

Youth Ministry Report to the NE MN Synod Assembly

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One of my least favorite movies is “Alice in Wonderland.” I don’t really know why – it just kind of creeps me out. But there is one scene that I find to be an enlightening and challenging statement for life and for ministry. The scene begins with Alice wandering through the dark forest when she happens upon the Cheshire Cat, and has the following conversation:

“Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?” says Alice.

“That depends a good deal on where you want to get to.” Responds the Cheshire Cat.

“I don't much care where –”

“Then it doesn't matter which way you go.”

I don’t much care where – then it doesn’t matter which way you go.

What frames your life? What frames your ministry? Where do you want to get to...or don’t you much care? When you consider the frames within which you live and do ministry, where do they get you? Does it matter?

The frames our culture holds for faith are pretty clear. If you’ve heard me speak before, you’ve heard about these frames. I’m sure I sound like a broken record, but I keep talking about these cultural frames because it is essential that we pay attention to the frames our children, youth and adults are steeped in on a daily basis. So a quick refresher on what research has been showing us. We have learned from the National Study on Youth and Religion that young people believe in God, but their belief system is something researchers call Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. What this means is they believe in a benign God that operates in the background of their lives. The central goal in life is to be happy and to be good. God is a cosmic genie that is pulled down from the shelf when a need arises, we rub the bottle, the genie God pops out and once the crisis has passed, the genie God gets put back in his genie bottle and placed on the shelf while we move on with our lives.

We also know from research that 20% of Americans of all ages, including our senior citizens, are not affiliated with any religion. We call them the “nones” because they check the box marked NONE when asked what their religion is. If you look just at those under the age of 30, the percentage jumps to more than 30%. These numbers are growing by 20% every year. For Lutherans, on average, 41% will leave the church. Of that, 13% will become nones, meaning they will no longer consider themselves affiliated with any religion. If you do the math, in 5 years the number who will become “nones” jumps to 30% of those who leave the Lutheran church.

Let me be clear. The “nones” believe in God. They pray. They are not anti-God. They consider themselves spiritual, not religious. The problem is, God makes no impact on their daily life.

Does that sound like any young people you know? Does it sound like any adults? Our children and youth aren't making this belief system up on their own...they are learning it from their parents and significant adults in their lives. And dare I say, or at least wonder, are they learning it from the church?

Case in point. Last fall I was at Best Buy getting some gadget for an upcoming event. I was running behind, mentally running through my to do list. Hungry...which naturally translates into crabby and impatient. My frustration increased at the checkout line where I was trying to use our synod tax exempt number for the purchase. The young adult who was checking me out didn't know how to do a tax exempt purchase. And God bless her, she was trying to be polite and have a conversation with this old crabby lady as we waited for the manager. She looked at my card, and innocently asked me what a "synod" was. I did the mental review of my behavior while in line, to make sure I wanted to claim I worked for the church or if I should pass off bad spelling and say that I worked for the state senate. I decided it was safe to say that I worked for the Lutheran church, and she responded with, "Oh, I was confirmed Lutheran." Confirmed Lutheran? I hadn't heard that phrase used before, so I decided to plod on. Are you still involved in a faith community? No. I'm more spiritual than religious.

There it was. Standing right in front of me was a face on the statistics. And I had no idea how to respond. As too often happens, my questions came as I drove away:

- How does that work for you? How does your faith grow, shape you, give you a foundation for your daily life?
- How does your faith frame your life? Does it? Or do you say this because you've been taught that saying you're spiritual but not religious gets you off the hook? Collectively, has the church given you the language and permission to wander off on your own? As long as you say you believe in God you're all good...we've done our job.

These are the questions that keep me up at night, because I fear that we have given our young people too small a frame in which to live. Like Alice, they are wandering through a dark forest wondering which way to go, and we say it doesn't matter where as long as they stay on any path. Or as a colleague of mine in the North Carolina synod says, we have let them listen to a culture that says faith is a piece of pie instead of the pie plate. Just like you get your music lesson piece of pie, your sports piece of pie, your family piece of pie...you go to church for confirmation/Sunday school/youth group to get your weekly slice of faith. And once you're confirmed, you can move on to other pieces of pie, with the faith piece of pie a lingering memory. What if instead, we gave our young people pie plates? A foundation in which all the other pieces dwell? A frame that says EVERYTHING we do comes from and is lived out through our faith. What might that look like?

It might look like our Lutheran Youth Organization Board, where young people are intentionally nurtured in faith and leadership skills, and then given an opportunity to put into practice their skills through our synod events, in their congregations and in their daily lives. You can read in my written report to the assembly how these youth have led Bible studies and faith discussions

with their team mates, friends and families. To me, this is a pie plate. Where faith shapes and informs young people to live out their faith where they live and play.

It might look like our Middle School Gathering, where young people grapple with theological teachings and how they apply to our lives, alongside adults and peers who will go home with them to continue those conversations. Community is important in our events, because we do not practice faith alone. We need caring adults who will wonder about God with our young people. We need to play and laugh together so our young people know we care about THEM, as they are, wherever they are on their faith journey. To me, this is a pie plate. Where events are more about building relationships that continue to wonder together about faith when they return home to their daily lives.

It might look like our Cardia Deo Retreat for senior high youth, where young people spend time in peer-led Bible studies...and so do the adults. They wrestle together with deep questions of faith and how to put their faith into practice when they return to their homes, schools and activities. To me, this is the pie plate. Where youth and adults are given space to ask questions, doubt, and challenge each other to grow in faith in a way that makes a difference and transforms. As one young person wrote in their evaluation this year, “How can I choose the most meaningful part of the most life changing weekend of my life? I have opened a new chapter in my life and faith. I feel more open to reaching out to people.”

It might look like our Synod Journey to the ELCA Youth Gathering, where young people and their adult leaders intentionally invest a year of their lives to dig deep in their faith through community, service, worship, learning, and more. You might remember the story I shared from the 2009 Synod Journey where a young person defiantly registered for the Journey to “find God.” After the Journey her pastor asked if she had found God, and the young girl responded that she had found the eyes to see that God was with her all along. To me, this is the pie plate. Where church equips youth and adults with the eyes to see God everywhere, every day.

Moving from faith as a piece of the pie to the pie plate requires a shift in thinking. There is no silver bullet or easy button to get there. A new curriculum or program won't give you a pie plate. What we need is a bigger frame for ministry.

This is why I, and a team of Coaches, writers and other leaders have spent so much time on the Practice Discipleship Initiative. Practice Discipleship lifts up a frame that develops leaders for the sake of deeper faith formation with young people. Leaders who are grounded in theology, theory and practical skills are better equipped to point to Christ as they walk with people of all ages. Leadership Development is only one side of the frame for Practice Discipleship and for ministry. It offers the *how* – how we do ministry in a bigger frame. How we move from offering pie pieces to pie plates to our young people.

The other side of the frame is Faith Formation. This is the *what* – what we hope our young people will live in their daily lives as they follow Christ. And this happens best when together, youth and adults, practice faith together. As Kenda Creasy Dean writes in [*Almost Christian*](#),

“...teenagers learn to articulate faith by hearing adults articulate theirs...(yet) American adults may be no more religiously articulate than their children. The solution is...to look for places where adults can move beyond their comfort zones and talk about their faith in teenagers’ presence.”

This is why I believe the most important frame within Practice Discipleship, or any of our ministries for that matter, is the faith practices. There are a variety of faith practices to choose from – Practice Discipleship has chosen to use the 7 faith practices lifted up by the 1997 ELCA initiative: Pray, Serve, Worship, Encourage, Invite, Study, and Give. We have adopted these in our synod’s Discipleship Challenge. Perhaps you have others that have been vital in your life and ministry. Great. The point is that these become a practice – a way of life – in your own life and in your ministry. An integral part of the pie plate that frames your entire life.

Faith Formation and Leadership Development are two parts of a never ending cycle. We need both. They are foundational frames for ministry. Faith formation opportunities allow us to be rooted and growing in faith. As we deepen our faith we are called to develop as leaders who are equipped in theology, theory and skills to be sent to share the story of Christ so others can be rooted and growing in faith. And we learn in the process that we have so much more to learn. And so the cycle continues.

The Discipleship Challenge is one of the tools the synod offers to help you build a bigger frame for ministry. It supports this never ending cycle of faith formation and leadership development. The faith formation side of the frame is a monthly focus on each of the 7 faith practices. The synod offers videos and discussion guides to use with children, families, youth and adults to start your conversations. The leadership development side of the frame is the Practice Discipleship workshops. This year the theme for Practice Discipleship is “Frame.” In a few minutes we will have the opportunity to experience the Framing Life Biblically session in our committee of the whole. I invite you to take part in the training sessions that will equip you as a leader to look at larger frames for your ministries and your life. They are available online at www.practicediscipleship.org, and will be offered throughout our synod. A new opportunity we are offering this year is a “train the trainer” event where a team from your congregation can be equipped to lead the Practice Discipleship sessions in your own congregation. Open enrollment workshops will also be offered. Please pick up a brochure at the synod resource table and visit the Discipleship Challenge website for more information.

All of my reading, all the research I have seen points to faith practices as a vital frame in which to pass on faith that makes a difference. But the most important research is what I hear from youth themselves. As one young man said after experiencing the faith practices at the 2012 ELCA Youth Gathering, “I no longer feel like a hypocrite saying that I follow Jesus but not knowing how to live that out in my life.”

He makes me think of the Best Buy girl. I don’t know what frame her leaders shared with her. But I do wonder if she had been steeped in a frame that equipped her to understand faith as the pie plate rather than a piece of pie how she would describe her faith today. Perhaps she

would be like the boy who no longer feels like a hypocrite as he fully lives into his life in Christ. Perhaps she would be like the girl on our Synod Journey that found the eyes to see that God was with her all along.

Frames make a difference. They give us perspective and deepen our understanding. They give us eyes to see that God is with us all along. So I return to my opening questions. What frames your life? What frames your ministry? Where do you want to get to...or don't you much care? My prayer for our synod is that we take time to consider what frames we hold in our own lives, and in our ministries. And I pray that we can move the frame of our lives and ministries from a slice of pie that is enjoyable and tasty for a moment, to a pie plate that can last a lifetime.

Amen.