



YOUTH DAY (YOUTH AND CHARACTER)

CULTURAL RESOURCES

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I. Youth Day Past and Present

Youth Day has traditionally served as the one Sunday (either monthly, quarterly or annually) set aside to celebrate the achievements and contributions of the portion of the congregation that ranges in age from middle school to high school/college years. Though the actual programming associated with this day varies according to denomination, size of congregation and the strength and vision of the youth ministry, universally this Sunday reflects the passing of traditions to the next generation and the opportunity for these practices to be redefined, or “loosened,” to reflect the energetic nature of the age group. It is largely believed within the black church that the future and vitality of the church lies in its regeneration through youth and young adults. But, in the years following the civil right movement, churches have found it increasingly difficult to attract and/or retain young parishioners. So, traditional programs that once attracted youth to churches have given way to new initiatives.

With the expansion of Youth ministries beyond the traditional programs such as Vacation Bible School, BTU (Baptist Training Union) and Young Disciples in Christ, Youth Sunday has also become the source of controversy within the body of some churches.

The inclusion of hip hop, urban contemporary gospel styles and other secular cultural forms into worship practices have polarized some congregations and raised questions about discretion and limits in trying to attract young parishioners. The same types of questions were raised when gospel music was introduced to the church. The inclusion of secular-derived culture in Youth Day celebrations is not simply a ploy to attract younger parishioners, but it reflects a greater transition in the ministry and theological perspectives of Youth Ministries. The burden of the contemporary church-based youth ministry is how does one balance the traditional teachings (i.e., Ten Commandments, The Lord’s Prayer, the Beatitudes) with the overwhelming need to address the cultural issues that youth face within the context of their everyday lives (i.e., drugs, incest, rape, murder). Many ministry leaders have abandoned the traditional verbiage of “just say no” and adopted Bible-centered, practical and frank strategies that address these issues head-on. In addition to these efforts, many Youth Ministries have sought to make the music, dance, and poetry of this generation a means of not only transcending their experiences, but also a means of “testimony.”

Traditionally Youth Sunday involved young parishioners reading the scripture, serving as worship leaders, ushering, and singing. In the case where a guest Youth Minister is not invited to deliver the sermon, churches will sometimes select one or more of their own parishioners to render a testimony or sermonette. While these practices are still evident in many churches, in others they have given way to new forms of youth-centered worship. Hip hop dance crews, gospel rappers, coupled with a party-like atmosphere, have become the new ways in which churches have provided Christian youth alternatives to current popular culture trends (some of which are patently negative), and in some instances Youth Sunday is the culminating event in a weeklong celebration that may include guest ministers, skate parties, and lock-ins. Youth Sunday in the ritual life of the black church remains one of the main ways in which young parishioners transition into the service life of the church and learn how to live Christian lives.

II. Testimonies about Working with Youth

Within the body of the church, there are a number of people who weekly devote their time, talents, and efforts to advance the dreams, aspirations and talents of the youth within their churches and respective communities. Most, if not all, draw from their own experiences with the church as youth as the basis of their current work and see this as an investment in the life of the church and community. The first testimony comes from Deliika Blackwell, ministry leader of the Daughters of Praise, a liturgical dance ministry at the Mt. Moriah Baptist Church in Cincinnati, Ohio. Much of her work with the young women of the community is inspired by her own experiences—good and bad. She has sought to be a confidant and mentor to young girls whose experiences are as diverse as America itself. For the past six years, Deliika has created a church-based ministry that works to build the self-esteem of young girls and provide them with a strong spiritual foundation. Her work has not, however, been confined to Mt. Moriah. For the past fifteen years, she has worked as a cheerleading coach for the community little league football team. Her efforts in this capacity have garnered a number of success stories, including young girls who have gone on to college. Blackwell’s testimony offers some insight to

her experiences with Youth Day while she was growing up and her role with the youth today.

(a) Deliika Blackwell

“Youth Day was always a big day in our church. We (the youth) looked forward to it. Unlike today, back then, Youth Day was held once every month. It was our opportunity to show the congregation all that we had learned. It was the time that the youth choir sang the best three songs we had. If you were an usher, you put on that navy skirt and white blouse and did your thing. That was the day we knew we got to lead the prayer and do everything. We even had a youth minister. It was the one time when it was all about us. But now-a-days, in many places it’s only once a year. The youth have nothing to really invest in sometimes. One of the biggest problems with youth ministry is that the youth don’t get to voice what their needs are. Their needs are not being met. I’ll speak for my community. There is very little for them to do during the week. We want them to show up on Sunday morning, but have nothing for them during the week. Why can’t there be a youth poetry night? A Bible study just for them? We want youth to come on Sundays and even then we just lump them into one group with no age appropriate activities.

“And the reaction of some older members, even on Youth Sunday, has been disconcerting. Because there are no on-going efforts to include the youth in the church, there’s limited and uninspired participation. Youth only seem to get excited when there are activities involving hip hop styled movements or songs. While I understand the attraction to hip-hop and the desire by youth to express themselves in their unique ways, I think the use of hip hop sometimes sends mixed messages. And it can intensify the existing generational divide in some churches.

“I’ve learned that the biggest thing with this current generation of tweens and teenagers is keeping them motivated. I wouldn’t say they’re a lost generation; it’s just hard to reach them. I have been working with a youth-based liturgical dance ministry for the past six years at Mt. Moriah Baptist Church in Lincoln Heights, one of the oldest-black suburbs outside of Cincinnati, OH. We were started because the church didn’t have any form of dance and the pastor had been exposed to liturgical dance. He was interested in seeing dance performed at the church during the worship service. Since it hadn’t been done in the church and a lot of older members frowned upon dancing at that time, I was a little apprehensive. I did not know anything about praise dancing at the time. So I enlisted a friend who had been doing it for seven years to help me.

“From the beginning, it was started as a ministry with only one age restriction. Participants had to be at least six years of age. Now I have dancers from age six to thirty-nine. In the early years, there were just two adults--me and another woman who helped me organize the ministry and danced as well. At that point, our youth were used to seeing ministries start and just disappear. In order to show we were invested, we danced as well. The girls came out to the ministry right away. It started with seven or eight girls who were between six and ten years old. The congregation was in awe the first time we danced. It wasn’t anything that they had expected. I remember one of the older members telling me, ‘you really looked professional.’

“But dance is only part of my ministry’s focus. I started out wanting to develop a relationship with girls. Letting them know that there was a safe haven for the youth. So that they could always have someone they could trust. I’ve watched one girl in the dance ministry go from age nine to eighteen. She’s had a baby during this period, now works a job, and is graduating from high school. She’s going to college next year. She’s still a part of the ministry, although most would not see her as being a part of the youth ministry. I made sure that while she was pregnant she could still participate and not be shunned because of her pregnancy. The Pastor agreed with my decision, and I think that has kept her in the church. She works in the church, dances in the ministry and her daughter loves coming to church. I have watched a lot of the participants grow from young girls to women. It is my hope that these young ladies get a true sense of who God is in their lives. So many times we wait until we are twenty-five or older to begin a relationship with God, but I want these girls to have a true relationship with God, to know who he is, and for them and to do it in their most formative years.”

A Male Perspective on Working with Youth

Young men are disappearing rapidly from churches and youth ministries. As many churches struggle to find initiatives that will appeal to black males across different age ranges, there are individuals who are devoting their extra time and talents to the mentoring of young black men. Michael Kernodle, a 31 year-old, college educated musician, currently teaches at the Ashbury School of Music in Durham, North Carolina, and he is a member of the music ministry at World Overcomers Christian Church in the same city. In addition to his work in the music ministry at his church, he also mentors a number of young men in his community and his church. In this account, he talks about his work with some young men in his church, as well as his work in the larger community. He also speaks about his church’s approach to youth ministry, and how it is impacting not only the larger community of youth, but also his son Xavier.

(b) Michael Kernodle

“I’m working with this young boy now who is Puerto Rican. His family has just moved to Durham. I have been spending a lot of time with him, talking and trying to get him on the right road. He’s a good kid. He prays, really knows his Word and is trying to do right, but he has problems sometimes. What I’ve found in working with young men is that communication and consistency are key. Young men want to know someone cares about them. That someone is listening to them. They will cling to or be attracted to young guys who are doing something but not the untouchable, elitist type of brother. They want to bond with someone who is down-to-earth. I am into music, so I use that as a tool to bond with younger brothers. I gave the young man I am mentoring some Tye Tribbett cds. He had never heard that type of gospel music, and he loved it. I gave it to him because I wanted him to have a different perspective on being saved. You don’t have to be stuck up to be saved. You can be saved and have fun. But you have to be real. I have to be real/ authentic in the way I live. It is a real let-down for a young boy if a youth minister or mentor falls or does something crazy. As adults we would just say—‘Ok he made a mistake.’ But it is a serious blow to a young boy’s faith and belief in adult Christians if

the person who has been telling him how to live fails. It's all about accountability, spending time and connecting.

“And for me it extends beyond the church. For instance, recently I was in Dollar General and there was this guy in line in front of me. He looked old enough to be out of school, but the cashier asked, ‘what are you doing out of school,’ and he started to tell this story. He said he went to school and there were these guys who were going to jump him. He went to the principal’s office and was told that if he got into a fight he would be suspended from school. So he decided to just leave school and go home. I was like what? So when I got outside I talked with him and tried to give him some advice. You see these young boys out here aren’t thinking about their future. They’re not thinking about their aspirations, or what they want to do with their lives, about going to college. They are thinking about survival—living today, surviving today. Most of them don’t have a male presence in their lives. They are living with grandmothers or mothers. Some are living in two-parent homes but that can still be a bad situation. So they need that outside presence, that outlet. It’s just getting them to choose the right outlet and not the street and drugs.

“As far as our youth ministry, our church does a mission trip to Jamaica and similar places to show kids how blessed we are here in America, to teach them compassion, and how to be world changers. The Youth Ministry also does a lot of their programming on Wednesday nights. The youth will do praise and worship with us (adults) then participate in their own activities. They have events and discussions about how the Word relates to their problems. Our church isn’t an old school church. The adults do not do everything and push the kids to the background. They are really involved. They let youth serve. The youth ministries are for kids aged ten to 17, and the activities are age specific. From their attendance the kids really like the activities.

“They really invest in the youth at this church. We invest money because these youth are the future of the church. We can’t expect them to turn 18 and 19 and begin doing church and community work if we have not trained them. The church needs to have a mentoring atmosphere such as you would have on a job. It’s like having someone following you around as they learn. Let them see what you do and then if they are impressed by you, they are inclined to do as you do.

“Now when my son Xavier comes to worship, they have their own children’s church. They do praise and worship too, or at least they are learning to. So Xavier, who is only eight, is not afraid to sing a gospel song and raise his hands—that’s great to me. He won’t be afraid to serve in church when he’s 18 or 19. They even teach the youth about money. They are given Bible Bucks and taught how to manage money. They receive money for learning scriptures, and performing other tasks. Then they can buy things from the church’s store. They can buy books, CDs, Play Stations, and even bikes. They are learning to earn and save their money. The church is investing in all facets of their lives at an early, early age and that is what it takes to reach them and keep them.”

III. Songs for this Moment on the Liturgical Calendar

My Story

I thought my testimony was less than holy/ I thought I was less blessed than my homies
Just confessing only the big sins/ I thought that was a badge of honor
I thought that I had to have a story that was packed with drama
But I ain't ever been shot, no big crimes, never smoked weed, never drank/
I never did time, I grew up with both parents both cheering me on, teaching me basic
things like no swearing (no swearing son)
It's so apparent I came up in the church; socially this is where I got my worth

Learned to pray and assert myself for God displaying its worth
Upon living without playing in the earth/ just the average kid
You know the type that likes to play in the dirt/ came home with dirt stains on my shirt
Reciting the same old verse/ at the table no games no hurts
And I knew I was called before the day of my birth/ and it's like that

I ain't got no horror story/ God kept me in my youth I give him all the glory
I thought my story didn't flow/ but now I know the blood of the Lamb has saved my soul
And that's my testimony

I ain't no gangster/ I ain't tough cause of rap/
Never been cuffed and stuffed in the back of a paddy-wagon
I ain't never cussed in my raps/ I started gospel most ain't accustom to that
Let me get back, when I was young I used to think I was corny
Cause I ain't grow up in the projects drinking a 40
And I ain't never had no thug dude sneaking upon me
And every buddy had the name brand sneakers before me
And it made me really mad but as I bugged my mom and pops taught me never to chase
silly fads

They told me focus and bought me note books
I really had brilliant parents they introduced me to Billy Graham

See I ain't got no horror story/ God kept me as a buck I give him all the glory
In high school all the pretty girls ignored me called me church boy
I wasn't bothered normally though/ Sometimes I would hate living the life of a saint
They saw the Christian boy and light right from the gate
Thought I would preach so they tried to escape but I guess that's just the price of
pronouncing your faith, and it's like that

Don't get me wrong I'm not saying I'm perfect
Matter of fact I took thoughts conveyed about cursing
I was saving my pain/ it was worse than it should have been man
I was ashamed just to say I'm a virgin/ plus I was too afraid to admit I was a Christian
I spent most of those days trying to prove I was hip/ plus trying to prove I was cool
Trying to move like a pimp/ my testimony wasn't cool enough yet

Then I came to my senses/ I put my brain to the scriptures
Thought of how Christ was blameless to sinners
He didn't grow up on the corner fornicating with sisters
A good Jew grew in favor of wisdom
That gave me relief/rearranged my belief no longer thinking what I'm saying is weak
I ain't never been sprayed in the street but saved by his grace plus raised to my feet
And it's like that.¹

Imagine Me

Loving what I see when the mirror looks at me cause I/I imagine me
In a place of no insecurities/And I'm finally happy cause
I imagine me
Letting go of all of the ones who hurt me/Cause they never did deserve me
Can you imagine me?/Saying no to thoughts that try to control me
Remembering all you told me/Lord, can you imagine me?

Over what my mama said/And healed from what my daddy did
And I wanna live and not read that page again
Imagine me, being free, trusting you totally finally I can...
Imagine me

I admit it was hard to see/You being in love with someone like me
But finally I can...
Imagine me

Being strong/And not letting people break me down
You won't get that joy this time around/Can you imagine me?
In a world (in a world) where nobody has to live afraid
Because of your love fears gone away
Can you imagine me?

Letting go of my past/And glad I have another chance
And my heart will dance/'Cause I don't have to read that page again

Gone, gone, it's gone, all gone.²

Notes

1. My Story. By Da T.R.U.T.H. Open Book. Deptford, NJ: Cross Movement Records, 2007. Youtube: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7npAuJ_FPZc
2. Imagine Me. By Kirk Franklin. Hero. New York, NY: Zomba Gospel, 2005.