

**YOUTH SUNDAY**

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Today's sermon will be presented by our members who attended the Youth Gathering in New Orleans. They will be speaking in their own words. Most of what you will hear is what they wrote in their journals while they were in New Orleans.

Since the Andersons are still traveling, reading the part of Ken Anderson today will be Ben Schroeder.

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RAY            The headline of the Wednesday, July 22nd issue of the New Orleans Times-Picayune newspaper read: "LIFT, LOVING, LEARNING. Lutheran youths, 37,000 strong, come to New Orleans to help rebuild the city and open themselves to a spirit of service greater than themselves."

For five days in July – Wednesday the 22nd through Sunday the 26th – New Orleans hosted the largest convention of any kind since Hurricane Katrina. The 37,000 participants in the ELCA's Youth Gathering – including over 470 youth and adult leaders from New Jersey – filled more than 70 hotels to capacity. During Youth Gathering participants worked on service projects including work at 82 schools, 21 community centers, 13 churches and 7 public parks. Youth helped build homes, read to children in Jefferson Parish schools' summer programs and donated a school supply kit for every New Orleans student from kindergarten to third grade – that's 13,5000 students!

KEN

Before the main Youth Gathering John and I attended a two-day gathering for special needs youth. The name of our gathering was DAYLE or “Definitely Abled Youth Leadership Event.” These youth are not really disabled because what is lacking in one area is usually compensated for in other, sometimes extraordinary, talents. These young people are often ridiculed or made fun of and gain true insight or perceptiveness of people they come in contact with on a daily basis.

Monday afternoon was given over to our servant encounters. John and I were part of a group packing goody bags for people who will be participating in a half-marathon to raise funds for the children's hospital in New Orleans. We packed several hundred bags with brochures and other items and we were visited by the administrator of the hospital and thanked for our work.

At Tuesday night’s talent show the youth got up and did or said whatever they wanted. One young man told us he was very glad to be away from home and his mother’s cooking for a week. He had quite a routine! This young man will be a great stand-up comedian some day. He was hilarious.

John wrote a poem and recited that for the occasion.

Another girl told some very funny knock-knock-jokes and of course everyone clapped and cheered. The look on her face was worth a million dollars, she was that happy. I got a chance to talk to her mom the next day and learned that she had never had the nerve to present to any audience before in her life. That made the look of joy on her face the previous evening all the more precious.

RAY

The seven of us who were just attending the Youth Gathering left on Tuesday.

KEVIN I thought that the ride to the airport was fun because I was excited to fly on a plane. The flight was cool and it seemed to be fast.

There are many fewer people who live in New Orleans than the number of people in the church groups. I have never seen so many people that are so friendly. It was a very warming feeling. The convention center was huge, and everyone there was so accepting to everyone. It made me happy that the world is full of kind people willing to help out complete strangers and change the life of those who need it most.

JACKIE I felt a mixture of emotions entering into the Superdome for the first time: excitement, sadness, awe-struck, and more. For the people of New Orleans, this dome represents sorrow and is filled with unwanted memories of Katrina. However, to us it was a symbol of energy, life and a place of God. Hopefully, we will leave those feelings behind for the people of New Orleans to feel.

It was so exciting to be a part of this. People reported that what we are doing in 3 days would have taken 3 years!!

KEVIN The Superdome was filled with so many people that I was just flabbergasted. Never before have I seen such an immense gathering of people. The miracle is that they aren't just a bunch of people, but over 30,000 caring individuals that are there not for fun but because they want to change the lives of a thousand people who have lost everything.

RAY We went to the Superdome every day for our large-group events. They had some really great bands and musicians there, people like Peter Mayer, Agape, and Skillet.

ALEX But don't forget all the great speakers we heard!

ALL <everybody nods agreement>

SARAH Our first night there we heard Marc Kielburger talk about a program he created, called Free The Children, through which he has built over 500 schools in Africa which provide daily education to over 50,000 kids. I learned about rebel raids that happened in Africa and how the rebel leader would cut off the young kid's right hand if they didn't kill their families. ...

Then on Thursday there was a woman who helps children in Senegal, West Africa. Viola Vaughn helps young girls finished the 3rd grade.

CHRISTINA She told a story about how a girl came to her house every day for three weeks asking her to help her finish the 3rd grade, otherwise she would fail. She now has helped educate over 10,000 girls. Her story was amazing. You never know what God is going to ask you to do.

ALEX I also liked a woman pastor, Becca Stevens. She started a thistle farm in the Midwest where they made soap products. The women who worked and lived at the farm were troubled women who were criminals, prostitutes and drug addicts. She taught them to make the soap products and start their own business to get them off the streets.

CHRISTINA Then on Friday we went to the Interaction Center and we learned a little about literacy. The speaker said that literacy is power; that teaching someone how to read gives them the power to go out into the world and fulfill their dreams.

ALEX The speakers on Friday were my favorite. I learned that you can overcome really bad obstacles in life and if you help other people it helps you, too.

JACKIE Spencer West spoke and he was my favorite speaker so far. Spencer had an amazing story that made you feel that you could do anything. He lost his legs at the age of 5 and became a victim of bullying and negative stereotyping. However, even through everything he never lost hope or his sense of humor. The most compelling and heart-wrenching part of his story was the time when he traveled to a poor African village with Free the Children. He said that when he arrived all the children ran up to him really excited asking him every question under the sun. However, one child stood up and said something that would change his life forever. The little girl said, "I never knew that things like this could happen to white people." Wow, if that doesn't have an impact on you, then I don't know what would.

SARAH The second speaker on Friday was Michel Chikwanine. He was a child soldier when he was 5. He was taken away and they put a mixture of cocaine and gun powder in his blood stream and blindfolded him, forcing him to shoot his friend. He stayed with them for 2 weeks then ran away and was eventually reunited with his family. He now travels around the world and hopes to better it by telling his story.

RAY Saturday was our big day to go do our Servant Project. Our group worked on literacy.

- ALEX First we watched a movie about how corrupt the government and school system is in New Orleans. Because the education is so poor, teenagers commit crimes and act really bad. The teachers are also bad there and most teens come from really poor families and have only a mother who works 2 jobs. I think that it is really sad that this area is so poor and an unsafe place to live and grow up. It doesn't feel like part of the United States.
- CHRISTINA New Orleans is lower on the list than Kenya in terms of education. It has the most people in jails in the U.S.
- JACKIE That movie was very insightful, but also really depressing. They stated that they had about a 60-70% drop-out rate, which correlates with the amount of poverty in New Orleans. It broke my heart to hear these students' stories. After the film, we had the opportunity to talk with the maker of the film and to one of the boys in the movie.
- RAY Our job for the day was to make 900 school kits.
- SARAH Each kit had 10 things: a ruler, paper, notebook, tissue box, pencils, crayons, eraser, pencil sharpener, and scissors.
- JACKIE These kits would cost more than \$20 if the parents had to purchase all of the supplies included in the kits. Many parents do not have that luxury so now the kids will be able to enjoy these kits for free.
- ALEX I felt really good at the end of the day and was really glad that I did something to help the children there. I would help them every day if I could.

ALEX I would like to volunteer for Communities for Schools in New Jersey and do the same thing for the kids in Newark.

JACKIE My favorite part of the day (even though it was extremely depressing) was touring the 9th Ward and St. Bernard's Parish. The bus drove us back through these areas to see the damage that is still left even 4 years after. I was amazed to see everything right there in front of me.

I wish we had time to be able to walk about the area and talk to the locals, to hear their stories. Time to just let it all sink in. Seeing everything first-hand makes it so real. It is so sad to see how much they are still struggling down there and how much they still need help.

CHRISTINA One of the speakers at the Superdome Saturday night was Anne Mahlum. She was a runner that lived in Philadelphia. After having her childhood suddenly fall apart she turned to running. She said it made her feel like she was going somewhere. Living in Philadelphia she ran past some homeless every morning. One day she stopped and asked herself what she was doing. She called the local shelter and asked if she could start a running club. She had 8 men sign up to run with her. She ended up declining an awesome job so she could start an organization called Back On My Feet. It gives these homeless strength, self-esteem, courage, respect and helps them get back on their feet. I was blown away by how she just knew God wanted her to do this and she changed her whole life to do it. I hope I have that courage.

JACKIE And at the dome that night, the mayor of New Orleans came to thank us. The Bishop also came up at the beginning of the service and read to us a letter from Obama, thanking us for all of our work. That was REALLY neat to hear!

ALEX           The final event was a church service on Sunday morning. It was really nice. There were not any speakers except for the Bishop and there was a lot of music but it was all familiar since we heard the songs already.

We took communion which was really cool.

RAY            Does anybody have any final thoughts about what going to Youth Gathering meant to you?

JACKIE        Personally, I thought the experience was more than I can put into words. The energy in the Superdome was like nothing else, the bonds that we created with people from all over the country and the story of New Orleans is just so incredible. I hope to bring back everything that I've seen, heard and felt and share it with not only our congregation, but with anyone I get the chance.

KEVIN         I keep remembering the story one man told. He talked about how he was helping build a school in Ecuador, and the town wise person told a word to the people and the word spread to towns miles away and all the people of those towns stopped everything and walked for hours to get to the town and help build the school. The word in their language was ??????. It means "the gathering of people to help for the good of others." The wise person asked the American guy what the English word for this was, and after he talked it over with his friend, they realized that no such English word even exists. It is something so uncommon in America that we don't even have a word for it. If we could only stop worrying for a moment and look at the problems of others and help them instead of focusing on our looks, money, and personal image, then perhaps a word for this would be made.

KEVIN

It is sad that others just don't care when over 30,000 Lutherans gathered to make a change, and have forgotten to worry about themselves for a moment and are making the difference. There are over six billion people in the world, and if every person did one random act of kindness to another, that would be over six billion problems solved. We need to stop thinking about ourselves, and help others, whether it be our enemies, friends, family or strangers. We have the power to change the world, and it is time to act, and that doesn't mean just going to church every Sunday, we need to get up and help out in our communities, or any place in poverty and in need.

RAY

I remember when a stranger on the street came up to us and told us how great it was that we teens came down to make a positive difference in New Orleans. The whole time we were there we kept getting the message that we are the "Change." After everything we did, I do feel as though we helped make a change for the better while we were there. I may be more open to helping others who are less fortunate now because of this experience.