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Making Joyful Noises: Christian Youth and Young Adults Reflect on Joy and Worship

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This essay explores the long association of joy with the Christian life, especially the joy performed and received in Christian worship. Yes, *joy*, the Spirit gift to an Easter People who together with the risen Christ and the company of saints sing unending praise and thanksgiving to God for God's unfailing embrace! The following pages draw upon lived experiences of Christian joy offered by adolescent and young adult partners of Duke Divinity School's Youth Academy for Christian Formation (DYA). Conversations with these young Christians reveal that, not only is joy a strong factor in their Christian experience, joy is also ingredient to their vocational awakening and lasting vocational fidelity.

Some contextualizing is in order beginning with a confession. The original architects of DYA (this author chief among them) did not set out to establish DYA as a community of joy. How could we forget that? We fancied ourselves part of a new breed of Christian youth workers deter- mined to overturn the late twentieth-century reign of entertainment-oriented, fun-and-games youth ministry. Instead, we adopted a strict rule of life for our two-week residential community; it would be patterned by liturgical practice and reflections upon baptismal theology. It even sported a dress code. We were determined to form serious Christians, capable of resisting (unto death!) the powers of consumerism, militarism, and the too-easy allegiance between church and state. Still, a funny thing happened on the way to costly discipleship. Our high school partners refused *not* to enjoy themselves. They shouted in unison "Christian Community is *Good*!" as we herded them like boot camp recruits through the impossibly rigorous daily schedule. They rewrote solemn Taizé chants to suit a sweaty (and smelly) afternoon of potato bagging for a local food bank.

> Po-ta-to in the bag,
> Po-ta-to in the bag,
> Twist it,
> Tie it,
> Al-le-lu-ia![1]

This infiltration of joy should have been a clue to the brain trust that "serious" discipleship formation need not preclude it. Alas, it wasn't until years later, after the author was invited to join a three-year Templeton-Funded collaboration sponsored by Yale Divinity School, that a reappraisal of DYA in light of Christian joy began. This scholarly consultation between practical theologians and youth workers around the subject of "Joy and Adolescent Faith and Flourishing" (JAFF) finally encouraged him to begin to sort out some of the overlap and difference between

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cultural happiness and Christian joy, the possibility of the coexistence of joy with suffering, and how the gift of divine joy might fund youthful resilience—even vocations. Additional fruits of this collaboration included a list of twelve "joy-enhancers" (sacramental worship being one of them) and twelve "joy-barriers."[2]

Aided by a small grant, the author spent the summer of 2018 as a participant-observer in the DYA community (a practice he'd engaged informally for the previous sixteen years) gathered at Duke Divinity School. He interviewed a group of high school students currently attending DYA and two groups of alumni/-ae, one consisting mainly of college students and young seminarians, the other of clergy and lay church workers under age thirty. In addition, together with film- maker Lauren Greenspan, he began the work of co-producing a documentary on the subject of joy and worship. Thanks to these many collaborators the result is a richer appraisal of practices of Christian formation at DYA and, in particular, how joy influenced by worship, may become constitutive of Christian life.[3]

Worship at DYA

Study participants' reflections on joy and its relation to worship joy did not arise in a vacuum. DYA's daily schedule features morning theological study elaborating upon baptismal themes, a separate gathering for liturgical catechesis and training for worship leadership, followed by afternoon practices focused on justice, creativity, and vocational reflection. Each day culminates with evening worship. Perhaps unlike typical youth-oriented worship, DYA follows a "Word and Table" pattern, meaning that worship always includes proclamation of and response to the scriptures followed by Holy Communion (known to some as the Lord's Supper or Eucharist). The word and table "heart" of our worship is preceded by a period of "gathering" and concludes with "sending forth."

Gathering is shorthand for the assembly's practices of coming together. It can be informal at DYA, a welcome into the presence of the triune God followed by songs of praise, or elaborate, as with processing behind a cross while hymning an ancient chant. Without fail the worshiping community of about sixty (approximately two-thirds youth and one-third adult) brings energy and anticipation to this gathering. Even as the four-fold worship pattern remains consistent throughout, it is enacted differently each day. Sometimes it feels like "call and response," other times it performs the highest of "high church," featuring smells, bells, and real wine. Each evening worshipers respond with delight to novel interpretations and performances of the pattern and in discovering other community members' willing (and often amazing) contributions of song, dance, testimony, and prayer. Young people's proclivity to passion adds to this sense of joyful anticipation and joyous worshipful practice.[4] DYA's gathering for worship is characterized by lively expectation that God will appear and act.

DYA worship always includes scripture reading (Old Testament, Psalm, Epistle, Gospel) and preaching. Proclaiming the Word and responding to it can take many forms—singing, drama, testimony, prayer, video, or dance. Youth participate together with adults in these practices of proclaiming and responding to the Word. For example, for a day featuring a pilgrimage with teach-ins, stories, and witnesses to the personal, relational, and social meanings of reconciliation in Christ, youth and adults together planned and led worship around that theme. An invited guest preached powerfully on how Jesus overcomes racialized, economic, and personal divisions. Then, following a pause to meditate silently on Christ's reconciling mission, worshipers were first shocked then delighted when worship leaders suddenly crashed through paper mural "walls" hung throughout the chapel, all while dancing and chanting: "Christ is Reconciler, Woot, Woot! Christ is Reconciler, Woot, Woot!"-- an acclamation taken up by the entire assembly. The last wall to fall revealed the prepared Table of the Lord. More joyous praise!

Gathering around the Table sustains this joy. The community confesses its sin before God and neighbor out loud and in public, then seeks to practice God's reconciliation through the sharing of Christ's peace with one another (we also call it "the hug-fest"), then joyfully sings a folk-mass

version of the Prayer of Great Thanksgiving over the gifts of bread and cup. Worshipers receive the consecrated elements at the front of the assembly from servers including youth themselves oozing hospitality. In this space worshipers may also pray before the Table, receive laying of hands for healing, or dip their fingers in the waters of the baptismal font.

At the conclusion of worship comes the benedictory exhortation to "Go forth to serve the Lord!" Often, this Sending Forth features worshipers processing behind the cross, dancing and singing their way out of the chapel accompanied by youth and adult musicians jamming on gui- tars, drums, horns, or even a string bass on wheels. Long time DYA director Alaina Kleinbeck describes this departure as "the eschatological dance party." It consumes more time each day, as if seeking to extend worshipful joy into all of community life.

Participants' Reflections

Participants widely concurred with the author's own sense of DYA's worship as joyous; yet nearly as many suggested that worship in their home communities was joyous, too. High school students initially characterized this joy as a "another [higher] level of happiness" and "something that's indescribably happy" related to ecstasy. The group quickly turned to scrutinizing this initial hypothesis, however. Other members reached toward distinctions between joy and happiness, saying that happiness can vary with circumstances but that joy "interlocks with hope" and "comes from God" implying permanence happiness lacks.

Worship was self-evidently joyous for teens because "we are in [God's] presence." This statement presumes that joy derives from God as a feature of the divine nature. In addition, some noted the reciprocity between divine gift and human effort: "[Joy] is a form of offering that we give to [God], like a thanks to God and, at the same time, it uplifts our soul." Another student, building upon this insight, agreed, adding, "It's like, 'Thank you God for everything you do' and it gives *us* joy as we do it."

Students perceived worshipful joy as a highly relational phenomenon as in this description from Chandra.[5]

> Worship makes you feel less alone … When I lift up my hands, it's mostly because either I realized I'm thanking God for what [God's] been doing [for me] … or I see the joy in everyone else and how they're singing and [they have] smiles on their faces and I see in that smile how God has worked in them; that they have experienced God's joy and it is sort of a unifying thing….

Anna also reflected at length on the communal nature of worshipful joy even as she mused on human suffering.

> Sometimes, you won't always wake up and feel like going to church, especially if something is going on or you lost someone. You won't always feel like praising God because you'll wonder, "God, why did I go through this?" There's something about getting around other people who might not be going through what you are. Something about being around people, who no matter what, they'll still give God their all. When they praise, they have that praise and energy you don't have right then. So it's difficult not to feel something. It's like their spirits, and their joy and that worship and that praise they're lifting to God, it's not just helping them, it's helping you. It's glorifying God. [God] honors that and says "Ok, you're trying and you're doing this and you're trying to connect and [and] despite how you feel [you're] coming to me." Being in the presence of all those people is going to get you where you need to be.

For Anna and others, joy is "caught" in communities of joy and offers uplift to worshipers who are troubled or suffering.

While individual high school students named their own idiosyncratic preferences for joy-enhancing worship practices (listening to singing, playing a musical instrument, testimony, being together with family, etc.), they all agreed that opportunities to lead community worship at DYA and elsewhere were occasions of personal joy. Speaking to vigorous nods of assent, one student described the joy of seeing DYA friends "taking part in the service." Their occasional "messing up" brought more joy, not less,

because it revealed the church as a "flawed place" where love prevails over pretense. Several young people expressed gratitude for the adults at DYA who prepared them for leadership roles in community worship through a blend of informal practice and confidence-building. Recalled one student who admitted to being anxious at the prospect of assisting in communion, "Rev. Julian showed me what to do and what to say, and then he told me, 'You got this.'"

When asked why they found liturgical leadership to be joyful, these high school students did not hesitate to link their leadership to the presence and activity of the joy-giving God. As if he still couldn't believe it, one young man volunteered, "I held in my hand the blood of Jesus Christ." Another young man described his "honor" at the invitation to be crucifer for evening worship, a role he'd never assumed before, but one he carried out with great solemnity. A young woman, seemingly exasperated by the interviewer's apparent incomprehension of this point, broke in to say, "you're doing the work of the *Lord!*" Abigail patiently explained: "There's something about serving the Lord with other people, I think, that … gives us joy. And I think it's a God- given gift. I don't have another explanation for it. There's something in [the practice of worship leadership] and … that's what we're all attributing our joy we found in worship to."

These students claimed to experience of the power of God's presence in the context of worship leadership, and, as we'll see below, this experience can be transformative for their vocational imaginations.

Students' high value of worship participation also impacted their views of worship at home. They rated positively local communities with first, high levels of congregational participation and, second, repeated invitation and support to students themselves to share their own gifts in worship. On the other hand, some students expressed frustration with worship that they perceived as enforcing congregational passivity and/or marginalizing them and their gifts. Even so, most were positive about their level of worship participation at home. Some went out of their way to laud congregations where they perceived their agency for worship was solicited and cultivated.

Young adult DYA alumni/-ae, having acquired lived experience and, in some cases, theological training and/or pastoral vocations, nevertheless tended toward descriptions of joy that were mostly continuous with their younger peers if more nuanced. They did offer starker contrasts between joy and happiness. They were more likely to describe joy as a "commitment," or a "posture" than in terms of emotional happiness. They stated that joy could be either a divine gift or a human phenomenon, the latter risking disconnect from its proper orientation. (Put plainly, they allowed that it was possible to rejoice for the wrong reasons.) They named the paradox of joy; believing it to be less a product of its own pursuit than a surprising side benefit of seeking the good for others.

Young adult alumni/-ae also voiced a greater number of significant barriers to joy in comparison to present DYA students. Keith, an African American pastor, named his and his community's generational struggle against racism as a barrier to joy. Several young adults mentioned the prevalence of anxiety and depression either personally or in the communities they serve as barriers. One protested the "church telling me I should be more joyful" as a form of manipulation.

These insights prompted deepened reflection on whether joy, suffering, and lament are related and whether they may coexist. Mary, a young seminarian, wrestled poignantly with these tensions:

> When someone dies, I would want to be sad. But when you think about their life or your relationship with them … . You're not happy, but it's more of a joyful feeling that you got the chance to experience this person, that you could share life with them. It's not the same as being happy, it's something that meets you. In the midst of crying and mourning, you're met with a smile.

With respect to worship, young adults offered more substantive theological reflections on joy than their younger peers. One participant alluded to the overflowing love of the Trinity, "uniquely present in corporate worship," as the source of joy. Another characterized worship as a "response to the Gospel, and that's a fundamentally joyful, joy-inducing message—that God

affirms us, God wants to be with us." They also tended to be more aware of barriers to joy in worship citing "being closed off" or "focused on ourselves" instead of God and neighbor, fear of vulnerability before God and others, and confusion about the purpose and meaning of worship. (They called out the prosperity gospel, for example.)

Pastor Keith also protested what to him seemed like a too narrow range of affective experience in his congregation in light of the suffering in black communities due to racialized violence.

> A number of Psalms used for worship, weren't always joyful. [They] were indictments on the character of God. We think sorrow lasts "but for a night," but "joy comes in the morning." So we [his community] put such emphasis on "joy comes in the morning," but are we really doing people a service by pushing joy and not allowing a time for weeping? I think about Good Friday in my context, even on Friday we want Jesus to *get up*. And we don't sit with the dirt and the death …"

Overall, these young adults pleaded for more authenticity in worship including greater transparency about the struggles of human life combined with honest acknowledgement of broken-ness. They felt practices of confession and lament were essential in order to legitimate expressions or experiences of joy. Implicitly criticizing the North American myth of self-suffi- ciency, they believed that confessing failure was critical to acknowledging dependence upon div- ine grace and provision, which they considered the precondition for receiving any of God's gifts including joy.

Similar to their younger peers but with the benefit of hindsight, young adult DYA alumni/ae described invitations to take up leadership in worship at DYA and elsewhere as vital to their vocational imagining. Their memories seemed powerfully fresh on this point. A young pastor said, "I still recall sitting in a session on liturgy and what liturgy is eleven years ago hearing the instructor say, 'now this is the work of the people.'" That insight, he reported, led to deepening participation in worship accompanied by growing love for it. Another collaborator noted half-apologetically, as if he were stating the obvious, that DYA was the place he "realized that for worship to happen, somebody has to plan it, put the effort into it, then lead it." He went on to say, "when you give us, meaning youth and college students, the burden/ responsibility, then by necessity, we [become] the leaders. College freshman Beatrice enthusiastically concurred.

> [At DYA] we had worship workshops every day. There's actually a structure [of worship]. We did that. Then, [our instructor] was like "now you've learned it. Now you do it." I was like "I don't know what to do." Of course, we had to plan it out and talk with others that we're going to do it that way or this way.

> I think for me it really sent me down the path of just loving worship. I came back from DYA and started to [help] plan worship every week. I just fell in love with the four-fold [pattern], plus the revelation and response pattern, it was just mind blowing to me. Yeah, it was definitely life-changing. It helped me to learn to be more active in worship, and [I] brought that back to other people as well.

Pastor Kimberly described her own participative leadership in her congregation from childhood forward. She began by explaining that because there were few children in her church, adults "really valued young people participating in worship." Kimberly enjoyed that role.

> But at DYA when we sort of had that first little push toward understanding [of] theological foundations [for worship] balanced with [leadership] training and mentoring … that was a springboard for me. And I did not know what was happening to me, had no idea.

> In college I [became] the chapel coordinator. And all of a sudden … I was just in love and obsessed with worship. And all the different components to it. And I was reflecting again, in my current [ministry] appointment, [on] what happened at the end of high school that just really made it so that I couldn't *not* do this. Like I can't *not* plan worship. I can't *not* be in worship every week.

All in their own ways describe great joy in leading worship, in discovering some of the deeper keys to worship, and in planning to share the gifts of worship with local assemblies.

Summary of Findings

The goals of this research were modest. As previously stated, it sought to describe a specific context for worship and then inquire what worshipers made of it. The first and most basic insight is this: what moved, looked, sounded, and felt like joyful worship to the author as participant/observer in the midst the DYA community was described by others in similar terms. Nor was this joy an isolated phenomenon uniquely attributable to an "elite" program housed in the rarified envir- onment of a university divinity school. Study participants claimed to receive joy in their worship at home, too.

Second, it was self-evident to youth and young adult participants alike that this joy was attributable to God's presence in worship. Because God's character includes joy, they reasoned, God's presence immerses worshipers in divine joy. Yet our conversation partners also demonstrated awareness of the reciprocity between their obligation to worship and the reception of joy. "You have to show up," one observed, in order to receive divine grace. Human agency plays a necessary though not by itself sufficient part in joyful worship.

Third, study participants allowed for the possibility that the practice of making a joyful noise even when feeling less than joyful can assist worshipers in coping with or even healing from suf- fering. Young adults were slightly more reticent about this claim, expressing caution about the dangers of communal manipulation, for example. Yet even Pastor Keith, who criticized his com- munity for practicing joy while neglecting the pressing realities of suffering, did not challenge the Psalmist's ultimate trust (and eschatological hope) that joy *will come* in the morning.

Fourth, the conversation groups voiced a common conviction that joy and worship are not adequately described in transactional terms. No one said "I go to worship so God can fill my tank with joy." Instead, they described their experience in quasi-sacramental language of *participation* in divine joy. This conviction was evident in the awe expressed by crucifer and chalice bearer at their perceived proximity to divine presence. Others voiced their delight at "God using me" to lead communal worship through a variety of practices. They were very aware, some for the first time, that they were participating in *divine* action.

Finally, each of the young pastors and several other young adults contributing to the study described planning and leading worship as central to discerning calls to ministry. One described these practices as being given "the special sauce" that gradually flavored her entire life. All agreed that that they continue to find joy in these practices which, in turn, sustains them in their ministry vocations. The first half of Frederick Beuchner's definition of vocation pertains here: study participants were describing the "deep gladness" (what we are calling *joy*) that fuels their vocations and provides confirmation that they are acting within God's will.[6]

Implications

DYA was developed to assist young people's faith formation and vocational discernment. Originally, it identified powers beyond the church (e.g., consumerism, racism) and powers within the church (e.g., marginalization of youth, inadequate discipleship) whose own (de-) formational agendas threatened their flourishing. Its proposed remedy was vigorous, disciplined, intentional Christian community where the full ecology of Christian practices, including especially worship, could exert their formational impact while simultaneously providing the contexts for students to learn Christian language and to reflect theologically upon Christian life (as well as threats to and distortions of it). Joy was a null curriculum, in part because it seemed to leaders at that time that it would just be one more warm and fuzzy domestication of youth ministry.

Thematizing joy as a legitimate expression of this community's life together has helped the author and others to more fully appreciate that serious youth ministry required not only cultivating capacities in youth for disciplined critique of—or resistance to—the powers, but awakening their hearts to

the goodness of God, delight in divine presence, and hopeful trust in God's promises. This is not to dismiss the powers that hover over youth as inconsequential; racialized violence threatens to eclipse the possibility of joy for many teens while endless meritocratic striving makes receiving the gift of joy nearly inconceivable for others.[7] But if worship contains a "special sauce" it is not found finally through withdrawing, shielding, criticizing, or resisting, it consists instead in the Spirit-prompted intimacy of joining the liturgical assembly to God and others, of worshipful vulnerability including confession and lamentation over sin that permits dependence upon divine love and rejoicing in the possibility of new life, and of graced participation in that love such that God's desires transform worshipers' own.[8] These liturgical dynamics operated right under our noses for two decades! If, therefore, the church hopes to renew itself through forming faith in its young people, it too will find ways to recover the joy at the heart of its worship, to notice and appreciate it for the singular and valuable gift that it is, to perform it in the vernacular of youth, and even to amplify it so that young love may be drawn to its proper ends.

Yes, youth need to participate in liturgical joy as a means of receiving God's grace, they need that *joy, joy, joy, joy down in their hearts*. Paradoxically, however, these same young people so deeply in need of joy, may also be best able to mediate it to their worshiping community. As the essay suggests, developmentally speaking, youth lead with their hearts; they are primed for pas- sion, they're a party waiting to happen. We might claim, therefore, that youth are especially well- tuned to joy, that they possess a charism for joy seeking to propel them toward vocations of joy.[9] When youth's passion finds itself juxtaposed to the passion of the life, death, resurrection of Jesus, fireworks ensue! Worship becomes an *event*. Congregations ought therefore locate youth at the center of their worship in order to recollect and recover joy as a principle gift of God to the church. In other words, congregations need young people's propensity to joy to remind them of the church's identity as an Easter people. Worshipful joy mediated through youth is key to the vitality of church's witness. Youth are essential to the church's becoming what the triune God intends for it. The answer to the "problem" of youth participation in congregational worship, therefore, is not to send them to the balcony or Sunday School—or even to Starbucks; it is to
find ways to welcome and set loose their passion for joy in the assembly.

Finally, we urge faith communities to find more ways to invite youth into the liturgical kitchen where they may stir that special sauce and add their own spice to it. Guided by experienced chefs who've cooked up a lifetime of liturgical faire, youth will learn to taste and see God's goodness, to depend upon divine provision, to find strength for the journey, and to rejoice in joyful abundance.

Notes on Contributor

Fred P. Edie is an associate professor of Christian education at Duke Divinity School. His latest publication, coauthored with Mark Lamport is *Nurturing Faith: A Practical Theology of Christian Education* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, forthcoming).

Notes

1. Sung to the tune for the Taize hymn, "Laudate Dominum." See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mwRMT2_pi9c.
2. Readers interested in the connections between joy and youth ministry will find a number of videotaped lectures by prominent scholars on the subject at https://faith.yale.edu/adolescent-faith-flourishing/yale- youth-ministry-institute-lectures. For a fuller treatment of biblical, theological, and liturgical considerations of joy and worship, see Fred Edie and Alaina Kleinbeck, "Christian Worship: Dancing in the Joy of the Trinity" in *Joy: A Guide for Youth Ministry*, ed. David White and Sarah Farmer (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2020). See also the brief video: Fred Edie and Lauren Greenspan, producers, "Joy and Youth and Worship" at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ItNrU_Djo74 and other resources for youth and worship at https://www.youtube.com/user/YouthMinistryNowYMI.

3. Permission to conduct this research was granted by the Duke University Internal Review Board in June, 2018. Research collaborators joined one of three conversation groups including six to eight participants each. The research facilitators employed a guided conversation methodology focused upon creative/critical reflections the groups constructed together. These conversations were videotaped and transcribed. Current DYA students ranged in age from fifteen to eighteen. Participating DYA alumni/-ae fell between the ages of eighteen and twenty-eight. Individual students and staff were also interviewed for possible contributions to the documentary film. Female subjects slightly outnumbered males. Students, staff, and alumni/-ae of color slightly outnumbered white participants. Collectively, study participants likely represent the "highly devoted" cohort of North American Christians. This was an ecumenical group representing diverse denominational and non-denominational traditions. All shared in common participation in DYA's worship-centered communal life, exposure to its process of theological reflection on practices of community life, including exposure to practices of vocational discernment and formation. Ten to fifteen percent of DYA alumni/-ae describe themselves as called to or currently engaged in vocational ministry.
4. I am deeply indebted to JAFF colleague Kenda Dean, whose theological anthropology of adolescence envisions their near limitless passion as the key to their communion with Jesus Christ. Only Christ, suggests Dean, manifests passion capable of embracing and transforming the passion of teens. See her *Practicing Passion: Youth and the Quest for a Passionate Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), esp. chaps. 1 and 2.
5. Pseudonyms are employed for study participants.
6. "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and world's deepest hunger meet." Frederick Beuchner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 95.
7. See David White, *Practicing Discernment with Youth: A Transformative Approach* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2005), chap. 5. White demonstrates the use of liberative pedagogies with youth for transforming racist and consumerist structures. See also Brian Mahan, "Advanced Placement in the Kingdom of God," in *Awakening Youth Discipleship: Christian Resistance in a Consumer Culture,* ed. Brian Mahan, Michael Warren, and David F. White (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2008), chap. 5.
8. The phrase "intimacy of joining" is inspired by Willie Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011). "Transformation of desire" comes from James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009).
9. The author is indebted to JAFF colleague David White for linking joy to the vocation of youth.