

Rev. Jeffery W. Grams
St. John's Lutheran Church
2220 Broadway Ave.
Scottsbluff, NE 69361
(308) 635-1722



Friday, September 03, 2004

Wyoming District (LCMS) Leadership and Pastors:

As many of you are aware, I volunteered to be the Wyoming District Coordinator for the National Youth Gathering that was held this summer in Orlando, FL. What many of you may not realize is that I chose to accept this position out of a genuine desire to become involved in the National Youth Gathering. I wanted to participate in the process, so that it might continue to improve and more accurately proclaim the pure Gospel of Jesus Christ to the High School youth of our congregations. My first National Youth Gathering was in Atlanta, GA – and I had some major concerns about the way Jesus Christ was presented at that Gathering. My second Gathering was the 2001 Gathering in New Orleans, LA – and I honestly felt that there had been some improvement and that the various concerns of good pastors throughout Synod were being heard and addressed... I therefore approached this 2004 Gathering in Orlando, FL with a spirit of optimism and hope. I honestly believed we were “headed in the right direction” and that this Gathering would be the most “Lutheran” yet! What a great opportunity to touch the lives of more than 30,000 youth with the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ and strengthen them in their understanding of the Truth of God’s Word as they had learned it in Luther’s Small Catechism.

I have had the privilege of meeting and working with many of the team responsible for bringing the National Youth Gathering together. I can honestly say that they are good Christian people, who have no other desire than to provide an event for our young people that is both uplifting and Christ-centered in its purpose and execution. It is my sincere hope that they do not feel “betrayed” by the criticism in this evaluation – it is intended in a spirit of love for the sake of Christ and His Church. There were many good things about the Gathering, including some positive teaching in the “smaller” events held throughout Beyond Imagination... And I always rejoice at every opportunity I have to spend with my youth in an environment that encourages opportunities for teaching and growth in the Gospel of Salvation.

It is therefore with a heavy heart that I found myself asking some very troubling questions when I returned from the Gathering. **Why did we go to Orlando? What did we accomplish? Did the youth of my congregation return from this Gathering more well grounded in the pure Gospel than before they left? Did they receive the absolute best that the Synod has to offer to strengthen them in their confession of the faith?**

Why did we go to Orlando? Even at the District Coordinators Luncheon, a theme that I heard over and over was: “It was awesome to see 35,000 youth gathered together and praising Jesus!” And I will confess that the first time that I saw tens of thousands of youth gathered in Atlanta, I was also pretty “moved” by the sheer numbers involved! My admiration and respect for the teams that organized this event cannot be overstated: those who worked for years to coordinate an event of this magnitude did an amazing job.

Nevertheless, if the most “amazing” part of the National Youth Gathering is simply being inspired by how “large” it is, then I am afraid that we are sending the wrong message to our youth. At issue is the Lutheran “theology of the cross” that is taught in our schools and our seminaries. Should our youth be “inspired” because they are part of a large crowd? Or should they be “inspired” by the truthfulness of God’s Word even if that means they sometimes have to stand alone? We know that young people are easily swayed by peer-pressure and a desire to “fit in” with other youth; we need to be careful not to give the impression that “large numbers” define what is true.

What did we accomplish? While I personally made an effort to add Biblical and doctrinal substance to what my own youth received at the Gathering, I was deeply disappointed in what was offered by the substance of the Gathering itself. What an opportunity was missed! Especially during the Mass Events and Bible Studies! Here are a few examples of the problems that I observed:

- The theme of the opening Mass Event was “Power” – Michelle Thompson’s presentation was highly emotional and intended to encourage the youth to leadership and service in the Church. She was a winsome and eloquent speaker who clearly loves the Lord Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, what most concerned me was when she attempted to share the “Gospel”: because it did not come through clearly at all. Too often, the youth were told “God wants you to let Him...” do things in their lives! Since when does our permissiveness *define* the Gospel of salvation? This is the danger of allowing those who are not properly trained to speak at a National Youth Gathering. The lack of connection between the Gospel and the Means of Grace was again demonstrated by the pseudo “confession and absolution” where the youth were asked to whisper their sins into cupped hands, and then release those sins to the Lord! I suppose that this fits into a general “declaration of grace” kind of understanding, but it was also quite confusing.
- “Truth” was the theme of the second Mass Event – and again I was deeply disappointed at the “opportunity missed”. Instead of receiving a solid presentation on the Eternal TRUTH of God’s Word and Jesus who is “the Way the Truth and the Life”, we received more drama and emotionalism. Bob Lenz is a compelling speaker, and easily connected to the emotions of our youth – but his ability to apply the Gospel of salvation was again sadly lacking, especially since it was disconnected from the Means of Grace. In a Synod this large, could we not have had a competent LCMS pastor teach us about the Truth of God?
- “Love” was the theme of the third Mass Event. Laura Vevers gave a good “testimonial” that demonstrated the power of God’s forgiveness to help those dealing with the guilt of abortion. Again, what was lacking was any concrete connection to the Means of Grace whereby the forgiveness of Jesus Christ is given to His people. A beautifully choreographed battle between God and Satan for the soul of a woman was also offered, but its interpretation for the youth was lacking... Once again, I believe that the intentions of those involved here were quite noble, but the *connection to Jesus Christ and Him Crucified* was simply not made often enough or clearly enough.
- “Praise” was the focus of the fourth Mass Event, and this Tuesday evening was the source of my greatest sorrow and frustration. Our youth went to the event expecting to receive the Divine Service – the real presence of our Lord Jesus Christ to bless them with forgiveness and peace through Word and Sacrament. Instead, it turned into yet another opportunity for theater and entertainment. The house band had the crowd “warmed up” for the “service” in such a way that any chance for a “reverent” Divine Service was impossible. The service was cluttered with so much drama, spectacle, clapping and entertainment; that it was virtually indistinguishable from any other “mass event” during the Gathering. While many of the “entertainment” additions to the Divine Service would have been interesting and enjoyable in another context, they were completely inappropriate for a true Divine Service. The offering was inappropriately collected during the distribution of the Lord’s Supper – contrary to the concerns that I expressed well before the event. And while I thank God for the faithful witness of the choir from Concordia Seward, NE during the course of the Divine service, their impact was minimized by the “pop music” that drove most of the service. Ultimately, the Blood of Jesus Christ, the forgiveness of sins, the real presence of the living God . . . these things were often lost in the spectacle and entertainment and flash photography going on. The “one thing needful” was clearly not at the center.
- President Kieschnick has already written a letter addressing my “concerns” over his wife taking time *during the sermon* to address the Gathering. I will include his letter with my report so that he may be faithfully represented. There is no doubt in my mind however, that by inviting his wife to speak during the Divine Service at all, especially during the time set aside for the proclamation of God’s Word, he has directly violated the Word of God: **"For God is not a God of disorder but of peace. As in all the congregations of the saints, women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says."** [1Corinthians 14:33-34]
- The pervasive presence of Contemporary Christian Music throughout the Gathering has been a growing concern for many Lutheran pastors. The content of the music is often weak at best, and is usually guilty of completely divorcing the Gospel of Salvation and the real presence of the Lord Jesus Christ from the Means of Grace. This should not surprise us given the “confession” of most of the

artists performing at the gathering – very few are members of the LCMS! I would not encourage my youth to attend a “Southern Baptist” convention, and I do not appreciate it at all when our National Youth Gathering begins to look and feel like one!¹ So much has already been written on the poor theology in much of Contemporary Christian Music, that I hardly feel equipped or prepared to address it in this report. Let it be sufficient to say that the overcharged emotionalism of the event, combined with “Christian” music with little or no genuine Christological character or content, frequently sidetracked even the better portions of the gathering from their purpose. Nor do I feel that a National Youth Gathering should run the risk of seeming to **endorse** bands whose message of decision theology runs contrary to the Gospel.

- The “skit” that ran throughout the course of the Mass Events was described by my own youth as: “confusing”, “a waste of time”, “What was the point?” and “How does this have anything to do with the Bible?” The central message of the Drama was the quote: “Jesus doesn’t have a plan B...” and as a Lutheran Pastor I am not sure that this statement will hold up under any rigorous theological scrutiny.
- Added to this list of issues, is the problem that I had with the “Bible Studies” during the Gathering! They were almost devoid of Biblical content! My own youth group was frustrated with the lack of time we actually spent in the Word of God during the “Bible Study” time. The Bible studies were so sidetracked by drama and theater and multimedia “fluff” that the concrete teaching of God’s Word was lost. Students did more “listening” to the flipping of pages in their Bibles as part of the “dramatic” presentation, than they did actually **studying** the meaning and Truth of God’s Word... And Pastor Nunes spent more time arguing with a cartoon character about what it means to be “real” than he did teaching us what God’s Word proclaims about reality.

Which in turn brings me to the next of my serious questions. **Did the youth of my congregation return from this Gathering more well grounded in the pure Gospel than before they left?** It is my hope that those congregations from our District who attended the Gathering were accompanied by leaders who are strong in their faith and able to correct the false doctrine and poor theology that they observed at the Gathering. For those who learned from the **errors** of the Gathering due to strong adult leadership, it was an opportunity to see what happens to the Gospel of Salvation when it accommodates itself to the cultures of this world. We are called by the Lord to be “in” the world but not “of” the world. One of my youth commented, “There were many things about the Gathering that I liked, but I just think they tried too hard to make everything fun and it got out of control.”

This is the heart of my greatest overall concern: If a young person who attended our Gathering did not know any better, they could easily be led to believe that Christianity itself is all about having fun and being entertained, and that Our Lord Jesus Christ is primarily a “good buddy” that you like to “hang out” with. The very *character* of our Lord Jesus Christ as He is clearly proclaimed in the Word of God; is in danger of being unintentionally *adjusted* to fit the desires of today’s entertainment oriented youth culture. When we cannot even receive the Divine Service of our Lord without making every moment “fun”, we clearly run the risk of exchanging the True God of Holy Scripture with a false god of our own sinful design.

It is my concern, that if a young person attending our Gathering were to truly embrace its “confession” of Jesus, they could easily be **farther away** from the Lord Jesus Christ and the Truth of His Word than if they had not attended at all. The Gospel of Jesus Christ was too often presented in a way that obscured and confused “the proper distinction between Law and Gospel” that we cherish so highly. The over-emphasis on emotion and experience, and a hard hitting push to get the youth to “respond”, could easily leave any of our youth confused about the very nature of salvation. This is especially a danger when the message is almost completely disconnected from clear teaching on the objective Justification of our Lord and the Means of Grace!

In the end, I can only conclude that in spite of the best intentions of those who organized the event, the emphasis on entertainment and fun began to **control** the agenda of the National Youth Gathering. So much so, that in the end the very Truth of the Gospel they intended to proclaim began to be lost in the mix. When we

¹ Pastor Ted Bourret commented, “...one young lady in my group said she felt like she was at a Baptist conference, not a Lutheran gathering! Pretty astute, and yet pretty sad at the same time.”

trade the substance of God's Word for entertainment and emotional manipulation, we easily lose sight of the pure Gospel in which the only true hope and joy and peace can be found.

It is my hope that this report will be received in the Spirit which it is intended, a gentle word of rebuke and correction to a group of people that I love and respect; as well as a public word of caution to pastors and congregations who are considering attending National Youth Gatherings in the future. The nature of my responsibilities as a pastor and as the youth chair for the Wyoming District, make it impossible for me to remain silent, or to keep my observations private. False teaching, no matter how unintentional or well motivated, must be publicly corrected for the sake of the people of God.

As for the congregations of the Wyoming District, I strongly encourage you to consider other options for the youth of your congregation to grow in their love for the Lord and His Church. Smaller gatherings in our own District, and regional events run by Lutheran Pastors; are simply much easier to control and much more likely to focus upon substance over spectacle. Servant events planned on a local level can be a far more effective and powerful opportunity for pastors and youth leaders to spend important time with their youth members.

Did they receive the absolute best that the Synod has to offer to strengthen them in their confession of the faith? No – we can, and we must, do better.

In Christ's Love,

Rev. Jeffery W. Grams
St. John's Lutheran Church