

## THE PATH OF YOUTH

“Welcome home, Travis,” said Tom. “Did you have a good week?”

“Different, enlightening, and nostalgic, all rolled up in one.”

“Anything you want to talk about?”

“In due time, my friend ... in due time. I’ve started making some notes and I will give them to you when I get done.”

“Fair enough. Are you ready to continue with our little project?”

“Yeah, I’ve got a couple of days, but then I’ve got to spend about a week with Pastor Lawson working through the transition.”

“Okay, we can work around that ... On Sunday, we worshiped at St. Paul, and I noticed a lot of young people there. I know that, as the school project, it would probably have a higher percentage of young people, but it just seemed so unusual compared to some other churches I’ve visited over the years. Maybe it was just my imagination, but is

that the story with the other churches in the network, too?”

“Pretty much. Oh, it varies with the demographics of each congregation, for sure, but we have a focus on the youth in the network overall.”

“Do you owe the large youth crowd to anything in particular?”

“My superior leadership ... no, not really. It is actually the work of a group of people from each congregation under the leadership of James Bogart, a recent college graduate with a good feel for young people and the whole college experience.”

“What have they done differently?”

“They started out studying everything that interests young people and everything that the parents think their kids are interested in. Then they studied what worries parents and young people the most. Of course, there were many other things they looked at, including all the ways that the church addressed the needs of young people. After all the background work and the brainstorming, they came up with a plan. It’s a working partnership modeled after the concept of the Trinity. Symbolically, of course, the parents correspond to the

Father, the young people to the Son, and the church to the Holy Spirit.

The foundation of their plan is a scholarship program. The most common point that seemed to come up in all their research centered on the future. Not only all the factors of time and indebtedness of future schooling, but also the simple fact that the young people are the future of the church. The average age of most congregations in the synod is creeping upward, because we don't have the influx of youth."

"How does the plan work, Travis? It certainly seems like it is effective."

"With the scholarship program as the core, they've built an entire system around it that operates on points. Every activity that involves the youth has a point value assigned to it, weighted as to the level of priority. For example, we give a certain number of points just for attendance. If it's a learning activity, such as a Bible study or something similar, we give more points. If it's a fun event or one of our inter-network competitions, additional points are given, but not as many as a learning activity, because we feel the learning activity is a higher level of priority. If it's a charitable activity that helps someone in the community, then

that justifies a higher value of points, and so on. Last Saturday, we held our annual inter-network Olympics, so to speak. We try to have a broad spectrum of activities at this competition—some athletic, some intellectual, some pure chance, and so forth. The goal is to have something that everyone can shine at in some way. And we have all sorts of bonuses that we award, such as good sportsmanship or best team player or the most encouraging of others.

We keep track of the points, adding a little more competition to keep it interesting, and at the end of the year, we give more bonus points for the top three in the standings and for perfect attendance. Then we divide the total amount of scholarship money that we have by the total number of points given. We then distribute that money to all the participants throughout the network of churches according to the number of points they've accumulated. The money is then put into a trust fund that each youth will have access to when they need it for continuing education. Recognizing that not all youth will go to college, we make the scholarship money applicable to additional learning of a trade or specialty training, as well.

While everything I've told you, so far, involves the youth and the church, the parents play a critical role in the trinitarian concept, besides the obvious of getting their kids to the activities and helping out where needed. We encourage the parents to talk to their kids often and be open about life. We encourage them to keep doing special things for their kids, since they are working hard to earn scholarship money.

And, most importantly, everything in the program is done with the guiding hand of the Gospel.”

“Are all those kids from the families of church members?”

“Yes and no. If that sounds ambiguous, let me explain. One of the most encouraging aspects of the program came up during the second year. We ran the program for a year with the youth of congregational members only, so we could get all the bugs worked out. Then we opened it up to the public. Any youth could participate, whether a member or not. We gave bonus points to a youth if they brought someone to an activity. Once the word got out, it was like the floodgates had opened, with many new youth coming and being exposed to the Gospel. I don't have the exact number at hand, but

as more of the outside youth got involved, it led to their families joining the church as members.

Because this was all so different and unproven when we started, we miscalculated the amount of money needed to fund the scholarships. We started with designated gifts as the seed money, but because the outreach effect has been so overwhelming, all the churches now include a sizable line item in their budgets for scholarship money.”

“Well, I think it is fascinating, albeit unorthodox. Have you had to make many changes in the program, Travis?”

“Oh, of course. We always make adjustments and tweak things here and there. One thing that we found we needed to address was what happens when the youth leave to go away to college. We felt we needed to maintain a relationship with them when they leave the influence of the parish here. So, we amended the program by working closely with the Lutheran church on or near the campus. We gave the pastor of that church our guidelines so that the youth could continue earning points to help with finances while at college. We’ve received glowing reports about the level of participation, and many of those campus churches have instituted similar programs for their other member students.

It's been beyond our wildest expectations, Tom."

"How long have you been running the program? Has it been long enough to measure the long-term effect?"

"This is our sixth year. Unfortunately, that is not long enough to gauge what kind of long-term effect there is. The youth from the first couple of years would just be getting out of college, so will they be active in reaching people for Christ in the years that follow? We don't yet know that. We can make some hopeful projections that they will, given their participation in church during their college years. But we just don't have enough data to validate that."

"Have you gotten much criticism?"

"Sure. Change always has its naysayers. No matter what you do, it won't please everybody. Maybe we've gotten a little more because it is unproven over the long-term, I'm not sure. I've received numerous comments about us paying our kids to come to church, but when I show them that is not the case and help them understand how the program works, they usually back off some."

Just as Tom was getting ready to ask Travis another question, the pastor's cell phone started to vibrate. Travis looked at the phone and then looked back at Tom.

"I'm sorry, Tom. I apologize, but I should answer this."

"Do you need me to step out, Travis?"

"No, you're fine ... hey, Bill. What's up? ... What's the time frame? ... Let me make some phone calls. It's pretty tight this week with the transition to the new pastor, but I'm sure I can work something out ... Okay, I'll get back with you in a little bit."

"Do we need to wrap it up for today, Travis?"

"Yes, I'm afraid so. I'm sorry, but you know everything that's going on now."

"It's not a problem, Travis. We're not under any deadline with this. Was that your friend, Bill Adams?"

"Yeah, and I guess you can deduce the rest. If I can back up the transition with Pastor Lawson, I'll probably be out of town for another week or so."



“Just call me when you get back. I’ve got all this from today that I can work on.”

“There is something I want to ask you before you go, Tom.”

“Sure, anything.”

“How do you and Rick decide what projects to support with Peterson and Paulson, Inc.?”

“Well, we don’t have any hard and fast rules that we go by. If something comes up, we sit down and discuss it. We like to learn as much as we can about the source of the request, if there is one. If there isn’t a request and we just come across the need on the path of life, then we rarely turn that down. If it’s something we want to go with, then we check our funds and decide how much monetary support we can give. Of course, we give support in other ways besides just money. We often provide contacts for people who need additional help. And then, sometimes it’s the helping hand of employment that we offer. I think half the people working for Rick in all his businesses have come by way of the help we’ve given when they needed it ... Why? Did you have something in mind?”

“Not right now, but I can see some cases probably showing up with what Bill is doing.”

“Look, Travis. I am completely sure that we can help with whatever you need. We just have to make sure our finances can handle it at the time.”

“I understand, Tom. And I appreciate the confidence you have in me. If something does come up, I’ll get you all the information I can.”

“Let me leave you to your rescheduling work, Travis. I’ll see you whenever you get back.”

“Thank you, Tom ... Oh, have you and Nichole set a date yet?”

“Close ... very close. We’ll get with you shortly, whenever we get over this scheduling hump.”

“Peace be with you, my friend.”