

Churchplace to Workplace: Helping Our Youth Get Ready

by Gina Casey



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I am very appreciative of the positive impact the church of my youth had on my spiritual development and theological formation. Its sound biblical teachings, coupled with the exemplary Christian lives of my pastor and church leaders, planted within me spiritual seeds that would encourage my commitment to the Lord at an early age. Those seeds became deeply rooted and were cultivated through Sunday school classes (which my siblings and I were almost never allowed to miss), and continuous involvement in church activities designed for children and youth. All of this served to solidify my faith and nurture an inherent desire to live efficaciously for Christ. I would come to realize that my church was also simultaneously (and probably unwittingly) equipping all of its actively participating youth members with skills and proficiencies that would one day *also* benefit us as active participants in the workforce.

Public Speaking: Memorization and Recitation

My earliest memories of church include annual recitations of Christmas, Easter and Black History Month speeches. Toddlers and kindergarteners had the shortest speeches; high school kids had the longest. Regardless of the age of the child or the length of the speech, memorization was expected. Declamations given without the aid of notes or parental prompters usually elicited the biggest applause, so most of us worked very hard in order to “hear the thunder roll” after our recitations. The anticipation of being awarded shiny, achievement stars by our names on the Sunday school attendance roll and prizes were strong motivators for us to learn and recite the weekly memory verse(s), the Decalogue, the Beatitudes, or the books of Old and New Testaments (in order, of course). Out of sheer repetition, biblical passages that were frequently used during Sunday worship services (e.g., the Lord’s Prayer, Psalm 23, etc.) were effortlessly and permanently imprinted on our young minds. The same can be said of the hymns most frequently sung in church. The lyrics are typically neither understood nor appreciated as children; yet, through spiritual osmosis, they have the capacity to somehow develop, shape and give depth to one’s theology over time.

Church school teachers are probably fully aware of the fact that the memorization and recitation of Scripture, poems and hymns familiarizes their students with God's word and essential teachings of the Christian faith. However, what they may be less cognizant of is how these religious exercises may one day benefit their young students in their marketplace careers.

There are two complementary, but different, sets of skills that memorization and recitation build: vocabulary and the "ability to understand and use complex English syntax." The mother-daughter co-authoring team of Jessie Wise and Susan Wise Bauer (www.welltrainedmind.com/poetry-memorization-methods-and-resources) explains that memorization (of poetry, in particular) expands the repository of language, as well as the patterns and phrases of language (i.e. syntax) that one uses daily in speaking and writing. Recitation is the fluent and expressive delivery of a memorized oration or speech; frequent repetition cements it in the memory. Recitation helps to develop presentation skills as the child is taught to be poised and persuasive while standing before and speaking into the gaze of onlookers. These skills prove to be tremendously advantageous when the Sunday school student becomes an employed adult and the audience becomes a panel of job interviewers or a room full of first-line management trainees.

In my opinion, public speaking ranks at the top of my list of activities that introduce and develop in children skill sets at the local church that are transferrable to the workplace. It is, by far, the easiest to execute (e.g., through speeches, plays, and leading worship) and it affords the widest range of participation. There are, however, three other points that I'd like to briefly offer for your consideration.

Youth Leadership Positions

Each youth-centered organization in the church (e.g., Youth Council, Youth Usher Board, Youth Choir, etc.) ought to include in its hierarchical structure youth leadership positions (e.g., president/chairperson, vice-president/chair, secretary, treasurer, chaplain), and at least one adult overseer functioning primarily in the role of mentor. These opportunities for youth leaders can help to build core competencies – like decision making, organization, collaboration, and critical thinking – that can be utilized in future leadership roles in all walks of life. They can learn the concept of "servant leadership" as taught by Jesus Christ in the Gospels, which has proven to be a very effective leadership model for the business world. Evident within the servant-leader is a deep sense of personal humility, which, according to *Good To Great* author, Jim Collins, is one of the primary attributes of a Level 5 leader. Church youth leaders also learn to work with diverse personalities, how to speak to those in authority, and how to represent the church in special meetings and conferences. The transferability of these church-taught leadership skills to the workplace is apparent.

One less obvious key learning from a church youth leadership experience is the value of saturating plans and problems with prayer. We were taught that Proverbs 3:5-6 was of utmost importance in our roles as teen leaders: *Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths.* We understood this to mean that prayerfully involving God in the handling of our ideas and our issues was always an integral part of the success of our youth organization. Incorporating this practice of prayer guided me in decision-making as a business manager many years later.

Participation on Planning Committees

Churches are *always* planning special projects, programs, and other events. And there are several upsides to encouraging youth involvement on these committees. First of all, the committee would have the opportunity to know and incorporate the youth perspective on the front end, during the design phase of their planning. Adults and youth can experience working both with people outside of their peer group and with those who bring a completely different set of strengths, viewpoints and experiences to the table. Teenage committee members can be introduced to several project planning processes, such as determining project scope, timeline, budget and success criteria; identifying, defining and assigning ownership to roles, responsibilities and tasks; and establishing a system for controlling and monitoring the project. When the activity has concluded, learning to review or evaluate what did and did not work, as well as identifying opportunities for improvement, may help these future workplace employees better understand project life cycle management in the business world.

Appointing Junior Officers to Key Boards

Most churches have a Trustee Board, Steward Board, and/or Deacon Board. The names may vary depending on the denomination or church, but these organizations are the ones responsible for church property and upkeep, finances, and administration. Appointing youth as junior officers to these boards can help them to begin to understand what it takes to run a church administratively. Junior officers can learn to count and record donations, prepare deposit slips and financial spreadsheets, and understand the operational costs of ministry. They learn the responsibility of stewardship of church finances and the physical plant. This is a great opportunity for succession planning as these experiences also help youth leaders to view themselves as future church officers. It is quite easy to see how these skills would come in handy for those who find work in the banking and finance industries, as fast food restaurant or store managers, accountants, and real estate brokers, just to name a few.

Downsides

Each one of the aforementioned examples of the churchplace preparing future workplace leaders and team players comes with this first downside. Since followers generally tend to imitate leaders, to the best of its ability, the church must be intentional and prayerful about placing ethical and competent adult persons in key leadership positions. With that in mind, youth should not be allowed to participate on a committee or board where the chairperson is known to make negative comments against pastoral leadership. If the stewards take two hours to count and record an offering of less than \$1000 each Sunday, it is probably not a choice environment for training junior officers. Carelessly pairing youth with weak or inept adult leadership or leadership teams will most likely result in the reproduction of future leaders of the same ilk.

On rare occasions, those who have been active in the church from childhood may find themselves surprised one day by religious vernacular that has crept its way into a business conversation. I remember making a presentation during a new employee training session at work. When listing the company's values, I inadvertently said, "Number one – Customer Orientation. Number two – Discipline. *Verse three* – Quality."

Another challenge is learning how to properly promote oneself in the workplace when Scripture teaches that those who exalt themselves will be humbled (Matthew 23:12). Christian youth should

be taught that keeping track of personal accomplishments on the job is necessary to receive high marks on performance reviews and to compete for promotions. On the other hand, these future workers must also learn that they are to be honest when sharing their personal strengths and weaknesses, and that credit should always be given to whom it is due, especially when it belongs to another person or team.

In summary, the local church can truly be the incubator for training and nurturing potential leaders through children- and youth-centered activities that produce and develop proficiencies that are both valuable and transferable for use in future workplace environments. Wendy, a public high school student, shares the value of taking part in a Catholic leadership development program for youth. "This training has become a big part of my life...It's not just some fun thing we did on the weekends or once a month, or one week in the summer. It goes beyond that." Wendy currently uses the leadership skills learned at her church's leadership training program at home, on the job, and at school with friends and teachers (www.uscatholic.org/church/2008/07/does-church-put-faith-our-youth).

When pastoral and congregational leaders truly grasp the potential and far-reaching effects of providing thoughtfully planned and robust Christian development programs for their children and youth, then the church can intentionally promote itself as a feeder for marketplace employees, executives, and entrepreneurs. And, the *feeding* will be reciprocated. As these workers begin to "salt" and "light" their workplaces through their skills and Christian work ethic, others will be drawn to the Lord through their witness. Then the workplace will, in turn, become the feeder to the church.