

PARTNERS IN  
*the spirit*  
JULY 2008

Synod Elects Next Bishop

Highlights of, Reflections on the  
Bishop's Election

Project Knits Parishes Together in  
Prayer for New Bishop

Helmut Kaffine Honored for  
World Hunger Efforts

Holy Spirit Launches *Rejoicing  
Spirits* Ministry

Project Connect Immersions and  
Mini-Grants



The Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod

Project Connect Immersions  
and Mini-Grants



Vocation is a term that might get tossed around often enough in Lutheran circles or in campus ministries, but to the average college student on the average college campus, discerning a vocation is right up there with worrying about retirement. It just isn't on their radar.

Even for those who do think about a calling in addition to just a career, figuring out what God has called you to — how to combine your gifts, passions and desire to serve in a neatly defined job — isn't easy. Enter [Project Connect](#).

Project Connect is a program of the Eastern Cluster of Lutheran Seminaries (which includes Philadelphia, Gettysburg and Southern) with the purpose of encouraging young adults (college-aged to 30) to consider a vocation of public ministry in the church.

Funded by the Lilly Endowment, Inc., Project Connect offers discernment weekends, seminary visits, competitive Mini-Grants, and Immersion Experiences, among other opportunities. The "flagship" programs are the Mini-Grants and Immersion Experiences, both of which offer summer-long or school-year-long opportunities to work in a congregation and serve in the ways pastors do (in an Immersion) or to design and carry out a ministry experience within the context of a local congregation (in a Mini-Grant).

Most young people who apply for either the Immersion Experience or the Mini-Grant do so on the advice or encouragement of a mentor. "My campus pastor told me he saw some gifts for ministry in me. I was like, 'yeah, whatever.' But he convinced me I needed to pursue this to get a better feel for what

actually goes on in parish ministry, to see if it's something I'd like to pursue further," said Karen Sease, an Immersion participant at Joy Lutheran Church in Moore, S.C.

Don Johnson, director of Project Connect, says that success for Project Connect is "each person discerning God's call on his or her life. For instance, Kate Proctor [a past participant] was a chemical engineer but ended up enrolled in the M.Div. program at Philadelphia Seminary. Rachael Welch had a terrific experience working in inner city Philadelphia and is now a public school teacher in inner city San Diego. Both were successful because we helped the students discern where God was calling them to use their gifts and passions."

The supervising pastors also emphasize the idea that Project Connect is about providing space and time for young people to explore, rather than achieving a set outcome. Daryl Nelson, pastor at University Lutheran in Philadelphia, said, "The process of these young men and women is most important — more important than the product. A process of having time to explore and discern."

Michael Thomas, pastor at Our Savior Lutheran Church in Hanover, NH, added, "If we set up a process with some imagination and creativity, then you can trust the process to help you determine what good thing God is calling you to."

Sandy Troyan, an Immersion participant at Christ Lutheran Church in Roanoke, Va., affirmed this: "Project Connect is giving me the chance to be curious."

The gifts and passions pursued by young adults through Project Connect vary widely. From creating a DVD, building an outdoor oven, and helping a church conduct a spiritual gifts survey to doing advocacy work with the ONE campaign, Project Connect really does connect young people with opportunities to see themselves, their passions, and their service in a new light. Regardless of the outcome of a participant's discernment, everyone leaves Project Connect with a greater specific understanding of what it means to engage in ministry, whether lay or ordained. As Sease said, "We are all called to do ministry and I will continue to immerse myself in God's mission for the world as I Ö discern where God is calling me."

Of course the ELCA seminaries hope that students finish Project Connect with an affirmed sense of call to public ministry, and many do. "I was able to learn about the church in a greater sense since I was in a parish much different than my home congregation. I experienced ministry in a completely different setting and still feel called to minister to God's people in all types of places," said Alina Gayeuski, who completed her Immersion experience at Trinity in Reading, Pa.

For those who are still in college, Project Connect changes how participants return to their campuses and engage in class-work. "Now that I have experienced ministry in such a hands-on way, I will be able to learn much more from my classes in religion and psychology, components of which are directly applicable to the pastoral vocation and congregational life," said Stephanie Williams, student at Thiel College and an Immersion participant.

While participants' experiences vary depending on the nature of their project, many expressed similar anxieties about their ability to be spiritual leaders and authorities, particularly due to their youth. Many also struggled with anxiety about their effectiveness. As Crystal Hall, who worked with the ONE campaign in Boston, said, "Three months is such a short time to accomplish anything. So how much is it about the work I can do in three months, and how much is it about my own discernment?"

Chris Stratton, of Sidney, Ohio, who worked with Lutheran Outdoor Ministries of Florida, helping to spiritually support camp staff, said, "I did not feel qualified to be in the position of spiritual leader ... [but] I sat in Pastor Kent's office and we had a long talk about where our strength comes from, and about the beauty of saying thank you and accepting help from others."

Other participants learned to depend on God for sheer physical strength. "I'm floored by the amount of dedication and planning that went into making not one, not two, but five camps get off the ground... After being assigned to the play station where 3, 4 and 5 year olds were painting with corn cobs, I'll never look at paint in the same way," said Lovis Williams, an Immersion participant at St. Andrew's in Charlestown, R.I.

Our vocation, all of us, whether lay or ordained, is the same as Jesus' — to reconcile — reconnect — people to God and to each other. Whether it's through painting with five-year-olds, baking pizza with teenagers, or praying with camp counselors, the ultimate task of Project Connect is to reconnect young people with that first, primary vocation.

Perhaps John Eskate, a Mini-Grant recipient who spent the summer at University Lutheran in Philadelphia, Pa., offers the best proof that the project is succeeding. While he knows he is called to pastoral ministry, he says, "Actually, I don't think pastoral ministry is God's vocation for me; I think his vocation for me is the same as everybody's, to love God with all our body and soul, and to love our neighbor as ourselves."

