



## Hallie Babcock

Just picture... You are sitting in a bus filled with 57 people, many whom you don't know, going to a place that you have never been to before. Let's just say it's a little bit scary. You are on your way to do God's work and that's about all you know. Your emotions consist of feeling nervous and happy to be going to a new place. That's what I was feeling on our way to New Orleans. I had butterflies in my stomach and an odd feeling of excitement. So when the day came and we arrived at our destination, those feelings got multiplied by 10.

But then, when we made our way to the Superdome on Wednesday night and sat among the 33,000-plus people attending the Gathering, that nervous feeling turned to awe. Several speakers welcomed us, but there was one who stood out to me.

Nadia Bolz-Weber, pastor of House for All Sinners and Saints, a congregation of the ELCA in Denver, CO. shared her story. Pastor Bolz-Weber, covered in tattoos, told of her drug and alcohol-addicted past and her sense of not belonging in the church in which she grew up. In her twenties, she met a man – now her husband - who re-introduced

her to church, the Lutheran church, where she learned that no matter who you are or what your past is that you are God's child. Awhile later that person that everyone saw as "different" was a Lutheran pastor, preaching the good news of Jesus. That amazed me and made me think. It made me see that no matter who you are or what you have done in life, God loves you as a chosen child. Like one of the thousand people fed by 5 loaves of bread and two fish, no matter who you are, God will feed you and fill you with his Word. And God will use us, with both our weaknesses and our strengths to feed others.



### **Hannah Korman**

You get a great feeling of excitement when you're in the Superdome with 33,309 other people, learning about faith. And the stories that were told impact you and the way you now think about the world, religion and God.

On Thursday night, we heard from 18-year-old Megan Stubbs. She has been living with her family in Tanzania since she was twelve years old. She talked to us about the differences between the United States and Africa in how we think about death. In the U.S. we fear death and avoid talking about it, but in Africa death is something they are prepared for and that they accept, because they don't have the medical care that we do. She told us about a girl at her

school whose Mom – her last living relative – had died. In Tanzania, people go to be with, pray and sing with the family of those who have died. She went with a couple of friends to visit the girl and as they were leaving, she looked back and saw that she was all alone. So she went back and stayed by her side for several days. Even though she wasn't really a close friend, she stayed with her.

She said that there was a phrase that they say there – “Over in the West, they have watches. But in Africa, people have time.” We watch the time, keeping busy and denying death, never wanting it to happen. People in Tanzania don't have so many things, but they do have time to spend with others and to give, listen and love. They live life to the fullest, while we rush through everything and they don't fear death. Her time spent with the girl reminded her that God is with us and we can trust and don't need to be afraid. We are never alone.

During the week in New Orleans, we often talked about where we saw Jesus each day. One day I saw God in this man who gave me a dollar when I was short a dollar when I was buying a coffee. Giving money to a complete stranger like me made me think that I can do the same for someone else. In the small things we do for each other we have a chance to show Jesus' love for everyone.

## Sadeo Yates



This trip was nothing like I expected. I was expecting to serve people and make friends. Well, that's just the half of it. On Sunday morning, one of my new friends was really upset and when I asked him why, he said "being here for 9 days made a huge impact on my life. All the things I have seen and heard and all the friends I've made have shown me the world in a different way." It took me a long time to understand what he was seeing. But on our last night in New Orleans, as I looked out of my hotel window I thought of all that I saw and heard through the week.

Thursday night at the Superdome, having the time of my life, a young woman talked to us about deciding what to do in life. Valerie Rivas seemed nervous about speaking to the crowd in the Superdome. She talked about her love of her family when she was growing up and how they didn't have much money, but they did what they could do. She was always that girl who did what her parents told her to do, following the rules and not taking risks. For years, her plan was to go to medical school and her family was proud of her. But after college, she wasn't sure that she wanted to be a doctor. After chapel one day, she saw a flyer telling about the Young Adults in Global Mission with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

After being accepted to serve with YAGM for a year in South Africa, she dreaded telling her dad. His response was "You are NOT going!" She

was so upset, but couldn't say anything because of the respect she had for her dad. She decided that God was calling her to go to South Africa and she went and lived with the Zulu people for the year, volunteering at the public hospital, elementary school and Lutheran church. God led her to South Africa and to her calling to be a physician's assistant.

This was important for me to hear because my dad always told me that I wouldn't be doing things like going to Paris like Dean when I grew up and told me that all the things I wanted to be and to see would never come true. I was only three years old when he told me this. I would hide this secret of what I wanted to be and to do from everyone because I didn't want a three-year-old's dream to end. But while listening to Ms. Rivas, I realized that if I don't tell anyone, how will others know that they can be and do what they want to be, too? She encouraged us to listen for God's voice and to take risks, knowing that God promises to be with us and show us the way for our lives.



### **Savannah Neill**

While in New Orleans, we spent each morning in one of three areas to: Practice Peacemaking, Practice Justice and Practice Discipleship. On Wednesday morning, our group went to the Practice Peacemaking

center at the Convention Center not far from our hotel. We started with worship upstairs then went downstairs to the Peacemaking Center.

There were many displays and activities there. People could donate hair to Locks of Love, blood to the American Red Cross (which Jesse did), and make bracelets for children in Africa. We could experience what it might be like to have to carry water long distances, build a Habitat for Humanity house and talk to young people from countries like Malaysia, Bosnia, Palestine and others where there have been recent wars or possibility of war. I made a bracelet for someone and it felt good knowing I did something for someone else. I saw God in everyone there that day, with many people doing things for others and learning about the needs of others around the world.



### **Alex Korman**

I was feeling so excited to go back to New Orleans after being there for the 2009 Gathering because I thought that we did a lot last time we went there.

What I was expecting as we left was that there were going to be long nights and early mornings while we were there.

Also that I was going to meet a lot of new people. The most important thing

that I was expecting was that we were going to help people that needed it most.

Every night around 10:45 or so we would get together for devotions or “Final 15” as it was called. On Friday, our group’s Practice Justice day, one part of the Final 15 devotions seemed to fit with our service project that day. It said, “Fear locks us away. Isolates us. Brick by brick we convince ourselves that it is best to just take care of number one. Make sure we are safe and happy. So, we build a wall. Put on a mask. Smile and pretend everything is A-Ok. Even though we know it is a lie, we answer ‘everything is fine’ when everything is not.”

We loaded the bus around 8 AM Friday to head out to where we were going for our service project. Once we got there, it took awhile to get our large group ready to work. After all the buses had arrived, we all gathered in a big circle to wait for the person that was in charge of our project, Tillman Hardy. He told us that we would be working with CORE USA and The Green Project, organizations in New Orleans that are interested in sustainable building practices. He explained the E.E.C.S. concept which stands for Environmental, Economic, Cultural and Social goals of sustainability. We would be helping to deconstruct a home, salvaging as many of the building materials as possible so that they would be able to be re-used by low-income homeowners, artists and builders, keeping these valuable materials from the landfill.

After they told us everything that we needed to know, they gave us all hard hats and safety glasses and we went into the shell of the house and started carrying out bricks and pieces of wood. Unfortunately, a thunderstorm soon stopped our work and we had to return to our buses. But, we were glad that we were able to learn about and get to

experience a little bit of the work people in New Orleans are doing with sustainable building practices. In this work, they are caring for the earth and for the needs of others, tearing down walls between people of different income levels and making their city a better place.



### **Kristen Brokenicky**

When I was getting ready to go to the Gathering, I honestly didn't know what to **expect. I was a little nervous about going and I was also excited about meeting new people and making new friends.** I knew we

were going to help people, but that was really it. What I found was fun, too!

Every night we went to the Superdome and the message of one woman of color caught my attention. Her name was Pastor Andrena Ingram and she told us about her life and how she eventually became a pastor. She grew up in a home where she was abused by an angry, alcoholic father. Then when her first husband was also an alcoholic, she realized that it was harming her daughter. She moved back into her parents' home and abused alcohol and drugs herself for a time.

When her second child was born addicted to cocaine, she put herself through rehab where she met her second husband. They got married and she gave birth to her third child. When her husband was diagnosed HIV positive and died two months later, she was tested and also was

found HIV positive. She thought that if she was going to die, she might as well get her son baptized. Eventually she learned of God's love for her and went to seminary. She found God as many youth found God on this trip and through the many speakers of the Gathering.

The people who had come to see Jesus in today's Gospel wanted to hear Jesus and be healed of their diseases and hardships. The miracle that Jesus performed with the bread and fish from the boy helped the crowd know that God was with them and that in Jesus there is always enough for everyone, just as Pastor Ingram found there was enough for her.



### **Jesse Kramme**

One of the themes we focused on during our week in New Orleans was "breaking down walls." During our Thursday night at the Superdome, one of the people who spoke to us was Shane Claiborne. Shane is a self-described "radical Christian." He talked

to us about these walls that we should be breaking down. One of the first things he told us was that in a poll taken of non-Christians, the top three keywords used to describe Christians were anti-gay, judgmental, and hypocritical. When I heard this less-than-cheerful fact, I did what perhaps some of you did. I thought that the people who gave those

stereotypical answers had just thought of the worst of us; the extremes, but not me.

Perhaps these stereotypes came from the hatred preached by the Westboro Baptist Church, whose congregation often pickets under the veil of Christianity with signs that have hate-filled, less-than-Christian messages. Maybe those who were asked thought of some of the dark history of Christianity, like the Crusades and the Dark Ages, which are hardly prime examples of an all-loving and accepting Christianity.

But finally, I thought, maybe I shouldn't be so quick to blame others. Maybe I'm not so innocent; maybe none of us are. What if we Christians, all of us, are to blame for this bad rap that we have in some peoples' minds. If this is the case, then what do we do about it?

If we look to today's gospel, we can see exactly how Jesus would handle the topic of stereotyping. When Jesus fed the thousands, you probably noticed that he had no system of checks and balances to determine just who exactly was worthy of the miracle that he was providing. This is one of the many examples you can find about Jesus where his grace and mercy is unwavering, non-judgmental, and most importantly, all-loving.

As far as the first stereotype of Christians Shane told us about, anti-gay, we can also look to Jesus to see how we should act as followers of Christ. In fact, Jesus' views of homosexuality can be summed up in the next two seconds. *\*wait two seconds\** That's right. Nothing. What we *can* see is what the clear priorities are to Jesus. In Matthew, Jesus says,

“Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” As far as the walls talked about in New Orleans, it is fairly clear that Jesus is not concerned with them in the slightest. He makes it simple enough to the point where all we need to know is **love everyone**.

Our trip to New Orleans was truly an eye-opening experience. It opened our eyes to the injustices practiced by everyone, and showed us that truly no one is innocent. But what we learned there, and what we were called back home to share, all 33,309 of us, was that we can get better. We have our perfect example of what we should strive to be and, lucky for us, that example is printed in the most popular Book in the world. The thousands of us that went to this Gathering are proof that this betterment of our character is extremely possible. A banner hanging in the Super Dome said “LOVE LIKE JESUS”. As we respond to the love that Jesus has shown for us, we are able to love others. In doing so, walls will be broken down and others will know God’s love for them, too.

## Some facts about the 2012 “Citizens With the Saints” Youth Gathering:

33,309 registered youth and adults (900+ Nebraska Synod attendees)

**1,193 pints of blood** given to American Red Cross

**509 "heads" of hair** donated to Locks of Love

**\$256,000 given during Sunday offering** – to benefit ELCA Malaria

Campaign, Young Adults in Global Mission program /South Africa, ELCA World Hunger, Ministry in New Orleans

**More than \$400,000 given towards the ELCA’s 100 Wells Challenge**

**Goal of one million books** for children in the New Orleans area was reached!

