

What Do YOU Dream?

Parenting and Congregational Care of Teenagers

Charles Scully Stikes

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How often do we ask our children, “What do you dream?” NOT asking that question was a mistake I used to make. Now, I ask quite regularly. My work involves helping teenagers to become what God has gifted and granted them to be and do. Their dreams and visions are the catalysts for their development and their actions. Too often, their dreams are deemed unrealistic, invalid, or nonsensical. We must be both priestly and prophetic in working with our children at all ages. We are priests when we care for them. We are prophetic when we interpret their dreams with them.

LIVING IN EXILE

Recall the narratives of the Israelites who were taken into exile. Four young Israelites were among the prisoners from Jerusalem taken to exile in Babylon. They were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. The palace master gave them other names. Daniel was called Belteshazzar, Hananiah was called Shadrach, Mishael was called Meshach, and Azariah was called Abednego. The Hebrew names contained references to the Jewish God. For service in the royal court in Babylon the young men were given new names incorporating references to the Babylonian deities Bell, Mark, and Nabu. The changes in the names were more than mere semantic changes. They were designed to change their characters. Furthermore, they were put on special rations and were given an advanced education. These privileges were intended to make them servants of new gods. But with God’s help, they resisted the influences of their oppressor’s culture. For example, Daniel resolved not to take the rations in order not to defile himself. God also gave them skill in every aspect of literature and wisdom, and Daniel was given insight into all visions and dreams. It was God’s revelation of King Nebuchadnezzar’s dreams through Daniel, as well as their faithfulness to God in the face of persecution, that elevated the young Israelites in the king’s service and helped to save their lives.

I liken the situation of the four young Israelites to the situa-

tion of our teenagers. With our counsel, our teenagers must be resistant to the pressures of this postmodern society. Our teens are living in an age that creates conditions of exile. In this disconnected, incongruent society, more information is available than ever before; however, its access and use are a blessing or curse depending upon how that information is used as a resource by our teenagers. It is increasingly more difficult for our children and teenagers to interpret what is going on and to become what God has gifted and granted them to be and do. They need our involvement and counsel. We live in an age that glorifies youthfulness, yet the resources to aid in the development of our youth are not sufficient. We do not have the kind of covenant relationships that enable our children to trust us and to share with us their thoughts and feelings. We do not listen to their voices and help them interpret their dreams. We live in an age where sixty percent of teenagers between 12 and 17 years of age are at risk for substance abuse. Substance abuse is less likely for children of parents who are directly involved with their children. These are parents who set rules for their teenagers’ behaviors by setting standards against drug abuse, have meal times regularly with them, know where they are in the evenings and monitor their tastes in TV, the Internet and music. Parental involvement makes an enormous difference, but less than thirty percent of parents are “hands-on” parents.

NOT THROUGH OUR EYES ONLY

Because we are not involved with our teenagers in “hands-on” ways, their dreams and visions are going unfulfilled even though many of their material interests and needs may be satisfied and they may rise to positions of authority in society as the four Israelites rose in Babylonian society. Our teenagers’ dreams and visions are powerful, but they may not know how to find meaning in them and how to use them as catalysts to achieve their goals in life.

It will be difficult for us to understand what is meaningful for our teenagers if we look at their visions through our eyes only. Their visions are shaped by what they have experienced. Their

life experience begins around 1983. Go to **historychannel.com** and review key events since 1983 in order to see through the eyes of teenagers. We cannot accurately say, "I've been through what you are going through." While the developmental issues of identity, peer relationships, rebellion against parental authority, sexuality, gender identification, etc. are the same, they have been experienced in a very different context and that makes the struggles different for our teenagers. AIDS was not a major concern as a consequence of sexual experimentation nor was the danger of life threatening drug addiction and/or death from one attempt at experimentation with drugs during our teenage years. Guns were not part of the fabric of everyday life. We have a large generation gap to overcome if we are to work effectively with teenagers.

In our priestly and prophetic roles, we must help teens shape their visions into goals for themselves, recognizing that their goals will be tentative and may change quite frequently. I often tell teenagers and others, "If you do not know where you are going, then anything will get you there; and any place will do." We must challenge our teenagers to make specific goals for their future and support them as they work toward achieving those goals. Where there are no visions the people perish.

WHAT CREATES SUCCESS?

What factors influence success for our teenagers? Race and ethnicity matter. Our teenagers may attend an "integrated" school, live in a racially isolated community, attend a racially isolated and monocultural church, and work in a job with ethnically different persons while serving a multicultural clientele. There are different roles and identities as a result of the adap-

tation to the varied cultures in which our teens interact. Different skills are needed in different settings. We need to purposefully structure cross cultural exchanges so that our children can learn and experience differences. I agree with the saying that "differences make a difference; however, they are not deficiencies." Even when our teens attend "integrated"



schools, these schools often remain white dominant; therefore, our teens do not experience the strengths and beauty of the cultures of people of color. As an African American pastor in a multicultural church, my observation is that white teenagers too often do not know how to welcome and exercise hospitality to teenagers of color. They must be taught the human relation skills, reciprocity and other skills necessary to function in a multicultural environment.

Teenagers of color need different kinds of experiences to move them toward accomplishing their visions and goals. For example, African American teenagers need a greater emphasis on: positive self-concept or confidence, realistic self-appraisal, understanding and dealing with racism, preferences for long-range goals to short-term or immediate needs, availability of a strong support person, successful leadership experiences, demonstrated community service, and knowledge acquired in a field. Race does matter. There are different paths toward the same goals. I have had good success with workshops, family retreats and lock-ins for African American teens, parents and their teachers in dealing with how to cultivate these strengths in the teens' lives.

When we know the favorite musical artists, video games, places to go, movies, sports, sports teams, players, websites and TV shows of all of our teenagers, then we have made a good start in understanding their world. We also need to know what to help them avoid. Blood and gore fasci-

nate some teens. One popular website to avoid is **www.rotten.com**. All things rotten are displayed. (No, don't go to the site; use your imagination.)

INTERPATHIC LISTENING

Teenagers' worlds are going to be different according to age, ethnicity and culture which affects the activities they are interested in and what we should plan with them. The differences can enrich all of us. After we have assessed their various interests, we need to listen and experience their world with them and on our own. Then we can help them deal with the direct and indirect messages that are communicated in their cultural language, experiences and perspectives. "Don't tell; ask and listen." Our interpathic listening is key. This is listening to learn and understand a different cultural experience.

- Appreciate the validity of teenager's experiences.
- See teenagers in the social and cultural contexts in which they exist.

Individual development occurs within each person's social and cultural context. We exist as humans in community. What we try to do with our teens is often rejected because the interventions are not in harmony with the contexts in which their development occurs. I have a colleague at another church who developed a teen group that meets at McDonald's before school. It is successful because she listened and entered their world. Such interpathic respect, understanding, and appreciation must occur in order for us to transcend our own cultural limitations as members of a different generation.

We must let our teens teach us and lead us into their world so that we can learn their dreams and help them to interpret what they dream. □



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