



One of the most important ministries to youth that our wider church of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America provides is the ELCA Youth Gathering. It is an event that hosts tens of thousands of young people from around the country and beyond, inviting them to places like Houston and Detroit and New Orleans for worship and Bible studies and leisure activities and community service projects. Granted, sometimes, teenagers go as a way to get out of the house for a week and have some fun with friends. Some, go just to explore a new big city. But others are struggling with their faith, struggling with God. Unfortunately, some of the younger children of God are under the impression that Jesus is like a secret gate that must be found sooner rather than later; otherwise, their salvation might be in peril, or they won't be looked at so fondly by their family or other church members. It leads some to go to these mass gatherings held by our wider church every three years to, quite simply, find Jesus in their life.

Now, my first ELCA Youth Gathering was in the year 2000 in St. Louis, Missouri, which also happened to be the location for, perhaps, the most famous gate in this country, the Gateway Arch. So, on the east side of the city, stands this massive arch of 630 feet in height and the same distance between the two legs. The national park brings in nearly two million visitors a year, and since the several of us youth grew up in a farming community in northwest Ohio; we, of course, had to do the usual tourist thing while we were in town. So, we walked onto the tram-like elevator and rode it all the way to the top of the arch, with the city hundreds of feet below.

Unfortunately, St. Louis, like many places in this country, has seen its fair share of unpleasant times, bringing about the not so positive reputation on the national landscape. Except, if we looked out from the top of the arch a few miles to the southwest, there was this ministry that was celebrating its 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary. At the time, it was called the 4 Church Association, bringing together different communities of faith in serving those who desperately needed help. Not only did they provide food and clothing, as well as counseling services and cooking classes, among other activities, they also started a most pivotal ministry called, "Soul Friends."

*The Soul Friends Group provides numerous opportunities for [the affected] individuals and families to come together, get to know one another, build relationships and improve their lives....[They provide] Lunch and Learn events around various issues, with speakers from the local community [focusing] on important topics [for the listeners' situations]. It goes on with community meals...to encourage and nurture strong [connections]. Field trips are [also] planned periodically to allow participants to explore [their] wonderful city. [The whole idea being that these communities of faith in St. Louis are so moved by the Gospel of Jesus Christ of unconditional grace, that they] strive to show people that they are accepted for who they are, wherever they are in life.*

So, as the tens of thousands of youth flocked to St. Louis that year, thinking they were going to somehow find Jesus when worshiping together at the massive stadium; sometimes that works. Other times, it takes a ministry like the 4 Church Association to help people of all ages realize something about our Lord that we often take for granted. You don't have to *find* Jesus. You don't have to go looking for him higher up than the Gateway Arch, to reach as close to the heavens as you can possibly get. After all, in our Risen Lord, a precious piece of the heavens was brought down to the earth itself, to us. But not only that, the faith journey for the young and old and everyone else in between is not about finding the secret gate, or to get just the right combination of community service hours or Bible passages memorized, in order to get just the right combination to open it. Because, in our Risen Lord, the gate has been shattered open with a love and hope that cannot possibly be contained on one side. This Good Shepherd of ours is not waiting around for us to find the perfect path before he starts walking beside us. In the end, the Resurrection set him loose into the depths of our hearts, to go with us on whatever path we take in this world, as if nothing in this entire Creation can possibly separate us from God's love in him.

In reality, the ELCA Youth Gathering isn't simply one of the most important ministries for the younger people in our wider church, but it sets a domino effect for the big kids to experience upon their arrival back home, as if younger disciples of Christ are under the impression that the church should "strive to show people that they are accepted for who they are, wherever they are in life." That, at no point in anyone's life, will we ever have to search for the Good Shepherd, for he has already found us, and will insist on staying with us now matter how many twists and turns of a path we take: as if the Gospel brought to life in him can go absolutely anywhere. And for that Greatest News of all, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen!

[Isaiah 58 Ministries | St Louis, MO \(i58ministries.org\)](http://i58ministries.org)

[Formerly known as 4 Church Association]