

The Danville News
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"A Civil Remedy"
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It's a puzzle, though hardly surprising, when struggling congregations look to pay their bills by gutting their mission budgets. Would you pay for car washes by spending the money you needed to buy gas? Gut your service to others and you gut your reason to occupy space. Growth comes not from what you get but from what you give.

A buddy once explained how he could have spent dollars on a Carnival Cruise, getting petted, fattened, entertained. He preferred paying for mission trips to Honduras. When he came home from serving in Honduras he was dirty, tired, skinnier, and more refreshed than any cruise ship could offer. There's something to be gained by getting beyond yourself, putting yourself on the line. There's something about relationships more than economic profit. Something about getting down and dirty, about experiencing other perspectives, about getting out of your stubborn, self-centered, self-admiring, rebellious, willful self, discovering commitment and self-respect.

On a youth mission trip we joined other youth groups from around the country. Each youth was assigned to work alongside young people they never met before. Given my painting background, I was assigned to supervise my work group in painting a house after glazing the window panes. The host organization supplied cans of latex paint. Like God, they planned to finish it in six days. I replied that no paint gets applied till we scrape and prime. Crucial to a lasting finish coat always is the preparation. The host organization grumbled. The kids grumbled. After six days they looked at the finished house and felt pride in their work. One kid, initially obnoxious and lazy, thanked me because he felt he had begun to learn a skill. He discovered how you climb a ladder.

Physical work, responsibility, and self-sacrifice remain the basis for moral character. Without work, we fail our graduates by failing to give them the chance to gain self-respect. You earn merit. It's hysterically hypocritical how the privileged often expect everyone else to earn their success. Give me a kid who does household chores. They'll go farther.

Are we here merely passengers? Are we here to buy happiness the way we buy shoes? Why are we here? Are we here to pad our resume, to be applauded, to be bored and boring, to assume the world owes you? Sweat and labor is a remedy for encouraging young men to behave. Columnist Will Bunch recommends we encourage our young people to take a 'gap year' after High School dedicated to national service. Part of his rationale stems from too many young men disoriented, disillusioned, discouraged, experiencing, "deaths of despair."

Bunch's ideas are sound. Meatier is an essay written back in 1916 by Randolph Bourne, a Greenwich Village bohemian, advocating mandatory national service. His essay was titled, "A Moral Equivalent for Universal Military Service."

Those Greenwich Village bohemians opposed rampant militarism masked as patriotism. Shortly after the outbreak of World War I, the Post Office shut down their magazine, "The Masses." What Bourne advised was that service in national defense could be one possibility. He envisioned a variety of options for the young to provide two year service for the common good. Take patriotic energy and harness it for

productive and creative action, Bourne argued. He recommended that national service become the “logical outgrowth of our public school system,” coming under the umbrella of the Department of Education versus the Department of War, offering not unskilled drudgery but exciting work, “creating new demands” in new, inspiring fields. “Stimulation, not obedience,” Bourne wrote.

This idea of national service became an attractive proposal during my first pastorate decades ago when most of the young men of our rural region graduated from High School, married, and labored on the farm or for Lukens Steel in Coatesville. Only 3% of Octorara’s High School population went on to any kind of trade program or four year educational opportunity. Then hit the recession of the early 1980’s. Economic recession led to emotional depression, distress, disappointment. Hope seemed lost. Public service could have given many of these young men and women new purpose, new skills, new awareness of possibilities, pride.

Imagine the benefit of working alongside persons from various backgrounds, class, and attitudes while building up saving accounts. Imagine unleashing our young into conservation corps, urban corps, working in schools and libraries, with the homeless, serving hospitals, non-profits, community centers, state institutions. Imagine also if those on Social Security would regard themselves as on the dole to volunteer for the public good.