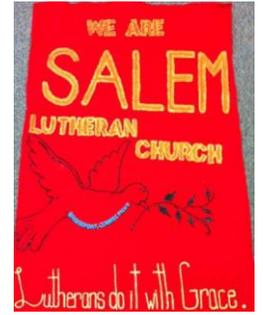


2012 ELCA Youth Gathering in New Orleans



From July 17 to July 22, Pastor Marjo and 5 of our youth, along with one youth and a chaperone from Holy Trinity, Trumbull, are attending the 2012 ELCA Youth Gathering in New Orleans. The theme, "Citizens with the Saints", is drawn from the second lesson for Sunday, July 22, 2012 (Ephesians 2:14-20), paraphrased here:

*"Jesus is our peace.
In his life and death on the cross, Jesus broke down the dividing walls
so that we are no longer strangers and outsiders,
but we are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God.
The foundation of God's house was built of apostles & prophets, and Jesus, the cornerstone, holds it all together."*

The theme also blends the rich faith history, diverse cultures and arts of New Orleans with the communion of saints that is present whenever and wherever God's people gather!

Live streaming of dome events returns for this year's Gathering. Streams will begin at 7:30 p.m. EDT Wednesday, July 18, through Saturday, July 21. Sunday's worship will begin at 10:30 a.m. To watch, go to the Gathering Page Web Site where the link will eventually be available: <http://www.elca.org/elca/youth-gathering.aspx>

Day 1 (Tuesday 16 July 2012)

Day 1 began the night before with a campfire and smores at the church. Then...

...we're off to new Orleans! Slept at the church. Went to bed around 10:45 - got up at 2:45 - left around 3:15 for the airport. The good thing about leaving at such an ungodly hour is that there's no traffic. Were checked in and at the gate an hour before boarding. Thanks to the Wilkins for the campfire & somores last night, to the Hintzs for seeing us off, and to Jeff Johnson and Mr. Senu for driving! This is gonna be an awesome trip!

- Pastor Marjo

We got to New Orleans a day early so had time to do some fun things. We went to the Palace Cafe for lunch and Kat had fish for the first (and last) time, Amber had duck gumbo and Marjo had seared shrimp (without the heads since we're northerners!) and grilled watermelon. We saw the house where much of the recent movie Abraham Lincoln Vampire Slayer was filmed. We went on a ghost and cemetery tour which was a little hot to say the least. Because of the water table, people are buried above ground in these "cities of the dead". We saw the tomb of Plessy of the famous civil rights court case Plessy vs. Ferguson. We also saw the pyramid tomb of Nicholas Cage. No, he's not dead, he's just prepared. Last night we went to Oceaniana Bar and Grill right off Bourbon Street and had an incredible meal. Everyone except Marjo tried alligator tail and loved it. Haley liked so much she got a whole sandwich of it and Christine wants to go back for more. Hannah and Leah had jambalaya pasta, Christine had seafood gumbo, and Marjo had cajun vegetarian stew - all super delicious.

By the time dinner was over it was 10 pm and we'd been up since 2:30 am, so we all went back to the hotel and crashed.

- Pastor Marjo

Day 2 (Wednesday 18 July 2012)

This morning we had breakfast at the hotel at 9:30, after which we've been working on making our t-shirts a bit more attractive - fringing, etc. Our first big event is this afternoon at 4 pm - tailgating at champion square, followed by the opening ceremonies at the Mercedes Benz Superdome.

- Pastor Marjo



Photo of the opening event, July 18. Photo courtesy of Pastor Dave Sorenson of Decorah Lutheran Church, Decorah, Iowa



Day 3 (Thursday 19 July 2012)

Today is our "Practice Justice Day". While some groups were out in the swamps, we were assigned the terrible task of being inside of an air conditioned restaurant learning to cook some famous Louisiana dishes with the hilarious Chef Kevin. It's a tough burden to bear, but we're making it through. We learned "the trinity" of cooking here is onions, celery, and green peppers. We also learned that there isn't enough sandy soil in Louisiana to grow carrots. We ate Corn and Crab bisque, Jamabalaya, Piña Colada Bread Pudding and some delicious Pralines. We are thoroughly enjoying our time down here in New Orleans!

Thursday night, an accident affected our group. With everyone pushing and running to enter the Superdome, Kat got knocked down the stairs. She and Pastor spent the entire night (yes, six and a half hours) in the local public hospital (the 2nd oldest one in the country) to find out her ankle was badly sprained. Rest, Ice, Elevation, Compression - got it! (And crutches, and wheelchair, and all kinds of fun....)

- Kat Johnson

Day 4 (Friday 20 July 2012)

Friday was our Practice Discipleship Day which we experienced with the New England Synod. We started the day with worship. We broke down a cardboard wall to create a large cross - the theme was breaking down the walls that separate us and create outsiders. The cross became our communion table. Volunteers from Calumet led the songs - they were awesome! We watched a video called "Dust" by Rob Bell and learned that to be a rabbi in Jesus' time you had to memorize the entire Old Testament and that Jesus' disciples may have been around fifteen years old!

Bishop Payne preached a sermon about her cows who break through fences. She said we should be more like cows than sheep, seeing fences as challenges rather than barriers.

We viewed another video from Bishop- Elect Jim Hazelwood who was unable to join us because he was at a work camp with the youth of his congregation. He talked about an old woman they had met whose mom, aunt and sister died in the great circus fire in Hartford. For sixty years, she thought God was punishing her, but when she finally attended a memorial service for the victims of the fire she found God's grace.

For lunch we went to Mulate's, The Original Cajun Restaurant, and enjoyed some more amazing food. We then went to the Fun Club at the Convention Center and paraded around with our "Free Hugs" signs.

The sky then proceeded to crack open and pour for at least an hour. We were able to get a ride for Kat, but the rest of us were forced to trudge through flooded streets for half a mile. The water was almost up to our knees, sewers were bubbling over, and water was pouring off of buildings. It gave us a tiny taste of what Katrina may have been like. After we dried off we headed to the dome. At the Superdome we heard Lost and Found (a Lutheran band from New England!), Leymah Gbowee (a Nobel laureate who helped bring the Liberian civil war to an end), Jamie Nabozny (an openly gay man who had been bullied as a child eventually winning the first court case against his school, who now has an anti bullying company, and talked about standing up against bullying to prevent and stop it), and then the program ended with an inspirational version of "Hallelujah" including lights and balloons. More to come later!

- Hannah Wilkins

Day 5 (Saturday 21 July 2012)

Saturday was our Practice Peacemaking Day, so we arrived at the convention center around 11:00 AM. The center is Ginormous, maybe half a mile long with 10 huge halls plus a ballroom so we decided to get Kat some ice for her ankle and a wheelchair. While we were at it, we got some ice for Katie's knee and an ace bandage to strap it on. By 11:30 we were ready for the digital scavenger hunt.

We divided our group into 2 teams of 3. There were 4 hotspots in the center (really FAR apart!) with computer terminals on which we logged on to receive a challenge. Some were about interpreting a bible passage; others had us getting out of our Lutheran comfort zone, sending us to talk with strangers like we were Mormons or something; one had us putting putty on drywall. After each of the 10 challenges there was a reflection question which we answered online. Two and a half hours later both of our teams had completed the hunt and their names were entered into a raffle for an iPod - which our own LEAH HINTZ WON!!!

We had lunch at the convention center - po-boys, red beans and rice, and gumbo.

By this time it was 3:00 and time to give blood. Because of Kat's injury, she didn't feel up to it, but Hannah was still game, and Marjo decided to go with her. We can't wait to find out how many gallons were donated during the gathering. While Hannah and Marjo were being drained, everyone else went off to the high ropes course, but it shut down right before they got there, so it was off to shop at the Old Lutheran store.

Since we now had 2 disabled people and 2 who had just given blood, we opted not to walk the mile back and flagged down a taxi van instead. We had it drop us off at Voodoo Mart where we did our last minute souvenir shopping, buying beads, masks, shirts, and even a voodoo doll or two.

Then it was back the 6 blocks to the hotel to drop off our purchases and get ready for our last night at the dome. This trip we were able to catch a ride in the courtesy van.

The last of the evening programs featured 2 speakers - a young man who challenged us to be the change and the Rev. Andrea Ingram from Philadelphia, who told us her story of being bowed down by sexual abuse by her father, abused by her 1st husband, addicted to drugs and alcohol, having her 2nd husband be diagnosed with HIV and dying in just 6 months, and then being diagnosed herself with HIV. Then she got involved in a church, was lifted up by Jesus, went to seminary and is now a pastor. About her father who had abused her, she said, "While I hate what he did to me, I don't hate him. Hurt people hurt people."



This last evening program also included 2 bands - a youth jazz band from New Orleans and Switchfoot - and the evening concluded with our theme song ("I want my life to make a difference. I want my life to make a change. I want my life to do some good here. I want my life to make a change.") while an enormous banner dropped down over our entire section, urging all 33,309 participants to "Love like Jesus".

Kat, Katie and chaperone Marjo caught a courtesy shuttle over to the Sheraton where the rest of our group met us for our last evening of Community Life with tricycle races, laser tag, and for Leah, Hannah and Christine, some karaoke. At 10:15 we left for the famous Cafe du Monde in the French Quarter where we had beignets before heading back to the Hampton Inn for our shortest night yet.

- Pastor Marjo

Returning Home (Sunday 22 July 2012)

After getting back to our room around midnight, packing, and getting to bed around 1:15, we set our alarm for 2:45 as we were supposed to be in the hotel lobby by 3:10 for a 3:30 airport shuttle pickup. Christine and Marjo made it by 3:15. No girls. Called Kat - no answer. Called Leah - no answer. Tried the other room. Hannah? Voicemail. Haley? Ditto. Katie? Phone broke earlier in the week. So Christine had the front desk call the rooms - again, no answer. "I'll just go bang on their doors", she said - to which the receptionist replied "No need for banging - I'll give you keys". So while Marjo watched the bags in the lobby, Christine headed upstairs. The girls were all sound asleep and totally confused about why they were being so rudely awakened (just like Marjo the day we left).

Back in the lobby Christine reported that while one room seemed pretty packed up, the same couldn't be said for the other one. By this time it was 3:20. At 3:25, the elevator dinged and the door opened to Kat. She immediately curled up on the sofa. Another ding and the doors opened to reveal Amber and Leah. 1 room down - 1 to go. A third ding. False alarm - wrong gender.

Another ding! The doors opened and Katie appeared. By this time it was 3:28 - shuttle due in 2 minutes. As Marjo got her phone out, the hotel valet announced that the shuttle was here. Would Hannah and Haley make it??? Or would they be left in New Orleans??? As Marjo started to make the call, the elevator arrived and Hannah and Haley got off. All there! But just one problem, the zipper on Haley's bag was broken! No time to worry about that - on the shuttle and off to JFK - we'd just have to hope the airlines were used to dealing with broken bags.

After another stop to pick up about 30 more youth gathering participants, we got to the airport around 4:00 and checked in. The man who checked us in was able to come up with a small roll of clear tape. Haley used it all but needed more. After a number of requests, she finally obtained a roll of official TSA INSPECTED tape to continue the wrapping. Pastor said a quick prayer of blessing for the broken bag and off it went.

At the gate, waiting to board at 5:30 for our 6 AM flight, Haley discovered a store with amazingly delicious chocolate-covered dried strawberries which almost made up for the trauma of the bag malfunction. Then it was all on board and up, up and away, back to JFK, where Jeff Johnson and Mr. Senu were waiting to drive us back to Salem. We made it by 11:50, ten minutes ahead of schedule, leaving just 2 hours and 10 minutes for Hannah, Haley and Pastor Marjo to get home, have lunch, repack, and be out in North Branford for our next adventure: GROUP's Tabor Workcamp 2012!

One amazing trip down - one to go. THANKS BE TO GOD FOR SUCH AN AMAZING AND AWESOME WEEK!

- Pastor Marjo

The next ELCA Youth Gathering will be in 2015 in Detroit. Time to start fundraising!

