



Shall we gather a

by James

**C**hurch youth events are more than the stereotypical image (and for some of us, the memory) of awkward teenagers playing games or sitting in a circle of chairs haltingly singing along to a guitar player.

On a larger scale, youth events include special music, worship, Bible study, servant events and exploring our Lutheran heritage. At a time when the number of youth in many congregations is diminishing, some people question the need for special youth events or gatherings.

### Begins at home

The family setting is the primary location where children see, learn, and experience the day-to-day Christian life. St. Paul notes how Timothy's family nurtured his faith: "I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, dwells in you as well" (2 Tim. 1:5). He also encourages young Timothy saying, "Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity." These words can also be seen as an instruction to the church about supporting and respecting its younger members, especially at a point in their lives when it is often a challenge finding their place in society and understanding themselves within the context of their Christian faith. It's also an important time for youth to realize they are part of the "Holy Christian and apostolic Church" that extends far beyond their congregation or youth group.

### It's not easy being young

As many LCC congregations have discovered, it's not always possible to form a youth fellowship. But that shouldn't stop young people from taking part in youth gatherings at the district or national level. Organizers of "Unmasked"—the 2018 Alberta-British Columbia District Youth Gathering — are trying to emphasize that point. They want to give all Lutheran youth from across their district (and the Central District too!) the opportunity to be together for one weekend every three years to hear and be strengthened by God's Word. This year's gathering takes place from July 5 to 8 at the University of Alberta Augustana Campus in Camrose.

The ABC District gathering's organizing committee

believes it is vital to nourish the Christian beliefs in which young people were raised at a time in their lives when they face challenges from other ideas in society. Committee chair Michelle Heumann emphasizes that a lot of that nourishing begins at the congregational level. She refers to research done by Dr. James Gimbel at Concordia Lutheran Seminary in Edmonton showing that the more adults in a congregation interact with the youth, the more likely those youth will keep attending church when they are older. LCC's partner synod, the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) has also researched attracting and keeping youth. A survey for the LCMS 2018 Youth Ministry Symposium shows that congregations that hired youth ministry staff have higher rates of youth retention than other congregations. So-called members of the Millennial demographic (those who became adults in the early 21st Century), make up 15% of LCMS congregations in a society where most young adults are not attending church.

Since 1995, Tony Marchand has been involved with LCC's National Youth Gatherings. He chairs his second one in 2019 at Trinity Western University in Langley, B.C. "National Youth Gatherings have been so important to the strengthening of their faith lives," he says about the



Bible study is an integral part of all national and regional youth events.

impact he's seen on young people he's taken to the events. He notes that the National Youth Gathering he took youth to 23 years ago was an uplifting experience they haven't forgotten. He adds that he knows of other youth who have decided to go into various roles in Lutheran

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ministry, either as pastors, deacons, teachers, or parish assistants because of positive experiences at National Youth Gatherings. Marchand says that the gatherings are the sort of thing one must attend to really appreciate what happens at them and their significance.

Gary Brucker's history with National Youth Gatherings goes back to 1980 when, as a young teenager, he attended his first. It was a joint effort of the LCMS congregations in Canada and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada (ELCIC). He's attended most district and national youth events since then and has held many event leadership roles. "Youth gatherings, in my experience, help solidify faith and change lives," he observes, adding that it's a "powerful thing" to bring youth together in worship, fellowship, and learning. In his role as Director of Family Life for First Lutheran Church in Kelowna, B.C., Brucker has also taken youth from his congregation to LCMS youth gatherings in the U.S. He says the experience is often magnified in many ways because of their size. He says up to 25,000 people attend those gatherings and the greater numbers and financial resources that come with it increases what can be offered.

LCC youth gatherings are organized by volunteers and, until LCC's next convention in 2021, are the largest ongoing national event the church holds. They are designed to be self-supporting.

## Another approach

Higher Things, a US-based Lutheran youth organization is also playing a role in forming young people in their Christian faith within a Lutheran context. Its events take a more traditional focus by engaging young people with liturgy and hymns but also include Bible studies and fun activities. Pastor David Saar of St. John's Lutheran Church in Mount Forest, Ont. has taken youth from his parish and around the Hanover Circuit to Higher Things retreats. Worship at the events uses the

hymnal, like most pastors and congregations. Pastor Saar believes it helps youth understand how congregational worship is done. He says he's observed that the hymns generally leave an impression on the participants, noting that some youth have brought non-Lutheran friends to Higher Things events and they were the ones still singing the conference hymns in the car during the trip home.

Many youth plan to attend one of the Higher Things conferences in 2018. Proceeds from the Shrove Tuesday pancake supper at Trinity Lutheran Church in Gowanstown, Ont. supported sending youth from that congregation to a Higher Things conference in July in Illinois. Mount Olive Lutheran Church in Regina hosted a local Higher Things youth retreat in February and other regional retreats are in the works.

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## Lasting effects

Some young adults want to carry forward the spirit of community and faith enrichment they discovered at youth gatherings or other events. At St. Luke Lutheran Church in Ottawa, three members of the congregation regularly make long trips to spend weekends at East District Lutheran Young Adults (EDLYA) events. Kaylyn Pollex, who studies mathematics at the University of Ottawa, says she enjoys the social aspect and wants to meet new people who share her values. After attending a Christian high school in Ottawa, she wanted to continue having a place to find fellowship.

Nathan Hasselstrom, a graduate student of history at the University of Ottawa, grew up in LCC's Central District and said EDLYA events are interesting to him because he gets to see the diversity of congregations and he appreciates the opportunity to interact with others who have similar approaches to the Christian faith.

A relative newcomer to Lutheranism, Patric Laub, an engineering student at Carleton University, previously worshipped in evangelical congregations. He says EDLYA events have exposed him to the spectrum of congregations

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and liturgical practices within the East District and Synod.

The East District takes in most of Ontario and all of Quebec and the Atlantic provinces. Yet, young adults from throughout the district make the effort to attend EDLYA events. They have been known to travel from Ottawa, Montreal, and Sherbrooke to southwestern Ontario. People from Windsor travelled to an EDLYA weekend at St. Luke in Ottawa last year—a drive of almost 8 hours!

Proponents of youth gatherings don't seem to express many negative things about them. Their only complaint is that attendance numbers are never what they wish for. The events however provide opportunities for youth to ask hard questions about faith and theology and discuss their questions confidentially if they want. Michelle Heumann emphasizes that participants at the upcoming ABC youth gathering will have that opportunity. Pastor Saar also said Higher Things participants have asked him follow up questions too. There seems to be a general theme of youth gatherings cultivating discussion as a way of forming young people in their faith and giving them a sense of lifelong commitment to their Lord.

Stressing the importance of religious instruction for young people, Martin Luther wrote, "If an injury that really hurts is to be done [to] the devil, it must be inflicted through the young people who are reared in the knowledge of God, spread God's Word and teach it to others."

Our society increasingly marginalizes and even ridicules a biblical Christian worldview. In response, all believers need the gifts God provides in His Word and Sacraments, even more so our young people who face daily challenges to their faith.

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