



God's Love Made Real

Commitment #3: Listening to and Amplifying Young Voices

The ELCA faces the critical challenge to engage younger generations who often feel overlooked in church settings. Research the Barna Group conducted to inform the work of God's Love Made Real highlights this growing disconnect: At least half of ELCA laity believe their churches are not effectively prioritizing young people, making innovative approaches to youth engagement crucial.

"Young people are looking for what everybody is looking for, which is belonging," explains Savanna Sullivan, program executive for youth with the Lutheran World Federation.

This search for belonging is answered through intentional efforts to integrate youth into all aspects of church life. Encouragingly, many innovative ELCA congregations are successfully reaching and engaging youth in some pivotal ways.

Meaningful Leadership Roles

At Christ Lutheran Church in Wichita, Kan., the Rev. Chad Langdon's vision has transformed how young people participate in worship. "When we started ... today's middle school and high school students were 4- and 5-year-olds who were reading in front of the congregation," he shares. "Now, these youth are super comfortable doing everything."

Exemplary ministries discuss empowering young people through such methods as introducing a youth delegate to the congregation council or providing microphones during children's messages — ensuring young voices are literally heard and amplified.

The Rev. Andrew Rickel, pastor of Grace House on the Georgia Tech campus in Atlanta, describes the need for a posture shift, from assuming that clergy always know best to listening to students. "We need to not just be a student-led ministry but a student-driven ministry," Rickel says. "You need to tell me what you are interested in and need."

At ELC we have students in various roles in worship, including reading scripture, Sunday school choir, children's chime choir, musical accompaniment for the final hymn each Sunday. Youth also are actively involved in fund-raisers such as pancake breakfasts and presentations upon return from Mission trips, etc.

Creating "Brave Spaces"

ELCA leaders also emphasize the importance of understanding what congregants need in order to feel they belong (no matter their age) and creating spaces that promote this. The Rev. Daniel Pugh, pastor of Christ the King Lutheran, Cary, N.C., calls these "brave spaces."

"We promise to be brave with you," he says.

"Our youth feel so comfortable because they're watching adults be comfortable and be their authentic selves," adds Haley Stone, director of youth and family. "If you are welcome and you belong in a space, you tend to feel at peace there."

The Lutheran Episcopal campus ministry at the University of Northern Colorado–Boulder, led by the Rev. Monica Butler, demonstrates another effective approach. Modeled after the Dinner Church Movement, it creates welcoming spaces where students can engage in authentic conversations about faith. Butler notes how openness and dialogue can make a difference.

“Right now, we have two people from very different faith backgrounds, theological commitments and language who are living next to each other,” she explains. “They have shared with me the ways they are learning from each other, and I’ve seen that play out in the way they show up and care for each other. Their differences aren’t barriers.”

At English, the youth are very involved in service projects. The Sunday School kids have actively been involved in service projects. They make Valentine’s cards for fire fighters, police officers and other community members every February, and they do some other type of service project during the year. Last year they helped collect, count, and package the Personal Care Kits for LWR.

The Christlers Group also works on projects for the church. They make cards for our shut ins and nursing home people at least twice a year. They have been helping to keep the Activity Bags in the narthex ready for use and they often do other projects needed for ELC: like coloring, sorting craft materials, helping keep the fidgets in order, etc.

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