

4 Summary

The Christian life is a marathon, not a 100 yard dash.
Howard Hendricks

4.1 Areas of Research

In one of the first contributions toward this study about the role of faith in the life of the young people in the Canadian Reformed Churches in the Fraser Valley, several tentative conclusions were made based on subjective observations and profiled events in our community. It was stated that there was reason for thankfulness, but also there was apparently reason for concern.¹ Many young people, by the grace of God, were obviously rising to the challenge to live committed Christian lives; others appeared to be blatantly unchristian in their deportment. Similar sentiments had been expressed several years ago by Rev. R. Schouten in an article entitled “Young Offenders Act in the Church.”² The researchers asked themselves the questions to what extent young people are embracing the Christian values of their parents and showing commitment to Christ? How prevalent is the lack of commitment to Christian values and Christian behaviour? If parents hear about events which reflect unchristian behaviour, it is usually very difficult to gauge the gravity of the situation in terms of personal commitment, or the number of young people truly involved in activities which reflect a lack of Christian commitment. If five young people are caught peddling drugs at school and subsequently expelled, are we confronted with the tip of an iceberg, or an anomaly, a few exceptional forms of behaviour?

The article about the cultural influences and traditions asks whether the young people have understood the reasons for their parents’ desire to perpetuate a unique Canadian Reformed culture by establishing and maintaining Canadian Reformed organizations³. How well have adults helped their children validate the cultural and historical traditions still embraced in our community today? Or do the young people feel that there is no real validation for some of our practices and traditions? Are they simply the residue of our emigrant past? Have our young people been able to remain distinctive in their thinking and behaviour concerning good financial stewardship? What do the survey responses bear out concerning these questions?

Additionally, this study has approached our research problem from a more dogmatic angle.⁴ What has the understanding of the role of the covenant meant for our community? The Bible clearly shows us that children have been given to parents and that therefore they have the primary responsibility to inculcate or impart the Scriptural traditions and values of our reformed faith. Schools were established to assist parents with task, the churches provided preaching and catechetical instruction to assist the parents as well. How did the young people perceive this complex dynamic within our community? How well have they related to their parents, teachers, ministers, elders and their Christian peers? How secure do the young people

¹ P. 19, The Local Context in the Fraser Valley.

² Schouten, R A., Young Offenders Act in the Church, in *Clarion*, Vol. 43, no. 23, p. 547.

³ P. 16, The Context of Faith Development among Young People: Cultural Influences and Traditions, Attitudes and Lifestyles.

⁴ P. 7, Outline of Scriptural Principles in the Role of Faith in the Lives of Young People in the Canadian Reformed Churches.

feel about their place in their church community? “It is important for a child not only to learn the truth, but also to see how it lives and comes to practice in others around him.”⁵ What did the survey find concerning young people’s perceptions of their parents’, teachers’ and leaders’ Christian practice?

Finally, we considered two studies on the stages of faith development in young people. We summarize the normal development of faith commitment as this was described by John Westerhoff and M. Vrymoeth deJong. Any research into the attitudes and opinions of young people must also be understood in the light of research about normal faith development in young people. In how far are the responses we received products of normally developing young people? In how far does the increased maturity of the older people in the survey group realistically reflect a commitment to either a godly or an ungodly lifestyle, a commitment to Christian values or a rejection of those values?

The survey the researchers conducted among the young people served, as it were, to hold up a mirror in front of our younger generation. Are we still seeing into “a looking glass darkly” or have we come to greater clarity on the issues we have raised? Certainly, the last word on this issue has not been spoken! Nor has this research been definitive. More research will have to be done in several areas to come to a greater definition. However, there are numerous observations from this survey that can inform us about our relationships with the young people, and potentially provide greater direction in more effective communication, in more effective ways to inculcate and nurture our reformed faith.

4.2 What the young people tell us

Homes

There is much reason for thankfulness. Without any question, in almost every area researched, the respondents gave us reasons for gratitude. The LORD has indeed blessed faithful parenting, faithful teaching and preaching, and faithful peer relationships. We found that young people are by and large happy in their Christian homes where often there is meaningful dialogue with their parents. Parents are valued and in many cases their parenting was appreciated. In fact quite a few young people felt they would emulate many of their parents’ practices if they were parents themselves. Isn’t that a wonderful endorsement in itself?

There are also reasons for concern. Quite a few young people complained that their parents do not practise what they preach and thus there appears to be a credibility gap. Young adolescents need validation of the Christian practices in their families. Have parents themselves validated their practices? Many young people asked for more meaningful devotions and dialogue about Scripture. The data suggest that many families have fallen into a rut of ritualistic Bible reading and prayer, without addressing the real meaning of family devotions: worship of the LORD.

Was it surprising that mothers and sisters appear to be the most sympathetic and meaningful sounding boards when family or personal problems need to be addressed? What can fathers do to appear more approachable or to make discussion with them more meaningful?

⁵ P. 10

Families need rules. God has placed parents in positions of authority to maintain rules and good order. Children need that sense of order and predictability for security, but also to learn about living in the Family of God's covenant where living in gratitude is reflected in our willingness to obey God's commandments. Therefore, if the young people complain about family rules, their complaints are possibly the normal reaction of teenagers against the imposition of *any* rules. The research, however, appears to point at a conflicting dynamic of at least two factors. The Father of our covenant Family has rules, but He is also very forgiving. Are some homes plagued with rigidity and a lack of forgiveness? Or is there a lack of consistency of good rules in all families so that teenagers observe a double standard within our community?

Teenagers have stated very clearly that they view the home as the hearth of their faith. In other words, their parents and the Christian atmosphere at home are paramount in the fostering of their faith. In the context of this important finding, parents and office bearers may want to take a close pastoral look at the quality of parenting and determine what can be done to help families nurture a positive Christian ambience in their homes. We hope and pray that parents and office-bearers will have the courage and the wisdom to deal with these issues in a focused and dedicated manner.

School

During adolescence and the middle school years, teenagers want to **belong**. This belonging is closely related to their self image and self-esteem. Typically, they begin to gain independence from their families and to form close bonds with their school peers. This social dynamic is certainly not unique to our young people.⁶ As they mature and engage in a validation process of the values and traditions their parents and other care-givers have taught them, they lean on the support of their peers. Many respondents claimed that being with their friends made them most happy about going to school. Especially if we realize how tremendously important social acceptance is at school, then the gravity of non-acceptance within their peer group is so much worse. A few respondents complained about teasing. How can the school reach out to help these socially struggling young people?⁷

Many respondents indicated that the Christian character of the school was important to them. They appreciated their Christian schooling, though they usually related this to the good Christian friends they had at their school. A large number of respondents credited the school with providing important nurturing in their faith. Slightly more than half the students acknowledged that teachers were important Christian role models in their lives. Fourteen (14) % of the respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed that teachers were important Christian role models.

⁶ p 14

⁷ Another dimension to the importance of social acceptance is the place of the *home-schooled* adolescents in our community. This survey has not targeted these young people. Nevertheless, even though their schooling situations are so completely different, to ignore their needs could be to their detriment. The parents of home-schoolers may not feel the need for more social interaction. In fact, they may not even want more socializing. How important is it for ALL young people to feel integral to the whole body. Are home-schooled teenagers missing out on essential interaction?

If we compare this data to the comments the respondents made about their teachers⁸, a lot of the discontent appears to focus on two main areas: the number of rules and the manner in which the rules are upheld. The young people appear not to have developed the motivation to take ownership of the rules, and therefore the imposition of the rules appears to be something that is done *to* them rather than *with* them. They would like fewer rules and not feel that the ones in place have been imposed on them "from above." Some rules seem "picky" and do not make sense to them. It then follows that the consequences for "breaking" those rules will also seem unfair. There appears to be a connection between this discontent and the fact that a number of respondents seem cynical about their teachers. What can be done within the school community to develop authentic relationships that will provide an affirmative atmosphere where all can work and grow together?

In general, respondents admit they do not readily go to a teacher to share personal difficulties. What barriers appear to prevent the development of this student - teacher relationship? Do teachers need to be challenged to overcome these barriers? More research will be needed to consider the factors involved in developing personal relationships between students and their teachers.

Another subtle yet important nuance may impact on the young people's perception of their school. Since our schools have been an integral part of our community for many years, there is a real and historical danger that the *significance* of that role is undervalued. Do our families still have real "heart" for our Christian schools or does negative criticism of schools and teachers at home cause children to be negative at school? Are the parents involved in a visible way in the affairs of the school? Do we pray for our schools in our daily devotions? Perhaps the supporting community needs to re-focus on the blessings and needs of Christian education.

Church

Most young people appear to be happy with their church membership. From their comments, it appears that many teenagers are not happy with church services, catechism classes and their relationship to the minister and elders. Liturgically they have failed to validate a number of important aspects of worship. Why do our churches have Genevan melodies and organs? Why isn't a greater variety of music possible? Some even pleaded for more involvement in the worship service. Though most adults may be convinced that our liturgy and worship as a whole are fully in accordance with Scripture, many young people do not understand why. Many have not taken ownership of our Canadian Reformed traditions. Should we abandon traditions if we cannot make them meaningful? What can we do to help everyone take ownership of our Reformed tradition and really feel integrally involved?

Also in the area of catechetical instruction, many young people have expressed satisfaction with their ministers as a teacher, but they have failed to understand the importance of memory work and they often complained that this form of instruction in the faith is boring and appears to have little to do with their everyday life. How can we make catechism students more excited about the Christian faith in which they are instructed?

⁸ p 26 and 36 - 39

It also appears that, if young people have a serious problem, one of the last people they would consult would be their elder, or even their minister. Should anything be done to develop closer relationships between pastors and elders and the young people?

It is not surprising to discover that young people set high standards for the adults in their lives, though they will acknowledge that as young people, they have failings and sins of their own. However, one area that really sticks out is their dissatisfaction with the gossip and negative attitude in our churches. They seem to indicate that the methods of our complaining are poor modeling for the coming generation.

There is so much to be thankful for in what the young people say about their community. What can we do to build on our strengths and address our weaknesses?

Own Faith and Lifestyle

The teenage years are often turbulent. Young people begin to validate the faith they have received from their parents and other care-givers. They know what is good and right and therefore they have high regard for people who consistently show Christian conviction in their lives. Even though they struggle with their own lack of consistent commitment, they despise hypocrisy in adults. Therefore they complain about parents and teachers who appear to be inconsistent. In their words, the young people complain that they do not practise what they preach. This perception not only creates a credibility gap, but equally important, it will make it more difficult for these care-givers to reach out and help the young people grow in their faith.

By and large, the survey group appeared to be quite conservative in their expectations. Most of them want meaningful relationships with a boy or girl friend, a career, marriage and a family. Certainly in the face of rapidly changing family patterns in our society this finding should motivate us to gratitude.

Indeed, in the area of lifestyle, the researchers have observed numerous areas which cause concern: use of drugs, smoking, shoplifting, abuse of alcohol, secular influences in the use of their money and in their selection of entertainment. How much Christian guidance have parents and other care-givers provided so that they can facilitate wise choices? Some of the young people's choices are very much in character with their age group, and as they mature, their tastes change and they will recognize "their sins of youth." It is also encouraging to observe that the young people themselves acknowledge that the struggle against sin is difficult. Their flesh is often so weak. Though they will need correction and clear direction, they also need understanding and compassion. Modern forces of the media and the secular environment in which we live assault their souls relentlessly. Have parents, teachers, ministers and elders given adequate consideration to the complex pastoral needs of our youth? Would the addition of *youth* elders to our consistories, or even ministers with a special focus on the youth, help address the growing needs of our teenagers? Congratulating ourselves with the numbers of faithful young people will not help address the needs of a substantial number of teens who are crying out for help. Paul's analogy of the body and its parts should also remind us that if some body parts are hurting, then the whole body hurts.⁹

⁹ 1 Cor. 12. 12 ff.

4.3 Finally

Our young people have been given the opportunity to express themselves. We've listened and found reasons for great joy. Looking back, there are perhaps even more questions we should have asked. Nevertheless, the young people have provided us with a wealth of information which, if we are willing, can be used to make us more effective as Christian leaders and care-givers, at home, at school and in the church.

Some of our respondents were more articulate than others. Some were angry and frustrated, and expressed that in their responses. Some expressed happiness about the survey; others scorned it. Many wrote copiously about their faith life and expectations; a few destroyed the questionnaire by invalidating it. However, an overwhelming majority took the exercise seriously.

We began this work with a degree of trepidation and some anxiety. How serious and focused are our young people about their Christian commitment? How prevalent is unchristian behaviour and how prevalent are unchristian attitudes? The LORD has certainly given us many reasons for gratitude. How richly He has blessed the efforts of parents, teachers and church leaders!

Because the survey was administered to a developmentally diverse age group (from 13 to 17 years of age), the answers clearly reflected a wide degree of maturity. It was encouraging to see the increase in maturity of our young people. Many answers of the young people, 16 and 17 years old, showed thought and Christian commitment. Perhaps one of the biggest favours we can do for our young people is to listen to them with interest and love, to show them they are more than young ornaments in our community (to be seen but not heard); **they belong**. May our gracious God give us the courage to deal with the issues that have been raised. May He give us wisdom and insight so that we can work together effectively as Christian parents, teachers, ministers and elders in seeking the good of the younger generation of Zion.

*"Pray for the peace of Jerusalem:
'May those who love you be secure.
May there be peace within your walls
And security within your citadels.'
For the sake of my brothers and friends,
I will say,
'Peace be within you.'
For the sake of the house of the LORD our God,
I will seek your prosperity."*

(Psalm 122. 6 – 9)