

A Summary of the Vertical Habits

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In my position at Unity Christian High School, I am responsible for coordinating chapel. At our school, our entire student body along with the teachers and staff (about 850 people) meet together for worship four times a week, Monday through Thursday. Our worship dynamics are unique in that the majority of worshippers are teens. Also, approximately 80% of our chapels are led by our students.

Every year we have an overall theme for chapel along with monthly sub-themes. Last year we implemented the Vertical Habits for our theme. Our overall yearly theme was entitled: Created to Worship. We used nine vertical habits for our monthly sub-themes:

September	-	I Love You, Lord
October	-	I'm Sorry
November	-	Thank You
December	-	Bless You
January	-	I'm Listening
February	-	Help Me
March	-	Why, Lord?
April	-	What Can I Do?
May	-	Here I Stand

At first glance, our sub-themes seemed extremely simplistic. But this simplicity allowed us to realize that we lacked a "balanced diet" in our times of worship together. We did a great job of praise and saying, "I love you, Lord" in worship, but rarely had we spent time together as a student body in confession. The vertical habits challenged us to spend a month thinking about confession and the importance of confession in our times of worship. Not every single chapel in the month of October was based on confession. But the overall theme of confession was a constant throughout the month and several chapels focused solely on confession.

The month of November proved to be challenging for us at first. How do you say thank you in worship without sounding trite? One powerful chapel for us involved connecting confession and thanksgiving. We first went through this exercise with the students on our Spiritual Leadership Committee. Then we re-enacted this experience in chapel. We challenged students to think of all the things for which they were thankful. We had the students from our Spiritual Leadership Committee sitting on the stage, and they listed several items of thanks. The students expressed thankfulness for friends and families. Some students said they were thankful for a family pet, or even for a hot shower on a cold day. These were the things they had shared in the small group setting. We gave time for all the students there to think of items of thanks. Then we spent time in confession, acknowledging our sins and asking for forgiveness. After our time spent together in confession, we asked students to think of non-tangible things for which they were thankful. The students in front shared a much different and deeper appreciation for God's blessings. One student mentioned that she was thankful that

God had a plan for her life and that God reveals His plan a little at a time. This student said that she would probably be overwhelmed if God revealed His plan for her life all at once. Another student shared that he was thankful that everyone has flaws, and that God created us that way so that we could all help each other with our strengths. We challenged all the students present to be thankful for non-tangible items as well, and together we spent time in a prayer of thanksgiving. In this time of worship, we saw that spending time in confession gave us a deeper sense of our gratitude to God.

The months of February and March proved to be very powerful for our students. In these months, we explored the themes of: "Help Me" and "Why, Lord?" Personal student testimonies and testimonies from teachers were very effective in our times of worship. As one student stated, "I always thought I had to have it all figured out. If I was angry with God or feeling doubtful in my faith, I felt that I was less of a Christian or that something was wrong with me." We found that students needed to be able to express their frustrations and doubts, realizing that God is big enough to handle all their fears, their doubts, their frustrations and tears, and their questions. We often referenced the Psalms during these months, using verses that cried out to the Lord for help and mercy. Most of all, we focused on God's faithfulness and His never failing love for us.

In April our focus was: What Can I Do? We used this month to talk about concrete ways of living our faith through service. We also challenged students to share their faith and be prepared to articulate their belief in God. We ended the school year using a vertical habit entitled: Here I Stand. This vertical habit is more creedal in context, but we also used this vertical habit to challenge students to make a stand for the Lord and bear witness to His name. This was especially relevant for the seniors in our school who would all be moving on to new challenges including college or jobs. Every year on the day of the last senior chapel, we always have our seniors stand and we pray for them and ask God's blessing on them as they leave our school. Using the vertical habit, "Here I Stand" took on new relevance for our seniors, standing together, ready to move on from our school. "Here I stand, Lord, ready to do your will for my life."

Using the Vertical Habits as our framework in chapel gave us a deeper sense of worship. We learned that not only do we come together as a school to praise and thank God, but we also come together in worship to confess, to cry out to God, to listen to Him, and to be blessed and sent forth by God. Using the vertical habits in worship gave us a balance in our worship that allowed our students to cultivate a deeper understanding of their faith. I believe that our students were able to see that God wants our praise, our thanks, our burdens, our guilt, our sorrows and our joys.

We realized that students do not necessarily understand what it means to worship, even though most of them have been worshipping in church all their lives. By leading each other in worship and by using the vertical habits as a framework, students gained a better understanding of worshipping together. We found that during this process, students needed much guidance and encouragement. But we also saw that when we allowed our students to be actively involved in worship and in the planning process, our students had a new appreciation for worship and found much joy in worshipping together.