

## Western North Dakota Synod Ministry Review

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A ministry review of the Western North Dakota (WND) Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) was conducted from April 11-13, 2008. The ministry review was requested by the WND Synod Council, which invited rostered and lay members from across the synod to participate in one of four “Vision for Ministry” Events.<sup>1</sup> At each location, there was a brief presentation about the process for electing a synod bishop; and then participants met in smaller groups to discuss the strengths, needs, concerns, priorities, and opportunities of the WND Synod.<sup>2</sup> The WND Synod Bishop and bishop’s assistants were also interviewed.<sup>3</sup>

At the beginning of each event, participants were reminded of WND Synod’s Vision Statement: “In Christ, Every Congregation, Facing Change, Discovering Hope.” Participants were quick to share many of the ways in which the congregations of WND Synod currently are facing change, including:

- Demographic changes with most areas of the synod losing population, especially the rural areas;
- Discovery and further exploration of a large oil field in North Dakota that many are predicting will significantly increase oil production and related industries in this area;
- The ‘Boom or Bust’ farm economy of the area that is so dependent on weather and price competition;
- Declining congregational membership, aging members, and reductions in congregation income; and
- The election of a different synod bishop at the upcoming Synod Assembly (June 2008).

In discussing the many changes, some participants were more hopeful than others about the future of WND Synod. These participants focused on the resiliency of rostered and lay members across the synod, and the many opportunities for outreach that already exist and will be created. Others were less optimistic about the future citing concerns about the financial viability of small congregations with aging members (some worshipping fewer than 10-15, on average), and upcoming ELCA decisions regarding the Draft Social Statement on Human Sexuality.

Nearly all participants agreed that a major part of addressing the concerns within the synod is to place a high priority on recruitment of clergy. In addition, many participants expressed a desire to feel more connected as a synod. To accomplish this, many suggested the next synod bishop develop a vision for the synod that would, ideally, serve to unify and inspire congregations.

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<sup>1</sup> The four event sites, all in North Dakota, were St John Lutheran Church, Dickinson; First Lutheran Church, Williston; Bethany Lutheran Church, Minot; and House of Prayer Lutheran Church, Bismarck.

<sup>2</sup> Group sizes ranged from 6 to 19. The total number of participants was approximately 120, with a slightly higher proportion of lay than clergy.

<sup>3</sup> The discussion groups and interviews were conducted by Marcia Johnson, who serves in the Synodical Relations section of the ELCA’s Office of the Presiding Bishop; Mark Grorud, who serves in the Evangelical Outreach and Congregational Mission unit of the ELCA churchwide office; and Victoria Flood, who serves in the Research and Evaluation section of the ELCA’s Office of the Presiding Bishop.

## **Synod Strengths**

When discussing synod strengths, nearly all participants talked about the people of WND Synod: both its hard-working pastors and the strength and leadership of congregational lay members. Despite the many challenges, rostered and lay members were described as continuing to be faithful to God and their congregations. Many participants expressed pride in the resiliency of the people and congregations that comprise WND Synod.

In terms of programs, the GIFTS Program (Growing In Faith To Serve) was one of the most frequently mentioned synod strengths. It was shared that over 200 people participate in this program, which is the primary venue this synod has for lay leadership training. Many of the GIFTS Program participants find themselves helping in small congregations where there is no called pastor or no full-time pastor. This help takes many forms, including worship planning and preaching. One disappointment for some, however, is the location of the classes for the GIFTS Program. For the far southern and western parts of the synod, distance has been an obstacle to participation. Re-examining the location of classes or the method of delivery (maybe broader use of video or satellite) were suggestions made by some.

Other programs mentioned frequently as synod strengths include Rural Plunge and the Ministry Trust Fund. Both of these programs are connected to helping recruit clergy to WND Synod. Rural Plunge is a week-long immersion program for seminary students from Wartburg and Luther Seminaries to experience rural ministry in WND Synod. This program has existed for about 10 years. It is hoped that the Rural Plunge experience will help to change some seminarians' negative perceptions of serving in rural ministry. The Ministry Trust Fund is a debt relief program for first call pastors in the synod. First call pastors are given grants from the Ministry Trust Fund to help them reduce the debt they have from seminary education. The Ministry Trust Fund also provides scholarships to people from WND Synod who are attending seminary.

Strong synod organizations mentioned most frequently by participants include Outdoor Ministries with its four camp locations within the synod, the Synodical Women's Organization, and the Lutheran Youth Organization (LYO). Although LYO is strong at the synod level, not all congregations participate. Many participants shared their frustrations over lack of youth participation in their congregations, especially after youth are confirmed.

The radio ministry done by some congregations, and the synod's connection to the Central African Republic through the Companion Synods Program were also highlighted by some as synod strengths.

## **Concerns Facing Congregations and Leaders**

Three of the primary concerns discussed by participants were: 1) a high number of small and declining congregations; 2) aging membership and the lack of youth involvement; and, 3) declining financial resources. A fourth, closely-related concern is the number of congregations without a called or a full-time pastor. The underlying issue connected to all of these concerns becomes one of financial viability and survival as a number of congregations across the synod, especially rural congregations, seek to find ways to continue their ministry.

A number of contributing factors to the declines in members, resources, and pastors were identified, including:

- Competition for members' time because of school activities/sports, community organizations that are also struggling for survival, or people working in jobs that are further away;
- An out-migration of people from many of the small towns to larger towns in the synod or in the state, or to other parts of the country;
- Geographic distances and people described as living "so spread out"; and
- Low average clergy salaries and few job opportunities for clergy spouses.

Another concern, especially among many clergy, is that of isolation. Multiple point parishes, and other situations created to cover small congregations without a called or full-time pastor, often mean greater workload and more travel for clergy. This can lead to less participation of clergy on a synod or conference level, which adds to the feeling of isolation. In addition to a lack of connectedness among clergy in many areas of the synod, clergy and lay participants described a general lack of connectedness among congregations, and between the synod office and congregations.

Finally, a few participants talked about a desire for more mission or ministry opportunities, especially for lay members, within WND Synod. It was suggested that greater focus on the companion synod relationship with Central African Republic, or focusing on some other mission or ministry priority could ignite passion or renew energy within the synod. Related to this were a couple of comments about the change from a synod committee structure to three synod teams. A few participants noted that the team structure has not, yet, functioned to its potential and, therefore, not many lay members from across the synod are involved.

## **Communication**

The primary means of communication from the synod office to congregations is through two print publications: the "West Wind," which is a newspaper-style publication produced a few times during the year; and the monthly Bishop's newsletter. Each of these is mailed to congregations and posted on the synod's Web site. The Bishop's newsletter, titled "Synod Bulletin for Church Councils" is described as a publication "intended to increase the sense of partnership between congregations in the synod and with the synod office. There is a need to know more about what the synod is doing. This publication will attempt to meet that need."

Approximately three-fourths of those participating were familiar with these publications. Many expressed appreciation for these publications, while at the same time providing suggestions for improvement. Some shared their experiences of times when the information in these publications has not made it to congregational members, except for the pastors or certain lay leaders. One reason for this, as described by participants, is that the publications are not consistently shared with the entire congregation. Another reason discussed by participants is that congregational members do not seek out this information by picking up copies or through reading their own congregational bulletins and newsletters. An analogy was made to the decreasing subscription rates to the *Lutheran* magazine. The magazine is available, but fewer people are reading it – and, the same seems to be true for these two WND Synod publications.

As for suggestions for improvement, participants would like these two publications to contain more stories of ministry within the synod and the broader ELCA. Participants also suggested that there be a way for congregations to share ideas and best practices for what is working well in congregations. Finally, there were suggestions for including some of this information in regular e-mail messages to congregations.

WND Synod does have a Web site. Many participants suggested this Web site needs to be improved. Suggestions include:

- Create a more contemporary lay-out for the Web site;
- Add more stories of what is happening in congregations across the synod;
- Add video downloads, including video of events such as classes from the GIFTS program;
- Revise the process for getting items posted to the Web site to make it easier;
- Develop a process to ensure that the information is posted in a timely manner and that all information on the Web site is kept up-to-date; and
- Consider contracting with someone who has information technology expertise to develop and/or maintain the Web site.

Participants agreed that it is difficult to know how best to disseminate information about the synod. While many would like to see more emphasis on using the Internet, there were also some who indicated that their congregation or some of their congregational members do not have Internet access. Thus, the option for printed information from the synod office remains necessary.

### **Role of the Synod Office**

There was much discussion about synod office staff, including the synod bishop, visiting more congregations and the clergy more often. Many participants expressed a desire for the synod bishop to be more visible in congregations across the synod. A concern was shared that too often the only time a congregation sees the synod bishop and/or synod staff is when there is a conflict, and this difficult experience can leave a negative impression with people about the synod office. Some participants suggested that discussion sessions with the synod bishop similar to the ones for this ministry review would be very welcome by members of congregations.

Related to this desire for increased visibility of synod office staff and the synod bishop among congregations is a desire for the synod office to facilitate connections of congregations to each other and of congregations to the synod office. Overall, participants expressed a relatively low level of connectedness to the synod as a whole. And, although many were not sure what a greater sense of connection might feel like, many indicated they have a desire for this. Some suggested that the role of the synod office ought to be to cultivate and nurture a sense of belonging to something greater than one's individual congregation. Others suggested that the role of the synod office ought to be to develop and share a unifying vision with congregations. From both of these suggestions, participants thought there could be renewed energy and inspiration for congregations.

Another desired role for the synod office, also mentioned frequently, is for the synod bishop to be a strong recruiter of pastors. Participants believe that the congregations and the culture of WND Synod have a lot to offer, and that this needs to be more aggressively promoted on seminary

campuses. In addition, participants would like to see more programs like Rural Plunge and the Ministry Trust Fund to both expose seminary students to WND Synod and provide financial assistance to them should they accept calls in the synod.

In terms of programs and resources, many agree the GIFTS Program should continue and maybe even be expanded. Some participants also expressed appreciation for recent resources related to stewardship, and would like to see this continue and maybe be expanded. Other desired resources include resources for families, and, as mentioned before, ideas and best practices for what is working well in other congregations.

Finally, some participants mentioned that they think the synod office needs to provide more assistance to congregations in finding coverage for Sunday morning preaching and presiding, especially for rural pastors that are in need of time off.

As a reminder to themselves and to the groups, a few participants indicated they think it is important not only to ask how the synod office can assist congregations, but also to ask how congregations can assist both the synod office and within the synod.

### **Priorities for WND Synod**

In some ways, the discussions about the role of the synod office highlight some of the priorities that participants identified when asked what they would like to see the WND Synod set as priorities in the coming years. This includes recruiting more clergy, and creating a vision to unify, motivate, and inspire congregations.

In addition, participants identified youth as a priority. Some participants suggested that the synod work to increase attendance at local events and gatherings for youth, and at the national ELCA Youth Gathering, which will be in New Orleans, LA, in 2009. Some participants also suggested that the Lutheran Youth Organization (LYO) and congregational leaders who work with youth be more supported in order to increase the involvement of youth within congregations and within the synod.

As part of the discussion about priorities, concerns were raised about the tensions that exist between larger and smaller congregations within the synod as they appear to compete for resources. Some participants expressed a concern or a fear that smaller congregations might be closed, and a vital ministry to people, especially in more rural places, might be lost. Others expressed an interest in making sure that congregations that are not financially viable do not keep resources from being used to support congregations that are financially viable. Although these tensions were not always mentioned directly, it was clear they exist. There were some participants who identified the need to address the future of smaller congregations in WND Synod as a priority.

### **Characteristics Desired in the Next Synod Bishop**

As part of the discussion, four general descriptions often used to describe synod bishops were shared: 1) Visionary; 2) Administrator; 3) Pastor to the Pastors and Congregations; and 4) Theologian. It was noted that these descriptions are not mutually exclusive and that elements of

all four descriptions are often desired in a synod bishop. When asked, however, to share which description or descriptions are seen as most important for the next bishop in WND Synod, nearly all participants agreed they would like to see an emphasis on Visionary and on being a Pastor to the Pastors and Congregations.

In addition, participants indicated they want a synod bishop who will motivate and inspire them. They also want a synod bishop who will be an aggressive recruiter for clergy, especially among ELCA seminaries.

Finally, participants indicated the importance of having a synod bishop who conveys to congregations that they really do matter, and will find meaningful and creative ways to share this message.

## **Conclusions**

“In Christ, Every Congregation, Facing Change, Discovering Hope.” This WND Synod vision statement very accurately reflects much of what was discussed during the four “Vision for Ministry” events. In the midst of many changes and challenges, participants identified much for WND Synod to celebrate, including its pastors, lay leaders, resilient members, GIFTS Program, Outdoor Ministries, Lutheran Youth Organization (LYO), Synodical Women’s Organization, and companion synod relationship with Central African Republic. There is also appreciation for the work Bishop Danielson has accomplished in his twelve years as synod bishop.

Participants also recognize the importance of addressing the changes and challenges facing WND Synod. Participants suggested this be done in part by focusing attention on recruiting more clergy, developing a unifying vision for the synod, increasing youth participation, and addressing the future of smaller congregations within the synod.

As WND Synod addresses the changes and challenges it faces, participants expressed a desire for more connectedness among congregations and between congregations and the synod office. Participant suggestions for helping to achieve this include improving communication within the synod, including the synod’s Web site, and asking the synod office staff and synod bishop to provide more personal and proactive contact with clergy and congregations in the synod.