



“Faith, Hope & Love” event builds safer and more welcoming congregations for LGBTQ+ youth

By Jamie Bruesehoff

Photo: Jamie Bruesehoff



Worship at the “Faith, Hope & Love” event in March.

What are your wildest and holiest dreams for LGBTQ+ youth and the church? A poster in the entryway of Abiding Presence Lutheran Church in Ewing asked the question as 140 participants, ranging in age from 11 to 75, gathered to dream, learn and share at the third “Faith, Hope & Love” event in March.

The event grew out of a request from some of the New Jersey Synod’s young people who wanted to talk about how the church walks with LGBTQ+ youth. The church has a complicated history with the LGBTQ+ community. These young people were, and continue to be, deeply aware of the mixed messages the church sends about gender and sexuality by what we say and do and by what we don’t.

For three years, youth, young adults, parents, youth leaders, pastors and congregational leaders have come together to celebrate the rich diversity of God’s people and learn how to make their homes, congregations and communities safer, more welcoming places for LGBTQ+ children and youth. Rooted in lifting up the voices of

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Photo: Jamie Bruesehoff



Rebecca Bruesehoff speaks at the event.

LGBTQ+ people, the day is filled with education, storytelling, community and worship.

Resource partners enrich the day by leading workshops, hosting display tables and connecting participants to resources that exist in their communities. This year's event included Garden State Equality, HiTops, PFLAG, GLSEN, RWJ's Proud Family Health Clinic, the Naming Project, GLAAD, LEAM NJ, Reconciling Works, and Cross Roads Camp.

People said things like, "To see so many people who are here to learn, fight for and love members of the queer community was overflowing with the Holy Spirit."

Another said, "I learned that churches have to go out of their way to acknowledge LGBTQ+ people. Even if we are open and affirming, we cannot say it enough. There's too many people of faith saying the opposite."

Perhaps most powerful of all is seeing the youngest LGBTQ+ participants immersed in a faith-filled community declaring that LGBTQ+ people are made in the image of God, admitting that the church needs to do better, and listening intently to LGBTQ+ voices to know how to create the necessary change. One young person described the power of hearing stories of faithful LGBTQ+ teens, seminarians and pastors as "I can see myself in the church."

From this ministry, people went out to change the world and church in big and small ways. Youth went to their councils to talk about becoming a Reconciling in Christ congregation. It didn't necessarily go the way they wanted, but they've started the conversation and aren't giving up.

Youth leaders hosted documentary screenings and panel discussions to start the conversation and learning. Educators hung signs in their offices that publicly declared they would be a safe space for LGBTQ students. Pastors connected struggling parents with those farther along on this journey. Grandparents started conversations with their grandchildren. Youth started conversations with their parents. Young adults dared to explore their call to ministry upon seeing a church that needs their voice. Thanks be to God! ५

Jamie Bruesehoff, a member of Holy Counselor Lutheran Church, Vernon, is a writer, speaker and advocate.

Buildings, budgets and benefits

By the Rev. Chris Halverson

I attended the Buildings Budgets and Benefits event sponsored by Excellence in Ministry Unleashed (EMU) in early May. As you look forward to the start of a new programming year, here are a few thoughts and tips for you.

Buildings

The shape and use of our church buildings ought to be driven by the mission of the congregation, otherwise they can become idols, the buildings themselves become the mission.

Create a “wish-list” of repairs and improvements to your building. You never know when someone might feel moved to be generous and purchase them for the church. If you don’t ask, people can’t say yes.

Congregations can cut their energy costs a lot simply by retrofitting their buildings. For example replacing all the incandescent bulbs with LED ones can cut energy costs by 25% and replacing single pane windows with multi-pane windows can cut costs by 50%.

Finally, here are a few questions to ask when thinking about the first impressions visitors get of your building:

- Do people know where to find the main entrance to the church?
- Can people see the sanctuary upon entering the church?
- Can they find the restroom?
- Is there an easily accessible place for folk to talk to the pastor after worship?

Budgets

Budgets are moral documents, where our treasures are, so are our hearts.

Congregations should ideally have a three-year budget plan.

A way to think about mission before worrying about money is to create a budget without dollar

signs that will tell the story of your hope for the coming year.

There are two ways to change a budget. One way is to shift priorities (moving percentages around on a pie chart). The other is to increase the size of the pie. A great way to do this is to challenge the congregation to increase their giving to the synod by 1%, their savings by 1% and their capital repairs fund by 1%.

Benefits

Two things most people don’t know when looking at a pastor’s benefit package are:

- They don’t know how much their own health care and benefits cost the company they work for (on average 40-80% of a business’ gross revenue goes to employee benefits.)
- They don’t realize that pastors covered by the “Gold” health care package (the one most pastors in New Jersey are covered under) still have to pay approximately 20% of their own health care costs (the congregation pays the remaining 80%).

Here are the three most commonly made mistakes around benefits that you should watch out for:

- Congregations, make sure to tell Portico when your pastor leaves—otherwise you’ll keep paying for them even though they don’t work for you.
- Pastors, make sure Portico knows when your compensation changes—otherwise you’ll lose a lot of retirement money.
- Pastors, know that there are tax implications to taking your money out of Portico and putting it in a different service. You have to pay taxes on the housing allowance amount portion if it isn’t in a Portico account. ƚ

Chris Halverson is pastor of St. Stephen Lutheran Church, South Plainfield.

From the bishop:

Worship is at the heart of who we are

During the first week in August, ELCA members from across the country will gather in Milwaukee for the 2019 Churchwide Assembly. Together, we will elect a presiding bishop and secretary, discuss and vote on issues important to how we live out our faith, and hear stories of this church making a difference in the world. Every day we will pause to worship Jesus Christ—hearing the Bible stories that shape our faith, singing the songs that express our faith and being fed with the food that sustains our faith. This daily worship is the heart of who and what we are as church together.

Every week, God’s people gather to worship together—in local communities of faith that reflect the contexts in which we are planted. In New Jersey, this means congregations gather in formal sanctuaries with pipe organs, in auditoriums with worship bands, in parks with guitars and folding chairs, on beaches with the sound of the ocean as the backdrop, or in newly reconfigured worship spaces with flexible seating and varied musical accompaniment. We gather to worship in the language of the people—English and Spanish and Korean and Portuguese and Bassa and more. We gather with people of every age

and generation and gender identity and sexual orientation and political persuasion and immigration status.

As you gather to worship, look around and give thanks for the congregation whom God has called together. And then ask, “Who’s missing” and “Why?”



Bishop Tracie
Bartholomew

Once you’ve answered that question, how will you take the risk to remedy it? Congregations have been asking and answering those questions in a variety of ways—in cohorts working together to strengthen their witness, with synod staff members providing resources to make changes, and even in deciding to bring a congregation to a close. Making bold decisions in Jesus’ name is nothing new for God’s people. Following where the Spirit leads is what a living church does—no matter what size or language or musical style your congregation embraces.

Worshiping with you,
Bishop Tracie L. Bartholomew

ELCA online resource for children and youth ministry available

Have you ever struggled to find theologically sound and age appropriate ministry tools for your congregation? Looking for ideas to supplement your Sunday school or youth programming? It can be daunting to find good books, crafts or the latest app to help us share the gospel with our children. Well, you don’t need to spend hours googling—the ELCA has a website that provides links to a multitude of resources you can use!

It’s called “Ministry Links Online” (ministrylinks.online) and it’s edited by the Rev. Janelle Rozek Hooper, ELCA program director for ministry with children, and Rachel Alley, program director for youth ministry—part of the First Third of Life Faith Formation Team. The website is full of books, suggested websites, curriculum, intergenerational events and worship ideas, games, and ways to celebrate the church seasons. If you’re looking for help, chances are you can find it here.