

**Southwestern Minnesota Synod Ministry Review
Online Questionnaire Results
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
March 2020**

An online questionnaire to receive feedback from the people of the Southwestern Minnesota Synod was available from February 23 to March 18, 2021. The intent of the survey was to learn more about the mission field of the area. Because Bishop Jon Anderson has served the synod as bishop since 2003 and will be retiring from his call this year, some of the questions were designed to elicit feedback that could guide the new bishop and to let the people of the synod get a better understanding of their synod as they discern who their next bishop should be. But also, some of the feedback was intended to challenge people to think about what they can do to build Christ’s kingdom in the area.¹

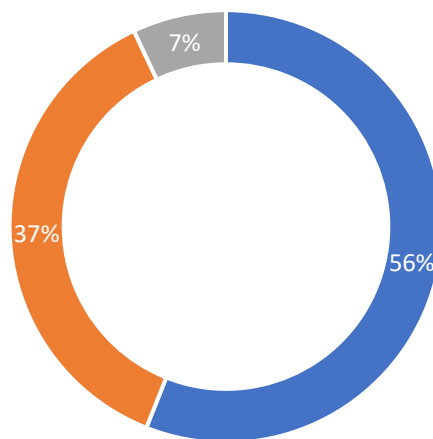
Who Responded?

A total of 409 people responded to the survey; however, not all respondents answered all questions.

Over half of the respondents are members/active participants in congregations in the Southwestern Minnesota Synod. Thirty-seven percent are rostered ministers. (See Figure 1.)

Figure 1: Respondents (N=345)

- Lay congregational member or active participant
- Rostered Minister in Southwestern Minnesota
- Other (church employee, retired pastor, pastor from another synod, etc.)

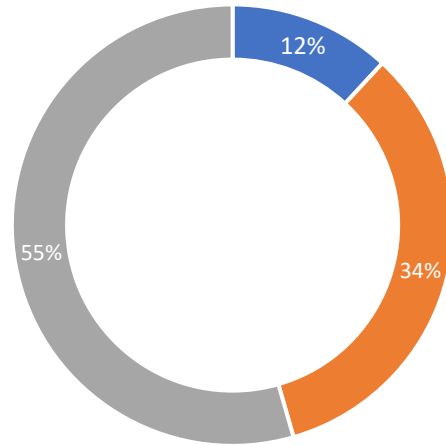


¹ Thanks should be noted for the following people in the Southwestern Minnesota Synod who helped in the design and distribution of the questionnaire: Bishop Jon Anderson; The Rev. Dee Pederson, Director for Evangelical Mission; Mr. Ferman Woodberry, Synod Vice President; Ms. Gwen Arneson, former Synod Vice President and chair of the bishop election committee; Kristin Bakeberg, Synod Communications; Tammy Schacher, Support Staff to Bishop.

Most of the respondents are older. Five people aged 30 or younger responded. (See Figure 2.)

Figure 2: Age of Respondents (N=348)

■ 40 or younger ■ 41 to 60 ■ 61 or older



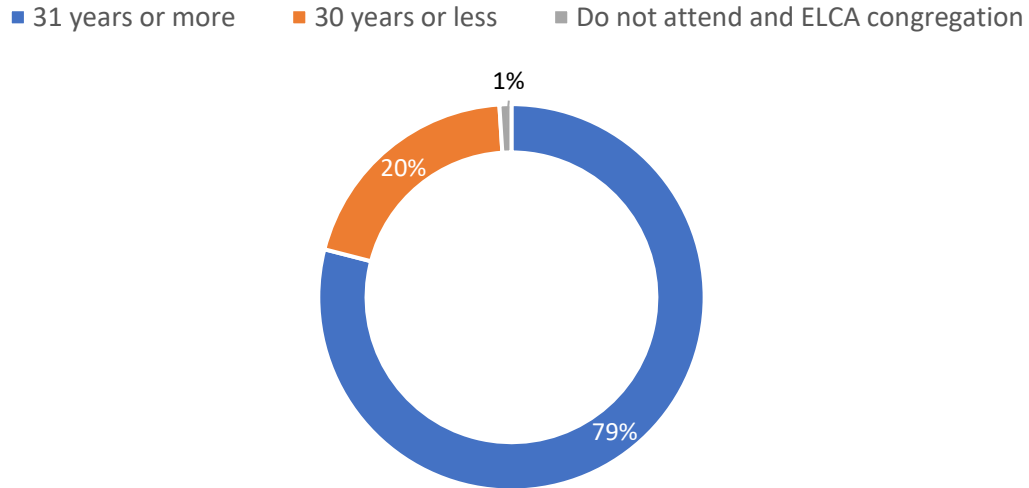
The respondents were spread out over the synod. Out of the 335 people who indicated where they lived, the following communities were the only ones that had six or more respondents. (See Table 1.)

Table 1: City/Town of Respondents (Only communities with 6 or more respondents)

City/Town	# of Respondents	City/Town	# of Respondents
Willmar	17	St Peter	8
St Cloud	11	Minneota	6
St James	9	Redwood Falls	6
Montevideo	8	St Joseph	6

Almost 80 percent of respondents have been members of an ELCA congregation for 31 years or more. Four respondents do not attend an ELCA congregation. (See Figure 3.)

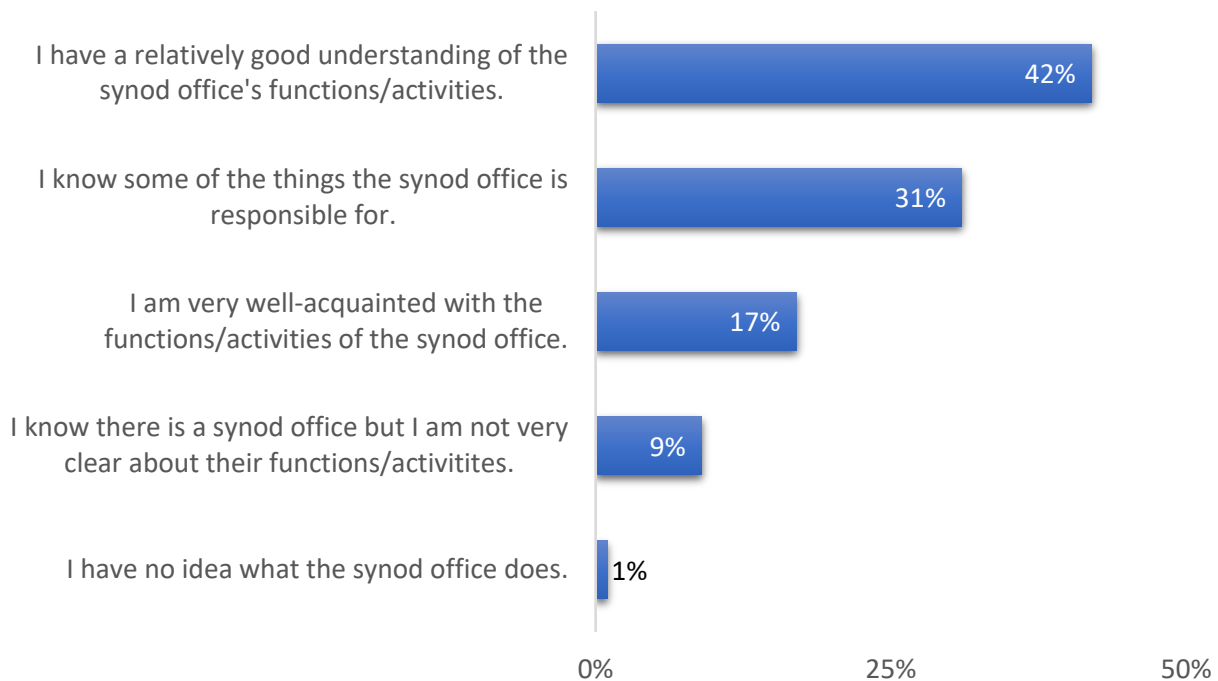
Figure 3: How long have you attended an ELCA congregation? (N=350)



Knowledge of Synod Office and Mission Partners

Most of the respondents have a relatively good or very good understanding of the functions and activities of the synod office. (See Figure 4.)

Figure 4: Functions and Activities of Synod Office (N=409)



Southwestern Minnesota Bishop Election Report

The Southwestern Minnesota Synod partners with a diverse array of organizations. Respondents were asked which ministries they were aware partnered with the synod. Table 2 shows a listing of the organizations with whom the synod partners and the number of respondents who were aware of these partnerships.

Table 2: Partnered Organizations and Respondent Awareness

Organization	# of Respondents Aware of the Partnership		Organization	# of Respondents Aware of Partnership
Green Lake Lutheran Ministries	346		Shetek Lutheran Min.	297
Women of the ELCA	345		Lutheran Youth Org.	267
Luther Seminary	343		Shalom Hill Farm	266
ELC in South Africa	332		Lutheran Men in Mission	252
Gustavus Adolphus College	332		Luther Crest Bible Camp	238
LSS of Minnesota	324		Minn. Council of Churches	221
Campus Ministry (various universities)	316		Lutheran Advocacy – Minnesota	171

Foci for the Next Bishop

Respondents were asked to pick the three most important areas (out of a list of 15) on which the next bishop should focus. Respondents felt *Vision and Planning* should be the next bishop's primary focus; the least important area for respondents was *Global Mission*. (See Table 3.)

Table 3: Most Important Foci for Next Bishop

Focus	Responses		Focus	Responses		Focus	Responses
Vision and planning	154		Children, youth and family ministry	101		Ecumenical and interfaith partnerships	49
Evangelism and outreach	138		Leadership development	97		Creation care	30
Pastoral care of rostered ministers	133		Faith formation	83		Financial management	22
Building healthy community	111		Administration	58		Media and communications	11
Healthy conflict management	107		Justice advocacy	53		Global Mission	7

Challenges, Opportunities, Advice

Challenges

Table 4 shows the most common challenges for the synod identified by the respondents. The overall decline in membership/attendance was the most frequently mentioned challenge. However, many of the themes that emerged could overlap with each other. For example, the inability to attract young people or young families is related to the general decline in membership/attendance. The lack of financial resources is a result of fewer people attending church. The themes of diversity, white supremacy and changing demographics could also overlap with each other.

Table 4: Challenges Facing the Southwestern Minnesota Synod (including the area in general)*

Challenge (N=705)	# of Responses
Membership/Attendance Decline, Attracting New Members, Outreach, Evangelism	108
Rostered Minister Shortage	86
Relevance, Decline of the Church in People’s Lives and in the Culture	67
COVID-19 and its effects on church and society	61
Financial Issues, Lack of Money	50
Young People/Families with Young Children – Not attracting them	47
Political/Cultural Divisions	44
Lack of Innovation, Inability to Re-Imagine Church, Focus on Building only	44
Diversity Issues – Engaging and reaching out to BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ People	34
Racism – White Supremacy/Nationalism	33
Rostered Minister Burnout, Need to lift up/care for Rostered Ministers	29
Consolidate/Merge/Close Small Congregations	28
Keep Small Congregations Open. Help small congregations stay open.	21
Shrinking population in SW Minnesota**	21
ELCA is too politically liberal for SW Minnesota.	16
Changing Demographics (racially/ethnically)	10
Aging Population	6

*Respondents were asked to identify two challenges.

**The actual population in SW Minnesota has increased 13% from 2000 to 2019. It has gone from 736,446 in 2000 to 811,171 in 2019.

Following are some select quotations about these themes.

The theme of relevance touched on the fact that so many people are too busy with other activities and just do not have time for church as well as the fact that people are turning away from organized religion in general.

Relevance

- *The changing patterns of how we live where individual schedules/lifestyle/activity reigns supreme over all other schedules, including community/church scheduling/activity.*
- *The large cultural shift away from church attendance & support (away from being religious in general).*

The theme of political cultural divisions touched on various areas of division.

Political/Cultural Division

- *Liberal clergy ministering to "Red" counties.*
- *Learning to live together in the toxic political environment.*
- *Some of the concepts of Shalom Farm of organic & sustainable farming are alienating most of today's farmers who do keep up with what is safe and appropriate and legal to do in agriculture.*
- *The political and cultural divide between our conservative area and a more liberal political and cultural national church culture.*

The theme of innovation/re-imagining church also indicates a paradigm shift about what church is.

Innovation/Re-imagining Church

- *Adapting our ways of doing ministry in the post-modern world, learning what we need to keep and what to let go.*
- *The reality of non-geographical friendship networks*
- *Delivering the true message of Christ without imbibing it with a 1950s American view of what is "proper."*
- *Reworking our collective ideas of how to be church in the 21st century, For Example: family availability, digital ministry.*

Opportunities

Table 5 shows the opportunities identified by the respondents. In some cases, the challenges can be the same as the opportunities. While some may claim that diversity or diversifying the participants in the congregations is a challenge, some of the same people say that the changing racial/ethnic demographics of the region are an opportunity for outreach. Just as re-imagining a new church is a challenge, the technology exists to keep people connected virtually even though they cannot be together in person. The decline in the church's place in society (lack of relevance of the church) and the rise of the unchurched population also offers the opportunity to attract those who are spiritual but not religious.

Table 5: Opportunities in the Southwestern Minnesota Synod (including the area in general)*

Opportunity (N=565)	# of Responses
Ethnic Diversity of Area, Changing Demographics, Learning about Anti-Racism	84
Technology, Online Presence, Virtual Dimension to Church	67
Community Outreach, Working with non-ELCA groups, Working outside the building	63
Gospel message, Lutheran theology, Spreading the Good News	60
Collaboration, Unification, Congregations Working Together (both intra-ELCA and ecumenically), Consolidating, Right Sizing	52
General Innovation, Ability to Change, New Ways of Doing Church, The Challenge is the Opportunity	51
Reach out to the unchurched, Decline of Christendom is opening up other avenues and ability to do outreach to the spiritual but not religious	49
Desire to connect post-COVID, Learnings from the COVID time will help the church in its mission	41
Reaching out to Young People and Families with Young Children, Faith Formation for young people	40
Leadership Development, Empowering Lay Leaders, TEEM Program, New Bishop	35
Care for Creation, Climate Change, Green Revolution	9
History of Lutheranism in the area, Loyal base of Lutherans	8
Money, Wealth, Transfer of Wealth from Baby Boomers to their children	6

*Respondents were asked to identify two opportunities.

Following are some quotations about the message the ELCA has to offer and the place the ELCA still holds in the area.

- *Delving deeper into the message of the Bible (history and imagery), and showing how/where Christ freed people from the dogma of the Old Testament will attract people not in the ELCA.*
- *Population that still values Lutheran identity.*
- *We have the best message for a hurting world.*

Table 6 shows the themes present in the question about God’s dream for the mission of the Southwestern Minnesota Synod. The themes were similar to some of the themes in the challenges and opportunities:

- Our faith in Christ will sustain us.
- COVID has been difficult but has provided a wake-up call that it is time for change.
- We have been living in a time of racial and political unrest/polarization and the church should be a place of peace that can help to bridge these divides.

Table 6: Is there anything you want to add about God’s dream and mission for the Southwestern Minnesota Synod?

God’s Dream (N=137)	# of Responses
Holy Spirit will guide us. Through Christ all is possible. We are a faith-filled people.	38
The time for change is now. It is time to evolve. COVID has shown us it is the time to change. We can die to new life in Christ.	36
There needs to be more collaboration and communication between and among the synod and the congregations. We all need to be more pro-active in collaboration and communication.	22
All people can be unified in Christ. We can get beyond politics and show the love of Christ that surpasses these divisions in our communities.	18
Racial Reconciliation. Racial/ethnic diversity will increase.	16
The ELCA is too political and has a political rather than a Gospel-centered message.	7

Advice

The advice offered was that the next bishop needs to be present in the congregations. S/he needs to trust in the Holy Spirit while working to bring people together. (See Table 7.)

Table 7: What advice would you give the next bishop of the SW Minnesota Synod?

Advice (N=234)	# of Responses
Visit congregations. Be present in congregations. Communicate with congregations.	42
Pray. Faith must be your guide. Trust in God. Listen to the Holy Spirit. Walk in the path of Jesus.	29
Delegate responsibilities. Collaborate. Have a good team and trust them.	28
Be a unifier. COVID, politics and civil/racial unrest have caused so many divisions. Please bring people together in Christ.	24
Listen. Listen to people’s concerns. Understand rural, SW Minnesota culture.	21
Be open to change. Don’t be tethered to tradition. Be thoughtful and creative in addressing change.	20
Shepherd the rostered ministers of the synod. Support them but also be able to discipline them when necessary.	17
Practice self care. Take time for yourself and your family. Take sabbath rest.	16
Focus on youth/young people and young families. Dedicate time and energy for them, listen to them and their concerns since they are the future.	13
Be a visionary. Look to the future.	9
Bishop Anderson - Try to follow his lead but also understand that you are your own person.	8
Lead. Be a bold leader. Lead by example. Be ready to make difficult decisions as a leader.	7

Following are various quotes showing a range of advice.

- *I would encourage this person to erase all images of what they think the office of bishop actually is... because I assure it is NOT. I would ask this person how they handle conflict - honestly. (not how they "think" or "want" to handle it but how they "honestly" handle it). I would tell this person that there will be many sleepless nights, that they will be forced to defend not only their denomination but their peers, their beliefs, and their faith to the very core. And then I would tell*

them that they will encounter many, many more amazing stories and people of faith who continually suit up and show up. They will restore your faith, bring tears to your eyes and make every day worth it.

- *Help congregations live in ways that set the church apart from business-as-usual in our society. Live/function in such a way that people see it as different from the way other nonprofits function. People in my community would be hard pressed to know what is different between Lions and local churches.*
- *Learn to discern between what is essential and what is only important and say no to some of the things that are not essential. Take care of yourself and your family. It is all about relationships. Spend as much time as possible with the leaders in the synod, one on one and in groups. This will require saying no to some of the things that are expected of the Bishop by various entities. Time spent inside the synod is time well spent. Time spent outside of the synod, not so much.*
- *Focus on the 20% of activity that gives you 80% of your results. Delegate the other stuff and you will find that you are not wasting your time on things of lower importance that wear you down. If other people drop items, resist the urge to clean up their messes.*
- *Not advice, but two questions: Who are you listening to, are you surrounding yourself with diverse voices, and do they all get an equal seat at the table? Are you able to take the financial concerns of our congregations and synod seriously, without letting money and membership become the primary mission of the ELCA?*
- *Remember that ultimately the work is God's work, and not ours to accomplish in our own strength. The Lord will ensure that His Word continues to reach out through our evolving society, regardless of socioeconomic trends. The task of the SW MN Synod will be to discern God's leading into the next season.*
- *The items that are important for a bishop are not in the list provided. 1) Build positive relationships with congregations. When a congregation asks, "What does the synod do?" it shows they don't have a good relationship.*
- *We have just gone through a very difficult stretch with our families, our communities, businesses and our churches and there is a lot of stress, fear, and weariness in everyone's life. We need to focus on a progressive and upbeat attitude of healing and moving forward. Learn from the period we are coming out of but don't dwell on its consequences.*

You and Your Congregation

Table 8 shows the most common mission areas in which the congregations of Southwestern Minnesota are engaged. The most common form of God’s work in the world has to do with food. Ninety-six respondents mentioned their congregations’ food pantries, free dinners, donated clothes/personal hygiene items. This was the most common response. However, as with many of the items in the questionnaire, there can be overlap. For example, people who wrote about volunteering in the community could be volunteering at a food pantry.

Table 8: Building up God's mission (In your community, the SW Minnesota Synod, the US, the world)

Build Up Mission Activity (N=518)	# of Responses
Food, Clothes, Hygiene Items – on the local level	96
Community Outreach – working in the community, God’s Work. Our Hands. Volunteering in the community, helping the homeless	84
Proclaiming the Gospel, Preaching the Word, Sharing the Good News, Prayer	52
Virtual Worship – Online, Television, Radio	46
Financial Benevolence – general, mission support with synod, local financial charity, (not specifically international)	46
Youth, young people, children, families with young children	42
Local congregational support – fellowship, caring for each other	38
Evangelism, welcoming everyone, reaching out to everyone to grow the church, inviting unchurched and de-churched people back to church	27
COVID-related issues, coming out of the pandemic	25
Ecumenical/Interfaith partnerships, Collaborating with other congregations	22
International support – South African Companion Synod, LWR, Quilts, Missionary Support	22
Diversity – anti-racism work, reaching out to Somali immigrants, working with BIPOC people	18

Lastly, respondents were asked what new thing they could do to be God’s hands and feet in the world. The most common responses were about volunteering, being more participatory in their communities and generally being a kind and good person.

Table 9: What is one new thing you can start doing to be God's hands and feet in the world?

New Thing (N=231)	# of Responses
Volunteer – in general, do some type of work	34
Community – be out in the community, be more participatory in the community, get out of the congregation and in the community	32
Kindness – be a kind person, lead by example, speak words of encouragement, be open-minded	24
My Congregation – be more involved in my congregation, do more work in the congregation, participate more with congregation members in Bible study, other activities	19
Evangelism – invite new people to church and invite people to come back to church	17
Youth – reach out to youth and young families, work with LYO, work with the Bible Camps	17
Racial Issues – work for racial reconciliation, discuss matters of race, work for racial justice	16
Reach Out – visit lonely people, visit the elderly, talk to new people (but not necessarily to get them to come to church)	14
Share Faith – be a witness to my Christian faith, preach the Gospel	12
Pray – pray more, listen to/discern the Holy Spirit	12
Larger Church – support the larger church, educate people more about the larger church (e.g., synod, churchwide organization), work with other congregations in the area, both ecumenically and other ELCA congregations	11
COVID – get back to some sense of pre-COVID life, keep some learnings from COVID but try to get back to “normal”	10
Money – support the church financially	8