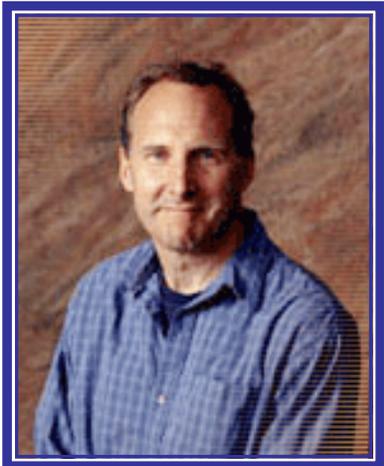


Claremont Program Takes Dramatic Approach To Develop Teen Leadership

An Interview with Frank Rogers, Jr.

Director, Narrative Pedagogies Project,
Adjunct Professor of Religious Education,
Claremont School of Theology

By Tracy Schier



Imagine an approach to leadership that goes beyond the creation of committees and delves into the heart of human yearnings. Imagine an approach to leadership among youth that invites them to be active agents in their own story instead of passive recipients of the consumer culture.

Imagine. Imagination. Those powerful words are key to a program at Claremont School of Theology that encourages young people to nurture their leadership abilities by imagining new ways to tell old stories.

Frank Rogers of the Claremont faculty is director of a project known as *Cultivating Youth for Christian Leadership Using Narrative Pedagogies*. "I am," explains Rogers, "a religious educator. But I'm also an educator heavily invested in the narrative arts, in storytelling, creative writing, drama, and in using these to help young people reconnect with the soul of what leadership is all about."

Rogers is a firm believer that stories help people to connect with human experience, and in the case of Christians, to connect with the ongoing story of God's work. "I help young people work through issues in their daily lives by helping them frame their experience in larger narratives that give them meaning. After all, what it is to be human is to be an agent in a story. And I am helping these young people to be intentional about crafting their own story; these youth can be active agents and not passive recipients of the larger culture."

One of the problems of the consumer culture, according to Rogers, is that there is a recurring story line that tells people that there is something wrong with them. "The holy grail, according to this story line, is presented like this: 'You buy our products and you will be a better person or you will look better, or you will feel happier, or you won't feel

bad about yourself.” Young people, Rogers relates, internalize the narratives that are shaped by the people in power—in this case, by the folks who generate the commercials on TV. “Unfortunately,” he goes on, “young people are not nurtured to be critically reflective, nor are they encouraged to question whether their own worth is tied to the products that they desire and acquire.”

Rogers explains that early in his work with youth he was convinced of the power of using stories, poetry, drama and art with them. At the time he was having conversations with a colleague, Scott Cormode, an expert in the field of leadership. “Scott pointed out that what I am doing with narrative studies dovetails with his field of leadership. I began to see that leaders can help nurture a vision of where to go by framing activity in response to the ongoing story of God’s work in the world. The narrative is contextualized in our church—we have ‘marker moments’ that come back to us as we try to respond to crises. For example, a leader can say, ‘remember how we rallied and embodied the spirit of collaboration and hope during such and such a crisis’. The leader can show people that the difficult time they are grappling with is not unlike something they may have already experienced and by putting it into a wider narrative it is given meaning and vision. By using stories or drama we are able to break through personality issues and other leadership challenges.”

Quick to give credit where credit is due, Rogers cites numerous writers and scholars whose work underscores his belief in and practice of narrative pedagogy. Harvard’s Howard Gardner is cited for his “anatomy of leadership” that looks at leaders and the kinds of stories they tell. Boston University’s Nancy Tatom Ammerman is another scholar who has come to similar conclusions after studying congregations that adapted to significant social change. Rogers quotes Ammerman, “Congregations engaged in a process of change will find themselves listening to new stories and teaching new people old tales. But they will also find themselves listening to old stories with new ears.” Writers Lee Bolman and Terrance Deal have described why “symbolic” competencies are particularly important in churches: “Symbolic leadership centers on the concepts of meaning, belief, and faith...visionary leadership is inevitably symbolic...stories are the medium” through which symbolic leaders communicate. Rogers notes that during periods of significant change, society looks to symbolic leaders to weave troublesome events into a coherent narrative of hope.

Rogers is convinced that all the best contemporary thinking on leadership suggests that the next generation of leaders will have to be particularly competent at symbolic leadership, using stories and symbols to weave communal meanings that engage churches and communities in processes of communication and decision-making.

When teens come to Rogers’ summer program at Claremont he invites them to write a play that they can perform for their community. The plays should truly depict life as it is lived in their community. Rogers points out also that teenagers face many difficult issues such as drug problems, dating, pregnancy, and divorce. They also struggle with issues of diversity and stereotyping. “Teens,” he says, “wrestle with real despair at

times. What I am trying to do is provide them the opportunity to give voice to their own experience, to frame the stories that make up their lives in ways that acknowledge problems and bad situations but can promise hope and meaning and healing. By linking their stories to Christian narratives they are provided a way to give their own experience meaning across time. They are given opportunity to see that they are participating in God's work."

Rogers states, "People are stories," and to illustrate he talks about his son who, for months when he was four-years-old, went around saying "I am Peter Pan." Just as children try on stories to make meaning of their living and learning environments, so too do adolescents and adults. "Grownups can go to a movie and walk out of the theater imagining their relationships through the experience of Tom Hanks or Meg Ryan. As an educator I'm looking for larger narratives that give meaning to a person's life story." Examples he gives are of having a group of young people act out the story of the Good Samaritan or the tomb scene after Christ's resurrection. When students think of themselves as the various participants in such stories they internalize the meaning and can begin to make connections between the old narratives and events in their own lives.

Rogers believes there is a simple logic behind his approach. Because teens are media-enmeshed, they quite naturally use symbols and stories to develop their own self-identity. Indeed, their upbringing in today's culture forms them to think in symbolic ways. Rogers points to the work of Princeton's Robert Wuthnow who has shown that people "produce the sacred." That is, Rogers explains, they construct symbolic representations that give meaning to their lives and then use these constructions to explain to themselves how God relates to the world. Some of this symbolic thinking comes to us as theological doctrines and church rituals while others are communicated through stories and brought to life through specific practices.

Rogers' pedagogical approach enables youth to use Christian symbols and stories and categories to tell their own life stories. He believes that this activity helps young people internalize Christian practices as something meaningful within their lives, and it allows them opportunity to think of themselves as members of their communities and how the Christian practices can present solutions to problems or hope where there might be despair. This in turn prepares them for symbolic leadership.

The Christian churches, Rogers believes, have not been particularly good at cultivating symbolic leaders. Neither the seminaries nor the judicatories have encouraged leaders to imagine new ways to tell the old stories. And, he points out, when young people do think of religion and the church in symbolic ways, it is often the mistakes of the past that come to the fore. The traditional methodologies of cultivating leaders can easily pass by the current generation of young people because theological educators have not found ways to penetrate the media-driven world in which young people live. "Thus," Rogers has written, "to call forth the next generation of Christian leaders, theological educators must find a way to connect the media-driven worlds within which youth dwell with the faith-filled realm of Christian practice. If such a connection can be made, then

the youth that we have so much difficulty reaching can become a dynamic source of just the symbolic leaders that the church will need as it enters uncertain times."

Claremont's three-week summer leadership program for youth meets five days a week for three hours per day. The young people are recruited from churches within the Pomona Valley and through seminarians who are doing youth internships in area churches. "Youth ministers are dying for ideas," Rogers says, "and the response to our program has been great." When working on-site in churches or in youth centers, the span of the program is typically one afternoon a week for 12 weeks. "We work the gamut of denominations, from Catholic and mainline Protestant to nondenominational storefront churches."

The pedagogical approach that Rogers uses is steeped in Christian scripture and tradition and is designed to encourage young people to engage with the stories through creative participation. In the summer program he begins in the first week by having students participate in writing, storytelling and theater exercises that catalyze the young people's creative impulses and skills while they learn about genres, elements, and modes of narrative expression.

During the second week students engage in critical reflection on stories that are formative and Rogers helps them to see the narrative structure of their personal and communal identity. At this point they look inward at their own lives and outward at the larger culture with all of the storylines that come through the media and society.



By the third week Rogers encourages the young people to engage with the narratives of the Christian tradition through role playing, imagination exercises, and interpretive exercises that relate to their own experiences. In the final week, they are ready to craft a play to perform for members of the community including parents, teachers, and church members and leaders. These plays depict life as it is lived in their own community and are intended

to give voice to their experience yet framed in ways that promise hope and meaning. "The plays," Rogers says, "are fiction but they are a mirror of teen experience—they are based on what the kids know."

An example of a teen-written and produced play was done in last summer's workshop. The kids called it "Finding God in the Graffiti". The setting consisted of a blank wall on stage. Students walked on stage one by one and wrote such words as *drugs, peer pressure, divorce, pregnancy*, among other real-life issues while asking the audience, 'Where is God'? Then a stranger walks in and asks the young people what they are doing. They tell her that they are waiting for God to show up. When she asks them why they are waiting for God, they begin to stage scenes about the eight troubling issues that are written on the wall: one youth has a friend with a drug problem, another has a dating issue, a third is fearing pregnancy, and so on. Each scene shows how teens wrestle with real despair and how, without firm footing in faith, their lives can be destroyed.

In the second act, the curtain rises with the graffiti wall vandalized, busted open with only a bench and a sheet inside. The students flood the stage excited about how the first eight scenes were resolved with hope and meaning. They perform each one to demonstrate the teenage agency that brought healing. Then the woman from Act One tells the youth about a guy who thought he was the Messiah and his name was Jesus. She tells them how Jesus was killed and entombed. The graffiti wall was Jesus' tomb all along. A messenger appears revealing that Jesus is alive, wherever people live with hope, healing and solidarity. The play ends with all of the performers understanding that they participated in Jesus' resurrection. Rogers says that, in this play, the students are living out Mark's resurrection depiction and the hope that comes from that biblical event. The youth learn to see ways they can find life in the midst of death and how they can be participants in the redemptive story of Jesus.

An important part of Rogers' work is the melding of his workshops for youth with the courses he teaches for seminary students in methods of narrative pedagogies. The seminarians have opportunity to work directly with high school students. Rogers explains, "I teach the seminarians theory but the class also meets in Pomona with kids in churches and community centers. For 12 weeks my Claremont students watch me work with these kids, and help me work with them. It is a real lab experience for them, and when they are through many of these seminarians want to do this work in their own churches. So in reality it is a longitudinal experience." Rogers also supervises and mentors CST students who use narrative pedagogy techniques during internships or field-based education opportunities in churches and youth centers.

There has been a ripple effect to this work at Claremont. Rogers relates that he has been invited to share his work at such seminaries as Emory, Princeton and Seattle University. "It is to the point," he says, "that I cannot possibly go to all of the places that want to learn about these methods. I wish I had a staff to do this around the country."

Like any good story, the work Rogers does with students is filled with surprises and lessons. One of the surprises, he explains, is the "intergenerational benefit of working with teens and training seminarians at the same time. I'm surprised at how intoxicating

this work is—it is like a miracle. First there is mass chaos and then poof, something happens, and the story line falls into place.”

He admits that when doing such intense work with kids, tensions sometimes emerge. “Sometimes this tension occurs between kids who just want to express themselves and the agenda that I have—the Christian agent-of-change agenda. This has to be negotiated with them.” Rogers also occasionally comes across students who are not fully invested in the process. “For some kids, drama is simply not their thing. So we help those kids to give their ideas to others and be the playwrights. But it is amazing at times to see that even some of the shy ones end up participating as actors in the play. They get caught up in portraying the real life experiences that they know reflect the reality of their lives. And they like to see that there can be hopeful responses to the bad situations that many of them regularly face. They learn that they can be agents of change and agents of hope. And, at the same time, they are learning skills of communication, leadership, and teamwork. When all this comes together with a group of teens you can see why I am a huge believer in narrative pedagogy.”