

An open letter to the St. Michael congregation:

The Gospel reading for Sunday, July 22, 2012 is Ephesians 2:14-20:

For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, so that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.



It may be strange to see a Gospel passage that will be read on a summertime Sunday more than a year away, but to the youth of this church, these are very important words.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA) will hold its Youth Gathering July 18-22, 2012 in New Orleans, Louisiana. The Gathering will bring high school students and their leaders from all over the world to New Orleans to dwell together as “one new humanity.” Remembering who we are in Christ, we act in response by forming faithful, wise and courageous leaders who will ...

- Live among God's faithful people.
- Hear the word of God and share in the Lord's Supper.
- Proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed.
- Serve all people, by following the example of Jesus.
- Strive for justice and peace in all the earth (ELW, page 236).

You may remember that 12 St. Michael youth and 4 adult leaders participated in the ELCA Youth Gathering in 2009. Some members of the congregation felt that the trip was just an expensive vacation; I can assure you that it was not. Think back to the inspirational service the youth held after we returned. They shared with us heartfelt and powerful stories of how they interacted with 40,000 peers from all over the world. Youth and adults together learned about the city of New Orleans and its people. We learned about how they suffered after hurricane Katrina, but we also saw how residents came together to rebuild their city and their lives after the hurricane. We learned about New Orleans' unique culture and how the city is a melting pot of different peoples, races, nationalities and faiths. We also learned about some of the difficulties faced not only by this community but also by many others throughout the country and world, including homelessness, hunger, racism, illiteracy and more.

We did have some fun, too! We shared stories and meals together; we completed service projects specially prepared for us; we worshiped together and spent time hearing inspirational speakers who talked about not only their faith, but ours as well; we spent time at learning sessions and workshops that helped to build our faith, awareness and knowledge.

I can assure you this was an unforgettable experience for all who attended. We returned to St. Michael fed by the Spirit and strengthened in our faith. My only regret is that our experience and joy was not shared fully with this congregation. As we prepare to return to the ELCA Youth Gathering and New Orleans in July, 2012, I would like to change that by inviting the whole congregation to share in this experience. I want to create excitement within St. Michael for our youth and this opportunity to serve, worship and learn.

The ELCA has created a monthly study guide that will begin in late summer/ early fall of 2011. As soon as the curriculum arrives, I will be holding monthly Gathering meetings which will include Bible Studies, educational materials, and time for fellowship and discussion. I invite every member of the congregation to attend any and all of these meetings. It is important for all members of St. Michael to support and empower our youth for this opportunity. Who knows – we adults may learn something as well!

Part of the curriculum for the Gathering will address different ways in which youth can provide service to their own communities. While in New Orleans, our youth will learn different ways to serve. The ELCA plans to equip youth and adult leaders with the tools, knowledge and education to return to their own congregations and communities ready to provide services to those who are homeless, hungry, illiterate or in need of other help. Our curriculum will prepare us for these types of activities plus many others. Wouldn't it be nice if the people of St. Michael, as a whole, could work together to better serve our community? As I was writing this, I remembered the incredible support for the recent Sr. FLYP homeless night – how the youth and adults of this congregation worked together to help so many who are in need. As a Christian family we should welcome more opportunities to work together to spread the Gospel and help and enrich our community.

While in New Orleans in 2009, we met hundreds of youth from other states and congregations. Many of these youth partnered with their congregations to make gifts to give away to friends they met at the Gathering. A number of church groups made bead necklaces, bracelets or other gifts distinctive to their areas. We met youth from Hawaii who had made necklaces with small shells taken from the beaches. We met youth from Ohio who made necklaces from rolled-up bulletins and buckeyes, just to name a few. These small gifts provided an opportunity to meet and befriend youth from all walks of life. They also provided youth with opportunities to tell others about their home congregations and proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The youth at St. Michael are in the process of designing their own unique gifts to make and to give away, and hope to pick one Sunday a month where we can gather to make these gifts in the Fellowship Hall. We invite the members of St. Michael to spend some time with us on these Sundays helping us make these gifts.

I believe we can grow as a congregational family only if we work and grow together. When adults in our church are present at the baptism of a child, each of them promises to nurture, support and educate that child in our Christian faith. It is also mentioned in Deuteronomy 11:18-21: ***You shall put these words of mine in your heart and soul, and you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and fix them as an emblem on your forehead. Teach them to your children, talking about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates, so that your days and the days of your children may be multiplied in the land that the LORD swore to your ancestors to give them, as long as the heavens are above the earth.***

How often do we as adults fulfill the baptismal promises or follow the words from Deuteronomy? Supporting our youth by attending the Gathering classes and helping with these small projects gives adults the opportunity to fulfill these promises.

With a trip like this, we must consider cost. The anticipated cost for this trip will be about \$1200 per youth and adult chaperone. As you might guess, this necessitates some fundraising, which also provides opportunities to help and serve our church family and our community, as well as promote fellowship. Beginning in late spring or early summer, we will operate a fresh vegetable stand every Sunday. Members of St. Michael and the Perry Hall community will be able to buy fresh produce (fruit and vegetables) on Sunday mornings before and after church services. This produce stand will be open through the fall. We also plan to have some low-cost dinners to promote fellowship. Some of these dinners may include entertainment such as movies. We will also hold car washes and possibly a basket bingo. It is important for members of the congregation to know that all funds raised will be used to defray the costs of the trip.

I hope this letter has given you not only an idea of what our youth are planning, but also the desire and opportunities to share the experience with them. We currently have 14 youth and 4 chaperones signed up to go to the Gathering.

If you are a youth in 7th, 8th, 9th, 10th or 11th grade and you are interested in more information, or if you are an adult who would like to be involved or share in the experience and excitement, there will be an informational meeting in the Fellowship Hall on Sunday, March 27th at 12 noon (this meeting will be mandatory for those youth and their parents who have already signed up for the event). I hope to see you there as we prepare to be Citizens With The Saints.

Yours in Christ,
Ernie Lehr