

“Melt me, mold me, fill me, use me”

How worship shapes our youth

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—Glory to God Hymnal, 288¹*

There is no greater joy for me than to be at a youth retreat, camp, conference, or event and have a leader or young person say, “The Lord be with you,” and a loud response of every young person there, “And also with you.” It isn’t that those are my favorite lines of worship or Scripture or that they evoke in me some hubris or organizational pride. (And, as an aside, I do hate when adults use these words to basically tell young people to be quiet. This phrase is not worship’s equivalent of “shut up.”) What I love about this gathering call and response is that it is the language of our life and worship together—and young people know it! When the corporate body responds as one to the invitation to be part of the fellowship of God, it sends shivers down my spine. And almost immediately, I experience God’s presence in our midst.

Language, music, ritual, community: these elements of faith shape and mold members of our congregations, regardless of age. For young people who are in the throes of figuring out whether they belong, whether they can trust, and whether they even believe, these elements of worship may be even more important in shaping their faith.

Language

Today, worship is a countercultural experience. There is probably nowhere else in a teenager’s life where they are asked to sit and listen, participate corporately, engage intergenerationally, confess that they are sinful out loud and possibly next to their parents, and sing music regardless of their vocal abilities. And all this comes with a particular language attached to it. Not a foreign language, but a phraseology and a terminology that sets worship apart from other experiences in their lives. Language shapes us. It changes the ways in which we think about and imagine God in our lives. Language draws God into real time. During worship, we are called to praise God, lift our sins and our prayers to God, and listen in Scripture for how we are then to live into who God wants us to be. This expectation of being transformed is communicated by our words. Our responses become automatic reactions. Rather than a bad thing, as though we aren’t thinking, it is a marvelous thing. We don’t have to think; it is in our very nature to respond to God. Eventually we take these words out into our daily lives. So, every time we hear the word peace, in our heads we might think “peace be with you.” When we pray, we might remember responses, “Lord have mercy” or “God of love, hear our prayer.” When we carry the language of worship into the world, we more fully integrate our understanding of worship as part of our very being. Whether we are questioning what we believe or where we belong, the language of the faith draws us in and encompasses us.

1. Daniel Iverson, “Spirit of the Living God,” © 1935 Birdwing Music (ASCAP) (adm. at CaptiolCMG Publishing.com). International copyright secured. All rights reserved. Used by permission.

Music

You may go to a church where rock music is the norm or where a weekly jazz service includes someone wailing on the saxophone or where a dozen other musical genres might perform. I will offer a guess that most Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) congregations in our country still sing hymns accompanied by an organ or piano. Whatever kind of music your youth is used to in your congregation, it is helping to shape them. The words we sing and the tunes they are set to give the church family a sense of their historical roots and their corporate belief. In the last decade or so of attending conferences and camps with the young people in my congregation, I have noticed that we hardly ever come home not having sung “Be Thou My Vision” or “Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing.” And if we don’t sing those, someone will begin to complain. More than once, this has led to a group sing-along of both these old hymns. These hymn texts were put to music in 1927 and 1813!! Yet their melody and their message still move young people. The music and the words are connecting young people to God. They are also connecting young people to the corporate body. The other folks singing along are, at the very same time, experiencing some sense of who God is and how God is in the world.

About eight years ago, I had a group of older middle school and high school youth attend a meeting with a consultant who was giving the congregation an assessment of the overall ministry of the church. The consultant asked youth if there was anything about worship they would change. There was a pause, and one young woman suggested it would be better if she remembered more old people’s names since they remembered hers. Another offered that it would be better if more youth came every week. The consultant thought maybe they were not remembering actual elements of the service they would like to change and asked if they would like to sing more contemporary, praise, or pop-style songs of faith. Before he had finished, heads were shaking and people were saying a resounding, NO. He laughed and asked why not? One young woman said, “If we want to listen to contemporary music, we can turn the radio on in the car on the way home or put earphones in and listen to what is on our phones. When we come to church, we sing with everyone. We hear music we don’t hear anywhere else. This is the music that reminds us about what we believe and what everyone before us believed.” Another young man chimed in, “If we wanted to be entertained, we can stay home. Worship isn’t about being entertained. It’s about showing up for God and being there for the others in our church. It isn’t about us.”

Though worship is not about us, the music that we hear and the hymns that we sing do begin to transform our individual faith as well as the faith of the congregation. It broadens our senses not just to be about thinking but also to include our voices, our ears, and our hearts. It can begin to stir up the faith in our heads to include our whole body. And in times of crisis or stress, the music of our faith is often what comes most easily to our lips.

Ritual

Each congregation has its own set of rituals that it might do every Sunday or each time it celebrates communion, has a baptism, or prays together. These rituals add to the gathered congregation’s sense of knowing, belonging, and participating. After someone reads Scripture, they say, “The Word of the Lord” and the congregation responds, “Thanks be to God.” These may seem like insignificant phrases, yet these responses are at the heart of corporate faith. We participate together because our faith depends on each other. We say a creed as a body because the wider church and the historical church are also gathered when we are worshiping. Passing the peace, saying the Lord’s Prayer, singing a benediction, responding after Scripture is read are all ways that children, teens, and adults participate throughout the worship service. Participating and learning how to worship together create a bond of belonging. Even if a young person goes to worship at a neighboring Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) or Reformed church, there will be elements of ritual and participation that will remind them that they belong to God’s family. Rituals also give young people things to look forward to and a feeling of comfort that they know what is to come.

Recently a young woman in our youth group experienced the death of her father. As would be expected, family and friends stopped by or gathered at the house, food was brought, cards were sent, and plans were made for the funeral. There was a lot of commotion in the week between her dad’s death and his funeral. Many of the things that were expected of her and her family seemed uncomfortable for her. I was with her the night before the funeral, and I asked how she was feeling about the next day. She said, “I can’t wait.” This was not the response I had anticipated. Then she went on, “Everything about Dad dying has been unknown and unexpected. But tomorrow we go to worship, and our family will be there, and our church family will be there. We will sing hymns my dad loved and hear Scripture he chose. I know what to expect in worship. Even though it will be sad, I know everyone is there to support us.” Even in our grief, our rituals shape us and transform who we are. They draw us in over and over, saying, “Child of God, you are loved.”

Community

Is there any place besides the church where two-year-olds and ninety-two-year-olds who aren’t related come together on a weekly basis? The church offers community that includes people of all ages, stages, abilities, and particularities. And in worship, the diverse community has a single focus: praise and thanksgiving to God. The worshiping community welcomes people, celebrates events in people’s lives, prays for people, and teaches people. Whether you are in elementary school or a retired rocket scientist, you sit in a pew and learn about Scripture together, ask God for forgiveness together, and pray for those in need together. More important than what you do beside those others in your church family is what you do for each other—uphold one another in prayer, offer each other the peace of Christ, say the creed for one another when believing seems difficult, and greet each other so that each person feels he or she belongs. It is in the worshiping community that we glimpse the kingdom of God and remember what we are called to do individually and corporately.

That there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

—1 Corinthians 12:25–27 (NRSV)

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