



THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY SERVICE IN THE FAITH DEVELOPMENT OF ADOLESCENTS

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Background

Reviews of the social scientific literature (King & Boyatzis, 2004) indicate that there had been little exploration of the religious and spiritual development of adolescents until the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR) was conducted in 2002-2003, involving both a nationwide random phone survey of parents and teens as well as face-to-face in-depth interviews with selected adolescents. The NSYR researchers discovered that the vast majority of U.S. teenagers value religion and are exceedingly conventional in their beliefs and practices (Smith & Denton, 2005). At the same time, the researchers found teenagers to be “incredibly inarticulate” (p. 131) about their faith. Moreover, the teens studied almost universally assumed an instrumental view of religion, that it helps individuals do and be what they want, with no reference to external traditions or authorities or divinity that make compelling claims on their lives. The researchers concluded that “very many religious congregations and communities of faith in the United States are failing rather badly in religiously engaging and educating their youth” (p.262); and that “young people should be taught to *practice* their faith. . . in the sense of consistently working on the skills, habits, and virtues in the direction of excellence in faith, analogous to musicians and athletes practicing their skills” (p. 269). The current study examines community ministry as one way of enhancing the faith maturity and faith practices of adolescents in congregations.

Christian Faith Practices and Community Service

The Christian practices to which they were referring are those activities that, taken together, constitute a Christian life of faith. Some of these practices are worship, Bible study, prayer, confession, giving financially, providing hospitality, telling and listening to the Christian story, talking together about meaningful life experiences, serving others in need, and working for justice.

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Dykstra lists fourteen such activities in his work on Christian faith practices (Bass, 1997b; Bass & Dykstra, 1997; Dykstra, 1986, 1991, 1999). The NSYR study used a shorter list of behavioral indicators to define teenage religious devotion: verbalizing that religion is extremely important to them, attending congregational activities at least weekly, and praying and reading the Bible regularly.

The NSYR researchers found that those teens they defined as “devoted” were twice as likely (50%) to do noncompulsory volunteer work as the religiously disengaged (25%), and to volunteer more often (Smith & Denton, 2005, p. 230). Other researchers have also found a link between teen religious involvement and community service. The Youth Volunteering and Civic Engagement Survey found that 64 percent of teenagers who attend religious services regularly also volunteer, compared to 41 percent among those youth who never attend religious services (Grimm, Dietz, Spring, Arey, & Foster-Bey, 2005, p. 2). Among teenage volunteers, those who attend religious services are nearly twice as likely to volunteer regularly as those who do not (p. 3). Other studies reinforce the finding that the more important religion is in the lives of adolescents, the more likely that they are involved in service (Kerestes, Youniss, & Metz, 2004; Youniss, McLellan, & Yates, 1999).

Outcomes of Community Service for Adolescents

Engagement in community service is related to positive outcomes in the lives of adolescents. Researchers have found that those involved in service as children and teens are much more likely to be involved in service as adults (Campbell, 2003; Janoski, Musick, & Wilson, 1998). Others have found that volunteering *through their congregations* as children and youths is linked to volunteering behavior when people reach adulthood (Hodgkinson & Weitzman, 1994; Wilson & Hanoski, 1995). In addition, a national study by the Search Institute found that young people who are involved in service are much more likely to be firmly bonded to their churches and much less likely to drop out of school. They are less likely to engage in behaviors that put them at risk, such as using drugs and alcohol; they have higher intrinsic motivation toward school work and a future career (Johnson, Beebe, Mortimer, & Snyder, 1998; see also Zaff, Moore, Papillo, & Williams, 2003).

The kinds of community service activities available to adolescents differ, and it would seem that activities would also differ in the impact they can have on those teens involved. Wuthnow (1995) conducted a national qualitative study of how teenagers learn kindness and service to others. The teenagers he interviewed were participating in programs helping the homeless, responding to environmental problems, tutoring, and caring for persons with AIDS

and residents of nursing homes and hospitals. Wuthnow concluded that the religious setting is not only the most frequent but also the best environment for nurturing the helping impulse in teenagers. Through the right kind of volunteer work, teens can find the role models and moral incentives that will instill a calling to service that they often carry into adulthood. According to Wuthnow, some of the key characteristics of service for encouraging the growth of caring in teens include:

1. *The experience must expose young people to need and create identification with the person suffering; there must be direct personal contact.* Raising money (selling candy, soliciting support for a cause, etc.) or providing free labor (stuffing envelopes, typing, etc.) do not create and may even detract from the growing sense of caring in young people.
2. *Young people develop “scripts” that they hear from others, remember, and internalize that explain their reasons for wanting to help others.* These frameworks of meaning do not need to be explicit or detailed, but they must explain why it is good to be a caring person. Support groups of caregivers, where volunteers can share their stories with one another, powerfully reinforce caring and kindness.
3. *Role models are important to teens.* When busy adults work with a teenager, it has special meaning and becomes a model for the teen’s own caring. The most significant role models are those who step out of their roles as teachers, coaches, pastors, or volunteers long enough to listen to and share themselves with teens.
4. *Kindness often is fundamentally symbolic.* It may indeed be helpful—the tutoring, the warm soup. But it carries deeper meaning beyond the gift itself. Kindness tells us we are not alone and that others are concerned enough about us to care. Young people need experiences that lead to the realization that small actions count, even though they do not solve all the problems or make the world more perfect. (Wuthnow, 1995).

Wuthnow was studying the development of kindness, which although different than the concepts of religion and faith, nevertheless provides provocative ideas for the impact of volunteering on the faith life of teenagers. In considering how community service can best contribute to faith development, others

have suggested that teens need to be guided to reflect on the meaning of their activity from a religious perspective (Roehlkepartain et al., 2000). Swezey (1990) explored how community service within college campus religious life could support and challenge students' faith development. In interviews, students said they had experienced transformation of their attitudes and values as a result of service. Some posed questions about larger issues of social injustice that they have encountered (Swezey, 1990). Youniss, McLellan, and Yates (1999) went further and collected essays from teenagers who did mandatory service as part of a high school religion course on social justice. They found that the service experience stimulated reflections on the religious meaning of service. Students wrote and talked about Christian duty, seeing God in the lives of persons who are poor and homeless, and fulfilling the teachings of Christ through their service. As adolescents contribute to their communities, researchers have hypothesized that they develop a sense of self transcendence (Hansen, Larson, & Dworkin, 2004).

Purpose of the Study

Researchers have established that community service is correlated with positive outcomes in the lives of adolescents, and that those young people who are active in their congregations are also significantly more likely to be involved in regular community service. The question remains, however, whether community service *contributes* to a more active life of faith and connection to congregational life, or is it simply that those teenagers active in congregational life have more opportunity to engage in community service programs. Are some teens more active than others in general, and so more involved in activities such as congregational attendance and youth service projects? Or are religious behavior and community service actually related to one another, so that service is actually influencing teens' spiritual and religious lives? One study found that volunteering with family members is associated positively with faith development (Roehlkepartain, 2003). Does this relationship between volunteering and faith development hold across other kinds of community service activities as well? This study was designed to examine how community service is related not only to religious involvement but to the faith maturity and faith practices of adolescents.

Methodology

We hypothesized that significant increases would exist in measures of Christian faith development and faith practices for adolescents actively involved in community ministry. Furthermore, we hypothesized that the significant increases would exist

independent of the effects of gender, ethnicity, living situation, how often adolescents participate in their congregations, and how long they have attended their current congregations.

Sampling and Participant Selection

The study involved secondary data analysis from a purposive sample of 35 congregations located in six states. The research team selected congregations that were (1) Protestant Christian, because the project was not large enough to study the array of U. S. religious congregations; (2) urban and suburban rather than rural because of the greater potential for formal community service programs in urban and suburban settings; and (3) currently involved in at least one community service program. The sample included congregations with diverse identities and affiliations: Baptist (including Southern Baptist, Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, National Baptist, and Missionary Baptist); (n=9); Christian Reformed (n=7); United Methodist (n=5); Episcopal (n=3); Presbyterian (n=3); nondenominational (n=3); Assemblies of God (n=2); Lutheran (n=1); Seventh Day Adventist (n=1); and African Methodist Episcopal (n=1). Researchers also selected a distribution of congregations that were predominantly Anglo American (n=18), African American (n=9), Latino (n=5), or multiethnic, i.e., with no dominant ethnic group (n=3). The total sample consisted of 7,403 participants that completed surveys attending the 35 congregations (Garland et al., 2002; Garland, Myers, & Wolfer, 2005; Hugen, Wolfer, & Renkema, 2006). The sub-sample of adolescents consisted of 631 participants 13-18 years of age.

Instruments

Adolescents completed a congregational survey developed by the research team. The congregational survey gathered demographic information about congregants—length of time attending the congregations, frequency of church attendance, gender, ethnicity, age, and family living situation. It also included a brief version of the Faith Maturity Scale (FMS)(Benson, Donahue, & Erickson, 1993); a 24-item structured instrument that asked respondents to indicate how true each statement was personally using a seven-point Likert scale ranging from “never” to “always.” There is some precedent for using this scale with adolescents (McEntire, 2003; Roehlkepartain & Williams, 1990).

In addition, based on the theoretical work of Bass and Dykstra (Bass, 1997a; Bass & Dykstra, 1997; Dykstra, 1991, 1999), the team developed a Christian Faith Practices Scale (CFPS) that asked respondents to use the same seven-point Likert scale to indicate how often they participated in a list of 13 faith behaviors or “practices.” A final section of the survey asked respondents to indicate whether they were personally involved in “community ministry,” a term familiar

in American Protestant congregational life (e.g., Bobo & Tom, 1996; Dudley, 1991; e.g., Dudley, 1996; e.g., Garland et al., 2002; e.g., Martin & Powers, 1981; e.g., Smith & Brown, 1996), and defined on the survey as “involvement in activities encouraged by your church that support the physical, material, emotional, and social well-being of people from your congregation, neighborhood, and community.” The survey provided examples of community ministry to facilitate accurate responses.

Results

Table 1 presents the sample according to key demographic variables. Although there were slightly more teenage girls than boys, the gender of the sample was proportionately diverse. In the same way, age was proportionately distributed among the three age groups. A majority of the participants were Caucasian (n=445, 70.5%). Nevertheless, the distribution of the sample by race/ethnicity

Table 1: Frequency Distribution of Sample Demographics

<i>Variables</i>	<i>N(631)</i>	<i>%</i>
Gender		
Female	339	53.8
Male	292	46.2
Age		
13-14 years	232	36.8
15-16 years	226	35.8
17-18 years	173	27.4
Race/Ethnicity		
Caucasian	445	70.5
African-American	89	14.1
Hispanic	86	13.6
Pacific/Asian-American	11	1.8
Living Situation		
Parents	607	96.2
Friend or Roommate	19	3.0
Other (alone, spouse, child)	5	.8
How often involved in wor/act in congregation	(n=614)	
More than once a week	284	46.3
Once a week	241	39.3
Once every 2-3 weeks	45	7.3
Once a month	10	1.6
Less than once a month	34	5.5
Personally involved in community ministry		
Yes	289	45.8
No	342	54.2

is similar to national trends (United States Census Bureaus, 2001). Almost the entire sample of adolescents lived with their parents. Without enough variation, living situation was not included in subsequent analysis. Of the 614 adolescents that responded to the item, a large majority reported being involved in worship and activities in their congregations at least once a week ($n=525$, 85.6%), not a surprising finding since the survey was conducted as a part of weekly congregational activities, most often on Sunday morning. Further, however, nearly half of the sample ($n=284$, 46.3%) reported being involved more than once a week. Slightly more than half indicated that they were personally currently involved in community ministry.

Preliminary Analysis

Preliminary analyses were run to assess for differences in faith outcome scores between adolescents personally involved in ministry and those that report not being involved. Significant differences were found on the Faith Maturity Scale ($t= 6.56$, $df=629$, $p=.000$) and the Christian Faith Practices Scale ($t=7.13$, $df=629$, $p=.000$) between those teenagers actively involved in community ministry and those who were not. Actively involved teenagers scored significantly higher on the FMS (mean=111.76, $SD=20.83$) and on the CFPS (60.93, $SD=10.75$) than those who were not involved (FMS mean=100.57, $SD=21.77$; CFPS mean= 54.67, $SD=11.20$). The findings confirmed our first hypothesis and warranted further analysis.

Multivariate Results

The data were analyzed using binary logistic regression to examine factors that explained personal involvement in community ministry. Binary logistic regression is well-suited for analyzing dichotomous variables because the procedure estimates an odds ratio of the probability of a value category being present (or not present) given certain factors (Peng & So, 2002).

Table 2 shows the values of factors examined to explain the relationship between personal involvement in community ministry and faith outcomes of adolescents. The measures of faith maturity (FMS) and faith practices (CFPS) were the only statistically significant factors to explain personal involvement in community ministry independent of the variables of age, gender, ethnic, identity, frequency of congregational involvement, and length of time they had been part of the congregation. The odds of adolescents being personally involved in community ministry increased 1.036 times with each point increase on the CFPS. In the same way, the odds of adolescents being personally involved in community ministry increased 1.012 times with each point increase on the FMS. The findings confirmed our second hypothesis that the significant

Table 2: Logistic Regression of Factors that Predict Involvement in Community Ministry

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Exp(B)</i>	<i>95% CI Lower/Upper</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Wald</i>	<i>d.f.</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
CFPS	1.036	1.013/1.058	.035	.011	10.04	1	.002**
FMS	1.012	1.001/1.023	.012	.006	4.59	1	.032*
Gender	1.363	.969/1.919	.310	.174	3.16	1	.075
Age	.985	.895/1.083	-.016	.049	.103	1	.748
Pacific/ Asian-Amer.	2.471	.672/9.081	.905	.664	1.85	1	.173
Hispanic	.705	.293/1.697	-.349	.448	.607	1	.436
Caucasian	.451	.191/1.064	-.796	.438	3.30	1	.069
African- American	.492	.203/1.194	-.708	.452	2.45	1	.117
Wor/act in congregation	.839	.493/1.429	-.175	.271	.416	1	.519
Time in congregation	.987	.955/1.019	-.013	.017	.663	1	.415

Note: * p< .05; ** p<.01

increases in faith outcomes would exist independent of the effects of gender, ethnicity, frequency of participation in worship/activities in their congregations, and how long they have attended their current congregations.

Discussion

The teenagers in this study were all active in their congregations. They varied both in the maturity of their faith and in the various ways they practiced their faith, variations not related to their degrees of congregational involvement but to their degrees of community ministry involvement. Teenagers who were involved in community ministry through their congregations scored significantly higher on the Faith Maturity Scale and on the degree to which they practice their faith in daily life.

With total possible scores of 91 for the CFPS and 168 for the FMS, the significant connection of community service with faith maturity and engagement in faith practices is powerful, according to these findings. For example, using the mathematical model for logistic regression: Probability (y=1) = $e^{\alpha + \beta x} / (1 + e^{\alpha + \beta x})$

^{+ betax}) where: Probability ($y=1$) is the probability of an adolescent being personally involved in community ministry; alpha and beta are parameters of the regression estimated from the data, and corresponding to the intercept and slope of the regression line; x is an adolescent's score on either the FMS or CFPS; and e is the base of the natural logarithm (approximately 2.718); an adolescent that scores 20 points higher on the FMS is 25% more likely to be personally involved in community ministry. In the same way, an adolescent that scores 20 points higher on the CFPS is 200% more likely to be personally involved in community ministry.

Consequently, these findings suggest that those who want to help young people develop a rigorous, meaningful faith life should involve them in meaningful service. Unfortunately, the earlier NSYR study found that only a minority of adolescents - 30% - have ever been involved by their congregation in a missions team or service project, compared to the 50% of U.S. teenagers who have been to a youth retreat or conference (Smith & Denton, 2005, p. 69).

This research indicates that community service should hold a central place in many youth ministry settings. Involving teenagers in authentic service to real needs accompanied by reflection on the connections between service experiences and religious teachings and other practices—perhaps with some pizza and “fun” mixed in—can serve as a fruit-bearing path for ministry. Treating teenagers as partners in ministry rather than objects of ministry is an important and empowering distinction for developing new generations of spiritual leaders.

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