Report on the
Northern Great Lakes Synod
at the
National Youth Gathering
in Detroit, MI.
July 2015
In preparation:

• At the Synod Assembly in 2012, I presented a brief powerpoint on Detroit and tried to meet any objections or reluctance to participate with positive reasons to attend anyway.
• Grants were offered from the Synod, $100 - $500, to encourage congregations to attend, and help defray expenses. These were disbursed in January 2015, after the deadline for youth and adults to register.
• The possibility of a Synod Bus was offered. Eventually two Synod Buses were arranged. Riders paid $65 per person, helping to cover that expense.
• The offering at one synod assembly went to support the Gathering.

Other Synod perks

• The Synod paid for a Synod T-shirt for our Synod Day together.
• The buses met at Zion, St. Ignace for lunch, and to travel together. Zion graciously hosted 100 or so youth and adults, before we headed over the bridge.
• It was arranged for the Synod Buses to have a sight-seeing day, Wednesday, at the Ford Museum and Village, and a drive through tour of the Heidelberg Project, Belle Isle, and...
through some downtown properties. We received the group rate, and churches paid their own way.

- Lunch was also arranged for those worship leaders and participants who spent the morning in preparation for the afternoon. Pizza was picked up for the thirty or so volunteers who helped with music, sound, ushering, leadership, and all the details of the day. The Synod paid for this lunch.
- The Sunday lunch meal was arranged. Box lunches were picked up and delivered to each bus to eat as we drove home. Churches paid the $8 per lunch fee.
- The Sunday evening meal was arranged by the Synod through B & C Pizza of St. Ignace. A third bus joined us for this meal before each bus went on its way. Churches paid the $8 per meal fee.

Participation from the Northern Great Lakes Synod

2009 - 97 Youth and Adults went to New Orleans
2012 - 99 Youth and Adults went to New Orleans
2015 - 150 Youth and Adults went to Detroit

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<th>Christ Parish, Ironwood</th>
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<td>Immanuel, Escanaba First, Grand Marais Zion, Manistique</td>
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<td><em>(Best guess numbers with last minute additions and subtractions)</em></td>
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The Event!

The Gathering began officially on Wednesday July 15 at 7:30pm at Ford Field. I felt the Spirit as soon as I entered the stadium. It was palpable, 30,000 youth and adults gathered together because they were people of faith in Jesus. Just walking into the stadium was an emotional experience. Ford Field had been transformed from a sport venue to a place of worship.

Every night ended at Ford Field. Folks gathered to worship, hear different speakers, sing with different music, be challenged, uplifted, have fun, dance, and be a part of the Church. Highlights included the Motown Experience, where suddenly the over 40 crowd became much more animated. Youth who had never seen their parents and adult leaders dance, didn’t quite know what to do. Also young poets, Christian rock, and more. Speakers challenged the crowd to welcome the LBGTQ community, work against racism, remember the poor, work for justice, and again, there was more.

Every night, as we left Ford Field, Detroit folks and Ford Field Staff would “high five” the crowds of Lutherans as we walked by. Adult leaders would hold up something high so their youth could find them, so blow up animal pool toys, pink umbrellas, be-ribboned sticks, bright stuffed animals and other distinctively out of place objects could be seen raised above the moving masses.

Police and volunteers escorted the exodus at every intersection. The road was closed to accommodate our nightly travel from Ford Field to the bus loading area, which was about a mile through the downtown area.
The days were divided into three units:

**Proclaim Justice:** A day of service in Detroit. Youth cleared empty lots of weeds and garbage, boarded up blighted properties, planted community gardens, and more. Efforts were coordinated through existing organizations who were already mobilized for urban renewal.

**Proclaim Story:** This was our Synod Day together. We met just after lunch and spent two hours spending time telling our personal stories of God at work in our lives. Both Youth and Adult leaders shared their stories with the whole group, and then everyone was invited to share with each other. The afternoon concluded with a worship celebration, focusing on Mark’s gospel story of the healing of the paralytic who was lowered through the roof by his friends.
Proclaim Community: This day was spent in the large convention area of the COBO Center. While the area was open every day, and people were encouraged to spend free hours there, every group had a particular day dedicated to checking out all that there was to offer here for activities, service opportunities, high adventure, and games. The center was divided into four quadrants: Build Bridges, Break Chains, Bring Hope, Bear Burdens. There were zip lines, dress up like the Da Vinci’s “The Last Supper”, Locks for Love, nap recharging stations, bumper cars, a Habitat for Humanity build, basketball games, painting wood murals, making blankets, the ELCA Walk for Water, bouncy houses, wheel chair obstacle course etc.

Food: Gathering participants could eat at vendors in Cobo, and at Ford Field. There were many restaurants and fast food places within walking distance. Many enjoyed Greek Town. There were box lunches for those on Proclaim Justice Day.
Glitches: On the first day, there were some major problems with transportation. Exacerbating an already logistically challenging day was an accident on the highway, delaying traffic for hours, including the buses that were on their way to pick up Proclaim Justice people waiting to go to their assignments. Many did not get to do their service day because the buses arrived too late to get them to and from their sights. While this was frustrating and disappointing, there were blessings too. The participants understood more deeply what it was to rely on public transportation, and their attitudes remained cheerful and positive as they made the most of a difficult situation. One article called the visiting Lutherans “insufferably cheerful.” 😊

An Average Day: Most groups had to be up by 6am to catch their bus into downtown. While they waited for the next scheduled thing, many would nap on the carpeted floors and hallways of the Cobo Center. It was a common sight to see sleeping bodies sprawled along the corridors in heaps, under jackets, under chairs, and in darkened corners. After a full day, we would end the evening at Ford Field. After exiting the arena, walking to the buses, and being transported back to hotels, many did not get back to their rooms until 11pm or 12 midnight. And then up at 6am the next day.

In Kind Offering: Gathering Participants were invited to bring food, books, and diapers in addition to monetary support for Detroit ministries. Our synod did an incredibly good job of bringing diapers. We barely had room for our luggage in our large charter buses, as the hold was packed full of diapers.
The Gathering in Numbers

People

Almost 20,000 people moved each night in more than 400 buses
6,961 calls to the InfoLine and Transportation Line
113 hotels in and around Detroit hosted Gathering participants
62 Bishops attended
497 MYLE participants
38 DAYLE participants
1500 Communion assistants
300 people in Sunday morning’s processional
5,000 people participated in mass casts
11 1/2 kegs of root beer consumed at the reformation space in Proclaim Community.
858 Volunteers with people serving as Community Life, Servant Companions, Gathering Volunteer Core and Local Volunteers
15 Planning Teams consisting of 462 people

Places

3,200 vacant lots cleared of debris
319 vacant homes boarded
26 dumpsters filled
600 neighborhood block clubs affected
36 urban gardens installed
99 picnic tables built

Created

2,033 mural boards created to beautify Detroit
4,000 hats made
1600 collages created
5200 bracelets made
6000 beaded bookmarks created

Donated

609 units of blood collected with the potential to help save 1593 lives in the Detroit community.
650 people donated at least 8 inches of hair for a minimum of 433 feet
More than 1 million diapers collected
1,425 backpacks filled and distributed
$296,000 collected in Sunday’s offering
$402,000 collected for Walk 4 Water as of 7/29/15
Summary –

The National Youth Gathering comes around once every three years. This year, we were as close to the Gathering as we, of Northern Wisconsin and Upper Peninsula locale, are ever going to be. It was an opportune time to offer as much encouragement and support as possible to make this a priority, especially for those congregations who have not in the past weighed the effort in preparation to be worthwhile.

There is no doubt that bringing a group of youth requires leaders to have a deep commitment to making this happen. The fundraising, the mental energy, the need to convince others, including youth, that this is a worthwhile endeavor is often a difficult sell. However, I am hopeful that this experience in Detroit will bolster efforts three years from now to get our Synod to Houston.

Over and over again, I have heard from youth and adults what a life-changing, faith awakening, God experience Detroit was. For those who attended this year, it was all worth it. And truthfully, the more time leaders spent in preparation with their youth, the more everyone got out of it.

In Detroit, we came together as Church, from all over the country, and all over the world. We experienced the diversity of our church, from race, to accents, to the spectrum of gender expression, to socio-economic circumstances, to urban, rural, farming, sub-urban, and hard core inner city home lives. There was an energy, a palpable Spirit presence, a happy exhaustion, and a deep sense of making a difference in Jesus’ name. Together, we lived and embodied the proclamation that “Jesus is...Good News!” And we were challenged to consider what such embodiment might look like at home.

Whether congregations sent one or twenty youth, they have been impacted by what their young people experienced. As youth continue to talk about and process their Detroit experience, their congregations glimpse the reality of the wider church, beyond their walls, beyond their town, beyond their limited experience and perhaps even isolated perspectives. The church is about so much more than how many people are in your pews, how much money you have or don’t have, or the current anxiety of the day. The church is about Jesus, proclaiming Jesus, embodying Jesus, talking about Jesus, and learning about all Jesus has to teach us. Detroit was as much celebration as service, as much worship as fellowship, as much hands on as it was thinking and learning.

For my own personal experience, not being connected with any particular youth group, I was free to talk with and get to know the security guards who were charged to be in our room all day long, and some of the staff at Ford Field. I was free to talk with the bus drivers who gathered waiting for their passengers to arrive after Ford Field every night. I enjoyed conversations about faith, and church, why we were there, and the kind of impact we were having, not only on the city, but on their understanding of Christians more broadly, and ELCA Lutherans in particular. I was blessed to hear their stories of faith, and for a few, blessed to pray with and for them. For me, the value of the Gathering became all the more evident in these conversations that were so outside the norm of everyday chit chat and the small talk that passes between strangers. We talked about things that mattered. Now if only we could find a way to open the same conversations in our own small towns and cafes, bus stops and dinner tables.

Respectfully submitted,

Rev. Katherine Finegan