

The Ministry of Presence

A reflection on the essential 'work' of youth ministry.

(by Phil Daughtry)

She was 15 and I was 23. She had been living in loose proximity to her older sister (21) in a caravan park somewhere on the outskirts of Brisbane. I was in the same city for a church leadership conference. She had been filling her days smoking dope and going to bed with a variety of the male residents of the van park. I had been learning to 'move in the Spirit' and experience an intimacy of quite a different kind. We met in an emergency accommodation youth shelter. She was there because she had nowhere to live and no family to belong to, I was there for a week of live-in 'observation' before returning to my church and home in North Queensland. The shelter manager gave me a summary of her story and it broke my heart. Her name was Sharon.

How does a 23-year-old, emerging church leader, living a comparatively comfortable and conservative lifestyle, offer meaningful support to a vulnerable, yet street-hardened, sexually active, homeless young woman? I didn't have the faintest idea. My saving grace came in the form of the lounge room pool table. Sharon liked playing pool, so did I, neither of us were much good at the game but it gave us a point of contact. Over the following 3 or 4 days we played quite a few games of pool. During these times I would try to initiate meaningful conversation, the dialogue flowed like cement. By the end of the week I had found out one or two personal details about Sharon and we had one brief conversation about God. Most of the time we just played pool and exchanged the occasional sentence or two.

Towards the end of my final day at the shelter I was standing in the hall with my suitcase packed. Sharon walked past and I stopped her to say goodbye. Her eyes opened wide with surprise and she said, 'where are you going?' I thought that she had picked up, through general conversation, the fact that I was just a visiting 'worker'. She hadn't, and when I told her that I was going back home to Townsville, she started crying. I was stunned, I really had no idea that my coming or going would make any real difference to the street-wise, independent, young woman I had tried (unsuccessfully I thought) to get to know.

Reflecting on this scenario, I realised that, despite the awkwardness of my conversational attempts and my feelings of irrelevance, I had managed to convey a meaningful non-verbal message. My attempts to 'be' with Sharon during the week had in some way 'spoken' to her need for authentic companionship in the midst of a dark and lonely and confusing experience. I hadn't done a thing to alleviate her logistic or social circumstances, I hadn't helped her to work out any kind of long-term strategy for her future accommodation scenario (others in the service were attempting to address these important issues). I simply offered her the security and comfort of caring presence.

The ministry of presence is at the very heart of meaningful youth work. I have so many memories of turning up to youth group gatherings on a Friday night, and having at least 5 or 6 teenagers all at once trying to tell me about the events and experiences of their week. What's that all about? Its about a mixture of things really. Its about the fascination that young people have with their own lives. Its about the need that young people have for the validation of their experience and existence. Its about the need for adult comfort in times of pain and vulnerability. Its about the need for a kind of security which can only be met by the availability and attentiveness of a safe and familiar older person.

Recently, at a mother's day service in my home congregation, the worship leader invited people to talk about a significant memory of 'being mothered'. One man spoke of his mother's support of his life-long passion for cricket. His significant memory was simply that, at every game he played, he knew that at some time during the day's play he'd look up to see his mother's car parked outside the boundary. She might stay just for half an hour, or an hour of play, but every game he could count on her presence for some part of the match. A woman in the congregation stood to recount, in tears, her memory of her mum canceling an important evening engagement to stay home and spend time with her after she'd had a particularly bad day at school during her year 7. For both these 30-something people, now both parents themselves, the outstanding memories of their own experience of being parented had to do with the ministry of presence.

Of course we are all aware that the kind of parental presence, represented in the above stories, is all too rare a commodity in the context of the complex demands of contemporary life. Even for those young people who are blessed with an attentive and available parent/s, the proverbial truism , 'it takes a village to raise a child', calls for

a broader response to the presence needs of young people. This calling has so much to say to our philosophy and practice of youth work.

I'm always at least a little disturbed by 'outcome' or 'purpose-driven' approaches to youth work, and to ministry and people work in general. Youth workers in the welfare/community sector are increasingly under pressure to prove the value of their service through documented evidence of client 'outcomes'. The funding bodies of such services will tend to define these outcomes in socio-economic quantifiable terms. Therefore, it becomes all-important to demonstrate the fact that the 'client' is being enabled to successfully engage with the culturally orthodox systems of education, training and employment. In the process of demonstrating that 'clients' are being adequately motivated and supported in the quest for the Western cultural 'Holy Grail' of economic independence, the far more difficult to measure, holistic and quality-based approaches to youth work are under-valued and pushed to the margins. The ministry of presence, if recognized at all, comes to be viewed as an optional extra, rather than as the core business of youth work.

A similar dynamic can also affect church and para-church based approaches to youth work. In the Christian sub-cultural context of youth work, outcome-focus is stated in terms of 'discipleship' and 'spiritual growth'. The discipleship-outcome driven youth ministry is often characterised by a programmatic and systematic process which is focussed on moving young people through a series of 'stages' in their spiritual development. Purpose statement-style slogans such as, 'making fully-fledged disciples', tend to reflect a 'production-line' approach to ministry. In the outcome-focussed Christian youth work culture, every relational and community experience must demonstrate a pragmatic developmental outcome to validate its existence. Small group ministry must be specifically structured around the core strategies and goals of the overall program. Mentoring relationships must be intentional, contractual and developmentally productive. The ministry of presence, if it operates at all, is viewed as a means towards an end: the relationship becomes the subservient medium to the all-important pragmatic 'spiritual' goal.

Now, I'm playing something of a devil's advocate game with regard to my criticism of outcome-focussed youth work. I'm really not opposed to the idea of developmental goals and strategies. The concepts of economic independence and spiritual development obviously represent important transitional tasks which have huge potential to impact a young person's sense of dignity, self-worth and ability to play out a meaningful role both in society and in the Kingdom. However, I am genuinely concerned that in our

approach to youth work, pragmatism, structuralism and professionalism do not displace the essential gift and way of being with young people which is suggested by my use of the phrase 'ministry of presence'.

Theological and Pastoral Perspectives on Ministry of Presence:

Theologically, our approach to ministry of presence is wonderfully empowered by a healthy appreciation for the incarnate medium of Jesus' work of salvation. The incarnation communicates to us a non-verbal message of incredible significance: 'For God so loved the world, that He came for a lengthy visit.' Thankfully, Jesus didn't take a strategically minimalist approach to the salvation of the world. He didn't 'drop in' as a fully-formed adult, conduct an intensive and targeted public preaching campaign, climaxing in a brief, bloody, focused response to the forensic issue of 'justification', hanging around just long enough to clarify the mission statement of a newly-inaugurated spiritual movement before shooting back up to his transcendent, executive office. The incarnation, particularly the 'silent' majority of years which Jesus spent on earth, suggest to us that He was intensely interested in being present in the everyday experiences of human existence. His extended presence and His willingness to share the common journey, are the factors which seem to empower the more 'strategic' aspects of Jesus teaching and miracle-working ministry.

It is this kind of theological perspective which seems to be influencing a growing trend within the 'contemporary' Christian movement to call pastoral workers back to a presence-orientated approach to ministry. Many will be familiar with Eugene Peterson's influence in this area¹, calling pastoral workers back to a biblical and historical approach to the work of the ministry:

Classically - and I have not seen anything in the twentieth century that has made me revise my expectation - a pastor is local. You know people's names, and they know your name. There's no way to put pastoral work on the assembly line... Pastoral care can be shared, but never delegated.¹

In their excellent publication, *The God Bearing Life* (The Art of Soul Tending for Youth Ministry), Kenda Creasy Dean and Ron Foster identify 'Ministry of Presence' as a core practice of spiritual communion:

¹ The *Contemplative Pastor* is an excellent example, and a thoroughly enjoyable and informative read.

Sitting up with a teenager as she pours out her heart over a love relationship that seemed so right and turned out to be so wrong. Hanging out with a couple of youth at Pizza Hut and talking about lots of things, nothing in particular. Listening to a sixteen-year-old boy hesitantly tell the story about his parents divorce. Playing video games and hearing bits and pieces of a middle-high boy's story of trying to be accepted. Praying with a sobbing young woman who doesn't feel that anyone likes her any more. Sitting quietly as a young man tries to figure out what God wants him to do with his life... What these scenarios have in common is hand-holding, or the ministry of presence.ⁱⁱ

One of my favourite 'presence' stories is from Kenneth Leech's *Spirituality and Pastoral Care*. The author narrates the story of Hugh Maycock², '...one of the great clerical characters of Cambridge... and Oxford (universities)', whose study '... had books everywhere, all round the walls, on every chair, and on the floor. Piled high among the books were many packets of Capstan Full Strength cigarettes which he smoked incessantly.' In the author's words, Hugh Maycock :

... seemed to exercise a ministry of pure being. He just was. It was difficult to describe him in terms of what he *did*. A lot of the time he didn't *do* anything. 'I sort of potter about,' he said to someone who asked him about his role at Canterbury, 'and people come and talk to me.' 'What about?' asked the enquirer. 'God' said Hugh, and then chuckled. He was a kind of resident guru at Canterbury, the wise old man, a cross between a Desert Father and a Zen Master - though if Hugh heard anyone saying any such thing, he would say it was 'ridiculous'. His priesthood was one of being around, being available.ⁱⁱⁱ

The Practical Implications of the Ministry of Presence:

Over the years, one of my great privileges and joys has been the process of recruiting volunteer leaders, helpers and carers for service with the groups and programs for which I have been responsible. Most of these volunteers will express one common fear, and one common question, in relation to the potentiality of their involvement. The common fear could be paraphrased in the following way: 'I'd feel so old working with these teenagers (I've heard this from volunteers as young as 20!), I don't think I can

² Such a good read if you get the chance, the snapshot biography of this 'spiritual eccentric' is both entertaining and liberating.

relate to them, they wouldn't want to have anything to do with someone as uncool as me'. The common question is more simply expressed: 'If I join the leadership team of this group/program, what would I do?' The concept of 'ministry of presence' provides a substantial answer to both the common fear and the common question of new recruits to the field.

In relation to the common fear, I have witnessed time, and time again, the amazing phenomenon of age and sub-cultural barriers dissolving through the process of simple familiarity. In plain terms, if you hang around in the proximity of a group of young people long enough to become a familiar feature of their environment; eventually, they **will** talk to you. Amazingly, a least one or two of them will come to relate to you as a comforting and safe source of relational support and occasional life-guidance. There is no secret technique to this, although it does help to have a specific role within the group (you're the person who helps with transport, or organises the games, or gives the devotional talk etc...). What is important, in breaking through the 'rejection barrier' with young people, is the discipline, and initial discomfort, of showing up on a regular basis in a place where a specific group of young people are gathered. I have seen some of the 'least likely' and 'un-hip' mature-age adults become something of a local legend to the youth groups they serve through this simple application of the ministry of presence.

The concept of the ministry of presence also provides a substantial response to the question of: 'If I serve this youth group/ministry, what will I do?' I was recently asked this question by a young man whom I invited to participate in a youth camp as an informal 'peer mentor', and who was concerned that he might end up 'just hanging around'. My response was along the following lines:

'Imagine that this youth camp is a party and you are one of the hosts. A good host mingles with the guests, and in some ways is indistinguishable from the partygoers. But a host has a very different agenda for being at the party, and while looking relaxed, is ever alert to the social dynamics of the event. A host uses her or his personality as a bridge of connection between 'fringe attendees' and established conversational groups. A host will fill some of the relational 'gaps' in the social fabric of a party with her own presence and conversation. A host will seek to inject life and enthusiasm for the event through the medium of their own personality.'

The above, I think, is a reasonable analogy of some of the pragmatic functions of the ministry of presence. Which, in this light, is seen to be much more than just 'hanging around'.

Of course, presence ministry at its best, is also attuned to the theological and spiritual potentialities afforded by the social context. For an excellent illustration of spiritual 'opportunism', within a presence ministry context, I refer to another excerpt from *The Godbearing Life*:

I once had a group of teenagers stop by the church after school to help with a bulk mailing. Because of their various extracurricular activities, they arrived in a somewhat staggered fashion. A few got to work at 2:45 P.M. Another joined us at 3:30 P.M., and the last person didn't arrive until nearly 4:00 P.M., just as we were wrapping up. We drove to get ice cream, which led to an interesting *en route* conversation about justice (it just wasn't *fair* that everyone got the same thing) and grace (everyone got the same thing). What a perfect entrée into the parable about the labourers in the vineyard and the nature of grace. I retold the story briefly, tied the two events together; and they made their own connections. With the cookies and cream and mint chocolate chip, I mixed in a little theology, a natural outgrowth of the situation at hand. They didn't even notice, and a scoop of theology often tastes better that way.^{iv}

I've often wondered what happened to the young woman whom I met at the youth shelter so many years ago. Since that time, I've had the privilege of being alongside of so many other young people both for brief and extended periods. Some of these have been in similar desperate situations, others have struggled with seemingly less dramatic issues, and still others seemed to be leading a stable and reasonably happy existence. All of them expressed, in many different ways, a desire and appreciation for the company of a safe, caring and interested adult presence at different stages of their life's journey. Our response to the presence needs of young people calls us back to the very heart of essential youth work. It also encourages us to see that the very best gift that we can bring to the field is the simple offering of ourselves in attentive friendship.

ⁱ ‘The Business of Making Saints’ an interview with Eugene Peterson in the journal *Leadership* (Spring 1997: 20-28).

ⁱⁱ Foster, R. & Creasy Dean, K. *The Godbearing Life - The Art of Soul Tending for Youth Ministry* (Nashville, Upper Room Books: 1998) 140.

ⁱⁱⁱ Leech, K. *Spirituality and Pastoral Care* (Charles Paine Publishers)

^{iv} Foster, R. & Creasy Dean, K. *The Godbearing Life - The Art of Soul Tending for Youth Ministry* (Nashville, Upper Room Books: 1998) 180 - 181.

