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Organizing the Young People's Department of the Sunday School

FRANK OTIS ERB*

Organization is an instinctive function of youth. It roots in the far-distant past when the strength of the wolf was the pack and the strength of the pack was the wolf. It works out in each succeeding generation as a normal expression of life. Its values, in giving expression to natural desire, in carrying on the activities of young people in orderly fashion, and in the preparation which it gives for associated living, are so well known that they need only to be mentioned. To organize the young people of our Sunday schools into young people's departments is not merely the utilization of the natural desires of the young people themselves; rather it is an endeavor to secure the participation of all the members of the group in the great ideals and enterprises that constitute the Kingdom of God, and to train the young people for the fullest service which their mature life shall be able to render.

The fundamental principle of such organization has been often stated: it must be democratic. Whether we regard the question from the standpoint of the nature of young people, or from the point of view of the inherent genius of our religion, or from the side of efficiency, we come to the same conclusion.

Young people are naturally democratic, though they may learn many perversions. Speaking in general terms, youth is ready to believe that the rights, privileges and duties of each are the rights, privileges and duties of all. If adherence to such a proposition is costly, youth is commonly willing to pay the price.

Further, our religion is inherently democratic. A gospel that is grounded in the infinite worth of every individual, whose founder declares, "All ye are brethren," which issues in democracy wherever it is freed from external restraints, is surely democratic at its heart.

From the standpoint of efficiency it may be questioned whether democracy is the most effective method of organization. There are two aspects of this which we do well to distinguish. First, an organization is said to be efficient when it turns out a given product with a minimum of effort. We have been so accustomed to the statement that an autocratic or aristocratic organization is most effective that we find it difficult even to question the assumption. But it is an assumption; and further, it is an assumption which the defeat of Germany and the continual friction in autocratically governed industries, seem to prove false. On the other hand, the successful operation of a growing number of industrial plants upon an increasingly democratic basis suggests that democracy can turn out a given product with a minimum of effort.

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However that may be, a democracy demands to be judged primarily in terms of the human product, and only secondarily in terms of a smoothly running machine or a perfectly finished article. It is not that democracy despises either the one or the other; it is simply that men are of more value than either machinery or machine-made products. If we have to choose, we choose without hesitation, and reckon efficiency in terms of manhood. We are not always obliged to choose, as the achievements of our American boys at the Argonne Wood and the Canadian troops at Vimy Ridge have abundantly made clear; but when we must choose, we prefer personal values to perfection of finish.

If any argument were needed as to the relative efficiency of autocracy and democracy in producing manhood, we have the answer in a multitude of forms. Professor Steiner tells of taking the Hungarian Minister of Education to see a game of basket-ball at Hull House. When His Excellency, after admiring the skill and initiative of the boys remarked that these must be all American born, he was astounded to learn that they were all foreign born, most of them in his own country. "Why," said he, "these are the people of whom we have been thinking we could make nothing."

Perhaps the most effective answer, however, is the thrill we still feel when we recall how our raw American troops, thrust reluctantly into the desperate battle at Chateau Thierry by the French command, defeated the far-famed Prussian Guard. When trained soldiers, the most characteristic expression of autocracy and the least characteristic expression of democracy, met on the battlefield, the democratic soldier was discovered to be the equal of several, sometimes as many as ten, soldiers of the autocracy.

Now to apply this principle of democracy somewhat in detail to the organization of the young people's department of the church school; this department should be democratic in its constituency. The department should include all the young people who belong to the church's field without respect to class, wealth, culture, occupation, or any other external differences.

There are, however, at least two aspects to which especial attention should be directed. Within the young people's group of any congregation are persons of all stages of religious development and of the most diverse types of religious experience. Our local churches, however, represent, each, one predominant aspect of religious experience or one outstanding form of religious expression. The situation is not unlike that of the public schools where through traditional and other forces one type of school has been built up. We have spoken, for example, of *the* high school, as if only one sort of high school were conceivable. The result has been, as we are all aware, that a vast majority of children drop out of school at fourteen years of age or a little later, and a mere handful of pupils graduate from *the* high school. Wiser counsels are now coming to prevail, and progressive communities in-

stead of having one type of high school have from two to a dozen high school courses—commercial, agricultural, domestic science, technical, and so on. This recognition of all the young people of high-school age as being alike worthy of consideration, whatever their interest, is meeting a most enthusiastic response on the part of the young people, and the number in our high schools is increasing by leaps and bounds.

In similar fashion, each Sunday school should recognize differing religious types within its legitimate constituency.

It may be objected to the illustration that there are usually several churches of differing types in the same community, so that if a person does not find what he needs in one church he may, if he wishes to, go to another. While there is a good deal of interchange, the likelihood is that if a young person breaks his connection with the church of his parents and of his childhood, he will be slow to make a new connection. It may be that the real solution to the problem is a community young people's department, whose leaders shall make a sincere and intelligent effort to discover what the young people of the community need religiously, and frame an organization that shall adequately meet the situation.

Further, as to constituency, we must recognize the existence of differing mental abilities and types. What is the average mental age of a young people's group? Earl Barnes recently said that the average mental age of adult Philadelphia was about thirteen years. Again, everyone acquainted with children knows that some are quick and others slow; some are imaginative and others prosaic; some are symbolically-minded while others are motor-minded; some are sub-normal, others are normal and still others super-normal. Each of us will doubtless recall friends who have a genius for literature or science or business or mechanics or art or music or what not, coupled with a corresponding indifference, inability or even antagonism to certain other things. Few administrative problems are more difficult than that of serving this heterogeneous constituency. We have this same constituency in Sunday school, or, more exactly, they are a part of our responsibility. A democratic young people's department cannot ignore these facts.

A second application of the democratic principle will be in the placing of responsibility. Responsibility is, perhaps, the greatest single educator. Responsibility discovers problems, and the solution of problems is the pathway of growth. Responsibility gives dignity and strength to life; it restrains impulse and passion; it harnesses enthusiasm; it develops initiative and confidence. In an organization whose chief product is manhood, responsibility must be constantly and wisely used.

The nomination and election of officers and committee chairmen should be in the hands of the young people themselves, acting, however, with the advice of the church or Sunday-school leaders. Every member of the department should be trained to feel his responsibility in such choices, and his continuing responsibility to support those elected to

positions of leadership. Further, ways and means should be discovered to place some responsibility upon each one, but the task assigned ought always to be a genuine and not a fictitious responsibility invented for the purpose of keeping people busy.

The officers and committee members of a young people's department should be young people within the age-limits of the department. Older people, preferably the teachers, will act as advisors, inspiring, guiding, restraining, but never attempting to control. The final decision, action and responsibility must be that of the young people themselves.

The democratic placing of responsibility does not carry the implication that everyone is capable of filling every office. It rather means the study of each person's aptitudes and interests, and the placing of each person where he will be most interested, where his special abilities can be utilized, and where he will find his largest opportunity of growth. Just as equality of opportunity in education does not mean the same education for all, but an education adapted to the person's needs and outlook; so equality of opportunity in responsibility will mean a responsibility adapted to the person's abilities, interest, and stage of development. Nevertheless, no person is to be hastily regarded as unable to fill a particular place. Perhaps the responsibility of that place is just what is needed for his mental and spiritual growth.

In the third place our principle will work out in the organization of a democratic course of study. What is a democratic course of study? The answer, in theory, is easy: it is one based on life-needs which are not being otherwise met. Dr. Bobbitt in his recent book, "The Curriculum," using "curriculum" in the sense of the complete program, lays down the principle that the purpose of a curriculum is to rectify mistakes either of commission or omission, whether individual or social. He says: "The curriculum of the schools will aim at those objectives that are not sufficiently attained as a result of the general undirected experience. The curriculum of the directed training is to be discovered in the shortcomings of individuals after they have all that can be given by the undirected training." (Pages 44 f.) In other words, our task in framing a course of study is to meet all the unmet needs of the entire group, in so far as a course of study can satisfy them. We must therefore see our task as the discovery, first, of typical life-problems of young people, and second, of the personal problems of the individuals in their particular young people's group. This will be followed by general courses of study upon the basis of typical life-problems, supplemented by the teacher's more intimate acquaintance with the needs of the individuals of his class or group. Some day we shall have adequate courses of study based upon individual and group needs rather than upon easily accessible material or ecclesiastical presuppositions.

Fourth, the democratic principle will function through the program of worship. This will be, first of all, worship by the young people themselves. It is not worship carried on by others in the presence of young

people, but the young people must themselves participate. This participation will range all the way from attendance and reverent attention, to the planning and leadership of a service. The more responsibility which young people carry for a service of worship, the greater will be the need for guidance by some one who understands what a service of worship should be. We do well to recall again, however, that guidance is not control, and that the development of those who share the service is more important than a well-ordered program finely presented. This, of course, is no disparagement of a well arranged service properly carried through. It is simply that persons are more important than a service.

Further, the worship of the young people's department will be a *program* of worship. There is no one service or type of service that will completely meet the needs of any situation. Some choose the classic forms, others are satisfied only with complete spontaneity, while most of us prefer varying degrees between these two extremes. Some demand finely-trained leadership or ecclesiastical sanction, while others insist on general participation. Democratic worship will seek out ways of serving all kinds of people and all stages of religious development.

Again, the materials of worship will be so selected and arranged as to give adequate expression to every worthy experience, to enrich and expand the Christian idealism, and to infuse the spirit of worship into all life.

Fifth, the democratic principle will express itself in service. Service is voluntary self-giving for the sake of others. There can be no discussion relative to the place of service in the development of life. It satisfies an inner impulse for the giving of self and for the sharing of the burdens of others. It reacts in a thrill of joy at the consciousness of having helped. It brings our Christian ideals of living out of the ethereal realms and translates them into substantial verities of the everyday world. It gathers up the best part of what educationalists mean by their phrase, "learning by living;" of what artists mean by "art for Art's sake;" of what moralists mean by "virtue its own reward;" of what preachers mean by "saving life through losing it."

This voluntary self-giving for the sake of others ought to begin with one's occupation. All occupations have been classified as either predatory or ministerial, the ministerial being those which make a contribution to human well-being, which add to the sum of human good. It is obvious, of course, that some callings usually known as ministerial may be carried on without the true spirit of service, though this is the exception and not the rule. But one of the greatest needs of our day is the permeation of the so-called "secular" occupations with the conception of ministry. No better antidote than this ideal can be discovered for the prevalent desire to give as little labor as possible for as large a remuneration as possible. "This is my work, my blessing, not my curse."

But service will go beyond the day's work at which we earn our bread and butter. It will find expression in helpfulness to any who need help.

Service, in order to be democratic must be intelligent. Intelligence is democracy's breath of life. If everyone is to share responsibility, everyone must also share the best light offered by knowledge, experience and thoughtfulness. In order to seek not merely the good but the highest good of those whom it serves, it must know what the highest good is, and this cannot be known without study and meditation. In order, further, to build substantially and for years, it must have the best plan that wisdom and foresight can offer. The knowledge required will be that of the need, of the available resources, and of the best way to bring needs and resources together.

In the second place, service will be coöperative. During the past years we have been learning to coöperate with all sorts of people for many worthy ends. We must continue that spirit of coöperation with every agency that stands for the increase of good in the world. As Lincoln said, "I must stand with whomever is right."

In the third place, democratic service must be personal in at least three senses of the word "personal." It must not only be giving, but it must be self-giving. Part of our personality must be in the gift we offer. It must be personal in the sense of being the sort of service which this person can best render. Human beings are exceedingly versatile, but no one can do all things equally well. The utilization of special abilities and the recognition of specific limitations both demand consideration. And part at least of our service should be personally delivered. The costliness of one's gift, the sacrifice it entails, and the good it renders are not sufficient justification for failing to add somewhere the touch of one's presence. The best service is that which is personally delivered. And it should be the constant endeavor and prayer of the leaders of the young people's department that many of its members shall devote themselves to specific Christian ministry in some form as life-work, when the element of personal delivery is at its largest.

Democratic service will be brotherly. It must have behind it the conception of the brotherhood of man and the driving impulse of the brotherly spirit. The people whom we serve are our brothers and they need us. They are not aliens even though they may differ from us in their habits of thinking and living, in religion, language or race. They are not foreigners though they may live at the ends of the earth. They are as dear to God as are we, and we best serve God in serving them. Consequently, our service must be brotherly in spirit. No perfunctory performance meets the situation. No feeling of aloofness, of condescension or even of pity will do. Our attitude must be that of genuine good will, of a sympathetic entering into these other lives and other situations, of a self-giving which shall not count the cost. "Talk not of sacrifice," said Livingstone; "I have never sacrificed in my life."

Now it is obvious that to secure in our young People's department

a service which is intelligent in its goal, personal and coöperative in its method, and brotherly in its spirit, requires the most careful planning and training. It will involve a curriculum of service as scientifically planned as any course of study, so that as the youth passes from one plane of religious experience to another, he will also pass from one stage of service to another. During these later adolescent years, we should have something in the nature of a laboratory course in the various types and fields of missionary and other service activities.

Finally, the Unified Program. It would seem almost to go without saying that if the preceding principles are adopted, we shall be under the immediate necessity of considering every organized group of young people in the church, whether it be a Sunday-school class, guild, club, young people's society, or what not. If one could begin at the beginning, one would undoubtedly set up a single organization and endeavor to make its program comprehensive enough to cover every essential activity, and flexible enough to meet any opportunity or demand that might arise. In such a case, the question of a name would be relatively simple. No one would be offended or alienated if it were called The Young People's Department of the Sunday School. Because, however, we come to our present situation with a great deal of history behind us, we must take things as we find them, and develop a unified program. The Council Plan of organization is being worked successful in many places. According to this plan, each organized group sends (two or more) delegates to a central Young People's Council of the church, which Council also includes official representatives of the church's Committee on Religious Education. At the regular (monthly or quarterly) meetings of this Council all the plans for all the groups are passed in review, and a comprehensive program evolved which provides for all necessary functions. Each organization is given particular responsibility for that element of the program which constitutes its predominant emphasis. Missionary meetings, plays, study classes and so forth may be the direction of the missionary society. Devotional meetings may be assigned to the leadership of the Young People's Society. Bible study classes are in the hands of the Sunday school. Social features are assigned to different groups from time to time, but are worked out so as to include everyone. Instead of a number of independent, competitive, more or less inefficient societies, not one of them able to reach all the young people, or to provide for all the unmet needs of its group, the Council eliminates the waste through friction and overlapping, and turns to real service the total energy of all the young people of the church. It should be added that this Young People's Department of the Church will solve the problems of the present day only if it has wise and tactful leadership. Adults with the gifts of vision, inspiration, and guidance, who will at the same time be able and willing to give sufficient time to the organization, are the *sine qua non* of success.