

## Youth are being heard in the ELCA

By the Rev. Julie Bailey

"I am hungry to have my voice heard," said Makenna Dawson at the 2018 Great Lakes Youth Gathering. Makenna, a sophomore from Swan Valley High School in Saginaw and a member of Ascension Lutheran Church, has been finding her voice in the church and in the community.

Along with Hanisi Smith, a sophomore at Cadillac High School and a member of Zion Lutheran Church, they are making sure the voices of our young leaders are being heard.

Makenna and Hanisi serve on the ELCA Youth Core Leadership Team, a partnership between Synodical Youth Ministry Leadership and the ELCA churchwide organization to provide intentional leadership development and faith formation for high school youth. Youth who are passionate about their faith, and the church and who exhibit leadership gifts in their context are encouraged to apply for one of six two-year terms.



Makenna Dawson (left) and Hanisi Smith attend the Youth Core Leadership Team in Chicago in March.

Makenna is currently serving her second year on the team, and Hanisi is serving her first year. Both were lifted up by their congregations and synods as leaders, and were selected from youth throughout the ELCA. They are required to attend two gatherings each year—one held in Chicago in the spring and the Youth Leadership Summit during the first weekend in November.

Makenna has been a participant in the Multicultural Youth Leadership, and both attended the Multicultural Youth Leadership Event in Houston in

2018 as the only youth representation from our synod. Both attended the synod youth summit and are active in their congregations. Makenna assists in the planning of a new worship service and Hanisi has been elected to serve as secretary of her congregation council. ✚

**Julie Bailey** is pastor of Ascension Lutheran Church in Saginaw.

**My take:**

## It is what it is ...

By Sue Sprang

It seems a common phrase these days is: “It is what it is.” And sometimes that’s the way it has to be. Sometimes whatever the “it” is cannot be changed. Whether or not we like the “it” doesn’t matter. That’s the way things are and there’s no alternative.

But I’ve a sneaking suspicion that all too often it’s easier to say “It is what it is” than to try to come to grips with the “it.” Dealing with the “it” can be painful, time-consuming and sometimes, well, just a plain nuisance. Grappling with the “it” can involve tough decisions. The “it” can move us out of our comfort zones and send us kicking and screaming into making changes in our lives that we’d rather not make.

**Jesus is our leader and we look to his words and actions as the “source and norm” for our lives.**

We Christians often find ourselves stuck in an “it is what it is” quagmire. We want to be faithful to our calling as disciples of Jesus Christ, yet we find ourselves battling the challenge he lays before us to go beyond the “it.”

For Lutherans, there is no road other than the one where Jesus leads us. Martin Luther’s teaching that the Bible is the “source and norm” for our lives should grab our attention. Lutherans also emphasize that in the case of conflicting information, the Gospels override the rest of the Scriptures.

That pretty much narrows it down. Jesus is our leader and we look to his words and actions as the “source and norm” for our lives. It shouldn’t be that hard, right? We try to keep up with Jesus as he leads us into the world, but it can be scary

stuff. Jesus has told us from day one that we don’t always need to know where he’s leading us. He asks that we trust him. That’s all it takes.

Easier said than done!

Humans that we are, we have a need to know what lies ahead and are sometimes suspicious—if not afraid—of the unknown.

The trick is to keep our eyes, ears and hearts open to Jesus and to trust him completely while we grope our way down the path he has laid for us. I believe that makes the gospel the blueprint for how we structure our thoughts and actions.

**Jesus has thrown down the gauntlet and dares us to move beyond “it.”**

And what is this road Jesus beckons us to follow? What is this path filled with unknowns that dare us to stretch our faith to its utmost limits and to seriously struggle with the “it”?

Jesus tells and shows us that we are to welcome strangers, treat others with dignity, assist those in need, work for peace, raise up those shoved to the fringes, and, well, just practice what he preaches.

On the flip side, Jesus shows little patience for those who hoard their wealth, abuse their religious or political power, and who spend their energy and resources spreading hate, discord, and those things that bring misery and destruction to the world.

I’m not making this stuff up. Read the Gospels. And read them again. And again. Then one more time. There are no apologies. There are no alternative facts. Jesus has thrown down the gauntlet and dares us to move beyond the “it.”

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Can we do it? Certainly, if we believe that we can do all things in Christ. Certainly, if we sustain one another through love, friendship, prayer, shared triumphs and mutual tears.

Here are some congregations across our synod who have taken up Jesus' challenge:

**Bethlehem, Lansing**, has committed itself to outreach to its neighborhood's poor and beyond. Mission trips are the norm. **Prince of Peace, Portage**, reaches out to the community's needy. One project is working with Open Door to maintain a residence for unemployed/underemployed workers and their families while they seek employment. **Immanuel, Mount Pleasant**, has played a critical role in the formation of Isabella County Restoration House (ICRH), which, among other things, provides temporary shelter for people experiencing homelessness.

**Zion, Saginaw**, has an intentional ministry to the Latino population in its changed neighborhood. It also hosts the Saginaw Boxing Club, which promotes discipline, hard work, pride and self-worth among the youth. **Bethlehem, Grand Rapids**, sold its building and moved into the old downtown post office building that serves as home base for various ministries. **University, East Lansing**, is immersed in outreach, social justice and campus ministry. The congregation shares parking and a playground with the neighboring Islamic Society of East Lansing, sharing learning, service, friendship, prayer and support.

**Living Water Ministries**, a shared outdoor and retreat ministry with the Southeast Michigan Synod, is gaining nationwide recognition for its cutting edge leadership and anti-racism opportunities for youth. It also has connected

with homeless and special-needs people, while continuing to raise the bar on its longtime summer camp/day camp programs. **Settlement, Gowen**, runs Barrie's House, a food pantry and clothing distribution. The ministry started as a food pantry in the church building over two decades ago—and is now housed in a freestanding structure.

**Hope, Plainwell**, is a key player in Bridges of Hope, a community ministry that reaches out to those in or near poverty. Advocacy and community awareness are also part of its work. **St. James** and **Emmanuel, Jackson**, are part of Faith in Action, a community outreach group that has partnered with Samaritas in establishing an unaccompanied refugee minors home in the county. **Christ the King, Gladwin**, lit the fire that produced a regularly scheduled food truck for those in need in the area and a Backpack Buddies project for the county's two school districts.

These are just some examples of the extraordinary things Jesus' people are doing across our synod: feeding the hungry; building/renewing homes; reaching out to refugees, the homeless and the LGBT community; standing with those vulnerable to hate crimes and violence; advocating for those with no voice; and more.

As you can see, following Jesus' lead is possible. It's not always an easy path. He never said it would be. But he does promise to be with us. No matter what.

And there is no alternative fact. It is what it is. **L**

**Sue Sprang** writes for the North/West Lower Michigan Synod.

## God's children sing!

Children are of the delights of the Sudanese synodically authorized worshipping community that meets at Christ Lutheran Church, Wyoming, is the children. They are a mix of the American society that surrounds them and their parents' roots, and it's evident that the church community is important to them. In fact, they sometimes outnumber adults at worship. They love to sing, and about 30 children and youth participate in the choir.

This past December, the choir began wearing identifying red overlays (each adorned with a white cross). They also began a tradition of singing and dancing when a special guest is at worship. The music and dance steps are usually part of their Sudanese culture. ♣



The children's choir sings and dances as part of the worship service.