

2003 Youth Gathering Focus Groups with Adult Leaders

*ELCA Department for Research and Evaluation
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The ELCA Department for Research and Evaluation (DRE) facilitated 18 focus groups during the 2003 Youth Gathering in Atlanta, Georgia. Three staff members¹ facilitated the focus groups. Adult leaders who attended at least two prior national Youth Gatherings were randomly invited to participate in one forty-five minute focus group. The size of each group ranged from six to 16. One-hundred and fifty-nine people participated in the focus groups. The focus groups provided an opportunity for participants to give feedback on Youth Gathering logistics, Youth Gathering content, and the long-term impact of attending Youth Gatherings.²

Each question that was asked during the focus groups is listed below in bold. A summary of responses follows each question.

How was the Atlanta Gathering communicated in your congregation?

There were many different ways that the Gathering was communicated in congregations, but almost all groups mentioned word-of-mouth or “just knowing” as the most common methods. Youth who attended the previous Gathering would tell others in the congregation, especially friends and siblings, so the Gathering evolved into a tradition. The majority of leaders also anticipated and expected the Youth Gathering informational mailing to be sent to the congregation.

Leaders also reported more formal ways of communicating, such as: sending letters to all eligible youth in the congregation, using newsletters/bulletins, information sessions, announcements in worship, using the pre-gathering video, and home visits. Fund-raising efforts with education were also used to let people in the congregation know about the upcoming Gathering.

¹Victoria Flood, Rebecca Sims and Jennifer Esser facilitated the 2003 Youth Gathering Focus groups.

²Due to time constraints, every question was not necessarily addressed by all 18 focus groups. However, at least 15 groups had an opportunity to respond to each question.

Appendix C: Youth Gathering Focus Group Questions and Responses

How did you find out about the Gathering? How did youth find out about the Gathering?

Since most of the leaders had attended several previous Gatherings, they typically find out about the next Gathering at the previous one and start planning for three years in advance. Many reported ELCA mailings and the website as good sources of information, and some found out about the Gathering from their synod coordinator.

Who are the “gatekeepers” in your congregation regarding attendance at the Gathering? Who decides who or how many youth may attend from your congregation?

Most of the leaders found this to be an odd question in that anyone who wanted to go was allowed to attend the Gathering. Generally, participants indicated that the Gathering was open to members of their congregation who expressed an interest in going, and at times, friends of members were invited to attend if they were active in the congregations' youth groups. Many participants agreed that those who wanted to go were required to make a one year commitment and were required to meet certain attendance requirements for meetings, fundraisers, and sometimes for involvement in worship or Sunday School.

Money was sometimes an issue, but most leaders said that they were able to raise enough money so that all of the interested youth could attend. Some members obtained scholarships or received special donations from congregation members so that youth with financial difficulties were not excluded.

What did you find helpful and not helpful about how the Youth Gathering planners communicated with you prior to the Gathering?

This question prompted a myriad of complaints about the preparation for the Gathering and the Gathering itself. The most frequently mentioned problem with the materials was that they came late and not according to the deadlines set by the Gathering staff. Participants were very clear in stating the need for details such as hotel assignments much earlier and were repeatedly promised forthcoming information that never came in the mail or were never made available on the Gathering website. Participants also requested that they be given Gathering schedules and lists of bands early, so they can “sell” the event to the youth. This is specifically true because there are so many other summer events that vie for the attention of youth and getting them to commit early is difficult.

Some of the adult leaders reported that it was difficult for them to contact staff in the Gathering office because Gathering staff were only available during regular business hours. Several of the adults who were volunteer youth leaders, and not working for the church full-time, were not available during the day to make or receive phone calls during the day.

There were also many problems with the servant events in terms of logistics and organization. The information that was received was often repetitive (multiple mailings of the same thing) or conflicting information with what had been previously received.

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What would have been helpful to know, and when would it have been helpful?

Leaders felt that the earlier they could have information, the better. Many acknowledged that the time line set out by the Gathering staff was fine if it had been followed. Most leaders start fundraising and meeting with youth in the fall, so having the information books by the prior February would be ideal. They also liked the past practice of receiving a book for each participant instead of one book per group. Some leaders suggested that there was too much information, so streamlining it into one book may be more effective than having three books with conflicting information. They also liked the once-a-month Bible studies that were included in previous years' books.

What did your youth group do to prepare for the theme of the Gathering?

Congregations did a variety of things to prepare for the theme, although some were more indirect. A large majority held meetings, some weekly or monthly, some only a few times, to discuss the theme. They often used material from the preparation books or their own materials. One congregation had an international guest visit the congregation, while some used fund-raising and volunteer activities as a way of introducing the theme. Others watched video tapes of Bishop Tutu, while some youth groups invited professors of African American studies to lead Youth Gathering preparation discussions. Many agreed that this was a difficult theme to prepare for, and some of the material was too high-level and abstract for the youth to understand. A small minority of participants thought that this theme was too internationally focused.

Some leaders tied the theme in through VBS material by Augsburg Fortress that had a similar theme and involved the younger kids in the preparation for the gathering.

How can Gathering organizers help you and your group better prepare for the theme?

Most leaders agreed that the information in the preparation books (once they got them) was helpful. Some suggested having more interactive activities on the website related to the theme so that youth could go there on their own as a homework assignment. Other suggestions were to include a video and CDs for the youth, or a list of ideas of what congregations have done in the past to prepare for the theme. They liked the idea of each youth receiving a Bible at the Gathering, but they would like to have them in advance so they could take more advantage of all the resources offered.

How was your congregation involved with preparing your youth to attend the Gathering?

Congregations were involved in a variety of ways, but by far the most common was fund-raising. Many leaders reported different types of fund-raisers that the congregation was invited to, from coffee hours to Easter breakfasts. Congregations also got involved in collecting quarters, and many reported this was a great way for older members to connect to the theme. Some participants discussed "shareholding" in which members of the congregation were invited to "invest" in the youth. Many used pictures of the youth and information about those participating to help the congregational members connect with youth. One smaller congregation decided not

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to do traditional fundraising and asked for anonymous pledges, and the youth attending the Gathering also contributed their own money to this fund.

Almost all of the congregations had a blessing or commissioning service before leaving for the Gathering, and most congregations prayed for the youth while they were gone. Some did a youth service before and after the Gathering with several youth speaking or doing the sermon. When they returned, most of the youth will do a presentation of some kind to the congregation, either during worship or at a special meeting. Some congregations formed prayer partners with their youth who were attending the Gathering, while others created mentoring programs.

What resources did you utilize to prepare for the Gathering? For example, how many of you called the Gathering office with questions?

Roughly three-fourths of the participants called the 800-Gathering number at least once prior to attending the Gathering. Many participants said that they left a message and never got a return call or they were on hold and transferred from one place to another trying to get an answer. Some reported that they got better results calling the ELCA's 1-800 number than the Gathering's number. Many suggested that it would be helpful to have a directory of phone numbers and email addresses for who to call or email regarding specific questions. This would reduce the time spent trying to track down the correct person. Those with effective synod coordinators did not feel the need to contact the churchwide office.

How many of you used the Gathering website for information?

Almost all of the participants (more than 90 percent) used the Gathering website. Several commented on the improvements to the website for this Gathering, although information was slow being posted.

Participants used the website primarily to download information about hotels, speakers, and servant events. A couple participants felt that the bulletin board was more helpful than the website itself. Some of the specific suggestions for future Gathering websites include:

1. Direct e-mail addresses of staff for specific concerns, such as housing
2. Creating a place for Frequently Asked Questions about things that could go wrong (for e.g., what to do when hotel reservations are not accurate)
3. Provide more details to go along with the daily schedules that are posted

How would you characterize the impact or effect that attending a Youth Gathering has on the youth from your church?

The overwhelming response to this question was that the Youth Gathering has a "life-changing, immeasurable, faith-shaping, memorable" impact on the youth. The impact may be delayed and it may vary for different individuals, but all the leaders agreed that this was a very powerful event that would stay with their youth for a long time. Many youth return as volunteers or adult leaders, and several of the leaders in the groups got involved by first attending a Gathering as a

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youth. Even those participants who had relatively negative comments about the Gathering in response to other questions, agreed with the comments about how important and valuable this event is in the lives of youth from their congregations. Many also felt that this was a good bonding experience for the youth, and a chance for them to see that it's "cool" to be Christian. The youth are able to get a sense of the wider church, and the life experience for some youth who have never been to a big city or flown on an airplane is life-altering. Some mentioned the impact on the congregation and the energy they bring back after the Gathering, which is important to follow-up on so they don't feel a huge let-down after such a high.

Many agreed that the Youth Gathering is an empowering event for youth to hear the messages, "I matter" and "I can make a difference." Some had stories of youth going into leadership roles such as Lutheran Student Movement, campus ministry, Lutheran Youth Organization, or seminary.

What do you think about planning a family event as an alternative to a high school Youth Gathering?

The overwhelming response to this question was "Don't mess with the youth gathering!" Everyone agreed that the youth needed something to call their own, and they probably wouldn't come if their parents were there. In fact, many went to the Youth Gathering in part to get away from their parents. Several suggested that teenagers needed a place where they can be independent from their families and yet also be in a safe environment and that is what the Gathering accomplishes.

Many participants indicated that a family event would be too costly and difficult to organize, and they felt that the Global Mission events were a good place for that. Some agreed that it might be an idea for something in addition to the Youth Gathering, but not to replace it.

Since the majority of you have attended at least 2 other national Youth Gatherings, have the Youth Gatherings had any impact on your sense of call to vocation? If so, please describe that impact.

Most participants felt that the Youth Gathering had a significant impact on them personally. Most of them reported feeling rejuvenated and some stay in youth ministry because they look forward to the Gatherings every three years. Some felt they developed more confidence in themselves and more patience. Others reported that they were called to seminary after attending Youth Gatherings. Some participants reported they get more out of the Gatherings as an adult. Many leaders from small congregations felt this connected them to the wider church and got them out of their small-town "shell." They also reported a sense of community, specifically with this year's theme.