



Was it worth it?

It was worth it. Every dollar. Every minute. Every drop of sweat. Every late night. Every early morning. Every long line. Every ounce of sunscreen. It was all worth it.

Before leaving for the ELCA Youth Gathering, I wondered on my blog about the cost of it all. Is the \$1,000+ for each person a faithful use of the resources God has given us? I had decided that it was worth it, in part, because we who belong to small congregations need to feel how alive, enormous and vital the church is today.

Because the youth group at Emmanuel Lutheran Church, High Point, is multicultural and multiethnic, we attended the event called MYLE (Multicultural Youth Leadership Event) that ran the three days prior to the Gathering. MYLE, held at the University of Houston, is smaller—maybe 700—and is a few days of intentional unity, praise, play and service. If I'm honest, it's a few days where my kids of color aren't (pretty much) the only people of color at an ELCA event.

At MYLE, the Glocal Band, made up of talented musicians from many lands and languages, invited us in and showed us the way as we sang of God's love in Swahili, Korean, Spanish, English, Kannada and other tongues!

Each day, speakers would challenge us to imagine the world through the eyes of "the other." And every speaker pointed to Christ as our freedom and unity, helping us see where we still have boundaries that need erasing. When we gathered at the close of each day to talk and pray together, each person had brought home different words and images from that day's experience.

One night, very late, there was this moment. I'll let you eavesdrop on my precious group for a bit:

Teen 1: I saw lots of Wakanda Forever shirts today.

Teen 2: Wakanda Forever (crosses arms over chest).

Teen 3: It's whatever. (We all kind of pause because something has changed in the room.)

Me: What's up?

Teen 3 (born in Africa): It took a movie for everyone to figure out that Africa is beautiful and strong? It's like, "OK, we've been over there being beautiful and strong, and you looked past us. Now, there's a movie, so you are looking at us?"

Teen 4 (slowly and quietly): That never occurred to me before.

Right there, at nearly midnight, in a small, gray dorm room with nine people perched on desks, beds and chairs, sweaty from a very long Houston summer day, snacks and drinks everywhere ... a boundary was erased. OK, maybe it was simply seen for the very first time, but it was crystal clear that the heart of the one who saw something for the first time was looking around for his eraser. And the young woman who showed him the boundary felt seen.

It's really all we can hope for! It's the finest of Christian formation when something painful bubbles from one heart and is seen and heard as true by another ... and confession falls from the lips of those who see and hear the pain ... and hearts are changed ... and lives are stitched together. And when all of that happens when the very next thing is the prayer prayed together at the close of the day, it is the holiest of moments, and the messy, smelly dorm room is the holiest of temples.

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Bishop's reflections

"This is not a performance," I always tell the nervous third-grader in the parish the first time they go to light the candles on a Sunday morning right there in front of Momma and Aunt Maggie and the grouchy altar guild lady and God and everybody. "It's worship, and we aren't perfect, nor are we supposed to be. We give God and God's people our best, but when we fall short, God does the rest." Luther's Sacristy Prayer essentially says the same thing: "Were it all up to me, I would bring it all to destruction." Yep. We have this treasure in earthen vessels.

I lead worship all over the place. I've preached and led worship in at least 10 states and at least 10 countries. I've been a pastor of small rural, large urban, and university/resort congregations. And I've messed up so many times that it's hard to believe I didn't at some point just give it up. It's one thing to make a defective widget every now and then. It's quite another horrifying reality to blunder the word and/or sacraments! My strongest recurring tendencies toward works righteousness are in these humbling moments.

A pastor in our synod was lamenting on social media that she had forgotten the words to the Lord's Prayer during a pastoral visit. What pastor

hasn't done that? My intern supervisor turned all red in the face once and finally had to walk down from the altar because he couldn't even remember how the Lord's Prayer started! A pastor with whom I worked preached a whole sermon on how "Mary washed Jesus' hair with her feet." That's just an image you can't unsee. Another pastoral colleague got up to lead the creed and entirely omitted the first article. No creation! An intern once meant to pray "for the hungry and the homeless," but it came out "for the hungry and the homely." He quickly recovered by adding, "And Lord, we pray for all of the good-looking people too."

Among my personal pastoral worship leadership and preaching blunders are:

- First time ever, distributing the wine in my first-year-teaching parish at St. Paul's in Stoverstown, Pa., my Mom and Dad had just given me a big pewter cross to wear, which I did, not realizing the physics of how when you bend over, the cross swings forward with force, which it did, dinging an elderly woman right in the mouth and breaking the top middle tooth of her dentures clean in half. Neither she nor I ever told my supervisor. I was horrified.
- Same parish, same semester, only Easter, and sundresses were all the rage, and my supervisor reminded me to be discreet. And as I handed out wafers on one side of the altar trying not to be creepy, I looked away and dropped a wafer right down the front of a dress. Moved on. Horrified.
- Unbeknownst to me, I scooped up several dozen wafers at the altar as I reached across the paten to pick up the chalice. I didn't know I had a sleeve full until I walked out to the nave level for distribution, and it was like manna raining from heaven. I couldn't figure out what had happened.
- Preached a sermon on the Ten Commandments in which I referred to the commandment, "You shall not admit adultery." Denied it. Heard it on the tape, though. Choir member's assessment: "Good advice, Pastor. But bad commandment."
- Finally got up the nerve to do footwashing on Maundy Thursday my fourth year in the parish, only to be so nervous in explaining it and issuing the invitation to come forward that I said, "All who

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This changes everything

Indescribable. Uncontainable. Incomparable. These Chris Tomlin lyrics come to mind whenever I am asked how the youth trip to the 2018 ELCA Youth Gathering in Houston was. It has been difficult to put into words just how amazing the Gathering truly was for our group at St. Mark's Lutheran Church, Mooresville—it definitely changed everything for us!

“God’s Call Changes Everything”

When we announced our decision to attend the Gathering, so many members confirmed that this was the right **call** as they expressed their excitement and support for our participation in this special event. The last (and only) time our congregation sent a group was in 2003 to Atlanta. I happened to be a participant of that group after my senior year of high school and have many wonderful memories of that experience of *Ubuntu*.

“God’s Love Changes Everything”

After more than a year of planning and preparing, it was my sincere privilege to lead a group from St. Mark's to the Gathering. Our group consisted of nine youth and two adults, including myself. Looking back, I would compare the experience to becoming a parent—as prepared as we thought we might have been, nothing could have truly prepared us without being there. It is something you have to experience to understand. And, the immense **love** that you, as a leader, end up having for the youth in your care is truly unexplainable, like the bond between parent and child.

“God’s Grace Changes Everything”

Truth be told, we had many ups and downs within our group over this week as we saw the best and worst of each other at different times! At one point, I realized that it had become necessary to have a heart-to-heart to allow everyone to express their honest frustrations about what was not going as expected so far. In that place of vulnerability, we

were able to open up to each other, gain a better understanding of each other's perspectives, and actually grow closer as a group. As we talked and prayed together in those fragile moments, we had the opportunity to show one another huge amounts of **grace**. In the end, we moved forward in unity by the Spirit's leading. An unbelievable accomplishment only explained as a God thing.

“God’s Hope Changes Everything”

As we have recounted our experiences, two major highlights have stood out—Mass Gatherings and Steve. I will never forget reviewing Day 1 in Houston, hearing the awe and amazement our group had over the Mass Gathering worship experience with 31,000 of their peers: “I didn't know there were so many Lutherans in this country! And this isn't even all of them!” “I felt the power of God moving throughout the crowd.” “This is so fun already with the music, dancing and powerful speakers!”

As we began our nightly hotel-lobby conversation following the final Mass Gathering, a gentleman's humble request to interrupt us seemed almost divinely appointed. Steve introduced himself and grabbed our group's attention with a simple request for a donation so he could afford shelter for the night. He shared his story of recently having been released from jail after an unfortunate night of reckless conduct that led to his arrest 14 years earlier, and how he now found himself homeless. In those intensely intimate moments, our group put faith into action as they demonstrated deep compassion and generosity toward this stranger. Most impressive was the genuine encouragement they expressed through words of **hope** that they shared with Steve, quoting messages from Gathering speakers. They let him know: “There's grace for that” and “Your current reality isn't your ultimate reality.” This very real encounter changed everything for our group that night.

“Jesus Changes Everything”

When we learned that the 2021 Gathering would be held in Minneapolis, I felt confident about two things: we should go, and we should fly. The unexpected challenges we worked through together strengthened our faith and love for one another. We will cherish this experience forever—a lasting reminder that “*Jesus Changes Everything!*” ✠

Written by Carissa Abraham, director of faith formation and engagement ministries, St. Mark's, Mooresville, NC.

Worth it? *continued from Page D*

I have described MYLE as being spiritually expensive. Spending time attending to racial identity and reconciliation costs a lot of energy that is not easily replaced with a nap or a cup of coffee. The cost hangs around a while. MYLE was so packed with gorgeous, serious, funny, musical, brave, deep and silly moments that by the time Wednesday came, and 31,000 of our closest friends were arriving for the Gathering, we were pretty tired. But, God had plans for our tired bodies and spirits, so we took naps, drank coffee and pressed toward the stadium ... where we received an IV infusion of the joy of 31,000 people who had been waiting for this holy party for three long years!

I could write endlessly about the Gathering—the planners crafted a masterpiece of an event. Each day was full of opportunities for worship, service, learning, play, music and unity. Some other blogger has written well about that. As for me and mine, we'll start fundraising right away for our trip to Minneapolis in 2021. And in the meantime, we will continue to bear witness to God's love and point to the cross of Christ—which changes everything! ✚

Written by the Rev. Jennifer Shimota Krushas of Emmanuel, High Point.

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desire may now remove your shoes and come forward for the fart-washing." Lots of laughter, but not the Holy Week moment I was aiming for.

- A teenager at the third morning worship service at the communion rail looked up and said, "Pastor, you have on a brown loafer and a black loafer." I did. Probably dozens of others saw it. She alone was brave. I said, "I have another pair almost like it at home, only in reverse."
- Sitting in the bishop's chair. At the Episcopal Church. At Easter Vigil. When I wasn't a bishop.

I could go on and on, as all pastors could. We're far from perfect. I tell those stories to nervous acolytes and now to you to highlight that we have to be able to take ourselves seriously enough, but not too seriously. "Hey," I remind acolytes, "until you knock out some lady's tooth, I'm way ahead of you in the worship-messing-up contest. But every now and then, God uses even me."

May God use you powerfully through the gift and calling of your baptism and Christ's presence in and through you—despite all of the perfectly good and accurate excuses that we're not good enough and never will be. ✚



The Gathering by the numbers

1 bishop. Synod Day centered around worship. Bishop Tim Smith preached to his largest synodical gathering of 2018—except it was in Houston!

2 team leaders. Two of the 15 team leaders were from our synod: Community Life (Liz Fisher, Kimball, Kannapolis) and Operations (Tammy Jones West, St. Luke, Taylorsville).

3 assistant team leaders. Three assistant team leaders were from our synod: Doug Ramsey, Friendship, Taylorsville (Operations); Heather Langan, Mount Hebron, Hildebrand (Community Life); and Scott Maxwell, Christ the King, Cary (Volunteers).

14 core or secondary team members. This group did everything from transport talent, DJ dances, wrangle the bishops, serve on the medical/safety team, and respond to chaplain calls.

28 volunteers. These folks met congregations at their buses and accompanied them to their service projects; helped load buses; assisted security in the stadium; and numerous other helpful tasks.

48 people from the NC Synod volunteered along with 809 other participants (adult and youth).

And, of course, the Gathering is far more than numbers. It's is about relationships and faith formation. Thanks be to God for the adults who walked with our youth, the volunteers and the youth participants. ✚