

HAITIAN YOUTH OVERVIEW

Throughout history the term, "adolescence," has been associated with problems. It is discussed everyday and everywhere: in the family, in the government, and in the Church. Young people are a source of perennial interest and continuing conversation. Socrates wrote of them in fourth century B.C., "They have execrable manners, flaunt authority, have no respect for their elders. What kind of awful creatures will they become when they grow up?"

Every society must somehow transform children into adults, for its very survival depends on that transition. Youth work has emerged out of the needs to address the numerous problems facing youth, and to assist young people toward personal, social, and spiritual development. This discussion examines the conditions constituting "adolescent problems" in Haiti and offers youth workers solutions to alleviate teen suffering and to guide teens in their searches for identity.

YOUTH PROBLEMS IN HAITI

Before examining youth problems and solutions, it is important to define briefly the concept of "youth." Youth are defined in many ways and in different contexts worldwide, confounding politicians, administrators, policy planners, youth workers, and academicians alike.

Boubakar Ly (1979) points out that "there is more than one way to be a young person. Youth is relative, and different cultures see it differently. The wisest line is to take up a fairly pragmatic position and to adopt the view of the society in which the young person lives." Which means that young people are those whom society regards as such. Generally the period between childhood and adulthood is called "youth."

A youth is regarded as a young person who can initiate and innovate a number of activities to accelerate the development of his or her society--youth are legally defined to include all persons within age range of 15 to 25 in most United Nations bodies and Commonwealth agencies. However, for political purposes, the range is widened to cover those from 10 to 35 years of age. In Haiti, youth is defined as between 15 to 35 years.

Adolescence is known as a transitional stage of development between childhood and adulthood. Many psychologists agree that adolescence begins around ages 12 or 13 and ends in the late teens or early twenties. Diane E. Papulua (1983) notes: "It is easier to determine when childhood ends than decide when adulthood has arrived."

In order to define clearly the problems of the youth, it is necessary to understand their needs. Adolescence is the period during which a young person learns who he or she is and what he or she really feels. To Erikson it is "the search for something and somebody to be true to." It is difficult for a youngster to learn about oneself even in the best circumstances; it is even harder in unstable living conditions. A host of needs may be discerned for adolescents as a group. Among the psychosocial needs of young adolescents, there are three of particular importance:

- The fundamental need to establish a personal identity.
- The need to establish significant associations with other people.
- The need to develop skills, attitudes, and understanding necessary for adulthood.

The years of youth—linking childhood and adulthood—are characterized by the individual forming a basic understanding and impression of the world and developing the skills (emotional, intellectual, and physical) to adequately cope with it. Thus, the young person seeks his or her place in society as an adult.

Youth all over the world face serious problems. However, the youth situation in Haiti is described as pathetic. Haiti is a youthful country. Nearly two-thirds of the population are between the ages of 15 to 35. They constitute a very important part of society. Haitian youth suffer the same afflictions affecting the rest of the Haitian society; however, certain problems are peculiar to the youth. These issues are discussed daily, but no significant action is taken.

The present status of Haitian youth emerges from the country's economic, demographic, social, cultural, and educational changes of the past century. The status of the youth has profound consequences for the kind and quality of relationships existing between generations. Haitian youth today are like much of the world's youth in that they are not integrated into Haitian society; they do not always feel at home within it and often encounter difficulties while navigating through it. In this regard, Kwaku Osei (1989) advances:

The youth today are growing up in an increasingly urban, technological society characterized in part by shifting values and traditions. Broad physical, social, psychological, economic, and family changes all have serious consequences for the youth. Thus, young people are forced not only to adjust to their individual changes but simultaneously to meet the societal and family expectations.

The distinguishing characteristic of Haitian youth is that they are not integrated into their own population; they are maladjusted to their society. It is noteworthy

that modern Haitian society is characterized by neo-colonial and imperialist domination, so the social system in which the young people now live is new. Generational conflict is deeply rooted in the human condition. Much has been said and written about the rebellious youth of today: how their values, attitudes, and lifestyles diverge from those of their parents' generation. Their activities are characterized by what is generally called "youth culture." Contemporary youth are drifting toward a world of private and personal satisfaction, and they find their parents increasingly irrelevant as role models.

Some problems instigated by youth include delinquency, rioting, murder, fleeing from law enforcement or custody, assault, robbery, malicious damage, begging, homebreaking, drug abuse, alcohol abuse, and prostitution. However, Haitian youth also face some social problems for which they are not responsible: unemployment, underemployment, poor education and training facilities, poor recreation and leisure facilities, low level income, malnutrition, insufficient shelter, poverty, hunger, poor medical treatment, broken homes, and unstable families. Most of these Haitian problems can be traced to the poor economic situation, negligence of agriculture, irrelevance of school curriculum, social disorder, political instability, cultural indifference, and spiritual darkness.

Cecile D. Gaoton, the director of "Christian Children Funds" in Haiti describes the pathetic situation of the Haitian youth as follows (translated from French text):

The Haitian youth of today have certainly many tares. In that sense they are the product of our system and as well as its main victims. For the most part, they have not been granted their minimum chances that would enable them to develop their abilities, to receive training, to acquire knowledge and skills...A high percentage of our youth, therefore, have never had the opportunity to attend school. Among those who have been admitted to school, more than three-fourths dropped out of elementary school.

This statement accurately describes youth in Haiti today. The dropouts and pushed out youth frequently leave school without skills to offer to an employer or work experience. The young get discouraged, feeling excluded and rejected. They lack self-confidence, and they often give up before they actually start seriously seeking work. Evidence of the gravity of the Haitian youth economic situation lies with the hundreds of young men and women who daily risk their lives in tiny little boats to flee the country in the hope of finding refuge in the United States. Unfortunately, many of these boat people do not complete the journey, but perish at sea.

In Haiti, the both rural and urban youth face critical social and economic problems. They are desperate for the chance to live their lives consistently with

their values. While many continue to push for change, others feel helpless, hopeless, and alienated; all are frustrated.

SOLUTIONS TO HAITIAN YOUTH PROBLEMS

The problems confronting the Haitian youth underscore the problems of Haiti as a whole and reflect the general well-being and prospects of the society. The problems of youth are inseparable from Haiti's societal problems. Youth are integral to the society. Many solutions for youth will be found within Haiti's socio-economic development. There is no single solution for Haitian youth problems; all aspects of societal life must be addressed (sociological, cultural, economical, structural, and political).

In Haiti, if any effective, broad program of action is developed to specifically assist rural youth, it must flow through the educational system. A primary key to solving many Haitian youth problems lies with the quality and effectiveness of the educational structure. There should be concern for relevance and practical application in the curricula, a greater emphasis on how to solve problems rather than just transmitting accumulated information.

Schools should not alienate young farmers and prepare them to migrate to town hoping for jobs (since 70% of Haitians live in rural areas). Youth training centers should be established with particular emphasis on rural youth. For example, there should be training in farming, animal husbandry, construction, carpentry, metal working, home economics, and cooking. Training programs should focus on all forms of development—economic, social, technical, political, individual, and spiritual. If youth can live successfully life in their rural communities, they will not migrate to the urban areas. Haitian young people should have the opportunity to discover their true identity and develop all aspects of their personality.

HELPING ADOLESCENTS IN THEIR SEARCH FOR SELF-IDENTITY

As mentioned earlier, the central question for adolescence is "Who am I?" Adolescents pursue their identity and ponder their life choices. In the search for identity—marked by a period of "storm and stress" and vacillating emotions--the social environment may be significant. The comfort and security of love, acceptance, and appreciation may sustain the adolescent through moments of crisis and terror. Youth workers can help the adolescents resolve one's conflict of identity. There are many approaches:

- **Understand them.** Youth workers need to create a good rapport with adolescents. Listen to them to understand their feelings, whether or not their behavior is acceptable.

- **Guide them with love.** Remember that the adolescent needs to develop his or her own values. Guiding is therefore counselling by giving direction on issues pertaining to their personality.
- **Encourage them.** Encourage them to develop themselves, take initiative, and participate in activities of their choice.
- **Encourage them to join a social group.** Adolescents have a sense of belonging to friends, companions, or groups in which they can have faithful commitments.
- **Counsel their parents.** Family can be a source of conflict; some parents need to change their negative attitudes and behavior toward their adolescents.

CONCLUSION

The irrelevance of school curriculum, economic despair, cultural indifferences, social disorder, political instability, and the influence of voodoo all contribute to Haitian youth problems. Unemployment, idleness, anomie, alienation, rejection and a poor self-image tempt millions of youth into violence, law-breaking, and involvement in a host of other antisocial activities. The youth are often direct victims of societal problems. There should be great concern about youth, and great effort to solve the various problems confronting them. Too many adults, hostile, use young people as scapegoats. They can no longer be rejected; their problems should be addressed with good will and cooperation.

Launching the International Year of Youth (IYY) on January 6, 1985, the bishops appealed to young people to "make something of the year, to create a better society, and to count on their support." Addressing the Council of Youth in April 1985, Bishop Romelus declared, "Enough, people are in chains. It's time to take the street, to unify. When one suffers, all do." To consolidate the message and symbolize the exodus, the Church organizes youth marches. More than 200,000 young people crossed the country and assembled in Port-au-Prince for peace, justice, participation and democracy—praying, singing, and chanting, saying, "Stand up young people! The future of the Haitian churches is in our hands. Let's come together to save our country, let's be committed to save our country."

The following sources were used for this discussion:

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