

Protagonist Corner

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In May 1998, I wrote the following article for the Central Presbyterian Church newsletter:

WHY YOUTH SUNDAY?

People who would prefer not to have their orderly Sunday experience changed often ask this question. Others may say, “We don’t have a Young Adult Sunday or an Older Adult Sunday, so why a Youth Sunday?” In the middle of a rehearsal with six people missing, two people throwing paper wads created from the bulletins, four people leaving early, and one announcing that she won’t be able to be at the service, I have asked the question myself. The debate has been around as long as youth have been a focus of ministry in the church. The history is as varied as the opinions as to how it should be done.

I have planned, led, participated in, and endured Youth Sundays for the past 25 years. I have seen sanctuaries full of clowns and balloons, chancel areas filled with slide screens and rock bands, I have heard scripture garbled, prayers forgotten, and on one occasion, an epidemic of giggling that spread into the congregation and out into the narthex. I have seen *The Velveteen Rabbit*, *The Giving Tree*, *Hope for the Flowers*, *Free to Be You and Me*, *Barrington Bunny*, *The Ragman*, *Where the Sidewalk Ends*, *The Missing Piece*, and *The Unselfish Giant* performed as a part of the proclamation. I have listened to songs from the musicals *Hair*, *Carousel*, *Les Miserables*, and *South Pacific*. The voices of Michael Jackson, John Denver, Janis Ian, The Beatles, Bette Midler, and Dan Fogelberg have poured from speakers into the liturgy of the morning. I have been handed flowers, sprinkled with confetti, eaten salt, and danced in the pew. I have been embarrassed, exhilarated, frustrated, angered, and moved to tears.

Through all of these experiences, I have never given up hope for Youth Sunday. I have endured the jokes, the rolling eyes, the people who make sure that I know they are going to another church for “real worship,” and those who ask hopefully if one of the advisors is going to preach. I have sat in the pew watching, wishing I were under it. I have paced the narthex mouthing every word with everyone up front, willing the leaders to speak with conviction, and have called forth the Holy Spirit to somehow tie this mass of confusion together into coherent worship. But through it all, I can always remember the *why*. Our worship each week is the most formative part of what we do as children of God. It brings together our portion of the body of Christ and shapes our Christian Education, our fellowship, and our service into the foundation of our discipleship. What better way to open the minds of our children and youth to the power of liturgy than to give them that responsibility? It may mean sitting through the call to worship, singing

Christmas hymns in May, and trying to follow the electric guitar instead of the organ, but I believe it is worth it. It is frightening when the inmates are running the asylum, but it can also be exciting and revealing of the true nature of our God and the life we lead as God's children.

This Youth Sunday begins with Advent, proceeds to Jesus' teachings, and ends on the Road to Emmaus: leaving the way open for Pentecost. It is about the whole story and is a reminder that we cannot hear it too many times and that we cannot tell it too many times. As our own youth reveal the story and ponder what it means, join with them in the struggle. Reflect on their choices, sing with them, pray with them, and rejoice that their young voices are full of the word of God this Sunday.

When this article appeared in the weekly newsletter, it elicited numerous responses and created a lively discussion at our next youth meeting. That conversation prompted me to spend time with youth exploring even more deeply their understanding of and response to worship. I learned that the two most important things about worship, from their perspective, were related to the people involved. They were most concerned about who would be sitting near them during the service, and who would be leading. I asked them individually and in small groups to recall the most meaningful worship service in their recent past and what made it meaningful. Being with friends was most important, and feeling some connection with the leaders of worship ran a close second. Obvious choices were Christmas Eve, Confirmation Sunday (their own), or youth council worship on the beach at sunrise, but many of them named Sunday morning services at their church when someone they cared about, who knew them, and whom they trusted, was in leadership. The relationship with the liturgist and preacher made the difference in their participation and response. It had less to do with illustrations, choice of text, humor, or innovations in liturgy. It had more to do with being known and loved by the people in the chancel and the pulpit.

My philosophy of Youth Sunday has always been that youth are leading a service for the rest of the congregation, not for themselves. In planning we always address the congregation's needs and concerns, and since most youth are in leadership, we focus those plans much more on adults, older adults, and children. We use the lectionary and seek to bring our understanding to the word provided rather than begin with an agenda and find text to support it. As a result of my recent conversations with youth about meaningful worship, we are adding a new dimension to the preparation and presentation of worship—opportunities for youth to get to know more of our members and to care for them. Our youth work with the young children of our church in Vacation Bible School and lead them during Advent, Lent, and for many special occasions during the church year. Youth have also prepared baskets for at-home members, visited older members, and will soon be involved in projects for our older adults. In this way, they will become leaders of worship who are more strongly related to those in the pew.

My advice to pastors who want to engage youth in worship: spend time with them, care for them, let them know, in tangible ways, that you understand their needs, and whenever possible play with them. Establish a relationship, listen to their fears, speak out for them, and acknowledge their gifts and talents. Develop their trust in you and your trust in them. They listen to those whose voices speak for them and to them.