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Youth Are Today's Church

I'm not a huge fan of “Youth Sunday” or “Graduating Senior Sunday” or whatever you call that one day we make the youth group dress up and run the Sunday morning service. Having one service a year like this makes me cringe almost as much as hearing someone say, “youth are the future of the church.” And for the same reasons.

In 2018 we have seen the immense impact and organizational skills of teenagers on a national level. If the March for Our Lives showed us anything at all, it's that these youth know to lead a liturgy, how to preach, and how to hold silence in reverence and prayer. I want us as a church to turn away from the easy stereotype of a once-a-year “Youth Sunday” and towards a more spirit-filled and life-giving model of youth led liturgy.

Creating a Youth-Centric Liturgical Calendar

How do we move from a single Sunday of service into full ministry? First, do it more than once a year. Consider children and youth throughout the liturgical calendar. Look at the life of your church and community. What important milestones and dates should be celebrated in the congregation?

- **Honor all graduations.** When commemorating graduations in May or June, include *all* graduates - preschool, middle school, high school, college, seminary. Mirror this celebration at the beginning of the school year with blessings and a liturgy for teachers, students, and parents.
- **Community events.** Does your town do one of those little league opening day parades? Or a children's fun run on the Fourth of July? Think of how your parish can highlight and join in town celebrations with prayer and blessing.
- **Camp experiences.** Do your children and youth participate in camp, mission trips or retreats? Consider how to incorporate their experiences into Sunday worship.
- **Youth preaching.** Is it a tricky Lectionary week and/or the clergy need a preaching break? Plan ahead and let the youth take a crack at a sermon for Trinity Sunday!

Mentoring Youth Through Adult Relationships

In addition to your parish's clergy, tap into other faithful leaders who will mentor your youth. Every congregation has many non-ordained leaders who can have a strong impact on teens.

- **Scripture study.** If the clergy cannot meet with the youth, have the youth team up with Bible Study or EfM leaders to work through the scriptures. The youth will learn that wisdom doesn't just come from an MDiv and a collar.
- **The Altar Guild** can pass down the traditions and rituals involved in preparing for and cleaning up after worship. Give them a chance to tell the story of why that action is an important part of *their* faith. When the youth get to handle the expensive, fragile, and tactile objects of the church at worship, they may learn that our faith is durable, enduring, and mysterious.
- **Ushers** can teach the youth about the value of a good, strong handshake, how to learn people's names, and how welcoming a genuine, warm smile can be. The youth will learn about ministry that reaches outside the church doors.
- **Communion ministry.** In mentoring youth to take on their responsibilities, Eucharistic Ministers can help youth distribute the bread and wine. Everyone can learn that, among other things, catching a case of the giggles while at the altar isn't the worst that could happen!
- **Ask the Sexton** to spend an afternoon with the youth. What are the unique responsibilities of this hidden ministry?
- **Liturgy case study.** Have the confirmation class do a deep dive into the liturgy. What would they change and why?
- **Youth-written prayers.** Can youth write their own prayers, creed, or Eucharist? What kind of amazing encouragement would they get from hearing their words spoken by the clergy and the congregation? What kind of transformation would the congregation have when putting the words of the youth into their prayers?

The Fruits of Including Youth in Worship

Including the youth fully and energetically in worship - planning, preparation, and execution - can turn a regular "Youth Sunday" into a ministry that embraces their gifts. Furthermore, it allows them to find their best fit in the church community.

Will it be difficult to find a meeting time? Yes. Will some people object to their piercings, or hair color, or choice of shoes? Yes. Is something going to break? Possibly. If you're lucky the only thing that will shatter are the preconceived notions of who can participate fully in the Kingdom of God.

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