

## Youth Ministry Update to the Synod Assembly

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In a few minutes you are going to hear one of our amazing LYO youth share her devotional insights on Luke 24. This is the story of the road to Emmaus, where Christ is walking on the road alongside the two disciples. It is a faith story journey. It is a story of accompaniment. I believe this scripture is a beautiful illustration of what ministry is, and in particular, youth ministry.

Our faith is a journey. Christ is present on this journey every step of the way. Often we aren't even aware of it. We long for those aha moments where the bread is broken and we really see Jesus – but the real faith journey is lived walking on the often dry and dusty road. God's story for you and the young people in your congregations takes place on this road. The gift of grace is that no matter what we do, the road of faith is there. God is actively walking on the road with our young people. No matter what. But like any journey, unless we have maps and signs to help us get where we are heading, it can be easy to stray or get lost on our faith journey. So my question for you tonight is this – what faith signs are we – are *you* - placing on the road for our young people?

If I was to give a fair account of all the faith signs we should post for young people, it would rival the barrage of placards for Wall Drug found on roadsides around the world, and leave your head spinning. Young people, and ministry with and for them, is complex, constantly evolving, and extensive. So tonight I want to focus on just a few of the signs that are needed to journey with young people.

**I would label the first road sign Relational Ministry. Better yet, accompaniment.**

This winter I had a call from a youth director in our synod. She had been playing with her 2 year old daughter who was soaking up the names of objects around the house as this youth director pointed to them and named them. A light bulb went off in the youth director's head – “this is youth ministry. Our job is to walk beside our kids, pointing to Christ and naming God present in their daily lives.”

Our young people need God-pointers in their life. Caring adults who walk alongside them, experiencing the faith journey along with them – but using their experience to point out what God is up to on the road. This is accompaniment. Some youth have heard the faith stories a million times. Others have never had the opportunity. All youth, I believe, have a keen sense of God present around them. But like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, they can't figure it out on their own. They have to have it explained. Again. And again. And again. There is no Expressway to bypass the twists and turns of a young person's faith journey. Accompaniment takes time, it takes persistence, it takes commitment.

**The next sign I would post would be a two for one deal: Faith Formation and Leadership Development.**

This sign would come in the form of a map. Young people need good maps for directional markers on their faith journey. They need to be taught how to use them by those who have experience with maps.

I was a canoe guide in college. On one particular trip I was co-guiding with my good friend Gayl Martenson. We finished a portage, and thought we would give the youth a chance to learn how to use a map by following along on ours as we paddled. So I gave my map to one of the kids. The problem was, unbeknownst to me, so did Gayl. Needless to say, we didn't get to our destination that night. I have a good sense of direction, but the kids still needed me – and Gayl – to rely on the map rather than our gut to get where we needed to go. To the farm kids we had on that trip, the map was more of a pretty picture than a directional tool. Unless we taught them how to read and use the map, they would spend the entire trip wandering aimlessly.

The Christian map is the Book of Faith. You may have grown up in the Lutheran church and been a Christian your entire life, but our young people still need you to refer to scripture and faith practices as you accompany them. That's why I love the theme for this Assembly. Whether you know it or not, you've been suckered in to a youth ministry conference this weekend. You've heard me say it before – the best youth ministry is a congregation full of adults growing in their faith – through the study of scripture, prayer practices, and worship. The Book of Faith is not some nice initiative that we'll talk about

for a few years before moving on to something else. It is the core of who we are as Christians. And the depth to which you and your congregation take seriously Bible study and faith practices has a direct correlation to the faith life and practices of your young people.

The map does no good if it remains a pretty picture with unrecognizable symbols and landmarks. As we steep ourselves in the study of scripture and other faith practices, we have a greater ability to be God-pointers. The more we point, the more young people recognize Christ present and active in their life. The symbols on the map come to have meaning, and faith is formed.

At the same time, often the best God-pointers are young people themselves. But you can't just hand them the map. Every summer, the Lutheran Youth Organization Board spends a week at Camp Vermilion in an intensive week long training camp. Now, instead of events that rely on "expert speakers" we have the Cardia Deo retreats for senior high youth in which the LYO Board leads Bible studies, plans fun activities that have a deeper faith meaning, lead the music and play in the band, and accompany their peers through a weekend faith journey. The result is evaluations that say the most meaningful part of the weekend "are the Bible studies where we talk about faith and what it has to do with my life." This year a pastor required his older confirmation students to attend. They arrived with the expected defensive walls that this was going to be some lame event. At breakfast Saturday morning, Jeff told me that the walls had come down and his kids were amazed how the LYO youth led everything. *Everything. And they're excited about it.* Why wouldn't they be? Intentional training equips young people to use their untapped God-given gifts in ways we can't even imagine.

The gifts of our young people are deep and wide, and we rarely bother to ask them to use them. In January I asked a youth on the Synod Journey planning team to burn some DVD's for me for our adult leaders. It saved me countless hours doing something that bored me to tears. You would have thought I gave him the keys to Disney World he was so thrilled to be asked. His comment to me – "I love to help, and I offer to help, but no one ever bothers to ask."

Faith formation and leadership development go hand in hand. God's call for each of us is to live out our faith by serving others. If this is true for adults, why wouldn't it be true for young people?

**The last marker I want to lift up tonight is a great big billboard entitled Investment.**

This summer, 450 youth and adult members from 49 congregations in our synod will be traveling on a very intentional faith journey through Peoria, IL, Memphis, TN and on to New Orleans for the Synod Journey to the ELCA Youth Gathering. Last week Pastor Marty Hancer and I were in Peoria for a site visit to finalize plans for the journey. One of our partners is the Children's Home in Peoria, an organization that serves young people and their families, both through intensive home services to keep families intact and through residential programs for youth ages 8-20. The Synod Journey will be holding a carnival for the youth in their programs.

In our conversations with the staff, we must have made light of the simplicity of just doing a carnival, because one of the staff members stopped the conversation, looked me square in the face, and said, "When kids arrive here their life's checkbook is completely in the red. Any positive memories you can provide puts a deposit in their life checkbook. Your presence makes such a difference – to the kids and to the staff. *You have no idea.*"

Investment. All young people need deposits made into their life checkbooks. As the Church, it is vital that we are intentional about making deposits into their faith checkbooks as well. Our young people desperately need your investment. They need you as **individuals** to be God-pointers. Every caring conversation you have, every time you say hello to a young person by name, every time you affirm them for the gifts they share at school, in the community, at home or at church, you make a deposit in their faith check book.

They need your investment as a **congregation**. This winter I had a conversation with a pastor whose congregation, like many, has had its financial struggles. The congregation had just found out that their youth director would be moving, and were discerning what would come next for that position. It would have been easy to reduce or eliminate the

position to save on finances. After much discussion, however, the council and congregation recognized that their call was to continue their commitment to young people through the intentionality of this position. I think of similar stories where pastors and councils find money to make sure their volunteer leaders get training so they are better equipped to be God-pointers. I saw church investment last Sunday when at the adult leader training for the Synod Journey nearly every congregation in attendance had met their fundraising goals.

Did you know that research has shown that the more churches invest in youth ministry and adults who work with youth, the more likely teenagers are to practice faith? Not just a benign belief, but actually practice their faith on a daily basis. Your budget conversations, your support at fundraisers, your staffing all have a direct impact on the faith checkbook of young people.

And yes, young people need our investment as a synod. As I wrote in my annual report, we are a weird synod. This synod has been very intentional in investing in young people and their leaders, and it has made a significant difference. Youth are given faith and leadership development opportunities through the Middle School Gathering, Cardia Deo retreats, the Synod Journey, and the LYO Board. Adult leaders are equipped and supported through God Talk, Cross Training, and having a resource person to refer to in the synod office. If you or your congregation have not been involved in these opportunities, I urge you to take the yellow piece of paper in your packets home and share these opportunities. Every November I stand in this room with 900 middle school youth over the course of a weekend. It looks like controlled chaos. I love to stand in the back and observe all that is quietly happening during the large group sessions. There are adults – God-pointers – nudging young people to see Christ in all the activity. There are LYO youth leading on stage and in the aisles with their prayers, their singing, their conversations and high fives. There are middle school youth who come from youth groups with 10 members standing wide-eyed in the midst of 500, learning for the first time they are not alone in this faith thing. Each in their own way offer deposits in the faith checkbooks of those present.

Accompaniment. Faith Formation. Leadership Development. Investment. I return to my question for you tonight - what faith signs are we – are *you* - placing on the road for our young people? Are these some of them? Have you placed others?

You didn't get here by accident. In your own faith journey there have been people who have served as faith signs for you. I invite you right now to grab a pen and piece of scratch paper, and list some of the people who have posted those faith signs for you. (PAUSE) Look at that list. Imagine what your life would be like without those people. Now list 3 young people in your congregation or community that need you to post a faith sign for them. I challenge you to spend the next year accompanying them on this faith journey. Be a God-pointer. Pray for them. Invite them to worship. Encourage them to go to camp, or to a youth event in your congregation or the synod. Affirm their gifts. Invest in them with your time and your resources. See what happens in a year. Who knows what you will encounter on the road. I can promise you the journey will be bumpy and the road will wind in ways you didn't expect. But just as certainly, I can promise that you will come to recognize Jesus in a whole new way through the young people who journey with you.