

*Then little children were being brought to him in order that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples spoke sternly to those who brought them; but Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs." And he laid his hands on them and went on his way.*

[Matthew 19:13-15]

Dear siblings in Christ of the Northeastern Ohio Synod,

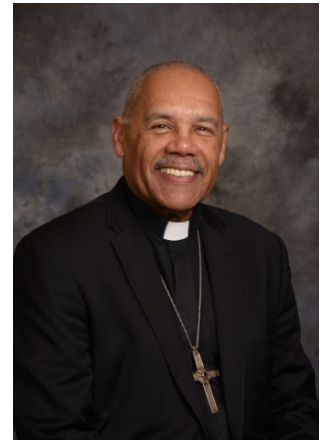
In Matthew's Gospel, which is from where the majority of our Gospel readings will come this year, children have significance to Jesus. The account of Jesus blessing the children, cited above, is recorded several times in the Bible. There are also numerous instances where Jesus heals children and even raises them from the dead.

It is in Matthew's Gospel that we read of the infant Jesus as a menace to Herod, who then goes on a rampage, and slaughters many innocent children, two years old and under, in order to put down this potential threat to his rule. Jesus and his family are forced to flee to Egypt in order to avoid death.

God's invasion of this world in Jesus is resisted by those who hold power, those whose lives are dedicated to keeping boundaries intact. We are no less misguided.

Though we, as adults in the church, are nowhere near as ruthless as Herod, we do at times exhibit some Herodian tendencies.

We are sometimes unable and often unwilling to give up control. As an unintended consequence, we drive the youth away.



We are summoned to reflect upon that image when we agonize about why youth are leaving church in alarming numbers. We must ask ourselves, what opportunities are we giving them in our congregations to offer their boundless energy and enthusiasm, their passion for the gospel? The challenge is to avoid the temptation of refusing to let go of our sense of authority and denying youth of their willingness to serve.

I had the unique experience this year of attending the Northeastern Ohio Lutheran Youth Organization's Annual Winter Gathering for the first time ever. Normally when the Gathering is held, I am travelling somewhere as part of the Bishops' Academy. Last year, however, it was decided to make the Academy an every other year event, which gave me the opportunity to be with the youth.

I never tire of telling anyone who will listen, how much I enjoy being around our young people. Being around young people keeps me young.

We have a national gathering every three years and those have been wonderful, but there's something about being with our

local youth, those who I see on a more regular basis, that feels more amicable and creates a closer bond among us.

After attending both the gatherings in Detroit and Houston, I came away with a renewed feeling of hope for the church. They are eager to serve and demonstrate the love of God by loving their neighbor. The many outreach ministries they performed in both cities brought glory to God.

Our Northeastern Ohio Gathering was different from the national gatherings in that it is three days in a hotel in the middle of winter, but no less spirit-filled than the summer events. We worshipped, we fellowshiped, we served God together. The speakers shared personal stories that were compelling. They related well to the kids, even though a couple of them were beyond what one would consider young adult.

I have made youth ministry a priority during my time in this office and those of you who have been to the Northeastern Ohio Synod Assembly the last three years know that the LYO Summer Gathering is held at the same time as our Assembly. We will continue to do the same this year.

In our baptism, God claimed us and called us God's special children. We have been chosen, set apart and appointed by God for God's purpose – to be God's people chosen to proclaim God's wonderful deeds, no matter what our age.

As followers of Christ, we can follow his example by showing a youngster that he or she has value in our eyes and in the eyes of God.

In Christ,



+Bishop Abraham D. Allende



*At the LYO Winter Gathering.*