
Many in the helping fields often read texts, quickly gleaning valuable insights for the purpose of sharing them with those to whom they minister. Dunn’s text offers one much valuable information to glean from, but mostly, only if one reads at the pace that the author sets, not by one’s normal reading pace. Upon an inspectional read, Dunn uses new ministry terms and phrases, “pacing, leading, and spiritual care-giving”, yet states nothing profoundly new. His insights echo similar calls represented in the ideas of meeting at the lamppost (Lewis, 1994), carefrontation (Augsburger, 1982), availability (Wicks, 1986), the Celtic way (Hunter, 1997), and spiritual mentoring (Anderson & Reese, 1999).

The value of this text is not so much in new insight, but rather in the fresh way that his valuable ideas are presented. Dunn, obviously under the leading of the Spirit, intentionally or unintentionally draws his readers into the kind of stop and pace ministry experience he encourages in the text, parlaying the reader beyond his or her own agenda and into part of Dunn’s agenda, “…Slow down, you move too fast…you’ve got to make this moment last…”(Simon & Garfunkel, 1972). Dunn slows the pace of one’s detailed reading by packaging his points with many poignant stories and challenging pre- and post-chapter questions. Reading at Dunn’s pace, one finds an inter-personal connection with God and with Dunn. The experience of reading this text profoundly illustrates the points made throughout the text.

Essentially, “Shaping the Spiritual Life of Students” makes one main claim. If those who teach and minister abandon ministry by their own agendas and provide ministry at the pace of the students, we would more likely make interpersonal connections with students where they are, thus finding the true spiritual care-giving and leading opportunities our spirits seek. “The
pacing-then-leading vision calls spiritual caregivers to be lingering leaders who journey with the interior worlds of post-modern adolescents” (p.239).

Structurally, the text breaks down into four sections: 1. A Vision for 21st century ministry; 2. Sacred practices of loving well; 3. Exploring the Terrain of Adolescent Journeys, and; 4. Spiritual Care for Spiritual Care-givers. In addition to walking the reader through the understanding of concepts, several chapters deal with the moral decline of society and developmental aspects of adolescents (ch.9-11). Dunn starts and ends the text making reference to a hiking-experience that he had with his son, in which he experientially realized management concepts of pacing and leading, such that his life perspective has never been the same.

The key claim weaving the text together postulates that 21st century youth need spiritual care-givers who will pace with them and then lead them on their spiritual journeys. Dunn defines pacing as “connecting authentically, intentionally, informally and interpersonally; listening beyond words and behaviors, with an agenda to understand the adolescent’s experiences and God’s current work in those experiences” (p.16-18, 241). Parents, youth workers and teachers who lead “speak truth, in love, into another person’s life” (p.19). Chapters 5 and 6 provide detail to speaking the truth in love through caring confrontation.

Dunn’s call for pacing and leading is permeated by the assumption that the millennial generation exists without hope; at best, tripping over an immature theology emphasizing nothing more than doing good and avoiding evil. He suggests that unless those in this generation encounter spiritual care-givers in their path, much as Cleopas did with Jesus on the road to Emmaus, they are bound to their hopelessness (p.35). Dunn defines a spiritual care-giver as someone who has learned to pace and lead (p.25), recognizing that the crux of one’s responsibility is in pacing, not leading (p.89). Spiritual care-givers must immerse themselves
into the lives of adolescents, seeing the students’ lives as the context for their own spiritual growth (p.50). Spiritual care-givers must be those who balance knowing, believing, and doing while embracing the work and process of care-giving as God’s, not their own (p.57, p.83).

Several critical points emerge from Dunn’s work. One simple, yet profound, insight is Dunn’s articulation that spiritual growth is not a matter of addition and subtraction (p.52). Spiritual growth is far deeper than simply doing things that are right and not doing things that are wrong. Dunn also efficiently argues that every struggle that a person wrestles with is a spiritual problem. He justly states that Christians too hastily either over-spiritualize problems or under-spiritualize problems. They either ignore emotional, social, intellectual, and psychological elements of people’s difficulties or they prescribe simplistic spiritual solutions to troubling situations, which may require far more help than a Bible verse and a prayer.

Dunn postulates that because of the sensate climate of culture and the ensuing morphing of morality, today’s young live in frenzied pursuit of self-pleasure. The morphing of morality means that, “the moral consciousness of the culture embraces more divergent moral perspectives” (p.40). Dunn describes the process of life in the 21st century astutely as teens quickly travel from the mindset of, “if it feels good, do it” to the mindset, “Do it—unless it starts to feel bad” (p. 40). Dunn suggests that we need to reverse the trends of moral failure.

If readers take the time to consider the answers to the reflection questions and experience the “Pressing In” scenarios that Dunn poses, they will benefit both intra-personally and inter-personally. Such questions as, “My biggest hindrances to pacing empathy are…” (p.90), and “What do you think you needed most from others when you were in High School?” (p.204), challenge the reader in a simple, yet thorough way. Some of Dunn’s pressing challenges literally guide the reader into creating experiences and listening opportunities with adolescents. These
make his text come to life. Dunn also provides helpful recommended readings at the end of each chapter.

There are some specific points that Dunn makes which stimulate readers into deeper understanding and thinking. Dunn’s articulate distinction between “telling” and “pacing” should help most readers sense when their listening and leading opportunities disappear as they begin to “help” a young person by telling him or her what he or she needs to know (p.18, p.128f). His three R’s of moral development succinctly describe the process of helping adolescents to transition their moral convictions into action (ch.7). Chapter eight discusses his ideas of “spiritual space-making”, which are excellent and parallel ideas represented in Sonlife youth ministry strategy. That said; one point of Dunn’s needs to be more strongly stated, while two other points need to be explained more clearly.

In chapter seven Dunn emphasizes that adolescents need authentic attachment to God and people, as opposed to “postmodern pseudo-attachments” (substance abuse, pornography, etc.). This excellent point could have more strongly supported his plea for pacing and leading adult-teen relationships had he defined, discussed, or provided any recommended references to explain what he meant specifically by “secure attachment” (p.125). “Consistent and appropriate boundary setting” (p.125) inadequately defines the concept.

The first concern with the text considers the logistical difficulty of writing one text about spiritual care-giving to teachers, youth workers and parents as one group; did Dunn target too wide of an audience with too large of a promise? It seems that he did. Dunn needed to explain in more detail how he sees those in different roles distinctly fulfilling the pacing and leading model and in all cases why the pacing and leading model is the most appropriate. Consider as an
example, his principle number three for nurturing early adolescents; “provide them with meaningful adult interaction” (p.178).

To what degree is a (school or Sunday school) teacher responsible for providing adolescents with other meaningful adult interaction? How would a teacher follow through on this directive? In a decadent world, parents may likely need to be persuaded with more reasoning as to why this principle is important, and with more guidance as to how this need can be carefully met. The youth leader (and the parent) might think that he or she is all the extra meaningful adult interaction that adolescents need. Is that true? Dunn does not say.

My second concern deals with a specific premise of Dunn’s, “all adolescents need adults who will provide an ongoing relationship of pacing, then leading” (p.21). The text seems to suggest that all adolescents need the same type of relationship with every guiding adult in their lives; I disagree. Secure youth from good homes seem often to be neglected by speakers and writers when considering the needs of today’s young people. These teens need to be ministered to as well. While Dunn never states that all pacing relationships should be of the same intensity, he does not distinguish any differences in the pacing adult-teen relationships.

Adolescents need their parents to pace with them far more than they need teachers or campus ministers to pace with them. Additionally, young people who are having their fundamental pacing and leading needs met in the home may be quite willing and able to trust, learn and grow in a non-pacing/teaching type of relationship with another adult. In fact, the major spiritual need of many of these secure young people may be more to learn experiential and/or doctrinal theology outside of the context of their world rather than on having someone else to pace with them inside of their world. Pacing, of course, would still be important to every adolescent/adult relationship, but it seems that the priority and degree of emphasis could vary.
One must also consider that there are certain adults who do not have pacing skills, though they love the Lord and have a call to teach what they passionately know to be true. What if by virtue of social ineptitude or time constraints they cannot find a way to pace with teens? Should they abandon their posts? I have observed that some of these adults, however, still can lead adolescents quite proficiently into new areas of spiritual discovery.

The underlying premise of this text, that this is a generation desperately needing to feel adult care, leads to Dunn’s call for the pursuit of authentic relationship between Christian adults and adolescents. He suggests that today’s ministry must travel “out-side of the box” and that those leading in ministry “must manifest themselves in a ‘go’ rather than a ‘come’ model”. We adults must pursue the young, where they are and wherever they are. These ideas are expanded upon in Rick Richardson’s book, “Evangelism Outside the Box” (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2000).

Concurring with Dunn, the adolescent population is desperate for adult attention and our manifestation of the grace of God must happen now. Readers needing to sense the urgency of Dunn’s call should read, “A Tribe Apart”, written by Patricia Hersch (1998), and published by Ballantine Books. This documentary of six teenagers reveals how lonely their world feels.
References


