

Northeastern Minnesota Synod, ELCA
Report of the Coordinator of Youth Ministry
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I don't recall the title, but there is a Ray Bradbury short story that has haunted me since I read it in elementary school. My stomach still tightens when I think about it. I go into panic attacks at the thought that it might happen to me. That I might become the little girl in the story who remembers living on earth and the glorious sun the earth had. The little girl who now lives on a foreign planet where the sun only comes out once a year for a few hours. The little girl whose new "friends" locked her in a closet the day the sun came because they were so tired of hearing her share about the wonderful goodness of the sun.

I can't imagine deeper **despair** than that closet. Can you?

Or maybe you can. Maybe you feel that despair when you look at empty pews on Sunday mornings. Maybe the panic rises in you when the young people in your family don't make youth group or church attendance a priority. Maybe you remember living in a different time when it felt like everyone thought the Son was important...and now you feel like you're on a foreign planet that wants to lock you in a closet for sharing the wonderful goodness of the Son of God. Yes, that is a deeper despair.

The 2014 Practice Discipleship curriculum included a session on "Framing Failure with Forgiveness." Author Colleen Windham-Hughes shared that too often we put a frame around our failures. A frame points out where we have failed, lifts our failures up for the world to see, and boxes us in, leaving us in a place of despair. She suggests that instead, we should consider our failures as part of a path...part of our journey. Forgiveness reframes our failure by acknowledging it and giving us a new beginning...a new path...a new way forward.

I can't imagine more life-giving **hope** than a new way forward. Can you?

The sense of failure and despair often go hand in hand, and I have been struck this year by their prevalence as I visit congregations and leaders...along with a yearning for hope. Nowhere in the church is this more evident than in ministry with young people. We feel the despair from research and personal experience: attendance is decreasing, *what* young people believe is becoming a watered down version of Christianity, more young people choose "none" as their religious preference every year, and the list goes on. It is tempting to put a frame around what once went well, hang those ministries on the wall and say that is the best imagination of what we can do. But if we limit our ministry to a particular frame – or box – there is no way forward in a new and changing culture.

What if we shifted our approach to ministry, and youth ministry in particular, as a path rather than a frame? What would that look like? What would happen if we said, "Yep, we've hit a few bumps and missed the mark at times along the way. But this is God's church, and these are God's young people. And God is up to something that is bigger than our current imaginations." What would that path look like? What if our failures became our opportunities for new beginnings?

What is so difficult about this time in our culture, is that we might know we need a new way forward, but we don't know how to get there. The path to "there" hasn't even been created. That's a scary thing. It is so much easier to follow a map than to blaze a trail. It might feel like we're lost. But in reality, the opportunities are abundant. We have all the tools we need: theology, scripture, training opportunities, resources, gifted leaders...and a God who is at work in and through us to "accomplish abundantly far more than we can ask or imagine." (Ephesians 3:20) And in that I find life-giving hope, even when I feel surrounded by the frames of despair.

Like you, I know we need a new path forward in passing on faith to young people. I hold on to faith formation and leadership development as the foundations for ministry, and continue to adapt practices to meet the needs of this current generation. I certainly have much to learn and try out, but I also see so many signs of hope, where God is at work accomplishing far more than I could ever ask or imagine.

- I have hope when 867 middle school youth and their adult leaders gather at Cragun's for the Middle School Gathering, because I know they are learning that they are a child of God, loved by God FOREVER, no matter what.
- I have hope when 157 senior high youth and their adult leaders gather for the Cardia Deo Retreat and spend a weekend being EQUIPPED, because I know they are learning to follow Jesus in their daily lives through the faith practices.
- I have hope when 300 senior high youth and their adult leaders register for the NE MN Synod Journey to the 2015 ELCA Youth Gathering, because I know they will spend a year in Bible studies, trainings and group building experiences to prepare to serve and learn from the people of Lansing and Detroit.
- I have hope when 25 senior high leaders commit to serving on the Lutheran Youth Organization (LYO) Board, because I know they are growing in faith and leadership skills they will put in

practice at our synod youth ministry events, in their congregations, and in their daily lives.

- I have hope when I hear that numbers are increasing at our outdoor ministry sites, because it means youth are being nurtured and transformed in faith.
- I have hope when 22 leaders from our synod attend the ELCA Youth Ministry Network Extravaganza Continuing Education event, and join a record breaking 1000+ leaders from across the nation, because it means leaders are growing in their skills and imagination for ministry.
- I have hope when 35 leaders spend a day preparing to lead Practice Discipleship workshops in their congregations, because it means they are seeking deeper conversations around faith and ministry.
- I have hope when congregations call me wanting to know if we can wonder together about how to pass on faith with their young people, because it means they are seeking a path forward.

Yes, I have much hope. Because in the face of failure, in the face of despair...our God offers a new path forward. Thank you for your partnership on this journey. It is a rich blessing to serve alongside you in this synod.

Tools for your Toolbox

www.practicediscipleship.org (See PD2014 Archives for the full curriculum on "Framing Failure with Forgiveness")

www.nemnsynod.org/Discipleship

www.elcaymnet.org

www.nemnysnod.org/resources2

www.faithformationlearningexchange.net

www.youthministrylinks.org