

Ministry Minute

Westwood & the ELCA Youth Gathering

“Explore, Examine, Excite, Experiment, Extol”



Seven Westwood youth experienced all of that and more at Created To Be, the ELCA's 2024 National Youth Gathering in the heat and humidity of July in New Orleans.

Alison Broman, Coordinator of the Children, Youth, and Families Ministry for Westwood, and volunteers Kristina and Michael Seehusen were adult leaders for the group.

Several others with Westwood connections were on hand as part of the national planning and execution teams for the event. Service opportunities and fellowship directed at having social justice, mental health and anti-racism conversations were offered through youth activities, worship, and Bible study. Participation was 16,000 strong this year.

Worship services in the Smoothie King Center opened and closed the national gathering, but the three days in between focused on opportunities and activities around the city. Divided into groups of about 5,000, the teens rotated into Synod Day, Interactive Learning Day, and Accompaniment Day.

Westwood's journey began with a Synod Day that started with a worship service including other Minnesotans and ELCA Bishop Elizabeth Eaton. It also had an exploration of the French Quarter and a scavenger hunt using a phone app.

Westwood's Dannica Olsen led the national team for planning the Synod Days. Her team included Westwood's Ann Sundermeyer and Elsa Lee on the implementation team. Ian and Rachel McConnell, who have strong Westwood ties, also served on planning teams.

“We were responsible for just over 5,000 kids per day doing our program,” Dannica said.

The aim was to engage all five senses. “It wasn't just ‘take a photo of something.’ It was, find out why it's significant. Look at a statue of a jazz musician. Look up one of their songs. Create a music video,” she said. “Our intention in a place with such a huge, rich history and culture was to make sure the youth were experiencing what New Orleans had to offer.”

The Westwood group's second day was Interactive Learning at the New Orleans Convention Center. It offered six football fields full of stations for sensory learning, photo ops, game play, merchandise shopping, music, and activities.

The third day was an Accompaniment Day focused on action, advocacy, and awareness regarding mental health and tools and techniques to bring back to Westwood and its larger community.

Westwood teen Luke Rowan points to several highlights, including the large worship services, the scavenger hunt, and the end-of-the-day Community Life parties. Those included dancing, snacks, and card games with other teens at the hotels hosting guests for the Gathering. “I made some connections with other students from Westwood I didn't know fully and now they are very good friends,” Luke said.

He also enjoyed being a part of the huge gatherings at the convention center. “I have a new-found appreciation for church,” he said.

While the aim is to inspire youth, adults feel the connections of Created to Be as well. “I attended the gathering twice in New Orleans as a youth,” said Alison. “It was a formative experience for me.”

Dannica has attended eight of the triannual gatherings as a youth or adult leader. This is her first time on the national planning committee.

“The youth gathering has been a significant event in my faith life since I was a teenager. It was my call to ministry,” she said. “To be on the other side of the event was so special. Hopefully, we helped create that kind of experience for some teenagers who might be in leadership roles down the road.”

Just being present for the massive worship services is inspirational, according to Kristina Seehusen. “I thought it was special to have an experience where they were surrounded by thousands of youths from around the country, creating bonds with other people and having the opportunity to worship in an extremely large community, and listen to speakers on pressing topics from social justice to resilience in their lives.”

Worship with 16,000 is hard for young people to imagine before they experience it. “Westwood doesn't look like the Smoothie King Center. There's no way for me to explain (to youth) what worshipping with 16,000 other people is like,” Alison said. “That it's pretty amazing!”

In 2027, the gathering will take place in Minneapolis. Learn more about Created To Be and its theme at www.elca.church/gathering/about/what-is-the-gathering.

