



Bishop's Synod Assembly Report

2024 | Rev. Dee Pederson, D.Min.

One *body* in Christ.

So we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.

– Romans 12:5

Thank you for living out being one body in Christ in your daily callings, wherever God has planted you – in the cities, farmland, and towns of this beautiful synod. I am grateful for the privilege of serving in the Office of the Bishop, and getting to know you through worship, meetings, and visits. “Synod” literally means “walking together on the way.” Wherever I go, I have the joy of seeing the abundance of gifts God has showered upon you. As our previous Synod Minister Rev. Barbara Knutson used to say so beautifully, you are “**gifts of God in human wrapping.**”

I am grateful for you!



Thank you to members of the Synod Council and staff. During the past year, we have tried to lead and work with this commitment: ***As followers of Jesus in a time in which the role of the Church is being re-formed, we of the Southwestern Minnesota Synod of the ELCA 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.***

This common commitment provides grounding and direction for moving our leadership forward.

There is no doubt that this is a time when the role of the Church is being re-formed. No longer is the church the center of community culture and life. No longer do people of any age feel an obligation to “join” a church or maintain the practices with which they were raised. No longer are people loyal to institutions, no matter how prominent those institutions used to be. Times have changed. We have changed. These changes began decades ago, but back then, it was just that just enough of us were doing just well enough that we did not need to notice. Enter the 21st century. Add a pandemic. Factor in the boomer retirement curve that we knew was coming but pretended not to see. Layer on declining birth rates. And then - divisions among other denominations, political pressure, and global instability. What a convergence!

We cannot imagine where these changes will lead us, nor see the future shape of Christ's church. But what an amazing time to participate in what God is doing to re-form us right here, right now! This is what God is about: "In Christ God was reconciling the world to God's very self, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation." (2 Corinthians 5:19, NRSV). This year's Assembly theme is descriptive, aspirational, and declarative for who we are as one body in Christ.



One body in Christ: *This describes the way we experience life in the church.*

This oneness as a body means that we share our mutual burdens. This year, we have shared communal grief over the unexpected death of Pastor Naomi Mahler as Synod Minister. Thank you for the many condolences you have shared for her family – Todd, Grace, and Sophia, and with us as staff. Grief remains.

As a nation, across all sectors, we are all impacted by the demographic cliff of the high number of retirements and the lower birth rate. There is a reason they call it "boomer." The "boom" in births of the 1940s, 50s, and 60s is not coming back. And across the U.S., 2024-2027 will mark a period some have called "peak 65" — years we will see the largest number of Americans hitting that age in history. Of course, this figure affects the number of elders in our communities and our care of them. It affects the number of young people entering our colleges and universities, serving as camp counselors, possibly heading to seminary, and serving congregations.

- In 2019 the number of candidates approved for entrance for rostered ministry was 368. In 2023 it was 154.
- In this synod, approximately 40 of our 226 congregations are at some point on the spectrum of transition, from the recent departure of a pastor to ready to call.

Our synod body is changing. In response to these changes, the Holy Spirit is also raising up lay leaders who are responding to new opportunities for training and growth and new roles in their congregations.

The economic challenges facing congregations have had an impact on the financial situation of congregations and therefore, on congregational Mission Support. The proposed Synod FY2026 budget includes recommendations that are appropriate, authentic, and realistic for this changing time. We are grateful for the thousands of lives touched by your generosity in our congregations and through our partners. Thank you for all those gifts that we, in turn, get to pass on to others. Thank you!

We are grateful to Lilly Endowment, Inc., and to individual donors for the Gifts of Grace initiative that has allowed us to share so many gifts for rostered ministers and congregations since 2016.

- Rostered Ministers know synod support through the gifts we are able to share:
 - Debt reduction = 221 grants, totaling \$649,851.51
 - Medical Expenses – 118 grants, totaling \$147,015.95
 - Retirement Challenge (Matching) – 112 grants, totaling \$68,933.50
 - Retirement Equity – 38 grants, totaling \$42,516

What a tremendous impact this generosity has had on so many individuals and families!

- Congregations also have benefited through training in stewardship/generosity and financial literacy through the synod's contract with GSB Consultants, Rev. Pete Reuss and Paul Marsh, funded by our Gifts of Grace ministry.

Rostered Ministers also know support and renewal through our partnership with The Continuous Growth Pathway – another gift!



Our synod Endowment Funds are providing generous scholarships and ministry grants for new opportunities in congregations.

Being one body in Christ means we have so much to celebrate.

- We are thrilled to welcome Pr. Seyward Ask as our new Synod Minister for Equipping Congregation Leaders, Rostered Ministers, Youth, and Families.
- Global partnership is flourishing. Last fall, five travelers journeyed to South Africa to visit our friends in the Southeastern Diocese of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa. (SED – ELCSA). I am thrilled to be able to welcome Presiding Bishop Nkosinathi Myaka and Mr. Joseph Mkhize to our Synod Assembly this year!

One body in Christ: *This is what we pray and aspire to be.*

What does it mean to live as one body when we do not always agree with each other and live in a polarized culture? This has been a reality for the Christian church from its beginning, and the biblical faith practices that are part of Christian discipleship provide guidance. They are called faith “practices” because they require practice. They give us a vision for what life as one body in Christ can look like as we:

- Work at having healthy, respectful conversation with one another and speaking well of our neighbors. My mother used to say that if you can’t say anything nice about someone, don’t say anything at all. I think she aced the 8th Commandment!
- Practice hospitality and outreach. Every congregation claims to be “welcoming.” Who we welcome, and how we practice hospitality in our building and beyond, becomes clear to others. What might it look like if we say, “All are welcome,” so that “all” really does mean “all” – with no exceptions?
- Accept the reality that unity does not mean uniformity. Families, friendship circles, congregations, and synods include people who hold many views. We are not identical. But in the church, we hold in common our Lutheran confessions and the biblical mandate to love God and neighbor.
- Live out the power Christ gave to his church. You as a congregation have received all the gifts you need to live together as one and live out life-transforming ministries. Those ministries vary according to where God has placed you: in a city, in open country, or in a small town. Wherever you are, I believe that local congregations in Jesus Christ are hope for the world. I imagine what it looks like when each of our 226 congregations is making a life-changing impact on the community where God planted you 150 or 75 or 25 years ago!
- Tear down the walls that keep us apart. Across the synod, God is doing the new thing of bringing together congregations to work in partnership with others. Twenty years ago, I never would have imagined that one congregation could step into a neighboring church’s sanctuary for worship. But you are doing just that, and in our time, we also get to witness how new ministry partnerships are developing with neighbors in Lutheran, Methodist, and Presbyterian congregations. God is re-forming us as “one body” through the blessing of new relationships.

One body in Christ: *This is what God has declared us to be.*

In Holy Baptism, the Triune God made you part of the one body in Christ. You were joined together with all the other precious children of God who are part of this body, each with their own individual gifts. The “one body” of this synod is strong because we believe we cannot go it alone; we need each other. And God makes us stronger because of the relationships that stretch across this corner of creation and around the globe. Thanks be to God!

+ grace and peace,
Bishop Dee Pederson



Southwestern Minnesota Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America