

Growing Disciples—Spiritual Gardening

When I was growing up there was a piece of waste ground behind where we lived. My dad decided that this would be a great plot for an allotment so he went to the local council and arranged to rent the land and convert it to growing fruit and vegetables.

He spent many hours digging the ground, adding compost and improving the soil. He also built a greenhouse and a shed for his tools. I enjoyed watching him, as well as eating the produce, but was not too keen on the back breaking tasks such as digging! Dad did not have a background in horticulture but he was interested and would read articles and books on gardening as well talking with others.

In some ways that plot reflects working with young people.

We can think that there is a waste ground as far as young people and the Church are concerned. However, with the right vision we can transform working with young people just as my dad converted the wilderness into a garden.

Watching

One of the first things we need to do is survey the ground. What is happening? What groundwork needs to be done? It is a time to get to know our young people – Who they are? What are they interested in? What do they want from the Church?

Planting

Once we have got to know our young people, we need to plant the seeds. This needs careful consideration of what conditions are needed for each one. In the same way we need to look at the gifts of each young person – it is

quite easy to think of young people as a homogenous group. They are all different and have different gifts and abilities and so need to be treated in different ways.

Nurturing

Once we have planted the seeds we need to care for the plants. They need to be watered and fed in order to grow. So do our young people. They need to be nourished in their faith and encouraged to be part of the communities they belong to. They need opportunities to learn about the traditions of our faith and what it means to be a young Catholic today, to be given the skills necessary to deepen their relationship with God and to live as disciples of Jesus.

Weeding

One of the major tasks my dad had was to clear the plot of waste stones and weeds. This was vital if the plants were going to grow and flourish. We need to look where are the stones and weeds in the lives of our young people. Problems at home and school, drugs and alcohol, substance abuse, bullying, sexual pressures are just a few of the issues young people face today. Young people need the help and support of all the community as they look to avoid or overcome such pressures.

Staking

A young sapling needs to be well staked in order for its root to firmly take. In the same way we need to ensure our young people are



well rooted in the community. This means supporting them and showing a good example. Young people will reflect the values they see present in the Church. They also need room to grow and when they make mistakes, be given a chance to start over again. They need to be challenged but also allowed an opportunity to challenge and question.

Fertilizing

In the shed, my dad kept a whole range of chemicals, plant foods and fertilizers. Knowing which to give to each plant to give it a boost and to get the best out of it was a real skill. This boost can be given to young people in a variety of ways. It may be larger gatherings across the pastoral area or diocesan events. It may be with a retreat or pilgrimage to Lourdes, where they are out of their usual routine. It may be at World Youth Day, where they are gathered with thousands of other young people.

Bearing Fruit

At the end of the day we must realize that we can only do so much. We must put our faith in God. He is the one who sows and the one who makes things grow. We may not see the benefits of our work, in the same way the one who plants the acorn may never see the oak tree. However, we must enter the garden and change the landscape so that our young people have the opportunity to **“Go out and Bear Fruit”**.

