

Emily H. L. – River Of Hope, New Orleans, LA – 1997

Dear Friends in Christ:

Fourteen years ago, a group of senior high youth from St. Paul's embarked on a journey to New Orleans, LA for the 1997 ELCA Youth Gathering. The theme of that event was "Rivers of Hope." I remember arriving at church early on the morning of our departure; we were up before the sun. It was our plan to drive to New Orleans from Aberdeen in St. Paul's church van, making stops along the way to do touristy kinds of activities, and spending our nights on the floors of Lutheran churches along our route who had agreed to open their doors so that youth and adults traveling to the ELCA Gathering would have a place to lay their heads after long days of driving. To make things more interesting, we traveled with the youth and adults from Emanuel Lutheran Church in Pasadena, MD, so we weren't just on big white church van full of enthusiastic teenagers on their way to big adventures in the Big Easy, we were *two* big white church vans full of enthusiastic teenagers on their way to big adventures in the Big Easy!

And big adventures they were! Nothing could have prepared me for what I was about to experience at the ELCA Youth Gathering. Our first night in the Superdome was something I will never forget. There were 35,000 youth gathered together in the dome. The excitement and enthusiasm was palpable. When it was time for the Gathering to begin, the lights in the Dome were dimmed and the crowd got quiet. Then the music began, lights filled the stage area, the crowd erupted in cheers and in song, the first speaker of the night came out on stage, and so it began. It is hard to describe what it feels like to worship with a group of people that large. Imagine what it is like to worship at Christmas or at Easter when the church is packed and people are excited, multiply that feeling by twenty, and add lighting, sound effects, and amazing stories of Christian witness, and maybe you can begin to understand what the experience of worship at the ELCA Youth Gathering was like for me. I remember tears coming to my eyes as I realized that all of those people were people just like me, people who were teenagers in America just like me, who loved Jesus and who were loved by Jesus just like me. Never before in my life had I ever felt such a powerful sense of unity and camaraderie with a group of people I didn't even know, nor had I ever felt such a powerful sense of unity and camaraderie with God who was so clearly present in the midst of our Gathering. I learned that day and throughout the experience of the Youth Gathering what it could be like to be a member of the Body of Christ, to be part of something so very much bigger than myself.

Upon reflection, I recognize that my experiences at the 1997 ELCA Youth Gathering played a crucial role in my vocational discernment. As a young adult trying to understand what God was calling me to do with my life, my mind kept going back to my experiences at the Youth Gathering—what I saw and heard, how I felt, what I learned and what I did—and I realized that God could use me to help others experience those same kinds of things in worship on Sunday mornings. Those memories and thoughts excited me in a way that nothing else ever had. Here I am, fourteen years later, an ordained minister in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, thanks in no small part to my experiences at the 1997 ELCA Youth Gathering. You also played a crucial role in helping me on my journey toward ordination by supporting and encouraging me to do whatever I needed in order to grow in my relationship with Christ, including sending me to the ELCA Youth Gathering as a youth, and to seminary as a young adult.

As a pastor, I have taken youth from my own congregation to the 2009 ELCA Youth Gathering—also held in New Orleans—and have seen the youth of my own congregation experience many of the things I did as a youth at my first Gathering in 1997. I have seen the Holy Spirit at work through the ministry of the ELCA Youth Gatherings, and would recommend it for any person and congregation who wants to know what it feels like to have a mountaintop experience with Christ and who is willing to be transformed by that experience. I can say beyond a shadow of a doubt that it is worth the time, it is worth the work, and it is worth the money. Let us never underestimate how God might be at work in the lives of our youth through an event like the ELCA Youth Gathering.

Please accept this small gift of love, gratitude, and encouragement as you work together with St. Paul's youth and their families to plan for the 2012 ELCA Youth Gathering. I pray that the experience might be as fulfilling and transformative for the youth of St. Paul's today as it was for the youth of St. Paul's fourteen years ago. In Christ's love, Rev. Emily Hollars Leitzke