

ARTS OVERVIEW

Young people who are involved in making something beautiful today are less likely to turn to acts of violence and destruction tomorrow. The arts - whether they be during or after school - provide opportunities for youth from all backgrounds to do something positive and creative with their talents and their time. We all need to support the arts. In doing so, we are telling America's youth that we believe in them and value what they can be.

-Janet Reno, Previous Attorney General, U.S. Department of Justice

Our society is quickly becoming shaped more by images than words as TV and advertisements predominate the communication landscape. And, as is often the case, the Church is lagging behind. In striking contrast, we allow words to control our spiritualities and actions. We recite creeds, memorize scripture, evangelize, teach, but we leave little room for the imagination to develop past Sunday School. Meanwhile, as we have dichotomized the imagination and the arts from "rational", verbal understanding, mainstream culture is dictating to our youth how to cultivate and use a visual vocabulary. "The arts are threatening," observes scholar Laurel Gasque. "After three centuries of valorizing certainty and control and the reductive literalism this has often led to, the ambiguity of the arts, with their suggestive and metaphorical quality is hard to get used to and can be deeply disturbing... They seem to be impractical in a pragmatic world." (Laurel Gasque, "The Christian Stake in the Arts." CRUX. Regent College. Volume XXXV, Number 4. December 1999, 13-29.) As more and more youth become passive consumers of the created image, recognizing brands and logos more than historic masterpieces, we must offer an alternative space for them to develop the artist inside. Further, youth arts programs are becoming the subject of many studies on crime prevention and development. They seem to offer safe, engaging and constructive environments for youth who lack adult supervision during non-school hours, a time when they are most vulnerable to community violence and gang recruitment. An increasing number of communities are realizing that art programs for at-risk youth offer an effective and more affordable alternative to detention and police-centered crime prevention. With billions spent annually to incarcerate young offenders and school dropouts costing taxpayers many more billions each year, U.S. communities and youth workers should take a good look at the promising effects gained by establishing arts programs for youth.

The possibilities for youth engagement within the arts are as vast as the imagination allows. We'll briefly look at three areas: Art and therapy/healing; Art and community economic development and art and worship.

Much work has been done on the power of art therapy. By working with the indirect use of symbols and metaphor, art (whether painting, sculpture, photography, music or creative writing) allows kids to express their pain in ways that may be more freeing and less intimidating. For example, a website -www.artslynx.org- was set up after the Columbine shootings to allow youth an outlet for emotions such as grief, anger and confusion. Another example of art therapy and youth are programs offering a context to depict ones body through art for youth dealing with eating disorders to recover a more healthy body image.

Art and community economic development is an exciting avenue that meets several different needs. Primarily, combining art and CED creates a place for youth to develop their artistic skills as well as entrepreneurial skills and even advocacy skills. In addition, such ventures can provide additional income for an organization. For example, a non-profit in Vancouver, BC works with at-risk and homeless youth to teach them lifeskills and move them toward independent living. They have an art program which at one point, became a gallery and shop. Youth were learning various art skills, as well as learning about the process of selling their art through a store. Another example is the Emmaus Episcopal Center in downtown Memphis. An outreach to at-risk youth, the Center began to incorporate T-Shirt silk screening into their program which has turned into a successful venture. Youth learn how to silk screen, design T-shirts, and sell their work, while the ministry is provided with additional income to support its social mission.

The arts is also a valuable vehicle for expressing spiritual meaning within the church. Too often, churches sacrifice the creative for word-dominated services. Churches, however, must learn to incorporate various art forms into their worship services, as well as church-based events, to allow people, especially youth, to give full expression to their seeking and love for God. Youth-led worship events and concerts, visual arts in the sanctuary following the church year or sermon series, pottery for the communion dishes, songs, poetry, dance and drama to highlight important themes in the readings or sermons...the possibilities are indeed endless. One group that has brought in various art forms to a church's services is the Eastside Story Guild located in a Vancouver-based church. The members of the group consist of children ranging between the ages of 5-16 who meet Sunday mornings for breakfast and practice and perform three to four times a year. Their first performance two years ago entitled, "Sacred Canopy," focused on themes of creation, redemption, and new creation. Blue, helium-filled balloons filled the sanctuary emulating the creation of the heavens! More recently, they interpreted the story of Revelation with long, colorful garments, music and story, allowing the ancient passages to come alive and speak in new ways to the congregation.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION/DISCUSSION

1. Why do you think we have put the arts on the back burner when working with youth?
2. Do you think the arts are important in youth work? Why or why not?
3. How has our culture used the arts to shape youth today?
4. How does the Bible affirm the use of the Christian imagination?

IMPLICATIONS

1. Because youth today live in a society laced with image and story, the arts should not be left behind in our work with them.
2. Incorporate the arts into talks and discussions with youth – photographs, paintings, films, poetry, drama...
3. Visit art events – concerts, galleries, readings, performances – and have discussions about them after.

4. Get youth involved in doing art themselves, whether through formal organizations/instruction or informally with friends.

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