

Embodied faith

A peacemaking approach to youth ministry

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It's not unusual to spot a bear in the outback of Alberta's foothills. I suppose that's why I looked behind me as quickly as I did. The circle of concerned junior high girls had been staring down the trail, a few pointing in my direction. Serious faces told me that I might be in danger. Turning to protect myself from impending assault, I saw nothing but cedars. Continuing on my way, as I drew closer to the circle of doom, it became painfully obvious that in the girls' eyes I was the scary thing on the trail.

As the camp pastor for the week, I was eager to help kids grow in their relationship with Jesus. It was only my second night at chapel, but clearly I'd already given offense. As I invited myself into their circle, the group became solemn and quiet. I felt like I

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was back in eighth grade, but instead of bolting for the boy's bathroom I asked, "What seems to be the problem?" Most of the girls stared at the dirt, though a few of the more brazen ones in the crowd rolled their eyes, giving me the impression that I should know better. There was a long pause, as though they were collectively willing me to solve the riddle without having to be told.

As I looked around the circle, it struck me that the girls were dressed almost identically. Same kind of shorts, shirts, threaded bracelets, and . . . Aha! The feet. Their sock-free feet all wore the same kind of leather sandals. I, having pragmatically considered the cool evening air, was wearing socks with my sandals. Dark socks. Oh the horror of this fashion faux pas! I now stood on the very brink of an adolescent shunning. They shook their heads in pity, waiting for me to slink away in shame.

Instead, I reached down and pulled my drooping socks up to my knees. Looking up, I noticed that a few of them had begun to smirk—and then we all erupted in laughter, and they proceeded to do their best to educate me on the finer points of summer footwear fashion. The next night, as I got up to speak, I noted that the entire front row of girls was decked out in smiles, sandals—and socks pulled up to their knees! You gotta love teenagers.

Jesus once said, “Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; *or about your body*, what you will wear” (Matt. 6:25). These are compelling words, but some teens—like the girls I met at camp—are hypersensitive to bodies around them and preoccupied with how their own bodies are perceived. As we seek to help teens grow spiritually, it seems wise to give some thought to how this increase in body awareness might interact with spiritual formation.

We might consider questions such as these: How do we help teenagers grow in their relationship with Jesus, when image can distract them from loving their neighbour? How do we help them learn compassion in a world that treats bodies like things to be consumed? How do we help them engage in a spiritual formation that is an embodied faith, without advocating self-hatred on the one hand or the idolatry of bodies on the other? Are we to communicate that the body is the enemy of faith?

The Apostle Paul once wrote, “I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize” (1 Cor. 9:27, NIV). Have we ever considered how a young person living with an eating disorder or a history of self-harm might hear these words? Is there a way that Anabaptist Christians might apply what we value about peacemaking to our language about the role of the body in spiritual formation?

These are just a few of the questions we might consider, as we think about helping teens grow closer to Jesus.

Full-bodied commitment

In Deuteronomy we read, “Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength” (6:5). We might be tempted to parse a few of these words, encouraging

followers of Jesus to love with emotions, thoughts, and physical bodies, but this would be a mistake. The author enjoins love with heart and soul and strength, using these words to describe not separate faculties but a full-person commitment to God. In the ancient mind, one could not be emotionally attached to God while somehow being physically or cognitively detached. God was inviting the Hebrews to be a people wholly belonging to Yahweh, a “treasured possession” (Deut. 7:6), holistically engaged in the relationship.

Diane Chandler reminds us that the physical body, not just the soul, has been made in the image of God, and its primary purpose is to bring glory to God.¹ Although God’s glory can be seen in all people (Ps. 139:14), as followers of Jesus our goal is to consciously live a life worthy of the calling we have received (Eph. 4:1)—to glorify the God who has lavished grace on us (Eph. 1:7–8).

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Our bodies were created to bring glory to God, fully engaging in a committed relationship with God and the faith community. Furthermore, we’ve been given bodies in order to be stewards. In the opening chapters of Genesis, it’s clear that God has given humans the task of caregiving, as God reigns over all that God has made. We love God with our entire being, and as we do, we glorify

and honour God not only with our spiritual selves but even with the physical bodies we use to engage in the stewardship of the resources God has placed in our care.

The body ally

“For usual human beings in the usual circumstances, their body runs their life.”² When we’re talking about a person moving through adolescence, my hunch is that that dynamic is even more exaggerated. Think for a moment about what life was like for you

in grade nine. What did you think about your developing body? How much time did you spend preparing your body before going out? How sensitive were you to comments about your body? Did you find that you were more aware of other bodies than you had been before adolescence?

With all this awareness in mind, ask yourself: how did your body help you or hinder you in your ability to worship, to glorify God, and to be a steward of all that God had placed in your care? The physical realities we live with are inseparable from our

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spiritual selves. I recall some of my encounters over the years, with a teen who lost his brother to cancer, a young woman with an addiction to alcohol, a young guy who constantly cut himself, a girl who suffered haunting nightmares after a sexual assault. All these experiences were physical, and all created a context for conversations about faith in Jesus. In many instances the body seems like the enemy. Disease, desire, dysfunction, and trauma may make faith seem elusive, and yet our bodies provide the context not only for pain but also for hope,

restoration, reconciliation, and healing. The body is the place where we meet with God, and it must come to serve as a primary ally in our transformation into Christlikeness.³

When I was serving as youth pastor in South Dakota, I sometimes drove with teens in my little Toyota. I'd purchased the car in Canada, so the speedometer units were kilometers per hour. On several occasions, as kids noticed the needle on the gauge at 100, they would frantically instruct me to slow down. They thought I was going 100 *miles* an hour! Young drivers tend to be hypersensitive to adult driving practices including speed, (rolling) stops, turns, and hands on the wheel. *We can tell* young drivers what to do at a stop sign, but the real teacher is *what we do* at a stop sign.

As I walk or drive along the roads of life, not only do young people notice how I drive, they also observe how I treat my body. I can teach them with my words that their body is the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19), but what tends to have a greater

impact is how I treat my own body. As we share life together, they notice how I interact with God with my entire person. They hear how I speak about my body. They see how I feed it, how I use it, how I treat it, how I dress it, whether I pierce or tattoo it, how I use it to build friendships or make enemies, and how I submit it to God. Teens will hear how I use my tongue to form words and my hands to help, heal, or hurt. All this bodily engagement becomes both the subject and the object of the discipling relationship.

Richard Dunn picks up on this idea of our lives as subject and object in our engagement with teens. He writes, “I have to learn to walk in rhythm with God *and* with the rhythm of an adolescent’s life. In doing so I recognize that I am both subject and object in the incredible mystery of God’s redemptive work in those to whom I provide spiritual care.”⁴ I’ve heard it said that ministry flows out of who you are, but I’ve come to understand that this statement is incomplete, for ministry also flows out of *how* you are. We are subjects of the unfolding work of God’s redemptive love in us. We are also objects: teachers, mentors, disciple-makers—living lives of worship, glorifying God with our entire being, and learning to be wise stewards of all that God has placed in our care.

We do all these things, sometimes well and at other times poorly, as we live our lives together with those whom God has called us to serve. The Apostle Paul captures this personal sentiment of discipleship when he writes, “Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well” (1 Thess. 2:8). As adults, many of us are carrying baggage of our own related to our bodies, and yet we find ourselves with opportunities to help shape young lives. How can we help young people engage in a fully embodied faith, when the body has often seemed the very opposite of an ally in our own transformation into Christlikeness?

Peacemaking for an embodied faith

I came to faith in Christ after wasting my teen years on substance abuse, criminal activity, and reckless living. In my early years of faith, I was taught to reject the person I’d been (Rom. 6:6) and to grow into the new creation I was becoming (2 Cor. 5:17). As a young youth pastor, I occasionally set aside time to sit with a

counselor. On one occasion, I told him the details of a recurring dream. In the dream I am walking on a sidewalk, as my current self. I am a pastor, dressed in a suit and on my way to church. I hear a noise and turn to see my teenage self, foul and intoxicated. That self is screaming at the pastor, “Why do you hate me?” And the dream ends. When I awaken, I always feel the same: sad and confused. As I sat with my counselor, he had me close my eyes and put myself back into the dream. He had me ask my teenage self what he was angry about. He answered: “You left me behind.” It was as though Christian faith had split me into two parts, the part God loved and the part God hated. I held out my arms and pulled the teenager toward me and held him. Tears were flowing down my cheeks, as I told him I was sorry and that I loved him.

This experience has shaped me profoundly. In embracing my wayward youthful self, I began to discover that self-love and not self-loathing is the path to integration and wellness, and also to a kind of embodied faith that I would never have discovered as long I was stuck in sanctified self-hatred. We must help young

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people understand that although they have a sinful nature, they are not a sinful nature. The physical body creates complications for faith formation, but the rejection of our physical selves is no fast track to spiritual enlightenment. On the contrary, we may find that “dying to self,” if misunderstood, becomes a deceptive pathway to self-hatred and to the kinds of destructive behaviours we pray teens will reject. Brennan Manning elaborates on this very thing when he describes self-hatred as the dominant sickness crippling Christians and stifling their growth in the Holy Spirit.⁵

The problem here is one of a balancing spirituality. How do we hold to the truths of

God’s word about the dangers of the “flesh” while engaging in peacemaking with our bodies? Here are a few ways for us to envision embodied peacemaking, while engaging in adolescent spiritual formation. Paul writes, “Each of you should learn to control your own body in a way that is holy and honourable” (1 Thess. 4:4). Self-control also appears as one fruit of God’s

Spirit (Gal. 5:22–23). Lent is a great time to participate with teens in the spiritual practice of self-control, as we take the radical step of denying our body a few small pleasures. In this practice, we learn that people don't live by bread alone (Matt. 4:4) but by the word of God. As we practice self-control and self-denial, we become even more aware of our body's incessant demands, and we learn that we can say no, not in self-hatred, but as an act of worship. In this gentle approach to embodied spirituality, we come to see that the body best serves as an ally in faith formation when it is brought under the lordship of Christ.

An embodied peacemaking might also include offering grace and forgiveness to ourselves, especially when we fail. How do we speak about ourselves in front of teens when we've made a mistake? It is a powerful experience for a teenager to watch an adult experience remorse for wrongdoing, followed by honest confession, making amends, showing grace to self, and making a change

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in behaviour. If we dare to share our lives with teens as both subject and object of the discipling relationship, there will come a time when God will use us as the actual, physical object lesson. It's no fun, but these experiences can be life-shaping for teenagers as they observe our faith in action.

As I've spent time in conversation with teens, one of the most compelling indications of an authentic encounter with Christ is change in the way they use words. In James 3

we're warned about the tongue, the body part that can bring as much damage as a spark in a forest. An embodied peacemaker understands the power of words. Words can cause bruises that take a lifetime to heal. If we are to be wise in modeling peacemaking in youth discipleship, we will pay close attention to the way we use words.

We might commend ourselves for the gracious way we speak to teens, but what about the verbal warfare we wage against ourselves as they listen? Comments about our intelligence, our weight, our stupidity, making the same mistake *again*—it's the lesson after the lesson. Our teaching on self-esteem might have been fantastic, but the class after the class convenes when you start to demonstrate

what self-esteem actually looks like in your own life, while you're cleaning up afterward with the youth. Ministry flows out of who we are, but it also flows out of *how* we are.

Before you despair and toss youth ministry out the window, remember that kids are incredibly resilient. They can laugh and forgive, and some of them will even wear dark socks with their sandals just to make you feel better about your odd fashion choices. We're walking together and learning together about this God who is calling us to be a chosen people. The great surprise in ministry to teens is this: God is interested in what the Spirit is doing through you, yes, but God is just as interested in what the Spirit is doing in you.

Notes

¹ Diane J. Chandler in *Christian Spiritual Formation: An Integrated Approach for Personal and Relational Wellness* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 181.

² Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002), 168.

³ *Ibid.*, 159.

⁴ Richard R. Dunn, *Shaping the Spiritual Lives of Students: A Guide for Youth Workers, Pastors, Teachers and Campus Ministers* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2001), 89.

⁵ Brennan Manning, *Abba's Child: The Cry of the Heart for Intimate Belonging* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2015), 7.

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