

Hi everyone, for those of you who don't know me, my name is Aleah Young. I've been a member here at St. Luke since I was little, I graduated high school this year, and now I am attending Slippery Rock University as a Homeland Security major. I would like to begin by thanking everyone who donated money in order for us to go on this trip, also everyone who prayed for safe travels or just for our group in general. I'd also like to thank our youth leader, and all of our chaperones who looked after us. The National Youth Gathering was unlike any trip I have ever gone on in my life. Starting that first day in Pittsburgh Airport we got a lot of questions as to why our shirts were all matching and why they said the logo "Real. Present. God". We all excitedly told them that we were traveling to Minnesota for a youth gathering that 21,000 youth would all be at. I'm sure you can imagine their faces when we told them that.

When we finally arrived in Minnesota, we all got to see what 21,000 youth looked like in one space, which was something to be admired. Mass events were my favorite thing in the whole youth gathering. It's when all of us got to worship together in one place, which is pretty powerful. We had the chance to listen to some of the most amazing speakers that I've ever seen. One of them was a female youth leader who wasn't sure how to relate to or lead her group of struggling girls. Her message was to listen to God and not try to problem solve your way. Our second speaker was a school teacher who was involved in a school shooting. He took 3 bullets for his students, survived, and smiled the whole way through it so he wouldn't scare his students. He wasn't afraid of death and he didn't want his students to be either. Our last main speaker was a woman who went through severe bullying. I won't go into details but trust me when I say it was severe. Her situation became so bad that it turned into an eating disorder. However she

found God in the darkest place in her life. She broke down to tears when everyone in the stadium gave her a standing ovation.

We also got to see some amazing artists in the stadium. Toby Mac, I Am They, and the Skit Guys all performed the first three nights. When I Am They performed we got the chance to have floor seating, and we got so close to the stage that we all had trouble hearing on the bus back to the hotel. The Skit Guys were my favorite performers though. They have the amazing talent of taking Bible stories or other people's stories and turn them into skits that made everyone laugh but also learn at the same time.

Although my personal favorite times were in the stadium we weren't there the all day every day. During the day, we spent our time in the convention center which is about half a mile or so away from the stadium. At the convention center we were able to listen to certain speakers. There were literally hundreds of sessions that we were able to go to. However, some of my favorite sessions were the following. We went to a session delivered from a middle aged guy who went through a time in his life with an eating disorder. He talked about how to find God in dark times and how to listen to Him. Another one of my favorites was called "Living Life a Little Different". That was delivered by a teenager my age who has dwarfism. He plans to attend Concordia University of Texas to start a career of being involved in the church. Like I said before there were so many sessions that there was no chance you could go to them all so if you want to hear more about other ones try to find someone who was on the trip and ask them what their favorite session was.

Along with the things I just talked about we had a lot of chances to serve. We were able to participate in an actual service project. Our group helped clean an elementary school to help

prepare it for this coming school year. We cleaned the cafeteria, pulled weeds from the playground, and organized two gym closets one of which I'm 99% sure went to Narnia. Not only were the youth and chaperones able to clean the school, we also had a lot more service opportunities. Crystal, Ashby, and I all ran the 5K that they planned. The money they collected all went to "Feed my Starving Children" which is a non profit company that provides meals to developing countries. By the end of the youth gathering over 1 million meals were able to be served from feed my starving children. Also just over 1,000 kits were built for the homeless, 574 letters of encouragement were written for veterans, 768 units of blood was donated, and 926 inches of hair was donated, that's over 77 feet in hair. Now, I said that Crystal and I ran the 5K. Partially true. We did run but we also walked a little bit because most of you might not guess that the pavement was 105 degrees that day. The hottest day we were there by far. It was fun nonetheless and it all went to a great cause.

As I said before, our theme was Real. Present. God. Which meant that we talked about how we as teens need to work on being more real and more present. However it also meant that we need to realize more that God is real. God is present. God is God. We focused on Psalm 46 verse 1. "God is our refuge and strength a very present help in trouble". We've all heard that verse a billion times. However when you study it for a week like we did it means something more to you. God is present. All the time. And what I learned is that being present isn't always having something to respond with. A lot of times it means you're just there to listen which is what God does for us all the time. He's always present. He's always there to listen.

I will wrap up by thanking you all for listening to me reminisce about one of the best trips of my life and once again thanking you all sincerely for the part you played in order for us to go

on this trip. I highly highly recommend for anyone that is able to go to Houston in 2022 to go.

Whether you go as a youth or as a chaperone it will be the most amazing spiritual experience of your life. Thank you all again, have a great rest of your day.