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**YOUTH
THEOLOGY
INSTITUTE
JOURNAL
2020**

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Augsburg Youth Theology Institute

2020 Journal of Participant Essays



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About the Augsburg Youth Theology Institute

“They’re our future, so I think for us that’s the mission of this university, to educate students to be informed citizens, thoughtful stewards, critical thinkers, and responsible leaders. It starts with Augsburg Youth Theology Institute.” -President Paul Pribbenow

What is AYTI?

The Augsburg Youth Theology Institute (AYTI) is an annual summer program for high school students (9th-12th grades) focused on theological reflection and vocational discernment connected to an annual theme. It is a collaborative effort sponsored by Augsburg University’s Christensen Center for Vocation and supported by Lilly Endowment, Inc. This experience aims to offer young leaders an opportunity for place-based vocational discernment around a theological and leadership focused theme. Students who attend AYTI take their questions and curiosity to the public square to learn, listen, pray, and play on the Augsburg campus, in the neighborhood, and in the city. Participants engage in daily reflection with a theologian, community based learning, small group relationship building, and worship. This commitment to wonder about how God is calling us to the common good for the sake of the world, is the reason why high school students leave AYTI inspired to be God’s hands and feet in the world. Learn more at: <https://www.augsburg.edu/ayti/>

The History of AYTI

Augsburg Youth Theology Institute (AYTI) began in 2005 with a generous grant from the Lilly Endowment. We have received multiple grants from the Lilly endowment over the years to grow this initiative. Each year, high school students come to campus to build relationships, engage in theological reflection and community engagement, and take what they learn back into their communities and congregations to make a difference in the world.

Christensen Center for Vocation

The Christensen Center for Vocation equips and accompanies students, staff, faculty, and ministry leaders as they engage in place-based vocational discernment in the public square for the common good. These learning partnerships happen through a variety of initiatives that foster learning experiences and creative collaborations. Learn more at: <https://www.augsburg.edu/ccv/>

Sustaining AYTI for Many Years to Come

Dear AYTI Participants, Nominators, Supporters, and Stakeholders,

Each year we ask pastors and youth directors to nominate young people they believe would benefit from an AYTI experience. We receive letters of recommendation from these nominators all over the country telling us about these incredible young people. And then we have the opportunity to spend a week with them. Hundreds of young people who attended AYTI are now living and leading in their communities and congregations across the country. None of this would be possible without the financial support, time, prayers, and other in-kind gifts that make this institute run each year. We are so very grateful for these partnerships.

AYTI has been and is currently funded by a generous grant from the Lilly Endowment. Augsburg University is blessed to have a long relationship with the Lilly Endowment and so many of our rich theological programs and initiatives have started with that relationship. They have been sustained however, by people like you.

As we look to our future, we ask you to consider how you will continue to support AYTI? Will you choose to be a partner congregation? Will you encourage and financially support a young person to attend AYTI? Will you encourage college admission to Augsburg University for future education? How will you support this legacy? We invite you to consider your investment today and we look forward to being in relationship with you for years to come.

Peace be with you,

***Adrienne Kuchler Eldridge** (she/her/hers)*

Augsburg University
AYTI Program Director
Theology & Public Leadership Program Associate
ayti@augsborg.edu

Augsburg University Undergraduate Degree Programs

Many high school students who attend AYTI have also discerned that their future includes attending Augsburg University for their undergraduate degree. We employ college mentors each year to work with AYTI participants, many of them attended AYTI as high school students and then decided to attend Augsburg University as an undergraduate student. Augsburg University offers multiple majors, some of which focus specifically on religion and ministry.

All students who attend AYTI are eligible to receive a scholarship towards their financial aid at Augsburg University.

Theology and Public Leadership Undergraduate Degree

This interdisciplinary major forms leaders at the intersections of church and society. Students develop the necessary theological and theoretical frameworks, leadership skills and servant hearts to lead communities in their expression of faith and their public work for justice in the world. Graduates work in the areas of youth & family ministry, congregational ministry, community organizing, public policy & advocacy, nonprofits and graduate school. Students earn a Bachelor of Arts in Theology and Public Leadership and are encouraged to combine this degree with a concentration, a minor or second major in an area of interest.

Public Church Scholars 5 Year BA/MDiv Pathway

The Public Church Scholars five-year degree pathway prepares students to be intentional leaders of a multiracial, multiethnic, public church. In this educational pathway, students will take a deep dive together in Christian community to explore theological education, leadership formation, experiential learning in an internship, and preparation to be public leaders in the church. Students in this pathway will complete two (2) degrees in five (5) years; a Bachelor of Arts in Theology and Public Leadership from Augsburg University and a Master of Divinity from Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago.



SHAPE THE FUTURE

DO YOU KNOW A STUDENT CALLED TO MINISTRY?

Invite emerging young leaders to join a community of curiosity and theological exploration at Augsburg University.

AUGSBURG YOUTH THEOLOGY INSTITUTE

High school students explore their calling and put faith into action during this annual one-week summer program.

High school students, apply now!

➡ augsburg.edu/ayti

THEOLOGY AND PUBLIC LEADERSHIP DEGREE

Students can earn a degree focused on service and leadership in ministry at the intersection of church and society.

Encourage a student to apply to Augsburg.

➡ augsburg.edu

PUBLIC CHURCH SCHOLARS PATHWAY

Students can earn a Bachelor of Arts in Theology and Public Leadership at Augsburg and a Master of Divinity at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago in five years to become a pastor.

Join the next cohort—apply to Augsburg now.

➡ augsburg.edu/religion/public-church-scholars

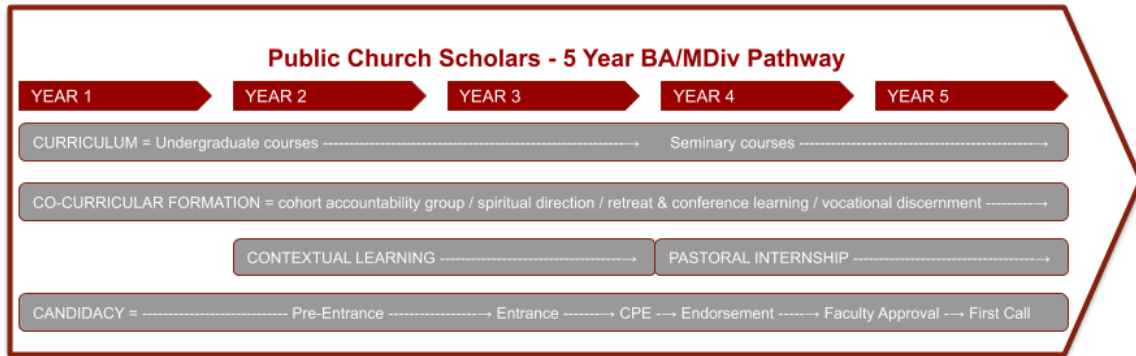
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Minneapolis, MN 55454

PUBLIC CHURCH SCHOLARS

5 YEARS, 2 DEGREES

The Public Church Scholars five-year degree pathway prepares students to be intentional leaders of a multiracial, multiethnic, public church. In this educational pathway, students will take a deep dive together in Christian community to explore theological education, leadership formation, experiential learning in an internship, and preparation to be public leaders in the church. Students in this pathway will complete two (2) degrees in five (5) years; a Bachelor of Arts in Theology and Public Leadership from Augsburg University and a Master of Divinity from Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago.



CURRICULUM	CO-CURRICULAR FORMATION	CANDIDACY & INTERNSHIP
<p>The PCS curriculum pathway prepares, supports, and generates well-equipped and intentionally formed young leaders for pastoral ministry in a changing church.</p> <p>The pathway is rooted in theological convictions that compel students to live and lead with an openness to the complexities of the world and their neighbors.</p> <p>Students are equipped with biblical literacy, cultural competency, and essential leadership competencies that prepare them to lead effectively in complex organizations.</p>	<p>PCS students are committed to shaping character by participating in intentional co-curricular formation, including participation and engagement with a supportive cohort of peers.</p> <p>All students receive training and development in equity and inclusion, cultural competency, and practice place based vocational discernment.</p> <p>Students engage in spiritual direction practice, both individual and group, work with a life coach, and receive guidance from professional mentors.</p>	<p>PCS students are accompanied through the ELCA candidacy process for ordination, on a modified timeline that aligns with the 5 year pathway.</p> <p>Students will be placed in a four year, part-time paid contextual learning and internship site in a congregation or faith based non-profit.</p> <p>Students will apply for, experience, and complete Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) located in the Chicago area.</p>

REDUCED COST AND FINANCIAL SUPPORT

Our team is committed to identifying, recruiting, and enrolling diverse and hopeful emerging young leaders, who might not otherwise have access to pastoral leadership education. We are committed to significantly reducing debt for the student when entering candidacy, seminary, and then ministry. Therefore, all PCS applicants start with a \$16,500 Regents Scholarship and successful applicants receive an additional PCS scholarship. We prioritize additional aid for students who have a demonstrated need and receive the Federal Pell Grant. Students in this pathway receive financial aid for seminary.



Called to be Co-Creators: You Are Enough Right Now!

2020 Theme Description

Are you tired of being looked down upon for your age? Do you know you have gifts God's church and the world need? Are you eager to dig deeper into how God is calling you in unique ways to God's redemptive work in our world? If so, then please plan on joining us at this year's Augsburg Youth Theology Institute. We will look at many ways the world views teenagers and we will construct a theological way of understanding what it means to be a youth. We will explore sites around the Twin Cities that will help you develop a deeper appreciation for how unique you are and how God is calling you to be a co-creator.

2020 Institute Instructor

In summer 2020, we had the privilege to work with Dr. Jeremy Myers as our institute instructor. Jeremy has been a member of the Religion department at Augsburg University since 2006 and the Executive Director of the Christensen Center for Vocation since 2019. He is a rostered Deacon in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and has served in the field of ministry with youth and young adults professionally since 1997. His first book, *Liberating Youth from Adolescence* was released in 2018 by Fortress Press. All participants and nominators received a copy of this book to use as the main resource for the week.

First Ever Virtual Institute

As many programs were impacted by the Covid-19 global pandemic in spring 2020, so was AYTI and Augsburg University. Classes for the university students shifted online, in-person events were postponed and eventually many of them were canceled. Given the significant shift to remote work, a handful of staff positions were eliminated and other staff experienced a furlough. These changes impacted the AYTI staff and the ability to bring students to campus. We thoughtfully considered how God was calling us to respond during this difficult time. Ultimately, we decided to host a virtual event that allowed participants to engage safely from their homes. We learned a lot about what worked and what didn't work in that format and we are grateful for the young people who chose to share that experience together.

A Letter from the Institute Instructor

Dear Friends,

This year's Youth Theology Institute was like no other. All online, all the time. To our participants - you took it in stride. I truly enjoyed engaging with you about how society thinks of young people versus how God and God's church think of young people. You were outstanding thinkers and I learned a lot from your questions and our conversations.

Our staff was faced with many challenges as we had to move the event online given the realities of the COVID-19 pandemic. And this work was done short-staffed as some of our colleagues were furloughed for the summer given budget constraints at the university. Still, we are proud of the exceptional learning experience that was designed and executed.

We spent the week exploring how society looks down upon our young people as Undeveloped Consumers who are assumed to be undeveloped, identity-less, self-centered consumers. To challenge that myth, we constructed a theological understanding of our young people as Called Co-Creators who are called, children of God, relational, co-creators. We used the text, *Liberating Youth from Adolescence* as our starting point, but also explored how young people are presented in scripture and in the social sciences.

Each participant was challenged to see themselves as Called Co-Creators and to exercise their God-given agency to design a way of addressing an issue they care about in their home communities. This journal contains their reflections on these efforts. We hope you enjoy learning from these amazing young people.

God's peace,

Jeremy Myers (he/him/his)

Augsburg University

Associate Professor of Religion, [Theology & Public Leadership](#)

Executive Director, [Christensen Center for Vocation](#)

2020 Participant Essays

Let's Work Together to Show Black Lives Matter

Dinkenesh Coltvet (she/her), Roseville, MN

Recently, my family attended an event in our hometown called Roseville Resists Racism. In that event I learned that there have been over 80 killings of black men and women and children by the police since 2016. That means that in just four years one black person has been killed about every two weeks. That seems shocking and it's surprising that the world didn't rise up until just this summer. However, maybe the fact that we were all inside due to COVID made a difference. Maybe it made a difference that George Floyd begged for his life as the police officer's knee pressed on his neck for more than eight minutes. Whatever it was, the whole world has responded and in many communities, we are still responding. My family has participated in protests for the first time this summer. I should say that we walked in a protest for Philando four years ago, but this is the first summer when we have participated repeatedly in actions where "Black Lives Matter" is the main message. My family also watched the movie The Hate U Give and talked a lot about how important it is for youth to raise our voices and how it can have an impact on others.



Marching is powerful because it shows how you are supporting the cause you are there for and shows how important it is to you. When I went to the protests I felt amazed by how many people showed up and that they were there because they believed in the same thing as I did: to make a change in the world. We should start using nonviolent communication skills to stop or make a change regarding how Blacks and people of color are being treated differently—and worse—than others. We need to work together as a community instead of separately because doing things together makes us stronger. In this paper I am going to show

how we should use nonviolent communication tools to express what we believe in rather than fighting back or yelling and screaming at one another. Also, I show how Black people's lives are more difficult than white people's because white people don't have to live with fear about their lives ending at any time. When white people are driving, they don't have to worry about being accused of something that they didn't do. There are a lot of things white people don't have to worry about because of the color of their skin, but all of us can work together to make changes happen.

I chose this topic because it means something to me as a Black person. I want to be comfortable and not anxious in the world I'm living in. I want to see a change so that Black people are treated equally and so that racism has less impact on people of color. Since the United States was founded on unequal treatment of Black people and its whole economy was based on having slavery (or modern forms of slavery such as mass incarceration) and keeping Black people systematically poor and disadvantaged, it is going to take a very powerful movement to make this massive change. Youth should stand up together and rise up and lead this movement to reshape the world so that Black people are not looked down upon, treated in a way that is oppressive, and where finally Black people live in "a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character" as the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. declared in his 1963 "I Have a Dream" speech (King).

Many people have critiqued Black Lives Matter by saying "all lives matter," but Black Lives Matter is protesting for equality in the long run. Black people have experienced generations of oppression and are so systematically disadvantaged that the focal point needs to be in gaining equality for that particular group, which in turn will benefit all people. How is it that a population that makes up only 13% of the United States has millions of people in the prison system? How is it that so many Black people have been killed by police in the past four years? Because as a society we haven't been able to sustain attention on working for the equality of Black people, we have to keep beginning the work over and over again in each new generation. Now it's time to have a movement that actually changes our society so that we can move on to other important work because Black lives truly do matter. When Black people are valued in the same way as White people, that will benefit everyone.

One of the tools that I think could bring greater racial justice into being is nonviolent communication. Clearly, it isn't working for people to yell at each other even though anger and raising our voices is very important. For one reason, Black people facing the police might be killed for standing up for their rights or for raising their voices or for expressing themselves in any way that might be perceived as threatening. When Black people do what's right they are

treated more harshly than when White people do the same things. We need ways to have dialogue where White people can gain empathy and imagine more deeply what it's like to be black in the United States. In a TEDx Talk given by eighth grader Ellis Fearon, he explained how if you're applying for a job and you have the same qualifications, and your name is more associated with a white person than a Black person, you will get the job (Fearon).

Nonviolent communication is a vital tool to help white people change their patterns of using their power and privilege for themselves and developing empathy with the everyday experiences and struggles of Black people. Nonviolent communication uses new patterns of communication to give permission for people to express themselves and to give them an opportunity to think before they speak (Van Duk). So for example, a sentence starter is the question "How would it be for you to... step back and let the Black person speak and listen to them?" The purpose of beginning a sentence this way is to invite the person to check in with themselves and get a better understanding through dialogue to get more of a chance to find something that works for both of you.

Another sentence starter is "Do you have space to listen to me for like 10 minutes?" In so many situations people do not understand what they're saying and don't have practice being good listeners, so this gives a heads up that the speaker needs a window of opportunity to express themselves. Another question from the seven key sentences of nonviolent communication is "Can I interrupt you for a moment? There's something going on with me." This is a phrase to use when you're feeling triggered and can't listen anymore and want the person to stop talking so that what you're feeling can be addressed.

When you're trying to get someone to try a new behavior or strategy, you might ask, "Would you be willing to try out this strategy for X amount of time?" Maybe this makes sense especially in situations where the person is skeptical about whether your idea could really work. This gives an opportunity to try it and if it's challenging for someone and out of their comfort zone, this question makes it safer because it gives them a limited-time trial period.

Three more sentences that can help in times of conflict, fragile territory, or a delicate situation include:

- "I would really love to find a way to get both our needs met."
- "I would prefer to do Y because I have a need for Z." and
- "Can I think about it and let you know tomorrow?"

In all of these examples, you're giving both yourself time to think and respond in the best ways possible and you're making space for the other person to do the same. Your modeling equal power in communication (Van Duk).

Because of the systems of oppression where Black people are always having to ask permission from white people to speak and act powerfully, I'm not sure that this approach would always work but nonviolent communication strategy seems like a good tool to have in the toolbox. We need to keep being creative and willing to try new approaches so we can find a solution that will work for as many people as possible and truly bring equity for Black and brown people.

One of the videos I watched was about how we can teach children that Black Lives Matter. In this video Nekole Amber talks about how parents and role models have a part to play and if they really want to change things for children, future generations, and the world, they shouldn't just sit back on the sidelines. You do something about it instead. You are putting something on the line instead of being just in your comfort zone and then instead of doing things individually, you do it as a community (Amber). I feel like this assertive action and taking the risk to participate is a good thing to learn how to do in our society. It could be useful in developing stronger advocacy and that could make life easier to stand up as a community. We want to practice advocacy so that the children can learn to love one another regardless of what they look like and so they can see the beauty in every skin tone. It also gives opportunities to connect with people who have different cultural backgrounds, beliefs, religions and to learn how to honor them. I find the value "love one another" so important because we Black people don't really see that happening for us. Nekole Amber said, "In order to solve the other monumental issues that are taking place right now, we have to understand that we need each other...we need to come together, we're so much more powerful together than apart" (Amber).

We can look at Black Lives Matter (BLM) from a biblical and theological standpoint. We want to treat each other equally but it doesn't seem like it is happening. God wants us to get along but it seems like we are not learning God's ways. The BLM movement affirms that the way you treat people of color should be the same as the way you treat white people. This sounds a lot like Jesus and his teaching "Love your neighbor as yourself." One of the BLM principles is that this is shared work. There is not a single person or leader who represents BLM alone, but it is embedded in the power of many people working together. In a similar way, Jeremy Myers makes this theological statement: "God's true power is willingness to share the power with us" (Lecture, July 16, 2020).

Also in this world it seems like youth are not supposed to speak up or do anything. What are we supposed to do, just watch the world fall apart? In 1 Timothy 4:12, it says, "Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity" (NIV). At my church our youth group is called

Four¹²; we chose this verse because we believe that it really related to all of us and how we are looked down on as people who aren't able to understand, especially outside of church. This verse from 1 Timothy empowers us to be examples for others in life, in faith, in love, in speech and in wholeness.

Another example comes from 1 Samuel 3, when God calls Samuel instead of his older mentor Eli. Samuel learns how to respond to God when God calls: "Speak, for your servant is listening" (1 Samuel 3:10, NIV). God tells Samuel, "I am about to do something in Israel that will make ears of everyone who hears of it tingle" (3:11). This part of the story teaches me that whenever you're going to do something big, it starts with listening for God's voice.

For my project, I am doing a video presentation for my congregation, Christ on Capitol Hill, about what I learned about youth leadership using Black Lives Matter and Nonviolent Communication tools. I am going to demonstrate how to empower and raise our voices so that Black and brown people get treated more equitably. It's important to me that youth lead in efforts to "not judge a book by its cover" and that our whole community grows in our ability to live with deeper respect for others. I am planning to ask three youth from church to help out. I will write the script and we will create videos or host a Second Saturday storytelling gathering via Zoom. After the presentation, we will seek input from people from church or guests about what they think about what's going on in our world today and future and previous generations. We'll get an inside view on what Black or non-white people have to say and then hear from a white person as well.

In conclusion, Black people's lives do matter and we should come together and make the BLM slogan actually mean something. This year I feel like I've seen people come together at protests, cleaning up their neighborhood after the riots that had happened. I've also seen amazing art of Black Lives Matter designs, including the names of other Black people who were killed drawn on walls or paper, flowers at George Floyd's memorial, and a sculpture of a fist rising high in the middle of the street where it all happened. This is important to me because I am a Black person who has lived in the United States of America for 10 years and I would like to see a change here. I shouldn't have to worry or think about being the only Black person in the room, being looked at or judged, and being accused of doing something that I didn't do. From what I've talked about in my paper you can see why Black Lives Matter and the ways you can do something to improve how Blacks and people of color are treated. I would encourage you to start something in your community or congregation so that everyone can be a part of it and so that you can work together to make something happen. Remember, when you work as a community you are more powerful!

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White Saviorism in Mission Work

Henry Engstrom (he/him), Edina, MN

Mission trips and service work are staples of growing up in the church. As our world gets more connected it becomes easier to go to faraway places and do mission work, but as Christians, is this what we should be doing? Is this way of doing mission and service work outdated? My project focuses on these questions.

The way most mission trips work, and have worked for a long time, is something like this: A group of mostly white, middle or upper middle class students go to a faraway country, often in the global south, build a school or housing for the people that live there, and leave. This kind of non-critical, service-oriented trip, or “traditional service trip” (Mitchell, 51), is not nearly as helpful as those who participate in them would like to believe. They do sound nice on paper, but really only serve to make the participants feel good about themselves.



These trips are rarely educational, beyond of course the superficial mission trip slogans of “they live with so little, yet they are so happy” or “I should be grateful because I have so much, and they have so little.” These slogans, of course being the captions to many Instagram posts, documenting their “acts of righteousness” as Christ called it in the book of Matthew (Matthew 6:1, NIV). The result is an unhealthy “white savior complex” that perpetuates white supremacy, and an unhealthy dynamic between the people in the visited communities and the church groups that are supposed to be helping them.

This one-sided relationship works against the stated goals of those service style trips, when you go to a town, build a house, and leave you cannot build the type of relationships that help break down the barriers between communities and actually bring about change. The real way to help people less fortunate is to listen to people and build relationships with people as Christ did. Unfortunately, too many church groups are content with short stays that manifest superficial change. Furthermore, these short stay mission trips are often only accessible by people of higher privilege, but do not allow for that privilege to be examined in a meaningful way (Mitchell, 613). The first step on the path to peace and meaningful change is

understanding your own privileges. If anything, these trips offer an easy way for students to feel gratified without doing meaningful work.

The solution to these problems with mission trips and service learning, is what is called “critical service trips” also known as immersion trips. These trips emphasize the importance of listening and learning from the experience of the people you meet. Critical service trips go beyond the superficial charity work of traditional missions, and tap into the deeper systemic, political problems that are faced by the communities in question. They also do a good job of dismantling white saviorism in participants.

My experiences with critical service work have made me reconsider my own privilege and how I fit into the socio-economic hierarchy that is propagated by traditional mission work. I have done two trips like these with a group called “The Global Immersion Project,” one trip was to San Diego/Tijuana and another to Israel/Palestine. Both of those trips taught me a lot personally and allowed me to develop relationships with those places and people. Compared to my more traditional experience in West Virginia, helping people who didn’t need it and not remembering a single person I met in that state. It was my experiences in Mexico and Palestine that would open my eyes to my own privilege and how I could personally affect change. The immersion structure also emphasizes bringing what you learn abroad home, to your own community. I truly believe that it is the way forward for churches that want to make a difference.

My project will be working with my church to build local immersion trips in our community, specifically around Minneapolis. This will combine what I learned on those immersion trips and what I learned at AYTl. They will help foster community engagement from the youth at my church and help us learn more about the area we live in. These trips will include stories of people who have spent time and have worked in the communities in the Minneapolis area. The idea is to bring into the forefront the issues that surround our community and what people are doing to fix them. The topics that these trips will cover will be things relating to housing, the environment, and race. Things that my church has already been involved with and that we can bring new perspectives to through our connections in the community. These trips will provide new perspectives and education on pervasive issues in Minneapolis, and also new perspectives on service as a whole and its place in the church.

The way we view mission work in our churches is outdated and in need of an update. Too many mission trips prioritize optics and superficial charity, when much more is needed to be done. Working with community members we can build a better kind of experience that

tackles the deeper roots of the problems that surround these communities and build towards real change.

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Let the Wise Also Hear and Gain in Learning

Kathryn Lewis (she/her), West St. Paul, MN

Since the No Child Left Behind Act was passed in 2001 (OSPI), schools have worked to help students performing at or below grade level in academics meet the grade level learning standards. However, this means that the near 10% of students in schools who are Gifted and Talented (nagc.org) often are not challenged academically and struggle with social and



emotional issues, due to lack of support and challenge from teachers and administration. The goal of this project is to address educational inequity for Gifted and Talented students in my district, at the high school level.

According to the National Association of Gifted Children (NAGC), between six and ten percent of students are gifted, and “perform - or have the capability to perform - at higher levels compared to others of the same age, experience, and environment in one or more domains. They require modification(s) to their educational experience(s) to learn and realize their potential” (nagc.org). In order to meet the needs of these students, the NAGC has compiled a list of standards for schools and organizations that will foster a supportive infrastructure for gifted and talented students. These standards cover learning and development, assessment, curriculum planning, learning environments, programming, and professional learning.

Independent School District 197 provides different support systems for Gifted and Talented students in elementary, middle and high school levels. At the elementary and middle school levels, each school has a gifted and talented coordinator, who works directly with students in small groups, and with teachers. Gifted and Talented students spend time in the classroom with their peers, as well as in pull-out groups with the coordinator. At the high school level, academic challenge is achieved through advanced classes, Advanced Placement, College In Schools, Concurrent Enrollment, and Post-Secondary Education Opportunity courses. All other support comes from the student’s counselor.

Standard 3.1.2. of the NAGC Pre-K-Grade 12 education standards states that educators should “design a comprehensive and cohesive curriculum and use learning

progressions to develop differentiated plans for Pre-K through Grade 12 students with gifts and talents” (nagc.org). At the high school level, district 197 has multiple pathway options for students with a variety of classes in each pathway. However, once a student has chosen a path, it is hard to move away from that path in future years. This can result in a lack of academic challenge for Gifted and Talented students in the later years of high school. Other education standards developed by NAGC to support Gifted and Talented students, also go unmet in many high school courses in our district, especially the classes aimed at gifted students, such as advanced and AP courses. Standards: such as

- 3.1.3 “Educators adapt, modify, or replace the core or standard curriculum to meet the interest, strengths, and needs of students with gifts and talents and those with special needs such as twice exceptional¹ students and English language learners”;
- 3.1.4 “Educators design differentiated curriculum that incorporates advanced, conceptually challenging, in-depth, and complex content for students with gifts and talents”; and
- 3.1.5 “ Educators regularly use pre-assessments, formative assessments, and summative assessments to identify students’ strengths and needs, develop differentiated content, and adjust instructional plans based on progress monitoring.”

Standard 4.2.2 states that educators should “provide opportunities for interaction and learning with intellectual and artistic/creative peers as well as with chronological-age peers.” This standard is achieved through the pathway options in math, and through electives. However, in science, social studies, and language arts, there are no options for students to work with other grade levels.

The Bible is full of verses and stories that emphasize the importance of individuals and communities fulfilling their potential, and the value of teaching those who already have knowledge. Proverbs 1:5 states “let the wise also hear and gain in learning” (Proverbs 1:5 NRSV) . Proverbs 9:9 states “teach the wise and they will become wiser” (Proverbs 9:9 NRSV). The Bible tells us to teach those who already have wisdom and learning so that they can become wiser and meet their potential. In Jesus, we witness one who has innate wisdom and

¹ Also referred to as “2e,” twice exceptional is the term used to describe students with gifts and talents who also give evidence of one or more disabilities as defined by federal or state eligibility criteria (e.g., specific learning disabilities (SpLD), speech and language disorders, emotional/behavioral disorders, physical disabilities, autism spectrum, etc.)

intrinsic advanced learning, “they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers (Luke 2:46b-47).”

One way we can follow the teachings of these Proverbs and to emulate Jesus is to meet Gifted and Talented students at their level and then challenge them. When Gifted and Talented students are taught based on their strengths and weaknesses, they can achieve advanced academic success, and they are prepared for future learning and application. By challenging students and providing them with resources to work through those challenges, schools and communities allow gifted students to continuously learn and improve, and to build resilience along the way.

When students have developed resilience through overcoming challenges in school, they learn how to work through problems. These experiences build students’ confidence to know that while not everything is easy, there are resources to help each of us find a way to work through our problems. This is far better than allowing students to sail through courses with no challenges, which leaves them frustrated and overwhelmed when something is difficult at a later stage in life.

I want to help my high school incorporate more of the NAGC learning standards into our educational model for Gifted & Talented students. Rather than continue to allow my classmates and me feel lost and struggling, how can we tweak the system to keep Gifted & Talented students engaged? Rather than witnessing students lower their standards and expectations for challenging themselves and others, how can ISD 197 raise the academic bar and social support infrastructure?

My plan and goal for my AYTI project is to improve support for Gifted and Talented students at the high school level in my school district. This will be achieved through work with the Gifted and Talented Advisory Committee, the district GT Coordinator, teachers, parents, administration, and most importantly students who are identified as Gifted and Talented by the district.

1. In July, I spoke to the district Gifted and Talented Coordinator. We discussed problems that I see in the support system for Gifted and Talented students at the high school level.
2. This school year, I will act as a student representative on the district Gifted and Talented Advisory Committee (GTAC), which has previously only had parent, teacher, and administrator representatives.

3. Before each GTAC meeting, I will meet with other high school students to discuss the issues that will be covered in the meeting. This will ensure that the student voice in the committee is more representative of the full Gifted and Talented student body.
4. I will work with the GTAC and the district coordinator to establish Gifted and Talented support at the high school level, and to communicate with families and students about the resources available to them.
5. I will work to expand the reach of the student representative to the other levels of education, so that there is more direct student input to the GTAC and the district.

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Creating a Youth Group to Grow in Faith

Grace Meyer (she/her), Caledonia, MN

We grow up surrounded by people. For most of us, it starts with our family, then neighbors and friends, students and teachers, sometimes your congregation and faith community as well. At some point, most of us belong to a group. Groups such as a sports team, Girl Scouts or Boy Scouts, 4-H, chess club, or a musical group. If you are in a sport or a scout, you work together to reach your goal and help each other along the way. If you are in a musical group you work together to make music and spread joy among others. You usually are part of a group because it is something you like and you like to be with your friends. What makes a youth group different from other groups you may be involved in? In a youth group, you are able to connect and talk about your faith in an open setting. You are able to grow in your relationships with God and other youth your age. My goal is to be able to create a youth group in my church for young people where they can learn, share, and grow in their faith while feeling that they are supported.



1 Timothy 4:12 says, “Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity.” God does not want us to hide and be ashamed of being young. We are called to be leaders and be present in our church. Jeremy Myers, member of the religion department at Augsburg University, says that we, as youth, are enough and we are not only the future of our churches, but we are the present. (lecture) The church needs to know that we are here and we are ready to be involved with our church and in the world.

Why is having a youth group and providing youth support important? Having a safe space such as a youth group in a church provides middle and high school aged youth a place to meet with others who share faith or have questions about their faith. A youth group provides a different kind of community and a support system for youth. As you reach the high school age, it is important to have a support system outside of your family; people who can help you

make some decisions and learn life lessons. "...attending church can help young people establish more and better social connections, and we already know that more social support leads to a better life." (Group Publishing)

Youth who are involved in their church will also have stronger connections with adults in their church and community who are not family. I have met many adults in my church and community, some of whom are now mentors or have provided me with new opportunities the past few years. Youth who participate in a youth group are more likely to have a closer relationship with God and have a better opportunity to be prepared to serve Christ as they move on in life. "Serving young people cannot only prepare them to become future leaders, but also allow them to contribute to the church" (Abraham). They are also more likely to contribute to the church whether it is through volunteer work, helping with communion, or assisting in Sunday school classes.

The goal of my project is to create a youth group in my church for middle school/high school aged students. We will begin by meeting monthly, starting in September, whether that is via Zoom, in an outdoor setting, or in-person. I will work with other members of our youth group to come up with service projects that we can carry out regularly, starting with bimonthly larger service projects. An evening of youth group at my church would include: devotionals using Faith Lens, games, discussions about faith, and other activities yet to be determined. I plan by starting with a smaller group and learning about what interests them, what they want to get out of a youth group, and what activities they would like to do and participate in. We do not have a youth director at our church, so I will be working with my pastor, mentors, and other adults in the congregation who are interested in helping with a youth group. My hope is that we can create a youth group where everyone feels safe, can have fun, and hopefully we will grow in size and in our faith and relationships with each other and God.

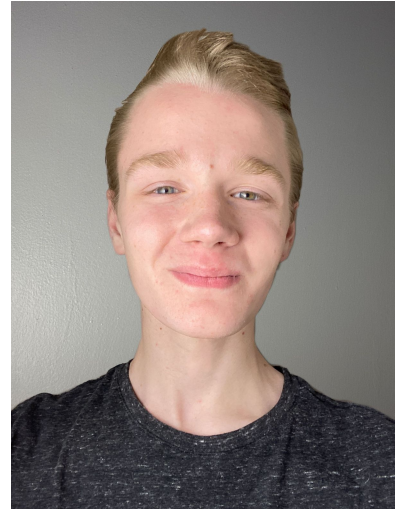
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Trying to Achieve Relationality in a Context of Disconnection

Paavo Rundman (he/him), Edina, MN

For most of my teenage years I have sought to fulfill my need for community with other people my age who want to form relationships through faith. Attending the Augsburg Youth Theology Institute in 2020 was part of that search, along with several camps, assemblies, summits, and gatherings over the past years. Those experiences have been incredible and instrumental in shaping me and my faith, but there is one staple of high school faith life I've never personally experienced. That is a space of relation and community among youth within my home congregation. This current disconnectedness is the issue I want to address in this essay.



I have three primary goals for this part of the project. I want to develop a greater understanding of why I haven't had a strong high school community at my church, use what I learned at the Institute to explore the issue theologically, and to see how I can deepen connections. To expand my understanding, I will explore the history of my youth group, I will use what I learned at the Institute to share why a space of relationality is theologically significant, and I will collaborate with my church staff and will continue to do so to see how I can make change. When churches provide a healthy place for youth to experience relationality in a community of faith, the youth benefit immensely because this easily-accessible space fulfills their deep developmental needs.

First, I wanted to understand more about what happened to our youth group, so I talked to Jacob, my High School Youth Ministry Coordinator. Using what I already knew and the insights he brought, I deepened my understanding of how our youth group lost attendance and students in each grade were disconnected from each other. Since the summer of 2018, the summer before my freshman year, our high school youth ministry has suffered from several setbacks, including a significant tragedy. Before 2018, a yearly summer mission trip or retreat was an important staple in developing relationships and welcoming incoming freshmen into what was a fairly well-established community. From 2007 to 2017, those trips averaged eleven participants, and though that number wasn't always representative of normal Sunday attendance, those kids were guaranteed a connection and reason to show up to Sunday school

fairly regularly. Building on that summer experience, their relationships with each other were strengthened by Sunday School and weekly get-togethers.

There was no trip the summer before I started high school, even though the ELCA Youth Gathering was held that June. Soon after, our Coordinator of Youth Ministry left. Just as the call process for a new Coordinator began, our community was overcome with grief when one of our co-pastors unexpectedly passed away. As our church struggled to deal with the grief of that tragedy, staffing priorities were adjusted. Because there wasn't a minister to lead or reach out, most youth struggled with their grief personally or with their family, but not in community with other youth. My family helped organize monthly evening get-togethers, but attendance declined, resulting in minimal high school youth participation throughout the rest of the school year. Sunday School often only had one or two participants. We called Jacob in April of 2019, but by that point most summer plans had already been established and we weren't able to gather everyone together during the summer. When the school year started, the freshman and sophomore classes didn't have any connection with the older two grades, and the few older kids didn't have an easy way to reach out and make connections. To establish a strong community of incoming freshmen and the other grades, Jacob and the staff began planning for a Boundary Waters trip in 2020 and for the Youth Gathering in 2021. I became optimistic about the near future of our youth group. Then the pandemic started. Our trip was canceled, the ELCA postponed the Youth Gathering, and uncertainty about the future years has placed any possible plans on hold.

I haven't had faith and community building experiences with my high school classmates through my church for the past three years, and there are no longer simple, weekly ways to build community because we cannot be physically present with each other. My concern is that the current generation of middle schoolers will create their expectations based upon the lack of community amongst high school youth in our congregation. My younger sister has a very bright, socially-connected eighth grade class that will enter high school next year. I'm afraid they will disconnect from their church community after being confirmed because they haven't had a strong high school ministry to look forward to. Our Children's Ministry Coordinator has been working hard with our elementary and preschool kids and has plans for the long-term reestablishment of a high school community. I feel called to work with my church's staff to help build a youth community in my final two years of high school.

I next want to look at how we can explore this issue theologically. As the future of our youth group was being examined, my church decided our High School ministry needed to focus on being a place of relationality. At the Institute I learned how important being relational is to

teenagers and Christianity. In the book *Liberating Youth From Adolescence* by Jeremy Paul Myers, he described how God is defined by a relationship through the Trinity, and all of creation is defined by our relationship with God and the world around us (118). Myers goes on to say that for us teens, there is a cultural belief that we are egocentric and self-centered, but we often defy those expectations because in reality, youth are simply highly relational, focusing on how we affect each other and are affected by those around us (120). Teenagers are at a critical spot in development, and have a deep developmental need to be relational. Our existence at this age is dominated by the ways we are exploring our place in the world and the way we interact with everyone surrounding us. This is why healthy opportunities to be relational that allow for an escape from the social beliefs of self-centeredness are so powerful. When churches can provide a regular, easily-accessible space of community with the further added context of our highly-relational Christianity, that deep developmental need is fulfilled.

These defining relationships that create community can often be jump-started by a shared experience, such as a mission trip or retreat. I've always understood how these experiences are more powerful to the development of relationships than many adults understand, but Myers articulates it well, suggesting that maybe the "experience [of the] trip was more real than the way we live our daily lives" (128). These experiences allow for more meaningful connections than everyday life. In a youth group setting, trips lay the foundation for strong connections that can later flourish during regular meetings in our normal lives. My age group hasn't been able to share one of these foundational experiences in the last three years. Therefore, most of the youth entering high school this year have never had an opportunity to have those more-than-real experiences with their peers. Our needs for relationality aren't being fulfilled in a deep way, leading to a disconnect whenever we do come together. We can't rely on these experiences due to the pandemic, so I feel called to find out what we *can* do.

I have begun connecting with the staff about how I can offer my perspective, time, and skills to help provide an available space of relationship-building in my community. I will be working with Jacob and the rest of the staff to help build community with current and soon-to-be high schoolers. After my week at the Institute I connected briefly with my nominating pastor to propose this project, then took some time to research and think about this issue theologically. I later connected with both pastors and the Children and Youth Coordinators explaining that I was willing to spend my time in the upcoming semester surveying and trying to find a position of leadership among the youth to use what I learned. During a Zoom call with Jacob, he gave me information regarding the history of the youth ministry of our congregation and helped develop action steps for this upcoming semester. We

began identifying ways I could use the time I would normally be spending on extracurriculars. One of the first things I will do is reach out to eighth graders and high schoolers to hear what they want in a youth group.

In the short term, I will write and distribute a survey to my fellow youth in the coming weeks to collect information that Jacob and the rest of the staff can use as we strive to create a more functional online youth group. I hope to help inform decisions moving forward in this time of uncertainty. My long term plan is to continue collaborating through the rest of quarantine and maybe my final two years of high school, depending on the amount of work that needs to be done. I feel called to do work welcoming new high schoolers into the community and to regularly connect with the staff, especially as one of the pastors becomes the new Confirmation leader. I know a few youth who are gifted leaders and very interested in theology. I hope to provide a place for them to do work with me to help more permanently establish people in the role of welcoming in our youth group.

When churches have an available space for community and relation through faith, youth flourish because this space fulfills important developmental needs. The current youth community is disconnected from each other because of setbacks and tragedy. To complete my goals for this paper, I have constructed a timeline of how our youth group got to where it is today, I have used what I learned at the Institute to theologically dive deeper into the issue, and I have presented my plans and hopes for my community. I have connected with my church staff and will continue to do so to enact my short-term and long-term plans. I hope that what I am doing now will mean that current and soon-to-be high schoolers will have a group ready to be relational that is available every Sunday before the 11 o'clock service.

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Bleeding Outside the Binary

Catherine Schultz (they/them), Toledo, OH

My name is Catherine Schultz. I'm 17 years old, going into my senior year of high school during a global pandemic, and I want to go to college to be a social worker. My hobbies include rocking out to hours long Spotify playlists, binge-watching tv shows that I have already seen, and hanging out with my two best friends.

I sound like a typical teenage girl, right? Well, to quote Janet from The Good Place, "I'm not a girl." I identify as non-binary. Biologically, though, I was assigned the female gender at birth. This means that approximately once a month, for an average of six days, I bleed. I am in a living position where it is possible for me to use a menstrual cup, to limit waste and to save money. People who menstruate while experiencing poverty and or homelessness don't necessarily have that luxury. For many of them, it comes down to purchasing menstrual products, or feeding themselves and their families.

My sophomore year of high school, I took a sociology class which involved a year-long research project with community outreach. My topic was the Pink Tax and the Wage Gap. The Pink Tax refers both to the fact that products marketed towards women are often priced higher than similar products marketed towards men (Elliott), and to the fact that menstrual products are often taxed as non-essential (Epstein). In the research I did for that project, I learned that in addition to being taxed as non-essential, menstrual products are often not provided by the government to homeless shelters. The community outreach I did for that project was to run a donation drive for menstrual products, collecting nearly 4,000 items.

My first thought for this project was to continue the work I have been doing for the past couple of years in working with a local women's shelter to provide menstrual products and other basic hygiene items. I have worked with the same women's shelter for the past two years, primarily because of name recognition, so for this project I wanted to broaden my horizons. My mom and I did some extensive research and found that a number of area churches operate Personal Needs Pantries, facilitated by Lutheran Social Services. For my



project, I will be collecting personal hygiene items for the pantry at Grace Lutheran Church in Toledo, Ohio.

Why should we care about this though, as people of faith? Jesus built his ministry on helping others. Our first lesson at AYTl was learning what exactly theology is. Theology is the good news that displaces the bad news and it is always for the neighbor (Myers). If I were to tell you the good news, it immediately becomes not yours. Once we have heard the good news, it is our duty to share it with our neighbor, with the “other.” Take the Gospel of Luke, for instance. In the 24th chapter we have the story of the Road to Emmaus (CEB, Luke. 24.13). As Jesus is walking with these followers of his, they are unable to see the good news that is right in front of them. He continues on with them, breaks bread with them. As soon as their eyes are opened, it becomes their responsibility to continue sharing the good news. It is in this way that it is our responsibility as people of faith, as the neighbor in this story, to do what we can to help those in need. Nobody should have to choose between buying food and buying deodorant.

I would like for this drive to run similarly to the ones I have held in the past, but I also know that that probably isn’t possible. In the past, I reached out to a number of store-owners and managers about keeping donation boxes for the donation drive in their businesses, and the response was overwhelmingly positive. But Covid-19 was not a factor when I ran those drives, so I know that things will have to look different. I will utilize resources in the community that I have built a connection with over the last couple of years. There are a number of women in my congregation who reach out to me periodically, asking when I will be doing a drive next and what they can do to help. I plan to reach out to these people. I also plan to use social media to spread the word of the drive.

The collection period will also look different for this drive than for others that I have run in the past. Previously, a drive would run for three or four weeks before I had everything collected. With different collection methods, comes a different collection timeline. I plan to collect items for approximately two months, but it will all depend on the response. Once the collection period is over, I will sort through all donations received. This is done to make sure that there are no expired products or products that have been previously used. I will sort through and group them by item to get a count of how many toothbrushes, tubes of toothpaste, etc. were donated. After all of the donations have been sorted, we will pack them up and deliver them to Grace.

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Everyone Is Human

Payton Sears (she/her) Rochester, MN

Have you ever wondered to yourself, 'How did racism start? How were people able to treat others with no respect because of differences? Aren't we all human?' I ponder these questions all the time.

My family raised me to treat everyone with respect. I grew up in a mostly white neighborhood and attended a church that never saw colored skin. At church it was instilled into our brains from a young age that everyone was created different for a purpose and that all were special in this world. Children don't really grow up exploring and learning about their peer's different cultures in the world around them. They might grow up to only see their side of life and that's how I had lived for a while. As technology became more accessible, social media became more widespread. And so did the discrimination I witnessed. I would hear about or see news articles on police brutality, murdering and injuring people, and I would always ask myself those questions I stated above.



Moreover, I realized that it's just how some people have grown up. Many aren't exposed to different cultural backgrounds and it's been happening for generations. If they are, they might not understand the importance or reason to a specific tradition of a culture. I'm not justifying any cruel acts that the police or others have done that destroyed lives, but I believe that it mostly stems from lack of education and communication with others. Talking to each other and truly listening is sometimes hard to do as an adult when you haven't been shown other cultures growing up. Now I know that I can't change the minds of adults that discriminate, but I do believe that with friends I've made and connections I'm willing to make, it can be a step forward in eliminating racist views. In my community at least, by talking to the younger generations about others and their culture more throughout their lives it will decrease the amount of racism. My goal is to help educate and start conversations with youths and others willing to listen about racism and poverty. I will do this by joining a school social group and starting a school community garden.

Everyone goes through tough situations. I am a high school student living through a major worldwide pandemic, but there is something I will never personally go through and fully understand what it's like; racism. I have privilege to be able to do certain things and not be

mistreated, all because of my skin color. Yet another young black male died, by the hands of people that are supposed to protect us. My friend shared a story about an experience she had in first grade. She went home wondering why she had been mistreated and why it was such a big deal. That's only one of many examples of my peers being racially discriminated against. This can be damaging to how POC view themselves and how white children will view them.

In a New York Amsterdam News article from 2019, it states "here in the United States and around the world, black children are seen as 'less than'- less beautiful, less lovable, less capable, less intelligent, less worthy, and less valuable" (Aird). This is damaging to POC's mental health and creates conflict. White people are now 'dangerous' and 'in charge', and it starts dividing each other's equality. It was not how I was taught to see other people. This is why I thought of joining and working with a club at my school to help with this. It is a way for everyone, no matter what color skin or values, to come together and talk. The diversity counsel is an example of a club working to fix these problems. If comfortable, people can share stories about how they felt left out or discriminated against, and for others to learn that that might not be the right behavior to engage in. Throughout the school year, opportunities to fundraise and donate to certain organizations and local charities around our community have arised, and I thought this would also be a way to all come together and help out. My high school is so diverse and I want everyone to be able to embrace who they are and meant to be. I want to help build a safe community at my school where everyone is comfortable to be themselves.

Another project I have been working on is a community garden that will be built and run by future high school students. This idea sprouted from getting the chance to work on my church's garden during the week we would have originally gone on a mission trip. Since my high school has a big lot behind the building, I had contacted my principal asking if this could even be possible. He set up a meeting, and I have already talked to him and another teacher who would be interested in helping make this happen. I believe that during this time of a worldwide pandemic that it is even more crucial to supply food for those who may not have it.

Even before, this was an issue in areas and I feel more can always be done to help out. There can never be enough help. Further discussions are going to be taking place in the near future and trying to gather people will also be starting. During the first talk, I was told I wouldn't fully get to see what this garden could offer since I will be graduating in the spring, but it is something that I can be proud of and still a part of. Some of the food will go to the students that attend the high school whose families may need it, or even need it for themselves. Even starting a food drive every couple months would greatly help out. Then some of it may be able to be donated and given to Channel One. I just want people to be able to eat and live, since we

are all human beings.

The college I happen to be writing this essay for, as a part of AYTI, happens to be a private liberal arts college that has a religion part to the campus. However these issues and topics I have written about are backed up by the Bible, it does not mean that that is the only source or that you have to be religious to not be racist. A bible verse from Ephesians reads, “Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen”(Ephesians 4:29 NIV). This is a perfect example of only saying things that help others out and that are kind. When others say hurtful things and discriminate, it goes against what God wants. He sees us all as equals and we should respect everyone. For people that don’t believe, would you want hurtful things to be said towards you? Is that something you want to happen to you most days of your life? Not to be able to do certain things because people don’t see you as the same? To me, yes there is a biblical side to not being racist, but there is also just a human sense that we should all treat each other with the respect that we want to be given to us. The point I am trying to get across is that we all have a decision on how to act. I believe that everyone is born good but some will disagree with me on that.

In 1 Corinthians it talks about how Christ sees us, “Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free”(1 Corinthians 12:12 NIV). Not everyone was meant or made to have the same skin color or look alike. Research even shows that Jesus wasn’t white, but in fact from the Middle East and was Jewish. People should be more willing and open to learning about other cultures and the way people live in other religions and countries because most are very different from the United States. Celebrating a cultural night doesn’t just bring forth different information, but also God’s creation is all celebrating each other together. Lastly, food should be available to everyone. This has been taught and told for a long long time. When God first created life on earth he said, “Everything that lives and moves about will be food for you”(Genesis 9:3 NIV). Everyone should be able to have access to a meal. Can you imagine if you didn’t have enough food to replenish you or your children’s bodies? Some people experience this, and it is not ok. Some people have loads of food in pantries just wasting away and will just end up throwing it out. People can grow fresh fruits and vegetables that can be used to make even more. This is a need that should have been solved already. Food is a necessity for humans, not a want. All of these things can be taken in a biblical way and just a basic human way. Either way, these things are dire.

Change is something I have always wanted. Being a shy child was never easy because

I felt I had no voice in this big world. Growing up and realizing that everyone is different and important in their own ways, was a big step to achieving this. Participating in the Augsburg Youth Theology Institute for the second time has once again been life changing. Speaking up and working with my peers is something I look forward to, to conquer these challenges that we face. I hope that with all the help I can get and my amazing and talented peers, we can overcome these obstacles by talking in and expanding the diversity club at my school and making a garden that will help people in our community eat.

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Sex, A Topic Bound to be Awkward

Caroline Siebels-Lindquist (she/her), St. Paul, MN

As the title clearly states, while the topic of sex and sexuality should not be associated with terms such as embarrassment, or discomfort, that sadly usually ends up being the case. It is also often how the subject is presented and interpreted. Most religious settings in particular have had an obvious history of shame, guilt, and pain connected with sex and sexuality for hundreds of years. While some churches have abandoned this mindset and have stepped into the 21st century, others still refuse to accept the benefits that in-depth and open conversations can have in communities compared to abstinence only education. Our bodies have always been cautioned as being extremely sinful and evil, and the attempt to dissuade youth from becoming educated regarding our bodies ends up having the opposite effect. Young people continue to have questions that are left unanswered and continue to find themselves in situations that they wouldn't have been in if it had not been for a lack of sex education. Discussing and participating in comprehensive sex education should not be viewed as an act against God, but rather an act that glorifies and connects us to God.



Throughout my week at the Augsburg Youth Theology Program, we discussed a book written by one of the program coordinators, Jeremey Myers, titled "Liberating Youth from Adolescence." The book was thoroughly researched on how the life of the average young person is almost always undermined and underrepresented by stereotypes cultivated many years ago and are still enforced by adults who pride themselves on being, 'fully developed.' I've always disliked the term 'teenager,' but I never really could put my finger on exactly why the word itself was so out of favor with me. While preparing for the week online at Augsburg and reading the required book, I discovered why the word unsettled me so much. The word itself signifies a period of intense growth and realization, when in reality everyone, in any age range, is always growing and changing and learning how to become a better version of their already ingrained child of God status. However, the so-called 'teenager' is nonetheless still growing

during this selected time frame, and sex education can play such a huge role in their choices as they broaden the horizons in the experiences that life has to offer.

Without access to informative education necessary to understand our bodies, young people may end up paying the consequences later in life. In her article, "Ministry for the Whole Person: When it comes to Sexual Health Education, Start Simple," Kara Haug writes how it is our responsibility as children of God to become educated and take ownership of our bodies, as they are what ties everyone to everyone else. She says, "Remember that God came to us through a body and in a body, so it is our job to educate ourselves on our bodies. They are intricate, delicate, fascinating, confusing, durable vessels that were created to experience deep connection that reunites us with our Creator" (Haug). It is common knowledge that everyone makes better decisions when they understand and acknowledge all of their options. For example, best vacation destinations, which stock you should invest in, and the best type of yarn for hat making. This applies to all other areas of life, so why not sex education? I had the pleasure of speaking to Kara Haug (over email) and when I asked her how abstinence education has been hurting young people today, her response was clear and straightforward. She says, "Abstinence education is hurting young people because it does not provide adequate information. Many of the programs out there that are taught, that are abstinence based, aren't even teaching correct biological information. I believe people are entitled to fully know and understand their bodies, that is how we care for ourselves and each other. When we fully know how our bodies function and how to keep them safe, then we make better choices for ourselves." (Haug) The more education and knowledge that you have the ability to obtain thoroughly in your youth, the better you will remember and carry those lessons into the future. Comprehensive sex education is a vital need for young people as they continue to grow, and learn. It aids youth in the ability to make the best decisions for themselves, to take care of themselves, and hold themselves to the highest value and respect from others while also promoting complete self-awareness.

It has been proven countless times that abstinence only education does not accomplish what it sets out to achieve. According to, "History of Sex Education in the U.S.," published by Planned Parenthood, "Between 2004 and 2008, five authoritative reports (including Kirby's) have shown that abstinence programs do not help young people to delay the onset of sexual intercourse, do not help them reduce risk-taking behaviors, and frequently include misinformation" (Page 8). No program evaluated for this particular Planned Parenthood publication convinced young people to abstain from sexual activity. In fact, most abstinence programs pass off incredibly inaccurate information as fact such as the effectiveness of

contraception, falsifying the risks of abortion, and incorporating harmful gender stereotypes, disguised as christian values, into the curriculum. The great hopes of fewer teen pregnancies and abortions, and lower STD rates, are all wrapped up in the solution to abstain from sex outside of marriage and to implement the practice of alleged christian standards. These are just not realistic expectations when paired with such a resolution. The curriculum of an abstinence only education does not compare to the viable information that young people require today and have always required. Lessons on sexual health, human development, and healthy relationships are all topics that every single young person must become acquainted with. Planned Parenthood says, "International organizations such as the World Health Organization, UNESCO, the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS, and the International Conference on Population and Development recognize that sex education must be evidence-based and must not be biased, ideologically motivated, or censored (CRR, 2008)." The argument that we must protect and censor young people circles right back to the idea that the youth are undeveloped for the world as they are, when in fact education is key in order to aid the continuous growth of knowledgeable and responsible youth.

My pastor at St. Timothy Lutheran Church was kind enough to lend me a textbook titled, 'Our Whole Lives: Sexuality Education For Grades 7-9.' This textbook provides scientific research and backed up information on the human body, different forms of birth control, and examples of healthy relationships, and much more, all while delivering wholesome and nourishing messages about religion and God and our place in the world. "We are called to enrich our lives by expressing sexuality in ways that can enhance human wholeness and fulfillment and that express love, commitment, delight, and pleasure," (Page xi). While it is written by and mainly for the Unitarian Church, I believe it is a prime example of how science based sex education with a Godly emphasis can and should transition to in christian communities. However, though I believe this book is a great start to a more sexually liberated future surrounding the church, I still fundamentally believe that sex education and religion should be taught and conducted separately. A level of separation is beneficial for young people as even sex education programs with a reasonable religious tone can be conducted as a method of influence for young minds as they begin and continue to unravel their own ideas and feelings. Youth should be able to consider all options and illuminate their own opinions on such intricate subjects, and the best way to do so is with scientific and unbiased information. "Knowledge about human sexuality is helpful, not harmful. Every individual has the right to accurate information about sexuality and to have her or his questions answered," (Page xi). While this textbook is not the curriculum I would personally choose to educate my generation,

we cannot ignore the fact that the purpose of this curriculum is to provide a continuously quizzical age demographic with essential information and awareness regarding sex and sexuality, instead of the usual educational censorship that the Christian church is so well known for and accustomed to.

So in conclusion, comprehensive sex education offers a substantial amount of information and understanding on topics that youth have been discouraged to educate themselves about. The fear of shame, guilt, and pain that becoming more educated and aware can lead us to a life of sin, distracts us from the fact that we already carry that shame, guilt, and pain with us everyday. It follows us like a shadow and weighs on our shoulders and has been ingrained in our heads by religion that to be educated is to be dirty and sinful and an act against the God who brought us into the world. When in reality, we were brought into this complicated world to experience love, to give and receive pleasure, to create life, to connect with one another, and share in intimate relationships. God would not have given us bodies if not to use them, and explore them, and learn about them. Educating ourselves is what connects us with God, therefore in doing so, we honor God and connect with God in a way we couldn't otherwise.

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A Single Step, A Single Block, One Book at a Time

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There is a void, something missing even though you cannot see it. I have heard the same sentiment over and over again from virtually all the adults within my close family, usually along the lines of “kids these days” but unlike eras past where the phrase and the varying discourse about the failings of young people was generally unwarranted, now it feels oddly poignant and I often find myself agreeing with their experiences. They describe the sheer social ineptitude of my peers especially when conversing with someone they are unfamiliar with, be it either a customer, a co-worker or just someone on the street. They seem to have a non-caring malaise about them, an unprecedented degree of social anxiety and a permanent attachment to their phone.

But it's never really been their fault. We too often forget that these young people have been subsumed by a technological age where someone can remain completely atomized, and in a culture where they, as the undeveloped consumer (the created illusion of the teenager manufactured by society and forced on youth, labeling young people as identity-less consumers who derive meaning only from brand identity), are held to no positive standards and given no responsibilities. I believe that the state of today's youth, my Generation Z, is a culmination of two factors whose joint effects have made the most well off generation in all of human history the most miserable. First, there was the image of the undeveloped consumer that has impacted our young people for decades. And secondly there is the slow degradation of the local community in America that has been taking place for a similar amount of time.

These thoughts of community were first placed in my mind earlier this year by a series of videos I discovered on YouTube by the name of “*The Importance of Civil Society*”. The youtuber known as Political Juice, in the six hour, five part series, breaks down the disintegration of civil society or the mediating institutions that fill the space between you as an individual and the government such as schools, churches, clubs, etc. And I know what you might be thinking, this is a college-level essay placed in the publication of an esteemed university and you are basing this... on a YouTube video? Yes, aside from its admittedly terrible cartoon illustrations, the Civil Society series was one of the best edited, best researched and most enlightening things I have seen on all of YouTube. I was staggered by the amount of sources he used, including 42 published books along with 199 other sources that varied from

government data to news articles to scientific studies. Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* is even referenced along with a hefty number of quotes from the founding fathers.

All that is to say that after diving into the "*Importance of Civil Society*" series I found myself very much aware of the various sources and symptoms of communal decay that our democratic republic is enduring. It was heartbreaking, seeing the country I love so much cast in such a bitter light, but it was real, it was happening and I needed to know it. Some of the problems I had been vaguely aware of such as the massive amount of children who have experienced divorce, (roughly 1 million a year since 1974), and the massive retreat from marriage both as a role and a function of society. But some were more obscure like the fact that 46% of Americans feel alone, 47% feel left out or that there has been both a steady decrease in happiness and a steady increase in depression in the last decade especially among young people.

Even with all this information, I had no idea how I would act on it all. I wanted to help but I had no outlet to do anything about it. Then I attended the Augsburg Youth Theology Institute (AYTI), which brought in the second part of my thoughts on community. As we began the week and I both began to read *Freeing Youth From Adolescence* and listening to the lectures given by its author, Jeremy Myers, I began to think back to the "*Importance of Civil Society*" series and the importance of the idea of the undeveloped consumer in our society. The two intersected when I began to think about what the undeveloped consumer was on a fundamental level, a "teenager" who was expected to participate in the momentary fads propped up by corporations that had been co-opted from their own youth culture and the removal of responsibilities to ensure that their youthful creativity was not dammed up before they reached adulthood.

The reason that these problems have been allowed to propagate in our communities is due to influences such as the undeveloped consumer, young people who are supposed to be formed into functioning members of society, are now left to their own devices, no instruction on how to function in adult society all while they are left unrestrained to do as they wish. It has resulted in a downward spike in community attendance and an increasing number of people without purpose and full of dissatisfaction with their lives.

But now knowing that this problem exists, what are we as Christians supposed to do? It's rather simple, actually. We need to do what we have always done and what Christ has asked of us in Mark 16:15 "*Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation.*" We need to once again reach out to our young people both in and outside of our congregations and begin to ask something of the youth. We must again resume our outreach in the community,

not just through charity and donation, but with spirituality and morality, and we must make an effort to welcome people into our places of worship and not just be passive.

I have always felt that one thing that my church especially struggles with is when new faces join the services. I don't feel like a lot of effort is made to speak with them or introduce them to the rest of the congregation. We need to be welcoming those people in and including them in the community, and finally we need to reinvigorate our youth spaces and focus our efforts not on just bringing kids through confirmation and being done with them, but instead focus on developing a long lasting and meaningful connection with these children and encouraging them to stay active within the church community, and to explore their faith to make Christ a part of their daily lives.

This unfortunately may be the hardest thing to do, as from personal experience I can assure you that the youth group, at least at my church, has often become nothing but a miniature teen hangout space. We had for a while attempted to do planned lessons and try to relate our weekly highs (weekly good moments) and lows (weekly bad moments) to the lesson. But soon that fell into disarray and was replaced by a self directed approach of students making lessons and controlling the discourse for a session. Then, after about 80% of my youth group had done a single session, we ran out of ideas and reverted back into the old method but this time with an even looser premise.

That however is far from the only problem. Not only is there a lack of interest in my youth group for larger discussion and putting in effort to have an enlightening conversation, but we have virtually no members when compared to my church's overall youth pool. We have eight consistent members in total and the ratios of the various confirmation classes that make it up are very slanted: myself along with three other seniors in the fall, one member who will be leaving for college and three who will be juniors this upcoming school year. When the youth group first started again last fall we had three others, another person who has graduated high school, another junior and a sophomore. But all of them dropped out by mid winter before covid-19 even caused a shut down. And to put all of these figures into perspective, of my confirmation class, four people including myself went on to join the youth group.

My total confirmation class had eight people total in it, (50% that's not bad) but we make up the highest percentage of the youth group. Next, of the current juniors we have three, but they had a confirmation class size of around a dozen, maybe more, (25% not looking great). And finally we have the most recent confirmation class that came in last fall. Of that group we had one who became a member and later quit attending, his confirmation group size was similar to the last, about a dozen, (0% now that's really bad).

So, how am I going to do it, fix the decay of civil society, help rewrite the expectations of youth to rid us from the undeveloped consumer and create a strong and healthy youth group? Once again my answer is a simple one, start a book club. For the thing that may help myself and my fellow youth prepare for the future and give us the tools to fix our image and our civil society is reading. It has long been established that reading can help with a myriad of issues, some of the most prominent of those being a greater ability to comprehend language, discuss while being more informed, and write. Reading has even been shown to help people develop empathy and stave off depression and stress.

Fortuitously enough God may have just given me a chance to start that book club at my church, as I've been nominated for and will soon be accepted into the position of the High School Church Council representative. I'm hoping that with this new position I can use it to accomplish the three goals I have for this AYTl project, within three months of writing this essay.

These goals are:

1. Officially start meeting with two of my close friends in our own private book club. We have already voted on some book options and we've set a reading pace of three chapters per two weeks. This could be used as a testing ground for books that could be moved into a youth group book club.
2. Either start a separate youth book club at my church or add onto our existing youth group with a book club element where we (as a group) would vote from a list of theological texts and read a chapter a week of the selected book, then come back to the youth group to discuss what we've learned. Additionally with my new position on my church's council I could look at a full list of the congregation's youth and mail out an invitation along with some sample reading material to the youth not currently attending the youth group.
3. Actively increase the current size of the youth group from its current 8 concurrent members to 12 (or more) concurrent members, the number we had had in prior years.

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Climate Change and its Effect on Us

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Every day, we spend time thanking God for all God has given us. One huge gift God has given us is our wonderful planet. Our wonderful planet that we mutilate more and more everyday. Climate change and environmental struggles are a huge problem in today's world. We see the effects of it and contribute more to it every single day of our lives. One of the reasons it has gotten so bad in recent years is because many people are uneducated on not only the effect it could have on us and future generations, but also ways to help. I plan to help educate my congregation on climate change and how to help stop it.

One of the main issues surrounding climate change is that a large amount of the population isn't well educated on the topic or how to help reduce it. Essentially, climate change is the rising of Earth's average land temperature over time due to human waste emissions (What is climate change? A really simple guide). The earth's average temperature has been increasing since the early 1900s, but especially in the last 30-40 years, up to almost 1.5 degrees C a year. This may not seem like much, but scientists believe that if the earth's average temperature increased by any more than 1.5 degrees in a year, it could cause serious repercussions. Prior to the mid 1900s, most of the sun's rays coming into earth's atmosphere would be reflected back into space. However, carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases are what trap the heat coming from the sun. In the last 80 years, as humans have emitted more and more greenhouse gases, leading to more heat being caught in earth's atmosphere. This also causes ocean levels to rise because as water increases in temperature, it also increases in volume. The melting icebergs have been thought to be contributing as well. So essentially, the more air waste we put into our atmosphere, the more climate change occurs. In short, if climate change isn't massively reduced soon, it could lead to huge issues such as increase in human deaths, especially in poorer countries, and cause water and food shortages, as well as destroy animal populations causing numbers of species to go extinct and threaten many incredible ecosystems, such as coral reefs (Why is climate important?). Another huge issue surrounding climate change, one that I will be focusing on in my project, is that people either don't believe that climate change will affect them, or they aren't educated on what the extent of the problem could be. "More than half of Americans seem to think that climate change won't affect them personally, a new poll shows. Only 45 percent think that global warming will pose a serious threat in their lifetime, and just 43 percent say they worry a great deal about climate

change” (Potenza). Much of this issue is due to political differences, polls saying many more republicans say that climate change isn’t a big deal while more independents and democrats believe it could have a large effect on us. The lack of knowledge poses a serious threat because if people don’t believe they will be affected, then they don’t think they need to help. In reality, many professionals, such as UN General Assembly President María Fernanda Espinosa Garcés of Chile, believe that we could have as little as 10 years before climate change is irreversible (Only 11 Years Left). This is a huge issue, and I want to teach people about it. However, I also believe that it is important to teach them how they can make a difference too. This is the reason why I decided to do this project. People need to know about climate change, how it could affect us, and how to reverse it before it’s too late.

Many times in our world, environmental issues become just another political issue, when in fact it is something everyone should care about. As Christians, it is our responsibility to not only think of it logically, but theologically as well. During AYTI this year, one thing that we had a conversation about was that you should not do good deeds to prove yourself to God, but that you should do good deeds because that is why you were created. I believe that this can be translated to this topic as well. “The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it” (Genesis 2:15, NRSV). This bible verse explains it in almost the simplest way possible. It uses the garden of Eden as a metaphor to the world. We are here to serve the world, not the other way around. “The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant. Therefore a curse devours the earth, and its inhabitants suffer for their guilt; therefore the inhabitants of the earth dwindled, and few people are left” (Isaiah 24:5-6, NRSV). God calls on us to take care of the wonderful world he has given us, and it is our responsibility to keep it protected, or soon we may not be here to do so. Another topic that we talked about at AYTI was vocation. It was explained as being something that God calls and equips you to do, a combination of what you are good at, what you are passionate about, and where you have power. We were taught that vocation can change from day to day. I believe that this is my current vocation, to help educate and inform the people around me as best I can.

For my project I will work to educate both adults and children in my congregation on climate change, and how we as a congregation and as individuals can help to change the situation. To do this, I will be creating videos within the next month that will be sent out to the entire congregation at my church. In these videos, I will speak about climate change much like I did earlier in this paper and talk about what they can do in their daily lives to help our planet. These videos will be sent out to my congregation with the help of my youth director at church. I

will encourage the members of my congregation to watch these videos, spend time thinking about them, maybe even do some more research, and then try to change at least one thing in their day to day lives to help the environment. For those that have already made changes to their lifestyle, I will challenge them to make even more and to spread the word about climate change and how to help to others who might be interested. This year's AYTI focus was on youth empowerment, and how to dissect and change the typical negative view of youth and teenagers. Because of this, I will not only make a video geared towards older youth and adults, but I will also make one geared towards young kids. For me, this is the most important part of the project. I want to make sure that these kids know from a young age that they do have valid opinions and that they can make a difference in their communities and in the world. The week that I spent participating in AYTI only further cemented my belief in this and inspired me to make sure that all youth are heard.

Climate change is a huge issue in today's society, and although most of the time it is viewed as a political issue, it should be something that everyone cares about. Throughout my week at AYTI, I learned about a number of valuable topics and learned about how I can change the negative narrative that has been given out to youth for years. I am using this to try and make a difference about something that I care about in my community. I hope that through this essay and my project, I can help make the world a little cleaner for the future generations.

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Called, Gathered, Equipped, Sent

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When I first heard the topic of this year's AYTI "Called to Be Co-Creator", I was very intrigued about the direction the leader of the program would take it. How youth are viewed in society is something I was, and still am, interested in. And after attending, I can say I was not disappointed in the slightest. Culture has created a narrative that sees youth as less than what we really are. We are often portrayed as shallow, self centered, uninspired, and lazy, when in fact we are so much more than that but are rarely given an opportunity to do better and prove otherwise. So when we started talking about the idea of "Called Co-Creator" and all that entails, I started thinking of a group that I am a part of called the Lutheran Youth Organization Board (LYO Board) of the Northeastern Minnesota Synod of the ELCA.

The LYO Board is a high school youth led, adult assisted, leadership team. Throughout the year we plan two events, one for high school youth and one for middle school youth. We also attend a week-long training retreat to both plan bible studies, worships, and learning events for our events. We also participate in peer ministry training to help prepare and give us skills not only for the events, but for the rest of our lives.

In my two years worth of experience doing training camp with the LYO Board, relational skills are the skills I notice us being taught the most. At first I thought I understood fully why we are taught these skills. I've realized the ability to build those bridges with people not only in our everyday life but in the people we meet at our events is incredibly valuable. One of the skills we learn is the ability to meet someone where they are at that point in their life, be it faith life, personal life, family life, or any other point, and relate to them. I talked to a former LYO youth, now adult leader, Rachel Jacob. She is currently working as an Early Childhood Special Ed teacher who does at-home visits with families who are currently going through very difficult points in their lives. She uses the skills she learned in LYO to try and relate to these families and help them through difficult times. I also talked to Coordinator of Youth Ministry of the North Eastern Minnesota Synod and leader of the LYO Board Catherine Anderson, and asked her why she taught us so many relational tools at training camp and this is what she had to say "Everything we do is based on relationship. We believe that the best way to pass on faith is through relationships, learning from each other, and sharing our stories. We listen to where others are on their faith journey, and share where we are on ours."

During AYTI, we talked about how God is calling us constantly to do God's work, even if we aren't fully aware of it. The call comes from outside, not within. We can become more aware of the call over time, but it never comes from you. And in my case, the outside call that brought me to the LYO Board was my mom. My mom has been a Youth Director for 19 years, and has been a part of the LYO Board for 17 years and in doing so she has become good at identifying people who would be a good fit for the board. And what she saw in me were the qualities that make a servant leader, and that is what LYO is. LYO itself isn't a call to serve, but an answer to the people who can serve. It is what people need at that point in their life and when we have to move on, we can take what we learned with us to newer things.

While re-reading the book *Liberating Youth From Adolescence* and thinking of how LYO can fit into the ideas in it, one of the things that come to mind is how LYO gives youth the opportunity to live into the unique gifts that we have been given as children of God. For instance, I do not like being on stage in front of people doing things, but I instead like working in the background and being on the edges with people. There are a variety of ways to lead. Some feel comfortable being up on stage, others can play music with the band, others can help create the curriculum for our events, and there are those that lead from within while being in the crowd singing with everyone else. For those who are attending the events, it is a reminder that there is not just one way to lead. There's opportunities to try different ways of leading to see where each person's personality and gifts come alive. I asked my friend and fellow board member Emma True about how she feels LYO has given her the opportunity to lead in a way that complimented her gifts, and she said "I was not the greatest at speaking in front of larger groups of people. LYO has given me the chance to become the leader that I always wanted to be." It's not just the people up on stage making the speeches. In my conversation with Rachel Jacob we also spoke about how there often isn't that kind of representation out there, and that for youth the person most often seen as a leader is that person on stage, or the person up in front making the presentation. LYO gives people the opportunity to not only lead from the front, but the side, the back, and within.

One of the great things I personally love about LYO is the fact that it gives youth the ability to be heard, to be taken seriously, and be respected. When planning our events a lot of ideas get proposed to the group, some of them good, some of them not, and the adult leaders on the board, instead of outright telling us that an idea is bad, instead ask us to think through the logistics of it, take out the parts that we like and raise them up, while trying to get rid of the portions that don't work. Very rarely in my two, coming on three years of the board have I heard an adult outright tell us that an idea won't work, and when they do say that, there is always a

valid reason why. They respect the ideas we come up with and what we have to offer, and that respect for our ideas allows for freedom of ideas and that creates a welcome space.

I have a lot of love for the LYO Board. Having that space has been such a blessing for this space and time in my life. So when I graduate in the spring and have to leave the board it will be bittersweet, but it won't be the end, because I can still take the experiences I learned there with me. In the coming year I would like to create a space in my congregation in which youth voices can be heard, and use the skills I learned in LYO to become more engaged and help encourage them as Called Co-Creators.

Mental Health In the Brainerd Lakes Area

Grace Whipple (she/her), Brainerd, MN

I am choosing to focus my AYTI project on mental health. I chose mental health because it's a very important subject to me because in the Brainerd Lakes Area, three years ago, two people from Brainerd chose to take their lives. No one knew anything about how these people felt because they didn't have anyone to talk to. I would like that number to be zero forever. After that happened two organizations, Smiles for Jake and the Lighthouse Project. These two organizations helped to spread awareness about mental health needs in the community and they raise money through fundraisers and selling clothes. They also donated money to help other organizations in the Brainerd Lakes Area.



There are different types of mental health like anxiety, depression, eating disorders, personality disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder, and psychotic disorder. What causes Mental Health? It could be caused by family history or genes, life experiences such as what happened and how you were treated in your childhood years, it could be caused by a brain injury or it could also be caused by having a few friends and you feel lonely. The CDC did a paper saying that,

"Problems with mental health are very common in the United States, with an estimated 50% of all Americans diagnosed with a mental illness or disorder at some point in their lifetime. Mental illnesses, such as depression, are the third most common cause of hospitalization in the United States for those aged 18-44 years old 1, 2, and adults living with serious mental illness die on average 25 years earlier than others. The reports and other products in this section can serve as resources to public health officials and other health professionals who need up-to-date statistics and data sources around mental health and mental illness. However, these lists of reports and data tools are not exhaustive" (csc.gov).

The National Institute of Mental Health said that mental illnesses are common in the United States. Nearly one in five U.S. adults live with a mental illness (46.6 million in 2017). Mental illnesses include many different conditions that vary in degree of severity, ranging from mild to moderate to severe. Two broad categories can be used to describe these conditions: Any Mental Illness (AMI) and Serious Mental Illness (SMI). AMI encompasses all recognized mental illnesses. SMI is a smaller and more severe subset of AMI”.

In Minnesota, the suicide rate in Minnesota has steadily increased since 2000. The age-adjusted suicide rate rose from 8.9 per 100,000 population in 2000 to 13.1 per 100,000 population in 2015. The emergency department visit rate for self-inflicted violence has also increased, jumping 15 percent in one year with 15,258 in 2015 compared to 13,293 in 2014. However, survey data suggest the overall prevalence of mental illness does not seem to be increasing. Suicide mortality is correlated with suicide attempts – those who attempt are at increased risk for suicide death. In 2015, suicide was the second leading cause of death among youth ages 13 to 19 years in the U.S., with a mortality rate of 8.1 per 100,000 population. In 2015, 8.6% of U.S. high school students who participated in the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS) had attempted suicide within the past year and were higher among females than males. In the Minnesota Student Survey (MSS), 4% of 9th graders reported attempting suicide within the past year. Females had higher rates compared to males. The rates were considerably higher among Pacific Islander 9th grade females and American Indian 9th-grade females. For 11th graders, 3% reported attempting suicide within the 2 past year, with the proportion of females decreasing, although still higher than males. Suicide attempts remained higher among American Indian and Pacific Islanders but were lower compared with 9th graders, especially among Pacific Islanders. American Indian males, however, had higher rates in 9th grade compared to 11th grade.

How do you treat mental health? Treatment depends on which mental health disorder you have and how serious it is. To treat your mental health disorder you could go to therapy, or you could take medication. If your mental health disorder is more severe you could go to a psychiatric hospital. Therapy would be first the first thing you would do if you have a mental health disorder.

In the bible, there are a lot of verses talking about mental health. In Jeremiah 29:11 (NIV) it says, “For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” I think It has to do with mental health because the Lord says that he has plans for you in the future. In the English Standard Version, Psalm 18:19 says, “He brought me out into a broad place; he rescued me because he

delighted me". I think it was to do with mental health because they are saying that the Lord rescued them from sadness. The NIV Bible says in John 16:33, "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world, you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." I think it's where it says you will have trouble, I have overcome the world. That means that you will have trouble but God overcame this world. And in Psalm 91:11-12 (NIV) says, "For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways; they will lift you up in their hands so that you will not strike your foot against a stone." I think it says the angels will guard you and they will protect you.

I asked people of different generations about how their mental health has been through Covid-19. There were many responses. Here are just a few.

- A lot of people said they didn't like wearing masks.
- One person said that it is very stressful because of all the extra stuff we have to do and it gets really hot while wearing a mask.
- Another person said they have been fairly stressed with work because of the masks but other than that I've been feeling pretty ok. They are not worried about Covid-19 themselves but will do everything they can to protect others including wearing a mask.
- Another person said they do feel pretty stressed and enjoyed staying at home because they love their family, but being around them for this long alone without the ability to leave is difficult.
- Other people are worried for their parents because they could carry the illness and end up getting it. So it's a big risk whenever you leave the house and pray this virus goes and that they stay safe.
- Another person said "severely stressed honestly, my anxiety and stress level has been through the roof though this entire pandemic.
- The next person I asked said "there was one week that was really stressful for me, with COVID and online school but now I am very stress-free and laid back.
- The last person I asked said "I felt sad because of all the things I never got to do my senior year so I felt a bit depressed and angry about it.

My personal response is that I have felt very stressed and lonely that I couldn't see anyone and I had to spend all my time at my house but when I got to go out in the public I felt

happy I could see people. I asked all these different generations to see how they felt and you could see that mental health concerns are at all ages.

How am I going to help with mental health in my community? I am going to try to start a support group at my school and we will talk about how people have been feeling. Another idea I had is that I would talk to my church congregation and talk to them about teen mental health and how that young youth are very stressed with school or sports or stuff at home.

Works Cited

https://www.cdc.gov/mentalhealth/data_publications/index.htm

<https://www.nimh.nih.gov/index.shtml>

NIV Bible: New International Version

ESV Bible: English Standard Version



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