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Transformational Ministry in our Parish Programming

Research helps to identify better ways to reach adolescents and to help them grow into young disciples.

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Being a parish director of religious education (DRE) or youth ministry seems to be getting harder every year. Everyone involved in our ministry – children, teens, parents and catechists – seems so busy these days. Parish program costs go up, yet families seem to have less money to pay for religious education. As parish revenues are stretched, expenses may be cut by hiring part-time directors or having volunteers administer programs. Parents register at the last minute, if they register at all. Catechists and youth leaders might not come to formation meetings; they hardly have time to look at the leader's guide before each session.

Children and youth often skip sessions; many don't even attend Mass. Church-related activities can take second place to anything else in the same time slot – band, music or dance lessons, drama, sports and other school activities. Not to mention that families may simply be tired and need a break! Some children, teens and their parents are so over-scheduled there isn't much down time in their lives.

And why should parents value that one weekly hour of faith development? Are their sons and daughter really learning all that much? In many cases catechists aren't trained as teachers, they just try to get through the book despite the boredom and the discipline problems they face. When the hour is up, catechists and students alike may be relieved.

At the end of the year, everyone -- parents, catechists, youth leaders, DREs and pastors -- wonder, "Why are we having so much trouble helping people learn about the faith?" And then we wonder why we have trouble finding tomorrow's priests, religious, and lay ministers.

So every summer we make new goals to try to improve the way we do things. We look for better textbooks (and those that conform with the Catechism of the Catholic Church) and become more determined to focus on content. But somehow, each year, we often get the same disappointing results.

Does this sound familiar? If it's not happening in your parish it is happening in others across the country. Why are so many of us banging our heads against a wall like this? Perhaps we keep trying to solve the wrong problem. Isn't there a better way?

Yes, there are parishes with effective programming, catechists who love their ministry, parents who are involved, and children and youth who come home from religious education activities, excited by new knowledge and insight. What is their secret?

What these programs have in common is this: they transform lives. They have found a way to bring core relationships and core experiences together, and the result is something I call transformational ministry. The rest of this article, building upon recent research, illustrates the importance of Transformational Ministry and how it develops.

Core Relationships

In many situations, catechists are described by their grade or program. “He’s my fourth grade catechist.” Or “she’s my confirmation leader.” The focus is more on the catechist’s relationship with the content than on the catechist’s relationship with the children and teens. Groups are sometimes so large that one catechist cannot possibly develop any meaningful relationship with each child or teen. This lack of relationship is the first obstacle to overcome to build effective programs. It’s hard for catechists to care about a student they don’t know. It’s difficult for students to pay attention to a teacher who doesn’t know them individually.

When my family moved to a new city, our son had to start his junior year in a new high school. We knew this transition would be very difficult for him. But his new school valued core relationships, and their organizational structure reflected those values. Unlike most high schools that lump all juniors together, his homeroom was a mixed group of freshman, sophomores, juniors and seniors. In this high school, homeroom groups stayed together all four years. Every year, freshmen were welcomed and seniors bid good-bye. Every year, members of the group celebrated each other’s important life events:

birthdays, driver's licenses, and graduations. Every year, this group worked together on school projects. And every year, this group had the same two homeroom teachers. Two teachers, not just one, so that if one of them left the school, the other would provide adult continuity. Every year, the freshmen would feel welcomed and were relieved to know that older students would befriend and mentor them. Every year, older students feel more confident and responsible as newer students looked up to them as role models and confidants.

This is a structure that works. It combines the support of adult mentoring with the support of positive peers, support that only comes with time together. This structure creates a sense of community and ownership as older and younger students begin to care about, look out for, and trust each other. With time, the students begin to share openly their innermost thoughts, feelings, and dreams – even their fears and doubts. When all of this takes place in an atmosphere of prayer and faith, the young people begin to understand at a deeper level what discipleship is all about. They help each other sit at the feet of the Master – by sitting at the feet of each other's lives – and they end up learning the lessons, the practices, and the ways of Jesus.

Core Relationships and Research

Research by the Search Institute supports the need for core relationships. Search conducts research and develops resources on healthy youth development. Its mission is to advance the well-being of adolescents and children by generating knowledge and

promoting its application. They have identified forty developmental assets young people need to succeed in life. One of these assets is called, “other adult relationships,” meaning that the young person receives support from three or more non-parent adults. Another asset is called, “positive peer influence,” meaning that the young person’s best friends model responsible behavior. These two assets describe the essence of core relationships – receiving support from both positive peers and caring adult mentors. Research done with young people in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee -- a three-year youth leadership training project called “Tomorrow’s Present,” made possible by a grant from the Lilly foundation -- also highlights the significance of these core relationships.

During the first phase of Tomorrow’s Present, young people were trained to present one of three different workshops.

- “Youth-Friendly Liturgy” focused on the movements of prayer, the symbols of prayer and principles from the Second Vatican Council’s *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* so that groups of youth and adults could evaluate their own parish Liturgy and make suggestions to improve weekend worship experiences.
- “Celebrate Youth Ministry” taught the three goals and eight components of youth ministry so that groups of youth and adults could evaluate and improve their own parish youth programming.
- “Hope Is Something You Do” explored peacemaking skills and non-violent conflict resolution so participants can become familiar with the five personal styles of

responding to conflict, four types of conflict, three common causes for conflict, and communication skills necessary for achieving a “win-win” solution.

During the three-year study, 45 workshops were presented by teams of teen presenters from eight different settings: one large suburban parish, two city parish clusters, two small rural parishes, one large Catholic high school, one small Catholic high school, and one community outreach center. Midway through this experience, and at the end, the teenagers completed questionnaires. They were asked to rate themselves in eighteen areas, such as their leadership ability, their learning from the project, their confidence level, and their interest in future church leadership.

Three of these eight teams scored consistently higher than the others. These three on the surface seemed to have very little in common. One team was from a small rural parish, one from a large Catholic high school, and one from a suburban parish; they were also on different workshop teams. But what these three groups had in common was very significant: they had (1) had the same youth/campus minister for the three-year period, and (2) a youth leadership team in their home setting. In other words, the research showed that they benefited from having core relationships and consistent support from both positive peers and a caring adult mentors.

None of the other teams had both these assets. Of the remaining five groups, one had a consistent adult for three years, but no youth leadership team. Another had a youth leadership team, but inconsistent adult leadership. The remaining three groups had neither a consistent adult nor a youth team at their home setting. The two groups who lacked one of the two core assets scored no better than the groups who lacked both.

Core Relationships and Real Life

What would it look like if parishes tried to focus on core relationships the way our son's high school did? Imagine a catechetical program with three catechists per group. Imagine that those three catechists stay with their group from middle school to high school graduation -- seven years with the same peers and the same adults. Because there are three catechists, one of them can take off from teaching duty for a semester to get refreshed (through, for example, individual reading and study or taking workshops or classes), as if on a sabbatical. Members of the small group would get to know each other very well. When a stressful or tragic situation develops -- a divorce, an accident, a death in the family -- close friends from church can respond quickly with love and support. This is natural and easy with such a structure in place.

What else might happen? The parents of these young people would get to know each other. They might come to church functions and begin to sit together because their sons and daughters are so close. They might begin to network as well, which is helpful because parents need support, too. If your son or daughter is invited to a party that sounds like it could involve irresponsible behavior, but "everyone else is going," it's easier to pick up a phone and check with another parent who has become a friend. It's also a lot easier to tell your teenagers they cannot attend a party to which "everyone else is going" once you find out that all their friends' parents agree with you and are not letting their teens go either.

Young people need these core relationships, as do adults. Without them, we just don't do as well in life. And yet, how many of us make it a priority to seek consistent support from both a mentor and a small group of peers?

Think of your own colleagues in ministry. Do you know anyone who has burned out? If so, did that person have a mentor or a network of colleagues to provide regular support? Chances are, that person did not have these two core relationships in his or her life.

Many religious educators and youth ministers think that only new directors need mentors. This is simply not true. Mentors are important and helpful, even for seasoned professionals. Many directors also think that they are too busy to attend meetings of professional associations or district/regional groups. Again, this is not healthy thinking. We need support from our colleagues and peers, as well as support from a mentor. These two kinds of support are different, and both are necessary for us.

Here's an example. After a tough parent meeting if I tell a group of colleagues how two parents treated me terribly, embarrassing me in front of my pastor, I will get lots of responses. Some will be sympathetic, telling me it happens to everyone; some will be humorous and make me laugh with their worst parent meeting stories; and some will ask me questions to help me review the situation. All the comments help to give me perspective, realize I'm not alone, and to give me courage, for if others can hang in there, so can I. I need such empathetic support.

Nonetheless, upon hearing the same story, my mentor will respond differently than my colleagues. My mentor will ask me to analyze the situation: How did I feel? How did I respond? What did I say? What did I learn? How would I do things differently? Where can I go from here? It's a different kind of support, but I need that kind, too.

Colleagues give us balance; a mentor pulls us forward. It's like riding a bicycle. We need both kinds of support -- it's good for us as professionals and it's good for the children and youth we serve. These two core relationships bring about transformation.

Core Experiences

The next part of transformational ministry involves core experiences. To illustrate, I offer another story about my son.

When he was in middle school, my husband and I decided that we, as a family, would serve meals at our cathedral's soup kitchen. Our son was furious and this decision and refused to go with us. He complained to us, insulted us, threatened us, and did other things that angry middle school youths do. We listened, tried to reason, tried to understand, and finally told him that he was part of the family, so he was coming with us. And so he did, but he remained angry. He hung out by the stove, stirring the chili with obvious resentment. All I could think of was how embarrassing it was for the son of two youth ministers to be acting in such a non-Christian way. But I did my best to ignore the situation, hoping it would go away.

It did, thanks to a stroke of luck – or grace.

Through a window in the kitchen, our son could see the line of people as they entered the soup kitchen. And there, standing in line, was a boy he knew from school. Instantly, his resentment vanished and he saw with new eyes. “Hunger” had a familiar name and face.

His mood changed. He became curious and asked us questions on the way home: “How can my friend be poor? What do his parents do for a living? Where do they live? How come they don’t have enough money to buy food? What’s it like for him to stand in line with a bunch of poor people? What do I say to him when I see him at school? How can this be happening?”

We tried to help him understand the connections between minimum wage, the cost of living, local industry, the state of the economy, and the availability of affordable housing. All of this bothered him greatly.

Because it happened to be Lent, he was hearing regularly at church about serving the poor, and about praying, fasting, and giving alms. At home, we had the Catholic Relief Services “Rice Bowl” on our supper table, with its pictures of hungry children from all over the world. We watched him pick it up and stare at it many times. One night he threw it across the room. “These faces are all from so far away,” he said. “Doesn’t anyone know there are poor people here in my own town?” It was clear he was struggling, searching deeply for answers.

Finally, he told us he wanted to return to the soup kitchen and sit down with the people who came. He wanted to eat with them and listen to their stories. The poor people standing in line had become real to him. They had begun to matter.

This story about our son exemplifies the four core experiences that lead to transformation: *service, learning, reflective prayer, and leadership*.

When he noticed the boy in the soup kitchen, he became aware. This happened while he was performing an act of service, even though he was reluctant and resentful. That new awareness made him curious, and more open to deeper learning about the overall situation. He asked questions, and we tried to coach him to find answers. As he went to church each week, read the Rice Bowl prayer at family meals, and was reminded of hungry faces, he reflected and struggled with his new knowledge. That was reflective prayer at its best. Finally, he resolved to do something new. He had made a decision about his life. He exercised leadership skills. He announced that he was going to return to the soup kitchen with a new attitude. Our son's individual transformation demonstrates the importance of those four core experiences.

Core Experiences and Popular Models of Ministry

The importance of the four core experiences of transformational ministry are seen in many popular models of ministry in the areas of service, learning, prayer and leadership.

For example, the Pastoral Circle, based on Joseph Holland and Peter Herniot's work, is a model of Christian service. Their four movements are named (1) Insertion, (2) Social Analysis, (3) Theological Reflection, and (4) Pastoral Planning. Thomas Bright and John Roberto from the Center for Ministry Development call these same four movements (1) Awareness, (2) Exploration, (3) Reflection, and (4) Action Planning.

Those of us who were trained in education would also recognize the work of Kurt Lewin, John Dewey, and David Kolb in describing the learning cycle. When I teach catechists and teachers, I call this the "Four G's of Teaching": (1) Grab my attention, (2) Give me something new, (3) Get something out of me, and (4) Go make a difference.

Those familiar with the Benedictine tradition of *Lectio Divino* might also recognize how this prayer process has similar steps (1) *Lectio* (reading and experiencing a Scripture passage), (2) *Meditatio* (thinking deeply about the Scripture), (3) *Oratio* (expressing your feelings and deepest self to God in prayer) and *Contemplatio* (emptying yourself and receiving God's deepest self to you in prayer), and (4) *Actio* (planning an action based on your new insights).

Finally, those of us who have been trained in leadership and youth ministry will recognize that the most basic decision-making process (made popular as "SODAS" by Michael Carotta and Valerie Vance Dillon in *Growing up Sexually*, from the *Discovering* Series of Saint Mary's Press) also has four similar steps: (1) State the Situation, (2) Identify the Options, (3) Reflect on the Disadvantages and Advantages of the options, and (4) Select and plan the best option.

These four models that involve service, learning, reflective prayer, and leadership all dovetail with the four basic movements that involve doing, learning, reflecting, and deciding.

These basic movements were identified by young people in Tomorrow's Present. Its research phase had three phases. The first phase was the training, when the workshop teams learned and began to present their three workshops. The second phase focused on strategy: At youth forums, young people in mixed groups found out what kinds of youth programming and leadership opportunities were available in other parishes and Catholic schools. When they returned to their home groups, they designed events and activities they would carry out at their schools and parishes in order to increase youth leadership opportunities. The third phase focused on implementation: young people all over the archdiocese implemented the plans they made at the forums.

One young person from each youth forum, and from each workshop team -- a total of twelve -- were randomly selected to be interviewed about their experiences with Tomorrow's Present. Their comments (and the comments of their youth/campus ministers) were analyzed into sub themes that fell into five areas. Besides the need for *support* (core relationships), they also identified the need for *leadership, service, learning, and prayer* (core experiences). They didn't use the word, "transformation," but many of the young people talked about how being part of this project had changed their lives. Many of them expressed greater interest in ministry and church leadership.

Beyond the way transformation worked in the story of my teenage son in a soup kitchen, we need to imagine how core experiences can work in a parish or school that provides holistic youth or campus ministry programming.

Core Experiences and Real Life

What if our parish programming were designed deliberately to integrate these four core experiences? What if (1) new experiences were followed by (2) curious fact finding, (3) age appropriate reflective prayer, and finally (4) decision making and action planning which would then lead to (1) new experiences all over again? The results would be transformational.

Many religious educators and youth ministers will hear about these four core experiences and decide that similar opportunities are already available for everyone in their parish, and they would be correct: Parishes naturally have service opportunities. There are classes for faith formation. There are opportunities to pray: Mass, Stations of the Cross, saying the rosary, and so on. And finally, there are youth leadership training camps that teenagers can attend. However, it isn't enough to have these options available. They need to be an intentional part of all programming so that there is a deliberate, holistic, integrated pattern in everything a young person does.

A teenager who (1) goes to a soup kitchen but is not assisted or coached (2) to learn from it, (3) to reflect on it, and then (4) to plan a new action based on it, is less likely to be transformed from that service experience. Likewise, teaching children or teenagers church doctrine is not going to transform them unless they go through a similar

set of four integrated steps. They need the catechist to (1) grab their attention and make them curious, (2) give them new information in a way that makes sense to them, (3) have them apply that new information in a way that gets them involved and then (4) help them find a way to go make a difference in the world, now that they have these new insights.

Parish staffs might listen to this research, agree that it sounds interesting, but believe there is not enough time and there is too much content to cover. But it seems to me we spend much time teaching many topics in a shallow way. What if we spent our time teaching fewer topics in a deeper way? What if? I think the results would be transformational.

The young people in Tomorrow's Present learned a single topic in a thorough way. Some of them focused on liturgy, some on ministry, some on justice and peacemaking. Their learning was deeper and more intense, but the result was a greater curiosity and interest in other areas of their faith.

Sometimes I think I would rather have young people graduate high school with less information about their faith, and more curiosity about learning for the rest of their lives. More curiosity, more wonder, more fascination, more desire -- not more information -- these are what make good disciples.

What Would Jesus Do?

We've all seen WWJD bracelets and T-shirts. While it may be a fashion statement, it certainly is an important question to ask: What would Jesus do? Every time young people try to answer that question regarding an issue they care about, they become

engaged, they learn more about Jesus, and they learn about themselves. That very process can be transforming.

So what *would* Jesus do if he were a catechist? According to the stories in the gospels he'd most likely start with the group's experience, and tell stories. He'd get their attention, lead them into deeper thought, and then teach something new. Next, he'd have everyone apply this new teaching to their own lives. They would have to chew on it, pray about it, and struggle with it a bit, until they had redefined some key issues or patterns. Finally, he'd challenge folks to go out into the world, maybe two by two, and make a difference with their new insight and courage. Then when everyone came back, they would swap stories, hear about each other's travels, learn from each other, and be ready to start the process all over again.

This is exactly what Jesus did with his disciples. He led folks through the four core experiences. Jesus was a terrific mentor. And having the twelve apostles together for three years created a very consistent support system of peers. By calling them to community, Jesus was providing the two core relationships of transformational ministry as well. In fact, Jesus created among the Twelve what some researchers today would call a "learning community."

Doing what Jesus did—creating learning communities for faith formation—is the easiest way to combine core relationships and core experiences. Learning communities are the perfect environment for transformational ministry to take place.

Learning Communities and Research.

A learning community is a community of continuous inquiry and improvement. Those involved in a learning community are dedicated to sharing their learning with each other so that all members grow. Shirley Hord, a researcher with the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory in Austin, Texas, identified five characteristics of learning communities.

1. Shared Leadership.

When leadership is shared and supportive, the person in charge is a servant, not a boss. Jesus modeled this by washing the feet of his apostles and calling them to do the same for each other. This kind of leadership is not hierarchical, but flat. Everyone has something to offer, and everyone has something to learn.

2. Collective Creativity.

This is sometimes called, “synergy.” In other words, we are better together than each of us can be separately. The disciples learned community together. When the Holy Spirit came, it came to everyone, together, on Pentecost. As church, we believe that we can do better together than any of us can do apart even though all of us are individual sinners.

3. Shared Values and Vision.

Jesus’ last recorded words in the gospel of Matthew help shape the vision of what we are to do as church: Go make disciples. We are called to witness by word and action all that Jesus taught us. Then they would know we are Christians by our love.

4. Supportive Conditions.

In learning communities, everyone is supported physically and emotionally. The story is told in the gospels of the multiplication of loaves and fish. Jesus preached all day, feeding his followers spiritually; and then made sure that they were physically fed at night.

5. Shared Personal Practice.

Jesus was consistent in his expectations, and the apostles knew where they stood. When Simon declared that Jesus was the messiah, he was called “Peter, the Rock.” When he told Jesus not to speak of suffering and death, he was told to “Get behind me, Satan.” In a learning community, people call each other to accountability, and challenge each other to be their best selves.

Learning Communities and Real Life

Intentionally creating learning communities is one of the best ways to bring about transformational ministry. They naturally provide the two core relationships of mentor and peer support, and they provide the perfect backdrop for processing through the four core experiences of service, learning, reflective prayer and leadership.

Instead of seeing themselves in classes, children and youth in faith formation can see themselves as belonging to a learning community. They can even name their group and design a personal group logo. Similar to the way our son’s high school homeroom

functioned, learning communities can be the center of support and involvement, with mentoring adults who stay with their groups, so they can grow together.

Renew groups, small Christian communities, or basic ecclesial communities are all examples of learning communities. Parishes are discovering life-changing effects that when they create such small communities with their adults and/or families.

When people are supported by both peers and mentors, they are transformed. When people process knowledge through experiences of learning, prayer, leadership, and service, they are transformed. They become people who experience something new and naturally want to learn from it, pray about it, and make life decisions based on it, so they can better serve the world because of it. They become people of integrity.

This is what the apostles did, and this is what small Christian communities are doing in countries all over the world. This is what our son's homeroom did, and this is what groups of young people can do in every parish.

Yes, it takes some energy to rethink the way we do catechesis and ministry. Yes, it takes energy to restructure, and change existing programs. But it also takes energy to continue to work through a structure that is not effective. As a matter of fact, it even takes energy to bang our heads against a wall!

By making such a change in our programming structure we would not be giving up content; instead we would be processing content in a deeper, more meaningful way. Young people – and their catechists – would grow in their faith, and in their understanding of what it means to be life-long disciples. They would be transformed.

Some of them might even begin to consider lay ministry, priesthood, or religious life as a serious option.

Transformational ministry is not a new concept. It's a new insight about concepts and practices older than Christianity, supported by both ancient traditions and very recent research. Religious educators and youth ministers don't have to reinvent the wheel. They can refer to leadership training resources and ministry programs for children and youth which use as their foundations this natural cycle of four core experiences, along with the support of two core relationships. They can also follow the example of Jesus, our master teacher. And what would Jesus do? He probably wouldn't bang his head against a wall.

For more information, visit these web sites:

About Search Institute: www.search-institute.org

About Learning Communities: www.sedl.org/pubs/catalog/items/cha34.html

www.sedl.org/pubs/change34/4.html

About The Center for Ministry Development: www.cmdnet.org

About Transformational Ministry: www.tomorrowspresent.org

For more information about the Pastoral Circle:

Holland, Joe & Henriot, SJ, Peter. (2001, Sixteenth printing) Social Analysis: Linking Faith and Justice. NY: Orbis Books (in collaboration with the Center of Concern: 3700 13th Street, NE, Washington DC, 20017).

Bright, Thomas & Roberto, John. (1990). The Pastoral Circle: a Guide to Analysis and Action on Justice Issues. In J. Roberto (ed.), Access Guides: Justice. New York: Don Bosco Multimedia.

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