

The Feast – My “Higher Things” Experience in Colorado Springs Report to the Board for Congregational Services of the Wyoming District – LCMS

As you may be aware from my previous evaluations, I have always rejoiced in every opportunity to serve the young people of the Body of Christ. As a pastor, I have taken every possible opportunity to attend youth events with the young people of my congregation. These events have always provided an opportunity to really get to know my youth, as well as giving them an opportunity to spend time with their pastor outside of Sunday morning.

As the facilitator for youth ministry in the Wyoming District, I am always looking for more opportunities to provide good Lutheran teaching to our High School Youth. Since many in our District have expressed concerns regarding the lack of clear Lutheran teaching at our Synodically sponsored youth gatherings, I have become more sensitive to other options available to our churches. This is especially important in lieu of the passing of Resolution 4-04 at our 2006 District Convention, which in part encourages that “the congregations and leadership of the Wyoming District seek other events for the support and growth of our youth in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and inform our congregations of such opportunities.”

Which brings us to the subject of this evaluation: “The Feast – A Higher Things Youth Conference – 2006” held in Colorado Springs, CO from July 18-21. This event was led and organized by pastors and laypeople of The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, and intended predominantly for High School youth. Over 1250 people were in attendance at the event, and those in attendance received it positively.

I attended The Feast in an official capacity, as Youth Facilitator for the Wyoming District. My intention was to explore as much of the event as possible and provide feedback for the congregations of our District regarding the event. This was my *first* time at an event sponsored by Higher Things (www.higherthings.org), and therefore I went to The Feast without much in the way of comparison, other than District and Synodical events.

Let me begin with some general observations:

- The **low cost** was a major blessing to the youth groups in attendance. Total registration was \$300 for the event, and this **included: most meals, housing, and event activities**. Cost beyond the initial registration included 1 evening meal and transportation to/from the Conference. My understanding is that registration for the two planned 2007 conferences is even lower.
- The Conference was **well organized** with a nice balance of worship, learning, and fun time. Registration was extremely smooth and the logistics and movement between the dorms, meals, and catechetical opportunities was excellent.
- It was inspiring to have **international youth** present. In addition to youth groups from 25 different states and Canada, 4 Swedish Lutheran pastors and 14 of their youth traveled to partake in the conference. The offering at the Divine Service was used to help pay for the Swedish registrations.
- The **worship** was faithfully and carefully organized and directed by Rev. Dr. Rick Stuckwisch, Jr. from South Bend, IN. It was reverent, biblical, and used only services and hymnody from our LCMS Hymnals. The only people who occupied pulpits during

the event were pastors of the LCMS, and their sermons were high quality Law/Gospel preaching. Opportunities for Compline were also given before quiet time began in the dorms each evening.

- The **group sessions** involving *all* of those attending the event were divided into two categories. **Catechism** sessions were led by Rev. Peter Bender, founder of the Concordia Catechetical Academy. **Plenary** Sessions were led by Rev. Brian Mosemann, Assistant Professor of Theology at Concordia University, Austin, TX. The overall theme for the sessions focused upon “The Feast” (1 Corinthians 5:8) emphasizing the Gospel of Salvation, the Means of Grace in general, and especially the Lord’s Supper.
- Throughout the day, **In-Depth Sectionals, and Breakaway Sessions**, provided significant further opportunity for Bible Study and growth. In-Depth sectionals were designed to allow a speaker to explore a particular topic for three days in a row, with an hour and 45 minutes per day. Topics included: Depression, Vocation, Liturgy, The DaVinci Code, Worship, Postmodernism, Movies, Law & Gospel, Dating, Writing, Prayer, Baptism, World Missions, The Passover, and preparation for the Lord’s Supper!
- Also, during the two-shift meal breaks, there were **Breakaway Sessions** to attend when you were not eating. These were “one session only” topics, and lasted only around 45 minutes. Topics included: Music in Worship, Parables, C.S. Lewis, Recovering from Mistakes, One True God, Gnostic Gospels, Lectionary, Asking Questions, Christ on Campus, Youth Ministry (for adults), Biblical Interpretation, The Office of the Holy Ministry, Homosexuality, Beauty, Evolution, Fire in the Bible, The Rapture, Exorcism, The Common Cup, Multiculturalism, Role-Playing, Revelation, Cloning and Stem-Cells, Closed Communion, Polemics, The Lord’s Supper, Blood & Water, Cutting, The Cup of the Lord and the Cup of Demons, Following Jesus, Speaking in Tongues, LSB, Small Catechism use, Harry Potter, Feminism, and Male Identity.
- **Recreational activities** were not as dominant or structured as at National Youth Gatherings – and no “contemporary Christian music bands” were contracted. Nevertheless, there was plenty to do when you were not studying and learning. Many congregations took advantage of Pike’s Peak or Garden of the Gods. The whole conference went to the “Flying W Ranch” for dinner and entertainment. Vendors and information booths from our Universities, Seminaries, CPH, and other Lutheran Mission organizations were present to engage and inform our youth. And there was ample time for our youth to play, swim, ice-skate, and make new friends from around the nation and the world.

Overall, the comments and feedback I have received from youth and pastors have been very favorable. Nevertheless, no event is perfect, and honest criticism of the event seemed to fall into two main categories – logistical concerns growing out of using dorm space on two different campuses, and discomfort during the worship, mostly due to heat and overcrowding.

Certainly no one could have predicted a nation wide heat wave of such severity during the week of the conference. The size of Shove Chapel was barely adequate to contain *all* of the conference participants at the same time; and due to the heat and lack of air-conditioning it was often uncomfortable. Having said that, because interest in “The Feast” was so great and many were turned away, the conference planners used every bit of available space. And while one location for housing would have been preferable, all those staying at the second campus had their

own transportation and the planners provided additional shuttle services for the sake of convenience.

It surely must be observed that *in spite* of the heat and the snug conditions, the numerous worship opportunities offered during the conference were ***faithfully attended!*** Whether it was ***Matins, Vespers, Evening Prayer, or the Divine Service*** – those present at the conference partook of the gifts of Word and Sacrament being offered. My own youth responded, “What an amazing thing to be worshiping together with all of those other Lutherans...” And indeed, it was ***Lutheran*** worship that we received. At times it was perhaps more formal, and it certainly was more often, than many of our congregations experience, but that provided excellent opportunity to teach our youth about the Divine Service.

Unlike those who like to claim that their services have passed “doctrinal review” and their speakers were “approved” by someone in authority, the organizers of this conference made those steps ***unnecessary*** by only using worship from our Hymnals and speakers who already fully share our confession of faith as Pastors and educators of the LCMS.

As in all of my evaluations, the following questions should be answered: **Why did we go to “The Feast”? What did we accomplish? Did the youth of my congregation return from this conference better grounded in the pure Gospel than before they left? Did they receive the absolute best that our Church has to offer to strengthen them in their confession of the faith?**

We went to “The Feast” in order to provide our Lutheran youth a chance to grow in their faith and in their confession, while at the same time having fun and growing together as a group. This goal was certainly accomplished – the conference speakers *continuously reinforced* what our youth had been taught in their confirmation classes. The Word of God, the Gospel of Salvation, the Small Catechism and the Means of Grace, were central to all of the teaching encompassed by the event. The professors, pastors, and teachers that provided instruction throughout the conference represent some amazing and exciting gifts that our LCMS has to offer.

Overall, I was impressed. If the evaluation of a youth event is done based upon how clearly the Gospel was proclaimed and how faithfully the sacraments were administered – the organizers of “The Feast” have good reason to be commended for their service to the Body of Christ.

You can learn more about “The Feast” at www.thefeastonline.org and information about next year’s Higher Things Conferences, “For You”, at www.foryou2007.org. I am confident that any congregations of the District would find their youth well fed and nourished at such future Higher Things events.

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