

NE MN Synod Youth Ministry Update
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One of the privileges I have in this position is to hear the stories of how God is at work in the lives of young people, adults, congregations, and the larger church. This is never more true than when the planning team spends time listening to the needs of the communities in which we take the Synod Journey participants.

Pastor Andy Johnson is one of those stories. In January, Marty and Laurie Hancer and I were in Gulfport, MS, on a site visit preparing for the Synod Journey, when we met Pastor Andy from First United Methodist Church in Gulfport. In the summer of 2005, First was a growing congregation in downtown Gulfport that drew from a wide geographic area, and was looking forward to a building program.

Then came August 29, 2005, when Katrina made landfall on the Gulf Coast. For most of us, Katrina is a faded memory. For the people on the Coast, it is an every day reality. Let me help remind you of the scope of the devastation in Mississippi:

- In Biloxi alone there were 53 fatalities. The debris would have filled a football field, and been 97 stories high. Let me put that in perspective for you. The IDS tower in Minneapolis is 57 stories high...next time you're driving through the Cities and see the tower, imagine nearly twice that height filled with debris from people's lives.
- 65,000 homes were destroyed in Mississippi. Again some perspective – according to the 2010 Census, the total households for Duluth, Brainerd and Grand Rapids combined was 46,000.
- Today as you drive down the coast on Hwy 90, you still see lot after empty lot with slabs that once housed restaurants, businesses, and homes that will never be rebuilt.

Every congregation on the Coast has a story of survival, recovery and rebirth. When Katrina passed, the members of First UMC found that they were the only congregation south of the railroad tracks to have survived. Why? The debris from the sanctuaries of two church buildings closer to the coast had surrounded their building and served as a barrier from the storm surge and the wind, so water only seeped in to measure in inches rather than several feet.

It sounds like good news, but there was still over a million dollars in damage with only \$300,000 in insurance money. At the same time, nearly half of their membership was lost, due to relocation or death. Pastor Andy came shortly after Katrina and did 26 funerals in his first year alone. Many of these were the top tier of givers.

The congregation struggled with what to do. Stay in downtown and rebuild, or move to a safer location? Turn inward for survival, or look to how they might meet the needs of the community? After much discussion, they made the intentional decision to stay and become a vital downtown congregation. Among other ministries they do, First now houses the only cold weather shelter for homeless people – all other shelters were destroyed and have not been rebuilt.

We asked Pastor Andy how the people came to this decision to stay downtown. Without a moment's hesitation, he said, "At least a quarter of our congregation has participated in a year long Bible study on discipleship. It has revitalized our congregation, and shifted how they look at the world. This is an eclectic congregation. We have liberals and conservatives. We have wealthy business people sitting next to homeless people. The focus on discipleship unifies this congregation, and has called them to serve the area in a meaningful way."

Why are we focusing on the marks of discipleship for our assembly this year? Because they are vital to our Christian faith. They transform us and shift how we look at the world. They bring us to a common starting point and call us into God's mission in the world. Pastor Andy's response does not surprise me. When

congregations spend time growing in faith practices, it makes a difference in who they are and what they do.

As one whose ministry focuses on young people, I firmly believe the marks of discipleship are essential to passing on faith. If adults are intentionally growing in and practicing their faith, youth will too. All studies point to this.

For several years now you have heard me share how, by and large, young people believe in God. The problem is, God doesn't really matter or make a difference in their lives. What they believe in is a watered down version of Christianity, in which the point of life is to be happy and do nice things. You can call on God when needed, but otherwise God sits in the background not involved or really caring what happens in your life. That's a very different belief system than our Lutheran theology in which we believe God stands with us in the muck of our lives because muck happens, and we know there is no way we can be good enough on our own.

It's easy to stop there and blame the kids for not believing what we do. But the reality is that these studies also show that, by and large, young people believe what the adults in their lives believe. Which if you follow the math, means that adults also believe in this watered down version of Christianity.

And that is why we are focusing on the marks of discipleship for this Synod Assembly. Everything I have read, every study done, points to the faith practices as the means by which we help our young people – and adults – learn and live the language of faith.

Two years ago I was approached by the ELCA Youth Gathering staff to give leadership to one of the program days at the Gathering. The goal for the day was to address the concern from research that our young people are incredibly inarticulate about their faith. I said yes with two caveats:

1. First, I knew that nothing of substance could be accomplished in one day at a Gathering. We didn't get to this place in one day and we're not going to crawl out of it in one day at a large event. So I said I would do it if my team could develop a system in which adults across the ELCA could be trained in theology, youth ministry theory and practices that would equip them to walk with young people on their faith journey. Adults matter. I think we take for granted in our synod the fruit of the investment you have made in youth ministry over the last decade. The majority of our 65 synods have no intentional strategy for training and supporting youth ministry in their areas. I wish I could share with you all the stories of how these free and accessible trainings have changed the landscape in many synods. All of the training events we have put together have been free, available to all adult leaders, and available online. For you, the easiest way to access these is at www.nemnsynod.org/MissionPossibleTraining. You will also receive a packet in August with a DVD and the scripts for the curriculum for these trainings so you can offer these in your own congregation. But back to the point, adult leadership makes all the difference. A one day event is a nice memory for young people. But a daily encounter with an adult who is living and wondering about faith is transformational.
2. My second caveat: the focus of our day at the Gathering would be on the faith practices. 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." (pp. 152-153) As 34,000 youth and adults gather in ballrooms this July in New Orleans to learn, discuss and practice the marks of discipleship they will be putting their faith into words and learning to articulate their faith.

My deepest prayer for this work with the Gathering, and for our ministry with young people in our synod, is that the faith practices will become part of our DNA, a natural part of who we are and what we do. I challenge you to think how you might work at this in your family and in your congregation. Like Pastor Andy and the members of First UMC in Gulfport, how might this revitalize and transform your youth, adults and congregation? How might it shift our world view, unify us, and call us to God's mission in the world?

I think it's safe to say that every person in this room has a desire for the young people in their congregation to live a life transformed by the living Christ. There is no one program, curriculum, activity, or idealized youth director that can make that happen. Together with the Holy Spirit, it takes each and everyone one of us, every day, year in and year out, whether you like kids or not, to pass on faith. It's hard work. It's time consuming. It's messy and complicated. The marks of discipleship are an essential part of that process, to deepen and strengthen our faith, to equip us and to send us. I pray that side by side, our youth and adults will steep themselves in the faith practices so that together we may learn and live the language of faith.