



Shaping theFuture

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Amy Moeller:

Shout to God!

by Jill Zempel

Amy Moeller has been teaching middle school at Lutheran schools for thirty years. Since 1982, she has served at Trinity Lutheran, Roselle, Illinois. She has taught middle-school literature and science, and currently teaches middle-school history, eighth-grade religion, bells, and a servant living elective. Amy is the recipient of the 2011 LEA Distinguished Lutheran Elementary Teacher Award. We thought some of Amy's experiences might be helpful to other Lutheran educators, so here are excerpts from a recent interview. Humility is one of Amy's key attributes, so getting her to talk about what she loves to do was no small feat!



Q: What do you love about teaching middle school?

A: I love the fact that the students I teach are still just kids. They are independent, yet reliant. I love being part of their confirmation years; and for a lot of them I don't have to say goodbye because I see them in high school. It's fun for me to watch them spread their wings.

Q: What are some of the challenges in teaching middle school?

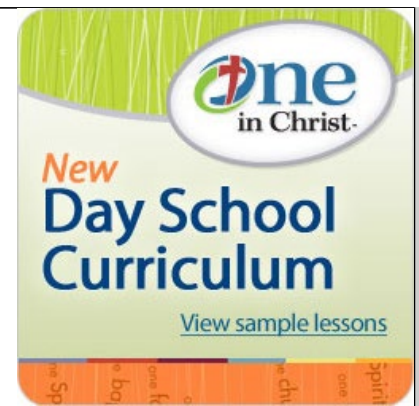
A: At this age, the mean-girl syndrome can hit pretty hard. They are going through a "me" stage, and it's a challenge to have them understand in the whole scheme of things that their "life and death" situation is just a drop in the bucket and will be insignificant later.

Q: Does anything still surprise you about working with adolescents?

A: Every year I'm struck by how young the sixth graders really are. You realize that when you spend a week with them at camp and you need to tell them to brush their teeth. They are still just kids struggling to eat their cheeseburgers neatly, and yet they are so poised at times. Working with this age makes you realize that they are just in between, and both of those roles are so important for them to have and to be.

The other thing that still surprises me is that some of these kids have a lot of baggage they carry with them. They are coming from different home situations with parents who are at odds, or the child is living with one parent, or the children are worried about their family's financial situation. The reality is that for some kids your classroom might be the most stable, safe, place.

Q: You teach a Servant Living Class. Can you tell us more about this class and why kids want to make a



Review, Reflect, Resolve

Note the interview questions. Ask your own middle school (or junior high) staff whatever questions apply. What would you say to a perspective middle school teacher to convince him or her to accept the challenge of a middle school classroom?



Other articles you might be interested in in this issue of **Shaping theFuture:**

Prescription for a Healthy School Ministry by Paul Brandt and Jill Zempel ([Feature](#))

Planning for a 1:1 Environment by Sharon Wallace ([LEADnet](#))

Extreme Challenges, Extreme Blessings by Krista Nagy ([GLEnet](#))



difference?

A: This is an elective that middle schoolers can choose as part of their enrichment choice. We meet twice a week and work on different projects at Trinity, and plan monthly events to two area nursing homes. The kids are usually a little nervous when we first go, but they look forward to the visits especially when they realize that the time they spend with the residents really does make a difference in these people's lives. For the first time, last fall we planned and presented a chapel service. The kids wrote an extra scene and an alternative ending to their skit because they were concerned about the little kids taking the message too hard. The class is very hands-on and at the end of the semester I ask the kids to evaluate the class. What worked? What would you do differently? How do you think you made a difference in someone else's life?

Q: You are a musician and have taught handbells for a number of years. Why do junior high and high school students like playing bells?

A: At Trinity, my first high school group had a lot of boys and they were the popular kids, the athletes. These guys made playing bells look really cool. Since then the school groups have grown because of the high school group, and the high school group has grown from the school classes. Working together is key for bells so I play with them, and try to show them some tricks. I stress to the guys that ringing bells builds muscles, plus it's just fun. The kids have a respect for the instruments and they also know I won't tolerate goofing around.

Note: Allegro, Trinity Lutheran's 58 member touring high school handbell players, just celebrated their 20th anniversary last summer.

Q: How has music helped develop and sustain you as an educator?

A: I can't imagine being anywhere without bells. It's the highlight of my day (three days a week and on Sundays). Teaching and directing bells can be frustrating, but when the kids really work at it it's so rewarding. Ringing bells is a wonderful way to praise God, and you don't have to be particularly musical to perform.

Q: You are a proponent of project-based learning. Why is this still a good approach in middle school?

A: I think it's important to give kids choices. Project-based learning gives students an opportunity to choose a project, be creative, and plan and budget their time. Kids who work in a project-based environment retain facts, and it helps them develop life skills — balancing work, making choices — and they learn about themselves and the subject matter in the process and also learn from other students' presentations.

Q: What have been the most challenging changes in education since you began teaching? In Lutheran education?

A: The biggest changes have been in parenting and parental support. Overall, both parents and kids have an increased sense of entitlement and lack of taking responsibility for their actions. I think sometimes families don't see Lutheran education as an extension of their faith life, but as a substitution for it.

Q: How do you keep the lines of communication open with parents?

A: I try really hard to communicate ahead of time with project expectations and reminders. Our grading and communication tool is great for sending out email reminders, and as I receive messages, I try to respond quickly. I also encourage parents to ask questions. When they aren't afraid to ask, it helps in the overall communication.

Q: You are involved in a number of activities and leadership roles at church and in the school. How do you serve in all of those ways without getting burned out?

A: My husband and my sons have always been supportive – helping me set up and shop and do a million different things. I do like to plan – I’m a little weird that way. I also love to read – it’s a great way for me to escape. I really feel that God put me here, and I love every minute of it.

Q: At the end of the day or the year, what gives you the most joy from your students?

A: Kids who pop in to say “good-bye” after practice, or stop in to say “hi” when they come back for Confirmation and I’m still at school. The kids who say, “have a good day.” The ones who come back for a visit and say, “Do you remember me?”



*Jill Zempel is Editor of **ShapingtheFuture**. Look for additional information about other winners of this year's LEA Awards in the next Summer issue of **ShapingtheFuture**.*

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