



Planning congregational worship experiences with youth

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Central to the life of God's people is worship. This is, or should be, true of God's young people too.

An important aspect of youth ministry is helping young people appreciate and participate in worship, as well as equipping them to help lead worship. Young people's presence in worship should be consistent, not sporadic. Many congregations involve youth in worship on a weekly basis. Some congregations plan annual or more frequent youth-led worship services. Some congregations do both.

"Behind the scenes"

Part of helping young people appreciate worship is "behind the scenes" work. It means teaching about worship, and involving youth in the planning. Here are some teaching ideas:

1. *Start early.* Before they become too loose with the word "boring," try to instill in them an appreciation for worship. In a Sunday or after-school setting, teach a four-session class on why and how we worship. A good resource for elementary youth is *My Worship Book* by Logos Art Productions, Inc. (1.800.328.0200). Use a *Lutheran Book of Worship* or the new [Renewing Worship](#) resources as a companion to the book. Plan experiences such as visiting the sanctuary, chancel and sacristy. Invite the pastor or chair of the worship committee to visit the class. Having other adults (besides their parents) tell why worship is important to them has impact.
2. *Make sure your confirmation program includes "worship" in its curriculum.* When other courses are studied, such as the Apostle's Creed, the Lord's Prayer, or the Sacraments, encourage teachers to always relate their sessions to worship and its importance to God's people.
3. *Teach them that worship doesn't just happen in the sanctuary on Sunday morning.* Make worship part of youth events, trips and retreats. Get in the habit of beginning or closing regular youth events with a brief worship, and make it central to a retreat schedule.

Encourage attendance at camps and youth gatherings that feature creative, celebrative worship.

Involve young people

In addition to teaching appreciation for and understanding of worship, it's crucial to involve young people in leading worship. After all, understanding and appreciation comes more naturally to us when we're involved in making something happen. Some ideas for involving young people in worship planning and leading are:

- Start early. Invite children to help lead worship by writing and praying the prayers of the people. A church school class could write the prayers in class and read them the following Sunday.
- Several weeks prior to a Sunday, invite church school children to illustrate the text individually or work together to make a mural.
- Transform your narthex into an art gallery. Young people will help prepare people for worship and remind folks of the day's scripture as they leave to go into the world.
- Make sure young people (especially 6-12 graders) are invited to take leadership/support roles in worship on a continual basis. If your church doesn't already have in place a "time and talent" survey which include young people, design one and make sure it gets used. It's one way of funneling young people's names to committees or other leaders who recruit greeters, ushers, lectors, communion assistants and musicians. Remember that lighting candles is not the only skill young people bring to the church. They are some of the church's best musicians and public speakers.
- Make sure young people are given the opportunity to plan worship. Encourage your church's worship committee to have young people among its members. Have them serve in pairs to provide them with a greater comfort level.
- Encourage your pastor to gather a group of youth while working on the week's sermon. They can give insight not found in a commentary or periodical. And when they give insight and ideas for the sermon, or volunteer to dramatize the text, find a way to use their ideas and talents. It may take extra time, but it's a win-win situation: young people feel needed, and the pastor gets some creative help with a sermon.
- Produce an annual (or more frequent) musical or drama for worship. Even small churches usually have young people interested in music or drama. Make the experience even richer by making it intergenerational--call forth those former high school and college dramatists, or wanna-be dramatists.
- Plan worship experiences around a rite of passage such as entrance into church school or confirmation study. Involve young people in planning and leading the worship. Many churches involve high school seniors at graduation time, or invite post-high schoolers to lead worship when home between Christmas and New Year's.
- Put together a youth outreach team that can take its youth-led worship "on the road." Call forth the gifts of young people involved in music, drama and speech, helping them to plan and lead their own service. They can share it in their own parish, as well as other churches, care centers or shelters.

When to hold youth-led worship

In many congregations, youth-led worship is a highlight. If done with sensitivity and structure, it becomes a Sunday to which even the older members look forward. Consider youth-led worship for these occasions:

- *To kick-off the school year.* Begin the programming year by dedicating a Sunday to youth ministry awareness. Put together a youth band or orchestra, and have youth plan and lead

- the service. Bring in a popular youth speaker as a special guest. Fill the narthex and hallways with posters, newsletters and brochures that advertise the year's programming.
- *To celebrate and culminate summer youth ministry experiences.* Invite young people who participated in trips or were at outdoor ministry programs to be worship leaders and to give sermonettes. Ask Vacation Bible school children or other campers to provide special music. Put trip or camp slides to music or set up a TV and VCR in the narthex with a trip or camp video.
 - *Be on the lookout for opportunities for youth-led worship, or at least participation on Sundays or months reserved for special concerns:* chemical awareness, introduction of the church's yearly theme, evangelism or global mission emphasis, volunteer appreciation, or church festivals.

➤ **The real answer... anytime!** Youth leadership in worship throughout the year is an expression of their baptism and their being part of a community of faith made up of people of all ages, abilities, and backgrounds.

When planning youth-led worship services, stay somewhat to a structure or worship rhythm familiar to your worshipers. Creativity can still come alive while following a worship pattern that includes: confession/absolution, scripture and prayer, a message, offering, creed and benediction. Youth-led worship doesn't mean turning it over to youth so they can finally take control and let loose with an entertaining worship experience. It's an opportunity to call forth their gifts and be refreshed and renewed by their enthusiasm and spirit. Keep them focused on the scripture, a structure for worship, inclusivity, and meaningfulness.

Set young people up for success by working closely with them. Communicate with the pastor or worship committee. Make sure all the bases are covered for who does and says what.

Above all, remember and remind young people that worship is central to our life together as God's people.

Worship is the launching pad from which young people are propelled into life and mission in God's world, says Roland Martinson in his book, *Effective Youth Ministry: A Congregational Approach*. Forgiveness and reconciliation are crucial for youth who are alienated and lonely. Rhythms of rest and rigor, gathering and scattering, receiving and sending, being healed and healing are vital for young saints called to be disciples of Jesus Christ.

Resources

- [The ELCA Worship](#) Web site
 - [Renewing Worship](#) resources
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