



Innovations with Youth

A Faith Journey on a Ropes Course

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“I’ve never heard these kids talk so much in my life, and I’ve spent over two years with them as they went through confirmation,” said Jim, an adult sponsor from Shepherd of the Valley Lutheran Church in Apple Valley, MN. He continued, “When everyone got in the van they were buzzing about the experience they had just had on the low and high ropes course. The question raised by the facilitators at the end of the day really got them thinking: ‘So what’s God been up to today?’ This led to a wild conversation about *The Lord of the Rings* and other spiritual matters.” Jim’s experience with a vanload of 9th graders was exciting for him and the youth. It was also the happy outcome of a very intentional ministry strategy designed to explore vibrant faith with this cohort, especially the males. (To view a video of the day go to the website of The Youth & Family Institute at www.TYFI.org. Click on *Vibrant Faith Ministries*, and then click on *Adventure Ministries*. On the left side of the page click on *9th Grade Retreat Ropes Course Video*.)

Shepherd of the Valley is a very large congregation in the southern suburbs of Minneapolis. The 9th grade class alone has more than 140 youth. They attend a wide variety of schools. It is difficult to establish a real sense of community with such a large and dispersed group. Pastor Randy and Youth Director Katie wanted to build significant, cross-generational connections and community with these kids. They knew that if this did not happen there would be a loss of between 30-36% of their kids immediately after confirmation. This attrition would continue throughout their senior high years. Young people who were just beginning to explore their faith and sense of vocation would have the journey interrupted, often permanently. This led Pastor Randy and Katie to consider an early fall high adventure experience on a nearby low and high ropes course. Why did they pick this strategy?

In the spring of 2008 Katie had heard me speak on the spiritual nature of adolescent males. That

presentation led to an extended conversation and ministry design for their 9th graders. Since 2000 I have been studying and researching the question, “What are the methods and contexts boys and young men use to grow spiritually?” In the process I have done extensive study in the brain sciences, especially relating to gender differences in how the brain works and the implications for ministry. I’ve also done research with junior high boys and co-published a book with David Anderson and Rollie Martinson on young adult men entitled, *Coming of Age: Exploring the Identity and Spirituality of Younger Men*.

One of the findings of this work is that boys and young men will use nature, sports, and kinesthetic methods to vitalize, or revitalize, themselves personally and spiritually. They literally wiggle themselves into faith. They do not separate themselves into two realms, the spiritual and the physical. Rather, they seem to naturally and unselfconsciously integrate these two spheres. Their bodies are both the temple and the receptacle for spiritual growth and development.

From a bio-neurological point of view this makes sense. They have ten times the testosterone flowing through their bodies than females. Testosterone is energizing, and is understood to be the hormone of rough and tumble behavior, and/or aggression. Secondly, brain studies show that males generally use the right hemisphere of the brain, whereas females tend to use both hemispheres. (No jokes about males only using half a brain!) The right hemisphere of the brain provides spatial images and pictures. It is oriented towards risk taking and novelty. There is very little impulse control. This may explain why boys are much more likely, for example, to try and ride their skateboards down a stair rail and do other seemingly hazardous activities, without much awareness for the consequences. God has made their brains and bodies in such a way that their experience of God will often have a significant physical dimension to it.

Boys and young men use nature, sports and kinesthetic outlets to achieve five things. Not surprisingly, it provides them an outlet for recreation. Secondly, they gain a sense of peace in doing activities such as walking in a park, hiking in nature, skateboarding, running, weightlifting, playing team sports etc. Third, these activities give them a sense of their own identity. Fourth, in doing these activities with others it provides them a real sense of community and bonding. Finally, they are inspired in doing these activities. One may argue that this is also true for females, and it often is. My research has been descriptive in nature, not comparative. My hunch is that much of what is being said would hold true for many females, although how their brains would process the experience would be somewhat different.

With this research in mind Pastor Randy, Katie, my colleague Sara Larson Woodruff, Director of Adventure Education and Women's Ministry at TYFI, and I created a design together built around four guidelines. We would divide the group in half and take each half on a sequenced, day-long low and high ropes course experience at nearby Ox Lake Lutheran Bible Camp. We would shape the day using four guidelines that came out of the research. First, we would encourage the kids to **Be Real**. They could come as they are, do what they wanted to try, and did not need to do any "posing." Secondly, we would ask them to **Show Respect**. There would be no "dissing" of those who might get scared, or not do as well as others. We would encourage, cheer for, and celebrate whatever accomplishments took place. Third, we guided them to **Work Together**. Community building was the order for the day. Therefore, we led the activities in such a way (and had enough trained support staff) that everyone could be involved, nearly all the time. Finally, we told them we would be asking them to look for **God Sightings**. Where was God active in what we were doing together?

It was also critical that there be a large number of adults, and senior high youth doing the activities with the 9th graders. We know that cross-generational community is a critical means by which God plants, nurtures and brings to light vibrant faith. I trained this group at the church regarding what to expect, and what was expected of them, prior to our trip to the ropes course.

Both Pastor Randy and Katie report that this experience was transformational for many and has created a more cohesive, energized, engaged, cross-generational Christian community. The positive feedback they have received has created a buzz to do it again in the spring. The group wants to explore further dynamics of the course and they want to do it together. Both report that they have a much different group and are having a much more meaningful

conversation with the kids, the senior high leaders and the adult mentors as a result of this immersion.

As a former parish pastor and camp director in the Lutheran church, and as a certified adventure facilitator for nearly 30 years, I have seen this happen many times. It's only more recently that I had a better idea as to how God was working spiritually in these young people through these physical, kinesthetic and outdoor activities. It is a grave mistake to assume that congregational life devoid of these outlets and opportunities is particularly faith formative, especially for males. The proof is demonstrated across North American congregations each week where between 60-75% of the participants are female. The guys did not find their spirituality in the "God box" experience. Their spiritual journey calls for congregations to expand their understandings of where and when the Spirit is nurturing faith. Congregations and parents need to encourage their young people, especially males, to participate in Christian retreats and Bible camps; and then accompany them on these programs. The faith formative classroom needs to move out of the basement or education wing of the church into parks, nature preserves, the back yards of members homes, and athletic fields. Adult members can serve as coaches and fans of sports teams.

Most significantly, the spiritual journey is fully engaged when these activities are framed with the four guidelines:

1. **Be real.**
2. **Show respect.**
3. **Work together.**
4. **Ask "What's God up to here?"**

Works Cited

Anderson, David, Paul Hill and Rollie Martinson.
Coming of Age: Exploring the Identity and Spirituality of Younger Men Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2006. (available at www.TYFI.org)

The Youth and Family Institute Web Site
www.TYFI.org