

“Prepared For Life”

If you decide to take a cruise in Eastern Asia sometime this year, you might meet my brother. He was hired in January to work as the lead male performer in a large cruise line’s performance series. Allen studied music in college and has been working as a professional actor and musician for the last two years. He was excited when the opportunity to work on a cruise ship surfaced because it gives him a chance to travel through parts of the world he might not ever see otherwise. Not only that, as a slightly egomaniacal fashionista/entertainer type, Allen could hardly imagine a better job than one that grants him celebrity profile and a *very* captive audience.

Normally, cruise line performers have duties beyond the performances—everything from food service to housekeeping. However, because Allen is the lead male performer, his only responsibility beyond the daily performances is to be visible and available to the passengers for pictures, conversations, dancing and other schmooze-oriented activities. Could there be a better fit?

As we all know, Youth Ministers and other clergy are often likened to cruise ship activity directors. So, it’s not a great mental distance to see that we are also, sometimes, like cruise line performers. I’ve certainly done my fair share of food service, cleaning bathrooms and schmoozing.

When I last talked to my brother about his work on the ship, he had an interesting insight regarding the correlation of all the performers’ duties. He talked about his schmoozing as a means for preparing the passengers to enjoy the shows; the food service, the bed making and the deck raking are related as well.

Allen said, “When their beds are made well and their toilets are clean, the passengers have what they need to enjoy our performances. When they get their pictures taken with me and we spend five minutes discussing the beauty of the open ocean, they come to the shows that night and they’re no longer watching a stranger (or worse, a *jerk*) perform for them—they’re watching that nice young man they met earlier in the day. When satisfied passengers come to see us perform, they enjoy the shows more because they’re not distracted by the thought of going back to a messy room or spending another day with an unfriendly crew. If we do our jobs before the shows, then the performances go well and the people love them; the converse is true as well.”

Making Room for Faith

The conditions are somewhat different for youth ministers. No matter what we do, we can’t fully clean up the messy world in which our youth and we live. It’s also not our job to “put on a good show” for youth in the hope that they will reach an emotionally high enough point to forget what the world is

really like. Sometimes I feel like my conversations with the parents of my youth are a bit *schmoozy*, though I don't mean them to be and I'm certainly not trying to manipulate anyone's feelings.

In a youth minister's line of work, the stakes are high. No matter what we say or do, people are always going to return to a messy world. There are no proverbial rugs under which to sweep the pain of divorce, 9/11 or the recent Virginia Tech shootings. So, we have to find ways to equip youth (and ourselves) to participate in the events of our faith, which will always take place in our messy world: Christmas in a world of poverty, Easter post-Holocaust, Communion amidst starvation, Confirmation into a world and a church that often prefers exclusion. Our task is to unite faith and life, discovering and revealing ways in which our youth can be realistic and hopeful about the severity of the world's transgression and the broadness of God's redeeming work.

People have different ways of going about this. A friend recently told me that her church's youth minister arranged for the youth group to participate in the *30-Hour Famine* program coordinated by World Vision. He decided to have the youth arrive at the church on Friday night for a lock-in (standard fare). On Saturday, he planned a paintball tournament coined, *War For the World*. I'm not sure if he actually believed that teaching children to engage in warfare would prepare them to respond to the complexities of global hunger and poverty. I sincerely hope not.

Consider Rwanda, where, to this day, children are the heads of 85,000 households following the genocide of more than 800,000 people depicted in the popular movie, *Hotel Rwanda*. Infant mortality rates jumped more than 61% during the years leading up to that conflict, resulting in the deaths of almost 14% of the babies born between 1992 and 1994. More shockingly, child mortality skyrocketed from an already horrifying 15% to nearly 25% during the genocide years. At the same time, malnutrition in children under five hovered around 25% for over a decade.¹ Imagine losing 1 of every 4 kids in our youth groups to hunger and poverty caused by war. How shocking would it be to then take the remaining children out to "play" war as a means for remembering the lost?

Perhaps this sort of negligence is one of the reasons that big events have become unpopular as of late among youth workers. Coffee shop rendezvous and relationships are the way to go these days, as if you can't have both the valuable day-to-day interactions and also the eye-opening effect of well-prepared big events. If our goal is to prepare young people to engage and minister to a messy world, then I think there is a place for both.

The events of faith

The gospels are full of "big events" like the transfiguration of Jesus, the feeding of the 5,000 (the gospels only recount the men who were present—how many more woman and children were fed by Jesus

¹ The World Bank, *Social Development Notes: Conflict Prevention and Reconstruction*, No. 18, June 2004.

that day?), the triumphal entry and that lesser known moment in Christian history: the resurrection. For humans, big events become the squares of fabric in our quilted lives, stitched together by the lesser noticed relationships and reflections of everyday experience. The big events of life and faith are only significant when we have communities, language and customs through which to interpret them. Perhaps the responsibility of youth ministers, then, is not to plan *bigger* events, but to equip youth to use the people and resources of the Christian faith to make meaning from the events of our lives—both planned and unplanned events.

In his highly influential book, *Educating Congregations: The Future of Christian Education*, Charles Foster identifies four types of significant events in the life of faith: *paradigmatic events*, *seasonal events*, *occasional events* and *unexpected events*.² Paradigmatic events “have their origin in significant events deeply rooted in our ancient traditions and rituals and recounted in sacred texts and stories.”³

Whenever I schedule a lock-in, a retreat or some other overnight event, I always incorporate paradigmatic elements. Usually, we have a late-night worship service. Admittedly, I often go overboard with media presentations and décor meant to heighten the ethereal sense of the moment. But it never fails that when our worship is done and we gather to reflect and share our experiences, the majority of youth identify the Lord’s Prayer, a foot washing or the Eucharist as the pivotal moment in their communion with God. I ask them, “Why was the Lord’s Prayer so meaningful for you tonight?” One person says, “Because it makes me think of standing beside my Mom when I was a kid and watching her say it every week in church.” Another youth says, “And because it’s in the Bible and people have been saying it for so long.” Finally, someone says, “It makes me feel like I’m actually sitting there with Jesus and the disciples, learning how to pray.”

Youth workers often neglect paradigmatic events in our programming. We decide that youth are not interested in saying the Lord’s Prayer, or that they won’t understand the significance of foot washing before we ever consider the ways these events develop faith. Paradigmatic events help youth understand that they are a part of an ongoing tradition. Youth enact the historical rites and upon reflection realize that they are lengthening the chord of Christian tradition and its significance in their own time and place.

Seasonal events can be difficult in youth ministry. These are the holidays that plot the passage of time in the liturgical year. Advent gives way to Christmas, then Epiphany. Lent yields to Easter, then Pentecost. These are some of the busiest times of year for many youth ministers and also seasons during which it is nearly impossible to anticipate who and how many may turn up for scheduled events. I know youth ministers who plan mission trips during spring break, and that works in years when Easter and

² Charles R. Foster, *Educating Congregations: The Future of Christian Education* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994) 43-47.

³ Foster, 44.

spring break do not overlap. Many years the local school system's spring break falls on the weekend of Palm Sunday or Easter, which means that half of the families in the church will be on vacation during the most significant holiday week in the Christian faith.

When I was a kid, my family never went to church on Christmas. We went to my grandparents' house on Christmas Eve, where my aunts, uncles and cousins were all gathered. We stayed there late into Christmas day. When I think about the meaningful "events" that surrounded the holidays of my youth, very little has to do with faith. Like so many of the youth in my church, we were gone at the holidays. Because the ministers of my youth taught me that faith happened at church, I never thought to look for it other places. I don't want the young people in my youth group to have to overcome that hurdle.

I have been developing a plan to prepare liturgical supplies for traveling families. Admittedly, I've been *planning* to do this for a long time. My concern is that when Christian parents do not plan to take their families to church on Easter, and do not know what to do to mark the holiday, they will put out a basket filled with green plastic grass, colored eggs and candy, and *that* will be Easter.

I think the situation would be different if youth workers spent Lent teaching kids about the life of Jesus, and preparing them for his coming death and resurrection. Then, when Easter and perhaps spring break are right around the corner, we could give them a small chest with prayers, homemade crosses, simple choruses and a suggested order of worship to take with them when their families travel. Easter morning might actually be a meaningful religious holiday for the youth who are prepared and empowered to lead their families in worship.

Occasional events and *unexpected events* can be tremendous blessings in the life of faith and also tragic reminders of human frailty. I recently spoke with a youth minister who, in one week, had to assist in the funerals of two youths in his church who both died unexpectedly in unrelated events. The following Sunday he performed baptisms for the two newest additions to the church community. Occasional events are those infrequent events that, like baptisms and confirmation, "intensify community identity and mission, illuminate community meanings, and energize community life."⁴

I love when, in worship, the minister invites all the children and youth to come and gather in front of the baptismal pool or font as the first witnesses of this sacred event. These young people watch as the baby splashes about in the water, held securely in tight grip of the minister, while the parents, grandparents and congregation make promises and pledges about the life of this child of God. Then, when the children and youth return to their parents, whispers can be heard throughout the sanctuary as the young ones ask, "When was I baptized?" "Did I splash like that in the water?" The older youth pay more attention to the pledges made by those who will accompany the baptized child on their faith journey. We can be sure that these youth take inventory of whether or not we have kept our promises to them. What

⁴ Foster, 45

would happen if we gave youth a public forum to discuss the ways in which the congregation has and has not fulfilled its promises? How might baptisms become more meaningful events in the life of the whole congregation?

Many churches have membership classes that acquaint people with the beliefs and practices of the church before they commit themselves to the community. Across the country, eighth graders are participating in confirmation classes so they can become informed members of the Christian faith. So how do we prepare our youth for their friends' funerals? How do we prepare young people for Hurricane Katrina and all its aftermath? How do we give them courage to return to school the day after 9/11? How do we prepare for the unexpected events that invade our worlds and demand that we question our sense of "right" and "good?" How might an in-depth and creative look at the book of Job help our young people confront the realities of a world where bad things regularly happen to good people, and God apparently permits evil to run amuck with our lives? How might *Hotel Rwanda* bring that book of the Bible to life? How might an exploration of Job be a better way to participate in the *30-Hour Famine* than a paintball battle?

Life explodes around us...

I love the idea of using sparklers on Pentecost to embody the coming of the Holy Spirit. Sparklers and children, however, turn out to be a precarious couple. At first, when the luminous streaks of metallic heat jump off the thin metal rod, children have a thrilling sense of control. Like Cro-Magnons, they experience the elation of conquering that which seemed impossible to domesticate. Little by little, the heat gets closer to their hands and feels increasingly out of control. Then, one of two things happens. The children whose parents have explained how to extinguish the sparklers in a bucket of water run over to that bucket and hurl their sparklers down into the water like an eager sinner's baptism. The other children hold onto their sparklers too long and you can see on their faces the encroaching sense of panic, then full-on terror. They feverishly look for an available adult, but the moment has passed and the sparks reach for their skin, and find it. When the heat of a complicated world gets too close for comfort, have we prepared our youth to manage life faithfully?

Whether or not we plan to participate in the *30-Hour Famine*, millions and millions of children will die each year from preventable hunger and illness. Thanks to TV, the Internet and Bono, the kids in our youth groups will hear about it. And that's a good thing. So, our responsibility as youth workers is to prepare young people to meet the complexity and horror of these realities in ways that engage and activate their faith. Of course, global hunger is a large-scale issue. We also have to prepare our youth to faithfully respond to bullies and unplanned pregnancy and college rejection and acceptance letters. I think the point is that life is full of "big events," whether we've planned them or not. Youth ministry, perhaps

all ministry, has come to a moment in which people need help realizing the ways that a well-rooted faith makes us stable and able to offer support to others in an unsteady world.

A fifteen year-old girl recently told me that she is not interested in coming to church to play games. Like most of the young people I know, she is overscheduled and over-pressured, but she doesn't come to church to forget about all that. She comes to make sense of it all. As much as the youth I know love to play sardines at lock-ins, they love worship even more. They regularly ask me to schedule a movie night, but they actually show up when I plan a service project in our area.

Our youth remember the big events, but only because we work hard (the youth, parents and youth workers) to prepare ourselves to make meaning out of those events. When we do service, we take time to learn about the life conditions of the people we are helping—not just by reading, but also by talking with those people. Afterwards, we take time to reflect on what we've done and why it was significant for us as Christians. We connect our personal stories to the stories of scripture and Christian history. We are *always* looking for ways to connect our lives and our faith.

Professional Bio:

Derek Elkins recently completed the MA in Christian Education from Union-PSCE and will begin the Master of Divinity at the Theological School at Drew University this fall. He has served student ministries at churches in NC and MA, and was recently hired as the Youth Minister at Christ Church in Summit, NJ. Derek also publishes original music and musings online at www.derekelkins.com.