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Involving Youth in Worship

by Chris Folmsbee

A wide-ranging contest in the church today is found in the increasingly prevalent "sport" of engaging youth to attend our church services. We find it a constant challenge to develop students into active participants of our worship services.

Residing in (or actually, on the fringes) of the church nowadays is what *appears* to be a faction of apathetic youth who have become embittered with our services. As a result of these middle school and high school students' perceived neglect, it becomes an endless game of trying to connect with the youth of your church. I call the game "maddened perplexity". Most church leaders are past attempting to identify with youth culture, and therefore are at wit's end when it comes to finding ways to create an inviting service. Church leaders are ready to box up the game and put it back on the shelf in the closet for good.

The problem of youth attendance in church services lies in two areas. First, pastors and church leaders have accepted and resigned themselves to the synthetic idea that this generation of students is keenly apathetic. Second, students understand this resignation as abandonment. Neither of the two assumptions is true. The students in our culture can hardly be considered apathetic when it appears that social volunteerism among youth is on the rise. Movements of emerging leaders seem to be changing the world as we have come to know it. Today's youth are also becoming more concerned with world affairs, ecology, and globalization than ever before. (Visit www.youthnoise.com for the latest conversation surrounding youth and their culture.) These facts can hardly lead us to giving up on the emerging generations. At the same time, pastors and church leaders are not designing some conspiracy to abandon the youth of the church either. Clearly, there's a desire to see this emerging generation connect with God in the way of Jesus. Unfortunately in our uncommunicative churches we turn down countless opportunities to discuss the issue, and the chasm of voiceless misunderstanding rapidly expands.

As one of the leaders in your faith community, take the initiative to reposition the youth of your church back into the service. Use the following simple yet effective ideas to lead students back into the sanctuary.

Involvement Youth in the Service

If you want to see students in the seats, get students on the platform. Students love to see their peers participating in significant roles. They love to encourage one another, cheer for one another, and spur one another on with their presence. Go to a local high school play and look at the line outside the box office. It's their friends buying the tickets! Also, students love to know that even though it would scare the death out of them to be up on the platform, the possibility isn't out of the question. Deep down in the heart of students there's a longing for an invitation to be a part of something significant.

This attempt to bridge the chasm of misunderstanding will necessitate church leaders to be tolerant with the unpolished and spontaneous experience of students' involvement in the worship service. Although not as often as they presuppose, it might also require that the pastors and leaders be contented with the decline of professionalism in the service. Often it will also require that the leaders put aside their self-interested preferences and purposes for the sake of connecting with a budding generation.

PRACTICAL TIPS: *Ways to involve youth in the service:*

- Ask them to sing or play an instrument in the worship band.
- Ask them to greet the congregation and share the church news/announcements.
- Ask them to serve on the usher team.
- Ask them to lead congregational prayers.
- Ask them to serve communion.
- Ask them to read Scripture.
- Ask them to help in the sound/tech booth.
- Ask them to serve on the atmosphere/decoration team.

Speak to the Youth

LowFat Leadership
by Dave Fleming

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Silence



Pastors and church leaders need not have periodic messages solely directed at students. That *might* work well to bridge the chasm of misunderstanding, but I tend to think not. I would think that most students would feel as though they're being called out or spoken at. More valuable would be for the communicator to use illustrations and reference points that students can identify with. Stop using all adult- or professional-oriented illustrations. Stop just talking about raising kids, business trips, getting lost while driving, junk mail, and so on and use illustrations that students can link up with. Illustrations such as school hallway conversations, teacher-student relationships, homework, current television shows and movies, songs, video games, and sibling rivalries will work toward bridging the chasm of misunderstanding.

PRACTICAL TIPS: Read the Sunday paper or get on the local school's Web sites prior to your service. Focus on the high school sports section and learn how the local teams did the night before. Whether the teams won or lost, a surprise mention in the service reveals you're in touch with what's happening in youth culture.

Attend Their Events, Services, and Activities

Most pastors and church leaders assume that the majority of students think they're out of touch, peculiar, irrelevant, and old school. For these reasons they choose not to make an occasional appearance in the youth room. In some cases, the students are right. Pastors and leaders are out of touch, peculiar, irrelevant, and old school. One can be all of those things and still be respected and admired, however. If pastors and leaders show up at the students' events, they'll be seen as one who wholistically cares about the church. On a personal level you will be seen as a one who cares about them as individuals. Try this on occasion, and over time you'll see more and more students attending worship. This idea might be a stretch because of a pastor or church leader's time restraints and tasks. It may also be a stretch because it undoubtedly requires stepping outside of any and all comfort zones. It will require intentionality for sure. Nevertheless, attending the students' activities, services, or events will move them toward the sanctuary.

PRACTICAL TIP: Don't stay too long at the students' events. Just make a genuine but brief appearance. Also, it might be good to let the youth pastor and volunteer leaders know that you'll be dropping by. Otherwise, they might think you're "checking up on them" or that their jobs are in jeopardy, especially if they're not used to seeing you outside of the office or pulpit.

Be Who You Really Are

No one likes a "plastic pulpiter." Students can see right through the disingenuous communicator. Students long for genuine relationships and can usually spot the counterfeit pre-relational dialogue before adults do. Pastors and church leaders need to stop trying so hard to be hip, trendy, or cool. Those who think buying an iPod, snow boarding, and wearing clothes that are two sizes too small will bridge the chasm of misunderstanding, are mistaken. What will help to bridge the chasm are sincere people presenting their true selves. Of course, it helps to understand the current youth culture and to try and connect with the youth in your church while standing on common ground. One who tries too hard to impress, however, will only be viewed as one who tries too hard to impress. Pastors and leaders get zero points for the attempt no matter what the effort might cost. Where they will get points, however is in (1) being vulnerable and transparent from the pulpit *and* in the everyday, (2) in the pledge to be who God has created them to be and nothing more, (3) by confidently speaking to the spiritual lives of the congregation and leading without a patronizing approach, and (4) by putting their money where their mouths are when it comes to living and loving like Jesus. If you desire to make a connection with the students in your church, be sure to practice your theology. Don't talk about what Jesus would do. Rather imitate who Jesus is.

PRACTICAL TIPS: Find out from your youth pastor or your volunteer youth leaders who the key students in the church are. Get permission from your youth pastor or your volunteer youth leaders and invite the students to a 15-minute Coke detour after school or before youth group. It's like any other reason in the church to connect with key people. If you get them on your side, you get most of the rest on your side also. Think

about it for a second. If you were going to cast a vision for a new building project, you would get the key people on your side before the vision ever went public, right? The same is true with leading students into the sanctuary. If you get key students to become active participants in your service, chances are you'll get most of the others.

Pray for the Youth

Of course, pray! There are a number of ways a pastor or church leader can be praying for the students in your church and community. Each of these prayer methods will communicate to the youth, their parents, and the greater church body that you, as the leader, welcome students in your services.

1. Invite a number of the students to pray for you throughout the week as you prepare for the weekly teaching(s).
2. Ask a group from the older generations to pray regularly for the students.

This is not a prayer group to discuss how shocking the students' behavior is "these days;" rather it's a prayer group that genuinely cares for the emerging generations and longs to see them connect to Jesus.

1. If you have public, corporate prayer in your services, then pray for the students every now and then. Let them hear your heart and the hearts of those within the church as it relates to your commitment to support, encourage, and care for them.
2. Include the students in any and all of your communication that calls people to pray for different things. Most pastors or leaders won't think about a regular communication piece directly to the students for reasons similar to why they won't attend student events and activities. I say let the students decide if they want to read your regular correspondence. You send it and let them decide their interest level.

PRACTICAL TIPS: It can be difficult to balance praying for youth because you are truly wanting them to enter into the life of the church and praying for them because you or others in the church think that this emerging generation is in need of an overhaul when it comes to behavior and lifestyle. Be positive when you pray. Don't pray, "... and God please transform the behavior of our students and bring them into the services where they belong in order to grow up, change, and become a real follower." Instead, pray, "... and God we lift up this rising generation to you. They have so much to offer all of us. Teach us to see the good in them as we seek to support, encourage, and care for them."

Survey the Students

One of the easiest ways to get the input of the students in your church and community is to survey them. If you really want the students' take on why they're not attending church or how the services could be different in order to better include them, then let them evaluate by way of an informal survey. There are some logistical challenges in this idea. If you have a youth ministry in your church, gather kids' contact data from whoever is leading that area of your ministry and send the youth a survey. Most of the students will respond if they know you're actually concerned. Email is the best way to do this for three reasons. First, it's quick and relatively painless. Second, it's much easier to compile the results when they're in an electronic format. It's also easier to forward the responses to those in your church who are helping you combat this challenge. Third, email is how students communicate. You will have a certain level of instant credibility with the youth if you use their method of dialogue. Probably the easiest way to survey your students is to use a Web-based data-gathering tool. There are many Web sites that offer free survey methods. One of the most common can be found at www.freesurveyonline.com. You might also want to create a communication method such as an online discussion forum. Again, it's well within the realm of students' communication preferences. It does take management and creative participation on your behalf. Maybe there's a potential volunteer in your church who would like to take on a project like this.

PRACTICAL TIPS: It might not be a tip so much as it is a caution: Don't use a survey

unless you're prepared to welcome reality. Students can be brutally honest, especially when it's confidential and anonymous. If you want reality, there's not a better tool, other than a face-to-face conversation.

Teach Your Congregation Forbearance

I've concluded that one of the reasons why students don't enter the sanctuary and participate in all-church functions is due to the way the older generations react to their conduct. It isn't even the reaction itself; it's *the way in which they react*. Students know that when their conduct is questionable they'll be asked to be quieter or change their behavior in some way. What students don't expect is the negative and sometimes condescending reaction from those around them. Forbearance is patience, tolerance, and self-control. Those three elements practiced together in a response to misguided conduct will go along to bridge the chasm of misunderstanding. Pastors and leaders who want students in their services must teach the practice of forbearance.

PRACTICAL TIPS: Yes, it's true that students need to learn forbearance too. But between a teenager and a middle-ager, who should be the first and most mature in extending an attitude and composition of mercy? My experience is when students feel respected, they respect. When students feel loved, they love. When students feel embraced, they embrace. As hard as it might be, teach the older generations to practice forbearance. The game of maddened perplexity can cause you to throw your arms up in the air and say, "I quit." I understand that feeling and at times have blurted out that very statement myself in moments of anger, confusion, and frustration. Before you prematurely give up, however, try these simple suggestions above to lead students into the sanctuary. And please let us know what's worked for you.

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