



Strengthening charitable causes to change the world through generosity

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Summary

Listening Process

Southwestern Minnesota Synod

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Purpose

The Southwestern Minnesota Synod sought insights on how congregations and leaders wish to be equipped, provide insights into why synod ministries exist, and ensure that synod ministries are responsive to our people in this changing time.

Listening Format

At the 2024 Synod Assembly the Southwestern Minnesota Synod launched an online survey for congregation members to share their perspectives. The survey remained open until Nov. 2024. Overall, 173 people took the survey.

In October, small group listening sessions were held throughout the synod, three in-person (New Ulm, Marshall, Albany) and one virtual via Zoom. Approximately 40 people took part in the conversations.

Major Themes

The congregations of the Southwestern Minnesota Synod bring vastly different perspectives and experiences to this process. The following themes emerged, some touting them as areas of strength and excitement and others sharing them as areas of concern.

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



Youth and Family Engagement

Findings

No area excites or concerns congregations more than the engagement of children, youth, and young families. This showed up in nearly every question asked in both the survey and the listening sessions. Confirmation and Sunday School appeared as two top congregational priorities.

Congregations with active and engaged young people see their ministry as 'successful.' Those without them identify it as one of their greatest concerns for the future.

Interpretation

Holding 'youth and family engagement' as THE pivotal issue between 'successful' and 'struggling' congregations does not serve the church well.

Congregations find themselves in vastly different contexts. Some communities abound in young families, with their schools needing to build larger facilities to house them. It makes sense that congregations in these communities place a large emphasis on engaging the young people of their communities.

Others face demographic shifts leading to an aging population, with schools consolidating due to declining enrollment. No matter how much energy some congregations put into engaging young people, the reality is that they have few young people in their neighborhoods. That does not mean that they should abandon their efforts. It simply provides a reality check for the expected results.

Engaging with younger generations means something different now than it did 20 years ago. Our culture has changed and the old methods don't have the same impact. This is the story in congregations across America. Congregations with a desire to engage with them must be open to new ministry experiments.

Many congregations engage in vibrant ministry without active children/youth ministries.

Critical Questions

Why does a congregation desire to engage young families?

- Is the goal to help young people grow in faith?
- It is to bring back memories of days when congregations had many young people?
- It is to keep the church open?

Where does/should children and youth ministry fit into a congregation's mission?



Worship/Spiritual Growth

Findings

Worship stands as a top priority in most congregations. While there is some concern about how worship engages people in a changing world, overall congregations are pleased with their worship ministry. Unsurprisingly, diversity of worship styles excites some and makes others anxious. In the survey, 'Worship styles' fell in the top five priorities reported.

There is concern about how people engage with their faith outside the worship experience.

Interpretation

Congregational ministry grounds itself in worship. It is where the most people engage. While congregations throughout the synod engage in a wide variety of programs, every congregation gathers for worship.

Unsurprisingly, the people attending worship in local congregations appreciate the style of worship they experience.

Critical Questions

How does worship engage the faith life of congregational members?

How does a congregation's worship experience help or hinder efforts to invite new people to worship?

How can congregations support congregational members as they engage in spiritual practices outside of worship?

Community Outreach and Service

Findings

People define 'outreach' in several ways. Some focus on serving the needs of the community. Others look to invite people to come to worship.

Congregations are excited about the ways they engage in their communities. Many congregations step outside their walls, engaging the needs of their local communities. 'Community Needs' fell in the top three congregational priorities, and many comments reflected joy for the way local congregations make an impact.

In the survey, people identified 'decreased commitment to organizations' as a significant change in their communities. Congregations step in to provide support in these gaps.



Outreach as evangelism proved more challenging, an area of needed support.

Interpretation

Community service is a tangible way that congregations impact lives. It can be difficult to rate how 'effective' a congregation is in helping people grow in faith. It's much easier to report on the number of meals served through a food pantry.

Critical Questions

How does faith play a role in a congregation's community service?

How does a congregation personally engage with those served?

How does a congregation avoid turning community service as 'us vs. them?'

Staffing

Findings

Congregations struggle to find the staff needed to serve their ministries. Of all the changes reported in the survey, 'congregational leadership/staff' was reported as the second highest change of all.

Some congregations seek pastoral staff. Others have a hard time finding and retaining children/youth ministry leaders.

Sometimes financial issues stand behind the challenge. Other times congregations just can't find capable people to fill the positions. Yet other times the positions lack clarity.

Interpretation

Amid the challenges in finding volunteers, congregations turn to paid staff to ensure that ministry moves forward. Lack of proper staffing makes congregations feel held back in what they can accomplish.

A national deficit in the number of pastoral leaders available plays a role in the challenge. Some congregations get around this with creative ministry options (like Synodically Authorized Ministers).

Critical Questions

Can a congregation accomplish their mission without full staffing?

How can raising up and training volunteers offset the need for staffing?

How many staffing issues are due to low pay and/or unrealistic expectations?



For those seeking pastoral leadership, what other options exist other than a called and ordained leader?

How can a congregation retain the staff they have? Are finances, training, or support the issue?

Volunteerism

Findings

While some congregations celebrate how volunteers step forward, many others struggle to find the people to accomplish the expected congregational tasks.

'Decreased institutional loyalty' was reported as third most of the congregational changes reported in the survey.

Interpretation

Following the pandemic, organizations of all types report a change in the level of volunteerism. Many people who had been regular volunteers had that pattern broken and never returned to those roles.

Volunteering in a congregation can prove amazingly rewarding. It can also become a source of frustration.

Many congregations do a poor job of recruiting volunteers. Some rely on worship announcements and newsletter notices and wait for people to step forward. Often the expectations of the role are unclear. Sometimes the role may no longer be necessary.

The reality is that only a small percentage of people will willingly step forward to fill a role. A significantly higher percentage will say yes if directly approached and given a clear understanding of the expectations and the impact of the work.

A focus on making the volunteer experience a positive one can have a lasting impact.

Critical Questions

How are volunteers invited to step forward?

Is the volunteer task still needed, or is there a lack of interest in that area of ministry? How else might the task be accomplished (if at all)?

How are volunteers made to feel appreciated for what they do?

What is the interplay between volunteer and staff roles?



Finances

Findings

Many (though definitely not all) congregations report struggles around finances. People identified 'Generosity/Stewardship' as one of the top 6 congregational priorities and had it first in the areas that congregations need help.

There is great concern about how congregations will continue to have the funds to continue meet their budgets and continue ministry at the levels they are accustomed to.

People recognize that in some cases giving has not fully rebounded following the pandemic. We should be clear that this is not the case across the board. Some congregations feel strong about their generosity ministries.

Interpretation

All non-profit organizations experience a major shift in giving patterns.

The number of non-profit organizations has exploded in the past few decades. In the past people gave to the church and expected the church to care for the hungry, support missionaries, train pastors, and the like. Now people can give to all those other agencies directly.

The generation that felt a strong desire to support institutions (like the church) is passing away. Younger generations often give where they feel their gifts have the greatest impact.

Congregations can adapt to this new reality by helping people see how giving to the local congregation has an impact on people's lives. Saying that people 'should' give, or making people feel guilty for not giving, will not motivate much giving.

Some congregations have a history of not talking about money. In most cases, this no longer works.

Fear of lack of funds hinders congregational visioning. Conversations of 'what does God call us to do' quickly turn into 'what can we afford?'

Critical Questions

What difference does the congregation make in people's lives (inside and outside the congregation)?

How can the congregation tell stories of that impact?



How do people's gifts allow for that ministry to happen?

Internal Relationships

Findings

We end this report on a positive note. Congregations widely report on the importance of relationships in their congregations. It is where the most people engage with the congregation. It's what excites people about their congregation and where they feel they excel.

Many talk about caring for one another in joys and sorrows. Members support each other, work well together, and readily offer help when needed.

Congregations widely talk about the importance of welcoming people.

Interpretation

Relationships matter. In most congregations, people gather in part because they really like each other. They personally experience the care of their communities of faith in times of need.

People talk about their 'church family.' On the one hand this shows the important connections people make. On the other hand, sometimes 'family' is good at loving those the most like ourselves and being suspicious of 'other' people who don't 'fit in.'

So while congregations claim to 'welcome all,' do 'all' actually feel welcome?

Critical Questions

What do relationships mean in your congregation?

How are new people welcomed into the congregation?

What is the difference between welcoming people and inviting them?