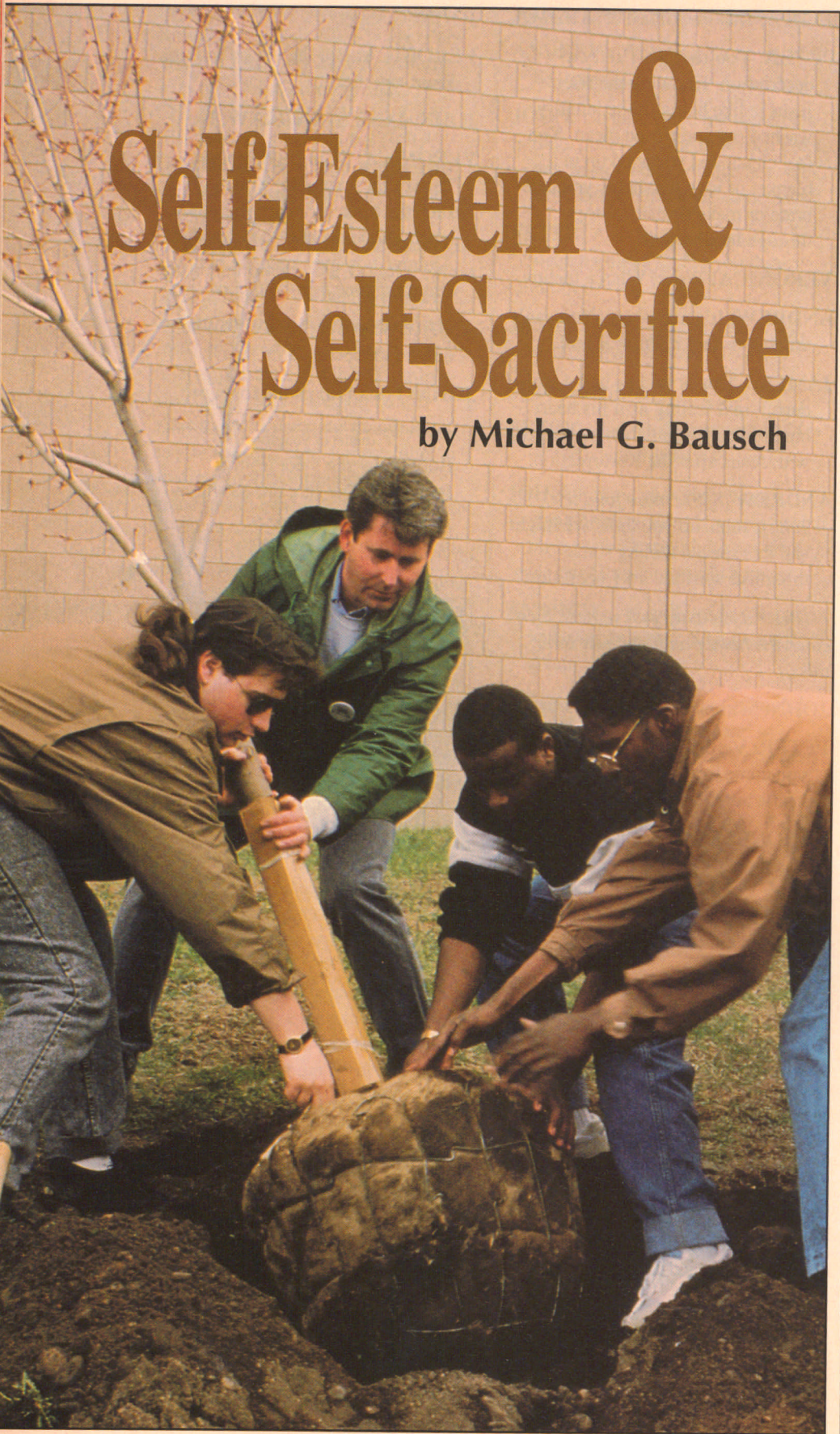


Self-Esteem & Self-Sacrifice

by Michael G. Bausch



It's hard to teach traditional Lenten and Easter themes of self-denial and self-sacrifice. Some youth continually seem selfish and concerned only about their own personal needs.

A recent study by the University of Wisconsin-Extension discovered top concerns of 7th-12th graders. These primarily rural teens worried about

- getting good grades
- finding a good job after completing school
- being too fat or too thin
- not fitting in
- not getting along with parents
- how well their parents were getting along with each other.

Psychologists such as Erik H. Erikson put the self-centeredness of youth into perspective. Youth are concerned mainly—and sometimes exclusively—with issues and relationships that affect them personally. This is because the primary task of adolescence is to build a sense of personal identity and self-esteem. Youth ask “who am I?” not “how do I lose myself in the service of others?” The challenge in our youth ministries is to help youth channel some of that inward-directed energy outward.

In the great commandment, Jesus taught balance: “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (Matthew 22:37-39). After loving God, self-love is as important as neighbor-love. Youth need to develop a sense of personal identity and self-esteem even as they learn to develop loyalty to causes outside of their own personal needs.

Erikson and others characterize youth as being highly idealistic. As they seek a sense of personal identity, youth develop unique selves through a commitment to social harmony and a process of change to rectify present injustices. Bruno Bettelheim wrote that youth are happiest when they feel they are fighting to reach goals that

were conceived of but not realized by the generation before them (*Symbolic Wounds*, The Free Press, 1954).

Columnist William Raspberry has suggested that the anger of our nation's inner city youth is due in part to an "absence of concerted, society-transforming activity that can lift people above their selfish concerns and frustrations" (From *The Washington Post National Weekly Edition*, June 29- July 5, 1992). In the absence of adult leadership for such work, he says, these movements must come from the youth themselves.

The good news is that youth-initiated efforts have been springing up across the country. The environment often provides the focus for these efforts. Action groups such as YES (Youth for Environmental Sanity); STOP (Students Tackle Ocean Plastics); and KAP (Kids against Pollution) are examples of youth efforts to channel their idealism and personal needs into social causes.

Youth develop self-identity and idealism in part through their relating with peers and by participating in various hands-on experiences. Car washes, pancake breakfasts, and dances generally are successful with youth. These experiences mix peer group fun with an effort toward a larger goal: to raise funds for a cause or a need of the group.

Other experiences, such as visiting in a nursing home or feeding the homeless in an urban church, can be "mountaintop" experiences for the youth who participate in them. One ninth-grade confirmation class helped feed 475 people in an urban food program. The class considered that experience the high point of their year.

An Exercise to Identify Group Concerns

Help your group talk about some of their other-directed concerns by having them bring to your session two kinds of popular songs: those that say something about social problems and those that speak about hope and har-

mony. Give each group member a sheet of paper (larger is better) and some crayons or markers for drawing. Listen to one of the songs that expresses problems that our society and world face. As the group listens to the song, have them draw and color pictures that portray the broken world in which we live. Some youth may prefer to write word pictures of the problems.

Next, play a song that holds a positive vision of the future. Have the youth use a different sheet of paper or the back of the first sheet. Ask them to draw a world in which harmony and peace are the rule.

When the music is finished and the pictures completed, talk together about the pictures. Ask everyone to hold up the pictures that show the brokenness of the world. Invite individuals to talk about what they have drawn or what others have drawn. Allow youth to speak freely and to discover common concerns. Make a list of those concerns on newsprint or chalkboard.

Next, look at the positive, harmonious pictures. Ask individuals to share what they have drawn. List on newsprint or chalkboard the common hopes the group holds.

Select an Issue Important to the Group

Looking at the lists of concerns and hopes, find two or three that the group thinks are most important. Ask them to choose one concern or hope they think they could make an impact on.

Brainstorm a list of ways the group could become involved in that issue. Choose one project the group could take on as a beginning effort to heal the brokenness they have perceived. Make plans to work on that project.

Whenever the group makes progress on their project, celebrate their efforts with a party and talk about their experience. Find symbols that remind them of their experience (for example, a plate and napkin as a symbol of a feeding program). Offer

prayers of thanks, hope, and vision as they talk about the meaning of the symbols and the experience.

This process—naming youth concerns beyond their own selfish interests and finding ways to make a difference about those issues—integrates the need of youth to be both self-directed and other-directed. A common project engages their developing

*Help
youth
shift
inward –
directed
energy
outward.*

minds, channels their intense energy, invites them to articulate their idealism, and puts them in contact with their peers. A sense of competency and the good feeling of making a difference help youth achieve their ultimate goal at this stage of life: to answer the question, "who am I?"

By joining the "who am I" question with the idea of self-sacrificing service, youth and workers with youth joyfully engage in the Easter work of carrying the mission of the Risen Christ into a broken world.

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