

Building a Youth Sunday Service

So, you want to plan a youth worship service? Great! Youth-led worship services can take a variety of forms and there is no one correct way to do them. That said, some churches have traditions for youth-led worship and what it will look like. It can be helpful to ask your church leadership (pastoral leadership and youth leadership) what is important to include and where creativity can be explored. Ultimately, *we are gathered in worship to glorify the God who is present and active among us* (Book of Order W-1.01) and this is an opportunity for youth to take a leadership role in guiding the congregation through worship.

Included below are some considerations and tips to keep in mind when planning a youth led-service, as well as an example of a youth-led worship service for Youth in the Church and World Sunday on August 11, 2024, Year B Proper 14. Some sections also have prompts to help guide the youth through crafting worship service elements and liturgy.

Considerations

While a youth lead worship service can happen any time, there are times that might lend themselves better for a youth-led service.

- **At the end of the program year:**
 - Youth can use the service as a culmination of what they have been learning throughout the year. Liturgy could be written as part of the curriculum during the year and then used in worship. The youth can share what they have learned and how it is applicable in their lives for the sermon(s). Additionally, this could be done in tandem with acknowledging graduating/matriculating students and volunteers.
- **Following camp, a mission trip, or an event:**
 - Oftentimes events like a camp or mission trip will have a theme and scripture focus. This scripture can also serve as the focus of the worship service. Liturgy used during the event can serve a dual purpose and also be the liturgy for the youth-led service. Youth can give testimonies of their experiences during the event. If there was a theme song used throughout the event, the youth could sing that song as a youth choir during the service or incorporate it into the congregational singing during the worship service. This is a good way to help youth reflect on the theological substance of the event in the midst of playing, working, serving, and hanging out with friends.
- **On a specially designated Sunday:**
 - There are some Sundays that work well throughout the calendar year for youth to lead. Perhaps there is a topic/scripture within a sermon series that lends itself to the perspective or voice of youth. This might also give a pastor who doesn't work directly with the youth time to come alongside them in leadership.
 - Worship services that follow a major holiday (like Easter) often have lower congregational attendance, but if youth are to lead worship, they would encourage others to be in worship.
 - Special denominational themed Sundays, like Youth in the Church and World Sunday or Pentecost when the Pentecost Special Offering is received (this offering focuses on a church-

wide effort to support young people and inspire them to share their faith, ideas, and unique gifts with the church and the world), would also provide good opportunities to have youth lead worship.

- Worship services that mark significant youth milestones would already have a youth focus and are good opportunities for youth leadership. For example, the Sunday that a confirmation class is confirmed or when graduating students are recognized. Confirmands or graduates can take the lead in planning, preaching, and/or leading the service.

Focus/Theme

- **Pick a scripture.** You can look to the lectionary, the scripture used during a camp/mission trip/event, a scripture that represents what they youth have been learning about in Sunday school/youth group or discuss with pastoral leadership how they normally decide what scripture to use for a worship service.
- **Read through your text** (multiple times). What words stand out? Who are the people involved in the text? What is the passage trying to tell us? It might be helpful to make a running list of the answers to these questions. Are there any throughlines that stand out? As a group, determine where there is the most energy and interest to craft a focus/theme around.
- **For example**, using the lectionary for August 11, 2024, Year B Proper 14 –
 - The text that catches my attention is *1 Kings 19:4-8*.

But [Elijah]¹ himself went a day's journey into the wilderness and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. [Elijah] asked that he might die, "It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors." Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched [Elijah] and said to him, "Get up and eat." He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones and a jar of water. [Elijah] ate and drank and lay down again. The angel of the Lord came a second time, touched [Elijah], and said, "Get up and eat, or the journey will be too much for you." [Elijah] got up and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God.
 - Focus: God provides, even when we are defeated.

Call to Worship

One: Come
All: You who are on a journey
One: Come
All: You who are hungry
One: Come
All: You who are thirsty
One: Come
All: You who are tired
One: Come
All: You who need strength
One: Come
All: You who see are seeking the Lord
All: Come

¹ I find it helpful to replace the pronouns with who they are referring too. The heavy use of pronouns in a scripture narrative can become unclear and confuse people about who is doing what.

Call to Confession

One: We come to God with truth and honesty, willing to acknowledge the things that cause us to stumble. God listens to our individual confession and our corporate confessions. God greets us with compassion. Let us unite our voices in confession.

Confession of Sins

One: Lord, we are tired.

All: Forgive us for the times we are ready to give up because it all feels too hard. We are quick to lament our hardships, yet we set lofty expectations for others.

One: Lord, we are distracted.

All: Forgive us when we fall asleep to where you are calling us to pay attention. We easily overlook the plight of our neighbors, the wars of the world, and the injustices of a system we benefit from.

One: Lord, we are complacent.

All: Forgive us for the ways we put our own comfort above doing your work. We hoard our gifts, and talents, and treasures, while becoming numb to the needs of others.

One: Lord, we are hungry.

All: Forgive us when we do what is easy instead of what is right. We stay on the surface level instead of diving deep where you are calling us. We remain unwilling to face what can be uncomfortable.

One: Lord, we are weak.

All: Forgive us for our show of force when you call for compassion, our greed when you call for selflessness, our timidity when you call us to new adventures.

One: Lord, in silence we lift up our individual petitions to you.

Assurance of Pardon

One: God welcomes our vulnerability and meets it with unbound grace. Be assured that God hears our confession and forgives us. God loves us and strengthens us. We are forgiven!

All: Thanks be to God! Amen.

Prayer for Illumination

One: Ground us, God, in the words and the message you have for us this morning. Open our minds to imagine new ways of getting to know you. Open our ears to hear new truths you have for us. Open our hearts to new ways of loving your kin-dom. Open our eyes to see you in our world.

Scripture Reading

Traditionally scripture is read directly from the Bible with one voice. Perhaps that is the best way to share the scripture for the youth-led service. But it is worth exploring how the scripture might be told in new and unique ways. Using creativity to tell the Biblical story can help us to understand the text in new ways. While this can be lighthearted, it is important to remain respectful of the text and focus on guiding the congregation in worship.

With a narrative passage like *1 Kings 19:4-8*, it might be helpful to have different voices read the different speaking parts, or one voice narrate the text while others act it out.

Sermon

The sermon is a great place for youth to share. Sharing or preaching can be done by one person or by multiple people. This is an opportunity for graduating seniors or confirmands to take the lead. If returning from a camp, mission trip, or event, selected students can share their different experiences. Be intentional about who is sharing if you are asking for volunteers from the whole group of students to share. Make sure you have representation from a variety of voices (differing ages/grades, experience levels, genders, etc.). This is a great opportunity to name a student's talent in speaking and leadership. You may also want to invite a volunteer adult to share their perspective.

Sometimes it can be hard to find students willing to speak. There are other ways to provide a sermon. The students can act out a skit, prerecord a video, or lead the congregation through an exercise in engaging with the scripture.

Using the text from *1 Kings 19:4-8*, I would start with 1-2 youth speaking about a time when they felt defeated and how God provided support to fulfill a purpose.

I would follow up the sharing with a community action:

- One: There is a practice of tying a piece of yarn around your finger to remember something. For example, if I promised I would take my neighbor's garbage can to the curb on trash day because they were out of town, I might tie a piece of string around my finger to remind me to do it. We are going to do something similar.
- One: An angel appeared to Elijah when he thought that he couldn't go any farther and provided him with the food and encouragement that he needed. The angel again came and provided Elijah with resources and words to remind him that he was not alone. Sometimes we need a reminder that we are not alone. We are capable. God is with us and provides for us. We need words of encouragement to help us on our journeys. We need reminders that God provides, and we are not alone.
- One: We have pieces of string (pre-prepared) in baskets that will be passed around. (People can also come forward to receive a string or use whatever practice works best for your context). Take a piece of string and have a neighbor help you tie it on your wrist.
- One: May this string serve as a reminder that God has not forgotten you. You are a part of a community who loves you and journeys with you. May this string help you remember to look for the ways God is providing for your needs.

Music

- "Here I am, Lord (I, the Lord of Sea and Sky)" – *Glory to God, the Presbyterian Hymnal* #69
- "Change My Heart, O God" – *Glory to God, the Presbyterian Hymnal* #695
- "Fill My Cup" – *Glory to God, the Presbyterian Hymnal* #699
- "Beautiful Things" – by Gungor <https://youtu.be/oyPBtExE4W0?si=CilZmyySmaoeTAsT>
- "I'm Gonna Live So God Can Use Me" – *Glory to God, the Presbyterian Hymnal* #700
- "God Be with You Till We Meet Again" – *Glory to God, the Presbyterian Hymnal* #541

Benediction

Our youth ends each youth group with the same benediction. A youth-led worship service gives them the opportunity to share this tradition with the larger congregation. Are there traditions you have that can be incorporated into a youth-led service?

This is our youth group benediction:

**All: May God bless you and keep you.
 May God make God's face to shine upon you,
 and be gracious unto you.
 May God lift up God's countenance upon you,
 and give you peace.
 Amen!**

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