The Teenager in the Program of the Church

Milli Greene

One cannot begin to talk or write about the teenager in the program of the church without understanding that a teenager is a complexity.

I am Milli G. Greene, Youth Associate in the Reformed Church in America. My life is bound up with youth that are of multiracial natures, cross cultural backgrounds, and various religious viewpoints—all of which would represent a variety of perspectives.

My experiences with youth have taught me to believe in their integrity. Over and over again they express this verbally and by their actions. For example: teenagers are always ready for a party; but an offer of a party in honor of a fellow member of a youth group was refused on the basis that the adult who offered it had not been honest with the youth and the party idea was just a bribe in place of a confrontation which they had asked for.

Another youth group of older teenagers asked for a Communicants' Class, a study which they had before but felt they were not ready for when it was required of them; but now they wished to study seriously.

Some direct quotations by teenagers may provide some insights about them and the church.

While discussing the purpose for the group existence and planning for the direction it should take one fellow chided:
“I only come to the fellowship 'cause I like the kids, advisors and the pastor but . . . ”

A group of teenagers concertly agreed that:
“We appreciate our church because it’s our church and we are permitted to do our own thing . . . and we experience worship together."
“Church is fun now because we got a new pastor.”

It seems that Personal Relationships take high priority with teenagers in the program of the church. Thus, churches that are sensitive to the fact that life is largely a matter of being in relationships with oneself, fellow human beings, the physical world, and with God are the churches that will appeal most to teenagers.

Unfortunately, negative quotations far outnumber the positive ones and I don’t think this bit of data should be taken too lightly.

“I don’t like church because its nothing but lousy, boring Bible talks (maybe discussions) that are irrelevant to the forthcoming future of youth whether it be their secular life or their relationship to Christ . . . The Sunday Church School is only a lot of rhetoric.”
So spoke one youth regarding her involvement in the program of the church. It seems from this that the church has failed in one aspect of its mission to celebrate the new creation in Jesus Christ and to pursue the abundant life. For the church must also keep faith with its new calling in new styles. It is imperative that the church develop ways of discovering that which is creative among teenagers’ many revolutionary ideas.

Generally speaking, evaluations of youth ministry demonstrate the failure of programs both as education and inspiration. The quotation bears this out well. Another statement has the same ring to it:

"The only thing I get out of the church program is helping out with the younger kids. Otherwise, church is irrelevant to my life style. The worship services tend to speak down to the congregation."

Too often, the teenager in the program of the church is shut out of the total church life. Most, if not all programs, are normally conceived, planned, and directed for youth by adults. They are not called upon to be involved where policy and action are determined. The perpetuation of old "youth work" styles is contributing to the disappearance of our youth from the church scene. Where adults are willing to work mutually with youth in conceiving the new age, new forms, etc., then the church will be viable to teenagers. In the words of Perrow "If we do not communicate the message of the church in the language of today, the world will not listen, and even though it should it will not understand."

Another youth stated: "Black people were forced into a religion simply to pacify them during slavery, and today it's still a factor ... so what am I going to that meaningless church for?" But, many teenagers in the program of the church now want out. One may describe it as "opt" out, "drop" out, or whatever way it may be said.

What is most impressive about youth today, after years of tumultuous activity by the younger generation, is the simple fact that they see what is happening in the world and/or church with freshness. They are in search of an awareness of themselves and their world and they are seeking to be involved in changing and making a better world.

The foregoing quotations reflect the attitudes of young people. Be it positive or negative, minority or majority is not the issue. Most young people would agree that one huge problem that may be "hanging up" the church's life for youth is a reluctance to make necessary changes. Youths are aware that the church sometimes allows the poorest leadership to work in the area of youth program. Sunday School is often grossly stagnant; too many ministers show deadening apathy about Christian education. Thus, no allowance is made for creativity of a new life style. But whenever the church gropes toward a new style of working with teenagers, they'll be there, willingly.

If we are to conserve youth in the church, we must allow full youth involvement. The church no longer can treat youth as second class citizens, nor the
church of tomorrow. Youth are part of the church today and they want to be part of the action now.

A basic need is to make Christian education meaningful. Change is the central thrust of education and we must get on with the necessary changes by the use of new styles and settings. Youth ministry can be innovative, action-oriented, and community based.

Ministry with teenagers can be exciting, and very frustrating, but wonderfully satisfying.

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**WRITERS IN THIS ISSUE**

Donald T. Van Hoeven is chaplain at Western Michigan University.
Allan Janssen is a student at New Brunswick Seminary.
Stanley R. Bongarden is a student at New Brunswick Seminary.
Elton J. Bruins is assistant professor of religion at Hope College.
Lambert J. Ponstein is associate professor of religion at Hope College.
Harry Buis is minister of Ebenezer Reformed Church, Morrison, Illinois.
John H. Piet is professor of English Bible and Missions at Western Seminary.
James I. Cook is associate professor of biblical languages at Western Seminary.
A. Derks is a layman in the Reformed Church of America.
Francis Fike is associate professor of English at Hope College.
Edward D. Seely is minister at Fifth Reformed Church, Grand Rapids, Michigan.
Raymond A. DeDoes is minister to youth, of the Michigan Synod.
M. E. Osterhavoen is professor of systematic theology at Western Seminary.
Elton M. Eenigenburg is dean at Western Seminary.
Howard Maatman is minister of Calvary Reformed Church, Holland, Michigan.
Robert A. Coughenour is associate professor of religion at Hope College.
Carl J. Schroeder is minister of evangelism of the Reformed Church of America.
E. Earle Ellis is associate professor of New Testament at New Brunswick Seminary.
Henry W. TenPas is a physician in Holland, Michigan.
John W. Beardslee III is professor of church history at New Brunswick Seminary.
Bastian Kruithof is associate professor of religion at Hope College.
Charles Shoeneck is a 1970 graduate of Hope College.
Herman J. Ridder is president of the seminaries.
Clarence DeGraaf is professor of English literature at Hope College.
Henry Bovendam is minister of Bethel Reformed Church of Leota, Minnesota.
David Hensley is a student at Western Seminary.
Milli Greene is Youth Associate in the Reformed Church in America.
Barry Schreiber is a student at Hope College.