



A service of the  
Northwest District  
of the  
Lutheran Church -  
Missouri Synod

# Youth Supports

A resource to encourage and empower youth  
leaders for the expansion of the Lord's kingdom.

October 2005 - Volume 6, Issue 10

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## Youth Ministry and the Experience of Faith

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that  
Lutherans  
and  
*experience*  
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hand in hand.

I have seen youth eager and willing to participate in anything and even travel 14 hours to get places with leaders who front loaded their experience with great expectations of what would come. Youth have within themselves the ability to dream dreams which have the potential to create a kingdom experience.

*“Inwardly he deals with us through the Holy Spirit, faith, and other gifts...But whatever their measure or order the outward factors should and must precede...The inward experience follows and is effected by the outward...God has determined to give the inward to no one except through the outward.”(Luther)<sup>1</sup>*

For as many years as I can remember, I have been under the impression that Lutherans and *experience* could not go hand in hand. We are the ones who are saved by Grace – not by faith experience. It was Luther who said, “Here I stand. I can do no other” and spoke against the Anabaptists’ *experience* in order to have faith. Could I dare consider *experience* as a biblical key to faith and belief?

After many years of excusing *experience* from faith discussions, I began questioning how the church formed during the modern era, and began entering into discussion about ways to lead the church in the transitory postmodern culture. Discussions about the postmodern church included themes much like Luther’s concept of *paradox*.

Instead of thinking of truth as *either/or*, the postmodern is comfortable with *both/and* – holding two truths simultaneously. “Truth is relative” is often attached to this discussion. We are both right because you see truth from your point of view and I see it from mine. *Both/and* thinking actually goes a step further. I can hold BOTH truths even when diametrically opposed to each other – a paradox.

Luther valued paradox. He wrote about being fully *sinner* and fully *saint* at the same time – one hundred percent *corrupt* and one hundred percent *perfect* simultaneously. True postmodern people like to read Martin Luther (and so do I).

### ***Luther Condemned Faith Based on Experience.***

When I taught in the university, there were students who viewed faith in different ways. Some believed spirituality was based on experiences they were having in life or that they came to faith through a specific experience. I was reminded of my experience working in a grocery store in Grand Rapids, Michigan, as a college student.

Five part-timers worked the meat department of a Grand Rapids store wrapping

Luther also understood the benefits of experience and active learning in the forming of children....

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meat. Four of them were students in local seminaries. (I was the fifth.) The students represented several denominations: Baptist, Christian Reformed, Dutch Reformed, and just plain Reformed. The Dutch Reformed student told me his *experience* of feeling as if the pastor were speaking right to him in worship was the indicator he had come to faith. At the time I did not think much of his story, but have since realized it was founded on a theology that required experience prior to faith. This was the experience that Luther condemned as purely emotional reaction – what we might label an adrenaline rush – and a weak foundation.

But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. (Matthew 7:26 (NIV))

### *Luther Welcomed Faith Formation THROUGH Experience.*

Luther opposed experience but did not fear experience. It is no secret that suffering produces a stronger faith, but it does not bring one to faith. It is no secret that the Holy Spirit may use experience as a means of bringing faith to a person, but it is not the experience that causes the faith. Though there are external ways used to form internally, it is God through the Holy Spirit that works faith in Christ within our hearts – quite beyond any rationalized external experience.

Luther also understood the benefits of experience and active learning in the forming of children, and there is enough indicated in his writings to show that the intent of his words is not limited to children.

Recall your own life story and travel back in your mind to the experiences that caused you great reflection on faith as a youth and you would find *experience* driving faith formation. It is faith, first built by Christ and on Christ, that benefits from experience.

*He is like a man building a house, who dug down deep and laid the foundation on rock. When a flood came, the torrent struck that house but could not shake it, because it was well **built**.* —Luke 6:48 NIV

1 Martin Luther, vol. 40, *Luther's Works, Vol. 40 : Church and Ministry II*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald and Helmut T. Lehmann, Luther's Works (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999, c1958)

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