

## Christian Formation Pilgrimages of the Twenty-First Century

An age gap persists as one unmistakable reality in the life of our United Methodist Churches in greater New Jersey. The average age of congregants is some twenty years older than the average age of the population. In our efforts to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world, we are losing ground when it comes to persons younger than 42 years old.

Craig Kennet Miller, in his article titled, *From Generation to Generation*, suggests we need a new missionary mindset as we attempt to address this reality. He writes,

If you were going to become a missionary to Zaire, you would learn the language, the customs, and the culture. You would attempt to discover the most urgent needs and concerns of the people. As we try to minister across generational lines, we are challenged to become missionaries to the new generations. Because of rapid technological and cultural change, we are called to learn a new language, a new way of dress, and a new culture so that we might share the gospel.<sup>1</sup>

One of the challenges of becoming missionaries to the new generation is how we work on developing Christian formation with and among the different generations of people who belong to our churches and those who are not yet in our churches, particularly persons belonging to the “Mosaic” and the “Buster” generations.

In this article the writer would like to explore the various ways the Church might strengthen Christian formation among our youth and young adults who are referred to as Busters<sup>2</sup> and Mosaics<sup>3</sup> in some of the literature and that are produced by the Church growth experts. These new ways of exploring Christian formation are formulated based on the writer’s own experience and observation over the last twenty years.

They are the Mission of Peace and *Taizé*.

**Mission of Peace:** Reverend John F. Lacaria has researched the long term impact of key religious experiences for his doctoral project at United Theological Seminary. One of those experiences is Mission of Peace sponsored by the Northeastern Jurisdictional Council on Youth Ministries (NEJCYMP) of The United Methodist Church. Lacaria refers to the experience as a “*a journey of shalom*.”<sup>4</sup> He writes,

In 1985, when Bishop C. Dale White challenged the youths of the Northeastern Jurisdiction to move out of their comfort zones, seeing with their own eyes what

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<sup>1</sup> Craig Kennet Miller, *From Generation to Generation*, taken from <http://www.upperroom.org>.

<sup>2</sup> According to the Barna group, Busters are those born between 1965 and 1985. See *Generational Differences*. Taken from <http://www.barna.org>.

<sup>3</sup> According to the Barna group, Mosaics are those born between 1984 and 2002. See *Generational Differences*. Taken from <http://www.barna.org>.

<sup>4</sup> John F. Lacaria, *How Have You Found God Today? Exploring the “Shelf Life” of Religious Experience*, Doctor of Ministry Final Project Dissertation, submitted to the United Theological Seminary, Dayton, Ohio, 2005, p. 2 .

The United Methodist Church was doing around the globe, and hearing with their own ears the witness to God and Christ being made by persons of diverse cultures, he may not have intended to set in motion a ministry opportunity that would continue to call youth over the next eighteen years and counting. Then again, perhaps he did. Either way, this is just what happened. Bishop White was convinced that sending United Methodist youths to the far-flung corners of the world would change their lives profoundly, given the fact that it connected them to the denomination's missionaries, the work of the General Board of Global Ministry, and other ecumenical and interfaith agencies. He knew that not only their lives would be changed, but also the lives of their hosts. He trusted that God would use just such an opportunity to call individuals to higher service. He knew that the stories they brought back would change the hearts and minds of their families and friends as testimonies were given about what God was doing around the world, and how Christ was present in other places."<sup>5</sup>

Being an encourager and recruiter of at least a dozen or more persons to participate in this journey, and having directly participated in four Journeys of Mission of Peace myself,<sup>6</sup> I need to hasten to say that what Mission of Peace is doing among our Mosaics and Busters is much deeper, prophetic, missional and ecumenical than what Bishop White envisioned more than two decades ago. Bishop White was a prophet before his time and it is sad that his prophetic call was not embraced by all quarters of the Church. However, one needs to acknowledge with excitement that the Northeastern Jurisdictional College of Bishops of the United Methodist Church has seen the profound effects of this journey in the Christian formation of our youth and young adults, and the Northeastern College of Bishops of the United Methodist Church has committed itself to send a Bishop as part of this journey.<sup>7</sup> In his penetrating research, Lacaria proves through surveys, statistics and analysis some of the profound facts about this journey and its impact on the Mosaics and the Busters. Lacaria states, "Over 90% went for religious reasons, e.g., to experience a different spiritual/religious culture, to seek a deeper level of personal spirituality, or to be with other persons who were spiritually similar."<sup>8</sup> "Respondents generally felt that the Mission of Peace experience was one that deepened their faith."<sup>9</sup>

Referring to the Mission of Peace elsewhere in his dissertation he states, ". . . all but one of the [participants in the Mission of Peace] were United Methodists at the time of their experience; almost 70% remained United Methodists, 20% have migrated to other denominations and 5% indicated no current religious affiliation."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Lacaria, p.63-64.

<sup>6</sup> I accompanied the Northeastern Jurisdictional Council on Youth Ministries Mission of Peace to India in 1994-95, 2000-01, 2004-05 as Resource Director and in 1996-97 to China as Family Group Advisor.

<sup>7</sup> Bishop Sudarshana Devadhar (2004-05, India), Bishop Violet Fisher (2005-06, China) Bishop Peter Weaver (2006-07, Nicaragua) have participated in this journey, and Bishop Thomas Bickerton (2007-08, Cuba) will be accompanying the youth in this journey.

<sup>8</sup> Lacaria, p.81.

<sup>9</sup> Lacaria, p.87.

<sup>10</sup> Lacaria, p.89.

One other important fact that should not be overlooked in relation to this journey, and it is correctly observed by Lacaria when he states, “The Mission of Peace is a journey of shalom. The chief quest is to search for God at the intersection of different religious and political cultures; the chief benefit is to have one’s faith formed and one’s global consciousness expanded; the chief mission of the trip is to come home and tell the story of this experience.”<sup>11</sup> One needs to go back in time and ask a question with reflection: How did it affect our youth in the formation of their Christian faith as they visited China and the USSR before the fall of the Berlin Wall or in the era before globalization and the introduction of I-Pods, My Space and You-Tubes in their lives?

In 1987, after I defended my dissertation on interfaith dialogue,<sup>12</sup> Pieter de Jong, one of the members of my dissertation committee asked me, “Do you think that this topic would ever become a topic of interest in the United States and in our local churches?” Little did I know at that time that Drew University Theological School was going to appoint a renowned scholar on interfaith dialogue ten years later as faculty member and likewise, no one would have guessed the impact of Mission of Peace in preparing our youth in their Christian formation drawing the insights of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, particularly in their interaction with people from other faiths in their own life situations! It is in the Mission of Peace that the participants are challenged to reflect consistently on questions that are crucial for the forming their faith. Once again Lacaria sums it up very well:

The Mission of Peace destinations invited youth to meet God at the boundaries, as they moved outside their cultural prejudices and opened themselves to cultures other than their own. Then they could help construct new theologies with others, with a purpose that was larger than any defense of the theologies each carried into the encounter. Youth could evangelize and be evangelized, with their focus on Christ who desired to do a new thing in their hearts. They were invited to be de-centered and intently sense others through rituals. Thus equipped, they worked for justice in their post-modern, global world.<sup>13</sup>

**Taizé** - Another key spiritual experience of lasting impact for younger generations revolves around the pilgrimage to Taizé. Founded by Brother Roger in the 1940s in the south of Burgundy, the Taizé Community seeks “. . .to find ways beyond divisions between Christians and, through the reconciliation of Christians, to overcome some of the conflicts in the human family. Today, Taizé is a place where hundreds of thousands of young adults from every continent come to pray and to prepare themselves to work for peace, reconciliation, and trust in the world.”<sup>14</sup> Currently, Taizé is headed by Brother Alois who is ably supported by other brothers in the community. Though persons of all ages may come to Taizé during the year for spiritual nourishment and renewal through the year, it is also attracting Busters and Mosaics in high numbers. My association with Taizé began shortly after I heard a compelling witness about a group of youths from the

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<sup>11</sup> Lacaria, p 2.

<sup>12</sup> I wrote my dissertation on “Stanley J. Samartha’s Contribution to the Interfaith Dialogue,” The Caspersen School of Graduate Studies, Madison, NJ.

<sup>13</sup> Lacaria, p. 39.

<sup>14</sup> Brother Roger of Taizé, *The Sources of Taizé: No Greater Love* (Chicago: GIA Publications, 2000) p.78.

United States who were transformed after a week of participation in Taizé. This led me to challenge the pastors and laity in the churches in the former Ontario District of the North Central New York Conference, where I was serving as District Superintendent, to arrange a group of youth to take a pilgrimage to Taizé from the district in the summer of 2002. The group of ten pilgrims with four advisors returned from Taizé changed people with a deep passion for the gospel of Jesus Christ. In my investiture service as Bishop of the Greater New Jersey Annual Conference I gave the same challenge to the Conference which I gave to the people of Ontario District. So far, nearly 100 youth have journeyed to Taizé and this summer a group of forty-four, including the advisors and some seminarians, is scheduled to go to Taizé. The conference is already seeing the marks of the impact of the pilgrimage to Taizé among our youth and young adults in many ways. This prompts me to agree with the observations of Amy McDougal when she writes,

While University of Michigan senior Kathryn Gaylord Miles accepts the daily technology overload as an inevitable part of life, she sees Taizé as a necessary release. 'I spend so much time in front of computers and looking at professors' Power Point presentations that I get sick of working with technology,' she said. 'I love the meditative quality of [Taizé].' And, according to Brother John, that's exactly what we can conclude from Taizé's broad appeal. 'The young people who are discovering this style of worship give us proof that it's not necessary to be up-to-date or have the latest gimmicks,' he said.<sup>15</sup>

The comments made by Miles and Brother John are not isolated statements, but typical of what the young pilgrims of Taizé say when they are probed as to why they come to Taizé for a pilgrimage. The former Archbishop of Canterbury who took 1000 young adults for a spiritual journey to Taizé articulated the secret of Taizé in the following words, "The secret which Taizé teaches us is fourfold. First, *young people respond to warmth and affection...* A second element is to *value the qualities and insights which young adults bring to church life...* A third element is that of *participation* [where everyone is involved in the building of community] ... The fourth element is that young people *do respond to genuine spirituality.*"<sup>16</sup>

In 1986 when I encouraged a youth to participate in the Mission of Peace, one of my favorite parishioners came to me and asked, "Why are you encouraging our youth to participate in a mission journey particularly when that journey takes him to Communist USSR? Why are you doing this? What does he have to learn from Communists in their Christian formation?" When I broached the subject of a Journey of Youth to *Taizé* many asked why we would spend so much money on this when our young people could go somewhere within the United States to find renewal. Some asked why our youths had to go to centers like Taizé to deepen their Christian formation. Though these questions were genuine and sincere, one needs to answer them by using a statement made by Steven W. Manskar.

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<sup>15</sup>Amy McDougal, "A Pilgrimage of Song and Silence" Sojourners magazine, July 2007. Vol.36 No 7, p29

<sup>16</sup>George Carey, *Spiritual Journey* (Moorehouse Publishing, Harrisburg, PA,) pp 143-145

John Wesley developed such a discipleship system with the people called Methodists in eighteenth century England. The system of societies, classes, bands, and select societies emerged from Wesley's theology and personal experience. While remaining loyal to the Church, he went beyond its walls to reach the people who rarely attended services or participated in any aspect of its life. He went to the people whose lives were most directly affected by the changing economic and cultural reality of the time. The Industrial Revolution was transforming Britain from an agrarian to an industrial society. Increasing numbers of people were moving from the land to the town and city to work in factories, mills, and mines. Many left behind family and friends in their search for work and a means to support themselves and their families. For many of these folks who lived hard lives in grinding poverty, the Methodist societies and class meetings became their support network and spiritual home. Wesley and Methodists brought the good news of Christ and universal grace to the people neglected by the established Church.

Wesley had much to offer the postmodern Church. The dawn of the twenty-first century has much in common with the eighteenth century Industrial Revolution. This is also a time of great social dislocation and rapid change. Wesley's discipleship system, if adapted to the needs of the age, can be just as effective today as it was two hundred years ago. This is true because, while the times have changed, the nature of God and of human beings and the Scripture way of salvation have not. Wesley's system emerged from those realities and eternal truth. This makes it just as applicable today as it was yesterday.<sup>17</sup>

One of the geniuses of the Christian formation of Wesleyan Methodism is the class meetings. Undoubtedly, Wesley got his insights for class meetings from Moravians. Likewise, in today's world as Manskar persuasively argues, Methodists need to explore outside the boundaries of the Church for tools which would help the Church develop strong Christian formation. This Christian formation develops in Busters and Mosaics as they reflect on questions such as, "Where have you seen God today?" in their Mission of Peace Journey, or after their encounter with a Hindu and Muslim social worker in Kolkatta, India, or as they tell their own witness about the transformation that took place through the work of the ministries of the United Methodist Committee on Relief. The latest issue of *Time* contains an article explaining the effects of the migration of rural workers in cities in China who work in factories to meet the demands for cheap products in Western markets.<sup>18</sup> It is in factories like these where our Busters and Mosaics often encounter laborers working under inhumane conditions. This is when they start asking deeper theological and ethical questions such as what the Lord requires of them as youths or what it means to spread scriptural holiness in our global world. It is in their Mission of

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<sup>17</sup> Steven W. Manskar, "Small Groups and Accountability: The Wesleyan Way of Christian Formation." Paper presented at the Eleventh Oxford Institute

<sup>18</sup> "On the Job in China," *Time*, July 9, 2007, VOL.170, No.2, pp 24 ff

<sup>19</sup> United Methodist Hymnal, # 413, verse 2

Peace Journey as they are involved in a hands-on mission ministry or as they do community work such as cleaning bathrooms in Taizé that they bond with one another and ask deeper theological questions. It is in Taizé where youth are involved in Bible studies with young people representing different branches of the Christian faith such as Roman Catholics, Protestants and Orthodox where one witnesses the *Catholic Spirit* at its best.

In one such Bible study a group was asked what was so meaningful in Taizé that was not available in the home churches. The resounding answer was, “Here at *Taizé* they do not preach to us but we hear and listen to the word of God.”

As we celebrate the tercentenary of Charles Wesley, we are constantly reminded of his words, “To serve the present age, my calling to fulfill; O may it all my powers engage to do my Master’s will.”<sup>19</sup> To serve the present age, as missionaries to new generations we need to equip our Busters and Mosaics with a strong Christian formation. In fulfilling this challenge as Christians with a Wesleyan heritage we need to follow John Wesley’s approach in reaching out to the Busters and Mosaics in the Information Age as he did as long ago as the Industrial Age.

Key spiritual experiences such as Mission to Peace and the pilgrimage to Taizé impact youth for the rest of their lives. As we receive these youth back from such trips we need to open our hearts to them and allow them to help re-shape the future of the church so that they integrate these experiences with ongoing church life and all of us—Busters, Mosaics, and older generations can reap the blessings.

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