

Youth Ministry Report to the NE MN Synod Assembly

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May 4, 2019

Every New Year's Day I watch the Rose Parade with my Mom. And every year, she has wistfully said, "Wouldn't it be fun to see that in person?" So this year, to celebrate birthdays that ended in zero, we made it happen. And we did it all. We helped decorate a float. We watched the judging. We got seats in the grandstand at the very beginning and waved to Al and Hoda in the Today show booth. We saw the floats up close at the post-parade display. The floats were amazing, and so much more beautiful and complex in person. I learned a lot about floats and float building. One of the intriguing things I learned is that they only build the floats to pass inspection. Floats need to prove during judging that they have engines that will pull the float, that the animation works, and that anything taller than the overpass at the end of the route must be able to lower itself then go back up again.

What happens when you only invest enough in your infrastructure to pass inspection? You break down. We saw multiple floats go by that had working animation for the judging, but parts weren't moving the day of the parade. The saddest story was a float at the end. I heard they had been behind on their building, so did a rush job in December. The engine broke down before they even got on the parade route, and when they brought in a truck to tow it down the route, the hitch – that all-important point of connection - broke. This may not be true, but I can only guess they had purchased the cheapest hitch possible, and the connection wasn't strong enough to carry the load.

So what do Rose Parade floats have to do with faith formation and youth ministry? You have probably noticed as I have, the seemingly exponential growth in young people experiencing mental health conditions in recent years. Depression, anxiety, suicidal tendencies and other diagnoses are real, and painful and scary. Often digital devices and social media tend to take the blame. And while I certainly think they are contributing factors, so are genetics, the environment, and a cultural permeated with fear, high expectations, busyness and more. Every generation has it's struggles, but there seems to be something unique happening now that I believe we need to pay attention to, especially as a faith community.

Like the Rose Parade floats, our young people are amazing, and so much more beautiful and complex in person. The young people I know build robots that move objects, play orchestral pieces they have composed, develop websites to promote the small business they have created. They spend their free time volunteering with the Special Olympics, handing out sandwiches to the homeless, and organizing fundraisers and awareness events for social justice issues they are passionate about. These same young people also tell me at events they want to go to bed early because they are exhausted. They are stressed by their school load and activities, sit in class thinking about the best exit strategy if a shooter enters the school, attend funerals for friends who have died by suicide, and struggle with debilitating anxiety that keeps them from fully engaging in activities.

It's not good enough to invest in our young people just to pass inspection or to get by. We need to give them connections that are strong enough to hold the loads they carry. I believe our faith communities are uniquely positioned to invest in the mental wellbeing of our young people and their families. We have connections that will strengthen young people for life's journey like no other place. Here are a few of the things I think we can do...

We can offer a caring community. During the winter storm a couple weeks ago, I went down to Lake Superior to watch the waves come in. Snow, ice and who knows what else were pelted at me so I couldn't even see. It was tough to stand in one place, and there were times I was blown backwards. I remember walking into my house, closing the door and pausing to thank God for sound shelter. That's what community does. In the midst of the storms of life, community gives us shelter, a safe place to be. Space to breathe. A place to be seen, known, and loved. How can we intentionally be a caring community for our young people? How can we be a safe space to share our journeys with mental health conditions – whether they're our own, a friend's, or a family member? How are we building relationships with youth so they are deeply connected to each other, to caring adults, and to the God who loves them more than they can know?

We can, and need to, start conversations on mental health. In 2018 I heard from leaders that at least 2 youth in each of our synod's five conferences had died by suicide. That takes my breath away. When I added my own observations of the number of youth at our events and on our LYO Board who were struggling with depression and anxiety in a way that was impacting

our time together, I knew we had to start talking about mental health as a synod. In October I invited Joy Hensel to speak on youth ministry and mental health. I told her I expected around 30-40 leaders. We had 80 show up. I am encouraged by that. You have seen these trends, too, and are stepping up to strengthen the connections that hold our young people.

It's been astounding to see what simply starting a conversation has done. So many of you have begun work in your own congregations to build those caring communities and create space for deeper conversations on mental health. To assist you with this, the synod applied for – and received – a \$10,000 grant from the ELCA to develop resources to help facilitate conversations on mental health with the goal to begin to break the stigma surrounding mental illnesses and to equip young people and leaders with resources. I am grateful to have Joy Hensel, a licensed counselor with an MA from Luther Seminary, serve as our Project Consultant. We will have five primary focus areas: wellbeing, anxiety, depression, suicide, and grief. The resources will be in three categories:

1. **Mental Health Discussion Guide Kits.** These kits provide a framework to start conversations with middle school and high school youth using rituals, Bible stories and discussion guides. The focus of the discussion guides is to give space for young people to learn about the mental health issue, have conversations, ask questions, and connect them to tools and resources...all within a faith context. Again, these are not therapy for youth diagnosed with a mental illness or support group sessions for youth impacted by mental health conditions. Too often the stigma around mental health keeps us from talking about it, especially in the church. I think we need to change that. It's not easy, because mental health is incredibly complex and we often don't know what to say. These discussion guides won't be perfect, and they certainly don't cover everything. But maybe if we start talking about mental health conditions and mental wellbeing they won't be so scary and daunting. And my prayer is that if it's not a forbidden topic, our young people and their parents won't be afraid to seek help when they or their friends need it. We have a Mental Health Discussion Guide Kit for each congregation. If you did not receive one at Synod Assembly, all Discussion Guides are available for download at www.nemnsynod.org/mentalhealth.

You will hear me saying over and over this year that these are not therapy, and the adults who lead them are not therapists. While each discussion guide is scripted, we do ask that adults who facilitate the conversation read through the overview document and spend ample time preparing for each discussion. This is not a place to only put in enough effort to pass inspection. Our youth need these conversations, and they need you to be a strong enough hitch to hold the loads they carry.

2. To further equip leaders for these conversations we will have a series of **Workshops** that will go deeper into our topic areas. They will be led by Joy Hensel and area mental health practitioners.
3. **And we will develop two sets of Podcasts** on each of the focus areas. One set will be for ministry leaders, one set for parents. Each will include discussion questions you might use in small groups, and further resources.

We know there are so many more topics to cover than the five focus areas we will work on in the coming months. What this grant offers is an opportunity to start the conversation. We will learn from these conversations and see what comes next.

Finally, we cannot underestimate that the greatest connection we have to offer is Christ.

Historically, the church has not been helpful when it comes to mental health. Too many are told to just “pray more” or “have faith” when dealing with very real medical diagnoses that require medication, therapy and other treatment. Our Lutheran theology offers hope to those who struggle with mental health conditions. We believe in a God who stands with us in the muck, who cries with us, who grieves with us, who accepts us as we are, who comes to us even when we can’t pray or have lost faith. At the end of every LYO meeting we gather in a circle, and I have the LYO look around the circle telling them that the love they feel in this community is real, but it doesn’t even come close to the love their God has for them in Christ Jesus, always and forever, no matter what, especially when they can’t feel it. I always include that last line, because I know they will walk into school the next day and face obstacles I can’t even imagine. And I want them to know that in the darkest of times, their God is with them. Faith is not a feeling. It’s trusting in a God who shows up, always and forever, no matter what, especially when we can’t see or feel God’s presence.

I encourage you to come to our workshop this afternoon to learn some basics on how you can be a caring community, start helpful conversations, and be the hands and feet of Christ. I encourage you to pick up your Mental Health Discussion Guide Kit and find a team of caring adults in your congregation to make a plan to lead those sessions with your youth.

My cousin lives a few blocks from the end of the Rose Parade route, near the freeway overpass that is an obstacle for tall floats. She laughs at the requirement to make the float come back up and told me, "By the time they get to the end of the parade, people are tired, flowers have fallen off, and most tall floats don't even bother trying to go back up after they go under the overpass. It's just not worth it." Our young people are going to experience obstacles in life. For far too many, those obstacles include mental health conditions. I pray we as a faith community help our young people build connections that will give them stamina for the entire parade route of their life, help them carry their load, and give them the strength to get back up when they encounter life's obstacles. Our youth need us more than ever before. You matter. The connections you give young people matter. Our youth are more than worth the investment. Thank you for walking with them on this journey.