

Your synod office is thankful for your ongoing generosity and support. We are thankful for the servants who serve and those who have dedicated many years of service (Carla Klawitter and Larry Strenge, who retired this year). We are also thankful for all the people who are stepping forward to guide your congregation and synod.

"But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."

- Matthew 6



Southwestern Minnesota Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
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Everyday Spirituality & Congregational Vitality

2019-2020 Bishop Jon Anderson Annual Report

I love this parable.

"Help us to find God," the disciples asked the elder.

"No one can help you to do that," the elder said.

"Why not?" the disciples asked amazed.

"For the same reason that no one can help fish to find the ocean."

-Joan Chittister

*Wisdom Distilled from Daily:
Living the Rule of St. Benedict Today – p. 28*

The parable reminds us of the incomprehensible mystery, beauty, presence and wonder of God. It calls us to conversion from worshiping a safe, small house idol who does what we need and want, to remind that our God is the creator, redeemer and sanctifier of all that exists. Jesus is the one who reveals God to us most deeply.

In the coming year we will continue to lift up God's gifts focusing on the cross, where we know God and ourselves most deeply. We will encourage people to attend to their spiritual life knowing that our longing to see our congregations thrive and flourish begins with what is happening in us as we gather to hear the Good News, receive the sacraments, offer our lives back to the one who made and sends us to serve in our personal and communal daily callings

Our synod will focus on God's call to **deepen congregational vitality** in the coming year. We will invite you to think about what makes a congregation vital? How does God do that? What do we need to encourage? What is unimportant to God? Congregational vitality begins with the deep waters of baptism and God's grace that calls us to faith. Congregational vitality is reinforced as we gather to hear the Good News and receive the meal of God's grace and love that comes from outside of us.

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Congregational vitality sends us to love our neighbors and God's creation. Congregational vitality inspires us to invite others into the conversation with God and into the community that bears Christ's name.

We need to notice and receive the gifts of God's Holy Spirit in our lives and our life together today. We also need to remember to lament what has changed. Many of our congregations, our synod, our larger Church body and the Christian movement are facing heavy head winds. We are not the first to experience change in our culture, but it is not easy for leaders or our congregations.

One of our former pastors shared this wisdom from her work with the sick and dying to the challenges of congregations who struggle like we do as individuals to face losses. Pastor Anne Andert used these three questions to claim and lament the transitions of loss.

What is lost? What is left? What is possible?

To these three questions, I want to ask this missional question.

"What will serve the Gospel now?"

Congregational vitality grows out of noticing our assets, noticing our opportunities and then experimenting leaning forward in the hope that grows out of the Story of Jesus and God's resurrecting grace. God is working in our lives and experience today as well.

Our synod will invite congregations into a deep and wide conversations about their health, assets and the mission field where God has placed them. God calls them to proclaim and live out the Good News we know in Jesus. We will lift up a variety of tools, writings and spiritual practices. For example, we want to invite your congregation to explore the <http://congregationalvitalitysurvey.com/> instrument. We also will share resources to enter into and accelerate the faithful innovation. Congregations are called to...

- a. **Listen** to God, each other, ourselves, and the World
- b. **Reconnect** with God's story and God's faithfulness
- c. **Define** the challenges we are facing
- d. **Reframe** our expectations and goals
- e. **Cultivate** new ways of being the church through spiritual practices and innovation

Congregational vitality grows out of encouraging and supporting your pastor and lay leadership. Instead of imagining these leaders are replaceable parts who are to be blamed when our congregations struggle, what if we began to imagine and encourage the idea that they are renewable resources who need to have support to serve as your Spiritual Shepherds and of your congregation? This includes encouraging them to make time to preach and teach the faith well. It includes lay people joining with pastors in the joy of pastoral visitation on behalf of the congregation. It means celebrating confirmation guides and teachers as faith formation servants engaging the Bible and the gifts of our tradition so people can better live out their everyday spiritualities. God invites us to have fun, tell holy and powerful stories about our lives. God calls us to share our pain and challenges and walk together in trusting that God is with us. Christ Jesus is out in front of us calling us to follow.

Congregational vitality means moving beyond welcoming people, to actually find ways to invite "new people" into the many doors of a congregation's life. Some will find meaning joining you to serve. Some will enjoy joining you to experience community, fun and laughter. Some will join you to learn about the Christian faith and its connections to the world. Some will come broken, lonely, lost, not sure what drove them into sadness and now towards the light. God's Spirit is working in our midst, in our lives, in our communities and in our world.

Our larger synod and churchwide organization are engaging in important work as well. We are focusing on leadership and congregational vitality which we know begins with the forming of faith at home and in communities. Your churchwide system is working to open more space for innovation, while engaging the challenges of racism, sexism, opening ourselves to create sanctuary and continuing to receive the gifts of women even as we celebrate fifty years of the ordination of women. Your synod sees congregational vitality to include helping congregations listen to their mission context, developing lay and rostered people to guide us into the next chapter of ministry in Jesus name. We are working on encouraging people to consider rostered service.