

Missio Dei and Youth Ministry

Mobilizing young people's assets and developing relationships

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Abstract

It is said that young people are the future of a country. It is also widely believed that young people flourish as human beings when they are entrusted with responsibility and leadership roles. This article advocates a distinctive approach in the effort of local churches to rethink how it could maximize the potential of young people and build healthy relationships across different generations in the church's participation in the Missio Dei. An examination of an asset-based and relational approach to the Missio Dei provides the local church with a potential dual movement that can have positive, far-reaching and more sustainable implications in the broader community.

Key words: Missio Dei, Church in society, youth, asset-based community development, relationships

1. Introduction

In this article, the writer will draw from the work of Life Zone Ministries International (LZMI), a registered faith-based organization (FBO) and non profit organization (NPO) that is based in the “twin-suburb” of Factretion-Kensington in Cape Town, South Africa. Most of the houses in Factretion are small, “sub-economic” units while most of the Kensington houses are larger free-standing ones. In a community that is a stone-throw away from the opulent Canal Walk Shopping Centre, Kensington and Factretion is a community faced with serious social challenges². On its website³, LZMI (established in 1996), states its purpose:

Life Zone is a registered Non Profit Organization based at Wingfield Primary School in Factretion, a vulnerable, “high-risk” community in Cape Town, South Africa... We use soccer as a tool for personal and social transformation in schools and “high-risk” communities in various townships in Cape Town.

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² See the following internet link: <http://www.timeslive.co.za/local/2014/12/09/a-woman-is-shot-kicked-raped-beaten-to-death-every-8-hours-in-south-africa>.

³ www.lifezonesoccer.co.za

2. What is going on?

We know of God in no other way than as one who seeks humanity in relationship. It is this God who calls us and inspires us to reach out to young people. Youth ministry or Christian youth work is therefore grounded in the missionary nature of God. The mission is God's not ours. We are called and inspired by God to participate in his seeking of relationship with all human beings. Our practice as youth workers finds its true rationale in the God who calls us to share in his seeking of young people (Ward 1997:26)

In every era of human history young people appear to be the one social group that often appears never to be taken seriously. Yet it is that same group that has the immense potential to change the course of history. When sportspeople excel in South Africa or on the global arena, one would find that these world-beaters, more than often, are persons who are young. It is evident at major global sports events that these world-beaters and athletes who excel are young people who are simply "loaded" with talent. In "Christianese" one could say that these people have exceptional gifts. It is therefore true that such gifted young persons are extremely talented and have a particular set of assets that, when put into practice through discipline, hard work and sacrifice, their gifts begin to be seen by other people who would never otherwise have experienced the joy of watching such young people excel.

However, discipline, hard work and sacrifice are not the only ingredients that are needed to help young people to excel at sport, other forms of recreation, work, and as Christians. Why is this so? There are perhaps many reasons why millions of young people across the globe should *not* excel. In South Africa for instance, literally millions of young people should not excel because of the scourge of unemployment⁴, crime, racial discrimination, living in informal settlements, disintegrated family structures, or because they have been orphaned. Beth Baleke in Linhart & Livermore (2011:87) identified five significant issues that impact young people in Africa today:

- i. Family breakdown
- ii. HIV/AIDS
- iii. Globalization
- iv. Poverty
- v. Corruption

Many of these negative socio-economic trends count heavily against young people who would want to excel in life but who do not have the opportunities or people-

⁴ The theologian, Klaus Nurnberger and the veteran political activist, Mampela Rampele, have well-documented works such as *The scourge of unemployment in South Africa* and *Uprooting poverty*, respectively.

networks through which they can reach their full potential. To further contextualize the scope of contemporary youth work and the opportunity to reach young people, Bosch (1991:399) advises:

Never before in history has people's social distress been as extensive as it is in the twentieth century. But never before have Christians been in a better position than they are today to do something about this need. Poverty, misery, sickness, criminality, and social chaos have assumed unheard of proportions. . . . people have become victims of other people. . . . Marginalized groups in many countries of the world lack every form of active and even passive participation in society; inter-human relationships are disintegrating. . . . To introduce change, as Christians, into all of this, is to mediate salvation.

In such a context of socio-economic upheaval, Christian youth leaders shine as a beacon of hope to the people who have to deal daily with unemployment, poverty, hardship, lack of proper housing and sanitation, expensive transportation and energy costs, and just merely fighting to not die of hunger. Christian youth leaders today (and all Christians for that matter), in their roles as mentors, are called to walk in genuine relationship (or relationship⁵) with such, often marginalized young people. Ward (1997:26-27) cautions that, "for some young people, the seeking God is first encountered in the care and concern offered by youth workers and the Church community". This care that is offered in day-to-day activities of youth work acts as a "concrete prophetic sign of the God who desires relationship". Young people are searchers of relationship. In relationship, there is always a need for youth leaders to attend to gifted young people who very often seek for opportunities to share with their youth pastor or youth leader about the talents that they have.

Therefore, one of the key qualities of relationship is for the youth pastor to be genuine or *real* in relating to all young people (especially to those who have to deal daily with adverse basic-needs challenges) and to unearth the talents that are innate in each of them. In the writer's perspective, this asset-based approach (as opposed to the traditional approach) which is needs-based and deficiency-oriented) is an important tool and starting point in unlocking the potential of young people today. According to Kretzmann & McKnight (2003:2), the traditional approach or "traditional path" is needs-based and deficiency-orientated and results in dependency that, in turn, creates "client neighbourhoods". By "client neighbourhoods", Kretzmann & McKnight (2003:2) imply that lower income neighbourhoods that have become "environments of service" where residents believed that their well-being depended upon being a "client" began to "see themselves as people with special

⁵ The author will often refer to the self-styled term, "relationship", as a way of emphasizing the phrase "real relationship".

needs that can only be met by outsiders”. An asset-based approach can therefore not merely be confined to the Church but it should be intentionally aimed outside of the Church walls if the Church is to become a relevant agent of transformation. Booker & Booker (2007:8) assert that “the Church in mission needs to move from a ‘come to us’ mindset... to a church that is in the community engaging with what God is doing already”. In addition, they emphasize a critical principle of youth ministry (Booker & Booker, 2007:4):

Jesus taught his disciples about mission out in the community, in the market place, on the hillside, by the beach, anywhere people congregated, that was ‘their turf’”.

When the Church begins to work missionally by *going* to the community who does not yet “belong” to it, then its transformative agenda begins to be experienced by those who are impacted by this Spirit-inspired missional work. It is in such a context that the non-profit organization, LZMI, uses soccer⁶ as a medium to engage non-churched⁷ and churched people, to share its ethos and also to unlock the many talents of children and youth connected with its simple community development program. Not only does it reach out to nominal Christians, but, by default, it also engages with people who are Muslim. For instance, LZMI’s annual schools’ football tournaments always begin by welcoming the hundreds of players and their families and then starting the activities with prayer. As such, LZMI is then able to be an instrument of Christian witness in a multi-faith community.

3. Which way? Either-or, or both-and?

According to Kretzmann and McKnight (2003:2-5) community building has two approaches. Given the adverse socio-economic realities of millions of people in the South African context, it becomes apparent that both approaches have value.

3.1 The first approach takes the *traditional path* which is “a need-driven dead-end”. In the traditional path a “neighbourhood needs map” essentially shows what a community *lacks* or what is *wrong* in that particular community. As illustrated below, such an approach creates negative impressions in peoples’ minds. These are images of needy, problematic and deficient neighbourhoods populated by needy problematic and deficient people. These images are conceived as a mental map of the neighbourhood but which often convey only a part of the truth about the actual conditions of a troubled community. Unfortunately, in most cases, these problems are not regarded as part of the truth but as the whole truth. For instance, Kretzmann and McKnight (2003:3) suggest that problems such as unemployment, truancy,

⁶ See youtube link <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JszqKjwhPqk>.

⁷ See youtube link <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RltzVP6GNS8>. In this video one can see people of other faiths, especially Muslim parents who have come to watch their children participate in LZMI’s programs.

gangs, slum housing, illiteracy, school drop-outs, child abuse and crime are generally the points of departure (the “whole truth”) when many churches, community organizations and well-meaning people desire to contribute positively to the plight of troubled communities.

In the case of LZMI, the organization followed a traditional path of community engagement when its members perceived a *lack* of nutrition at an informal settlement⁸ (in 1997), as well as a distinct lack of organized sports activities for foundation phase learners at ten primary schools in the Kensington-Facreton⁹ community in Cape Town (in 2006). As a result, LZMI sourced healthy food from a local food bank called Robin Good and provided 25 families with nutritious meals once per week for approximately four years. When Robin Good ceased its operations, LZMI’s nutrition program also stopped. The organization’s response to the lack of sport at the community’s primary schools was to recruit unemployed youth from the community to volunteer as coaches and physical education instructors at some of these schools. The organization then also established a cross-gender under-7 football league for the ten primary schools in the area’s Maitland Education

⁸ The Housing Development Agency (HDA) cites the definition of Statistics South Africa and defines an “informal settlement” as “an unplanned settlement on land which has not been surveyed or proclaimed as residential, consisting mainly of informal dwellings (shacks).” The same source defines an informal dwelling as “a makeshift structure not approved by a local authority and not intended as a permanent dwelling”. In the case of the Kensington informal settlement which has been in existence since the 1990s, the residents have complained that many promises and excuses have been made by the City of Cape Town regarding their relocation to formal settlements. Only recently have the outside toilets been fitted with running water systems while most of the dwellings do not have any running water at all.

⁹ Kensington-Facreton is located approximately ten kilometres from the Cape Town city centre and is situated next to the N1 freeway directly opposite Century City. To the north it is bordered by Wingfield Naval Base (18th Avenue); to the East by Voortrekker Road and the Maitland Cemetery; to the South by the Maitland suburb. Most of the people who first came to settle in Kensington-Facreton in the early 1960s were people who were victims of forced removals under the National Party government of the day. These people were evicted from their homes in places such as District Six (City), Goodwood, Maitland and other areas which were later legally designated for “whites” only. The author of this paper is one of those who were forcibly removed and displaced. There are currently approximately 25000 people living in this community. The 2011 municipal census showed that the population of Kensington-Facreton totalled 24161 of which only 42% have completed Grade 12 compared to 88% in the adjacent mainly “white” suburb of Pinelands. Thus, if education is a means to creating a better future for the youth of our country then Kensington, in comparison to Pinelands, is in some trouble. Whereas 33% of Kensington’s residents earn less than R3200 per month, the percentage in Pinelands is only 10%. This implies that Kensington is generally not as economically well-off than its neighbouring suburb, Pinelands. In addition, crime and substance abuse also play a role in social description of the suburb.

¹⁰ Information about the community was borrowed from the author’s PhD thesis (2013:64-72) and also the article, “Congregations in communion with the poor”, by August & Wyngaard in NGTT Vol 45, No. 2, Supplement 2004 & the 2011 municipal census.

cluster. To date, LZMI has created four schools football leagues: ten under-7 teams (girls and boys), ten under-9 teams (girls and boys), six under-11 teams (boys), six under-13 teams (boys), and 4 under-13 teams (girls). Thus, the organization has organized five hundred and ten learners into an organized football program managed by unemployed youth and two youth pastors from the Kensington Assemblies of God Church.

In LZMI's nutrition-based service to the informal settlement in Kensington, certain trends started to become evident. While the food supplied to the unemployed families was meeting a basic need of this group of people, some people started to develop a dependency syndrome. Once again, Kretzmann & McKnight (2003:2-6) designates a few points why this traditional path has its dangers for the people who receive food and other things continuously:

- It teaches the value of services as the answer to the problems of poor neighbourhoods
- Many residents would then believe that their well-being depends upon being a client
- They begin to see themselves as people with special needs that can only be met by outsiders
- They become consumers of services with no incentive of being producers
- This could very well be the seedbed of dependency

The authors therefore rightfully propose that there should be an alternative path or at least an area of compromise where receiving services from others are balanced with, or will lead to, a desire to become self-sufficient.

3.2 The second approach takes the *alternative path*, a path that is focused on the assets in a community. This alternative path is a path that is identified as capacity-focused development (Kretzman & McKnight, 2003:5) and that is important for a community-based organization such as Life Zone. In the alternative path (which could be a significant tool in the Church's missional approach), the assets of a community and the innate abilities and gifts of individuals come sharply into focus. Kretzmann & McKnight (2003:6) reinforce this notion:

Each community boasts a unique combination of assets upon which to build its future... This basic truth about the "giftedness" of every individual is particularly important to apply to persons who often find themselves marginalized by communities. It is essential to recognize the capacities, for example, of those who have been labeled handicapped or disabled, or of those who are marginalized because they are too old, or too young, or too poor. In a community whose assets are being fully recognized and mobilized, these people too will be part of the action, not as clients or recipients of aid, but as full contributors to the community-building process.

It is clear that a capacity-focused approach is more advantageous to the well-being of people. LZMI, while not discounting the importance of welfare as a means to alleviate the suffering of poor people, nevertheless prefers to align itself with a capacity-focused approach. In order to reach children more effectively, it believes in helping the volunteers to understand their own potential, utilize that potential and maximize the same potential – the God-given talent and abilities inherent in their being. Such an alternative community development path is characterized by three valuable principles (Kretzmann & McKnight, 2003:9) and could be summarized as follows:

1. It is *asset-based* – the community development strategy starts with what is present in the community, the capability of its residents and workers – not with what is absent, or with what is problematic, or with what the community lacks. The asset-based principle suggests that every individual possesses a God-given giftedness that should be used for the advantage of the whole community

2. It is *internally-focused* – as with LZMI’s football program, the development strategy concentrates first of all upon the agenda-building and problem-solving capacities of local residents (volunteers), local organizations (such as LZMI) and local associations (such as primary schools). This intense and self-conscious internal focus is not intended to curtail either the role external forces have played in helping to create the desperate conditions of lower income neighbourhoods, nor the need to attract additional resources to these communities. Rather this strong internal focus is intended simply to stress the priority of local definition, investment, creativity, hope and control

3. LZMI has found that for its ministry to be asset-based and internally focused, it needed to be, in very important ways, *relationship driven*. Therefore, one of the central challenges for asset-based community developers is to constantly build and rebuild the relationships between and among local residents, local associations, local institutions, and very importantly, with external organizations and people outside of the community. Networking and partnering with the “right” people and community-building organizations from outside the community is imperative. In the context of youth ministry, and especially when ministering among non-church goers, the relationship-driven principle will play a critical role in helping the non-churched to gain understanding of God and God’s purposes for every individual.

In summarizing the foregoing dialogue, it could be argued that both approaches (the traditional path as well as the alternative, asset-based path) have its merits. While it is often important for humanity to respond to the pressing basic needs of others in practical ways exclusively, it is probably *as* important to assist needy people by promoting a capacity-focused approach from a relationship-driven perspective. Since one cannot be prescriptive in suggesting which of these two paths to

follow, experience within the work of LZMI has shown that both approaches have its merits. It thus becomes a case of “both-and”, rather than one of “either-or”, when one considers from a relational perspective, how best to engage with needy people (particularly the youth in this case) in a community.

4. Towards a relational path: how can relationships be developed?

With special reference to LZMI’s values-based schools soccer project in Kensington-Factreton, relationships have been built in the following ways, although these are not the only modes of relationship-building:

4.1 Service

Given the nature of the difficulties and logistical challenges experienced by educators to be involved with their schools’ extra-mural activities at the time, LZMI (by then already known in the community) proposed to serve the schools by starting up, at its own expense, a coaching program and an under-7 football league for girls and boys. When LZMI presented the proposal at a school principals’ meeting in 2005, it was on the basis that the organization would serve these schools with the same attitude of Jesus who “came to *serve* and not be served”. It was also an opportunity to share the organization’s Christian witness to a group of key role-players in the community. The four-tier league program is now in its tenth year and is still driven by the members’ desire to serve the under-resourced schools in this community. Some of these members or coaches are Muslim but yet align themselves with LZMI’s Christian values-base.

4.2 Acknowledging and affirming the unemployed volunteers while releasing individual capacities

With reference to the affirmation of young people, Booker & Booker (2007:9) contend that there are two important questions to be asked: Are there any young people in my congregation that feel under-utilized or ignored? Is there anything I can do as a church leader to encourage the young people in our community to be recognized and accepted? The real heroes of LZMI’s coaching service to the schools in its community are the selfless volunteers who coach at schools, set up six mini football fields once a week during the second and third school terms, referee matches, and develop healthy mentor-mentee relationships with many of the learners from the participating schools. These volunteers represent part of the human and social capital at the community’s disposal. So rather than looking at the volunteers as unemployed or school drop-outs, LZMI adopts a capacity-focused approach and sees them as assets,

potential leaders and role-models in communities affected by poverty, unemployment, gangsterism and many types of abuse.

Through assuming the role as a coach and role-model, the weight of being an “unemployed person” is somewhat negated in the life of a LZMI volunteer. When these volunteer assume this role, they essentially acknowledge that they have assets, gifts and talents that they are able to share with others. Because so many children enjoy the input and interaction of the coach, the volunteer experiences a sense of self-fulfillment when he/she receives positive feedback from the children being coached. Such results also boost the self-esteem of the volunteer, and it can have a profound, positive effect on the volunteer who is unemployed. According to Wetmore & Theron in Liebenberg & Stewart (1997:92) self-esteem is the ability to feel a sense of worth and respect. Therefore, for someone who is unemployed, a sense of newly found self-esteem can help tremendously with the personal development of an individual. Leaders such as the Program Director and Project Coordinator in LZMI are always vigilant to the need to affirm and build the capacity of our volunteers. Thus acknowledgement of children, youth and young adults are critical for the holistic development of the organization’s volunteers.

4.3 The importance of being sensitive to the aspirations of children in a world of suffering should not be under-estimated. Long (1997:115), in his chapter, Hope in the midst of suffering, lucidly sketches the prevailing context of many young people (the Generation Xers) today:

Xers have grown up with broken promises from parents, friends and society. If they possess hope, it is a virtual-reality hope having little if anything to do with reality. Most of us in the postmodern world are changing from belief in progress (future hope) to resignation in the face of human misery (present despair).

According to a study by Casey Carlson and Deloitte & Touche¹¹ on the United Nations website, the Xers are classified as the third of five generational groupings of people. The five groups, classified chronologically according to the year of birth, are categorized by this United Nations study group as follows:

- Traditionalists (born 1925-1945)
- Baby Boomers (1946-1964)
- Generation X (1965-1980)
- Generation Y or Millennials (1981-2000)
- Generation Z or Nexters (post 2000)

¹¹ <http://www.un.org/staffdevelopment/pdf/Designing%20Recruitment,%20Selection%20&%20Talent%20Management%20Model%20tailored%20to%20meet%20UNJSPF's%20Business%20Development%20Needs.pdf>

Flowing from the description of the characteristics of the parents of the Xers in the Carlson and Deloitte & Touche Report, one could somehow get a sense of why Xers were so disappointed with their parents and society. The “disappointment” that Xers often felt towards their parents and society possibly stemmed from the long hours that their parents spent at work trying to build the “perfect career¹²”. In addition, the demands that employers placed upon the Xers’ parents to work these long hours could also have played a role in how Xers viewed society. Since the Xers’ parents were born after the Second World War when economic growth was essential to improve the quality of life of millions of people around the world, it could perhaps be plausible to assume that Baby Boomers needed to work long hours to provide decent incomes for their families but at the expense of not spending enough time with the Xers at home. These may not have been the defining factors in the Xers’ experience of disappointment and loss but it helps for people to see why Xers may have felt lonely due to the “absence” of their parents as a result of them having to work long hours.

This “playing field”, the mission field of the Church, is filled with young people (and even parents of these young people) who have a burdening sense of hopelessness. What can be done about this situation? Is the church ready to enter into the pain and suffering of this generation, and even the new generation “Y”, feels? The Carlson and Deloitte & Touche Report show that Generation Y is a technologically-savvy generation who view life from this perspective. In their 20s and early 30s, one could argue that Long (1997:115) has valid reasons to be concerned as he probes further: “is it ready to meet, minister to and give desperately needed hope to individuals? Will the church be ready to meet people in this generation who have no Christian involvement or background and offer them hope?”

One part of LZMI’s ministry among youth is to offer the children in its program “tangible hope”. By tangible hope it is meant that children can aspire to achieve specific, particular goals if they are willing to participate in reaching those goals. For example, LZMI’s partnerships with Swedish individuals, sports clubs, churches and NGOs as well as with the professional football club, Ajax Cape Town, assists the organization to help children and adults to believe that anything is possible. Some children from our program, many of whom still live in informal housing or come from single-parent families, have travelled with the organization to Sweden on sports-educational tours. Since 2009, LZMI has travelled with youth on five tours to Sweden. Some children, who have never travelled outside of their community before, have also played football tournaments at the University of Pretoria and visited the Union Buildings and Soccer City during the 2010 FIFA World Cup. Through

¹² One of the characteristics described in the Carlson and Deloitte & Touche Report

LZMI, many of the most talented football players have been successful at professional clubs such as Ajax Cape Town, Santos, Hellenic and the Old Mutual Football Academy. In addition, some children (including Muslims) were part of a Swedish-sponsored photography workshop¹³ earlier in 2013 to help them to develop skills in the area of picture storytelling. To LZMI, this is a representation of tangible hope.

Coaching at the various schools and also during school holidays is always geared at helping children to have fun and also helping to affirming them. It is of utmost importance that coaches understand that their role is to serve the children with love. In turn, this love will help children to develop a positive self-esteem and respect for their families, peers, educators and all human beings. Through the interaction with learners through soccer coaching, children begin to understand that they are able to do accomplish many things. They are taught to understand that they need to give their best at all times irrespective of their social background, physique or level of sports skills. They are taught that giving of their best is also an important attitude for their excelling at education and in their relationships with others.

5. Opportunities to share the Gospel, pray and to be Christian witnesses

LZMI schools youth soccer program in the Kensington-Factreton community has also opened the door for opportunities to share our Christian witness and ethos with many people, literally thousands, in the community. The organization's annual schools' football tournaments attract thousands of family members of the participating learners. In addition, other people from the community also attend. As a representation of the church, LZMI begins every tournament with a public prayer that reinforces why the organization does what it does, and it also does so in honour and thanks to Jesus for His guidance and providence of the program. Praying at such big public events where there are people from many different faiths reinforces LZMI's position as a Christian (faith-based) organization and it helps to inform people what the ethical basis of the organization is. LZMI believes that as representatives of the *Missio Dei*, the church cannot operate in isolation from the human community. With specific reference to the church and the world, Baker in Bosch (1999:388) provides valuable insight on this:

The perception of the church as an entity completely separate from the human community...has been shown to be false and untenable. The church exists only as an organic and integral part of the human community. As soon as it tries to view its own life as meaningful in independence from the total human community it betrays the major purpose of its existence...the church has to remain identifiably different from the world, else it will cease to be able to minister to it.

¹³ See youtube link <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xwwKgk7aS98>.

Further, LZMI's five sports-educational tours to Sweden since 2009 have also created additional opportunities to share the organization's Christian witness. As an instrument of Missio Dei, LZMI usually invites the families of the touring children (some who may be Muslim or Rastafarian), to a Sunday morning commissioning service at His People local church. Many Muslims have already attended such services where the Word of God is shared through song and preaching. Since these tours usually start just after South Africa's National Youth Day (16 June), these services underline the asset-based ethos of LZMI and serve as a reminder that every life (in this case children, youth and adult volunteers) has purpose and significance.

Thus, as a Christian faith-based organization, LZMI attempts to maintain a relationship-driven development ethos through which healthy relationships with different people are nurtured. Through soccer, the world's most-played sport, God has created an opportunity to reach masses of people globally with the Word of God. The sport of soccer in the LZMI context has created a significant opportunity for the church to participate in the Missio Dei. One is reminded of the development of roads and infrastructure during the time of the Roman Empire and just before Jesus's arrival here on earth. After Jesus's ministry on earth, Christians could use those very roads, which were meant for Roman Empire expansion, to expand the church to all parts of the known world (Tenney, 1996:61-2). In contemporary society, soccer has become another way for the church to become relevant to African and global youth while it (the church) still maintains its unique identity.

6. Conclusion: towards a relational basis of outreach

Having set forth the necessity of relationships in youth ministry, it has become apparent that an incarnational, relational approach would help youth workers to participate effectively in the mission of God. It is hoped that youth workers would understand that it is critical to connect, affirm, unearth the gifts of, and disciple young people in their respective contexts. As such, Ward (1997:45-69) proposes a practical five-point framework centred on relational outreach:

1. Making contact: go to where young people are at
2. Extended contact and making friends: deepening relationship
3. Proclamation: young people experience God through the activity of God in the youth worker's life
4. Nurture: mentoring leads to Christian nurture
5. Church: from an outside-in point of departure, unchurched young people are drawn into the life of the church

In this paper, it is proposed that a relational, asset-based approach (in conjunction with a needs-driven method where necessary), presents a fluid way for youth

ministers and churches to enjoy an open-ended process of church growth. As the church, individual Christians and believers move *towards* young people outside of the congregation and assist with expanding the capabilities of the youth, they will be able to see the first fruits of a society in transformation. Ward (1997:43) proposes that such contact with young people is best done through an “incarnational approach” where a pattern of working *outside-in*, helps to develop and strengthen relationships with unchurched young people. This incarnational approach, says Ward (1997:43), means to be engaged in building relationships with young people as an intentional activity where *real* connections are made with them. He further asserts that a youth worker’s presence amongst a group of young people is an “intervention” where “we have crossed a natural social boundary in order that we might bring about change in the lives of young people”. For Ward (1997:43) relationships are the fuel on which youth work travels – an undisputed claim if youth ministry and the Missio Dei are to be carried out effectively. Thus, the organization’s reason for building relationships or for crossing the social boundary is the Missio Dei and its desire to share its Christian faith.

As part of the Church, LZMI’s “sentness” is characterized by the belief that people need to be restored to a right relationship with God. Ward (1997:26) endorses this notion and indicates that we are called to proclaim this gospel in both our words and deeds in ways that young people can understand. With regard to this transformative mission of God, which has as its driving force the salvation of humankind, Bosch (1991:400) recaps important truths related to the scope of the church’s role in society:

The integral character of salvation demands that the scope of the church’s mission be more comprehensive than has traditionally been the case. Salvation is as coherent, broad, and deep as the needs and exigencies of human existence. Mission therefore means being involved in the ongoing dialogue between God, who offers his salvation, and the world, which . . . craves that salvation . . . Mission means being sent to proclaim in deed and word that Christ died and rose for the life of the world, that he lives to transform human lives and to overcome death. . . From the tension between the “already” and the “not yet” of the reign of God. . . there emerges the salvation imperative – Get involved in the ministry of salvation!

Thus, the church’s task is to seek a location within the mind-set and subculture of particular groups of young people where God’s story can come to life (Ward, 1997:26). And within this location, “we need to affirm the image of God not as a disconnected ‘Spirit’ within young people, but as a renewed vision of the way that God sees us. How God sees us is important, because, if young people could grasp this, then they will live their lives radically differently in a transformed lifestyle that oozes hope!”

For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus, to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. Ephesians 2:10 (NIV).

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