

# From Pastor Marissa Becklin

## What is Youth Gathering, Anyway?

As I prepare to travel with three of our youth from Faith United to the ELCA Youth Gathering in New Orleans this July 15<sup>th</sup>, I wanted to take some time to tell you about what Youth Gathering actually is—and why I am so passionate about it as a pastor.

The ELCA Youth Gathering is an extraordinary event that brings together thousands of Lutheran youth from across the country for a week of faith, fellowship, and service. It happens every three years, and is organized by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) for high school youth, adult leaders, and volunteers. The Gathering aims to provide an opportunity for young people to deepen their faith, engage in meaningful discussions, and connect with peers who share their Lutheran identity.

So, what exactly happens at the ELCA Youth Gathering? Picture this: thousands of youth and adult leaders converging in a host city for a week-long experience filled with worship, Bible study, workshops, and service projects. The Gathering is structured around a central theme that guides all activities and discussions, allowing participants to explore relevant topics and issues in light of their faith. This year's theme is "Created to Be", and the host city is New Orleans, Louisiana.

One of the most impactful aspects of the Gathering is its emphasis on service and social justice. Participants have the opportunity to engage in hands-on service projects within the local community, addressing issues such as hunger, homelessness, environmental stewardship, and racial justice. These service experiences not only make a tangible difference in the lives of those served but also challenge participants to live out their faith in practical ways. The Gathering took place in New Orleans in 2009 and 2012 as well, and played a big role in the city's recovery from Hurricane Katrina. In 2018 it was in Houston, right after Hurricane Harvey went through the previous year, and most of the service done that year was hurricane cleanup.

In addition to service, the Gathering provides a space for worship and spiritual growth. Each day begins and ends with powerful worship experiences, featuring dynamic speakers, inspiring music, and opportunities for reflection and prayer. Through these worship gatherings, youth are encouraged to encounter God in new and meaningful ways and to deepen their relationship with Christ.

But perhaps the most significant aspect of the Gathering is the sense of community and belonging that participants experience. For many youth, the Gathering is a chance to connect with peers from different backgrounds and cultures, forming friendships that last a lifetime. It's a place where youth can be themselves, ask tough questions, and explore their faith in a supportive and affirming environment.

The ELCA Youth Gathering is more than just a conference—it's a transformative experience that equips young people to live out their faith in the world. It's an opportunity to encounter God, serve others, and build meaningful relationships with peers who share a common Lutheran heritage.

I'm passionate about the Gathering because I attended as a high schooler, and I got to experience the feeling of being surrounded by thousands of other teens from across the United States who were Lutheran and were proud of that fact. It would be hard to overemphasize how important it is for young people (especially in today's more secular society) to experience that community, and that space of pride and joy in one's faith. The Gathering made me think about myself and my role in the church in a different way, and it was on the bus back to Iowa that I first wondered if I might feel called to be a pastor someday.

This will be (I hope) a life-changing event for Lily, Haley, and Gabby. Please pray for them in these months as we prepare to head out, and please be ready to ask them questions about their experience when they get back. Lastly, thank you for your generous support of this trip for them—the Gathering is not inexpensive, but it is worth it, and your financial support makes this experience possible for them. Thank you for helping them feel valued by you in this way.

*In Christ's Love, Pastor Marissa*