

# What tomorrow's church leaders did on their summer vacation

By Heidi Ernst

Thoughts of Lutheran summer camps often turn to wilderness. But while thousands of young people scale spiritual heights in the wilds of nature, a cluster of programs is focusing on a different kind of uncharted territory. These camps are challenging high school students to study through word and experience how theology relates to contemporary issues, all while helping them discern their vocation and find their place in a modern faith community.

To kick-start such programs, Lilly Endowment Inc., a philanthropic foundation based in Indianapolis, first offered grants in the 1990s to Christian-affiliated higher-education institutions nationwide to create high school theology institutes.

In 2015, Lilly distributed a new round of 82 grants. Three went to ELCA colleges—Augsburg, Minneapolis; Gustavus Adolphus, St. Peter, Minn.; and Roanoke, Salem, Va.—to fund programs beginning this past summer. Another two, Grand View University, Des Moines, Iowa, and Newberry (S.C.) College, were among 10 recipients this year.

It's all part of what Lilly calls its "commitment to identify and cultivate a cadre of theologically-minded youth who will become leaders in church and society."

The weeklong programs have many commonalities, and one is that signing kids up for seminary isn't necessarily the goal. "What we really need to focus on is theologically informed, critical thinkers who are lay leaders," said Jeremy Myers, associate professor of religion at Augsburg. "Whether they become accountants or social workers, pastors or homemakers, that's the way we want to think about vocation: a call into leading a theologically informed, intentional life."

Myers serves as program director of the Youth Theology Institute at Augsburg, a two-time Lilly grant recipient. In 2016, 18 high-schoolers and their Augsburg student mentors practiced discipleship in the public square. After three hours of class that covered "the theology of the cross as the underpinning of our call as Christians into the world," they did just that, speaking to leaders and reading Scripture in a nearby neighborhood.



Photo: Courtesy of Augsburg

As a mentor at the Youth Theology Institute at Augsburg, Hannah Schmit (left) draws on her experience navigating Minneapolis as an Augsburg student to guide participants through community-based learning activities.

"We had really good dialogue about what it looks like to be called out into communities, to be neighbors to people who don't necessarily look like you," said student mentor Hannah Schmit, a senior at Augsburg studying sociology, religion and biology whose home congregation is Grace Lutheran in Tomahawk, Wis.

That topic also emerged at Roanoke's Theology4Teens, whose 14 attendees visited a synagogue and spoke with two of the college's Muslim students, among other events. It all tied into their readings of Genesis 1-3 and discussions of German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer's book *Life Together*, which reflects on the concept of community.

"We all have a vocation we've been given to love and serve our community," said T4Teens mentor Zach Wright, a senior Christian studies and business major who grew up attending Calvary Lutheran Church in Mount Airy, Md., and wants to be a Lutheran pastor. "That's exciting for me, being able to tell young people that. I can't fix the world. But I know who can and what I can do to be a part of that life together, that community."

Gustavus Adolphus took a slightly different worldview in its Gustavus Academy for Faith, Science and Ethics. Building on a history of bringing together science and theology (in 1963 the college originated the Nobel Conference, an annual gathering of Nobel science laureates plus theologians or philosophers), Gustavus' program desired to "help students think about global challenges and how science and religion could partner to address them," said Siri Erickson, Gustavus' chaplain and academy director.

"I clarified many questions that I had for years," said Sophia Gottlick, a high school senior who was baptized Lutheran, attends a nondenominational church in Rockford, Ill., and is applying to Gustavus.

Photo: Courtesy of Augsburg



Molly Hoyt and Nickolai Podvin participate in worship, which happens daily and in many different forms throughout the institute's weeklong program.

Photo: Courtesy of Augsburg



Group discussions engage program participants in thoughtful and meaningful dialogue with Augsburg faculty at the institute.

Photo: Courtesy of Gustavus Academy



Gabe Grosshuesch (right), a student at Gustavus Adolphus College, St. Peter, Minn., and a mentor at the Gustavus Academy for Faith, Science and Ethics, discusses energy efficiency in campus buildings with students.



Photo: Courtesy of Gustavus Academy

Scott Moeller, director of the Linnaeus Arboretum at Gustavus Adolphus, talks about the biodiversity of Minnesota's landscape with academy participants. The academy focuses on connecting science and theology.

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“Like many, I had the misconception that science and religion are at odds. I learned of the many creative alliances between the two areas and [how their integration can] help us better understand our values and beliefs and become better stewards of the earth.”

Next summer each institute will continue its mission, using Lilly’s grant for another few years and becoming self-supporting after that. And Grand View and Newberry will launch their Lilly-funded institutes.

Like parts of other programs, Newberry hopes to combine reflections on the world’s moral and ethical challenges, such as poverty and environmental degradation, with the students’ sense of vocation.

Grand View will concentrate on another common theme: community. “We’ll be trying to develop a community around faith, theology, the idea of being connected to each other,” said Russell Lackey, a campus pastor and the institute’s project director. “We’ll be saying that the moment you

leave, you can begin the work of the church. We want to help them build the church of tomorrow today.”

Young people crave those bonds of connection and community so much that numerous students wrote on their institute applications that the one simple thing they hoped to gain from the experience was meeting someone like them.

Afterward many proclaimed it the highlight—getting to know people their age who had the same questions they did, who were thinking about a call to the ministry, who got excited about science and/or theology, who could share thoughts about their faith. That, said Gustavus’ Erickson, “really allowed them to explore questions more deeply.” And it allowed them a place where they could finally be themselves. 



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