

Spiritually Vital and Alive: Contemporary Worship For UU Young Adults

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Faith Communities Today

The Faith Communities Today project, a 2000 study of congregational life in a number of U.S. religions and denominations, found a statistical correlation between UU congregations that describe themselves as “spiritually vital and alive” and UU congregations with high percentages of young adult members. Those congregations with large numbers of young adults were also more likely to describe their worship services as “inspirational and uplifting,” and having a “sense of God’s presence.” This shouldn’t surprise us, as it confirms the anecdotal evidence that young adults have been collecting for years—that young adults are attracted to worship with a palpable energy, in which their connection to that which is greater than them can be renewed. This is primarily what we mean when we challenge congregations to consider “contemporary” worship services to attract and retain young adults.

“My spiritual community gives me a sense of larger purpose. It’s easy to become so focused on politics, art and human relationships that one forgets the synchronicity of it all. Spiritual community grounds me, humbles me, and helps me remain open to mystery.” –Natalie Brewster Nguyen

Anecdotal Evidence: Young Adult Voices

What do young adults tell us that they want from worship? The answers will probably not surprise you. Young adults want worship that is relevant to their lives—to their experiences as well as to the turmoil and transitions that they are living with. They want a place where they can explore relationships, connect their values with their work, and ground themselves in community. They want a place where the best ideals of humanity are put forth as a challenge for all of society—justice, accountability, democracy, and equality.

Many young adults tell us that they also want something that fits their lifestyle and schedule. Often this means that Sunday morning is not when they want to worship. In addition to young adult-oriented Sunday morning worship, contemporary services have been successful on weekday evenings, Saturday nights, and Sunday afternoons and evenings. Planning a contemporary worship forces us to think outside of the paradigm that the “real” worship in our congregations takes place on Sunday mornings. Real worship can take place any time of the day or night, and on any day of the week.

Within one congregation, there just may be people who want to worship in different ways and at different times—and things other than Sunday morning worship are going to need to be in place to tie those people together into one community. Just as congregations with multiple services on Sunday morning have found, a congregational community is about overlapping circles of programming and people—and not just about one time and place, in one space designated the sanctuary or worship hall.

Most of all, young adults want to be invited—into worship, into relationship, into community, into membership in your congregation. Without that explicit invitation, they will largely assume that they are not who you are reaching out to, even if this assumption is wrong. Never underestimate the power of invitation.

“Young adults need acknowledgment that we exist, and the spiritual sustenance and sense of community that everyone needs, regardless of age.” –Anonymous UU Young Adult, responding to a 1997 survey.

Myths About Young Adult Worship

Along the way, we've heard a lot of resistance to worship aimed at young adults. Most of this resistance is grounded in a few myths about young adult worship. Let me address the ones we've heard the most often.

Young adult worship is not stupid. It is not a "dumbed-down" version of traditional Sunday morning worship. Among the most common misconceptions about contemporary worship is the notion that because it requires a different format—and because it challenges us to hear from more than one voice—it is somehow less intellectually rigorous than a traditional worship service. This is just not the case. The message is just presented in a different way—a way that keeps people's attention and brings them to a deeper place than most lectures do. Remember that a good deal of the young adults in your congregation will not be so far removed from sitting through endless boring lectures, whether in high school or college, and are probably not going to find them very spiritually uplifting.

Another common misconception is that the phrase "spiritually vital and alive" means that somehow we must abandon all hope of a message that is rational. Spirituality and reason can go hand in hand, and young adults do not ask for a religion that does not make sense to them based in their own experience. While spiritual questions aren't necessarily going to be scientifically provable, this does not make them less rational. Young adults, just like older adults, want worship that speaks to their experiences in life, that challenges them to develop deeper relationships, and that connects them to things that are beyond themselves—be that in human relationships, struggles for justice, or a connection with nature or God or any other profound mystery.

Contemporary worship is also not necessarily loud. Many people hear of worship services with a lot of music and think that it must be some sort of ear-splitting rock music. While this can be an enjoyable way to worship, it's not the only music that young adults find meaningful. Long periods of silent meditation, soft music behind a candle-lighting ritual, poetry readings, and well-written folk or jazz have all been parts of good young adult worship. Energetic and alive does not necessarily translate into loud.

Neither does it have to mean that the worship must come from a particular theology. While Christian movements, especially evangelical fundamentalist ones, have done a remarkable job in reaching out to young adults with exciting and vibrant worship, this does not mean that the energy or the feeling of those worship services is tied to their theology. Humanist calls to social justice, Buddhist lovingkindness meditations, pagan invocations and rituals, or Jewish litanies of atonement are all perfectly at home in a contemporary worship service. We must keep our worship services—including contemporary ones—diverse and welcoming.

Finally, contemporary worship services aimed at young adults need not—indeed should not—be irrelevant to people under 18 or over 35. Good contemporary worship services will attract people of all ages, and will challenge you to walk the talk of intergenerational religious community. You might need a Religious Education program during the service—or you might find that children would rather stay in the upbeat and welcoming space of your contemporary worship. You might need to form a Senior Citizens' dinner group to eat together before or after the service—I know a lot of 70 year-olds who enjoy a vibrant afternoon worship service. Don't be afraid of attracting a completely different—and completely diverse (in many ways)—crowd than the one that comes to your congregation on Sunday morning. That's what these services are for.

"Being UU allows me to feel spiritually challenged and respected. I can explore, change my mind, and ask questions knowing my path will be honored." – Reannon Peterson

A Multicultural Metaphor for Worship: Contemporary Worship as an Ethiopian Dinner

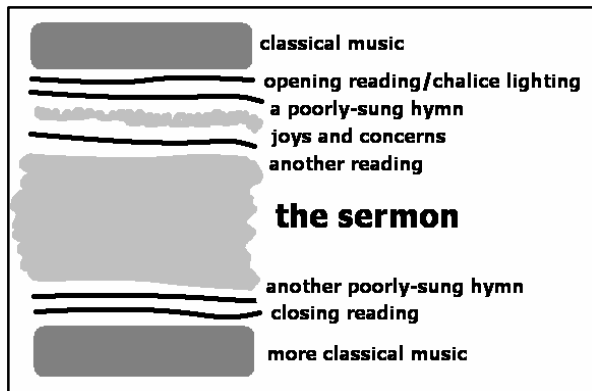


Figure 1: The Sermon Sandwich

I've been asked often for a simple explanation of the difference between traditional UU worship services and contemporary worship. Thinking about this in preparation for General Assembly 2003, it occurred to me that the answer was as close as the nearest Ethiopian restaurant.

Traditional UU worship services are often derisively called the "sermon sandwich." Thin layers of music and readings surround a huge chunk of sermon, given in one voice from one perspective (see Figure 1: The Sermon Sandwich). Even if your experience of traditional worship services is far more interesting and exciting than this picture (and I, for one, really love a good traditional worship service, and plan

them often when invited to preach), know that to many young adults, your delectable Sunday morning experience looks like a boring sandwich.

What then, are contemporary worship services? They are Ethiopian dinners (see Figure 2: A Contemporary Worship Platter). If you've never had one, please allow me to explain. In Ethiopian restaurants, dinner is served to the entire group on a large platter, lined with a spongy, soft pancake of bread called *injera*. All of the group's dishes, along with various delicious side items, are placed in piles on the *injera* for everyone to share. Each person is given additional *injera* with which to eat the meal (the food is grasped in small bits of this bread and eaten with the hands). Diners share dishes and eat delectable morsels of spicy, saucy food in manageable bites, skipping those dishes they don't like in favor of the ones they prefer. Each dish has its own unique spice and texture, and the meal is not over when they are done, for the spices and sauces from the dishes soak down into the bread lining the dish, leaving behind a delicious reminder of the tastes of the meal.

The first difference between the traditional and contemporary worship is a matter of spice. Contemporary worship at its best draws upon a rich, spicy and diverse set of experiences, and is presented with flair and excitement. While there are many people gifted at presenting exciting and interesting sermons, contemporary worship services are generally more energetic and engaging than the sermon sandwich, and draw from a broad and post-modern array of voices and perspectives.

The next important aspect of contemporary worship is the format. Unlike in the sandwich, in which the sermon is one large (and often indigestible) chunk, contemporary worship spreads the message out. There's not necessarily any less of it, mind you, but it's given in manageable chunks and intermingled with other things, and more balanced in proportion to those things. Music, readings, and candle lighting or dancing allow people with different ways of learning to hear the message better.

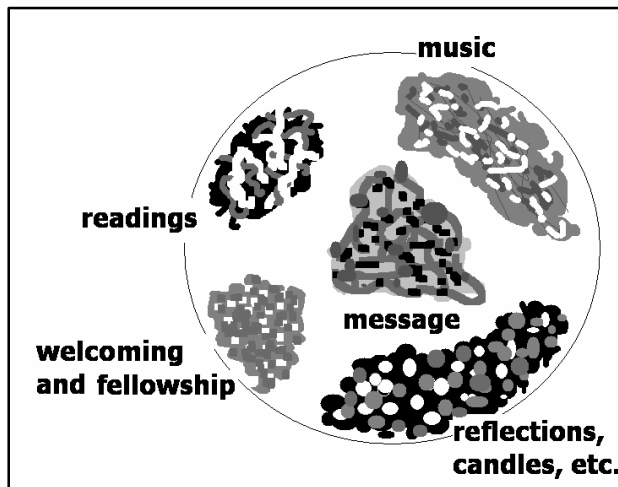


Figure 2: A Contemporary Worship Platter

Finally, the contemporary worship service almost never has only one voice in it. Like the Ethiopian dinner in which each diner's selections affect the whole group's meal, a contemporary worship service finds some way to hear from people beyond the person (or even the small group) who planned the service. Intimate circle worships (most appropriate with small groups unless you have hours to spend at them) let everyone have a turn to talk. Newer interpretations of this that are not bound by size allow more voices in creative and inviting ways. From inviting participation from a select (and diverse) group to designating "wild card" talking time, these services find ways to hear from more than one perspective.

To be sure, there are some things that both kinds of worship have in common. They both center on a message—a sermon or another kind of way to get a central theme across. They both are nutritious and filling to the spirit, and they both depend on the community gathered to make them whole. Contemporary worship in its various forms will, however, draw a different crowd—one that wants a different spiritual experience than the traditional Sunday morning UU variety.

Possibilities and Promises

Contemporary worship is within your congregation's grasp. It need not be a huge production, costing lots of money. It can start small, build community, and even have the exact same sermon as in a traditional service—just not all at once, perhaps. Congregations as small as 25 members have found that a monthly evening worship service with a contemporary format is not only possible, but energizes their whole community. All it takes is the commitment of a small group to get these services off the ground and invite people to them.

Young adults will bring many things to your congregation. Energy, passion, values, families, and money are just a few of the things you can expect from a group of young people for whom your congregation becomes a spiritual home. Change will come, as will challenge, and your work to include young adults will propel our movement into the future. We hope that you're ready for the ride.