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Student Ministry: Preparing Young People as Leaders for the 21st Century

Chris Hackett

University of Notre Dame Australia, chackett3@nd.edu.au

Shane D. Lavery

University of Notre Dame Australia, shane.lavery@nd.edu.au

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Submitting Author Name: Dr Chris Hackett

Submitting Author Contact Phone & Email: (08) 9433 0159 chackett3@nd.edu.au

Co-Authors Name: Associate Professor Shane Lavery cfc

STUDENT MINISTRY: PREPARING YOUNG PEOPLE AS LEADERS FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

Dr Chris Hackett

Associate Professor Shane Lavery cfc

The University of Notre Dame Australia

Introduction

Ministry with young people has never been more important. Ever-increasing local, national and global concerns demand that schools must do more than prepare young people as responsible citizens. They must prepare young people as emerging leaders with a civic conscience who proactively seek solutions to issues such as increased poverty, the plight of refugees, terrorism, climate change, and corporate greed. This article is about student ministry. Student ministry, as defined in this article, specifically aims to build leadership capacity in school students. In particular, the article attempts to highlight the distinctiveness of student ministry and those ways it promotes and develops the innate leadership potential of all students. Three other forms of ministry to young people, pastoral ministry, youth ministry and campus ministry, are initially described by way of contrast. An understanding of student ministry follows this description. The need for student ministry in Catholic schools is then explored. The article concludes with a brief outline of the authors' pilot study, the findings of which will be presented at the conference.

Pastoral Ministry, Youth Ministry and Campus Ministry

The origins of the term "ministry" lie in the Greek word *diakonia* or menial service (Treston, 2000). The word literally means, "to wait on table", to render service during a meal. *Diakonia* was not a common word and in its secular Greek usage it was certainly not a title of honour. Yet, this was the word chosen by the early church to express the New Testament understanding, both of ministry and of leadership (Adair, 2001). The disciples of Jesus are called to have a servant mind and attitude among themselves (Ph 2:5; Jn 12:24-26). The notion of service is used to describe how one should respond to the needs of the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick and the imprisoned (Mt 25), where service to one in need is identified with service to Jesus (Edwards, 1989). The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (2009b) recently noted that Jesus gave an image for ministry and mission when he read from the prophet Isaiah in the synagogue at Nazareth: "The spirit of the Lord is upon me, for he has anointed me. He has sent me to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives and to the blind new sight, to set the downtrodden free, to proclaim the Lord's year of favour" (Lk 4: 18-19). Such an image, the Bishops believe, provides a guiding light for a present day understanding of ministry.

Pastoral ministry focuses on the pastor and the role of the Church. The Archdiocese of Sydney Pastoral Plan 2008-2011 (2007) is a case in point. Its Mission Statement emphasises the fact that Catholics in the Archdiocese are "part of the universal Church under the successor of St Peter" (p. 3) who are committed within the framework of Catholic teaching "to strengthen Catholic life, foster co-operation and service, and strengthen evangelisation" (p. 3). The Pastoral Plan has eight "priorities" that focus on evangelisation and spiritual life, the Clergy,

Parish renewal, marriage and family life, ministry to the poor and needy, young people, Catholic Education, and World Youth Day (pp. 4-5). In similar fashion, the Pastoral Plan of the Diocese of San Jose (2002) proposes a vision for the Diocese of a Church that is not afraid to dream, that makes a real difference in people's lives, that reaches out to the young and the old, is compassionate, forgiving and has a servant mentality. Three pastoral issues are highlighted: lay leadership, youth and young adults, and the social justice teaching of the Church.

Youth ministry is a formalised Church-based program that is clearly centred on young people. For example, the National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry (2007) defines youth ministry in terms of the Church being a "travelling companion to young people". The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (2009b) presents a framework for Catholic Youth Ministry based on three goals. These goals are firstly, to foster the personal and spiritual growth of each young person, secondly, to draw young people into responsible participation in the life, mission and work of the Catholic faith community, and thirdly, to empower young people to live as disciples of Jesus Christ in the world today. The goals are advanced through eight focus areas: prayer and worship, evangelisation, catechesis, pastoral care, community life, justice and service, leadership development, and advocacy (p. 7). The Australian Catholic Bishops argue that this framework is not a single program or recipe for ministry. Rather, it is a flexible, adaptive and inclusive way to develop appropriate programs and tools for youth ministry.

Campus ministry has four main elements. These are: a focus on young people (Nanko, 1997); the ministry takes place in the context of an educational institution (Warrick, 1986); the various programs attempt to challenge the faith life or spirituality of students into active participation (Wermert, 2004); and the campus minister is central to the effective running of the ministry (Furore, Fulay, Iwanski, Petifils, 2007). Definitions of campus ministry tend to focus on programs offered to students. Frequently, these programs involve what Nanko calls pastoral praxis, spiritual praxis, liturgical praxis, and social praxis. Praxis usually refers to the process of putting theoretical knowledge into practice. In the case of campus ministry, Nanko argues that praxis encompasses action "that is both formed by, and in turn, informs identity and mission" (p. 17). Specifically, pastoral praxis incorporates care, counselling and presence cultivated in a climate of trust and hospitality. Spiritual praxis entails prayer and reflection. Liturgical praxis includes celebration of the sacraments, various other ritual expressions, the notion of sacred space, along with an appreciation of the power of ritual. Social praxis embraces social ministry to the vulnerable in society (Nanko, pp. iii-iv).

Student Ministry

Student ministry involves working with young people in a school setting. It frequently incorporates many of the programs associated with youth ministry and campus ministry. Such programs include student leadership development, service-learning and social justice, retreats, prayer and reflection. In this respect, student ministry, youth ministry and campus ministry have strong connections. The fundamental differences lie in the explicit leadership focus inherent in all student ministry programs, the mentoring role which teachers adopt when working with students, and the leadership responsibilities that many students (especially senior students) exercise when working with fellow students.

Underpinning the leadership approach in student ministry is the concept of servant leadership. Critical to servant leadership is the desire to serve first before leading. Greenleaf (1977) stresses that, at the heart of such leadership, is the wish "to make sure that other people's highest priority needs are being served" (p. 13). He argues that the best test of servant leadership is: "Do those being served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?" (p. 13).

The most distinctive feature of Jesus' teaching on leadership was His emphasis that a leader is essentially a servant (Mk 10:42-45; Mt 23:8-12; Lk 22:24-27; Jn 13:12-17). The servant leadership that Jesus exemplified was not a leadership of power and control. Nor was it a psychologically weak leadership. Rather, as a leader Jesus was proactive in the compassionate way he interacted with people – the Gospels abound with examples of such compassion. Moreover, Jesus was not afraid to challenge those in authority when he saw injustice or hypocrisy (Mk 3:1-6; Mt 7:1-5; Lk 7:36-50; Jn 8:1-11). Student ministry programs, especially those centred on leadership, social justice and service-learning, retreats, as well as prayer and reflection all readily provide opportunities for students to learn about and exercise servant leadership. These programs are also excellent opportunities for teacher mentors to model servant leadership in their dealings with students. In such ways student ministry can help develop a leadership culture in young people based on the Gospel understanding of service.

The role of the teacher mentor is pivotal to the success of any student ministry program. However, there is no simple recipe for how to mentor students. The actual responsibility of a teacher mentor will vary according to the needs of the students. The capacity to listen, to explore ideas, to share experiences, to facilitate processes, to share information, to give advice, and to provide feedback (Hunter, Bailey and Taylor, 1997) would seem to be central. The manner in which teachers engage in the mentoring process is vitally important. Being flexible and consultative, as opposed to directive and instructional, allows students to genuinely experience leadership in designing and planning and not simply at the implementation stage (Appleton, 2002). A positive belief in the students' ability is highly recommended (Treston, 2001) as is the idea of viewing those being mentored respectfully as equals who are yet to reach their full potential (Hunter, Bailey and Taylor, 1997). This last point is most important, as there is a danger that adults can underestimate the capacity of young people and trivialise student involvement in leadership endeavours (Gray, 2002). Hart (1992, p. 2) uses words such as "manipulation", "decoration" or "tokenism" to describe this level of student participation in leadership. Lack of appropriate adult support is by far the most effective way to destroy student leadership and initiative. It is the responsibility of all teachers who mentor young people in student ministry programs to be cognizant of their role and what they are trying to accomplish.

As an evangelising agent of the Church, the Catholic school needs to "become the travelling companion of young people" (John Paul II, 1995), to help them meet the challenges of the 21st century. If students are to be able to make a difference, then it is crucial that students are directly engaged in their formation (Smith & Denton, 2005). School leaders have a responsibility to provide the best possible means to ensure that young people in their schools are able to exercise servant leadership as part of their civic and Christian formation. In Catholic secondary schools, student ministry could form an integral part of the evangelisation plan to develop in young men and women a desire to act and lead like Jesus.

The Need for Student Ministry in Catholic Schools

The need for student ministry in Catholic schools stems from the challenges that young people face today. The Congregation for Catholic Education (1997, para. 1) calls the most significant of these challenges a "crisis of values". The Congregation considers this crisis of values to assume the form, especially in highly developed countries, of subjectivism, moral relativism and nihilism. In a similar vein in the USA, the Secretary of Education, Rod Paige lamented that young people:

live in a culture without role models, where millions of students are taught the wrong values—or no values at all. This culture of callousness has led to a staggering

achievement gap, poor health status, overweight students, crime, violence, teenage pregnancy, and tobacco and alcohol abuse (US Department of Education, 2004).

Among the challenges to be faced by young people in Australia are “an uncertain transition to work, the rising cost of higher education, family breakdown and isolation from parents, the implications of cultural influences such as materialism and individualism, and the power of the media and marketing” (Hodder, 2007, p. 180). According to Hodder (2007), young people feel they need to constantly achieve – to ‘be more by having more’ – more friends, more education, more work, more money, more clothes, more social life, more fun. The focus is on the self and immediate relationships, especially friends and family; connections with and responsibilities to a wider community may be minimal.

Hodder (2007) believes that many young people feel a spiritual malaise as a consequence of the various challenges that they face. She argues that a key way of addressing this spiritual malaise of the ‘*My-self*’ generation is to develop stronger “spiritual foundations for Australian schooling” (Hodder, 2007, p. 180). Perhaps young people require a spiritual education that challenges the present self-focusing ‘more’ disposition, an education that explicitly encourages young people to become other-centred. Such an education is reflected in the second “Educational Goal for Young Australians” to achieve (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs [MCEETYA], 2008, p. 9):

- act with moral and ethical integrity
- are committed to national values of democracy, equity and justice, and participate in Australia’s civic life
- work for the common good, in particular sustaining and improving natural and social environments
- are responsible global and local citizens.

The emphasis on addressing this second goal is partnerships. In particular, “Partnerships engender support for the development and wellbeing of young people and their families and can provide opportunities for young Australians to connect with their communities, participate in civic life and develop a sense of responsible citizenship” (MCEETYA, 2009, p. 5). The MCEETYA (2009) document suggests that students need opportunities to work in and for communities. In predisposing students to the values and aspirations enunciated above, many schools have developed programs in community service and service-learning (Lovat, Toomey, Clement, Crotty and Nielsen, 2009). Likewise Catholic schools have embraced such programs, perhaps even, in a counter-cultural direction. Such direction encourages students to consider a Christian response to global and community issues.

Pope Benedict XVI (2008) in his homily at the World Youth Day in Sydney urged young people to consider their future:

What will *you* leave to the next generation? Are you building your lives on firm foundations, building something that will endure? Are you living your lives in a way that opens up space for the Spirit in the midst of a world that wants to forget God, or even rejects him in the name of a falsely-conceived freedom? How are you using the gifts you have been given, the “power” which the Holy Spirit is even now prepared to release within you? What legacy will you leave to young people yet to come? What difference will you make? (para. 9).

If young people are to ‘make a difference’ in the future, to become Christian leaders for the 21st century and avert a ‘crisis of values’, then Catholic school communities have a responsibility to assist young people in addressing the Pope’s challenge. Furthermore, in following up World

Youth Day, the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference “emphasised the need for leadership development, spiritual formation and the inclusion of young people in the life of communities” (2009a, p. 10). By no means, is the school to be the only place to address these challenges; the home and the parish will always be the protagonists in this endeavour (John Paul II, 1979, paras 67-68). However, Catholic schools are obligated to contribute towards the evangelisation of their students by providing a knowledge and experience of Gospel values (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977, paras 8-9).

As part of the Church’s mission of evangelisation (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1997, para. 3), Catholic schools offer a distinctive quality of education that seeks the “integral formation of the human person” and includes developing the students’ “sense of responsibility, [to] learn the correct use of freedom, and participate actively in [community] life” (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2009, para. 1). Catholic schools have a mandate to promote a Gospel vision of society and to help students integrate faith and culture (Catholic Bishops of NSW and ACT, 2007, p. 14; Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009, paras 27-28). Such a vision is part of the Catholic schools’ systematic planning to become “centres of ‘the new evangelisation’” (Holohan, 1999, p. 65; Catholic Bishops of NSW and ACT, 2007, p. 3). One of the ways this vision could be achieved is through student ministry programs.

The role of the Catholic school has become accentuated because of the need for “new evangelisation” where many young people no longer experience an active family or parish faith life (John Paul II, 1990, para. 33). Catholic schools are filled with young people from different backgrounds and outlooks. Many of them have been baptised yet need experiences that re-awaken in them a sense of the sacred and to be inspired to become Christ-like. The authors have begun an exploratory study of how school leaders in three Catholic secondary schools in metropolitan Perth have approached the development of student ministry.

Pilot Study

Research into the design and implementation of student ministry in Australian Catholic schools is limited. What does exist, suggests that student ministry programs are a major factor in the Evangelisation Plan of a Catholic school and contribute significantly to students’ understanding of leadership. For example, Flynn (1993; Flynn and Mok, 2002) noted that students appreciated the opportunities for school retreats. Hughes (2007) commented on the powerful influence retreats can have on young people. He observed that retreats give students an opportunity to share deeply with peers, take their friendships to a new level, and glimpse something of the sacredness of the other and the spirituality of close friendships. A study of eleven service-learning coordinators in Catholic Schools in Western Australia (Lavery, 2007) found that involvement in service-learning programs could have a range of constructive benefits for leadership development in students. The study indicated that service-learning experiences aid in the personal growth of students as future leaders by developing young men and women as leaders who would act with compassion and a strong sense of justice. Specifically, the study highlighted the impact of service-learning on the formation of life skills, that it encouraged the habit of giving, the exercise of gifts and talents for others, and had a positive effect on character enhancement.

At a tertiary level, Australian Catholic University (cited in Groundwater-Smith, Ewing & Le Cornu, 2007) and The University of Notre Dame Australia (Lavery, 2009) incorporate service-learning units as part of their pre-service teacher degrees and diplomas. Analysis of reflective journals from pre-service teachers at The University of Notre Dame Australia, along with their placement supervisors’ comments (Lavery, 2009), clearly indicate the potential for leadership development inherent in service-learning programs. Moreover, Hackett and Lavery

(2010) found that pre-service teachers at The University of Notre Dame Australia cultivated a deeper appreciation of their teacher vocation through leadership, service, and retreat opportunities. In particular, such activities provided important opportunities for pre-service teachers to develop both personal and professional attributes.

To explore ways that Catholic secondary schools can develop an effective student ministry program, the authors have embarked on a pilot study involving three Western Australian Catholic secondary colleges: a boys' school, a girls' school and a coeducational school. The principal, along with other school leaders responsible for student ministry (for example, the service-learning coordinator, campus minister, retreat coordinator), were invited to take part in 30-minute semi-structured interviews. Participants were asked to give their perceptions of student ministry and how student ministry can best be developed. The authors intend to present the findings of this research at the conference. It is anticipated that this research will provide the basis for a more comprehensive investigation into the place and value of student ministry in Catholic secondary schools.

Conclusion

When schools talk about student leadership they are invariably referring to those elected few who hold specific leadership positions. Student ministry allows schools to potentially involve all students in leadership through specific leadership programs, service to the community, reflection, and working with younger students. Such activities enable students to develop a spirituality of leadership based on service and concern for others. Such activities also encourage teachers to use their professional (and personal) skills as mentors and guides to groom young people as leaders, for now and into the future. For Catholic schools, student ministry is one practical way teachers can help young people take up the challenge of Pope Benedict XVI (2008) when he asked of them: Are you building your lives on firm foundations? Are you using the gifts you were given? What legacy will you leave to young people yet to come? And, what difference will you make?

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