

Lutheran Life®

ISSUE 222

Inside this issue:

Encourage youth
to stay and flourish
in the church, even
after high school.



Serve Well the Young People of the Congregation:

SEVEN PRACTICES OF HEALTHY YOUTH MINISTRY

Youth leaders come in so many variations. Some congregations can afford to have professional church workers whose focus is youth ministry and others rely on volunteers. There are leaders who have been doing youth ministry for twice as long as the teens in their ministry have been alive and others that just stepped up last week. Some are naturally drawn to teens and others take a bit of warming up. Parents, young adults, retirees, pastors, DCEs, and more are all filling this vital role in their congregations.

One thing all youth leaders share is that they take no greater joy than in seeing young people who are walking in the truth of Jesus. Their heart is for youth ministry so that the teens in their care can know the Lord Jesus, who died for their sins on the cross and rose again to give them eternal life. Youth leaders want to see their youth become disciples of Jesus for life.

They pray for God's wisdom and for the Holy Spirit to guide them. They read articles and talk to other youth leaders. They are constantly assessing how they can better serve and care for the teens in their congregation and community.

*I have no greater joy than to hear that
my children are walking in the truth.*

(3 John 1:4)

There have been many models for youth ministry in the LCMS throughout the years. Congregations have served their young

people in a variety of ways at different times. While the Word of God and what we teach do not change, the way we plan, teach, engage, and program toward young people do and will. As the world continues to change, youth leaders may feel unprepared to face the unique gifts and challenges of working with this generation of teens.

The articles in this issue of *Lutheran Life* magazine are all about healthy youth ministry in your congregation. May God richly bless your efforts on behalf of His sons and daughters. †

About This Issue's Authors



Amy Bird is a writer and editor serving as the primary author of *Lutheran Life* and as a contributing author for various devotional resources. She studied communication and theology at Concordia University Wisconsin, and holds an MA in systematic theology from Concordia Seminary.



The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod Youth Ministry faithfully leads, serves, resources, and networks youth and adults—working through LCMS districts and congregations—with Christ and His gifts at the heart and center of everything.



Discover Jesus-centered resources for those working with young people on The LCMS Youth Ministry's **YouthESource**. Find videos, articles, Bible studies, and more at www.youthesource.com.

Seven Practices of Healthy Youth Ministry



LCMS Youth Ministry has spent considerable time listening, reading data, conducting research, and digging into Scripture around what is key for healthy congregational youth ministry. Our heart is to faithfully lead, serve, resource, and network youth and adults by working through LCMS districts and congregations with Christ at the center of everything. This is where we formed the Seven Practices of Healthy Youth Ministry.

While the practices described here may not cover every facet of ministry or teaching of the Church, we do hope it provides support, direction, and inspiration. Before you dive into this material, we want to highlight a few things you will not see in our Seven Practices of Healthy Youth Ministry.

This is not a program.

We will not present you with a curriculum, schedule, or plan of events. There is no single right path to producing healthy youth ministry. Instead, the focus is on relationships—God’s relationship with us, parents’ relationships with their children, the congregational relationship with its youth, and the youth’s relationship with key adults. We believe that when you seek to build and sustain Christ-centered relationships, the right programs for your congregation will become clear.

This is not a short-term fix.

Transitions and cultural shifts take time. There will be trial and error along the way. Do not be disheartened when your work does not immediately result in teens flocking to your ministry or when you receive pushback against new ideas. Trust that God will work in and through you over time to help young people live out their faith from Baptism through adulthood.

This does not have to be complicated.

There is a lot to unpack in these seven practices, but they are not designed to be complicated or theoretical. We hope a lot of the things you read in the practices will seem obvious and natural. Other parts of the practices will seem familiar from other sources but are approached from a Lutheran framework. Keep in mind that some of the best pieces of youth ministry are the simplest.

This does not depend on you.

It can be easy to believe that youth ministry succeeds or fails on the work of parents, pastors, commissioned ministers, church staff, or volunteers. This is simply not the case. It is God who works through the Word and Sacraments giving forgiveness and new life. It is God who is at work in and through each of us as we live out our daily vocations, including serving the youth of our congregation. We will sin, fail, overwork, and fall short. Yet in all this, God works His will and way in us and in our youth. Take heart, this responsibility is in the hands of the Holy Spirit.

This is what we hope you will see.



This is about Jesus.

Youth ministry is nothing but loud games and banging dodge balls if it is not rooted deeply in the love of Jesus Christ. From community-building to Bible study, the cross and empty tomb should be at the center of everything we do. Healthy youth ministry should seek to point everyone back to Jesus' love and the forgiveness we receive through His death and resurrection.

This is possible for any congregation.

Location, resources, and the level of teen involvement do not qualify or disqualify any congregation from healthy youth ministry. The devil discourages ministry by focusing our attention on limitations. Yet congregations with two or three teens or only a few resources do some of the most amazing youth ministry. Vibrant, healthy youth ministries exist in suburbs and in rural areas. We have done our best to present practices that can translate to any congregational setting. Ministry will look different for each congregation. Your task is to find what these practices look like in your unique context.

This is a team effort.

Caring for young people in the church cannot be the responsibility of a single person. It must be a task shared with a variety of people, including parents and guardians, elders, pastors, and other volunteers. No amount of passion or energy is going to be enough on your own, so bring in other teammates along the way.

This task is worth it.

God has called these youth into His family through Baptism. Our ministry with and for them can have a lasting impact today and for eternity. When you are a part of youth ministry, you are doing something extremely valuable for your teens and for the Church at large. Thank you for dedicating your time, heart, and energy to the care of today's youth.



C. F. W. Walther (the first president of the LCMS) once reportedly said to his seminary students, "You cannot use your time to better advantage than by serving well the young people of the congregation." If you are taking the time to read this material, we hope you believe Walther's sentiment as well. We can become overwhelmed and even wonder why healthy youth ministry is important at all. It is easy to forget the whys of ministry after time, repetition, or busyness have taken their toll.

Take time to remind yourself and others why healthy youth ministry (or healthy ministry for any age) is important. Reminding longtime members and explaining it to young or new members can reinforce church culture. A congregation's ministry values should be communicated regularly and reinforced with actions. When a congregation prioritizes youth ministry, youth will be able to both hear and see their value and place in the congregation.

May God bless you richly as you serve the youth of your congregation. LCMS Youth Ministry is praying for you and desires to serve you as you build healthy congregational youth ministry. ‡

Congregations have ...

Warmth, Challenge, and Grace

- Congregations foster an open and honest environment where youth share joys, questions, crises, and doubts, knowing God's Word will be spoken in love.
- Congregations share personal stories of grace, failure, challenge, and joy.
- Congregations are willing to engage in tough spiritual conversations.
- Congregations have a dedicated, developmentally appropriate space for youth where they grow as disciples with their peers.

Supportive Adults

- Supportive congregations seek to connect every youth with at least five engaged Christian adults.
- Supportive adults deliberately invest in and value long-term, intergenerational relationships.
- Supportive adults prepare for and respond to celebrations, transitions, and crises.
- Supportive congregations have adults who champion young people and dedicate time and energy to developing teens as disciples of Jesus Christ for life.

Engaged Parents

- Engaged parents prioritize faith development by encouraging daily faith practices, especially during times of transition.
- Engaged parents invest in the lives of their children by understanding their child's vocation and the culture around them.
- Engaged parents participate in worship, personal spiritual practices, and service.
- Supportive congregations provide parents encouragement and support from other Christian adults.

Opportunities to Serve and Lead

- Congregations identify gifts and skills in youth that can be used in service, leadership, and vocation inside and outside the church.
- Congregations invest in youth by providing consistent opportunities for meaningful contributions.
- Congregations engage and support youth in service inside the congregation, in the community, and beyond.
- Congregations empower young people to be load-bearing leaders by providing training, mentors, and space to learn.



Congregations help each young person ...

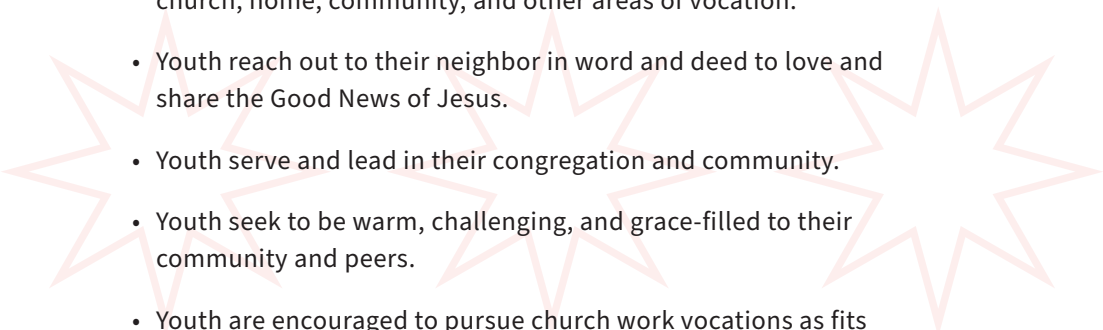
Deeply Understand their Baptismal Faith

- Youth live as forgiven sinners with the promise of eternal life through Jesus' death and resurrection.
- Youth recognize the work of the Holy Spirit, who brought them to faith, gathers them into God's family, and works through them.
- Youth regularly worship, study the living and active Word of God, pray together, and receive the Lord's Supper.
- Youth are provided with deliberate, age-specific opportunities to move toward key outcomes for young Lutheran Christians (examples are outlined in Youth Ministry Teaching End Goals).

Develop a Resilient Identity in Christ

- Resilient youth identify with the life and mission of the Christian church and seek to serve others.
- Resilient youth remain humbly confident in their faith in the face of crisis and transition.
- Resilient youth can build relationships with those different than themselves and navigate disagreements in a humble, loving way.
- Resilient youth are lifelong learners who face doubt and challenge by turning to God's Word.

Live Out Their Unique Vocation

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- Youth understand their role as Christ's hands and feet in their church, home, community, and other areas of vocation.
 - Youth reach out to their neighbor in word and deed to love and share the Good News of Jesus.
 - Youth serve and lead in their congregation and community.
 - Youth seek to be warm, challenging, and grace-filled to their community and peers.
 - Youth are encouraged to pursue church work vocations as fits their gifts and skills.

What Are Warmth, Challenge, and Grace?

What words would you use to describe your congregation?

How would your youth describe it?

How would young people in your community?

We look at many markers of success in youth ministry: worship attendance, confirmation numbers, retention rates through high school, and beyond. We like tangibles and programs that are easy to quantify. What we often don't track is the environment and culture of a youth ministry. These are so much more nebulous. Yet if we aren't tracking the feel of our youth ministry, we miss important indicators, both positive and negative.

God works in and through people and relationships to develop critical factors for faithful growth in God's Word. Healthy youth ministries have an environment that builds trust, fosters Christlike relationships, and helps weather the storms of the teenage and young adult years. In contrast, an unhealthy culture can create animosity, frustration, hurt, and make it easier for young people to walk away.

Starting our Seven Practices of Healthy Youth Ministry with the words *warmth*, *challenge*, and *grace* may be hard for those who are data-driven. Yet over time, in development, we became convinced that the most intangible things permeate everything else done in youth ministry. Even then, we spent months thinking about the right words to describe environments that seemed to positively impact retention. We tried words like *safe*, *authentic*, *welcoming*, *empathy*, and *value*, but none seemed quite right. Many of the words we found were full of cultural baggage that might lead to misunderstandings. Others did not indicate the right balance of Law and Gospel that we knew was key.

In the end, we settled on “warmth, challenge, and grace.” ‡

Warmth

Warmth is characterized by displaying Christ's love for all people and a personal invitation to be part of the community of believers. Everyone, from guest to longtime member, should be welcomed generously to worship and ministry programming. While this can look different for every ministry, often we see it in simple things like calling teens by name, greeting them with a smile, and finding space to include them. Warmth comes when we show grace and encouragement every time a teen steps into the church.

Warmth is shown when people across generations are known and want to know others. As teens navigate important parts of identity development, they need spaces where adults of all ages engage them with support. Warmth is a welcome invitation to find that belonging in the family of God where we all receive God's forgiveness and love. Teens can share their gifts and skills. All baptized members are consistently reminded and show they are an important part of the Body of Christ.

Warmth in a congregation fosters an open and honest environment where youth share joys, questions, crises, and doubts knowing God's Word will be spoken in love. Warmth can't be performative or surface-level. It comes from an outflow of the Gospel and our forgiven and loved hearts. Even those in the margins should feel it. It values every young person we are called to serve. †



Challenge

Challenge can be used to describe two distinct characteristics: (1) willingness to approach difficult topics and situations and (2) encouraging young people to step out in faith and through the Holy Spirit, to be a light in dark places even when it is difficult. Both aspects of challenge are important to healthy youth ministry.

Challenge means engaging young people in tough spiritual conversations while standing firmly in God's Word. Teens are faced with many different voices every day, often speaking directly against what God says in Scripture. They need adults and peers who will face the questions and confusion in our current culture with them. Even when we feel we have taught the topics fully, it is important to take their questions seriously. Challenging topics may need active listening and additional questions to get at the heart of the issue. Then, in response, we can spend time in God's Word, which can speak to even the most difficult issues.

One of the more difficult lines to walk as youth leaders is approaching young people who are in conflict or wrestling with sin. Even if they are not directly involved, teens are watching to see if we truly behave in a way that aligns with what we teach. They want to see what it looks like to lovingly address sin or conflict with the Gospel. Challenge means that we do not let these things slide by. Instead we take time to pray, to talk, and to speak the truth in love.

The second aspect of challenge means respecting young people as they are empowered by the Holy Spirit to live out their faith. Adults should use opportunities to challenge young disciples to actively engage in their vocations, in service, and in leadership through the work of the Holy Spirit. Challenge does not underestimate young people. Instead, it gives them opportunities to grow, even if there is potential for failure.

Teens are learning to understand and grasp their gift of faith, independent of family or other supportive adults. In doing that, they need opportunities to stretch what they know and how they share their faith. Challenge can be encouraging teens not to compartmentalize or privatize their faith. Rather, to find new ways to be God's hands and feet in the world. †

Grace

Grace in our relationships and culture echoes God's love and forgiveness to us. Teens are sinful humans who break relationships and fall for the temptations of this world. They are still learning, growing, and developing. As Christians, we meet these struggles differently than the world. We speak mercy, love, and forgiveness through Jesus Christ. Teens need to be constantly reminded that their chief identity is God's beloved, baptized child.

We cultivate an environment of grace not on our own but with the help of Jesus. This makes room for the Holy Spirit to step into trying and difficult situations. We speak words of confession and absolution often. In conversation, teens and adults should regularly share personal stories of grace, failure, challenge, and joy. This helps us see how God is at work in our lives. As young people struggle, they need a community of believers who support, teach, and share the Gospel with them, always reminding them of the God who sent His Son for us all.

1 Corinthians 13:1–3 reminds us that we can say and do all the right things, but if we do it without the love of God it is just “a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.” It is nothing. Paul calls us to a “still more excellent way” (1 Corinthians 12:31). It does not matter how many programs are run with precision or if your youth room is bright and filled with technology or if you have the most engaging social media plan. If you try to do youth ministry without God's love, it is not worth anything. When we look at the qualities of love that Paul writes about in 1 Corinthians 13, we are reminded of how we should be toward one another and especially toward our young people. If you want to know what it looks like to bring warmth, challenge, and grace to your teens, this passage is a beautiful place to start.

We are going to fail when it comes to being kind, patient, and undemanding. On our own, we cannot bring grace to the teens in our community and congregation. Yet Jesus was perfect and showed us immeasurable grace in His death on our behalf. God works these things as He ties people of all ages together in the congregation where we share in God's good gifts. As the Holy Spirit works, these qualities fill our relationships and our time together. As they do, we are able to continue to point young people back to our salvation in Jesus now and throughout their lives. †

WARMTH, CHALLENGE, AND GRACE:

Small Changes Consistently over Time

“Death by a thousand cuts.” That was how one person described why they left the church after growing up in the LCMS. That phrase still sticks out years later because it encapsulates the experience that we hear from many who grow up in the church and walk away.

This is one of the reasons fostering warmth, challenge, and grace in your youth ministry is so important.

When we do not pay attention to the environment or culture of a church, we create a place where small cuts can go untreated. They fester and build on one another until it becomes less painful to leave the church than it is to stay. This environment is often not created maliciously, but out of inattention. Youth leaders, professional or lay, are stretched too thin and serve in a spiritual, emotional, and resource deficit. They are gifted and well-intentioned, but between running from program to program, trying to communicate with busy families, and recruiting other volunteers, they simply don't have enough time. They simply let the feel of the youth ministry be what it is.

In busy youth ministry, it is easy to forget that Jesus Christ and Him crucified is the heart of the Church and of our youth ministry. The best place to energize an environment of warmth, challenge, and grace is at the foot of Jesus' cross. There we can work to bring balm to our youth and to one another from the hurts—big and little—with which we have cut one another. We offer confession and absolution to each other. We can call

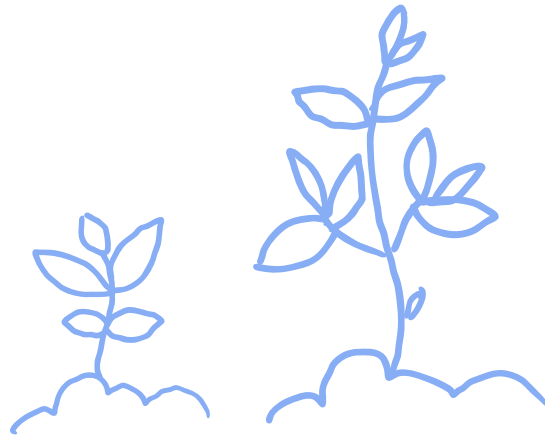
out hurt without fearing retaliation or disregard. While the church will still be filled with sinful people, deliberate and specific action can be taken through the power of the Holy Spirit to slow and heal the injuries we cause to one another. God can work through us to make a space in our churches where young people find such community and encouragement that it is the thought of leaving that becomes painful.

One of the pitfalls of talking about environment is that it often feels different to highly engaged, longtime leaders than it does to those who are closer to the margins. As you look to make small changes, one of the first things you can do is be aware of what actions you currently take that might be impacting ministry. It can be natural to gravitate to the teens you know best, but often that leaves other teens disconnected. Maybe you use words or terms that not everyone is familiar with. Perhaps you get so focused on the activity of youth ministry that you lose the goal of pointing young people to Jesus.

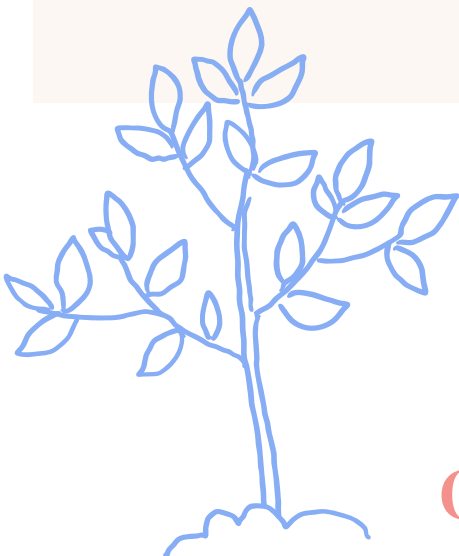


Don't let your need to get the pizza dispensed fairly keep you from focusing your attention (and theirs!) on Jesus Christ and His great salvation. That is the key to having important times of joy and connection with teens.

The changing of an environment or culture does not happen overnight, though many have tried. It cannot be forced. It starts with the work of the Holy Spirit as we make small choices over and over that reinforce warmth, challenge, and grace. Some of those small changes can include the following:



- Praying often for the youth of your congregation and their families
- Calling young people by name
- Recruiting other adults to be consistently in communication with youth; this ensures that every teen has someone who is checking and showing care for them
- Taking time during programming to listen well, even if that means you don't do everything you had planned (sometimes taking time to ask good questions and really listen allows you to speak God's Word in powerful ways, perhaps even more than the lesson you planned for them)
- Writing a note of encouragement or sending a text of support to teens experiencing stress
- Planning to talk about difficult topics—which may mean finding additional adults, like your pastor, to lead or doing extra work to prepare
- Celebrating together, even if it is small things—don't miss out on opportunities to rejoice in how God is using young people in their daily lives
- Apologizing when you do something wrong; it can be easy to just move on when you make a mistake, but the more often youth hear you ask for forgiveness and receive absolution, the more they will feel encouraged to do the same
- Bringing older adults to share their stories and helping both groups find points of connection
- Preparing for crises by making sure you have access to resources and professionals with which and to whom you can connect teens and their families



In busy youth ministry, it is easy to forget that Jesus Christ and Him crucified is the heart of the Church and of our youth ministry.

This can feel like just another list of things to do. Yet we know consistent, small, deliberate changes can be powerful in their impact. They help form the culture and environment where the Gospel can be shared clearly, and young people can be disciplined well. As a leader, your words and actions set a tone whether you want them to or not. Considering how you can add even just one of these things can help move you closer to reflecting God's warmth, challenge, and grace.

Developing a culture of warmth, challenge, and grace means learning to be people of warmth, challenge, and grace through the work of the Holy Spirit. In these steps, we are not only setting an example, but we are teaching young people how to bring warmth, challenge, and grace into their lives and vocations. We can teach these concepts, but it is all the more powerful when young people see them at work in our actions. Congregational communities can be a teen's testing ground for seeing if God's love described in His Word is effectively applied and active in real life.

We know that some young people feel the church is pushing them away one small cut at a time. On the other hand, we heard from many young people who could not point to a single person or moment that drew them closer to Jesus and the church. Instead, they spoke about many people and circumstances that built them up through small interactions—parents, extended family, supportive adults, peers, and congregations that gave them space to learn, grow, and serve. Instead of a thousand cuts, they experienced a great cloud of witnesses that pointed them regularly back to the cross and their gift of faith.

Every congregation has its own history, norms, practices, and community that all impact the congregational environment. We can recognize the powerful pieces that brought us to where we are today while also seeing new ways of being in community together.

We celebrate the many people who grew up in the church and can point to a thousand different ways the church has cared for them. This is what we believe healthy youth ministry should look like.

There is no prescription or program for creating a healthy environment. We wish there was. Instead, the work of creating this environment of warmth, challenge, and grace is done by God through us, deep below the surface over time. In taking small steps, leaders model God's love overflowing in action and build connections that share the Gospel. May God use you and many others to walk alongside teens and point them to Jesus with warmth, challenge, and grace. ‡



AN INTERVIEW WITH

FLAME

BY AMY BIRD



Marcus Gray, known as FLAME, is a GRAMMY®- and Dove-nominated, Stellar Award-winning Christian rap artist. He's also a graduate of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, and holds a master's degree in systematic theology. His three recent EPs (Extended Plays)—*Extra Nos* (2020), *DayBreak* (2020), and *Christ For You* (2021)—feature songs packed with the richness of Lutheran theology. You'll hear FLAME speaking and performing music at the LCMS Youth Gathering mass events.

Q: How did you get into performing? What's your favorite part about it?

A: I started performing in grade school. I was in drama class and the band in addition to being in the drum corps. It was the element of self-expression that attracted me to live performance. Although I was an introverted only child, performing proved to be the perfect outlet for me.

My favorite part has to be losing myself in the moment—being consumed by the music, the message, and the response of the audience. It's one of the most freeing experiences.

Q: What advice would you tell a young artist who wants to use their craft to tell others about Jesus?

A: I'd tell an upcoming artist to enjoy the developing process for what it is. Those will be some of the most memorable and fun times. I'd also tell them to not be in a rush to get exposure. Don't be desperate for a viral moment. Enjoy each stage of the process. Work through the stage fright. Get comfortable discovering your particular strengths and skills. Get used to being in front of people. I'd also say learn the music business so you can protect yourself, your creative property, and make a living, potentially.

Another important thing to note is if the artist desires to share their faith in music, I'd encourage them to give adequate attention to learning good theology. Not only learning it in your head but in your daily living and conversation. This will show up in your art and will help others work through things in their lives based on your clear presentation of godly ideas centered around a Christian worldview.

Q: What difference has a supportive adult made in your life?

A: It's a game-changer to have someone cheering you on. They can offer insight, pay attention to things that

may have escaped your mind, encourage you when things don't go as planned, and celebrate with you when things go well. This is crucial.

Q: Why do you think it's important for youth across the Synod to gather together on a large scale like this at the LCMS Youth Gathering?

A: There is something unique about rallying together around one central theme or cause. In this case, we are rallying together around Jesus—in particular, the Gospel as articulated by Lutheran thought. There is a distinguishable sweetness that Lutherans have preserved that must be highlighted and exposed continuously. Students should experience this confidence and celebrate the legacy of such a tradition all while seeing it contextualized for contemporary concerns. This type of gathering builds boldness and passion in the person. It will drive camaraderie and encourage others to be “Lutheran out loud,” as I like to say. Which ultimately means to be a Christlike force in the world, honoring God and serving neighbor.

Q: What one thing do you hope happens at the Gathering?

A: That through these grand efforts and creative expressions developed by the Gathering, the burdened consciences would find rest in the Good News of forgiveness—all while having fun doing so.

Q: What does “Christ in all things” mean to you?

A: It communicates to me the nearness of Jesus in the full panorama of my human experience. I can close my eyes and trust that His intentions for me are good.

Q: Any encouragement you want to give adult leaders who are leading teens at the Gathering?

A: Mostly, I'd like to say thank you for your willingness to serve in your vocation as an adult leader. I know it comes with unique challenges. Yet, as these students age, you will be one of the persons they recall with great fondness, who served them in one of the most turbulent and confusing stages of the life cycle. Great is your reward.

Hear FLAME share more on faith, vocation, and songwriting on the Concordia Publishing House Podcast (podcasts.cph.org). †

Featured Speakers

Watch for these amazing speakers presenting on topics they're passionate about at this year's Gathering.



Gerard Bolling

Rev. Dr. Gerard Bolling is a pastor at Bethlehem Lutheran Church in St. Louis, Missouri, and an assistant professor at Concordia University Texas. His passion for urban ministry, education, leadership, mentorship, diversity/inclusion, and distance learning are all married in his dual services.

“The LCMS Youth Gathering is an opportunity for us to come together as Lutherans and to live out a life of community, worship, and service all as one. While we know God is working through our individual churches, we are so grateful He shows Himself in this gathering of thousands of the youngest saints of God all in one place. It’s a mountaintop moment with the God who sees us through the mountains and the valleys of life.”

FLAME

FLAME is a GRAMMY® nominated and Stellar Award-winning hip-hop artist. He founded and helms Extra Nos Academy, a boutique record label raising the bar in Christian hip-hop and beyond.





Heather Ruesch

Heather Ruesch is a life-issues speaker and singer/songwriter. She is passionate about youth and being a voice of God's truth in their lives.

“At [the LCMS Youth Gathering], students are receiving Christ over and over in every aspect of their time there together. My favorite part is just watching that powerful camaraderie happen between them, and then seeing how the Word begins to make sense and becomes relatable to the relationships and situations they have at home.”

Julianna Shults

Julianna Shults is a DCE serving as program manager for LCMS Youth Ministry. She has a passion for helping teens and young adults share the Gospel through leadership and service.

“Attending the Gathering as a teen, I was blown away to see the church was so much bigger than my home congregation. I felt connection and belonging through our shared faith unlike anything else. Now as an adult, that feeling is just as strong, and I am so grateful to be able to help young people experience that as well.”



A. Trevor Sutton

A. Trevor Sutton is senior pastor at St. Luke Lutheran Church in Lansing, Michigan. He has written and spoken about technology and Christianity for various publications and is the author of several books.

An illustration at the top of the page shows two hands, one on the left and one on the right, holding two interlocking puzzle pieces. The puzzle pieces are light blue and feature a large, faint white question mark. The hands are dark blue with visible line art for fingers and palms. The background is a solid medium blue.

Who Is a Supportive Adult?

Not all of us remember our teen years fondly. For some of us, we avoid thinking about junior high and high school as much as possible because of the awkwardness, insecurity, and hurts of those years. But isn't that exactly the time when you most needed to know about God's love and acceptance for the sake of Jesus' life, suffering, death, and resurrection?

Just for a moment, think back to the adults who were with you during that time. Were there adults outside of your parents who listened to you and cheered you on? Were there adults who taught you about Jesus and who prayed for you? Were there adults who took a chance on you even when you had not earned it?

Hopefully, you can remember adults in your life who made a lasting impact on you. As you look back, you may be able to see with new eyes just how powerful

their presence was and why you want to be that same kind of adult for other young people. In the *Seven Practices of Healthy Youth Ministry*, we call these "supportive adults."

God created and designed us for community, to be parts of the same Body. In Baptism, God brings a young person into His family full of supportive adults of many generations. Our parents, godparents, extended family, and a whole congregation pray together to be the kind of people who want God's best for them. The Holy Spirit works through many relationships as we walk through life to help us be who God made us to be.

We believe that every teen should have five supportive Christian adults in their lives. This is a number first suggested by Fuller Youth Institute in their book *Sticky Faith*. In some cases, youth may have many of these adults, including extended family, Christian teachers and coaches, and youth ministry leaders. In other cases, teens may be struggling to find any adults who are providing them with support that points them to Jesus. We don't count just any adult in their lives; supportive adults take on specific and important qualities.

Supportive Adults

- Ask good questions and provide a listening ear on everyday easy topics as well as difficult moments of struggle. Engaging in conversation is the place where we learn about each other.
- Share who they are in Christ, openly and honestly. This means showing both how God is working through them in their various vocations but also the ways in which they are still learning or struggling. In this space they need to show challenge, but not judgment or critique.
- Set an example for teens by spending regular time in God's Word, prayer, worship, and frequently use words of confession and absolution in their relationship. Supportive adults do not have to be perfect, but they are best able to point young people to Jesus when they are deeply rooted in Christ.
- Build a reciprocal relationship with mutual trust. This means both having a genuine interest in getting to know a young person including their gifts, skills, and passions but also a willingness to earn the right to be heard.
- Extend hospitality in sharing time, celebrations, joy, crises, and struggles as they walk alongside young people.

Nearly every Christian adult can serve as a supportive adult to a teen in their youth ministry. Sometimes those connections are made organically and other times they are developed through programming. Older adults may connect to teens through service—altar guild, ushering, and VBS, for example. Some congregations have specific programs for confirmation mentors. Others facilitate this by allowing Sunday School teachers to age up with a specific group of students. Regardless of how the connection is formed, being a supportive adult does not need to be complex or time-consuming.

Being a supportive adult isn't a one-way street. Teens have a lot of wonderful gifts that they bring to the relationship as well. They have a unique perspective and passion that is often lost in adulthood. As digital natives, they can bring a lot of insight into our culture today for those who grew up before cell phones. Each teen has gifts, skills, passions, and experiences that can be shared with mutual trust and honesty.

It is important to note that no pastor or other church worker can be the only supportive adult to all a congregation's teens. Often congregations depend on church workers to be the single person maintaining relationships with teens.

Instead, their time may be better served networking teens and adults through common passions, service, and programming. Youth ministry is always a team effort.

When looking for supportive adults, it is critical that they be Christians who are active in learning about who God is and what Jesus Christ has done as well as in service and leadership. As God works through their vocations, supportive adults model and encourage faithful worship, Bible study, and prayer. In all they do, they are seeking to draw young people closer to Jesus and to His Church. Through good times and bad, supportive adults help keep God's Word in front of young people and show they have their eternal best interest at heart.

Finding yourself in a space of being a supportive adult will take time. Keep checking in with your youth and seek out opportunities for conversation and hospitality. There will be times when you will be unsure of what to say or do. You may even struggle to be supportive of some teens. Yet, many of us would not be here if, when we were young, there had not been adults in the church who through the Holy Spirit pointed us over and over to the cross. Young people want to know they are valued and loved by God, by their parents, and by other adults. †

Take a quiet moment to read these devotions with your group. Then, use this time to discuss God's blessings at the Gathering and answer difficult or complex questions that arise. Let Christ be your guide during this devotional time.

The Double-Edged Sword of Being One of a Kind

BY JULIANNA SHULTS

You are one of a kind.

Did you read that sentence as a compliment or an insult? We have all heard those words, or ones like them, spoken in affirmation when someone does something extraordinary or is exactly the right person for the task in front of them. We have also heard the words used in anger, stinging with rejection, as someone is seen as too different, too hard to understand, unable to fit in with others. The same six words, yet context and inflection give them dramatically different meanings.

There is truth in that sentence. God's Word tells us that God has lovingly formed each of us. Yet being one of a kind, just like that sentence, can be a double-edged sword.

You are uniquely created by God. Isaiah 43:1 says, "Thus says the LORD, He who created you, O Jacob, He who formed you, O Israel: 'Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are Mine.'" You are created and formed by our all-powerful God. This same God has called you by name and redeemed you through Jesus' death on the cross. You are one of a kind, a person created and known by God.

You are one of a kind. No one has your same gifts, skills, passions, and experiences. We can spend a lot of time criticizing our appearance, our gifts, and our status. The truth is that God made you and placed you with great intention. You aren't an accident or a mistake. In your Baptism, God has given you important ways to serve the church, your family, and your community. Other people need you to be exactly who God has made you to be. God's world is richer for having you in it. The Body of Christ benefits when God works in and through you.

Being who God made you and baptized you to be is not easy. In fact, it can be desperately difficult and even lonely at times.

If we are true to who God made us to be and to the faith He has given us, we might discover we don't fit into the world the way others do. Living as Christians in this world can be difficult. We have God's Holy Spirit to help us love our enemy and to protect all life as precious. God calls us to be the light of the world and a city set on a hill (see Matthew 5:14 from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount). This doesn't mean we get to fit in or blend in with the crowd. In fact, it makes us stand out.

You are one of a kind, someone who doesn't just blend in with the world. Isaiah 43:2 reminds us that waters, rivers, fire, and flame will threaten us. The world will sometimes feel dangerous. It will be overwhelming, and we may even wonder where God is. We are going to experience rejection and loneliness. Yet God promises that He will be with us every step of the way. God will protect us and support us with His Holy Spirit.

You are one of a kind, but you are never alone. You have a God who loves you enough to send His only Son, Jesus, to die for you. That same God walks beside you through everything and gives you a community of Christians who share your faith. God has given you faithful people who love and care for you, even in times when you feel alone.

You are one of a kind, and that can be both wonderful and difficult. In those times when it is a joy, we celebrate. We praise the God who made us and called us by name into faith. When it is hard, we remember Isaiah 43:4: "Because you are precious in My eyes, and honored, and I love you." You are loved deeply by God. When there seems to be no one else quite like you, remember that as a Christian, you are going to be different. When loneliness and rejection set in, remember that you are loved by the one true God, and He has given us one another to be the Church together.

You are one of a kind; never doubt it. It is exactly how God made you to be. ‡

A Lamp-Lit Path

BY A. TREVOR SUTTON

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.
(Psalm 119:105)

Have you ever walked along a path in the dark? If so, you most likely pulled out your phone and used the flashlight feature to illuminate the path. If you hold the flashlight way up high, you can see far ahead of you. Holding the flashlight above your head shows a large portion of the path.

On the other hand, if you hold the flashlight low, you see just a few feet or even inches ahead of you. Dropping the flashlight down to your feet will show just a part of the path. How high the flashlight is held determines how far ahead you can see.

In our verse above, the psalmist describes God's Word as "a lamp to my feet and a light to my path." God's Word illuminates our path in life. His promises provide a firm foundation for our feet. His presence reminds us that we never walk alone. God's Law keeps us from wandering off the path and into the bramble of sin. God's Gospel proclaims mercy and forgiveness for all the times we have strayed from His path of righteousness. Like a flashlight shining in the darkness, God's Word illuminates our path and gives us confidence for our journey through life.

Nevertheless, God does not promise how much of the path He will illuminate. Yes, God's Word is a light for our path. Yet, sometimes, the light shines on only a few feet of it. God never promised to illuminate the whole path so we can see far ahead into the future. Often, God shows only enough of the path to help us take the next step.

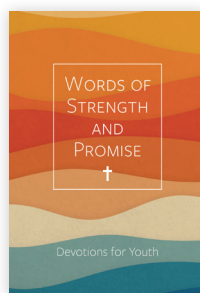
Perhaps you are reading this and God has illuminated your path for the next several years. Maybe you have a clear path forward through the next several years through college or work. Thanks be to God that He has revealed a large portion of the path to you!

Perhaps you are reading this and God has illuminated your path for only the next several months. Maybe you know where God is directing your life in the near future, but not in the distant future. Press on and know that God will further illuminate your steps when you get there!

Perhaps you are reading this and God has illuminated your path for only the next couple of days or hours. This can be a hard place to be. Maybe you do not know where God is leading your life tomorrow. (Truth be told, we are all in this place; we don't really know what God has planned for us tomorrow.) Take heart and know that He is still leading you through His promises and mercy.

No matter what, God's Word guides our path. Even if you cannot see the whole path ahead, know that you never walk alone: "He will not leave you or forsake you" (Deuteronomy 31:6). It's much easier making a hard decision, going to college, or beginning a new job knowing that Jesus is with you. He knows where He is going. He knows where He is leading you. Journey on! †

WORDS OF STRENGTH AND PROMISE



Did you enjoy these two devotions? Find over 60 more written for youth about the questions and life issues they face every day in *Words of Strength and Promise*. Order copies for your youth at cph.org/wordsofstrength.

One of the easiest ways to make the connection between teens and adults is during youth ministry programming. The regular interaction and shared time together are a perfect spot to help adults not only build relationships but teach and share the Gospel, which the Holy Spirit will use to form the young people in your church. Youth ministry leaders should take advantage of the programming time by making sure the adults they invite are thinking of themselves not just as chaperones or drivers but as relationship builders.

Youth ministry volunteers may find the first few steps of developing relationships with teens somewhat awkward. Life stage, experience, and even vocabulary differences might make it hard to instantly connect. As an adult, you need to be ready to embarrass yourself a little in the process. Don't worry too much, though—often those first few miscommunications and honest mistakes help create spaces of mutuality and honesty. Simply be who God made you to be and enjoy who God made the teens in your congregation to be as well.

Youth ministry leaders can ease that initial pairing by using opportunities for directed conversation or shared activity. Give them something to do together, like playing a strategy game or cooking a meal. Find topics of conversation that don't require intense personal disclosure. For example, in one of the first meetings between youth and mentors in your confirmation program, they could go on a five-minute walk around the church campus and identify all the things they saw, smelled, and felt. When they come back, create a list together to start a lesson on the First Article. Encourage adults to be as participatory as possible—it will help give solid footing to developing relationships.

There are beautiful ways that technology, and especially social media, have allowed us to create networks of support and to connect with people who are passionate about what we are passionate about, even at a distance. Technology allowed many adults in the church

to stay connected to youth and their families during times in the pandemic when it wasn't safe to meet in person. There are some fantastic tools that can allow adults to get a glimpse into the lives of teens and meet them where they are at.

Like all tools, technology has a dark side and can lead down some dangerous roads. Teens often deal with bullying, the fear of missing out, and comparing their lives to the posts of others in their online activity. Adult and teen phone usage sometimes keeps us from spending time connecting even when we are together. Adults and teens can work together to use technology safely and to put it away when we need to see people face-to-face. In our technological culture, the time we have in person each week in the narthex or in Bible study can anchor young people to real relationships and keep them from being pushed out and isolated.

Supportive adults are uniquely set up to anticipate transitions, spot rising issues, and engage at critical moments.

The longer an adult can volunteer in youth ministry, the deeper their relationships will go. The hope is that God will use supportive adults over time to walk through both joys and struggles in the lives of youth.

Finding and Engaging Supportive Adults



Adolescence is a time of ups and downs and big emotions. Supportive adults help ground young people in their identity in Christ as they prepare for and respond to celebrations, transitions, and crises. Supportive adults are also better able to gauge when to use Law and Gospel. As Romans 12:15 says, “Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.” Supportive adults are uniquely set up to anticipate transitions, spot rising issues, and engage at critical moments.

The need for supportive adults does not change as young people transition into college.

It can be easy to think in moments of shifting or struggle that the adult needs to have all the answers. Instead, we lean on the work of the Holy Spirit and trust in His guidance. Being present at these key times helps young people know God has surrounded them with

adults who desire God’s best for them. Adults should not feel as though they know the answer to every question. Teens instead want someone to be available to walk with them, pointing to the cross through joyful celebration, through times of change, and in difficult spots. Through the Holy Spirit, these adults can pray for young people, provide mentorship, and continue to show up in whatever way that young person needs.

The need for supportive adults does not change as young people transition into college. In fact, their need may grow as they leave home and are stretched in new and unusual ways. This is the moment we most see young people leave the church and few return. This is a key moment supportive adults can prepare for. Supportive adults should be equipped to keep up communication and prayer as youth transition out of high school and into what is next. Checking in regularly and helping connect them to new congregations or campus ministry helps ease this critical transition.

There is no perfect age for supportive adults. As adults are pulled into supporting teens, we can utilize strengths from each generation, from young adults to retirees. Teens especially benefit from an intergenerational church. Young adults can relate to the world of teens. Teens are also more quickly able to picture their futures when they look to young adults who are modeling living out their vocations. Supportive adults who are similar ages as their parents, often other teens’ parents, can be strong bridges between parent and





teen, supporting both and helping ease communication. Older adults bring a wealth of experience and joy to young people. Often this is a space where mentoring and reverse-mentoring work best.

It can be a bit more difficult to connect youth with adults outside of youth ministry programming, but no less valuable. Faithful adults can come from anywhere. In fact, many of the adults who champion or care for teens come from unexpected places. As you look for adults outside of youth ministry volunteers, you may find that adults feel too nervous or embarrassed to start that conversation. It is good to remind them that it is not easy to meet new people in any circumstance. Encourage them to be the kind of adult they had or wish they had when they were in high school. We should not let our own anxiety keep us from engaging with young people in our congregation. Teens are just people who want to be seen and known, just like you.

If you have adults in the congregation who want to engage youth, one encouragement is to have them start with a name and a question. They should learn a teen's name and use it in greeting them, then think of a question to ask them. Encourage these adults to listen well to the answer and file it away. They could even add

such answers and details they learn to their phone's note app if they are worried about forgetting. The next time they see the teen, have them follow up and ask a new question. They should continue this pattern until they find points of connection with that young person.

For example, ask a teen what they are looking forward to this week. If they respond that they have a basketball game, ask about the result of that game the next time you see them. And then add a question about what position they play (especially if you understand basketball). Keep at it until you find out that you are both big fans of the movie *Space Jam* because the conversation develops and grows over time.

Engaging supportive adults doesn't have to be complicated for it to be effective. More than anything, it requires adults who are willing to make an investment in the lives of teens. When they invest consistently, they will find God can use them in powerful ways to care for young people and share the Word of God with them. The investment we work for here is a long-term payoff, not a quick return. But it is worth it as young people deepen their resilient identity as baptized children of God. †



AN INTERVIEW WITH

Tanner Olson

BY AMY BIRD

Tanner Olson is an author, poet, and speaker living in Nashville, Tennessee, with his wife, Sarah, and their dog, Pancake. After graduating from Concordia University Wisconsin in 2012, Tanner started writing and began sharing his work on his website, writtentospeak.com. The mission of his writing is to spread hope and announce love through written and spoken word poetry. He's also the author of three self-published collections of poetry

At the 2022 LCMS Youth Gathering, you'll find Tanner on the Gathering's social media accounts, bringing hope and joy to participants. Follow the Gathering at [@lcmsgathering](https://twitter.com/lcmsgathering).

Q: How did you get into writing and performing? What's your favorite part about it?

A: I have always enjoyed writing. It has allowed me to dig deeper in my faith, ask questions, and rest in the truth that surrounds me. After seeing spoken word poet Anis Mojgani perform, I decided to give it a try. My first few years as a writer and performer were clunky. I had a difficult time finding my voice and honing in on the messages I wanted to communicate. Through several steps back, I finally found my footing and was able to move forward with confidence into the unknown.

My favorite part of writing and performing is meeting those who have connected with my words. Every day I get to have conversations with people all over the world who have stumbled upon my words and been reminded of the beauty of hope.

Q: What advice would you tell a young artist (your younger self) who wants to use their craft to tell others about Jesus?

A: Give it time. Be willing to learn and be wrong. Keep Jesus at the center. This is not about being famous but being faithful to what I believe God has invited me to do with my life.

Q: What difference has a supportive adult made in your life?

A: A supportive adult can make or break the difference in the life of a young individual. There are a few adults who have slowed down to walk with me. They didn't just see me for me, but they saw me for who I was becoming. I don't want to know where I would be without them.

Q: What one thing do you hope happens at the Gathering?

A: When the Gathering comes to an end, I pray the students and leaders will go home with endless reminders of hope to rest in. The theme, *In All Things*, invites us to keep trusting the endless love and grace of Jesus through every season. And I hope we keep trusting.

This truth changes not only how we navigate this life, but how we respond to the uncertainty we experience while on earth.

Q: I know the words *all things* mean a lot to you—so much so that you have them tattooed on your arm. Can you share more about that and how “Christ in all things” specifically encourages you and your faith right now?

A: As the world continues to grow and change and offer noise, I need something hopeful and true to stand on. These two words, *all things*, offer just that. Knowing that Christ is in all things tells me that I am not alone.

He is with me in my wondering.

He is with me in my fear.

He is with me in my questions.

He is with me in my joy.

He is with me in my grief.

He is with me always.

Q: Any encouragement you want to give adult leaders who are leading teens at the Gathering?

A: I was fortunate to have incredible adult leaders walk alongside me in high school. Looking back, it wasn't what they said that made a difference, it was that they were present with me. They asked me questions and reminded me that I was a forgiven child of God.

It's okay to be honest.

It's okay to say I don't know.

It's okay to listen.

Q: What are you working on this year that you're really excited about?

A: I currently host a weekly podcast titled *Walk A Little Slower*. Each episode seeks to remind you of the hope found in Christ and invite you to slow down as you make your way through all that is uncertain and unknown.

I am releasing a book of poems and prayers with Concordia Publishing House titled *Continue* and am praying it will be helpful as you spend time in prayer and reflection. †

CONTINUE

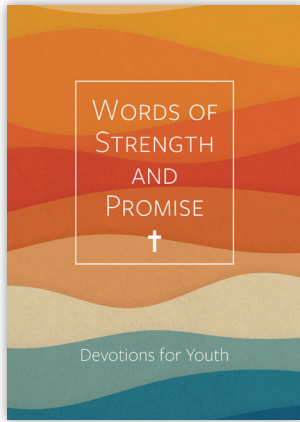


View a sample and order Tanner's latest collection of poetry, *Continue*, at cph.org/continue or by scanning the QR code below.



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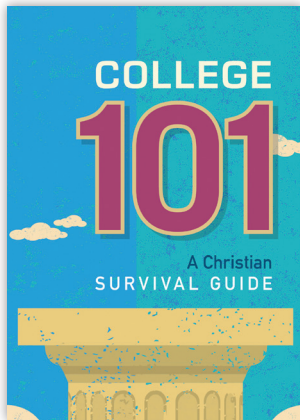
Words of Strength and Promise: Devotions for Youth

There are times when you need answers to navigate the labyrinth of life. Take hope in knowing that all of God's people have gone through the same struggles. Here are 70 devotions from 14 authors on important topics in the lives of today's youth.



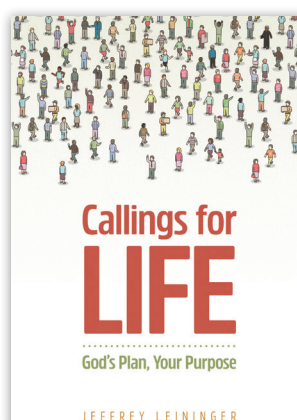
Continue: Poems and Prayers of Hope

This collection of poetry is written for you. Author Tanner Olson's words will inspire and encourage you to continue, helping you find the strength that comes in Jesus.



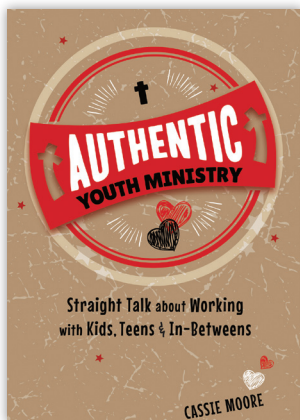
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Developed by college students, College 101 offers words of practical advice and genuine, honest, insightful, and Christ-centered counsel to help students prepare for the challenges of contemporary life on campus.



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Connected for Life: Essential Guide to Youth Ministry

Youth are not just the church's future—they also are the church's now. In Connected for Life, you'll find guidance, encouragement, and advice on leading a youth ministry that supports young adults in their faith for life.

The
whole
root and origin
of our
salvation
lies in
God who
sends.



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