

**INCULCATING SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES AMONG POST-HIGH SCHOOL YOUTH:
A CASE STUDY OF THE VUMA TRANSITIONAL PROGRAM OF THE NAIROBI
CHAPEL CHURCH, NAIROBI KENYA**

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ABSTRACT

The future of any society is vested in the younger generation; and religious heritage is important in enhancing morality in society. In Kenya, culture change has led to a gap whereby the rite of passage in early adolescence only prepares young people for teenage life. After high school, when the Kenyan law recognizes them as adults, there is no institutionalized ROP. This creates a gap because youth are left alone to maneuver young adulthood. Realizing this gap, a few churches have developed curricula whereby they equip the youth with religious instruction that can jump start them into the next phase of life. Using Kolb's experiential learning theory, this study endeavored to establish the role of church based transitional programs in inculcating Christian spiritual disciplines among post high school youth. A case study was done on the 2018 edition of the VUMA program organized by the Nairobi Chapel Church, Nairobi Kenya. In this phenomenological study, 30 out of 112 youth and all the five counselors and program director participated in interviews. The data was then transcribed into text and subsequently coded using the NVIVO software. The emerging themes provided the basis for discussion of the results. Findings revealed that the program inculcated a culture of Bible Study and Prayer among the youth through daily activities of Quiet Time, Bible study and teachings.

Key Words: Spiritual disciplines, experiential learning, VUMA, Quiet Time (QT).

1. INTRODUCTION

The desire of any society is to bring up morally upright youth because they represent future survival and continuity of the society. Late teenage and early adulthood is a key transitional moment where the youth find themselves between two stages whereby, without strong support systems they can find their own coping mechanisms (Fay, 2015, p. 6). Research shows that spirituality among youth results in moral development, identity formation, well-being, and thriving (Benson & Roehlkepartain, 2008) in (Sibthorp et al., 2017, p. 522). After high school, Kenyan youth are often left unguided to find their bearing into life. A few churches in Kenya have deliberately integrated a discipleship program into this pre-college transition season in order to equip youth with tools that can enable them to adjust and excel in college. The VUMA program was initiated by the Nairobi Chapel church in 2012 with this goal in mind. VUMA is an acronym that stands for vibrant in purpose, unveiled in potential, mature in

person and anchored in principle(Chapel, 2015). The focus of this qualitative study was to examine the role of the program in instilling spiritual disciplines of prayer and Bible Study through the practice of Quiet Time and group Bible study.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical framework: Experiential Education

Kurt Hahn and John Dewey are credited as the fathers of experiential education. Theirs was an attempt to extend knowledge and learning beyond the theoretical, abstract and cognitive into the subjective perception of the world; i.e. learning by doing(Roberts, 2012, p. 18). On this premise, there have been developments that show that there is no ‘universal’ knowledge and that the perception of persons from different contexts can determine their understanding of a matter. The most commonly used model that emerged from the works of Dewey is Kolb’s experiential learning cycle that can be explained by examining the process by which cognitive knowledge leads to transformative experience. Kolb outlines the processes, each relating to the cycle: apprehension and comprehension (concrete experience and abstract conceptualization), intention (reflective observation) and transformation (active experimentation) and which the learner can join at any stage (Kolb, 2014, p. 71).

While applying experiential learning to youth work, Orb observes that impactful experiential learning entails three components: personal involvement, meaning attached to the experience and freedom in determining objectives (Ord, 2016, p. 55). Concerning Kolb’s cycle and youth work, Ord argues proposes further interrogation of Dewey’s proposition which entails real life experiences beginning with the youth’s immediate perception and recognizing that learning requires support structures including parents and teachers (Ord, 2016, p. 64). Wilderness-based Positive Youth Development (PYD) programs characterized by internal and external assets also enhance resilience among at-risk- youth. Studies show that internal assets include ‘a youth’s personal commitments, values and competencies’ while external assets mainly involve ‘support systems’ in a youth’s context (Norton and Watt, 2014, pp. 336–337). From these studies, it is apparent that experiential learning occurs where there is cooperation between the facilitator and the learner. In relation to the current study, the cooperation between the counselor and the participant (Vumite) is critical for any transformation.

Biblically, Mark 3:14 explains Jesus’ model of training the disciples: they were to spend time observing and obeying Him so that in the future, they would duplicate what they learnt. He sent the 72 into Samaria to experience the real world (Luke 10:1-17) (Nehrbass and Rhoades, 2021). Willard (1998) in Vosexplains howJesus called his disciples to become rather than do; spiritual disciplines ‘put us in a position where we can receive His grace more readily’ which ultimately leads to transformation (Vos, 2009, pp. 2–3).

2.2 Empirical Literature

The VUMA program was residential in nature and had several youth camps features. Due to limited literature on post high school residential mentorship programs, studies on residential youth camps were significant in laying an empirical foundation to the study. Residential camps are ‘immersive’, providing counselors with ample time to impart positive values on the

campers. Furthermore, camps have been associated with several benefits during and after camp: affective, cognitive, behavioral, physical, social and spiritual. This is facilitated by certain features including settings, structures and programs and activities which provide a basis for youth development (Garst et al., 2011, p. 76).

Regarding Christian camps, Sorenson acknowledges that even though they have been long in existence, very little research has been done on their ‘unique characteristics and outcomes’ (Sorenson, 2018, p. 188). A study done on a week-long summer camp revealed five characteristics: relational, safe space, participatory, unplugged from home and faith-centered. The uniqueness of the Christian camp is on its’ faith-focus, which may not intentionally appear in other camps. Eventually, camp experience should not be seen as an isolated life-changing event, but as part of the larger scheme of all life realities (Sorenson, 2018, p. 197). Heinrich also points out that Christian camps provide ‘an atmosphere conducive for worship, a place for encounters with God, teachable moments, and the possibility for spiritual rejuvenation’ (Heinrich, 2012, p. 6).

A study on ‘Doing Life’, a pre-college program focused on helping young people maintain their Christian faith in college with youth exhibited three main components of ‘Doing Life’ with young people. These include: being “Christ-centered”, “experiential” and “seeking to foster integrity, faith in God and life in community with others” (Marcus, 2016, p. 3). Pre-college preparation in matters of faith was found to be very important to youth.

From the foregoing, studies point to the fact that learning by doing enables youth to acquire spiritual practices that can be foundational for coping with college and life pursuits. We can therefore apply Kolb’s experiential learning theory in attempting to understand how the spiritual disciplines of solitude, prayer and Bible study were passed down to the youth at the VUMA camp.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study was qualitative in nature and interviews were the basic tool for data collection. Being a doctoral study, the necessary research ethical process was duly followed. Data collection happened between from January to March 2019; about six to nine months after the program. From an initial contact list of 40 out of 112, 75% were reachable, available, and willing to participate in the study. The data was recorded in MP3 and cellphone modes and consequently transcribed into text. Using the NVIVO software, the data was analyzed by coding into emerging themes; thus, forming the basis for discussion of the findings and recommendations.

4. FINDINGS

The study focused on the role of the VUMA transitional program in inculcating spiritual disciplines of solitude, prayer and Bible study among participants. Faith-based camping enables participants to focus on essential practices of their faith. There were three main spiritual disciplines that all respondents identified with: Quiet Time, prayer and Bible study. Participation was mandatory to all Vumites. First they were taught about these disciplines, then, they were expected to practice them at scheduled times each day; thus learning by doing.

4.1 Quiet Time- The Posture of Solitude

Solitude and silence are common practices in pilgrimages, retreats and camps that often go hand in hand. It takes a combination of venue, activity and mode. Studies point out that solitude requires both a physical and mental posture; involving strength and will to observe it regularly especially in a tech-noisy world (Senechal, 2011, p. 24). In the mode of silence and solitude, the VUMA program venue was conducive for the Quiet Time (QT) activity.

Quiet Time (QT) was an essential part of the VUMA program. Every morning, the Vumites would take time between 6.00am and 7.00am to spend time alone in reading some portion of the Bible, prayer and meditating silently while listening to God. Most respondents reported that this was a new experience that called for sacrifice and discipline which at first was not easy but they adapted to it over time. Some of the benefits of QT included meeting God at personal level, change in character and cultivating a personal culture of praying and studying the Bible. Counselor M2 explains that the role of the QT experience was to introduce the Vumites to learning to hear God for themselves through time alone in the word, prayer and meditation.

R13 observes that “There was a lot of quietness coz there were trees all over so you just had a peaceful Bible time with yourself in a venue somewhere around the field. So, it was a peaceful environment for that”. Vumites were free to select an appropriate location for their QT; they had a choice between indoors in the hall or outdoors in the field, or under a tree.

Counselor M1 observes that youth hardly practiced spiritual disciplines e.g. QT, reading the Bible, and fasting. He attributes this to lack of exposure as this is hardly taught in the church. Many Vumites therefore found the discipline of waking up early and spending a full hour on QT quite challenging. With time they found deeper motivation for maintaining the practice. They were also encouraged by the transformations that were taking place in their lives. For example, M6 overcame the habit of using vulgar language during his time at VUMA while R23 enjoyed communion with God and His Spirit. By the time VUMA was over, some were already sharing what they had been hearing from God. M2 narrates,

Someone would just approach you...God told me this... in my quiet time. And you'd get even to share with others like the new believers', because I was taking them through the new believers. You'd hear them saying that when I was going through this scripture, God told me this and that and you'd see that the spirit was working within.

The more the Vumites understood the meaning and value of QT, the more time they wanted to spend doing it. R5 could not even have enough of it, and explains,

I believe that QT should be a time between you and God and to read the Bible and to grow up spiritually. That's what happened to me. I found myself just reading the Bible at odd times. I didn't just read at QT coz QT helped me understand the Bible the way I should.

There were dissenting voices with regard to the nature of QT at VUMA. From the counselors, M5 reports that they had to enforce it during the scheduled time which he found to be counterproductive as only 30% of them grasped it altogether. In response, a few Vumites would

find other ways of studying the Bible together creatively and naturally, not under compulsion. However, some would either do a partial QT or none at all. Instead, they slept or engaged themselves in other ways e.g., doing morning kitchen chores in order to avoid punishment. This was confirmed by a few respondents, e.g., R1, R14 and R28. To mitigate this problem, R1 proposes 30 minutes, then extending to be optional; with freedom to choose the timing apart from morning hours. It should not sound 'Like we are forcing people into a relationship with God'. This may pose a challenge in camp programming because activities are generally communal following a prescribed timetable. M5 further suggests that QT should be taught like other disciplines like fasting and tithing then leave people free to apply it on their own. From the perspective of experiential learning, teaching without opportunity to practice would dilute the value of the experience because it breaks the cycle, leaving it at the cognitive stage.

Previous studies show that silence, even without solitude and especially in the outdoors, links one to nature, and enables one to think and be non-social (DavidssonBremborg, 2013, p. 554). This study confirms these findings, while acknowledging that it is not a welcome discipline to some. Only one Respondent R3 reported to have toned down from being a 'hype' person to being more reflective; thus, becoming non-social. Most respondents learnt to connect with God and others in a better way.

4.2 Prayer- Simple, Direct, Conversation with God

The youth need to learn to connect with God at their personal level. In the spirit of experiential learning, 'Prayer is something we learn by praying' (Vos, 2009, p. 6). Prayer should be simple and contextual as a way of communing with God; as a friend and Father. Many Vumites experienced prayer in a new way during the program especially during QT; in fact, many used the words QT and prayer interchangeably. Regular QT grew into a discipline to be done without supervision with many benefits to different individuals including closeness to God and preparation for Christian ministry. Respondents R9, R10, R15, R18, R19, R23, R25 and R26 and Counselor M3 reported how QT facilitated and enhanced the quality of their prayer time which led to spiritual growth. First, it taught them how to make time for God in prayer and served as a time to openly commune with God in personal prayer and intercession for others. Secondly, it set the mood for those who would be preaching during outreach to neighboring schools. Thirdly, it inculcated a culture of daily prayer among them that continued beyond VUMA. Being new to QT, R18 adapted to the exercise and used the notion that a habit is formed after 21 days of daily repetition. He formed the habit that opened a new chapter in his life where he had a forum for daily connection with God daily rather than waiting for Sunday or depending on the pastor to teach the word or pray.

QT helped the Vumites to connect with God. For example, it enabled new converts to develop a new perception about God. Learning to talk to God as a friend in confidence and in very simple and direct language happened through the daily practice of QT. R13 shares that

I think it was how I relate to God on a personal level. Like there's no formula. I started a habit of talking to God like how I discuss with my friend telling her or him about my issues instead of always having this formula of prayer and thinking

that I should speak big words and I just learnt that God would relate to me as me so I started talking to him the way I talk to my friend.

Through QT, the Vumites developed a sense of intimacy with God. R15 points out that she learnt a new way to pray ‘There is a way you can pray, and you just feel like you've seen God. And all that started in VUMA.’ R28 explains that VUMA was a place to learn how to pray beyond personal needs. ‘It taught us how to pray. You know at times you just pray for your basic things. Now in VUMA you learn how to pray more.’ According to R24,

Like when I was born again, but I was not close to God; so, prayer would come when there was in the intakes of trouble. Prayer was like, I don't want pray, it's wasting time...But when I came to VUMA, I saw the other part of prayer. People prayed in VUMA until they touched my heart. In VUMA, I was very touched to see young people like me praying seriously, that what made me be moved again then, I started praying spiritually meaningfully.

QT enabled the Vumites to reconnect with their inner person. QT provided a forum for self-examination and taking stock of one's direction in life. R13 points out that ‘During the QT, we had a lot of time to think about yourself and the decisions you make; it gave time to analyze yourself- personality.’ R14 had a similar experience ‘It helped me in meditating, in thinking about how life is; how should I do things in many forms? I can try to be alone and meditate on the creation of God, on anything out there.’ For R8, QT was hard at first especially due to being forced; but seeing everyone quiet and focusing on God, he was motivated to also do the same to avoid looking out of place. Ultimately, he mastered the discipline and concluded that ‘in the meditation, time alone makes you know who you are, time alone makes you know who God is, time alone makes you know what keeps you. So altogether, I know who I am, I know what keeps me, I know who God is.’

QT provided a lens for connection with life through a new perception. This happened through seeking Biblical answers to daily situations by linking the devotion with real life experiences. Respondent R3 reports that he toned down to a more devotional life. He explains, ‘VUMA changed my way of thinking about relating with God that is the spiritual part, the act of worship, prayer and daily devotions.’ R7's motivation to maintain QT comes from the need to begin with God. He says QT is a time ‘I see God before I meet people’. During his QT he ensures that every morning he seeks answers for his current situations in Scripture, then prays over the matter. Since VUMA, he has found it necessary to have a specific location to meet God e.g., his room at home and at campus where there is no disturbance. He also shares what he has learnt with others.

A culture of prayer can only be cultivated if the person understands the various dimensions of prayer. Vumites learnt that prayer includes several aspects: R24 explains that they were taught about ‘How you adore God. You give thanks, you confess your sins and then you pray for others as you pray for yourself.’ These are critical aspects of prayer and should be done willingly because God knows what is in the heart. They also learnt that God is accessible anytime anywhere. R16 reports that any time of the day is suitable for prayer, as long there is

seriousness, intentionality and quality of reflection to it; coupled with Scripture that will inspire them.

On the other hand, a culture of prayer grows when the believer actually learns how to pray. With encouragement from her mentor, Respondent R29 learnt to be open with God about her situations: feelings and pain at a very personal level because God provides the victory. She transitioned from ordinary prayer to personal, specific prayer. R29 says the foundation gained at VUMA has enabled her to pray and find answers through challenging situations that appeared impossible and beyond comprehension. R24 also learnt that anger issues can be handled not only by walking away, but also by praying about the situation.

With the goal of QT being to build a culture of prayer among the Vumites, a few respondents reported that they still maintained QT after the program. They learnt to dedicate a daily moment with God at an appropriate hour. R6, R7 and R23 reported that despite their busy school schedules, they were still able to create time in the day for communion with God. R6 explains that 'I must always have time with my Bible, with my God, even if it's just 30 minutes to just talk with my God. It's something basically that was a foundation from VUMA that is helping me right now'. On the other hand, there are quite a number of Vumites who admitted that it has been difficult. However, R1, R2, R13, R21 and R25 reported having difficulties in maintaining regular QT owing to distractions from friends, busy schedules as well as fatigue or laziness.

Learning how to pray ignited a desire to pray and to lead others in prayer after the program. After learning how to pray, some Vumites carried the practice to their homes. R3 went ahead and not only did personal devotions, but also led family devotions first thing in the morning and evening before bedtime. This impacted the family by bringing a sense of unity and closeness to God. Beyond VUMA, some Vumites have maintained their prayer life. R20 narrates that he has time for prayer within his busy schedule.

4.3 Bible study- reading the Bible for myself

During VUMA, participants interacted with the Bible in several ways, first through QT, then devotion, teachings on Biblical books and Bible study using a book entitled 3D. The devotions were personal; devotion was led by the counselors, teachings had facilitators; Studying 3D happened in groups of six to seven in the afternoon.

The intention of the VUMA program was to equip young people with skills for understanding the word and to instill a desire for personal study of the Bible which would inform their faith and practice as Christians. According to R30, they were taught Biblical hermeneutic skills like examining the context of the verse in order to make correct interpretation. Bible study also intended to equip youth with factual scriptural evidence which is very important in preparing them to face a religiously pluralistic world where they might be called upon to defend their faith.

The 3D stood for: Daily devotion, doctrine and decision.

1. *Daily devotion* means that each and every morning you create your time at least one hour so that in a silent and quiet environment you commune alone with God.
2. *Doctrine*, Vumites are to adhere to the teachings they received during the program once they go back to society.
3. *Decision*. Life is all about decisions. You are to make decisions that will not lead to future regret.

Youth resonate with the Bible when it is simple, relevant and practical; devoid of theological jargon. The 3D approach aimed to achieve this goal as R9 explains that, 'You know these things that are very crazy like a big clause, a big cross, if you are a teenager, we don't like that.' In essence, 3D has a 3-part focus: the real-life story, the Biblical story and the conclusion. The applications were quite specific. R7 states, 'Most of the time it questions you directly and you have to answer on the basis of what has been discussed. That book is like a person guiding you in life but it is in the form of written word.' R9 further explains that 3D gave her a desire to study Scripture. 'I like the way it was structured and, in every topic, it had Biblical references. I think for me it stood out in a very different way...It made me want to know Scripture'.

3D was quite relevant to the needs of the youth and ignited a hunger to know the word of God, note it down and even counter-checking what people preach in church from the Bible. For R9, this is something he did not do previously. He learnt to read the Bible for himself as well, without depending too much on sermons. This also built a greater desire and thirst for the Word among the Vumites. Some respondents reported that before VUMA, they only did Bible reading when they were free. For example, R22 explains that 'I used to read the Bible just when I was free, or just when I wanted to recap on something. But at Vuma we used to do QT each morning, so it just brought me back in again.'

Another skill that was imparted was the macro and micro view of the Bible. Bible survey provided the big picture; Bible exposition gave the smaller picture of focusing on a book of the Bible at a time. These were covered in plenary sessions. For R7 and R24 Bible survey at VUMA provided an overview of the Bible story which made it easy, clear and meaningful. Regarding the big picture of the Bible, R19 points out:

First thing is that the Bible is a story from beginning to end. It's not different stories at different places; they're all connected into one story. And that's the story of salvation. And another thing I learnt is that instant gratification is not necessary, so you don't always have to get what you want now, you can wait for it.

Covering a chapter per day, R17 reports that they concentrated on the epistles: Ephesians, Colossians, Philippians, Titus and Timothy. As a result, R16 got inspired through the study of the Book of Esther, with special interest in the two Queens Esther and Vashti. R15 also reported having managed to complete some books in the Bible, a culture she developed at VUMA. 'I'm finishing books. I'm like, wow, I never finish books in reading a Bible... but now I'm finishing a book and I think I got that culture from VUMA'. Not everyone understood Biblical teachings

presented at VUMA until much later. R29 did not realize exactly what they were being taught at VUMA until she got to do her campus studies where they are taught doctrine and Bible survey.

Apart from skill acquisition, the content covered during the personal and group Bible sessions, many respondents found it beneficial in their devotion to God. Personal time in hearing from God through His Word enables the believer to derive meaning that is personally relevant and applicable to daily life and to develop a closer relationship with God. R2, R21 and R15 got better understanding of God's word which informed their prayer lives and consequently their walk with God. Respondent R11 considered QT to be his best moment at VUMA because he benefitted more from reading the Bible directly than having it read for him. Using the 3D and practicing prayer, he reports, 'I think I came closer to God and got deeper in prayer because when reading silently and then you have the Bible and then you have such a guide, it was really an excellent moment; I wish there could be an extra time for that.'

4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

From the above findings the study indicates that it is possible to inculcate spiritual disciplines among youth through a residential transitional program. Such programs afford the counselors and youth ample time to learn and practice the disciplines repeatedly until they become a habit. In a busy and noisy world, solitude becomes rare and must be sought intentionally. Bible study and prayer provide content for the posture of solitude and eventually influence behavior and character of the Christian. On the other hand, it is apparent that many youths were not able to keep up beyond the program. This calls for follow up mechanisms that can enable youth to join fellowships at home and in college that can provide the needful support. Church youth workers need to link up with college chaplains and campus youth ministries to encourage youth to maintain spiritual disciplines which eventually transform character and make them strong in faith. Nonetheless, more studies need to be done to probe the reasons for non-adherence to Christian disciplines of solitude, Bible study and prayer among many participants after the intense three-month long program; as well as factors that enhance adherence.

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