

The Decline and Fall of Youth Worship - JASON CARSON

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The other day a youth pastor friend asked me a question that pinpoints a major shift that's changing his ministry landscape:

“How do I get my kids to care about worship? Nothing seems to be working.”

My friend is not alone—the “worship problem” is quickly spreading, and deepening, in youth ministry. The worship culture that formed the foundation for so many things we do now seems to be crumbling. As a longtime worship leader, working with teenagers to craft environments that invite their friends into a greater intimacy with Jesus, I've noticed three underlying problems that are fueling this shift. And I also see three solutions that address those problems.

Problem #1: A Fickle Fan-Base and an Over-Saturated Culture

Ten years ago, the landscape for worship music was radically different...

Most of our worship menu was served-up by Hillsong, Chris Tomlin, Matt Redman, and Tim Hughes. Everyone knew these artists, owned their CD's (remember those?), and felt connected to the exciting modern-worship era of the new Millennium.

Students used to be WAY more connected to worship artists and songs than they are now. They actually paid for their music (so there was a personal investment), and they would listen to whole albums in one sitting, from first song to last. They would even read the CD booklet for background on the artist—they wanted to know the people who were creating the music.

Today, if a group of teenagers is sitting around listening to music, they might not make it through one full song—they're “over it” quickly. And forget about listening to two songs by the same artist, on the same album. The insanity! It's common to see kids on their phones and iPods switching to something new with nervous-tick frequency. There are exceptions to this norm, but most kids are looking to move on to something new before they've enjoyed the moment that they are in.

Solution: Stay relevant, and focus on familiarity.

This hurdle is tough to clear. There's an over-saturation of worship artists and new songs coming out all the time—we've gone from a half-dozen “big players” to hundreds of niche artists producing tens of thousands of songs. The fire-hose of new music makes it very difficult to balance “keeping up” while planting a worship culture that's familiar to everyone.

So, if you're not your group's passionate “expert” on worship music, find the students in your group who are. Ask what they're into, then get suggestions for new and relevant worship music. When you do this, you just got major buy-in kids in your group, and that usually spreads to others! If no one is into worship music in your group, ask youth workers at other churches about which songs work best for the kids in their groups. If all else fails, just Google “top modern worship songs.”

Just like any other aspect of your ministry, you choose what kind of culture you'd like to create. I'd start with a foundation of three-to-five artists, and pick a maximum of 20 songs for the whole year. If you're teaching kids new songs every week by dozens of different artists, they're going to have trouble connecting. Remember, they're not really invested anymore—give them a reason to

be!

Problem #2: It's a Bored and Passive Generation

Our culture's attempts to make life simple and easier have resulted in the busiest generation in history—even so, it's also the most bored and passive generation in history? The new normal for raising kids is teaching them that everything is a choice—before they can even talk! Do you want the red cup or the blue cup? Do you want chicken or pizza? Do you want milk or juice? So, of course, the first time these babies don't get a say in the matter, they have a meltdown! They've been trained to insist on their way in every situation.

A decade or so later, we have a stream of young teenagers entering our ministries that believe they are captains of their own ships and queens of their own castles. If they don't like something, then they're over it. If they don't feel like doing something, they find something else to do. If they get a text they don't like, they avoid it. If it's hard work, well, there had better be a good incentive. Most teenagers...

- struggle to engage in deep relationships,
- have a hard time with conflict resolution,
- are weak face-to-face communicators,
- lack discipline, and
- are unable to slow down in life.

Solution #2: Teach them depth, and focus on relationships.

If you think you can keep your teenagers entertained better than the rest of their culture, forget it! Your students have more than enough content to fill a lifetime. But what none of these distractions can give them, you can—real relationships. Nothing substitutes for the love and care of a real human being. Jesus reminded us that nothing is greater than love. He created us for community and formed us for friendship. There's not a student on the planet who doesn't need to be loved, seen, welcomed, encouraged, challenged, built up, and prayed-for.

No matter how bored or passive your students seem to be, your hands-on commitment to them is never wasted. In a hands-off world, everything matters—all the phone calls, texts, trips to games or activities, outings, prayers, lunch runs, crisis interventions, and hang-out times. Believe it or not, your students will remember these human interventions into their stories their whole lives. Most have never been taught patience or perseverance, so they're used to people quitting if they don't get immediate gratification. Your perseverance with them will shock their soul and open them to Jesus. Model faithfulness and commitment. Sink your roots into their lives, and show your students that you'll be there for them, because Jesus is there for you.

And as you're building intentional relationships with your students disciple them in worship. When you're driving with them, play worship music. Talk about what you're listening to—give them the back-story of the artist, and ask questions about the lyrics. Describe why you love certain songs. Point to worship songs as a profound source of encouragement in your everyday life. To cement your advocacy, take a few students to a worship concert. Nothing compares with a live worship experience. And, of course, ask them to help lead the group into a deeper experience of worship.

Problem #3: We've Focused On the Wrong Thing

Youth ministry is wild, fun, crazy, and chaotic. It's also more unpredictable and experimental

than any other ministry in the church. We're experts on pizza parties, fun activities, big events, lock-ins, movie nights, game nights, root-beer floats, nachos, wacky videos, wacky leadership, and wacky lifestyles. We can watch Jimmy Fallon or a performer on Saturday Night Live do something, and skillfully copy it the next day.

But we can't copy Hillsong United or Rend Collective, no matter how hard we try. Sure, we can pour a lot of energy and creativity into a cool youth room, our stage may look hip and relevant, and even our worship team can look the part. Our screen technology might be cutting-edge, our lighting system calibrated just right, and our setting Pinterest-perfect. But we simply can't match the professional recording standards of recording artists. We don't have Phil Wickham as a worship leader, and it's not possible to match a professionally mixed recording. So don't kill yourself over all that stuff. Yes, strive for excellence. But never make it the point.

Solution #3: Teach them worship, and focus on the point.

Jesus said that a time is coming when the true worshippers will worship him "in Spirit and in truth." Worship is a lifestyle. Our students are on a journey, so don't give up on them! There was a time when worship didn't mean a lot to you—look where God has you now.

The word worship literally means "worth-ship." Show your group what Jesus is worth. Introduce them to his beauty. Teach a four-week series on why we worship. For those who don't want to sing, and them to look at the words on the screen and make the words their prayer. Challenge them to lay down their choices for a few minutes to focus on their connection to God. As they warm up to it, teach them about generosity in praise. Model the importance of being still, of a "broken and contrite heart." Invite them to do what all people have done for all time—use their bodies to express their "spiritual act of worship." Connect them back to their foundational purpose in life—to know Jesus and worship him with all their heart.

And don't forget—Jesus is the point of it all. So put down that pizza, we've got a God to worship! ?

Jason is a founding member of the seminal Christian ska band The OC Supertones, and he's a longtime youth pastor and worship leader in Southern California. He also leads workshops on building youth worship teams at our Simply Youth Ministry Conference.

The Problem(s) With Worship - By Chris Laws

I've been reflecting on the state of worship and youth ministry. Has anyone else has noticed a "stone wall" response from teenagers to current worship music? Over the last 10 years, I've seen a slow slide toward "tolerating" our worship time, rather than students who have a passion for it. They talk to each other during worship times. Others stand and stare, refusing to sing. And others just move their lips. It feels like the music of today is like old hymns to the last generation—pretty boring and uninspiring. So, why have so many of our students given worship the cold shoulder?

1. Musically, current worship music is out of touch with this generation. Most of today's Christian teenagers are not listening to CCM and modern worship music on their iPhones. When

worship was “hot” in ministry, we used contemporary music to help young people connect more deeply with God. But the music of this day is no longer rock-guitar-driven—it’s computer-driven. Is there anything in Billboard’s Top 100 that sounds like worship music?

2. Group singing has become an oddity in our culture. In what other environments do kids sing as a group? Well, maybe a performance group at school. But other than that... never. They don’t see church as a concert venue—that’s especially true with youth group, unless it’s a huge group. When I first started in youth ministry our kids were passionate about worship when they’d go on a retreat or at summer camp. And that passion often translated to youth group when we returned home, but not for long. Every year, it’s harder and harder to engage kids in worship, no matter what the context.

3. The format of the band doesn’t seem to matter. Even when we populate our worship band with youth, our students still talk and tune out during worship times.

4. Familiarity and applicability matter most. When we stick with specific songs (or meaningful songs from retreats or camps) we have the best chance of hooking our kids into worship. And when we choose songs that target pain, students seem to tune in. So I lead worship times that are focused on bringing our pain to God.

5. Alternative forms of worship or more experiential expressions seem to work better. Non-musical forms of worship seem to grab our kids. Lately I’ve had them close their eyes, and then I invite them to say things that are true about Jesus. I’ve also had good success with “worship stations” experiences—we’ve created themes like “Journey to the Cross” and meditative prayer times. Contemplative prayer really seems to work well with most kids in my group. And I have students listen to a song with the lyrics, then talk about it.

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I have some lingering questions I’m still wrestling with...

- Is the generalized boredom students have with worship simply the fallout from our emphasis on their “spiritual journey,” rather than an emphasis on the captivating beauty of Jesus?
- Do kids know Jesus well enough to worship him?
- Is worship just more background noise in students’ lives—do they need less noise of every kind and more quiet?
- If kids started writing worship music today, would it even be accepted in the church?
- If we emphasized praising God, as opposed to “worshipping” him, would this subtle shift guide students to focus on truths about Jesus rather than emotions about him?
- Are we simply living out the reality of Amos 5:21-24: “I hate, I despise your religious festivals; your assemblies are a stench to me. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them. Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!”?
- Will the new missional focus of the church bring a rebirth to worship? ?

Chris is a longtime youth pastor in New York state.

Creative Ways to Re-Engage Students In Worship

We have a trusted worldwide team of youth ministry advisors who are involved in everything we do at GROUP, and with our Simply Youth Ministry resources and Simply Youth Ministry Conference. One of our longtime team members, Jonathan Hale, recently posted a question on the group's private Facebook page:

I've had some complaints from the youth (some directly and some via parents) that they don't like the worship option I added to our Sunday night youth group last semester because they only like singing at camps, but not here. They said it's "awkward." Though I turned the volume up and never forced anyone to sing, it was still "awkward" for them. There are several who DO enjoy the worship time. Since it's my job to minister to all the youth, not only the ones who don't like it, I decided to offer both singing and a "creative worship option" on an every-other-week rotation.

For creative worship, I offer options. One group is learning an interpretive movement to "Alien Youth" by Skillet for our upcoming alien-themed lock-in. One group is learning sign language to a song our choir is doing in March. Another group will be learning a puppet skit, and another will be learning and practicing a dramatic reading for our local mission project next month. I have five or six students who aren't signed up for anything, and they're going to need something to do for the 20-25 minutes I've set aside for these worship experiences. What meaningful experience can I offer them?

- Melissa Rau—Check out Sacred Space by Lilly Lewin and Dan Kimball. I LOVE this book—it's full of great ideas! And you might expand your view on what worship is in the first place.
- John T Mulholland—The closest I've come to cracking the worship nut is when we watched YouTube lyric videos in our middle school ministry.
- Jay Higham—I think this is often a combined condition of personality and where they are spiritually. Some kids just don't like group singing, while others are quite comfortable with it. Other students might not understand worship and why it's important. I think a mix of teaching and understanding personalities might help. Find out why they "don't like it" or why it "feels awkward." I've learned that students respond better to the idea of worship when they understand it, have experienced a significant worship experience as at a conference or festival, and as the Spirit moves in their individual lives.
- Liz Simmonds—We sing every Sunday night for 15 to 20 minutes. Some students never sing—they just stand there. Others are all-in. A couple of the boys who don't sing say they still enjoy the experience; they just prefer not to sing. Another one waits in the hall because the noise is overwhelming for him.
- Jon Batch—Our younger students (7th-graders) enjoy the worship time, but older students (seniors mainly) don't. Most often, those who don't like to sing are the ones whose parents don't attend Sunday worship. I suggest injecting variety into the worship time, and teaching about worship as a lifestyle.
- Tom Fraser—I haven't been able to develop much of a music-based worship focus in my current youth group, so we've done something completely different—we use worship stations to engage them.

- Chris Bartley—We launched our new live youth band with three worship songs tonight. Up until now, we've used lyric videos from Interlinc (interlinc.com) and YouTube. Our students love to sing and dance together. We also watch videos we've made from past events that are relevant to the topic that we are discussing.
- Jonathan Hale—I am trying some new things, too. I've set up stations for silent prayer, to have them re-write or paraphrase hymns from the hymnbook into their own words, or a monument station where they read Joshua 4:1-7 then take a stone from a pile I have on the table as a memorial to something God had done in their lives. They can also sculpt something out of clay, draw something on our chalkboard wall, or journal. ?