

YOUTH IN MISSION: Serving the Poor, Growing in Faith

By Samantha Tashman

In the summer of 1974, several youth from Blakemore United Methodist Church in Nashville, Tenn. spent a week serving together at the Hinton Rural Life Center in North Carolina. When they unloaded their vans at home and spent time processing their experience, many of them wondered the same thing: “Couldn’t we be serving the people in our own communities in the same way we served the families in North Carolina?” These youth, and their leader, George Bass, felt an overwhelming call to create a ministry that would seek to serve the people in their own “backyard” through major and minor home repair. That backyard turned out to be the Cumberland Mountain counties east of Nashville. Thus, the dream and vision of Mountain T.O.P. (Tennessee Outreach Project) was born. Since the summer of 1975, when the first Mountain T.O.P. volunteers gathered at Beersheba Springs Methodist Assembly in Grundy County, youth have been coming to the mountain to put faith into action.

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From the beginning, George felt strongly about challenging youth to see beyond a week of service. He knew that the higher calling was and still is to go into the valley below with a sense of urgency in spreading the good news of Christ. Jesus’ calling to the first disciples, found in the Gospel of Matthew, became the foundation of Mountain T.O.P.’s spiritual direction. “And he said to them, ‘Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.’ Immediately they left their nets and followed him” (4:19-20). As a reminder of that call, the fishhook has remained Mountain T.O.P.’s symbol for thirty-four years

and is offered to every camper who comes through our gates.

Not Just Physical Needs

Mountain T.O.P. encourages youth to help meet not only the physical, but also the spiritual, emotional and social needs of the Tennessee Cumberland Mountain people. For example, a family may need a wheelchair ramp built for their handicapped son. We can help meet that need physically, but we also want to take the time to hear the family’s story. There’s something valuable, even holy, in taking the time to listen. Often, we find God woven in those conversations, and discover the families we work with ministering to us more than we minister to them.

Similarly, we focus on being a partnership-based ministry. Any family or individual we work with is given the opportunity to contribute to the project, whether that is through providing a meal for the

work group or providing materials for the project. We try to be intentional in saying we work “with” a family instead of “for” a family. Likewise, we have immersed ourselves in the same communities for over thirty-four years, forming relationships with our neighbors and stimulating the local businesses that will sustain this region economically.

Enriching the Youth

Also a priority is the Christian growth of the participants and staff who come to

Mountain T.O.P. Youth are encouraged to step outside their comfort zones in a safe, Christian community where exploration of Christ is encouraged. Our main focus in creating this space came about when we found that many organizations offer a place to come and work, but very few offer the connection of why we do what we do. Through personal reflection time guided by a devotional in the morning, a devotional on the work sites during lunch, a time to gather and share the day’s events and evening worship, we seek to encourage a day that is continuously refocusing on God, asking the questions: Who are you in Christ? What does He have planned for your journey with Him? What do you hear Him saying to you while on this mountain? What do you hear Him calling you to do when you leave this mountain?

Likewise, we create a space for the youth to plan and participate in worship services within “major groups” of twenty-five to thirty people each. Since our focus lies primarily in empowering youth to lead and acquire new skills, we offer the opportunity to contribute to worship in ways they may not have experienced previously.

Developing Leadership Skills

The third and final objective of Mountain T.O.P. is to develop the leadership skills of participants and staff. The goal is to teach youth the value of servant leadership. To understand the true nature of a servant, one must look to Jesus as the example. In her book, *No Greater Love*, Mother Theresa writes, “May we never forget that in the service to the poor we are offered a magnificent opportunity to do something beautiful for God. In fact, when we give ourselves with all of our hearts to the poor, it is Christ whom we are serving in their disfigured faces. Jesus himself said that when we do good work for others, we do it for him. (Matthew 25:31-46).



Action Step

For more information about how you can get your youth involved at Mountain T.O.P., please visit our website at www.mountain-top.org, e-mail sam@mountain-top.org or call our office at (931) 692-3999. Mountain T.O.P. also offers adult programs in the summer and fall that include major home repair and children's ministries, Spring Break options mid-February through mid-April, a family weekend in April, retreat options, and facility rentals.

It is important to help youth recognize that their opinions and participation are valued. In fact, adults that attend camp are expected not to be the leaders within their work groups, but rather, to empower the youth to take on those responsibilities. Youth are encouraged to use power tools (often for the first time), help plan and prepare projects, act as safety coordinators and/or lead a prayer with the families they are working with. They build confidence in tackling minor home repair projects such as building porches, sheds or wheel chair ramps, painting houses, sealing roofs, and doing yard work.

In the year 2009, our focus has been

people they served and to experience that grace in their own lives.

After his recent trip to the mountain, Jim Smith, youth leader for Mount Zion United Methodist Church in Mount Zion, Ill., wrote to tell us of the transformation his youth—and he—had experienced during their week in mission:

“On the way to work this morning I was listening to our local Christian radio station when Amazing Grace came onto the radio, the version and artist used during our camp week. It reminded me of our service we had on Sunday morning immediately following our week at Mountain

on God's Amazing Grace, centered on Ephesians 2:8, “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God.” Through this theme, youth were inspired to show God's grace to the

T.O.P. We opened our service of sharing and celebration with this song by asking the congregation to just sit and listen. You could have heard a pin drop except for the emotion of the team who had just returned and then many around us listening to the words and music and then getting caught up in our emotion—before a word had been spoken. The thought of that moment, that hour in church that Sunday, and the memories of that week and those we touched and were touched by, was enough to bring me to a few tears again. I was reminded of not only how great that week was but the whole point of the week as well: God's amazing grace.” □



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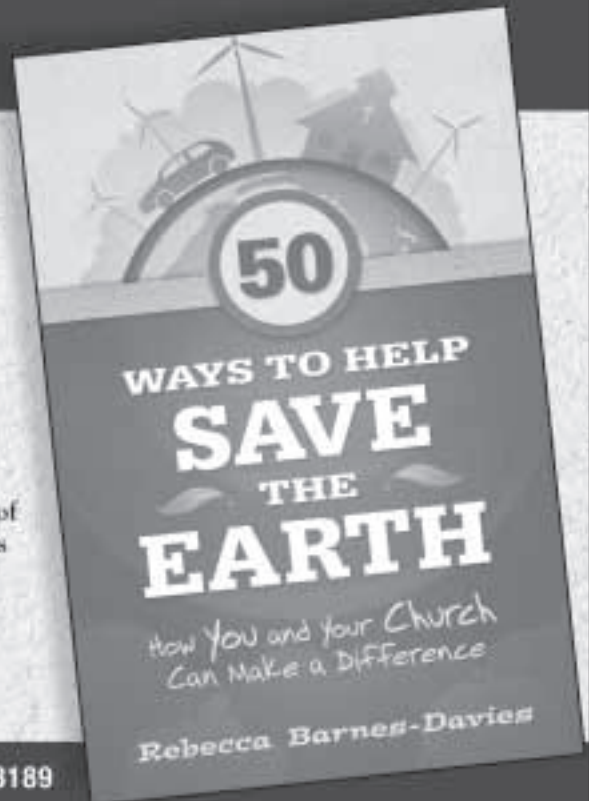
“Real world, practical tips and encouragement for putting faith into action as responsible stewards of God's creation. The clear advice is a welcome addition to the increasing awareness among faith communities that environmental issues are religious too.”

—Publishers Weekly

Barnes-Davies's book offers a lighthearted way to address global warming by reshaping our lives to honor rather than destroy God's creation. She addresses the topics of water, energy, transportation, food and agriculture, people, other species, and wilderness and land planning. Perfect for individual or group use.

Rebecca Barnes-Davies is an environmental activist with over a decade of experience in advocating for public policy changes and educating groups of concerned Christians.

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