

Nurturing Ethical Values in The 21st Century Adolescent

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Abstract

There is a wise proverb that insists it takes a whole village to raise a child to adulthood. In light of the expanding convolution of contemporary values, it is especially important to attentively nurture the inherent desire in each developing human person to seek good and avoid evil, especially during the critical years of adolescent formation.

The special focus of this paper will be to present a vision document from the United States, called *Renewing The Vision*, which provides a comprehensive framework for developmentally appropriate activities, programming, and spiritual formation that support and nurture the development of ethical values in the adolescent.

This holistic approach also integrates the resources of the community in a common effort for intergenerational mentoring of the young. Further, by utilizing eight components of this dynamic vision, adolescents can be drawn into active participation in building their moral value system to insure their lifelong commitment to personal integrity and moral social action within the fabric of society.

Ideally, adolescents will develop sound moral reasoning to be able to face the ethical realities and personal choices the 21st century demands, and be empowered to embrace the worthy adventure of living a moral, ethical Life!

Introduction & Scope of Paper

This Oxford Round Table paper begins with an ethical presumption that human beings follow inherent desires and principles to develop the kind of character required to successfully exist within a moral society. Our duty as relational, communal creatures is to assist others, and especially our young, to establish and nurture ethical values that will insure the continuance of an acceptable moral order in society. This challenge is critically significant in light of the expanding convolution of contemporary ethical values in 21st century society.

Participation in a religious tradition provides opportunity to positively assist adolescents in developing their moral value system. The focus of this paper will be on a document from the United States entitled *Renewing The Vision*, that presents a comprehensive framework for developmentally appropriate activities, programming, and moral development for adolescents between the ages of 14-18 years. It is the thesis of this paper that the eight components of this holistic framework effectively and deeply support the continued nurturing of ethical values in adolescents.

This thesis is supported by a 1996 study of youth ministry program participants, *New Directions In Youth Ministry*, who identify that their participation in holistic youth ministry programming contributed significantly to their faith and their moral formation. In addition, the study also identified that these adolescents showed continued growth while they remained involved in youth programs. These are positive signs that participation in comprehensive and holistic programming makes a positive difference in their lives.¹

Before we discuss the Vision document, we will ground our comments in Natural Law, and briefly identify the ethical values that this paper identifies are developmentally significant during the adolescent years. Then, we will consider basic developmental needs of adolescents

¹ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. *Renewing The Vision: A Framework for Catholic Youth Ministry*. (Washington, DC: USCCB Publishing, 1997), 5.

for moral formation and healthy integration of the individual into the social order. We will learn that humans are “hardwired” to connect with others.

In our presentation of the Vision document, there will be a clear overview of each of the eight components, inclusive of a brief example of how the component can nurture ethical values in an adolescent. Next, a summary of the authentic voices of adolescents and their personal experiences will be presented to support the thesis that holistic, comprehensive youth ministry programming supports moral formation. Finally, the role of the adult community will be overviewed briefly to present its value in the continued building of the moral value system of adolescents.

Natural Law & Ethical Values To Be Considered

The natural law tradition delineates what a human being should be by identifying that moral laws defining human behavior are higher than any human laws. As human beings, we have natural capacities to reason and to be virtuous, and our character is “good” to the extent that we fulfill these capacities. Human collaboration about **how we should live** is what enables us to seek the common good, and create and sustain a good society.²

In addition to this natural law approach to ethics, this paper also recognizes divine law within the Judeo-Christian religious tradition, and its accompanying tradition of moral formation and commitment to Aquinas’ maxim of “Do good and avoid evil.” Matt Malone, S.J. in a current issue of *America* magazine says

. . . within every human heart there is a voice exhorting us to avoid evil and to choose what is right, what is good . . . We hear this voice as an absolute, unconditional moral imperative: ‘You ought to do this good. You ought to avoid this evil.’ In other words, it is a general, categorical, even primordial command.³

It is not possible within the scope of this paper to consider all ethical values. So, in addition to Aquinas’ wisdom, we identify the following values to be of primary significance in the moral development of an adolescent: 1) Integrity, with a special focus on seeking truth, 2) Altruism and care about others outside of self 3) Honesty 4) Compassion and empathy, and 5) the virtues of prudence, temperance, justice, and fortitude.

In addition, the following presumptions will be present as we consider how to consistently nurture ethical values in adolescents: 1) We can, as humans, know right from wrong by developing our moral capacity through reason and good habits. 2) We can learn to do what is right by becoming the good people that we have been created (by God, by nature) to be. 3) We can cultivate moderation, good habits, and responsibility. 4) We can strive for happiness by virtuous living that seeks the common good.⁴

We turn now to consider a smattering of “assets” that research and pastoral experience have identified as making a significant difference in promoting healthy moral development in adolescents. We will first consider assets provided by the Search Institute, and then focus on assets identified in the *Renewing The Vision* document.

² Robert Traer and Harlan Stelmach. *Doing Ethics In A Diverse World*. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2008), 65-6.

³ Matt Malone, S.J. “*Of Many Things*.” *America Magazine*, March 9, 2009, 2.

⁴ Traer and Stelmach. 72.

Developmental Needs of Adolescents

The Search Institute is a research organization that is dedicated to promoting the well-being and positive development of children and adolescents. After surveying more than a quarter of a million adolescents in 450 communities across the United States, the Search Institute in 1996 identified forty essential building blocks or “asset” based experiences, relationships, opportunities, skills, and character traits that form a foundation for positive, healthy adolescent development.⁵ The “External Assets” are provided by the community through families, schools, churches, and organizations. “Internal Assets” that develop within the adolescent include commitment to learning, positive values, social skills, and positive personal identity.

These forty identified assets are powerful shapers of adolescent behavior, and help to inoculate youth from high-risk behaviors of alcohol and drug abuse, rampant sexual activity, violence, and self destruction. The assets also encourage positive development of the healthy competencies of normal adolescence. It is important to note that this connection between developmental assets and choices made by adolescents is documented by the Search Institute for youth, regardless of age, gender, geographic region, town size, or race/ethnicity.⁶

The Search Institute has published a list of these forty assets, “Search Institute’s Framework of Developmental Assets,” which can be viewed in their entirety in Appendix A.⁷ For the purpose of this paper, we will only discuss the assets that reference morality or the development of ethical values. These Internal Assets are in the “Positive Values” category and are as follows:

- Caring – Young person places high value on helping other people.
- Equality and Social Justice – Young person places high value on promoting equality and reducing hunger and poverty.

- Integrity – Young person acts on convictions and stands up for her or his beliefs.
- Honesty – Young person “tells the truth even when it’s not easy.”
- Responsibility – Young person accepts and exercises personal responsibility.

One of the three goals for ministry with adolescents in *Renewing The Vision* is to foster the total personal and spiritual growth of each young person. Appendix B contains the adolescent assets identified within this context that are foundational for faith development and healthy moral growth in adolescents. As before, we focus on the assets that form a foundation for healthy moral development. They are:

- Empower young people to live the moral and theological virtues and to apply these virtues in making moral decisions.

- Nurture in young people positive, Catholic values of love, honesty, courage, peace and nonviolence, fidelity, chastity, generosity, tolerance, respect for life from conception to natural death, care and compassion, service to those in need, equality, social justice, integrity, responsibility, and community.

⁵ [<http://www.search-institute.org.html>] and [<http://www.search-institute.org/ass.html>] (1 March 2005).

⁶ USCCB. *Renewing The Vision*, 16.

⁷ Search Institute. “*Tapping the Power of Community*,” March 2004 Vol. 2, No. 1. [<http://www.search-institute.org>], 2-3.

- Empower young people to serve those in need, to develop skills that foster social changes to secure justice and equality for every human being.⁸

“Hardwired” To Connect

In the United States in the 21st century, adolescents are increasingly isolated from adults, and often, even from their peers, due to crammed personal schedules, as well as increased dependence on technological items such as iPods, MP3 players, internet access, etc. In a 2003 report entitled *“Hardwired To Connect: The New Scientific Case for Authoritative Communities,”* thirty-three leading children’s doctors, neuroscientists, research scholars and youth service professionals draw upon a large body of recent research to report that children and adolescents are “biologically primed” to establish enduring connections to others and to seek moral and spiritual meaning. This emphasis on “connecting” with other human persons is of critical importance, as two of their findings relate directly to our focus on nurturing ethical values:

- The beginning of morality is the biologically primed moralization of attachment.
- The ongoing development of morality in later childhood and adolescence involves the human capacity to idealize individuals and ideas.⁹

We turn now to the main focus of this paper: an overview of the comprehensive “Vision” for holistic formation of adolescents, and how its eight component areas allow for healthy and continued moral development, and the reinforcement of ethical values.

Renewing The Vision

In 1976 the Department of Education of the United States Catholic Conference of Bishops created a document, *A Vision of Youth Ministry*,¹⁰ which identified a vision for a holistic program for ministry with high school adolescents. This new youth ministry direction was well articulated and was eagerly embraced by those who were daily striving to nurture and educate adolescents. Two decades later in 1996, the United States Catholic Conference of Bishops expanded the 1976 document to address an adolescent’s personal call to discipleship, evangelization, and leadership. Because the new document, *Renewing The Vision: A Framework for Catholic Youth Ministry*, was a broader and more comprehensive vision than its predecessor, it was able to respond to emerging challenges and opportunities of adolescent development, and also provided a blueprint for the continued development of effective, holistic ministry with adolescents as we entered the 21st century. Further, this document definitively directed that the entire faith community and all its resources must be utilized to insure the nurturing of ethical values, and to incorporate adolescents and families into the total mission to serve the world.¹¹

Even though this Vision document has been developed and disseminated by the Catholic Church, its principles and directives can be implemented by all Christian communities; and,

⁸ USCCB. *Renewing The Vision*, 16-17.

⁹ Commission on Children At Risk. *Hardwired To Connect – The New Scientific Case for Authoritative Communities*. (New York: Institute for American Values, 2003) p. 15.

¹⁰ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. *A Vision of Youth Ministry*. (Washington, D.C.: USCCB Publishing, 1970).

¹¹ USCCB. *Renewing The Vision*, 2.

many of its elements are widely applicable for adolescent formation in other religious affiliations.

Focus on Eight Components for Ministry With Adolescents

Renewing the Vision presents eight “components” of a comprehensive youth ministry program: these are advocacy, catechesis, community life, evangelization, justice and service, leadership development, pastoral care, prayer and worship. Such a holistic program assures that the high school adolescent can participate in a well rounded choice of social, spiritual, service, leadership and educational programs and activities that will support and nurture ethical values.

We will simultaneously access data from a recent study done by Christian Smith and Melinda Denton. Their book, *Soul Searching: The Religious And Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*,¹² presents data from the largest and most detailed study of teenagers on religion ever accomplished. It examines the character of adolescent religion in the U.S. and the effect it has on risk behaviors and moral reasoning. This landmark scientific research provides interesting insights into how 267 surveyed adolescents, ages 13-17, understand their faith and develop their concepts of right and wrong. Their research is of valuable significance to our focus here because their conclusions have identified factors that exert positive sociological influence in the moral development and spiritual growth of adolescents. As we overview the eight components of holistic youth ministry, we will simultaneously interweave their conclusions that are pertinent in the following areas: 1) Moral directives 2) Spiritual experiences 3) Role models 4) Leadership Skills, and 5) Coping Skills.

Each of these eight components of holistic youth ministry will now be briefly defined, and a few examples will be given of how each one supports and/or nurtures ethical values in adolescent moral formation.

Catechesis Component & Moral Directives

It is of importance at this juncture, to identify that throughout this paper we are operating under the premise that ethical values and moral formation have begun many years earlier in the adolescent’s life. The emphasis during the adolescent years is to assist the individual in “internalizing” the faith and ethical values that hopefully already exist as they enter high school. Of course, additional values can be learned and internalized by the curious adolescent. Also, developing a personal relationship with God and with others is the paramount task of faith development at this developmental stage. Continued moral development and learning about one’s faith are a lifelong process: living the ethical values and the faith that is professed are also essential.

The Vision document identifies that the faith development of the adolescent should be focused on important themes that are drawn from the teachings of the church, and that simultaneously attend to the developmental needs and life experiences of the adolescent. There are three faith themes that are pertinent to our consideration of moral development in the adolescent:

- **Morality and Living a Virtuous Life:** incorporating Catholic moral principles and virtues into one’s life and moral decision making.

¹² Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton. *Soul Searching: The Religious And Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

- **Catholic Morality:** applying Catholic moral teachings to contemporary life situations as one encounters the many complexities in our world.
- **Conscience, Virtue, and Sin:** understanding the innate desire to turn toward God and to do good, understanding the impact of sin, and learning to make decisions according to one's rightly formed conscience.¹³

The word "catechesis" is applied to any instruction meant to educate or to deepen Christian faith. This assists adolescents in increasing their knowledge about their faith, and enriching and expanding their understanding through catechetical programming and curriculum. Such instruction can occur in established classes with a defined teacher, on a retreat, or within less formal settings, such as a small gathering of adolescents with a designated adult leader or peer minister.¹⁴ Lifelong catechesis fosters growth in faith and in moral development in three dimensions: trusting (heart), knowing and believing (mind), and doing (will).¹⁵ There is also encouragement to apply such instruction to daily life and personal decisions.

A basic pattern for effective catechesis begins with 1) providing adolescents with opportunity to critically reflect on their personal life experience, 2) always connecting their personal experience with the deep traditions of the Christian heritage, 3) sharing their insights and wisdom with one another, and 4) deciding on life action to live out their new reality. Encouraging the adolescents to actively participate in this pattern with one another will energize the sessions and provide some impetus for the adolescents to then decide how to internalize and "live out" in their lives the faith and moral values they are learning. This allows the adolescents the opportunity to experience their personal faith as a vibrantly lived reality, and not simply as an archaic tradition. Also, this model of shared Christian praxis¹⁶ that we have just described above, engages the adolescents as full participants in their personal faith formation, and not simply as inert objects of directed education.

Ideally, within this pattern for catechesis, adolescents are encouraged to express their personal point of view, and to question concepts that maybe unclear or unacceptable to them. This is of great value in encouraging adolescents to also explore and/or challenge the established norms or patterns of faith and morals. It is through such inquiry that confusion can be eliminated, correct information can be disseminated, the mind and heart can be engaged, and ethical values and faith realities can be internalized. As the adolescent continuously searches for truth, personal clarity grows and integrity is reinforced. Hopefully, commitment to the truth is deepened in the adolescent as well.

Christian Smith's research supports the moral value of catechesis. He strongly states that the moral directives dictated by religious formation definitively orient human consciousness and motivate human action.

¹³ USCCB. *Renewing The Vision*, 30-33.

¹⁴ The value of these adult mentors or peer ministers will be discussed in the Leadership Component.

¹⁵ USCCB. *Renewing The Vision*, 29.

¹⁶ Shared Christian Praxis is the four part theory of Thomas Groome who believes that parents and educators are responsible for nurturing the young in their ability to experience their faith and moral development as a lived reality.

American religions promote specific cultural moral directives of self-control and personal virtue grounded in the authority of long historical traditions and narratives into which members are inducted, such that youth may internalize these moral orders and use them to guide their life choices and moral commitments.¹⁷

In this way, faith formation can provide the adolescent with learned moral standards and imperatives that assist in forming their consciences, to guide personal choices and their moral decision making. Within the security and comfort of a community of peers, turning away from evil and toward the good can become the adolescent's accepted norm of behavior in the world. Further, learning about and practicing the virtues of prudence, fortitude, justice, and temperance will equip the 21st century adolescent to live positive, productive moral lives.

Prayer and Worship Component & Spiritual Experiences

This component affords adolescents an opportunity to learn about prayer and worship in their catechetical sessions, as well as participate in personal and communal prayer, and a variety of worship experiences within a church community. It is definitely reinforcing when adolescents are also encouraged to utilize their abilities to minister during worship as musicians, singers, readers, etc. Very important for the spiritual health of the adolescent is the opportunity to learn about God and to establish/nurture a relationship that is personally meaningful. Also valuable is the opportunity for the adolescent to "learn" various ways of praying, and to "experience" new prayer forms within the security of their own community of peers.

Overnight and weekend retreats afford an excellent opportunity for adolescents to leave the reality of their lives for an extended period of time, and enter into a safe, peaceful environment to reflect on life experiences, focus on a valuable topic, search for truth, and refresh their spirits. Such retreat opportunities provide an excellent atmosphere and time for deeper consideration of personal ethical values, life choices and patterns, and moral priorities. This spiritually nourishing time also provides opportunity for the adolescent to gain a better understanding of himself/herself within a community of supportive peers and nurturing adult mentors.

The value of these above mentioned activities is that the adolescent can continue to deepen personal spirituality and connect prayerfully with God, peers, and mentors. Christian Smith concludes that such personal spiritual experiences reinforce ethical values, and assist adolescents to legitimize their subjective beliefs, commitments, convictions, and perceptions. "...religious organizations and traditions possess the contexts and resources to help facilitate such spiritual experiences, which, in turn, often solidify the moral orders that shape various outcomes in youth's lives."¹⁸ Thus, positive spiritual experiences can definitively reinforce constructive moral practices.

Advocacy Component & The Value of Role Models

The *Renewing The Vision* strongly directs the need for developing a shared vision to protect and to empower our young:

. . . we need to provide strong moral leadership; to stand up for adolescents, especially those who are voiceless and powerless in society. . . . to use the

¹⁷ Smith and Denton. 241.

¹⁸ Smith and Denton. 242-3.

resources of our faith community, the resources and talents of all our people, and the opportunities of this democracy to shape a society more respectful of the life, dignity, and rights of adolescents and their families.¹⁹

In addition, advocacy encourages awareness of the needs of adolescents, and how well they are integrated into the faith community or broader community. Advocacy also occurs when adolescent voices are heard, especially around issues that directly affect their lives. Also valuable are opportunities for adolescents to be empowered to serve the community in meaningful ways; as mentors for the younger kids, as teen leaders on their retreats or as adolescent representatives on boards or committees, etc. Their willingness and eagerness to serve, and their contribution should be generously and consistently affirmed. In such a way, the adolescent is given an opportunity to altruistically expend self to help others.

Adults are called to support adolescents, and to advocate on their behalf with a consistent commitment to their developmental needs and moral formation. Generous commitment of time to “mentoring” the young is essential. In *Soul Searching*, Smith definitively affirms the great moral value of wise elders and peer role models who advocate for youth by providing examples of life practices that have been shaped by moral order and personal choice. These individuals constructively influence the lives of youth by offering supportive mentoring through positive, nurturing personal relationship. As youth become personally invested in such sustaining relationships, they also become aware of the moral order to which their mentors are committed. They see how it is lived out in the mentor’s lives, and they are encouraged to emulate what they hold in high regard.²⁰

Margaret McCarty in her doctoral project, *Longing To Belong – Strategies for Families and Faith Communities to Connect With Today’s Millennial Generation*, presents an entire chapter on the importance of consistent and effective nurture from caring adults. She begins the chapter by defining Authoritative Communities as “. . . groups of people committed to one another over time, and (who) are able to pass on what it means to be a good person and to live a good life.”²¹ She is, of course, describing the concept purported by the Commission on Children at Risk in their report *Hardwired To Connect*. The following concepts from this report that affirm the value of role models: 1) Rules matter in authoritative communities, but so do relationships 2) Expectations are important as well 3) Authoritative communities do employ moral reasoning and moral judgments 4) These communities demonstrate and teach what it means to be virtuous (i.e. a good person).²²

Leadership Component & Leadership Skills

When adolescents are called forth and empowered to develop and then utilize their leadership skills and abilities during their adolescent years, their confidence and general functionality are also increased. Christian Smith believes that their well-being and life outcomes are positively affected as they observe, acquire, and practice valuable leadership skills.²³ The important focus in the Vision document is on the value of continuous recruiting, training, and empowerment of

¹⁹ USCCB. *Renewing The Vision*, 27.

²⁰ Smith and Denton. 243.

²¹ Margaret McCarty. *Longing To Belong – Strategies for Families and Faith Communities to Connect With Today’s Millennial Generation*, (Doctoral Project – Graduate Theological Foundation in South Bend, IN, February 2005), 55.

²² McCarty. 52-53.

²³ Smith and Denton. 244.

adolescents for leadership with their peers, in their schools and family, and in faith and local communities. A few arenas in which the leadership skills of adolescents can be developed include peer ministry skills, retreat leadership skills, collaboration and decision making skills, spiritual leadership abilities, as well as leadership skills useful in school settings and work environments. By placing adolescents in leadership roles or giving them leadership opportunities, they are empowered to go beyond themselves in trust to make a contribution to the community.²⁴

The forming and nourishing of adolescent leaders provides them with a sense of identity, can develop a feeling of competence, and an awareness that their presence in their group is valued and needed. Developing leaders grow in maturity, relational skills, and basic organizational ability. There is also value in the leader possessing trust, self confidence, and a commitment to living in an honest manner. All of these developing skills contribute directly to the personal growth of the adolescent leader. This in turn, assists in the continuing formation of personal confidence so essential to good moral decision making and commitment to personal moral stances. In most cases, an adolescent who desires to develop leadership abilities is usually also forming the ethical values of altruism and integrity by being attentive to the needs of others in the community. Ethical values in general become more defined and internalized in a deeper way because leadership requires this.

Pastoral Care Component & Coping Skills

This component focuses on compassion, empathy, and sincere caring. Often adolescents and their families need support, counseling or just a listening ear as they face life decisions, sudden traumas, or difficult moral choices and consequences. A holistic youth ministry program should always have a strong reality of pastoral care that nurtures growth in the adolescents and provides networks of care and support when needed. A few examples of this would include adolescents serving as peer ministers and journeying alongside their friends during times of difficulty; adult leader support of adolescents during trauma or rejoicing for adolescent accomplishments.

Of course, adult mentors would be pastorally available to adolescents who face serious life challenges or trauma, or who become confused or disheartened, or who need support or guidance in making an important moral decision. Mentioned earlier in this paper during the catechesis section are the adult mentors who facilitate the small group meetings of a group of adolescent believers. Such adults are truly great role models by their welcoming manner, willingness to spend time with adolescents, facilitate their formation, teach life skills, and genuinely care for their needs and their concerns.

This concept of pastoral care is really about compassionate presence, and can be very effective in an established peer ministry group where the members learn to be honest with one another, trust each another, and are willing to share life experiences and moral dilemmas. In all these areas there is excellent reinforcement of the ethical values of honesty, compassion and empathy in the adolescent; and, this is true whether the individual is receiving care or generously bestowing love and attention on peers facing difficult or challenging moral choices. “Pastoral care enables healing and growth to take place within individuals and their relationships. It nurtures growth toward wholeness, provides guidance in decision making, and challenges obstacles to positive development.”²⁵

²⁴ USCCB. *Renewing The Vision*, 40-42.

²⁵ USCCB. *Renewing The Vision*, 42.

Soul Searching has concluded that American religions do foster many beliefs and practices that definitely strengthen the adolescent's ability to effectively cope with life problems. This includes a belief in a loving and omnipotent divine being who understands suffering, and who is truly desiring and orchestrating the world for the good of all people.²⁶ This can be very instructive and consoling to the morally developing adolescent, who is thus more encouraged, and even empowered, to remain committed to their chosen ethical values.

Component of Community Life

This component supports adolescents in developing healthy and life-giving relationships with one another, usually in a social setting or activity. This truly reinforces the adolescent's developing independence and emerging identity. Further, when adolescents are truly welcomed, they feel safe, and know that their presence and giftedness are valued.²⁷ Community building among the members of a retreat, a leadership team, or a service event enhances the adolescents' learning and rounds out their formation experience. Also, throughout the program year social activities encourage the development of friendships and provide opportunities for "fun" and social connection and growth: ski trips, amusement parks, pizza parties, sporting events, ice cream socials, pasta dinners, coffee houses with jazz bands, etc. When this thread of "socializing" and personal connection is woven through each of the other seven components of holistic youth ministry programming, the adolescent is provided with a myriad of opportunities to be honest, outgoing, and participative. There is also a crucible existent in which the adolescent can live in relationship and community life, and practice the virtues of prudence, temperance, fortitude, and justice!

Component of Justice & Service

Since adolescents often do not readily understand "justice" issues in society, ongoing education about *social change* is necessary to guide and empower them to help change the root causes that contribute to social problems. Continually sharing information with adolescents about social realities locally and globally will provide them with incentive to make a difference in the world by their actions, and they will learn how to improve the system. Educating adolescents is only the first step. Empowering them to then work for justice and defend the life, dignity and rights of others helps them to develop a personal social consciousness that feeds their desire to stand in solidarity with the poor and continue to work for justice in the world.

And so, adolescents also benefit from participating in *direct service* to attend to the immediate, urgent needs of those in their community, as well as in the wider world. Some practical examples include collecting food for shelters or food pantries, visiting the elderly and sick, providing childcare for young parents, shoveling snow for the infirm, welcoming the stranger, comforting the sad or distressed, sleeping in a box on a cold November night to be in solidarity with those who are homeless. In and through these various service experiences, adolescents are hopefully touched and affected by the people who are being served, and the ethical values of compassion and empathy are deepened within them.

Specific mention will be made here of the immense value of weeklong service trips that afford the adolescents an opportunity to live together in solidarity as a team, and to serve and care about those who are in need of help or personal connection. Such altruism deepens the adolescents' understanding of human dignity and affirms the value of meaningful connection

²⁶ Smith and Denton. 245

²⁷ USCCB. *Renewing The Vision*, 35.

with other people. Fortunate adolescents learn that their listening to and relating with those served is more important than accomplishing the actual service work. For many adolescents, the expanded opportunity to serve others during a service trip motivates them well beyond the trip; to open their minds and hearts, and to offer their physical ability to be used in whatever way serves the needs of others. This is an admirable way to live the virtue of Justice.

In addition to establishing or nurturing the ethical values of altruism, empathy, and compassion *Renewing The Vision* identifies that service involvement “. . . develops the assets, skills, and faith of young people . . . by increasing positive self-esteem, self-confidence, and moral reasoning abilities; by building leadership and social skills, by helping them discover their personal gifts and abilities.”²⁸

Component of Evangelization

In this component, Christian adolescents are encouraged to consciously develop their relationship with their God, and to be aware of God’s presence in their daily lives. Then, each adolescent is ready and energized to share their personal stories with others about how God is working in their lives! Such witnessing is accomplished by who adolescents “are,” as well as by what they “say.” In the process, adolescents learn that actions really do speak louder than mere words, and integrity becomes more deeply entrenched.

The Vision document identifies evangelization as the “. . . energizing core of all ministry with adolescents. All of the relationships, ministry components, and programs of comprehensive ministry with adolescents must proclaim the Good News.”²⁹ Adolescents are encouraged to be witnesses of Jesus, and to love God and love others. Such commitment to be a disciple informs and shapes their lives and ethical values, and inevitably empowers them to continue to share their personal beliefs. They have been seeking Truth, and are now able to continue that quest by proclaiming their personal beliefs with energy and conviction!

Holistic youth ministry programming provides many opportunities for Christian adolescents to witness their discipleship and share their faith, including faith sharing in small groups of adolescents as well as with adults, defending/explaining faith to peers, family and friends, and building healthy, and Christian relationships with people. Most importantly, there is opportunity to simply live the faith that is verbally professed! Throughout this process of internalizing their personal moral values, adolescents come to faith or deepen existent faith. This, in turn, encourages adolescents to continue seeking truth and developing their personal integrity.

Authentic Voices of Adolescents

Personal experience in the world is vibrant and vital in our consideration of developing moral values. James and Evelyn Whitehead define experience as “all those ideas, feelings, biases and insights that persons and communities bring to the reflection. Experience embraces not only life events, but the conviction and apprehensions and hopes carried in these events.”³⁰ They strongly advocate that all of our reflections be based in our own personal experience in the world. They suggest that each individual should come to consciousness and insight about what has been experienced, and this will, in turn, lead to self-knowledge and clarity.

²⁸ USCCB. *Renewing The Vision*, 42.

²⁹ USCCB. *Renewing The Vision*, 36.

³⁰ James D. and Evelyn Eaton Whitehead. *Method In Ministry: Theological Reflection And Christian Ministry*. (Franklin, WI: Sheed & Ward, 1995), 43.

To gather some authentic, lived experience, I invited a variety of adolescents to converse with me, and to candidly share how/if their involvement in the comprehensive high school program at Saints Peter and Paul Church in Naperville, IL did or did not nurture their developing ethical values. During the conversations, I did not ask direct questions about their specific experiences. Instead, I asked several open-ended questions that allowed each individual to share experiences and opinions in a personal, non-threatening manner.

Since the length of this paper does not allow a complete reporting of their remarks, we will present a sampling of their comments and insights: 1) Mitch feels that his participation encouraged him to become more honest and to grow to be a better person. His faith formation experiences allowed him the opportunity to read the Bible more and to reflect on the moral imperatives of Jesus Christ. Further, he feels supported in his attempts to stay away from evil which he knows is a very powerful force. 2) Haley recently participated in a 30 hour food fast during which she ate no solid food to raise money to fight hunger. Her experience of “walking in the shoes of someone who is truly hungry” has sensitized her more to the plight and pain of the hungry, and has increased her altruistic attitude about the issue of world hunger. 3) Kim remembers a session with a good conversation about sin that helped her understand the reality of evil better. She also likes learning about “why” we do what we do in matters of faith and prayer. 4) Jon talked immediately about being with his friends during the program sessions. He likes getting into deep conversations with these friends because he says when that happens, what he is learning gets imprinted in his memory more deeply. He understands what is “going on,” and feels that being present with friends allows them to understand better what he is going through.

5) Austin states that he likes talking about his faith and morals with other teens his own age because they know how it is in the teen world: it is not the same when you talk with adults or parents. 6) Katie feels more “opened up” when she is attending youth ministry programs. She definitely likes to be able to question what she is being told because she feels that every person has some doubt that needs to be cleared up. “If I can ask WHY things are the way they are, I can better understand why I do what I do.” 7) Kim wants to be part of the faith community and the group of teens because she can understand life better. She feels she internalizes what she is told better and more deeply because she feels connected to the community. 8) Katy feels welcome and likes that “issues” that are important in her life can be discussed in her small group. This helps her to “live out” what she is learning in the program. 9) Sam likes the variety of the activities and the interaction of the teens who attend. He feels that examining his faith really helps him to figure out his ethical values. 10) Alex experienced a week long service trip in high school, and it helped him to be able to actually meet and talk with the people as he worked to help them. Such conversation and the service work itself reinforced his desire to continue to live altruistically in service to others.

11) Jake enjoys learning and understanding moral concepts presented in the programming. He has developed a deeper relationship with God by learning about his faith. 12) Alex likes that the youth ministry program was attentive to the physical, social, emotional development of the adolescent. He appreciates that there is access to both theological ideas and to service opportunities. This drastically changed his life. Alex is also pleased that there is encouragement for teens to also begin new activities, such as Bible study. 13) Gabriella also participated in a service trip, serving the people in Mississippi who were devastated by hurricane Katrina. Her altruism grew when she saw so many people at rock bottom, and now she wants to help more and more people. In fact, she has decided that her life path will be as a social worker! 14) George likes the individual development and the consistency of the program. He feels like

he attained wisdom and established a whole philosophy of life. He is often motivated to push conversations to the edge to understand as much as possible. 15) Kevin feels the youth ministry program literally changed his life. This has affected how he treats his friends, how he feels about God, and how he treats people each day.

16) Olivia states that the controversial teen topics that were discussed in her small group meetings gave her a valuable perspective about the beliefs of other people. She likes that this occurred without any judgment and without any bad consequences after the session. For her now, honesty is the best policy. 17) Jake witnessed a short play on a retreat about a man who willingly sacrificed himself to serve the needs of others. After the retreat, Jake's mom was having a very bad day, and Jake was empowered to convey the story to her which restored her confidence and energy for life. Jake shared with her his new philosophy learned on the retreat: God is always there for you. Just put everything into God's hands! 18) Kinley says that being with people his own age helps him to learn and to internalize ethical values better. He feels that it helps him so much because he is with people who think and feel as he does.

This collective, human experience of these teens does validate the main thesis of this paper: they felt that their participation in youth ministry programming during their high school years did assist them in developing moral values and learning about right and wrong.

Conclusion

We began our consideration of nurturing ethical values in the young by identifying the proverb that insists it takes a whole village to raise a child to adulthood. It is valuable to reaffirm this wisdom, and to identify the primary communities that typically contribute to the moral development of the 21st century adolescent: community of the family, school community, faith community, and various civic communities that serve youth.

Ideally, there would be visioning and collaboration among various communities to embark on this worthy task of assisting the young to establish ethical values. Margaret McCarty proclaims that such communities have tremendous power to influence, and must become intentional partners in surrounding young people in supportive networks. If we approach education, faith formation, community programs, and moral formation with the intent to foster positive youth development, then planning and programming can work in tandem to achieve positive results,³¹ and the moral formation of the young can be initiated, sustained and completed.

And so, each community serves as the source, locus, and means of moral formation for all the individuals within the community, and is a concrete, human reference point for the moral formation of all individuals within the community as they transmit beliefs, truths, and moral practices. Such moral formation is cyclic, episodic, continuous, and lifelong, and is formed in the natural rhythm and pattern of the community of reference. As adolescents are immersed into the daily life of the community, there are opportunities to learn from everyone, and possibly to be individually nurtured by a mentoring adult.³² Adolescents learn how to make positive life choices that will help them be prepared for situations in life that challenge their established moral order. It is valuable to consider that, as these communities journey with the adolescent toward moral clarity, they receive much from the mere presence of the young among them. In this way, communities continue to grow and develop, mature, and be transformed!

³¹ McCarty. 68.

³² John Roberto. "Institute Program" for *Generations of Faith Project*. Naugatuck, CT: Center for Ministry Development – Workshop Services, 2004, 5-7.

As we have seen, the eight components of the *Renewing The Vision* document describe the “essence” of ministry for adolescents, and clearly provide us with fundamental ways to minister effectively with them in a comprehensive and balanced manner during the ages of 14-18 years. Further, the practical and effective framework suggested in the Vision document supports implementing developmentally appropriate activities and programming that nurture moral values in the adolescent, and engaging each individual in the process of building a moral system of personal and universal ethics. This can have an authentic, positive impact on developing sound reasoning and moral courage in the adolescent. This, in turn, satisfies their hunger for participating in the worthy lifelong adventure of living a moral, ethical Life!

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APPENDIX A

This publication presents research on developmental assets, which are positive factors in young people, families, communities, schools, and other settings that have been found to be important in promoting young people's healthy development. Further details on developmental assets are available at www.search-institute.org/assets.

External Assets

SUPPORT

1. Family support-Family life provides high levels of love and support.
2. Positive family communication-Young person and her or his parent(s) communicate positively, and young person is willing to seek advice and counsel from parents.
3. Other adult relationships-Young person receives support from three or more nonparent adults.
4. Caring neighborhood-Young person experiences caring neighbors.
5. Caring school climate-School provides a caring, encouraging environment.
6. Parent involvement in schooling-Parent(s) are actively involved in helping young person succeed in school.

EMPOWERMENT

7. Community values youth-Young person perceives that adults in the community value youth.
8. Youth as resources-Young people are given useful roles in the community.
9. Service to others-Young person serves in the community one hour or more per week.
10. Safety-Young person feels safe at home, at school, and in the neighborhood.

BOUNDARIES AND EXPECTATIONS

11. Family boundaries-Family has clear rules and consequences and monitors the young person's whereabouts.
12. School boundaries-School provides clear rules and consequences.
13. Neighborhood boundaries-Neighbors take responsibility for monitoring young people's behavior.
14. Adult role models-Parent(s) and other adults model positive, responsible behavior.
15. Positive peer influence-Young person's best friends model responsible behavior.
16. High expectations-Both parent(s) and teachers encourage the young person to do well.

CONSTRUCTIVE USE OF TIME

17. Creative activities-Young person spends three or more hours per week in lessons or practice in music, theater, or other arts.
18. Youth programs-Young person spends three or more hours per week in sports, clubs, or organizations at school and/or

in the community.

19. Religious community-Young person spends one or more hours per week in activities in a religious institution.
20. Time at home-Young person is out with friends "with nothing special to do" two or fewer nights per week.

Internal Assets

COMMITMENT TO LEARNING

21. Achievement motivation-Young person is motivated to do well in school.
22. School engagement-Young person is actively engaged in learning.
23. Homework-Young person reports doing at least one hour of homework every school day.
24. Bonding to school-Young person cares about her or his school.
25. Reading for pleasure- Young person reads for pleasure three or more hours per week.

POSITIVE VALUES

26. Caring-Young person places high value on helping other people.
27. Equality and social justice-Young person places high value on promoting equality and reducing hunger and poverty.
28. Integrity-Young person acts on convictions and stands up for her or his beliefs.
29. Honesty-Young person "tells the truth even when it is not easy."
30. Responsibility-Young person accepts and takes personal responsibility.
31. Restraint-Young person believes it is important not to be sexually active or to use alcohol or other drugs.

SOCIAL COMPETENCIES

32. Planning and decision making-Young person knows how to plan ahead and make choices.
33. Interpersonal competence-Young person has empathy, sensitivity, and friendship skills.
34. Cultural competence-Young person has knowledge of and comfort with people of different cultural/racial/ethnic backgrounds.
35. Resistance skills-Young person can resist negative peer pressure and dangerous situations.
36. Peaceful conflict resolution-Young person seeks to resolve conflict nonviolently.

POSITIVE IDENTITY

37. Personal power-Young person feels he or she has control over "things

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that happen to me."

38. Self-esteem-Young person reports having a high self-esteem.
39. Sense of purpose-Young person reports that "my life has a purpose."
40. Positive view of personal future-Young person is optimistic about her or his personal future.

APPENDIX B

Assets To Promote Development of Adolescents

“Renewing The Vision” pages 16-17

To promote the faith development of adolescents, *Renewing the Vision* identifies eighteen "assets" that are foundational for nurturing healthy faith development and growth in adolescents. A complete list of these assets is outlined below.

The Catholic Church's ministry with adolescents seeks to:

1. Guide young people in the call to holiness by developing a personal relationship with Jesus Christ by meeting him in the Scriptures, in the life and teachings of the Catholic Church, and in their own prayer lives.
2. Empower young people with the knowledge and skills for active participation in the life and ministries of the Church, including a comprehensive and substantive catechesis based on the catechism of the Catholic Church.
3. Nurture in young people positive, Catholic values of love, honesty, courage, peace and nonviolence, fidelity, chastity, generosity, tolerance, respect for life from conception to natural death, care and compassion, service to those in need, equality, social justice, integrity, responsibility, and community.
4. Help young people apply their Catholic faith to daily life experiences, nurture in young people a lifelong commitment to the Catholic faith, guiding them in developing a personal faith and skills for continuing their growth as Catholics.
5. Empower young people to live the moral and theological virtues and apply these virtues in making moral decisions.
6. Develop the biblical and doctrinal literacy of young people and a deeper appreciation for the importance of the Scriptures and the teachings of the Church in the Christian life.
7. Foster development of a personal spirituality of, and active participation in, the sacramental life of the Church, especially the Eucharist.
8. Nurture in young people an understanding of, and active participation in, the sacramental life of the Church, especially the Eucharist.
9. Help young people recognize that the Catholic faith calls them to work for justice and to defend human dignity.