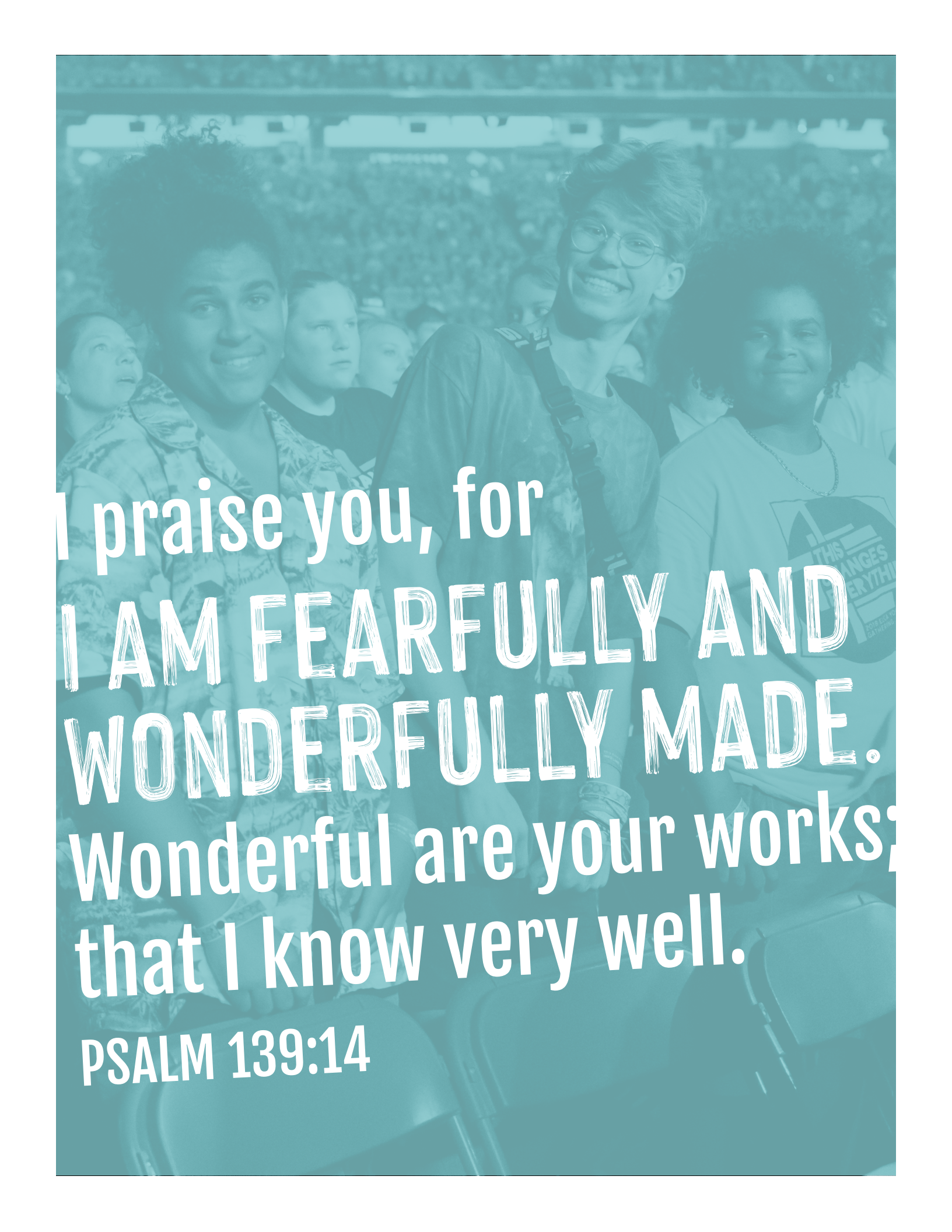


# GETTING CREATED TO BE READY

*A Youth Ministry Curriculum preparing for*  
**THE 2024 ELCA YOUTH GATHERING**  
**MYLE • the table • Young Adult Gathering**



Evangelical  
Lutheran Church  
in America



I praise you, for  
I AM FEARFULLY AND  
WONDERFULLY MADE.  
Wonderful are your works;  
that I know very well.

PSALM 139:14

# *table of contents*

**Welcome 4**

**General Outline 8**

**Additional Components 9**

**Unit 1, Session 1: BRAVE 10**

**Unit 1, Session 2: BRAVE 18**

**Unit 2, Session 1: AUTHENTIC 25**

**Unit 2, Session 2: AUTHENTIC 32**

**Unit 3, Session 1: FREE 38**

**Unit 3, Session 2: FREE 46**

**Unit 4, Session 1: DISRUPTIVE 52**

**Unit 4, Session 2: DISRUPTIVE 58**

**Unit 5, Session 1: DISCIPLES 65**

**Unit 5, Session 2: DISCIPLES 70**

**APPENDIX: Worksheets + Resources 76**

# WELCOME

## Welcome to the Getting Ready Materials for the 2024 ELCA Youth Gathering!

On behalf of the church, your youth and their families, thank you for taking on the role of adult leader and investing in the faith formation of young people and yourself. Your presence, preparation and planning will be a gift to the young people in your care.

We designed this curriculum to help your group ponder the Gathering theme, “Created to Be,” as you build relationships with one another. Know that, whether you use this curriculum in monthly sessions or a group retreat, you are the expert on your youth and their needs. **Trust your knowledge of your context, and adapt the curriculum to your setting.**

**The** five units in this curriculum correlate with the five daily themes of the Gathering. Each unit has two sessions, each approaching the theme from a different perspective. In addition to exploring the daily themes each lesson provides opportunities for group building. We encourage you to review the “Overview for Adult Leaders” section at the beginning of each session before your group meets; it provides more specifics about the session, along with a list of necessary materials.

As we’ve assembled the curriculum, we were acutely aware that, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, every youth attending the 2024 Gathering will have never experienced this ministry before. Earlier groups often had one or two youth returning to the Gathering who could unpack the experience for newcomers. This gap in returning youth led us to add a “Gathering Connection” to the second lesson of each unit in hope of introducing your youth to the Gathering in a way that builds excitement and calms anxiety. We have also incorporated some of the history of our host city, New Orleans.

## ***objectives:***

- ✓ **Build and nurture community**
- ✓ **Laugh together**
- ✓ **Introduce youth to the host city and the Gathering**
- ✓ **Engage youth in Scripture**
- ✓ **Create a space for youth to respond**

Throughout the curriculum are various icons and fonts to help you along the way:



Get your Bible; we're reading from Scripture.



We're watching a video. Find videos on the Gathering website's resource list.



We're using music or a song in the lesson. Songs can be found on the Gathering's Spotify playlist (@elcagathering).



Opportunities to add to the conversation online. Take note of the Gathering handles: **FB.com/YouthGathering** **@elcagathering**

We know that every youth group and its leaders are in a different place regarding difficult topics. Our new "Going Deeper" component allows your group, if ready, to wrestle with some harder realities of our life, many of which will be addressed at the Gathering. If your group is brand-new, we suggest focusing first on building trust and a strong foundation from which to experience the Gathering. You will have ample time during the Gathering to talk about hard things, but first you must foster trust among your youth and adult leaders.

Song and video resources were carefully curated to amplify the daily themes, and we've tried to make them easily accessible in hope that you will



@elcagathering

share them with your participants. Find the Gathering's Spotify playlist (@elcagathering), then search for each unit.

- **Bold type** indicates text to be read aloud by the leader.
- Roman (regular) type indicates instructions for the leader.

Once again, feel free to adapt this curriculum and adjust it as needed. Through it all, know that you were Created to Be ... **brave, authentic, free, disruptive disciples!**

We would like to express sincere gratitude to the following contributors who wrote specific parts of these Getting Ready Materials and served as a sounding board throughout the writing process:

*The Rev. James Demmel*  
*The Rev. Sarah Mayer-Flatt*  
*The Rev. Alejandro Mejia*  
*The Rev. Elizabeth Rawlings*  
*Deacon Beka Forst*  
*Van Van Horne*  
*The Rev. Hazel Salazar-Davidson*

Yours in God's love,

***Lucille "CeCee" Mills***  
***Matt Canniff-Kesecker***  
***Danielle DeNise***

Managers for the  
Getting Ready Materials

## ***pro tips:***

**Dig deeper with one or two questions** instead of rushing through all of them. Become comfortable with silence to allow people time to think. Keep track of who hasn't spoken up as the session continues, and consider prompting them for their thoughts. Cutting some of the questions after each Scripture reading is a good way to open up more time.

**Be flexible and offer opportunities for youth to respond** to these lessons with whatever learning styles they are most comfortable using.

**Invite youth to write, draw, talk quietly** with a friend, or reflect on the questions in whatever way best engages them.

**If you have a large group, invite youth to discuss questions with a smaller group of peers** sitting near them. This can make space for more youth to share while also providing an opportunity for youth who feel less comfortable sharing in the large group.

**If your group includes people with mobility challenges, make the activities more accessible** by asking other youth in the group to accompany their peers and offer any desired assistance. This will build their capacity to partner with their peers at the Gathering.

# General Outline of Each Session

## 1. ADULT OVERVIEW

- **Supplies:** We tried to keep supplies to a minimum for each session, though more are needed for the “Going Deeper” activities. (NOTE: The final session, “Disciple 2,” is supply-heavy.) One thing needed for almost every session is capability to share videos.
- **Setting Up the Space:** We suggest that you review the session materials the day before you set up your space. Some sessions require lots of room to play, whereas others stress intimacy. For breakout groups consider the noise level and whether you should use other rooms. If possible, utilize multiple spaces depending on the part of the curriculum; e.g., one space for the opening activity and another for Scripture study. Previewing the material and adapting your space will help you keep your youth engaged.

## 2. GATHERING

- **Land Acknowledgement:** We encourage you to remember who first occupied the land you gather on. Each session includes an acknowledgement of the land we will gather on in New Orleans in summer 2024 and an opportunity for you to add your local context. For help creating a land acknowledgement for your community, visit [www.elca.org/Our-Work/Congregations-and-Synods/Ethnic-Specific-and-Multicultural-Ministries/Indigenous-Ministries-and-Tribal-Relations](http://www.elca.org/Our-Work/Congregations-and-Synods/Ethnic-Specific-and-Multicultural-Ministries/Indigenous-Ministries-and-Tribal-Relations) and [Native-Land.ca](http://Native-Land.ca).
- **Opening Prayer:** Offered collectively or by the leader, this prayer highlights the theme for the day and centers your group in God’s presence.
- **Opening Activity:** This serves as an icebreaker. The silly activities are designed to get your youth laughing with each other; others introduce the daily themes. All of them serve a vital function by helping your young people connect with one another and begin to feel like a group. Make appropriate adjustments for your group size and abilities.

## 3. WORD

This section serves as an opportunity to wrestle with Scripture. Don’t underestimate your youth. Make space for all their doubts, wonderings and creative contributions to the body of Christ.

Each of these sections begins with listening to God as revealed to us in Scripture. In the vast majority of our Lutheran churches Scripture is read from the New Revised Standard Version translation. We use the NRSV in the curriculum but have intentionally selected alternate translations as well so we can read the Scriptures in fresh ways.

- **Reflection Questions:** Scripture reading and listening are followed by questions for reflection. Don’t be afraid of silence. Allow your youth time to think first. If your group has experienced a difficult situation or defining moment, adapt the questions to help them process these realities.
- **Response Activity:** The goal of the response activities is to move the learning from head to heart, and to engage youth in different learning types. There are song lyrics, journal prompts, a science experiment, video discussions and more.

## 4. SENDING

- **Blessing:** Each session ends with a blessing. Always send your students out with this gift of encouragement and hope, helping them remember that they are Created to Be! This is a great blessing to send as a text message in the week after the session.





# Additional Components

## Going Deeper

This section was added for groups with enough trust and community between youth and adult leaders to tackle hard topics together. We suggest particular places in the session for these. They may require more supplies or extended time. You may choose to do this activity in place of a response activity.

The “Going Deeper” materials begin by introducing youth to the idea of implicit bias. This gives them the language to challenge their own assumptions and serves as a strong foundation for the remaining “Going Deeper” sessions.

## New Orleans Connection

The first lesson of each unit includes a connection to New Orleans. This is a good way to learn local history, engage with the local culture and prepare to experience the gift that is our host city.

## Gathering Connection

These components will help your group to understand better what their week in New Orleans will entail.

## SUGGESTED USES FOR THIS RESOURCE:

### monthly meetings

The sessions were designed for monthly meetings. We encourage you to meet together **once a month for an hour and a half** (90 minutes). We suggest adding time for meals together. Remember, you are meeting to build community, not to get through a curriculum. The activities are intentionally not timed, so that you can decide what your group needs most and spend more time on activities they are connecting with.

For best results, use one session per month in the 10 months leading up to the 2024 ELCA Youth Gathering.

### retreat option

Friday evening: Unit 1 (**brave**)  
Saturday morning: Unit 2 (**authentic**)  
Saturday afternoon: Unit 3 (**free**)  
Saturday evening: Unit 4 (**disruptive**)  
Sunday morning: Unit 5 (**disciples**)

Should you choose to use the sessions from each unit, we suggest augmenting the first session in each unit with the “Gathering Connection” from the second session. If you’re looking for a place to hold your retreat, check out the ELCA website for a list of camps and retreat centers near you. [www.elca.org/Our-Work/Related-Ministries/Outdoor-Ministry](http://www.elca.org/Our-Work/Related-Ministries/Outdoor-Ministry).

### meeting during a faith formation hour

To cover the materials in a regular faith formation hour, try meeting **twice per month**, doing the regular session for the first meeting and focusing on the “Going Deeper” component for the second.

# Unit 1, Session 1:

# BRAVE



Spotify playlist:  
*Created to Be Brave*

## ***Supplies Needed:***

- Smartphones (optional)
- Magazines and newspapers (optional)
- Paper (optional)
- Markers, crayons, colored pencils (optional)
- *Going Deeper:*  
A computer or TV to show a video; printout of "[How Many Triangles](#)" image

# 1. OVERVIEW FOR ADULT LEADERS

This session focuses on community-building. The priority is knowing who is in the room, sharing names, and building the beginnings of your community. If your group members already know each other well, use the “Going Deeper” section to introduce the group to the idea of implicit bias and help youth understand how their brain fills in endings. Our hope is that, in addition to building community, your group will show bravery and imagine what living in a “yes, and ...” mindset could be.



We are **CREATED TO BE BRAVE** —  
to show up with an open mind and heart,  
willing to be challenged.

# 2. GATHERING

## LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The 2024 ELCA Youth Gathering, MYLE, the tAble and the Young Adult Gathering will take place on stolen land that originally belonged to the Chitimacha people. The Atakapa, Caddo, Choctaw, Houma, Natchez and Tunica people inhabited other areas of what is now Louisiana. Today we gather on stolen land that originally belonged to \_\_\_\_\_.

As we prepare for the 2024 Gathering, let us remember the Indigenous peoples and tribal nations who were the first to love, pray, grow, celebrate, cry, drum and sing upon the land where we will assemble.

## OPENING PRAYER

As we begin to gather, we invite you into a posture of prayer that helps you connect with God.

Let us pray. O Lord, you are aware of all the ways we need you if we are to be brave. As we seek your way, guide us into the courage needed to face the ideas, places or people we fear. Help us to see your purpose as far more significant than our own comfort. Give us the wisdom to be brave and not foolish. We pray this in the name of our brave Savior, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

## INTRODUCTIONS

Getting to know everyone in the group is crucial as you start to form your Gathering community. Some members of your group may already know each other, but some might be new. Don't skip learning names or assume that someone wants a nickname. Remember, no name is too hard to pronounce.

We encourage you to also ask each person to share their preferred pronouns. An easy way to do this is by having people say, "Hi, my name is \_\_\_\_\_, and I use the pronouns \_\_\_\_\_." Having everyone share their pronouns might be a risk or a challenge for some in your group.

Doing this work together is important so that you can honor everyone by calling them by the name and pronouns they feel comfortable with. This act of hospitality will help build a strong foundation for trust and vulnerability. You might be surprised to learn that someone in your group has been longing to introduce themselves to you in this way!

In addition, we invite you to add an additional question to generate some laughs in your space. Your young people may be nervous, and laughter is a beautiful way to create community. Here are a few questions you can use, or create your own!

- What song would you use as your theme song?
- If you came home and found a penguin in your freezer, what would you do?
- How many owls would you have to see in a single day before starting to feel as if something is up?
- If you could eat at only one restaurant for the rest of your life, what would it be?

Let's put this into action — set an example by sharing your own name, pronouns and answer to the question. Invite the group to continue to share by mutual invitation, meaning that once the person finishes, they invite someone else in the group to speak next.

## OPENING ACTIVITY

*"Yes, and..."*

The classic improv game "Yes, and..." teaches the value of accepting each other's ideas and collaborating with one another. The game may be played in small groups or with everyone in a circle. If your group members are very new to each other, do the activity as a whole group.

As leader, start the activity by making a simple statement such as "The river is full of fish." The statement doesn't have to be around anything specific — use your imagination!

Next, invite a youth to add "yes, and ...". This might sound like "Yes, and it is filled with other sea creatures and monsters." Again, use your imagination.

Every new sentence added to the story should start with "yes, and..." Try to make every new sentence more exaggerated, furthering the scene.

If you are in a circle, have everyone make clear eye contact with someone while they are making the statement. Whomever they make eye contact with should continue the storyline.

If two people are doing the activity in front of everyone else, you can call “cut” when a particularly interesting or funny moment occurs. Ending on a high note captures the energy!

Here’s an example of what the activity could sound like:

“The river is full of fish.”

“Yes, and it is filled with other sea creatures and monsters.”

“Yes, and something spooky is swimming toward us.”

“Yes, and it looks hungry.”

“Yes, and we are trapped in this boat.”

“Yes, and it looks more like a whale.”

“Yes, and now the motor won’t start.”

“Yes, and the whale is getting closer. It’s about to swallow us.”

“Yes, and I just remembered that this boat is also a plane.”

“Yes, and lucky for you I just got my pilot’s license.”

“Cut!”

## New Orleans Connection



**New Orleans is a city that lives “yes, and.” It has taken the realities of hurricanes and flooding and said, “Yes, and this is our home.” The people of New Orleans are brave. The city is surrounded by three large bodies of water — Lake Pontchartrain, Lake Borgne and the Mississippi River.**

**The immense amount of water naturally created areas of high ground, called levees. Indigenous people inhabited the levees when the waters were low and relocated during times of flooding. Over time, engineers developed levee systems to combat the flooding, but many people have suffered the consequences of living around so much water.**

**The people of New Orleans recognize both the danger and the beauty of living in such a geographical reality. Generations have braved the times of uncontrolled flooding because for them the city is home.**

**In 2005, as a result of Hurricane Katrina, the levees designed to provide safety from the waters failed. Systems failed, transportation out of the city failed, and emergency procedures failed. The city suffered, and people died; the danger of living on the gulf was real. When you hear the stories of those who stayed in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, you will hear the “yes, and...” stories. Some are heartbreaking, some are uplifting. Some are brave, some are not. We know there are times we are brave and times we are not. Building community helps us to be brave.**

**As we enter this time of preparation, we encourage you into a posture of “yes, and...” A posture that knows leaving home is hard. A posture that knows being brave does not guarantee a happy ending. Yes, and...God will walk with you as you bravely do a new thing.**

### 3. WORD



Invite youth to read the Scripture aloud. Ask,  
**“What did you notice? What words or phrases stick out to you?”**

*Psalm 27:1-3 from the New Revised Standard Version:*

**<sup>1</sup>The Lord is my light and my salvation;  
 whom shall I fear?**

**The Lord is the stronghold of my life;  
 of whom shall I be afraid?**

**<sup>2</sup>When evildoers assail me  
 to devour my flesh —  
 my adversaries and foes —  
 they shall stumble and fall.**

**<sup>3</sup>Though an army encamp against me,  
 my heart shall not fear;  
 though war rise up against me,  
 yet I will be confident.**

Invite youth to read the Scripture a second time and consider the following questions:

- How does the Scripture present a posture of “yes, and ...”?
- What does it mean to be brave?
- Why is it sometimes hard to be brave?
- What helps you be brave?
- Who do you know who is brave? In what ways are they brave?

### RESPONSE ACTIVITY



Spend some time looking through social media, news reports, Spotify/Apple Music playlists, magazines, newspapers, etc. to find content that captures what bravery means for you. Youth can pair up with others if they do not have a smartphone. Another option would be to invite them to create their own art, song, poem, etc. that captures what bravery means to them. Once everyone has completed the activity, encourage them to share with their group what they chose and why.

# GOING DEEPER

*This section was added for groups with enough trust and community between adult leaders and youth to tackle hard topics together. Use this section only if you feel that your group will be able to go deeper into these hard topics.*

## IMPLICIT BIAS

**Being brave is about living a “yes, and ...” posture, but it is also about interrupting the ways your brain assumes an ending.**

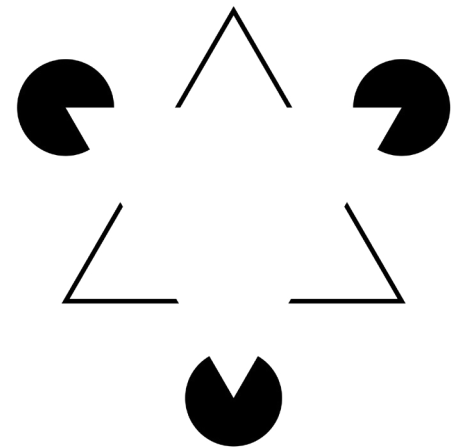
Share the image of the Kanizsa triangle, which can be found in the [appendix](#). Ask your group, **“How many triangles do you see?”**

Let your young people call out their guesses. Expect a wide variety of answers and even the correct one from some. After a few minutes announce, **“The correct answer is zero.”**

**The words of the original question cause the brain to begin counting the number of triangles without considering that there may be none. Most people begin counting because their brains draw lines where there are none. Look again. How many triangles are there? The power of suggestion is strong, and so is the brain’s impulse to fill in the blanks.**

**One of the first steps to being brave is being self-aware. By becoming more aware of how the brain functions, we can embrace new ways of experiencing and responding to the world. One of our greatest assets is the brain. However, it is simultaneously one of our greatest stumbling blocks.**

**The brain uses the senses to take in and process information in an instant. How many bits of information do you imagine the human brain processes in a second? Would it surprise you to know that the answer is 11 billion? That sounds like a lot! Would it surprise you to learn that the conscious mind can process only 40 to 50 bits of information per second? The brain can’t possibly keep up with the immense amount of information it receives. Instead the brain fills in the gaps in the information it’s processing.**



*Fibonacci. English: Kanizsa triangle (2007)*

## GOING DEEPER, continued

This ability to fill in gaps helps us to avoid danger and survive. It is an important facet of how we exist. However, it is also a pitfall. The ways the brain fills in gaps are not always correct and are definitely skewed by experience and perception. A brave step is to acknowledge this reality and work toward accepting that you are unable to process most of the information you are receiving. Because of this, we must accept that there are myriad ways you can misinterpret or misunderstand information.



Watch this video and be ready to share how many passes the team in the white shirts accomplishes: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=1\\_UuZQhIZ5k](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1_UuZQhIZ5k)

Did you see the moonwalking bear immediately? Again, because of the prompt, our brains focused on counting the passes of the people in the white shirts. Looking for the moonwalking bear was not on our radar, so most people don't see the bear until it's pointed out. Some even rewind the video to check.

Use this awareness of how your brain works to expand what you imagine is possible. Be aware that there's a lot of information in each second and we can't consciously process all of it. Therefore we need our brains to fill in the gaps. This can be really helpful but is potentially problematic. We can fill in the gaps with misinformation and refuse to consider any other truth. This forms implicit bias. Will you be brave enough to admit that some of the conclusions you've drawn about people, situations or other things might simply be wrong? Will you be brave, opening up yourself (and your brain) to an unexpected ending?

Here are some questions to consider:

1. Can you think of a time when you made an assumption that turned out to be wrong?  
What drew you to that assumption?
2. How does implicit bias keep our brains in a posture of "no" and not "yes, and ..."?
3. How can you be brave in your awareness of your implicit bias?

### ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

"Understanding Unconscious Bias": [www.npr.org/player/embed/891140598/891214991](https://www.npr.org/player/embed/891140598/891214991)

"4 Steps for Busting Unconscious Bias": [www.youtube.com/watch?v=K-n7eI87Dmo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K-n7eI87Dmo)

"An Introduction to Unconscious Bias": [www.youtube.com/watch?v=KCgIRGKAAbfc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KCgIRGKAAbfc)



# 1. SENDING

## BLESSING

As you prepare to end your time together today, share this blessing with your youth.

**Leader: The world often tells us that if you are afraid, you should stop.**

All: God has surrounded us with courage to go.

**Leader: The Creator God created you to live a full life despite its challenges.**

All: God has created us in the image of boldness.

**Leader: God knows your fears, doubts and weakness.**

All: God has equipped us with all we need.

**Leader: Go now and bravely step into your tomorrows. God is with you and will be on the other side. Your bravery comes from God.**

All: Amen.

## Unit 1, Session 2:

# BRAVE



Spotify playlist:  
*Created to Be Brave*

### ***Supplies Needed:***

- Journaling handout for each person
- Envelope for each person
- Markers
- *Going Deeper:*  
Various colored-dot stickers

## 1. OVERVIEW FOR ADULT LEADERS

In this session you'll continue to create space for building community. A key concept in this session is that bravery requires vulnerability. At the end your young people will be invited to journal and place their work in a sealed envelope. We encourage you to hold on to those envelopes and then mail them to each person a month prior to leaving for New Orleans. Include a note of encouragement! The letter should include examples of how you have seen this person grow as they prepared for the Gathering, and encourage them to continue to show and be brave. Put a note on your calendar now to remind you to send the letters!



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willing to be challenged.

## 2. GATHERING

### LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The 2024 ELCA Youth Gathering, MYLE, the tAble and the Young Adult Gathering will take place on stolen land that originally belonged to the Chitimacha people. The Atakapa, Caddo, Choctaw, Houma, Natchez and Tunica people inhabited other areas of what is now Louisiana. Today we gather on stolen land that originally belonged to \_\_\_\_\_.

As we prepare for the 2024 Gathering, let us remember the Indigenous peoples and tribal nations who were the first to love, pray, grow, celebrate, cry, drum and sing upon the land where we will assemble.

### OPENING PRAYER

As we begin to gather, we invite you into a posture of prayer that helps you connect with God.

Let us pray. O Lord, thank you for calling us to follow Jesus by being vulnerable for the sake of the world. Help us to see how, in risking ourselves, we participate in the evolution of your kingdom. Show us where we are called to be vulnerable, and help us to be brave enough to follow you. We pray this in the name of the one who became vulnerable to the point of death for the sake of the world, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

## OPENING ACTIVITY

Your youth are likely still getting to know each other. This activity prompts them to share their names again and disclose a piece of information about themselves in an unusual way. Even if your group members know each other well, they may learn something new — middle names! Not everyone has a middle name, so if this applies to someone in your group, encourage them to pick a name they feel fits them.

Invite your youth to come up with a personal tag based on the acronym for their name and to share it with the group. For example, “Cody Patrick Fitzgerald is CPF, which stands for ‘Continuously Playing Fortnite.’” Or “Olive Kathryn Smith is OKS, which stands for ‘Obviously Knows Soccer.’”

## 3. WORD

**Being brave doesn’t mean being without fear. In fact, being completely comfortable doesn’t require any bravery at all. On the contrary, researchers find a direct link between bravery and vulnerability. Why should we be brave anyway?**



Spend a few minutes listening to Brené Brown’s interview with CBS This Morning.

If you have extra time, consider watching the Netflix special Call to Courage:

<https://www.netflix.com/title/81010166>

**Brené Brown shares, “Courage is a heart word. The root of the word courage is cor — the Latin word for “heart.” Courage originally meant “to speak one’s mind by telling all one’s heart.”**

Ask your group, **“Is this how you would define courage? What other words would you use?”**

**Today courage means:**

- **Talking about how we feel.**
- **Asking for what we need.**
- **Being ourselves.**
- **Being kind to others who are trying to be themselves.**
- **Learning how to be brave and afraid at the exact same time.**

**Being brave and being courageous is accompanied by one more feeling — vulnerability.**

Ask the group, **“How do you define vulnerability?”**

**Brené Brown shares, “Vulnerability is the feeling we get during times of uncertainty, risk or emotional exposure. This includes times when we’re showing our feelings and we’re not sure what people will think, and times when we really care about something and people will know that we’re sad or disappointed when it doesn’t work out.”**

You are not either brave or afraid, brave or vulnerable. To be brave is to be vulnerable. Let's look at what bravery and vulnerability look like in Jesus.



Invite youth to read the Scripture aloud.

Ask, **“What did you notice? What words or phrases stick out to you?”**

*Matthew 26:36-46 from the New Revised Standard Version:*

**<sup>36</sup>Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to his disciples, “Sit here while I go over there and pray.” <sup>37</sup>He took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee and began to be grieved and agitated. <sup>38</sup>Then he said to them, “I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me.” <sup>39</sup>And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed, “[God], if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want.” <sup>40</sup>Then he came to the disciples and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, “So, could you not stay awake with me one hour? <sup>41</sup>Stay awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.” <sup>42</sup>Again he went away for the second time and prayed, “[God], if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.” <sup>43</sup>Again he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy. <sup>44</sup>So leaving them again, he went away and prayed for the third time, saying the same words. <sup>45</sup>Then he came to the disciples and said to them, “Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? See, the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. <sup>46</sup>Get up, let us be going. See, my betrayer is at hand.”**

Invite youth to read the Scripture aloud a second time and consider the following questions:

- How was Jesus vulnerable?
- What was Jesus afraid of?
- How did Jesus demonstrate bravery through vulnerability?
- How did Jesus express his needs to his disciples and to God?

# GOING DEEPER

*This section was added for groups with enough trust and community between adult leaders and youth to tackle hard topics together. Use this section only if you feel that your group will be able to go deeper into these hard topics.*

## DOT EXERCISE

Tell the group, **“I am going to place a sticker on your forehead.”** Stick a dot on the forehead of each youth so that one or two people are the only ones with a particular color. For example: If you have 20 youth, stick nine blue dots on nine youth and nine green dots on nine more youth. Stick a red dot on one youth and an orange dot on another youth. If you have three youth, stick blue dots on two youth and a green dot on the other.

Say to the group, **“In complete silence, group yourselves.”**

Watch what happens. Likely they will divide by color. When they seem “grouped,” ask, **“Are we grouped?”** and then **“What just happened?”**

Ask the people in the colors with large numbers, **“What did it feel like to do this?”**

Ask the same question of those in the solo colors.

Now ask, **“Did anyone try to bring them [the solo-color people] into their group?”**

Share the following with the solo-color people — **“Beloved, note that I did not tell them how to group themselves. The group decided to do this.”**

Ask, **“How can you avoid this happening at your school? Or in our church or even in the community we are creating in this room?”**

After discussion comes to a good end, say, **“All right, group yourselves.”** It is likely the whole group will come together.



If you have a small group or you want to process the exercise further, here is a video of the exercise: [youtu.be/iaa6UvmMZPw](https://youtu.be/iaa6UvmMZPw)

**Implicit bias causes us to fill in the gaps in thoughts, instructions, images, relationships, etc. This is our brain’s way of caring for us. It can keep us safe and help us adapt. It can also make us to jump to conclusions that are either incorrect or just one possibility. This exercise reveals the powerful influence of group dynamics on bias. We need to question decisions and ways of being even if doing so challenges the group norm, requiring vulnerability and bravery.**

Here are some questions to consider:

1. Think about a time in your life when bias kept you or someone you know from participating in something. How can you be more vulnerable in the future and encourage others to consider different possibilities?
2. How can your being vulnerable decrease the influence of bias in your daily life?

## RESPONSE ACTIVITY

Distribute to each participant a marker and the [journaling handout](#) for this session. Ask them to spend 5-10 minutes journaling alone. They can write, draw or combine writing and drawing. They will be asked to share their work with the primary adult leader but not the rest of the group.

The prompts listed on the handout include:

- What is something you feel nervous, fearful or insecure about?
- When you think about being vulnerable in this situation, what feelings come to mind?
- What help do you need from God? How might God be calling you to be brave?
- How can the experience of preparing for and going to the Gathering (or any new event/situation) be an opportunity for you to be vulnerable and brave?



Consider playing the Gathering's Spotify playlist (use the QR code at right) while everyone is journaling. At the end of the activity, ask each person to seal their journal pages in an envelope and write their name on it. As leader, collect the envelopes. We encourage you to write a letter of encouragement to each of your youth and mail it to them a month before the Gathering, with the sealed journal exercise enclosed, as a reminder that God will abide with them in and through all their fears.



Spotify playlist:  
*Created to Be Brave*

## Gathering Connection



**You have been brave and resilient. Saying yes to attending the Gathering and traveling to New Orleans is brave. For some this will be their first time traveling out of state, traveling without their family or traveling on an airplane.**

**While in New Orleans, we will join thousands of other high school youth and their adult leaders for a week of faith formation together. The extroverts among us might be thinking, "That's thousands of new people to get to know!" The introverts might be thinking, "How am I going to survive this?"**

**Showing up is brave. You, beloved of God, are brave. We trust that this experience will be a gift to you, and we know that you must be vulnerable to open yourself up to this group and to grow. You were created to be brave, and we can't wait to see the ways God stirs courage in you for this moment and the next.**

## 7. SENDING

### BLESSING

As you prepare to end your time together today, share this blessing with your youth.

**Leader: The world may not equate being vulnerable with being brave.**

All: God knows the power of vulnerability.

**Leader: The Creator God wants you to risk for the sake of the gospel.**

All: God has created us to love one another.

**Leader: God knows your needs and protects you with community.**

All: God has called us to live on the strength of connection.

**Leader: Go now and be vulnerable when you can. People along your journey will give you the space to be vulnerable and will provide support, comfort and connection to help you face the days ahead.**

All: Amen.



## Unit 2, Session 1:

# AUTHENTIC



Spotify playlist:  
*Created to Be Authentic*

### *Supplies Needed:*

- Lyric sheets for Casting Crowns' "City on a Hill" (the lyrics are easily located online)
- A computer or TV to show a video and listen to music
- A small bag of M&M candies
- A bowl

## 1. OVERVIEW FOR ADULT LEADERS

This session is anchored in a New Orleans favorite — gumbo. What is gumbo? Typically it's a thick stew with seafood, meat, celery, peppers, onions. It's a mix of things that comes together as a New Orleans staple. Stories about its origins differ, but gumbo is a part of New Orleans history, available at almost every restaurant. We've been told that New Orleanians can't tell you where to find a restaurant with the best gumbo, because the best gumbo is made at home.

A video clip from the 2012 Gathering invites the group to consider what it means to bring all of them to a space and, in doing so, enrich that space with God's diversity. Students will reflect on how their authentic self is caught up in community. They will wrestle with the question "Does someone else living authentically inspire you to live authentically too?"

As young people begin to share authentically, you might hear things that surprise and/or challenge you. Your job in this session is not to fix or correct or even share your opinion of these choices; your job is to provide a ministry of presence that allows youth to speak — maybe for the first time — about authentic parts of themselves. If you feel challenged by or uncomfortable navigating such topics, we encourage you to reach out to your pastor, a deacon, a trusted faith mentor or the Gathering staff for more resources.



We are **CREATED TO BE AUTHENTIC** —  
to bring our whole selves and know that  
we are loved by our Creator.

## 2. GATHERING

### LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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As we prepare for the 2024 Gathering, let us remember the Indigenous peoples and tribal nations who were the first to love, pray, grow, celebrate, cry, drum and sing upon the land where we will assemble.

## OPENING PRAYER

As we begin to gather, we invite you into a posture of prayer that helps you connect with God.

Let us pray. O God, you delight in bringing together different kinds, flavors and aromas. You have drawn into creation varieties of size, shape and color. Variety is a mark of your kingdom. Help us to be aware of the ways different things co-exist in your creation. May that creation invite us to embrace, celebrate and co-create diversity wherever we are. We ask this in the name of the one who came to graft all people into the kin-dom of God, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

## OPENING ACTIVITY

Our differences are what bring us together. Today we will continue to learn about one another. To start our opening activity, everyone grab one M&M from the bowl. (Or give everyone a fun-sized bag of M&Ms and ask them to remove one candy. If there are food allergies in your community, do the activity with beads in a bowl.)

**Don't eat the M&M, just hold on to it for our activity.**

Once everyone has an M&M, let them know that you'll be going around the room and everyone will share a fact about themselves according to the color in the chart below.

**If you grabbed a...**

- **Red M&M** — share something about your childhood.
- **Orange M&M** — share something you do well.
- **Yellow M&M** — share something you've learned in the last few weeks.
- **Green M&M** — share something you enjoy watching or listening to.
- **Blue M&M** — share something you can't live without.
- **Brown M&M** — share something about your day.

## New Orleans Connection



M&Ms are great, but in New Orleans we'll get to try a handful of great dishes! Gumbo is one famous dish found in the Big Easy, a food of welcome and hospitality. The name is derived from a West African word for okra, adding sassafras leaves is credited to the Choctaws, and roux, a main ingredient, has French origins.

Because of its African, Indigenous and European roots, this flavorful dish is often used as a metaphor for diversity. The variety of ingredients, slow-cooked to create a delicious experience, exemplify the possibilities presented to us when we all work together. It's called a "forgiving" dish because no exact measurements are necessary — you measure with your heart! Cooked together with the right spices, the ingredients bring out the best in each other. Over time the list of desired ingredients has expanded; this makes gumbo even more diverse yet still authentically New Orleans.

New Orleans has hosted several cycles of the ELCA Youth Gathering. In 2012 thousands of young people gathered in the same spaces where you'll gather in 2024. At the opening of the 2012 Gathering, the Rev. Yehiel Curry, currently bishop of the Metropolitan Chicago Synod, provided a welcome at Mass Gathering in the Superdome, explaining how gumbo embodies diversity and that all are welcome.



Watch the clip of Rev. Curry's welcome on YouTube:  
[www.youtube.com/watch?v=CzRjDYSEGY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CzRjDYSEGY)

Afterward, ask your group, **"How does that welcome from the 2012 Gathering get you excited about traveling to New Orleans?"**

### 3. WORD

Invite youth to read the Scripture aloud. Ask,  
**"What did you notice? What words or phrases stick out to you?"**



*Matthew 5:14-16 from the New Living Translation:*

<sup>14</sup>"You are the light of the world — like a city on a hilltop that cannot be hidden. <sup>15</sup>No one lights a lamp and then puts it under a basket. Instead, a lamp is placed on a stand, where it gives light to everyone in the house. <sup>16</sup>In the same way, let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise [God].

Invite youth to read the Scripture aloud a second time and consider the following questions:

- What does it mean to be truly authentic?
- How does the Scripture passage relate to living authentically?
- Why would God care if we are authentic or not?
- What identity do you have that is often misunderstood by others?
- How does the knowledge that we are beloved by God invite us or help us to be authentic in all areas of our life?

## RESPONSE ACTIVITY

Pass out the lyric sheets for the song “City on a Hill” by Casting Crowns and play the group’s recording, which you can find on YouTube or the Gathering’s Spotify playlist.

**How is this song similar to or different from the Scripture passage?**

**The song lyrics read, “Each one thought that they knew better / But they were different by design / Instead of standing strong together / They let their differences divide.”**

Here are some questions to consider:

- What does “standing strong together” in authenticity look like?
- Does someone else living authentically inspire you to live authentically too?
- How would living authentically as a community help or hurt our sharing of God’s love in this world?



# GOING DEEPER

*This section was added for groups with enough trust and community between adult leaders and youth to tackle hard topics together. Use this section only if you feel that your group will be able to go deeper into these hard topics.*

Divide the group into pairs. **“Partners, take turns finding a recent photo on your phone that brings you joy; the catch is that the photo cannot picture a human. Describe the photo to your partner and share why it brings you joy or happiness. If you are comfortable doing so, show the photo to your partner.”**

Bring the group back together. **“What makes something joyful? Who decides what joy is? How do you know you’re feeling joy?”**

**Implicit bias comes not only from our brain filling in blanks but from the people around us. Social norms heavily influence how we interpret experience, causing us to accept without question common ways of thinking about a particular thing.**

Questions:

- 1. Think about the ways your family, friends, teachers, etc. have influenced your understanding of joy. What marks of joy have they taught you? Examples: smiling, bright colors, positive energy, etc.**
- 2. Have you ever had someone ask you to stop being joyful? Not to tone it down but to stop outright? Youth will probably say no or recall being asked to be calmer or more appropriate.**
- 3. Have you ever had someone try to help you overcome sadness? We often hear phrases such as “cheer you up” or “get you out of your funk.” Why does it seem OK to be joyful but not to be sad? Expect them to say that their mood affects other people or that “sad” doesn’t feel good. They may mention that cheerful people are usually more popular than serious people.**

**I invite you to show authentically how you’re feeling right at this moment. It’s OK to feel sad, angry, happy, joyful, indifferent or whatever. Rather than try to convince someone to come out of their feelings, let’s agree to share them and to listen to one another. A huge part of shifting implicit bias is giving people the space to be authentic and not making them feel as if they need to get over themselves.**

**In Scripture, when someone is saddened by a death, the community mourns with them. We need to sit with people and their emotions so long as they aren’t harming themselves or others. We’re going to sit here with each other for five minutes and just be. You can express what you’re feeling in any way you like — laughing, crying, talking, being quiet, etc.**

Let the five minutes pass and then invite them to pray the Lord’s Prayer together.

## 7. SENDING

### BLESSING

As you prepare to end your time together, share this blessing with your youth.

**Christ has called you not just as you are but because of who you are. You bring something unique to this community. Your voice, your thoughts, your ideas are not just desired — they are needed. God’s creativity knows no bounds. Go now, knowing that you can be your authentic self, the self that God envisioned you to be. Amen.**

## Unit 2, Session 2:

# AUTHENTIC



Spotify playlist:  
*Created to Be Authentic*

### ***Supplies Needed:***

- Index cards (or slips of paper the same size)
- Markers
- A computer or phone to listen to music
- *Going Deeper:* temporary tattoo markers (these can be found easily on Amazon)



## 1. OVERVIEW FOR ADULT LEADERS

This session helps young people to make connections between authenticity and knowing they are loved. The “Going Deeper” activity helps them name the reasons they might doubt that they are beloved by God and provides affirmation (and even temporary tattoos!) to remind them of God’s love. They will also be invited to affirm others whose authenticity has influenced them.

We are **CREATED TO BE AUTHENTIC** —  
to bring our whole selves and know that  
we are loved by our Creator.

## 2. GATHERING

### LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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As we prepare for the 2024 Gathering, let us remember the Indigenous peoples and tribal nations who were the first to love, pray, grow, celebrate, cry, drum and sing upon the land where we will assemble.

### OPENING PRAYER

As we begin to gather, we invite you into a posture of prayer that helps you connect with God.

O God, you invite us to be true to who you created us to be. Help us to see how, in being honest about who we are, we might inspire others to be honest about who they are. Cultivate in us the ability to be our authentic selves without apology, because we are your creation, meant to be seen as a reflection of you. We pray this in the name of the one whose authenticity we follow, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

## OPENING ACTIVITY

Let's get the group guessing! This activity will help your group get to know one another and to practice sharing themselves and building a trusting, respectful sense of community. You'll need some markers and some index cards or small slips of paper of equal size, shape and color.

If you have a large group, consider breaking into smaller groups. If you have a small group, do the activity together. Ask each group member to write on an index card something about themselves that they are comfortable sharing and are certain no one in the group already knows about them. Once they've done this, ask them to fold up their cards multiple times. Toss all the folded cards into a bowl or hat and have everyone draw one card. Be sure that everyone keeps it folded up and in their hand.

One at a time, have each person unfold their card and read it aloud; then, as a group, try to guess to whom it belongs. Try to limit the number of guesses to three for the entire group — this will encourage everyone to work together! After three unsuccessful guesses, the person who wrote the note can reveal themselves to the group. If you have extra time, that person could share more details about their fact. Go around the circle until everyone has participated.

Once everyone has taken a turn, thank everyone for sharing themselves with the group!

## 3. WORD

Invite youth to read the Scripture aloud. Ask,  
**“What did you notice? What words or phrases stick out to you?”**



*Matthew 5:14-16 from the Message Translation:*

**<sup>14-16</sup>Here's another way to put it: You're here to be light, bringing out the God-colors in the world. God is not a secret to be kept. We're going public with this, as public as a city on a hill. If I make you light-bearers, you don't think I'm going to hide you under a bucket, do you? I'm putting you on a light stand. Now that I've put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand — shine! Keep open house; be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you'll prompt people to open up with God.**

Invite youth to read the Scripture aloud a second time and consider the following questions:

- As we live our everyday lives, how are we being authentic to who God created us to be?
- Who are authentic people in your life?
- The Scripture we just read asks us to bring out the “God-colors” in the world. What do you think this means?
- When we are inauthentic, how is our witness impacted?
- How are you, as an individual and as a member of your group, a city on a hill?

## RESPONSE ACTIVITY

Send a message of thanks and love to someone who is an authentic witness to God in your life! You can write this on a card, draw or collage images, send a meaningful text message or use any other form of communication. Make sure to give an example of the person's authenticity. While youth are making their cards and/or reaching out via text, play the Gathering's Spotify playlist to inspire them.

An example could look like this: "I've been thinking about authenticity and want you to know you are one of the most authentic people I know. Your honesty and truth-telling inspires me. Thanks for being who God created you to be."



# GOING DEEPER

*This section was added for groups with enough trust and community between adult leaders and youth to tackle hard topics together. Use this section only if you feel that your group will be able to go deeper into these hard topics.*

**Being authentic comes from a place of knowing your own beloved-ness. You are beloved by God. All of you. Every single part. Yet the ways of sin, the brokenness of this world, the dumpster fires we call our relationships, and the distorted truths in our minds and the larger world often blind us to the fact that God calls us beloved.**

Invite the group to consider these two questions in silence.

- What makes it hard to believe that God calls you beloved?
- How would your life be different if you knew in your guts that you are God's beloved and were treated that way?

After creating space for individual reflection, invite each member of the group to turn to another person and share their thoughts. Ask if anyone would like to share with the larger group. Note that these two questions can be very personal, so any sharing should be by invitation only.

**One way to lean into our beloved-ness is to speak it to ourselves, to see it written in our path, to hear the truth of that affirmation spoken over us. Affirmations are positive statements that can help you to challenge and overcome self-sabotaging and negative thoughts. When you repeat them often and believe in them, you can start to make positive changes.**

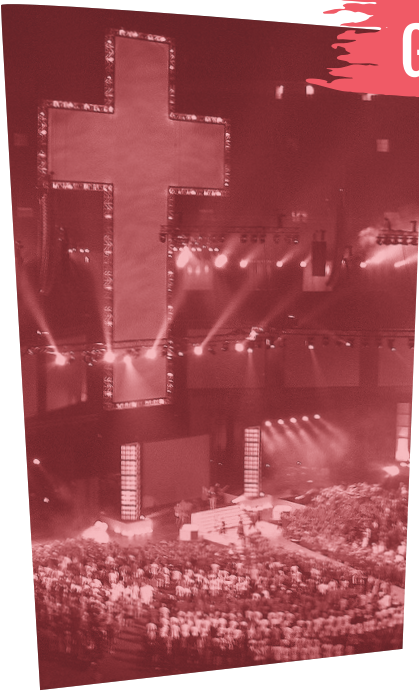
**We need to create an affirmation that reminds us that we're beloved.**

This can be done in a variety of ways:

- Ask everyone to write a statement on an index card to stick into their Bible for safekeeping.
- If you have temporary-tattoo markers available, ask everyone to design a tattoo reminding them of their beloved-ness.
- Write the affirmation on a sticky note and place in somewhere you look often — on a mirror, in your school locker, on your nightstand.

You might consider introducing both this and the response activity at the same time so youth can shuttle between them, encouraging both themselves and others.

## Gathering Connection



Each night of the Gathering, everyone will come together in the Caesars Superdome for Mass Gathering. The Superdome is home to the New Orleans Saints football team! Our time at Mass Gathering will be filled with inspiring speakers, engaging musicians and worship. Each speaker on stage will be giving us their authentic self — and they are loved.

Our deep hope is that in our speakers' stories you will hear echoes of your own. The speakers will tackle tough topics. We encourage you to converse with your community about these topics if you aren't already. We see the Gathering as a place where you can lay aside the "masks," the "should be's," and live fully into who God has created you to be. You, beloved of God, are created to be authentic, and every aspect of you is fully loved.

## 7. SENDING

### BLESSING

Leader: The world often tells us that we are only good enough to be a supporting actor.

**All: God has created us in the image of love.**

Leader: The Creator God created you so that you might live into the lead role of your own story.

**All: God has created us in the image of truth.**

Leader: Just as you are — fully, joyfully, authentically you — God has created you.

**All: God has created us in the image of joy.**

Leader: Go now and live into your true love and joy, so that others may witness the gift of you and be inspired and encouraged to be themselves.

**All: Amen.**

## Unit 3, Session 1:

# FREE



Spotify playlist:  
*Created to Be Free*

### ***Supplies Needed:***

- Paper
- Pens or pencils
- A computer or TV to show a video

## 1. OVERVIEW FOR ADULT LEADERS

This session will help your group explore multiple avenues to express what is going on in their world. In reflection, your group will name the ways they are weighed down and expected to conform. Through music, haikus and meditation, youth will be invited to lean into the freedom offered in Christ. In the “Going Deeper” section we acknowledge the weight of anxiety and depression, inviting youth back into their bodies.

This session can feel heavy. We encourage you to conduct it in a location different from the one where you normally meet. By changing the location to a park, the backyard of your home or even a different room in the church, you will open youth to new opportunities and shift expectations of what the session will be like.



We are **CREATED TO BE FREE** —  
to be transformed by the gospel.

## 2. GATHERING

### LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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As we prepare for the 2024 Gathering, let us remember the Indigenous peoples and tribal nations who were the first to love, pray, grow, celebrate, cry, drum and sing upon the land where we will assemble.

### OPENING PRAYER

As we begin to gather, we invite you into a posture of prayer that helps you connect with God.

Let us pray. O God, you have created us to be free. We live in a world that feels limited. Help us to believe that when we follow you, nothing is impossible. Build in us the courage to follow wherever you lead without fear of failure. Draw the spirit of liberation from within us so that we might be unleashed. We pray this in the name of the one who came into the world so that we might be free, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

## OPENING ACTIVITY

Imagine having to spend a week inside an apartment stocked with food and supplies, but with no visitors, TV, phone, computer or tablet. Think of one activity or hobby you'd bring along to keep yourself sane for the week.

Invite the group to share the activity or hobby they'd bring along. If you want to add some laughs, have them turn their sharing into a game of charades with one person acting out their answer while the remainder of the group guesses at it.

## New Orleans Connection



Today we're going to talk about the ways in which we're confined and set free. One place we see New Orleans living into freedom is through jazz. New Orleans is known for jazz, but it's much more than a genre of music. It created a new language by combining different musical expressions of African-descent people in New Orleans in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Inspiration came from what they heard at church, in their homes, around the city and even in bars. Every part of their lives touched the moving sounds of jazz.

Jazz musicians don't always use sheet music, as in other genres. They are free to add their own sound and story to the song. Troy Andrews, more commonly known as Trombone Shorty, is one of the many popular jazz musicians who call New Orleans home. He is a musician, producer and philanthropist. Despite his stage name, he also plays the trumpet, drums, organ and even the tuba!



Take some time to listen to Trombone Shorty's song "Come Back":

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=IRpkGnymJXk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IRpkGnymJXk)

**"Come Back" is about perseverance and determination in times of struggle. Shorty sings about missing an important figure in his life. He begs them to come back to him and expresses feelings of grief and regret.**

Here are some questions to consider:

- How does music make space for expressing how you feel?
- What type of music are you drawn to?
- Jazz is known for allowing expression outside the "normal rules" of Western music. How might this freedom in musical structure make space for truth-telling?



## 3. WORD

Invite youth to read the Scripture aloud. Ask,  
**“What did you notice? What words or phrases stick out to you?”**



*Romans 12:2 from the New Revised Standard Version:*

**Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God — what is good and acceptable and perfect.**

Invite youth to read the Scripture aloud a second time and consider the following questions:

- What does it mean to be conformed? In what ways does our world try to conform us?
- What do you think it means to be “free”?
- What would life be like if the pressure were off?
- What helps to renew and refresh your mind?



*Galatians 5:1, 13-15 from the New Revised Standard Version:*

**<sup>1</sup>For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. ... <sup>13</sup>For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. <sup>14</sup>For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” <sup>15</sup>If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.**

In Paul’s letter to the Galatians, there are pressures to conform to a certain standard; early Christians debated whether one had to follow Jewish law and custom. Paul writes that we are “free” of such things but also argues that the gift of freedom is not only for ourselves but for our neighbors as well.

What would the world look like if people tried to affirm others in their own freedom of choice or expression instead of trying to label them or box them in?

## RESPONSE ACTIVITY

Give students paper and writing utensils, and invite them to create two haikus.

**A haiku is a Japanese poetic form in three lines: the first contains five syllables; the second, seven syllables; and the third, five syllables. We want to invite you to write two haikus today. The first is about the pressures you face. The second should imagine what life would be like if those pressures were gone.**

An example (inspired by the Disney animation Encanto):

*Pressure, like a drip,  
drip, drip that'll never stop, whoa.  
Pressure till you pop.*

Here's one you might have written in the middle of the pandemic:

*Dumpster fire. For real.  
Catastrophically bad. Ugh.  
Too much. All the time.*

Here's one about how some days are too much:

*Be perfect. Do all.  
"They" ask too much. Can never win.  
Grades, sports, and TikTok.*



# GOING DEEPER

*This section was added for groups with enough trust and community between adult leaders and youth to tackle hard topics together. Use this section only if you feel that your group will be able to go deeper into these hard topics.*

The pressures of this world have significantly impacted the mental health of young people. This “Going Deeper” section helps them name this, building on what was shared in the haikus. As the adult leader, know that this activity is about your youth.

All this pressure to conform, to deal, to simply make it, has fed a mental health crisis. [According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#), more than a third (37%) of high school students reported that they experienced poor mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic, and 44% reported that they persistently felt sad or hopeless during the past year. New analyses describe some of the severe challenges youth encountered during the pandemic:

- More than half (55%) reported that they experienced emotional abuse by a parent or other adult in the home, including being sworn at, insulted or put down.
- Eleven percent experienced physical abuse by a parent or other adult in the home, including being hit, beaten, kicked or otherwise physically hurt.
- More than a quarter (29%) reported that a parent or other adult in their home lost a job.

Youth show more consistent elevations in anxiety, depression and stress. This is particularly true for marginalized young people such as African American, Latino, LGBTQIA+ or low-resourced youth.

**We have already talked about how music and poetry can express what is inside and help you lean into the freedom Christ has given you. Another way you can lean into your freedom, releasing stress and anxiety, is by returning to your body. We have an embodied faith — one that invites us to experience God not just in our hearts and minds but in our whole selves.**

**We can return to our bodies through exercise, breathing, dance and meditation. Today we are going to do a body meditation to invite ourselves back into our bodies and to open ourselves to the spirit’s renewing work in us.**

**If any part of this meditation triggers something in you, skip that part. If being in your body is difficult or feels unsafe, instead we invite you to sit and, using your five senses, notice three things you can see, hear, touch, taste and smell.**

Note: Connecting with one’s own body can be particularly difficult for trauma survivors when dissociation is part of their coping process. Assure your youth know that they can skip the meditation if there’s a part of their body they aren’t comfortable with. If someone in your group has a disability and cannot feel their lower body, start with their head and move down so that they’re able to practice the whole time and don’t feel left out.

## GOING DEEPER, continued

**Get your body in as comfortable a position as possible.  
Close your eyes or open them, whichever is more comfortable.**

**Feel the parts of your body that touch what is holding you up (your sit bones or back against the ground, your head resting against your chair). Feel the earth supporting you through the ground or your chair, and just breathe.**

Wait a few breaths.

**Now imagine a source of light outside your body. Feel the light shining down on you. Feel its warmth. That light is the Holy Spirit, shining on you, warming your face, your body.**

Wait a few breaths.

**As you are able, inhale the light into your body, into the lower part of your torso, into your sit bones, your hips, all the organs you have down there. Feel them fill with light.**

Wait a few breaths.

**Now inhale the light down into your legs, your knees, your calves ... all the way down to your tippy-toes. Feel the lower half of your body fill with the light of the Holy Spirit, with love and with power.**

Wait a few breaths.

**Now inhale the light into your stomach, your chest, your back, your shoulders. Feel the Holy Spirit filling you up.**

Wait a few breaths.

**Inhale the light into your neck, your face, your ears, the back of your head, up to the top of your head.**

**Feel the power and love of the Holy Spirit burning within you.**

**Notice what you notice.**

Pause for however long feels right.

**At your baptism you received the Holy Spirit, and it lives within you always. But sometimes we need a reminder that the Spirit is there, filling us up with love and faith and power, shining through us into the world.**

**When you are ready, open your eyes, begin to move around, and take this feeling with you throughout your day.**

# 7. SENDING

## BLESSING

Gather together and share this blessing.

**Leader: “For freedom Christ has set you free.”**

All: But what does it mean to be free?

**Leader: For some, it means being able to choose what to wear each day.**

All: Is that all that it means?

**Leader: For others, it comes at a price of life or death.**

All: Is that really all that it means?

**Leader: To be free in Christ is to be transformed by the love that has been extended to us through the gift of grace. Go now in the full knowledge that freedom has been extended to you without barriers or restrictions.**

All: Amen.

## Unit 3, Session 2:

# FREE



Spotify playlist:  
*Created to Be Free*

### *Supplies Needed:*

- Paper
- Pens or pencils
- Markers (all different colors)
- A computer or TV to show a video

## 1. OVERVIEW FOR ADULT LEADERS

In this session we'll use the words of Martin Lutheran and Dietrich Bonhoeffer to explore the idea that we are not only freed from something but freed for something. Youth will be invited to think about freedom in the context of personal relationships. The response activity will help them name the relationships in their own lives. The "Going Deeper" section invites them to look at one relationship we all share — with creation. You will explore both how we neglect creation and how we might renounce our misuse and abuse of creation.



We are **CREATED TO BE FREE** —  
to be transformed by the gospel.

## 2. GATHERING

### LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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As we prepare for the 2024 Gathering, let us remember the Indigenous peoples and tribal nations who were the first to love, pray, grow, celebrate, cry, drum and sing upon the land where we will assemble.

### OPENING PRAYER

As we begin to gather, we invite you into a posture of prayer that helps you connect with God.

Let us pray. O God, you have created us to be free. Help us to realize what doors that opens for us. Give us hearts fully liberated so that we might boldly explore new ways of being and doing that expand on your holy creation. Create in us visions from your holy imagination that lead us to radically new tomorrows. We pray this in the hope we have received through Jesus Christ. Amen.

## OPENING ACTIVITY

This activity will help the group feel both the weight of being bound and the gift of being free. Have your youth stand in a circle, shoulder to shoulder. If you have more than 10 people, divide into two groups. Ask everyone to lift their right hand and grab the right hand of someone else in the circle who is not directly beside them. Now ask everyone to lift their left hand and grab the left hand of a third person in the circle who is not directly beside them.

The goal is for the group to untangle the ensuing knot without anyone letting go of another's hand. Youth may change their grip to move comfortably but may not let go of each others' hands. All communication must be nonverbal. If a group finishes quickly, repeat the exercise. Initially you may see little progress, but after 10 minutes or so, the unfolding will begin and the pace will speed up. If participants make little progress for more than 10 minutes, allow two youth only to unclasp hands, untangle part of the knot, and clasp hands again. Remind your youth that they need to discuss and decide how best to take advantage of these two moves.

Here are some questions to consider:

- How does it feel to be stuck?
- What did you need most in order to get free?

## 3. WORD

In this section we build on the concepts introduced in the first session of Unit 3 and wrestle with the words of two theologians who have shaped our Lutheran understanding of freedom. Share a printout of the following quotations with your students and read them aloud, twice.

**“To say that in humankind God creates God’s own image on earth means that humankind is like the Creator in that it is free. ... To be more precise, freedom is a relation between two persons. Being free means ‘being-free-for-the-other,’ because I am bound to the other. Only by being in relation with the other am I free.” —Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 62-63**

**“A Christian is lord of all, completely free of everything. A Christian is a servant, completely attentive to the needs of all. ... It is the very nature of love to be attentive to others and to serve the one who is loved.” —Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian***

Invite your group to reflect on the quotations, underlining the words that seem important. What questions do they have? Encourage them to circle anything they do not understand.



Now ask your group to reflect together on the following questions.

- Theologians have long tried to figure out what being created in the “image of God” looks like. Bonhoeffer argues that the image of God is a particular kind of freedom — freedom as a relationship. Human beings are always in relationship with one another, just as God is always in relationship with us. Do you think this accurately describes the image of God? How would you describe it?
- Usually we think of freedom as the ability to do whatever we want. How does Bonhoeffer’s explanation of freedom help you to think about it differently?
- Luther writes that through faith in Christ, the Christian is “completely free.” We have been given a great gift that we don’t have to earn ourselves — salvation and abundant life. Yet when we receive the gift, it changes us; it “transforms our minds” so that we, loving God and neighbor, become servants of all. How are you “bound to the other” in your relationships? What does that look like with your family and friends? What about strangers you pass on the street?
- What does it look like when human beings abuse their freedom?

## RESPONSE ACTIVITY

Hand out a piece of paper to each person in your group. They’ll need some markers as well for this activity.

**First, write the word “God” in the middle of the paper. Then list at random all your relationships (with yourself, family, friends, the earth, plants, animals, etc.).**

**Draw lines of relation between each of these words. You can use different colors to describe different kinds of relationships; for example, mark easy relationships in green and stressed relationships in red.**

**Next, write a prayer for each of these relationships.**

**Fold this sheet and stick it between the pages of your Bible. This relationship map can become a prayer map as we think about the relationships we need to pray for and those we need to lift up and celebrate. These maps remind us that we are freed to love and serve in all our relationships.**

# GOING DEEPER

*This section was added for groups that with enough trust and community between adult leaders and youth to tackle hard topics together. Use this section only if you feel that your group will be able to go deeper into these hard topics.*

After you complete the relationship maps, ask if anyone included creation on their map.

**Scripture makes clear that we are in relationship with God, each other and all of creation. Often this relationship is neglected.**

**If you were to draw a line on your relationship map connecting you with creation, what color would it be?**

**How have you seen people neglect their relationship with creation?**

**One thing that defines our relationship with creation is plastic.**



We encourage you to watch this short video of the story of plastic:

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=iO3SA4YyEYU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iO3SA4YyEYU)

Here are some questions to consider:

- What stood out to you in the video? Was there something new that struck you?
- How does our relationship with creation affect our relationship with other humans?
- How might God be inviting you to use your freedom to care for creation?

**For the last several seasons of Lent, ELCA Young Adults from across of the church have participated in the #NoPlasticsForLent initiative. This calls us to pray for creation, to lament the ways we have been complicit in degrading the earth, and to fast from the things that hurt our planet.**

**Can you imagine fasting from single-use plastic for 40 days? What would that change about your daily routine? Is your shampoo in a throw-away plastic bottle? Are those tortillas you want for dinner in a plastic bag?**

**How does this conversation inspire you to use your freedom for care of creation? What's your action item?** Challenge each person to do one day without plastic.

## 7. SENDING

During the Gathering, we will spend one day immersed in the city of New Orleans. This day, our Accompaniment Day, will give us the opportunity to work with partners on action, advocacy and awareness. Listening to the diverse stories and experiences of people in New Orleans will expand our view of God and God's people, providing us with a new lens through which we can experience God's work in the world and in our life. You were created to be free. You have been transformed by the gospel. Beloveds of God, rejoice in the call to serve, love, and learn alongside New Orleans.

### **BLESSING**

Since the beginning of time, humanity has desired and cried out for freedom. Why? Because without freedom, we are constrained to be what others expect. Yet the freedom of Christ is transformative, calling us to be who we are at our core: beloved children of God. Go now, assured that in Christ you have been freed from the expectations that separate us from God and one another. Amen.

## Unit 4, Session 1:

# DISRUPTIVE



Spotify playlist:  
*Created to Be Disruptive*

### ***Supplies Needed:***

- A computer or TV to show a video and image
- *Going Deeper:*  
Cardboard and markers

## 1. OVERVIEW FOR ADULT LEADERS

This session will introduce your group to Ruby Bridges and her family, who fought for civil rights in New Orleans. Your group will explore moving from being mad, sad and overwhelmed by what goes on in this world to understanding that justice work is part of our baptismal call, following the example of Jesus. The “Going Deeper” section invites youth to consider the root of the word “protest” and to “go public” with their own commitments to justice in the world. Moreover, they will discover that prayer and action are both part of who they were created to be.



We are **CREATED TO BE FREE** —  
to work for justice for all our siblings.

## 2. GATHERING

### LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The 2024 ELCA Youth Gathering, MYLE, the tAble and the Young Adult Gathering will take place on stolen land that originally belonged to the Chitimacha people. The Atakapa, Caddo, Choctaw, Houma, Natchez and Tunica people inhabited other areas of what is now Louisiana. Today we gather on stolen land that originally belonged to \_\_\_\_\_.

As we prepare for the 2024 Gathering, let us remember the Indigenous peoples and tribal nations who were the first to love, pray, grow, celebrate, cry, drum and sing upon the land where we will assemble.

### OPENING PRAYER

As we begin to gather, we invite you into a posture of prayer that helps you connect with God.

Let us pray. O Lord, we acknowledge that your creation has grown into ways of being that need to be disrupted. We realize that changing how we live or think can be counterintuitive. Keeping things as they have been feels much easier. But as your followers, we are called to disrupt the ways your creation has grown away from you. Give us the clarity to know and act when you call us to be disruptive for the sake of your kingdom and our neighbors. We pray this in the name of our Savior, who disrupted this world to save it — Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

### OPENING ACTIVITY

This activity will introduce chaos into the room! Yep, you read that right. This activity helps people remember that the world is in chaos — and we are called to disrupt the ways of chaos in our world. We hope your youth will laugh and let down their guards during this activity.

Have everyone stand in a circle. Designate someone to hold an imaginary pie in their hands. The person holding the imaginary pie starts the game by making eye contact with someone across the circle, shouting “Pie!” and throwing the pie to them. The person catching the imaginary pie says, “Oh no! Not today!” and then shouts “Pie!” and throws it to someone else.

After a few moments, while the pie is still going around, introduce another imaginary item — a strudel. When throwing it, participants shout, “Strudel!,” and when catching it, they shout, “Well, well! Not to-doodle!”

Once the pie and the strudel are both moving, shout, “Freak out!” Upon hearing this, participants will stop what they’re doing, wave their hands in the air, scream and find a new place in the circle. Count down aloud: “5 ... 4 ... 3 ... 2 ... 1.” Everyone should find a new spot in the circle by the time the leader gets to “1.”

The two people last holding the pie and strudel continue throwing them around the circle. You can call “Freak out!” several times over the course of the game. Each time, give your youth a directive such as “Freak out — as quietly as you can!” or “Freak out — on one foot!” or “Freak out — while singing!” End the game after about five minutes.

**The activity we just did is just a game. The chaos is interrupted each time I yell, “Freak out!” Yet we know that chaos is all around us. It demands more than someone just yelling to change it — God is calling us to be disrupters.**

## New Orleans Connection



New Orleans has a history of disrupters. The city builds community through diversity. Through people such as Ruby Bridges, its history challenges us to reject the things that separate us.

On Nov. 19, 1960, at age 6, Bridges became a civil rights leader by taking the first step toward desegregating William Frantz Elementary School. The image to the left (which can also be found [in the appendix](#)) records the historic moment when she was escorted to school by federal marshals.

The significant difference in height and stature between Bridges and her escorts captured the absurdity of the European-descent parents who withdrew their students from school and left Bridges all alone on that first day, six years after desegregation had been mandated in the Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education*.

Her parents answered a call by the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) to challenge school segregation. This cost them — her grandparents were forced off the land they tilled as sharecroppers, and her father was fired from his job. But they stayed the course, and Ruby Bridges continues to call New Orleans home.



Let's learn a little more about Ruby by watching a short video.

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=dkMDD2L70Sg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dkMDD2L70Sg)

To learn more, visit:

[www.kennedy-center.org/education/resources-for-educators/classroom-resources/media-and-interactives/media/visual-arts/norman-rockwell--the-problem-we-all-live-with/](https://www.kennedy-center.org/education/resources-for-educators/classroom-resources/media-and-interactives/media/visual-arts/norman-rockwell--the-problem-we-all-live-with/)

Give your group an opportunity to wonder about Ruby's personal experience:

- How do you think Ruby felt each day walking through this crowd to school?
- How do you think other students reacted, felt or behaved with Ruby in their classroom?
- Have you ever felt as if you were walking through insurmountable injustice?

### 3. WORD

Ruby Bridges parents' opposed the status quo and suffered as a result. Jesus opposed the status quo too. Today's Scripture shows Jesus in a moment of righteous indignation because the Temple of Jerusalem, dedicated to God, has been overrun by people trying to make money. Jesus disrupts the selling by literally turning over tables.

Invite youth to read the Scripture aloud. Ask,  
“What did you notice? What words or phrases stick out to you?”



*Matthew 21:12 from the New Revised Standard Version translation:*

Then Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves.

Invite youth to read the Scripture aloud a second time and consider the following questions:

- How do you think the people selling things in the temple responded to Jesus' wrath?
- How do you think shoppers responded?
- What have you seen that you found offensive to God and wanted to disrupt?
- What tables in your church or community do you wish you could overturn?
- Have you ever considered disruption to be part of your faith? Has this text changed your mind?



# GOING DEEPER

*This section was added for groups with enough trust and community between adult leaders and youth to tackle hard topics together. Use this section only if you feel that your group will be able to go deeper into these hard topics.*

The Gospel passage we just read shows Jesus going public with his commitment to justice. Though the word “protest” has lots of baggage right now, the word originates from the Latin *prōtestārī*, meaning “to declare publicly.” The “pro-” in “protest” doesn’t mean “in favor of” or “supporting,” as it does in some other terms — instead it’s used to indicate a sense of outwardness.

**The first records of Christian protest come from the 1300s, though we could argue that the first recorded protest was Jesus’ public commitment to justice in the temple.**

**At a march in Washington, D.C., held prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and in response to ongoing gun violence in our schools and neighborhoods, leaders in this church carried a banner that read, “Thoughts. Prayers. Action.” This reminds us that our public witness is both spiritual and embodied — we both pray and work for the good of our neighbors.**

**As Bishop Eaton shared at the ELCA Advocacy Summer School, “We in the ELCA often say, ‘God’s work. Our hands.’ and that’s how we show up in the world. ... Our public speech and our visible actions are part of the witness of the church in the world.”**

**What do you want to go public with today? What protest do you have in you that needs to be named for the world? What injustice or table do you want to see overturned?**



Give each youth half of a poster board. Ask them to use the front to create a public statement against injustice and the back to create a prayer petition addressing this injustice. Once everyone is finished, invite the youth to share their signs with one another. Close this activity by inviting them to pray together, with each youth contributing their prayer petition. After each petition add “Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.”

## 7. SENDING

**Wise ones, you have been told that you’re too young, that you must wait your turn, that you don’t know any better, that you don’t understand. Receive this blessing: You have been given power by the One who did not wait his turn, who instead went to people on the margins who needed to be loved, listened to and cared for. You have been given power by the One who overturned tables, who called elders to attention and challenged them to dismantle oppressive systems. This is your inheritance — not for later but for now. Go out into the world confident that your voice is needed, your presence is valued and your actions will produce change. Amen.**

## Unit 4, Session 2:

# DISRUPTIVE



Spotify playlist:  
*Created to Be Disruptive*

### ***Supplies Needed:***

- Printed copies of the [“Interrupting Phrases”](#) resource (or write the phrases in a place where all students can see them).
- *Going Deeper:* God’s Holy Darkness book and video player

## 1. OVERVIEW FOR ADULT LEADERS

This session helps youth practice disruption through “Interrupting Phrases.” In the “Going Deeper” activity, youth will be invited to consider the ways that harmful theologies need to be interrupted and will hear one way in which three ELCA leaders are working to celebrate God’s Holy Darkness.



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to work for justice for all our siblings.

## 2. GATHERING

### LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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As we prepare for the 2024 Gathering, let us remember the Indigenous peoples and tribal nations who were the first to love, pray, grow, celebrate, cry, drum and sing upon the land where we will assemble.

### OPENING PRAYER

As we begin to gather, we invite you into a posture of prayer that helps you connect with God.

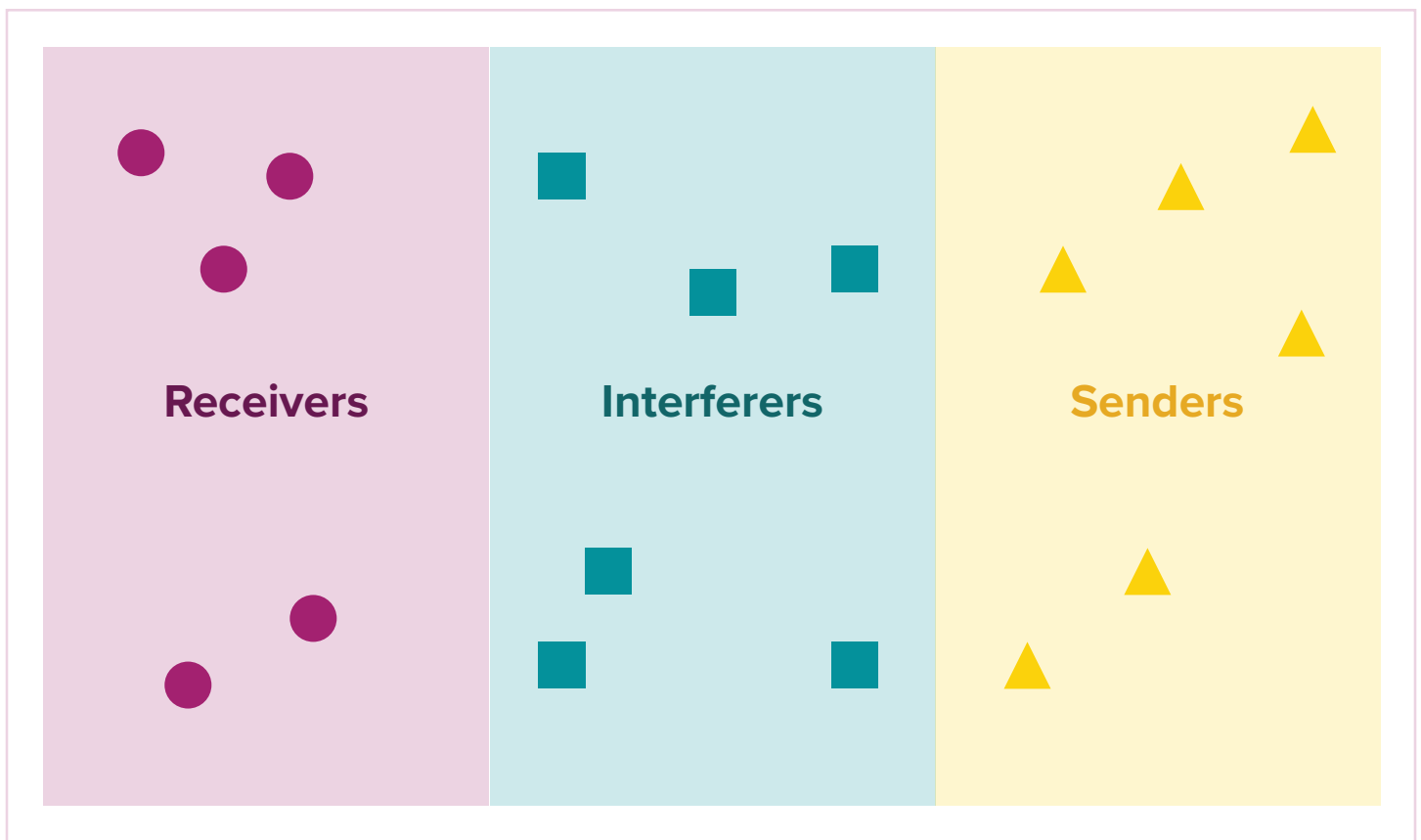
Let us pray. O Lord God, you give us discomfort so that we will know when things are not in alignment. Let that discomfort spur us into holy action. Allow your Holy Spirit to create in us the sense of urgency we need to act. Surround us with those you have called to work alongside us. May the disruptions we cause dissipate the ways your creation is not as you intend. We pray this in the name of the One who restored creation through the giving of his own life, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

## OPENING ACTIVITY

This activity shows how interference and disruption can happen. It is meant as a simple icebreaker and invitation into the day's themes. For this activity, split the group into three smaller groups: the senders, the receivers and the interferers.

Position the senders on one side of a room, behind a marked line, and the receivers on the other side of the room, also behind a marked line. The interferers stand in the middle, between the marked lines of the other two groups, and are free to move anywhere in that area.

The senders are given a secret phrase; for example, "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself." They must communicate that phrase to the other side through body language only. They may not write it down to show the other team. After 30 seconds of this the receivers must huddle together and then attempt to tell the entire group what they think the phrase is. During the 30 seconds of sending and receiving, the interferers try to disrupt the communication. They can yell and jump up and down in front of the senders or the receivers. They may not touch the senders or receivers, nor can they cross the lines. After one round, rotate the groups until all three have played all three positions. With very small groups you can have one or two senders and one or two receivers and designate the rest of the group as interferers.



### 3. WORD

Invite youth to read the Scripture aloud. Ask,  
**“What did you notice? What words or phrases stick out to you?”**



*Matthew 21:12-17 from the Message Translation:*

**<sup>12-14</sup>Jesus went straight to the Temple and threw out everyone who had set up shop, buying and selling. He kicked over the tables of loan sharks and the stalls of dove merchants. He quoted this text:**

**My house was designated a house of prayer;  
 You have made it a hangout for thieves.**

**Now there was room for the blind and crippled to get in. They came to Jesus and he healed them.**

**<sup>15-16</sup>When the religious leaders saw the outrageous things he was doing, and heard all the children running and shouting through the Temple, “Hosanna to David’s Son!” they were up in arms and took him to task. “Do you hear what these children are saying?” Jesus said, “Yes, I hear them. And haven’t you read in God’s Word, ‘From the mouths of children and babies I’ll furnish a place of praise?’”**

**<sup>17</sup>Fed up, Jesus turned on his heel and left the city for Bethany, where he spent the night.**

Invite youth to read the Scripture aloud a second time and consider the following questions:

- Jesus responded with holy disruption to the injustice he witnessed in the temple. How do you define injustice?
- What injustices you have experienced, witnessed or become aware of?
- The religious leaders were angry with Jesus over his actions. Whom do we risk upsetting when we disrupt injustice?
- Some people are naturally drawn to confrontation, whereas others avoid it at all costs. Where do you find yourself on this spectrum?
- With your gifts, what role could be a good fit for you in disrupting injustice?

## RESPONSE ACTIVITY

Put students in pairs and give each pair a printed copy of the [interrupting phrases](#) below (also available in the appendix). Ask them to read through the “interrupting phrases.”

Group people together in pairs and give them a list of interrupting phrases.

Interrupting Phrases adapted from @privtoprog and @slyviaduckworth

- That’s not OK with me.
- I didn’t realize you think that.
- I’m not comfortable with that.
- That’s not funny.
- We don’t say things like that here.
- I’m sorry, what?
- Hold on. I need to process what you said.
- I find that offensive.
- Help me understand your thinking.
- What you just said is harmful.

Have each pair share a time when they were in a situation where they could have used one of these phrases. Which interrupting phrase would they have used? They can practice saying the phrase out loud a few times, to help it stick for the next time they want to disrupt an unjust situation.

# GOING DEEPER

*This section was added for groups with enough trust and community between adult leaders and youth to tackle hard topics together. Use this section only if you feel that your group will be able to go deeper into these hard topics.*

**One particularly harmful part of theology is associating sin with all things dark or black. Many churches held VBS programs in which we made bracelets to tell the gospel story; the black beads represented sin and the white ones represented purity or salvation.**

**Embedded in our theology, this association has created an implicit bias against things that are black. There has been an active movement in our church and in larger Christian culture to claim the truth that darkness and blackness are holy, interrupting the harmful intertwining of white supremacy and God's love.**

**A book called *God's Holy Darkness* helps us reimagine how God is beyond this binary of light and dark — and how both are holy.**

We encourage you to purchase and read *God's Holy Darkness* with your group.

Here are some questions to consider:

- What was your favorite page? Why?
- How does this book disrupt your notion of darkness/black as sin?
- How does claiming the holiness of darkness reframe who God is for you?
- How does claiming the holiness of darkness reframe your love for your neighbor?



We also invite you to watch a conversation with the authors of *God's Holy Darkness*. If you are short on time, we encourage you to start at 19:15 and continue to 26:25. In this section the authors talk about how they explore the richness of Scripture beyond binaries.

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=iRCf6LLpZLg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iRCf6LLpZLg)

Here are some questions to consider:

- How does this example of disrupting harmful theology inspire you?
- What do you hope the church will continue to talk about?

## Gathering Connection



Like the church, the Gathering should be a place where we can practice living in a community that is growing, forgiving and infused with God's grace. Far too often our communities choose comfort as their primary goal, thinking, "If we just keep everyone comfortable, everyone will be happy." Centering comfort keeps us from experiencing growth. At the Gathering you will experience disruption. Your normal routines will look different. Your normal thought patterns will be challenged. Your thoughts about who God is will be disrupted — and, we hope, expanded.

There is grace in each disruption. By God's grace you were created to sit and wait in that uncomfortable space, trusting that God will stir something new — a new relationship, new imagination, new hopes, etc.

As disciples of Jesus, we know that disruptions don't end there. They are an invitation from the Holy Spirit to be part of God's creative, redeeming, disruptive work in our world. When you witness injustice, even at the Gathering, we invite you to disrupt, challenge and embody change. Beloveds of God, the world is waiting for us to move beyond our comfort to disrupt injustice. You were created to be disruptive.

## 7. SENDING

**Leader:** The church throughout history has been a place of change.

All: We are called to be the change makers.

**Leader:** We gather together in community because we have hope for a better future.

All: We are called to be hope for the hopeless.

**Leader:** There are times when we are told we are too much.

All: We are called to resist temptation to be silent.

**Leader:** Beloveds, you are not too much.

All: Fear is a liar that silences the reformer.

**Leader:** Go now, assured that the Spirit will meet you along the way and accompany you through your days.

All: Amen.



## Unit 5, Session 1:

# DISCIPLES




Spotify playlist:  
*Created to Be Disciples*

### *Supplies Needed:*

- A computer or TV to show a video

## 1. OVERVIEW FOR ADULT LEADERS

This session allows your youth to explore what it means to be a disciple — in action, in speech, with our whole selves. It features Bethlehem Lutheran Church in New Orleans and utilizes a video created by African Descent Ministries of the ELCA.



We are **CREATED TO BE DISCIPLES** —  
to be sent into the world to love our neighbor,  
just as we are loved by God.

## 2. GATHERING

### LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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As we prepare for the 2024 Gathering, let us remember the Indigenous peoples and tribal nations who were the first to love, pray, grow, celebrate, cry, drum and sing upon the land where we will assemble.

### OPENING PRAYER

As we begin to gather, we invite you into a posture of prayer that helps you connect with God.

Let us pray. O Lord, you call us to follow you wherever you lead. We know we do not always follow without question if we follow at all. Help us to listen for your call and to prepare for action. Stir your Spirit inside us that we might long to follow you and that people will recognize us as your disciples by the love we share. We pray this in the name of the One who was love, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

## OPENING ACTIVITY

This activity reveals how people work together and allows the group to demonstrate how we communicate with our words and our actions — just as disciples do.

Line up your group in some determined order (dates of birth, for instance) without allowing them to speak to one another.

**Disciples are created to bear witness to God’s love with both words and actions. That’s right — this means figuring out how to share God’s love in action, as you did in the activity, but also with words. We are created to be disciples, to be sent out into the world to love our neighbor just as we are loved by God.**

## 3. WORD

Invite youth to read the Scripture aloud. Ask,  
**“What did you notice? What words or phrases stick out to you?”**



*Matthew 22:36-40 from the New Revised Standard Version:*

**“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” [Jesus] said to [the lawyer], “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”**

Invite youth to read the Scripture aloud a second time and consider the following questions:

- Why do you think this is the “greatest commandment”?
- Describe what love for God looks like.
- Describe what love for our neighbor looks like.
- How are love for God and love for our neighbor intertwined? Why does that matter?
- What is a disciple?

**New Orleans is marked by many things including its music, its food and historic events in the civil rights movement. It has a unique flavor that blends diverse influences. No one should be surprised that the Lutheran witness of the pastors and people of Bethlehem Lutheran Church is full of the flavor of New Orleans.**

**Begun in 1884 by the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod, this historic church later became part of the ELCA. It is known for many things including its music and the work it does in, with and for the community. At a time when segregation was the order of the day, it offered a school for African-descent people as their schools were defunded. Bethlehem Lutheran lost half its membership after Hurricane Katrina, yet currently it feeds over 200 neighbors twice a week. The feeding, known as the Community Table, is one way this community lives its discipleship.**

In 2022, Bethlehem Lutheran was featured in the second episode of “Talks at the Desk,” a series created by African Descent Ministries of the ELCA.



We encourage you to watch the entire video, but if you are short on time, skip to 12:00 and watch until 14:53 to hear the story of the Community Table’s chef, Deborah Wells.

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=4AFqTnFTsDY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4AFqTnFTsDY)

Here are some questions to consider:

- How is Chef Wells living out her discipleship?
- Chef Wells explains how Bethlehem is part of the community. How are you and/or your church engaged in your community as part of your discipleship?
- Do you have gifts you are aching to share with your community?
- How does this story inspire you to make a difference in your own community?

## GOING DEEPER

*This section was added for groups with enough trust and community between adult leaders and youth to tackle hard topics together. Use this section only if you feel that your group will be able to go deeper into these hard topics.*



We encourage you to watch the whole “Talks at the Desk” video about Bethlehem Lutheran Church. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=4AFqTnFTsDY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4AFqTnFTsDY)

After watching the full video, reflect on these questions, adapted from the “Talks at the Desk” discussion guide: [download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Talks\\_at\\_the\\_Desk\\_discussion\\_guide.pdf](https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Talks_at_the_Desk_discussion_guide.pdf)

- What assumptions do you have about Black church culture? What did you learn about church culture in this story?
- Is your church a Reconciling in Christ congregation? If so, how long did your church take to make that commitment and adopt a welcome statement? If not, what would it mean for you if your congregation became a Reconciling in Christ congregation?
- Has your congregation taken steps to address immediate and/or long-term needs in your community? If so, which steps have you already taken? What further steps could you take?
- Bethlehem Lutheran is making an ambitious commitment to address the housing crisis in New Orleans. How can the collective church support initiatives such as this? Is there a need for housing in your neighborhood?
- How has this story inspired you to think about discipleship as love for God and love for neighbor?

## 7. SENDING

**Beloved siblings, followers of Christ, you have been equipped with the knowledge of God and the word of God. Created to be disciples, you are sent into the world as a blessing, to love our neighbor. Go now and share your blessedness with the world. Amen.**

## Unit 5, Session 2:

# DISCIPLES

### *Supplies Needed:*

- A dull penny for each person
- Several plastic or glass bowls
- Vinegar
- Salt
- Rags
- Water
- *Going Deeper:* Sheets of paper, glue, a large piece of paper, a battery-operated candle for each person



Spotify playlist:  
*Created to Be Disciples*

## 1. OVERVIEW FOR ADULT LEADERS

This session is heavy on supplies and requires preplanning! It invites youth to understand their call of discipleship as one that connects them with God and each other. In the “Going Deeper” section they will be invited to name the ways Christianity has done harm and to transform that harm into love.

The response activity is a science experiment that transforms dull pennies. The idea behind it is that we are transformed similarly in baptism and that, just as we notice new parts of the coin, God calls us to notice neighbors and join in God’s creative and redeeming work in the world.



We are **CREATED TO BE DISCIPLES** —  
to be sent into the world to love our neighbor,  
just as we are loved by God.

## 2. GATHERING

### LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The 2024 ELCA Youth Gathering, MYLE, the tAble and the Young Adult Gathering will take place on stolen land that originally belonged to the Chitimacha people. The Atakapa, Caddo, Choctaw, Houma, Natchez and Tunica people inhabited other areas of what is now Louisiana. Today we gather on stolen land that originally belonged to \_\_\_\_\_.

As we prepare for the 2024 Gathering, let us remember the Indigenous peoples and tribal nations who were the first to love, pray, grow, celebrate, cry, drum and sing upon the land where we will assemble.

### OPENING PRAYER

As we begin to gather, we invite you into a posture of prayer that helps you connect with God.

Let us pray. O Lord, we know that we are marked with your love. Help us to understand how we are seen, experienced and felt as your disciples. May we, as your disciples, show the love we have for you in the way we love our neighbor. We pray in the name of the one who first loved us, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

## OPENING ACTIVITY

The purpose of this activity is twofold — to give your group a chance to laugh together and to demonstrate that disciples are engaged in two things at once:

Loving God. Loving people.

Have your group stand in a circle around you with a little space between each person. Each person holds their left hand out to the side, palm up, then uses their right index finger to touch the upturned palm of the person to their right.

When you say, “Go!,” each person should try to grab their neighbor’s right index finger with their left hand and also pull their own right index finger away without it being grabbed by the person on their right.

After three or four rounds, invite people switch hands, holding out their right palm and using their left index finger to touch their neighbor’s hand. Try the game a few times this way.

**You are using two hands in this activity. Today we will explore the idea that discipleship not only involves our two hands but invites all of us to respond to God’s love.**

## 3. WORD

Invite youth to read the Scripture aloud. Ask,  
**“What did you notice? What words or phrases stick out to you?”**



*Matthew 22:36-40 from the Message Translation:*

<sup>36</sup>“Teacher, which command in God’s Law is the most important?”

<sup>37-40</sup>Jesus said, “‘Love the Lord your God with all your passion and prayer and intelligence.’ This is the most important, the first on any list. But there is a second to set alongside it: ‘Love others as well as you love yourself.’ These two commands are pegs; everything in God’s Law and the Prophets hangs from them.

Invite youth to read the Scripture aloud a second time, then read the following to them.

**Notice how, in this Scripture, love of God and love of neighbor are two sides of the same coin. The same is true of discipleship. Some theologians have captured this by describing a cross: a vertical beam pointing up to God and a horizontal beam reaching out in extended love of our neighbor. Without the vertical dimension we are just a club or social service agency. Without the horizontal dimension we are missing the gospel message regarding our neighbors. An early church theologian, Irenaeus, writes, “How fitting for Christ to die with arms wide open, for how else would he have embraced the whole world?” As disciples, we too are invited to take the posture of loving God and embracing our neighbor.**



Sometimes we choose instead a posture that protects or comforts us. We hold onto fears, focusing on the risks, rather than being Jesus' disciples, sent out into the world to love our neighbor as we are loved by God. These fears become stumbling blocks to our being Christ in the world that God loves so much. As Lutherans, we care for our siblings in Christ and for all creation as a response to God's infinite love for us, which was there even before we came into this world: "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19 NIV).

Here are some questions to ponder:

- As you consider the cross, do you feel more like a vertical beam, a horizontal beam or a combination of both?
- What are your fears? What discourages you from loving your neighbor as Christ loves you?
- How does Christ's love inspire you?

## GOING DEEPER

*This section was added for groups with enough trust and community between adult leaders and youth to tackle hard topics together. Use this section only if you feel that your group will be able to go deeper into these hard topics.*

**Discipleship is beautiful, yet many of our young people have experienced Christians who do harm, speak hatefully and work for laws that hurt our neighbors. This activity makes space for young people to name the ways in which discipleship has a "branding problem."**

Ask your youth to write, on a piece of colored paper, answers to the following prompts:

- How do you see Christians portrayed in the media?
- What negative words come to mind when you think of Christians or disciples?
- What harm have you seen people do in Jesus' name?

If comfortable, have youth share their responses. Afterward invite them to tear up their paper into smaller pieces and, on a large piece of paper, glue the pieces into the word "LOVE." Hand each youth a battery-operated candle and ask them to think of a person who needs to hear that they are beloved at this moment. This person may not believe in God, and that's OK. Place the candles on the sheet of paper. Invite the group to take a photo of the candles and the "love" collage and to text it to the person in question with a message as simple as "Sending you love this day."



Invite your youth to share this image and the love it communicates with their wider social media circle.

## RESPONSE ACTIVITY

Now it's time to move into the activity. Start by giving each person a dull penny.

In this activity participants see old, dull pennies become shiny and new before their very eyes! You will need several plastic or glass bowls, vinegar, salt, some old dull pennies, rags or paper towels, and water. Mix  $\frac{1}{4}$  cup of vinegar and 1 tablespoon of salt in one bowl and pour clean water into another. Invite everyone to look at their dull pennies and then drop them into the salted vinegar. The longer you leave them, the shinier they will become.

Using a spoon, grab the pennies out of the bowl, rinse them in the clean water and dry them off with a paper towel. Ask everyone to observe their shiny pennies and report any new details they can see.

**Discipleship is transformative. Transformation comes when we, changed by God's love, see our neighbor differently, notice God at work in our world and take action. Like a coin, discipleship has two sides.**

**As you look at this penny, reflect on how God has changed you and given you new eyes.**

- **In what ways do you share God's love?**
- **In what ways does your congregation express God's love in the world?**
- **What neighbors might the Spirit be calling you to notice and come alongside this morning?**



## Gathering Connection

**Disciples are sent into the world to love our neighbor just as we are loved by God. The whole Gathering is an experience of discipleship. We will come together for five days to experience God's love, to hear again "You are loved. You are fearfully and wonderfully made. You were created — on purpose — by God." We will gather for five days to experience being sent into community, in our neighborhoods and our world. You are brave. You were created to be disruptive.**

**You are a disciple. Every day is an opportunity to experience God's love and be that love in your world. You were created to be ... brave, authentic, free, disruptive disciples. New Orleans, here we come!**

## 7. SENDING

**Leader: Repeat after me: I have been called to a purpose!**

All: I have been called to a purpose!

**Leader: To share the love of God!**

All: To share the love of God!

**Leader: With the world!**

All: With the world!

**Leader: And our neighbor!**

All: And our neighbor!

**Leader: And our ourselves!**

All: And ourselves!

**Leader: Go now in full confidence, knowing that the manner in which you share that love is uniquely yours and desperately needed.**

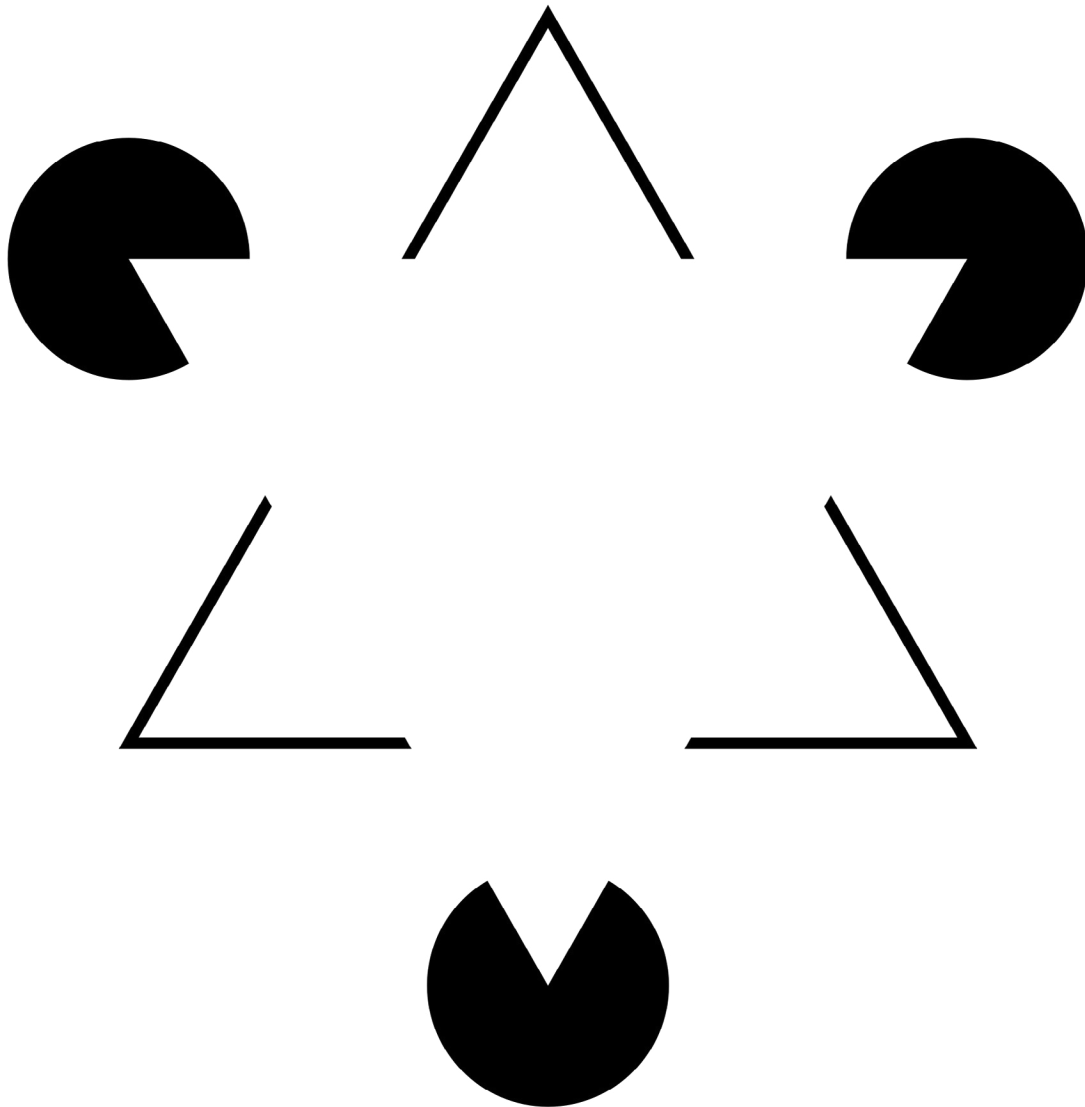
All: Amen.

GETTING READY: A Youth Ministry Curriculum preparing  
for the 2024 ELCA Youth Gathering

# APPENDIX: Worksheets & Resources

Unit 1, Session 1: BRAVE

# Worksheet: "How Many Triangles?"



*Fibonacci. English: Kanizsa triangle (2007)*

Unit 1, Session 2: BRAVE

# Worksheet: Journal Handout

- What is something you feel nervous, fearful or insecure about?

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- When you think about being vulnerable in this situation, what feelings come to mind?

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- What help do you need from God? How might God be calling you to be brave?

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- How can the experience of preparing for and going to the Gathering (or any new event/situation) be an opportunity for you to be vulnerable and brave?

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Unit 4, Session 1: DISRUPTIVE

# Resource: Ruby Bridges Photo



*William Frantz Elementary School, New Orleans, 1960.  
US Marshals with Young Ruby Bridges on School Steps*

Unit 4, Session 2: DISRUPTIVE

## Resource: Interrupting Phrases

- That's not OK with me.
- I didn't realize you think that.
- I'm not comfortable with that.
- That's not funny.
- We don't say things like that here.
- I'm sorry, what?
- Hold on. I need to process what you said.
- I find that offensive.
- Help me understand your thinking.
- What you just said is harmful.



#ELCAYG2024

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TO BE



Evangelical  
Lutheran Church  
in America

GREATER

GREATER  
MILWAUKEE  
SYNOD