**Designing for Encounter or Attraction?**

**Exploring the Use of Contemporary Worship to Motivate Youth Participation**

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**Introduction**

**[SLIDE]** “If we just change the music, the young people will come, and our church will grow.” As part of our ongoing work to explore the liturgical participation and flexibility of young people in corporate Christian worship, we’ve been especially interested in unpacking this argument: that it is musical style that especially affects, to motivate or diminish, the participation of teens and emerging adults in public worship.

It was our own experiences that initially sparked this question, namely our observation that so many find it difficult to imagine otherwise. It is widely assumed that a key means of engaging youth in the church is through musical practice, particularly music that reflects their own, popular musical sensibilities—something contemporary. Even as the young people with whom we work acknowledge that this argument does not align with what they themselves perceive to centrally animate their worship and faith, they remain reluctant to privilege alternative liturgical and ministry models.

No doubt, certain exemplar congregations have achieved success by operating under this logic, lending further credence to the seeming common sense nature of it all. **[SLIDE]** And yet, even as contemporary worship has emerged as the dominant and enduring model of worship in the twenty-first century, the reality is that fewer and fewer young people are participating in the church’s worship life—and at an increasing rate. According to Springtide’s 2023 State of Religion and Young People Report , only 36% attend once a month or more, and 38% never attend a religious service at all. What’s more, young people are not simply not attending, they are disaffiliating from religion all together at both increased rates and at younger ages.1

**[SLIDE]** Why have so many internalized this assumption—that the church’s embrace of popular musical styles will engage young people and lead to growth—for decades? This paper, an abbreviated version of a forthcoming publication, unpacks the argument through a series of four vignettes, cases that have proven to have significant impact on its shape and drive. What we’re doing here is sketching some key, historical undercurrents propelling this argument. This especially supports our next steps, to explore the intersection of young people and musical change in public worship, by framing out the wider scaffolding in which these dynamics continue to catalyze worship and ministry with and among young people.

**Youth Musicals and the Emergence of a Youth Worship Space**

**[SLIDE]** In the 1960s, some church leaders saw in the innovative format of “youth musical,” a model of youth choir and performance featuring popular musical styles, a means of increasing involvement of youth in the church (Senter 2010, 208). The response to the youth musical was “overwhelming; young people who had never been interested in traditional music activity, either in the public school or in church, flocked to the choir” (Hustad 1993, 434). Publishing houses associated with denominations and parachurch organizations immediately responded, and as a result, “youth ministries took on a new look” (Senter 2010, 208).

**[SLIDE]** An illustrative example, representing a break-through in this effort among Southern Baptists, came with the premiere of the “folk musical,” *Good News*. Like youth musicals in general, *Good News* was either an unrivaled success or a *coup d’église*—depending on who you asked. Upon seeing the way young people responded so enthusiastically to popular musical idioms in parachurch settings emphasizing  Christian morality, Bob Oldenberg and Cecil McGee, consultants for the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board’s Church Recreation Department,2  experimented with contemporary-folk music with young people gathered for Glorieta Baptist Assembly’s “Church Recreation Week” in 1966 to resounding success.3  Oldenburg and McGee then led a team to write the songs that would become the musical, *Good News.* The following summer, the musical premiered at the Glorieta Baptist Assembly in conjunction with a series of summer camps. Performed mostly with college-age staffers from the Assembly, the musical was well-received, so much so that it continued to be performed there every Saturday night throughout the summer (Briggs 1991, 7).

Broadman Press released the recording and score of the musical in 1968, selling 72,576 copies that first year alone, making *Good News* the best-selling musical product that year.4 Later that year, the Convention highlighted a performance of it “by young people from throughout the Convention territory,” alongside featured preaching by none other than Billy Graham (ASBC 1968, 87).

This musical was bold, and it set the tone for what youth and music efforts were to come. **[SLIDE]** While “folk” was more palatable to many church music insiders than “pop” or “rock,” the unapologetic use of guitars and drums alongside innovative staging instructions pushed the genre toward the edgier end. For instance, picture the presentation of “I’m a Rebel,” a song in *Good News*, based on these stage directions:

Dress four youth in “hippie” attire: long hair, dark glasses, sweat shirts, dirty jeans; one with a guitar strapped to his back, two carrying picket signs reading, “Peace” and “Amen.” Do not dress them ridiculously or offensively, but set the mood (Oldenburg 1967, 7).

Over the next eight years, the market was flooded with *Good News*-like works. The impact of the youth musical changed the design of ministry with and to youth, having shaped the guiding assumptions on youth ministry and its relation to the musical and worship life of the Church.

**Jesus People and Black Americans**

**[SLIDE]** The second instance where we see the relationship between musical change and youth participation explicitly linked is through the Jesus Movement. One area that is relatively underexplored is the Jesus Movement and Black Christianity. Within this intersection of Jesus People and race we’re often provided the example of gospel artist Andrae Crouch.

Crouch grew up in LA as a part of the Church of God in Christ and served as a church musician in his dad’s church. Prior to his music career with the Disciples (who were signed by Ralph Carmichael of Youth Musical notoriety), he led music for troubled young people at Teen Challenge, which helped youth caught in the trappings of activities associated with the rock and roll lifestyle. His heart was for sharing the gospel and helping young people live a countercultural life in response to all who might be, “tripping out.”5

**[SLIDE]** In a retrospective article from the Saturday Evening Post in 1978, journalist Paul Baker asserts, “Singers such as Larry Norman and Andrae Crouch and the Disciples shared the teachings of Jesus in a musical language the youth could both understand and accept as their very own.”6 Crouch’s aim for musical accessibility, translatability, and his concern for the evangelism of young minds was consistent with other musical artists of the Jesus Movement at the time.

This attention to music as a tool in evangelizing young people is also present in “on the ground” ministries associated with the Jesus Movement. **[SLIDE]** Harold Brinkley, a black man and a pentecostal, served as Director of the Youth for Truth Outreach organization, based in Sacramento, CA. They ran a mixed race, commune-like housing organization for troubled youth, but also traveled around the country with their band, “The Valley of Decision Singers.” Erick Nelson, the bassist in this band (who was a former member of the bands Selah and Good News) recalls an event at Stonewall Jackson Jr. High, quote “somewhere in Texas.” He shares, “Harold had been asked to come because they had the worst pregnancy and crime rates in the state (in a Jr. High!), and were so desperate they said we could have at it, do anything we wanted.” They played some songs, the crowd got rowdy. Pastor Harold scolded them, then told them about Jesus, which led to an altar call. Nelson reports, 400 kids were saved, then the next day began their own Christian club.”

Again, we have band-led Jesus music used as a tool to cater to and evangelize young people, for the sake of their souls, but in this example, we also have the social justice component. In an interview with journalist Hiley Ward in the 1972 Book, Brinkley reflects on his desire to give opportunities to young black men who grew up in a similar situation as himself. He says, “I know the bitterness of the youth who feels trapped, who feels there is no opportunity, no way out for him. If he could only hear the truth about Jesus Christ, it could be the most liberating force in his life.” For Jesus People who are black in the 1970s, music as a tool to engage young people isn’t just to evangelize and transform the soul, but the very socioeconomic well-being of black Americans.

**Youth Worship Emerges in the Youth Ministry Space**

**[SLIDE]** The argument became pervasive, shaping youth ministry and its leadership—even among those who may have not initially perceived their role to be musical. We see a third key development in this argument’s trajectory in the 1970s, at a time when the role of professionally employed youth minister was often framed in ways that prioritized the sentiment, that music is “*the* lifeline connection to kids” (Kirgiss 1997, 21). Job descriptions from the 1970s through the 1990s reflect the widely-held expectation that the youth minister also “assist with worship and music,”78 or fulfill a combination role as a “Minister of Music and Youth” (York 2003, 24).9 Many evangelicals suggested that this model of youth minister was the most effective, especially when he or she supported “contemporary Christian music…and a worship style that focuses upon experiencing God” (Randlett 2000, 151). Some w`ent on to argue that a “liturgical model” of youth ministry, one whose worship practice is characterized as “structured in a…traditional style…[honoring] the historical church” is explicitly unviable for youth ministry (Randlett 2000, 151).

**[SLIDE]** With the waning of widespread youth conferences coupled with the professionalization of the youth minister, youth ministers increasingly “obtained permission to conduct youth worship services away from the sanctuary,” usually in the “youth space” and, increasingly with “youth-generated music, instruments, perspectives, and energy, and freedom from the adults and trappings” of the adult-led Sunday gathering (York 2003, 27). Here are two exemplars of this model.

**[SLIDE]** In 1973, David Holmbo was serving in the dual role of “youth minister and associate music minister” at South Park Church in Park Ridge, Illinois, and partnered with his friend, Bill Hybels, who was serving at Camp Awana at the time. They both saw in age-specific worship a vehicle for reaching youth. Together, they launched “Son City” , a gathering explicitly modeled on earlier Youth for Christ rallies, but one which happened weekly and with a local church. Holmbo brought the rock band and drama; Hybels became the dynamic speaker. Attendance swelled within a few years. Church leaders across America saw in these in-house youth rallies, ones especially known for their contemporary worship, a viable model for growing both a youth ministry and the larger congregation (Senter 2010, 270).

**[SLIDE]** That model wasn’t singular, and these kinds of efforts didn’t stop in the 1970s. Casting Crowns frontman Mark Hall has devoted more than two decades to youth ministry. In 1999, as a youth pastor in Daytona, Florida, Hall focused on gathering young people through his founding leadership in a Christian rock group. As a songwriter, Hall’s group began recording original music and their independent albums began rising on the charts, which coincided with Hall’s move to Atlanta, Georgia. Even then, Hall’s vision was for his music ministry to be an “outreach project” for youth.10 While Hall and Casting Crowns have received continued success in subsequent decades, it is still congregational student ministry in Georgia, where he spends roughly half of each week, that continues to ground his work —and where he maintains a model of youth ministry that prioritizes the midweek youth worship space.11

**Mainliners and Generational Theory**

**[SLIDE]** No one wants young people more than Mainline denominations, who have been—for the most part—experiencing numerical decline in worship membership and attendance since the 1960s. In the 1990s, when many Mainline denominations were dipping their toes into contemporary worship, there was a concurrent fascination with generational theory. Generational theory was far from new, but interest in it was renewed with the 1992 publication of William Strauss and Neil Howe’s book, *Generations*, which asserted that various generations go through their own life cycles….and to be overly reductive…a cycle of crisis and a cycle of awakening.12

So, we have Mainline decline since the 60s, we have generational theory, and these are both in tandem with various iterations of church growth theory of the 60s through 90s. This makes for an interesting recipe in Mainline books about contemporary worship and attracting young people. In addition, we have the influence of the wildly successful Willow Creek Church, who has reaped the numeric benefits of church-growth principles.

As Glenn Stallsmith argues, there was a bit of a Mainline obsession (“obsession” is my word) with the success of Willow Creek Community Church.13 As such, Willow Creek became the surprisingly ecumenical hub of church leadership and growth-oriented wisdom. It put the  homogenous unit principle in church-growth literature to practice (which urges churches to worship in ways that are contextual with minimal barriers…which forged homogenous congregations for the sake of growth). Many Mainline leadership pilgrims to Willow Creek internalized this homogenous unit principle, alongside Willow’s example, to give rise to the second service that focused on contemporary musical forms.

**[SLIDE]** The most aggressive denomination in the 1990s publishing materials about contemporary worship was The United Methodist Church, both through Discipleship Resources and Abingdon Press. Here are a couple of them: *Contemporary Worship for the 21st Century,* published by Dan Benedict and Craig Miller with Discipleship Resources in 1994 and *Contemporary Worship: A Sourcebook for Spirited-Traditional, Praise and Seeker Services*, edited by Tim and Jan Wright. Both books are laced with generational theory and offer ways that contemporary worship might be a solution to increasing secularization, mainline decline, and getting in touch with young people.

**[SLIDE]** In their 1999 book *Growing Spiritual Redwoods* with Abingdon Press, church-growth expert Bill Easum alongside pastor and author Tom Bandy had an even stronger focus on engaging musical and worship forms for young people.14 They argue that “Spiritual Redwoods cannot be grown from the traditional, informational worship of Christendom.”15 To solve this, worship must be indigenous, or customized to the local community. Additionally, there must be multiple options in which leaders must, quote, “customize worship experiences like entrepreneurs in a free market.” If you want to customize to young people, they argue you need to frame your service as “sensory worship” – an “experience” – not an education or celebration, featuring heavy technology. Perhaps, then, this would combat mainline decline and generate new vitality through the participation of young people.

**Conclusion**

**[SLIDE]** To conclude, we hope these four vignettes have been illustrative examples of how historically pervasive the discussions have been about changing musical forms for the sake of young people—either engaging them for the sake of evangelism, or leveraging them toward church growth. Sometimes, both.  Through our own research with young people, we have learned that the argument of musical change stands the test of time and is internalized by young people themselves. However, since we also know the faith of the parent is one of the most determinative factors for the faith lives of young people, perhaps they’re internalizing this “myth” or argument because their parents taught them this, explicitly or implicitly.

As researchers, this motivates us to dive more deeply in a qualitative manner. This project is a small, foundational step in charting some key historical touchpoints, which will then lead to our multi-year, mixed methods research project. Most churches still want young people in their congregations, but the theories of many well-intentioned pastors and parishioners for what “works” (likely…many of the ones we discussed in the vignettes) are often detached from the perspectives of young people, and from the lived experience of congregations. We are currently in the middle of a project that researches the attitudes of young people toward diverse liturgical forms, their expressed motivations for participation in corporate worship, and their observable behavior in various expressions of public Christian worship. We’re happy to chat offline about that project if you’d like to hear more.

Thank you.