

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

-Romans 12:5

THANK YOU for the privilege of walking with you in ministry this year. It is an honor to be entrusted with the stories of your greatest joys and hopes for the church, as well as your burdens and concerns. I “keep watch” with you as we look for what God is doing among us today and in the future. This verse from Romans 12 provides a vision of what this might look like as this synod lives as one body, in Christ, and as **members one of another**.



We become part of this one body in Christ in holy baptism as we are united with Christians across space and time. Today, you and I are one with Christians in the Lutheran tradition in 99 countries around the world through the Lutheran World Federation, with the other 8900 congregations of the ELCA, and the 225 congregations God planted in cities, open country, or towns, of this synod. We are people who live by grace, yield our wisdom at the foot of the cross, and look for the light and life of Christ among us. As we enter 2025, I give thanks for the abundance of gifts God is giving us:

- the rostered ministers who are on call 24/7/365 and unite us through the good news of the gospel every week;
- congregation leaders who are welcoming, supporting, respecting, and loving the rostered ministers called to lead now. We cannot grow pastors & deacons on trees. As Pr. Heather has said, “Our rostered ministers are not a renewable resource. We need to nurture the pastors we have.” Inasmuch as congregations are supporting all of our pastors & deacons, this Synod will become known on the pastors’ grapevine as a place people want to come and serve;
- lay leaders who have sensed the Holy Spirit leading them to pursue theological studies and lead worship in their congregations;
- call committees working hard and persevering in a time when there far more than twice as many congregations seeking first-call candidates as there are graduates;
- congregations who are talking with their neighbors about various kinds of partnerships, and are discovering how we can be and do more together than apart. Some are sharing youth ministries with congregations in the same school district, and some are rotating worship schedules.

The simple reality of demographics means that there are fewer students entering college, and there will be more rostered ministers retiring in the future. The future of our congregations will require innovations in ministries, an open heart to partner with others, and the commitment to encourage people of any age who have the faith, temperament, and gifts to consider ministry. I ask you to pray in public worship each week that God would “send forth laborers” for God’s vineyard.



Unlike the other organizations and groups to which we belong, the church is only one where we are welcomed just as we are because we are “in Christ.” Christ is our Life. And it is only because we are in Christ that people as different and unique as the people of our churches could come together as one. The ministries of your congregation and of our synod exist because we are “in Christ.” Jesus’ great commandment to love God and neighbor and his command to go and make disciples provides the “why” of our congregation ministries, that all might have life and have it abundantly.

Churches today are discovering the importance of welcoming people not only thru our physical front door, but thru the front door of websites, FB pages, and livestream. Today we are BOTH/AND churches that extend hospitality to people who worship- in the room AND online.

And rather than only waiting for people to come to “us” Christ sends us so that wherever we go – work, school, wherever – people know they are valued, accepted and loved when they meet someone from our church in the community. Thank you for being the hands and feet and love of Christ as you do God’s work with your hands. Our synod ministries exist to equip congregations to live out this mission.

This summer and fall, the synod engaged in a listening process that included both a survey (172 responses) and small group conversations. The purpose of the listening process was to:

- grow in direct communication with congregations
- build awareness of synod ministry
- expand the synod’s ability to equip congregations
- build solidarity between congregations.

Discussions focused on what is going well in congregations, challenges they face, and opportunities that lie ahead. Major themes that surfaced in both the surveys and discussions were:

- Worship/Spiritual Growth
- Youth and Family Engagement
- Community Outreach and Service
- Staffing
- Volunteerism
- Finances
- Internal Relationships

Thanks to the team that worked to plan the survey and conversations. They will continue to share results and host gatherings of congregations with common priorities.



MEMBERS ONE OF ANOTHER

Praise God, no one is a Christian alone! We were baptized into the body of Christ. We know the truth of the words of St. Paul, that “if one of us suffers, all suffer together, and if one rejoices, all rejoice together.” As our culture and the church are changing, I give thanks for the gift of the partnerships we have as an ELCA synod. These partnerships expand our impact and include:

- colleges & seminaries, campus ministries, advocacy, tackling world hunger, and global partners like LDR & LWR;
- our Mission Developments- House of Grace in Montrose and Reborn Lao Lutheran in Waite Park, and strategic ministry Paz y Esperanza in Willmar – powerful examples of evangelism;
- the accompaniment partnership we share with our Companion Church – the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa. This past June our Synod Assembly was blessed by the presence of Presiding Bishop Nkosinathi Myaka and Diocesan Board Chair Mr. Mkhize. We have much to learn from our friends in the South Eastern Diocese. I ask you to hold our global companions in prayer as they continue to proclaim the Gospel in challenging circumstances, and yet with deep faith and always – JOY and PRAISE to God.
- our global partners of the Ev. Lutheran Church in Jordan & the Holy Land, where I was able to visit two years ago with the Conference of Bishops. I met many of our Lutheran church members and the pastors of our 6 Lutheran congregations who are proclaiming the Gospel in an impossible time. They are surviving with steadfastness and persistence – “Sumud” - and most of all, ask for your prayers for the situations in which they live today.

Numbers together

Reports tell us how our life together is going. Even though our own congregation may not feel the effects of changes in a congregation on the other side of the synod, we are in this together “for better or worse” because we are one in Christ. I want you to have the most recent statistical summary for congregations that comes from the annual reports you completed for 2023.

2023

Congregations	228
Congregations who completed annual reports	177
Congregations who did not send reports	51

The following summaries reflect the date those churches that filed annual reports (Form A):

	2022	2023
Baptized members:	97,689	95,600
Ave. baptized/cong.	428	419
Baptisms age 16+	24	19
Affirmation of Faith	353	377
Transfer in	1093	971
Baptized Received	2,594	2,402
Active Participants	48,875	45,488
Ave. wkly worship on-site	12,918	14,203
Ave. wkly. worship online	9,554	10,418
Ave. att. per cong. on-site	64	70
Ave. att per cong. online	70	80

Those membership figures may reflect the changed attitudes people place in the importance of “membership” in organizations and specifically, in the institutional church. Yet notice how they also represent how people are slowly emerging to attend worship in person and online as we live out being a both/and church – both in the room and online. Online worship is being accomplished by many congregations with technology as available as the phones we hold in our hands. St. Paul knew that the Good news of Jesus Christ is to be shared. Thank you for proclaiming it near and far.

When the annual report information comes to you in January, please direct the form to those who can pitch in to complete it. Talk with your Church Council about the trends you see. Return the form. And then know you have helped us reach a target of 100% responses this year! Thank you!

Generosity

Thank you for the Mission Support you shared in 2024. Although current 2024 figures won’t be known until after the fiscal year ends January 31, as we conclude December 2024, Mission Support, our primary source of revenue, again is lower than the previous year. Why?

- Everything costs more.
- Some of our congregations’ generous givers are passing away or face high costs for care.
- The cost of health benefits continues to rise for everyone.
- There is the tendency that when faced with financial challenges, congregations choose to direct funds closer to home.



We know there is great generosity in our congregations. Nearly 88% of our congregations have no debt. I regularly hear people say that they don't talk about money in their church. But every congregation can talk about God's great blessings and begin in the announcements and newsletters by:

- **thanking** people for their generosity,
- **telling** people why your congregation's ministry is important,
- **sharing information** about what their generosity is making possible,
- **telling inspiring stories** about our ministries,
- **asking** people for their generosity, and always –
- **thanking** for those gifts.

The Synod budget for the fiscal year ending in Jan 2026 was approved at the 2024 Synod Assembly, and we are currently preparing the budget that will guide us through January 2027. There are many uncertainties between now and then! Like you, we know that challenges can also lead to doing things in new ways, and we trust in God's creative Spirit as we plan for the future. We will continue to wisely steward the resources we receive and are committed to providing care and equipping for rostered ministers and congregations. Staff will continue to manage expenses conservatively and wisely, so that total expenses are lower than budget.

So often, we think about church from a perspective of scarcity: we need more pastors, people, money, just MORE..... The reality is that our God is a Giver and a Giver of abundance. As our synod statement says, *"By God's grace, together we have what we need."* And God continues to bless us – and often surprise us – in so many ways!

I am grateful for the leadership of our Synod Council, taking seriously its responsibility to be faithful stewards of our resources of staffing, facility, and funding. I remain excited to work together with them on the Council's commitment to *"empower Christian communities to join in God's mission of reconciliation: listening intentionally, loving unconditionally, serving others authentically, and faithfully healing creation."*

On a daily basis, I give **thanks** for the synod staff who equip and support you in being one body in Christ: Rev. Heather Culuris & Rev. Seyward Ask – Synod Ministers, Tammy Schacher – Executive Assistant, Kristin Bakeberg – Communications Coordinator, Maggie Berggren – Administrative Assistant, and Rev. Dr. Troy Pflibsen – Director for Evangelical Mission. They walk beside you in ministry with wisdom and joy. + *SOLI DEO GLORIA!* each day.

Thank you for the privilege of walking with you and living as one body in Christ and members one of another as the Southwestern Minnesota Synod, ELCA.

+ with grace, peace, and love,



Rev. Dee Pederson, D. Min

Bishop, Southwestern Minnesota Synod, ELCA



Southwestern Minnesota Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

