

Youth Ministry Report to the NE MN Synod Assembly

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May 2, 2015

Let me tell you a story. I was born in southern Illinois in the middle of July. I followed two boys in my family, and my mom was so excited to have a girl she wouldn't believe the doctor when he said I was a "she." Those were the days when they put mothers "under" for the delivery, so she had missed my arrival. It took my poor Mom hours to stop calling the doctor a liar. They took me home 3 days later, and Nurse Dixie looked on in disbelief as my native Minnesota parents wrapped me in 3 blankets just in case I would get cold. It was 95 degrees that day with equal humidity. I have no doubt that is where my love for swimming in cool lakes began.

I showed up in the middle of a story. Life existed in the Anderson household before me. In fact, life existed before the Anderson household. Generations of Germans and Norwegians and Swedes...and a few Scotch Irish just for fun...passed on traditions and faith that led to me. So the question for me in this story is how will I use my gifts and talents to contribute to this ongoing story?

Let me tell you a story. Last week on a flight to Lansing, MI, I sat next to a 91 year old African American grandma. Esther was born into a world of segregation and prejudice. She was brought home from the hospital to the black side of town, the only place African Americans were allowed to buy or rent homes. Until her late 20's, she was not allowed to seek employment in most sectors. When she was finally allowed to apply for a job as a lab technician at Michigan State, the lab director – for whom the new science building would eventually be named – had to ask the other lab technicians if they would be ok working alongside a Negro, in her language. "What did they think I would do, bite them?" she wondered aloud to me. And then Esther looked off into the distance - "I suppose that was prejudice. You just didn't think of it at the time." She paused. Sighed. And then asked if we could talk about something happier.

Esther showed up in a middle of a story. Life with racism existed before she was born, and it certainly still exists today. Generations of Americans passed on stories of prejudice and hatred that created the life in Lansing Esther thought was normal. Participants of the Synod Journey to the ELCA Youth Gathering will experience the beginning of that story this summer as we visit the Charles Wright African American History Museum. They will hear and experience how Africans were taken from their homes, held in cells until ships packed beyond capacity would carry them to America where they were sold into slavery. They will follow their stories into the Civil War, Civil Rights, and hear in particular the story of African Americans in Michigan. I am eager for

our very white, very sheltered northern Minnesota youth to hear this story, because they will hear stories like Esther's...and the stories of so many others they will encounter on the Synod Journey and throughout their lives. I hope they – and all of us - learn these stories are also part of our story. And how we have the opportunity to use our gifts and talents to stand up for the marginalized for the sake of Jesus Christ, and contribute in a positive way to this ongoing story.

Let me tell you a story. The young people in our congregations today were born after 1995, and are known as Generation Z. They were born into a world that is digital and global, and are being educated for jobs that don't exist yet. They are independent, entrepreneurial, service oriented and collaborative. Here's a quick peek at part of their story.

VIDEO: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LmNzZf0996o>

Youth today showed up in a middle of a story. Life existed in our culture before them. Life existed in your congregation before they arrived. Generations of Lutherans passed on traditions and faith that led to these young people. What story will they live out? How will they use their gifts and talents to contribute to this ongoing story?

Let me tell you a story. A baby was born in Bethlehem. It was a dark and lonely night. But then angels sent out an announcement. Shepherds showed up. Gifts were brought.

The baby Jesus showed up in the middle of a story. Life existed before that night in Bethlehem. The story of Creation, Moses, the prophets all led to that night. And because of Christ, life continues. My story, your story, the story of the young people in our congregations, the story of Esther and everyone we meet, is wrapped up in the Story of Jesus. What Story do we tell? How do we tell it? How do our gifts and talents contribute to the ongoing Story of God?

This Story matters, and how we tell the Story of Jesus matters. The way in which the faith story was told to my age group or Esther's generation will be different than how we need to tell it to the young people of today. There is no one way to effectively pass on faith. Sorry. But I have found that there are three consistent pieces to fruitful youth and family ministry:

1. **Time.** Time to listen to youth, to deeply know their story. Time to know their needs, their issues. Time to step into their shoes and learn what life is like from their perspective. Time to adapt programs, schedules and traditions in ways that will engage this digital and collaborative generation.

2. **Investment.** Beyond the investment of sharing your personal time with young people, is a financial investment by congregations for youth faith formation and leadership development. You tell a story with your annual budget. Does that story include passing on faith to young people?
3. **Last is the Story itself.** While our methods for communicating the Story of Jesus need to continually change, the content of the Story remains the same: Jesus is Good News. Jesus is Good News for YOU. You are called. You are claimed. You are forgiven. You are loved. This is indeed Good News. And this Story most certainly has a happy ending.

Stories are important. My story. Your story. Our collective story. They are important because all of our stories are living in the middle of God's Story. God's Story includes all of creation and the specific life of Jesus. Within that Story we live and tell our life stories – the places we live, the gifts of our neighbors, what it means to serve, and what matters most in growing up and into discipleship. We live by stories. They tell us where we came from, help us talk about challenges, and inspire us to make choices for good.

Here is a glimpse of what it looks like to live your story in the middle of God's Story.

- This summer, nearly 28,000 youth and adult leaders will travel to Detroit for the ELCA Youth Gathering to share their stories, learn the story of Detroit, and experience all these stories as part of God's larger love story for the world. We will gather as a synod on the Proclaim Story learning day as we hear from the Gospel of Mark that Jesus is Good News, and how that Good News makes a difference in our daily stories.
- 300 of those youth and adults will be on the Synod Journey to the ELCA Youth Gathering. We will stop in Lansing for servant events, worship and learning. We will hear the story of Lansing, where 47% of the population in that area live at or below the poverty line. What does it do to the story of a city when half your people live in poverty? As followers of Jesus, how do we enter into that story? And what does that story teach us about our own communities? Those are some of the questions we hope to grapple with as we center on a theme to Dig Deep and Rise Up, digging deep together on a faith journey to KNOW, BE, and TELL the Story of Christ's love in the world.
- Each year, 250,000 children, youth and adults gather at outdoor ministry sites around the country to hear the story of Jesus, grow as disciples, and return home to live out the Story of Christ's love in their daily lives. Each summer, over 3000 young adults serve and grow in faith and leadership as they work at those

camps. We have phenomenal camps in our backyard. If you're not connected with one, I encourage you to talk to any of the camp staff at the Camp Café this weekend. Encourage your young people to get to camp. Invest in your young people to get to camp. They will hear the Story of Jesus in a whole new way that will transform their lives forever.

- The NE MN Synod Middle School Gathering gathers nearly 1000 youth and adult leaders every November to share stories of faith. This year we will hear the Story of the Ten Commandments and how this is still a Story for today. Our speaker will be Pastor Mike Carlson. The Cardia Deo retreat for senior high youth gathers another 200 youth and adult leaders who share their stories and learn the Story of Jesus in small group Bible studies, worship and servant learning opportunities. More information for both events will be available in August. Mark your calendars now, and encourage your youth to be part of this story in our synod. I can't tell you how many young people have told me how much it meant to them to come to these events and see for the first time they are not alone in this faith Story. You don't need a large group – there are many congregations that come to both events with five or fewer youth.
- The Lutheran Youth Organization (LYO) Board allows high school youth to live out their story of faith as they grow in leadership through planning and implementing the Middle School Gathering and Cardia Deo Retreat. These young people willingly sacrifice opportunities to play in sports, be part of plays, spend time with friends and family, and so much more in order to serve in this way. Yet they never see it as a sacrifice. They fully understand the joy of living in the middle of God's Story.

Starting this fall, our synod Discipleship Challenge will focus on the theme of STORY. There will be three resources provided each month:

- **Discussion Guides** to use with groups in your congregation, ministry organization or with ministry colleagues will be available to help us share our stories and hear the stories of others. We need to know each other's stories of life and how God is at work within and through us, and challenge each other to continue to grow into God's Story for us. It is our prayer these discussion guides might help you do this.
- **Study Guides** adapted from the Practice Discipleship curriculum will be available for groups of all types and ages. We need to dig deep in God's Story, so we are better able to live and share God's Story for others and in our daily life.
- Bishop Tom will also provide short video clips based on the monthly themes of the faith practices and Study Guides.

It is our plan to have all Discussion and Study Guides for the entire year available on the synod website by the end of August.

Stories are at the core of who we are as followers of Jesus Christ, central to our congregations and ministries, and essential in ministry with young people. How will you – how will we – contribute our gifts and talents to God's ongoing Story this coming year? As you live your story this coming year...

May you **KNOW** the Story of Jesus. For your own sake, and to share it with others.

May you **BE** the Story of Jesus, every day, with everyone you encounter.

May you **TELL** the Story of Jesus through your actions and words to those who need to know that Jesus is indeed Good News for them. Every day. Always and forever. No matter what.