

What is it Like to Attend a Nightwatch?

(excerpted from The Cathedral Church of Saint John the Divine Newsletter, Fall 2007, with some revisions)

A group of young people visit New York City with their adult group leaders. Their plans have been in place for months and on this particular Saturday they arrive at the Cathedral around 3pm.

Each Nightwatch participant brings an overnight bag and a sleeping bag. They all come to the registration table where they make out a nametag and sign in on a big sheet of paper.

During this gathering time, there is usually an opportunity to play a little basketball or participate in quieter games. The Nightwatch begins with a tour of the grounds and the massive Cathedral space.

After the adults have had a brief meeting with Nightwatch director Paul Johnson, everyone gathers in the chairs in the “blue” gym and the live music begins. The youth and their leaders sing songs; some songs are familiar and some are new. They break up into small groups or play a game that helps people meet one another. It’s important for people to meet one another because this is the time when several different youth groups are going to become one Nightwatch community for the next 13 or 14 hours.

The next activity varies because different programs are run during the course of a school year’s 30-35 Nightwatch programs. One of the favorite activities is the labyrinth, an 11-course, Chartres-style labyrinth painted on canvas and set out in the crossing of the Cathedral. There is always the chance to explore the Cathedral space and to spend time looking around the majestic architecture and art of the sanctuary. Then it’s time for a scavenger hunt—using the small groups created earlier in the evening. It’s a chance to find out some of the details of the Cathedral church. What’s the significance of the “Christus Rex” over the high altar? Why is the inscription on the compass rose written in Greek? Whose statues stand at the entrance of the pulpit—and why those two figures? (If you’re interested to know the answers, come to a Nightwatch!)

After the scavenger hunt and some free time, everyone gathers for the final activity of the evening. It’s a candlelight meditation and Eucharist in the sanctuary. By now, the group has become one big community. The meditation takes place in the softened light of the crossing until everyone is called to gather around a table in the Presbytery. The musicians lead music for worship, but the youth are the important volunteers that help the worship to go smoothly, taking the roles of ushers, readers and acolytes. An important element of the service is making use of the big sheet of paper everyone signed at registration—it is attached to the altar to represent the “offering of ourselves.”

After the service, everyone goes downstairs to sleep. There are tow gyms to spread out in and there are mats for everyone’s sleeping bag.

Wake up time is 7a.m. and there is just enough time to have breakfast, pack everything up and clean up a bit before ending with Morning Watch. The Nightwatch community has ended but for the people who have been to one, the memories last a lifetime.