Youth led worship services -- "Youth Sundays"

A Theology of Youth led Worship Services

Worship is not for the leaders, the youth or the people, but to honor and adore God. This must always be foremost in our minds when we are preparing and leading in a worship service. Too many youth services have become skewed in their character because everyone involved has lost sight of the purpose of such a service. This is usually a result of a tradition that was built up over time, perhaps where a creative idea has become cast in stone. The attitude of the congregation can also influence the service negatively. Keep harking back to the call to lead the congregation in worshiping God and keeping everything else secondary.

The things that I am suggesting in this document may seem overly complex and detailed, but if you do a worship service, not only is it theologically important to do it well, but afterward the youth will feel really good about themselves, the congregation will be impressed (and more likely to support youth ministry). It is worth the effort and struggle.

- First some negative attitudes to avoid:
  - Many congregations have an “aren't they cute” and “I remember when they were in Kindergarten” view of these services. This means they do not expect to get anything of value from the service. Some youth will try to accommodate the congregational expectation by being cute. There may even be slides or reminiscences of the youth when they were children.
  - “Oh its amateur hour.” They are expected to be sloppy and childish and will not present anything of value (many people stay away on Youth Sunday). The youth may accommodate this attitude by being sloppy.
  - Academy Award acceptance speeches in place of a sermon. “I want to thank all the little people who made me who I am.” A sermon that is merely reminiscences and expressions of appreciation is not a sermon.
  - Youth reading scripts written for them by adult ghost writers.

- Now the positive:
  - Youth, even down to Middle School, can (and I've experienced this) write and produce outstanding worship services with serious messages. They just need to be given a chance (details on how to give them that chance will come later).
  - They need to view the service as an opportunity to preach to the congregation and to lead the congregation in worship.
  - They have a message from God to the congregation. They just need to figure out what that message is and how to convey it convincingly.
  - They need to know that they are competent and viewed as such by their leaders and their congregation.

- Always start with assuring the youth that it is their service and that you will support them in their efforts
  - You will stand behind them and resist anyone that tries to change their plans or write it for them.
  - You will not overrule them, correct them or write it for them. They only need to be able to
justify what they are trying to do. (Sometimes an inappropriate “hymn” can be killed without rejecting it by asking them how it fits into their service.)

You will not jump in to save them. You trust them and know they can do this. However, if they goof off and produce something embarrassing, you will let them embarrass themselves. You have too much respect to save them from themselves.

**Step Two Initial planning**

- A retreat or lock-in is a good way to have a relaxed, creative time for initial work
- Have a brainstorming session where they generate 10-15 creative ideas for making their service unique. No idea is rejected – it just may not be selected by them later.
  - After discussion,
  - Everyone gets 3 (or 5) votes.
  - No idea is absolutely eliminated but the top 3-5 vote getters are expected to be a part of their service
- Leave the ideas sheets posted and allow people to add to them when so inspired
- Have a brainstorming session where they generate 10-15 themes.
  - (Be patient, they'll get there eventually.)
  - After they generate the list, allow people to talk in behalf of specific ideas
  - Sometimes they may combine items
  - Give everyone 3 votes and go through the list voting.
  - If there is a clear winner then proceed. Otherwise repeat the process, but with one vote.
- Post the chosen theme and keep it before them as they work on the service.
- Divide the service into common elements: Music, Prayers, Sermon & Scriptures (including Children's sermon), mechanics.
  - Divide the group into these teams. Any method of division is ok
  - Have an adult leader to work with each team
    - The leaders must have been instructed beforehand on the theology of worship, and that they are not to give too much leadership nor do the work for the youth. They are to trust the youth.
    - They (and you) can provide technical information.
    - They can make resources (such as song books and hymnals) available
    - They are not to veto anything. If an idea is too difficult or offensive, no youth will agree to take it on and it dies a natural death. No confrontation this way.
  - The small group can operate any way that seems right to them – parcel out the prayers, write them as a team, work in subgroups.
- Each group is to recruit people to do each item/activity under their jurisdiction. They do not necessarily have to do it themselves, but they are responsible for making it happen.
  - If they need to recruit someone from the outside (church musician, sound system technician, …) they need to appoint someone to do recruiting.
- Depending on how much time they have to work on the service, they may need to have committee meetings outside the normal meeting time.
- It is acceptable to help them locate Bible references once they have firmly decided on the theme and how that theme is to be developed. Someone might give them a number of passages for them to choose from.
- I usually expected everyone in the group to have a speaking part, but someone can volunteer for
something easy like starting a congregational response such as a creed.

**Step 3: Final preparations**

- Have a deadline of two weeks before the service to have everything in. They won't meet that deadline but it moves their procrastination up a week.
- Gather all the materials from the committees and create a sample bulletin
- Have a printed (as in computer printed) copy of everything. You will need this when someone doesn't show up. Any form of technology can be used, from emailing to a particular person to worship development software.
- One week before, print and distribute the sample bulletin. Go through it with the group, item by item, making sure everything is covered. Have someone write down all the who/what/when/where information and questions that comes up.
- Create two versions of the bulletin – the traditional one that will be distributed to the congregation and one that will be given to the participants. More on this later.
- Set a rehearsal time. You'll be lucky to find a time when everyone can show up. (every local situation is different, but I have consistently found that right after school on Friday is the most likely time to get everyone.) Notes on conducting this rehearsal will come later.
- Rehearsal time in the Sanctuary or worship space may have to be negotiated in advance with the music department for both the dress rehearsal and the warm up before the service.

**Notes for the Sunday before the service**

Inform them that the group will be expected to arrive one hour before the (first?) service. All texts are to be turned in for copying early in week. Announcements and Prayer concerns will be written out and emailed to those doing them on Friday. There may be some last minute changes on Sunday morning. Announcements can be done by two people.

“Memorize even if you have the text in front of you – you need to be able to look the congregation in the eye!”

“Your copy of the bulletin will have complete instructions about movement and seating.”

At the rehearsal we will go over instructions about public speaking.

**Clothing rules:**

Typical church clothes
No distractions! The focus is to be on God not your clothing
So... No tuxedos or high heels so high the congregation is worried you will fall off them
No bare bellies or butts
Skirts (male or female) must reach knees – the front row of the congregation is at eye level with your knees.
No noisy shoes (flip-flops, etc)
Nothing too exaggerated or dramatic

**Talk through the bulletin:**

(A leader needs to take notes)
List who’s doing what
Anyone in youth choir?
Need composers, titles etc
The participants bulletin

- The special bulletin for everyone directly involved should include enough detail that no can (easily) get lost, misdirected, forget what they are supposed to say or do. If everyone can see all the instructions, it helps keep things in sync.
- There should be instructions on where people are to stand, sit and speak from.
- Include instructions on when someone is to move, such as from chair to pulpit or from choir loft to lectern, or from group to back to get offering plate. Think through such motion:
  - Can the motion be hidden behind other actions? Major movement of bodies works well during hymns, passing of the peace and offering.
  - Is someone expected to be in two places at once?
  - Is there time to get from place A to place B?
  - Are there chairs enough for everyone expected to sit in one location at one time?
  - Does the pulpit or lectern need a step stool?
  - If wireless mics are being used, do any of them need to be passed from one youth to another? And Is it possible to do that (one youth in back of sanctuary the other in the front)?
- Include instructions to sound, light, video, and other technicians.
  - Specify what mic is being used at what location for each event
  - When does a video or sound track have to be started and stopped?
  - When are slides changed?
- Except for major pieces (such as the Sermon) include all spoken parts, such as prayers, calls to the offering, introduction to the Lord's Prayer, etc. You should have a copy of the major pieces with you (in case the preacher left their copy in the bathroom just before coming in).
- See the sample participant's bulletin in the Documents page of the Blog.

Step 4: The “dress” rehearsal

- Distribute the internal bulletins and printout of all written parts. (Don't plan on their remembering to bring their copy.)
- Everyone needs to be there including the sound/light/video people. Just as with a fire drill, the idea is to have the whole process be instinctual through practice.
- Give notes on public speaking in a Sanctuary (see below).
- Walk through the entire service with nothing left out or shortened. Give loving, encouraging criticism (“boy you have a great voice, but you need to be louder so everyone can hear it”) and start a section over if needed to get it right.
- Keep everything moving so the kids don't get too bored and restless. Use energy and movement on your part to get energy out of them.
- Work at getting people moved and in place before they need to speak or play. This makes the service sharper and more professional and it gives the youth a chance to settle before having to do whatever it is they need to do.
- Go over the processional and seating (leave room for musicians and starting leaders)
- I always had pizza afterward for those who could stay.
Notes for Rehearsal about leading a worship service:

Do not upstage God by drawing attention to yourself
Like clothing rule – do nothing to draw attention away from God and worship
Know when you need to be where. If you are speaking from the lectern, sit on that side of the stage, if the Pulpit, sit on the other side.
Anticipate: Move before you are to speak. In almost all cases you move to your place during the end of a piece of music
Once it is time to begin, look at the congregation and make sure you have their attention. You are in charge at that moment. Think it, act it, insist that the congregation acknowledge it.
Do not rely on the sound system – it is reinforcement only.
   Do not swallow the mic
   Do not tap or blow into the mic
   Do not lean into the mic
Speak so that a hearing impaired person in the last row can hear you.
Everything exaggerated. Distance reduces everything:
   Loud
   SLOW
   Enunciate beyond normal
   Broad gestures
   SLOW
Make sure everyone hears everything – what you have to say is important!
Speak to the congregation, not your paper – memorize
As a group you are the Worship leaders even during the Hymns. SING OUT
   Be sure to bring your materials on Sunday.
We Start the rehearsal at 7:45.... Don’t start heading this way at 7:45, don’t consider being on the property at 7:45 as adequate -- be ready to say/play your part at 7:45.
   Pizza and soda tonight after our rehearsal.

Step 5: The service itself

• Make sure everyone is present and accounted for
• Distribute the internal bulletins and printout of all written parts. (Don't plan on their remembering to bring their copy.)
• Do a walk through in the worship space. Longer items like sermon, Postlude can be shortened, depending on time available. Again encourage them to speak clearly, slowly and loudly.
• Especially practice movement. Nothing is more amateurish than people going to the wrong spot, not moving at the right time and panicking or tripping over each other. Movement should be so smooth that no one notices.
• Leave enough time to give them a potty break before regathering. Set an exact regathering time and place (not in the worship space). When everyone is ready, have a prayer together, then do whatever has been planned for entry.
• If there is more than one service:
  ○ Have a place where they can hang out between services and have snack food and soda/pop/coke available.
  ○ when gathered explain that they are at half-time and the game is not won until the end. There is a natural tendency to let down after completing the service once. They need to get
“psyched” and ready to do the subsequent service(s) with the same energy as the first. The energy needs to come from the energy of the leaders and the encouragement they give the youth.

- It is acceptable to make adjustment between services but don't sweat the small stuff or be very critical. It is too late for that and it can discourage the group. Be positive, report any positive feedback you have received after the first service.
- Once it is over, squash (gently) any negativity, second thoughts, regrets, accusations and complaints. There is no value in “evaluating” other than complementing and expressing pleasure in a job well done.