



Bishop's Synod Assembly Report

2023 | Rev. Dee Pederson, D.Min.



Welcome to the Southwestern Minnesota Synod Assembly! Our focus, *Embody the Word*, is rich with meaning that we will only begin to explore here. We gather as followers of Jesus, the Word Incarnate, God-in-flesh. We gather around the word of Scripture, woven throughout this Assembly. We gather as the body of Christ. The Scripture story of the walk to Emmaus provides the heartbeat for my report.

“That very day two of them were going to a village named Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and they were talking with each other about these things that had happened.” Luke 24:13-14

Thank you for the honor of walking on the road of synod ministry with you. The word “synod” is made up of two Greek words: syn = together and hodos = way or journey. Being a synod means we are walking together on the way, accompanying each other like those early followers of Jesus.

Serving as the synod’s pastor, it is a real blessing to travel the many roads of our large synod territory to be present with you! Whether connecting with you for meetings, worship, preaching, or visiting, I get to experience the beauty of our synod’s identity, that **“God has placed us in cities, farmland, and towns together, under one prairie sky.”** This synod includes thousands of lay leaders and staff; 300 rostered ministers - called, retired, on disability or on leave from call; and 227 congregations. You, dear friends, are the body of Christ. You are telling the stories of Jesus - the Word made flesh. You embody that word as you live out your Christian callings each day. I give thanks to the Triune God for you, and for leading us through the past few years together.

Like those two on the road, we have had much to talk about on our recent journey as the church. The pandemic accelerated changes that have been happening in our culture for decades. So much is new! I and our staff are here to listen to you, pray with you, and help equip you as we walk together in ministry and embody the word today.

What have you been talking about “on the way” in the congregation and community where you live?

“While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them. But their eyes were kept from recognizing him.” Luke 24:15-16

The story doesn’t explain why they didn’t recognize Jesus, but it reminds us that Jesus is right here beside us. Always. And often in surprising ways. As our synod identity states, *“The risen Christ surprises us as we plant God’s word in the world.”*

In this Office, I often deal with difficult matters, but I also have the incredible privilege of experiencing some of the greatest joys! I am grateful for the new ministries our leaders have initiated – ministries like ***Faithful Innovation, Coaching, the Congregational Resource Team, new partnerships, and Generosity & Stewardship***. Like those early disciples, we discover that God is right here beside us, even when we have a hard time seeing that presence. We as synod, walk with one another, accompany each other, and embody that presence for others. Again and again, I see the truth of our synod’s identity embodied in you: ***“By God’s grace, together, we have what we need.”***

Where do you see the presence of God in your ministries, and in your community?



“When Jesus was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him, and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?” That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem, and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, “The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!” Then they told what had happened on the road and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.”

All of us wish there were a magic formula, a step-by-step process, that would show us how to be the church today. There isn't! But in the Emmaus story, there are cues that provide promise and wisdom for embodying the word in our time. (Spoiler alert: They're not rocket science!)

- ***Dwelling in the Word and listening to Scripture together.*** The stories of Scripture are life-giving! It is this story that draws us into community and then sends us to share that story with our neighbors. “The risen Christ surprises us as we plant God’s word in the world.”
- ***Belonging.*** The two on the road welcome Jesus and urge him to stay with them. Wherever we are, whatever our church size, we get to be the kind of Christian communities where people know a living-breathing relationship with Jesus Christ and are welcomed for who they are – precious in God’s sight.
- ***Breaking bread.*** It is in the table fellowship Jesus shared with his friends that they recognize he is with them. What a gift to be able to come to the Lord’s Table “just as I am,” where Christ is truly present today. From the earliest times, the church also gathered to share fellowship meals with those in their community. Some of the powerful stories I hear from congregations these days involve the ways you are sharing your bread and working to end hunger. Motivated by God’s love, you are making a difference for the people near and far.
- ***Listening and telling.*** In this last scene of the story, the two get up and go back to Jerusalem with a new joy and purpose they never could have imagined. Jesus had been with them! They go and tell others and listen to what others have seen and heard. This is the nature of Christian community. Wherever I go, I hear how congregations who are facing outward toward their neighbors are seeing renewed joy and energy in their ministries. I am inspired by the conversations and friendship of congregations in new partnerships – something I never would have imagined for ELCA churches even 10 years ago. I am grateful for the opportunity to have traveled to the Holy Land in January, meet our Lutheran partners in the ELCJHL - Palestinian Christians, and learn of their courageous testimony. I am inspired by the witness of our Global Companions in the South Eastern Diocese of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa. I look forward to the months ahead when we will finally meet together in person.

Some days, it may seem that the challenges before us as the church today are just too big. But then I read this story and remember that God is walking beside us into a new reality. Some of our churchy habits and institutional assumptions will need to be left by the roadside, and that is O.K. We are Emmaus people, after all. You are the body of Christ. You embody the Word.



In its own commitment to lead in new ways, the Synod Council recently adopted a statement to focus the leadership of governance and staff as a commitment of our work together:

*As followers of Jesus in a time in which the role of the church is being re-formed,
we of the Southwestern Minnesota Synod are committed to
empowering Christian communities to join in God's mission of reconciliation:
listening intentionally,
loving unconditionally,
serving others authentically, and
faithfully healing creation.*

We are excited to live out these commitments as a guide for our work together in the future!

I began this report noting how being a synod means being on the way together. I am so grateful for the wise and faith-filled partners in ministry who do that every day. Thank you to: Synod Ministers Pr. Heather Culuris & Pr. Naomi Mahler, D.E.M. Pr. Troy Pflibsen; Administrative staff Tammy Schacher, Kristin Bakeberg, and Maggie Berggren; Youth Ministry Coordinator Pr. Nikoli Falenschek; Gifts of Grace Coordinator Pr. Andrew Hermodson-Olsen; Regional Gift Planner Pr. Keith Pearson, GSB Consultants Rev. Pete Reuss and Paul Marsh; Coaching Coordinator Rev. Kirsten Nelson Roenfeldt; our Synod Council; and Conference Deans and Chair-people.

Thanks to each of you for walking on the way together. "By God's grace, together we have what we need." The Living Christ is here!

+ grace and peace,
Bishop Dee Pederson



Southwestern Minnesota Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

