

**NC Synod Gathering Podcast Transcript – Episode 1 with Molly Beck Dean
Tammy Jones West - hosting.
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Tammy Jones West: I've invited a few guests to join me and first on this adventure is the director of the ELCA Youth gathering, Molly Beck Dean. Thanks for joining us, Molly.

Molly Beck Dean: Hello, Ms. Tammy.

Tammy Jones West: Surely, some of our 792 participants in the gathering are podcast listeners. So tell us in your own words why do we do a gathering?

Molly Beck Dean: I think there are lots of important reasons. But I think the most important reason for me is that we know that the gathering is transformational for young people. I know that because it was transformational for me when I was a young person and went as a student to the gathering but we know through conversations and research and all those good things that this kind of experience, this week of faith formation, this week of boundary stretching and exploration and vocation pondering that it matters and it has been a part of our tradition in the Lutheran church for more than 100 years. The youth gathering dates back to at least the late 1800s. I've found evidence of a Lutheran youth convention or gathering and it's just been a historical tradition in our church to gather kids for faith formation and it just matters it makes a difference to gather as the church and to recognize our Lutheran-ness and to celebrate and to worship and to learn together.

Tammy Jones West: That's exciting and for most synods this is the largest gathering that they have of their synod. It just may not happen to be in their synod.

Molly Beck Dean: Right. Right. It's larger than a lot of their synod assemblies (or whatever) and so to be able to gather especially now that we have synod day as part of the gathering. To gather and for the bishop to be able to worship and study and play with that many of their constituents. What a great opportunity!

Tammy Jones West: Well tell us: we're here in Houston. We're here at the ELCA Youth Ministry Extravaganza. What goes into choosing a gathering city?

Molly Beck Dean: You know, a whole lot. It's a good mix of the Holy Spirit, then a checklist. There is this kind of spirit-ness to it that just kind of leads you to certain places at certain times. But there's also that checklist of: A city has to be able to host us, they have to have a stadium, they have to have hotels. Those kinds of things. It's just a balance. We've already started site visits for 2024.

Tammy Jones West: Oh my gracious.

Molly Beck Dean: And so as we've visited these different cities and learned about what makes their city great and maybe even what challenges that certain city is facing, we start to process that through with the mission of the gathering. And then of course look at their stadium and their convention center and sometimes like we're like "hmmm I don't know if that's going to work so well" and all of those things. But it's a good combination.

Tammy Jones West: So besides a city, what does it take behind the scenes to make a gathering happen? There are a lot of people who have never been to a gathering and they see the outside of it. Tell us about the inside.

Molly Beck Dean: Right. I am just so lucky. I have an amazing staff. But we are small.

Tammy Jones West: Super small.

Molly Beck Dean: But mighty! Small but mighty. But it's really about our 15 planning teams made up of volunteers, youth, young adults, and adult adults from all over the country. Those teams plan starting as far as two years out and really kick into high gear 18 months out to first dream, to evaluate from last cycle and to dream a little about what this next cycle could look like. And then start to make plans and then back up and remake plans. But really that's what happens. And when we get to the gathering, it's about even more volunteers who are added to that force. Hundreds of volunteers from all over the country who are so excited to give up a week to come and work like crazy and do a whole variety of tasks and that's what really happens. My colleague Donna says the gathering only happens because of the work of the Holy Spirit and I truly believe that. When you think about what we're trying to do and what we actually pull off every 3 years, it is only because of the Holy Spirit.

Tammy Jones West: Absolutely.

Molly Beck Dean: yep absolutely.

Tammy Jones West: So, let's talk a little bit about the Holy Spirit behind the scenes. You started as director in 2015 just before Detroit. What's one behind the scenes story from that gathering that you're willing to share?

MBD: You know there's all sorts of stuff that happens behind the scenes and we think that if we're doing our jobs, most people will never know about it.

TJW: Exactly. That's the prayer.

MBD: This is semi behind the scenes: So last cycle, we had a little issue with lunches for our service learning. We worked with a local vendor who was just starting this company up and thought that she had the capacity to do 10,000 lunches a day and we found out on Thursday that she actually did not. And that was a little stressful right? Because people need to and want to eat after they've been serving for the day. So that

was super chaotic and crazy, but then we also saw some really amazing things happen because of it. We saw adult leaders and serving companions and volunteers who did some really awesome problem solving and just figured it out. Partners (our service learning organizations that we partnered with) stepped up in big ways too. They fed our people; they reached out to local restaurants in their neighborhood and said “hey we have these kids who are working so hard for us, but their lunches aren’t showing up.” We had families who brought food out. So it was crazy and not great, but again it’s the work of the Holy Spirit, right? And nobody died because they didn’t get their sandwich that day.

TJW: Exactly.

MBD: People figured it out. It was unfortunate, but it also allowed for these Holy Spirit moments and then the next day we had quickly contracted with a new contractor-a new lunch provider to bring all the lunches-and they did, but then also our original lady showed up with thousands of lunches even though we told her we were moving on. And so now we have almost twice as many lunches as we need which is so crazy. But again, the Holy Spirit moment in that is that these congregations took it upon themselves and walked around the streets of Detroit handing out boxed lunches to homeless folks on the street.

TJW: Oh, that’s beautiful.

MBD: Ya know? So not only feeding them, but also giving these kids a really tangible way to approach somebody who’s on the street that maybe they just walk by, but now they have an excuse to engage that person a little bit. So, you know, it all happens. We got through it.

TJW: You survived.

MBD: We did!

TJW: And you stayed on staff

MBD: That’s great

TJW: Well, let’s talk about some of those adults. We have a wonderful group of adults, many of whom are giving up of their vacation to do this. To be a part of this gathering. What advice do you have for them?

MBD: I have lots of advice. I think one of the things we know for sure is that a young person’s experience at the gathering is directly related to how prepared their adult leader is. So I really encourage adult leaders to think ahead. Don’t just hop on the plane on June 26th and show up in Houston, right? But look through our gathering handbook which has just tons of tips and tricks. Think about your days. Plan out your days a little bit. Whether that means deciding what you’re going to do and experience at interactive

learning, or where you're going to make food reservations. You know put a little thought into that before you come. And the other thing that really matters for young people is their adult's attitude.

TJW: Oh amen.

MBD: And flexibility. Right? So if you as an adult leader stay positive even when your lunches don't arrive or whatever, your shuttle bus is late, or your flight is delayed or whatever it is: If you stay positive, your kids are going to stay positive. If you get all grumpy and cranky about it, they are too. So those young people are watching you and they're watching how you react and how you deal with those stressful situations. And so to stay flexible and to know that things are going to happen.

TJW: Absolutely!

MBD: Right? You can prepare and plan and be like 100% ready, but stuff's gonna happen. Stuff is gonna go wrong: stuff in your control, stuff out of your control. So be prepared for that too. Stuff is gonna happen and you've got to just roll with it sometimes.

TJW: How about those amazing young people that are coming to be a part of this: What advice do you have for them?

MBD: Come with an open heart. Our goal at the gathering is to provide opportunities for kids to be affirmed in their faith. So if you're a young person coming, we want you to come and have those warm fuzzy God moments. Where you just are like: "Yes this is what I believe and I love that 30,000 others believe it too and this just feels warm and fuzzy." But we also hope that you're challenged in your faith somehow. And maybe it's something that you hear or that you experience or you see that makes you wrestle a little bit with your faith that maybe pushes you out of your norm. Maybe it's something that you hear or experience that isn't what's reflected in your home community or isn't what you talk about at your dining room table and that it pushes them a little bit and challenges them and gives them something to pray about and to wrestle with God because that's all a part of the faith journey: that wrestling and doubting and getting a little angry with God and just doing some of that wrestling. So I really would just hope that young people come to the gathering with an open heart and open mind ready to have those faith experiences.

TJW: That's amazing. Tell us a little about... We know that Wednesday this gathering starts and goes through Sunday, but the reality is there are people here in Houston before that. Tell us a little about the pre-events.

MBD: Yeah so hundreds of people will come to the gathering: come to the city of Houston on Sunday for our two pre-events. So, one of them is the Table which is a pre-event for young people with disabilities (a whole range of disabilities) and the Table is really about gathering that community. So it can be kinda lonely as a kid with a disability in a congregation even if you have the most awesome-sauce youth group who loves

and embraces you as you are that's great, but you're still usually the one kid with a disability. And so to be able to gather that community ahead of time for faith formation and leadership development and just community empowerment is just great and so that's a really meaningful event. And our other event is MYLE the multicultural youth leadership event and that will gather about 700 young people of color again for faith formation, leadership development, and just bringing that community together for some empowerment and some specific development. And so I'm really excited about: our registration numbers are up for both of those pre-events which just means more kids will get to access those really important communities.

TJW: So they're here for a nice long time

MBD: They're here for like 8 days usually at least..

TJW: So when you see those folks on Sunday they're going to be tired

MBD: They're ready to go home.

TJW: They're ready to go home. But what an exciting ministry of the gathering to do that. So other than the gathering tell us something we might not know about Molly Beck Dean

MBD: Um...Well... I'm a mom. I have 2 little kids: Claire and Connor who are just amazing and challenging in all their own ways. I am a vegetarian and so I am always on the lookout for like good eats in the vegetarian world and Houston has a lot of good eats

TJW: That's good to know because we have folks that will be happy to hear that.

MBD: Yes. It is not a hard city to find food in which is great because New Orleans was a really hard city for me to eat in. It was like "everything has seafood in it and sausage. So I'm a vegetarian. I'm super passionate about LGBTQ issues and advocacy and making sure that young people (especially young people) that they have a place in this church and that God loves them how they are. And my favorite food is ice cream.

TJW: this I knew actually. I will tell you that as a team leader, when we have meetings, Molly absolutely always knows where the ice cream is to be found in the cities.

MBD: It has been 6 days, Tammy, since I've had ice cream

TJW: Oh no.

MBD: it's time. We gotta go somewhere tonight

TJW: So I appreciate you being with us. This is our first in the series. We haven't done podcasts in years in North Carolina, but we knew the gathering was something people cared about and would want to hear more about. So we're going to follow it up with

some “day in the life” kind of things, we’re going to interview some other folks, but you’re our first. Thank you so much

MBD: Ooooh very fun. Happy to do it. Thank you and I have to say before we leave that I am very thankful to the people of North Carolina for loaning us Tammy Jones West. I mean you are a gift and I hope the fine folks of North Carolina realize that.

TJW: Well I appreciate that. They’re pretty wonderful to work with as well. So thanks for your help and thanks for being here.

MBD: Absolutely

TJW: Alright, take care.

MBD: Bye

TJW: Bye