



Do we celebrate Youth Sunday?

The worship staff receives a number of similar inquiries on worship-related topics from across the church.

These responses should not be considered the final word on the topic, but useful guides that are to be considered in respect to local context with pastoral sensitivity.

The response herein may be reproduced for congregational use as long as the web address is cited on each copy.

"Youth are the future of our church," some say. Without missing a beat, a well-informed youth will reply, "Wrong! We are part of the church today." That young responder understands baptismal theology. The ELCA's statement on sacramental practices, *The Use of the Means of Grace*, states:

In Baptism people become members not only of the Church universal but of a particular congregation (Principle 29).

Baptized young people are fully a part of the church. Vital worship practices will strive to engage all people in roles of worship leadership, based on their gifts rather than age.

In an honest attempt to keep youth involved and active, many congregations hold an annual Youth Sunday that features young people planning and leading the entire service. Although the intent of such an event is noble, consider the drawbacks this approach might unknowingly suggest:

- An annual Youth Sunday can isolate the young people from the regular worship life of the congregation. Because it is unusual, it says in an indirect way that young people are not yet fully a part of the community. If youth are relegated to serve as acolytes or choir members most of the year, what message does it send when, once a year, they are "allowed" to do more?
- A Youth Sunday can interrupt the rhythm of worship and the church year. Often, when Youth Sundays occur, the regular readings for the day are disregarded in favor of some topic of the youth group's choosing. Although on the surface this may seem like a positive step toward making the youth feel included, it reinforces the culture's message of individualism, rather than encouraging a healthy understanding of the church as community.
- Especially in small congregations with few young people, Youth Sundays sometimes put young people in the awkward position of doing something that they are not really able to do.

- Lutheran theology clearly articulates certain responsibilities that come along with ordination. It is never appropriate for nonordained young people to function in these roles (that is, presiding at Holy Communion).

Having said that, however, it remains true that many congregations have a long way to go to fully integrate the talents of young people into their weekly worship life. Many youth are remarkably gifted and skilled. They can certainly make a significant contribution to the worship life when they are encouraged, properly guided, and treated as full members of the congregation.

- Many young people have received excellent musical training. Given appropriate guidance and encouragement, young people can play the piano or organ to lead congregational singing, play handbells or other instruments, sing in choirs or serve as cantors. Students who sing in their high school choir often have more choral experience than many adults. They may make a significant contribution, even to the "adult" choir. As music in public schools gradually disappears, a congregation might choose to care for its long-term health by giving scholarships to young people to study organ or piano, and especially the skills for leading a congregation in song.
- Some youth have taken speech classes or have experience in public speaking or drama. With some guidance and encouragement, these talented young people might make excellent lay readers. The public reading of scripture in worship is an important task. If a young person can speak well in public and has a sense of graceful reverence, he or she may also be encouraged to serve as an assisting minister or to assist with the distribution for Holy Communion.
- Some youth are well suited to serve as ministers of hospitality. They might serve as ushers or greeters, serve refreshments, tend the childcare room, or direct visitors in the parking lot and in the hallways. What a positive vision of the church it would be to see men and women of all ages serving side by side in these roles each week!
- Many people, including youth, are better suited to serve behind the scenes. Altar guilds, long the domain of the women in the congregation, are excellent places for young men and women to serve. Some young people with writing skills might study the readings for a particular day and craft the prayer petitions to be led by an assisting minister. Some young people might be adept at planning and organization and could serve on the worship committee or planning groups. Many young people have computer expertise and might contribute graphic design and layout for worship folders. Others may be hard workers who could copy, fold, and staple materials.

The possibilities are nearly endless! Youth should be invited to serve regularly in every conceivable corner of worship preparation and leadership as a way to use their God-given gifts and talents.

In some congregations, the annual Youth Sunday is inevitable, even in those congregations where young people are regularly involved in worship. If that is the case, here are a few suggestions:

- Do not radically change the liturgy or lectionary that day. Encourage youth to serve in leadership roles, but keep them connected to the regular life of the congregation.
- Involve the youth in musical leadership that day. Consider having them assist in selecting the assembly's song, taking care to teach how hymns are chosen in your congregation (see also, [“How to we select hymns for all seasons?”](#)). Aim to choose a variety of styles, being careful to not make assumptions about what young people like. Whatever music is chosen, make certain it appropriately communicates the Gospel for that day, and begin integrating that music into the regular repertoire of the congregation.
- Use Youth Sunday to introduce youth leadership in a variety of roles in worship. In that way Youth Sunday can become a starting point for including youth in worship throughout the year.
- If a young person preaches, be sure that the preaching is supervised by the pastor. The pastor needs to shepherd the preparation and presentation of the sermon and use this as an educational opportunity, teaching how to use the lectionary and grapple with scriptural passages that may not be easy to understand. If a particular theme is desired for Youth Sunday, *Indexes to Evangelical Lutheran Worship* provides the necessary reference material to find where certain passages and themes occur in the lectionary. Studying the lectionary before scheduling Youth Sunday may be an excellent way for youth to learn about the rhythms of the church year.

Youth are indeed the church of tomorrow and today and yesterday — as are children, seniors, men, women, the middle-aged, persons who are differently abled, and all God's people. Small groups within a congregation that focus on particular ages and interests provide helpful, affirming opportunities. Baptism, however, washes away all division. Worship, that weekly assembly of the baptized, offers of a vision that includes all people and offers opportunity for all who are willing and able to be involved both in participation and leadership.

RESOURCES

[Frequently Asked Questions:](#)

- ↪ How do we select hymns and songs for all seasons?
- ↪ How can lay people participate in worship leadership?
- ↪ How can we involve children and youth in worship?

[Resources Available for Download on the ELCA Website:](#)

- 📄 *The Use of the Means of Grace: A Statement on the Practice of Word and Sacrament.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997. (Available in English and Spanish)
- 📄 *Principles for Worship.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002. (Available in English and Spanish)

[Resources Available from Augsburg Fortress:](#)

- 📖 *Indexes to Evangelical Lutheran Worship.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2007.

Other Resources

- 📖 Edie, Fred P. [book, bath, table and time: Christian worship as a source and resource for youth ministry.](#) Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2007.
- 📖 Dean, Kenda Creasy and Ron Foster. [The Godbearing Life: The Art of Soul Tending for Youth Ministry.](#) Nashville: UpperRoom Books, 1998.

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