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Study guide

Mission-driven art

Ohio church gives youth spiritual, creative outlet

By Robert C. Blezard

Art holds a special place in human expression. More than simply passing along information, it also conveys human experience and deep emotions—sorrow, love, passion, anger, longing, joy, hope and so much more. Art captures—in visual images, musical notes, in words, in sculpture and other media—what it means to be a human being. Is it any wonder that art can help us understand more fully our shared religious experiences? In doing so, it helps fulfill the church's mission—to bring people more deeply into the faith and help them walk the path of discipleship.

Exercise 1: Visual art in church

Every church has art and uses art, so much so that it's easy to take it for granted. Consider that worship services are planned primarily around arts that come to us through the ear—music (hymns, choral works and praise songs) and words (hymn lyrics, prayers, liturgies, sermons). But we experience visual art through our eyes and this, too, enhances and enriches our experience of Christian community and supports the mission of the church.

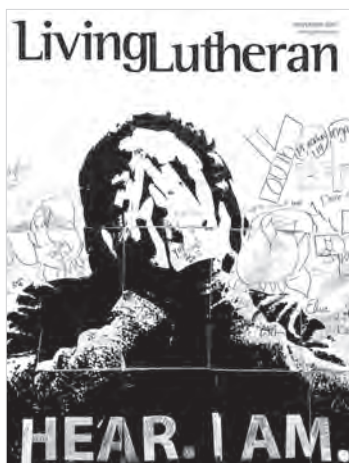
As a study group, walk through your church and take note of all the art that you experience through the eye:

The obvious—paintings, photographs, Sunday school children's drawings, crafts, sanctuary windows.

Less obvious—paint color schemes, carpeting, architecture, fabrics (such as paraments and altar cloths), woodwork (pews, railings, ceiling and window trim), artifacts (baptismal font, chalice and candles).

Discuss:

- How does each of these expressions of visual art on its own convey emotion and sentiment? What does it say? How does the artwork say it? What feelings and thoughts are generated in someone who is taking it in? How are those feelings related to the faith experience of both the artist and the one who is viewing it? How can the artwork assist the viewer in faith formation?
- Considered together, what overall emotions and sentiments are generated by these artworks? What general feelings and thoughts are aroused as a result of the collection of visual art in the church? How do all these works of visual art cooperate to establish a church setting that is conducive to holy worship?
- How do these artworks contribute to the overall mission of the church?



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Exercise 2: Art as faith expression

In a time when many schools are reducing art classes and people are more inclined to pick up a smartphone than a paintbrush, the visual arts may be less a part of everyday life. And yet, as many congregations have discovered, visual art is important as a human expression of the religious experience.

- How does your congregation help people express themselves through the visual arts?
- What is the value of these efforts in individual faith formation? Community faith formation?
- Are arts and crafts part of your children's ministry? Youth ministry? Adult ministry?
- Many congregations seek out and employ people who are highly skilled in the musical arts. Why is this important?
- How might an emphasis on visual arts assist your congregation in faith formation? Are there visual artists in the worshiping community or neighborhood who could assist?
- How would an emphasis on art support your congregation's mission? How would you describe that mission?

Exercise 3: Art as community outreach

Salem Lutheran Church, Toledo, Ohio, found a way to use art to assist in their community outreach. Discuss:

- What is your church's mission in reaching and connecting to neighbors? How important is it?
- How might an art program help your congregation achieve its mission goal of connecting to your neighbors?
- What emotions, issues, problems, joys and concerns are important in your community? How might the congregation invite community members to express those visually?
- As a study group, brainstorm an action plan and present it to your congregation council or pastor for consideration.

Exercise 4: For action

Visual arts can enhance the faith experience not only of those who create the art, but also those who view it and experience the emotions and expressions for themselves. Here are some ideas to make artwork a bigger part of your congregation's faith formation mission:

- **Emphasize visual arts.** Work with your Christian education committee to emphasize visual arts as a faith-forming tool in all classes, all grade levels.



About the study guide author:

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Look for an artist or teacher who can assist their efforts. Create a strategy for making visual art a bigger part of your congregation. Develop a detailed plan, including what materials will need to be purchased. Bring the congregation council and other leaders on board.

- **Community art:** Using newsprint or a roll of craft paper taped to a prominent wall in your building, create a mural space for people to draw images. Make crayons or water-based markers available. You could choose a theme from faith formation, Scripture or the church seasons to guide participants' thoughts. Some ideas: creation (Genesis 1), the exodus, the nativity, resurrection, Pentecost, "God cares for me," "God's love," "I'm grateful for ..." "Earth—God's gift to us."
- **Children's art for adults:** Finger painting provides tactile art possibilities for children, but how about for adults? Equip your adult Sunday school groups with supplies for finger painting and invite them to create artworks. You could select a theme tied into the church season or the day's Scripture lesson. (Similarly, have them work with crayons!)
- **Create gallery space:** A gallery is simply an area where artwork is displayed. As you emphasize visual arts in your congregation, find a dedicated place to view these artworks. As you display them, include the artist's name, title of the work (if there is one) and perhaps a sentence or two explaining the piece.
- **Take it "on the road:"** How can your congregation share its artworks beyond the church walls? Look for places where a representative sampling of artwork can be displayed for the world to see. Here are some possibilities: other churches, libraries, community centers, town offices, schools, community bulletin boards, businesses that have public spaces (such as a bank lobby), and museums and art galleries.

Mission-driven art



Ohio congregation gives youth spiritual, creative outlet

By Jay Saunders



“Art is a nation’s most precious heritage. For it is in our works of art that we reveal to ourselves, and to others, the inner vision which guides us as a nation. And where there is no vision, the people perish.”

These are the words President Lyndon B. Johnson spoke when he signed the National Endowment for the Arts into law in 1965. More than 50 years later, schools nationwide are cutting arts programs, potentially leaving children with fewer opportunities to share their vision.

But even when that vision is clouded, it can shine through in unexpected places and ways.

Michael Hanck, pastor of Salem Lutheran in Toledo, Ohio, said he had young people in his congregation and the surrounding neighborhood who were “looking for something positive to do.”

Salem, a mission congregation that receives a congregational vitality grant funded by Mission Support, is located in the North End neighborhood of Toledo, the most economically challenged part of the city. A majority of the residents live below the poverty line, Hanck said.

“There are a lot of fine people here with amazing talents,” he added. “We are all about neighborhood building and we are here to serve. There is no other reason for us to exist. That is what a mission congregation does.”

With that mission in mind, last year Hanck engaged teenagers from Salem and the area—22 of them at the outset—and enlisted them in what he called a “vocational exploration.” One aspect of the program was giving the youth opportunities to create visual art, with help from local artist Yusuf

Lateef, who worked with arts-based nonprofit organizations.

Eventually, Hanck obtained a grant that allowed Lateef to expand and continue the work he was doing, “providing quality artistic programming and exploration with our area teenagers.”

What followed was “12 weeks of joyous learning and creation and fellowship,” Hanck said.

In each of those 12 weeks, the students met with Lateef and learned about various kinds of art, then put those lessons onto the canvas. At the end of the session, the students got to experience something completely different—which started the beginning of an unforgettable summer for them.

“We feel cared about”

Lateef was able to have the teens’ work displayed in an art show at a Toledo gallery, under the



Youth from Salem Lutheran Church, Toledo, Ohio, and the surrounding area created an exhibit of visual art titled “Hear. I Am.”



Photos: Nancy Kinsel

The gallery was displayed at Zion Lutheran Church, Sandusky, Ohio, among other locations.

title “Hear. I Am.” The mission, initially meant to open students’ eyes to the arts, was now on public display.

“They got to experience what it was like to get a blessing out of their hard work,” Hanck said. “They walked away from there having sold art and made money.”

“It’s one thing to make something away from human view, but to be able to showcase it and allow folks to experience your work really brings it full circle,” Lateef added. “Our concept of ‘Hear. I Am.’ is all about projecting onto the world from within and seeing growth. The art show gave us the perfect venue to do just that.”

But the experience was far from over.

That show’s success led to an extension of the arts program and a broadening of horizons.

Zion Lutheran Church in nearby Sandusky, Ohio, offered to host what would become a traveling art show. The exhibit opened at Zion in August; now there are plans to bring it to Defiance, Ohio, and Fort Wayne, Ind.

“This started with a plan of teaching kids about art, but we’re teaching them about business and commerce as well,” Hanck said. “This allows them a new form of expression and gives them a ‘legal side hustle.’”


Throughout this process, the students have also been learning a lesson in faith. The teens and Lateef, a Muslim, would engage each other in interfaith dialogue while he taught them about art. The theme “Hear. I Am.” came to fruition, in part, because of that dialogue.

“[‘Hear. I Am.’] invokes the divine name—a common one that we can all share, and which,

for me, invokes the idea of the *imago Dei*, our being created in God’s image,” Hanck said. “It’s a very affirming and empowering title, ‘Hear. I Am.’ It’s the cry of all human beings and of God’s own self; a nonexclusive image.”

Lateef agreed: “I see Allah’s oneness when I allow myself to be open to people. The ‘Hear. I Am.’ project helped people realize the importance of art in society, which, in turn, helped folks see our true value in the overall mission of peace.”

The message emphasized by Lyndon Johnson 50 years ago—community through art—is being brought to life today with Salem youth in Toledo.

“This is an area of town that often feels forgotten,” Hanck said. “But in this [project], we feel cared about. We feel warmth. We feel wanted.” 

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“This started with a plan of teaching kids about art, but we’re teaching them about business and commerce as well,” said Michael Hanck, pastor of Salem.



Jay Saunders has more than 20 years’ experience writing for TV, newspapers and magazines. He is a member of Fox Point (Wis.) Lutheran Church.