

‘Lives in Your Hands’

Reformational Colloquium 27.10.2006

This is about endeavouring to do research as a Christian and about something that many Christians with others in their churches could do to help give meaning to the lives of troublesome young people in our society.

In the early 70's I was the research methodologist on a team investigating ‘baby-battering’ – a newly discovered syndrome describing the physical injuries, internal as well as external, which pointed to child abuse. The team leader was a psychiatrist and we had a senior social worker for whom for and with whom I designed the home interview. I carried out my own structured interviews and some psychological testing on both parents, and on the infant if and when it recovered and was fit to leave hospital. We included only severe cases in which 2 consultants agreed that the injuries could not have happened by accident, or the parents were newly imprisoned after having killed a child (134 cases and a control sample of other hospitalised children).

It was a challenge for me, but I had done my apprenticeship on the prediction of juvenile delinquency based in the Cambridge Department of Criminology and I now got myself some training in the assessment of child development. Armed with this, my knowledge of psychology, a degree of understanding of what it should mean to be a human being made in the image of God and of the attitudes in us that make for life rather than death, and a sense of the complexity and richness of things from a little knowledge of Dooyeweerd's philosophy - with all the excitement that gives in the search for answers to anything - I took on the task.

To cut a very long story short, I was 100% involved, together with my team leader, in the interpretation and publication of my findings – which seemed like a privilege for me as an inheritor of all things with Christ. What emerged from multivariate analysis of many possible factors was that the most crucial of all was the lack of fathers' or partners' support mothers suffered. This was the variable most closely associated with ‘frequent smacking’ of the child!

From then on it was my desire to find and work with young men pre-parenthood. And 15 years later a wonderful opportunity came when I was invited to teach at Caring For Life here in Leeds, a Christian charity which dealt with lads in trouble of all kinds and with histories making them a risk to children. I asked if I could write a course for them. It had to hold the attention of a group with resistance to learning of any kind, potential horror at being required to talk about childcare, poor concentration, inability to read, etc. etc. It had therefore to be a bit devious and gripping from the word ‘go’. A series of evenings entitled ‘Lives in Your Hands’ with eight lads was run with varied leadership but the same two of us always there to be supportive. At the 1st session the lads were invited to tell us of the best childhood memories they had. Interestingly, these turned out to be rare occasions when male relatives took them on outings or played with them. After that happy discussion they were asked to tell us their worst memories, having of course received from us and given each other promises of confidentiality. Finally they were asked, Did they want things to be better for any children *they* might have or have to help look after? So . . . would they like to learn about childcare?

Session 2 dealt with ‘What helps children grow well’ (and led imperceptibly on to safety issues). Session 3 – ‘When children are difficult’ (how to nurture their

individuality and make it easier for them to be good). Session 4 – ‘How to make every day a good one in the child’s life’ (using an example of how to fill each hour of a day well with a family of three aged 5, 2 and 1!). Session 5 – practice, helping in a home and tea- and bed-time. Session 6 – what do children want to know when they are six or seven, about darkness, evil, death, and what did we need to believe to help them. Session 7 - ‘Why do children need two happy parents?’ What is it like for hostages? for mothers alone with children 24 hours a day? What is promised in the marriage service and why? Session 8 – a party and certificates for completing the course. By this time the next group couldn’t wait to be given the same course!

Things the course brought about, as seen by the CFL staff: a change in the lads’ attitudes to the female workers, perception of children as human beings with their own rights, a readiness to talk through painful experiences and a new supportiveness for one another. It was also mentioned that they now held their heads up and seemed happier. And one young man, soon after, prevented his out-of-control girlfriend from hurting a child by running out with the child in his arms to a phone to ring CFL. (Normally such couples collude with one another to hide what’s happened.)

We ran the course a number of times and subsequently ran a course with them on helping young teenagers see fascinating things happening in the world of work, with the result that the lads were fired with enthusiasm for such knowledge and wanted to tell all 13-year-olds to ‘Get an education!’

I want every badly hurt young man in the country to have the ‘Lives’ course. Statutory bodies won’t take it on because it is Christian. I haven’t had time to talk about it in churches because of wysocs! In view of the good things God has done for us, I mustn’t grumble like the Israelites, but I am mystified that I couldn’t go on and deeply concerned that no progress has been made towards breaking the cycle of anger and abuse and lack of positive motivation among a troubled and highly troublesome part of Britain’s population. It is acknowledge to be especially difficult to reach young men from such backgrounds, and I am still convinced that this is a more powerful way of bringing meaning and positive motivation into their lives than any other so far.

Ruth Hanson.