

## What If . . .

Pastors Gene Ernst, Merle Mahnken, and Mark Hansen wondered “what if” the six parishes they served combined for some youth ministry activities. The limited number of youth in the smaller rural parishes made it difficult to generate much energy as a group. What if youth from several congregations and several school districts got together periodically for fellowship, service, study, and worship? A year ago (summer 2008) the pastors initiated the concept and began the conversations with lay leaders and youth.

The congregations decided to join youth groups for three or four activities during the coming months. Immanuel, Schleswig hosted the combined groups for a group building activity. The Triple Parish hosted “Reggies Sleep Out” in November. Youth camped out on a cold evening raising awareness and raising funds for the homeless. In January the Kiron-Deloit dual parish organized a trip to the Sioux City Gospel Mission where the youth volunteered. Immanuel, Schleswig hosted an education event in February featuring a speaker on the creation/evolution debate. In March the groups traveled to Denison for a bowling activity. Devotions and prayers are always part of the gatherings—and food!

The leaders celebrate the openness and respect of the youth. The youth have enjoyed not only getting acquainted with one another but with the other pastors and church settings. The leaders have appreciated the assistance of their partners and peers from other congregations. Getting youth (and leaders) out of their “comfort zone” is always a challenge. More interactions and more time will strengthen the relationships. Many local congregation youth group traditions (Easter breakfasts, etc.) have continued.

What if the groups explored a servant event or mission experience together? What if the congregations registered together for a District or national youth gathering having counselors supervise youth from several congregations? What if . . .?

A small congregation or a small number of youth does not mean that youth ministry is simply dropped. Youth can continue to be blessed with ministry opportunities unique to their gifts and their age. Youth can continue to be a vital part of the ministry of the local congregation, make an impact on the community, and be missionaries into the world.

What if a congregation celebrated the gifts and contributions of youth? St. John, Charter Oak held a youth appreciation Sunday on May 10. The individual and collective gifts of the

youth were noted. Youth of the congregation have not only hosted dinners (Thanksgiving, Easter, Lent) but have also collected Christ-



*Youth from St. John, Charter Oak are recognized by Pastor Merrill, Pastor Riggert and their sixth grade midweek class.*

mas gifts for the needy, assisted in teaching midweek and VBS, and in other ways been visible in the congregation and community. Pastor Richard Merrill notes the extraordinary support of the parents of the youth. Executive assistant Bob Riggert was present to share in the worship service and recognitions.



What if junior youth (grades 6-8) realized that they possess keys more important than the key to their home, locker or other space? What if they carried “The King’s Keys” with them into their church, home, and school? The Office of the Keys will be the focus of the October 31-Nov. 1, 2009 Iowa District West Junior Youth Gathering. Registration information will be available in August.



What if every high school youth celebrated the “Impact” of Jesus on their lives? What if youth saw the “Impact” that their faith could have in the contexts of their family, church, and community? “Impact” is the theme of the Nov. 27-29 Iowa District West Senior Youth Gathering.



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