

Two Critical Factors that Help Young People Consider the Call to Church Leadership: The Matrix of Support and the Cycle of Transformational Ministry

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“I was standing for something that I do believe in, and I honestly didn’t know I believed in it.

Youth being able to teach other youth. Youth being able to teach adults! It meant a lot to me to be able to be part of that. I didn’t think it was going to be such a big deal, but when I was done, I realized that this had been a really cool thing...” (Ron, a high school junior)

“I know I will do something ministry-related when I am older. There’s no way around it. It’s going to happen...” (McKenzie, a high school sophomore)

It warms our hearts when teenagers begin to consider their call to church leadership. Yet sadly, it doesn’t happen often enough. That concerns us. We grow anxious as the average age of church ministers climbs, and fewer young people come forward to be church leaders. On the one hand, we’re afraid that the church might become irrelevant to the youth of today. On the other hand, we realize that teenaged angst is related to spiritual unrest, and we long to connect this generation with some searching souls who have journeyed long before us, folks like Moses and Miriam, Simon Peter and Mary Magdalene.

People often ask, “Why can’t young people see that the church has so much to offer?” An obvious response is, “Why can’t the church see that young people have so much to offer?”

Name them “Leaders”

Tomorrow’s Present is the name of a youth leadership training project in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee. It trains teenagers to present workshops to mixed audiences of youth and adults, and it gathers youth and adults to strategize new ways to increase youth leadership in their churches.

Its first deliberate intention is to call young people “leaders.” Teenagers are treated as the gifted resources they are; every workshop and activity has improved because of their insights and suggestions. Adults may know more about Theology, Scripture, and Liturgy, but teenagers know more about being young in the church, and having to deal with life issues from that perspective. A church that wants this generation to be leaders in the future needs to recognize them as leaders *and name them leaders* today. Tomorrow is present in the faces of our young people. And most of the time, adults don’t recognize the present they are.

Recognize what is Transformational

We have heard stories of transformed lives, but perhaps we haven’t thought about how this process of transformation actually takes place. Here is an example of one teen’s transformation.

Peter was a young person whose parents brought him to a soup kitchen one evening. He went reluctantly and spent most of his shift sulking by the stove, stirring the chili with obvious resentment. But his negative attitude vanished the moment he noticed a classmate in the line. He was quite surprised. “Hunger” suddenly had a name and a familiar face.

Peter became curious. He started asking questions, and did some fact-finding. He discovered the relationships among minimum wage, the cost of living, and the lack of good jobs and affordable housing.

Incidentally, this happened during Lent; so at church, Peter kept hearing about the need to feed the poor. He read Matthew 25: 31-46. He read the stories on the “rice bowl” from Catholic Relief Services sitting on his kitchen table and kept thinking about the hunger in his own town.

Peter decided to return to the soup kitchen, and instead of hiding out near the stove, to talk with people and eat with them, to hear their stories and learn about their lives.

So he did. And he saw with new eyes, and heard with new ears, and he was never the same again. He was transformed. He began to see things from the perspective of others, especially others whose perspectives are seldom shared. It became a new way of life for him.

Peter's transformation can be seen in four repeatable steps that many people know as "The Pastoral Circle." They are simply: (1) Awareness (sometimes called Immersion or Experience), (2) Analysis (sometimes called Deeper Exploration), (3) Reflection (sometimes called Prayer or Inner Work), and (4) Action Planning. These four steps led him back to the soup kitchen for deeper Awareness (1), which began the cycle all over again.

The Cycle of Transformational Ministry

Peter's story illustrates how a person must function well at each step in order to travel through the Pastoral Circle. It was pure luck (or perhaps grace) that he happened to glance up when the student he knew was passing by. But once he became curious, his parents were there to help him find information about poverty, and his church was there to provide prayer and resources that encouraged his spiritual reflection.

On an individual level, it's easy to see how all four steps are essential. If one is skipped or even skimmed, the momentum can be lost. On the programmatic level, it becomes clear that four similar steps are necessary components in every congregation's ministry to young people.

The steps of the Pastoral Circle were reshaped as a result of the research findings from Tomorrow's Present. This new model is called, "The Cycle of Transformational Ministry," and the four movements are renamed: Service, Learning, Reflective Prayer and Leadership. What is said of the Pastoral Circle is true of the Cycle of Transformational Ministry: any place can be a starting point, but all four are core experiences that must be included and integrated together.

Using the example of hunger, try to imagine the results if any one of these four areas is neglected. Without service, the issue of hunger might be well studied, prayed about and analyzed with recommendations for future action, but nothing will ever happen afterward. Without learning, the situation might never improve; a lack of knowledge could result in perishable items being sent to a location with no refrigeration. Without prayer and reflection, a person may actually research a situation, provide excellent leadership and then arrive with an attitude of arrogance and superiority that is upsetting to the guests supposedly being “served.” Finally, without leadership, nothing would be organized or efficient; a soup kitchen without posted hours, a weekly menu, a volunteer schedule or budget would soon have to close its doors.

Most congregations would agree that young people need to experience service, learning, reflective prayer and leadership. Most would probably report that there are already opportunities in their church programming for young people to learn, pray, lead, and serve.

What is probably lacking is the integration of the four, and that is essential. When these experiences are integrated, learning leads to reflective prayer which in turn brings forth leadership with courage and integrity, resulting in service with dignity; which then leads to more extensive learning, and then deeper prayer, and then more challenging leadership, and then even fuller service; and then a greater desire to learn more, and to pray more reflectively, and to lead more effectively, and to serve more graciously, and so on and so on. This “and so on” is the transformational part. Once transformed, there’s a desire in your very bones to continue to learn, reflect, and lead for greater service. Connected to that is a drive to seek out the perspectives seldom shared by those who are often silent. It’s almost the very definition of ministry itself.

How do we know it’s Ministry?

In *A Vision of Youth Ministry*, The U.S. Catholic bishops said these challenging words about the

true test of ministry: “True Ministry duplicates itself. It is essential that youth ministry evoke in each person the willingness to offer ministry to others.” In other words, if it doesn’t bring out the desire to minister, then is it really ministry?

Appendix A shows a visual depiction of the Cycle of Transformational Ministry. The four areas are clearly marked and explained. The most mysterious part of the diagram may be the presence of the four arrows. Once a person is transformed, one area calls forth a natural movement to the next. But what about the first time? What fuels the movement of the arrows? How can we set things up from the start so that transformation is more likely to take place?

The Matrix of Support

Besides surfacing the four core experiences of the Cycle of Transformational Ministry, the research on Tomorrow’s Present also identified two core relationships that made an impact in the young people’s lives. Those youth who were most strongly impacted by Tomorrow’s Present were the ones who had two things: (1) a consistent adult mentor and (2) a consistent home-based group of peers. Doesn’t that make logical sense?

Imagine you are a teenager whose original youth minister just left. You have a big adjustment to make. It’s harder to apply your Tomorrow’s Present learning to your own church because your new adult isn’t familiar with it. This would be true even if your church had its own youth leader team. Now imagine you’re a teenager whose youth minister didn’t leave. However, your church doesn’t have a youth leader team. It still would be hard for you to practice your new skills because there is no organized youth leadership structure at your church to give you that opportunity. The best situation would be for you to have support from both (1) a consistent adult leader helping you apply that new learning with (2) a group of peers living it out with you.

Now, think of an adult who has “burned out” of ministry. Did that person have both a mentor (to call forth gifts and challenge him/her) along with a network of colleagues (to share the ups and downs and help keep balance and perspective) for support? Probably not!

Appendix B shows a visual depiction of the Matrix of Support. The two core relationships of peer support and mentor support is what fuels the movement of the arrows in the Cycle of Transformational Ministry. That way, the young people journey through the four core experiences of learning, prayer, leadership and service in an integrated fashion.

It seems like a complicated system, but it’s been happening naturally in small learning communities for thousands of years. When Jesus called together The Twelve, they had support from both a consistent mentor and a consistent peer group for three years.

Youth in Learning Communities

When a learning community forms with a shared vision, the members want to make a difference. Whether it’s a workshop team wanting to present the best workshop possible, or a group wanting to eradicate hunger in their local area, they are committed to their purpose. When the leadership is shared, youth have an equal voice with the adults. They feel supported and grow in confidence. They begin to hold each other accountable, and are more creative and effective together, because they are working cooperatively and learning from each other.

Projects with learning communities have a natural flow, following the Cycle of Transformational Ministry: They learn about their project and related issues (Learning). They pray together and do faith sharing (Reflective Prayer). They come up with a plan (Leadership). They try it out (Service). They learn from their experience regarding what went well or what went poorly (Learning). They pray and do more faith sharing based on their deeper

understanding (Prayer). They evaluate, problem solve, seek consensus and design a new plan (Leadership). Then they try it out again (Service). *And so on.*

They continue to learn, pray, lead, and serve, with a deeper and deeper sense of mission. They take ownership for passing on their faith, and they see themselves as church ministers. Val, a graduating senior said this: “I thank God all the time for the amazing experiences I have had. I made new friends, became a confident and creative leader, learned the times to be serious and the times to be goofy, and my spirituality has grown tremendously.”

Implications for Future Ministry

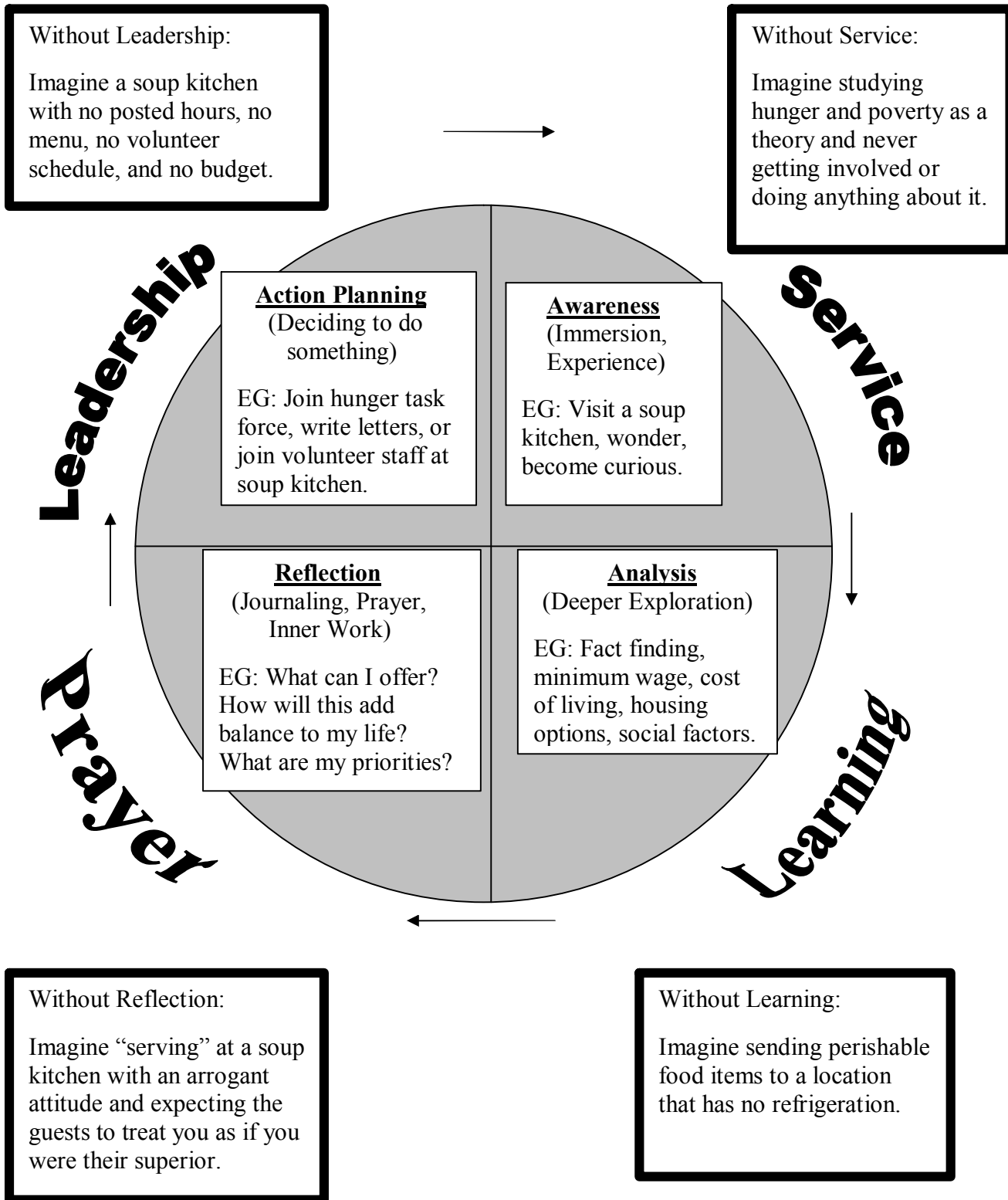
Schools and churches need to pay more attention to the core relationships of the Matrix of Support and the core experiences of the Cycle of Transformational Ministry. Grouping young people into learning communities can provide peer and mentor support, and address important issues with a deliberate emphasis on integrated leadership, service, learning and reflective prayer. Not only can this transform young people, but their adults and congregations as well.

It takes more time and energy and costs more money up front, but we must find creative ways to make that initial investment. The results are worth it. Adult burnout will decrease as more young people consider the call to church leadership. As Lupe said: “We’ll be involved in the church as adults because we’ve already been involved in the church as teenagers.”

Reflective Questions

1. What kind of impact could learning communities have on how we structure youth formation?
2. How can we provide all youth with the core relationships of mentor and peer support?
3. How can seminaries partner with congregations to integrate the core experiences of learning, reflective prayer, leadership and service for high school students as well as seminarians?

APPENDIX A: THE CYCLE OF TRANSFORMATIONAL MINISTRY
 Based on the PASTORAL CIRCLE (represented by the boxes inside the circle)
 (Calderone-Stewart, 2002)



APPENDIX B: THE MATRIX OF SUPPORT

Tomorrow's Present had the most impact on the youth in the "Yes, Yes" quadrant, according to the data analysis of their answers to questionnaires.

		PEER SUPPORT: Did the Youth have a Pre-existing Youth Leadership Team?	
		Yes	No
MENTOR SUPPORT: Did the Youth have a Consistent Adult Leader?	Yes	<u>The Most Impact</u>	Less Impact
	No	Less Impact	Less Impact

(Calderone-Stewart, 2002)

For Further Study:

Regarding the Vision of Catholic Youth Ministry:

United States Catholic Conference (1986). *A Vision of Youth Ministry*. (Available from the Dept. of Education, USCCB Office of Publishing and Promotional Services; 1312 Massachusetts Ave., NW, Washington, D.C. 20005-4105).

Regarding the Pastoral Circle:

Bright, T. & Roberto, J. (1990). The pastoral circle: A guide to Analysis and Action on Justice Issues. In J. Roberto (Ed.), *Access Guides to Justice*. New York: Don Bosco Multimedia.

Regarding Learning Communities:

Hord, S. (1997). Professional learning communities: What are they and why are they important? *Issues... About Change*, 6 (1). (Available from Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 211 East Seventh Street, Austin, Texas 78701).

Regarding the Tomorrow's Present Project:

Calderone-Stewart, L. (2002). *Tomorrow's Present Resource Packet*. (Available from the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, 3501 South Lake Drive, P. O. Box 07912, Milwaukee, WI 53207-0912).

Note: Ron, McKenzie, Peter, Val and Lupe are all Tomorrow's Present young people; however their actual names have been changed for the purposes of this research and resulting articles.