

Youth Ministry Report to the NE MN Synod Assembly

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“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.” - Ephesians 2:8-10

This changes everything.

That is the theme and focus for the 2018 ELCA Youth Gathering, and it is what we will explore this year on the NE MN Synod Journey.

But what does **THIS** mean? And what does **THIS** change?

Our culture makes a lot of promises about change. Here are a few examples...

(Cue commercials...)

- <https://vimeo.com/41293286>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0FsZ6oI0vcQ>
- <https://www.ispot.tv/ad/7vM3/ford-f-150-this-changes-everything>

The latest sandwich, flavored drink or truck might change an aspect of my life. But I doubt it will change everything.

Our culture spends a lot of time pursuing that one thing – that one silver bullet, that one easy button - that will change everything else, doesn't it?

Think of some of the different ways we try to define THIS:

- This job will change everything.
- This gym membership will change everything.
- This diet will change everything.
- This relationship will change everything.

We can pursue a lot of strategies for change, and they might get us where we want to be for the short term. But for the long term do they get us where we want to be? Do they change everything, or do we eventually end up in the same place we were before?

I wonder as well, how often in our congregations we pursue the things that will give us short term change, rather than lifelong transformation.

- This curriculum will change everything.
- This worship style will change everything.
- This guitar-playing, tie-dye shirt wearing, young and techy youth director will change everything.
- This pastor...this budget...this new building...will change everything.

None of these are bad – and in some cases they are necessary. But are they for the long term? Do they change everything? Or will we eventually end up in the same place we were before?

If you've heard me speak just about anywhere the last several years, you have heard me talking about the changing culture. I continue to speak about it because the changes are significant and demand our attention. Our culture is experiencing exponential changes in technology, globalization, population, communication and more. Family structure and schedules are changing, depression, anxiety and other mental illnesses are increasing, and youth culture is vastly different than it was even ten years ago. In the midst of this, even the church – the one thing you could always count on - is changing. Membership is declining across all denominations. One quarter of the population is not affiliated with any religion. We often call this group the “nones” – and that number is much higher if you just look at millennials. Belief systems have shifted and often reflect a watered down version of Christianity. Decreased church attendance has impacted giving, which in turn impacts staff and programs. Anxiety over changes creates conflict. Older generations often wonder why the youth don't make church a priority. Youth often wonder what's the point of church.

Cultural shifts have changed everything, whether we like it or not. So what do we do with these changes? As humans we tend to respond to change and uncertainty in one of two ways – with fear and grief, which can paralyze us and make us cling to the certainties of days gone by. Or with excitement and hope, which can open us to new ways of being. Even in the midst of this frenetic pace of change and depressing figures, I choose excitement and hope for God's church. Because first and foremost this is God's church, and this gift of faith comes from God. And because, as our Ephesians verse says, God uses us to launch us into new ways of being. We are called to this work and this way of life. But as we face changes and uncertainty in the church, we can no longer wing it, rely on old models, and simply maintain ministries. We never should have. Now more than ever, we need to listen to God's call to be intentional and strategic in how we approach ministry because what we pursue for our THIS determines what is changed.

- If I pursue a truck, my ride to work is changed.
- If I pursue a diet plan, my health is changed.
- If we pursue a new curriculum, Sunday school is changed.

These are short term goals that do create some important changes. But what about this:

- If we pursue a culture of faith formation, our entire church is changed. WE are changed.

A culture of faith formation. Now that would change everything.

Last fall I started thinking about research on faith formation that has been conducted over the last few decades. I believe studies are helpful because they give us a lens to consider what is needed beyond what the latest trends offer, so we can effect long term change. When I started to compare several research studies, I found very similar themes around how to pursue a culture of faith formation. There is so much more to each of these, but here is a very brief synopsis:

- **Faith Formation need to be Relational:** This makes the top of the list because every study and experience points to the importance of faith-nurturing relationships. The Confirmation Project study that just came out shared how the primary predictor of faith growth was if mentors were involved in the confirmation program. Relationships equip young people to claim their own call to follow Jesus, because they come to understand and experience Jesus alive and at work in the lives they encounter.
- **Faith formation needs to Engage Parents:** The primary faith relationship still remains that of parents. Parents are always passing on what they believe. How are we equipping them to share faith with their children in meaningful ways? How are we supporting them in this fast paced, demanding and challenging culture?
- **Faith formation needs to be grounded in Theology:** In a chaotic and often broken world, we have a particular story of hope and love through Jesus to share. Interestingly, the Confirmation Project found that youth entering confirmation expected and assumed they would be learning theology and that foundational pieces like the small catechism teachings on the commandments, baptism, communion and apostle's creed would be part of the curriculum. At the same time, our deep theology needs to be relevant to their daily lives, answering how does this theology change me and everything around me?
- **Faith formation needs to be about Discipleship:** Following Jesus is our way of life. How are we equipping young people for this journey with faith practices that will sustain them? Equally important, how are adults growing in faith so as they build relationships with young people and each other they have depth of faith and grounded theology to share?
- **Faith formation needs to develop Leaders:** Nothing happens without a leader. And the primary leader is the pastor. Pastors need to hold up a vision for a culture of faith formation in the congregation, support youth ministry and faith formation initiatives, and make sure sound theology and discipleship are a priority. At the same time, youth and adults need to be equipped and empowered for leadership in the congregation. Lyle Griner, National Director for Peer Ministry is known for saying, "Give them a purpose." Our youth have gifts to share – how are we equipping and inviting them to do so in the name of Christ?

- **Faith formation needs to be a Congregational Ministry:** A culture of faith formation can only occur when the entire congregation is involved and takes ownership. There is a time and place for age specific or specialized ministries. But overall, pursuing this theme means the congregation has an attitude that we are disciples together, and we invest in and support faith formation, especially for young people. Polly the Pewsitter sees herself just as much involved in the faith development of little Joey as the pastor and youth leader.
- **Faith formation needs to offer Contextual Programs:** Programs are important. But only when we remember that programs are tools to accomplish all of the above. Programs change with the season and with the changing culture to meet the needs of the people to build relationships, grow as disciples, be grounded in theology, engage parents, develop leaders and involve the congregation.

What we pursue for our THIS determines what is changed. If we pursue these foundational elements, we get a culture of faith formation. This changes everything. These don't leave us with a short term goal that will fade when a leader leaves or a curriculum goes out of print, but lifelong faith transformation.

I look at that list, and I know I have so much more to learn and grow, and ways I could be better. I'm sure you feel that way too. I invite and encourage you this year to pick one of these themes to intentionally work on as you further pursue a culture of faith formation in your congregation.

We'll spend the rest of our lives developing these themes in our lives and for our congregations. But even in our imperfections, I see our synod and congregations at work pursuing a culture of faith formation in so many ways.

- I see it in the tiny congregation of Zion Lutheran Church in Markville, where I met a 5th grade girl who just showed up at church one day. The congregation adopted her as one of their own, and she decided to stick around. I don't remember all the details of her story, but I will always remember the visual of her walking into their church basement and being greeted by name by all the adults in the room. She was asked about her day, and introduced to me as a leader in the church because of how she reaches out and influences others. I didn't need much convincing – that night alone she had invited three new friends to join her for worship. Sunday school, church events and other faith formation opportunities have been part of her story, but she has been changed by a culture of faith formation expressed most deeply through relationships.

- I see a culture of faith formation in Zion Lutheran Church in Cloquet, where they realized their Wednesday programming was just not working. So they took the risk of moving everything to Sunday afternoon, required parents to be part of the process and invited adults from the congregation to serve as mentors, and involved the congregation through serving a meal. Even though the program year is shorter, it is deeper in theology and discipleship practices. And they have exponentially multiplied their average attendance. Like many of you have also done, they paid attention to their context and it has changed everything.
- I see a culture of faith formation at our Middle School Gathering where amidst the fun and activity, adult leaders build relationships with young people that allow them to share Jesus not only through what they say but also in how they live. One middle schooler wrote this year that the best part of the weekend was “Family time, because we talked about stuff we wouldn’t usually talk about and it felt like I belonged.” I felt the spirit of a synod owned ministry this fall when we needed to cancel the Friday event due to the blizzard. Talk about changing everything. Your investment in returning what you could of the deposits for the canceled event were an act of discipleship, and I am still humbled by your generosity to make sure faith formation can continue through this event in the coming years.
- I see a culture of faith formation at our Cardia Deo Retreat where our LYO youth lead small group Bible studies in which youth grapple with theology and how it applies to their daily lives. Evaluations consistently share comments from youth how they have been changed. One youth said this year, “I started to understand my relationship with God and Jesus a lot more.” That changes everything.
- I see a culture of faith formation on our LYO Board where our synod intentionally invests in growing leaders who are following Jesus as their way of life. We spend a week at training camp learning communication skills, Lutheran theology, Biblical understanding, building relationships, small and large group leadership skills, and plan our events. Give youth a purpose and high expectations, and they rise to the occasion if they are equipped to do so. And if you have ever wondered if leadership development for youth in your congregation or on the LYO makes a difference, check out this picture from Recharge, a training event for congregational leaders we hold in February. Three of these leaders are former LYO youth who are now fulltime youth directors in our synod. One is a college student who was invited to lead in her congregation as a youth and now serves regularly as an adult leader. It’s not surprising she is considering going into ministry after college. And the other two are the youth directors who invested in their faith journey not only in the congregation but through LYO as well. Leaders make a difference, and leadership development changes everything.

- I see a culture of faith formation at our camps where every summer hundreds of young people spend a week building relationships, growing as disciples, steeped in theology, alongside young adults who are growing as leaders. If you don't have youth signed up for camp yet, there is still time. A week at camp can change everything, and so can serving for an entire summer. If you have young adults looking for an opportunity that will change everything this summer, encourage them to work at camp. You can talk with any of our amazing camp staff at the camp café throughout the weekend.
- I see a culture of faith formation on the Synod Journey where we spend a year equipping adults to work with their youth, growing in faith through Bible studies, and deepening faith relationships through group activities. All congregations and ages are invited on the Synod Journey – this is much more than an event. Worship resources are already on the Synod Journey website and will be added to throughout the year. The Discipleship Challenge will be part of the Synod Journey this year, and help all congregations and members explore how “This Changes Everything.” The working plan is to take biblical stories that will frame the daily themes of the Gathering, and engage those stories through the faith practices. Resources will be posted by September 1st. Those who register for the Synod Journey to the ELCA Youth Gathering will journey together for ten days of service learning, worship, Bible studies, activities and so much more in Galveston and Houston. If you don't have youth who are able to go, you are invited to partner with a congregation who does.

A culture of faith formation can change everything. It can change your young people. It can change your congregation. It can change you. But don't ever forget as you pursue this worthy goal, that...

The Synod Journey doesn't change us.

The ELCA Youth Gathering doesn't change us.

The Middle School Gathering and Cardia Deo don't change us.

Our programs don't change us.

Not even our beloved camps change us.

Jesus changes us.

But as Ephesians reminds us, we have work to do. And I believe the Holy Spirit calls us to use our best thinking...calls us to be strategic...calls us to pursue a culture of faith formation so that through our programs, our events, our congregations, our institutions – and most importantly through each other, Jesus might change us.

And that, my friends, changes everything.