

Tammy Jones West: Alright here we go. I welcome you to episode three of the North Carolina Synod podcast on the ELCA Youth Gathering. So I have a couple friends with me and I'm going to let them introduce themselves and tell you where they are in this ministry world. So Van, you're up first.

Van Van Horne: Van Van Horne. I'm from Holy Trinity Lutheran Church in Hickory, North Carolina.

Megan Downey: And I'm Megan Downey and I'm from Calvary Lutheran Church in Morganton, North Carolina.

Tammy Jones West: And I should probably introduce myself again: I'm Tammy Jones West, assistant to the bishop for the North Carolina Synod and we're excited that you're joining us on this journey to the Gathering. We're going to begin: I'm going to tell you a little story. Back in the fall, we had new people around the table with lots of questions and we had people who have experience—are veterans—in youth ministry and two of those (the two that are joining me today) decided to get together and have lunch so that Megan could ask all her questions and Van could answer them all.

Van Van Horne: Right...

Tammy Jones West: But we also wanted to include you on that because we know that there are questions still out there and the best way to experience the Gathering is to be prepared for it. So let's talk about: first of all, one of your questions, Megan, was about the role of adults. So Van, how does that play out in your ministry?

Van Van Horne: I think having the adults go as part of the Gathering is certainly helpful in a lot of ways: making sure they have specific tasks helps them to feel involved and more included and gives them a job, which is a smart way to go with working with the adults to have them have some responsibilities, specific responsibilities, for the group and for individuals.

Tammy Jones West: So what are some of the jobs that you've given your adults?

Van Van Horne: Sometimes I make someone the money person who takes care of all the money while we're there; that gets it off my plate. I always have one that is the first-aid carrier and everything medical goes to them. They hang onto the forms, they keep the first-aid kit with them so that you can send every boo-boo their way when you're busy with a million other things.

Tammy Jones West: Megan have you thought about, with your adults, what you plan? Are there specific things you'd like to do or roles you'd like them to play?

Megan Downey: Yeah I think it's super helpful to have each person just because as a youth director I've learned that there's a lot of things I have to handle in preparation and even probably while we're there there's going to be problem-solving and just making sure everybody gets from point A to point B so that's super helpful and I also just think even having a small group (I have a small group going), just making sure there's an adult that has their own youth to take care of. Making sure they're okay and if a youth says "I need to go here. I would like to go here" that they have that adult that they can talk to and let them know so I'm not getting a million and one text messages about where my children are. So I think that's super helpful and I've also just learned with chaperones: they're just as excited about the Youth Gathering as the youth are, so it's really important to not degrade that or just to not let that go aside just because they are just as excited to see what comes out of a Youth Gathering just as much as your high schoolers are.

Tammy Jones West: Sure, and they don't have a gathering. The adults don't have something this fun. So there's a lot of folks that want to be involved in it. We can't take all the adults, but there's a lot that want to be a part of that. By now, you've already chosen your adults. That's an entirely different conversation as you move forward, so we're not going there. Hope you got the right ones. We pray you got the right ones. But, one of the things I tell the adults is: you set the tone for the Gathering and if you're whiny and complaining, then your kids will be too. So if you can keep the positive attitude: and know that you're going to wait on things, know that things are not going to go exactly as planned, but you set the tone. So don't turn up the temperature to hangry or angry or whatever that looks like. And start walking now because you're going to walk miles and miles at the Gathering. Get your shoes now. Get a new pair of shoes now, not June 20th. So start walking. If you keep track, you're going to hit between 20 and 30 thousands steps easily. Easily. And that's a lot of walking. The first day you might do well. Days 2, 3, 4, and 5, your feet are going to hurt. Anyway, what about the role of youth? Are there tasks or specific roles that you expect them to play?

Van Van Horne: Absolutely. I think having the youth take on some responsibilities—I usually give at least a couple people responsibilities for the schedule. While I may still keep up with it myself of course, I do give some that they get to answer the questions when other kids and even other adults have questions about the schedule they can be the front line on that. And certainly you can kind of hand pick those folks that may need to feel like they have more control, ones that aren't good at just going on the fly, that they would prefer to know what's going on. I think as you get ready to go to the Gathering, having the kids take some responsibilities in some of the Bible studies, some of the pre-event material, that they take the lead on that. Usually probably go with some of the older kids that are kind of teaching the younger ones in your group what they can expect with that as well.

Megan Downey: And I think it's important for them to remember that they're there to experience the event. I don't want them to have to worry about anything, and so just being able to enjoy and live in that moment of just being able to embrace everything and I think having them getting used to taking on bible studies and taking on that will get them used to talking about new experiences in Houston and getting them used to talking in a group about how their faith journey is happening, what is happening in their life and how that week in Houston will affect them as they go home.

Tammy Jones West: Absolutely. Because we do want to take it home. It can't be a one and done thing. It's got to be something that translates back. What about: what are you doing now to get ready for the Gathering with your group?

Van Van Horne: We have a few meetings still planned before the event. It's as much group building as anything else, getting that group to feel pretty tight before we go so that they know where each other's strengths are, where their weaknesses are, that they just feel really comfortable, some of them are going to be maybe in close quarters together in hotel rooms. So they kind of get past that initial awkwardness of that so they are already feeling pretty close to each other. And just sharing with them what they can expect from having gone to other Gatherings that this one will be different than the last one and the one before that, but there are some similarities in what you can expect with this event.

Megan Downey: I mean with my group: they've never been to a Youth Gathering. There's not one child, there have been a couple of adults that have been to Gatherings as youth but none of my youth have ever been and so a lot of the main thing is group building, but also just being completely open and honest with them about what's going to happen, what they can expect, and just getting them really excited because this is something they've never done before and just providing all of the information I can with them so that they feel comfortable just flying across the nation and going somewhere that they've never been for a week. I've also talked to

them about things that we've told adults: to start walking, and start drinking water, and just taking care of themselves health wise. That way they can enjoy the whole Gathering.

Tammy Jones West: I was at a group last night and just simply walked through the schedule with them and none of them in the room had ever been. We also had some adults in the room. But in the process of that we were talking about directions and where things were so in the process of that someone said "Oh and I'm the directionally challenged one, so you're going to lose me." So just knowing. Good to know that we're going to keep an eye on that. Let's keep her—we're not going to put a leash on her, that was discussed—but to know that there are people for whom if you're in a big group and they start walking in one direction, they don't stop until someone turns them. There are people like that and just to know who those people are so that you don't lose them over the course of the time.

Van Van Horne: And Megan you touched on this a little bit that just sharing what a unique experience this is, there is nothing you can do at your church to say "okay there's going to be thirty thousand plus of us in a huge stadium all worshipping together and experiencing different things" to say this really is such a unique experience that is just another way to pump them up and get them excited about what they're about to do.

Megan Downey: Yeah and within Morganton—Morganton is so small—I mean there's one Lutheran church in Morganton, and that's Calvary. So doing things like taking my kids to LYO, their eyes were opened just in that experience that there's more than just them. And now taking them to Houston where there's thirty thousand of them: I'm actually so excited to take them for them to understand that there are people more like them than not and just being able to broaden their spectrum just in an amazing way. And like I said, I'm just so excited to take them just to see what they get out of it

TJW: Exactly. And it's such a wonderful view of the church at large. There are things that we don't know. We know what's in our own congregation, our own context and so to see what all we're doing all over the globe: I think that's a fabulous eye-opening experience for our young Lutherans who may be like, in your case, the only Lutheran church in towns which means they don't have a whole lot of friends who know what being Lutheran is all about. So that's exciting. Tell me about what are the skills: Megan you've got a history of camping and outdoor ministry so what of those skills that have transferred over to this experience?

MD: Definitely just being prepared in a fun way with games. Learning you're going to be waiting a long time, so having games in your pocket and asking even if you haven't had an outdoor ministry experience, reaching out to people to teach you games to play with your kids on the metro, waiting in line for food, or waiting in line to go into the stadium, wherever you are just to keep them occupied in that there's not really a dull moment for them to sit. Another thing we mentioned is a first aid kit. Everything will happen. Everything. You just have to be ready with a first aid kit and just have that backpack ready for any kind of situation so you have the water bottles, you have the snacks, and your medical forms and sunscreen and every scenario. Just being able to have that ready and just also: being in outdoor ministry you just have a leadership skill that kind of comes about because when you're a counselor, you're in charge of children and you're their mom and their dad for a week and just having that confidence in the leadership skills that you know what you're doing, you know what you're talking about. So serving my first year as a youth director just having the confidence that I do know what I'm doing, I do know what's going on in the Youth Gathering and that you can do it and you can make it through: The planning process and the week that you're there.

TJW: Well Megan has the unique experience of starting youth ministry in a Gathering year which she may or may not tell you is a good thing, but one of the things I think is important to remember is that even if you've never been to a Gathering, the getting ready materials can get

you as prepared as possible because the more work you do on this end, the better experience you're gonna have. So Van tell us about this game on the light rail you mentioned earlier.

VH: Yes. And this would not a new game to everybody, but it's just where you have your group count from one to however many are in your group. I guess you could get another congregation or two involved or maybe the other people on the metro, but you just start counting from one to twenty (if that's how many people you have). The trick is that no one can speak at the same time as anyone else in your group, so you're going to have to talk loud because there might be other people on the metro, but if two people say a number at the same time you have to start over and it's one where everyone's laughing while they're doing it, it keeps them concentrating, you need to be in no particular order is best for this game, which is what I envision will happen on the metro is that you're just kind of all over the place smushed in there, and that can make that a fun game especially if you can get people from Houston involved on the metro.

TJW: "We'll add you to our number."

VH: Yes, one of them will probably say "eighteen!"

TJW: And then you're all starting over.

VH: Yep. Start over.

TJW: That could be hilarious actually. What about the first and final fifteen? The goal of the Gathering is for faith formation and then at some point you're going to have to process things. You're going to hear new things, experience new things. How do you best do that with, Van you mentioned sometimes you get back late. What do you do?

VH: When you get back late I think if you know that's coming and can anticipate that, I've had groups where we split up that fifteen throughout the day. We're going to have five minutes here and there where we process what we did maybe that morning or at lunch especially if we're somewhere where we're just waiting: waiting for a table, waiting at the table for food, that's a place that I've found was a good spot to just kind of process our day already so when we did get back in the evening we really kind of just gathered and prayed and had already done a lot of the processing of the day and share what's going on in the next day and have people ready in that way.

MD: The reality is: the day's are so packed so sometimes when you get back at 11:00 at night the kids are just "I don't remember what we did. I don't know. What did we do?" And it's not that they didn't experience anything it's just their brains are so wiped out that they're just "Send me to bed as quickly as possible. Please."

TJW: "I just want sleep." And adults will be there way before the youth are. And that is a challenge. You're exactly right; they are long days. Luckily with the three days of the Gathering there are some mornings that don't start at 7:00 AM or 6:00 AM or worse than that. But then there are days that you're going to be up early and it's going to be a go. So how do you give advice to your kids on how to slow down a little bit sometimes? Are there things where "Let's just take a break and we're going to go sit and do nothing for a bit?" I know we want to have games, but there's also times that you've just got to go "Ugh. I'm done."

VH: True. I think some unstructured time is necessary for all of us: even finding the little spot where there's a patch of grass and a tree and just everyone sit down for a little while and maybe get the snacks out if it's been a while since you've eaten, get everyone hydrated (that's a big one), to keep them hydrated. That will keep the headaches away more and make people

less cranky. But definitely finding some time: and sometimes that just happens and sometimes for me I would probably have some idea of when I would be trying to get that in there as well.

MD: And I would just emphasize to take the time when it's given. And emphasize it to your kids just because they're going to be so excited when they first get there but just keep reminding them when you have this time just take it as best as you can.

TJW: Right. With 30,000 of your closest friends.

MD: With my group, we're flying in Tuesday and we'll be there Tuesday afternoon and our service day is Friday, so there will be some times that they're just going to be ready to get going and get going and you'll have to say "you need this right now."

VH: Trust me.

MD: "Trust me: I need this and you need this too."

TJW: You need me to have this. So you need some time by the pool or something or just under a tree. Absolutely. Other things that you want to share with somebody that might be new. What's some advice?

VH: Well, some depends on the size of your group. I know Megan doesn't have a huge group so that's probably a good way to start. If you have a larger group just some crowd management to have: make it your kids' responsibility to check in with their adult and then if you have four adults with five kids checking in with each, you're not having to run around and count every kid, you're just finding those three or four adults and asking if they've got everyone. Evening time in the hotel I usually would call rooms to check to make sure everyone was in rather than calling cell phones because all of my kids are so well-behaved and would never consider going out or leaving the hotel room once they were in there for the night, but cell phones of course can be anywhere and the hotel room phone will only be in the room.

TJW: Not a bad plan there, Van. Not a bad plan.

MD: And I know one piece that I'm holding onto that someone mentioned to me is that in the mornings to make your kids come to your room. You make them come get their breakfast and you make them come and get their food money. That way you see them and you know they're awake and you know they're functioning to come and get their food and their money for the day. And I would just say if you're a new person doing this is just: get yourself informed as much as you can. I mean you read through Facebook posts, keep reading through Facebook posts. The more you're informed, the more confidence you have. And the confidence is what you need to lead a group. No matter what the size is, you need that confidence in yourself that you can do this and to get through the whole week of the Gathering.

TJW: And I would just remind everyone: as far as the schedule of what's going on at the Gathering, you're going to have a wristband on that at all times has a 1-800 number. That is the info-line number and the info-line literally has pages and pages and pages. If you were to print it, the Excel spreadsheet would be a monstrous, monstrous print job. However, it tells where things are going on by the hour. For example, one hour of the gathering could be two pages of things happening. It's a scary thing to think about. But you can always call the info-line and say "It's Friday. What are we doing today?" Because sometimes you just need to know it's Friday. Somebody tell me what day it is. But it is a resource and they are staffed 24/7 and those people: bless them. Bless them, bless them for wanting to do that, being stuck on a phone all day. Not my skill. But it is a great resource to have.

MD: And we're staying in downtown and so when we went for Extravaganza in—what was that, January? February? Sometime?— I learned not necessarily the hard way, but I did learn that there are people in downtown that ride Segways and they have a hat that says "safety" on it and their whole job is to ride around and guide people where they need to go. So even if it's just "I'm looking for a good affordable restaurant for my kids", those people know where to lead you or you say "I need to get to this line for the light rail." Or "I want to do this. Tell me where I should go." I had a guy stop me when I was there and he handed me his own personal map of downtown Houston and circled all of these things to do when we come and so those people are even just helpful to talk to. And like I said they have "safety" written across their hat and he explained to me "Our whole job is just to tell people where to go and what to do." I mean in an advice sense not a demanding sense.

TJW: That will be helpful too. There will be a lot of people getting on the light rail. All the people who are downtown and North Carolina happens to be downtown. All those folks will get light rail passes and you'll be able to just get on the light rail at any time and go. Just know that if you're in downtown and you want to go to NRG, you want to go south. Ok? And if you're at NRG and want to go downtown, you want to go north. So your directionally challenged people should not be the boss of which light rail. The good thing about when you're going to NRG, it's the next to the last stop, it also does not say "NRG." I think it says "astrodome" or something like that. So just be aware of that. The astrodome is in the park at NRG. We're not using the astrodome; it's closed. But I think the light rail still says that. So if you by chance miss the fact that you're out at NRG, you've only have to go one more thing before it turns around and comes back. So it's not that bad. It's not the end of the world, but I think once everyone gets there I think you'll recognize that this is our stop.

MD: I mean yeah there's a big fence and massive buildings.

TJW: And lots of people pouring out of the light rail. Other last thoughts you have before we say goodbye to this crowd on the podcast?

VH: Plan to enjoy yourself. As the leader, you'll feel a lot of responsibility and you certainly have that, but you should enjoy the experience and be a part of it just as much and that will make it seem even more worthwhile to you.

TJW: And adults, for those of you that have never been, the reality of communing 30,000 people in the NRG stadium is something to behold. My son, in New Orleans, he went and when he heard we were having communion on Sunday he was like "oh my."

VH: "This will take 17 hours."

TJW: Not a good "Oh my." But he timed it and from the time he hit the stopwatch to the time we were done was seventeen minutes. And he was like "we can't do that at our home congregation." There's about 300 communion stations which helps, but just know that that is something to see. It is amazing to watch. So we do hope you enjoy it and we hope you've enjoyed this and thank you to Van and Megan for joining me on this journey.

MD: Yeah thanks!

VH: Sure thing.

TJW: Have a great day guys. Bye.