

Pastor's Report to Congregation Council  
July 24, 2024

There's a scripture passage engraved in stone hanging over the doorway on the Pearl Street entrance that says "Train up a child in the way he should go and when he is old he will not depart from it." *Proverbs 22:6*. Ever since seeing this engraving for the first time over two years ago, as I've entered the church most days through these doors, it's reminded me that St. Matthew has always taken the youth of the congregation quite seriously. Sure, it's fitting that this engraving would be found at the entrance into the Christian education wing of the building ... but to "commit" to this verse enough to put it in stone and make it a permanent part of the structure of the building speaks volumes of the dedication towards our youth. As the church, we take this quite seriously. As the called leaders of the congregation, we too take this responsibility quite seriously. But even more importantly, this responsibility falls upon the parents of the children. This was something that Martin Luther strongly believed, which is part of why he wrote the *Small Catechism*. Parents are the ones who help the children to learn and apply their faith to their daily lives the most. Parents are the ones responsible in getting their children to the church for worship and Sunday School, where they can not only experience and grow in their faith with others, but also receive opportunities to be challenged and grow from those of us who've been called and trained to do so.

This past month was very much a "youth month" for me. Much of my time was centered around and spent with the young people of the congregation. I spent Sunday the 23<sup>rd</sup> with the High Schoolers as we held our last preparation meeting before the ELCA Youth Gathering in New Orleans.

That same week I spent the mornings with some of the Littles from St. Matthew and other littles from our neighborhood participating and helping to lead VBS. It was a joy to help Rachel Knaggs in teaching the children new songs about God, their faith, and themselves and leading them in song throughout the week. Those of us who led that week, in the many different capacities required, all expressed how fun the week was for us, and how well we all seemed to work together.

Continuing that same week, Deacon Lindsay, Austin, Julie Shrader, and I took the Middles tent camping and canoeing in Canal Fulton Friday and Saturday. We worshipped together, marveled at God while being surrounded by creation, and even had the added bonus of watching a fireworks show that evening, as the town of Canal Fulton celebrated their "Canal Days Festival." I was so incredibly impressed by the youth that were on this trip ... their openness to trying new things, their kind and friendly interactions between one another, and their eagerness to help lend a hand. Both Deacon Lindsay and I agreed that this was a great alternative, and more beneficial for the youth, than requiring of them an expensive week at camp.

The weeks between this busy week and the gathering were filled with the normal activities that appear in my report ... visits, administration, sermon preparation, and meetings galore (the week of the 8<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> was one of those weeks!). Bible & Brews also met that Thursday evening for some fun and fellowship at Red Wagon Farms.

On the 14<sup>th</sup> the Luther League were commissioned and sent off by the congregation as a part of worship. During this liturgy they promised the congregation that they would do their best to represent themselves, St. Matthew, and our community as best they could. The excitement level was palpable that morning, as the congregation was filled with the youth, their parents, and many congregation members that have given financially in support of this experience.

I've been to many gatherings in my 22+ years of ministry with different groups of kids and different personalities. Some of you reading this report may have also experienced a Gathering or two in your lifetime, as a participant and as an adult leader. So you know how special, impactful, and sometimes life-changing these events can be. Some of what you'd expect us to have experienced while away happened. There were some hi highs: hearing from some incredible speakers speaking to the themes of the week; singing along with some talented and gifted musicians; witnessing worship in an exciting and different way; seeing our youth connect with one another and come together. These are just a few of the things a leader expects (and hopes) to witness among the youth. But with that said, there were also some of the lowest of lows I've ever experienced. Without going into great detail or naming names for sake of confidentiality, protection of the individuals, and Christian love for these young people, among a small percentage of our participants I witnessed poor choices, disruptive behaviors, disrespect to others within our very own group and other groups around us, disregard and disengagement for and from the overall experience, all of which culminated in a verbal and physical altercation between two people. To say I, along with the other leaders of the group, were shocked and saddened by this doesn't fully capture it. Tears flowed, not just from the frustration of having attempted to address issues with individuals, or the frustration of having those attempts blatantly ignored and then mocked among their peers, or the fact that our group didn't feel like a safe space for our members to be their true authentic self, or the embarrassment from having heard from not just one but four different group leaders that had called some of the group out for inappropriateness ... but from the sadness that somehow "we had failed them." I do not share this fact lightly, but for you to know the facts. As the adult leaders of this experience, we made every effort in the way in which we felt was necessary at the time to address the issues as we learned of them. When you have as large a group as we had, we simply couldn't be around all of the kids all of the time to witness these occurrences. Nor did we believe we would have to be ... but we were made to be wrong. And although we heard from many that their overall experience for the week was a positive one, I cannot help but be saddened by the fact that not everyone got to experience what "could have been."

I am thankful that yesterday, the 23<sup>rd</sup>, I had the opportunity for a "pick-me-up" experience with some of the youth, as we spent much of the day enjoying Cedar Point together.

In Christ, with Christ, for Christ!

Pastor Steve