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ALL THINGS NEW: THE ROLE OF
WORSHIP IN YOUTH MINISTRY



Brandon Metcalf

"Church is boring, but youth group is fun." That statement summarizes one of the greatest struggles in youth ministry. In our desire to make the church "relevant" to youth, we can easily set up a system that is totally different from the actual congregation that we are hoping they will be a part of for the rest of their lives. They come to youth group because it is fun and their friends are there, but oftentimes it never goes any deeper than that. The youth get used to short object lessons, and so get easily bored during "long" sermons. They are used to upbeat praise songs, and get disinterested in multi-verse hymns. They are in the habit of letting the leaders give them all the information, so they do not feel comfortable reading Scripture on their own. When youth ministry gets relegated to just another social opportunity for kids, we are building a foundation on sand instead of the rock of the Word of God (Luke 6:46-49).

I realize that some of the specifics that I listed above may not apply to your specific church or ministry, but I think we can all relate to the disconnect our youth experience when they are no longer members of the youth group and transition into being adult church members. Church looks very different from youth group oftentimes, so what can we do to ease that transition? Well, there are books worth of ideas on ways to do this, but I want to highlight one that I think we can all put into practice: worship.

As a starter question, what do you do in your youth ministry that reflects the worship life of your

congregation? Our weekly worship services are one of the main ways that we come together as congregations, so we need to teach our young people the joys of congregational worship. If our young people don't see the need to participate in Sunday worship, then we're in the process of losing them. The solution isn't to change our Sunday worship services so that their primary goal is to be "exciting" and cater to the youth desire to be entertained. It's not about picking one music style or the other, or choosing a more structured liturgy versus a more fluid one. The solution certainly isn't found in creating what essentially turns into one "youth" service and one "old people" service.

Perhaps we actually teach our youth the reason for the worship service in the first place. Give frequent opportunities for "youth group regulars" (those that come on Wednesdays but not Sundays, for example) to learn more about the vital nature of Word and Sacrament ministry. Make it a habit to sing a couple songs each week with your youth, and try to give some of them an opportunity to lead those songs. Include one of the historic Creeds or the Lord's Prayer as part of your weekly meetings, and actually take time to explain why those are important statements of the church. Take a week and instead of doing your regular programming, work with the youth to design and participate in a worship service (consider inviting your pastor so you can include more divine service elements). Attend Lenten and Advent services as a group, and then talk about it with your students afterwards. Have some of your youth lead a praise song or choral anthem on a Sunday morning. Consider volunteering as a group to serve as ushers and greeters

on a regular schedule. Teach not just the tradition of liturgy (i.e. "this is how we've always done it, end of discussion"), but the importance and purpose of each part. Talk about the awesome truth that we can worship our God with such a variety of instruments and styles. Invite adult members of the congregation to a youth group meeting, partner them up with your young people, and have them share their favorite hymns and praise songs with each other. These are but a few of the multitude of ways we can help connect our youth group to our Sunday morning services and help ease the transition from active youth group member to active young adult church member (though the ideal is for them to be an active church member throughout their adolescence).

When youth are able to see the beauty of congregational worship and God's service to us in that, then the whole issue of boring versus fun gets thrown out the window. Instead of only engaging youth with musical excellence, let's also engage them in dialogue about why we do what we do in the service, and infinitely more important—what God does for us in the service. I am a firm believer that once youth see all that God does for them through Word and Sacrament ministry, then all those preferences that we have in the service (contemporary, traditional, song choice, chanting, etc) will go to the wayside. Instead of going to worship thinking, "I need to be entertained," our youth will go in knowing, "I need Jesus." That's how they stay connected to the church. Not through entertainment, a certain musical style or a particular order of service, but through a God who fills us with "all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit [we]

may abound in hope" (Romans 15:13)

 **WORSHIP**

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