

# DISCERNMENT

*Theology and the Practice of Ministry*

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## Book Review: Worship with Teenagers: Adolescent Spirituality and Congregational Practice

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# DISCERNMENT

*Theology and the Practice of Ministry*

## Book Review

*Worship with Teenagers: Adolescent Spirituality and Congregational Practice*, by Eric Mathis. Baker Academic, 2022. 243 pages, \$17.00.

*Reviewer: Chelsea Flow Stirman*

*Worship with Teenagers* takes on the daunting task of creating a holistic picture of this subject: historical and cultural developments, theological considerations of different models, psychological and social aspects of teens themselves, and a vision for a way forward. Author Eric L. Mathis builds on research and work of a wide range of scholars to answer the seemingly simple question: “What happens when teenagers are intentionally engaged in the worship life of a congregation?” (p. 2).

To answer this question, this book works through historical trends (across most of the major denominations) in engaging adolescents in church as a whole. From Sunday schools, to bringing instruments into the Sunday morning service, to conferences, adults fearful of “losing” the next generation from church innovated a variety of ways to make church relevant and desirable to teens and young adults—often to the detriment of the gospel message. “Youth ministry sold Jesus to adolescents because it was relevant, entertaining, and they would ‘get something out of it’” (p. 164). Mathis points out that the development of age-specific ministries was undertaken without much theological basis and, in the most segregated instances, has begun to show cracks in terms of its efficacy and adherence to biblical examples.

Similarly, models used to include teens have often had shallow premises and fall short of actually incorporating them deeply into the life of the church. Having teens silent but present in adult-oriented settings fails to transmit the formative nature of worship, “Youth Sundays” err toward tokenism and performance, and having teen-specific worship as the exclusive setting separates them from the congregation and leaves them disenchanted with something so different from their experience when they age out. Attempts to innovate worship quickly to simply appeal to younger

people fail because they fail to ask what true worship must include and who it hopes to form its participants into. “Worship examined in the short term without a nod toward the long term is bound to present an incongruent vision of the Triune God, God’s people, and their call to be the hands and feet of Christ in the world” (p. 83).

Fortunately, Mathis does offer a way forward that involves deep theological reflection, intentional actions, and a vision of worship that becomes more formative for all—not just teens. Beyond even intergenerational ministry, which gathers all generations in the same spiritual setting, he proposes adoptive ministry, which invites each generation to share their practices, hospitality, and styles with each other for the mutual edification of all. “If congregations are willing to cultivate an understanding, a vision, and empathy toward the promises and challenges of all generational cohorts—especially adolescents—the church will find itself raising a generation of worshipers who later contribute to the renewal of the church at large” (p. 128). He explores how congregations can create opportunities for true leadership and ownership for teens and how rehearsing the story of God and engaging traditional and historical practices can share space with artistic, expressive, and dynamic forms of worship.

Despite the sheer volume of topics covered in this book, its strongest success is in the way of practical guidance. Without offering specifics that would translate differently across different contexts, Mathis lays out how a church might move toward the holistic vision of adoptive ministry, which masterfully considers how to bring along those who could be a source of interference.

Holding sound theological reflection at the center, rather than as an afterthought after change has been implemented, he ties together various models and methods to invite all members of a congregation, including teens, into a meaningful shared worship experience. He says, “I think we can do real reflection on the practice of ministry and the young people to and with whom we minister by reclaiming the holistic picture that practical theology calls ministers to engage in experience that leads to reflection that leads to action that leads to new experience” (p. 212). Mathis does an excellent job of pointing toward a path that balances adherence to Scripture and formation and how that looks lived out.

There were places throughout the text that could have benefitted from being narrowed. Some readers will find that the fifty-page historical chapter, while doing a thorough job of examining how current circumstances were developed, could have served the same purpose with a

condensed summary connected with the same reflection and interpretation. The work tends toward reading like a survey rather than a deep dive on a core topic because of all the different strands of the larger concept of worship it pursues. While naming that worship doesn't happen just within a sanctuary on a Sunday morning and looks different across different cultural experiences can be important asides in dealing with a topic like this, these tangents became a distraction since most of the work focused on the corporate worship experience.

Overall, *Worship with Teenagers* is a groundbreaking exploration of an often undervalued practice in the church. Though it might age out of relevance like the practices it details, it will stand up through time as a useful snapshot of both past and present states of worship. Moving from anxiously putting on performances to retain teens to faith toward a thoughtful practice of drawing all generations into shared life together is a necessary message for any worshiping community. In my own context as a family minister, I am going to request that our worship leaders read this book together to talk about the larger work of revitalizing worship faithfully. Engaging teens is not just the work of youth workers but the community as a whole. In fact, some of the cultural, social, and theological factors supporting the arguments in this book are worth sharing with the wider congregation to help the exploration and understanding of worship for all. Mathis provides the *why?* and the *how?*, and those interested in the faith formation of teens and the church body can together engage the *so what?* to the glory of God and the flourishing of the community.

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