Young life together: Bonhoeffer as youth minister

by Andrew Root in the February 18, 2015 issue

Dietrich Bonhoeffer on a weekend trip with confirmands in the spring of 1932. From the German Federal Archive via Wikimedia Commons.

I would bet that nearly all pastors who work with youth have caught themselves—just a little bit—contemplating murder. The frustration, confusion, and pure annoyance of teaching the tradition to energy drink–fueled young people can be acute. Possibly to avoid arrest and the shame and notoriety that come with a public trial, pastors often opt out of youth ministry, giving that work to someone else. Youth ministry seems to be for those wired to be enthusiastic entertainers or unyielding prison guards, or something other than the theologically thoughtful person that pastors usually imagine themselves to be.

I would also bet, however, that these same theologically thoughtful pastors have at least one book by Dietrich Bonhoeffer on the shelf and remember from seminary days at least parts of Bonhoeffer's biography. They remember Bonhoeffer's encounter with the black church in Harlem, his work in the Confessing Church in Germany, his writing of *The Cost of Discipleship*, his heading up the illegal seminary in Finkenwalde, his *Ethics*, and of course his arrest, his letters and papers from

prison, and finally his martyrdom. Bonhoeffer is just the kind of engaged, intellectual, and action-oriented Christian that pastors admire.

These two seemingly disconnected parts of pastoral life come together in the fact that Bonhoeffer himself was a youth worker. Nearly all the direct ministry that Bonhoeffer did was with children or youth. From 1925 to 1939, when World War II broke out, it is nearly impossible to find a period that Bonhoeffer was not working with children or teens. This history is often missed when telling the story of Bonhoeffer. He saw it as his core theological and pastoral task to wade into the chaos of the lives and experience of young people as a witness to the gospel.

Bonhoeffer knew directly how crazy-making confirmation could be, how murderous thoughts and Luther's Small Catechism could oddly become wrapped together. In 1932 he was asked by his synod to take over an out-of-control confirmation class in a low-income district of Berlin called Wedding. Bonhoeffer had already shown skill at youth ministry. He had excelled in this area in Grunewald and Barcelona, had taught Sunday school in Harlem, and had just months earlier been elected secretary of an ecumenical youth movement.

Pastor Maller, who had been leading the confirmation class, had had many murderous thoughts. He could take it no more. Just weeks after turning the class over to Bonhoeffer, Maller died of a heart attack. Bonhoeffer told his friend Erwin Sutz in a letter that this confirmation class "had quite literally annoyed him to death."

It didn't take long for Bonhoeffer to witness the level of bedlam Maller faced. When Maller led Bonhoeffer to the class, the boys waited on the top floor as Bonhoeffer and Maller climbed the stairs. As they approached, the boys serenaded them with screams, stomping, and a confetti welcome of paper and banana peels. Upon reaching the top, Maller screamed and shoved the boys into the classroom (not good for his ailing heart) and shouted that Pastor Dr. Bonhoeffer was now their teacher. The boys began chanting "Bon, Bon, Bon," and Maller turned and walked out the door.

Bonhoeffer allowed the chanting to continue for a few minutes. Then he began to speak very quietly, telling a story from his experience in Harlem. One by one, the boys quieted down and leaned forward to hear what he was saying. The room fell quiet as Bonhoeffer continued with stories from New York. And with his stories a new

spirit was injected into the group. Bonhoeffer dismissed them that day with the promise of more stories to come.

In this first encounter, we can recognize the pedagogical shape of Bonhoeffer's ministry. He used his own stories to create a space for these boys to enter. He shared his life as he promised to share in theirs. As Bonhoeffer saw it, if these boys were to learn the catechism, they would have to learn it through sharing in another person's life. And for this to be possible Dietrich would need to remain composed.

This first encounter displays the two core commitments that shaped Bonhoeffer's confirmation pedagogy: remain calm and composed and share personal experience. Richard Rother, one of the boys in the confirmation class, said later that Bonhoeffer "was so composed that it was easy for him to guide us; he made us familiar with the catechism in quite a new way, making it alive for us by telling us of many personal experiences."

Composure and stories became fertile ground for encountering Jesus Christ. A year or so after his experience at Wedding, Bonhoeffer wrote in his christological lectures (published in English as *Christ the Center*) that Jesus is found with and for our neighbor and that when we share in our neighbor we share in Christ himself. It seems likely that in some way the boys in Wedding were on his mind.

The relational connections were possible only if he remained composed. It actually may be that composure is essential to leadership—composure not only as a personality trait but as the spiritual practice of prayerfully avoiding anxiety.

Anxiety, as neuropsychologists tell us today, is toxic; our brains are wired to avoid anxiety. Anxiety corrupts the chemistry of the brain and leads us to depart (emotionally or physically) from others to protect ourselves. Jesus' words to his disciples to "fear not" (Luke 8:50) become of utmost significance. Anxiety is so acidic that it is nearly impossible to have relationships where the air is poisoned with it.

Our murderous rage toward young people often arises because we wrap ourselves in anxiety, feeling the temptation to define our ministry as something that exists outside our relationships with these young people. We start thinking things like, "Why aren't they getting this? Why are they so disconnected? What am I doing wrong? Why am I not interesting or cool enough to connect to them? Why won't they just listen or engage?"

This anxiety leads us tacitly to believe that our job is bound more to the content and material of the curriculum than to the humanity of the young people. Filled with anxiety, we cling to what we can control—getting from page 14 to 16 in the curriculum—but then our anxiety turns into anger as the young people disengage, sensing that we care more for the content than for them.

Bonhoeffer's approach signaled to the boys that he had no worry about lessons being unfinished or of others thinking he was a failure. He signaled that he really was there just for them, rather than to fulfill some goal that they could frustrate (like getting them through the material). As a result, the youth were willing to be led.

And lead them Bonhoeffer did. He did not shy away from teaching them the catechism and taking them deeply into the tradition of the Christian faith. But this faith had to be concrete and lived; its confession needed to be born from personal narratives.

Bonhoeffer admitted in a letter to his friend Erwin Sutz that he didn't prepare much for these classes. Knowing the material well, he sought through spontaneous sermonettes to weave together their stories and the tradition that already lived deeply within him.

"Something I almost hate to admit but which is true: I never prepared for the classes in detail. Of course, I knew the material very well, but then I just went there, talked with the boys for a couple of minutes before the class, and then just started. I didn't hesitate, quite often, just to preach to the children; I believe everything else is, in the final analysis, pedagogically doctrinaire."

To be "pedagogically doctrinaire" is to make the material more important than the lives. With the Bible and Luther's Small Catechism in hand, Bonhoeffer invited the boys to witness and share with him as he followed Jesus Christ. The central material of Christian faith is not the content of creeds and catechisms but Jesus Christ, who lives in the humanity of lived experience.

In another letter to Sutz, Bonhoeffer wrote: "At the beginning the boys were acting wild, so for the first time I really had discipline problems." He continued, "But here too one thing helped, namely, just simply telling the boys Bible stories in massive quantity, and especially eschatological passages. By the way, in doing this I also made use of the Spirituals. Now it is absolutely quiet, and the boys see to that themselves, so that I no longer have to fear the same fate as my predecessor."

Bonhoeffer reminds us that we must form our ministries around explorations of the living Christ. He also points us to the practical dispositions of doing youth ministry. He encourages us to do ministry through stories of our own faith life and to prayerfully seek composure, a spirit of calm. A calm disposition, coupled with narration, creates fertile ground for a depth of relationship (what Bonhoeffer called *Stellvertretung* or “place-sharing”) that mediates the presence of the living Christ. Rather than being onerous, ministry with youth can be an invitation into the very community where Jesus Christ is present, bringing life out of death.

This essay is adapted from Andrew Root's recent book Bonhoeffer as Youth Worker: A Theological Vision for Discipleship and Life Together.