

Youth and Worship: Session Design to Use with Youth

by Evelyn Worth McMullen (Adapted from *Footprints*)

OBJECTIVES FOR THE SESSION:

1. Participants will identify how they keep an open attitude to God in worship and how barriers are built up.
2. Participants will develop a plan of action to help their congregation keep open attitudes to God in worship.

PREPARING FOR THE SESSION:

This session is designed for a group of high school and/or middle school youth. Leaders should begin by examining their own attitudes toward corporate worship. Their openness in sharing questions and in listening to concerns will determine the seriousness with which the participants approach the "plan of action." This session could also be a starting point for an evaluation of your Youth Sunday.

Additional preparation could include talking with a pastor or church educator about worship and reading background material. Some resources are: "Directory for Worship" in the **CONFESSION OF FAITH for CUMBERLAND PRESBYTERIANS**, the **Book of Common Worship, A Planning Guide for the Worship Committee: A Resource for the Congregation** (from Board of Christian Education, 1978 Union Ave., Memphis, TN 38104), and **Making Worship Real** by Aimee and Bill Buchanan and Jodi Martin.

MATERIALS NEEDED:

Poster, Bible, hymnals, copies of worship bulletins, chalkboard or newsprint, markers, masking tape, pictures of people, nature, tray of objects, Psalm 95 in a modern translation.

GETTING STARTED

The skit is intended to be revised by the planners to make it more real. Change the names if they don't reflect common ones in your community. If your sanctuary has stained glass windows and banners, revise the part about a plain sanctuary to indicate a concern of your congregation. The planning group may want to initiate a survey of church school classes to obtain your own survey results rather than using the ones in the script. Introduce characters and present the skit.

Aaron and Suzanne — have compiled the results of a worship survey and have summarized their report on a poster. Aaron tends to be sarcastic.

Amy and Jennifer — are trying to catch up on the latest gossip.

Neil — lives up to the stereotype of the superintelligent nerd. During the skit he is constantly reading through bulletins, hymnal, Bible.

Rob and Sharon — Are adult advisors or church school teachers.

DEVELOPING THE SESSION

1. Ask the group which issues in the skit are issues in their experience of congregational worship. Discuss the following questions.

A. Thinking/Feeling

Which parts of worship seem to develop *the feeling* of the presence of God? Which parts depend on our *thinking* about God?

B. Repetition/Variety

Which elements of worship are repeated every week? Where is there variety of form? personal expression? congregational expression?

One of our barriers to being open to God in worship is lack of understanding about the structure of the service. Referring to the bulletins, list the parts of worship which may include: Preparation to Hear the Word; Hearing the Word; and Responding to the Word. Then analyze each element asking why we do this and what is its purpose.

C. Open Attitudes/Barriers

- How does our attitude to hearing God in Sunday morning worship relate to our communication with God during the rest of the week?
- How does our ability to respond to God "in the world" relate to the presence of that world in our worship?
- Are there stories or references to "the real world" in sermons, prayers, hymns?
- How do the sacraments affect our experience of the presence of God in our lives? For instance, in baptism, we are reminded of our belonging to God's family and in the Lord's supper — we are "reunited around one loaf and cup" and we "receive strength and courage to continue our pilgrimage with God in the world."
- Summarize the discussion by asking youth to list ways that they keep open attitudes to God in worship and ways that barriers are built up.

2. New Ways of Looking at Worship

One way to break down some of our barriers is to look at worship with new eyes. Place on a table the following objects:

pictures of people *pictures of nature* *thumbtack* *Band-aid* *ruler*
box salt & pepper shakers *can of soft drink* *paper napkin* *cardboard box* *other ordinary items*

Ask persons to choose an object and tell how worship is like that object and how it is not like that object. For example worship is like a Band-aid because it holds us together; worship is *not* like a Band-aid because it doesn't just cover up wounds — it really heals. No right or wrong answer here; just creative expression.

3. Plan of Action

The group now chooses a way that they can help break down barriers to congregational worship. Fifteen minutes on this activity is just a start. The group will need to continue planning at another time. Here are four suggestions:

A. Service of Worship

Plan together a service for your congregation.

B. Liturgist Group

Organize a group of youth and adults who are interested in helping to lead worship. The support of your pastor and worship committee is essential. Training and study of liturgy would be involved. Composition of appropriate calls to confession, etc., could be compiled in a notebook for liturgists.

C. Personal Preparation Guide

Create a pamphlet or booklet of suggestions for developing an open attitude to worship. Written by youth and approved by the worship committee, make them available in the sanctuary.

D. Proposals for Worship Committee Any of the three ideas above. There may be other suggestions which the youth propose for helping the congregation develop more open attitudes to worship.

CONCLUDE THE SESSION:

Conclude the session by having a member of the group read out loud Psalm 95:1-7 from a modern translation. Go around the group and ask each person to share one new idea they have discovered in your group's study of worship or to explain a new way they will approach worship in the future. Remind the group that worship not only happens on Sunday mornings in the sanctuary but also throughout the week. Close with the group reciting together Psalm 122:1. "I was glad when they said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the Lord!'" Pray.

"Holy, Holy, Holy"

Suzanne: Hold the poster up higher, Aaron.

Aaron: So everyone can see your fine lettering?

Suzanne: Okay. Here are the results of the survey we did last Sunday.

Neil: I wasn't here last Sunday.

Rob: Neil, last week we asked people in the adult and youth church school classes to answer some questions about worship. We wanted to know what kinds of things kept people from being open to God in worship and what helped people have open attitudes. Aaron: You know, the pastor always prays that we will hear God speaking through the scripture and sermon, but how can we hear God if our stomachs are growling?

Neil: I get the idea.

Suzanne: Okay. Here are the results. Things that *help* people keep an open attitude to God during worship are: music, communion, the familiar order, sermons that relate to life, and if people are friendly before and after the service. You do the negatives, Aaron.

Aaron: Here are the things that are barriers to being open to God in worship: our plain sanctuary, *long* sermons and prayers, what I'm doing right after worship (soccer or lunch), who I'm sitting with, all the repetition (nothing ever *happens*).

Suzanne: Okay. One thing we found was that the youth and adults had similar answers. Amy and Jennifer, will you please pay attention. We're discussing worship.

Jennifer: I like going to church, but talking about worship is boring.

Sharon: What do you like about church?

Jennifer: Something about being there — I feel that God is there.

Sharon: So worship is a feeling?

Jennifer: Partly.

Amy: You mean like feeling sad or happy? Mostly I feel serious, like a heavy weight is on me.

Jennifer: That's because you're not paying attention to the service. You're looking to see if *somebody* is looking at you.

Amy: I try to pay attention during the sermon, but I get lost.

Jennifer: That's because you have to get ready to hear God in the scripture and sermon and you don't even try.

Sharon: How do you get ready to hear God, Jennifer?

Jennifer: I love the hymn at the beginning of the service. It helps me focus on God.

Neil: (looking at a worship bulletin) That would be the hymn of praise.

Aaron: (sarcastically) Thank you, Neil.

Suzanne: The thing that helps me get ready to hear God is the prayer of confession. Actually, I guess it's the assurance of pardon. It makes me feel like celebrating; like clapping.

Jennifer: One thing I've never understood. Why don't we clap when the choir has finished singing?

Rob: That's because their music is a part of leading worship; not a performance.

Jennifer: Well, I just don't feel a part of things if I can't express myself.

Aaron: We noticed that.

Rob: So what chances do you have in church to express yourself.

Jennifer: Hymns, unison prayers, — but those are all someone else's words.

Aaron: I think that one of the special things about worship is that the words of other people can become your own.

(Other youth give Aaron points for a profound statement.)

Aaron: I mean it. Just think of how many times you've said The Lord's Prayer in church. Now I say it to myself everyday on my way to school. It helps me focus on God.

Sharon: Thank you for sharing that, Aaron.

Amy: Let me ask a question. How are you supposed to focus on God during communion? It takes *so long*.

Suzanne: I listen to the hymns that the organist is playing.

Rob: I think back over all the gospel stories about Jesus that I can remember. Those stories remind me that Christ is with us always.

Neil: (reading from the bulletin again) Here's the Affirmation of Faith from last Sunday. It was a communion Sunday.

We believe that at the Lord's supper the community of believers is renewed by the memory of Christ's life and death, by his real presence in the power of the Holy Spirit, and by the promise of his coming again. I like this part at the end: *Reunited around one loaf and cup, we receive strength and courage to continue our pilgrimage with God in the world.*

Sharon: What do you like about the part at the end, Neil?

Neil: Well, it seems like we've mostly been talking about feeling and thinking. Some people seem to care more about how they *feel* in worship. I usually am more interested in the words. I like church best when the pastor gives us something new to *think* about.

Suzanne: Yeah, or when she challenges us to *do* something. Then I feel like God isn't just a warm glow who lives in the sanctuary.

Neil: That's why communion means so much to me. It combines the thinking and feeling parts of worship.

Aaron: Aren't we off the subject?

Sharon: No, Aaron, the subject is how we help people in this church keep an open attitude to God during worship. I think Neil has given us a new way to think about breaking down some of the barriers to God in worship.