



"For we are co-workers
in God's service;
you are God's field,
God's building."

– 1 Corinthians 3:9 (NIV)

One of the beautiful parts of synod ministry involves driving across this large territory and seeing the changing colors from one season to the next: bright yellow-greens of springtime, rich deep greens of summer, the golden crops in late summer, the brilliant colors of leaves in the fall, and then the rich dark soil of early winter.

In his first letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul describes the church in beautiful images: as coworkers in God's service, a field, and a building! As we look ahead to 2023, I consider the image of the church as a field.

You are God's Field

The first thing I want to say is, "**Thank you!**" Thank you for planting God's Word in the world and loving your neighbors as we move through the global pandemic. Thank you for the generosity you share to further partner and synod ministries during times of transition, challenge, and celebration. Whether lay or rostered leaders, we are coworkers for God's mission. We lead and serve in our various congregational ministries with the patience of gardeners and farmers, believing and trusting that it is God who gives the growth. I give thanks to God for you!

Planted Together

Our synod identity statement says God has planted our congregations in cities, farms, and towns together under one prairie sky, and that by God's grace, together we have what we need. As I visit our congregations and listen to rostered and lay leaders, several things are clear:

- Like the earliest Christian communities, congregations today – from those in open country to larger cities and small towns - are very different from each other! Paul's letters to those early churches reflect the unique circumstance of each. Our congregations today are emerging the pandemic each facing their own unique challenges and opportunities. And so this is a time to listen to one another's hopes and concerns, seek to understand, and continue to remind each other that we are still in this together. *What does it mean to know that we as churches are connected to each other today?*
- God has given unique gifts to each congregation: the fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23), and the gifts given to equip the saints for the work of ministry for building up the body of Christ. (Eph. 4:12). Lay and rostered ministry is not a solo endeavor; we are all partners because we are the body of Christ. *Whose gifts might you discover and lift up as you look to the new year?*
- Congregation identities have been shaped by the context in which God has planted us. That includes geography, and cultural and denominational histories. It also includes the mile-markers along the way: congregation and community crises, anniversaries, transitions, and the new things we have discovered over time. Post-pandemic, we acknowledge that we cannot retreat to some of the nostalgia or habits of the past. *What is God calling you and your church to be and do in this new year?*
- Our context also provides important signposts as we consider how God is calling us into the future. Our communities have changed drastically in the past few years. The needs of our neighbors are significant. Many congregations are partnering for new ministries of serving, faith formation, staffing, and worship. *How is the Spirit leading you to be the hands and feet and smile and love of Jesus with others in your area today?*

"God's demonstration plot"

When a seed is planted and tender shoots start to emerge from the soil, it's hard to imagine the plant that will grow there. Corn or beans, daffodils or iris bulbs, tomatoes or pumpkins... from small beginnings grow plants that can be beautiful and sustain life. As we emerge from this global pandemic, we can see how the rate of change sped up innovation and creativity across our congregations. We see new fruit.

One of my professors, Prof. Craig Van Gelder, wrote that growing up on a farm in rural Iowa provided a lesson for understanding the church being missionary by nature. Extension agents then would introduce new farming technologies, seeds, and fertilizers in strips of land along major highways that served as *demonstration plots* for these new innovations. Van Gelder writes, “The church is God’s demonstration plot in the world. Its very existence demonstrates that his redemptive reign has already begun. Its very presence invites the world to watch, listen, examine, and consider accepting God’s reign as a superior way of living.”¹



As we move into new levels of activity in our congregations, it’s easy to turn inward, wonder where the people have gone, and focus on scarcity and survival. But dear friends, many in our world are watching to see what kind of church we will be in the future. People in our communities long for healing and hope. I believe God is calling and sending this church to live out the way of Jesus for this time, in the context where we’re planted. God’s reign is breaking into our world, and in Jesus Christ God is reconciling the whole world to God’s very self.

“You happen to be God’s field in which we are working.” (The Message).

I give thanks for these partners in ministry who make us all better together:

- Pastoral staff: now-retired Synod Minister Pr. Stephen Cook, and current Synod Ministers Pr. Heather Culuris and Pr. Naomi Mahler, focusing on candidacy, transitions, call process, and equipping; Director for Evangelical Mission (D.E.M.) Pr. Troy Pflibsen; Synod Administrative staff Tammy Schacher, Kristin Bakeberg, and Maggie Berggren; new Synod Youth Ministry Coordinator Pr. Nikoli Falenschek; Gifts of Grace team Pr. Andrew Hermodson-Olsen and Pr. Kelly France; and ELCA Regional Gift Planner Pr. Keith Pearson. We are also pleased that GSB Consultants Pr. Pete Reuss and Paul Marsh are working with us in generosity and stewardship ministries.
- I give thanks that we have celebrated ordinations and welcomed 11 new rostered ministers in 2022: Pr. Janet Adams, Deacon Jill Davis, Pr. Jeremy Hallquist, Pr. Jon Wendt, Pr. Chuck Shingledecker, Pr. Sherri Larson, Deacon Brenda Handel-Johnson, Pr. Paul Bravinder, Pr. Sarah Jones, Pr. Allison Peterson, Pr. Austin Krohnke, Pr. David Nelson. Please cheer them on in their ministry. And as you see people in your congregation or community who you think have the gifts for rostered ministry, consider asking them if they have considered full-time ministry. You could be the one to plant the seeds of a call in their hearts.
- Synod governance: Synod Council, boards, and committees, including the rejuvenated Partnership Committee with the Southeastern Diocese of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa and networks like the Racial Justice Network and Faithful Innovation and Coaching.
- Conference Deans and Chairpersons who keep us connected close to home.

The generosity of your Mission Support sustains all we do together in the synod and with our partners in outdoor ministries, campus ministries, colleges & universities, seminaries, across the ELCA, and around the world. Our Mission Support comes back to us by providing us with a whole, full-time staff member - D.E.M. Pr. Troy - who is working with many congregations as they plan for their future. We give thanks for the relationships we share with Lutheran World Relief, Lutheran Disaster Response, and Lutheran immigration and Refugee Services. Through them, you are there, standing with people experiencing war, unrest, hunger, disasters, and so much more. Thank you!

Thank you for your witness as the church today. Thank you for your generosity and partnership. I give thanks for the signs of God’s presence all around us and in our life together. “*You are God’s field.*”

Thanks be to God!

Handwritten signature of Rev. Dee Pederson.

+ Rev. Dee Pederson, D. Min
Bishop, Southwestern Minnesota Synod, ELCA



Southwestern Minnesota Synod

¹Craig Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church: A Community Created by the Spirit* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2000), 99.