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LIGHT IN THE WORLD: BECOMING A PUBLIC CHRISTIAN LEADER

October 2018

Dear readers,

In this journal you will find a number of outstanding essays by a group of young theologians who are seeking to understand and shape their world through the lens of God's promises. These scholars were participants in the Augsburg Youth Theology Institute which took place at Augsburg University in Minneapolis, Minnesota July 8-13, 2018. This year's institute equipped young people to be leaders for mission in their congregations and communities. These scholars became skilled peer ministers under the tutelage of Lyle Griner, National Peer Ministry director. They were trained to be cross-cultural advocates by Augsburg University's Chief Diversity Office, Joanne Reeck. They were initiated into the practices of community organizing by the staff of the Minneapolis Area Synod. They wrestled with the theory and theology of local missions as accompaniment in Jesus' name. They were empowered to challenge and lead their congregations into their neighborhoods for the common good. You will read their visions for how to do this work in these essays.

Their essays have taken shape under seven main themes. Amber, Daria, Fuchen, Jaclyn, Kathryn, and Nicholas open our eyes to the importance of diversity for our church and the reality of racism. Lydia and Serena both take on different forms of conflict, offering us strategies for moving beyond conflict and violence. Oskar, Renee, and Sophie address the importance of noticing and destigmatizing the mental health issues so many people in our communities are managing. Cole and Isaac challenge us to care for our environment with more intentionality. Anna, Isabella, and Taryn show us the reality of poverty and give us hope for ending it. Annika, Gavin, Montana, Rosella, Rosie, Sarah, and Samantha all call the church to double-down on engaging their youth in unique and urgent ways. Lastly, Joshua and Will express their concerns for drug use in their communities and beg the church to become involved.

Theology and the proclamation of the gospel cannot happen in a vacuum. They both must take place in conversation with the real challenges we face in our world. You will notice the interdisciplinarity of these essays as they seek to describe urgent issues, frame them theologically, and offer a strategy for addressing them. These young theologians are critical thinkers and compassionate doers. They can lead our church and our world in the right direction if we allow them. Let's listen to what they have to say.

God's peace,
Jeremy Myers
Associate Professor of Religion
Augsburg Youth Theology Institute Director



Theology and Public Leadership Major

Theology and Public Leadership is an interdisciplinary major that forms leaders for work at the intersections of church and society. Students are equipped with the necessary theological and theoretical frameworks, leadership skills and servant hearts to lead a variety of communities in their expression of faith and their work for justice in the world. This happens through the disciplined study of theology, scripture, the social sciences and ministry. A distinctive element of the major is the combination of practical and theological training: students will have many opportunities to apply their knowledge and discernment skills in specific ministry contexts, including a supervised internship.

Graduates work in the areas of youth & family ministry, congregational ministry, community organizing, public policy & advocacy, non-profits and graduate school. Our vision is a generation of Christian leaders equipped to lead the Christian church into the public square for the common good.

Students earn a Bachelor of Arts in Theology and Public Leadership and are encouraged to combine this degree with one of the concentrations on the back, a minor or a second major in an area of interest.

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Required Courses

Theology Core	Ministry Core
Research Methods in Religion	Theological Foundations for Public Ministry
The Bible in Culture and Counterculture	Life and Work of the Church
Martin Luther and the Reformation	The Art of Public Ministry
Contemporary Theology	Internship
Religion Keystone	

Cross-Disciplinary Elective OR Concentration

Complete one course in a concentration listed below or complete the entire concentration

- **Youth Studies Concentration**—offers students the opportunity to explore the history and practice of work with children and youth, to form a critical and constructive framework for understanding and appreciating young people, and to develop the necessary skill set for effective work with children and youth.
- **Leadership and Management Concentration**—prepares students to manage and lead organizations, especially non-profits.
- **Community Engagement Concentration**—prepares students to be community organizers and leaders who help organizations connect with their communities.
- **Worship and Music Concentration**—prepares students to be worship and music leaders in congregations and other faith communities.
- **Environmental Stewardship Concentration**—prepares students to organize, educate and lead faith communities and other non-profits around environmental stewardship.
- **Advocacy & Public Policy Concentration**—prepares students to lead faith communities and other non-profits in their work around advocacy and public policy.
- **Human Services Concentration**—prepares students to work in faith communities and other non-profits serving individuals and families in need.
- **Cross-Cultural Relations Concentration**—prepares students to help faith communities and other non-profits work effectively across cultural differences.



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Socioeconomic Status, Racism, and Faith

Amber Torvund, Rochester, MN

People still believe that race is the cause of racial disparity. People tend to forget, however, that societal structures and barriers create the opportunity for racial disparity to exist. This paper explores causes of racial disparity, calls God's people into action, and provides a solution to bringing all people back together in an equal community. Racial disparity needs to be reevaluated through socioeconomic status in communities rather than blaming race.

I was talking to a teacher about the imbalance in my school between our population demographics and only black students getting punishments. This teacher, who I've admired and taken trusted advice from in the past, turned to me and said that in his experience, it's only those kids that act out. Of course they would get the punishments. It's only natural. That was the end of the story for that teacher, but it wasn't for me. They never bothered to ask *why*. Why do minority students always seem to be the ones disrupting class? Why is race a bigger issue at our newest, most modern and affluent public school than at our run-down, overpopulated high school on the other side of town? Why does Rochester attempt to bring in more upper class residents, which also means that less minorities live around downtown? Why is it abnormal and a small cultural shock to see a black family in our good, Christian suburbs?

Rather than solely blaming race, a social construct ingrained into society, for the separation of people of different colors in my city, society has formed disparities that unevenly impact different races. It's because of our systems and already imbalanced equality that minorities are worse off than the white majority. In Rochester, socioeconomic disparity plays a large role in separating white people from people of color and sustaining racial inequality.

People are able to trace race inequality from the foundations of the U.S. to the present. Eventually, along the way, generations and society pass down beliefs and systems that create institutionalized racism. This racism builds up barriers to societal expectations and economic opportunities, stemming from school segregation to housing segregation, building on all aspects of an individual's life (Katel). Because society has set up patterns of oppression in every experience, black minorities can't easily get ahead or even caught up to the majority. School segregation doesn't necessarily mean the most accessible, historic example of separate schools—presently, black and white students get unequal treatment, unequal funding based on socioeconomic status in the school district, and unequal opportunities based on what families can afford to pay for field trips, sports, clubs, fundraisers, and more.

Schooling and housing disparities are connected. A lot of school districts are funded through local property taxes. Gentrification and solely improving and building upper-class apartments promotes wealthier families to take advantage of specific areas, excluding lower and lower-middle classes. Higher poverty levels can be connected to “fewer guidance counselors and psychologists, lower-paid teachers, bigger class sizes, and more run-down facilities” in schools (Armstrong). Because of economic status in communities, groups get different educational opportunities that will impact them for the rest of their lives. Kids in poorer communities get fewer opportunities, while wealthier kids get better support and outlets through schools. And it's no secret that people in poverty and with low income are mainly minorities, specifically black, Hispanic, and American Indian populations (Macartney). Minorities get fewer opportunities for housing and schooling due to racial disparity imbedded in social systems.

There's an interesting connection between socioeconomic status and faith. It starts with the belief that God is a personal, present God (Lowe). He is involved in daily life choices and experiences. His love and grace are liberating and freeing for any believer in any situation. The cross bears the weight of all human sins, and can liberate both the powerful and oppressed from systems of domination. God listens and knows everyone's struggles and problems in their lives personally and deeply.

All of those statements can be liberating and beneficial to anyone in the country. The interesting factor, however, is that people with lower socioeconomic status are not only benefiting from this God more than others, but they also believe more than their higher socioeconomic counterparts in divine involvement (Schieman). People with lower income and lower social status believe that God is involved in their life more than people with better jobs and communities. The group with less money, less opportunity, and less hope in a world surrounded with systemic racism and oppression believes more numerous, more generously, and more freely that God has involvement in their everyday lives. The power of God is shining through the power of the oppressed to continuously and powerfully believe in Him. Their love and hope for the future is humbling and uplifting to all who see their faith and strong wills. So why is it separated?

Why is their faith in divine involvement shoved into boxed-up schools and residential areas in the not-so-nice parts of town that no one else has a reason to go to? Why are they not in my church, helping my faith, benefiting from my community as well? Why are we not accepting everyone, despite their socioeconomic status, to commune with us, to love with us, and to praise with us in all parts of our lives?

In today's society where connections between the world and faith grow slimmer and farther in between, it's hard for communities to see past skin color for prospective neighbors in their suburbs, it's hard for people to invite people of different economic standings into their social circles, and it's hard for people to be ready to easily relate to others with lower social positions. It shouldn't be, though.

Jesus taught us to not judge people by their money or social standing. We all have something to bring to the table. We have our gifts and talents to share, our company to give, and our ears, hearts, and arms to listen, love and hold. All people are God's people, and we should treat each other as such. No material or societal barrier should get between God's people and sharing His love.

Addressing systems in society that abide by racism poses the issue of dealing with society rather than racists. The problem of minorities getting unfair treatment is deeper than outright hatred and action against them. Society has to stand up against its own institutions and tendencies.

The first step is education. People need to know that socioeconomic status plays a large role in why society is the way it is—why minorities have larger populations in poverty than the majority, why minorities don't actually get the same schooling in their neighborhoods, and why the system isn't working. School districts need to make their teachers and board members aware of socioeconomic backgrounds and how to fully succeed in helping all types of students. School districts should provide the same type of schools throughout all parts of their district so that all students have an equal opportunity for seeking out help, getting resources, and moving forward in life. Local governments need to be aware of the connection between property tax and school

funding, and how gentrification and segregation in housing districts impacts the future of minorities.

There needs to be more diverse locations for all types of people to live. While it's nice to build new apartment complexes in downtown Rochester, the apartments available aren't even affordable to nurses at the Mayo Clinic. New housing should be made available to people at all income levels. This will help promote a more diverse neighborhood, which will in turn reduce the separation of classes and help schools become more diverse with better opportunities for all students.

An easy step to help build up a stronger, more cohesive community is to welcome all people into the church. Invite strangers to come and worship; seek out people who are different than the majority of the congregation and welcome them in—welcome everyone in. Invite someone with a different economic upbringing than you to sit down and have coffee. A full, diverse church can bring the community together and cross boundaries that society has structured around everything else. Welcoming the stranger—or becoming the stranger yourself—creates cracks in the social constructs of class, race, and societal separation. When people band together to become a community with everyone, the systems and structures of society will be changed. When people begin to see that everyone deserves the same opportunity as their neighbor, the world will change.

Racial disparity stems from socioeconomic status and societal structures in communities. Schooling and housing become intertwined to segregate races and oppress minorities further. People with lower socioeconomic statuses tend to believe more in divine involvement, and churches and congregations can benefit from mixing all demographics into their communities. People should be educated on the relationship between socioeconomic status and racial disparity, and school and government officials should get involved in making housing areas and schools more diverse. Socioeconomic status is a barrier to creating an equal opportunity society, but communities just like Rochester can come together to build relationships across barrier lines.

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Welcome

Daira Metz Tufino Peña, New Brighton, MN

During this summer I faced new challenges, not only in my community or myself but in the world around me. I started off blind, I believed I already knew all there is to know about these problems, but I was proven wrong. I had many experiences that brought me to think of these problems in my community such as diversity, immigration and deportation. I want others to be willing to open up and see these problems and help me abolish them.

At the start of this summer I participated with my church in two major events in Houston, Texas for the very first time and didn't know what to expect. The first event I attended was the Multicultural Youth Leadership Event, otherwise known as MYLE. MYLE, aside from being fun and exciting, was a whole different experience in the Lutheran community for me. This event showed me that the Lutheran community was not just in Minnesota but all over the world; I learned so many different songs about God in different languages and I worshiped in a way I never had before. I worshiped in a room with tons of people of different ethnicities, cultures and backgrounds from all over the world. We danced and sang together in comfort and happiness. During this experience I found comfort and freedom to be me, I didn't hold back. After MYLE I was very excited for the ELCA Youth Gathering, however my excitement soon died down after the first day. I no longer felt the comfort I felt at MYLE or the diversity.

This got me thinking of my church. My church is welcoming to everyone, in fact in order to bring the latino community in our neighborhood together, my church has a spanish service and invites everyone to come and worship. However, what about all the other non-english speakers? What if my church had services in other languages besides english? Not only would this help the church grow but this would bring the lutheran community closer together. My church has events where the latino community in church teaches the church about their culture, including their food and songs. I believe doing this with the other ethnicities that surround our community would bring us together in a place of peace and comfort where we can all worship God together. Bringing diversity into my church can help others continue their faith and can create new way to bring us together through the love of God regardless of race or language. This can break down barriers society has created.

Immigration has always been a hard topic in America. Everyone has the right to their own opinions, and mine is that immigration is important to America. Why? Because immigration is what started America and made America grow in the first place. People first came to America in search of a better place and greater opportunity for themselves, their family or both. Some came in search of a job to better their lives, freedom of speech, a better working government, seeking asylum from their government, or seeking freedom of religion.

While staying at Augsburg and walking around the neighborhood I saw many places, specifically churches, with signs that wrote: IMMIGRANTS AND REFUGEES WELCOME! It was my very first time seeing those signs in person but when I saw them, I felt a sense of care, welcome and acceptance. At the end of the day I thought back and realised, I had never seen those signs anywhere around my neighborhood. I began to think, what if there are people in my community who want to attend church but are afraid of not being welcomed or don't feel like they belong because of their background? Would their faith die? What would happen if they knew they were welcomed? Knowing you are accepted just the way you are gives you strength. I want to give others strength and tranquility to be who they are regardless of their background.

During my stay at the Augsburg Youth Theology Institute, I learned that many people do not know the difference between race, ethnicity and culture. I also learned that if you stop putting people in a race box, you can get past their looks during a one-on-one and learn about their ethnicity and their culture. Once you get that done you must learn to respect them and yourself so you can get on common ground and organize an event that fights for a common good. If I get to know my neighbor, and if I welcome my neighbor, then I can welcome diversity into my community. Communication is the key. Letting my neighbor know that they are welcome is one step closer to letting everyone know they are welcome. “For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places”(Ephesians 6:12, ESV). To become strong, people must come together and they will overcome obstacles instead of fighting with each other.

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Introducing Chinese History in the Church

Fuchen Yang, Saint Anthony Village, MN

I live in Saint Anthony Village. There is a high school near our church, Saint Anthony Village High School. I think teaching the high school students in this school is the issue I want to focus on.

I came to America last year on September 24th. Then I went to Saint Anthony Village High School. Our school doesn't have many Chinese students. Several Chinese students have been in America for a long time, and they can just speak a little Chinese and they don't know a lot about Chinese history and culture. During the days in high school I found that there are many students who want to learn Chinese history and language. During the morning class in the English Language classroom, some of my classmates asked me to teach them Chinese. My U.S History teacher let me talk about the Chinese College Examination and some Chinese culture to my classmates and I found that they are interested in Chinese culture and history. I think I can do a presentation in church about the Chinese history, language, and religion. I will invite other students to our church, and they can also bring their families and friends who are interested in Chinese history. They can go to our church and listen to our presentation. After that, they can talk to each other and introduce themselves to other people and then they might like to go to church. Because some high school students want to learn about other countries' culture and language, but they don't have the time or chance to do so. This will be a good time to let them learn these things. Some of them might never have been to church before, so it will be a good opportunity to learn about church and talk with people in church. If they like what they experience at church, they might also bring their friends and families.

I'm not a Christian and because of the history and culture, most people in China don't have religion. After I came to America I didn't know anything about the culture. Because of the language and different traditions sometimes I feel alone in my school. One day last year my mom told me that there is a church near our school and she wanted to visit it. I went with her, and after we went there, both me and my mom felt very good. My mom said she can feel peaceful and relaxed in church and she really enjoyed talking with the people at church. I also heard that there is a high school student group in our church and I am very interested in that. After I joined in their activities, I found that this is a very good group; they are friendly and make me feel like I am part of a small family. At first I was a little shy, but after a while, I felt relaxed enough to talk with other members. After that, I always like to go to the church and join the activities at church. Now I have some good friends in my high school, I'm not shy anymore, and like to communicate with others.

I also learned many things in church, such as how to communicate with people and let them focus on the topic we discuss and how to help people feel better when they feel alone (like the new students who come to a new school). The study days at Augsburg University also taught me new things such as community organizing, how to respect different cultures, and so on. These are very good experiences. At first before I went to Augsburg University, I was wondering if I would feel lonely and if I would have problems because of the language. However, the students were very friendly and interesting. We soon became good friends. In the classes, the other two students from our church helped me a lot so I felt relaxed. I can say church helped me a lot, just like a big family. Although I'm not a Christian, I like this big family and want to have more people join us. I want to do a presentation about Chinese history and culture. Then I can lead

more people to church and let them love to go to church. Because our church's high school student group has not been set up for a long time, some high school students come to the church several times, but then they didn't come again. I want to show people that the church is not a boring place. You can learn many different things and meet many new people. I want to let people to feel and touch this culture.

I want to do a presentation about Chinese history and culture in the church. China is a country that has about five thousand years of history. Even in China, our history textbook in middle school and high school is rough because it's hard to show all the events and details of history, that would take a very long time. My plan is to separate our history into some different parts, such as the different dynasties, how these dynasties built up, and the big events that happened in these dynasties, then how these dynasties fell into decay and why. During the history lesson, I will also show how the Chinese language has changed, because our country's language has changed a lot of times throughout history. Nowadays we still have two kinds of Chinese-simplified Chinese and traditional Chinese. I can teach some simple Chinese to the people in church such as some greetings, holiday blessings, weather, time, numbers and so on.

I will also introduce some traditional Chinese festivals, such as the Spring Festivals (this festival is the most important festival in China, like Christmas Day in the US), Mid-Autumn Festival, The Dragon Boat Festival and so on. I will introduce these festivals' background stories, including how these festivals started, what we do in these different festivals, and how we celebrate them.

In ancient China most people have religions. The very famous world religion, which originated in India, named Buddhism, spread to China, and it influenced many people in China at that time, even the emperor. The emperor in some dynasties advised people to learn Buddhism. It influenced a lot of people's daily life in meals, weddings, funerals, house style and so on. Buddhism also had a big influence on Chinese culture. It is an important part of Chinese Literature; many ancient Chinese literary works have included a large number of Buddhist materials. Chinese poetry and arts (like sculpture and painting) also include a lot of Buddhist material as background. I will introduce all these influences with history and give some examples in the church and do some research on it. I will introduce some of China's own religions, such as Taoism. This religion is one of the most famous religions in China, there are still many people who practice this religion. I don't know a lot about this religion, but I will do research on that.

At the same time, I will show some traditional Chinese music and artwork like painting, sculpture and calligraphy in church. I will introduce China's modern development, economics, and the scenic spots and historical sites in China. As a student, I want to introduce the Chinese education system and the school life in China. I will present the differences between the school life in America and China, to show our education's positive and negative parts.

These are my plans to show in church, although I'm not a Christian, I really like to go to the church and the church also helped me a lot. I will do my best to do these plans and not only let people learn about different cultures but also let them know more about church.

The Problem with White Privilege

Jaclyn Hawkins, New Brighton, MN

According to Peggy McIntosh, an American activist, white privilege is “the concrete ways in which legal and economic construction of race benefited white people in their daily and cumulative lives” (as quoted in Boxill). Some white Americans believe that this was a thing of the past. An idea that was prevalent during the time of extreme white supremacists such as the KKK. That belief is false. White privilege is thriving today, and it will continue to thrive until white people give up their privilege and fight for a just world.

In order to understand white privilege, the idea of race must be understood. Race is what other people say about your skin color and physical characteristics. Race is socially constructed, it has no real scientific meaning and it only matters because of the social implications of it (Joanne K. Reeck). The idea of race came about when European Americans began to find cheap labor to exploit from Africa. Before that, there were still cultural differences and conflicts, but culture and race are very different. Culture is how one identifies one’s self. It is the way they were raised, the beliefs and celebrations that their family passed onto them. Race is when other people define a person based solely on physical characteristics.

Defining people by race does not automatically create white privilege. White privilege became a reality when white Americans began capturing and enslaving people who were not white. The white people believed that they were better than everyone who was not white, especially people who were black. Sadly, they had a country and a government who agreed with these beliefs. They kept black people “in their place” by beating them, and taking away all human rights. The white supremacy didn’t end when slavery did. Even when official slavery was illegal, white people made no attempts to help black people move out and buy homes, so the crippling cycle of slavery continued. The KKK continued to spread the idea that white people were superior to black people. When WWII ended, the country put into effect the GI bill, which was supposed to help soldiers go to college and be immersed into civilian life. The soldiers got loans for houses and got money for education. Many of these services were denied to the African American soldiers (After the War). They all fought the same war, but they were treated differently when they returned home. The effects of this bill can still be seen today. When the African American soldiers returned, they couldn’t get loans that would help them move out to the suburbs, so they were forced to live in the cheaper urban areas. The suburbs are still predominantly white because of that. The soldiers were not judged on their performance in the war, they were judged solely on the color of their skin. The white soldiers got more benefits just because they were white. All of these facts are things that are learned in history class in school. But the side effects of those things that are still prevalent today are never mentioned. In his book, *Between the World and Me*, Ta-Nehisi Coates talks about his life growing up in Baltimore and how he had to learn how to protect his own body. He talks about how the safe, white suburbs were like a fairytale to him, something he saw on TV but couldn’t imagine in real life.

Jesus calls His people to give up their privilege. In Mark 10:17-31, a rich man goes to Jesus and asks how he can inherit eternal life. The rich man tells Jesus that he has followed all of the commandments for his entire life. Jesus told him that he must give up his wealth and follow Jesus. Then the man walked away sadly because he was very rich. This text can be taken literally in the context of white privilege. According to the Washington Post, white families have ten times the net worth of black families (Jan). In this Bible story, Jesus calls the white people to

give up their wealth and follow Jesus. His followers can fight for social justice like Jesus did. Another example of the Bible disagreeing with white privilege is the simple fact the Jesus is not white. He was born in Bethlehem. People that come from this region are not white.

White privilege will be hard to break, but it is not impossible. The first step to breaking it is education. I will have a forum at my church about white privilege and about the consequences of it. I want to organize a field trip for my congregation to go to the science museum and bring them to the race exhibit. Educating people in my community will help bring attention to these problems and will start the road to change. I plan to work with the other congregation in my church to put on a community event that is targeted at the entire community, not just my regular congregation.

White privilege is not only a problem in my community, but in the entire US. If individual communities begin to look at how it is affecting them, the whole country will be on the road to success.

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This Christian's Response to Systemic Racism in Education

Kathryn Robinson, Mahtomedi, MN

“Until justice is blind to color, until education is unaware of race, until opportunity is unaware of the color of men’s skin, emancipation will be a proclamation but not a fact.” This quote by Lyndon B Johnson, although stated fifty-five years ago, still rings true today. People across Minnesota, across America, and across the world are still fighting for equality and opportunity. As Christians, we are called to stand up and fight for and with our brothers and sisters in Christ. Racism has not gone away, that is obvious. Here in the land of “Minnesota Nice” racism is alive, but it looks a little different. Specifically in the Twin Cities area, students of color are not given the same amount of respect, time, and effort when they report bullying, derogatory terms, and racism in general; for this reason, education is needed to teach authority figures how to combat these issues. Students of color are the first to be punished but the last to be heard, and this must change.

Racism in Minnesota is unique. It stands out, not for how present it is or how uniquely atrocious, although it is both those things, but for how much Minnesotans are not aware of their own racism. During a community book read at Mahtomedi High School, author Heid E. Erdrich said, “Minnesota racism is walking out of a parking garage with your black and brown male friends and having people look at you like you should be afraid.” To white Minnesotans, racism is subtle, or not even present, but to Minnesotans of color, racism is anything but subtle. Minnesota “nice” gives way to a “colorblind” ideology that hurts more than it helps. By someone denying that they see race at all, they are taking away a person’s identity and their struggles. By not being willing to see or talk about these issues, we as a society, move nowhere. This racism and denial of oppression moves into our schools, hurts a student’s education, and puts a damper on their future.

Districts in the Twin Cities area have been voiceless and actionless when students and parents report incidents of bullying, specifically because of race. In the Woodbury school district, students of color and their parents have had enough. These students have reported being called derogatory names at school and on social media. Instead of administration stepping in, they are doing nothing, and these students are dealing with racism on their own. Many parents have taken action, such as Jodie Carroll who has two daughters in the district. Carroll worked to implement a zero tolerance policy on racism in the schools, but her efforts were rejected (Zamora). And this is not just happening in Woodbury. In the Roseville Area school district a student of color was given a hair weave from her teammates as a gag gift at her basketball banquet. LaToya Turk, the student’s mother, was at the banquet and explained to WCCO news that “everyone was laughing, [but] I was humiliated and so was my child.” Actions like these are often unintentional, but they leave an impact on a person of color. And because many white Minnesotans, and Americans in general, are culturally uneducated, instances like these do not seem like a problem, but they are. Since administration in schools are primarily white men and women, schools need to give administration, teachers, and students education on race, culture, and what people of color experience.

Racism is often thought of as a “social issue” and not a “gospel issue.” But as Christians, every issue should be a gospel issue. Every act of injustice is an act against what Jesus died for. Jesus died for us, each and every one of us. He did not give his life only for white people or powerful people, he gave his life for every human being. This is clear in the bible. For example,

when Peter refuses to associate with Gentiles after learning their true identity, Paul rebukes him and knows his actions are against the truth of the gospel (Gal. 2:11-14, NRSV). Racism, oppression, and hatred are against the truth of scripture and the truth of what the church is meant to look like. In Revelation 7, the visual representation of heaven is that there will be every tribe, every nation, and every person (Revelation 7:1-9, NRSV). The church is meant to act out on that model and the followers are supposed to live that truth. Every church in the New Testament is multi-ethnic. And as Dr. Crawford Loritts, a nationally known bible speaker, says, “the reason God let the church in the world is to model to the world what they were ultimately to become and what they were born for.” That is why we as Christians, and as people, need to care about racial tension and injustice. At the church’s very core, and at the core of what Christians believe in, is harmony. Jesus Christ embodies what we need and what we desire: peace and love. There is an entire population of beloved people who do not get to feel this as easily as the privileged do. It is time to stand up. It is time to pull our heads out of the sand and fight for justice. It is time to become educated on the issues that affect so many. That is truly what Jesus would do.

There is not one solution to combating systemic racism in the schools, but there is a starting place: education. Knowledge is one of the greatest weapons against injustice. Here in my hometown of Mahtomedi, Minnesota, I hope to spread awareness by creating a book club. Books such as *The New Jim Crow*, *The Fire Next Time*, *Between the World and Me*, and many others are eye-opening reads that put the world into perspective. As the book group hopefully grows, I also plan on starting a support group for people of color who have faced injustice in the schools. The book club will not only educate my congregation who attends, but also myself. By hearing student experiences I myself can become more aware and spread these stories to many people who have never faced it. Every child, and especially teenagers, look to find a place that accepts them and loves them. I hope to create that space to help repair the wounds of racism and move forward. I am very grateful that my church, Saint Andrews Lutheran Church, is open to my ideas and hopes and is incredibly gracious in helping me. The support I feel in my church is endless and without them, none of this would be possible. My end goal is to create safe spaces for people to learn, teach, and feel accepted.

Justice is not blind to color, education is aware of race, and opportunity is aware of a person’s skin. Ignorance can no longer be the driving force behind our fear of speaking about the issues at hand. This fear is silencing the ones who need a voice, and this fear is stopping progress. There is not one magical solution to end racism, and I am completely aware that my plan will not fix the problem. Racism is bigger than myself. It is deeply ingrained in our culture, our schools, and our lives. But progress starts with learning, well intentioned conversations, and respect. And for this reason, it is time for Christians to finally stop asking what would Jesus do, and actually do what Jesus did.

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Diversifying the Lutheran Church

Nicholas Guiang, Roseville, MN

We live in a divisive world. Things that divide and separate us as humans and as a society are at the front and center of our lives. Walls are built up around our lives. Within those walls, we have our friends, our family, and our society, with people that are just like them. People that think the same, look the same, and talk the same. With every wall, society separates us more. We understand each other less. We empathize with each other less. We love each other less. The lack of experienced diversity weakens our society, and builds higher walls. Among the highest walls and identifiers are race, ethnicity, and culture. These are distinct and obvious within in our society. On the basis of race, we can take one glance and separate ourselves from one another. As for culture, it doesn't take much observation to acknowledge that we act, speak, and operate in different ways and live different lives. Our society has lost its unity and our understanding of our differences. We must not use our difference to further remove ourselves from each other, but to better understand each other. We must use race, ethnicity, and culture to unite our world and create societies that coexist peacefully together.

We all want to think that we are welcoming. We want our efforts to be recognized and people to understand that we are doing our best to open our arms and doors to all people, rich or poor, black or white, liberal or conservative. Especially within a church, we try our best to make sure everyone is welcome, but when it comes down to it, are we really welcoming everyone in, or are we just saying that? At my home congregation, St. Michael's Lutheran Church, we are open and welcoming and caring for all that enter through our doors, but we still lack diversity. According to our congregational report done by the ELCA, of the 830 registered members in 2017, only 28 identified as a non-white ethnic group. According to this report, only 5% of my church has a racial background that is not white. Above all that, of the 6 multiracial members at church, my brothers and I make up 4 of them. I sit in the pews on Sunday and see a sea of white faces, and with that sea comes a lack of change, education, and understanding. Without significant diversity within a community, how are we supposed to understand cultural or ethnic differences? Although religious differences will break down diversity and segregate us, communities must reach over those walls and pull us back together.

Even the Bible preaches diversity. It shows us the benefits. If God didn't want a diverse world, he would have made everyone the same, but he didn't. He made us different for a reason. God created diversity because it made us better as humans and so we could learn from each others' differences. The Bible shows the importance and God's want for diversity in the church through stories such as Acts 8:26-40, the story of Philip the Evangelist and the Ethiopian eunuch. Philip meets this man on his way to Gaza, and Philip baptizes this man. The Ethiopian man was not forced, but asked to be baptized. An Ethiopian man, baptized. Not a descendant of Abraham, not even from the area of Jerusalem, but a man from Ethiopia, a eunuch, a court official under the queen. He is the man that asks to be baptized by Philip. The Ethiopian man questions Philip, "What prevents me from being baptized?" (Acts 8:37, NIV). The answer is nothing. God wants diversity among his children. He called Philip to that Ethiopian man, and Philip baptized him. As Christians and children of God, we must bring in more diversity to the church. Our sisters and brothers need not to be a replica of ourselves, but must be from around the world. There is no one kind of child of God, and God's family has no limits or requirements.

Walter Brueggemann, in *Interrupting Silence*, calls to us as Christians to reach out past

our walls and barriers, and to look past our differences. By using the story of Mark 7:24-30, Bruggemann teaches us that even Jesus had to learn how his love was not just for the people of Israel, but for all the nations. Jesus is interrupted by a Gentile woman. Not an Israelite, but a Gentile. A people considered by Jews to be “dogs”. Even Jesus doesn’t believe she is worthy of his grace and love. But, she reminds him, that we are all God’s children, even those who we see as dogs, are worthy of God’s love and grace. Bruggemann shows Christians that even Jesus had to learn about diversity and how everyone is worthy of being a child of God. We do not need to be of the same nation, ethnic group, or even cultural upbringing to have the same love and praise for our Lord and God. As Christians, we are Asian, or Mexican, or African, but we are all Christians and all are worthy children of God, and so we should treat each other and act as if we are all children of God. We should welcome each other into our homes and churches and learn and listen to one another. We should not build walls and continue separate our lives and futures.

Within my community, I want to change the demographic, not only in ethnicity and race, but demographic of ideals and thought. I want my church to sustain a diverse congregation. The way to work towards a more diverse community is to educate our own congregation. During the church year, we have two services, and between those services we have an educational hour. During that hour, we bring in speakers to educate our adult members and to discuss different topics, however, I do not feel as though we are using the hour in the best way possible. My plan is to bring more diverse speakers in to educate our members on cultural relationships and how we can be more welcoming to everyone. I also want to begin to educate and diversify our youth as well. If we teach our children how to welcome and interact with a diverse congregation, it will become apart of our whole churches identity. Our church only shows people like us within its walls. Children do not experience or learn from people who are different from them. Our children can be the true change and reshaping of our church if they learn how to interact with those of different cultural backgrounds. In order to educate my congregation, I want to work with my two pastors as well as our youth director to bring in more speakers, not just speakers who come from different places in society, but I want to bring in people from the community in which the church resides. I want the surrounding area of St. Michael’s Lutheran Church to participate in our education. By bringing in community leaders, our church is not only becoming more educated, but also pushing towards sustaining membership from the diverse community and neighborhood in which the building is built.

We are called by God to open our arms to all children and all people on Earth. As a congregation and as a society, we need to begin to diversify our communities in both backgrounds and in ideals. When we begin to understand one another and coexist, that is when we have fulfilled God’s love on Earth. As a society, we must not build a fortress to defend ourselves, but we must build a glorious kingdom on the Earth God gave us.

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Utilizing the Power of Our Voices: Radical Vulnerability in Politics and Religion

Lydia Meier, Willmar, MN

When I got into the car to leave Augsburg's Youth Theology Institute, post-it notes and journals spilled from my arms. Notebooks were scrawled over with notes, ideas, and memories of candlelit services, studies on *Interrupting Silence* by Walter Brueggemann, leadership workshops, and people I would never forget. See, I was feathered with paper wings.

In the next few days, as life settled back around my shoulders, I tried to focus on keeping my wings up. I knew that if I shook off the feathers and hugged them with a folder or paperclip, it'd be that much harder to get motivated again. Luckily, I didn't have much chance to forget about my experiences. There was this paper, for one, as well as multiple community events I was entrusted with organizing or helping with.

In the month since AYTI, I've had time to ponder on my experience and the way it affected my spirituality and community organizing. I believe that AYTI was yet another stepping stone on my path of reconciling religion and politics. AYTI enforced my emphatic trust in the power of radical vulnerability. My goal for my congregation and community is that of this unreserved soul-baring. Complete honesty is contagious in its power to unify, inspire, and motivate. In this paper, I will be aiming to identify an issue in my community and my plan for mending it.

For a rural town of only twenty thousand, my city of Willmar is incredibly diverse. Named an All-America City by the National Civic League, we are blessed to have a large immigrant and refugee population from Latin America and Northeast Africa. However, integration hasn't been easy, and it's not the "newcomers'" faults. Many residents are off put by the sudden diversity; fear has a much stronger grip on our state than we give it credit for. We don't bother to step outside and walk through our vibrant communities, seeing the colors and diversity, smelling the memories and culture and air, *hearing* the conversations... Instead we sit in our tidy, lysol scented, staticky, well ironed, stale living rooms and listen to "fake news" that gives us ready made, low carb, mass produced profiles on the people groups we're supposed to hate. Of course we don't see them as they should be seen. The media has no pair of rose tinted glasses, because feel-good stories don't sell.

In Willmar, there seem to be three equally large groups of people. Those who vote, those who don't, and those who can't. Even with the Latinx and Somali communities who tend to vote "blue," Willmar leans republican. In the 2016 presidential elections, Kandiyohi County voted for Trump by 25%.

Willmar seems to be a microcosm of Minnesota. Minnesota has the highest voter turnout rates in the nation, but the discrepancy between our youngest and oldest voters is striking. 73% percent of people 45 or over showed up to vote in the last presidential election, but turnout among 18-24 year olds reached only about 55 percent, according to the Star Tribune.

Similarly, white Minnesotans had a turnout rate of 71%, while 66%, 52%, and 37% were the respective percentages for Black, Asian, and Hispanic Minnesotans (Star Tribune). Underrepresented community voter turnout is, I believe one of the biggest issues in my community, and my goal is to spend the next three months promoting, organizing, and registering with the end goal of getting as many people to primaries and ultimately, the election, as possible. I may not be old enough to vote, but that just makes me more determined to give

everyone who can a fighting chance. If there's one thing I learned at AYTI this year, it's that my voice matters and that speaking out is a form of faith in action.

In *Interrupting Silence*, Brueggemann emphasizes that "All of [the Bible's] silence breakers have come to see that silence is a strategy for the maintenance of the status quo, with its unbearable distribution of power and wealth. Silence breakers characteristically insist that the old patterns of power must be disrupted and reconfigured (2-3)." Brueggemann's belief is that throughout the gospel, God makes his case for advocacy and truth in all aspects of life. On page 4, he iterates,

"The church has a huge stake in breaking the silence, because the God of the Bible characteristically appears at the margins of established power arrangements, whether theological or socio economic and political. The church at its most faithful is allied with artistic expression from the margin that voices alternatives to dominant imagination. Prayer--beyond conventional polite prayer--is an act of breaking the silence."

Utilizing Brueggemann's logic, I would argue that in the 21st century, voting is one form of radical prayer. Christians are called to speak out--taking our morals and faith to the polls is our sacred responsibility. I have confidence that through altruistic advocacy we become closer to our Creator as we seek to fulfill His vision for Earth, and Jesus is the ultimate model for this.

The story of the Woman at the Well in John 4 is a pellucid example of Him specifically uplifting someone on the peripheral of society. He chooses this woman. Our Savior chooses this socially ostracized woman to reveal Himself in more clarity than He does anywhere else in the Gospels.

If Jesus returned to the world today, it is my belief that He would return to this role of revolutionary enabler. As the epitome of the Biblical silence breaker, His mission would continue to draw everyone into God's circle of profound love. I think that voting is one of the great equalizers in our society. Everyone has the same level of power once they step into the booth, and if we realized this, I think our society would radically change. It is our theological commitment to follow Jesus' example of silence breaking, as Brueggemann outlines throughout his book.

And so: with the help of the ISAI AH organization, which I have been involved in for two years, a friend and I created V.O.I.C.E. with two clear goals: to increase youth leadership and voter outreach in our community of Kandiyohi county. VOICE (Voter Organizing In the Community for Everyone) is a non partisan non profit that encourages youth activists to stand up and speak out. We seek to challenge stereotypes and divisive narratives, motivate dialogue, empower typically underrepresented voices, and disturb the status quo.

From July 23-25, I had the wonderful experience of helping to head a Youth Leadership Workshop in our Community Integration Center. For three days, twelve people met in a room with bright turquoise walls, sharing food, a circle of chairs, a whiteboard, and most importantly the experience. The teens in our training learned the power of intentional conversations, how to use our collective voice to create change in our community, and how to identify others' self interests. Teaching my classmates to become student organizers was intense, rewarding, and most of all, inspiring. Much of what I gave back to my community through this came directly from what I learned at Augsburg's 2018 Youth Theology Institute.

Though no one on VOICE's nine person grassroots team is old enough to vote, we are focused on one goal as we hurtle toward the August 14th primaries. We believe that through

conducting intentional dialogue in our community, we can accelerate voter registration in our town. VOICE is collaborating with ISAIAH on a voter registration campaign that will continue past the primaries with a downtown block party in September or October with voting registration and information.

Assembling help and enthusiasm from local businesses, congregations, and organizations, like ISAIAH, CURE, and League of Women Voters, and community members themselves is crucial in succeeding to getting more voters to the booths. We plan to gain this support through forums, discussions, personal conversations, and community events.

As youth, we are next to inherit this world. Whatever we put into it now, that is what we're left with. Over the past few years, I've wondered, will it all be worth it? And after spending a week at AYTI, practicing openness and faith, I think I have my answer. I feel incredibly fortunate to be working with this group of driven, passionate leaders, and I feel hopeful about our country for the first time in awhile.

(You can follow VOICE's path of courageous vulnerability on instagram at [voice_organization](#))

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Combating Conflict

Serina Sharbo, Eagan, MN

Amidst the fluctuating hormones, differing social scenes, and increase in freedoms of high school, interpersonal conflicts emanate. Senior high overflows with change and stress, flooding young minds with an overwhelming sense of new. Schools, educators, and peers, looked at through the eyes of a frustrated and exhausted scholar, can, and often are, looked at as atrocities. Learning how to approach these obstacles is an essential skill for being an affirmative and ecclesiastical individual in today's society.

Children begin their life without a filter, saying exactly how they feel and what is on their mind at that moment. Moral development and a general awareness of their own emotions and those of their peers advance and change as they grow older. Through the strain of planning the future and trying to discover vocations, hormones in teenagers waver, causing impulses, moods, and emotions to be vibrant.

Conflicts between adolescents cover a wide range of topics, from small disagreements to capital felonies, such as murder charges. In the first 21 weeks of 2018, 16 of the 24 firearms used in school shootings were discharged by youths (Ahmed). Mental health and psychiatric disabilities play a large role in statistics surrounding shootings. Education on better outlets and the soundness of the mind is one step toward finding a solution to decreasing violence in young adults whether or not they deal with mental illness.

Violence in schools also pertains to physical fighting and assault. Although the amount of fighting in schools has declined by about ten percent since the 1990's, improvements in our approach to disputes can be made to reduce the remaining twenty-one percent (Child Trends). Fighting is used as a coping method by many minors but is not the proper or most practical system to relieve tensions. Medical bills and injuries sustained during a fight are not the only deterrent to future fights; students can also obtain a criminal charge for assault, resulting in their arrest and leading towards a negative future.

Though statistics make the problem of conflict between high schoolers transparent, the Bible acknowledges the subject of conflict resolution in the initial few books of the New Testament. Exclaiming "blessed [are] the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God," Matthew 5:9 (NIV) declares that the people who maintain harmony are those who shall be nurtured and loved by the Lord. It is a well-known and essential part of the Christian lifestyle, that God wants all his children to treat each other in a respectful, loving, and caring manner. Having a mindset that is "always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that [we] may know how to answer everyone," and applying the Fruit of the Holy Spirit as said in the book of Galatians, allows God to work within us (Colossians 4:6, NIV). Striving to see from an opposing perspective leads to a salutary resolution in which Christians can "love [their] enemies and do good to them," (Luke 6:27, NIV).

Dr. David Hawkins, a Christian psychologist, explains that although maintaining healthy conflict "requires our best energy, our best effort, and our best attitude,... scripture offers many directives on how to engage in healthy communication, the backbone of which is often patience" (Neffinger). Taking the high and reasoned road when in a feud isn't the easiest or most gratifying option, however, as it is written in Proverbs 19:11: "[a] man's wisdom gives him patience; it is to his glory to overlook an offense" (NIV).

Another factor in Christian conflict resolution is that God not only strives for his children

to have patience and forgiveness with each other, but for us to realize that we, as ourselves, are not perfect. As Jesus said in Matthew 7:3, “why worry about a speck in your friend's eye when you have a log in your own?” (CEV). A simple way to avoid the creation of conflict is to focus on bettering our own person before worrying about others.

There are many ways to provide high schoolers with the tools necessary to resolve the conflicts that appear in their daily lives. The help and resources school administrators, other adults such as pastors, youth leaders, and fellow peers can provide, can contribute to the making of a method to combat conflict. I would like to mobilize these resources in a nonprofit program at my school. I would run the program like a club, and it will blend fun and entertainment with conflict resolution resources held twice a month over the school year during home room. With the administration from a teacher and support from my church community, I hope to bring in speakers to talk about topics such as stress, anger, attitude, perspective, and different types of conflict. In addition, I would like to offer my peers ways to let out their emotions through physical activity as well as relaxation. This would include boxing using punching bags, team games, yoga, and the use of playdough, stress balls, and movies. These activities and others like them will provide students a break from and way to release their cooped up stresses. Although participation will be wanted, students will have the freedom to work on school work or socialize during these meetings. My main hope is to supply students with a break, a release, and a fun, comfortable environment where everyone feels welcome, and, in return, the school and surrounding community see a decline in violence and conflict.

Conflict is evident in everyday life and not knowing how to properly handle it appropriately can change a person’s future. The words of God and the customary Christian mentality allow us to be guided to appreciate and approach our family in Christ.

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On Depression, Suicide, and Theology

Oskar Alyn, Rochester, MN

Depression and suicide are topics commonly kept out of the public conversation, but the vast majority of people either know someone or they themselves are affected by depression or suicide. It is easy to feel overwhelmed by a problem with such a vast scope, but despite its widespread effects, there are two things that need to happen in order to solve this problem: information on its nature needs to be more broadly available, and people need to be taught how to effectively intervene. At the very least on a local scale, these methods can be implemented with relative ease. Depression and suicide can both be significantly reduced if they are handled through informed interventions.

Before solving a problem it is imperative to understand what exactly the problem is. To start, establishing a connection between depression and suicide is obvious. By far the most common reason for suicide is depression (“The Six Reasons People Attempt Suicide”). While other causes have been identified, depression causes the vast majority; therefore, it is the best target for reducing suicides. Put simply, depression is a mood disorder that results in a variety of behaviors including loss of energy or interest, persistent feelings of loss along with other emotional and physical problems (“Depression (Major Depressive Disorder)”). Like many other mental illnesses, causes of depression are hard to isolate. It has, however, been linked to a variety of factors including trauma, substance abuse, and genetic factors. As for suicide, although the majority of the public knows what it is, they are less likely to be aware of how prevalent it is. Suicide is currently the second leading cause of death for younger demographics. In addition, as stated by the Post Bulletin, “Olmsted County has been hit particularly hard by youth suicide” (Boese). For people between 15 and 24 suicide is the cause of about a quarter of the deaths. Overall it is clear and apparent that suicide and depression are both problems that require addressing.

If we try to approach this problem from a theological perspective there is a pretty clear roadblock: the Bible typically mentions mental illness as demons. This sort of demonization can be seen in a variety of stories. One of the better-known stories is in Matthew when Jesus casts two demons out of two men and into pigs (Matthew 8:28-34, NRSV). In addition, suicide in the Bible is portrayed in a way that does not particularly help with the situation. It is portrayed more like a natural course of actions than something that is preventable. This sort of approach to mental illness, thinking it to be the work of demons or something natural, is not particularly informed or useful. In order to make any theological sense of mental illness, a deeper examination is required.

Just beneath the surface level details of stories of demons, there is a consistent trend: when Jesus finds demons, he casts them out. In any example, Jesus is working to help those affected by mental illness whenever he is aware of it. In this context, these stories begin to bear a striking resemblance to the story of the Good Samaritan. Many people see those who need help in their battle against mental illness but few stop to help them. What further complicates the situation is that not everyone has the power to “cast out demons” or help other people struggling with a mental illness. This is why it is imperative to better inform the public on mental illness and how to intervene.

In order to be these good Samaritans, the first step is to learn more about what depression is and how it can be helped, but even this is a multistep process. Fully understanding depression

isn't even realistic for those working in psychology. Instead, a more working knowledge should be implemented. Programs like the John Hopkins ADAP are designed with this sort of objective in mind (Mennitto). ADAP is designed for use in schools, but a similar program can be devised for community-wide distribution. Some of the core pieces programs like ADAP use are the messages that these mental illnesses are treatable and that people should seek help. Once implemented, a community-wide program would be able to start reaching those needing help quickly as members of their own communities become capable of providing the support they need.

Logistically this sort of distribution will take time though. Although curriculums like ADAP take only three hours to complete, development, preparation, and scheduling will delay its actual use. Developing a community-wide version of a curriculum can be accomplished within a few months provided there is adequate expertise involved. After the curriculum is developed teachers will need to be selected and prepared which will take a few more months. Once teachers are prepared, a forum for the lessons can be selected. Provided the community is adequately notified, the information and thereby the ability to help should be in the community within six months.

Although this sort of problem is difficult to combat, provided that the community works it, it can be done. Its scope is massive which makes it all the more worth the necessary effort. On a theological level, the Bible shows that individuals should do something, and by using information based programs, it is possible to have an impact because depression and suicide can both be significantly reduced if they are handled through informed interventions.

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The Stigma of Mental Illness

Renee Christensen, Shafer, MN

The ratio 1069:3 represents the number of students from the 2017-18 school year to the number of guidance counselors available at a high school in my county (ISD 2144). This ratio results in each counselor overseeing over 350 students! This brings to the fore a real world question: how can one person adequately counsel over 350 students, while performing all of the other duties assigned them? This year, at the Augsburg Youth Theology Institute, 30 students from around the country came together to learn how to become public Christian leaders. We learned rather quickly that many of us had a few things in common: our love for God and knowing someone who has or had some sort of mental illness. It became apparent that almost everyone has been touched by mental health issues in some way. Considering the overwhelming task of school counselors, and the prevalence of mental health issues among my peers, I am inspired to raise awareness regarding mental health to reduce the stigma of mental health issues.

When I first heard about this paper, I was inspired, but also a bit intimidated. I was intimidated because I found out these would be put in a journal, with public access. As I thought more about this paper, however, the verses we studied this week changed my mindset.

“You are a light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light so shine before others, so that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.” (Matthew 5:14-16, NIV)

After hearing these verses, I knew what the topic of my paper would be about: ending the stigma that revolves around mental health. Throughout my time at AYTI, I learned that I do have a voice, and I can use that voice to respectfully, but effectively talk about the ‘sensitive’ subjects, like mental health in my community. Based on a survey done in 2016, 11% of my high school's 11th graders have considered suicide (MDE). Grades average around 280 students; 11% of 280 is about 31 students. Thirty one out of 280 students is way too many. If you would walk into a normal high school and listen to conversations you hear in the hallways, I guarantee that you will hear something along the lines of “Ugh. I have this stupid class next. Kill me now.” or “Can I just curl up in a ball and die? I don’t wanna take this test!” To most, these statements mean nothing. But to others, with people making these statements, how can we know if someone is truly hurting? Today, so many kids make jokes about suicide and mental illnesses, it is hard to tell if they are serious or not. With students and adults making jokes about mental illnesses, it further increases the already bad stigma related to mental health. That stigma is getting worse and worse each day we ignore it. You may be asking yourself why this matters. As children of God, we are instructed to let our light shine before others. We can do that by using our voices for those who are or feel silenced.

Throughout both theological and world history, there has always been a stigma surrounding mental health. There are many examples in the Christian Bible where people were quick to say that if you didn’t fit their definition of ‘normal’, it would not be uncommon for them to assume that you had a demon possessing you, or that you had an unclean spirit. For example, Bible passages such as Luke 9:37-43, where Jesus heals a ‘demon’ possessed boy. My question is how do we know that the boy was demon possessed? The boy’s fits were described as: “A spirit seizes him and he suddenly screams; it throws him into convulsions so that he foams at the

mouth. It scarcely ever leaves him and is destroying him” (Luke 9:39, NIV). I’m not trying to prove the Bible wrong, but what if the boy mentioned was having seizures instead of being demon-possessed? We may never know for sure. Let’s face a fact: we have all been possessed by something. Whether it is our phones/electronics, internet usage, ideals, our need to be liked by others, etc. Our culture is so quick to label people, do we stop and realize how destructive it can be to the person being labeled? In having a conversation with one of my pastors, he said something that stuck out: some of the most creative people in the world are those who were mentally ill. Artists like Picasso, Robin Williams, and so many others. Maybe even Martin Luther. The incredible amount of work he accomplished could be related to a manic phase with bipolar disorder. But let’s not look at the people with mental illnesses as completely crazy. There is a fine line between craziness and creativity, If the goal of our world is to rid it of mental illnesses, the world would be incredibly dull.

Matthew 5:14 says that a town built on a hill cannot be hidden. It also states that we are the light of the world. As with any lights, however, there is always a shadow side. For this paper, I think of the shadow side as mental illnesses. So many people go about their lives, and to most, look like they have everything together. They know what they are doing in life. However, many are silently suffering, unable to talk about what is really troubling them- the shadow side. I’m not advising to look for the shadow in everyone you meet, but it may not be such a bad idea to keep this fact in mind. Everyone has struggles, whether you can see them or not. Don’t assume that a person has their life put together. In my county, I believe that a majority of the population believes that if you can't see an illness or if it is not a physical illness, then it isn't real. People say that they don't want to talk about mental health because it is an uncomfortable conversation to have. My hope is that I can gather people who are willing to start that conversation about mental health, shed light on a very dark topic and provide resources to those who are silently suffering; and in doing that, help to lessen or even end the stigma that mental health is too ‘awkward’ to talk about. One of the places that the AYTI students went to was the Science Museum of Minnesota. In our free time there, we found an exhibit about mental health. In that exhibit, we saw people of all ages, races, and backgrounds talking and learning about mental health and why it is so important. The exhibit used the hashtag #MakeItOkay, to start a conversation on social media. Their efforts inspired the group because we learned that we aren’t alone, and that people do care about those struggling with an invisible disease.

In raising awareness of the stigma, I am going to be educating my congregation and community on the signs and symptoms of ‘major’ mental illnesses and also providing a Question and Answer forum for community members to ask professionals, (ex. Mental health counselors, drug and alcohol counselors, and psychiatrists) any questions they may have. I will be videotaping that forum and making that video available to the public for future use. In addition, I will be working closely with my pastor and youth director to help get teens involved with this conversation and provide a safe environment to talk respectfully about mental illnesses and our mental health. Overall, my goal is to create an environment where my community, congregation, and peers can have a healthy and respectful conversation where we can discuss the importance of mental health and illness.

Unfortunately, even with all of the new technology we have today, scientists and doctors have only begun to scratch the surface of understanding mental illnesses and our brain. However, we should remind ourselves of some facts, as children of God. Stated in Psalm 139:

“You have searched me, Lord, and you know me. You know when I sit and when

I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; You are familiar with all my ways. If I say ‘Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me,’ even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you. For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place, when I was woven together in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be. Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting” (Psalm 139:1-3,11-16,23-24, NIV)

God loves us more than we'll ever know, and He will never leave us. God’s blessings to you.

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Tackling the Stigma of Mental Health

Sophie Frank, Minnetonka, MN

In the US, mental health is a controversial topic that is either openly discussed or greatly avoided. Due to the lack of education on mental health, there is a common stigma that surrounds many individuals' view on the issue. By bringing awareness to mental health in Minnetonka we can work to improve the common stigma surrounding the topic.

At this time, many individuals might not realize that rather than eliminating the stigma surrounding mental health, they are actually supporting it. So what exactly is the stigma? The stigma is the result of repeated stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination, and with the lack of education the public has on mental health, it is no surprise that these actions which increase the stigma go unnoticed. Although you may not realize it, the negative mindset that is associated with the term "mental illness" is partially due to the media. In the article "The Stigma of Mental Health Is Making Us Sicker" by Michael Friedman, the author says that "the negative stereotypes involve perceptions that people with mental illness are dangerous. This perception is fueled by media stories that paint violent perpetrators as 'mentally ill' without providing the context of the broad spectrum of mental illness" (Friedman). In today's society, our education on major topics like mental health come from the media which is filled with derogatory labels and is often times found to misrepresent major issues. So while some individuals may just have a negative view on mental health, others may not realize that what they think is the correct opinion of mental health is actually an opinion influenced by the media.

With an increase of programs and professionals attempting to educate the public on mental health on a larger scale, there is still a lack of change being made on a smaller scale, such as in communities like Minnetonka. As reported by the National Center for Children in Poverty: "Mental health problems may lead to poor school performance, school dropout, strained family relationships, involvement with the child welfare or juvenile justice systems, substance abuse, and engaging in risky sexual behaviors" (NCCP). Furthermore, if a community is doing little to nothing in the prevention and early intervention strategies of mental health, the outstanding effects on teenagers will become more prominent and controlling in their everyday lives. As a current high schooler myself, I have experienced the presence of mental health issues not only on a personal level, but also through the majority of my peers. Through being an active member in the Minnetonka community, it has become clear that the idea that "there is nothing to be depressed about" is a common excuse for someone to look past the growing mental health issues in our schools. With the high expectations set for high schoolers and the ridiculous amount of competition between peers, it is common for families to look past the mental health spectrum and revert to money and materialism to solve any and all problems rather than getting the needed help. In the article "Adolescent Mental Health in the United States", Susan Schwarz wrote that "between 25% and 33% of adolescents forgo needed care, and many others lack access" (Schwarz). As mentioned before, the lack of treatment for adolescents suffering from mental health issues can result in larger issues within their lives. By bringing awareness to mental health in smaller scale communities similar to Minnetonka, the needed prevention and intervention options can be formed to help control the presence of poor emotional health.

Within communities such as Minnetonka, Christian leaders are not only those who spread the word of God, but are also those who impact their community through leadership and compassion. When it comes to controversial topics like mental health, finding ways to leave an

impression on your community can be difficult. One of the most challenging parts of being a Christian leader is having to recognize your voice and refuse to be silenced. In the book *Interrupting Silence* by Walter Brueggemann, it is said that “silence is a strategy for the maintenance of the status quo, with its unbearable distribution of power and wealth” (Brueggemann, 2). This idea remains true for Christian leaders in Minnetonka when speaking out about such a vexed topic. With such a relevant status quo that sits above the community of Minnetonka, it can be hard to assert dominance and break the silence on such issues. While the idea of staying silent is something Christian leaders must face, staying silent also describes a common theme seen within Minnetonka families. Following the stigma surrounding mental health, it is not uncommon for a family to try and hide the fact that a loved one is suffering from a mental illness for the sake of maintaining their status quo within the community. By breaking silence and bringing attention to the fact that having a mental illness is nothing to be ashamed of, but rather something to be celebrated, communities like Minnetonka can improve the way mental health is thought about.

As a young Christian leader and a current student at Minnetonka High School, I have experienced first hand the growing issue of mental health. Not only have I had multiple encounters with friends who were suicidal, but I know the feeling of being that person that others turn to for support, as well as being the person that has had to reach out to others for their own support. Within the past couple months at Minnetonka, our community, and especially the young Christian leaders like myself, have practiced comforting and supporting each other. Most recently one of my peers, Archer Amorosi, committed suicide by cops, something that was absolutely horrifying and devastating to everyone, was also something that, sadly, brought our community together. As my friends and I got ready for Archer’s funeral, we sat on the end of the bed and went around, each of us saying how many months we thought would pass before we would be getting ready to go to another funeral. We realized that suicide has become something so common within Minnetonka, that all we knew how to do was prepare for another loss. Just from this last year alone, I know five high schoolers personally that have committed suicide. After Archer’s death, I decided that mental health is not something that will only be discussed periodically, but rather something that will be prevalent in our everyday lives.

Utilizing my leadership skills and the knowledge I gained from the Augsburg Youth Theology Institute, I plan to follow through with my goal of breaking the stigma surrounding mental health. By tackling the stigma and bringing mental health to light, I believe progress will be made within my community making mental health something that can be comfortably discussed between individuals. I plan to find ways to educate the public about mental health and provide them with steps to break the stigma. In a lecture given by Lyle Griner, I improved my peer ministry skills and was given new tools to bring with me throughout my daily life. With those tools in hand, I plan to live this next year while educating and breaking the silence within my community, whether that entails simple one-on-one conversation with my peers, or addressing my congregation and the members of my youth group. In addition to my year long mission of spreading the good word, I plan to continue researching mental health and what education my school offers on the topic. I am aiming to address the places mental health is most relevant in our daily lives: our schools, our homes, and our churches. After working with my health teachers and reaching out to the school principal to encourage educating our students on the broad spectrum of mental health and the stigma surrounding it, I want to directly impact how mental health is seen in the homes of my peers. Throughout the next year I want to work with

our local government to provide more prevention and intervention options for teens, as well as ask for an increase in advertising and marketing within the community, hopefully making families more aware of mental health. As far as addressing the church, seeing as though I am already a prominent leader and youth member within my church, I will ask for the support of Lyle Griner in implementing education and tools into our youth group curriculum. I also plan to connect with Pastor Aaron Warner in hopes to address the congregation, whether that means having an advertisement in the slide show before the service, or going up and delivering a message to the congregation myself.

Although defying the stigma surrounding mental health is no small feat, I feel compelled to put in my best effort into educating my community and bringing us all together as a Christian leader. I look forward to this upcoming year knowing I will be making a difference throughout my community, helping not only my peers, but also by giving the families of Minnetonka a more educated and non-media influenced opinion of mental health. Mental health is something that should be celebrated, not something to be ashamed of. I hope to continue to spread the good word through my peers, my community, and new strangers I encounter everyday. From this day on my goal is to make mental health something that is no longer uncomfortable to talk about. As a Christian leader, I know I will always continue to lead within my community, even after this year is complete.

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Environmental Sustainability

Cole Helland, New Brighton, MN

We are a wasteful society revolving around consumption and materialism. Much of what we purchase finds homes in landfills, contaminating this delicate, beautiful world. We push “reduce, reuse, recycle,” earth day, and green products, but in reality, we have a long journey ahead to become a green society. It can be simple to push aside our dying Earth and choose ignorance, hoping for bliss. However, action needs to be taken now, we cannot wait, sustainability is not possible if we continue with our destructive habits.

Conquering all the problems plaguing the environment would be impossible, it's too large of a topic for anyone to take on. However, something progressive can be done about a much smaller focus, the impaired state of Minnesota's lakes and waterways. As Minnesotans, we pride ourselves on the being the “Land of 10,000 lakes,” however, in reality, we only take care of half of them. According to Environment Minnesota, nearly “half of Minnesota's waterways are classified ‘impaired’ meaning they don't meet water quality standards and are unsafe for fishing and swimming” (Environment Minnesota). Truthfully, Minnesota is the land of 5,000 lakes. We have neglected our responsibilities as stewards on this Earth to protect and nurture this precious resource. A recent update in 2013 said “511 water bodies or river segments were added to the impaired list and only 13 were removed” (Environment Minnesota). This is an alarming statistic, but it illustrates there is the possibility for removal from the list. We need to take action to slow the additions while increasing the amount removed and we can work to reverse the process. It seems simple when stated in those terms, but in reality, it is a difficult task. These are waterways that we use for swimming, fishing, and freshwater, yet we neglect to properly maintain them. The problem is that one person changing their habits does little to assist an ecosystem; we need awareness to even begin to start taking waterways off the contaminated list. This is a problem that I feel called to alleviate because as a results-driven person I will see some tangible progress that will motivate me to continue with my endeavors. I have a small lake near my backyard, where I spend much of my summer tubing, swimming, kayaking and walking around it, yet I have found that this entire time it's been labeled as unsafe for swimming and fishing. This fact is horrifying to me; a core part of my childhood hasn't been safe for many years. The reasons Long Lake is unsafe are not life-threatening, however, the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA) has listed the lake unsafe for swimming because of low visibility and algae blooms from the high phosphorus concentration (Minnesota Pollution Control Agency). The MPCA also listed fishing as unsafe because of the high mercury levels in fish tissue, which is potentially dangerous (Minnesota Pollution Control Agency). These are all solvable problems, people just need to care. None of the solutions are difficult, it just takes awareness and compassion. If everyone felt called to protect the environment, humanity would see massive steps in saving it, but until that day, environmental activists will continue to clean up after the rest of humanity, proving to be janitors rather than activists. We are searching for solutions to problems that could have been solved if society only kept the environment at the forefront of their thoughts. It's a resource we use every day, and is essential to our existence, yet we take it for granted. Not every resource is self-sustainable at a level to match our uncontrollable consumption. Currently, humans require “1.7 planets to offset our use of natural resources each year” (Nace, Forbes). Similarly, if everyone lived the American lifestyle we “would need five Earths to produce the

resources” (Phys.org). These are eye-opening facts, yet privileged countries, cushioned by their wealth, can remain ignorant. The most staggering statistics is the number of species that go extinct on a given day: “Scientists estimate that 150-200 species of plant, insect, bird, and mammal become extinct every 24 hours” (Vidal, Huffington Post). The Giant Panda and Red Panda might have support around the world, but the 10,000 to 100,000 that go extinct never stood a chance against humanity’s rapid expansion (WWF). Ignoring the problem does not stop the effects from spreading, drastic changes need to be made now to stop our downward spiral. Humans can not wait or action will be irrelevant. Resources seem limitless until they’re gone, then everyone cares about the environment.

As Christians, we are called to be stewards of the Earth. We see this theme repeated throughout the Bible, however, the book of Genesis clearly illustrates the responsibilities of a steward on this Earth. Genesis 1:27-28 reads “So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth” (Genesis 1:27-28, ESV). We are given dominion over the Earth, not to exploit and overuse, but to serve as a steward, protecting, nurturing, and managing. The essential part of this verse is that we have been created in God’s image to love and care for the “fish of the sea” and the “birds of the air,” just as God cares for us. We do have power over the flora and fauna of this planet, but as Christians, we must mirror God in our coexistence with the environment. We must mimic God, providing and protecting, and use our relationship with God as a template for our responsibility on this Earth to protect and serve the environment. This does not call for every Christian to suddenly switch to sustainable power and drop off the grid, but realizing that maintaining the Earth is the responsibility of every individual. It might take an individual or group to “break the silence” of what is considered societal normality, but every individual needs to do their part. Walter Brueggemann offers insight into this idea with his book, *Interrupting Silence*, arguing that in society we need an individual to tear down the shams of what's accepted in order to bring about improvement and progression. This is a feat that requires persistence and ingenuity, and is difficult with no experience and no credentials, but the prophets didn’t have experience or credentials and they succeeded. This is a point Brueggemann returned to many times; prophets had no credentials, so anyone can be instrumental in breaking the silence to bring change. The silence needs to be broken, so every Christian can realize that they need to love the neighbor that they live in co-existence with, the environment. By being created in the image of God, it becomes our responsibility to care for and serve the environment.

The most difficult part of creating change is taking action, it's simple to do “your part,” recycling and composting, however, to bring meaningful change you have to take action. My action plan involves familiarizing myself with proper environmental sustainability and beginning with a manageable project. I would like to implement my talents in restoring Long lake to a state this is safe for swimming and fishing. The biggest resource available to me is the Long Lake Improvement Association which has already taken action to improve the lake and the surrounding area, however, the association is not as focused on water quality as I would prefer. This is still an immensely valuable resource to me in my endeavors. At this point I don’t have an event or solution that could be implemented, it's going to be a journey to get to a point where I can target one aspect of the water quality problem and solve it. The backing of my church will aid me to support public events if I do choose that route, however, the most important part of

beginning to take action is selecting the appropriate course of action. Rushing to plan an event could be ineffective, I need to choose the proper course of action. For a time frame, I'm going to use the rest of the year to learn more about the problems plaguing the lake and possible solutions, as well as building a partnership with organizations that could aid me. Planning on organizing a spring or summer awareness event seems to be the best option. It would probably be a cookout with games and other activities, with a guest speaker and informational stations to help inform the public and raise awareness. I will be trying to work with other organizations because then I'll have more resources at my disposal. The focus of my action is going to be raising awareness, but also partnering that awareness with action and cleanup to improve water quality. It might take one person to break the silence, but it takes many to save and protect the natural world.

With the crippling state of our environment, we need action now to preserve and protect what we have been given on this planet. Through faith, all Christians have been called to walk the path of stewardship and protect what God has provided for us. Ignorance needs to be cast aside to allow for progression and change. The time for action is now, hesitation is not an option.

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Incorporating Environmental Sustainability Into My Community

Isaac Schultz, Roseville, MN

In our daily activities, we have an incredible effect upon the environment. The car ride to the grocery store a few miles away, the soda with a straw from McDonald's tossed in the trash, or even the apple core that was thrown in the trash. All of those seemingly harmless actions have a harmful effect on the environment, and many people don't even realize it. It is important as a fellow community member and a fellow Christian, that I influence the community to incorporate different actions that are environmentally sustainable and protect the incredible home that God has gifted us with.

A major environmental issue is the amount of Municipal Solid Waste (MSW) that is generated each year. "In the US, the average American produces 4.40 pounds of MSW per day and of that 4.40 pounds, only 1.51 pounds is recycled or composted" (archive.epa). That results in 1,606 pounds of waste produced by a single person in one year. However, an even larger problem than the amount of MSW that are generated is how that waste is disposed of.

Objects such as an apple core or a banana peel are called organic waste. Organic waste is able to go through aerobic decomposition (which happens when there is oxygen available to the waste) in soil and compost bins. When organic waste is thrown in the trash and into a landfill, something else happens. In the landfill, it goes through anaerobic decomposition (which happens because of the lack of oxygen), and produces a gas called methane. Methane, and gases like it, can have a very harmful effect on our atmosphere.

Plastic waste is a completely different story. Plastic straws, lids, bags, bottles, and whatever else is made from plastic can take hundreds of years to decompose. According to 4Ocean, plastic water bottles can take 450 years to decompose, plastic bags can take 10-20 years, plastic straws and lids can take up to 200 years, and plastic caps and lids can even take 450-1,000 years to decompose (4Ocean.com). Because these plastics take so long to decompose, many of them just sit in landfills. As they sit, many can get swept up by rain or wind, and can eventually end up in bodies of water. According to National Geographic, eight million tons of plastic end up in the ocean every year. That's equal to five grocery bags per every foot of coastline around the globe (National Geographic). The effect that plastics have on marine ecosystems is immense. Many deaths are due to the oceanic creatures ingesting the plastics. Birds mistaking floating plastics for food, whales swallowing plastics when filtering water, and the effect of microplastics in the food chain are all big problems right now. As the predators at the top of the chain eat the prey below them, they ingest all the plastic that their prey did, resulting in them having a very high amount of plastic content within them. According to the Environmental Investigation Agency, 633 marine species are known to be impacted by the plastics. (EIA) For all we know, there could be thousands more.

Another environmental issue is our combustion of fossil fuels. Fossil fuels are fuels that are formed by the natural decomposition of buried dead organisms. We burn fossil fuels in our daily activities, such as driving a car. When fossil fuels are combusted, they release harmful gases called greenhouse gases. These gases are extremely harmful to our atmosphere and cause the greenhouse effect. The greenhouse effect causes the earth to heat up by forming a layer of gas above the earth that doesn't let heat from the sun escape out into space. The heating of the earth can cause ice caps to melt and raise ocean levels, cause wind and ocean currents to shift

and change, and some animals may even go extinct due to their habitat being destroyed.

When God created the universe, He created it in his divine image. From the stars in the sky, to the birds and the bees, was perfect in God's eyes. When God breathed life into the first humans, God gifted them with "dominion" over the rest of creation. Genesis 1:28 says: "God blessed them and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the Earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth'" (NRSV). The dictionary defines dominion as having ownership over something. That can be interpreted in many different ways. We could say that God has given us power and rule over everything else and we can do whatever we want with it, allowing us to legitimize the exploitation of the environment. But, the God that I personally believe in would not allow that to happen. Instead, I believe that the word "dominion" is being used to encourage responsible care of the environment and all of God's creation. For why would God let us ruin something that He loved so much, as Genesis 1:31 says: "God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good" (NRSV).

When there are so many environmental problems, it can be hard to figure out a plan to try and solve them. Within my community, I believe that there are a few actions that can take place. The first action is the outlawing of plastic straws. That may seem like a very large and difficult action to be put in place, but in reality, it's not that difficult. The only thing that would be sacrificed is the convenience of not having to carry a straw with you and being able to dispose of it right after use. Other cities, even a fairly large one, Seattle, have begun the movement of banishing straws. Even if the loss of convenience of the plastic straw is hard, the payoff of protecting marine life is worth it.

A second action is making the city of Roseville distribute composting bins to all residents and/or require residents to obtain their own. This action could be a bit costly to the city or the resident, but the cost to the environment of not composting is much greater. If the city required the residents to purchase a composting bin, financial aid could be an option for those who cannot afford one. For residents who live in apartments or other living situations without a yard, a community compost could be created in a community park or garden nearby.

A third (and last action to be listed, though there are many more that could be implemented) action is the addition of bike lanes in Roseville. There are a lot of shopping centers in Roseville which draw a lot of vehicles to the area. That makes biking a very annoying and dangerous activity because there are little to no bike lanes in Roseville. There are many roads that are not very busy in Roseville that have two lanes. By eliminating one of the lanes, there would be plenty of space to add a bike lane without disrupting the flow of traffic. Adding the lanes would not only make it safer, but it would make biking in Roseville more appealing, resulting in less people driving and reducing the amount of harmful gases emitted from vehicular use.

As I have shown, immense environmental issues can be confronted by small actions, such as making the distribution of plastic straws in Roseville illegal, composting bins/locations mandatory for Roseville residents, and making biking more convenient and safe with the addition of bike lanes in Roseville. It may sometimes feel like your actions are insignificant, but by not taking that single plastic grocery bag, or that plastic water bottle, you will be making an important contribution towards protecting the beautiful life that God created.

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The Relationship Between the Homeless and my Community

Anna Countryman, Vancouver, WA

Homelessness is known as having no home or permanent place of residence. There are many people who suffer from homelessness in the world; a study showed that on one night in 2018 there were half a million people staying on the streets because they had no home and there was no room in a shelter (Homelessness). In the Portland Metro area there is a large homeless population, it was recorded that 4,177 people were experiencing this. My community and the area surrounding it tries to help this issue by donating to or volunteering in shelters and many homeless people rely on these shelters to get the necessities they need to survive (Linden). Out of the homeless population in the Portland area 88% were living in a shelter, and 12% were not; this shows that many people who are experiencing this really do rely on shelters.

Even though shelters are helping this problem, there are still many homeless people living on the streets as well as people being shipped to this area because there is such a large homeless population. A study shows that cities have been offering homeless people free bus tickets to relocate elsewhere for at least three decades. In recent years, homeless relocation programs have become more common, sprouting up in new cities across the country and costing the public millions of dollars (Bussed). Many of these people are being sent to larger cities such as Seattle and Portland, two major cities in my area, this is making it difficult for shelters to provide for the growing homeless population. Due to this, homelessness has increased 10% since the last count, growing from 3,801 in 2015 to 4,177 in 2017 (Linden). Even though there has been an overall increase in homelessness, the data suggests that a growing proportion of these individuals are staying in shelters, instead of on the streets. Which means that our community needs to volunteer and donate more to these shelters because without that there is nothing to provide for this fluctuating population of homelessness. Many people think that volunteering will not solve homelessness, but in reality, it is the first step to help this problem. Even though many people do help volunteer they don't actually connect with the people experiencing homelessness, which is the start of any success in helping this problem. A study shows that when people sit down and have conversations with the others in the shelter they feel that their volunteer work made an impact (Mimi). People can volunteer by themselves, with a team, or even with a youth group.

In the bible there are many references to helping the homeless for instance Isaiah 58:7 says "Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?" (NIV). This bible verse is telling us that if we see someone in need we should help them because as humans God put us in this world to be kind and help people who need it, instead of hiding our true selves. We can also use Luke 14:13-14 as an example because it says "But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just." (NIV). This verse is telling us that when we have something we should share it with the marginalized because it is easy for us, who are fortunate enough to have these gifts, to keep them to ourselves instead of sharing them with those who truly need it. Even though we may not be given anything in return, we can still remember giving back to those in need and knowing that we made an impact, which in many ways is better than receiving a gift. In the book *Interrupting Silence*, the author talks about how as Lutheran Christians we need to break the silence and speak out on the problems in

the world. It also shows that in the bible we can always find God in the margins, from the woman at the well to the blind man on the road (Brueggemann). This connects with homelessness and my church because we can see God in helping volunteer in shelters around our community to help the people who are experiencing homelessness.

Since my church is in a community where homelessness is such a prominent issue, I hope that as a congregation we can volunteer and help in shelters more than we have in the past. My goal is to start monthly volunteer opportunities for both youth and adults in my congregation to participate in. In the past our church has donated a lot to shelters but have never really volunteered in soup kitchens or other shelters. When I was in Denver, Colorado for a mission trip, my youth group and I worked in a soup kitchen and the experience opened my eyes to how important it is to help the people who are in need and don't have everyday necessities. This made me want to volunteer more as well as getting my peers and congregation to volunteer. My plan is to get my church to work in soup kitchens in the area as well as at a shelter in our area, this is important to me because I feel that since this is an issue in our area we should want to help and support these people in need. I would also like more people to get involved in our lenten service projects because they all impact and help homeless people. During lent we do service projects and I would like to get more people involved. For example, one project we do every year is LifePax, which are ziploc bags filled with food that provides the nutrients that a person needs in one day. My goal is to get more people involved in this service project because they make such a large impact in the community. I hope that through these experiences my congregation will want to get their friends and family involved because of the great impact they make. I hope that through this I can help bring light to those in the darkness experiencing homelessness by sharing my story and listening to theirs, and I hope that people in my community as well as others will choose to help me in doing the same.

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Women in Poverty and Sanitary Needs

Isabella Zerwas, Maplewood, MN

If you are a female, you are well aware of how obnoxious, painful, expensive and uncomfortable periods are and if you are male, you most likely have had to deal with us women on “that time of the month.” Women out there, how much money do you think you spend on hygiene products every year? Could you imagine being in prison with little to no access to menstrual products? How about being in a shelter after an already hard time in your life and not being able to purchase or have access to these necessities? Have you ever wondered about the difficulties women face receiving easy access to tampons and pads? The difficulties they are facing is not actually having easy access to them in prison because of the money they are making and the actual costs of the items. How about that the items are considered as “luxury” rather than an actual necessity? Well, of the 10,418 homeless people in Minnesota, 40% of them are female, and don't have proper resources to these products. In prisons, they don't have the money to buy period products and if they want them, they have to work for them and they may only receive a limited number per month. So what do they do? Well when their periods come they just bleed out or use thin toilet paper as pads. Deodorant? They don't have that. Women in shelters do sometimes get pads or tampons but not all the time. Deodorant is the same. Women's shelters don't get money very often so they can't buy pads or tampons and all the other feminine products that they need. Many others think this is a major problem also. Access to feminine hygiene products is a problem everywhere. “They should be provided, otherwise do they just want them to bleed all over the floor?!” I believe this is a good example of how a young teen feels about them not being provided. To look at the male side of this topic, one slightly awkward conversation and a little convincing later, a close guy friend replied with “Yeah, they need them, they aren't luxury. They also should not be required to work for them. They should be given however much they need.” In regular shelters and women's shelters there are little to no hygiene products available for women. This problem is equally important because every woman needs these things. We can't live without them.

My theology connection to hygiene for women in poverty and jails is Jesus and the unclean woman. She appears in Mark 5:25-34, Luke 8:43-48 and Matthew 9:20-22. These passages describe a woman who has been bleeding for twelve years, which was considered extremely unclean physically and mentally. She simply wanted to touch Jesus' clothes to be healed, and her faith healed her. If Jesus was willing to help a spiritually unclean woman, why can't we (even if she's not spiritually unclean)?

I believe this topic is a fight between equality and equity. The equality part in jails is that men don't receive deodorant or two ply toilet paper, just because they ask for it, so why should women? But if you look at equity, more fair of the two I believe, takes into consideration that these women don't want to deal with it, it just happens. These women don't have access to birth control to control it or their sanitary products.

I have actually brought this topic up at the capital. I have given solutions and alternatives and put this topic on law-makers minds. One solution I presented was collecting donations to give out or bring to women shelters. Another alternate solution we have found is prisons contacting and buying products from places like Tampax and Always. This shows that not all prisons are anti-cleanliness and that some actually care for their female inmates. Although some prisons do this, many claim that it is too expensive to provide these kinds of care products

because they claim they are “luxury”. As many know, tampons and pads are not luxury items and they are a necessity. A friend named Stacy, age 13 says “They should be given to women unless they want them bleeding all over their jails or shelters.” And I would expect they probably don't want that.

Another alternative solution is for companies like “Always” to partner up with Feeding America. “They distribute P&G products through a nationwide network to lots and lots of pantries, agencies, emergency shelters, senior care facilities and after school programs.”- our expert Lisa, from the Always team said. This shows that a female hygiene company as big as Always or P&G have noticed the problems of not having enough female products for people to have. Also they are doing something to stop it or help solve it or even to make the situation a little less worse for women all over. P&G is the company that owns the Always and Tampax brands.

Although many people agree that this is a problem and they say they are trying to solve it, we see no change nor a difference in the attitudes of jails or shelters. If we had the government backup, this change is actually a possibility.

As it says in Article 25 of Human Rights “Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for health.” Meaning we as women have the right to have pads and tampons as they are a necessity and we very much do need them to have a standard way of living. We as women need hygiene products, but pads and tampons are what we cannot live without. Yes, we as women could live without these products but if we did that would be a major biohazard as well as a public safety issue.

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Dance Within Reach

Taryn Meyer, Caledonia, MN

“And David danced before the Lord with all his might” (2 Samuel 6:14a, ESV). Dance is positively referenced in the Bible as a form of praise. It is most definitely an outlet for people to express themselves, not only to God, but also to other people across cultural barriers.

Unfortunately, however, dance is not easily accessible to students in the Caledonia area, especially those of low income. In the Caledonia Public School District, about 1 in 4 students receive free or reduced price lunch (Data Reports). This means that in a district of about 680 students, about 170 live in families that struggle to meet basic needs. My goal is to increase arts exposure in the form of dance to low-income children in Caledonia and help them discover their God-given gifts of praise and expression through dance.

Studies show that childhood participation in dance helps develop creativity, coordination, motor skills, social skills, strength, endurance, and creativity. Dance also teaches important life skills, such as spatial awareness, taking turns, standing in line, listening, talking when appropriate, respect, good posture, following directions, sharing, and dressing to impress (White). According to Steven Tepper of Vanderbilt University, studies have shown there is “strong support that artistic practice is associated with higher levels of life satisfaction, a more positive self-image, less anxiety about change, a more tolerant and open approach to diverse others, and, in some cases, less focus on materialistic values on the acquisition of goods” (Shank). According to the Minnesota Department of Education’s survey respondents, in 2016, only 11,624 fifth grade youth participated in “artistic lessons” weekly, compared to 28,747 youth who did not. That same year, only 6,264 eleventh grade youth in Minnesota participated in “artistic lessons” weekly, compared to 29,198 who did not (Data Reports and Analytics). Unfortunately, however, arts programs in schools have been the first ones to go when budget cuts hit. To some, including myself, dance is a way for people to break the silence. This is especially important for people in poverty, because their voices are rarely heard. This is because people do not take what they have to say seriously. They are silenced by the people in power and seen as less important because they do not have money. Many people simply find their voices through music and art rather than through talking. If we do not break the silence, then the status quo is maintained. Dance is frequently referenced through the Holy Bible as a form of worship, which I personally see dance as. As said in Psalm 150, “Praise the Lord! Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty heavens!...Praise him with tambourine and dance...Let everything that has breath praise the Lord!” (Psalm 150:1, 4, 6, ESV). Dance is widely celebrated in the Bible, so why do we not celebrate it in my community? I am working to change this.

The arts are a vessel to communicate across cultural boundaries. As is evident just about anywhere and everywhere, communicating across cultures can be a struggle and lead to conflict. Cross-cultural miscommunication is quite common, as shown in the following example from Nancy J. Adler:

A British boss asked a new, young American employee if he would like to have an early lunch at 11 A.M. each day. The employee answered, "Yeah, that would be great!" The boss, hearing the word yeah instead of the word yes, assumed that the employee was rude, ill-mannered, and disrespectful. The boss responded with a curt, "With that kind of

attitude, you may as well forget about lunch!" The employee was bewildered. What had gone wrong?(Adler, 2)

Neither the worker nor the boss fully understood what went wrong and why. This is because no ethnic group sees the world the same as any other ethnic group. When using forms of art, however, the soul is allowed to speak, societal norms are challenged, and main points can be communicated. According to Samantha Rounds, dance is "communication in which the soul expresses itself through meaningful gesture." She describes dance as a form of communication to "lure and keep mates; define and perpetuate gender roles; form and cultivate social and cultural bounds; and even express societal and political expectations and preferences"(Rounds). Dance is "an essential ingredient to life itself"(Rounds). God calls us as Christians to "speak out for those who cannot speak"(Proverbs 31:8a, NRSV) to challenge norms. However, while we speak for those who cannot speak for themselves, we also need to give those people vessels to make their voices heard. I am a strong believer that the arts can do that. Giving people voices is very urgent because there are many issues of injustice in our world today, and justice can only be reached by breaking the silence. Dance is emancipatory because it relieves weight from yourself when the silence is broken. I believe, that as a Christian, I am called to create opportunities for people to make their voices heard, as well as make my own voice heard. The privileged are often silencers, and the non-privileged (often the poor) need voices to give new possibilities and challenge the privileged. Dance has the potential to be a voice for the non-privileged.

There are two main barriers for children discovering their voice and expression through dance: accessibility and affordability. Low income children do not have the money or transportation to travel 30 minutes to attend a dance class. Countless other students are unable to get the transportation they would need to attend dance classes because of working parents or guardians.

To address these barriers, first I will offer dance classes at my school through community education consistently. Classes have been offered before, but not consistently. I will work closely with the Director of Community Education to make sure the classes are publicized and scheduled at times that work for the most kids. These classes will cost money, but scholarships will be available for students who receive free or reduced price breakfast and lunch. For those who would like to connect with God through dance, I will also offer a free class focused on faith that will include a devotional and routine. There will also be a community performance at the culmination of sessions through community education, which has never been done before. In order to be able to offer scholarships, I will need the help of my congregation and community members to raise funds. I am also planning a clothing and shoe drive to collect dance clothes and shoes for the kids who receive the scholarships. To reach high school aged youth like myself, I am going to offer classes before prom on basic moves and learning to feel the rhythm.

In conclusion, bringing dance to my community will lead to voices for the non-privileged. Given the population of low-income children in my community, scholarships will be offered for students who receive free and reduced price lunches. In addition, there will be a 100% free class focusing on dance as a form of worship. I believe this will give voices to the non-privileged, which leads to change, and increase health and happiness in children of the Caledonia Area School District. As said in Jeremiah 31:13, "Then shall the young women rejoice in the dance, and the young men and the old shall be merry"(Jeremiah 31:13a, NRSV).

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Decline of Youth in Church

Annika Angerman, Rochester, MN

The decline of youth in church is a big problem. Over the past fifty years it has become a prominent issue that needs to be addressed. This paper will explain the problem, offer ways that we as Christians must deal with this dilemma, and offer a small scale solution to this issue. The church needs to find new ways to bring youth into the church.

I go to Good Shepherd Lutheran in Rochester, Minnesota. I consider this church my second home and love it with my whole heart. However, my church struggles with bringing in youth, as do other churches around the country. Currently we have about seven high schoolers that consistently participate in church youth activities. Four out of seven of those students graduated this year and will be at college this coming winter. This creates a problem as that these four girls have been leaders in our youth events and have always been very welcoming to new and younger people like myself.

When I was younger there were always plenty of kids in Sunday school and church. However, as we got older many kids stopped coming to church. "They simply lost track of the church and stopped seeing it as important in their life" (Stetzer). When I was confirmed this past fall I was confirmed with one other person. We are the only people from our age group that attend church regularly. In the grade above me, only one person attends church at all.

This is a common trend in churches around the country. They are finding less and less youth in their activities and worship services. However, the decline of youth in church is not as recent as most people think. It actually started with the baby boomers, but has recently picked up quite a bit. "35 percent of Generation Z (1999-2015) teens identified as atheist, agnostic, or not affiliated with religion. By comparison only 30 percent of Millennials, 30 percent of Generation X and 26 percent of Baby Boomers said the same" (Smith). Generation Z has experienced the biggest drop in church participation. According to the Christian Post Reporter, "Generation Z is considered the least Christian generation in America today" (Gryboski). In a recent (2016) study done by the Minnesota Department of Education, they found that out of 43,992 ninth graders living in Minnesota, 62.2% were not involved in any church activities throughout the week (Minnesota Department of Education).

I don't think many youth realize that church is so much more than sitting in a service for an hour. Church is everything you do outside of it as well; it is the relationships you form and it is spreading love in the name of God, it is helping someone in need and giving joy to another person. Church does not need to be constrained to one place, one building. It is everywhere. I think that spreading this message will encourage more youth to participate in church activities.

The decline of youth in church needs to be addressed in the Christian community. I think that everyone in the church has the job of bringing in the youth and keeping them from leaving. They are essential to the survival of the church, and must be seen this way. Without the youth, there is less vibrancy. The bible often speaks of the importance of children and how they must grow with the church. "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these" (Mark 10:14, NIV). We must take this message seriously and encourage more youth to come into the church. We must be welcoming of them and accept that they may not do things traditionally. The world is changing and the church needs to be able to change with it. People in the church community must be accepting and understanding or the youth will be driven farther away.

Youth leaving the church is a national problem that communities around the world can take steps to stop and prevent. Although I can't provide a world-wide solution, I do have a way to help at my church. While I was at Augsburg we would have "jam sessions" every night after dinner and classes. This was a fun way to bring us all together and create a bond between us. These jam sessions inspired my project. I want to bring the youth together and get them into the church so they can experience church together and see how fun it can be.

I decided to form a music group, of sorts. I thought it would be fun to have an open space where we could sing songs, play instruments and enjoy one another's company. It would be a safe place for youth to come and have fun with one another while being able to talk about their faith and doubts. It would be open to all youth from the community, no matter if they attended church or not. It would be a way to encourage youth to attend church, as well as a place for them to come to talk about any struggles they may be having.

To get my project started I would get some of my friends from church to help be leaders of the music group. I would ask my pastors and parents to help me organize the group, including where and when it would take place. I would also print out flyers to put up at church and create an instagram and snapchat account. I would like to get it up and running by the start of the second semester of school. To spread the word I would make an announcement in church and ask the congregation to spread the word around the community.

As you can see, the decline of youth in church is a big issue. However, this is a problem that can be solved. We as Christians can make the changes that will help stop youth from leaving. If churches are able to open up more events and activities for youth, I think that some youth may return to the church and others won't leave in the first place. Small scale solutions like the music group are the small steps to a greater change that we can all make.

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Youth Attendance

Gavin Pexsa, Alexandria, MN

At Shalom Lutheran Church in Alexandria, Minnesota the consistency of youth involvement has declined. This has made the church stop some of the activities and rethink how to keep the younger generation apart of the church. Shalom went through a “dry period,” with the most recently confirmed classes being small to start before youth stopped attending events. However the next few classes will be much larger, and this is where Shalom needs to improve in order to keep these groups engaged.

Shalom had what is easily explained as a staircase system when it came to the progression of the youth. Step one was Sunday School, you would spend quite a lot of time on this step. In Sunday School, you stay’d active in the congregation through skits and other similar activities. Towards the end of that step you started practicing having conversations and trying to understand scripture.

Step two was when you started confirmation. You spend about three years in this step focusing on asking questions to help solidify your faith. During your last year in confirmation you chose a mentor who is preferably from the congregation. This mentor will spend time with you discussing your understanding of Christianity and taking part in four hours of service for your community.

Step three is the step that all the others have led to. You are now confirmed and are allowed to do pretty much whatever you choose, which is where our issue begins. After confirmation many youth decide that they've finished everything they need to, and lose interest in the church. The youth that stick around don’t have many options on what to do from here, up until recently there was an event known as Go Deep held on every sunday at 6:30, where there was food and an opportunity to discuss scripture for the newly confirmed and soon to graduate age group of the congregation. On paper this is great, however, when put into practice it doesn't look as nice; while the class went smoothly and everyone that went enjoyed it, it was hard to get youth to show up. This would result in an average night having about three members participating.

While the church should focus on the education of the youth they should not be the only ones pushing this. There is only so much influence the teachers can have on the students with only half an hour of Sunday School, confirmation is only active for half of the year, and the youth aren’t informed on all the opportunities given to them when they are confirmed. The households of these youth should be pulling their weight when it comes to communicating with the youth about opportunities at church.

During the breaks between the years of confirmation, the youth should still be using the information that they learn in their daily lives instead of waiting half a year to pick back up where they left off. The idea behind the mentorship program was for the youth to start being engaged with the congregation, however this often feels like just another task or worksheet like what the kids are given in Sunday School and it turns into just going through the motions. The number of opportunities youth have after confirmation should also be emphasized. There are not just youth activities, but positions in the church as well. I found a position on council, and one other person in my class was placed on a call committee.

I spoke to our youth director Tim Knorek about what our plans are to improve on the system. He told me that he would like to change how the different age groups met. For example,

it did not work for the Go Deep crew to meet every Sunday so it was going to be changed to once a month. Also, instead of being led by him, it would be interesting to try to get some youth to lead it once or twice. The confirmation group would also be able to meet with the Go Deep crew some nights. This would change the step system into more of a slope-like system where they are introduced to the next step before they are thrown into it. This means that the confirmation classes will get an idea that there is still more expected from them after they are confirmed.

This is a great start but I think that it could be expanded on. The confirmation class could teach a lesson of Sunday School, bridging the gap between those two groups. It would also be important to involve adult members of the congregation into the activities that the youth do. This would involve inviting adults to the short service that happens before confirmation. Including the adult community gives the youth more of a feeling that this is just as important as a normal church service.

While Shalom has struggled with keeping the youth engaged this year, the church is heading in the right direction and I look forward to seeing what happens. The church needs to prioritize teaching the youth because they are the future of the church. If all the youth leave, the church will struggle. To do this the church will work harder to create better ways of getting the youth together, which will include meeting at times that are convenient, combining classes to keep everyone interested, and getting the youth involved in the congregation.

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The Church is Dying to Live

Montana Tolzman, Le Sueur, MN

I want to change the way most people think about church. I want to enhance the enthusiasm, create a new love for our God, and help people realize that it can be “fun”. During the Youth Theology Institute at Augsburg, I asked the other kids if their church was the same, and almost all said that after confirmation, the young adults would show up no more than a couple times a year. Usually all you see are elders, or younger children that are forced to go by their parents, except for the occasional teenager who truly enjoys going to church and isn’t forced. I understand that we all have our own lives, vacations, and unexpected occurrences but besides that, why can’t we just give one hour out of each day to the Lord we all proclaim we love. God doesn’t just want to hear it, he wants to feel it and see it.

One positive about the church “dying” is that it gives all of us the chance to revive and renew. It doesn’t mean we have to start over completely, it just means that we all should feel fresh, because it’s a brand new start. It almost feels like the church is being baptized so the world sees it a different and a better way. Another positive is that God is forgiving. God knows that we have busy lives these days, especially teenagers. God knows the homework you stay up late doing is hard and sometimes pointless. God knows the late hours you work to barely get through. God knows the home lives that are harder than some. He watches each and every one of us at all seconds of the day and sees what we are doing. He knows we are busy, and he understands our lives more than any other. Bishop Eaton of the ELCA said: “Eighteen- to 35-year-olds aren’t seeing church as really relevant to what they need to get done. They want meaning in their lives but don’t necessarily see the church as providing that” (Living Lutheran). The potential negative of creating a more modern twist in the church is that it may affect the elderly as well. They enjoy tradition, no drastic change, and what they have been used to their whole lives.

The reason why the church is slowly getting smaller and smaller is because it is not considered the only thing to do on Sunday morning anymore. It used to be somewhere basically everyone would attend just because it was the thing to do on a Sunday morning. Now there are sporting events, a lot of sleeping in, or people just don’t want to go. Why do people not want to go? They may have something going on, or they simply don’t believe. I’m not saying that I’m perfect or that I attend church every single Sunday, I’m just saying that we should give this awesome God the same love he gives us.

One reason why I chose this topic is because I realized that I didn’t see my friends at church as often. I would be one of the few teenagers that go to church more than just on the holiday services. That sparked something in my brain. At first, I wanted to change all churches, but right now I’m sticking to just my church. I want to see how my church reacts and more specifically, how the elders react. The older people at my church keep the church stable and contribute a lot, so if we were to lose them because of a modern touch then I’m not sure if it would be worth it. Congregational renewal is a process of spiritual self-discovery and transformation that aims to create healthy, attended ministries. It’s an intense process of proactively confronting decline with the willingness to change. “For a congregation to pursue renewal, it needs to identify that things are not the way they want them to be and be willing to explore,” Neil Harrison, the director for Renewed Evangelizing Congregations said (Living Lutheran). Change is hard for most, but usually it is intended for the better. It is for not only the church, but the people who go there too. “While ELCA grants support a three-year process, it

often takes five to seven years to turn around a congregation, Harrison said” (Living Lutheran). The work is challenging, but it has led some churches to incredible growth. I am going to use this or something similar to change my church. My Pastor is on board for this as well and thinks that our congregation will give us full support. In order to finish this project completely, I will bring it to my Church Council. That will help to get it in action and create the movement we all want to see. The reason why this means so much to me is because I hate seeing people lose their faith in a matter of a couple months. I want to see people growing in their faith instead of losing it. I want to be the change that keeps churches running before it’s too late. Now is the time to do this, and now is the time to be that change. The Church is dying to live, but why do we have to let it die in order to live?

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Collaborative Learning

Rosella Birgy, Hopkins, MN

Researcher Scott McConnell likens the relationship between church and teenagers to “a free trial on a product,” and he’s not wrong. By age eighteen when many youth become independent from their parents and their parents’ lifestyles, many teens haven’t felt engaged enough by the church to stay with it. From personal experience, I’ve too often witnessed that instead of drawing teens in with meaningful discussions or studies, churches minimize teenagers’ capacity to understand or add to the conversation surrounding divinity or even their own faith. They decide it would be more effective to lure them in with promises of pizza or donuts. Consequently, seventy percent of Protestants aged eighteen to thirty--though they may have attended church regularly in high school-- left the church by age twenty-three. Less than thirty percent have returned, even decades later (Grossman). With youth leaving church in such large numbers, it’s important that programming focuses on youth and church families for the sake of continuing the faith practice. Rather than simply utilizing the high school aged youth as volunteers or leaders of more structured programming for confirmands or elementary children, the church needs to act on the idea that we never stop learning about God and design relevant groups or classes for high schoolers who otherwise may feel like there is no place for them in the church. But the lack of youth involved in existing church groups can make organizing these types of programming both financially and logistically even more difficult. My church personally has struggled with finding a youth minister and the transition from temporary youth minister to newly hired youth minister to searching out a youth minister *again* has made involvement for the post-Confirmation high schoolers inconsistent, and has made it harder for youth to bond and engage with new leadership and each other. When you add to that the fact that regular attendees to high school programming are far less than for other youth (child and Confirmation-age) programming, putting in the work and effort to engage us doesn’t always seem feasible or worthwhile. In order to make use of the church’s resources and involve the maximum amount of youth possible, forming a youth group in collaboration with one or more churches is a viable solution to both problems: lack of youth, and Gethsemane’s present lack of youth ministry leadership resources and/or consistency.

Theologically, partnerships between churches are supported, as they are for the mutual growth of God’s people. This is exemplified in multiple verses of the Bible, including Corinthians 14:26: “What then shall we say, brothers and sisters? When you come together, each of you has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. Everything must be done so that the church may be built up” (NIV). Bringing together the resources, ideas, and beliefs of multiple churches will better equip them to give youth the consistency and nurturing that they need in order to keep them engaged in the church. Faith development like this is a core part of the mission of the ELCA by reaching out to all people and spreading God’s word for the sake of a better future. Without youth to be the future of the church, how can we do as we are called and spread the Gospel (Mark 14:9, NIV)? Pride or the belief that one congregation can “do it all ourselves” is ignorant and prevents us from reaching our full capabilities when we could “come to such unity in our faith and knowledge of God’s Son that we will be mature in the Lord, measuring up to the full and complete standard of Christ” (Ephesians 4:12-13, NLT). Jesus--the all powerful Son of God--certainly did not *need* the twelve disciples. However, by working together and engaging the disciples, He could equip them to

carry out His work when he was gone. It is with a similar attitude that we should approach collaboration between churches--we were never meant to work alone, especially when risking the future of the church and the next generation of modern-day disciples.

Thus far, my plan would be to have my church, Gethsemane Lutheran, partner with one of our other local Hopkins churches--preferably one or more of the other Lutheran churches such as Zion Lutheran, Oak Knoll Lutheran Church, St. Paul's Lutheran Church, or Shepherd of the Hills Lutheran--to form a shared program for high schoolers. Depending on who we collaborate with and our pooled resources, this program would ideally have high schoolers meet once a week or every other week for some type of religious/theology class, discussion, games, service project, or fun outing. We could trade off which facility (whether Gethsemane or other) hosted this program depending on what each church has available at the decided time. All of the aforementioned churches are close enough that in warmer weather we could either walk from Gethsemane to another location, or in colder weather carpool from Gethsemane in one of the church vans. At Gethsemane we have fewer high schoolers as is, but with a more specific and structured program, I think it would be fairly easy to engage everyone. There would be consistent leadership (either volunteers, hired staff from the churches, or both) facilitating the program for the sake of building more impactful relationships and experiences. Ideally, we would partner with a congregation that has a smaller amount of high schoolers so that the new program would be mutually beneficial in providing new opportunities for growth and new relationships. In the end, meeting with church leaders and proposing the concept and allowing them to meet with their own youth ministers and councils could reasonably take a month, then planning and coordinating further partnerships could take two months more. I believe it would be a reasonable goal for the partnerships to be established and the program underway and driving the teenage formation of new relationships and an invigorated interest in our faith by the spring of 2019.

It's easy to say that teenage disinterest in church is just part of an angsty phase but the fact is that if teenagers are repelled by the church, the church isn't going about their work in the right way. A relevant and personal approach to faith like what I experienced at Augsburg engaged me and my fellow students, and I don't think that that kind of experience needs to be limited to a week away from home. We can engage the youth in our own local congregations by bringing them together and forging relationships that will last a lifetime; we can educate them in ways that are relevant and tailored specifically to a high school audience, and we can assure the future of the church, we just have to work together.

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Involving Youth in the Church

Rosie Baldus, Charles City, IA

Many people don't seem to realize how little the youth are actually involved in church. While the youth do volunteer for mission trips and have assigned jobs like acolyting, they're not really connecting to the church. The church should be a place that you feel at ease; a place where you feel connected with others and with your faith. It's a place where you can feel safe and help others feel the same. Youth in my church don't often look or feel that way. Most look like they don't want to be there or feel out of place. They don't feel comfortable opening up in the church. In order for more growth to be had, the youth and church need to work together to become more connected with one another.

Youth are the light of the church. They help expand the church and learn as they grow. We as a church should want them in the church to grow in their faith; to believe, and to connect to and help others in believing. If youth aren't active or interested in the church their light dies and the church dies along with it. Think about it; 70% of youth stop attending church after graduating high school (The Gospel Coalition). Then, after nearly a decade, only half of that 70% come back to church. They may have moved on and away from their church because of college or a job, but you have to wonder, why don't they come back? They might feel like they are no longer welcome within the church, or that they didn't have enough experience with growth in the church, etc. Obviously, churches don't want that to happen. If the church plans to be active for many, many years in the future; they need the younger generations of church-goers to be and feel connected. They need attendance from youth; they want them to come back. That's why we need to start taking steps to keep them active. If we can get more youth to be active and feeling at one with the church, then we can get more youth active as a team helping the community. It's great that the older generations love and respect the church, and want to keep it that way, but inviting the younger generations into the church so that they may love and respect it as well is something that can open up new doors to greater growth and connections between many generations over their common beliefs.

"Then the little children were being brought to him in order that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples spoke sternly to those who brought them; but Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs." And he laid his hands on them and went on his way." (Matthew 19:13-15, NRSV) I think this bible story helps explain that Jesus of course loves children and he wants them to believe and learn about him. He wants them to love each other as they love themselves and have a strong connection with their faith. As Christians, we should be open to ideas from the younger generations and older generations equally and then make decisions based on the needs and ideas of both generations. Some youth feel crushed under the expectations, or rather the assumptions, that they always have to go by the book or they need to be super religious and attend church every single Sunday. As Christians we know that it is not as demanding as it seems. Sure we want them to come every single Sunday, but they're not forced to. We'd like them to use the Bible as a guideline to help guide them in their path through discovering or strengthening their faith. Everyone sins, because we're human, and God knows that we kids try our best to be good Christians, but sometimes youth need to strengthen their faith not with the older generation, but with their peers so that they are comfortable with one another and can possibly learn to spread their faith around to others who may need something to lean on.

For my project I want to start a youth group in my church. I believe it will help the youth at my church connect with the church, their faith, their peers, and the community. I feel that a youth group that is run by youth is a great way to connect the younger generation. The first step I took to do this was making a plan and talking with my youth director and pastor. The next step I will take, after discussing and getting approval, is talking to my peers about scheduling around their events so that we may have as many kids as possible able to come. The most important thing after that would be to discuss what they would want to learn/discuss at youth group. Comfort would be a top priority in what we talk about and, of course, fun! I would make sure to write what they would like down and have them give me their phone number if they are interested so later I could make a group chat for youth group for anything they might want to talk about. Following this I would fix a time with my pastor and youth director on discussing the matter and how to get the word out there more. We would want to get it in the church newsletter, in the announcements in the Sunday bulletin, and on social media. Then, talking to some willing volunteers about where we could set up and what we are going to do at the youth group would be the next step. Hopefully we will have bible study, games, community service, and other things that the church and the participating youth want. I want to make sure that the promoting of this youth group goes far out into the public and is successful in getting more people to join the church and connect to the church and community- hopefully making this youth group successful and helpful towards the church and the community.

In conclusion, I think that getting youth connected with the church will help the youth connect with their peers, their church, and their community. This will make the community more full in the end. Jesus loves the children and wants them to love God and believe in Him. He wants them to be connected so I pray that he guides us all through this journey. Finding a way to get the youth involved in church is important for many reasons and I will make sure to take those steps to improve the youth involvement in the church.

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Our Forgotten Elders

Sarah Aman, Aberdeen, SD

There is an often overlooked problem happening within the church right now. With many churches working hard to recruit younger members, the elderly are being forgotten. This has resulted in the senior citizens of the church being often overlooked in their needs, and it has also caused difficulty in getting many younger church members to establish relations with elder church members. Therefore, the church needs to begin a program to bridge the generational gap between its members.

First of all, it can be very difficult for churches to keep their elder members involved. Many members who do not have much family in the area can become unhappy and see no reason to leave their house. However, this generation grew up going to church no matter what and many still do. For some senior citizens going to church is the only time they leave their homes during the week. Because of this, the church is the most natural place to care for the elder members of society.

Furthermore, one of the key problems of the older generations of society is loneliness. This can be especially difficult for those who have lost their significant others and family members to death, and it can be difficult for those whose families live far away. According to Singh and Srivastava loneliness is defined as “the feeling that emerges when social relationships are felt to be deficient”(Singh, 1). When loneliness is combined with the frail health of the elderly, it can often lead to impaired quality of life, greater need for institutional care, and increased mortality.

Equally important to this problem of neglecting our elders is the theological approach we as Christians take to caring for our elderly. This generation already does not ask for much from the church. They grew up always going to church because that is what they were told. However, they do not always stay involved in the church as they age. These people are valuable members of the church and many members could benefit from their stories. Often these stories contain valuable wisdom that has been collected over time.

Furthermore, we can look at these stories as God’s stories. After all, the Bible is simply stories about God, if God is still at work in our daily lives, who are we to say that our stories are less important than those written in the Bible? As Ganzevoort wrote, “In our stories about God we access the deepest symbolic meanings of life”(Ganzevoort, 1). Religious stories are the anchor that roots all of our beliefs. They are the proof of what we believe.

Often one of the biggest causes of unhappiness in the elderly community is the challenge of finding satisfaction in one’s own life experiences. Too often people worry about things that cannot be changed. Once a person is able to confidently say that they are happy with their life, their quality of life will improve dramatically. One of the most powerful healing factors for those who are dissatisfied with life can be spirituality. In every religious person there is an underlying desire for spiritual wholeness. As mortal sinners, we ourselves can never truly see our own spiritual wholeness, but others around us can open our eyes to our own wholeness as we grow in faith.

Many people will ask what spiritual wholeness looks like. It is very different for each person. However, spiritual wholeness can be found through caring conversation with others. True spiritual wholeness comes when someone accepts what they have and have not done and

they have found peace in their relationship with faith. Achieving spiritual wholeness can be frustrating, difficult, uncomfortable, and intense by one's self, but when others help along the way this terrifying journey can become enlightening and enjoyable.

First and foremost, in order to solve the problem of neglecting our elderly we must have a plan. I have crafted a plan to work specifically within my home congregation and it may not work within all congregations. My plan is to get my church involved in the Adopt-A-Grandparent program.

Recently, the Adopt-A-Grandparent program was cut from the local school system due to lack of funding. However, I am confident that the church will be a very good place to restart the program within the community. The start of the program would involve church leaders pushing younger church members and senior citizens to become involved in the program. Although this will take some work, I am confident that we will be able to get this program off the ground.

To jump start involvement of young people within the program I suggest making it a confirmation requirement and involving older groups such as peer ministry. The church has many youth programs that could really benefit from connecting with elders. Comparatively, getting senior citizens involved will have to come from adults and leaders within the church. Often all it will take is a gentle push during caring conversation to encourage someone to become involved with the program.

This program will start by the beginning of ninth grade confirmation in 2018. The first meeting place will be at either Wednesday night supper or Sunday morning coffee, depending on the preferences of those meeting. Having meetings set in the church will offer a safe and wholesome environment for everyone involved. As friendships blossom, participants will be free to move their meetings outside the church. There will be a set of rules written up for the program to keep everyone safe and all participants will have set expectations they need to follow.

Overall, I believe that my church and many others could benefit from a program to connect their youth to their elders in a way that promotes caring conversation and spiritual fulfillment. This program is focused on uniting the church across generations and keeping all church members engaged, involved, happy, and healthy. Because at the end of the day, the church is truly there to care for its people in a way that glorifies God's good works.

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Youth Need to be Involved in the Church

Samantha Fletcher, Rochester, MN

When I was asked the question “How many young adults attend your church?” I was less than enthusiastic to answer, the reason being that I could count how many young adults attend our church on two hands. I had never recognized that as a problem until I found out that other congregations have triple the young adults that my church has. However, I was curious to see if other people had a similar problem. So, I did some investigating and I found out that it wasn’t just my church losing youth, it seemed to be a very common issue. Why, you might ask? Why aren’t young adults coming to church? I don’t believe that there is a definitive answer to that question. Some will say that it is because church is “boring.” However, if you think about it, church has not always been the most exciting place to visit. You sit in a big room listening to the same church hymns, listening to the pastor preach about something that went wrong with his son, and how that connects with a random Bible story. Maybe it’s because our parents were forced to go to church, and now we are allowed the freedom to not go? Maybe it’s because church is early in the morning and no teenager wants to get up early to listen to the pastor talk about his son? Maybe it’s because church isn’t considered “cool” anymore? There’s also the possibility that youth can’t connect to the church, a lot of young adults can’t relate to the message they’re hearing. Many young adults also feel judged when they do come to church, whether it be because they haven’t been to church for a while, their sexuality, or their race. Whatever the reason, it’s all causing the same problem, youth are not coming to church.

People are going to ask, “why does it matter if youth don’t attend church?” Because without the youth, the church will have no future. If the next generation doesn’t feel that church is important, the church will eventually lose all its members and must shut down. It can also be concerning because if youth are not learning the Word of God, they won’t spread it. What happens if the youth don’t spread the Word of God? No one will know about him, just let that sink in for a minute. Nobody will know about God and all the amazing things God has done. Everyone would turn to violence to fix problems, because they wouldn’t know the option of forgiveness. People wouldn’t take care of the earth because they don’t know how amazing it is. People would also lose a lot of purpose because they don’t know that God put them here for a reason.

“So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness” (Colossians 2:6-7, NIV). This verse comes from the second chapter of Colossians and I think it is a perfect example for keeping the youth in the church. From the very beginning God was with us, and He chose to stay with us. When we were baptized we received Jesus as the Lord, and I believe that we should “continue to live our lives in him.” However, many young adults forget about their baptism because they don’t come to church, so they don’t know what an amazing thing it is to have Jesus as your Savior. As a child it is very important to know that you are good enough, that Jesus died for you. You are an amazing gift that God blessed this world with. I also think that this verse shows us that God is always with us. We don’t need to be afraid of anything because God will help us through everything. A lot of people live in fear because they don’t know that they can trust God, and everything will be okay. This verse says, “strengthened in the faith as you were taught.” This means that we can grow deeper in our faith as we learn more about God, but how are people going to know about God if they

don't go to church? Going to church and learning more about your faith is very important and is something that people of all ages should do.

So, how do I plan on helping to solve this issue? I want to get a youth group organized in my church. I want the group to include everyone, because church should be a place where you feel accepted. I want to do many things in this program including a Bible study. The Bible study would be a discussion-based Bible study because I feel that youth like to be heard, and what a better thing to talk about besides the Bible. It would give youth a chance to voice their opinion about how they feel about the story that we read. A Bible study would be a great way to have fun while still learning about God and all the amazing things that he's done, and it would give the kids a chance to bring friends along because it would be very easy to jump in and join the discussion. Another thing I would like the program to include would be day trips. These day trips could be as simple as going to the park for a picnic and just talking about our faith, or as extravagant as going to a hospital and reading Bible stories to young kids that are sick. Doing day trips would be extremely fun, and they would allow kids to see that church isn't just sitting and listening to the same story over and over. It would give kids a chance to get new experiences while growing in their faith. Some other ideas that have been in thought would be service days in which the youth would go out and help our community. While this would be a great way to gain knowledge and learn about how lucky we are for what we have I still haven't figured out how I would incorporate a faith aspect into it yet. Another solution that has been suggested would be camps that kids would go to for a couple days and they would be totally faith based. I think they would be very fun however, I'm afraid that young adults would just show up for the camps and not come to church on the regular. I plan on starting this program in the fall when confirmation starts up again, I will continue to do it through the school year and see where the youth numbers are at when the school year is over. What will you do to get youth more involved at your church?

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Stopping Drug Abuse and Use

Joshua Jimenez-Becerra, Fridley, MN

An issue that I have noticed in my community is a lot of drug activity and usage. This problem isn't only with the adults but also the high school students and even middle schoolers. I have heard of many drug stories and even seen many people with drugs, there are many students who are involved in buying and selling of drugs and it is very big in my community with students at the high school and middle school. The types of things I've seen are smoking in school and out of school and selling and buying in school and out of school I have seen things like alcohol, cigarettes, marijuana, molly, xanax, percocet, lean, etc. I have heard stories of people getting hurt buying and people getting robbed and I have even heard of a story when about 10-15 years ago a student overdosed from heroin. I feel like this a very big and bad problem in my community that should be stopped and I want to stop this problem or help stop it. This drug problem needs to be stopped from hurting the student population or getting the students involved in this trouble.

This drug problem can be stopped with the help of God. God tells us that we shall have no other god, by giving these people these drugs they soon will break that commandment by getting addicted and making the drug a god for them and becoming dependant on the drug, worshipping it. By selling and buying you hurt these people and yourself, if one of the kids you sell to overdoses off your drugs, you just committed murder and broke a commandment. God gives us these commandments to follow as guidelines to living by his "policies". God also tells us to not steal and by scamming the people that buy, people steal not only the money but the "happiness" from these buyers and steal their life at some point. We can also break the silence by doing many things such as stopping the deals and reporting to police. Asking God and praying to God to stop this problem will not be enough to stop it and we should also help how we can. We need to break the silence and stop this problem as soon as possible, this problem will take lives if we let it. God will help us stop this, but he will not do it for us, he can only help us stop it.

My plan is to stop the problem gradually, because stopping it too suddenly will not work and will fail badly. My plan is starting in January, I will contact my local mayor or governor and discuss this problem. I will get D.A.R.E involved and other anti-drug and anti-alcohol organizations involved in stopping this problem and helping with resources. Such resources would include posters, videos, studies, graphs, meetings, fundraisers, and many more. I plan on taking a couple months to raise awareness about this, after those months I will contact my local school board about creating a program to keep kids off the streets and doing something productive. This program will be held after school and during the summer to help with kids who stay home all day. I plan to provide transportation and food for these kids who sign up and will take occasional trips to the zoo or a movie or to valleyfair. My objective is show kids that drugs are not the way to living by having speakers come in to talk about their past or present and experiences. In the end, I want to end this drug problem in my community and help stop it from growing.

In January I plan to contact my local mayor and discuss this problem. During February I will gather anti-drug and alcohol groups and have meetings and plan events. In March through August I plan to start these events to raise awareness and in September I will contact my school board and start this program for kids in middle school to help them not get involved with drugs.

This drug problem needs to be stopped in order to prevent drugs from hurting students and I want to stop kids from getting involved, and I hope that people will help me accomplish this.

Drugs in Our Community

Will Kanfield, Lakeville, MN

One of the main problems in the community of Lakeville, Minnesota is the usage of drugs by low-income residents. Narcotics are a problem that has seen increase in recent years and the use of theology will hopefully help ministries all over the state to reach out to citizens with problems regarding drug addiction.

Opioid and narcotic trafficking is a problem very prevalent in the Lakeville community as it resides just off of Highway 35, giving southern based cartels an easy route North to traffic pure drugs. The drugs that are coming to Lakeville often come straight from the source, reducing the opportunity for these substances to get “cut”, or mixed with similar looking ingredients to give the impression that the supply of drugs is bigger, leading to overdoses due to dosage mishaps. Opioid overdoses have killed almost 250,000 Americans since 2000, and opioid addiction has spread to every corner of the United States. Studies have found that more adults use prescription painkillers than tobacco or cigarettes (Katel).

Not only are the drugs that are too pure a problem, but now a new trend of drug use has swept the nation. Cannabis and other mainstream drugs are getting mixed with fentanyl and carfentanil, known for its use as an elephant tranquilizer. The addition of these new drugs to already heavily used drugs are causing deaths all over the country, added to the already terrifying heroin epidemic. The most common heroin users now are predominantly white woman living in suburban housing (Duhaime-Ross). Many of these users have no place to go due to sheer embarrassment and guilt, and will refuse treatment recommended by loved ones.

Drug addiction is classified as a disease by many American health organizations, and many of the symptoms can be related to many diseases. A loud minority of people struggle with addiction, but no matter how loud they may be, the conversation doesn't seem to happen enough. Many addicts have been cast out of the church because of preconceived notions, depriving them of a desperately needed community. Also, many churches don't even have a stance on the topic of addiction because congregations don't want to talk about such a graphic and often personal issue. Addiction can be equated to the Pharaoh of the old testament, and addicts can be related to the persecuted jews. Many felt like they didn't have a voice due to the repressive nature of their ruthless leader. Just like addicts feel like they cannot speak up while they are under the thumb of the drug that controls them. In his book *Interrupting Silence*, Walter Brueggemann brings up the point that “because the slave master is “without God,” Pharaoh finds everything possible. Pharaoh finds abuse and exploitation possible” (Brueggemann, 19). While the Pharaoh enslaved the Jews in Egypt, Narcotics and opioids are enslaving America's youth, and it's easy to draw parallels between scripture and U.S drug statistics if you just replace the oppressor with drugs and the oppressed with the addicted. Brueggemann never outright points this out, but the connection can still be made.

A solution to this problem many Americans face may be the church. It offers a great community to people who feel alone and brings many people to talk to. If the church would allow these people into their sanctuary it would help many people who desperately need it. There are over 100,000 churches that would be able to offer aid. The church offering a helping hand might also be a way to keep the church relevant, having a new demographic attending services. Imprisonment would do more harm than good, and having them go to church would be a good way to start integrating them back into society. It could also help prison systems, having lower

intake of inmates, leaving room for more serious offenders. This solution would allow a good method of treatment for addicts, a strong source of publicity for churches, and a much needed break for prisons across the nation. Christian organizations like the Salvation Army have helped a countless number of people and maybe the church itself could save just as many people.

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