



## *Youth Ministry in an Inconvenient Church*

What might be the character of a youth ministry in a church of radical discipleship? What is a church of radical discipleship? What would be its characteristics? Do we know an example of such a church locally? In such a church, how would the young get from A to Z in the pursuit of discipleship? How would youth go from being spectators in the household of the Spirit to full members? How would youth move from being consumers in a consumerist culture to having a commitment to the poor and to gospel simplicity? How will they master the skills of discipleship? (And just what are those skills?) What changes would have to occur to make radical discipleship accessible to the young? These are some of the questions I wish to address in this lecture. These questions surface in dilemmas that don't go away and decisions that must be made.

The most basic form of teaching is that of exhibiting the behavior or skills you would like people to adopt, explaining why these behaviors are good or helpful, and then coaching the group in learning these same behaviors. I fear that in most churches people never get to the basics. Once someone mentions getting to the basics, some people begin their own inner chant about how so many young people don't know the basics of their faith, claiming that they can't even recite the Creed. But I am not talking about the basics as verbal formulas or abstract truths. By basics I mean the basic habits, skills, and attitudes needed to be a disciple of Jesus. One might add "gestures" to this list, because gestures so often disclose habits and attitudes a person might wish to disguise. Are there gestures typical of those who follow Jesus of Nazareth? I think there are. To help you understand where I am coming from, let me contrast the gestures of consumerism with what I am calling the gestures of the gospel.

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## *The gestures of capitalist consumerism*

The key gesture of capitalist consumerism is the closed fist, the fist that grabs, as in “grab all the gusto you can get.” A related gesture is the closed fist that does not grab but that grasps, as a fundamental gesture about life: “Everything I have is mine; I earned it, and I intend to keep it. I’m not giving up my hard-earned money to support the lazy on welfare.”

Another gesture is sometimes called “the flip,” or what I prefer to call “an obscene finger gesture,” which can also take the form of an obscene arm gesture. It is a dismissive gesture that says, “You got in my way. How dare you, when you are nothing! I am the only important person in this event.” The gesture is often accompanied verbally by offensive sentences that begin with “Go...” These gestures tend to be habitual and not so easy to free oneself from.

A third gesture might be “the scowl.” “Who do you think you are?” Or, “what are you doing in my neighborhood?” Such a scowl says to the other, “You are my enemy.”

## *The gestures of discipleship*

What are the gestures of those who accept Jesus’ imagination of what it means to be human? Are there gestures that are not exactly distinctively Christian but at least characteristically Christian, in other words, that accompany people who try to imitate the gestures of Jesus? I say there are.

Instead of the closed fist that grabs, the gesture of Christian discipleship is the open hand that offers food to the hungry or comfort to those in pain. It says, as Jesus did at the feeding of the multitude, “Pass around what you have and let’s see how far it goes.” Open hands are a fundamental Christian gesture and a fundamental one for public as well as private prayer. Before we take food into our hands to eat, we open our hands in thanksgiving to God for the gift of food.

Instead of the obscenely raised finger, the gesture of discipleship is the healing gesture of embracing we find in the father of the prodigal son or in the helping gesture of raising up we find in the Samaritan who recognized the humanity of the injured one.

Instead of the scowl, the gesture of discipleship is the look of attentive acceptance of the other, the kind of look Jesus must have had in his encounter with the woman at the well or the woman taken in adultery. Or it is the smile of joy at seeing the face of someone we “love.”

There are other gestures, but I leave you to consider them yourselves. Gestures are nonverbal ways of communicating. Wordlessly they signal



attitudes. Many of the gestures and actions prompted by Jesus' imagination of the human have to do with food, with people in pain, with the doubtful, with the sick, or with the dying. All these gestures, both the consumerist ones and those I am saying are gospel-inspired ones, represent learned physical ways of communicating, skillful ways of getting our point across.

Here I am asking the following question as a youth ministry question, a question largely unasked in the context of youth ministry. What are the skills of discipleship appropriate to a self who has moved beyond childhood, and how will they be exhibited by a community of discipleship in such a way the young might wish to imitate them, seeking out the masters and mistresses of those skills as mentors? By what criteria will a person know if he or she has moved to a skill-level appropriate to his or her age? These are the questions that show themselves when we ask about the kind of self inspired by Jesus and by the credible community of his followers.

The idea of habits, skills, practices, and gestures does not seem to be a central one in the youth ministry literature I see. However in the *General Director for Catechesis*, formation in the Christian way is set forth as "more than instruction" but as "an apprenticeship of the entire Christian life" [Par. 69-70, USCC 1998 edition]. An apprenticeship is a time of mastering the skills that make up a particular craft. Does this idea have value for those ministering with youth in the church? Does it signal a shift toward more attention to behavior and to the skills of action? I think so.

### *Convictions about Skills*

I have been struck by how young people themselves judge the importance of skills in their lives. They are convinced that in certain endeavors skills are clearly needed. There is no question about the matter, and to even raise it about these areas appears ridiculous. The first of these is sports. All know you cannot walk onto an athletic field and demand to be on a sports team. You need to exhibit the skills of that sport at a level equal or nearly equal to that of the team. In most instances the skills are recognized as not just individual skills, since you don't qualify for team membership unless your individual skills can be blended into team play. It is important to note here that the pursuit of ever-enhanced athletic skills, though exhausting and even tedious, is no dour endeavor. It takes place in a celebrative atmosphere, where levels of competence are appreciated, openly acknowledged, and celebrated. Exhaustion is compensated for by exhilaration.

Another area recognized as demanding skill is school, with grades exhibiting to some degree one's level of academic proficiency. Few will

deny that one must know how to write standard English prose sentences in order to qualify for high school-level or college-level schooling, and fewer still will deny that these skills help one qualify for many jobs in the workplace. The workplace itself is a third uncontested zone demanding skills. To secure paid employment, you must show you have the skills for the position. There is no argument about these points; society has successfully taught them. I have never heard a young person question these convictions about the need for skills in sports, school, and work.

There are, however, areas where young people don't consider the need for skills. Again, young people don't invent this conviction; society itself hands it on to them. The first of these de-skilled areas is love relationships. As one nineteen-year-old once told me at the start of a semester (and with considerable insight), "I don't need no marriage course to tell me the kind of person I like." If my semester with him was successful, he came to an even greater insight: that recognizing the kind of person you like does not represent a full range of interpersonal skills.

Another skills-unrelated area is parenting, where love for a baby is thought to give a person a full range of parenting competence. When I told a young mother I was sending her two books about parenting to mark the birth of her first child, she responded—again with some insight but the same grammatical imprecision—"I don't need no books to teach me how to love my baby." I presume she quickly learned for herself that affection for her child does not disclose the range of skills needed to care for a tiny infant.

The third area is my concern here: religion.<sup>1</sup> Most young people I meet see religion as an area devoid of skill, a conviction successfully taught them by religion itself. Religion is an optional interior attitude: having nice thoughts or loving thoughts about God. The idea that a religion is a discrete set of practices that forges a distinct way of being in the world—more like a sport than a set of thoughts—is one many young people have never considered. If there is a practice to religion, it is thought to consist of a single activity, and one they would reject: attending religious services. This conviction is defended with an equation: If you love God who knows all, God knows of your love, and you don't have to be part of a religious assembly to show that love. However, if you do assemble but don't love God, you are a hypocrite. In order to avoid hypocrisy, don't assemble.

Can ministry to youth reclaim its connection to the tradition of formation in discipleship as a set of practices necessary for "seeing the Lord?"<sup>2</sup> Can it embrace these practices and celebrate them in ways that are credible with the young? Here I offer two examples, a counterexample of the use of



practices and a positive one. In 1998, World Vision, a Christian program to alleviate hunger and poverty in economically distressed areas of the world, publicized its attempt to involve thousands of U.S. youth in a fast to raise money for starving children in the world's poorest countries. Clearly aimed at youth themselves, the ad reads in part:

Make your mark through the planet's coolest event! ...It's World Vision's 30 Hour Famine—the worldwide event you and your group won't want to miss. It's fun. It's free. And best of all, the 30 Hour Famine lets you make your mark on a world that's seriously hungry.

This ad can be examined from many angles. Its language speaks for itself. The event is cool, it's fun, it's free, so don't miss out on the fun. It also misnames a fast as a famine, trivializing thereby the horrors of famine. Famine is a very different kind of event from a fast, and for those caught in it, it's not "a cool event" in any sense. I am not denying a fast of solidarity might raise consciousness about world poverty and hunger, and help the young reconsider what hunger feels like. My question is, can this be done without trivializing youth's energies and capacity for thought the way this ad does? What other ways, less manipulative and truer to their capacities, might the young come to understand the global collusion in the deaths of children by hunger? My other questions are about how variations of such an ad, with the same message that religion is fun and entertaining, can be found in youth ministry literature across the country. "Like what?" you might ask. I answer that question with a question, "Is the supreme sacramental moment of the youth ministry program in many places the ski trip?"

Here, on the other hand, is a positive example of the use of practices. A student in graduate theology, a former restaurateur, merchant seaman, butcher, and barman-cum-bouncer, accepts a part-time position in youth ministry at a suburban New York Catholic church: twenty hours a week. His mandate is open-ended if not particularly helpful: "Do something with the teens. Get them involved in something at the church." In his first meeting with the small group of young people who gather to meet him, he proposes they go once a week to a soup kitchen in a troubled neighborhood of Brooklyn and serve meals to the hungry. He also proposes they meet another day each week and prepare some simple but large, nourishing dish for the hungry. None of the young people has ever been to such a place, and they are interested, though unsure their parents will approve. Neither has any of them done much cooking at home and certainly not the preparation of a

large quantity of food. He explains to them that Jesus called his followers to feed the hungry, and that's what they will be doing.

When they meet the next week to cook, he doesn't need any icebreakers or group building activities. They set to work cooking. He explains to them how to go about it. They have only so much time to complete the task: a huge bowl of potato salad. Everybody gets busy, and they "break the ice" with each other as they go about their task of peeling, cutting, cooking, and so forth. When they finish about two hours later, they sit for a moment of prayer.

Two days later, at the moment for bringing the food to the soup kitchen, the young people are somewhat anxious about what is going to happen. Their mentor reassures them they will be fine, and during the forty-five minute van trip he details exactly what it will be like and what they will do. Basically he answers their questions. They arrive, serve meals, including the one they had prepared themselves, and tumble back into the van. On the trip back to suburbia, their guide explains to his friends—in response to their questions—how it happens that such a large group of people in their area comes to the soup kitchen to eat. They also sing songs and tell their favorite jokes. In subsequent trips, the group doubles and triples as more and more young people want to cook and serve. Transportation is a problem. Parents have to volunteer their vehicles and their own service as nervous drivers of their late-model vehicles in a questionable neighborhood. On arriving back at their church, the groups always spend a few minutes in prayer for those they met that day.

The questions, conversations, songs, and jokes go on for weeks and weeks of "food runs" to the hungry (that's what they are called), each trip offering an hour and a half of conversation about themselves, their world, the poor who don't eat, the rich who haul their newest purchases in their front doors and, when they no longer satisfy, out the back door to the yard sales. Implicit in the miles of driving and the hours of conversation are questions about who our neighbors are, about what those who gather to worship do in the spaces between times of worship, about the purpose of life, about discipleship, and most implicit of all, what it means to be a self who takes Jesus' proposals seriously.

The rest is for a lengthy report. The group grows in various ways and finally agrees to spend a whole weekend learning about how certain social groups come to be beaten down, about the deeper problems of change, and about what the Gospel and the church has to say about such matters. Whether the young ever state that what they did was cool or fun or free, I do



not know. What I do know is that their action was not a one-time event, but a continual, ever more attentive, ever more appreciative set of activities. What did the efforts of this group have to do with self-esteem? I cannot say, except that its weekly trips to Brooklyn were surely prompted by esteem for the hungry there and marked by appreciation for the efforts of one another. My hunch is that they learned not just how to cook, serve a table, and talk to guests. They might have learned these things in their own homes without ever using them to serve people in desperate need of food. The youth learned a new *sensibility*, a new way of feeling the plight of the poor, a new conviction about the rightness of people being able to eat, an emerging sense of the structural injustice in the way society parcels out rewards and punishments. They may even have gotten a new sense of their own selves.

Shifts in our sense of self are important but not instantaneous. Ministry with youth does well to pay attention to this sense of self. In some important ways, it defines us. If I could use a kind of shorthand here for matters needing more thorough treatment, I would put the matter this way. We are defined in the following ways:

- by the things we find funny and the things we find tragic. Such things are not superficial acts of a self but defining acts. What spontaneously “hits us” as funny or tragic betrays to us, even when we may not want to see it, who we are.
- by how we allow ourselves to be addressed or named and how we will never allow ourselves to be addressed or named. These allowances or disallowances point to the boundaries of the kind of self we are.
- by the things we cannot do and the things we won’t do.
- by how we see the place of God in our lives, the deep way we see who God is for us and where God fits in our lives. (How God “hits us.”) This self-defining presence of God is different from the ritual intoning of God.
- by the allegiances we cannot pledge. These include pledges of allegiance we choke on, that we cannot utter.
- by the things we don’t want our eyes to see—and the reasons we don’t want to see them. We turn our eyes from such things instinctively or because we have decided such things are not fit for our eyes.
- by the names of those we admire or those we consider our role models or our heroes or heroines.
- by the places of entertainment we are willing to enter—and by those places we would never enter for entertainment.

I am claiming here that practices foster sensibility but also that sensibility

fosters practices, habits, and gestures that become “characteristic” of us. I also claim that ministry with youth could become much more action-centered, practice-centered—behavior-centered. What follows here is an outline of some of the practices those working with youth might want to consider as part of the program of apprenticeship suitable to disciples of Jesus. If the metaphor of a “Circus Barker” is an appropriate one for what some in youth ministry actually do when the ministry becomes one largely of entertainment, then I wish to propose an alternative metaphor: the skilled craftsman, who invites youth to begin to master the skills of discipleship in an atmosphere of joyful celebration of common effort to live the gospel.

To make my proposal here more specific I offer a listing of some gospel practices that may open themselves to implementation in youth ministry. Insofar as these are indeed practices of the Christian Way, my rendition of them may raise questions for readers, whom I encourage to stew in those questions for some while before dismissing them. At the end of each of these three lists, I add a “recognition” required for actually practicing them. By “recognition” I am trying to suggest a way of looking at the world through a gospel lens.

*Love of neighbor, as seen in individual and communal acts:*

- Feeding the hungry
- Sheltering the homeless
- Caring for and healing the wounded
- Warming the frozen
- Visiting the imprisoned
- Comforting those in anguish
- Confronting the oppressor(s)
- Siding with the oppressed
- Being attentive to the needs of those whose lives are diminished
- Taking a stance of doing no harm, physical or spiritual, to others
- Counseling and/or educating the confused and the ignorant
- Recognition: Seeing others as the proxies of Jesus and as the locus of God’s presence

*Love of the relationship between self and neighbor:*

- Forgiving wrongs done to self and others
- Seeking forgiveness for wrongs done to others
- Responding to insults and injury with kindness and compassion
- Recovering and prizing our common humanity



- Bonding with all persons of goodwill and seeking goodwill in those lacking it
- Replacing violence with peaceful sister and brotherhood
- Fostering loving committed relationships between life partners and between parents and children
- Resisting greed and misuse of the world's goods
- Resisting the temptation to judge the motive of others
- Recognition: God's presence is found in human loving kindness

### *Worship:*

- A habit of communal worship, based on a need to come together with others of like mind to celebrate their common faith
- The desire to assemble for communal worship
- Frequent unscripted moments of communion with God and regular periods of prayer
- Ongoing reflection on the sacred writings
- Recognition: an underlying habit of seeing the presence of God in the world

### *Others:*

- Maintaining emotional bonds in disputes
- Moderation instead of excess
- Fasting instead of addiction
- Sharing instead of hoarding
- Openhandedness instead of greed

At this point, I can hear someone ask the following question, “Okay, Mr. professor doctor, but I am sorry. You have given lots of bits of ideas but only one detailed example, that of the soup kitchen. But in my neighborhood or my church or my situation of not working with kids in a parish setting but in a school, cooking up bowls of macaroni for a soup kitchen just won’t work. What help do you give to me and my kids? Obviously this is a good question. I claim that any of the points within the three areas above—love of neighbor seen in particular acts, love of the relationship between self and neighbor, and worship—can be opened out to a skills-based program.

Take prayer as an example. Consider developing a skills-based approach. Set up a NEXUS group (new encounter with Christ using scripture). It cannot be done in a vacuum, out of the blue. But when you find young people ready for prayer, wanting to know what personal prayer is all about and *ready* to develop some prayer skills, show them how to find space

in their own home where they can quiet themselves, slow themselves down, each day for ten minutes. Then teach them how to pick at random a passage from the New Testament, reflect on it for five minutes, and then talk to Jesus about “how it hits them.” Before the end of their prayer session, they should write a few words in their journal. Then each week they should come together to do the same thing in a group, sharing what they wish of their own journal reflections with the group. In this way, they are learning to get their feet wet in private prayer and also in group prayer.

Or take the example of an interpersonal list. What about bringing young people together to develop skills of conflict resolution (using a lot of role playing) and to try to do it so well that they could role play these skills for younger kids. Older teens—those sixteen and older—might want to learn how to do conflict resolution in boy/girl relationships. There is some skill involved in listening to another, not getting defensive, and trying to see the situation from the other side. Harriet Lerner’s books *The Dance of Intimacy* and *The Dance of Anger* could be very useful in such a program. But “is it Christian?” Of course it is, in a context that makes clear God’s call to love one another. I myself think there is much work to be done with young people on the skills of friendship as one aspect of the gospel call to love one another.

Or visiting the imprisoned. Philip Berrigan was seventy-six-years old and in jail in Maine for a couple of years for his actions to expose our nation’s weapons of death. During that time letters would have given him great comfort. There are other people in jail that could be comforted with letters. All I am saying is that these ideas are not from the towers of academe all draped with ivy. They are realizable in the real world.

Are they inconvenient? Yes. But is the gospel inconvenient? I’ll let you answer that one. Is Jesus inconvenient? Remember that the disciples on their way to Emmaus were headed away from Jerusalem, but after meeting Jesus, they returned the way they had come. Was that an inconvenient turnaround? When we stop being local churches of self-congratulation, “Ain’t we something?” and start awkwardly and endlessly asking what the gospel means in our own time and in our own neighborhoods—for us—then youth ministry will become what it should be.

### *Ministry in an Inconvenient Church*

In conclusion, I would like to explain why I have entitled this lecture “Youth Ministry in an Inconvenient Church,” a strange title for some. Briefly this is what it means: Ministry in the churches cannot be properly understood outside of mission, the mission of Jesus, which he did not originate but which



was given him by God. We find that mission in the Gospels and other New Testament writings. Jesus' mission defined him, marked him with a particular character. Jesus' mission was not only laborious and inconvenient but it was downright dangerous. One could be killed for that, and he was. What exactly was his mission? Well, it can be found in various of Jesus' words in the Gospels, but a stunning place where Jesus sums it up is in Matthew 11, when the jailed John the Baptist sends his follower to Jesus to ask him, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for someone else?" Jesus' answer is about his mission, and it is interesting how it moves to crescendo:

"Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and [...and what, what is the last sign that Jesus' mission is truly of God] the poor have good news brought to them." [Matthew 11:4-5]

And what is that good news for the poor? That their misery is not God's will but a human abomination.

The earliest churches took on that mission, and the result was various ministries, all tied to being a disciple of Jesus in a particular time and place. Those ministries were not just programs of those churches, but they were expressions of who they were. Their mission and ministries defined them. Today much of what is called youth ministry does not flow from the life of the local church. It is a *program* of a particular church.


When a local church's ministry is organic, flowing from its very life, and endemic (literally, in the "demos" or crowd or community), flowing from the very nature of the group, then *its ministry to youth* is organic and endemic. When youth ministry becomes a gesture of welcome from the church that says, "This is who we are; this is how we live; we invite you to be part of our living discipleship," then it has an organic and endemic character. "Now that you are moving to a time of full agency in your life we invite you to walk with us in our own efforts to become better disciples of Jesus. You can enrich our own efforts." As I hope to make clear: When the local church is a living sign of the good news, then its ministry to youth is likewise a living sign, flowing out of what the church is living.

But back to the New Testament churches. None of that ministry was convenient in those churches. It was about as convenient as trying to sneak food into the Warsaw ghetto, which is to say that early-on ministry was downright dangerous and you could be killed for it, and many were. That mission questioned policies of the state. It pointed out injustices, which were tolerated

because leaders profited by those injustices. That's why it was dangerous. It pointed to the social castoffs and insisted they were the proxies of God's own self and, later, of Jesus' own self. These New Testament churches denounced greed in a big way, giving numerous examples of why it was evil to feast sumptuously while your pet dogs ate better than the beggar starving at your gates. In today's terms maybe, the question might be why it is a social abomination when automobiles are housed in spacious heated garages while the homeless freeze on our sidewalks or when corporations are given generous financial gifts (tax breaks called corporate welfare) while poor women with small children are punished for being poor.

This comment of mine is inspired by St. John Chrysostom who said to the comfortable Christians of Antioch,

Your dog is fed to fullness while Christ wastes with hunger. Christ has nowhere to lodge, but goes about as a stranger, and naked and hungry, and you set up houses out of town, and baths and terraces and chambers without number, in thoughtless vanity; and to Christ you give not even a share of a little hut.<sup>3</sup>

The New Testament churches were a ministry both to church members and to society. But much youth ministry in the churches I have known does not have this character of inconvenience—let alone danger. It is a ministry of fun. Its goal is to get the young to love the church and to know that the church loves them. The young are to feel good about the church and to feel good about themselves. The ministry is vague about the gospel but clear about its goals: Have a good time under the aegis of the church. In some youth ministry programs, the most significant event of the year is the annual ski trip. To enjoy such a trip a young person may have to brush up on the skills of skiing. Here I have proposed we give more attention to the skills of Christian discipleship than to the skills needed for an annual ski trip. 

## NOTES

1. See Johann Baptist Metz, "Suffering unto God," *Critical Inquiry* 20 (summer 1994): 611-622. Here Metz repeats a slogan used many years ago by "many young Christians": "Jesus, yes—church, no." Today, Metz claims that the often unspoken slogan is: "Religion, yes—God, no," the attitude of many who are looking for a religion-friendly godlessness, an era of religion without God. Metz's insight into the contemporary mind set does not deal with—nor contradict—my point here, that one needs to be in a community of practice to achieve insight into the ethos of any particular religion. I presume Metz would agree with my point that the two must be brought together: a community of practice seeking to encounter and disclose the God who won't fit in to our jacket pocket, or as he puts it "the god of contingency management." See pp. 613 ff.

2. Marianne Sawicki, *Seeing the Lord: Resurrection and Early Christian Practices* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1994).

3. Dolores Greeley, "St. John Chrysostom: Prophet of Social Justice," *Studia Patristica* vol. 18, ed. Elizabeth Livingstone, pp. 1163-1168.