

Preparation, Presence, and Proclamation: Youth Groups Journey to the 2009 Presidential Inauguration

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I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young women and men shall see visions, and your old men and women shall dream dreams. (Acts 2:17)

Preaching necessarily involves preparation and study, an encounter in the presence of God, and the practice of testimony. The process is not an easy one; you can end up a long way from where you started; and wrestling – usually of the spiritual variety – is almost always a part of the journey. Yet, there are moments when the encounter with God is so palpable, so unmistakable, that our lives are changed forever.

The same is true in ministry with youth – particularly on mission trips. It was certainly the case in January 2009, as youth groups from Central Presbyterian Church in Atlanta and Church of Reconciliation (The Rec) PC(USA) in Chapel Hill journeyed together to witness the inauguration of the first African American president of the United States of America.

The trip was planned long before we knew who would take the oath of office, long before we could fathom the logistical details needed to keep us safe and warm, long before we could imagine how the Spirit would work within and among us. There was much preparation and study; the plan was constantly changing; and wrestling – of the spiritual variety – was definitely a part of the process. Yet, standing on the National Mall – after waiting eight hours in 20-degree weather, surrounded by and embracing people of every race and creed and age and background, with flags waving, tears flowing, and shouts of joy being lifted – God’s presence was unmistakable. Truly, our lives were changed forever.

This is our story, the story of a community born between two churches and among two million people, grounded in our belief in a community born 2,000 years ago by the Spirit’s unexpected and unimaginable presence.

Preparation

Planning the inauguration trip was a massive undertaking. The challenges had less to do with the almost 70 youth and adults going on the trip from our two churches and more to do with the two million people who were also embarking on a trip to the nation’s capitol for the same event. We arranged everything from the daily schedule to the smallest detail – how and where to park our vans on inauguration day, accounting for which roads and bridges would be closed to vehicle traffic, and how the groups would make their way to the airport or the highway to North Carolina, respectively. These logistical pieces of the puzzle, usually the most simple – the things that only take one phone call or one email – turned into communication roller coasters and roundabouts. Every other day our best laid plans from the day before had fallen through. As

we continued to grapple with the details, we focused on developing a trip grounded in Christian community and a safe environment for all.

God calls us to break down barriers between all people and to create community. As with most youth groups, these two have circles of friends and particular dynamics that the members understand and find comfortable. Not only did we want to break down those familiar patterns of interaction within our own groups, but we also wanted to create a space where we were gathered as one community—not two separate youth groups staying at the same place.

Technology and intentionality helped us introduce the two youth groups and congregations to each other before we gathered as one community in D.C. We watched each other's mission trip videos, published the same articles in both church newsletters, connected the groups by Skype during our final trip meetings, and commissioned trip participants with the same liturgy. By doing the same things at the same time and in the same way with the youth, parents, adult advisors, and congregations, we built small bridges to cover the 380 miles between our two churches.

We continued to develop this intentional community once we arrived in Washington. We held a meeting with all of the adults so they could learn each other's names and model community for the youth. We displayed a cross listing the already established relationships between the two churches – including the fact that Katie had served at both churches and that a member of Central, Carolyn Clarke, was a founding member of The Rec. And we had icebreakers, prepared food, and created a joint covenant to blend middle school youth with senior highs, youth with adults, and Central with The Rec.

We were aware of the inherent obstacles involved in combining youth groups, and we knew we could not control the relationships among our seventy participants. It was both illogical and essential to believe that barriers would be broken and community formed. Still, we did believe. And we did it – all of us together. We stood in a big circle with a ball to connect us. If you had the ball in hand, you said your name, then tossed the ball to someone else. After giving our names, we asked each other questions until we discovered more about each other—that the person across the room plays lacrosse, is a church officer, or likes science better than history.

Safety is always a priority when leading youth, but it had increased emphasis due to the size of the crowds and the heightened security in the area. We sought to weave safety procedures into our practice of community. We wore the same yellow fleece hats, which kept us warm and marked us as one group – easily recognizable by ourselves and others; we went on a combined scavenger hunt to gain a better sense of our neighborhood around Capitol Hill; we created care groups of four youth to each adult to make it easier to keep track of one another; and, we gave each person a laminated wallet-size card with the phone numbers of all the adults and the address where we were staying. Robert Fulghum summed it up well, “When you go out into the world, watch for traffic, hold hands, and stick together.”

Other than going from our living space downstairs to the sanctuary upstairs for worship, we never went out as one large group. We configured each small group based on what we were doing and where we were going. Youth and adults from both churches worked together for meal preparation and the scavenger hunt. In our care groups, we attended the largest events over the weekend—the “We Are One” concert on Sunday and the Inauguration on Tuesday.

On the morning of the inauguration, the two groups separated, but still kept a bond of community together by covenanting to pray the same prayer. The families and both congregations back at home also had the prayer, and we invited them to pray it out loud from wherever they were at 9:30 on inauguration morning.

We had it all planned. We thought through every possible obstacle to community or safety and made a plan, a backup plan, and in some cases, a backup to the backup plan. We wanted to ensure that everyone would stay together and not get separated from the group. Yet, before we loaded up the van or boarded the plane to go to D.C., we had to be willing to let go of all the plans and just be, be responsible, but be present as well. It was no longer “plan, implement, control,” but “plan, implement, and let go.”

Presence

When we do mission work, we go out into the world to seek God’s presence—to recognize the face of Christ. It’s different from missions of bygone years, when people believed that they took Jesus into the world. We believe God is waiting to meet us at our destination, waiting to reveal more to us, waiting to call us into new understanding, new service, new life. Sometimes God is present, but we are too distracted to witness the encounter. Other times, it feels as if we can’t turn around without being washed by the Spirit. We experienced this in D.C. The Spirit called us—or rather, compelled us—into intentional community, a ministry of presence, and a new way of being in the world.

The sense of community throughout the weekend was overwhelming. Certainly, we had a heightened awareness because we had intentionally sought it within the Central-Rec group, but there was an unmistakable connection to something bigger, perhaps something as big as a banquet thrown for all of God’s children. The almost two million people responded to each other as if they had been friends for years, greeting each other with smiles and embraces; sharing food, blankets and hand-warmers; keeping people together and safe.

Because we were easily identified (marked) by those bright yellow hats, others felt an immediate kinship with us. “We know how to find our way back because of you.” “Hey, we saw some of your people about 50 yards over that way.” “Tell us where you are from.” Throughout the crowded weekend, we heard remarks like these and more. Every time we shared the story of our newly-formed community, someone would say, “Wow, I wish my church youth group had done that.”

That bond helped on the way out of town as well. As the Central crew of 52 people with luggage tried to make their way through a congested Metro station, the crowd parted, allowing the yellow-hatted group to get to the train platform together. When the last few yellow hats descended the long, steep staircase, a stranger, or new friend, had joined them, carrying the luggage of their youngest member.

All of us who took pictures have hundreds of shots of our yellow-hatted crew—a sea of hats—at the Lincoln Memorial concert, the Inauguration on the Mall, the packed Metro station. We remembered family trips from childhood, posing in front of monuments as a group. We were capturing our new family and each extraordinary moment. We didn’t want to leave anyone out.

The sheer numbers of people gathered in Washington, D.C. altered our carefully planned itinerary as well. We, along with 32,000 others, took to the streets and shelters and youth centers across the DC area to participate in the Martin Luther King Jr. “Day

of Service.” We were set to serve with “We Feed Our People,” an organization that serves a hot meal on that day to people living near the MLK Jr. Library. Three college students started the program 22 years ago, when they heard the call to use the newly established holiday as an opportunity to do something meaningful. When we arrived, one of the founders approached us and thanked us for being there. “We have plenty of volunteers,” he said, “but, please stay and enjoy the program. Your presence means a great deal to us.”

We looked at each other with mild panic. What do you do with 70 people who are supposed to be here on a service trip but now have nothing to do? The hardest thing for people of God to do is just be. Yet, that is exactly what we had been asked to do, to be a witness to a generation of young people who are helping to make the world a better place, to be holders of signs that call for all to be fed, to be a yellow-hatted ministry of presence that shares the love of God through laughter and dancing and music and community. The Spirit flowed. (It didn’t hurt that the program included David Arquette, Ben Affleck, Josh Groban, Herbie Hancock, and Martin Luther King III!)

Being in the presence of God not only opens us up to hearing new calls from God, but also sparks a yearning to seek out that presence even more. The desire to be with God can inspire us to make choices that are contrary to our normal way of being. That was certainly the case for our youth. We had created an elaborate “Inauguration Day” plan with staggered wake up times, strategic routes to the Mall, and tactics for surviving the intense cold and the long wait on the Mall. When we approached the youth, they told us that despite their natural inclinations for sleep, comfort, and entertainment, they each, every last one of them, wanted to wake up at 3:15 a.m. to get out to the Mall as soon as possible for the event that didn’t even begin until noon. They knew that God was in the midst of that gathered community; they knew that God would be with them in the waiting; they knew that God would spark something new within their hearts.

They were right. For upon our return, teenagers who rarely utter more than “it was fine” when describing a mission trip to their parents couldn’t stop talking; they wanted to share all that they had seen and heard.

Proclamation

This desire to proclaim began on the trip and became rooted in the new community that emerged. Because the care groups traveled separately around the city, each would encounter different people, different stories, different challenges. Every time a small group would return to the Washington Seminar Center, eyes wide with excitement, faces red from the cold, hair tousled from the yellow hats, others would approach them to listen and share and laugh. We wanted to hear each other’s experiences.

This is, after all, one of the foundations of Christian community. Jesus sends us out into the world to love and serve God and God’s people, and we gather again, each day, each week, each year, to proclaim where we have experienced God, to give thanks, and to listen for our next call.

Listen for the Spirit alive in the world, as you hear some words from our community:

I don’t think I have or will feel that much excitement coming from that

many people ever again in my life. It was really moving to see all the emotions going through that crowd. (Jacob Haythorn, age 12)

My favorite experience on the trip was standing out on the mall and feeling so cold, while knowing that I was a part of something so great. (Lauren Melville, age 13)

We were surrounded by hundreds of thousands of people who were all strangers, but we were all gathered together to witness and celebrate this historic event. Watching Obama being inaugurated made me feel hopeful that our country could accomplish great things and finally change for the better. That was truly amazing. (Kat Thomson, age 14)

It was amazing to be there to witness history with two million other people, who had all come from across the country and from different backgrounds and cultures to watch Obama's inauguration. It was a very powerful moment to be standing in the crowd of so many different people, who at one moment were all there for the same thing — to watch history be made." (Emma Thomson, age 14)

We had the most amazing seats that I ever imagined we would have. With good eyesight, our group could see the stage with our very own eyes. It was just the most incredible experience, even if waking up at 3 isn't my favorite, or walking 3 miles being pushed into gates isn't my favorite, I would do it again, anytime, any day. I can't really put into words how grateful I was to see such an important piece of history, and now I have something incredible I can tell my kids one day! (Dylan Farrow, age 13)

I never thought I would see the day when we would elect a non European American as President. Suddenly, that changed. If that was possible, what else could be possible — what else could we do if we were open to what's possible? (Annette Perot, adult leader)

The best part of attending the inauguration was being in that crowd of millions of people and hearing them all laugh. Even in these times when everything seems to be against us, I see that it is still possible to feel joy. Joy in masses. To be standing next to people I had never seen before and will probably never see again and yet still feeling utterly connected to them because of that incredible moment when Barack Obama said: 'So help me God' and all anyone could feel was this incredible, unspeakable joy. A joy experienced by millions together. Feeling like I am living in a country I can finally be truly proud of. A country united. I can't believe it took us this long to get here, but we're here now. Feeling like finally, finally our country is living up to the principles that started it. Thank God Almighty. (Elizabeth Carr, age 14)

This trip meant that we witnessed history. This will be a lifelong memory that will stay with me forever. I felt very responsible walking around D.C. and the church where we were staying. I wish we could do this again! (Miriam Moore Keish, age 11)

This responsibility of which Miriam spoke permeated our time together. We knew that we represented our individual churches and the denomination, but more important, we were a witness to a God who dreams (what we imagine to be) impossible

dreams, who creates and unites a community of extraordinarily diverse people, and who opens our hearts and calls us to serve.

The call is what drew us to come to the inauguration – not as an individual participant on a school trip, but as part of a community that knows and believes that we are responsible for living our faith in the world.

As we have reflected on the trip, the words attributed to St. Francis of Assisi keep coming into our hearts – “Preach the Gospel always. If necessary, use words.” Proclamation came in many different forms – in the youth’s awe-struck faces, in their enthusiastic words, in their laughter, and in the manner in which they live their daily lives, seeking to continue living that “incredible, unspeakable joy.”

Youth trips are transformational. They build on the intentional community spawned in advance, they challenge us to shake up our daily routines and perspectives on the world, and they continue to shape our lives as we return to our homes to serve God in new and different ways. One of our adult leaders, Craig Carlson, said it this way: “The faces in that crowd told the story of great joy and hope for the future, but also of past struggles and pain. Such a sense of promise filled the air, but it was a promise that seemed firmly rooted in a hard-fought past. That day it was especially easy to feel a part of the sweep of history and the continuing journey of our Nation. Certainly the struggles for equality and justice go on, but all around me I saw and heard signs that the journey had long ago begun and would indeed continue. And January 20, 2009, in the cold, on the National Mall, was surely a milepost on that great journey.”

The story of God’s history with God’s people is continually being written. We prepare, we encounter, we proclaim – all the time seeking to be open to the Spirit transforming our lives and compelling us to serve. May God continue to bless all of us on our journeys.

Inauguration Prayer

Holy God, we stand here at this moment knowing that you have been with your people throughout history and grateful that we can rely upon you to be with us now.

Fill these newly elected officials with honesty and integrity and conviction – that they would serve your people with fairness and energy and love.

Keep our leaders safe – and those around the world – that they might live and serve without fear of physical, spiritual, or emotional attack.

Surround all of your children who are actively experiencing violence and abuse and the reality of war – that they may know your Peace and Love.

Strengthen those who are wrestling with poverty and famine and these uncertain economic times – that they may find grounding in your presence and resources to care for their basic needs.

Guide all of us who join together in lifting up your name – that we may diligently work with you to bring about your Reign of Justice and Peace.

We pray with confidence and hope and trust in the One who came to walk among us, who taught us to pray, saying...(Insert Lord’s Prayer for your community).