

Tammy Jones West: Welcome to the North Carolina Synod podcast series on the 2018 ELCA Youth Gathering. I'm Tammy Jones West, your host, and today I have with me Danielle DeNise from Salisbury, North Carolina. Danielle, tell us about yourself.

Danielle DeNise: I serve as the Director of Evangelical Minute... Mission. I should know the name of my job. I'm the Director of Evangelical Mission here in the North Carolina Synod. I'm a member at St. John's in Salisbury and have taken...was at 2 National Youth Gatherings as a young kid in New Orleans and St. Louis and have taken teams to New Orleans and Detroit and just love the ministry of the Youth Gathering. So in addition to Youth Gathering stuff, I've taken teams to Guatemala and honestly all over the world and so I'm excited to share some tips of things we've learned along the way.

Tammy Jones West: Alright. So let's talk about getting ready. So we've got pre-event happening. We're in that pre-event time right now. What should people be thinking about to be ready for June in Houston?

Danielle DeNise: I know what you're thinking about is money. And you need to be thinking about that. But it cannot be the only thing you're thinking about. If all you're talking about is fundraising, you need to sort of check yourself and remember this isn't just an event in which we're producing consumers. We're hoping it's a huge faith formation experience for our young people. And so you've got to be paying attention to their formation before they walk through the doors of the dome in Houston. And so.. two things that I think are really key for that: One is use the "getting ready" materials. Make use of them. They're great. They have challenging conversations, but they also prep the kids for the kind of conversations that are going to happen in Houston. And we don't do those on accident or as an extra. We do them hoping they're an integral part of your groups getting ready and your group's preparation.

Tammy Jones West: And we've heard fabulous things. People who are actually using the material and actually digging in deep have had some phenomenal conversations around faith formation and so absolutely take advantage of that. It is free, it is there ready for you. So use it please.

Danielle DeNise: And you can find that at [elca.org/gathering](http://elca.org/gathering) and the getting ready materials are there. And don't feel like you have to do it on a youth group night. That can be a great time. And also, they're great conversation for kids who aren't coming to the gathering. So if you do do it on a youth group night, make the best of it, but it also might be appropriate to say "I'm going to do a lock in with this." Or "I'm going to do a retreat with this." I've done it both ways. It really just depends on your group right now. And you know your group, so make that work. One of the things that is in the getting ready materials is covenant and how you're going to be together and kids need to have those conversations like respecting people's stuff and use of cell phones. Like how are you going to use them. This is not the trip to say "you have social media" because it's integral to the Gathering. But there are appropriate uses of it. I was sharing with Tammy earlier that we always have a section in our covenant called BVs which meant Bon Voyage. And what it meant was these are the things that are BVable. Meaning the things I will Bon Voyage you home for. Nonnegotiable. And by BV I also mean BV you to your parental unit who will be at the airport. I was very clear that if you are BVed, this is at the cost of the participant. You name those things upfront so that there is no shock and it puts a little bit more fear in them in regards to doing that. For example, an inappropriate use of a cell phone probably is a place where you have a conversation and you think about what is the appropriate consequence. For me, a physical altercation: BVed. I find you with alcohol, you're BVed. These are the nonnegotiable pieces of our life together for the Gathering. And for me it was always important for me to say "you know my BVs upfront." I will tell you for my youth groups that I took to the Gathering, I didn't have problems with BVable offenses. Because even the kids would say "don't get BVed. You're gonna get Bon Voyaged. We're not gonna do this." And that

was really helpful. Calling it a Bon Voyage brings a little bit of levity to it, but it also says you will get sent home. So that was always helpful for me in that part of the covenant to name those things outright.

TJW: What about adults?

DD: Goodness. So here's the thing: you essentially have to have a covenant with your adult leaders as well. So for example one of the things the Gathering doesn't allow is the drinking of your adult leaders. And I would tell my adult leaders "If I find you drinking, you're BVED." I need you, but here's the deal: you have to follow those same guidelines. Usually for my adult leaders, I had 1 or 2 dinner meetings with just them which were opportunities to talk covenant, remind them of their role, give them logistic and schedule questions, but part of that depends on your leaders. But remember as the key contact for this, this is a faith formation experience for them, so set them up well. Encourage them well. But people need to know you're serious about your boundaries and your rules and if they don't, that's when they get pressed and they get walked on.

TJW: I will say that in your hotel you will see adult leaders with the Gathering in the bar and I will also tell you that those are the groups that are not having the same experience that those who have done some work with will have. It is so important that they are a part. If you're in the bar, your kids can't be in the bar. And while it's nice to get away from them. The thought of them sometimes getting away from them is ok, that's not faith formation. At all.

DD: And the other thing I think you can do to help kids remember it's a faith formation and the congregation remember it's a faith formation: it's not a big trip. That's not the point of it. We don't pour the money into the youth gathering so that kids can say "Check. I've been to Houston on a BuzzFeed quiz" That's not the goal of it right? The goal is that their lives look different. And so one of the things that I've always done in congregations is create a prayer calendar and the day that the team gets commissioned, there's a paper prayer calendar that we say "put this on your fridge." Usually I use a photo for each kid so they know and each day I say, for example, "On Thursday, in the North Carolina Synod, we'll be in synod day." My prayer petition might be: "792 Lutherans from North Carolina will gather. Pray that the spirit shows up in that place. That the young people who are giving testimonies and sharing stories are moved in such a way that they're able to claim that their faith is real and that it does change everything." And that actually, especially if you're not able to give regular updates from the Gathering like a blog post or something like that, it tells the congregation what's happening. They have a little glimmer of your journey if you create that prayer calendar ahead of time. And I always did it written because I had older members who didn't use technology and they wanted it on their fridge so they could see it every day when they got up. But also it's a way of affirming people who have made financial contributions. And it's a way of giving you some common language when you get back.

TJW: Sure.

DD: "How was your synod day?" "What was it like to serve?" "What did you learn in interaction center? What does that even mean?" So I do think.. for North Carolina: Tammy, do you want to share what their rotation is? So if they're creating...

TJW: Yes. We're going to be posting that. We know that synod day is Thursday and I think we're serving Saturday, but I'm going to have to check to be honest.

DD: So check back with Tammy Jones West.

TJW: And you'll hear it on the next podcast.

DD: Danielle just put her on the spot.

TJW: You put me on the spot and I had no clue, but the next podcast will definitely have all of that information in it, so you've got to come back.

DD: That's too funny. So those are things I think you can do before you even walk out the door. The other thing I would say-literally before the bus hits the ground-the night before you leave is not the night to pull an all-nighter. You've got to be at your best; so sleep. I really am addicted to chai lattes, so I would always start the trip with a chai latte to be like "it's going to be ok, Danielle. Don't get stressed." Do what you need to do to be the best leader that you can be at the start of the trip because you've got to have energy day 1.

TJW: Absolutely. And now is a great time to get those new pair of tennis shoes and get them going because you will walk miles and miles before you sleep. Literally. The steps you get for that week will carry you through the entire month of July. But to get those shoes now and get them broken in so that you're not walking around with blisters and you know, just think about how you're preparing physically for this event. It's going to be hot in Houston and you're just going to walk and walk and walk. So get that started now because it's not a time to get your beginning exercise on June 25th or 26th.

DD: And if you subsist on some Cheerwine, start drinking some water too, because A) in Houston they don't have Cheerwine but B) you need to stay hydrated.

TJW: And they say that the hydration piece is so critical and its critical to do it beforehand. 2 weeks before the Gathering, you've got to start your hydration of really doubling up.. well for some of you starting to drink water. But to start that 2 weeks before because you will arrive in Houston already dehydrated if you haven't done the work ahead of time. And that's hard because it's hot and you've got to stay hydrated.

DD: Yeah absolutely. Absolutely

TJW: Alright what are other helpful hints?

DD: What are other tips...So here are the two things that I think are so important when you're actually on site... well, let me say 3.

TJW: You can say 4 if you need to. We're hoping no one's counting, because we're probably not going to.

DD: So here's the deal. People ask me about t-shirts a lot. Do you really need t-shirts? Do you really need a t-shirt for every day? You can say "I don't need" but it makes your life a lot easier. If you have 2 kids coming with you, you can count 2 kids pretty easily. I've always taken larger groups than that and it's way easier to count 20 kids when you're walking in a line if they've all got the same shirt for the day. And so you can order a synod shirt that we're wearing on synod day, you'll receive a shirt that you'll wear on the service day and that means the interaction center day and then potentially when you arrive and go home. Some congregations say Wednesday and Sunday we can get by in our own clothes but the 3 days that we're really mixed in beyond dome stuff we want them in t-shirts. Some people bring an umbrella or a stick with a teddy bear glued to it that they can hold up so their team always knows "hey we're following the right group of orange shirts." One year I took an adult leader that was super super tall and he was basically our teddy bear on a stick because you could see him from really far back so it was ok. I've never taken that stick because I don't like to hold it during the whole day, but if you've got a large large group, it would certainly help.

TJW: And some of them use those blow up monkeys or something you can deflate so that you can carry it with you in your backpack. And just so you know, the synod shirt for Thursday is a heather purple and it's the same design as 2015 "The Lord Be With Y'all." People love that shirt and it'll be very soft and comfy because I've checked them out so we're ready to rock and roll on those and those are also available for anybody else it's not just for those folks going to the gathering. You can order them and the link has been posted on the Facebook group and we'll put it in the E-News soon, but you can order them for anybody; they're going to be delivered at Synod Assembly, so have someone at Synod Assembly to pick up your shirts.

DD: The other 2 things I think are really helpful: 1) and this goes to the t-shirts: you would be amazed how kids can't remember from Wednesday night to Thursday morning what t-shirt they should be wearing. Adults too, but when you're like "everybody say to me what shirt we should be in" and the next morning they're like "what... are we wearing purple today or are we wearing blue?" So I started creating for the Gathering a postcard that every night my adult that was doing the check-ins to make sure people were in their rooms would deliver and it would say "for Thursday, you're wearing this t-shirt" and then it would say "your backpack should have your water bottle, or a bible," or anything you knew in particular that you needed. Or for example if you knew a day like your service learning day you may not get dinner until a little bit later, I would put something that said "our meal time is going to be really flexible this time. You might want to pack some granola bars for today." Those kind of things. Essentially, it's just like a "tips" for them that they know for Thursday. I do one per room so I'm not carrying tons of extra paper with me, but the night before the adult that's making sure they're all in their rooms gives them their postcard and says "here's what you need to pack for Thursday."

TJW: And when we're leaving in the morning.

DD: Exactly. "You're meeting in the lobby at this time" or those kind of things. Basically, it's like their cheat sheet for the day. And I found that it didn't matter how many times I said it; if it was written, then the next morning they could go back to it. And they would gather around a little credenza in the hotel and be like "it says this" or "we're doing that." So I think that's helpful. The other thing—not at the end of the day but in the morning—you've just got to think about breakfast. I think breakfast is the hardest meal to figure out on the spot. Sometimes hotels have restaurants, but breakfast can be pricy and so if you really are kind of tight on a budget, hotel breakfast is not generally something you want to pay for.

TJW: It's just too expensive.

DD: And sometimes they do cash and care, like they'll have a little thing with pop tarts or whatever. I would see if you can—even if you're flying—pay \$50 for an extra suitcase that's filled with pop tarts and small cereal boxes and green bananas that might be ripe by the time you get to Houston. That kind of thing. \$50 for a suitcase is way less than you're going to pay for hotel breakfast.

TJW: For 3 people in a hotel breakfast.

DD: Exactly. Exactly. And I would always have my kids check into my room: I kept breakfast in my room so they had to come to my room to get breakfast and that's also where they got their meal money for the day, but then I knew that they were awake and they had taken steps. So they didn't just say "I'm awake but I haven't rolled out of bed yet." That kind of thing. Or they didn't hit the snooze button. That kind of thing. And I never let their roommate get their money or their breakfast because I wanted to physically see every kid's face in the morning.

TJW: gotta lay eyes on them.

DD: Exactly. But I really do encourage you to bring breakfast. It's the easiest thing. You can bring little apple juice boxes, I mean there really are ways for you to be creative. And if you're taking a bus, pack a suitcase or a tub. And if you're flying, pay the \$50 to bring an extra suitcase because it will be way cheaper than breakfast.

TJW: And now they've even got milk that's on the shelf and you can use that and you don't have to worry about finding regular milk—I mean it would be great if you can find it—but if not there are options now.

DD: And we always had a really hard time budgeting meal money. And I just didn't have the money to budget breakfast. And I would do—Tammy, Houston may be more expensive. I was just there last week and it was a little bit more expensive.—But I always did \$10 for lunch and \$20 for dinner. You may have to go up a little bit and do \$20 and \$30.

TJW: Or at least \$15 and \$20 we can probably get by with. But it is a little more expensive. But there are options. But you're going to get tired of concession food and it's not inexpensive if you're at NRG. What about if someone has an "in" with someone who has the ability to order in bulk?

DD: Yeah so if you are near a nursing home, a daycare, you have a good relationship with a school, they order from Sysco or US Foods and they can buy in bulk. And so I actually always asked our local nursing home to just add our breakfast order to their Sysco order for that week. And so then I got all of this stuff in bulk and it all came in boxes that were very easy to put under the bus. So I didn't have to repackage them or anything. And so they get those items a lot cheaper than if I go to Costco and buy pop tarts. But also what I learned the first time I did it when I sat down with the lady: she was really good about saying "This will keep. This will keep. This is easy to transport. This is a small size." Because the lady from the nursing home makes those orders every week. And so that was a super helpful thing to me. So I say suck up to your local nursing home. But then what we did was: we took a huge group picture and at the end of the trip we sent it back to that nursing home. And they put it up on their wall saying "thank you for making our breakfast possible at the Youth Gathering." So that was another community partner that sent our kids on their way.

TJW: That's nice. And it's a great idea. They're going to do it anyway. Might as well take advantage of it.

DD: Absolutely. And again, they know the food. They know what will travel well and what's small and all that kind of stuff. So I think that's really important for your group. And I think the last part—and this is so fluid—is you've got to remember as the leader of the group that you're always taking the temperature of your group. I like to joke that my motto for youth gatherings is "fed and not dead" so my job is that you are not dead and that you are fed. Because when kids aren't fed, including Danielle, we get hangry. And then they cannot focus on what's ahead. If you come to Synod Day and you haven't fed your kids: I'm going to be with them for two and half hours. They're not going to focus on that really remarkable faith formation time because they're not well-fed. So I always assigned an adult leader like the first day we arrived: Wednesday night before the dome, you've got to help us figure out the meal. I'm going to get kids into the hotel, you figure out what we're going to do for our meal. You've got to be flexible and I understand that, but you're always taking the pulse, but what I like to tell adult leaders is you're not just the thermometer, you're also the thermostat. So if your group is mopey, if your group is grumpy, if your group is sleepy, you might say "man, the temperature of this group right now is sixty degrees." Your job is not to keep it there. Your job is to come into that space and say "we've got to look different. I need to do a group game right now" or I need to say "we're taking a twenty minute break. All you introverts: you get twenty minutes of silence to yourselves."

TJW: Bless the introverts on this trip.

DD: I know. So you get twenty minutes of silence to yourself to just hang out. I think that's huge. And I think the last thing I would share is about coming home. For a lot of kids, this is a huge huge experience. And as much as we think our kids don't like tradition, they love ritual and they love when things are ritualized. So I would encourage you not just at the gathering but on a youth trip in general: figure out how you ritualize your final night together. So I always did this really weird thing where I would go to the dollar store and I would buy enough items—the dollar store or Hobby Lobby's clearance section: those were my two go tos—and I would buy an item. I didn't know what kid it was going to. I didn't know if it was going to be used. I just bought a random group of items. And then I would sit down with my adult leaders usually the lunch before the last night and we would come up with an affirmation for every kid that matched the random item that I bought. It would be like silly putty: "you were the most flexible on this trip. You went with the flow and you bended or God was working on you and you didn't resist it: you just opened yourself up and moved." So our kids knew to expect these weird items that they would take home. One time they were the party lights on your fingers and it was a kid that was like "you were the life of the party. You brought light wherever you came." So we would always give them their item and then we would ask their small group leader, and then we would usually ask if there was one other kid in the circle that wanted to affirm them. And we would do that. And then we would do that for our group and then the last thing we would always do is put our seniors in the center, lay hands, and pray.

TJW: And cry.

DD: And cry. But ritual matters to our young people. And it's powerful. On the night home, often in the past I've asked for a parent letter and that's the night it gets shared. And the parent letter is something that says "I'm proud of you" and "I love you" and it's not an affirmation of what they but who they are. And it may not be a parent, it might just be random members of the congregation that say "we're going to write ten letters" or "our council is going to write ten letters for these kids." Those are great ways to use affirmation, but you've got to take a moment to ritualize it. And the other thing they do besides the affirmation: I always have the kids share a Kodak moment. So you have to explain to them what Kodak is and what Kodak film is. But here's the reality: when kids come home from any kind of mission trip or major retreat experience, people say "how was it?"

TJW: "It was fun!"

DD: "It was fun" right? Or its like a firehose and you tell them everything and they were like "I really just wanted..."

TJW: "I just wanted wanted to know you were fed and not dead."

DD: Exactly! So what I always tell kids is: what's your Kodak moment? What's the picture that you have in your pocket that when someone asks you "how was the National Youth Gathering?" You answer "Can I tell you about my picture?" And they get to practice with their group telling about that moment. So that's it. That's what it looks like. When we were in New Orleans, there was a moment in the dome where Rachel Kurtz was singing the Hallelujah song and there were white balloons that were lifted up and our group was part of lifting up the white balloons. My kids could remember: one of them was like "my Kodak moment is the lyric of the song when we walked in." So she was like "On 'march', the word 'march', we started walking in through the doors." She didn't explain everything about the Gathering, but whoever was listening to her response caught a glimpse of what God was doing. So it's this Kodak moment so they can explain their experience. Because the last thing you want them to do is go back to the congregation and say "it was fun."

TJW: We spent a whole lot of money for just “fun.”

DD: No “it was forming and God moved and here’s my Kodak moment.” And for some of the Kodak moment might be “I got to hang out and make new friends.” But praise the Lord because that meant that they didn’t have a sense of belonging with those kids beforehand. Some of them are going to be much more spiritual in their Kodak moments. Some of them their Kodak moment will be being on a plane for the first time because it was their first time on a plane. But I think its really helpful the night before you get home to say “Let’s think about our Kodak moments because people are going to ask you and let’s share them with each other in this space.”

TJW: Absolutely. Alright, last chance: what are the other things? Anything else? Tell us about one of your Kodak moments. Do you have one from Detroit or New Orleans or one of those? What were your things?

DD: Here’s the other thing about making kids do Kodak moments: if you have a Kodak moment then their first memory is not something negative. Because I was a kid in St. Louis and the transit system was terrible and for some reason when people say “what’s your memory?” I’m like “oh no. Transit.” Because no one asked me “where was God moving in that space?” My Kodak moments honestly from the Gathering are when my kids share their Kodak moments. One of the years in New Orleans our kids drove back. We stayed in some city, in...Alabama? I don’t know what it was along the way. And my Kodak moment actually was that our kids were sitting in the hotel lobby sharing and affirming each other and after that they went to their rooms and the person working the hotel front desk pulled me aside and said “I recently found out I have cancer and I’ve been so frustrated with who God was and your young people just ministered to me.”

TJW: Wow. That’s awesome.

DD: And it was such a cool story. So also don’t feel like you have to do that in total private space. We did it in a hotel lobby because it was the only space that could hold our whole group. A hotel room is fine, but it was beautiful for someone else to see the kind of community and hear them name and witness to who God was and I asked her her name and the whole way home our team just prayed for her. And it was just such a cool cool moment with our kids. I think lastly: I wouldn’t sell them short. Don’t not ask because you’re worried they won’t have an answer. They will. And we believe in the Gathering because we believe that our God is doing something new. If you don’t ask the question, what you’re essentially saying is that “ugh. I believe that God didn’t move in your life this week.” God did. God is transforming our young people. And they are major major beautiful leaders in our church and we’ve got to keep lifting them up. So those are things that I would do. You can make them contextual for you, but you’ve got to remember that you’re the leader and you set the thermostat and if you don’t do any prep, you can just guess that you’re group is going in at fifty degrees. And the amount of work to get them to eighty two is going to be really hard, but if you do a lot of work with them and you’ve invested in them, even when they’re having a bad day it doesn’t take a ton of energy to redirect them.

TJW: Absolutely. Well, just so you know: we’re praying for each of you as you’re preparing because this is holy ground. We get to walk with young people on this holy ground adventure and we’ll be praying for you. And join us next week because we’re going to walk through the entire Gathering a day at a time and walk you through what you’re going to be experiencing, or at least try to prep you for the general options that we know of at this point. It is an experience, it is a flexible time and if you can be flexible and enjoy the experience and pay attention with eyes that are looking for God at work, then you’re going to have an experience that you won’t

forget. You'll have your Kodak moments as well. So thanks for joining us and thank you Danielle for being here

DD: Thanks. Have a great day!

TJW: Alright. Take care. Bye.