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Enabling an Emerging Youth Movement in the ELCIC: Inheritances of Faith, the Early Years of the ELCIC

Lynn Granke

As the ELCIC took shape in 1986, the National Youth Ministry Committee (NYMC) was established as a priority within the Division for Parish Life (DPL). Underscoring the importance of youth ministry was the hiring of a program director whose role was to develop youth programming and oversee the outdoor ministries of the ELCIC. The NYMC consisted of youth representing their synods who came with a history of involvement at the congregational and/or synodical level. Serving on NYMC offered youth an additional opportunity to expand their leadership skills. Membership on NYMC also included adult lay members and clergy.

The NYMC focused its energy and commitment on nurturing the faith of and developing leadership with youth. This occurred through a number of initiatives including the Global Hunger and Economic Justice Seminar (GHEJS), a servant event, and the Canadian Lutheran Youth Gathering (CLYG).

In May of 1987 the DPL created an opportunity for youth aged 17–25 to participate in an education and advocacy event in Ottawa. The NYMC, chaired by the Rev. Gordon Jensen, recognized the passion and concern of many in this age group who saw the injustices and inequities of those living in poverty and experiencing homelessness. There was a strong commitment on the part of NYMC to equip youth to address these issues as a response to their vocation as disciples of Christ. Rev. Jensen’s focus, then and now, is on gathering people together in conversation to be inspired by the Spirit and to reflect on the gospel that brings us together and sends us out in love and service of our neighbours. And so, the Global Hunger and Economic Justice Seminar (GHEJS) was born.

Modelled after a similar event in the Lutheran Church in America (LCA), the seminar brought together 30 youth from across the ELCIC, appointed by their synods. The ELCIC partnered with Canadian Lutheran World Relief (CLWR), who provided funding and leadership to the event. CLWR had a long history of addressing poverty and food insecurity internationally; partnering with the ELCIC demonstrated their commitment to educating ELCIC youth and building awareness and knowledge in youth participants on the issues of food insecurity and poverty.

The seminar was an experiential model of education rooted in the context of diakonia, a “doing” ministry in response to the needs of people, our neighbours. Diakonia is both a practical ministry in which the immediate needs of a suffering person are addressed while also considering the wider context, the root causes, that create disparity and inequity. Diakonia is understood as flowing from our baptism and into our vocation as Christians, called to love and serve our neighbours as a witness to God’s love in Christ for all. This love seeks to uphold the dignity of each person, ensuring their rights are respected. In baptism we are called to bear God’s creative and redeeming word to all the world. Discerning how we

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respond to the needs of the vulnerable was a question explored, considered, and discussed in a variety of contexts during the GHEJS.

The program for the five-day event considered the root causes of poverty, hunger, and homelessness in Canada through a variety of engagements with government leaders and those working the front lines in food banks. The Rev. Dr. David Pfrimmer, who at the time was the Director of the Lutheran Office for Public Policy, engaged participants in discussing the role of the Church in ensuring the rights and dignity of all, in particular as it pertains to issues of justice for the vulnerable. Daily worship and reflection, facilitated by the Rev. Bob Shantz, grounded participants in the gospel that is centered on the poor and oppressed. A simulation game on hunger engaged participants in an experiential exercise to deepen their understanding of the daily realities of hunger and poverty. Participants met with their respective Members of Parliament to share their concerns over the desperate needs of their neighbours who are hungry and homeless and to advocate for a more equitable and just system. During Question Period in the House of Commons, the participants were acknowledged and commended for their work on behalf of others.

Other opportunities included a conversation with leaders from the Canadian Labour Congress, visits to the Good Shepherd Soup Kitchen and Men’s Shelter, and the Ottawa Food Bank. These gatherings introduced participants to their neighbours whose stories of the daily challenge of feeding their families and finding affordable housing were jarring. The conversations served to broaden the participants understanding that the work of diakonia is done with others rather than for others, an expression of mutuality.

In conversation with the staff at the Ottawa Food Bank (which was established in 1984), participants heard of their desire to be out of business within a decade. The hope that the root causes of hunger in Canada could be addressed and alleviated was real. Sadly, this food bank and hundreds more remain a necessity even as advocacy work continues.

The GHEJS sought to address the root causes of hunger, poverty, and homelessness, bearing witness to the transformative nature of God’s love for all. The actions of youth in advocating with MP’s and listening to the stories of another’s struggle and suffering is an act of hope. The actions of accompaniment and envisioning future possibilities that respect and honour the dignity of all is diakonia in action.

The NYMC also created a servant event at Camp Kyriakos (Sylvan Lake, Alberta) in the summer of 1987, offering youth who were selected by their synods an opportunity to be of service to the camp community. This event of the NYMC melded two aspects of the work of DPL: outdoor ministry and youth ministry. The week-long service project involved the restoration of a covered wagon that housed a group of campers. The participants cleaned off rust, painted the wagon, repaired the canvas that encircled the hoops, and the interior of the wagon was thoroughly cleaned and refurbished.

Each day was structured following the flow of camp life. There was opportunity for team building, group worship, recreation, and service via painting, scrubbing, and repairing! With outdoor ministries offering an opportunity for life together, an added dimension was in the call and response to service. In their role as servants, their combined efforts responded to an important need of the camp. There was a lot of laughter and fun, and there was a sense of shared purpose in working together on a project that would help the camp community. The model of Christ as a servant was foundational to the worship and reflection times.

Prior to the formation of the ELCIC, the national youth gathering was for many years a joint project with the Missouri Lutheran Church. In 1986 the DPL took steps to bring the
youth gathering in-house, creating space for the event to align with the theology and direction of the ELCIC. Another goal was to draw upon ELCIC adult leadership—especially through inviting Canadian keynote presenters.

In August 1988, the first Canadian Lutheran Youth Gathering (CLYG) took place at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, bringing over 800 participants together. Rev. Walter Wangerin was the keynote for “Stand By Me,” the largest youth gathering in Canada ever! Over the next 10 years, the CLYG continued to develop leadership as young adults provided small group and home team leadership and led workshops. The faith of youth participants grew through a palette of offerings: keynotes, workshops, bible studies, and worship—in particular through the music and singing. The NYMC encouraged the CLYG to create opportunities for youth to lead the large group singing, and so the CLYG band and drama team were born. This provided youth with the ability to share their gifts in creative ways for the building up of the Body of Christ. After the 2002 Waterloo Declaration in which the ELCIC and the Anglican Church of Canada entered into full communion, the CLYG morphed once more into CLAY, the Canadian Lutheran-Anglican Youth gathering—which continues to this day.

The priorities of NYMC in the early days of the ELCIC added to the richness of leadership development. Many of the participants in all of these events have offered to the Church their time, energy, skills, and expertise, some as lay leaders and a significant number as clergy. The vision of DPL in encouraging, supporting, and visioning a future strengthened by youth leadership and participation has been a gift to the ELCIC.