

The background image shows a vibrant indoor setting, likely a youth gathering. It features colorful murals on the walls, including one with the text 'ANGES EVERYTHING.' and another with 'I CAN'. The scene is filled with people, mostly seen from behind, looking towards a brightly lit area. The overall atmosphere is bright and energetic.

# *reflections of hope*

Hope Lutheran Youth reflect on their experience at the 2018 ELCA Youth Gathering in Houston, TX.



## Cora Blackwell

Going to Houston this year, without a doubt, was a life-changing experience. One of my fondest memories was on the first night we had a worship service. I didn't know what time the service actually started, so when we got there (which I now know was long before the service started) I was surprised by how few people I saw. I remember looking around the stadium, and thinking "This is it? We have this whole huge stadium to ourselves and just the floor is full?", before climbing back up the stairs to go check out the concessions booths around the stands. When I climbed back down the stairs later, there were considerably more people, but it still didn't seem like 30,000 people (not that I had any clue what 30,000 people altogether looked like). Then the DJ started playing and everybody was dancing so I forgot to look around the stadium again. In fact, I didn't really look around the stadium until well after the worship service had started, when the whole place was dark and the only light came from the lights onstage. We were singing a slow song when suddenly I heard other people on the floor turning around and gasping - so naturally, I turned around too. And what I saw astonished me.

For three, almost four entire levels of the stadium, the people sitting there had turned the flashlights on their phones on, making the stadium look like it was full of stars. The sight of so many people completely blew me away. Just knowing how many other kids there were out there like me, God-loving Lutheran teens, was amazing. That was the first time I saw God in Houston. But asking if I saw God on that trip is like asking if

Houston was hot – the answer is an overwhelming yes. I saw him not just in the worship services, but in everyone else from St. Hope and in the many people we got to meet. God was everywhere. Another major thing I experienced was God’s Grace, a thing the speakers we listened to talked about a lot. Every time I saw one of my friends do something kind for someone else, or go up to someone and talk to them, or make someone else smile, I knew it was God’s grace that was doing it. And I think that it is that knowledge of God’s grace that has changed my life today. After Houston, I have been able to see much more frequently where God is working around me, even in the smaller moments. I am so fortunate I was able to go on this trip and experience what I did. Houston was a trip so amazing it’s indescribable, and I know these experiences will stick with me for the rest of my life.

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### Helena Blackwell

My mind has never been a quiet place. All things considered, this isn’t necessarily a bad thing; it certainly never keeps me bored. Between the fantastical stories and the random questions to later research upon using Google and the writing of essays before I even hit the keyboard, it’s easy to keep me from going stir crazy in the many moments of waiting and sitting around in life. That being said, it’s also not terribly difficult for me to stay in a moment and keep myself from slipping into my head. Situations with large crowds are...

stressful, to say the least, and my prolonged presence within them is less than enjoyable. Houston was an amazing opportunity to truly see how many people share our faith and our love and a way to experience the true excitement of being in such a charged, lively, and overall compassionate environment, don't get me wrong. I wouldn't trade that for the world, in all honesty. But... Well. I enjoy

my alone time. The time where I'm not in a heavily crowded, screaming environment. The time where I can sit with myself and live in my mind with no distractions, and without being completely overwhelmed by everything occurring around me. It was hard to cope at first, in that regard, but even I couldn't help but be surprised at the fact that the event that I was worried was going to make everything worse, and be completely and utterly overwhelming with all of the emotions and noise... instead of supposedly ramping up the anxiety, it only brought moments of true peace.

The most memorable moment in this regard, and admittedly one of my favorite moments of the entire trip, was actually something that might be considered a bit simple. Every night after the Mass Gathering, our motley crew had split off into small groups and had late-night devotionals; a session where we could reflect on what had happened that day, what had impacted us, and where we could freely discuss some of our questions about what we had learned that day. Sunday night was a bit different, considering that A) We weren't struggling to form coherent, meaningful thoughts at

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11:30 at night after a long day, and B) we all gathered in one big group to do our last devotionals. The spot, admittedly, was a bit unconventional, but the air was absolutely perfect all the same. We sat in an area designated as a water park of sorts during the day, where the residents of Houston would bring their kids to play in the Jets of water that came up from the holes in the concrete. No one got any water on them, promise! But on that humid night, we all sat in one big circle, holding hands and praying and listening to everyone's favorite- "Oceans". It's hard to describe the atmosphere, but just imagine a moment where you're outside, listening to the world around you, and everything is... content. You don't have a worry in the world, and if you do? You're supported by the people who surround you. That's exactly what it was like. We listened to the frogs in the nearby man-made pond, and heard the bustling noises the city, and for that brief, unassuming moment? Everything was quiet. Peaceful. Not just outside, but in my own mind, and it was amazing. I saw God in many places in our time in Houston, the majority of which exemplified by the love and compassion of everyone who came with us, but being able to see Him with the people I truly care about, and knowing that I wasn't alone, truly took the cake.

### Trevor Bley

Ever since we left the city of Detroit a few years ago I was counting down the days to Houston. I had no idea what to expect and I was eager to replicate the same experience I

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had had previously. Houston more than delivered on my expectations. I witnessed firsthand God’s grace in love through the streets, our group and through the community that had been created by this trip. Whether it had been members of our group helping others or others helping members of our own group. I saw God during this trip through the speakers who

drove their inspiring messages into me and through the charity our gathering was able to accomplish.

This Gathering has impacted my faith in ways the previous gathering couldn’t. While I enjoyed them both the same there was things my young self couldn’t understand fully until now which has led to a deeper rooting of my faith in God and his people. It also led to new and improved connections with people I have never really met. While I’m sad to say that I’m done with gatherings I’m glad to say I did the best with both trips.

### Tyler Bley

When 30,000 Lutherans, including myself, were called by God to Houston, none of us knew what would happen, where God would be and the impact the trip would have on any of us. I saw God in one significant way every night when all 29 of us were on the floor dancing and singing. Instead of being two groups, Hope and St. John, we became one big family together and I could see God’s work being done.

I experienced grace and love numerous times in Houston, but the one that stood out to me was on Synod day. Many of the New York State Synod was swaying back and forth to my favorite song "Oceans" and I could just feel the love and grace in that moment. One major impact from this gathering was to stay true and be myself for God has a plan for me and every single one of us. All we have to do is just believe in God and his AMAZING work.

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Kara Boldt

This summer when we traveled to Houston for the ELCA youth gathering we saw god and learned about his grace and love and those things impacted our lives afterward and truly changed everything. I saw god in everything we did some things were big and others were just small things that really meant a lot. God was there when the speakers hit close to home for some of us, he

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helped us to help each other through the hard times and have fun. There was also this one night at the mass gathering where one of the speakers had us turn on our flashlights on our phones, the stadium was filled with light and it was a breathtaking moment when you know god is with you through it all. I saw god's grace and love on



synod day, we started singing a song and our smallish group started to sway in a circle and before you knew it every single person in that room of upstate New York Lutherans came together and held hands and was one. That I think is an amazing power of our god, he took us as a room full of strangers and turned us into a big loving and accepting mass of best friends. During the devotions this one night we sat at a local park and just reflected about how what the speakers said that night had reflected in our lives and it amazed me how many people stood up in front of everyone and shared things about themselves that may have never come out without the grace of good and the love and support he helps us give to one another.

This trip to Houston surprised me a lot, I was going into it thinking, "I'm going on this awesome trip with a bunch of my friends and we are going to have a lot of fun." But what I got out of it was something I had never expected, I had learned so much more of what it meant to be a Lutheran in 2018 and how god can really change everything. It impacted the way I think about myself and the way I act, I was always so afraid of being myself in public and just having fun and opening myself up to an experience. But there in Houston you had to, the experience of 30,000 other kids just like you there for the same exact reason made it easier to realize that I am me and I am proud of who I am so why shouldn't I have fun and dance like crazy with my new friends. It also impacted me in a way that it changed my perspective on life, I now see that I have so many privileges that so many more people don't have. God's grace, hope, and love truly changed everything.

## Payeton Burfield

When we went to Houston, I saw God nearly everywhere. He was inside each and every one of us. But I mostly saw him at each mass gathering. He was there in each and every speaker, especially the speakers' words that spoke to me the most. God was also there at our last devotion, inside of Eric as he spoke, and inside all of us hopesters. His love spread through each and every one of us that night, and his love was overflowing and overwhelming. But it was also the greatest experience I've ever felt, let me tell you that.

Everywhere we went, or everything we did I experienced grace and love. I experienced love all the time, whether it was singing on the train with the kids from Pennsylvania, to singing on the streets of Houston, or my roommates and I jamming out to Moana in our hotel room. I experienced a lot of love at our last devotion, and I can't tell you how grateful I am for that, and always will be. I also experienced love when we crammed into one hotel room to eat Chinese food for dinner one night. I experienced grace when we were cleaning up the park on service day. I felt like God was cleaning me too, forgiving me. And during the speeches every night at mass gathering, God's grace was everywhere. God's grace really does change everything, and I know this because this trip changed my life so much and made my faith even stronger. I know now, more than I ever did, that I am never alone, and He is always with me. I know now that I never

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have to doubt God again. My life was drastically affected due to a certain speaker, and I was finally able to open up about things that I have held in forever. And I can say that it was the greatest choice of my life. I no longer believe it was my fault. And I'm glad that I got to go, because without this trip, I would still be under so much weight with no one to talk to. I can now breathe, and I thank God every day I was able to go on this trip.

### Tyler Cockle

Houston was a big eye opener on the path of my faith. Seeing the community come together and the bonding that we have done was more than I imagined this trip would ever be. I saw God everywhere down in Houston, from the transit

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to the night time mass gatherings. People in Houston asked us about what we were doing, and I thought at that moment God was changing everything. There were a lot of funny times, a lot of serious times, but we made it through and now I feel like we're deeper in our faith than just going to church on Sunday. It really opened my eyes to the future with hope and a deeper love for God. There's a thing I learned down in Houston. On synod day, we sat in a big ball room and had a normal day of church, but there's a phrase we learned. Someone would say, "God's Gift", and the crowd would chant back "changes everything!"

## Emily Frazier

Where did I see God? I saw God in the masses of people. Present with us were thirty thousand people with only one thing in common at the beginning of this gathering; being present. Despite only one commonality, no matter the time and place, everyone you came in contact with was generous. Over time you began to see the wonderful characteristic that were also present in yourself, a wonderful characteristic that God had put in you, and brought us here. Every individual had God in them, and a vision to give everyone they met the most wonderful time they could experience.

Where did I see grace and love? I saw grace and love in every individual that had the time and patience to volunteer, helping us. With thirty thousand people, it's a hassle to keep everyone corralled and safe. They were gracious enough to not only care for themselves, but people who really needed it. They spread love and grace through their devoted time and kindness.

How did this new-found faith impact my life? The gathering gave me so much hope for the future. The energy of the gathering and God revived my heart and it gave me the hope that when I returned home I could do almost anything. It showed me no matter how low I was in my life, God was still trying with all his might to revive my heart and show me he is there. When I was busy or not in a good mood to do anything during the summer, he was there to push me even through the smallest of struggles, telling me to push through and finish or even to go the extra mile.

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## Evan Frazier

During our trip to Houston, I saw God in many places, but there was one place where God was most present and that was when we were all on a metro train going back to the hotel from NRG stadium and we started to sing camp songs.

**“We were  
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The greatest part was not that we all knew the songs, but that a different youth group started to share some of the songs that they knew with us. I really saw God in this moment because we didn't care what others thought and how crazy we looked. We were just being us, how we were made to be. The Metro is one way that I experienced love, but another place where I experienced love was when

our group started a swaying circle and it grew to take up the whole room and everyone was a part of it.

Going to the Gathering impacted my life, it showed me that we are not all that different, and every night there was a speaker that was relatable and if they weren't relatable than they were inspirational. They showed me that it is okay to not fit in sometimes and that it was okay to doubt my faith sometimes, this just made my faith in God that much stronger.

## Zoe Helmich

The Youth Gathering Trip to Houston was inexplicably amazing. The trip impacted my life in more ways than just one. For example, the gathering showed me how many people are just like me and have the same faith I do. It showed me how I am never alone in anything and always have

someone by my side. This trip made me grow in my faith and understand God in a different way. It also allowed me to go

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out of my comfort zone, make new friends and break boundaries. It opened my eyes to new beginnings.

I saw God on multiple different occasions during the span of this trip. I saw God during the mass gatherings every night where I had the chance to meet new people and gain friendships. I also saw God during synod day when we all swayed in a big circle with the people who we knew would have in our hearts forever. Overall, God was with me the whole trip from getting us to and from Houston okay, to shenanigans in the pool. This trip changed everything.

### Cole Pleace

The trip to Houston, Texas impacted my life in several different ways. One way when I saw how God's grace affected people was in the nightly worships at NRG stadium and how excited we would get. There were multiple times where you would get high fives from people you didn't even know. I saw God in how easily you could strike up a conversation with a random person or group on the train or waiting in line for the various activities we did at our stay in Houston. These are some ways I felt God in our trip to Houston.

The journey to Houston taught me how much you can just be yourself and connect with people. It taught

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me how I can talk to people and make conversation easily. One way it impacted my faith was that it made it stronger by now knowing how many people my age shared the same love for God as myself, and how we can worship him even with a gathering of thirty thousand people in one city. In conclusion, Houston impacted my life greatly and changed our group as a whole, connecting us in ways we never thought possible. Thank you for your support in our journey.

### Amanda Prior

God was everywhere in this trip. I saw God in the strangers singing with us, I saw god in the sense of community not only in our group but in the 30,000 of our brothers and sisters in Christ, and I saw god in little things like speakers who reassured and validated my thoughts and feelings about my faith. Grace and love were abundant in Houston, from random high fives and hugs to overall kindness from everyone you talked to. All of the people we saw were so happy to be there excited to help clean up the neighborhood.

This gathering had a huge impact on my faith but on me especially. Houston taught me, why should I be embarrassed of who I am and of my faith when there are 30,000 other kids just like me? This trip showed me how God loves me more than there are stars in the sky, and God's love doesn't give up. Even when you feel like you are drowning, you have no reason to worry because his is your lifeguard; he walks on water. Before Texas I had doubts about my faith. I'd always gone to church and I learned about Jesus, but I

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never understood it. In the smiles of strangers on the street, in the laughs and stories shared in our group, and in the abundance of love present, I realized God has been and will always be with me, through it all. This changed everything.

### Damin Rautenstrauch

I, Damin Rautenstrauch, have been emotionally drawn to the love and grace that I witnessed in Houston, Texas. I could feel the love of God in everyone, in the plane rides, mass gatherings and lots, lots more. Even before I got to Houston, I could see the peace and happiness in the eyes of everyone. Then when we went to Synod Day, the love was in the air, the grace was in the air, and the faith was all around us. People were talking about life and God and lots more. James held a plant for a person on the metro rail. He didn't have to hold it for her, but he did and they talked about everything under the sun. These moments only happen once in a life time. The most meaningful moment of Houston was the work day when we cleaned up around the park, school and by the road.

The group of all the Hope kids and St. John kids came to be one church, one mind and one family. The speakers that were at all the mass gatherings really and truly hit me hard with my faith and all the emotions that were put into the talks. I don't normally cry easy, but one of the speakers really

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touched my heart. This moment really opened my eyes to the faith of God. When I was crying the first person to talk to me and help me through it was Zach. Thank you, Zach, thank you, Hope and St. John. Thank you, God.



## James Rautenstrauch

I saw God in many people and ways during my time in Houston, Texas. But one specific time I saw God on the trip is when this lady came onto the metro train and she was holding a plant. It seemed heavy, so I asked if she needed help and she said "Yes, please", and I held it, and she started talking about everything and why we were there and what for. She was one of the nicest ladies I have ever met. I experienced grace and love in all the people who had a full-on conversation and helped me while I hopefully helped them.

**"It showed  
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The gathering made an impact on my life and faith in a way that I thought it would not. It showed me that I have a voice and to speak up in what I believe in. It also showed me not to be afraid in what I believe in and experience life in the present, not the past and not in the future. In conclusion, I saw God and this whole trip had an impact on my life and on my faith.

## Evelyn Schrock

In Houston, during the gathering, I saw God everywhere. In the people that stopped to talk to us on the streets. In the people that were riding the metro with us. In the speakers, singers, and other performers. In the group we went with and in the 30,000 other kids just like us that were there. The way they were all so accepting and caring and helpful allowed me to see god in them. I experienced grace when we were all dancing with random kids that we didn't

know. We were all crowded together, barely able to move, dancing and jumping up and down. It was at that point that I realized we were all there for God and brought together because we all had something in common; God's love for us. God loves us all so much that he wanted to bring us together to spread our love like he had done to us.

I experienced love during synod day, when all the Lutherans that had gone to the gathering that were from NY gathered and had worshiped, sang, and played games. At one point during synod day, a few kids from our group started a small circle swaying back and forth. Soon after more people from our group started joining in, and then more people from our synod. Eventually everyone in our synod was in a giant

circle, well as close to a circle as we could get with all the people in the room. During that moment, I noticed how everyone was so accepting. Everyone was let into the circle- no questions asked- because it didn't matter what you do or how you act or what you like, all that mattered was that you were let in. God taught us to love and accept others no matter what, and in that room I felt so loved by all of those people. The gathering had definitely made my faith stronger. I

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used to question if it was real or not and would always come back to the conclusion that, well, we had to get here somehow. But at a certain point at the gathering, you could just feel something different. Like God was there. It really hit me when we got into NRG stadium and the seats began to fill

up. I couldn't believe how many people there were. And I thought, all of this is happening because of God. All of the fun I had on this gathering was because of Him. All of the 30,000 plus people that were in that stadium were brought there because of God. If God didn't exist or wasn't there, none of that would have happened, and the whole gathering wouldn't have been a thing. I wouldn't have had all of the new experiences that I gained on that trip. But I did. Clearly, the Houston gathering has made an impact on my faith for the better.

### Madisen Sonner

For me, I saw God every night when we were at the mass gatherings and you could look around the stadium and the stadium was full of people, friends, pastors, family members, etc. In some songs you would turn on your flash light and when a lot of people around the stadium did it, it was so awesome to see everyone coming together and swaying. When we all made a line with our arms around each other and would sway together. We all filled the stadium and I loved how we could all be together in one place at one time singing songs, listening to speeches, and having fun. Everyone was different, but we all had at least one thing in common; we were there because we believed in God and we love God. Seeing all of us together in one place just made me stop and think about everything and how neat the experience was and how no words could describe the experience.

This experience changed my life. It makes you realize you aren't alone.

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This experience has changed my life by opening my eyes to see so much more than just yourself and your problems. You realize that you're not alone. This experience has impacted my faith by making me want to be a part of it and go to church and take part in everything. If I wouldn't have gone I would have been missing out on so much. I loved being with so many people that all love God and like to take part in church functions. Our church youth being so close was awesome because we got times that we spent together and got to have this amazing life changing experience together as friends. It makes you see what's really important. It was nice to disconnect from the world and hang out with everyone, make new friends, try new things, and just have fun.

### Anna Sonner

I feel God has never been more present in my life than he was during our week in Houston. Being surrounded by thirty thousand high school students who share one common belief is not something most get to experience but it is absolutely incredible. Thirty thousand strangers all packed in a city together should be a little scary, but it wasn't. I have never felt so comfortable despite being surrounded by strangers and far from home. I could feel God throughout the entire city. Everyone was so excited to be experiencing God's presence together that it felt as though nothing was holding us back from being ourselves and meeting new people. We got the opportunity to meet people from all around the country and normally talking to new people makes me extremely nervous but during that week it just felt natural. I felt God in all the conversations that sparked between strangers; whether it be with someone near you in the stadium, on the metro or in the hotel. We all only knew one thing

about each other and that was that we all shared a common faith and that one commonality gave us the strength to overcome our fear and to be ourselves together. God gave each one of us the strength to come out of our comfort zones to be able to meet and worship with thirty thousand of our brothers and sisters in Christ.

This trip will forever play a large role in my life and faith. Not only will all of the amazing memories replay within my mind for years to come, but also everything I have learned will stay with me as I grow in my faith and continue on my journey through life. I learned a lot about the importance of helping those who don't have the same privileges or abilities as me. I have always found great joy in helping others, but this trip helped show me

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so many ways that I can make an impact even though I am just a teenager. I am hoping that I will be able to use all of these strategies I have learned to start making an impact and start helping others in different ways. This trip also gave me the ability to let go of some of my insecurities and find my path and where I am being called to do for the next few years of my life. Knowing

how many other people my age not only share my beliefs, but also the same struggles as me really helped strengthen my faith. God placed all thirty thousand in Houston that week to teach each other about faith and to strengthen all of us and I couldn't be more excited to see where this experience will lead all us in the future. I cannot thank you enough for all of your support throughout this experience. This was life changing and without you we would never have been able to have these experiences.

## Stephen Struckmann

One of my goals in life is that everyone I meet laughs at something I say or do, and Houston really a testing ground for that for the rest of my life. We all had one thing in common, which made conversations really easy, plus the always popular "where you from?", and "What does your shirt mean?" They definitely made waiting in line for pizza and elevator rides less awkward. You could tell there was more of a connection from the "BuffaLutheran" youth, whether it was the chilling in the hotel rooms, or singing on the metro rail to and from our hotel. Not to brag, but we were one the most influential youth groups there. I can see that came straight the community that we were willing to share to anyone who was there, the ones that didn't feel completely there at those Mass Gatherings.

Another thing about the gathering was that we got to see the real side of some my closest friends. Sure, you can show up Tuesday and Sunday by putting on a smiling face and hiding your true self, but it's pretty hard to do for an entire week, literally sleeping in the same bed as them, and you are really able to show who you really are, which is amazing because it shows bonding and it makes our group more tight- knit. Personally, I'd like to think of myself as "open book" sort. I was so moved from one of the stories shared even from within our own group. It just makes me more excited for 2021, by then I hope to be more mature and be willing to see it for what it really is.

**"You are  
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*Dear Stockholders,*

Thank you so much for your faithful support and for investing in our experience. God used you to change our lives, and we cannot thank you or God enough.

Your brothers and sisters in Christ,

*Cora, Helena, Trevor, Tyler B., Kara,  
Payeton, Tyler C., Emily, Evan, Zoe,  
Cole, Amanda, Damin, James, Evelyn,  
Madisen, Anna, Stephen,  
Carol, Julie, & Zach*



*In everything there is hope.*