

# TELLING THE STORY OF SERVICE: THE REV. DR. JOHN A. YOUNG

By Dr. Rebecca Blair '80 & Dr. Michael G. Cartwright



## *Chaplain John A. Young*

Service is a vocation. God calls us to activities that help us best to realize who we are. This view of service guides the ministry of the Rev. Dr. John A. Young, former chaplain of the University of Indianapolis (1984-2001) and currently serving as a pastor in the North Indiana Conference of the United Methodist Church. For Young, preaching, service, and storytelling become synonymous because each represents a kind of narrative identity. This link between the spiritual nature of religious faith and the concrete impulses of personal experience crucially embodies the essential aspects of community found in Jesus' teachings. Indeed, Jesus teaches in parables, in part, to model the process of narrating the self into being through care and service for one's fellow humans. Discerning a vocation, then, implies piecing together a story of oneself that is meaningful, one which makes sense in relation to the world.

Young observes that this view of vocation has evolved for him over the course of his life. Growing up the youngest of four children in Frankfort, IN, Young's parents involved the family extensively in volunteer community service. Young's father, a maintenance mechanic,



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and his mother, a homemaker and Girl Scout camp director, and Migrant Day Care director instilled in their children the ethos of service as a hands-on enterprise through activities in the United Methodist Church as well as through school and community groups. This notion prompted Young to prepare for college with the intent to be an agent of social change, a mindset that he describes as “a very ‘60s impulse.”

Young attended New College in Sarasota, FL for one year, majoring in psychology and social work in an effort to equip himself to work on social justice issues. While there he helped bus students to an alternative school supporting the boycott of the city schools in protest of the plans to move a school building out of the black community and put it on the playground of a school in the white community so that white students would not need to be bussed into the black neighborhood. He transferred to Shaw University, in Raleigh, NC. At that institution, which is one of the historic black colleges, Young was one of two Euro-Americans living on campus at that time.

There also, Young found a home in theatre, developing an interest that began in high school, constructing sets and reflecting upon the connections between the craft of theatre and a vocation in service to others. “Theatre has been a continuing thread for me,” Young comments. “As an agent of change, I realized that seeing myself as one who acts in a specific context was important in achieving worthwhile goals.” Young’s vocation then took another turn as he pursued an interest in urban studies even as he pondered his feeling of a call to ministry. After obtaining his undergraduate degree, Young attended Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis, focusing on theatre as an instrument of faith inquiry and expression.

In February, 1984, Young, who was then serving as a local church pastor, received an unexpected appointment from Bishop Ralph Alton to serve as the Chaplain at Indiana Central University. He continued to serve in this position until 2001, when he assumed the pastorate at St. Matthew United Methodist Church in Anderson, IN. Preparing for his arrival on the campus of (what was then called) Indiana Central University, Young remembers, he thought about how his vocation as an agent of social change, a vocation that was becoming increasingly clear, might be expressed through his new ministerial role. Amazingly enough, students were already open to and involved in service projects when Young took up his work on campus. Students who had served as summer staff with the Appalachia Service Project, had organized a mission trip to work there which evolved into a traditional service project for Young. Every Christmas break, Young would travel with a group of students to one of the year-round sites in Jonesville, VA, Chavies, KY, or Brenton, WV to work on home repair projects for the local populace. As it turned out, he recalls, rather than needing to consider actively how his vocation might be expressed on campus, he found himself swept up in an exciting, active narrative of service. “The Bishop recognized a good fit,” Young declared.

In the thirteenth chapter of John’s Gospel, we read the story of Jesus’ washing the disciples’ feet. Young understands this passage as a paradigm for ministry

and service within an educational context because of the four-part process contained in this text. First, there is an initial inquiry by Simon Peter, “Lord, are you going to wash my feet?” This question not only represents an openness to experience God but also a movement towards humility. Young considers both of these to be essential for service. Secondly, there is a generative sense of identity as the disciples realize the nature of their roles as servants of Christ. Thirdly, they feel an overwhelming sense of gratitude for being called into service, no matter their estimations of their own worthiness. Lastly, they respond to the teaching model demonstrated before them as they move out into the world in service. The significance of this process, as Young understands it, lies within the opportunity to be transformed by and to transform the context in which they serve.

In practice, this orientation points toward mission, and Young responded to the student desire for service activities by conceiving of Fountain Square, the identifiable neighborhood closest to campus, as a mission field. In tandem with Tim Maher, he built communication networks to identify opportunities for service, networks which generated working partnerships between Fountain Square residents and members of the University community. These initial recognitions of the literal need to serve our neighbors would culminate in 2001 with the dedication of the Wheeler Arts Center, established in partnership with Southeast Neighborhood Development. The Center currently houses loft apartments for low-income tenants, classrooms, art and music rooms, a children’s theater, and the Writers’ Center of Indiana in addition to the office of Tim Maher, Professor of Sociology and the visionary behind this project. Social service agencies, members of the neighborhood development group, and schools all join together in the same space to address social and cultural issues, learn about each other and to improve the lives of neighborhood residents.

As the impetus for such service, one that would eventually be institutionalized as service-learning, took shape, Young looked to the work of his predecessor, the Rev. David V. W. Owen, and history professor Dr. Charles Guthrie for direction and



inspiration. Always at the center of the work lay Young's desire to construct a model of how to serve for the students of this church-related university. As his colleague, Charles Guthrie, notes, "if one could itemize the transformed lives just from the Appalachia Service Project, the results would be enormous." Young and Guthrie have jointly led a number of such projects in Africa and South America, the latest in 2005 to Totonicopan in Guatemala building homes with the Global Village program of Habitat for Humanity International.

In these ways, Young views service as writing the narrative of his life, the lives of those he serves, and the lives of those for whom he models service. He cites the lives of two exemplars, the French Catholic theology Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and Albert Schweitzer as two of the persons who have inspired his own commitment to service. Schweitzer, who was a brilliant historian of early Christianity as well as a musician, also is remembered for having dedicated himself to serving native populations in the heart of Africa. Schweitzer once addressed a group of Christian letters with the following prediction: "I don't know what your destiny will be, but one thing I know: the only ones among you who will be really happy are those who have sought and found how to serve."

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, born in Auvergne, France in 1881, stands among the very few leaders of thought in this century to integrate pure scientific research with a religious vocation. At an early point in his career, this paleontologist and Jesuit priest, an agent of social change like Young, made it his personal mission to reinterpret the most basic Christian doctrines from the perspectives of science and, at the same time, to interrogate science from the perspectives of faith. He did so by ignoring many of the intellectual and theological barriers that had been erected between science and religion in the past one hundred years. Like Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Society of Jesus—the Catholic religious order in which Teilhard de Chardin was a priest—this brilliant scientist and theologian was animated by a vision of the Triune God at work in the world redeeming and transforming all things. As de Chardin affirms, "By means

of all created things, without exception, the divine assails us, penetrates us and moulds us." This perspective also shaped the way Teilhard de Chardin thought about the way human beings participate in social change. As he explained, the point is not to "try to do remarkable things, but rather to do ordinary things with the conviction of their immense value" for God's purposes in the world.

Since leaving the University of Indianapolis, John Young has continued to live a life of service in the context of parish ministry in Anderson, Indiana. In a recent sermon that he preached before the congregation of St. Matthew's UMC, John Young told the story of Helen Fehr (1901-2001), another person who has inspired his own service ethic. As a young girl growing up in Indiana, Ms. Fehr attended Manual High School and was raised in the German Methodist Church. She dedicated her life to Christian service at the age of sixteen. At that point, Helen Fehr adopted a life-long motto: "A need known, with an ability to meet that need, is a call." She graduated Phi Beta Kappa from DePauw University before going to Indiana in 1927 where she spent the next twenty-eight years of her life teaching villagers to read and write as a Methodist missionary. By the time Helen Fehr left India in 1955, she had built educational programs and a library in India. In the late 1950s, she went to Pakistan where she developed a highly successful literacy program.

In 1971, Ms. Fehr returned to her birthplace in Fountain Square—a Southside neighborhood near UIndy where she had planned to retire—after serving as a missionary in India and Pakistan for almost four decades. She found the place much changed from the way she remembered her childhood, and she began working with her neighbors to reclaim the abandoned houses of the neighborhood. Her persistence resulted in the creation of a housing project called "Church and Community," which later evolved into a social service agency now known as Southeast Neighborhood Development, Inc. (SEND). Young marveled at this remarkable woman who even in retirement was responding to human need and affirming God's call to service.

For John Young, service is essentially



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a matter of vocation—it is a calling that is enriched by the stories of how people like Albert Schweitzer, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, and Helen Fehr have given themselves in various ways, without being unduly self-conscious, simply responding to the needs around them. Service enriched by education pens our life narrative. As various UIndy students and alumni have attested over the years, the story of John Young's life of service has also had significant effects on their lives. For that reason, we have chosen to give the "last words" about John Young in this "profile" of his life of service to a faculty colleague with whom he collaborated in several international travel/study service projects and a set of alumni perspectives from different periods of Young's chaplaincy.

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## AWARDS AND RECOGNITIONS:

2001: The Lantz Medallion for Christian Vocations was given to John Young in recognition of the many ways that he exemplified "Education for Service" in the context of his ministry at the University of Indianapolis and beyond.

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## ALUMNI REFLECTIONS



### JENNY FOGO'S REFLECTION ON JOHN YOUNG AS EXEMPLAR OF "EDUCATION FOR SERVICE"

John Young truly lived out the University of Indianapolis's motto, "Education for Service". John came to the University as the chaplain when I was a junior at UINDY. His calm, gentle, and strong spirit provided guidance to many students as they wrestled with life. John's door was always open. John not only opened his office to all students, but also his home. He housed many students for long or short-term stays when they had no other place to stay.

John was instrumental in establishing service opportunities for students. He organized and led students to participate in annual service trips with The Appalachia Service Project, where students worked in Appalachian communities to repair homes, making people's homes warmer, safer, and drier. John also led students on service projects overseas to help people in need.

As a chaplain, he not only exemplified education for service by participating in service, but I believe his compassion for others and his desire to make a difference in the world, changed the lives of many students, instilling in them the same drive to see all of humanity as equal and deserving of basic rights.

All of this was before the WWJD craze, however, I think that John has always lived his life by asking himself "What Would Jesus Do?" In addition, he inspired students to do so as well, making "Education for Service" come to life over and over again.

—Jennifer Fogo '85, '87, Assistant Professor of Occupational Therapy







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### CHUCK PORTER'S REFLECTION ABOUT JOHN YOUNG

Why does John Young remain such a great influence on me these many years after my college experience? I've not seen John in far too many years, but he makes frequent appearances in my good memories.

I've puzzled over a term to describe John: hero, mentor, pastor, shepherd, disciple, among others; but those words fall short of describing John adequately. I believe that John played a key role in introducing me to serving others. But, dissecting John's character was not leading me to a satisfying defining concept about him. Instead, I turned to a reflection about myself... who I am, who I was in my college years when I spent significant time around John, and why John has remained influential to me in my life today. One epithet came forward in my mind, and it has resonated with me. **KINDRED SPIRIT.** That's who John was (and is) to me.

To be in the company of John Young is to experience an authentic call to service. As a kindred spirit in service, John taught me that it is pretentious to define the who's, what's, and why's of a servant situation prior to coming to know those who you hope to serve.

Quietly, but, I think, intentionally, John exemplifies an important perspective in service that isn't always recognized...ser-

vice begins by nurturing a relationship with someone. Without investing some of our servant energies into coming to know those being served, a communion experience is being missed. John Young, a kindred spirit to all who are called to serve, has realized that this communion experience is crucial to establishing common ground between the servant and the served. In so doing, the boundaries become blurry and we're able to realize that by serving we are also being served. Thank you, John.

—Chuck Porter '93, *Unadilla, Nebraska*

### SHALIMAR HOLDERLY'S REFLECTION: JOHN YOUNG AS EXEMPLAR OF "EDUCATION FOR SERVICE"

The first thing I recall as I look back to the time I spent with John Young as a college student are his eyes. There was something deep-seeing about his eyes, as though they could see through skin and false pretension into the very heart of a person. John saw the world differently than I saw the world; John saw me differently than I saw myself, and in all those hours I spent talking with him in his office what I wanted more than anything was for John to teach me to see.

John did teach me to see, but he didn't teach me with his words. He taught me with his life and his quiet commitment to self-giving service that spoke louder than

anything he ever actually said. John was a servant; and John was a servant, not now and then, but every day of his life. Whether it was taking time out of his busy schedule to talk with a distressed student in his office, leading teams of young people in mission experiences around the globe, loaning his car to a someone in need of transportation, or simply stooping to pick up an empty pop can laying beside the road, John was always looking to the needs of the world around him and how he could best meet those needs.

I wanted John to teach me how to see, and John taught me to see by showing me how to look beyond myself. John opened my eyes to the needs of the world around me; and John taught me through his own example how to serve Christ in the midst of that need. Christ said, "I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you" (John 13:15). As best he knew how, John followed the example of Christ and as best I know how, I follow the example of Christ through the self-giving service that John exemplified before me.

—Rev. Shalimar W. Holderly '01

## A TRIBUTE TO JOHN YOUNG

by Charlie Guthrie



I recall a construction project to Sierra Leone a few years ago where John stood up before a gathering of folk that had come to welcome us to their community. After a short greeting, he got right to the point: “We have come to you not just to build a church, but more importantly to reach out and build bridges between your community and ours.” Smiles and nodding heads made it clear that he had touched the audience in exactly the right place. Although they were happy to have us come, it was not just for the physical labor. They were capable of building the church without us. John knew that service is less about what you do than who you are and how you think about and relate to others.

Concrete images of John pour out of my memory: carrying heavy block for construction one at a time up a very steep mountainside in Guatemala to a home site on top; leading an end-of-day reflec-

tion with a group of students on a different project in Central America, drawing tears and hope from a group I was almost ready to give up on; sitting with a student in crisis, long after working hours. And so it has been for the twenty-five years that I have known John, a deep reservoir of images of service.

To the individuals he has touched, John is a continual presence. Chuck Porter (above) speaks for many when he says: “I’ve not seen John in far too many years, but he makes frequent appearances in my good memories.” Amen. His positive influence has woven itself seamlessly into so many individual and community narratives that continue to unfold at this institution and beyond.

But I am not only an observer of John’s service; I am also a fortunate recipient. John has frequently balanced my impatience with patience, and my anger with the spirit of forgiveness. For many

of us who struggle to find relevance and meaning in the Christian faith, John has been a powerful reminder of the possibility of that meaning. He has helped me to shift my focus and energies from “life as a race” to “life as a journey,” enabling me more easily to incorporate service into my life as a teacher. His endless reserve of jokes and stories and his easy sense of humor have rained down upon dark moments. I have been a willing and grateful Student to his Teacher.

Searching for something that would capture and celebrate John’s contribution to service at this university and beyond, I keep defaulting to something very simple: John listens, and then he reaches out and holds your hand when you need it most. He builds bridges; between people, between cultures. In my own journey, John is still listening, and still holding my hand.

## PHOTOGRAPHS

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- A Rev. Dr. John A. Young and Dr. Charlie Guthrie with cone of the volcano Pacaya in background following Habitat for Humanity Global Village Work Team in Tonicapan, Guatemala in 2005.
- B Sierra Leone photograph, students with people from Sierra Leone village of Kissy, Spring 1986, photograph belongs to Charlie Guthrie, used with permission.
- C Sierra Leone photograph, construction at Bo Centenary School, members of work group Guthrie bending down, John Young with his back to the camera, Spring 1989, photograph belongs to Charlie Guthrie, used with permission.
- D Habitat for Humanity Project, Sichuani, Peru (1996), photograph belongs to John Young, used with permission.
- E Habitat for Humanity gathering to exchange thanks (Guatemala, 2003), photograph belongs to John Young, used with permission.
- F John Young, Charlie Guthrie, Fred Hill, Kathie Hancock, and school officials at Bo Centenary Secondary School, Bo, Sierra Leone, 1989.
- G Kathie Hancock and Darrin Long placing last block to complete the walls of the science building at Bo Centenary Secondary School, Bo, Sierra Leone, 1989.
- H Habitat for Humanity Gathering of Families (Guatemala 2003), photograph belongs to John Young, used with permission.
- I John Young and Charlie Guthrie on top of Temple IV, Tikal, Guatemala following Habitat for Humanity Global Village Work Team in Tonicapan, Guatemala in 2005.

## ENDNOTES

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1. Young's perspective about how our lives are "pieced together" is similar to the "composition of perspectives" approach advocated by Mary Catherine Bateson, *Composing a Life* (New York, NY: Grove Press, 1989).
2. The school retained that name until 1875, when it was chartered by the North Carolina Legislature as "The Shaw University."
3. Albert Schweitzer's humanitarian approach to service is described in Charlie May Simon's biography *All Men Are Brothers: A Portrait of Albert Schweitzer* (New York, NY: Dutton Books, 1963). For another book, see Norman Cousins and Albert Schweitzer *Albert Schweitzer's Mission: Healing and Peace* (New York, NY: W.W.Norton & Co., 1985).
4. Teilhard de Chardin, *The Divine Milieu: An Essay on the Interior Life*. English translation (New York, NY: Harper Brothers, 1960), 89
5. "Helen Fehr—A Need Known is a Call" in *Voices of Faith: Making a Difference in Urban Neighborhoods* with an Introduction by David Bodenhamer (Indianapolis, IN: The Polis Center, 1998), 4.
6. Ibid.
7. See the article on "Faith and Community" in *Religion & Community* Spring 1996, Vol. 2, No. 1 (newsletter published by The Polis Center at Indiana University—Purdue University of Indianapolis), page 4. Each year, the Southeast Neighborhood Development organization awards the Helen Fehr Community Service Award to someone in the community who has demonstrated excellence in community service.
8. For another example, see the "Faculty Profile" by Amy Stultz, "Service Projects which impact students focus of chaplain's life" in the September 23, 1997 issue of *The Reflector*, the student newspaper at the university of Indianapolis, Features page 7.