



## Innovations with Youth

# Worship and the Formation of Christian Identity in Youth

Fred P. Edie

Duke University Divinity School

**T**he Duke Youth Academy for Christian Formation (DYA), a deliberately “alternative” model for youth ministry, invites approximately 50 high school students and thirty adults into a two week residential community on Duke’s campus each summer. DYA features several innovations in youth ministry practice including: serious theological study and reflection with the Divinity School faculty; sustained conversation between youth and mature Christian adults; regular engagement with the poor, sick, and imprisoned in the community; and even practices of “embodied” theology by way of participation with theologically trained artists in our Arts Village. Yet the most distinctive innovation of the Youth Academy is its attention to immersing youth in the depth and breadth of the Christian worship tradition as a primary means to forming them in Christian Identity.

The rationale for immersing youth in Christian worship is as follows: If the fundamental gift and call to Christ’s Body in the world is the love of God and the love of neighbor, then worship will ever be the primary and principal practice of Christian life. Theologically speaking, the church’s faith that the triune God creates, redeems, and sustains all that exists always prompts its grace-engendered responses of praise and gratitude—of worship. In and through this worshipful communion with God Christians learn to draw upon the Spirit’s gifts and power for loving ourselves and our neighbors. Thus, worship is always at the heart of the church’s mission and ministry—including its youth ministry.

In theory, such a claim may seem underwhelming. Nobody—save the Grinch—thinks kids shouldn’t worship. But in practice, youth are often marginalized from a community’s liturgical life. They are confined to the back row of the balcony; passive spectators to the liturgy. Or worse, they are relegated to the trailer at the edge of the church parking lot and forced to dream up their own worship, the content of which almost inevitably

neglects the grace-filled ritual symbols of the church—her baptismal waters, Eucharistic feast, biblical Story of God’s Salvation, and the embracing rhythms of her patterning of time. Worst of all may be the annual Youth Service, where teens parade around in the sanctuary long enough to reassure the congregation that “our young people are terrific” before they are quickly herded back to obscurity.

This critique is about more than the injustice of youth’s marginalization from congregational worship, however. Such marginalization also deprives the young of essential practical and theological resources for discerning their unfolding vocations for God and world. In other words, to miss out on the best practices of Christian worship is also to lose the possibility of deep formation into Christian identity. Put positively, the regular and purposeful practice of Christian ritual symbols in worship may form youth capable of interpreting and living their lives consistent with the Gospel.

## A Worship-Centered Formational Ecology

Given this diagnosis and prescription, the Youth Academy employs a formational ecology grounded in worship that is designed to remediate youth’s liturgical ignorance, empower their liturgical participation and leadership, and foster their vocational imaginations such that the liturgy of their worshipping illumines the liturgy of their living beyond the sanctuary walls. I employ the language of “formational ecology” purposefully. DYA employs multiple interrelated and interdependent practices that together constitute what we hope is a vibrant formational ecosystem. In the paragraphs below I briefly describe the members of this ecology; (1) robust daily corporate worship; (2) deliberate teaching on the theology of worship and the theological significance of its ritual symbols (book, bath, table, time); (3) opportunities for youth and

adults together to practice planning and leading corporate worship; (4) deliberate juxtaposition of corporate worship with other Christian practices (serving with the poor, just food distribution, hospitality to strangers, and more); (5) sustained and repeated occasions for reflection between students and adult mentors on the emerging significance of Christian worship to their theological self-understandings and to living out faithful Christian life.

## 1) Robust Corporate Worship

At DYA, the community gathers daily for worship, fourteen times over two weeks. The gifts of book, bath, table, and time are ritualized artfully and expectantly. A “lectionary” is employed that seeks over time to tell the full biblical Story of God’s Salvation from creation to Christ to God’s Coming Reign. This lectionary is also keyed to daily theological themes (creation, covenant, Christ, church, and so on). Diverse preachers and presiders bring their various cultural and stylistic interpretations to the basic pattern of Word and Table. Sometimes worship “feels” contemporary, sometimes high church Anglican, sometimes African American call and response, but all styles partake of the basic pattern. Worship music also covers a wide spectrum from old to new, North American to World, and it evokes a similarly broad affective range from ecstasies of praise to the pathos of lamentation.

## 2) Teaching on the Theology of Worship

DYA devotes considerable time and energy to sharing the theology of Christian worship with youth. One session considers the basic biblical pattern for Christian worship: Gathering; Proclaiming and Responding to God’s Word; Thanksgiving and Holy Communion; and Sending Forth. Additional sessions consider baptism, Eucharist, and the church’s worshipful patterning of time. Each session seeks to deepen students’ capacities to imaginatively “play” with ritual symbols, i.e., to explore the multivalent meanings already resident within such naturally occurring symbols as water, bread, cup, and temporal rhythms; to discover how the fashioners of the biblical story and church tradition were inspired to make theological meaning out of these symbols; and to notice how ritual symbolic practices in worship intersect with daily life.

## 3) Planning and Leading Worship

As they are being schooled in the theology of worship, so are youth at DYA invited into the practices of worship leadership. Small teams of youth and adults take responsibility for worship on a given night. The process begins with exegesis of the biblical texts assigned by the lectionary and in light of the day’s theological theme (Christ’s passion, for example). From this point the group must make multiple decisions—how to proclaim the texts, what ideas seem central to preaching on these texts at this time and place, what responses are possible, what music best suits the service, what prayers are germane, what if any adornment of the worship space may contribute to worship, how the Eucharist both shapes and is shaped by the texts and theme, and so on. Admittedly this is a complex assignment. It is asking youth to subordinate worship preferences based in habit and personal taste to worship generated out of theological reflection and communal negotiation.

Worship planned must then be enacted. Worship teams practice speaking, singing, acting out biblical texts, processions, and more, then lead community worship.<sup>1</sup> In eight years, I have found these services unfailingly doxological and theologically responsible. Though small performance glitches are part of the package, these services always engage the entire community precisely because they are born out of the faithfulness and gifts of that community. Worship becomes, as it should be, the peoples’ work.

## 4) Juxtaposing Christian Worship with other Ministry Practices

Through careful planning DYA strives to place its worshipping life in relationship to its life beyond the sanctuary. In this way, swimming with disabled children at a community pool may become an expression of baptismal servanthood; agricultural gleaning on behalf of the food insecure a Eucharistic ministry; or conversation with the elderly a testimony to God’s gift of time. The intent of these juxtapositions is to demythologize worship. Instead of an arcane and esoteric practice disconnected from faithful life, students are invited to see how worship is, at its best, organic to and generative of that life.

## 5) Student Reflection

Though a formationally rich environment is crucial, it is also essential to invite students to reflect upon their experiences in it. At DYA adult mentors are trained to help students connect the dots between the interdependent pieces of this ecology. They also ask

what impact the liturgical and extra-liturgical pieces of the ecology have upon students' growing sense of who and what Christians are called to be and do.

## DYA's Impact

Students profess deepened appreciation for and understanding of corporate worship. They often comment on the transformational impact of assuming agency for worship or related ministry. Their pastors report that many return home with a desire to get where the action is, liturgically speaking. They volunteer as acolytes, as lay readers, and as lay Eucharistic ministers. They form liturgical dance troupes for the children of the congregation. They push the congregation to share its Water of Life and Bread of Heaven with the world. Longer term trends suggest that approximately 15%-20% of DYA graduates enroll in seminary after college with many others taking up lay ministries.

## DYA and Congregational Youth Ministries

DYA was birthed in support of local congregations. Its "curriculum" is worship, the central event of congregational life. It seeks to provide youth greater knowledge and practical agency for faithful worship in their communities, and, in the process, to afford them a better hope for and practice of faithful Christian life.

Since worship belongs to local faith communities, creating a formational ecology rooted in worship is readily within their grasp. The pieces of the ecology outlined above are easily adaptable to local communities. With commitment and patience congregations may yet invite youth to their worshipful center and, in the process, empower them for service to God's reign.

### End Notes

<sup>1</sup> Readers should note that in our case preaching and presiding at table are practices reserved for ordained clergy. However, students contribute sermon ideas and sometimes take speaking roles in support of the preaching. In addition, they may assist at the table.

### Resources

Edie, F. *Book, Bath, Table and Time: Christian Worship as Source and Resource for Youth Ministry*. Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2007.

Includes full descriptions of the five members of the formational ecology outlined above.

### Duke Youth Academy Web Site

[www.divinity.duke.edu/programs/youth](http://www.divinity.duke.edu/programs/youth)

Includes daily blogs from summer academies, a link to a video documentary report produced by *Religion and Ethics Newsweekly*, and downloadable applications for students and adult staff members.

---

## Continued from "Learning to Question" by Tonya Y. Burton

### Works Cited

- Freire, Paulo and Antonio Faundez. *Learning to Question: A Pedagogy of Liberation*. Geneva: WCC Publications, 1989.
- Parks, Sharon Daloz. *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Young Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose and Faith*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000.
- Rainer Maria Rilke. *Letters to a Young Poet*. Trans. M.D. Herter Norton. New York: Norton, 1993.
- Stone, Howard O. and James O. Duke. *How To Think Theologically*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006.

### Perkins Youth School of Theology Web Site

<http://smu.edu/theology/PYST>