"

"Religious Upbringing: Does It Matter and, If So,
What Matters?"

"Unto the Least of These: Youth and the Ministry of Caring"

UNTO THE LEAST OF THESE: YOUTH AND THE MINISTRY OF CARING

Robert Wuthnow



My third lecture takes up the somewhat specific topic of service, that is, of getting young people involved in activities that help other people, perhaps

within the church itself, or perhaps in the wider community, such as ministries to the homeless, or projects such as Habitat for Humanity, or tutoring, or working with the handicapped. At one time, virtually every church youth group sponsored service projects of this kind, and I suspect many youth groups still do. To be sure, these programs can be criticized, possibly because they focus too much on humanitarianism and not enough on Christian doctrine, or possibly because they exploit the poor as a means of giving young people from middle-class churches an exotic experience once in a while. Nevertheless, I think we would all agree that the churches need to heed Christ's call to minister unto the homeless, the sick, and the needy, and I'm sure we would all agree that young people have a lot to offer in helping with these ministries. What better way to get young people to see that the church can make a difference? And what better way to encourage young people to put their faith into practice?

About three years ago, I had the privilege of conducting a large research project on youth service activities as part of a grant from the Kellogg Foundation to an organization in Washington, D.C., called Independent Sector. As a supplement to a national survey of teenagers that Independent Sector conducted, my project involved doing in-depth interviews with several dozen teenagers who were participating in various community service projects around the country through their schools, community agencies, or churches. The results of that project were published last fall as a book by Oxford University Press called *Learning to Care: Elementary Kindness in an Age of Indifference*. The book examines the motives that lead young people to become involved in service activities, describes their experiences in schools and other community organizations, shows what made their experiences meaningful, talks about how these experiences contribute

to character formation, and presents some evidence on the ways in which career plans are shaped by volunteering. Religion is a theme that runs throughout the book. I want to draw on some of the insights that grew out of that project, but to do so without repeating what I've already published in the book.

I'm going to emphasize three points: first, that churches can indeed be a significant place in which young people learn to care for others; second, that service activities need to include reflection and mentoring in order for their spiritual meanings to be understood; and third, that service activities can actually be a way of saving young people themselves, quite apart from their benefit for the people being served.

Let me make the discussion a little more concrete by introducing a couple of the young people we interviewed. These are two of the young people who were not featured in the book, but whose service involvement was primarily through their churches.

Isaac Martin is a high-school senior who lives on the East Coast, and who attends a mainline Protestant church with an active senior-high youth group that sends some of its members to other states during summer vacations to work on Habitat for Humanity projects. It is on one of these projects that we can catch up with him. He came back to the house early that Saturday night, catching a ride with some friends and then walking six blocks to where he was staying. Sleep was just about to overtake him when he heard a knock at the door. Opening it, he was confronted by a police officer. Through the door he could see three or four other police cars pulling up in front of the house. They had come to arrest the burglar. Him.

Isaac Martin was experiencing something he thought happened only in movies, or in the South before the civil rights movement. He was a black man who happened to be in a white neighborhood at the wrong time. He had already been there six days. Plenty of people had seen him come and go. He generally stopped and played with the cats in the yard whenever he was coming or going. There was no way anybody could mistake him for a burglar. But the neighbor did. And now he had a yard full of police.

The real reason he was there was his church. That was why Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. had been there, too. Only this was different, kind of. They hadn't exactly sent him out here to work for racial justice. This was an economic thing. For years his church had been doing things to help the poor. One of them was working with Habitat for Humanity to provide housing for the poor. The way it worked was that poor people had to provide some of the labor themselves. Then volunteers from someplace else, like First Baptist, would help them. In his case, First Baptist had raised enough money to fly him and his buddies in his youth group (about a dozen of them) out here—more than a thousand miles away—and to cover their living expenses for two weeks while they wielded hammers and paint brushes.

So it was funny, in a way, that he now had a policeman in his face. This was, however, mostly a white area. Poor white at that. Other than the Kiowas they were trying to help and a few blacks over on the other side of town, there wasn't much diversity at all. He guessed that was the problem. Fortunately, the police figured it out, too, at least after making a few phone calls. He would chalk it up to experience. After all, that was what he was getting here.

Part of the experience, of course, was learning how to do carpentry work. That might come in handy later on as a skill. He had already learned quite a bit about that from his dad, though, because his dad worked for a construction company and could put up a drywall without thinking twice about it. He had spent a lot of Saturdays helping his dad with fix-up projects around the church. Come to think of it, that was what sparked his interest in coming out here in the first place. Besides knowing his way around a power saw, he also knew it was a good feeling having done something for someone else.

There was that good feeling from helping. But what always struck him was that somehow he learned as much from the people he was trying to help as they did from him, like the time at the church when he'd helped his dad build an apartment for some refugees from Central America. When the refugees showed up, it was really interesting to hear about everything they had been through before leaving their country. Or like the Kiowas this summer. The last night there they had all built a sweat lodge together. It was a dome about nine feet in diameter and four feet high, made out of willow and cedar branches and covered with canvas. They threw a bunch of rocks that had been heated until they were glowing hot into a pit in the center, and poured on water to make the steam. They all sat in there and prayed and cleansed themselves. They talked and sang and cried. It was the closest thing to total happiness he had ever experienced.

Despite his bad experience with the police, he also learned some things about racial understanding that summer. One afternoon the group made a trip out to Rainy Mountain, the place where the Kiowas made their last stand against the cavalry and were killed in large numbers. Standing there with his newfound Kiowa friends, he realized how much they had in common. Later, one of the Kiowas said to him, "Get past your feelings about racism. Run past it. Don't even think about it, because that only holds you back."

The other thing that made it special for Isaac was the kids. There were three of them. They liked to hang around and watch whenever the crew was building something. One little boy was living with his aunt because his mother had died recently. Nobody had seen him smile since the funeral. Then gradually, he began to lighten up again. The smile came back. It felt so good to see him smile that everyone else smiled, too.

Isaac thinks he has probably become addicted to helping people as a result of these experiences. When he was little, he used to watch his father

working on his grandmother's house on weekends. He wished he could pound nails, so his father taught him how. When he started high school, he began volunteering for Habitat on Saturday mornings just for the fun of it. He had the time and it was an outlet for his interest in building things. Then as he continued, he realized how special it was to be doing things that other people genuinely appreciated. "After a while," he muses, "the fun of just doing construction work wasn't it. It was just a whole feeling you get. The experiences that you get during community projects you'll never have anywhere else."

His work with Habitat continues. As he works with the others from his church, he feels more clearly than ever before that God is with him. As he works with the poor, he also feels their pain. Lately, he has been working in a very depressed section of the city. A man was stabbed there not long ago. Isaac knows he isn't solving the problems there. Yet he does feel he is making a difference. He knows this because he can see the tangible results of his efforts.

Just a few days ago, he was working across the street from a house they had helped refurbish a few weeks before. He was down in the basement digging out dirt. The day was hot and it was hard work. All of a sudden he looked up and saw the family that had moved into a Habitat house across the street. He recalls, "I was kind of thinking, hey, I helped out with that house. Now there's a family with children running around in the yard. Those children are coming over and helping us sometimes. They come out, they clean up the yards. They clean up the fields and stuff like that. They help us out. It puts a smile on your face, to say the least."

So that's the way Isaac Martin has learned about caring. His church has played an important role in helping him put the vague, caring impulses he has learned from his family into action. He is making a real difference in the lives of a few people, and he is maturing in his understanding of himself as a caring individual.

The other story I want to relate is also of a boy who happens to be African American. He is a freshman in high school now and he lives in the Midwest. Unlike Isaac Martin, he and his family attend an all-black church and they are very poor. His name is Dexter Wellman, and we must start by picturing the community in which he lives. If it were in Mexico City or Soweto, it would be called Shantytown. Here in a prosperous Midwestern city that prides itself on commerce, insurance, and being one of the pharmaceutical capitals of the world, it is known simply, when anyone thinks about it at all, as a low-income area. In livable space, his home amounts to no more than seven hundred square feet, a tiny, one-story clapboard house with walls so thin the cold arctic air that comes sweeping across the plains blows right through. But at least it's a house. Dexter, a ninth grader, sleeps in a small room with a mattress on the floor, a couple of posters on the wall, and some plastic milk crates stuffed with books. There is no other furniture. He lives here with his mother, father, and sister. Next door is an identical

dwelling occupied by a frail woman in her late seventies. Next door to that is a vacant lot where Dexter and his neighbor have vegetables growing. Trucks rumble by on the expressway. The rest of the neighborhood consists of boarded-up buildings, vacant lots, and four-story projects put up during Lyndon Johnson's Great Society era.

Dexter grew up in one of these projects. But when he was twelve and his sister was ten, his father and mother both lost their jobs. The utility company turned off their electricity, and they were forced to move out. They had no place to go. All they could do was to store what few belongings they had at his aunt's apartment, and declare themselves homeless. Fortunately, the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church they had been attending operated a shelter for the homeless. And they provided refuge for Dexter and his family. He and his father were given a little cubicle. His mother and sister shared a comparable one. There was one bathroom in the building, a shower, and a kind of soup kitchen for people in the shelter as well as those who came in from the street. Dexter was afraid because of all the strange people, and he spent as much time as he could in his cubicle. Helping others became his way of saving himself.

After a few weeks at the shelter, Dexter realized he had time on his hands. He was still attending school, of course, but he had long hours in the evenings and on weekends with nothing to do. So he started tutoring. One day he was wandering around the church building and noticed that the classrooms were sitting there empty and unused. There were children of all ages in the shelter. And when he had lived in the project, he had sometimes played "school" in the park. Why not do it again? he thought. The woman who ran the shelter said she didn't mind. He went to his principal and got some workbooks the school was going to throw away. And as soon as he found a community agency willing to bring over a few desks, he was in business. All that winter, for the nine months while he was homeless, Dexter ran his school, every afternoon and evening and all day Saturday. The kids would come, or their parents would send them, about twenty in all, and he would help them with their homework, or teach them to read, or just give them papers to work on.

The ceiling leaked and some of the kids didn't want to be there. But Dexter discovered quickly how rewarding it was to help. In fact, he remembers vividly one of his first pupils. "It was when I first started living there. I met a four-year-old girl named Sarah. She was the youngest student I ever had. She couldn't read or write, and within three days she could read small books, like *The Cat in the Hat* and *Green Eggs and Ham*. She read a couple of read-along books that I had on tape. I taped my voice, reading a book and taping it. She read along with it." He remembers how good that made him feel. "It was touching to me because I had done something for someone. It was just spectacular for me. I had a great feeling about it."

Dexter goes so far as to say that he had a lot of fun with his tutoring at the shelter. But it would be dishonest to suggest that it was all roses. He

missed his home. He missed the friends he had known in the project. On one occasion he persuaded one of the deacons at the church to drive a van over every day and pick up some of these children so he could tutor them. But that lasted only a few days. He also found that it was painful when his pupils moved on, which they did frequently, being shunted from shelter to shelter. Of little Sarah, for example, he says, "She was always real shy, but when it came to art, she really came alive. See that picnic table out there? Me and her painted it together. I was really upset when she left. Just when you got used to someone, they'd move out. I saw her a couple of weeks later at the train station with her mom. They'd been moved to a different shelter."

Two years have passed since Dexter and his family moved out of the shelter themselves and started getting back on their feet. But he still goes back every day to do his tutoring. The few books he has, stuffed into his plastic milk crates, are his lending library. Children in the neighborhood come to his bedroom window to check them out. He seems old for his years. At fifteen, he has already experienced more than many people would want to in a lifetime. When asked why he still does volunteer work, he muses for a moment and says, "Like they always say, you do something for somebody else, you always get something back." He pauses, though, as if somehow that saying has become trite. Then he adds: "But I really don't think much about that now. It was just something in me that always wanted to help someone else, because people have always helped me during my lifetime. So I thought that it was time to give something back."

Isaac Martin and Dexter Wellman are vivid examples of the ways in which churches can encourage young people to become involved in service to other people. Their stories are unique, but they are not so different from the stories of many of the other young people in our study. A senior girl in another Midwestern high school, also an African American, attends church every Sunday, teaches Sunday school, and is heading up an effort in her high school to combat drugs and violence because nine classmates have been killed in the past year. Another young woman attends the same church that Isaac Martin does and became active in refugee work when she was in junior high; during high school she made a number of trips to Central America to help refugees in the U.S. resettle in their homelands, and she raised money to help support an insurgent group that was running as an opposition party against the government in El Salvador. A third young woman served as the youth representative on the session of her Presbyterian church and hopes she can continue doing denominational work as a volunteer when she grows up.

In all, looking nationally at young people ages twelve through seventeen, approximately 60 percent of American teenagers have done some kind of volunteer work within the past year. It is important to realize, of course, that quite a lot of such volunteer work occurs without any connection to religious organizations. This is because schools themselves—contrary to the view of some critics that schools are not teaching values—have

begun to encourage community service as a way of exposing young people to humanitarian values. Nationally, 55 percent of the schools that American teenagers attend encourage them to become involved in some kind of community service project. And 8 percent of the teens we surveyed said their schools require them to perform a certain number of hours of community service. The value of community service is also being promoted nationally—for example, by various efforts such as the National Service Act, AmeriCorps, the Points of Light Foundation, the White House Conference on Youth, the Justice Department's National Crime Prevention Program, and awards for volunteerism given annually by the White House and by Congress. And it is being encouraged locally through secular nonprofit organizations, such as Youth in Service, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, the Red Cross, Special Olympics, and various community agencies.

Nevertheless, churches remain one of the most important ways in which young people are learning the value of caring for others. In fact, approximately 30 percent of all community service work performed each year by teenagers in the United States is performed through a church or synagogue program—which is a lot, considering that so much community service in general now takes place through the schools.

Now, it is important for church leaders to recognize that they are, in a sense, competing with other organizations as places in which volunteering can happen. In fact, pastors often complain that it is hard to attract people to youth groups because they are too busy with scouting or programs at their schools, let alone part-time jobs or doing homework or just hanging out with their friends. The point is this: At one time, church leaders and parents could have argued that youth group was the only place in which young people were learning wholesome, humanitarian values; that no longer is the case. Other organizations can make that claim as well.

But it is also important for youth ministers to understand that the appeals of voluntary service, whether performed at church or elsewhere, are considerable. Indeed, young people can probably be attracted to the youth group *because* they enjoy the service activities it sponsors. Here are some of the things that young people—in service activities of all kinds—said they liked most: just having personal contact with someone who benefits from your help. For example, a young woman who spent one of her evenings each week taking meals to the homeless described the importance of the personal touch in vivid terms: "The most I've liked about it is the fact just that the people will open up to you. It's enjoyable as you're helping somebody else. It's not standing around for a while and selling something so you can get money for people. You're actually out there on the streets. You have a fun time. You have a fun time talking with the people, and it's nice to know that you're helping them."

Also, being appreciated is very nice. Too often, there are few rewards from simply accomplishing things in school. Having another person actually say "thank you" is a major event. Just the smile on someone's

face means a lot. A sophomore who helps at a nursing home, for example, emphasized how much "the elderlies" meant to her: "You can read to them and talk to them, and they'll tell you stories from way back when, and you'll be like, 'That didn't happen!' And they'll say, 'Yeah.' Some people that never, ever smile or anything, they smile, and to me that means that I have done something to brighten their day and to make them happy. So that makes me happy."

And then some young people like service work because it gives them a chance—that they wouldn't otherwise have—to interact with their parents (a point that might encourage youth ministers to try to draw in the parents). For instance, Isaac Martin had this to say about helping his father with projects around the church: "I guess it was sort of a father-son thing. Most guys that I know have something that their father and them do together. I'm not that kind of guy—like normally in my life there's not a lot of things that I'm too sentimental about, but I always wondered what the father-son thing was that my father and I had. And I learned that it was this. That was my fun, just being there. A lot of times I was with my father doing the construction work and everything. He'd laugh, and we'd have fun. We'd go to lunch together, and stuff like that. That was a lot of my fun, was working with my father. Otherwise, it was working with either [the pastor] or working with the youth group or someone else that I feel close to. It was kind of a chance for me to work with them sometimes and have a different experience in life."

Another reason that young people find volunteering meaningful is that they can make more of a difference than when they are simply hanging out, or even when doing their schoolwork. They want to take on adult responsibilities. Yet the school environment often discourages them from doing so. Volunteering allows them to display initiative and to take pride in what they are doing.

So there may not be anything that is terribly pious or religious about the service work, but the intrinsic rewards of doing it are sufficient to get young people involved. They make friends and have something to put on their college applications, but also feel that they are making a real difference in the world and are appreciated by those they are helping.

The second main point I want to emphasize is that effective youth programs provide mentoring and opportunities for young people to reflect on their caring activities. We found that most young people already have some broad humanitarian understandings of caring that they have learned in their families. So they are not having to learn about caring for the first time by volunteering. But the trick is this: They have to arrive at a more mature understanding of caring. If they do not, the service activity can seem trivial, even exploitative, and, at least, disconnected from their career goals and main interests. Just participating in service activities is not enough; there needs to be guidance from an adult who helps young people understand the significance of what they are doing, and there needs to be time set

aside for them to write about their activities in a journal, to reflect on them, and to discuss their reactions with their peers. When these opportunities for reflection were present, we found that the following resulted: Young people became more self-aware about the broader, implicit humanitarian ideals that they already held; they developed specific stories about their motives that they could tell themselves and others as explanations of how and why they had become involved in a certain type of caring activity; they were able to recognize that pain and discomfort is part of helping others, as well as the good feelings one may derive; they discovered that particular talents and skills were needed to be an effective helper; they realized that making even a small contribution is still valuable, thus overcoming some of the guilt and frustration that results from an overly idealistic or optimistic conception of helping; they were able to imagine better how they could continue being of service through volunteer work or through their jobs as adults; and they incorporated some of the specific scripts about caring that their organizations hoped they would incorporate. All of these are worthy results, but let me emphasize the last point—about scripts—a bit more.

It's fair to say that church programs should be concerned with teaching young people something about Christianity in particular, not just about humanitarianism or community service in general. This is why there usually are times for prayer or Bible study or worship, as well as fun and games, or service projects. In keeping with what I said in the last lecture, it may be the implicit messages that matter most; for example, just the fact that the meeting was held in the church, or the casual conversation with the youth pastor one evening that showed he was a real person as well as a Christian can be very significant. But we also found that young people learned explicit ways of talking about their faith and about caring.

We found that imagery of family was especially important in church discussions of caring. Young people, in most cases, already had a sense of family as a place of nurture, and they knew that caring often happened there, and that it felt good. Thus they could relate to the idea that the church was like a family, or that the Christian community worldwide was like a family, and that helping the needy was like helping your brothers and sisters. More so than schools or community agencies, young people could envision their churches or their youth groups as an extension of their families.

It was also helpful, however, for young people to learn that the church was an organization. Doing so helped them realize that the visible church was different from the more inclusive sense of Christianity as a family. They also realized that institutions are important for getting things done, and that one needs to play responsible roles in these institutions. This was especially important because many young people thought spirituality was important but were unconvinced of the importance of the church. They could at least see that it provided services that would not just happen by themselves.

And young people also learned biblical stories by discussing them

and by seeing them enacted in their service activities. They learned to connect their experiences with the specific language of the Christian tradition. For instance, listen to the way in which a young woman who attends an all-black church in a lower-income area tells the story of the Good Samaritan: "There was this little boy who was walking home from school. He had stayed after school for an after-school club. He was on the basketball team. He was walking home to get to his parents' house. While he was walking home, this guy shot him and took all of his money so he could go buy drugs. He was laying there on the street, bleeding. The guy had left him there. So this first person came by, and he was a Vice Lord. He just kind of looked at the boy and picked him up to see if there was any money left, and then he went off on his own separate way and left the boy there. The boy was really in pain and was really hurting. So then another person came past. This guy was a basketball player. He walked up to the boy, and he was like, 'Oh, man, you want to go play some ball? You want to do this? Let's just hang out. Aw, you hurt. Well, let me go find somebody else.' So then a third person would come past, and this person wasn't the brightest person in school, wasn't the most athletic, he didn't belong in a gang. He was just a normal person, just like you or I or anyone else. He stopped and he helped the person, and he went and dialed the operator in the phone booth that was near there and told the ambulance that someone was hurting. He saved the little boy's life, because he went and called the ambulance."

Stories like this don't spring to mind without thought. Youth groups can be times for telling such stories, or praying about people who are being helped or who are in need, and simply talking about one's faith. We found that many youth groups became a kind of enclave in which their members could feel at home, but the boundaries of these enclaves were also permeable because young people were interacting with others in the wider world.

Finally, I want to emphasize that service activities can be a way of rescuing young people from troubled situations. I stress this because our image of voluntary service may be one of privileged young people from affluent churches who venture briefly into disadvantaged neighborhoods to help the poor, perhaps learning something in the process, but helping others more than benefitting from it themselves. That image may be appropriate, given that most churches are, in fact, located in middle-class neighborhoods. But many young people, even in our more affluent communities, are exposed to physical and emotional abuse from their families, suffer from the trauma of broken marriages, are tempted with drugs, and are subject to fits of depression and to thoughts of suicide. And if this is the case in affluent neighborhoods, it is no less the case in disadvantaged communities, where gangs and street violence and homelessness may also be a way of life. My story of Dexter Wellman was meant to show what can happen when a young person who is himself homeless is given the resources to be of service to others.

Let me give an even more compelling example. This is the story of T. J. Hawke, a young woman from a dysfunctional family who was rescued by volunteer work. In her case, it happened to be the Red Cross that rescued her, but it could have been a church and, indeed, we would probably hope in other cases that it would be the church. T. J. Hawke was always Daddy's little girl, a tomboy, actually, who preferred blue jeans to dresses, played softball, and went camping with her dad. There was just one problem. Daddy was an alcoholic. When he was drunk, he'd beat her up, and then he'd drink some more.

When T. J. was in sixth grade, things started going from bad to worse. Her mother, a nurse's aide, decided to go back to school to become a registered nurse. On the outside, everything looked great. Soon there would be more money. What Daddy made repairing automobiles had never been much. Mommy was such a caring person, always going off to help one of the neighbors. She was active at church, serving on the Altar Guild, and now T. J.'s father was attending, too, helping in the kitchen during potluck dinners and on bingo nights. Mommy was the Girl Scout leader, the one who took her places, helped with her homework, and comforted her when Daddy got mad. As T. J. entered adolescence, she started to identify more and more with her mother. But Mommy wasn't as available now that she was going to classes at night. And Daddy was acting strange, drinking more than ever. He seemed threatened by the idea of her mother getting more education and making more money.

T. J.'s sixth-grade teacher noticed that she was becoming increasingly withdrawn. Always shy, she was the sort of girl who sat in the corner and read books instead of mixing with the other children. One day a letter came from the local Red Cross chapter asking for a student to participate in a training class for volunteers. The teacher picked T. J., thinking it might help with whatever was bothering her. Reluctantly, T. J. went. What she found was a new family that eventually saved her life.

She recalls that first meeting: "It was really interesting because even the first time there I felt a sense of belonging, like I fit in. They didn't judge me." She liked the way people were working together, and she liked the variety of people she met. Something drew her to come back. And she did. Not often. But enough to stay involved. She went to meetings occasionally and to workshops. Gradually, somewhere around ninth grade, she realized this was something she really enjoyed, and decided to make a stronger commitment.

With one other girl, who became her best friend, she started volunteering regularly at the Red Cross. She learned to help at the blood bank, showing donors how to fill out forms and working in the canteen that provided snacks afterwards. She took a class in cardiopulmonary resuscitation. She went along on Red Cross training programs at elementary schools. A couple of times, when the Red Cross put on parties for sick children, she dressed up like a clown and helped with the entertainment. That year she

put in about two hundred hours. And the next year she did, too.

What kept T. J. involved were the close friendships she developed with other volunteers. Her friend Stacy and three other students from other high schools became like a miniature family. She says the summer leadership camps she attended were especially meaningful to her. They not only taught her skills, but a better understanding of herself, and they have been the occasion for deepening her friendships. Speaking of her group of five, she says, "We have a bond that will never end. We come from different backgrounds. We're different people, but we built a friendship on something that was mutual. The Red Cross brought us together and made us a group."

It was important to her to have this group, because things were gradually deteriorating at home. When her father started sleeping with her mother's best friend, her mother divorced him. T. J. was glad when her father moved out, declaring she never wanted to see him or speak to him again. At least the beatings would stop. She became emotionally more dependent on her mother. Yet her mother was busy working and preoccupied with a new boyfriend. Her extended family was also falling apart. Half Cherokee, T. J. had always been proud of her heritage. Her mother's siblings mingled with her father's siblings. The aunts and uncles and cousins saw a lot of each other. But the divorce caused everyone to choose sides. Family members wouldn't speak to each other anymore. Having responsibilities at the Red Cross gave T. J. something else to think about.

The way it saved her life was toward the end of her junior year. Her mother moved into her boyfriend's townhouse, taking her thirteen-year-old sister with her. They left T. J. living alone in the run-down, two-bedroom house that had always been home, ostensibly for insurance purposes and so she could be close to school. All the furniture was gone except for T. J.'s bed and her dresser. She felt abandoned and became increasingly depressed. Thoughts of suicide started clamoring in her mind. As the weeks went by, they became louder and louder, until the day her mother went off to get married. That night T. J. thought for sure she was going to kill herself. She tried to call her mother, but didn't know where she was. Her sister, who had been sent to stay with an uncle, knew only that her mother was going to be away for a week honeymooning. It was Stacy, her friend from the Red Cross, who came through for her. After a long session on the telephone, Stacy convinced T. J. she shouldn't be alone. Stacy and her mother picked her up and took her to their house to spend the night.

That was where the police found T. J. the next day. They tracked her down to tell her that her sister had been raped. Her uncle had done it. This was the crushing blow. It destroyed T. J.'s last vestige of faith in humanity. In retrospect, she knows she would have killed herself if she had been alone. But she was at Stacy's. And Stacy's mother got her a therapist to talk to. And even more than that, Stacy herself knew her and knew what she needed.

A year has passed since then. A few months later the house was sold and T. J. rented a room from another woman she'd met at the Red Cross. She still puts in several hours a week as a blood donor assistant. Now that she has more experience, she is the one who organizes parties for sick children, and she puts on the programs at elementary schools herself. She is the president of a Red Cross Club she got started at her high school. She also runs the youth group at her church and is active in a student organization to combat alcoholism. She has been honored by several local organizations, and just last week she received a phone call from the White House saying she had been chosen to receive a Presidential Youth Service Award.

She will graduate in a few weeks. She knows she will keep in touch with Stacy and her other friends from the Red Cross, wherever they are in the coming years. She is also training a group of ninth graders to take her place. She wants them to discover what she has learned from volunteering. As she puts it, "Even though you may be different, you're just as good as anybody else, and you can use those differences to be a leader, and to help others, whether you're scared or not and no matter what anybody else thinks of you."

As I say, we would hope that churches and church youth groups would be there in the same way the Red Cross was for other young people in similar situations. But let me re-emphasize the main points of what I've said. First, service activities *are* being encouraged by churches, and the churches *are* important places where young people can be drawn into such activities. Service activities can be a way of retaining the interest of young people in their churches, especially because many young people *are* idealistic and do want to be engaged in meaningful, helping activities, rather than simply being entertained. Second, service activities need to include mentoring and times for reflection and discussion. These are the ways in which specific values become attached to service activities. Without them, young people can fail to make the connection between what they are doing and what Christianity is all about. Times for reflection and discussion also help young people to think in more mature ways about their faith. Finally, service activities can rescue troubled young people as well as providing help for others. Every youth minister is aware that such young people are present in his or her church and in the surrounding community. Service activities can provide alternative role models when parents may not be present, or friendship networks on which a lonely person can depend in a moment of crisis. We know that support of this kind is desperately needed in today's world. ●