



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

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GLOBAL MISSION

YAGM RENOVATIONS

July 2020

20 years: It's time for some updates

By Dan Beirne, Program Director of YAGM Leadership Formation and Alumni Engagement

Over the past two years, the Young Adults in Global Mission (YAGM) program has experienced many changes that, for the most part, are visible only to our active volunteers and our partners. These changes are rooted in our commitment to make and keep this program a modern, actively inclusive and safe space for each and every individual who applies. Because YAGM was a part of your life in the past, I hope you will find this update on our enhancements to the program both interesting and energizing. We want you to be part of these efforts, so as you read, ask yourself, "How can I join in?"

YAGM Renovations

20 YEARS: IT'S TIME FOR SOME UPDATES

I. WHAT CHANGES HAVE ALREADY TAKEN PLACE?

Almost two years have passed since I started as program director for YAGM, and it's been nearly the same amount of time since Venis Hamb and Samantha Ea joined Global Service. Together with Mike Busbey, we make up the team that works with all our missionaries, including YAGM.

Before I took on this role, I spoke with YAGM staff and alums¹ about some ideas and hopes I had for the program – observations from the sidelines, if you will. I was serving with Venis on the fundraising team for YAGM and missionaries at the time, and she and I were steeped in the rich stories of each new service year. Once I began as program director, I had the opportunity to bring some of these ideas to the table. After the team was completed, we began to hit our stride. As we got to know one another, learning our own roles and the flow of the year, we would share our dreams for YAGM. The more we chatted, the more we realized our ideas were aligned. We had many of the same hopes and ideas for how the program could improve! So, we eagerly got to work.

Sam served as a YAGM in Jerusalem and the West Bank from 2016 to 2017. Venis worked on the fundraising team I mentioned above and, for five years, helped take y'all's pictures at the Discernment Interview Placement (DIP) events. Mike spent four years with Global Mission in Nicaragua and has been on the Global Service team for five years now. I was in El Salvador for two years with Global Mission, and worked in fundraising for YAGM and missionaries for three years. *The folks on this team have known and cared about this program for a long time*, and we've made the following changes from that vantage point. We're excited to share them with you now.



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¹ Wondering why we said “alums” and not “alumni”? *Alumni* is the masculine plural of the word *alumnus*, and *alumnae* is the feminine plural of *alumna*. Typically *alumni* is used to refer to groups made up of male- and female-identifying individuals, but this isn't encompassing of individuals who do not identify as male or female, and it lumps women under a masculine label. *Alums* is the plural of *alum*, which is gender-neutral. Thus, *alums* is more inclusive.

YAGM renovations in the past 18 months (as of March 2020)

Programmatic Structure

- Candidate processes
 - The opening for applications has been moved up from Dec. 1 to Nov. 1.
 - In addition to the Feb. 15 application deadline, a priority deadline has been established on Jan. 15. This incentivizes folks to apply early, giving them preliminary country placements while there are more options available.
 - DIP will take place one month earlier in 2021. This way, **candidates will find out where they are placed in mid-March instead of late April!** (They also find out a whole month earlier whether or not they are in YAGM, prior to DIP.)
 - Categories of service have been reduced from 17 to five. When applying, candidates rate their interest in the service categories. Narrowing them to five (environmental justice, education, health and human rights, congregational ministry, and professional support and development) makes it easier for candidates not only to choose what they're interested in but also **to highlight the service on resumés later in life.**

- Updated content at YAGM events
 - Much of the content for YAGM events creates a spiritual space that resonates with many volunteers and their backgrounds but also marginalizes others. Over the past year, this content has been updated to avoid unintentional “insider language” that might exclude participants, and to draw from a wider scope of resources and cultural backgrounds (both global and domestic), **so that the overall environment at YAGM events appeals to more than one specific expression of Lutheranism or faith.**
 - All content that sought to educate white-identifying volunteers about race and inequality but inadvertently retraumatized or excluded volunteers who identified as people of color has been replaced by professionally led seminars. (More on this in Care and Support.)
 - All content that sought to educate straight- and cis-identifying volunteers about gender and sexuality but inadvertently retraumatized or excluded volunteers who identified as members of the LGBTQIA+ community has been replaced by professionally led seminars. (More on this in Care and Support.)
 - Reentry has been entirely revamped to provide more concrete “next steps” and more networking opportunities with organizations that relate to causes YAGM alums are passionate about (AMMPARO, Peace Not Walls, Opportunity Palestine, ELCA Seminaries, ELCA World Hunger and more).

Mental Health Policy

Previously, there wasn't much of a mental health policy for YAGM volunteers outside of what insurance did and didn't cover. To affirm the destigmatizing of mental illness by many young adults today, YAGM now includes the following in the YAGM Handbook. We **read this policy aloud at every event** to ensure that volunteers know about it.

- YAGM will now reimburse up to six counseling sessions for active volunteers.
 - Volunteers may choose a local therapist, if one is available in their country program, or a U.S.-based therapist whom we have set up to meet digitally and who bills us directly.
 - This policy is meant to **remove any obstacles that arise between the moment a volunteer decides they need help and the moment they get it.**
- YAGM now offers a healing space for survivors of sexual assault and harassment.
 - **Orientation and reentry offer spaces of education and training around the realities of surviving and responding to sexual harassment and assault.**
 - Reentry has a volunteer-led contemplative space of healing for survivors as well.

Care and Support for Volunteers Who Identify as People of Color

It is important to acknowledge that both YAGM and the ELCA are made up of predominantly white-identifying individuals. Any attempt to support volunteers who identify as people of color must therefore be informed by the recognition that they likely come to YAGM already feeling singled out in some way, so we seek to amplify their "welcome." This work is an ongoing priority for our team, and though there is always more work to be done, the bullet points below denote changes that have already been made in the past year and a half, as of January 2020.

- The "Race, Power and Privilege" session is presented at *all three* YAGM events.
 - Judith Roberts, ELCA program director for Racial Justice, and Stacy Kitahata, with the [Krista Foundation](#), have contributed.
 - "Race, Power and Privilege" observes systemic racism through three lenses:
 - our privilege as U.S. volunteers who can travel freely in most of the world,
 - how this privilege, enjoyed over a long period of time, shapes our understanding of the world and our approach to mission and service, and
 - how divisions and inequities in the United States play out in our host countries, and how we can/do or cannot/won't engage in them while abroad.

- We have removed from events any content that educates white volunteers on race at the expense of retraumatizing volunteers who identify as people of color.
 - Instead of skits and activities to invoke the themes of inequality, racial profiling, classism, xenophobia, and more, **we now contract professionals to educate us directly on these themes and acknowledge our individual social locations as part of the conversation.**
 - **County coordinators receive training and continued education on these same themes so that the work and support can continue in their countries of service.**
- Language in the YAGM application has been corrected to enable volunteers to identify their race or ethnicity in their own words.

Care and Support for Volunteers Who Identify as LGBTQIA+

Though people generally know that the ELCA is open to and affirming of LGBTQIA+ individuals, many volunteers still come to the program unsure of their safety or the degree of welcome they will receive, both in the program and in their countries of service. Thus, it is our job to inform volunteers of what they can expect in different cultural settings, to make sure they feel welcome and to educate our leaders on how to extend and sustain this sense of welcome throughout the volunteer's year of service.

- The program offers three-hour sessions on gender and sexuality with Aubrey Thonvold of [Reconciling Works](#), one session at orientation and another with country coordinators so they're trained on the same content.
- In collaboration with alums, we have created the LGBTQIA+ Support Resource Document, which:
 - provides resources for safe and inclusive churches and organizations, and
 - offers alternative **interpretations of famously combative theological texts**, reframing them without the homophobia and heteronormativity that have been injected by white, straight, cis-gendered male theologians.
- YAGM applications have been adjusted to create a space for LGBTQIA+ volunteers to express in their own words how they identify in gender and sexuality.
- In phone interviews, if a candidate identifies as LGBTQIA+, we now inform them right away that, given the cultural context of some country programs, they may have to reenter the closet or live selectively "out" for their own safety. By sharing this information, **we put the agency in their hands, and we ask them directly what their preference would be** so that there are no surprises. If a candidate prefers not to be considered for those particular contexts, those country programs will be removed from the table for that candidate. Likewise, if they want to be considered for all country programs and accept the possibility of having to live selectively out for the duration, or

parts, of their year of service, we take note of that as well. In short, this is the volunteer's choice, and we honor it.

Engagement of Alums

- In cities or areas with a large number of YAGM alums, we've recruited program alums to welcome and connect with newly returned YAGM. This is a growing effort, but we've begun with a few alums who have offered to help receive newly returned YAGM.
- Working with local synods and congregations, we list opportunities for YAGM alums to connect. We plan to include these lists, and a list of congregations who have had conversations about "receiving a YAGM," in volunteers' reentry folders.
- We've booked facilities and sent invitations for the YAGM anniversary celebration, which has been postponed to June 2021 because of the pandemic and will now commemorate the program's 21st anniversary. More information to come.
- In the wake of COVID-19, we offered a virtual retreat that was hosted largely by the YAGM alumni community, under the direction of Global Service and Mission Formation staff.
- We've reinstated the application for alum teams for each YAGM event, enabling the entire community of alums to be part of these events for our new YAGM groups.

Interested in serving on a focus group to help us plan the anniversary celebration? [CLICK HERE!](#)

That wraps up the changes we've made so far. Now, read on to see a preview of changes to come as well as invitations to contribute and participate.

II. WHAT OTHER CHANGES ARE TO COME?

The year 2020 offers a unique (though unwanted) opportunity to reassess the YAGM program. The COVID-19 pandemic not only forced our current YAGM crew to return to the U.S., cutting their year short, but also prohibited us from sending out our next crew, which was to depart in August 2020. In the absence of active volunteers, we are "lifting the hood" on the program and tending to other important work. Riding the momentum of the necessary changes and updates mentioned above, we look forward to tackling the following initiatives in the coming year.

YAGM Rebrand

Those of you who filled out the survey of alums conducted in February might recall that we asked for your thoughts about rebranding and possibly renaming the program. Read below the reasons we're considering a rebrand and how the results of the survey are informing our next steps.

Haven't filled out the YAGM alumni survey yet? [CLICK HERE!](#)

- Why change the name?
 - "YAGM" is a well-recognized entity in much of the Lutheran world, and this serves many of our alums well, especially if they pursue careers in that world. However, when we acknowledge that the Lutheran world is made up of predominantly white-identifying individuals, the fact that the YAGM brand is not well-recognized *outside* of that world becomes problematic because **this means that the name inadvertently advantages white-identifying alums over people of color.**
 - Though "young adults" empowers and spotlights the thousand-plus young people who have made up this program over the years, **it does little to represent or honor the partners, hosts and relationships that are the true core of the program.**
 - Finally, as literal as "Young Adults in Global Mission" might seem, it does not present a clear picture of the experience. This presents a problem for volunteers' future networks and employers. When 30% of YAGM alums pursue careers in the church (a statistic that is still accurate today), then 70% of our alums – about 700 people – lack the advantage of future employers recognizing and understanding what "YAGM" means on a resume.
- What did the survey reveal about rebranding?
 - 67% of survey respondents said "Young Adults in Global Mission" is "rarely" or "seldom" recognized by their respective industries or employers.
 - 40% had thoughts on and suggestions for a new name.
 - 30% felt the name did not need to be changed.
 - On a separate question, 58% of respondents were indifferent about changing the name.
 - Of the 10 words respondents were asked to rank:
 - "global" was ranked highest,
 - "fellowship" was ranked second highest,
 - "mission" and "young adults" ranked in the middle, with strong votes both for and against, and

- “corps,” “coworker” and “colleague” were ranked lowest (especially “corps” – folks hated that one).
- What are the next steps?
 - We’ve already made one change that figures in the final rebranding (whether there is a name change or not): with last year’s candidate process, **we narrowed the categories of service from 17 options to five** (environmental justice, education, congregational ministry, health and human rights, and professional support and communication).
 - Doing so has allowed us to:
 - eliminate redundancy among the categories;
 - streamline the application process and paint a clearer picture of the service opportunity; and
 - **give volunteers more succinct and interdisciplinary language to describe their service once it has concluded and they are looking for new jobs and opportunities.**
 - Finally, we are consulting our colleagues in the ELCA’s Mission Advancement unit, especially the strategic communications team, for expert guidance on the nuances of potential new language.

[Interested in being on the YAGM rebrand focus group? CLICK HERE!](#)

YAGM Storytelling Groups and Book Study Options

To maintain a sense of continued community during the pandemic, our country coordinators have been hard at work creating spaces to gather for book studies, story sharing and support. See some of these spaces below, along with invitations to join!

- Anti-Racism Book Study began July 26 and will meet regularly.
 - This group is studying *[I’m Still Here: Black Dignity in a World Made for Whiteness](#)* by Austin Channing Brown. The facilitators are Kristin Engstrom (Senegal country coordinator), Meghan Brown Saavedra (Mexico country coordinator) and Kirsten Laderach (former Madagascar country coordinator).
- Storytelling groups will launch in fall and winter.
 - These spaces will be used to share stories of YAGM and educate ourselves together (as in the aforementioned book study), maintaining a sense of continuity in this pause between years of service.
 - Keep your eyes out for these invitations as they come!

Continued Education for Country Coordinators and Chicago Staff:

Last, our country coordinators and Chicago staff are working with Luther Seminary on creating a series of courses to improve our care and support for volunteers.

- We hope for these courses to include themes such as:
 - mental health,
 - support for survivors of sexual assault and harassment,
 - racial sensitivity training and history,
 - support for LGBTQIA+ individuals in conservative cultural settings, and
 - understanding privilege in a context of service.
- These courses will mirror and inform the content and care we provide to our active volunteers.

New YAGM Media

We are producing new digital and print media for the YAGM program, updating our narrative and our publications. This will be taking place whether or not the program is renamed.

Interested in being part of a new-media focus group? [CLICK HERE!](#)

- New YAGM videos
 - We will be releasing new videos highlighting YAGM stories from alums who have not been featured in our media before.
- New YAGM print media
 - YAGM print media has been pretty limited in the past, so next we will be excited to produce some new material that better represents the program's updated foci.
 - This will be used largely to recruit candidates.
- New YAGM digital presence
 - We've already moved to step up YAGM's social media presence (thanks, Sam Ea!), and we plan to have more digital content to share.

This represents only some of the changes we are working on this year. As always, we welcome your input – many of these changes originated in alums prompting productive conversations and offering themselves as resources!

We are grateful for this community and excited for the year ahead.

Blessings to you and yours,
Dan and the YAGM family

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