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Kara E. Powell

Cameron Lee

Cheryl Crawford

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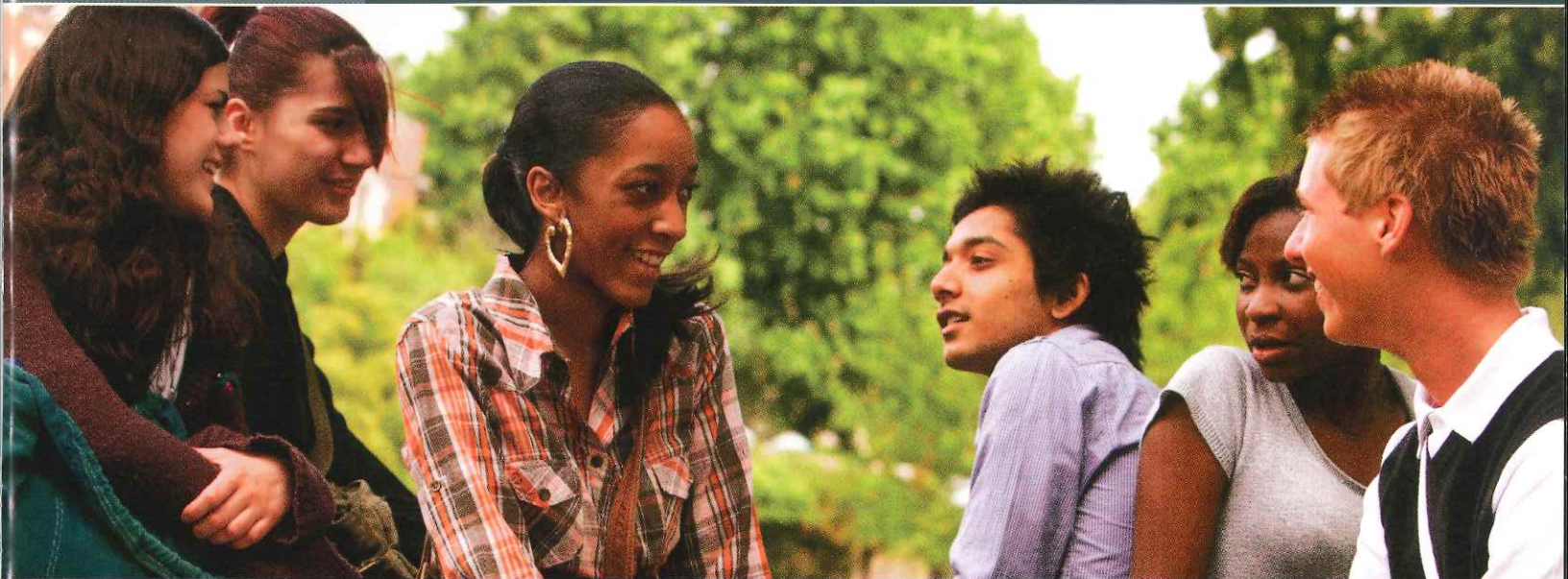
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THEOLOGY NEWS & NOTES



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KARA E. POWELL

The Invitation to Deeper Youth Ministry Is Everyone's Calling

IN HIS COMMENCEMENT address this past June, Fuller President Richard J. Mouw shared a quote by Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. that applies to the increasingly complex world of doing ministry with today's youth: "I would not give a fig for the simplicity this side of complexity," said Holmes, "but I would give my life for the simplicity on the other side of complexity."

Whether you're a parent, grandparent, neighbor, youth worker, or friend of a teenager, you know that understanding and ministering to teenagers is getting more and more complex. Fuller has become a center for many national and international leaders whose resolve is to delve into that complex world to reach the "simplicity on the other side of complexity." As a result, the Center for Youth and Family Ministry (CYFM) was established to serve both youth workers and the entire church by translating research into resources that transform youth and family ministry.

As CYFM executive director, I speak for all our scholars, researchers, teachers, staff, and extended community when I say that as we dive into the issues surrounding youth, family, and culture, it is our prayerful hope to emerge with resources that simplify the often overwhelming task of loving and serving today's teenager. All the research in the world will not be enough without relationship, however, so it's not surprising that the greatest resource we have to offer is ourselves.

One of the most revolutionary insights Fuller professor Chap Clark has recently provided to the field of youth ministry relates to the often discussed adult/student ratio. For the past several decades, youth workers have tried to maintain approximately a 1:5 ratio with students, meaning one adult for every five students. Chap suggests we turn that ratio on its head and mobilize five adults to invest themselves into each teenager.

That doesn't mean each teenager gets five new Bible study or small group leaders. Rather it urges all adults to survey their neighborhoods and churches and prayerfully discern how to encourage the teenagers that are in their

Kara E. Powell, PhD, is the executive director of the Center for Youth and Family Ministry and an assistant professor of Youth and Family Ministry at Fuller. She has been in youth ministry for 20 years and is the author of many articles and books including *Deep Ministry in a Shallow World* (coauthored with Chapman R. Clark, Zondervan, 2006), *Help! I'm a Woman in Youth Ministry* (Zondervan, 2004), *Mirror! Mirror!* (Zondervan, 2003), and the *Good Sex Curriculum Guide* (coauthored with Jim Hancock, Zondervan, 2001). Powell is coauthor with Clark of the upcoming book *Deep Justice in a Broken World* (Zondervan, 2008).

daily paths. Maybe it's asking teenagers how they can be praying for them, and then following up the next week to see how the Lord is working. Or maybe it's paying for a teenager to go to camp or helping a kid learn how to change a tire. Simply knowing a teenager's name has been shown to positively influence that student (not to mention that adult and his or her church).

From this perspective, *everyone's* a youth worker, and we hope with this *Theology, News & Notes* to help readers see how to be part of the growing community of adults pouring themselves into the lives of teenagers. The faculty associated with CYFM is a community drawn from all three schools at Fuller—the School of Psychology, the School of Theology, and the School of Intercultural Studies. Here they give a small sampling of what we are discovering about youth work, in the hopes that deep ministry will be not only the goal but the result of our collective efforts.

We begin with an investigation into the pressing problem of what happens with spiritually minded high schoolers as they transition into college. For many, faith and fellowship are casualties of the move into adulthood; a scrutinization of the reasons for that loss is a vital part of understanding how to prepare students for coming of age. Here a collaboration of interdisciplinary authors—as is common in CYFM—includes myself, School of Psychology Professor Cameron Lee, and PhD student Cheryl Crawford as we try (with help from the Lilly Foundation) to help teens graduate from high school but not from their faith.

CYFM Assistant Director Brad Griffin et al. take an unromanticized look at short-term missions—what impact they have on participants and how to maximize the effects of this increasingly popular youth ministry activity. As this interdisciplinary article reminds us, it's time to stop thinking of service as a trip and time to start thinking of it as an ongoing learning process.

School of Theology Professor Chap Clark and I address how to encourage and empower youth to move beyond random acts of service into a lifestyle of deep justice. The

surprising capacity of young people to passionately and committedly engage in social justice issues is evidence that our teenagers have special resources to bring to the shaping of the global culture in which they participate.

Incoming School of Intercultural Studies Professor Desiree Segura-April weighs in with a brief snapshot of international girls at risk—part of a greater field of study she brings to her new relationship with Fuller. Fuller alumnus and pastor Tod Bolsinger chooses a short but potent anecdote suggesting that pastors too often make the mistake of thinking that a successful intergenerational ministry is the result of superficial tips and tricks rather than relationship.

Pamela Ebstynne King offers a statistical look at the deeply philosophical subject of whether youth are perceived as problems to be solved or assets to be treasured. Based on a recent Urban Youth Workers in America study, she suggests that a candid look at the developmental assets available to youth—whether urban or suburban—can help youth workers determine how to shape their programs for maximum effectiveness.

School of Psychology Professor Cynthia Eriksson and School of Intercultural Studies Professor Jude Tiersma Watson delve deeply into the subject of urban youth work and the disturbing evidence of stressful burnout—what do

the studies show and what ought to be done about it?

Finally, youth worker and Fuller graduate J. R. Rozko urges a redefinition of "at-risk" with regards to suburban teens. Rozko's experience points to a disturbing trend of churches who embrace a culture defined by consumerism and materialism rather than countering it by emphasizing and modeling simplicity, godliness, and service.

These two perspectives—of mobilizing the entire church in youth work and of consciously shifting our perspective of youth to one of fully participatory kingdom members—are part of the foundation of CYFM. This paradigm shift in the way we view young people affects not only how successfully they navigate the tumultuous years between adolescence and adulthood but also the kind of world we help them shape for future generations. That future is one of both complexity and simplicity, but as J. R. Rozko emphasizes, this is our high calling. The issues are more than can adequately be addressed in one issue of *Theology, News & Notes*, yet they are issues with universal implications. I hope that all Fuller alumni/ae and friends find themselves challenged to be involved in youth work no matter what their other ministry callings entail. ■

For a lengthier discourse on this and other articles included in this issue, please visit www.cyfm.net

THEOLOGY NEWS & NOTES

Vol. 54, No. 3

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Send change of address to:

Fuller Theological Seminary

Office of Publications

135 N. Oakland Avenue

Pasadena, CA 91182

Internet address:

www.fuller.edu/news/pubs/tnn

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THE MINISTRY OF FULLER

Fuller Theological Seminary, embracing the Schools of Theology, Psychology, and Intercultural Studies, is an evangelical, multid denominational, international, and multiethnic community dedicated to the preparation of men and women for the manifold ministries of Christ and his Church. Under the authority of Scripture it seeks to fulfill its commitment to ministry through graduate education, professional development, and spiritual formation. In all of its activities, including instruction, nurture, worship, service, research, and publication, Fuller Theological Seminary strives for excellence in the service of Jesus Christ, under the guidance and power of the Holy Spirit, to the glory of the Father.



KARA E. POWELL, CAMERON LEE, AND CHERYL CRAWFORD

Seniors Speak Out: The Precarious Transition from High School to College

EVERY YOUTH WORKER, and just about every parent of teenagers, knows a Nicole.

Nicole was in my (Kara's) small group from her ninth grade year until she graduated. I did all the normal "small group stuff" with Nicole and the other girls. We had overnights at my house. We went toilet papering. We'd grab lunch after church. We talked about everything from guys to grace to getting braces. I made an effort to get to know Nicole and the other girls' parents so I could support what they were trying to teach their own daughters.

For the first few months after Nicole graduated from high school, we stayed in touch. But by that fall, she stopped calling me back. She also stopped coming to our church, claiming that the college ministry was "boring." Given that

I had a new small group of freshman girls sitting before me every Sunday, I ended up focusing my time, energy and attention on them. Every few months when I thought of Nicole, I'd toss up a "God, please keep her close to you" prayer, but I wasn't sure I'd see her again.

Three years later, I ran into Nicole at a shopping mall near our church. After we hugged,

she somewhat timidly introduced me to her nine-month-old daughter and told me that she had lost contact with her daughter's father. When I asked her if she ever went to church, she said she wasn't into that "God stuff" anymore.

As I drove from the mall back to church, I couldn't help but wonder: What had I done wrong as a small group leader? What conversations with Nicole could I have handled better? What should I have done in Nicole's life but didn't?

We all know Nicoles—students who graduate from a youth ministry and seem to graduate from following God also. We all know teenagers who walked the narrow path in

high school but then somehow make a U-turn and then stumble—or maybe even sprint—in the opposite direction.

The CYFM College Transition Project

These days evangelical and mainline churches, denominations, and parachurch organizations are becoming increasingly concerned about the attrition rate of high school students involved in church youth groups as they graduate and transition to college and late adolescence/emerging adulthood. The drop-out rate among college students and young adults from churches in the United States prompted a team from CYFM to launch the College Transition Project. The goals of the College Transition Project (CTP) are to explore the nature of the transition out of youth group and to examine the characteristics of students who remain in church or parachurch faith communities as they transition out of youth group as well as those who drift away from such communities during this time frame. As significant differences are documented between these two groups, CYFM can provide information and recommendations to help churches, youth ministries, and college ministries more effectively retain and disciple students.

The Students Being Studied

Funded, in part, by the Lilly Endowment, the CYFM research team recently launched a three-year longitudinal study to track youth group seniors during their first three years in college. Our non-random sample consists of 222 high school seniors drawn from different regions across the United States, 56.3% female and 43.7% male, 78.0% White/Caucasian. Asian/Asian American students comprised 11.0% of the sample, Hispanic/Latino students account for 5.0%, and African-American and Native American students each account for 1.4%.

Participants have reported a median high school grade point average (GPA) of 3.5 to 3.99, with 63% of the sample having GPAs above 3.5. This is higher than the average GPA for college-bound seniors nationwide, which was reported in

2006 as 3.28.¹ The median youth group size being tracked is 51–100 students, while the median church size is reported to be over 800 members.

What We're Learning about High School Seniors

Thus far, we have completed only the first of five planned waves of data collection and analysis. Yet already we are getting an interesting glimpse into high school seniors and their youth group experiences.

Reasons Seniors Attend Youth Group. Seniors were given a list of 22 different reasons to attend youth group and were asked to rate how true each statement was for them on a 5-point scale. The top 5 reasons these seniors attend youth group are that they like their youth pastor, they learn about God there, they feel comfortable there, they can really worship God, and they have always gone.

Improvements Seniors Would Make to Their Youth Group. When asked what they would have liked "more of" in their youth group, seniors expressed a desire for more time for deep conversation, mission trips, service projects, accountability, and one-on-one time with leaders. Fewer than one-third of the students said they wanted more games; of 13 possible youth group modifications, this item ranked last.

The Vital Role of Adult Youth Group Leaders. As evident in the reasons seniors attend youth groups as well as their desire for more one-on-one time with leaders, seniors value time with their adult youth group leaders. One of the additional findings thus far is that there is a relationship between students' faith maturity and their perception that their adult youth group leader is a "safe place" for honest discussions.

Students' ranking of "I like my youth pastor" as the top reason for attending youth group has engendered mixed reactions from youth workers and parents. As we've discussed these findings with the youth workers involved in CYFM's Los Angeles Youth Ministry Network, they were encouraged that high school seniors feel some sort of connection with their adult leaders. Yet on the other hand, given the rocky transitions students often face when they leave youth ministry, is it possible that they have become overly dependent on their youth leaders?

Parental Support. While respondents certainly value relationship with their youth pastors, their youth pastors aren't their greatest source of support. When asked to rank various sources of support, seniors ranked parents higher than adult youth leaders, teens inside or outside their youth group, or other adults in the church. This is encouraging news for parents of youth group seniors, and a finding that should be incorporated into youth workers' philosophies and programs to aid seniors in transitioning to college.

Relationship with and Involvement in the Church.

Perhaps not surprisingly given the tendency among churches to offer youth ministry programs that are by and large held separately from the overall life of the church, respondents ranked the support they receive from other adults in the church as the lowest of five possible sources of support. In the pilot studies conducted during the planning phase of CTP, there was some evidence of a relationship between involvement in overall church life and church worship during high school and greater spirituality/religiosity during college. It will be interesting to determine if this finding is replicated in the current CTP study.

Opportunities for Service. As mentioned previously, increased opportunities to participate in mission trips and service projects were the second and third highest ranked changes that seniors suggested for their youth ministries. In the midst of students' desires for deeper relationships, they also want to put their faith in action by serving others both locally and globally.

Levels of Prayer and Bible Reading. While many youth leaders and parents will be encouraged to hear that over 82% of these youth group seniors pray alone once or more per week, they might be disheartened to hear that only 41% of these same students report reading the Bible alone once or more per week. Given students' desire to engage in more service and mission opportunities, youth leaders would be wise to integrate Bible reading into these opportunities so that students understand the Scriptural rationale underlying their justice work.

Risk Behaviors. Seniors were asked how many times in the past month and year they had engaged in each of four risk behaviors (alcohol use, sexual contact, gambling, and pornography). As a group overall, they were not heavily engaged in any of them; in each case, the majority reported not having engaged in the behavior in either the past month or year. Alcohol was the most common behavior: over a third (34.1%) reported using alcohol at least once in the past month, and nearly half (48.6%) used alcohol at least once in the previous year.

About a fifth (20.5%) reported engaging in sexual encounters in the past month, and one-fourth (25.5%) in the past year. Of those who had such contact, the median was 3 to 5 encounters in the past month, and 10 to 19 in the past year.

Only 18.1% of the students reported gambling in the past month. Almost a third (31.2%) reported gambling in the past year. Of those who gambled, the median was twice in the past month, and 3 to 5 times in the past year.

Finally, over a fifth (21.2%) of the students reported

continued on page 20

SYNOPSIS

Powell, Lee, and Crawford investigate the characteristics of students making the critical transition from high school to college and the impact of youth group involvement on their college experience.

Cameron Lee, PhD, is professor of family studies in the department of marriage and family in Fuller's School of Psychology. He is a Family Wellness Instructor and Trainer, a Certified Family Life Educator, and a frequent public speaker. His most recent books are, with Alvin C. Dueck, *Why Psychology Needs Theology: A Radical-Reformation Perspective* (Eerdmans, 2005) and *Unexpected Blessing: Living the Countercultural Reality of the Beatitudes* (InterVarsity Press, 2004). Cheryl Crawford, MDiv, is an assistant professor in practical theology at Azusa Pacific University and is a PhD candidate at Fuller's School of Theology.



Short-Term Mission Trips in Youth Ministry: How to Make Them Effective?

AS A YOUTH WORKER, you want to encourage students to sign up for short-term missions (STM) because they deepen relationships with each other and the Lord and are a way to obey the command to serve the “least of these.” Right?

Recent research suggests STM experiences might not produce the *long-term* spiritual and relational “bang” you might be hoping for. Consider these findings:¹

- The explosive growth in STM trips among youth and adults has not been mirrored by similar growth in the number of career missionaries.
- It's not clear whether participation in STM trips causes participants to give more money to alleviate poverty once life returns to “normal.”
- Participating in a STM trip does not seem to reduce participants' tendencies toward materialism.

SYNOPSIS

Griffin addresses traditional approaches to short-term missions and shows how youth workers can maximize the transformational results of such experiences for both students and the adults who accompany and support them.

Making a Difference After the Suitcases are Unpacked

How do we increase the odds that STMs will make a long-term difference in youth after the suitcases are unpacked and the photo albums are buried in bedroom closets? A two-day “Short-Term Missions Effectiveness” think tank held recently by Fuller’s CYFM

convened 20 exemplary youth pastors and STM agency leaders. In the midst of heated discussions about cultural intelligence, team building, and whether STMs are truly “missions,” the universally agreed-upon need was for more effective ways to help students interpret and apply STM experiences to everyday life.

An honest assessment must include the admission that most youth workers don't have the time to thoughtfully help students engage in interpretation and application before, during, and after STM trips. “Preparation” before the STM

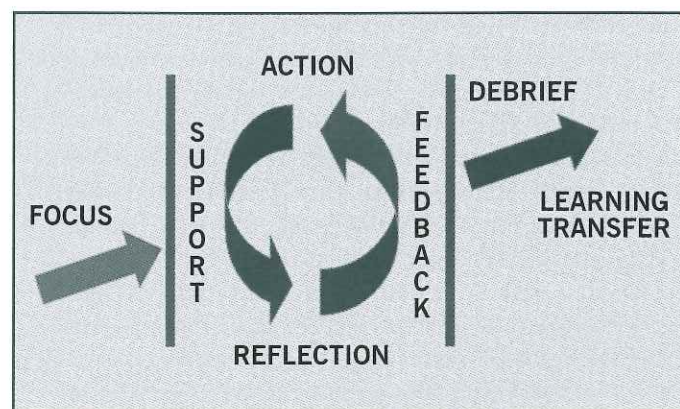
experience usually consists of fund raising and medical releases; “processing” during the trip boils down to a few minutes of prayer requests before everyone tumbles into bed, exhausted; and “debriefing” at home is little more than organizing slide shows and testimonies for “big church.” Greater transformation requires a completely different approach to the before, during, and after aspects of STM—demanding a radically different time frame.

For example, an inner city trip for three days might actually be conceived as a three-month process. A week in the Dominican Republic might be viewed as a seven-month journey. The entire STM aspect of youth ministry must become a year-round reality if long-term, sustainable change in the lives of our kids *and* those served is the goal.

How Does a Trip Become a Journey?

How do you prepare during the weeks before and after an STM experience? How do you make the most of your time with students during your trip?

Much student transformation and learning is dependent on experience—an observation recognized by the experiential education framework proposed by Laura Joplin² (and later modified by Terry Linhart³) for youth STM trips.



The Joplin (1995) model, modified by Linhart (2005).

Brad Griffin, MDiv, is the assistant director of the Center for Youth and Family Ministry at Fuller. He has been involved in youth, worship, and camp ministry for the past 12 years, and has a degree concentration in youth, family, and culture. In addition to guest worship leading and speaking at various churches, he volunteers in high school and worship ministries at New Song Community Church.

Component One: FOCUS

A key start to a successful short-term learning experience is to help students *focus* on the experience and the challenging actions it will effect. More than helping them raise money, learn a drama, or know how to pack, leaders can facilitate events that help students prepare emotionally, mentally, spiritually, and relationally for what lies ahead.

Some key topics to be included in this focus time are

- Identifying motivations for the trip (shared ministry motivations and *honest* individual motivations).
- Honestly addressing fears about upcoming experiences (e.g. safety, food, language, and compatibility).
- For cross-cultural STM, understanding how youth are shaped by their own culture, learning about the culture they're going to visit, and identifying basic differences.
- Understanding what God is *already doing* in the destination through local Christians—whether the trip is to a neighboring city or a village several time zones away.
- Identifying ways to ensure that those being served aren't being objectified.

During this focus time, encourage students to keep written journals of their thoughts and feelings as they think about what lies ahead. Study or memorize passages of Scripture that seem especially relevant to your mission.

The leaders gathered at the Fuller think tank thought part of the focus time should include rigorous team building. Many have become more selective of those who are allowed to participate in trips. Some include a team covenant for all members to sign at the beginning of the pre-trip training process for the purpose of accountability. Since a driving theme at the think tank was helping students interpret and apply STM experiences to life at home, some exemplars stressed the selection process for accompanying adults.

Component Two: ACTION-REFLECTION

The main component in students' learning during STM is the *action-reflection* process. Often students are purposefully stretched by using new skills in cross-cultural settings or relying on a small amount of knowledge in an unfamiliar environment. While most STM trips include such activities, many lack the reflection that maximizes growth. Students constantly make meaning of their actions, often by unconsciously engaging in highly personal, ongoing “conversations” about relations to others, to God, and to their own futures. Since this is usually internal, students often draw conclusions from their experiences that do not reflect reality.

The barrage of experiences on a typical STM trip may resemble walking through a museum and experiencing an

entire civilization in a single hallway. Students, like museum-goers, have difficulty making sense of so much. Adult youth workers who accompany students in these provocative encounters need to ask questions that help decipher the meaning behind such varied experiences. Start by asking three simple questions: *What? So what? and Now what?*⁴

By asking *What?* students address what they actually saw, heard, smelled, and felt. By asking *So what?* students think about the difference their experiences can make in their lives. By asking *Now what?* students can think about how they want to live, act, or be different when they return to their more comfortable “normal” lives.

If you serve students who struggle to process feelings or experiences (can anyone say “middle school boys”?), then these questions may elicit the gamut of answers from “I don't know” to “What she said.” Reflection is also a process that can take months—or years—to refine. In the meantime, model patiently listening and simply being there with them.

Component Three: SUPPORT-FEEDBACK

To facilitate the action-reflection cycle, Joplin recommends surrounding discussions and experiences with walls of *support* and *feedback*. Support usually comes from other participants in the experience (e.g., other students, adult leaders, and locals from the communities you visit). However, it also includes encouragement from supportive networks at home. Research shows a strong correlation between individuals' success in a cross-cultural experience and the emotional and tangible support they have from friends and family. Support can also include financial and logistical assistance provided by a church, organization, and family members—an important element of successful STM trips.

According to think tank exemplars, most youth workers overlook the importance of high-quality, ongoing feedback. As the action and reflection cycle continues throughout the learning process, adult leaders must “jump in” with the students and help them talk about their reflections and the meaning students are creating from their experiences. Many groups share each night in a small “debriefing” time, but the size of the group and the limited time often demean thoughtful feedback to a simple re-hash of the day rather than reflection that leads to transformation.

It's a delicate but necessary skill to assist students in learning as it takes place. Everything is new and happening so fast—students *and* adult leaders feel pressured to make sense of each moment too quickly, often missing the broader realities. Good feedback in conversation with adults helps students see as broadly as possible, often encouraging the suspension of ill-formed judgments.



For example, if students serve in an under-resourced community where poverty abounds, they may notice people smiling at them. A quick interpretation may be “Even without much money or stuff, these people are happy.” Perhaps, however, they are simply being polite. It’s important not to assume that nonverbal behavior has the same meaning everywhere, and to avoid quickly jumping to judgment in an attempt to make meaning.

Midway through the STM experience, have students write down their own completion of sentences such as

- The dominant sound here is . . .
- The most obvious objects I see are . . .
- The primary purpose of this place is . . .
- The categories of diversity I see here are . . .
- Young people here are . . .

At the end of the week, have them record their responses again and observe the changes. Be sure to discuss these with new local friends to test observations and interpretations.

Component Four: DEBRIEF

When the action component is completed, the students enter into a time of *debrief*. Different from the reflection process—a time many of us *call* debriefing—debrief as it is used in the Joplin model is a process of identifying what learning has happened, discussing it with others, and evaluating it. This process is most effectively done in community. The most helpful debriefs often include a rereading of pre- and during-trip journals where each day’s reflections have been recorded.

An easy way to facilitate this process is to gather the group together before returning home, either on-site or in a “neutral” place away from the home community. Many STM agencies have curricular materials that can facilitate this process, but helpful questions include

- As you read your journals, what 5–7 themes or subjects do you see most often?
- What 3–5 encounters or experiences were the most significant for you during this trip and why?
- What did you feel like God was trying to say to you?
- What thoughts about home did you have during the trip?
- What did you observe about what God was already doing before you arrived there?
- What 3–5 new things might you learn in a year that you weren’t able to fully understand during this trip?

Consider developing a debrief framework that includes strategies for daily debriefing (what we’re calling “reflection” and “support-feedback” above), end-of-trip debriefing, re-entry debriefing (e.g., on the airport layover halfway home), and post-trip debriefing. This will maximize the potential for

transformation and encourage ongoing interpretation of the STM experience in the expanding worldviews of young lives.

Component Five: LEARNING TRANSFER

If most trips don’t have an effective pre-trip focus, even more have difficulty with facilitating effective *learning transfer*. Two realities fight against this important goal: First, most of the learning on a short-term trip takes place in an environment very different from the home communities of students. Second, the students themselves don’t know how to transfer the learning to their own lives, and most student ministries don’t have programmatic structures that assist them in the transfer process.

One approach is for students to identify a mentor to help with the learning transfer before the trip starts who can help ensure that the STM experience stays a present reality rather than becoming a distant memory. It’s important to weave the STM into the year-round life of the church and its youth ministry—one post-trip learning transfer catalyst might be requiring students who participate in distant trips to take part in a few neighborhood service opportunities as well.

Transformation Over Adventure

One of the most common words associated with STM is “adventure.” Most leaders know that these adventures stretch and push students beyond their comfort zones, and facilitate an enlightenment with longer-term effects. There is no simple formula guaranteeing that integrating these five components will produce long-term transformation, but intentional planning to make the most of STM provides great promise for empowering students to change the world around them every day for the rest of their lives—not just when they’re on a short-term mission high. ■

This article was coauthored with Kara E. Powell, Dave Livermore of Grand Rapids Theological Seminary, MI, and Terry Linhart of Bethel College, IN. It appeared in vol. 3, issue 2, March 2007, of the CYFM E-Journal, accessed at www.cyfm.net, and in the March/April 2007 Journal of Student Ministries.

ENDNOTES

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2. L. Joplin, “On Defining Experiential Education,” in *The Theory of Experiential Education*, ed. K. Warren, M. Sakofs, and J. S. Hunt Jr. (Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt Publishing, 1995) 15–22.
3. T. D. Linhart, “Planting Seeds: The Curricular Hope of Short Term Mission Experiences in Youth Ministry,” *Christian Education Journal*, series 3 (2005): 256–72.
4. This three-question reflection exercise has been popularized by the Campus Outreach Opportunity League.

Mobilizing Youth for Deep Justice

EACH YEAR AMERICANS spend \$20 billion dollars on ice cream. Mint Chocolate Chip, Strawberry, Jamoca Almond Fudge, Rainbow Sherbet, just plain Vanilla, and all other ice cream flavors: \$20 billion.

Compare that with figures recently released by the United Nations.² Providing clean water and basic sanitation for the entire world would cost \$7 billion a year for the next ten years. An additional \$4 billion a year for the next ten years could finance basic health care that would prevent the deaths of 3 million infants each year.²

For \$11 billion a year for the next decade—just over half of what Americans spend on ice cream—we could give the world clean water and basic sanitation and prevent the deaths of millions of babies. But since there is no Give-Up-Ice-Cream-for-World-Health movement, odds are good that we’ll keep eating mint chocolate chip while much of the world lacks water and basic health care.

Does that sound like justice?

On September 11, 2001, the terrorists who hijacked four U.S. planes claimed 2,792 lives. Our entire nation—and much of the world—was glued to radios, televisions, and the Internet, desperate to find out why and how so many had been killed.

Yet on that same day nearly three times as many people were killed by HIV/AIDS worldwide. And that same number of people died from HIV/AIDS on September 12, 2001. And on September 13. And that many people have died because of AIDS every day since then. Yet as AIDS rips apart children, families, villages, and entire nations, the world remains disengaged. Tragically, so do our churches and youth ministries.

Does that sound like justice?

Many of us slept on comfortable mattresses last night, and with a flick of a thermostat switch, we kept our homes at temperatures we considered ideal. Last night, approximately 600,000 homeless people sought shelter on U.S. streets.³ Making matters worse, an estimated 38 percent of those homeless persons were children.⁴

Chapman “Chap” R. Clark, PhD, is professor of youth, family, and culture, and director of PhD and DMin Programs in youth, family, and culture at Fuller. He is the president of ParenTeen Seminars and an associate staff member of Youth Specialties. He is the author of several articles and books, including (with Dee Clark), *Disconnected: Parenting Teens in a MySpace World* (Baker Books, 2007); and *Hurt: Inside the World of Today’s Teenagers* (Baker Academic, 2004). He is coauthor with Kara Powell of *Deep Ministry in a Shallow World: Not-so-Secret Findings About Youth Ministry* (Zondervan/Youth Specialties, 2006) and the upcoming book *Deep Justice in a Broken World* (Zondervan, 2008).

Does that sound like justice?

Perhaps the most alarming statistic of all is that this injustice and poverty is happening in a world in which 2.1 billion of us, or 33 percent of the world’s total population, claim to be followers of Christ, who are taught in Matthew 25:40 that whatever we do for the “least of these brothers and sisters,” we are actually doing for him.⁵

Does that sound like justice?

No, it doesn’t. It doesn’t sound like justice to the authors of this article and it doesn’t sound like justice to author Ronald J. Sider, who says, “The church should consist of communities of loving defiance. Instead it consists largely of comfortable clubs of conformity.”⁶

Youth ministries addressing social justice issues is a fast-growing trend in the church. Some partner with faith communities of different ethnic and economic backgrounds to create job centers, food co-ops, and college scholarship funds to counter the injustice in their towns. Others mobilize kids and families to mentor under-resourced kids at the local school as well as serve as advocates at their school districts for increased funding. Still others are raising up groups of kids who care about the AIDS pandemic—in the United States, in Africa, and in Asia.

A growing number of youth ministries are alarmed by the brokenness of our world and are determined to restore justice. Maybe your church has one of them. A naive approach to these complicated issues can result in more harm than good. However, *informed* youth workers—rookies and veterans of all colors and classes, urban, suburban, small-town, and rural—can be part of ensuring that “hearts in the right place” result in God’s deep justice.

SYNOPSIS

Clark and Powell address the trend in youth ministries of investigating justice issues, giving direction on how to encourage kids to do more than random acts of service, but rather building a lifestyle of doing “deep justice” in an otherwise shallow world.

Deep Justice vs Not-So-Deep Service

Urban youth worker Jeremy Del Rio describes social justice in two very simple words: *righting wrongs*. Service is vital to the life of faith, a high calling modeled for us consistently by Jesus, but his call to love is also a call to look for more lasting solutions. Righting wrongs is only possible when we understand the difference between service and social justice.

God's doesn't extend his call only to the church in the U.S. or the West. We don't have to muster up our own solutions and "go get 'em" in the name of justice; in fact, we would be wise to remember that God is already at work in those with needs. Often the keys to overcoming poverty and oppression lie within those communities that are the most broken and brokenhearted. The primary role of youth ministries is simply to come alongside those who are struggling and remove the obstacles that hinder their solutions.

Enter deep justice.

The result of sin is that all social systems and interper-

sonal relationships break down sooner or later, resulting in poverty, disease, oppression, racism, greed, and corruption. Youth ministries that do shallow service look at the world's brokenness, feel bad about it, and offer Band-Aids—free turkeys to the homeless on Thanksgiving, clothes for a naked child in Zambia at Christmas. The turkey and the clothes fix what's broken, but often only for a few hours.

Youth ministries engaged in deep justice take a different approach. Like their shallower counterparts, they see the breakdown, feel bad, and send turkeys and T-shirts; yet they also investigate deeper: *How did these wrongs come to exist in the first place? How can we help the poor and marginalized fix their own problems? What does God want us to do that will make a difference beyond today?*

When we encounter something broken in the world, our first response is often physical, tangible help—send money, distribute sandwiches, paint buildings. Recognizing that money runs out, sandwiches get eaten, and paint eventually

Justice for the Girl-Child

Girls are maggots in the rice." "Daughters and dead fish are no keeping wares." "A girl is merely a weed." "Happy is he whose children are sons and woe to him whose children are daughters." Female birth announcement: "Nothing was born."¹

These proverbs and sayings from around the world reflect that, according to several secular and Christian development agencies, girl children are often the most neglected, exploited, abused, and discriminated-against human beings on earth.² Unfortunately, most are unaware of the problem because "girls are not usually visible on statistical profiles. Their predicament is blended with those of women or boys."³ Girls are often devalued simply because of gender, age, and economic status.

"Despite the almost universal ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the rights and equality of girls and young women continue to be denied."⁴ A higher value placed on boys leads to the denial of equal rights to education, food, dignity, and protection to girls; exposure to harmful practices, such as gender-selective abortion, female genital mutilation, child marriage, violence, sexual abuse, and exploitation; girls being objectified in media; and girls suffering from low self-esteem, eating disorders, and depression.

How might the church respond? More research is needed on the issues girls face and how the gospel can become truly good news that transforms lives, families, communities, and cultures. In this research and our ministries, we must listen to the girls themselves and try to understand their realities. Then,

we must act. How? Analyze how we are unintentionally teaching children gender stereotypes in our churches. Speak out against cultural practices that may be harmful to the girl-child. Become advocates for exploited girls so that governments will take notice. Thoughtfully and theologically analyze the root causes of violence and seek ways to change them. Consider gender and age in our Sunday School and youth group curriculums and activities.

We can't change proverbs or cultures overnight—a complex web of factors creates these situations for the girl-child. Yet every girl is precious in God's sight. It is time for the church to become aware and respond to the obstacles many girls face, so that instead of curses we can speak blessings into their lives, proclaiming "You are the daughter of the King!"

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Desiree Segura-April, PhD, is a new assistant professor of children-at-risk in Fuller's School of Intercultural Studies.

fades, some youth ministries go deeper by offering a relational response. They take time to get to know those they are serving, try to learn from them, and even continue the friendship—in person or long distance—for months and years. It's not bad to send food and clothing, it's just not enough. The deep wrongs underlying class divisions, racism, and oppression in our world will never be right if that's all we do.

As deep relationships with others are developed, and as victims of injustice are perceived as individuals with real names, faces, and stories, people realize that the still deeper level of response is a systemic one. Sadly, few youth ministries are willing to do whatever it takes—for as long as it takes—until the systems that perpetuate brokenness are fixed. There are several ways to identify the nuances of difference between service and justice.

- Service makes us feel like a "great savior" who rescues the broken. *Justice means God does the rescuing, but often he works through the united power of his great and diverse community to do it.*
- Service often dehumanizes (even if only subtly) those who are labeled the "receivers." *Justice restores human dignity by creating an environment in which all involved "give" and "receive" in a spirit of reciprocal learning and mutual ministry.*
- Service is something we do for others. *Justice is something we do with others.*
- Service is an event. *Justice is a lifestyle.*
- Service expects results immediately. *Justice hopes for results some time soon but recognizes that systemic change takes time.*
- The goal of service is to help others. *The goal of justice is to remove obstacles so others can help themselves.*
- Service focuses on what our own ministry can accomplish. *Justice focuses on how we can work with other ministries to accomplish even more.*
- Service is serving food at the local homeless shelter. *Justice means asking why people are hungry and homeless in the first place and then doing something about it.*

Deep Justice Asks Why

Deep justice is not afraid to ask why the world is broken, and then take steps to fix it. *Why* invites us to truly listen to and get to know the voiceless in our world. *Why* requires a long-term perspective, because poverty and powerlessness cannot be eliminated in weekend bursts of activism. *Why* invites us to interact with social systems—because we cannot truly help individuals until we also change the systems that

rob dignity. *Why* forces us to face the truth about our own participation in the systems and structures that rob the poor of opportunities.

One word of warning: *Why* is not a popular question. Others may question you and your motives when you ask why. Bishop Oscar Romero, the martyred leader of the Nicaraguan church, once commented, "When I feed the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor are poor, they call me a communist."⁷ Deep justice means not only asking why, but being prepared to act on the answer.

Deep Justice is More Than a Project

It's so tempting to try to distill deep justice into a project, or maybe even two or three projects that we go and do with kids. That's like suggesting a marriage can be boiled down to a few overnights and a handful of dinner dates each year. Justice, like marriage, is a daily commitment to be empowered by God's grace to love and serve others.

Like a fancy Valentine's Day dinner or an anniversary weekend, justice projects play a part—perhaps even a significant part—in the journey. But the real reflection of a commitment to justice isn't in money raised for a weeklong spring break trip to serve in a Guatemalan orphanage; it's in serving as "partners" instead of "projects" the other 51 weeks of the year.

Deep Justice in Real Life Kids

You may be wondering if 13- and 17-year-olds are capable of deep justice. They are—we've seen it with our own eyes. When Kristin was a sophomore in our church's youth ministry, Sarah, her small group leader, sent out monthly e-mail newsletters reminding the girls of a spring break trip to inner-city San Francisco. Yet, when it came time to sign up for the trip, Kristin was the only one from her small group who did, and she almost backed out. But she didn't.

During the trip, Kristin fell in love with helping the homeless experience kingdom justice. Her commitment to deep justice was crystallized when she and one of our adult leaders met J.R., a homeless man hanging out near the San Francisco Convention Center. Kristin offered her extra sack lunch to him and started asking him questions about his family and his life in San Francisco.

J.R. responded with a tirade against the government, the middle and upper classes, and Christians. While not a member of the government, Kristin is upper-middle class and a Christian. She remembers, "I left that lunch determined not to be the type of apathetic Christian J.R. hated."

She came back and dove into her church's Beverage Crew, a ministry in which high school students offer drinks to

homeless persons and try to build relationships with them, eventually understanding why they have ended up on the streets. Kristin has realized “some of them choose to be there, but others just end up there. We don’t know their stories until we talk to them. And we need to figure out how to help them help themselves.”

Over time, Kristin’s commitment to justice on behalf of the homeless has grown deeper. Her junior year she served as the student shepherd for that San Francisco trip, and the next year was the student director. Probably just as important, Kristin encouraged a friend to attend who loved it so much that she is pursuing a global studies major in college in the pursuit of righting wrongs.

Or take Marcus, a high school senior in our church who received a Hi8 video camera as a Christmas gift when he was in sixth grade and has been making movies ever since. His passion for and skills in moviemaking increased concurrently with his concern about the friction he experienced at his public high school between students of different races and socioeconomic levels. He and his friend decided to write, direct, and produce *Viola*, a full-length film about two students—one white American girl and one Chinese-American boy—and the lessons they learn about “fitting in” with people who are different from them.

“We got more than we bargained for,” Marcus recalls. Once it was completed, *Viola* was screened at a major Pasadena theatre and was also accepted at several film festivals. Even more importantly for Marcus, this justice movie made entirely by high school students provoked great conversations about race at both his school and church.

Since *Viola*, Marcus has worked on a number of projects, all geared to spark conversation and insight about racial and economic injustices. Marcus’s small group leader, Jeff, has played a major role in Marcus’s desire to change how others think about race, class, and disabilities. “It wasn’t so much what Jeff has said about any of that; it’s more how he has put us in positions that force us to think about it. The more I see, the more I realize how many wrongs need to be righted. We can’t just meet people’s needs short-term; we have to help them learn how to meet their own needs long-term.”

These stories confirm two things: First, God can use ordinary kids to bring about deep justice in a broken world. Second, God often works through adults to do it.

Deep Justice is Possible with Your Kids

Your setting is unlike any other. You may be working with kids whose allowances rival your own salary, or you may be working with kids who live on the streets. Your ministry

may be out in the heartlands of rural America where the closest neighbor is a long walk away, or it may be where your closest neighbor is less than a foot away.

Either way, deep justice is for you and your students.

Regardless of your particular ministry setting—suburban, urban, rural, or something in between—you can dig deeper into the injustices in your community and your world to unearth the hope and freedom of the gospel.

In our own experience and our conversations with youth leaders around the country, we’re encountering revolutionaries who recognize that service and justice aren’t just for adults. Not only are teenagers able to right the wrongs around them, but they are also like wet cement themselves. We want to make the right impression on them. Maybe a young Martin Luther King Jr. is sitting in your class on Sunday. Perhaps you’re giving a future Mother Teresa a ride home after church tomorrow night.

More likely, you are rubbing shoulders every day with kids who will be spouses, parents, bus drivers, administrators, teachers, business entrepreneurs, and political leaders. As philosopher and theologian Dallas Willard reminds us, “We are becoming who we will be—forever.”⁸ That’s true for the moldable 15-year-old you’re taking out to coffee after school and just as true for adults. The believing community must stop applying Band-Aids to the gaping wounds of injustice and find out what’s causing those wounds in the first place. That is the way for the wounded to experience the deep grace and hope of our Lord Jesus Christ. ■

This article is excerpted from Deep Justice in a Shallow World by Chapman R. Clark and Kara E. Powell. Reprinted with permission from Zondervan, estimated publication date 2007.

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Asset Building in Youth: Do You Treat Them as Half Full or Half Empty?

HALF FULL? Or half empty? The age-old debate about whether a glass 50 percent full of water is either half full or half empty is not just an interesting personality test. It’s surprisingly relevant to the way you interact with kids in your ministries.

Do you view your kids as full of problems, or full of possibility? Do you see them with strengths to build upon, or weaknesses to compensate for? Research conducted by the Center for Youth and Family Ministry (CYFM) confirms the reality that each kid is a mixture of possibilities and problems. Through a portion of our Urban Youth Workers in America (UYWA) Study, CYFM took a closer look at the “full-ness” and “empty-ness” of both urban and non-urban youth, confirming what anyone working with kids realizes: below the surface, each is a unique swirling mixture of potential and pain.

The Background of the Urban Youth Workers in America Study

The UYWA Study is closely related to two decades of applied research conducted by the Search Institute, a well-respected research center in Minnesota. Based on surveys with over 2 million youth in the U.S. and Canada since 1989, Search Institute has developed the “40 Developmental Assets.” The assets are 40 different building blocks of development that help people of all ages (including teenagers!) thrive. The more teenagers access these assets through their relationships and surrounding communities, the more likely they are to exhibit leadership, avoid high-risk behaviors, and succeed in school. (The 40 assets are listed and further described at <http://www.search-institute.org/assets/forty.html>.)

Acknowledging the wide variety of assets available to kids can help us have a more holistic ministry—by which we mean ministry that seeks to develop their whole potential. Those who practice holistic ministry seek to develop kids not just spiritually, but also emotionally, socially, physically, and academically. Holistic ministry recognizes that the kingdom of God has implications for every aspect of our lives.

Pamela Ebstyne King, PhD, assistant research professor of family studies in the Center for Research in Child and Adolescent Development in Fuller’s School of Psychology, researches and teaches positive youth development, spiritual and moral development, and theological perspectives of development. She received an MDiv and PhD in family studies from Fuller, did her undergraduate and postdoctoral work at Stanford University, and is ordained in the Presbyterian Church (USA). King is a coauthor of *The Reciprocating Self: A Theological Perspective of Development* (InterVarsity Press, 2005) and coeditor of *The Handbook of Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence* (Sage, 2005).

Across the country, we’re discovering youth workers—both urban and non-urban—who are eager to let the assets shape their ministry philosophies and programs. There seems to be a growing recognition that while all kids need Jesus, Jesus is not all that kids need. They also need assets like family support, a caring school climate, a chance to serve others, and appropriate boundaries and expectations.

The Goals of the UYWA Study

The two principal researchers in the UYWA Study, myself, from Fuller Seminary, and Dr. Kelly Schwartz from Nazarene University College, obtained permission from Search Institute to sift through its 1999 dataset of 212,000 kids. In particular, the goals of the UYWA Study were to

- Identify the assets that were most prevalent in the portion of the 212,000 kids who could be described as “urban.”¹
- Identify the assets that were least prevalent in that same group of urban kids.
- Compare and contrast the assets present in urban youth with those present in non-urban youth.

As we studied kids’ assets and the implications for youth ministry, we discovered some surprises that impact how we interact with all types of young people.

Urban and Non-Urban Kids

The majority of the non-urban kids are Anglo/White (78%). In contrast, the two largest ethnic groups in the urban sample are Hispanic/Latino (41.3%) and Black/African-American (25.8%).

The family structures of the two groups of kids also

SYNOPSIS

King examines research on viewing youth through the lens of possibility rather than problems. More than a simple positive thinking approach, asset management has affected a paradigm shift in youth ministry philosophies and programs.

differ quite significantly. Almost 75% of non-urban kids reside in two-parent families, while less than 60% of urban kids reside in similar two-parent homes. Twice as many urban kids live in mother-only families as non-urban kids.

Of the 40 Developmental Assets, the non-urban kids on average have more (19.6) developmental assets than do the urban (17.2) kids. Looking at overall asset levels between the two samples, a smaller percentage of urban kids have 21 or more assets (34.6%) compared to non-urban students (44.1%), while a larger percentage of urban youth have 20 or less assets (65.4%) compared to non-urban kids (55.9%).

When looking at asset numbers by grade level, non-urban kids consistently exceed urban kids at each grade level from sixth grade to twelfth grade.

Prevalence of the Assets

Recognizing that it would be helpful to narrow these 40 assets into fewer categories, before the launch of the UYWA study, a group of researchers from Tufts University conducted their own analysis on the same dataset of 212,000 youth.

An Intergenerational Church that Worships Together: It's Not About the Slides

There is perhaps no arena where the dream of an intergenerational church is more controversial than in worship. But very often the greatest obstacle is the short-sightedness of leaders, even pastors, who believe that intergenerational ministry is just one "quick fix" away.

A few years ago our church was visited by the worship committees of a couple of churches wanting to observe our growing multi-generational services. I remember the 11:00 a.m. praise band-led worship being particularly moving—brilliantly designed by our worship director. Our vocal team was our middle-aged choir director, a young dad, and a college-aged woman, joyfully demonstrating the passion they have for intergenerational worship. The Junior High students kept standing and singing their hearts out while the rest of us clapped along enthusiastically (with the relatively limited amount of rhythm we have). It was a wonderful service. We could sense God's presence, and were deeply aware of the joy that comes when we all together give ourselves to God.

When the service was over, members of the visiting church's worship committee said their pastor had some questions about how we got to this place in our worship. I said, "I don't know what I'll tell him, but ask away." The pastor had

They simplified the 40 assets into a list of 14 *asset factors*²—or clusters of personal and social support systems that interact with each other to protect kids from risk and promote healthy development. Two categories were established: individual assets (i.e. social conscience, personal values, interpersonal values, rules and boundaries, risk avoidance, school engagement, and activity participation) and ecological or environmental assets (i.e. connection to family, community connection, school connection, contextual safety, adult mentors, positive identify, parent involvement).

The UYWA Study compared these 14 asset factors in urban and non-urban kids to find that the differences between the two groups of kids are relatively small. Yet there are interesting twists in both the individual and ecological categories. Of the seven individual factors urban kids score higher than non-urban kids in social conscience and personal values. Of the seven ecological factors, urban kids score higher than non-urban kids in connection to family.

In reference to the initial list of 40 Developmental Assets, females in both samples exceed males in the number of assets

only one question: "So, what did you pay for those screens?"

If my momma had not raised me to be polite, I would have yelled in his face. "Screens? You think this is about screens? You want to ask me about the screens? This is about the people. It is about our worship director spending three years on Saturday nights learning how to lead worship for a new generation. It is about our choir director spending ten years training every choir in this church to be a group of worship leaders, including the bell and children's choirs. It is about the entire Youth Department changing its focus on Sunday morning so that every child and youth can be part of the worship life of the church and not just have a kids' program where they never darken the doors of the sanctuary. It's about a group of older worshippers who are more concerned about the glory of God being demonstrated to a watching world then getting their musical preferences. And all you want to know is how much the screens cost?"

Of course, that is what I *wanted* to say. What I said was, "About \$30,000—given to us through the estate of one of our oldest members when she went to glory, because she loved to see children worship and grow in Christ."

Tod Bolsinger, PhD, senior pastor, San Clemente Presbyterian Church, CA. From It Takes a Church to Raise a Christian: How the Community of God Transforms Lives. Permission from Brazos Press, a division of Baker Publishing Group, copyright 2004. All rights reserved. Not to be distributed to web locations for retrieval, published in other media, or mirrored at other sites without written permission.

they report. Another similarity between the two groups is that late middle school and early high school years show a dip in reported number of assets for both urban and non-urban youth. The greatest disparity in the number of assets between urban and non-urban kids is during middle school.

Implications for Youth Workers

It is no big surprise that urban kids have fewer resources than non-urban kids, but the gap between urban kids and non-urban kids is not as great as many would have guessed. Of the 40 assets, urban youth on average have 2.4 fewer assets (17.2) than non-urban youth (19.6)—surprisingly good news for urban youth workers.

Here's more good news for urban youth workers: urban kids score higher than non-urban kids in social conscience, personal values, and connection to family, values that youth workers can build upon as they try to help urban kids love and serve both Jesus Christ and others around them.

Now for the bad news for all youth workers: While it's tough to know whether there's some sort of "magic number" of assets that guarantees that kids will thrive, Search Institute hints that 31 assets is a common benchmark that separates kids who thrive from those who struggle.³ The averages for both samples fall far short of that benchmark.

Our data shows that from sixth to twelfth grade, the average non-urban kid drops from 23.7 to 18.3 assets, and the average urban kid drops from 19.9 assets to 17.6 assets. The greatest plummet happens from sixth to ninth grade, after which asset levels remain relatively stable throughout the rest of high school.

Combine this finding with the previously mentioned difference between high school girls and guys and the implication is quite simple: focus young, focus male. Youth workers who want to try to intervene by building assets into young people need to focus on middle schoolers, especially boys, *before* they hit the slippery slope of asset decline. For some of us, that might mean re-thinking middle school ministry and how to divide money, time, and energy between high school and middle school ministry.

The Assets as a Springboard

Youth workers will benefit by asking certain key questions about their own youth: what assets do they have? How do these assets provide a springboard that aids in their personal and spiritual transformation?

Using that list of assets, think about your kids and answer two more questions: What assets do they lack, and what can I do to help them access the missing resources?

More and more youth workers are changing their

paradigm for their role in kids' lives. They are looking to schools, neighborhoods, and other faith-based and community-based organizations for resources that can supplement what they provide for kids.

Curt Gibson, a veteran youth worker with over twenty years of experience who currently directs the Neighborhood Student Mentoring Program at Lake Avenue Church in Pasadena, reports that viewing his kids through an asset framework has changed the way he does ministry. He trains his leadership to think differently as well. "Instead of trying to *be* the resource for their kids, they should *find* the resources for their kids."⁴

Mark Maines, in his work with non-urban kids outside of Los Angeles, has decided not to keep the value of the assets a secret from his kids. Working in collaboration with other local youth workers, he's developed a three-year curriculum that frames teaching series around the assets.

For instance, one of the 40 Developmental Assets is restraint. Mark and the team developed a teaching series based out of the book of *Ecclesiastes* that examined the unrestrained life in order to highlight the role of restraint in our own lives. Another asset is cultural competence. To develop this asset in their youth ministry, Mark is using the local metro rail system to introduce students to the various ethnic regions (Chinatown, Koreatown) in their area while helping students see God's redemptive plan for all peoples throughout the Scriptures. He was able to teach about Babel (Genesis) and Jerusalem (Acts-Revelation) while standing alongside students in the heart of Los Angeles.

According to Mark, "We were looking for a way to reinvent our programs to better utilize our time with students. Once we accepted the research behind the 40 Developmental Assets, we quickly concluded that there was no better way to spend our time with students than to build assets. We assessed what assets we had direct influence over and began looking for the examples of the assets in Scripture. One question that has been especially helpful for our teaching is, Where does this asset first show itself in Scripture?"

Teaching the Assets to Your Church

Churches like Mark's aren't just being explicit about the assets with their youth ministries. They are integrating the assets into the framework of their entire church. The assets inform every ministry in five different ways:

- Curriculum development (what they teach)—all of the church's programs are encouraged to connect their teaching to the asset framework when possible.
- Ministry programs and philosophy (what they do)—the

continued on page 20



Stress in the City: A New Study of Youth Workers

RISK. IT'S A WORD urban youth workers know all about. Resilience. It's a word probably *not* as familiar, but youth workers demonstrate it every day. When people are resilient, or "bounce back," they are able to go through difficult experiences and find energy, hope, and support.

Shortly after Robert heard about Fuller's Risk and Resilience in Urban Youth Ministry Project, he left a phone message asking how he could be involved. When a team member called him back, it was difficult to hear him over the clanging and echoing voices in the background. He explained that he was at a juvenile hall, being fingerprinted so he could visit some of his kids.

Robert listened patiently to our goals of understanding both the stress that urban youth workers experience, as well as the support that helps them not just survive, but thrive.

Robert had to cut the conversation short to prepare for a funeral service for one of the young men in his neighborhood who had been shot.

Violence, poverty, inadequate schools, juvenile hall, gangs, racial tensions, and the everyday injustices of urban life. If you are a youth worker like Robert, these are some of your realities.

But as we learned through the research project, there are life-giving resources and support structures to help urban youth workers like Robert not just survive, but actually thrive.

In order to understand the risk and resilience of urban youth workers, Fuller's Center for Youth and Family Ministry partnered with Fuller's Headington Program¹ to launch the Risk and Resilience in Urban Youth Ministry Project.² Surveys were sent to 905 urban youth workers from five randomly selected large American cities (Los Angeles,

Phoenix, Chicago, Memphis, and Philadelphia) with questions related to community violence, chronic stressors, posttraumatic stressors, burnout, motivation, spirituality, and beliefs about God in the midst of suffering. Completed surveys were returned by 284 youth workers (or 31.4% of those who received them).³

Nearly two thirds (65%) of the youth workers who completed the survey were women, and while they represented ages ranging from 18 to over 65, the average age was 35. Just over half of the youth workers (53%) were married, 39% were single, and the remaining 8% were separated, divorced, or widowed; just over half (53%) had children.

The vast majority (90%) were born in the United States. Almost half (46%) of the urban youth workers were Caucasian; 34% were African American; 12% were Latino/a; 4% were Middle Eastern; Asian American, or Native American; and the remaining 4% indicated that they were of more than one race. Nearly two-thirds (65%) did *not* live in the community in which they do urban youth ministry. Almost two thirds (62%) were being paid for their urban ministry work.

In order to better understand and translate our research findings into practical ideas, we convened urban youth worker focus groups.⁴ The insights from these groups resulted in practical suggestions for those in youth work—whether that's in inner-city Detroit, a small town outside of Des Moines, or the suburbs of Denver.

Question 1: What Traumatic Experiences Did Urban Youth Workers Experience During Childhood?

As depicted in Table 1, urban youth workers reported fairly high rates of exposure to well-documented Adverse Childhood Experiences.⁵

Over 22% of the urban youth workers indicated that they had experienced four or more of these Adverse Childhood Experiences. Unfortunately, that level of childhood trauma has been shown to increase the risk for

TABLE 1
Rate of adverse childhood experience among urban youth workers

Divorce	37%
Substance abuse	33.8%
Mental illness	28.2%
Sexual abuse	27.1%
Death in family	25.4%
Incarceration	16.2%
Verbal abuse	14.8%
Domestic violence	14.1%
Physical abuse	12.7%
Emotional neglect	10.9%
Physical neglect	10.2%

psychological and physical health problems later in life. Adults with four or more Adverse Childhood Experiences are more likely than those who do not report any adverse experiences to be obese, experience depression, attempt suicide, use drugs, have more than fifty sexual partners, and experience a stroke or heart disease.⁶

Response and Ideas from Urban Youth Workers

According to the urban youth workers in our focus groups, these numbers fit their experience. Yet in the midst of these traumatic experiences, many urban youth workers keep it to themselves because they are reluctant to "tell other people my business." One national leader remarked, "I know a lot of folks who have 4 or 5 of those Adverse Childhood Experiences, and they don't talk to others about it. They deal with it through worship and through going to church." While the Lord is the ultimate healer, many of the urban leaders we talked to recommended that leaders find other like-minded men and women with whom they can share their pain.

Yet sometimes people do need specific care for problems that get in the way of their work and relationships. Leaders said that finding someone who was a trained counselor who understands the urban context may take time. But finding that person is worth the effort, and may prove to be a life-giving resource to staff, as well as kids in the neighborhood.

Question 2: What Stressors Do Youth Workers Experience Now?

Of 24 potential stressors, at least 50% of volunteer and/or paid urban youth workers reported experiencing the twelve stressful situations shown in Table 2.

Interestingly, the most frequent stressors tended to be more personal and internal than we might expect (violence in the community being an obvious exception). As indicated in Table 2, the top stressor in both groups was "feeling

powerless to change the situation of the people in the community." The second most prevalent for paid staff was "frustration with portrayals of urban life in the media."

Response and Ideas from Urban Youth Workers

These stressors undoubtedly take their toll on dedicated youth workers. As one urban youth worker who switched from suburban to inner-city ministry commented, "I never saw a leader meltdown until I got into urban youth ministry. Now I see if four or five times a year."

TABLE 2
Stressors experienced by urban youth workers

TYPE OF STRESSOR	PAID STAFF	VOLUNTEER
Feeling powerless to change the situation of the people in the community	71%	61%
Frustration with portrayals of urban life in media	71%	59%
Difficulty finding time for rest and relaxation	69%	48%
Violence in the community	67%	51%
Encountering subtle racist attitudes	64%	54%
Negotiating gap between urban ministry environment and family/friends/sending church	63%	42%
Expectations to stay in contact with others	62%	59%
Conflicts or misunderstandings between team members	61%	39%
Low or no salary, economic pressures	60%	31%
Struggle to maintain emotional boundaries	58%	27%
Adapting to different ethnic cultures	53%	45%
Difficulty maintaining healthy communication within the organization	52%	30%

The internal quality of these stressors means that we might not see them coming, and they may not be things that the organization can change. But they raise several important questions about our support structure. Who are we talking to about feeling powerless? Who encourages us to take a break when they see us starting to get frazzled or frustrated with our kids? Who reminds us to take a vacation away from the ministry and offers to cover our responsibilities?

Question 3: What Types of Violence Do Urban Youth Workers Experience?

Violence, while not the top rated stressor, is still part of the stress in the city. Table 3 below captures the violent events that urban youth workers have personally experienced in their lives, as well as in the past year.

Response and Ideas from Urban Youth Workers

Most everybody we interviewed agreed that the inner city

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Eriksson and Tiersma Watson turn their attention to the youth workers in urban environments, and how life-giving resources and support structures can help them thrive—with responses and ideas from urban youth workers themselves.

can be a war zone. Not all inner cities are alike, however. As one urban leader described, "There are urban jungles, which are rough and tough, and there are urban villages, which are still tough but not as traumatic."

TABLE 3
Types of violence experienced by urban youth workers⁷

HAVE BEEN . . .	IN ADULTHOOD	IN PAST YEAR
away from home when someone broke in	40.7%	7.1%
threatened with serious physical harm	28.8%	7.5%
slapped, hit, or punched by a non-family member	27%	5%
asked to use, sell, or help distribute illegal drugs	25.9%	8.5%
slapped, hit, or punched by family member	23.4%	2.8%
chased by gangs or individuals	17.4%	2.5%
beaten up or mugged	12.8%	0.4%
sexually assaulted or raped	12.2%	1.1%
at home when someone broke in	11.9%	1.4%
shot or shot at with a gun	7.5%	0.7%
attacked or stabbed with a knife	5%	0%

In either case, one leader likened urban workers to "sponges" who "absorb all this trauma and then are supposed to squeeze out wisdom. When all the pain comes into you, it's easy to feel anger, stress, and pity. That pain has to come out somehow, or it can do real damage." Experiencing trauma does not happen only when you are the victim yourself. We experience the pain of trauma when we hear stories, witness violence, or feel loss when a kid turns away from us and to drugs or gangs instead.

In the midst of trying to express pain, many church and parachurch urban youth workers seem to rely on the support of their community for help and healing. As one national parachurch leader said, "Urban leaders will turn to their church as much or more as to our national ministry. They want support from relationships more than from organizational structure." On the flipside, other leaders described the importance of relationships with colleagues—both within their own organization as well as with friends in other ministries who are not connected to organizational politics.

Other tools that were helpful for letting out pain were crying, praying, physical exercise, and expressing pain through art, including music, dance, and murals. As one urban veteran summarized, "In our work with street artists, I've learned that for some, tagging is a way to release pain. One kid told me that tagging was his aspirin. The pain of their broken lives has to come out somehow, and if we can provide appropriate ways, then fewer kids and adults will

resort to methods like tagging that can get them arrested."

Question 4: What Keeps Urban Youth Workers From Receiving the Support They Need?

Because of these and other types of stress in the city, about one-third of urban youth workers (or 36%) reported significant levels of posttraumatic stress.⁸ By "posttraumatic stress," we mean the emotional and physical symptoms that can develop after experiencing a trauma. These symptoms fit in 3 categories: re-experiencing the trauma (for example through nightmares or thinking about the event when one does not want to); avoiding the trauma (avoiding things that remind you of the event, withdrawing from people) and hyperarousal (feeling jumpy, easily agitated, or irritable).

The urban youth workers who filled out the survey indicated that 36% of them are feeling those symptoms right now. We can compare that to the general public where studies show that 12% of the population will experience Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in their lifetime.⁹ This means that there are a significant number of urban youth workers who are serving while simultaneously managing a considerable level of internal pain.

Thankfully, many urban youth workers are taking advantage of support systems available to them such as medical care, church services, counseling, spiritual direction, small groups, support from their teams, and spiritual mentoring. Yet in the last year, approximately one-fifth of urban youth workers felt the need to get emotional, physical, or spiritual support but did not end up receiving any. When asked why, they reported the following obstacles: availability, affordability, lack of time, self-addressed (meaning they ended up taking care of it themselves), and concern about the stigma involved in getting the help.

Response and Ideas from Urban Youth Workers

For many of the urban youth workers in our focus groups, the idea that "lack of time" would keep leaders from getting the support they need was disconcerting. As one summarized, "If I need help, going to a spiritual director is just as much part of my ministry as hanging out with a kid." Some likened self-care to the announcement we hear every time we board a plane that we need to put on our own oxygen masks before we try to put the mask around the children. Keeping ourselves healthy means that we will be around to care for kids in the future.

A few wondered if behind the obstacles of time and money lay a deeper obstacle: that if I have a "Savior Complex" and I have to get help, then that means I'm no longer the Savior. Taking time to get support forces leaders

to realize that it's "God's ministry and not mine," which quite honestly, can be hard to face.

In addition, some youth workers seem to enjoy the "drama" of urban ministry. As one leader lamented, "I had to let one of our team members go because he seemed to thrive on the drama of urban ministry. Since he couldn't control the drama in his own home, he burned himself out trying to respond to the drama in his kids' homes."

Question 5: What is Unique about Urban Youth Workers' Burnout?¹⁰

In general, people who are emotionally exhausted tend to feel like they are accomplishing less than those who are less exhausted. Perhaps the greatest surprise of our entire study is that in urban youth workers, the opposite is true. Youth workers who are emotionally exhausted tend to feel like they are actually accomplishing more!

Response and Ideas from Urban Youth Workers

The majority of our focus group leaders didn't seem surprised that youth workers who are the most tired also seem to feel the most effective. In many cases, perhaps being exhausted and/or traumatized by violence and pain is a "badge of honor" in the city. As one youth worker commented, "Someone is welcomed into the urban family when they've been shot or done time." However, urban youth workers cautioned against oversimplifying the link between fatigue and a sense of accomplishment. For many urban youth workers, being tired and experiencing suffering is part of who they are, and since it is part of their own personal story, it becomes a deep well of healing for the kids and families in their own communities.

In either case, the urban leaders also made a number of recommendations to help youth workers find a sense of rhythm and balance:

- Take a sabbatical. If your ministry doesn't have a sabbatical policy, suggest that they consider developing one.
- *Require*, not *recommend*, that leaders take one day each week to disengage from the constant ups and downs of urban ministry.
- Beware of adrenaline addiction, meaning the tendency we have to get hooked on the physiological "rush" that comes from being needed and being busy.
- Listen to your team members or your mentor when they warn you that you are approaching burnout.
- Team leaders need to model rest for their entire team. If they don't, then the rest of the team wonders if it is okay to take a break.
- Think about what "rest" is for you. It does not always

mean taking a retreat. It may mean a great game of one-on-one basketball with a kid in the neighborhood. What are the things that give you life, that renew and "recycle" you?

Conclusion

During our focus groups, one veteran youth worker shared about her early days of pouring herself out for the kids and taking little rest for herself. One of her high school seniors told her, "We love you and we love all the time you spend with us. But if you don't get a life, you will burn out and get tired of us. Then you'll leave and we will have no one."

In the Gospels, Jesus teaches us to "love our neighbor as ourselves," not "instead of ourselves." More often than not, seeking our own health and healing is the best ministry we can offer our kids. ■

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ENDNOTES

1. The mission of the Headington Program is to understand the experience of traumatic and chronic stress in ministry settings.
2. The research data reported in this article is taken from C. Eriksson, H. Shin, S. Walling, H. Lee, and C. Montgomery, "Risk and Resilience in Urban Ministry: Stress, Spirituality, and Support, Report of General Findings" (Pasadena, CA: Center for Youth and Family Ministry, Fuller Theological Seminary, January 2007); available at http://www.cyfm.net/pdfs/risk_and_resilience_report_2007.pdf.
3. Thirty percent is considered a fairly typical response rate for survey research.
4. One of the focus groups was predominantly Los Angeles urban youth workers; the other was comprised of national leaders from across the United States.
5. "The Adverse Childhood Experiences Scale" was used to assess these early traumatic experiences. S. R. Dube, R. F. Anda, R. F. Felitti, V. J. Edwards and D. F. Williamson, "Exposure to Abuse, Neglect, and Household Dysfunction Among Adults Who Witnessed Intimate Partner Violence as Children: Implication for Health and Social Services," *Violence and Victims* 17 (2002): 3-17.
6. V. J. Felitti, R. F. Anda, D. Nordenberg, D. F. Williamson, A. M. Spitz, V. Edwards, M. P. Koss, J. S. Marks, "The Relationship of Adult Health Status to Childhood Abuse and Household Dysfunction to Many of the Leading Causes of Death in Adults: The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study," *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 14 (1998): 245-58.
7. The experience of violence in the community was measured using the "Survey of Exposure to Community Violence." J. E. Richters and W. Saltzman, "Survey of Children's Exposure to Community Violence," National Institute of Mental Health, 1990.
8. Posttraumatic stress was measured using the "Los Angeles Symptom Checklist." L. King, D. King, G. Leskin, and D. Foy, "The Los Angeles Symptom Checklist: A Self-Report Measure of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder," *Assessment* 2 (1995): 1-17. There was no significant difference in levels of posttraumatic stress between the volunteers compared to paid staff. In addition, there was not a significant difference in levels of post-traumatic stress disorder severity between local leaders (those who ministered in the

same neighborhood in which they grew up) and relocated leaders (those who ministered in a different neighborhood than the one in which they grew up).

9. H. S. Resnick, D. G. Kilpatrick, B. S. Dansky, B. E. Saudners, and C. L. Best, "Prevalence of Civilian Trauma and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder in a Representative National Sample of Women," *Journal*

Powell, Lee, and Crawford, continued from page 5

viewing Internet pornography at least once in the past month; the median was 3 to 5 times. Over a third viewed pornography in the past year with the median at 10 to 19 times. Males engage in more risk behavior than females, with a particularly striking difference in the realm of viewing Internet pornography (71.8% of males viewing it every year as compared with 10.6% of females). For most graduating seniors, opportunities to engage in risk behaviors assessed will increase on the transition to college. Youth leaders preparing their students for college life would be wise to focus not only on the risk behaviors of alcohol, sex, and pornography, but to keep in mind the greater male participation in risk behaviors in general and Internet pornography specifically.

These are preliminary findings at the front end of what we hope to be a fruitful longitudinal investigation into factors that influence youth group graduates' healthy transition to college. In the future, we will be looking at important research questions like, What is it about our youth groups, if

King, continued from page 15

church tends to shy away from doing anything that does not directly build assets into the lives of children and youth.

- Training (how they develop leaders)—the highest expectation for volunteer staff is that they would become "asset builders" on behalf of the community's young people.
- Recruitment (who they call to serve)—the church's leadership pool increased exponentially when thinking shifted to an asset-based model. The church discovered that regardless of age, gender, education, or occupation, any adult was a potential volunteer leader because every adult can help develop and nurture at least one asset.
- Advocacy (what they use their collective voice for)—whether it's the training seminar they offer parents or how they encourage public school administrators and the policies they create, their church is now more informed and more equipped to use its collective voice to help ensure that young people have the resources they need.

Do kids lack the resources they need to thrive? You bet. Are kids hurting? You bet. But in the midst of the pain and

of Consulting and Clinical Psychology 61 (1993): 984-91.

10. Burnout was measured using the "Maslach Burnout Inventory." (C. Maslach and S. E. Jackson, "Maslach Burnout Inventory: Human Services Survey (MBI-HSS)," in *MBI Manual*, ed. C. Maslach, S. E. Jackson, and M. P. Leiter, 3rd ed. (Palo Alto, CA: Consulting Psychologists Press, 1996).

anything, that predicts how well students will transition? Does having a supportive relationship with a youth pastor make more difference than relationships with other kids in the group? What role do parents play? Is there any relationship between loneliness and how students fare spiritually?

At the urging of parents and youth workers across the United States who are concerned about the "Nicoles" they know, we intend to discover and share the answers to these questions, all in an effort to help set students on a lifelong trajectory of relationship with Christ. ■

This article is adapted from "When the Pomp and Circumstance Fades: A Profile of Youth Group Kids Post-Youth Group," Kara Powell and Krista Kubiak, YouthWorker Journal (Sep/Oct 2005); and "High School Youth Group Seniors Transitioning to College: Risk Behavior, Social Support, Religiosity, and Attitude toward Youth Group," Kara Powell, Cameron Lee, and Cheryl Crawford, Christian Education Journal, (est. publication 2007).

ENDNOTE

1. National Center for Education Statistics, *The Nation's Report Card, "Academic Records: America's High School Graduates 2005,"* available at http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/pdf/studies/2007467_2.pdf (2006).

emptiness we see on kids' faces and in kids' lives, this research shows we have something to celebrate: each of them has assets that can help contribute to their growth and development. And for that, we thank God. And we cheer. ■

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ENDNOTES

1. The designation of kids as "urban" was based on two criteria: living in cities of over 200,000 residents and having a mother who did not graduate from high school. Of the initial dataset, 7,171 youth fit both of these criteria.
2. C. Theokas, J. Almerigi, R. Lerner, E. Dowling, P. Benson, P. Scales, and A. Von Eye, "Conceptualizing and Modeling Individual and Ecological Asset Components of Thriving in Early Adolescence," *Journal of Early Adolescence* 25, no. 1 (2005): 113-43.
3. See Peter L. Benson, *All Kids Are Our Kids: What Communities Can Do to Raise Caring and Responsible Children and Adolescents*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2006).
4. To read the full interview, see Chap Clark and Kara E. Powell, *Deep Ministry in a Shallow World: Not-So-Secret Findings about Youth Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 99-104. Or to hear it, visit <http://www.cyfm.net/audio/curtgibson/index.php>.



J. R. ROZKO

The Other Side of "At-Risk": Freeing Youth from Suburban Oppression

From Suburbia to Seminary and Back Again

I GREW UP IN the suburbs. The college I attended was comprised predominantly of white, middle- to upper-class students and faculty. As a youth ministry major, I participated in internships in local, suburban church communities. When I graduated, I served for a number of years as a youth pastor in an affluent suburban church, ministering to affluent suburban teenagers and young adults. In seminary, I continued to think about and study the church in suburban America. I have become incredibly worried.

What worries me is the subtle, perhaps even invisible, oppression of teenagers in the suburbs. When we think of oppression we tend to think of the poor and needy, those without a voice whose cry goes largely unheard—and we are right to do so. Please don't miss that. In nothing I am going to say do I mean to imply that this form of oppression is not one of the greatest challenges (read opportunities) facing the global church today. It is, and there is much work to be done. At the same time, however, this fact does not excuse us from ignoring other forms of oppression, equally as sad and perhaps harder to address.

In suburban America the powers of consumerism, materialism, and individualism have become so all-pervasive that we scarcely recognize them any more. When combined, these forces have resulted in enormous pressure on teenagers to strive for success in all that they do in order to achieve the "American Dream." But any force which compels us to pursue a dream which isn't God's is an oppressive one.

Though there are a number of ways to approach this discussion, asking "How do these oppressive powers prohibit suburban youth from practicing the way of Jesus?" seems an apt place to start: It is Jesus who embodied God's dream for humanity—a dream that includes suburban teenagers.

From Consumerism to Stewardship

By consumerism, I mean the cultural force which encourages creation of identity based on the consumption of goods and services—a defining characteristic of suburban life. As

an example, we might note the way in which teens in the suburbs adopt certain name brands, styles, stores, and produces in search of identity. In 2003, teenagers in the United States spent \$112.5 billion. There were roughly 20.5 million teenagers in the U.S. in 2003; therefore, on average, teens were spending more than \$100 per week, primarily on clothes.¹ Flowing out of a capitalistic approach to society is the notion that our chief end is to possess with increasing capacity, to consume more and better goods and services as a strategy for climbing economic and social ladders. From all angles, teenagers are fed the (well-intentioned) lie that of primary importance is their "being whoever they want to be," stripping them of an ability to discern, and thereby subvert, the oppressive force of consumerism.

More problematic than this is the church's tendency to uncritically adopt the consumeristic tendencies of suburban culture "for the sake of the gospel." Yet as controversial 1960s communications theorist Marshal McLuhan aptly noted, "The medium is the message." For the church to adopt a consumeristic model of ministry is to lose the thrust of the gospel message itself.

Whereas the American dream necessitates that teenagers derive an identity from what they consume, God's dream is that they learn to be stewards of all they have—indeed, of all of creation. Jesus was anything but a passive consumer. Armed with a razor-sharp understanding of his father's desire for humanity and creation, Jesus sought to rectify wrongs, reconcile relationships, and restore that which had been lost. Suburban teenagers, like Jesus, ought to be free from the oppressive force of consumerism in order to understand who they are in and through their participation in God's way of being, exemplified by Jesus. When the church fails to point

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Rozko suggests that the primary threats to suburban youth are the oppression of individualism, materialism, and consumerism. From his own experience, he recommends ways to shift the thinking of youth and adults toward God's dream for suburban teens.

J. R. Rozko recently completed a masters degree at Fuller Theological Seminary focusing on a missiology of Western culture. Rozko is a graduate of Malone College in Canton, Ohio, and has worked with youth and young adults for almost ten years. He is currently serving as an academic advisor for Fuller's Master of Arts in Global Leadership program.

out the contrast between the kingdom of God and the oppression of consumerism as a cultural power, it handicaps itself in its ability to help teenagers practice the ways of Jesus.

From Materialism to Simplicity

Consumerism is directly related to materialism: consumerism encourages suburban teenagers to derive identity from what they can consume while materialism emphasizes this oppression by convincing them that their value is equal to the value of their possessions. Teenagers do not develop materialistic tendencies out of thin air; rather, these tendencies are learned from family, friends, and their culture. Yet suburban families, however involved in church activities, tend to ignore the material dimension of spiritual formation. God predicted this disastrous outcome of a similar mistake for the nation of Israel who were to leave their sojourn in the desert, possess the promised land, become wealthy, forget the Lord, and in the end destroy themselves.

The suburbs are among the most economically polarized places to live. There is often a powerful pressure for families to move into nicer homes, with more space, and farther and farther away from any sort of risk to themselves or their things. In suburban contexts, if both parents live in the same home, they are usually both working full-time jobs, sometimes to make ends meet, but often to climb ahead economically. While parents have the seemingly noble intention of “sacrificing for the good of their children,” they seldom stop to define what “sacrifice” and “good” actually mean. Chap Clark, in his book *Hurt*, speaks of this “sacrifice” more in terms of abandonment:

We have evolved to the point where we believe driving is support, being active is love, and providing any and every opportunity is selfless nurture . . . Even with the best of intentions, the way we raise, train, and even parent our children today exhibits attitudes and behaviors that are simply subtle forms of parental abandonment.²

It is the insatiable force of materialism that drives this trend, damaging both to families and to the spiritual formation of suburban youth.

During one of the years that I served as a youth pastor in an affluent suburban megachurch, we held a New Year’s Eve all-nighter. One of the intended draws of the evening was the contest prize of a donated car. You can imagine my surprise when the newly minted 16-year-old who won asked, “Do I *have* to take the car?” as he was sure that his parents intended to buy him something newer and nicer. It was an incentive we were not to repeat.

Jesus lived unencumbered by worldly possessions, yet he

was able both to give freely and to receive joyfully. Because so many evangelical suburban churches proclaim a gospel which emphasizes going to heaven when you die (as opposed to seeking to give people a taste of heaven on earth such as we are taught by Jesus to ask for in the Lord’s Prayer), the painful grip of materialism on all our people, especially our teenagers, goes largely ignored. Like the oppressive force of consumerism, suburban materialism left unaddressed by churches and youth ministries robs our teenagers of the freedom they might know in practicing the simpler way of Jesus.

From Individualism to Relatedness

Individualism is interrelated with both the oppressive forces of consumerism and materialism, undergirding them both. Individualism is so ingrained in our culture that we rarely perceive, let alone judge it as a potentially oppressive reality. Our educational philosophy rewards individual effort and ability, while even team-oriented athletics and other extra-curricular activities are often little more than covert opportunities for students to distinguish themselves. Corporations market to the individual: Burger King teaches, “Have it your way,” AT&T advertises, “Your world. Delivered.” There is a power at work in suburban cultures that encourages the oppressive force of individualism.

Suburban teenagers enjoy the great benefits afforded by a culture which seeks to meet their individual needs. But is this in keeping with God’s dream for his people? The whole of Scripture tells that God’s desire for humanity—including suburban teenagers—is to find joy not in individuality, but in their fellowship with and to others. To miss this is to be sorrowfully oppressed.

Again, the question arises: “How might the oppressive force of individualism be hindering our teenagers from practicing the way of Jesus?” Through and through, Jesus’ life, ministry, and teaching were relational. He gathered a band of disciples to teach and share in ministry. His healings and exorcisms, though obviously of personal benefit, were aimed at restoring people to community. Jesus’ teaching centered on how we are to relate to one another (in the Beatitudes alone we have Jesus’ wisdom with regard to murder, adultery, divorce, oaths, revenge, enemies, giving, etc.—all relational matters). More than this, Jesus’ central message of love loses all significance when understood from a solely individual point of view, for love is unthinkable outside of relationship. To say it another way, God’s personal involvement with us is always a beginning and never an end. God’s ultimate end is a communal way to understand life and salvation—one that must be offered to suburban teenagers oppressed by individualism on all sides.

Moving Towards God’s Dream for Suburban Teenagers

We conclude by asking about the practical implications of all this for those who care about suburban teenagers. With regard to the oppressive force of consumerism, you might start by simply raising this issue with students. Ask them what they think about it and help them explore the tension between consumerist tendencies and the life of Jesus. By challenging and partnering with your students in concrete anti-consumerist practices and actions, you can help them not just *understand* the issue, but also *evaluate* it for themselves. Help your students examine the ways in which suburban culture perpetuates trends of consumerism. Or, more positively, help your students dream about how they might be better stewards of all that God has given them.

Because of its complex relationship with family dynamics, the oppressive force of materialism can be harder to combat. Nevertheless, you might consider inviting a group of students to think differently about possessions. Explore ways to share more, to give things away to those in need who can offer nothing in return, or to trade expensive possessions for more modest ones. Perhaps these students, attempting to practice this dimension of Jesus’ life, might serve as a catalyst for change within your group as a whole.

How to practically combat the oppressive force of individualism? The answer is more nuanced than getting students to engage in “fellowship,” and more involved than giving students an opportunity to serve others. It requires a fundamental shift in understanding what it means to be bearers of the image of God. Students need to feel the weight of their responsibility to and for others. This is not mere grief over suffering, but a holistic sense of needing others to understand ourselves. We are who we are only *in relation* to others. These are complex matters, but we can make progress by simply asking the right questions and leading students into the right situations.

Finally, as leaders, if we are not modeling a life of freedom from the oppressive forces of consumerism,

materialism, and individualism, any and all other efforts are rendered meaningless. Jesus’ message had credibility because he preached it with his life. More than attractive and entertaining ministries and programs, the great need of students in suburban America is to be invited into the lives of men and women who are practicing the way of Jesus. The homes we live in, the cars we drive, the ways we spend money (our own as well as the church budget), the way we make decisions, our concern for others, the clothes we wear, the way we speak—all these dimensions of our lives are under the constant scrutiny of the students we serve. If we are not modeling the sort of life we envision for our students, there is little chance we will ever help them experience it for themselves.

The oppressive force of the powers addressed here bear significance not only for the suburban teenagers we are focusing on, but for all those they are meant to impact—their families, friends, classmates, teammates, coworkers, and all those they come in contact with. They are particular forms of oppression which have universal implications.

While I know these issues are bigger than can be meaningfully addressed in a brief article, I also know that many who read this will be in churches and ministries who perpetuate these forces, making change seem quite impossible. Yet we are urged to place our faith in the One who embodied God’s dream for us, who lived as a steward over all creation, who lived simply, and who lived a life of relatedness. For it is Jesus who is jealous for his bride, the Church, and he continues to move and act that she might be presented to him without blemish. ■

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ENDNOTES

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