

HIGHER GROUND!



An Evaluation of the 2001 LCMS National Youth Gathering

by

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FORWARD

As I pen these words the nation is yet in shock in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon and we stand on the brink of war in the Middle East and perhaps elsewhere. Further, here at the University of Wyoming eight members of the twelve man Men's Cross Country team are dead following a horrific car accident. Truly, death is all around us!

In the midst of this culture of death is our solemn responsibility to catechize our youth and prepare them for life lived in, but not of, the world. It is no secret that catechizing our youth in the faith of the "one, holy, Christian and apostolic Church" and increasing their understanding of their Lutheran identity is an ongoing struggle, especially in this technological, materialistic, self-absorbent and postmodern age. Truly, we all lament that more of our young people appear to leave the Church as they grow older rather than remain. Surely our task is a great one! Because of our concern to train our children in the pattern of sound doctrine and teaching, we must constantly evaluate the manner and means in which we seek to hand over that faith to the next generation.

Part of my responsibility in my position as the Youth Chair of the Wyoming District is to do just that, namely to "review youth materials, servant events, and other youth related gatherings" in order to assist you in your work with your congregation's young people.

This evaluation is the culmination of an approximate twelve-month process, which included our District's decision to not directly encourage our young people in attending the most recent National Youth Gathering in New Orleans this past summer.

Considering our various concerns, and in order to make the best evaluation possible, on behalf of the District I did the following things leading up to this report:

- 1) I attended the 2001 National Youth Gathering in New Orleans in order to provide the best first hand, on-site evaluation possible;
- 2) I asked for input from those who likewise attended the Gathering from our District; and
- 3) I traveled to St. Louis and spent nearly five hours discussing such matters with Rev. Terry Dittmer, LCMS Director of Youth Ministry, and Mr. David Weidner, the National Gathering Director for the last three gatherings.

I am profoundly grateful to Rev. Dittmer and Mr. Weidner for meeting with me, as well as their willingness to listen and discuss issues of such importance in a cordial and constructive manner. I especially offer a word of extra thanks to Rev. Dittmer with whom I have developed an open and cordial relationship as a result of this process and in light of our mutual concern for the development of our Synods' youth and the future of our Church.

Last fall the letter I wrote to the pastors and youth workers of our District laid out the following areas of concern regarding the LCMS National Youth Gathering:

- 1) The goal of creating a "mountain-top experience" for the sake of the experience itself.
- 2) A general confusion of the distinction of Law and Gospel.
- 3) The introduction of "worship" that is foreign to our confession rather than highlighting and teaching that which serves us well in our synodical hymnals.
- 4) The attitude that what our youth need is something "different" from what they receive in their own church as if "real" youth ministry can only take place at such an event.
- 5) The overall lack of reverence taken toward the Lord's Supper and its administration, as well as the reason for having it in the first place (see #1 above).
- 6) A focus on entertainment at the expense of real learning (including the emphasis of that which pertains to a theology of glory rather than the theology of the cross)
- 7) The denigration of the role that pastors should play in working with their youth (as evidenced in great measure in the newly released pre-gathering video)
- 8) A general negative attitude concerning what it means to be a confessional Lutheran in the world in which we live.

Throughout the course of this evaluation the above will all be addressed in light of my participation in these events and discussions with those engaged in youth ministry and the planning of the Gathering on the national level. While one cannot participate in, or witness, everything that takes place at the Gathering, I am confident that the approach I have taken has provided me with as good a vantage point as possible in order to offer this evaluation.

I have also sought, wherever reasonably possible, to directly contact many others involved in the planning of the Gathering for the sake of accuracy and clarity. The hope is to provide an objective overview and critique of the major components of the Gathering itself (especially for those of you who have never been to one), and a critical evaluation of the Gathering in lieu of the above concerns and others. Finally, suggestions will be offered that will hopefully be helpful not only to those who work with youth in our District and elsewhere, but moreover, to those engaged in the planning of the next National Youth Gathering.

I would like to especially thank the members of the Wyoming District Commission on Congregational Services, its chairman Rev. Lee Rupert, and our District President, Rev. Ron Garwood, for their ongoing support, input and encouragement throughout this process.

Almighty God, gracious Father, whose years know no end and before whom the generations come and go, teach our youth to number their days and to apply their hearts to eternal wisdom.

By Your Word and Spirit increase their faith. Lead them to choose and ever strive for holiness of living, to the end that they may faithfully serve You and finally obtain the heavenly inheritance; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. (Prayer for Youth Organizations, from Lutheran Worship Agenda, copyright 1984 by CPH. Used by permission)

Sincerely,

Rev. Marcus T. Zill

21 September 2001

St. Matthew, Apostle and Evangelist

GATHERING OVERVIEW

Organization

The National Youth Gathering (hereafter NYG) has grown quite a bit since 1980 when the first one was held in Fort Collins, CO, on the campus of Colorado State University, and Mass Events were held in Moby Gym which seats perhaps 7,000. Today, the Gathering has more than quintupled in size (not to mention influence).

One cannot but marvel at the level of organization that it takes to put on a gathering of 35,000 people so far away from home, much less when most of them are teenagers without their parents. It is simply staggering to consider the logistics of airplane travel, hotel registration, food service and the like, all of which for the most part are outside the \$5.2 million budget that it costs to put on such an event.

In general, everything from the very informative 130 page Gathering Booklet (hereafter GB) to the smallest of details was extremely well done. Nearly everything throughout the week went as smooth as could be expected. Even when the unexpected took place the Gathering planners were well-organized and ready to deal with it. This included everything from the unexpected death of one of the youth registrants and issues such as a water main break and evacuation of a local hotel. They have clearly developed a massive organizational system that makes good use of experienced individuals and volunteers. Without the ongoing and continued help of those who have worked at past events, the Gathering clearly could not come together as well as it does, if at all.

In meeting with Rev. Dittmer and Mr. Weidner, I was impressed all the more with even the level of contingency plans that must be in place when you have, in essence, a small city gathered in a dome, including potential disaster plans. For instance, in New Orleans a prime concern was the potential for hurricanes, but in the future, potential safety concerns due to the threat of terrorism may be a major factor. Once again, not enough can be said about the level of organization involved with planning and carrying out the National Youth Gathering.

Location

In recent years, because of the logistical needs required by the present format, potential locations have been limited. In general, New Orleans was a nice location. One can easily see why it was picked as the Superdome, the Morial Convention Center, the Riverwalk Mall, the history, French flavor, and general

ambiance of the city, not to mention the plethora of hotels and restaurants, make it an obvious choice selection.

Of course, having 35,000 young people in the proximity of Bourbon Street is a concern with its great number of strip clubs and other such places of licentious activity. One night I went to the French Quarter to hear some blues. On my way back to the hotel I did notice not a small number of youth walking through areas they probably shouldn't have been in at all. Being out after midnight in such an area and without adult supervision is not a good combination. Others in our District informed me that some youth leaders perhaps patronized some places not appropriate as well.

Given such concerns, one cannot fault the planners of the National Youth Gathering (hereafter NYG) for the failure of the adults leaders of various groups to appropriately chaperone their youth. Just as the planners rely on a great network of volunteer helpers and staff, so too should they be able to expect that the adult leaders of various youth groups will act and chaperone appropriately.

District Youth Coordinators

As you may or may not know, due to our collective concerns regarding the NYG we as a District chose not to have a District Coordinator for this event as we have had in years past. Considering the impressive level of organization inherent with the NYG you can imagine my surprise when in the official GB someone from our District was incorrectly listed as the Wyoming District Coordinator. In my discussions with that individual and with Rev. Dittmer and Mr. Weidner, it appears that this was the fault of a staff person in St. Louis who assumed that a certain individual was our District Coordinator, even though we as a District expressly decided not to have one. The confusion created by this miscommunication is quite unfortunate.

The Daily Schedule

A typical day at the National Youth Gathering includes normally one or two Mass Events at the dome at which everyone is gathered. Youth groups were encouraged to have Bible Studies as a group sometime during the day, most likely in the morning. This, is of course, very healthy and good. In the afternoons, youth can take part in carnival and sports activities at the convention center, listen to Contemporary Christian Music (hereafter CCM) in a separate space at the convention center, attend one of a number of sectionals or interest centers, or participate in a servant event if their church group was signed up for one. Some groups choose to also use an afternoon or two to perhaps sight see and the like. Following the evening Mass Events dances were held in various downtown hotels. Everyone was to be in their hotels at 12:30 a.m.

THE DIVINE SERVICE

In years past the Divine Service has been one of the parts of the NYG most criticized by pastors, youth leaders and youth alike. Concerns have revolved around such things as the use of mariachi bands, non-LCMS Gospel choirs, liturgical dancing, so-called "contemporary" settings of the Divine Service, and the administration of the Lord's Supper, among other things.

Some Areas of Improvement

This time around the Divine Service on Sunday morning was a fairly straightforward use of Divine Service II (1st Setting), p.158 from *Lutheran Worship*. I was impressed by the layout of the service included in the GB and developed by Rev. Jon Vieker of the LCMS Commission on Worship who served

the “Event Team” planners in an advisory capacity. It was complete with quality artwork, catechetical notes and the like. The Event Team did a nice job in this regard.

My understanding from those who have been to past Gatherings is that the Divine Service was generally much improved this time. In addition to the use of one of the orders of the Divine Service from one of our hymnals, instead of bringing in a Gospel choir or other group from outside the LCMS, a mass choir of Gathering participants was used. Even an organ was brought in to aid the singing of the assembly. I was likewise very pleased that LCMS President Rev. Robert Kuhn was asked to preach, and his sermon was a highlight of the service.

Having said that, there was nonetheless much to cause concern regarding the Divine Service even though the order was generally followed.

Warm-Up Period with Gathering Band

The Gathering band led everyone in 30-45 minutes of singing before the Service began. In this way, gathering for the Divine Service was approached in the same exact fashion as any other Mass event, including the “opening signal” which was basically a large procession that included dancing and the singing of the main Gathering song, “Rain On.” The Bible Study before the Divine Service was also similar to that at all the other mass events (more on that later). Thus, nothing was approached differently considering that we were gathering for the Divine Service. That was unfortunate. Hearing loud music is not exactly the best way to help our young people focus on that which is about to take place in the Divine Service, not to mention the fact that the first thing that you do is confess your sins and receive Holy Absolution. Very little was done to help with this transition and reflection and I believe in general reflects the attitude and/or lack of understanding of most involved with the planning process towards our Lutheran view of worship.

A side effect of this approach was a rather irreverent atmosphere taken by many toward the Divine Service. Again, perhaps it was improved over years past, but it was quite sad, for instance, to see applause throughout the Divine Service, whether it was following a hymn, a choir selection, or in the middle of Dr. Kuhn’s sermon. It was quite telling that following Dr. Kuhn’s sermon everyone clapped, and I even overheard behind me a pastor’s wife saying to her husband, “Gee, it’s too bad people don’t clap like that for you when you are done preaching.”

In short, since the Divine Service was treated as being simply a part of another Mass Event, the atmosphere cultivated at it was really no different than it was at the other Mass Events. Even the dry ice machine used throughout the pre-service CCM and Bible Study continued throughout the Divine Service itself.

I was pleased to see that this time the vendor’s stands were at least closed down right before the Divine Service began so that people were not eating hot dogs and drinking Coke throughout the Service as was evidently a problem at least at the Atlanta Gathering in 1998.

Host Congregations?

One of the concerns of many pastors over the years with large gatherings, much less mega-gatherings such as this one, has been the reverent and proper administration of the Lord’s Supper and the question of whether or not it should be celebrated at all.

Three of the historic LCMS congregations in New Orleans were asked to serve as host congregations. In my speaking with a vacancy pastor at one of those congregations, I discovered that the host congregations were, in essence, given conditions on their hosting, namely that they had to agree

1. To allow Rev. Orval Mueller, the Southern District President, to serve as celebrant;
2. To identify youth from their congregations to participate in the Divine Service by reading the Scripture lessons and/or offering petitions during the Prayer of the Church; and
3. That their pastors would only participate in the Service as one of approximately 200 communion distribution teams.

I must point out that Mr. Weidner and Rev. Dittmer told me that to their understanding it was the congregations who specifically “asked” for Dr. Mueller to serve as celebrant. There is obviously conflicting information here, but perhaps Mr. Weidner and Rev. Dittmer were not privy to the type of communication that the “host” congregations actually received. Regardless, one can hardly ask someone to “host” anything when conditions or expectations are placed on their hosting.

Interestingly, in the GB it was stated that “With thanks to God for their hospitality, the Gathering welcomes the members of these congregations to our Gathering worship this morning.” (GB, p.31) In reality, those host congregations (if they are really hosting) should be welcoming those at the Gathering in joining them.

Youth Participation in the Liturgy

As mentioned, there was an obvious desire on the part of the planners to incorporate youth in the Service where appropriate. This is not altogether bad, though it can portray a misunderstanding of what and whom the Divine Service is actually for. It is not primarily about our doing something for God, but for our being fed and nourished with God’s Word and Sacraments. Further it needs to be noted that youth already do participate throughout the liturgy in the singing of hymns, being in the choir, the hearing of God’s Word, and their joining their “Amen” to God’s Word proclaimed to them continuously throughout the service beginning with the invocation, ending with the Benediction and nearly everywhere in between.

Moreover, while it is one thing to have teenage male youth involved as lectors, it is quite another thing to have teenage female youth involved in offering petitions during the Prayer of the Church. This was simply inappropriate and demonstrated a denial of the Scriptural prohibition of such participation on the part of women (1 Cor. 14:33ff). Perhaps worse is the fact that this was a poor witness to the thousands of women and teenage girls present as to the appropriate role of women in the church.

Out of concern for appropriate attire for those participating in the Divine Service, it would seem that perhaps albs could have been provided for youth participants, especially as most of them were wearing shorts and t-shirts though they were asked to play a large role in the Divine Service. The three pastors were vested though oddly enough they were wearing red stoles. No explanation was given. Since it was not a saint’s day or minor festival, green would have been the color one would have normally expected to use.

It also was fairly obvious that the youth (as well as pastors) did not always appear confident of where they were to go on stage or stand. They also encountered microphone problems. For instance, the lector who read the Old Testament reading was provided a microphone that did not work. He tried several times, clearly with great embarrassment, to get his microphone to work and was finally handed another microphone from off stage. One of the sound technicians indicated that the request for that microphone had only been received that very morning. This is, of course, not the lectors fault, but it does underscore that appropriate preparations were not apparently made, nor adequate orientation given to those participating, at this important Divine Service which could have been the highlight of the Gathering.

The Distribution

Clearly one of the most cumbersome logistical tasks of those involved in planning the Divine Service at a gathering such as this is the distribution of the Lord's Supper. When considering that there are 35,000 communing in an extra-ordinary setting great and many measures are called for to make sure the distribution is done with decency and good order. This is no small task!

Communion Assistants were made up of approximately 200 teams of pastors in attendance using their youth and/or youth leaders as helpers. Instructions were given ahead of time that no women/girls were to be used in the distribution, though they could help by holding the station banners or "running" to get more bread and/or wine. In general, such instructions were followed. However, one pastor I spoke with informed me that at the station at which he and his group communed a woman distributed the bread the entire time. I believe that this is not necessarily the fault of the Gathering planners, but rather an individual pastor who chose to make a "statement" in doing so by disregarding the said instructions. Nonetheless, the potential lasting impression made on those youth who witnessed even this one incident could be potentially far reaching. Moreover, it serves to demonstrate that the appropriate oversight of such administration in such a setting is simply impossible.

Several of the pastors who helped with distribution that I have spoken with were not pleased at all with the level of organization or reverence used throughout the distribution process, and specifically the orientation they received. One pastor mentioned that they were supposed to meet the night before the Divine Service for instructions. When he arrived, he was given a paper that said that it was rescheduled for the next morning. In general, he did not feel that the level of orientation given was in any way adequate.

During the Service itself, at the beginning of Dr. Kuhn's sermon approximately 800-1000 individuals got up and walked out of the Dome from wherever they were seated. While, at first thought, that doesn't appear to be much compared to the 35,000 who were assembled, that many people leaving at exactly the same time and traversing the arena floor was quite disruptive. Dr. Kuhn was clearly surprised to see so many people leaving and moving around as he began his sermon. I later surmised that this had to do with the said distribution teams. It did. They were leaving when instructed to go to a certain location to receive the elements to go to their stations.

Not only is it sad that that many individuals were not able to hear Dr. Kuhn's sermon, but it underscores at the worst the poor planning involved in the distribution, and at the best, further evidence that if no better system is found, that it is perhaps wise and prudent to simply not have the Lord's Supper at all.

In general, the teams were supposed to be at their stations by the time the consecration took place on the stage. Thus, the consecrated elements were nowhere near the altar (as would be most appropriate), but people were already at their stations, or in some places, perhaps still trying to get to their stations when that took place. Rev. Dittmer informed me that it is estimated that it takes upwards of ten minutes to have the elements at the altar and then have everyone go to their stations from that central area. The planners felt they could simply not afford that time. So the idea was for the pastors to simultaneously consecrate the elements at their individual stations, though I did not witness that take place at the stations near where I was seated. The extra supply of bread and wine was apparently under the dome at a certain gate and not at the altar, which makes one concerned as to whether it was even consecrated at all. All of this is at the very least terribly confusing. Not only did individuals generally not get the chance to have assurance that what they received had actually been consecrated with the Verba, but there is the possibility that perhaps some of it was not actually consecrated at all, given the general confusion associated with the distribution. I was glad to see chalices used and that certainly aided in the distribution.

During the distribution, it was disturbing to witness the general lack of irreverence of many. I witnessed people dancing in their seats, toilet paper rolls being thrown from the second tier of seating to the floor where people were communing, people taking pictures and a general lack of reverence or consideration for what is taken place, or the needs of others who might be preparing themselves to yet commune. While some of this may be due to matters beyond the planners' control, the climate created preceding the start of the Service certainly did not help, nor did the band's playing during the distribution. Rather than receiving our Lord's precious body and blood, one would have thought that the masses were waiting during an intermission at a football game and, therefore, had to entertain themselves somehow.

Also, while I understand the need to have "runners" going to get more wine and bread, it was upsetting to see the lack of reverence with which many took this important task. As clay chalices and bowls were carried around the dome, I saw many stopping to talk to those that they saw next to restrooms or hot dog stands while they were en route.

During the distribution several hymns were sung from our synodically approved hymnals such as "Holy, Holy, Holy," and "At the Lamb's High Feast We Sing," and "Eat this Bread." Unfortunately, because of the poor planning regarding microphones it was hard to hear either the organ or the choir attempting to lead the singing. This was quite unfortunate, especially as those involved were attempting to lead God's people in song and were not given, for whatever reason, the support system necessary to aid their effort.

As a consequence, just after the midpoint of the distribution the Gathering band (whose microphones helped them fill the entire Dome) got up and sang three or four of their songs, speaking to the crowd throughout saying, "Oh, you guys sound great." The first song they sang was "In My Life Lord, Be Glorified." Apparently they jumped up to aid the singing so that the youth did not lose interest and act more irreverent than already apparent. As a result, not a few people were standing/swaying/dancing during the singing of such songs, some lifting their arms in a charismatic-like fashion.

As mentioned, I marvel at the organizational skills that are a part of nearly everything concerning the Gathering and how everything runs very smoothly. Indeed, most everything runs without a hitch. What a shame then that at what should be the most important part of the entire Gathering, more care was not taken to plan, implement, and carry out what was necessary so that things could have gone more smoothly.

The Offering

Another logistical concern for Gathering planners is the collection of the offering. The Gathering offering was thoughtfully designated toward several projects and ministries in international, domestic, district, and youth ministry categories. This was well and good. The problem is that neither the GB nor the order of worship in it indicated how the offering was to be collected. Instead, it was announced during the Service that when individuals came forward to the various stations to receive the Lord's Supper that there would be a container for them to place their offering in at that station.

While realizing that there is some historic LCMS precedent for people bringing their offering up to a designated offering box in conjunction with their coming forward to the Lord's Supper, this is obviously not the norm today in most, if not all, LCMS congregations. Given that and the fact that there is not time for catechesis concerning it, it is unfortunate for those communing to be put in the position of offering God something that is to be a response to their receiving His gifts in the Lord's Supper, directly in conjunction with their reception of it. Surely there is a better solution.

Pastoral Care

Of larger concern is the issue of pastoral care concerning admittance to the Supper. It is simply impossible for any “host pastor” to exercise even minimal spiritual care in the administration of those involved, much less, those helping as part of the distribution teams, who surely were concerned most with the practicality of what they were even supposed to do.

As is often the case, matters are left to communion statements and the assumption is made that individuals read them and thoroughly understand them, which may or may not be true. Putting aside the fact that it is unfortunate that such statements are often simply deemed to suffice for pastoral care, a communion statement nonetheless speaks volumes about not only the importance that a church takes towards the Sacrament of the Altar, but also their reverence and view concerning its administration.

Below is the statement that appeared at the beginning of the Service in the GB. It is a slightly modified version of the “model communion card statement” found on the CTCR web page:

<http://www.lcms.org/ctcr/comcard.html> (*italics* for my emphasis):

“The Lord’s Supper is celebrated at this Gathering in the confession and glad confidence that, as He says, our Lord gives into our mouths not only bread and wine but His very body and blood to eat and to drink for the forgiveness of sins and to strengthen our union with Him and with one another. Our Lord invites to His table those who trust His Words, repent of all sin, and set aside any refusal to forgive and love as He forgives and loves us, that they may show forth His death until He comes.

Because those who eat and drink our Lord’s body and blood unworthily do so to their great harm and because Holy Communion is a confession of the faith which is confessed at this altar, any who are not yet instructed, in doubt, or who hold a confession differing from the congregations of the The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, and yet desire to receive the Sacrament, are requested not to receive the Sacrament today. They may come forward for a blessing and are requested to come with hands folded as an indication to the pastor.

While the statement does a nice job of presenting what the Sacrament is, the context of where the Sacrament is being received clearly places the burden on the individual to determine whether or not he or she should commune, regardless of his or her confession of faith. In reality, pastoral care is replaced with individual discretion on the part of the teenager and/or the many others present at the Gathering who are not in fellowship with the LCMS, including most of the speakers, musicians, sectional leaders and the like. In a context where there are many non-LCMS members present and especially when so many are heavily involved with the programming, it does make one wonder if the majority of these people communed and if they did, what witness we gave to them in creating a climate where they felt comfortable doing so. Moreover, with this large of a crowd it is simply impossible for any pastor to know everyone he is communing – statement or no statement.

THE USE OF CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN MUSIC (CCM)

I realized that there would be a lot of CCM at the Gathering but I was nonetheless shocked to see just how deeply it permeated nearly everything that took place at the Gathering. It was quickly obvious upon my arrival that the NYG has become an enormous conduit for the CCM industry and that evangelical praise music would be front and center nearly the entire time. Several pastors who have been to multiple gatherings have expressed to me that it appeared to them that the amount of CCM had been greatly increased at this Gathering, if not perhaps doubled.

CCM was incorporated at the NYG in the following ways:

1. There was a gathering band singing before, during, and after every Mass Event at the Superdome. (As mentioned previously, it was deemed necessary at the Divine Service for the band to “rescue” things by jumping up and singing several songs during the distribution of the Lord’s Supper as the microphones for the organ and the choir were not working well and their was concern about the youth losing interest as a result)
2. One of the mass events included a 75-minute concert by the band Audio Adrenaline.
3. There was a separate room at the Convention Center called “The Big Easy” which was open for approximately 8-9 hours a day and offered a revolving menu of CCM artists.
4. The “Solid Rock” Concert Series was a daily event which included the biggest of all the CCM bands present and for which youth had to literally camp out and wait in line in order to get tickets.
5. The speaker(s) or performer(s) at nearly every Mega and Mini-Mega Sectional (if not all) that I attended were introduced by 5-10 minutes of singing with a contemporary Christian band/soloist.
6. Several of the Mega or Mini-Mega Sectionals were actually additional concerts by well-known CCM bands, and/or opportunities for Talk Back sessions with them (i.e. question and answer periods).
7. In what was called the “Adult Resting Ground” (a place for adults to retreat to and relax, have a cup of coffee and the like) there was a praise band singing while I was in there. One strangely felt as if they were some kind of a Christian lounge act to simply provide background music.
8. There were various stages outside the Superdome so that those who walked toward the Superdome for the Mass Events could be greeted with CCM (and other various entertainers and performers).
9. On the final night the outdoor festival called Common Ground included six large stages where CCM was continuously played by the various bands who were there most of the week.
10. Though I did not witness it, there was what was called the Food Court Coffee House Series, which was a place where bands/singers were playing while you could have something to eat.
11. A handful of the Mini-Mega Sectionals and Interest Centers were direct promotional opportunities for the CCM movement and its artists.

In short, wherever CCM could be highlighted or incorporated it was. It goes without saying that the planners had made a conscious effort to emphasize it at this Gathering.

Checks and Balances?

One of the first concerns in incorporating CCM music is that the vast majority of artists are not Lutheran, and generally come from an evangelical Protestant background (i.e. Baptist, Reformed, etc.). While many take the posture that anything “Christian” is better than nothing at all, it is nonetheless naïve to think that the specific beliefs of the various performers will not be reflected in their lyrics, and their various talks and testimonies between songs. To think that this does not catechize our youth is simply foolish! We also must be sensitive to the often blurred distinction of Law and Gospel that is present in much of CCM. Regardless of the medium, the message does matter and we have a responsibility to not promote, directly or indirectly, anything that contradicts or confuses what we believe, teach and confess as Lutherans, especially because the majority of these artists view what they do as a “ministry” and view what they do on stage as “worship.” Further, they express these views to the young and impressionable who listen to their music.

I asked Rev. Terry Dittmer about this and he mentioned that the CCM artists are asked to not speak decision theology and cannot have altar calls, even if that is their normal *modus operandi* at their concerts. He said that for the most part, they respect such wishes and that he believes most of the music goes under a “general” doctrinal review. I was pleased to hear this. Of course, doctrinal review can mean different things to different people. Considering that there were probably at least 30 CCM bands/singers at the Gathering, I find it hard to believe that that much doctrinal review is even possible. I

also doubt it would be appreciated by the bands if they were told that they could not sing some of “their” songs because they were considered inappropriate. Further, just because you ask an artist to not do certain things, doesn’t mean that other false theology does not come through “between” songs.

Mr. David Weidner remarked that the goal of the planners in emphasizing CCM was to provide a clear alternative for our young people considering all the secular music that they listen to which has inappropriate lyrics and the like. Providing an alternative is laudable, but the big question is: What is inappropriate and what is not? Is all secular music bad? Is all music that claims the mantle of Christianity necessarily “good”? Moreover, who is taking the time to do this and do they have the theological background necessary to do so?

The Promotion of the Contemporary Christian Music Industry

One of the contributing ways that CCM was promoted was through the presence of an organization called Inter-linc (www.interlinc-online.com). Inter-linc is a pan-denominational organization in Nashville, TN, which promotes CCM for use within youth ministry circles. In addition to having a couple of sectionals, they had a booth and one of their associates, Phil Chalmers, a concert promoter, presented a Mega-Sectional entitled, “Music To Die For.” (More on that later).

It is important to recognize that most all of these groups view what they do as a “ministry,” and it is clearly obvious that the Gathering planners view it that way as well. Throughout the GB reference is made to their “ministries.” For instance, the web address of the Gathering band, Echelon, is www.echelonministires.com. (GB, p.27). A quick glance at their web page clearly reveals that they view what they do as a “ministry.” The group “Lost and Found” had a Mega sectional entitled “Music and Ministry.” In the GB it was written that “their ministry is more than just music.”(p.47) Further, not only did the band Audio Adrenaline at a Talk Back session describe what they do as ministry, but further, an LCMS staff person led 1200 youth in standing and “laying their hands on them” to thank God precisely for their “ministry.” (more on that later).

In the corner of an enormous area designated in the GB for the massive CPH Bookstore there was large area set aside with 15-20 tables for CCM artists to sell their CD’s, t-shirts, sign autographs and the like. Clearly, young people were more attracted to the CCM area of the CPH booth than nearly anywhere else. Some would argue that that is therefore reason to sell such fare. However, I express concern that in doing so the focus of our youth is being steered away from that which is objective and trustworthy, to that which is subjective and emotive. As one previously consumed by the CCM industry and an enormous supporter of it, I greatly caution that it is very dangerous to think that just because our youth are listening to music or having fun, that they are being fed appropriately.

Under the Radar Screen

While I was walking through this area I heard a Christian rap artist at his booth teaching four young, and rather timid, girls to rap (and rather loudly), “God is my Big Daddy!” again and again as he encouraged them to shout it louder and louder. Placing the merits and/or demerits aside of the musical medium for the moment, it must be asked whether it is appropriate or not to ever refer to our Triune God as “Big Daddy,” much less in the form of a mantra-like rap.

The second commandment is quite clear: “*You shall not misuse the name of the Lord, Your God.*” When speaking to God, or of God, we should refer to Him reverently and by using those names He has disclosed to us. Moreover, if we are not speaking to Him, we should not flippantly use His name for frivolous reasons, or just because we like the sound of singing it a certain way. This was clearly blasphemous activity. There was no altar call and no decision theology, but false teaching was promoted nonetheless. It is a great temptation of the evil one to persuade us to assume that lyrics have no effect, even if the

music claims to be “Christian.” It is a grave danger when Scriptural discernment is relegated to the background for the sake of “at least having something Christian.” When that happens false theology flies stealthily under the radar!

“Let’s Party for Jesus!”

While I could not attend every concert by every CCM group, I attended a large number of them. I believe the following dialogue by one of the members of the popular CCM soul group, “Out of Eden” summarizes a common thread present in the CCM industry:

In between songs, the main singers asks: “I just have to ask you ‘How many of you are party people? (at this everyone yells, though relatively disinterested)

She responds with her head down, shaking her head: “Oh, I don’t know, that wasn’t as good as I was hoping for. so let me rephrase it then, ‘How many of you like to party for JESUS!?!’” (at this everyone screams and wildly jumps up and down)

Now with her head raised in affirmation, she responds, “That’s more like it.” Then she yells as the music builds and builds, “OK, then, I want everyone up on your feet. I want you jumping, dancing and yelling and getting so crazy for Jesus that we will drive the devil crazy!!!”

In summary, this scene reveals a couple things that are an inherent danger with much, if not most, of CCM music. First, there is nearly always a pre-meditated use of emotions to elicit a desired response (after all that is a goal of such pop forms of entertainment). Second, there is this idea that we exist to “party for Jesus,” as if having “fun” is the Christian’s greatest aim or somehow a means to some other goal. Third, this “partying for Jesus”(i.e. our physical movements or responses) in a way, whether realized or not, becomes quasi-sacramental. In the above instance getting “crazy” and “partying” for Jesus was portrayed as a means to be able to accomplish some task like routing the devil. This is not only false teaching but is quite confusing to our youth who hear in God’s Word, and sing accordingly in their Church’s hymnody, that not their emotions, but rather, “one little word can fell him.” (LW #298:3/ TLH #262:3) “A Mighty Fortress is Our God”)

Make no mistake about it, not all CCM is bad, and there may be times when some of it (that which is not given to false theology) is appropriate to listen to for “entertainment” purposes. I even listen to some of it myself from time to time. The problem is that CCM appeals to our base emotions and makes such use of them that we quickly lose the ability, and for some, the desire, to be discerning. The mere fact that many, if not most, CCM artists, have altar calls at their concerts, clearly signals that in the minds of many of the performers the music is a means to an end, and one that is quite foreign to our confession of faith.

Another danger is that instead of thinking about what we need, we are tempted to relegate such necessary processing to the background because we are enamored with “what we like.” This has particularly serious ramifications in terms of our ability to teach our young people why we as Lutherans worship they way we do. In an age where “style” is considered to be a theological and simply a matter of personal taste, we must clearly confess to our youth that we don’t worship the way we do because it is necessarily what “we” like. Instead, our Lutheran understanding of worship is informed, guided by, and flows out of, who we believe God is, and what He seeks to give us and why. This must remain central at all times. It is terribly confusing to young people to hear musicians who play what they “like” and promote what they do as “worship” and then return home after having been subsequently taught, whether directly or indirectly, to find that “worship” at their home church is somehow altogether different, and clearly not considered to be as “fun.”

In one way, one can make the claim that CCM is not necessarily, by simply bearing the label “Christian,” better than listening to the best that secular music has to offer. There is clearly good and bad in both. It is however easier in a sense to listen to the best of secular music precisely because one is not seeking to receive anything “spiritual” from it, and therefore having “fun” and being fed something “spiritual” are at least not confused. In either case, great discretion is required. The grave problem is that precisely such discretion is unfortunately set aside when speaking in the realm of CCM and those who promote it.

MASS EVENTS

There were seven such events at the Gathering in the Superdome when all 35,000 were assembled. Each Mass Event was preceded by 30 minutes or so of praise singing called a “warm-up!” (GB, p.6) as everyone gathered. When that specific mass event (Battle Ground, Victory Ground, Dangerous Ground) was to begin an opening signal was used which included a festive entrance, dancers, banner carriers, while the Gathering band, Echelon, played the rousing and catchy song, “Rain On” based on the theme “Higher Ground.”

Concerning this first Mass Event, it was stated in the GB that “through drama, music, singing, video images and an inspiring message by Pastor Tom Rogers, we are going to march on the Battleground tonight with Jesus. Let’s get ready to rumble!!!” (GB, p.30) Thus, it is clear even from the GB that at least a secondary goal of these events is to rile up the crowd so that they can feed off of such emotion. After all, “Let’s get ready to rumble” is a phrase routinely used in the sport’s world after the introduction of players to get those in the arena hyped and ready to make noise. Further, just as sometimes at sporting events it is the fans who might actually begin the cheers, you often saw young student volunteers yelling to people to get them “fired up” and “crazy” before they even entered the Superdome.

Bible Study

The Gathering theme was based on the following passage from Colossians 3:1, “*Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God.*” In the early stages of the Gathering planning the theme, “Higher Ground” was chosen based on this passage in conjunction with the idea that New Orleans is a city that sits five feet below sea level.

It is interesting that in the GB, the description of the Mass Events (p.27) has two captions below it, the first says “Featuring Echelon” (i.e. the Gathering band) and then secondarily, and after a description of the band, “With a Special Emphasis on the Study of God’s Word.” That is quite revealing! Whether intended or not it gives the impression that the main course is the band and the side dish is the Word of God, even though the following is stated:

“Every mass event will be focused in the study of God’s Word, especially from St. Paul’s letters to the Colossians. The drama that is a part of these studies promises to be a major highlight of the Gathering and something you won’t want to miss.” (GB, p.27)

Dr. Jerry Joersz of the LCMS Commission on Theology and Church Relations was asked to prepare a Bible Study on the book of Colossians. I talked to Dr. Jerry Joersz about his role in the preparation of this study. He shared with me that he had the opportunity to speak at three separate occasions, and at various stages in the Gathering planning process, on the book of Colossians. As a result of those studies the planners selected the various sub-themes for the seven Mass Events. I have not seen such studies, but I have no doubt that they were well done. Dr. Joersz mentioned several times that he was greatly encouraged by the level of interest in the studying of God’s Word in such preparations compared to Gatherings in years past. This is truly wonderful news and for that we should rejoice.

However, it is apparent that in spite of all such study and preparation, the connections from the book of Colossians were not greatly made. As Dr. Joersz told me, not all of those involved in the final stages of the preparations were a part of his presentations. Very rarely were we asked by the Bible Study leader, Mr. David Noll (a Director of Christian Education in Spokane, WA), to open the paperback Bibles provided to all registrants. When we did open them, it wasn't for long. In fact, usually the quotation of a verse from Colossians was simply used as a jumping off spot.

When expressing my concern about this to Rev. Dittmer and Mr. Weidner, as well as my sincere belief that our youth actually can handle thirty minutes of really digging into the Scriptures, Rev. Dittmer remarked that he would very much like to see improvement in that area as well. It is a shame! It truly would have been a wonderful opportunity for our youth to come away from this Gathering believing that they had gained an understanding of at least one book of the Sacred Scriptures.

In effect, for the most part the dramas were the Bible Study. There was a talented team of young people who would act out the drama and at some point in the middle or at the end of each drama, Mr. Noll would break in while the action was frozen. In spite of the fact that the dramas were very professionally done and in some places quite good, I don't believe that the majority of youth really saw the connection between what was being acted out and the theme from the book of Colossians. A great many simply viewed the dramas as being soap opera-like, which they, in essence, were. Drama can be a very powerful tool especially for setting the stage for learning, but it can also fall flat when the connection between the lead-in drama and the intended objective is not clearly made.

Drama or Dirty Dancing?

One evening during the drama there was a "dirty dancing" scene just like what you would see on MTV that made use of the graphic sexual innuendo that so saturates our society and which seeks to draw upon the core of our base sinful nature. In this scene, about 30 young people were dancing on stage while two of the leading drama actors were about to kiss. The dancing by design was supposed to be exactly what it was - "dirty."

At the danger of sounding crude, but in order to accurately present what actually happened, 35,000 young people and their leaders during the event designated as "Dangerous Ground," witnessed high school or junior high girls dancing beyond suggestively and inappropriately. During this scene, which was depicted larger than life on the big screens above the stage, there was a girl wearing tight clothing bent over with her hands on her knees, with a boy standing closely behind her and gyrating his hips. She appeared to be rubbing her buttocks up against the boy behind her as they "danced" while at least two other boys made motions in front of the same girl as if they were fondling her breasts. All this was taking place while one of the Gathering theme songs was being played again and again building to a crescendo while repeating the words, "Take me, take me, to Higher Ground." It was heartbreaking to see the crowd clapping, cheering and roaring not in disapproval or disgust, but rather with precisely great approval and enthusiasm. In fact, the response and applause for this was as loud as I heard from the crowd at nearly any time during the other Mass Events.

I can only surmise that the goal of such a scene was to demonstrate in a vivid way the tension of the flesh (i.e. Dangerous Ground) perhaps swirling in the mind of the main characters who were about to kiss, namely the struggle between the flesh and standing on "Higher Ground." This was the best possible construction I could put on it and I was dearly and earnestly praying that the Bible Study leader would at least then come out and say something to the effect that, "What you just witnessed was clearly wrong and sinful behavior!" He did not. Instead he walked out on to a ladder that was set on the stage and read, Colossians 2:8, "*See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.*" He then

proceeded to explain that we are not saved by our works because “There just aren’t enough rungs in the ladder.” Such a statement is theologically vacuous and false enough on its own (i.e. we can’t even get on the ladder to begin with), but more importantly, it had nothing at all to do with the drama. Of greater immediate concern was the fact that through it no connection was made in the slightest to what we had just unfortunately seen with our eyes. As if that was not bad enough, Mr. Noll threw in a statement out of the blue: “If someone tells you that there is only one way to worship, you can tell them that I said they are wrong.” This is just one example of the “anti-liturgical” attitude pervasive through much of the entire Gathering.

While I was watching the main scene in question above, I was in great disbelief, not only wishing I was actually not witnessing what I saw (and feeling guilty for what I myself was seeing), but frankly, I was filled with righteous anger that at least some involved with this event felt that mimicking such behavior, regardless of intention, was somehow appropriate for these young people entrusted to their care for five days, much less those they asked to do it. I could not help imagining how such things were even rehearsed and choreographed.

Appealing to the base instincts in our youth (much less adults) is never, ever good, as tragically witnessed by the roaring affirmation from the crowd. I wept inside for those youth who at an official event of the LCMS were treated to that which many were concerned they might find if they strayed too far in the French Quarter. Is it any wonder that throughout the remainder of the dramas the rest of the week, there were a great many catcalls of “affection” (“I love you Rachel”) or worse (“Take it off!”) from the crowd towards the characters on stage! There is simply no other way to say it, the whole scene was abominable, and is something for which an apology by those who planned and implemented it should be offered.

While this is the dancing scene that I found most objectionable, this clearly was not the only time that “questionable” dancing was employed. In my discussions with Rev. Dittmer and Mr. Weidner, they likewise mentioned that there was actually another dancing scene that they had heard as many objections to as the one described above, because of the sexual innuendo employed.

MASS EVENT SPEAKERS AND OTHER EVENTS

In addition to the Drama/Bible Study each Mass Event incorporated a variety of speakers and guests. Among them were:

- **Bob Lenz.** Bob Lenz of Life Promotions (www.lifepromotions.com) is described as a “youth communicator” who speaks to over 100,000 youth a year. He is not a Lutheran and yet was asked to serve as the master of ceremonies for the Mass Events. He is truly an interesting individual, can surely keep the attention of an audience, and has many great stories and anecdotes. He is a high energy speaker and in many ways, quite likeable. In the evaluations I received (both paper and phone) he received both the greatest praise but also the harshest criticism of all the speakers. While he was loved by many, many others were greatly offended at some of his crude humor (i.e. in order to get a rise out of the crowd he once made a passing reference to his “third leg.”)

At one point he invited a young girl up to the stage and acting nervous (though this was probably all staged) he asked her in front of 35,000 of her peers, among other things, if she had ever been drunk and if she had ever had sex. When she answered in the negative, he acted relieved. Whether staged or not, this was simply out of line! What, after all, would have happened, if she had said “Yes?” He also elsewhere spoke with great lament about “how boring worship is back home” compared to what it is like at the Gathering. This was simply and completely an inappropriate remark, and again one for which ultimately the Gathering planners ultimately must accept responsibility for they contracted with him to be the master of ceremonies.

- Thomas Rogers. Rev. Rogers was the first main speaker the opening night of the Gathering. While he perhaps was one of the better speakers, his presence at the NYG was not without great controversy in lieu of the content of three letters he sent to Synodical Convention delegates earlier in the summer. Rev. Rogers, who is a member of the Jesus First convention committee, publicly accused one of our seminary faculties of teaching that there are “seven” sacraments and other such things, which were without any substance or merit. Quite appropriately, many questions were raised throughout the Synod about his involvement as a speaker at the Gathering in front of our Synod’s youth. Given such concerns, I made inquiry of those involved in order to clarify the situation.

In a nutshell, as the President’s office has the task of overseeing and approving speakers for the NYG, then LMCS President Dr. Robert Kuhn seriously considered removing Rev. Rogers from the speaking list. Rev. Rogers indicated to me that after lengthy discussions with Dr. Kuhn and upon his second draft of a statement of apology, he was reinstated as a speaker. This was confirmed by Dr. Kuhn. He told me in a phone conversation that at that point the matter was considered concluded, at least in as far as it related to his office.

As one can imagine, all of this caused not a few problems for the Gathering planners so close to the NYG itself. Mr. Weidner noted that they had already nearly finished plans with a replacement speaker and were almost ready to proceed in that manner, when Rev. Rogers was allowed to stand as a speaker. Though both Rev. Dittmer and Mr. Weidner expressed concerns to me themselves over Rev. Roger’s actions, given the shortness of time and considering his relative importance to the first night’s activities especially as he had helped in the planning of them, they indicated that it was decided by the planners to allow him to yet speak.

- Laura Wilkinson. She is an Olympic Gold Medalist in diving from the 2000 Summer games. She was interviewed one evening by Bob Lenz on the stage. After video footage was shown including her saying in a post-victory TV interview, “*I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me,*” she explained how she had broken her foot, didn’t know if she would even be able to participate, much less even place. Nonetheless, God had strengthened her, the idea being that he can do that for you too. To this Bob Lenz replied, “Laura, you are so awesome, can I have your autograph?” To which she quite tellingly replied, “After the *show*, Bob!” (*italics mine for emphasis*)
- Audio Adrenaline. As previously mentioned one of the mass events incorporated this group’s high energy CCM concert. Again, while there were no altar calls or decision theology present, much was nonetheless revealed by what the band said in between songs.

First, the lead singer spoke of the Great Commission (Matthew 28:16-20) and quoted it verbatim, but purposely left out any reference to baptism contained in it. Second, as you can see in the below quote from a young girl in our District, the lead singer made an inappropriate reference in an attempt to further whip the audience in a frenzy:

"The two things that disturbed me the most were Holy Communion, which was anything but Holy, and Sacred; and the "Audio Adrenaline" portion of the Mass Events. During the free concert at the Superdome everyone was having a great, fun time. Although that kind of "music" (I call it noise) is not what I listen to, I found myself enjoying the excitement of being with the 35,000 kids. That entire evening was destroyed when the leader of the band referred to one of the most sacrilegious things of the time. He said, "C'mon people, I need to see you, need to see your hands; it'll be like an old Woodstock concert." What I am questioning is why he, or anyone, would compare this Christian activity to that one? The one relation that Woodstock should have with Christ's church and our Christian people is to be an example of great sin, sodomy, and Satanism, things that we should turn away from. This was the main thing that caused me to realize how superficial this gathering was."

- Gianna Jessen. One of the highlights of the Gathering for most everyone was hearing this young lady speak. She is a survivor of an attempted abortion and as a result developed cerebral palsy. Having participated as a singer with the Gathering band throughout the week, she spoke at length about the evil of abortion, the need to reach out to young girls who find themselves in such a crisis, and the desperate need for young boys and girls to dress modestly and remain chaste. In spite of concerns for it being basically all law (i.e. “Just do it!”), to which Rev. Dittmer and Mr. Weidner agreed, it was nonetheless a powerful speech. Unfortunately, several times she said that as she was pondering what to say during her “testimony” that “God had spoken to her and commanded her to say” what she ended up saying. Yet another case of subtle false teaching.
- The Rite of Confirmation. In the past, baptisms have taken place at the Gathering. This time, in an attempt to make the connection that we are called by God to “take a stand on Holy Ground,” following his rousing speech, Rev. John Nunes of St. Paul Lutheran Church in Dallas, TX confirmed his congregation’s confirmation class before the Gathering. Rev. Nunes is an exceptional high energy speaker who did make a couple of good baptismal connections before turning to his confirmands to walk through the rite.

Unfortunately, the rite of confirmation from the Lutheran Worship Agenda was not used and it appeared that Rev. Nunes created his own rite, probably being fashioned to correspond to his speech and the certain themes he emphasized. Interestingly enough, Rev. Dittmer shared with me that the planners had at first considered having the Rite of Ordination at the NYG. Evidently someone eligible for ordination this past summer was open to having it take place at the Gathering. While perhaps a light-hearted request, it was nonetheless made.

When witnessing this “rite” I was deeply saddened thinking of the congregation of these young people who were not given the opportunity to witness the confirmation of their youth so that they (and others) could instead have this experience at the Youth Gathering. The Rite of Confirmation is not something that takes place in a vacuum, but among a certain people, in a certain place, in a certain church. There is a real danger that instead of identifying the confession of their faith in the context of their locale (i.e. their congregation at which altar they kneel), those who were confirmed may well identify it apart from that context. Moreover, what witness was given to the 35,000 others who saw this and perhaps thought, “Wow, I wish I could have been confirmed here rather than back at my church. That would have been really awesome!?!”

While I do not doubt the “intent” of why this Rite was done, I do not believe that a National LCMS Youth Gathering is a place where the rites of the church should take place, especially those normally reserved for the local congregation.

After all, that which takes place at the Gathering should support the ministry of the local congregation, not replace it. Another pastor who witnessed this scene put it well: “This was not really about their confession of faith. This was a show and they were props.” Nearly every young person who I have asked specifically about their witnessing this rite very much thought that having such a rite at the Gathering was at the very least, misplaced.

As I expressed to Rev. Dittmer and Mr. Weidner, this could have been a fantastic opportunity to walk these 35,000 young people through the actual rite of confirmation from the Lutheran Worship Agenda itself as a way of helping them reaffirm and better understand what it is that they have vowed themselves and what it means. Unfortunately, the way this was handled actually took away from the opportunity to make such a wonderful and appropriate connection.

MEGA SECTIONALS

In addition to servant events, listening to CCM, carnival activities and other recreation, during the afternoons there were a large number of opportunities for going to listen to speakers on specific topics of interest. It is literally impossible to attend everything that one might desire, especially as many are offered at the same time. Unfortunately, from most of the evaluations I received, it appears that not many youth attended very many of the sectionals at all.

There are three groupings: Mega Sectionals, Mini-Mega Sectionals and Interest Centers. Mega Sectionals are the largest and could seat anywhere from 1500-2500 a piece. There were eight different Mega Sectionals offered over the three days (some of which were repeated), only two of the eight presenters being LCMS Lutherans (those who are LCMS are marked with an asterisk):

- Phil Chalmers, “Music to Die for.” Phil Chalmers is a self-proclaimed researcher of contemporary music, both secular and Christian. The basic premise of his talk was as follows: “Kids listen to music. If you put garbage in, you will get garbage out. You have to give kids an alternative. Therefore you should listen to CCM.” In fact, you could say that his presentation was a blatant promotion of the CCM industry. Moreover, one of the dangers of CCM is that it is also true that, to borrow his phrase, “if you put false theology in, you will get false theology out.”

Mr. Chalmers would present a song by a certain secular group and then say, “These folks are not Christians, but an equivalent to their sound is this CCM group.” He continually repeated statements that one of the barriers to bringing CCM to your church back home is “yourself” and your own “prejudices. You name the genre of music; he had the copycat CCM group for it, even if it was grunge or death metal. The general idea? You can take whatever style music there is, take out the bad lyrics and insert “Christian” lyrics and the song is immediately sanctified. That, of course, is a false premise. It was interesting to witness a great number of youth laughing when he played a selection from some alternative metal band, who were literally screaming something that could barely be made out about the Holy Spirit.

He also said concerning a secular singer who claims to be a Christian, “He is not a Christian, he drinks beer and parties.” Thus, instead of passing judgment on the individual’s music, he passed judgment on him as a person and judged the state of his heart. Moreover, while, of course, we don’t want our teenagers engaged in drinking at this stage in their life, it is simply false to claim that if someone drinks a beer they are not to be considered Christians. Drinking beer is not necessarily sinful activity, and it surely is not a measuring stick of one’s salvation. This is an example, subtle and harmless, as it may seem, of how we should not expect those with differing theological perspectives to speak to our youth without aspects of their false theology shining through. I cannot relate enough just how telling it was to witness that during the course of his media presentation nearly two thirds of everyone left.

- Phil Keaggy, “Life is an Attitude.” Phil Keaggy was a former high school athlete whose athletic career and life were threatened when he was paralyzed from the neck down. I did not attend this sectional but it was described in the following way: “He thought life was over, but God stepped in.” (GB, p.47)
- Jim Burns “Radical Respect: A Christian Approach to Love, Sex and Dating.” This gentleman is President of Youth Builders, formerly the National Institute of Youth Ministry. I attended part of his talk and he spent a great amount of time making jokes about dating and sexual matters in order to appeal to the youth.
- *Lost & Found “Music and Ministry.” This was basically a concert by one of the better (theologically speaking) of the CCM bands at the Gathering. I believe they are also members of LCMS

congregations, or at least grew up in the LCMS. Though they do not describe themselves as being a “ministry” the promotional material does. It states: “Their ministry is more than just music.” (GB, p.47) I attended their entire concert.

- Bob Lenz, “Bringing Your Friends to Higher Ground.” As he was the master of ceremonies for the Mass Events, I did not attend this mega sectional.
- Talk Back with Audio-Adrenaline. As mentioned, this band had a 75-minute concert at one of the Mass Events and this was an opportunity the next afternoon for the youth to ask them questions. This band clearly expressed to the 1200 or so gathered that their music “is” their ministry, saying “You have to do whatever you can to get in front of people all the time. Some are called to be pastors and teachers and evangelists. We view ourselves as pastoral and evangelistic. After all, preachers are entertainers too. They have to entertain in their sermons in order to keep your interest. It’s really no different.” They also spoke of how “it is sure nice to see denominational lines becoming more transparent” and that “Entertainment and Ministry can go together.”

One LCMS pastor arose and thanked them for their “ministry.” He then asked if he could come up to the stage and shake their hands, get their autograph and have his picture taken with them. Nearly half of the questions from the youth involved inquiries of how they could get involved in “doing music ministry” like they do.

At the end of the session, in a scene that was simply unfathomable, an LCMS staff person stood up and asked the entire audience to rise and “lay their hands on these fine young man and pray to God to bless them in their ministry.” Those nearest the stage literally laid their hands on them while the rest in the audience where instructed to stand, bow their heads and extend their arms in front of them. I was stunned. I still am actually. Whereas our youth otherwise only see the laying on of hands in conjunction with the rite of confirmation, the rite of ordination, or the rite of individual confession and absolution, now, at least in their minds, that list also includes some kind of new rite for the blessing of CCM artists. Moreover, what witness was given to the young non-LCMS men who are members of Audio-Adrenaline about what we believe, teach and confess? This was simply a poor witness to both them and our youth.

- Ken Davis, “A Reason for Joy.” (Sponsored by Lutheran Hour Ministries). Though I did not attend this sectional, my understanding from others who went or who have seen him before is that he is basically a motivational/inspirational type speaker. He spent 15 years with Youth for Christ. He has written many books including “How to Live with Your Parents without Losing Your Mind.”
- *Victor Belton, “Forming a Spiritual You.” Rev. Vic Belton is an LCMS pastor in Decatur, GA. I attended most of this sectional. To my surprise the band “Lost and Found” not only opened for him, but also remained throughout this time. In fact, they actually were front and center for twice the amount of time as Rev. Belton. The band would sing 2-3 songs and then Rev. Belton would talk for a couple of minutes. Rev. Belton’s message was mostly emotional and of the inspirational variety saying such things after the music stopped as: “Did you feel challenged to be more holy?” “Anybody here want to take it up another notch to get up to higher ground?” “This world can not push you around if you are in Jesus” “Nothing can get between you and your Jesus” “This world belongs to you.” “Does that touch anyone’s spirit?” At one point he was so enthralled with the music (they are quite good after all) that he said, “Let’s just bless the Lord, let’s just have a party!” and he let the band play on.

Overall a number of interesting conclusions can be drawn:

1. Only two of the eight Mega Sectional Speakers (which by being the largest billing were naturally intended to draw the most youth) were LCMS Lutherans. Something is not right with this picture.
2. Exactly half of the Mega Sectionals had to do with Contemporary Christian Music, one being a concert, another being a question & answer with a CCM band, one being a promotional opportunity for CCM, and one being a joint venture with a CCM band.
3. The rest of the Mega sectionals could best be described as being of the motivation/inspirational variety.

MINI-MEGA SECTIONALS

Mini-Mega Sectionals generally accommodated anywhere from 300-1000 individuals. Again, some of them were offered more than once.

- Micah Parker, “Overcoming Adversity – Christian Comfort Zone”
- Heidi Carlson, “Speaking the Truth on Prostitution”
- Tom Rogers, “Being Different in a Different World”
- Jill Hartman, “All About Angels”
- Micah Parker, “Sex and Profanity”
- Jay Reed, “Sex and Dating”
- Craig and Jake Live, “What Are You Hungry For?”
- Mark Brighton, “Revelation – End Times”
- Jim Henkell, “Extreme Evangelism”

It’s interesting that three of the nine had to do with topics related to “sex.” Of the eight Mini-Mega Sectional Speakers (Micah Parker spoke twice) five of the eight were LCMS (two DCE/Teachers, two pastors and one a professor).

INTEREST CENTERS

By my count according to the GB (pp.54-67) there were 72 speakers at Interest Centers, some of which repeated their sectionals or did more than one with a different topic. According to my research, 18 of the 72 were by ordained clergy, 20 were by either commissioned DCE/Teachers and 34 could be classified as “other.” Thus, 25% were pastors while almost half were either perhaps non-commissioned LCMS laity and/or non-LCMS Lutherans.

Topics included such things as: Sanctity of Life, Sex, Christian Values, Self-Esteem, CCM, Sex, Children’s violence, Fundraising, Leadership, CCM, College Transition, Eternal Life, Self-concept, the Role of Women, Personal Stewardship, the Satanic Arts, Gender Issues, Understanding God’s Will, Sex, Dating, Homosexuality, Having a Winning Attitude, Dating, Trust, Genetic Engineering, Devotional Life, Positive Thinking and Attitudes, Teenage Pregnancy, Living Together, Talk Barks with CCM bands, Teenage Rebellion, Family Issues, College Life, Christian Womanhood, Dieting Issues, Witnessing, Religion in Public Schools, Spiritual Warfare, Evolution, Abortion & Genetic Engineering, Media Issues, Satanism and the Occult, Magic Ministry, Eating Disorders, Domestic Violence, Tattooing.

While there was a large variety of topics, of the nearly 75 or so of them, only one of them had to do with church vocations, and it was put on by the head Admissions Counselor at our Fort Wayne seminary who specifically made a request to have an Interest Center.

Some were specifically for “Adults Only” or “Girls Only” or “Boys Only.” While that may be appropriate and/or helpful for interest centers dealing with sensitive issues, some were for “Youth Only” including the following which are of special note:

- Tim Kurth, “From Recreation to Reverence.” “Learn how one church converted their youth ‘group’ into a youth ‘Ministry’ anchored in weekly youth oriented worship experience complete with a youth band. Hear what can happen at your church! (Youth only!)” (GB, p.57) Frankly, it is absolutely inappropriate that no pastors or youth leaders were allowed to attend, nor was I allowed to observe and yet the whole point is apparently to teach kids to revolutionize their church’s “worship life.” Why the desire to not allow adults? Well, the reason is obvious from the description provided!
- Alan Weed, “Watchgoingtodowithwatchagot?” “This workshop will help you use music effectively in youth ministry?” (GB, p.58) This was basically an Inter-linc presentation on the services they offer to help with the promotion of CCM. The materials they handed out contained material that hyped how many “decisions” for Christ were made at a recent Billy Graham Crusade. Thus, there went the moratorium on “decision theology” though these were not performers, but promoters of CCM.
- Brian Williamson, Dir. “Takestone: Contemporary Music Without Offense.” (GB, p.60) Again, the stated description says it all: “Songs for the Masses,” a Lutheran Christian Music group from Nashville, TN will share with you ideas on how to bring new music into the church without offending the members of the congregation. They will discuss lyrics, arrangements, and methods of teaching the congregations this new music. The group will share their music along with God’s Word with you.”

Notice that according to the stated purposes as printed in the GB, at least two of these three interest centers were specifically designed to teach youth to return to their congregations and try to change their congregations worship practice. The Inter-linc one did that as well through the promotion of CCM services.

One cannot help but assume that the inclusion of these types of workshops relays an obvious “agenda.” In essence, this demonstrates that the NYG, by their consent to such workshops, evidently supports those who seek to use youth and their leaders to “change things back home” where after all, as the master of ceremonies himself told everyone, “worship is boring.” One wonders how many youth were taught at this Gathering, either directly or indirectly, to despise the liturgy and hymnody of the Lutheran Church and their home congregations in this way at the very time in their life when they most need to be helped to understand it and its relevance to their life. One cannot easily separate the use of CCM as a so-called alternative to “secular music” when it is quite often also viewed by those who promote it as an alternative to “our Lutheran understanding of worship” as well.

The off-site interest centers looked great, though I did not have an opportunity to attend one of them. However, I heard many good things about one that was held on death and dying at one of the local “above-ground” New Orleans cemeteries. This was a fantastic idea.

RECREATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

There were a great many fun activities for youth to participate in mostly during the afternoon hours. Within the convention center called Ground Zero, there was a bona fide carnival complete with a dozen or so rides, a great many basketball and volleyball courts and other such sporting and creative activities. Youth could play laser tag and all sorts of other such games. At Ground Zero, there were also a great variety of exhibitors representing our colleges, seminaries, various departments and entities in the Synod, mission societies and the like.

In addition at the Big Easy, besides for listening to CCM, youth could check their email at a Cyber-Cafe and play video games. Right next to the Convention Center was the Riverwalk mall, which was surely had plenty of places for nearly everyone to shop for souvenirs. Also, there were dances at several of the larger hotels each night of the Gathering from 10 – 12 p.m.

On the final night of the Gathering, there was a giant outdoor festival at a waterfront park. Among other things, youth groups could take in an IMAX movie and/or ride a riverboat. The evening was capped with a fantastic fireworks display on the Mississippi river. This was very nice, though unfortunately it did rain that night.

During the afternoon times many groups also made sight -seeing excursions in and around New Orleans with their family groups. In short, there was little shortage of “fun things” to do, and I greatly doubt that anyone left New Orleans having had a shortage of “fun.”

SERVANT EVENTS

Youth groups could also participate in daily servant events in places in the New Orleans community such as parks, playgrounds, nursing homes, cemeteries, homeless shelters and the like. There was also an opportunity to contribute in the building of a Habitat for Humanity house. It is obvious that those who were able to participate in such servant events benefited from them as much as did those whose lives they touched. I can simply not say enough positive things about providing such opportunities, and it is clear that the New Orleans community was greatly touched. A record number of youth participated in these events over previous Gatherings and I believe that is a clear indication that not only are youth desirous of serving in such manners of outreach, but moreover, that they do not have to be entertained all the time in order to gain from an experience. In fact, quite a number of youth groups did not go to the Gathering and instead did servant events elsewhere, which was probably much more cost-effective and gave the same type of opportunity available at the NYG, but on an extended and larger scale. It goes without saying that there are surely many Servant Event type opportunities as close to home as there are far away from home. These should definitely be promoted and encouraged.

During the Gathering, youth groups also donated 22,000 Bibles for Concordia Gospel Outreach to distribute and 10 tons of nonperishable food for the hungry, gave 804 pints of blood, and brought along thousands of gel pens for needy school children. This is, of course, likewise very positive, though frankly, it does seem odd that 22,000 Bibles were brought from across the country to give away, when the registrants were given 35,000 of them at the Gathering which, at least at the Mass Events, were seldom used.

CONCLUSION

The National Youth Gathering is clearly an event of enormous proportions that is beloved by many for a wide variety of reasons, both good and bad. I went to New Orleans with as open and fair a mind as I possibly could have had and I have sought at each step of the way to provide a fair and objective analysis. Nonetheless, as I believe this evaluation clearly reveals, I found that nearly all of those areas that we had originally identified as reasons for concern, are not only true, but in some cases, even greater cause for such concern.

There is one exception. I do not believe that those who plan the NYG believe that “real” youth ministry can only take place at an event such as this, and as I have witnessed in my discussions with those such as Rev. Dittmer and Mr. Weidner, I believe wholeheartedly that there is definitely a sincere desire on the part of all involved to support the “ministry” that takes place “back home.” The problem has more to do with what that “ministry” actually is, and what it is to be about!

“The Experience!”

One of the comments heard repeatedly and stated almost universally by young people when asked what they gained the most from the Gathering is “Seeing 35,000 other LCMS youth all in one place.” I am glad that this has a positive impact on them. However, while one cannot separate out the “experiential” factor from any event (i.e. Yes, of course, it is a nice thing to see!), it should not be an intended result, or what is being promoted. Further, regardless of intent, such an experience, especially when fanned and encouraged, can have as much of a negative effect as a positive one. Bigger is not necessarily wrong, but it is certainly not always better. Such thinking is the way of the world.

While the Gathering planners may not intend to promote any “Mountain Top Experience” it is certainly not discouraged. In fact it is clearly highlighted! On the final morning of the Gathering, participants were encouraged to “Take a moment to listen (to) how amazing 35,000 people sound when singing praises to God. You won’t hear that every day.” (GB, p.35) Indeed, you don’t hear that every day...but is this what is important? Is this why millions of dollars are spent to have this kind of Gathering? If not, why is it so clearly emphasized? Apparently it is one of the things that Gathering planners desire young people to come away with from the Gathering. In fact in an opening letter in the GB booklet, Mr. David Weidner speaks of youth groups now “coming together to the Gathering for a once-in-a-lifetime experience of the Body of Christ.” (GB, p.3) Yet that once-in-a-lifetime experience exists not only every three years at the National Youth Gathering or events like it, but in fact, it exists even more so and fully each week at churches in places like Rock Springs, Laramie, Buffalo and Wheatland, Wyoming, and Chadron, Bridgeport and Potter, Nebraska.

The Body of Christ is not something that we necessarily “see” with our eyes, nor is it any kind of “outward” experience! It exists wherever we are gathered in Christ, regardless of numbers. Our unity is found in what we confess, teach and believe, period. If we hold events such as the NYG in order to somehow “see” the church than we are gathering for wrong and idolatrous reasons. Seeing more Lutherans or more people your age is nice, but simply “seeing” them does not equip anyone with anything. Whether age thirteen or sixty-five, such equipping is found only where the Gospel is “preached in its purity and the holy sacraments administered according to the Gospel.” (AC VII:1)

Rev. Dittmer mentioned in our meeting that smaller events are clearly more manageable, intimate, and conducive to learning. Great, let’s have them! Many for years have called upon the Department of Youth Ministry to consider regional events including those in our own District. Though the NYG planners continually struggle with this idea, I believe that in the end it will be hard for them to think about having “smaller” events for the sheer fact that it just won’t be the same. I am pleased that they are researching some alterations to the format that may effect future Gathering locations, but I don’t believe much consideration will ultimately be given to smaller, more manageable, regional Gatherings as a replacement for one large Gathering.

Emotion! Emotion! Emotion!

It is a mistake to necessarily equate someone’s response to the reasons they respond to something. The mere fact that the loudest applause that I heard at the Mass Events had to do with the graphically depicted “dirty dancing” scenes should only serve as further evidence that the level of emotional response achieved does not necessitate proper conviction. Just because you can hear 35,000 youth screaming, doesn’t mean that they are learning or screaming for the right reasons, much less providing a rousing defense of their faith, as is often maintained by those on stage when they hear such a response. In fact, they may just be releasing energy, whether appropriately or inappropriately. Frankly, in a setting such as a dome with 35,000 youth, they can be led to scream for just about anything.

At the start of nearly each Mass Event someone would stand on the stage and yell something like, “Are you ready to go to higher ground?” But is “Higher Ground” an emotional experience? In many places it was treated that way. Every day at rock concerts across this country singers yell things such as “Are you ready to party, New Orleans?” and people yell and scream. But then the stage is dismantled, the bus is loaded, they move on to the next location and yell the same thing to others, while those who attended the show return home, having escaped reality for a short time, but only for a time. Such escape perhaps has its place, but it is a cause for concern whenever it is in any way equated with true growth in faith.

Youth Discernment

In reading through the many evaluations from youth I have received, and from my discussions with many of them before and after the Gathering, I am continually struck at how they answer questions that relate to the substance of what they have learned. It is clear that most of them had fun, and that they “feel” that they grew in their faith, but with rare exception do they plainly articulate much at all that they actually “learned.” Repeatedly I have asked youth what they learned from the presentations, only to have them reply in the following way, “Oh, the speakers? They were awesome!.” That is sadly often as deep as it gets.

It is clear that our youth are responding more to the messenger, than the message itself. They are viewing style “as” substance. It is likewise obvious that, by their choice of speakers (especially when considering the fact that the majority are not even Lutheran) the NYG planners have demonstrated that the “appeal” of the messenger is more important than the clarity and truth of their message. We should be careful that we don’t send our youth somewhere just because they say it was “fun” or because they had such a great “experience” as if somehow that equates to true growth in the faith.

In many ways, the NYG can be described as a “Feast of the Senses.” At the Mass Events everything is presented in lightning quick and detailed MTV like style! Songs like the popular “Who Let the Dogs Out?” are set to video scenes of what took place at the Gathering. Everything is big and glitzy. There is great sensory overload. Carnivals, video games, loud music and the like are not bad things in and of themselves, but they can send a mixed signal when they are packaged in a way that creates an overwhelming experience. I was struck repeatedly by how often I overheard youth say they were bored even with all there was to do. Truly, we as Christians should take time to enjoy God’s First Article gifts, including having a lot of fun with each other. However, we don’t have to entertain our youth all the time, nor should we assume that that is even what they desire.

The Prominence of a Theology of Glory

While, in places, passing reference is made to a theology of the cross, it is clearly a theology of glory that is overwhelmingly presented to our youth. This is greatly apparent given the reliance on the use of testimonies, whether it be someone who is paralyzed, a victim of abortion, or a NFL or Olympic hero. This doesn’t mean it isn’t good to hear from such individuals, but there is an inherent danger in so heavily emphasizing such testimonies, especially when most of those contracted with to give them are non-Lutherans.

For instance, the Olympic diver Laura Wilkinson said repeatedly, “What God did for me he can do for you too!” But what if instead of her broken foot being healed enough, she had finished 37th instead of 1st? What if she had never even made her college diving team? Would God have still done great things for her? Further, would she have then even been flown in at great expense to speak to our youth as an example of faith?

The Confusion of Christian Vocation

Most of our youth will never be Olympic divers or professional football players, but they will be husbands and wives, fathers and mothers, employers and workers, and the like. Perhaps ways could instead be found to highlight how we witness to our faith in the ordinariness of everyday human life, rather than promoting the sensational and extraordinary.

It is likewise quite unfortunate to witness the massive push of the faulty and confusing “everyone a minister” concept. Even the newly elected Lutheran Youth Fellowship delegates were publicly equated with having a “ministry.” Moreover, it is quite telling that our young people had a great many more opportunities to ask non-Lutherans about how they could become a CCM artist than they had to learn about becoming a pastor or teacher in the LCMS. This is simply unacceptable.

The Minimization of our Lutheran Identity

Sometimes you can tell as much by what IS NOT said, then by what IS said. It is interesting that never once did I hear any reference whatsoever to Luther’s *Small Catechism*, even though this is a Gathering of our Synod’s most recently confirmed. While one does not expect to necessarily see speakers quoting from the Catechism all the time, it is odd when it is never mentioned at all.

Further, I heard only 4-5 references to Holy Baptism and perhaps 2-3 references to the Lord’s Supper (outside the Divine Service itself). There was never a single reference to Confession and Absolution. Only twice did I hear someone who was a pastor actually called a pastor (once in reference to a DCE). Even more, only twice during the entire Gathering did I even hear the name “Lutheran” publicly spoken.

I can only ask: Do we so despise the teachings of our Church? Are we ashamed of being Lutherans? Can we not dare to emphasize our Lutheran identity to our youth?

In all honesty, if an outside observer were present, with precious little exception, I believe that they would be hard pressed to be able to tell that they were at a specifically “Lutheran” gathering as opposed to one of any number of pan-denominational events or interdenominational Christian Music Festivals!

Regarding the Celebration of the Lord’s Supper

It is quite telling that the only references to the Lord’s Supper that I heard made by speakers were in terms of how “cool” or “awesome” it was to see 35,000 people communing, and never in reference to what was actually received – forgiveness. Forgiveness is not granted through the eyes! All things considered, including the insufficient measures taken to appropriately administer this most sacred and Holy Meal, I believe it would be wise for it to no longer be celebrated at the NYG.

An Insufficient Level of Catechesis

We clearly today are faced with a crisis in catechesis. Almost every study done indicates that the vast majority of our youth are no longer members of LCMS congregations by the time they leave college. Rev. Dittmer mentioned to me that he believes that the bar is much too low in terms of catechesis at the NYG, and that perhaps there has been some gravitation to the lowest common denominator. I would agree. If anything we are at a time when we must raise the bar rather than continue to lower it. I am convinced that our youth will follow us wherever we lead them. The question is: Where will that be? One young man I recently spoke to attended both the NYG in New Orleans and the Dying To Live Youth Conference, hosted by our District two summers ago. He commented that while he certainly had a good time at both, he learned an awful lot in Laramie, but not much at all in New Orleans! This should speak volumes to us. Can we afford for it not to?

Not only was most of the catechesis quite shallow, but Law and Gospel were often terribly confused, and our youth were at times turned for comfort to where it is not promised to be found. Instead of a sacramental emphasis, youth were often told to look deep within their hearts for assurance. Further, Bob Lenz, in a speech typical of many, ended by pointing and saying, “Forgiveness is found at the foot of the cross.” This is false teaching. Forgiveness is not found at the foot of the cross. Forgiveness was “accomplished” for us at the cross but it is not “distributed” to us there, but is rather brought to us today precisely in God’s Holy Word and Sacraments. Pious sounding phrases are not helpful substitutes for the truth.

FINAL THOUGHTS AND SUGGESTIONS

Near the end of her testimony, Gianna Jessen declared: “You cannot change this world by imitating its actions.” This statement haunts me, because much of what I witnessed at the NYG in New Orleans did exactly that, and it speaks volumes about the use of CCM, suggestive dancing, the constant need to entertain, and the like.

It is important to realize that speaking about Jesus and asking youth if they want to “party for” Jesus, and actually giving them Jesus, are not one and the same thing. No doubt our youth have a great time at our NYG’s, but at what cost? In times of great uncertainty we must ask ourselves: Are we training our youth to be faithful confessors of the faith in spite of what they “see”, or are we just teaching them to long for more such “experiences” that will surely promise to be even bigger and better the next time? Further, does the NYG presently help or hinder the way our youth view what they receive back home, at their church, and from their pastor?

It is clear from the desire of youth to participate in servant events that they long to serve. What is presently missing at the NYG is the appropriate catechesis that will serve not only them, but in addition, those they do serve in their various vocations.

I pray that a critical evaluation will be made at the national level about the state of our NYG. As I have so pledged to our District and Rev. Dittmer, I will continue to strive to help in any way possible to address many of these concerns in a constructive manner. But until such changes are actually made, I firmly believe that we as a District should continue to encourage our congregations to consider other options for their youth rather than attendance at the National Youth Gathering.

If congregations do choose to continue to send their youth, I strongly encourage them to make sure that their pastor is present so that he can at least help them critique and evaluate what it is that they experience. Over the next two years, among other things, I plan on forming a committee to aid in the development of materials to help pastors and youth leaders discuss the issues contained in this evaluation with their youth. Hopefully such study materials can be helpful for all, whether or not their youth attend the next Gathering.

If anyone has questions about anything in this evaluation, please don’t hesitate to contact me (307.745-5892, pastor@standrewslcms.org). I will continue to make myself available in any way helpful to whoever is interested. May God bless all of us as we continue the ongoing task of faithfully handing over the faith to the next generation!