

Youth Ministry Report to the NE MN Synod Assembly Catherine Anderson, Coordinator of Youth Ministry April 30, 2016

As you heard Bishop Tom share earlier, our synod is deep in wondering about mission planning. This morning I would like to wonder with you about a specific and very critical part of your missional plans - faith formation. I intentionally use the word wonder. As you know, we live in a complicated culture for faith formation. There is no right answer for how to do this. Instead, I think the Holy Spirit gives us the gift of wondering about our current realities, to stir our imagination and help us think differently so we can move forward in mission and faith formation. So let me share with you some of my latest wonderings around faith formation.

Last week a common robin prompted me to wonder about new ways we can help youth and adults know and follow Jesus. It started one morning when I heard something hit a window in my house. I investigated, and saw a robin perched on the tiny ledge outside the window, then jump up and try to fly into my window. I rolled my eyes, had a humorous thought about natural selection, and left for work. This went on for a couple days. Every morning it would bang into my window. I shut the curtains, but that didn't help. So I started watching this persistent little bird. It was hitting my window, but its real aim was the rainspout at the edge of my house next to the window - where it wanted to build a nest. I would watch as it would get a twig, fly up to the rainspout, drop the twig on the slippery sloped surface and watch it fall to the ground. Over and over again. No wonder it was banging its head into my window.

I'm pretty sure I could read the bird's mind as she sat perplexed on the window ledge, wondering what to do next: "I'm doing everything I was taught. I found a safe place. I've got the right twigs. This is how it worked last year. This is how my parents did it. I want the same thing for my kids. WHY WON'T IT STICK???"

I believe in letting nature take its course, but I couldn't bear watching that well-meaning bird trying the same thing over and over with the same result. Which, of course, was no

result. So I found some old material in my garage and wrapped it around the rainspout so the robin would at least have a chance of having its twigs stick. The change was instantaneous. After checking out this new reality for a couple minutes, my bird went nuts flying back and forth gathering twigs. And I think we both giggled out loud when each twig stuck. Within minutes the nest was starting to take shape.

As you read in my annual report, I wonder if nostalgia is poisoning the church. Nostalgia for the curriculum *we* loved, the program that was good for *our* kids, the big and fun events that were meaningful on *our* faith journeys. Like my well-meaning but unsuccessful robin, we often find ourselves in a place where we keep doing the same things over and over again, expecting different results that never come. And then we wonder why faith isn't sticking in the lives of our young people.

The truth for my robin is she was building her nest in a foreign land. Not that long ago, any nesting choices would have worked, because the only options were trees, bushes and any other number of supportive habitats. But today, she finds herself in a world that is very different. It's complicated and confusing when rain gutters take the place of trees and bushes. All of her tools for nest building were right. All of her instincts were right. But to build a nest that could adapt to the challenging habitat of this new world, she needed to go about it in a new way.

The same is true for faith formation. Not that long ago, faith would stick because the habitat was conducive for faith to stick. This is no longer true. The habitat in which we are trying to build a solid faith foundation is slippery and toxic. Our instincts and motives are good. Our ministry tools of relationships and faith practices are right. But faith won't stick using the same models, programs and curriculum that worked in the past. We need to wonder about faith formation in a new way.

I wish I had some magical material in my garage that would give us new ways to instantly allow faith to stick. But I don't. Instead, the Holy Spirit puts an itch in us to wonder about our current realities and what that means for faith formation for all ages.

These wonderings challenge me to wonder about what God is up to, where God is calling me and all of us, and how you and I might need to let go of familiar ways of thinking and doing things to adapt to this new world. Here are some of the things I have been wondering about recently. Perhaps you've had some of the same wonderings:

- **I wonder...if we're clear on what we want for our youth.** Earlier this spring I asked congregations to respond to a youth ministry survey. This survey was not scientific and not every congregation in our synod responded. But it was a good cross section of small, medium and large churches with fulltime, part-time, volunteer and pastor-led youth ministry programs. The surveys shared a lot of "stuff" going on in our congregations, from confirmation to mission trips to weekly gatherings to summer programs. Yet when asked if they have a clear vision for their youth ministry 62% of our congregations say no. Even the congregations who list the most programs. I wonder what it means when we have a lot of "stuff" going on, but don't have a clear vision for why we're doing that stuff? Or said another way...
- **I wonder...if we are actually getting exactly what we are planning for.** One of the survey responses shared their vision for youth ministry is to "have our youth volunteer and help out *whenever possible*." Another said, "I'm sure we have a vision but I'm not sure what it is." They're not alone. Tiger McLuen shared at Recharge in January that "vagueness is killing the church." If our strategy for faith formation is ambiguous – or non-existent, kids will know this...and will achieve this. I wonder when we plan, if we really believe young people will be transformed through what we offer?
- **I also wonder...if we realize that youth are incredibly involved in congregational life and ministry.** The list from the survey of how youth participated was extensive. Ushers, lectors, acolytes, serving at Lenten meals, worship assistants, prayer leaders, visits to homebound members, serving at the soup kitchen, bell choir, clean-up projects, videographers, I could go on and on. I

wonder if the list would be as extensive for the same percentage of adults? I wonder if we are helping our youth name these activities as ministries and not just requirements? I wonder if we view these as ministries and not just requirements?

- **I wonder...if we know “why” we do faith formation.** Simon Sinek has a TED talk on how inspiring leaders lead. I encourage you to watch the whole thing, but here is a snippet. Listen to this through a congregational lens. (*Play first 5 minutes of “Simon Sinek: How Great Leaders Lead”* - https://www.ted.com/talks/simon_sinek_how_great_leaders_inspire_action?language=en) People don't buy what you do, they buy why you do it. People don't invest in what you require, they invest in why it will change their lives. People don't come for a program or curriculum or model of ministry, they come to be transformed - to know and follow Jesus. I wonder, if we are clear on our why, how that might shape faith formation in our congregations?
- **I wonder...what a *culture* of faith formation would look like in our congregations.** I wonder if we miss the mark when we view faith formation as something just for school age children and youth. I wonder this when I know research says faith is primarily formed through relationships with parents and caring adults in the lives of young people, and yet research also says that our adults are no more articulate in their faith than young people. I wonder how we are preparing our youth for a life of learning about Jesus. I wonder how we are creating a culture in our congregations that expects all ages to participate in lifelong learning.
- **I wonder...what keeps us rooted in old ways, even when we know and acknowledge they no longer work.** LEAD, a ministry organization whose focus is to grow leaders with a deep, bold, consequential faith in Jesus Christ, shares that the number one reason leaders give for not wondering about how to find new ways to do faith formation is they lack confidence. They don't know where or how

to even start. Our synod survey seems to support this observation when the majority shared they do not intentionally train or equip adult leaders. I wonder how we can wonder about new ways of being if we are not intentionally equipping leaders in faith and leadership?

- **I wonder...if we have defaulted to resources – the right curriculum, the right program – to do our faith formation for us.** I wonder if we have relegated faith formation to the paid staff and super volunteers, when faith formation really needs every single adult to be active participants through relationships of all generations to build a culture of faith formation.
- **I wonder...what would happen in our churches if we *expected* people to leave...and equipped them to do so,** in order to be sent out into the world to share the love of Christ.

I could wonder all day long. I believe wondering about faith formation is critical. It gives me hope to wonder. When we wonder, we leave space for God to show up. Better said, wondering leaves space for me to see that God is already at work - and this is God's work, not mine. I don't need to have all the answers. I need to listen. I need to follow. I need to trust.

I have hope when we wonder together. Many of you have been on this path of wondering. When I see congregations and leaders let go of how things have always been done and wonder about new ways of going about faith formation, the change can be breathtaking. Like my bird, they quickly realize that new ways of being have traction where the nostalgia of our past has lost its hold.

So how do you start wondering about new ways of being and doing faith formation, and building a culture of faith formation in your congregation? How do you wonder about faith formation within your missional plan?

I suggest you start by wondering about ONE thing.

One new way of getting at faith formation, of building a culture of faith formation in your congregation. Multiple goals can be exhausting, overwhelming and unrealistic in the midst of our busy and demanding culture. So wonder about ONE thing. And wonder about it well. When that wondering is complete, then wonder about the next thing.

You are not alone in this wondering. The synod youth ministry teams met last week to wonder about our ministries together, about our WHY for doing our ministries, and how our WHY might help congregations and leaders live into new ways of being. We want to help you wonder in this coming year.

Starting in September,

- The **Practice Discipleship** team is developing flexible, “bite-sized” wondering sessions from this year’s Practice Discipleship curriculum on “Wonder”. They are to be used in a variety of settings within the congregation – ministry teams, council, parent track during confirmation, adult forums, youth group and any time members gather together. The audience is all ages, but in particular our adults. The intent is whether you have 5 minutes, 15 minutes, or a full hour – you can spend time wondering together about faith.
- Our **Outdoor Ministry** partners are planning to facilitate structured events at each of the camps to help congregations and leaders wonder together about the Golden Circle – the Why, How and What – of faith formation in their congregations. The staff are committed to finding funding to offer these at low to no cost.
- The leaders of the **Lutheran Youth Organization Board** are wondering how we can more deeply integrate leadership development for youth and adult leaders at our events. Watch for more details, but know that the Middle School Gathering

and Cardia Deo events are places where we will continue to wonder deeply in new ways.

- Plans begin this fall for the **Synod Journey** to the 2018 ELCA Youth Gathering. This event has always been a transformative experience because it expects youth and adults to commit to a year of wondering together through Bible studies, group building, faith practices, learning, and other preparation before even stepping on the bus for the Gathering. The Synod Journey planning team is wondering how the Journey might be a vehicle to make an impact on leadership development in congregations beyond those participating in the Synod Journey. Start planning now to participate beginning spring 2017.

Wondering is hard work. It was long and tedious work for my bird to build her nest. It happened one tiny twig at a time. Twigs would fall off during the process. My bird would still fly into my window on a regular basis as she defaulted to old habits. It takes time to learn and trust a new reality. So it is with faith formation. This is long and challenging work when it is done right. Faith formation happens one wondering at a time. We fall down during the process, and get caught in old paradigms. But as our wonderings lead to new ways of being, faith begins to stick.

I leave you with this final wondering. What would happen in our congregations if we spent the next year deeply and intentionally wondering together? Wondering about Jesus. Wondering about faith formation. Wondering about what God is up to, and where God is calling us. What would happen if leaders in our congregations were intentional every time they gathered to spend at least ten minutes wondering about Jesus, and wondering about faith formation before they jumped into agendas and decision making? I believe it would change us. I believe it would change our congregations. I believe it would transform our conversations. I believe it would renew our leaders. I believe it would stir our imaginations for mission. I believe it would lead us into new ways of being. I believe it would help faith stick.

If the Holy Spirit has put an itch in you as well to wonder about faith formation and mission, I invite you into this challenge for the coming year: **TEN MINUTES**.

Let your first ONE thing be to spend ten minutes at the start of every council meeting, every board meeting, every adult forum, every activity night, every potluck, every time adults gather, to wonder deeply about following Jesus. Do this as its own initiative or as part of your missional planning. I have a list of resources already listed on the Discipleship Challenge website, the Practice Discipleship pieces will be added in September, and we will continue to add throughout the year. Please do this with youth, too, but hear me clearly – this challenge is particularly for adults.

- Why?** I want faith to stick. I want our young people to know and follow Jesus.
- How:** To do this we need a culture of faith formation in our congregations, where every member – young, middle, and old – is intentionally wondering about faith.
- What:** I think we start by having adults wonder together about faith, about following Jesus, about faith formation for ten minutes each time they gather.

I am so thankful for your partnership in wondering together how we are called forward into new ways of being. God is up to something in our congregations and leaders, and I'm excited to see where it leads.