

## Coordinator of Youth Ministry Written Report to Synod Assembly, 2013

**"I no longer feel like a hypocrite saying that I follow Jesus, but having no idea how to do that."**

*- Senior High Boy, during the 2012 Synod Journey*

**"I learned at this gathering too much to write down. I liked the activities, learning new things about the Bible and God. And new ways to go out and apply everything to my life."**

*-Middle School Girl, on evaluation form from the 2012 Middle School Gathering*

**"The most meaningful part of the retreat for me was Bible study! I found out I have a purpose and I'm called by God to spread God's word!"**

*- Senior High Girl, on evaluation from 2013 Cardia Deo Retreat*

**"I am interested in serving on the LYO Board because I want to grow even more in my faith and have a closer relationship with God. What motivated me to apply was that I had some friends apply for LYO their 9<sup>th</sup> grade year, now they are seniors and it completely changed their lives. I would like to help the youth of the NE MN Synod to be in a closer relationship with God that will grow through their lives. I would love for these youth to want to make a difference just like I want to. My expectation of being on the LYO Board is growing with God and meeting many new people while doing that and watching their faith and relationship with God grow stronger also."**

*- Senior High Girl, answering "Why are you interested in serving on the LYO Board?" on her LYO Board Application*

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The church is changing. There is no doubt about that. We have clearly seen a decrease in worship participation. Research points to a rising number of those who claim no religious affiliation. And you have heard me say for years that while young people do believe in God, a significant percentage of those who believe have a watered down version of Christianity researchers call Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, that has very little to do with daily life.

***And yet...***

***And yet,*** in this last year we have seen a significant increase in participants for synod youth ministry events. The Synod Journey filled beyond capacity the day registration opened. Middle School Gathering and Cardia Deo events closed registration before the deadline because there was no more bed space to put participants. The increasing number of high quality LYO (Lutheran Youth Organization) Board applications we receive is causing the LYO Board to consider a redesign of our application process and how we structure the board.

***And yet*** as you read in the quotes at the top, faith for many of our young people is very real and makes a significant impact on their daily life and decisions they make.

Why the increase? Why the difference? I wish I had the clear answer for that. But I do have some guesses.

- **We focus on faith formation.** The Synod Journey is not a trip, but a year long journey of faith with Bible studies, group building and other formative faith practices. The Middle School Gathering might have inflatable toys and "Hotel Life" but all of these extras are intentional activities to point to our themes based on common confirmation teachings (*a rotation of The Ten Commandments, The Apostle's Creed, the sacraments and the*

*Lord's Prayer*) and how those apply to our daily lives. The highlight for most at our Cardia Deo retreats are the Bible studies led by our high school LYO Board members because they are able to connect faith with their real lives.

- **We focus on leadership development.** Tiger McLuen from Youth Leadership advocates that “nothing happens without a leader.” Good intentions mean a lot, but they most often leave young people wondering what the point is. Each of our events offers opportunities to grow in theology, ministry theory and practical skills. The Synod Journey is the best example of this as it requires attendance for adult leaders at numerous training events so they can more effectively walk with youth during the Journey.

### ***And yet...***

I recently met with a PhD student doing research on the decline of the Protestant church and the ELCA in particular. At the end of our interview, she remarked that despite all the trends and statistics, she heard a common thread of hope from me and others she had interviewed. Why?

First and always foremost, because this is not about us. This is God's Church and despite our best efforts we can't wreck it. Thanks be to God.

On a practical level, my hope comes from a renewed sense of discipleship that I hear across the ELCA, across denominations, and across generations. I see it in our synod's Discipleship Challenge that grew out of the faith practice emphasis on The Synod Journey and 2012 ELCA Youth Gathering. The 7 faith practices (Prayer, Worship, Study, Give, Invite, Encourage, Serve) give us tools (*leadership development*) to live out our faith on a daily basis (*faith formation*), and offer opportunities for youth and adults to discuss faith and life together.

I see it in the Practice Discipleship Initiative that is taking place across the ELCA. The next step of our Discipleship Challenge is a partnership with this initiative. This year's theme, “Faith Formation in a Missional Age” invites everyone – *pastors, lay, paid staff, volunteers, those working directly with young people, those who would rather not be in the same room with young people* – to talk about how we form faith in our quickly changing culture. We can no longer afford to silo our ministries to youth, children, adult, women, men, or whatever sub-cultures we may have. Faith formation is for *everyone*, and we need to intentionally work together and learn from each other in how we do mission across these sub-cultures. The Discipleship Challenge/Practice Discipleship is not a program, but a start of a conversation on how we are more effective in faith formation. And this conversation of discipleship is for our *entire* church.

### ***And yet...***

Faith Formation and Leadership Development. This is what we do. And together with the Holy Spirit, it makes a difference. This summer on the Synod Journey, one of our LYO youth struck up a conversation with a tourist in New Orleans. He was wondering what all these kids were doing. She explained the Synod Journey and the ELCA Youth Gathering, and he responded with a longing that he had a Bible to learn more about Jesus like the youth were doing. Without hesitating, this young leader reached into her backpack for the one “souvenir” she had wanted from this trip – the Gathering Bible given to each participant. With a smile and a blessing, she gave him her Bible, and went on her way. A real faith, lived out in a real way, because she had been nurtured in faith and leadership development. You bet I have hope.

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Learn more about the Discipleship Challenge, Practice Discipleship and the faith formation events mentioned here at:

[www.nemnsynod.org/Discipleship](http://www.nemnsynod.org/Discipleship)

[www.practicediscipleship.org](http://www.practicediscipleship.org)

[www.nemnsynod.org/nemnyouth](http://www.nemnsynod.org/nemnyouth)