

Coordinator of Youth Ministry Bulletin of Reports to the NE MN Synod, 2017

A few weeks ago I had a conversation with a youth director who lamented, "I want to spend time in youth group - even just ten minutes - in Bible study or devotions, but the parents insist I just play games because the youth are too busy and need a break." Hours later in another phone call I talked with a mom whose middle school son was struggling with confirmation. "He wants so badly to talk about the things that are going on in his life and what he sees going on in the world around him, and what faith has to say about that...and all they do is play games at church."

I understand the parents who insist on games. They are fearful their kids won't want to go to church, so they want it to be fun. But in their eagerness to nourish the faith of their young people, they end up giving them junk food that doesn't sustain.

The last few years, five Protestant denominations have been conducting research on current confirmation practices and what contributes to youth discipleship so faith will be nourished and sustained beyond confirmation years (www.theconfirmationproject.com). Here are some of the key findings they have shared so far:

- **Relevance Matters.** Confirmation programs where real life issues were addressed, where students were able to connect faith to their life and the world around them, made a difference.
- **Leadership Matters.** When church leadership valued confirmation as a ministry and not a requirement, and equipped and empowered teams of leaders around that ministry, it made a difference in the faith life of young people.
- **A Congregational Culture of Discipleship Matters.** As other studies have shared, "You get what you are." When congregations are vibrant in discipleship practices of study, prayer, worship, giving, inviting, encouragement and serving, it makes a difference in the lives of young people.
- **Camp Matters.** Time together, apart from the world, in which youth can experience a pattern of faithful living alongside faithful adults, makes a difference in their faith.
- **Relationships Matter.** It's important what we teach, but faith is caught much more than it is taught. What happens between and among youth and adults relationally is more important than any printed curriculum. Most significantly, MENTORS were one of the few clear predictors of faith growth. Not curriculum, not the pastor's teaching – but faith-filled adults who walked alongside young people and shared their faith stories.

These findings match what we have learned in other studies: young people grow in faith when we invest in leaders, in relationships and in faith practices that connect our lives with our faith.

That's why our synod invests in the **Lutheran Youth Organization (LYO) Board**. This group of 21 high school youth and nine adults are selected through an application process to plan and implement the NE MN Synod Middle School Gathering and Cardia Deo Retreat. They are required to participate in a week long training camp where they learn Peer Ministry skills, small and large group leadership skills, Lutheran theology, and faith practices, and develop relationships that encourage, support and challenge them as they provide leadership for our synod events.

That's why our synod invests in the **Middle School Gathering**. A keynote speaker, workshops and worship deepen the understanding of core confirmation teachings. But the impact of the event comes through the relationships. One youth wrote in this year's evaluation, "The best part of the Gathering was Family Time (*when congregations meet together to talk about what they are learning and experiencing*). We talked about stuff we wouldn't usually talk about and I felt like I belonged."

That's why our synod invests in **Cardia Deo**, a retreat for high school youth. This event features small group Bible studies led by the LYO where youth dig deep into scripture and how faith connects with their daily life. We do games and fun activities as well, but listen to what they share as the most meaningful part of the event in their evaluations:

- I learned what my faith means to me and why it's important.
- I learned that I have a mission that God is sending me to do.
- I learned I'm not alone when I saw how many youth were really involved or really wanted to be involved with their church, faith and other youth.
- Talking to people in my bible study about obstacles they have faced in their faith.
- Getting to meet new people that share the same values and interests as me.
- The most meaningful part of my weekend was being told that I was sent and I now feel more prepared to go out in the world and share God's love.

That's why our synod invested in the **EcoFaith Youth Camp** last June. A planning team of high school youth and adult spent a year growing together in leadership, relationships and faith to lead this day camp to explore how our faith intersects with environmental, justice, and racial issues. For a generation who cares deeply about the environment and the world around them, this was a relevant and meaningful week of exploring their faith.

That's why our synod partners with our **ELCA Outdoor Ministries**. Spending time at camp is vital for the faith growth of our young people...and for adults. Week long camps and retreats build relationships, form faith, develop leaders in the staff and campers, and make faith relevant. We have some of the best camps in the nation right in our back yard with Voyageurs Lutheran Ministry, Camp Onomia, Luther Crest Bible Camp and Camp Amnicon. I can't urge you enough to encourage your young people to get to camp this summer, to participate in retreats during the school year, and to consider working at a camp during their young adult years. Your leadership as a congregation matters – young people won't get there unless you make this a priority in your encouragement/requirements, and help them get there financially!

That's why our synod invests in **the Synod Journey to the ELCA Youth Gathering**. This is a year-long leadership development and faith formation event, where adult leaders are trained and equipped to walk alongside high school youth in Bible study, service, worship and activities that will connect faith and life. **All of our congregations are invited to participate** in this faith journey, whether or not you register for the event that will travel to Galveston for service events and Houston for the ELCA Youth Gathering. Worship and Bible study resources will be available at www.nemnsynod.org/SynodJourney beginning April 2017. The theme this year is "This Changes Everything." How might you be changed through a year of intentional leadership development, faith formation and relationship building?

The programs we do matter because they get at leadership development and faith formation. These programs are tools to build relationships for youth and adults to walk alongside each other, sharing their faith and life, being transformed by the Holy Spirit on the journey. I am so grateful to be in a synod that chooses to invest in the things that matter. Thank you for your partnership in this ministry!

In Christ,



Catherine Anderson
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For more information on programs in the NE MN Synod, visit: www.nemnsynod.org/youth