

Youth Leadership Training and Transformational Ministry

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“The ministry of Leadership Development *calls forth, affirms and empowers* the diverse gifts, talents, and abilities of adults and young people in our faith communities.”
(*Renewing the Vision*, 1997, page 40).

Calling forth

Several years ago, our family served meals at a soup kitchen. Our one son was unhappy with this decision, and remained at the stove, stirring the chili with obvious anger and resentment. At one point, he noticed a boy he knew from school in the line. Suddenly his mood changed. “The Nameless Poor” now had a name and a familiar face. His anger vanished and he became curious.

He started to ask: How can my friend be poor? Where do his parents work? Where do they live? Why don't they have enough money for food?

We talked about minimum wage, the cost of living, the economy, and the lack of affordable housing. He started to understand how complicated life could be.

Because this happened during Lent, he kept hearing about “prayer, fasting and almsgiving.” He prayed for the poor at Church; at home, he prayed the CRS “Rice Bowl” prayer at suppertime.

He finally decided to return to the soup kitchen, to eat with the people there, and listen to the stories of their lives.

Folks who work in social justice might quickly point out the four movements of the “Pastoral Circle” in this true story.

- Awareness (when he visited the Soup Kitchen and saw his friend)
- Exploration (when he began to ask questions and investigate the issue of hunger)
- Reflection (as he prayed at church and home)
- Action Planning (when he decided to return and talk with the people).

If we are concerned with calling forth the gifts, talents and abilities, we need to be aware of how transformation occurs in a person. The Pastoral Circle describes this process in service and justice work.

Educators might talk about transformation in terms of the Learning Cycle. I like to summarize this with the “Four G’s of Teaching” – Grab my attention, Give me something new, Get something out of me, and Go make a difference. No one can be taught anything new unless we first grab their attention. Then, the real learning takes place after they have

initially applied new knowledge, and then tried to do something more creative and significant. The deep learning of those four steps transforms students.

Liturgists might talk about the transformational process of prayer. They might mention the four movements of prayer (Call to Prayer, Hearing the Word of God, Responding to God, and the Sending Forth) or the major parts of the Mass (The Opening Rites, the Liturgy of the Word, the Liturgy of the Eucharist, and the Dismissal & Final Blessing).

Youth ministers might talk about the “SODAS” method of decision making: Describe the Situation, Explore the Options, Reflect on the Disadvantages and Advantages, and Choose the Best Solution.

All of these different approaches – those from service, learning, prayer, and leadership – are talking about the same basic process of transformation. And each approach would say that the basic process involves some aspect of the four core experiences of service, learning, prayer and leadership:

Pastoral Circle (Service) →	Awareness	Exploration	Reflection	Action Planning
Learning Cycle (Learning) →	Grab my attention	Give me something new	Get something out of me	Go make a difference
Liturgy and Movements of Prayer (Prayer) →	Call to Prayer Opening Rites	Hearing the Word Liturgy of the Word	Responding to God Liturgy of the Eucharist	Sending Forth Dismissal and Final Blessing
SODAS (Leadership) →	Describe the Situation	Explore the Options	Reflect on Disadvantages and Advantages	Choose the best Solution
Transformational Ministry →	<u>SERVICE</u>	<u>LEARNING</u>	<u>PRAYER</u>	<u>LEADERSHIP</u>

Transformational Ministry is a model, based on research, which illustrates how these four core experiences are needed to change a life, to transform a person. Leadership training is essential for everyone; it cannot be reserved for a select few. If one of these four experiences is missing, the process is not complete.

Imagine studying the issue of hunger, without providing outreach to those in need of food. Without service, it's a useless exercise. Imagine bringing milk or meat to a food distribution center with no refrigeration. Without learning, the food would be wasted. Imagine working at a soup kitchen with a superior attitude. Without a spirit of prayer and humility, your arrogance would hurt your efforts to provide food; the guests could feel demoralized. Finally, imagine working at a soup kitchen with no schedule, no budget, and no meal plans. Without leadership, the place would soon close.

It's no mere coincidence that all four approaches describe the same core experiences. The best way to call forth gifts, talents and abilities is to be sure that all four core experiences – including leadership – are part of any process you provide.

Affirming

Young people cannot usually waltz through these four core experiences alone. In fact, most people do not experience transformation in a vacuum. They usually do it with the help of two core relationships – a mentor (teacher, coach, youth or campus minister) and a group of peers (class, team, church or school group). Research has shown that the benefits of having consistent support from both a mentor and a peer group are very powerful.

If you're in a school setting, think of the benefits of having home room with freshmen, sophomores, juniors and seniors plus two teachers. Think of the consistent peer and mentor support that could provide. The groups could celebrate birthdays and new drivers licenses; they could plan Lent and Advent projects together. If one teacher left, the other one would still be there to provide continuity. If you work in a parish setting, think of the benefits of having small groups stay together with the same three catechists or youth workers over the years. Then one adult could always be taking a half year "sabbatical" to learn more and stay fresh, so adult burn out would decrease. In both settings, whenever there was a death or divorce or other family crisis, you would already have a "pastoral care" network in place to provide presence and comfort.

A combination of two core relationships – support from both mentors and peers – is the best way to affirm young people.

Empowering

Educators and Business folks have begun to talk about "Learning Communities." Often, they use words such as "Metanoia" (meaning conversion – or transformation) and "Agape" (meaning unconditional love). It's about time ministry folks start talking about the benefits of learning communities! How can your youth group, team, class or school group become a learning community? Here are five characteristics to develop:

#1. Supportive and Shared Leadership. Young people have a voice, and their opinions are valid and valuable. Adults and youth see each other as partners.

#2. Collective Creativity. We are better together than we can be separately. When we get together, we are more creative, better problem solvers, and stronger people. We have more fun together as well.

#3. Shared Values and Vision. The whole group is committed to the success of the project. We all want the same thing, and we all work together toward the same goal.

#4. Supportive Conditions. Emotionally, people are there for each other. We encourage, comfort, and celebrate each other. Physically, we have decent space. The work is done. People chip in, and material items are taken care of.

#5. Shared Personal Practice. We have certain expectations of each other, and we call each other to accountability. We want to practice what we preach, so we depend on each other's feedback. It's collaborative – if you do well, I do well. Then we all do well.

Transformational Ministry

Pope John Paul II said this at World Youth Day 1993 in Denver:

“The Church needs your energies, your enthusiasm, your youthful ideals, in order to make the Gospel of life penetrate the fabric of society, transforming people's hearts and the structures of society in order to create a civilization of true justice and love.”
(*Renewing the Vision*, 1997, page 50).

How do we transform young people's hearts?

The scientific answer is this: The research indicates that transformational ministry takes place with young people, and all people, when three things happen: (1) When core experiences of service, learning, prayer and leadership call forth their diverse gifts, talents and abilities; (2) when core relationships with mentors and peers support and affirm them; and (3) when they are empowered by their membership in a learning community.

The programmatic answer is this: We have always known that youth ministry is all about relationships and experiences. This research just backs it up with data. But can we be more deliberate about integrating service, learning, prayer and leadership? Can we be more deliberate about keeping mentors and peers more consistent? Can we develop learning communities in our catechetical programs, our campus ministry programs, our faculty, parish staffs, our Boy and Girl Scout troops, and even our sports teams?

Transformational ministry is just a model. What we do with that model is what actually changes lives.

NOTES

1. Transformational Ministry is a model that surfaced as a result of research done in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee. For more information, you can order the book *Changing Lives: Transformational Ministry and Today's Teens* from www.tomorrowspresent.org.

2. The SODAS method of decision making was made popular by Michael Carotta and Valerie Vance Dillon in their book *Growing Up Sexually*, part of the *Discovering* series of Saint Mary's Press. For more information, call 1-800-533-8095 or visit www.smp.org.

3. Shirley Hord is the researcher who first identified these five characteristics of a learning community. For more information about learning communities and their characteristics, visit www.sedl.org/pubs/catalog/items/cha34.html and www.sedl.org/pubs/change34/4.html.