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Personal Reflections on Christian Endeavor

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Outside of my family, Christian Endeavor was the most significant source of Christian formation for me during my junior and senior high school years. It provided a setting in which I formed close friendships, encountered other Christian traditions and communities, and learned leadership and service skills. In understated but important ways, it also helped to bond its young members to Christ and to their local church.

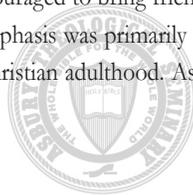
During my years in CE, I knew little about its origins or its important, even seminal, place in the development of youth ministry. I did know that it was where I wanted to be on Sunday nights. Combining discipleship, service projects, fun and fellowship, the weekly gatherings were a central part of my life.

In fact, no matter where my family was on Sunday afternoon, we were almost always back at church in time for the CE meeting on Sunday night. For my parents, who had four children, this meant a commitment of about twelve years to having their Sunday evenings shaped by Christian Endeavor. For my mother especially, it also meant a great deal of support work—running the annual CE dinner for two hundred people, arranging activities, and baking countless cakes for the weekly refreshments.

Our sponsors were a wonderful couple, Mr. and Mrs. Marshall. He was a New York City police officer; she had been in the WAVES during WWII, and together they were raising three children. They were so beloved that my siblings and I named our turtles after them. Embodying a generous combination of guidance and good humor, they consistently encouraged CE members toward faithfulness, creativity, and leadership.

The church within which I grew up was what we would now call “mainline,” with an independent congregational polity and a theologically liberal pastor. Christian Endeavor provided my most consistent exposure to the importance of the Lordship of Christ. The pledge we repeated regularly, “Trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ for strength, I promise Him that I will strive to do whatever He would like to have me do...” reminded us of the centrality of Christ to our lives. The motto of CE, “For Christ and the Church,” undergirded our group identity. Romans 12:1-2 were our foundational guiding verses.

I do not remember much in the way of focused evangelistic outreach, though we were certainly encouraged to bring friends from school to CE meetings and special activities. The emphasis was primarily on developing the youth of the church toward responsible Christian adulthood. As I look back on those six years, several features stand out.



1. CE provided my first significant exposure to the wider Christian world. Because it was an international, interdenominational, and interracial movement, activities beyond our local group brought us into contact with Christians from varied backgrounds. Attendance at city, state, national, and international gatherings gave me a vision for a much bigger and more diverse Christian community than what I was exposed to in the local church. The larger gatherings also tended to be more explicitly evangelistic, biblical, and response-oriented than our weekly meetings.
2. CE gave me major opportunities to develop leadership skills and a love for serving in the church. Members were expected to take turns leading the meetings, and officers were given significant responsibilities. Our CE group was very involved in the local church and we were expected to take part in its activities, leadership, and worship services.
3. CE provided important experiences of friendship among members and with adult leaders. Our CE sponsors were the first adults beyond my family with whom I developed close relationships. They were mentors before we used that language. Putting on plays, roller-skating, beach parties, helping with church activities, and sharing meals were an important part of growing up. It was nothing very flashy, but the activities often also served to connect us with other adults in the church.

I graduated from high school and from Christian Endeavor just as the American youth movement exploded in various directions. Youth ministry and Christian outreach soon developed in forms quite different from CE. But the steady, church-based nurture and encouragement from Christian Endeavor provided a strong foundation as I negotiated college years that were extremely volatile. CE provided a background and a basis from which I was able to move among very diverse Christian worlds—mainline, evangelical, and charismatic—with both an appreciative and discerning approach.

When I learned that Asbury Theological Seminary had acquired the archives of Christian Endeavor, I felt as if two very separate but crucial parts of my Christian journey were unexpectedly but happily being connected. I praise God that both have challenged me over and over again to faithfully “serve Christ and the Church.”