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8765 W. Higgins Rd.
Chicago, IL 60631
(800) 638-3522, ext. 2540
livinglutheran@elca.org
livinglutheran.org

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Study guide

Gathered together, changed forever

By Robert C. Blezard

You hear the question in most every congregation: “How can we reach today’s youth?” The ELCA Youth Gathering, held every three years and just this past summer in Houston, is one answer. It brings together tens of thousands of Lutheran youth from all over North America for a time of learning, worship, fellowship, service and faith formation. Does your congregation know about this wonderful event?

Exercise 1: Faith formation

Everything the church does should point to the central goals of forming people as disciples of Christ and gathering those people together into sacred community. Some church activities help this along better than others.

- In your experience, how does God work in the lives of people to call them to faith? How has God worked in yours?
- How did you learn about Jesus? Who taught you? What role did the church play?
- What do you think is the best approach to faith formation?
- When you were a youth or young adult, what was the most meaningful experience in your faith formation?
- In what activities did you participate with other youth? What part did it play in your faith formation?
- Why is it important that the church provide activities and opportunities for youth to develop their faith?
- What activities and opportunities does your congregation provide for youth? Are they sufficient? Explain.

Exercise 2: Trip or pilgrimage?

Most participants and congregations refer to the ELCA Youth Gathering as a trip. But isn’t it really more than that?

Prepare for this discussion by asking the study group in advance of the class to look into the definition of pilgrimage using an internet search tool. Begin the session by asking the group to share their findings.

- A pilgrimage is a trip, but what are the factors that make it more than a trip?



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- How do the purposes for a pilgrimage differ from, say, that of a vacation trip? How would you describe the purposes for a pilgrimage?
- How are one's expectations for a pilgrimage different from those associated with a trip?
- How does one's preparations and planning differ for a pilgrimage versus a travel trip?
- Discuss why traveling to Wittenberg and other locations in Germany is more of a pilgrimage than a trip for many Lutherans. Or to the monastic community of Iona in the United Kingdom. Or the Holy Land for many Christians.
- In what ways is the Youth Gathering a pilgrimage for many ELCA youth and young adults?

Exercise 3: Cost or investment?

Participation in the ELCA Youth Gathering requires a steep commitment on the part of congregations and the youth and adults who attend. First, there is a time commitment, especially for the adult leaders, and then there is a financial commitment to pay for the travel and registration fee.

- How has your congregation managed Gathering participation?
- How have volunteer leaders been selected? How hard has that been?
- How has the event been publicized? Who has done the work?
- How has the event been financed? If there are fundraising activities, who participated?
- Who made travel arrangements?
- On the whole, why has the work to participate in a Gathering been worth it? (Or, why hasn't it been worthwhile?)
- For what reasons can the time, effort and expense of participating in a Gathering be understood more as an investment in the future than an expense?

Exercise 4: 2018 participants

Many young Lutherans describe the Gathering as the most influential experience of their faith lives. If your congregation sent youth to the 2018 Gathering, discuss:

- Why did the congregation feel it was important for youth to participate?
- How did the youth prepare themselves to go? How did the congregation prepare to send them?



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- How was their trip financed? How did the youth work with the congregation to raise money?
- How and why were the adult chaperones chosen?
- Was the congregation informed of the group's activities in Houston? How? What was that like?
- When they came back, how did the group share their experiences with the congregation?
- Would or will your congregation send youth to another Gathering? Why or why not?

Assemble a panel

Invite some of the participants in the 2018 Gathering to talk with your study group. You could ask them:

- What did you expect when you signed up?
- How did you prepare?
- What was it like to go? What did you learn?
- What was the best part? The best activity or speaker?
- How was God present to you? How did the Gathering impact your faith? How did it affect your notion of God?
- What was it like to be gathered as community? How did it affect your relationships with other Lutheran youth?
- Did the Gathering meet your expectations?
- How has the Gathering changed you?
- Would you urge your congregation to participate again? Why or why not?

Past participants

If your congregation didn't participate in 2018, but has participated in prior Gatherings, go through the above discussion questions but answer them for the past experiences. And assemble a panel of past participants.

Never participated

- Why has your congregation never participated in a Gathering? Think of as many reasons as you can.
- Reading over the article in *Living Lutheran*, what information supports the Gatherings as a good idea for youth?
- What would it take for your congregation to send youth to a future Gathering? How could those obstacles be overcome?



About the study guide author:

Rob Blezard

is an assistant to the bishop in the Lower Susquehanna Synod. He holds degrees from Boston University School of Theology and the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg (Pa).



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Exercise 5: Experience the Gathering

Through the technological marvel of the internet, you and your study group can experience the event through the ELCA Gathering YouTube channel: youtube.com/playlist?list=PLD2BE6D47D7169CB5.

View an assortment of the videos, perhaps getting recommendations from the Gathering participants from your congregation. Better yet, invite the participants to watch their favorite segments with you, and then have them talk about why they were so moved.

If you're on your own, you might start with Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton's talks or the always interesting Nadia Bolz-Weber, an ELCA pastor and author.

Discussion questions

- How would you describe your congregation's success in attracting and keeping youth? What are the challenges involved? How has your congregation worked to create an atmosphere that is relevant and meaningful to youth? How might participation in the ELCA Youth Gathering compliment your efforts?
- Describe the highlights of your personal spiritual journey. What event or experience really made a difference in your faith life? Without that experience or event, what might your faith life be like? How might the Gathering provide your congregation's youth and young adults with that kind of life-changing experience?
- For what reasons can the time, effort and expense of participating in a Gathering be understood more as an investment in the future than an expense?



Gathered together, changed



Photo: Jacob Chumbley

Youth from St. Andrew Lutheran Church, Vancouver, Wash., watch the final Mass Gathering of the 2018 ELCA Youth Gathering. More than 31,000 Lutheran youth, young adults and adult leaders attended the June 27-July 1 event in Houston.

forever

By Erin Strybis

On the final night of the 2018 ELCA Youth Gathering, a hush fell over the crowded stadium. Thousands of ELCA youth were tap-tap-tapping at their smartphones. They weren't checking Snapchat. Instead they were texting a message to someone who needed encouragement.

That message: "May God hold you in a grip of hope."

After completing the assignment, youth were instructed to turn on their phone flashlight and hold it high. One by one, tiny beacons of light dotted the stands, illuminating the room in a dazzling display of the Spirit at work.

The moment demonstrated how the Gathering impacts participants—and everyone in their networks.

"Jesus has the power to change the world, working through us," said Caroline Salopek, 16, who attended the June 27-July 1 event in Houston with her congregation, Holy Trinity Lutheran, Laurel, Md. For members of this youth group, the Gathering's central theme, "This changes everything" (Ephesians 2:8), was revealed in Scripture, stories, song and relationships. *Living Lutheran* was with them to get a glimpse of their experience.

The journey begins

Guided by adult leaders Stephanie Gonzales, Bobby Gonzales, Gary Kreh and their pastor, Connie Miller, the youth began their Gathering journey Sunday, June 24, with a 7:45 a.m. flight to Houston.

At 5:45 a.m., a small group of parishioners met them at the airport to bestow traveling mercies. Cameron (C.J.) Jones, 14, was surprised to see his church family, saying, "It shows they really care about us."

For months, under Stephanie Gonzales' direction, the 12 teens raised funds and studied the "Gathering Getting Ready Materials." Earlier this year they dressed in plaid shirts and funky hats while serving Texas-style barbecue to Holy Trinity members for Gathering donations. While they didn't bring those funky hats to Houston, they did pack eight sets of matching T-shirts and 60 pounds

of books for the Gathering's "Blast off for books" drive to help economically disadvantaged students.

Nearly all of these youth were attending their first Gathering, and they were visibly excited. After their flight landed, the group traveled to the University of Houston for three days at the Multicultural Youth Leadership Event (MYLE) preceding the Gathering (page 10).

Wednesday: God's call changes everything

On the Gathering's opening night, waves of Lutheran youth and their adult leaders streamed into NRG Stadium. The air was abuzz with anticipation; the stands were awash with a kaleidoscope of colorful T-shirts. When the overhead lights dimmed, all eyes were on stage as the band LZ7 kicked off the Mass Gathering with electronic dance music proclaiming God's glory.

Holy Trinity's youth sat in the upper section, with a bird's-eye view of the 31,000 attending the Gathering. Tyler Ferrer, 17, was amazed to be surrounded by thousands of Lutheran peers.

ELCA Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton welcomed youth to the Gathering, urging them to listen for God's "irresistible" call and to watch for God to "show up in places we least expect." Dynamic

speakers and musicians reflected on the night's theme, "God's call changes everything," inspiring youth to consider their vocations.

Caroline was moved by Ginny Owens' stunning testimony. Blind from an early age, Owens defied her critics and became a successful singer and songwriter. "I couldn't believe she'd accomplished so much," Caroline said. "She overcame all her challenges. That's helped me to believe I can too."

C.J.'s favorite speaker was Bryan Stevenson, a lawyer working to revoke sentencing for juveniles imprisoned with adults. After hearing Stevenson's story, C.J. felt motivated to speak out when he sees something unjust.

Youth exited the stadium smiling, amped up by all they heard and eager for the days ahead. "I'm really excited to connect more with God and deepen my faith," Caroline said.

Thursday: God's love changes everything

The youth rose early the next day to depart for the Salvation Army in Pasadena, Texas, where they would participate in service projects.

One of the Gathering's three programming tracks, Service Learning Day offers youth volunteering experience and faith-based reflection.

On Friday night, Michael Gonzales, 16 (front), and all of Holy Trinity's group witnessed the Mass Gathering from the floor. Each night of the Gathering, participants gathered at NRG Stadium for a time of inspiring speakers, uplifting music and more.



Photo: Will Numally



Photo: Will Numally

Jordan Kreh, 16, organized canned goods in the Salvation Army pantry, Pasadena, Texas, on Service Learning Day. The Gathering's community partners invited youth to do certain activities as they accompanied Houston during the week.

During their orientation, they learned about accompaniment, an ELCA approach to mission defined as walking together in a solidarity that practices interdependence and mutuality.

At the Salvation Army, Alicia Ribeiro, 15, and Michael Gonzales, 16, practiced accompaniment—and their Spanish—as they conversed with older adults. “They were so patient with me,” Alicia said. “I liked it because it felt like they were helping me rather than I was helping them. I’m kind of glad we could help each other.”

For Michael, the experience was challenging. While he’s always done hands-on volunteer work, that day meant simply playing dominoes with older adults and his mother, Gonzales. “You don’t always think that just spending time with someone is sharing Christ,” she said. “I think the seniors were really appreciative.”

Jordan Kreh, 16, and Samantha Ferrer, 16, helped organize giant cans of green beans, boxes of pasta and other items in the Salvation Army pantry. “It was really fun because we got to work together as a team to accomplish something really good,” Samantha said.

Jordan left inspired to do more service in her community—and to invite her friends to join her.

After completing their work, the youth were bused to NRG Arena for a celebration of service ceremony with 10,000 other service learning

participants. Holy Trinity then spent the afternoon in the Community Life zone, racing on inflatables and scaling the rock climbing wall.

At Mass Gathering, the youth heard the day’s theme, “God’s love changes everything,” reflected in story and song. The Guardian Drum and Bugle Corps ended the night with an explosive performance.

Heading to her hotel after a long, full day, Alicia felt inspired by Houstonite and storyteller Marlon Hall’s message: “You already have God’s love. No one can give it back to you.”

Friday: God’s grace changes everything

This morning the youth arrived at NRG Center and found Interactive Learning Day activities underway: other groups were donating blood, working on a Habitat for Humanity build, participating in a refugee simulation and riding zip lines.

Another Gathering programming track, Interactive Learning is a collection of exhibits designed to connect youth with God, their sense of purpose and God’s work in the world. It also includes play.

Holy Trinity’s youth explored the ELCA colleges and universities exhibit and jumped in on volleyball and soccer games with their peers. They also wrote prayers and painted together. At the Peace Not Walls exhibit, Alicia learned how the ELCA and its global partners are building peace in the Holy Land.

“God gave me grace. Out of the thankfulness of my heart, I can use God’s grace and give it to others.”

They delivered their \$300 donation to ELCA World Hunger at the Global Farm Challenge exhibit. And later they attended practice for the mass cast, which was to perform during Friday’s Mass Gathering.

That night they snagged seats on the stadium floor so they could dance near the stage. They moved to the beat as singer Tauren Wells performed, then listened intently as ELCA pastors Will Starkweather and Nadia Bolz-Weber spoke of God’s transformative grace. The Gathering House Band closed with a rousing rendition of “This Is Me,” and the mass cast, including Holy Trinity’s

youth, filled the stage and floor donning white T-shirts imprinted with “Loved.”

Leaving the stadium, they were literally jumping with joy. “What really got to me tonight was the energy,” Jordan said. “I thought it was so cool that we could be up close.”

Gonzales led them to a quiet spot outside for Bible study, where they sat in a circle and discussed the day’s theme, “God’s grace changes everything.”

Will Behler, 15, was astonished by Starkweather’s story. “Rev. Will overcame one of the most adverse things ... he kept cutting himself every time something bad happened,” he said. “Even though a pastor told him he was going to hell, he was able to overcome that.”

“We all have a place, and there’s a lot of work to do in Jesus’ name.”

Lewis Miller, 15, agreed, adding, “After [Starkweather] stopped going to church and dropped out of college, he went to a new church. His new pastor said four words that completely changed everything for him.”

Those words: “There’s grace for that.”

Peter Olaitan, 18, found comfort in Bolz-Weber’s message. “She said that everything is going to get better after high school, whatever you’re going through—it’s fine,” he said.

Bolz-Weber helped Michael understand the depths of God’s love. “Nadia said even haters get God’s grace,” he said. “God gave me grace. Out of

the thankfulness of my heart, I can use God’s grace and give it to others.”

As their conversation concluded, Gonzales told the youth: “One of the things I think about when I go to the Gathering is that you guys are the future of the church. Grace to change isn’t with adults—it’s with you. You have the power to make changes.”

Saturday: God’s hope changes everything

The youth had a little free time this morning, so they cooled off from the heat in their hotel pool. After a birthday lunch for Madison Ashley, 15, they joined others from the Delaware-Maryland Synod for Synod Day.

This programming track gives youth the chance to meet and worship alongside peers from their geographic region. A time of community, Synod Day aims to foster in youth a deep sense of belonging in the wider church.

Youth from the Delaware-Maryland Synod participated in icebreaker activities; sang and danced; learned about the ELCA; and heard a message from William J. Gohl Jr., their synod bishop. Gohl said there’s power in coming together as a synod and in inviting others to church. For Will, meeting their bishop was “really, really cool.” Jenna Kreh, 14, liked meeting other youth in her synod.

Later they witnessed their final Mass Gathering, hearing from speakers who covered heavy issues—gun violence, racism, migration, addiction, hunger, rape, LGBTQ rights—and highlighted times they’d witnessed how “God’s hope changes everything.”

The group was spellbound by an exhilarating concert from Tenth Avenue North. During the final slow song, they waved their smartphone flashlights

Peter Olaitan, 18 (left), and Will Behler, 15 (second from left), prayed with others from the Delaware-Maryland Synod during Synod Day. This is a time for youth to make connections with others from their geographic area.



Photo: Will Nunnally



Photo: Will Nunnally

Cameron (C.J.) Jones, 14, was one of 31,000 receiving communion during Sunday worship at the Gathering. When volunteers were finished serving their sections, they closed their white umbrellas as a signal.

in the air, a powerful visual reminder of God’s relentless hope. “No matter how dark everything gets, there’s always light,” Samantha said.

Sunday: Jesus changes everything

At last it was Sunday and the group made their final pilgrimage to NRG Stadium for morning worship. They watched from floor seats as a triumphant processional of worship leaders approached the cross. The Gathering House Band provided stirring music, and Eaton preached on Jairus and the hemorrhaging woman who sought healing from Jesus. “Here is the wonderful news,” Eaton said. “When it looks impossible, remember most of all that Jesus has changed everything.”

Offerings were collected to support Prison Congregations of America Inc., global ministries and the Gulf Coast Synod. Thousands of Lutherans received communion at stations across the stadium. As Holy Trinity’s youth waited for communion to end, they linked arms, swayed and sang, “My soul will rest in Your embrace. I am Yours and You are mine.”

After worship the 2021 Gathering site was revealed as Minneapolis—the stadium erupted in cheers.

During a late lunch, the group reflected on the week and the day’s theme, “Jesus changes everything.”

The Gathering inspired Peter to be less judgmental and “to try and better understand where others are coming from.” As he heard from speakers and musicians, he realized that “no matter what you’re going through, if you put your faith in God, God is gonna make a way for you when it seems there is no way.”

Jenna loved dancing with her youth group

friends and wished some of her other friends who are struggling with depression could have heard the speakers. “It changes everything to be Christian and know Jesus,” she said. “It changes the way we think and act and our compassion toward others.” Going forward she hopes to be more welcoming and invite others to church.

Miller’s highlight was watching the group, including her son Lewis, express their joy through music, dance and creative experiences. For her, the Gathering’s theme hit close to home. “We’re going through a health crisis in our family,” she said, and the week reminded her that “Jesus is always present” amid our suffering and challenges.

After the Gathering, Alicia has a firm stance on LGBTQ issues. “No one at church ever talks about it; I didn’t know what to think,” she said. “God is for everyone. Now I can finally say this is what I believe in and this is what my church believes in, and I can represent the church in a positive way.”

Gonzales reveled in seeing the youth internalize messages they had heard during the week. She said the Gathering affirmed her belief that “everybody’s welcome, we all belong, we all have a place, and there’s a lot of work to do in Jesus’ name.” 

To see Holy Trinity youth’s daily posts on the Gathering, find them on Instagram: [@_htlcyouth_](https://www.instagram.com/_htlcyouth_).

Download a study guide at [livinglutheran.org](https://www.livinglutheran.org) by clicking on the “Spiritual practices & resources” tab.



Erin Strybis is a content editor of *Living Lutheran*.