



# **WORSHIP WITH TEENAGERS**

Adolescent Spirituality  
and Congregational Practice

**ERIC L. MATHIS**

Foreword by **Kenda Creasy Dean**



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# Foreword

*Kenda Creasy Dean*

I spent the summer of my sixteenth year trying to make my church’s worship look more like camp. The reason was screamingly obvious (to me): worship in my congregation felt like a flat Sprite, while worship at camp felt fizzy and alive, which made Jesus feel alive as well. Obviously (I surmised), my church was doing it wrong. Clearly, they needed my help.

Trying to discern just what made worship “alive”—what makes you sure God is in the house—turned out to be trickier. Was it the singing? (Strong chance, but soaring songs from camp sounded cheesy in the sanctuary.) Was it the peer-led service or the youth-friendly sermon? (Possibly, but back home Youth Sunday came up only once a year.) Was it the Communion liturgy, when teary young people streamed forward to receive the elements from peers and counselors who meted out love and affirmation along with bread and cup? (Likely; sacraments seemed holy in both contexts, but our congregation only celebrated sacraments a few times a year.) At camp, the unapologetic emotion, the palpable sense of divine connection, the peer leadership, the embodied physicality, the participative spirit—all were at play. I left camp worship believing God was afoot. I left church worship convinced that God was at camp.

I was lucky to attend a small, struggling congregation, one of those churches where you need everyone with a pulse to pitch in or the whole thing falls apart. So youth participation in worship was not revolutionary; teens sang, read Scripture, prayed, played instruments, served as greeters, lit the candles (I didn’t know what an acolyte was until seminary), and occasionally shared relevant announcements or experiences. The congregation received our offerings with unabashed “joy-joy-joy-joy down in their hearts.” Most people

in the pews were retired (whatever that means if you're a farmer), but they knew us by name, asked about our school activities when the service ended, and let us call them *Ed* and *Marcia*. Bob Whiteside doled out Tootsie Rolls after every service as a reward for getting through it.

Nothing much came of my “worship reform” summer save for some bad guitar playing on my part. I still wanted to put a fork in my eye on most Sunday mornings. I counted ceiling tiles, stared at the stained glass, and practiced crossing my eyes slightly to take in the altar candles (the blurry flames seemed more magical). I became ridiculously well acquainted with the hymnal since it was the only reading material in the pew other than a Bible. Sermons evaporated from memory before the benediction landed. Baptism and Communion Sundays were the exceptions; these mysteries needed no commentary. As babies wailed, resisting the water, grace sank into them (and me) unbidden. As the Communion elements entered my digestive tract, bread and juice, body and blood, girl and God all became one mysterious entanglement.

Something took.

This book is not about doing worship wrong—or right. It is about the multiplicity of ways we invite young people into worship (I had never counted how many different ways we do this until now) and what is at stake in each of them. Eric Mathis has written a book unlike any I have read in youth ministry. He explores, with impressive depth and scope, the various ways young people worship and how these experiences both reflect and shape their faith and lives. He shows how sticky wickets (like emotions) can also be holy portals, and he never once blames youth for “shallow” worship. In fact, he avoids judgment altogether; after all, today's youth weren't even born during the “worship wars” of the 1990s. He does all this with disarming honesty and joy—hallmarks of his character as well as his writing.

For as long as people have cared that young people have faith, youth have worshiped. Somehow Mathis manages to view everything we have learned to call youth ministry—from revivals to YMCAs to parachurch ministries to staid youth groups in church basements—through the aperture of worship, which, after all, is the point. Worship, as he points out, is many things, not least of which is a way of life. Both because of us and in spite of us, worship is where many, many young people—in many, many ways—have encountered God's encounter of them.

Patricia Snell's research on youth groups found that youth who attend religious youth groups (and 51 percent of US teens do)<sup>1</sup> experience more adult

1. Jeff Diamant and Elizabeth Podrebarac Sciapac, “10 Key Findings about the Religious Lives of U.S. Teens and Their Parents,” Pew Research Center, September 10, 2020, <https://www>

support, are more comfortable around adults, are more likely to attend church (and less likely to think it's boring), and receive better reinforcement of moral codes than their peers. Interestingly, teenagers who attend worship but who do *not* attend youth group experience the same benefits.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, one national study found that “the most consistent predictor of youths’ religiosity was their experience leading worship” through music, serving as an acolyte or altar boy/girl, teaching a lesson or giving a sermon or testimony, serving as an usher or greeter, or collecting offerings. Youth who did several of these activities attended church more often, engaged in more personal prayer and Scripture reading, volunteered more, and found religion helpful for making “big decisions.” Compared to their peers, these youth had a stronger commitment to their faith tradition and a greater desire for others to know about their commitment.<sup>3</sup>

In these youth, something—apparently—took.

The metric that matters seems to be *participation*, not style of worship; young people who lead worship don't leave worship, at least not until the faith community has formed them (and vice versa) in significant ways. The truth is that feeling “alive” is a terrible measure of divine presence; God is alive in *all* worship. The issue is whether we have the wherewithal to notice. Worship, in its myriad forms and endless contexts, reliably acts as a burning bush that helps young people behold God. It's an occasion when they turn aside and take note: something has happened. God is afoot. Something took. *Sit laus deo.*

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[pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/09/10/10-key-findings-about-the-religious-lives-of-u-s-teens-and-their-parents/](https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/09/10/10-key-findings-about-the-religious-lives-of-u-s-teens-and-their-parents/).

2. Strengthening faith does not appear to be a strong benefit of religious youth group participation. See Patricia Snell, “What Difference Does Youth Group Make? A Longitudinal Analysis of Religious Youth Group Participation Outcomes,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (September 1, 2009), <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5906.2009.01466.x>.

3. Marjorie Lindner Gunnoe and Claudia DeVries Beversluis, “Youth, Worship, and Faith Formation,” *Reformed Worship* 91 (March 2009), <https://www.reformedworship.org/article/march-2009/youth-worship-and-faith-formation>.

# Introduction

In 2003 I stumbled my way into working with teenagers. I had just graduated from college and moved to Waco, Texas, to begin seminary at Baylor University. I took a part-time job as a minister of music at a two-hundred-member congregation in a rural Texas community. The congregation had a remarkable music ministry for a church of its size, and its adult choir, children’s choirs, and other programs attracted a number of individuals from the community who enjoyed making music but had no other outlet for artistic expression. But the music ministry had one problem, made clear to me by a longtime church member in my second week on the job. The problem was that though teenagers had always been engaged in the music ministry of the church, they were not engaged at the present—and they needed to be. I could solve this problem, she said, by starting a choir to “get teenagers off the streets and into the church.”

While I don’t remember the exact impetus—my own desire to please this devoted church member or to create a comprehensive music ministry, or my genuine interest in teenagers—I took her words to heart and started a youth choir the following spring. Thirty-four teenagers from grades seven through twelve showed up to the first rehearsal, probably because I offered food and promised a trip in early summer. Of the thirty-four, only one could read music, none of them had experience singing in a choir, and they sounded terrible when we tried to sing a familiar worship song. “What on earth have I done?” I wondered. Left with no other option, I continued meeting those teenagers every Sunday night that semester and for the next two years that I served the congregation. That student choir became a nucleus for youth ministry in the little congregation. The teenagers who participated in it became participants in and students of worship. They sat in front each Sunday morning eager



to participate in worship, they led worship as individuals and as a group, they traveled and served together, they read Scripture and prayed with one another, they sang for graduation ceremonies, and they offered their voices at the funeral of a beloved friend. This work continued well beyond my tenure in that beloved congregation.

Twenty years later, I reflect on that season of my life. I now know that while my job title was Minister of Music, I was actually serving as Minister of Youth under the auspices of public worship. This experience, and others like it, prompted questions in my own soul about the spiritual formation of teenagers in the context of worship.

In 2013 I became founding director of the Center for Worship and the Arts at Samford University in Birmingham, Alabama. My work focused on teaching teenage worshippers, training teenage worship leaders, and equipping the adults in the congregations, schools, and faith communities in which they reside. Through grant-based initiatives, we engaged in the qualitative and quantitative study of teenage worship practices. Part of this research included a weeklong intensive summer program, *Animate*, for seventh- through twelfth-grade students on Samford's campus. While running *Animate*, I worked with faculty in sociology and undergraduate and graduate students to collect data on teenage worship practices through surveys, focus groups, and site visits of more than five hundred teenagers and twenty-five congregations across the United States. A number of summer programs like ours have recently developed at universities across the country thanks to generous funding from Lilly Endowment. These programs have enhanced the conversation and awareness of teenage worship practices and have increased dialogue opportunities with program leaders and the individuals, congregations, and schools associated with them. They have provided me with excellent opportunities to see, ponder, critique, and ask questions about the broader teenage worship landscape in the United States.

The central question of this book might be articulated in this way: What happens when teenagers are intentionally engaged in the worship life of a congregation? The short answer is that when congregations choose to engage teenagers in the worship life of the church, all ages in the church are enriched, connected, encouraged, and strengthened for the ministry of the gospel of Jesus Christ. While much of my work focusing on the relationship between teenagers and worship has been positive, it has also brought up a number of challenges and questions that have necessitated further study of teenage worship practices. In some instances I have found answers; in other instances I have ended up with more questions than when I began.

The aim of this book is to present my observations to you, the reader. Does my work reflect your experience, leadership, reading, and research? At

times I will suggest answers—or at least the starting point for answers—for some questions in which the relationship between faith, teenagers, formation, and worship is cloudy. At other times, I will not be able to provide clear-cut answers because I am still searching myself. In these instances, I will hope for opportunities to continue the dialogue with you in person, online, or through additional publications.

## Observations, Questions, and Opportunities

Before we get started, it is worth naming a few key observations about the landscape of teenage worship practices. These key observations and their accompanying pastoral questions set the backdrop for most, if not all, of the chapters in this book.

*First, there is no shortage of communal worship opportunities for teenagers engaged in the Christian church in the United States.* Teenagers typically participate in weekly worship gatherings with all ages in the church, in services otherwise known as all-church worship. They also participate in worship gatherings beyond these intergenerational worship experiences throughout the week, such as when their youth group worships together on Sunday or Wednesday evenings. Some of them worship in one or multiple chapel services at Christian high schools, others in Bible studies and small groups before and after school, and on and on the list goes. I've met teenagers who say they participate in a worship gathering three or four times a week. This weekly list omits other opportunities for communal worship, such as seasonal and annual youth ministry events. Indeed, teenagers participate in multiple youth camps, retreats, mission trips, denominational youth gatherings, and other conferences where worship services might take place three, four, five, or more times in a period of twenty-four or forty-eight hours. These observations lead me to a series of questions: What is the relationship between worship and the spiritual formation of teenagers participating in these worship practices? How do we teach teenagers about the multifaceted activity of worship? How are we forming teenagers in the Christian faith as they engage communal worship?

*Second, teenagers on the whole are a discrete minority in most congregations, and the worship gatherings that teenagers participate in are nearly always the product of adult planning and leadership.* Even where teenagers lead the music or speak or play another leadership role in adult or youth worship, teenagers remain influenced by the adults who mentor them and who bear responsibility for their actions. In intergenerational worship, teenagers

are often lumped together with children or with college students and emerging adults. On the one hand, it is logical that adults would preside over and lead worship since most teenagers are not able to assume the pastoral role that worship planning and leadership requires in some traditions. On the other hand, teenagers may experience a gap between the worship practices of a primarily adult community and the more juvenile ways adults teach children to worship. The end product is a cumulative disparity among the worship experiences of teenagers in the church. Some teenagers leave for college understanding worship as an event that caters to their specific wants and needs, while other teenagers leave for college understanding worship as a rhythm of spiritual formation disconnected from personal preference. This reveals a failure of initial primary enculturation into a faith community. Of course, “The mistaken hope is that this alternative enculturation would in any way lead people to return to the primary enculturating community and its practices, but that’s just hardly ever how it works.”<sup>1</sup> How do we best equip those responsible for planning and leading the worship gatherings in which teenagers participate?

*Third, despite the many opportunities teenagers have to participate in communal worship gatherings, they are attuned to experiences of God in individual or private worship experiences.* These experiences are as important—if not more important—than the communal worship of the church, and teenagers often describe these experiences as more significant, meaningful, or impactful than experiences of corporate worship. At Samford we have spent the last five years documenting teenagers’ responses to questions such as “Where do you worship?” and “Where do you find God?” The answers are, “When I’m outside,” “When I’m singing ‘that song’ in my school choir,” “When I’m driving with my windows down on a sunny day,” “When I’m curled up reading a book that wasn’t assigned,” “When I’m running cross-country,” or “When I attended that concert with my friends.” These are the times teenagers feel closest to God. Teenagers need these experiences of God beyond the walls of the church, to be sure. But this raises important questions about the role of Christian community in a teenager’s life and important questions about the connection between worship on the Lord’s Day and worship in all of life: How does the church encourage teenagers to engage worship as full, conscious, active participants? How does our communal worship on Sunday inform our individual worship throughout the week? Are worship experiences limited to only those times when teenagers feel God?

1. Taylor Burton-Edwards, email to the author, September 29, 2015.

*Fourth, a significant number of teenagers are currently serving as worship leaders in their communities, schools, and congregations.* Communities of faith have seen and observed particular skills in teenagers. They have encouraged teenagers to use these skills, and teenagers have found themselves in worship leadership. This leadership is often connected to a specific adult's recognition of a gift and encouragement to use that gift. I have regularly asked teenage worship leaders how they started leading worship at their churches/schools. They often respond, "Well, I played [insert instrument], and [insert name/role of adult] asked me to help out." While their leadership often happens in an area of the arts such as music, worship leadership is not limited to the arts. Teenagers lead worship by making music, speaking, running audio and video, creating prayer spaces, making graphics, and welcoming friends, among other things. Burnout is a common challenge among these teenage worship leaders. This observation leads to another series of questions: How do we balance worship leadership roles for teenage worship leaders with their own need for mentoring and formation through worship? How do we teach and train teenage worship leaders? How do we prevent leadership burnout among these teenage worship leaders?

*Fifth, in the web of teenage worship practices, a number of individuals, most of whom are adults, bear responsibility for planning and leading these all-church and youth-only worship gatherings.* These people include youth ministers, chaplains, music teachers, worship ministers, pastors, and thoughtful laypersons, as well as teenagers themselves. When I ask adult mentors of these teenagers how they started working with teenage worship leaders, they often say things like, "I'm a youth minister, and our youth group worships on Wednesday nights. I never took a class on worship in seminary, but I spend a lot of time planning worship times for our youth group." Or, "I'm a science teacher at a Christian high school and sing on the praise team at my church. We needed someone to help with the music in chapel services, and I agreed to do it." In the best instances, adults who mentor these young people are able to devote time to work with and train worship leaders. In other instances, adults are overwhelmed or don't know how to coach young worship leaders, and as a result, some teenagers have no one to invest in them as a worship leader. One challenge for all these faithful adults is that very few of them have had extensive training in worship ministry. Few seminaries require students to take courses in worship, and many congregations and schools do not require worship leaders to have formal education in worship leadership or from a seminary. Those in higher education circles have often debated what theological and musical requirements we should place on those who lead faith communities in worship (no matter their age). We should ask,

How do we balance (what some articulate as) a lack of formal education with the meaningful experience of a number of young worship leaders who were taught through apprenticeship and mentoring models?

*Finally, there seems to be a gap in resources and literature about and for teenage worshippers, teenage worship leaders, and their adult mentors.* Despite the large number of worship services that teenagers participate in, the large number of teenage worship leaders, and the many church leaders responsible for overseeing their work, few resources address these topics. There are few books and articles about what happens when teenagers worship, and there are even fewer books, articles, and resources for teenagers about how to lead worship for peers or a congregation of adults. How do we best equip the church for the task of forming faithful teenagers who are disciples through the process of worshipping, worship planning, and worship leading?

## Youth Ministry and Worship Ministry

### *Examining a Relationship*

Taken as a whole, the above observations, questions, and opportunities point to a very specific question: What is the relationship between youth ministry and worship ministry? Academic research in the twenty-first century has focused on the developmental trajectories of teenagers and the need for the church to provide deep spiritual formation to support and encourage lifelong faith. Despite the numerous research projects, books, articles, and resources that have been published about teenagers in recent years, the role of public Christian worship in adolescent spiritual formation has been only peripherally addressed. In ecclesial practice, teenagers often function as marginalized worshippers. Congregations tend to group teenagers with older children or young adults where worship principles and practices are concerned. Yet the process of spiritual formation in worship is unique for teenagers. These critiques are not intended to be indictments, but they do demonstrate that a gap exists in both the scholarship and the practice of youth ministry and worship ministry.

It seems there are misperceptions about worship from teenagers as well as adults. In some instances, teenagers perceive worship as irrelevant, a show, a ritual, or something to be done in private outside the worshipping community, while adults tend to overcompensate for such misperceptions by turning worship into a spectacle or game. Adults come to critique worship practices they participate in through the lens of sentimentality, the way they remember feeling when they worshipped as teenagers.

Engaging the gap between scholarship and practice, between youth ministry and worship ministry, has the potential to help the church reach a healthier place in worship practice, and I believe the cumulative effect will be a significant reframing of conversations surrounding both youth ministry and worship ministry for the twenty-first-century church. To that end, the purpose of this book is to build a bridge between these two disciplines by identifying the gap between adolescent spirituality and liturgical studies in academic and pastoral literature, illustrating the importance of the reciprocal relationship between youth ministry and worship ministry, and initiating conversations in academic and ecclesial circles about teenagers and worship. Aside from my personal experiences, questions, hopes, and challenges, this book is an invitation to consider how to engage the worship life of the faith community and cultivate a generative faith among teenagers—a faith rooted in the story of the Triune God, nurtured by the Christian community, and important enough to extend beyond adolescence.

### ***A Word of Caution***

As we examine worship ministry and youth ministry, we will find much to celebrate as well as much to lament. We will learn about the successes and failures of those who have gone before us, and we will identify repetitive cycles that cater to or ignore teenagers altogether. We might also realize we have much to learn. Both the generalities and the particularities of our learning can provide a way to frame ministry in the present as well as in the future.

Worship ministry influences youth ministry, and youth ministry influences worship ministry. This has been the pattern throughout history, at times for the better and at other times for the worse. As we examine the histories of worship ministry and youth ministry and attend to their narratives side by side, we will uncover a story we must hold carefully—namely, that the two ministries have not been the best ministry partners. Too often youth ministry has become the scapegoat for worship ministry, and church leaders blame youth programs for not having enough young people in worship. At the same time, worship ministry can become the scapegoat for youth ministry, and congregations change worship styles without critical reflection to “attract the young people.”

Perhaps the most infamous chasm between worship ministry and youth ministry occurred throughout the latter half of the twentieth century. While life in the sanctuary progressed “as usual” with choirs and organs, youth ministry discovered the guitar and created a shift in worship ministry.<sup>2</sup> This

2. Randall Bradley uses a helpful metaphor here, describing how worship moved “up the stairs” from the youth room in the basement to the sanctuary throughout the 1960s and 1970s.

period became defined as the “worship wars,” and though this type of “war” occurred most recently in the late twentieth century, the concept is not new.<sup>3</sup> This chapter will allude to the story of the worship wars, but it will also tell the story of how worship in the youth room can move teenagers toward full, active, and conscious participation in the worship life of the church. Indeed, God is present in the sanctuary, but God is also present in the youth room. When God finds teenagers and teenagers find God in either place, adolescents can expand the worship and mission of the church.

However, we must hold that possibility in tension with the vast amounts of literature that describe America’s teenagers as “inarticulate” about matters of faith, especially the overarching narrative of the gospel and its relevance for life today. It is difficult to place the blame for this in a single place because the problem is so complex. But the heartbeat of this book is a belief that the most public pronouncement of the Christian story happens in Christian worship. If teenagers are participating in communal worship week in and week out yet still cannot articulate the God story and their place in it, then our approach to worship must change.

This change will need to come from all sides: evangelicals, Catholics, and mainline Protestants. It will need to come from youth ministry and worship ministry. It will need to come from every ministry area of the church. Ultimately, this is a Christian problem that impacts every age group and ministry in the church in the past, present, and future. Making this change will require collaboration among all ministries in the church, and this change will not be a change in the style of worship; it will be a change in the content of worship. Before we approach how to make this shift, we must first define worship in more specific terms, which we will do below.

What is largely missing from the historical narratives of youth ministry and worship ministry is a reciprocal relationship and dialogue between both ministries. If the ministries cannot work together, the church loses its capacity to celebrate, appreciate, and uphold the gifts of the Christian tradition. It also loses its ability to imagine, inspire, and adapt ministry practices for faithful transmission in the current culture. Upholding the story and tradition

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See C. Randall Bradley, *From Memory to Imagination: Reforming the Church’s Music*, Calvin Institute of Christian Worship Liturgical Studies (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 16–18.

3. These battles are internal (within the church) as well as external (from church to culture). As an example of worship against the prevailing societal culture, see the example from Scripture in Walter Brueggemann, *Israel’s Praise: Doxology against Idolatry and Ideology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988). As an example of worship among Protestant congregations and denominations, see Terry W. York, *America’s Worship Wars* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003). For illustrations from the Roman Catholic Church, see James Empereur, “Worship Wars in the Roman Catholic Church,” *Liturgy* 19, no. 4 (2004): 15–24.

of the church is the gift and calling of worship ministry. Adapting ministry practices to the current culture is the gift and calling of youth ministry. The twenty-first century needs the collective gifts, which combine the best of faithful improvisation and careful discernment, from these two ministries in the church.

## Disclaimers

A few disclaimers and definitions are in order. Whenever I speak to an individual or a group, three questions are nearly always asked. The first question sounds something like this: “When you say the word *teenagers*, what ages are you talking about?” I define a teenager as any young person between thirteen and eighteen years old. This distinguishes them from *older children*, who are typically eight to twelve years of age, and *emerging and young adults*, who are nineteen to twenty-nine years of age.<sup>4</sup> While some of the things I say about the thirteen- to eighteen-year-old population may apply to older children or emerging adults, this text intentionally focuses on the thirteen- to eighteen-year-old age group. From time to time, I will interchange the word *teenagers* with *youth* or *students* to keep it interesting for the reader.

The second question sounds something like this: “When you talk about the value of teenagers worshiping with their peers, are you saying intergenerational worship is not important?” Here, it is worth noting that I value intergenerational worship, I believe intergenerational worship practices are biblically grounded, and I believe they are the best model of worship the church can foster. At times, I will use the words *intergenerational worship* and *all-church worship* interchangeably.

The third question I receive is the inverse of the second: “When you say intergenerational worship is important, are you saying that the youth group is an outdated model of ministry?” My response is that to do intergenerational worship well, we must know and understand each generational segment in the population. While I advocate for intergenerational worship and activities, I am not denying that age-specific ministries are vital, necessary, and can contribute to the spiritual well-being of all ages, particularly teenagers.

We know from James Fowler’s *Stages of Faith* that each of us moves through a progression of spiritual development in the same way we move

4. See Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, *Adolescence and Emerging Adulthood: A Cultural Approach*, 5th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, 2012).



through progressions in physical and emotional development.<sup>5</sup> Teenagers are in a different place from children, college-age students, middle-aged adults, and senior adults. Most of them are in what Fowler labels as stage 3 of faith development, “Synthetic-Conventional faith.” This stage is characterized by questions of belonging (Who am I? Do I matter? Do I belong?) and is a season during which teenagers make their faith their own, as opposed to the faith of their parents. Like all of us, teenagers benefit from ministries that acknowledge this specific place on the faith development journey.

## Defining Worship

Every fall semester, I start my Introduction to Worship Leadership class with a clip from the movie *Mean Girls*. In a famous scene from this movie, Cady, the new girl at North Shore High School, is introduced to the school lunchroom. Her friends Janis and Damian tell her, “Where you sit in the cafeteria is crucial.” Then they carefully map out the cafeteria using stereotypical labels: freshmen, ROTC guys, jocks, nerds, hotties, wannabes, burnouts, band geeks, plastics, and so on. Their labels for each subset of students at each table in the cafeteria represent accurate stereotypes of high school students.

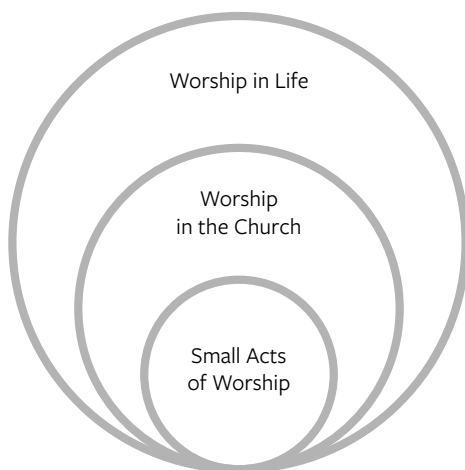
Sadly, their approach to talking about the lunchroom is similar to our approach to talking about worship. *Worship* is a problematic term. In fact, we have given it so many meanings that it has lost its meaning. The terms we use for worship presuppose particular values, often relating to style, quality, and quantity. Regarding style, we use terms like *contemporary* or *traditional*. Regarding quality, we use terms like *good* or *bad*. And when we speak of quantity, we refer to the size of the gathered congregation. When we talk about worship with these labels, we imply one alternative is good and one is bad, just like Janis and Damian did.

Really, these labels indicate our preferences, and rarely are we able to prevent ourselves from neutrality. There are multiple ways to worship God, and we live in an era of liturgical pluralism. Yet while our worship practices may look different, our conversations about worship should not polarize or claim superiority. We should have common values that guide our different worship practices, and we should be willing to enter conversations about those values.

5. James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981).

In an article addressing the challenges of talking about worship, John Witvliet says that the word *worship* has at least three meanings and probably more.<sup>6</sup> He suggests we conceive of these three meanings as forming concentric circles: worship in life, worship in the church, and small acts of worship.

Figure 1.1  
**Three Meanings of Worship**



### ***Worship in Life***

First, worship is the way in which we live all of life. We offer our work, leisure, family, and every other aspect of life to the Lord. In that sense, our entire life is a sacrifice of praise to God. This aligns with Romans 12:1, where Paul admonishes believers “to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.” No matter how we define worship, we can never diminish the importance of worship in the way we live life and the way those around us live their lives. Mark Labberton says it this way: “Worship names what matters most: the way human beings are created to reflect God’s glory by embodying God’s character in lives that seek righteousness and do justice. Such comprehensive worship redefines all

6. These three meanings are borrowed from John Witvliet, “On Three Meanings of the Term Worship,” *Reformed Worship* 56 (June 2000), <https://www.reformedworship.org/article/june-2000/three-meaning-term-worship>. I have added to and developed his meanings with additional materials.

we call ordinary. Worship turns out to be the dangerous act of waking up to God and to the purposes of God in the world, and then living lives that actually show it.”<sup>7</sup>

### ***Worship in the Church***

The second definition of worship is an event, ritual practice, or liturgy that we often call a worship service. Congregations around the world gather on the Lord’s Day for public worship. Worship is the sum of what happens when people show up on Sunday mornings, and this is synonymous with the meaning of the Greek word that we translate as *liturgy*, which means work performed for the benefit of another. This term was brought into the church from society to describe the goods (often food) that people brought to the Lord’s Table as offerings: grapes, olives, cheese, bread, and wine. This food was given to clergy to eat, and the remains were given to the poor. The meaning of *liturgy* is corporate by nature, and every congregation, whether high church or low church, has a liturgy that is written or extemporaneous in worship. Worship is more than a printed bulletin; it is what occurs when people embody the text on the page. We see a biblical example of this meaning in John 4:21, where Jesus explains, “The hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.” Christopher Ellis emphasizes this definition of Christian worship, which he defines as “a gathering of the church, in the name of Jesus Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit, in order to meet God through Scripture, prayer, proclamation and sacraments, and to seek God’s Kingdom.”<sup>8</sup>

### ***Worship Is a Specific Act***

A third and equally common understanding of worship suggests that worship is a specific act, such as adoration or praise. We ascribe worth to God in public worship and in our own lives. We might sing a song of praise to God, or we might see a new baby and give thanks to God. Psalm 95:6 uses the word in this sense, “Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the LORD, our maker” (NIV). This is the narrowest sense of the word *worship*. It closely matches the Old English word *weorthship*, which means “to give the worth due a person.” Evelyn Underhill, a twentieth-century

7. Mark Labberton, *The Dangerous Act of Worship: Living God’s Call to Justice* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2007), 13.

8. Christopher J. Ellis, *Gathering: A Theology and Spirituality of Worship in Free Church Tradition* (London: SCM, 2004), 20–21.

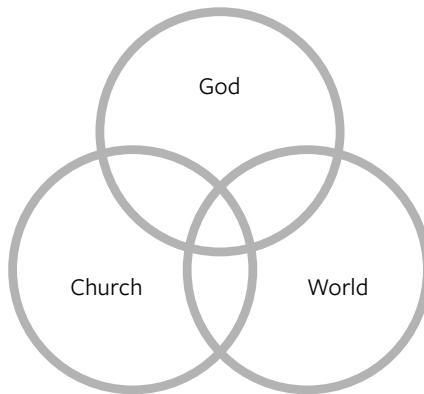
lay theologian, claims that orientation is the key to worship. She identifies worship as a specific act that directs our attention to God and prompts us to say, “God is God and I am not.”<sup>9</sup> Therefore, “worship will include all those dispositions and deeds which adoration wakes up in us, all the responses of the soul to the Uncreated, all the Godward activities of [humans].”<sup>10</sup> The true test of worship is whether we have reoriented ourselves, or allowed others to reorient themselves, in light of encountering God.

We often confuse various meanings of worship, emphasize one over the other, and even forget some of these components. But when we talk about public Christian worship, we shouldn’t ignore any of these definitions. Rather, we should seek to understand how they might work together. But before we can comprehend them, we need to examine the object of our worship by asking, Who is worship for?

### ***Who Is Worship for?***

Worship is a multifaceted event that involves many people, places, things, and beliefs. It engages at least three major entities: God, the church, and the world. In worship, these three entities converse with one another. Worship is a conversation that occurs in the present while engaging the past and anticipating the future. God speaks to us, we speak to God, and we learn God’s vision for the world.

Figure 1.2  
**The Focus of Worship**



9. Evelyn Underhill, *Worship* (New York: Harper, 1937), 8.

10. Underhill, *Worship*, 8.

### *Worship Is for God*

First, worship cultivates knowledge and imagination about who God is and what God has done. This means worship does not begin with our needs and priorities. Rather, worship begins with acknowledging, recognizing, praising, and honoring God, along with the psalmist who wrote, “One thing I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: to live in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in his temple” (Ps. 27:4). Philippians 2:6–11 is an ancient hymn from the church that describes the passion of Christ. The final verses, 9–11, remind us that Christ is the object of our worship: “Therefore, God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

### *Worship Is for the Church*

Worship is not only for God; worship is for the church. Through the full, conscious, and active participation of all worshipers as an intergenerational community, worship acknowledges the covenant relationship we have with God and one another. These themes are prominent in the Old Testament, especially where Yahweh articulates the covenant with Israel in Jeremiah 31:33: “I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.”

Nehemiah 8 describes a rich scene of worship where Ezra the scribe brings out the book of the law before all the assembled people—“both men and women and all who could hear with understanding” (v. 2). This community acts when Ezra “blessed the LORD, the great God,” and the people respond by raising their hands. Then, they bow their heads and worship God by lying facedown on the ground (v. 6). After instructing them in the Scriptures, Nehemiah says to them, “Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared” (v. 10).

Finally, 1 Peter 2:9–10 identifies the church as the community of God: “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light” (NIV). As individual members of the church, we have needs when we enter the church. By the grace of God, these needs have the potential to be met in worship. Through communal actions of giving thanks and praise, extending hospitality, and clarifying our commitment to God, we are strengthened and enriched as the body.

### *Worship Is for the World*

Third, worship is for the world. We seek the kingdom of God, and this inevitably involves God's vision for the whole world. Acts 2:42–47 tells of the many wonders and signs done by the apostles. All “would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need” (2:45). Finally, passages like Revelation 5:9 remind us of the final consummation, when all tribes, tongues, nations, and languages will worship together singing a new song: “You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation.” Worship reminds us that, indeed, “the God on whom we focus is the One who is passionately concerned about the world, and our worship must reflect that reality. Any worship which avoids the needs of the world for which Christ died is not going to be worship which is true to the gospel.”<sup>11</sup>

Worship is difficult to define in a few words. It is the way we live life, it is the worship event, and it is small acts of adoration. It is for God, the gathered community, and the world.

## **An Overview of the Book**

I have presented most, but not all, of the topics in this book at academic conferences or regional or national gatherings of youth ministers, worship ministers, and denominations within the last five years. These discussions have developed through seasons of full- and part-time youth ministry, graduate studies in Christian worship, continued studies in adolescent culture and spirituality, and the administration of two Lilly Endowment grants related to teenage worship leaders and the adults who mentor them.

This book is divided into three parts with three chapters each: “Cultural Perspectives,” “Liturgical Perspectives,” and “Pastoral Perspectives.” The first part, “Cultural Perspectives,” provides an analysis of teenagers, youth ministry, and worship ministry from literature in these three fields from the late nineteenth century to the present day. This is a broad segment of history to cover, and my aim is to give an aerial view that will get us to the present-day context. Chapter 1 paints a picture of the American teenager using cultural studies from the first two decades of the twenty-first century with a broad focus on the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR). Chapter 2 traces

11. Christopher J. Ellis, *Approaching God: A Guide for Worship Leaders and Worshippers* (London: SCM, 2009), 26.

the history of youth ministry and worship ministry, interpreting those histories for lessons that we can use to think about student worship ministry in the twenty-first-century church. Chapter 3 is the heartbeat of this book. It outlines a telos for teenage worshipers that builds on the work of James K. A. Smith.

The second part, “Liturgical Perspectives,” looks at key issues with worship practices of congregations where teenagers are concerned. The chapters are organized around the theology of worship I teach teenagers and articulated earlier in this introduction: that worship is about God, the church, and the world. Chapter 4 demonstrates how God’s story and teenagers’ stories have become lost in our worship and provides perspectives for uncovering both. Chapter 5 advocates for intergenerational worship as the crucible in which teenagers find acceptance and belonging, even though worshiping with all generational cohorts presents immense complexities as well as deep hope. Chapter 6 looks at the worship experiences teenagers have in the world—namely, those down the street, in soup kitchens, on mission trips, and at summer camps and seasonal retreats.

The third part, “Pastoral Perspectives,” holds up a mirror to the first two parts of this book by asking how we should reframe our worship practices with teenagers in the sanctuary and in the youth group. Chapter 7 uses philosophy, psychology, and anthropology to describe the role of emotions in the worship of the American teenager. Chapter 8 is written for worship pastors, and it examines models of worship with teenagers in the present-day context through the lens of worship systems. Chapter 9 is written for youth pastors and provides a framework for youth ministers to think about worship in the context of the youth group. Two appendixes at the end expound on practical elements of student worship ministry: mentoring teenage worship leaders and planning worship with teenagers.

## A Final Word

I am an inherent optimist, and I hope to approach conversations about worship like Witvliet, who always argues that the study and practice of worship must be undertaken with wisdom, discernment, gratitude, and a “hermeneutic of charity”:

Every act of Christian ministry . . . reflects a certain undertone, often an undertone of fear, guilt, pride, or gratitude. It is terribly tempting to teach worship with an undertone of guilt (“if you don’t do it this way, be shamed”), fear (“worship practices out there are pretty bad, and getting worse”), or pride (“how

fine indeed it is that we don't pray like those [fill in the blank] publicans"). But a gospel undertone for both worship and discussion about worship—even in the bleakest days—is most fittingly that of gratitude. Ultimately, gratitude itself is a gift we receive. We can't engineer it. But we can hope for it, pray for it, and celebrate it when it arrives, even in the middle of a college or seminary class. Two moves—from legalism to wisdom, from didacticism to doxology—set the tone for a more fruitful kind of learning environment, better attuned to the topic of worship.<sup>12</sup>

Some of my dearest friends and family members are pessimists, and they lose sleep at night worrying that because of the shape of today's young people, Christianity as a whole is on a downward spiral into a pit from which it will never recover. Similarly, many books about ministry begin by stating a problem and explaining how readers can fix that problem by mobilizing the forces or changing that one thing or overhauling an entire system. So a book about teenagers or a book about worship that starts by articulating a problem is not surprising. Writers have sold many books about youth ministry and worship ministry by articulating a gospel of fear: Christianity is languishing, and we should do something about it, like better mobilize our young people or change our worship style. This has been the practice of the church throughout much of the twentieth century, it seems, and more often than not, this practice has gotten us nowhere. It has hurt congregations and ministries of all shapes and sizes.

While I am aware of the challenges of the twenty-first-century church in the United States, I do not share their sentiments. I am optimistic when it comes to the faith of our teenagers, and I believe others should be as well. For instance, research shows us that rather than a 40 to 50 percent decline of teenagers in the church after college, there is hope of 50 to 60 percent of teenagers keeping the faith, and I believe this is the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ.<sup>13</sup> While it is true that the spiritual formation of teenagers is a challenge for the twenty-first-century church, within this challenge lies the immense hope that there are teenagers in your midst who love your congregation and its worship practices because they know them, they love the people associated with them, and they want to belong to and participate in your worshipping community with all that they are and all that they have to offer.

12. John D. Witvliet, "Teaching Worship as a Christian Practice," in *For Life Abundant: Practical Theology, Theological Education, and Christian Ministry*, ed. Dorothy C. Bass and Craig Dykstra (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 143–44.

13. See Kara E. Powell and Chap Clark, *Sticky Faith: Everyday Ideas to Build Lasting Faith in Your Kids* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), chap. 1.



In the same way, some children, young adults, middle-aged adults, and senior adults have yet to know those teenagers individually, but they love them simply because they are teenagers. Children can't wait to be them, and adults fondly remember when they were them. Whether those children and adults know it or not, those teenagers need them to be all in, 100 percent, worshiping alongside them, reminding them that they are known, loved, and have a purpose. Whether those teenagers know it or not, those children and adults need them to be all in, 100 percent, for the reminder that teenagers bring—namely, that the great God of the universe, who sent his Son incarnate to be born of a virgin teenager and empowered that same Son to preach in the synagogue and call adults to a new way of living and being in the world—is, by the power of the Holy Spirit, still calling the twenty-first-century church to a new way of living and being in the world. May this book inspire all of us to live into our baptismal vocation of loving God with our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and may it remind us to love our teenage neighbors as ourselves.