



Rev. Heather Culuris, Synod Minister.

2026 Synod Assembly Report.

This past year, I delved into a book that quickly became a favorite book of mine. It was written as an interview with Jane Goodall titled [The Book of Hope: A Survival Guide for Trying Times](#). In it she said: *“Hope is often misunderstood. People tend to think that it is simply passive wishful thinking: I hope something will happen but I’m not going to do anything about it. This is indeed the opposite of real hope, which requires action and engagement.”* At another point, she listed some of her reasons for hope, saying: *“I do have reasons for hope: our clever brains, the resilience of nature, the indomitable human spirit, and above all, the commitment of young people when they’re empowered to take action.”*

Her words lead me to wonder: In our communities, in our congregations, in our daily lives of faith, in our synod, where do we find reasons for hope?

I find hope in the work of the Candidacy process and Candidacy committee. The candidacy process involves 3 official steps that a candidate takes through seminary: entrance, endorsement, and approval that all involve levels of preparation and conversation with our synod leaders. We have approximately 15 people on our candidacy committee who serve with joy and wisdom as they walk with our candidates preparing for ministry. We have approximately 20 individuals in our candidacy process actively. **There is such hope when you look at all those varied and diverse people who are following God’s call to ministry as pastors and deacons bringing amazing faith and skills and gifts to that call.**

I find hope as I work with congregations and pastors through the call process. We as synod staff work with congregations through the process of saying goodbye to a pastor or deacon through all the paperwork and interviews until a new pastor is called. Time is spent discerning with pastors if they sense a call to one of our congregations and contacting pastors interested in serving in our synod. Time is spent with congregations seeking a pastor as they work on their congregational paperwork and interview pastoral or diaconal candidates. Even recognizing the shortage of clergy, I find immense hope in the call process. Why? Because I get to encounter congregations who are doing amazingly faithful ministry. Because I get to engage with pastors looking for the next stage in their ministry. **There is such hope when a match is made between a congregation and a pastor looking to faithfully work together as God is calling them!**

I find hope in our grant and programming that supports and trains lay leaders to serve in congregations. It is hopeful that granting organizations and seminaries are supporting rural congregations to continue ministry in their contexts. I have been blessed to work with the bishop in planning and implementing retreats for our lay leaders that have been full of learning and fellowship. Our authorized lay leaders are stepping into unexpected ministry in their congregations and neighboring congregations providing stability and encouragement and continued ministry. **This gives me much joy and hope!**

I find hope in supporting the interim collaborative, a group of pastors who meet monthly, who are serving in interim ministries throughout our synod. Our interim pastors provide a significant ministry to congregations in our synod and they gather monthly to discuss topics such as constitutions, church trends, church policies, and congregation partnerships. This year we also considered Jane Goodall’s *The Book of Hope* and considered how it might speak to the role of interim pastors. **Working together to care for congregations in transition and seeing the faithful, challenging work of our interim pastors gives me hope.**



I find hope in all the many ways we support and equip our leaders, both lay and rostered, through boundaries training workshops, ZOOM trainings, Equipping Day, and our Fall Theological conference, among other events. We equip our leaders through the work of several committees such as the compensation guidelines committee and our scholarship committee. **In each of these learning moments, in conversations that support our leaders and congregations, I find hope as we continue to learn and grow together.**

Sometimes it feels like there are so many challenges in our world, obstacles to overcome, puzzles to solve. But we as people of faith are also people of hope. In this year ahead, I encourage you to look for signs of hope around you and help others to see them as well.



Southwestern Minnesota Synod  
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America



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Rev. Seyward Ask, Synod Minister.

2026 Synod Assembly Report.

This past year, my work has centered on the word *equipping*. In different ways and with different people, I have had the privilege of walking alongside leaders across our Synod as they discern, grow, and serve.

### **Equipping Congregation Leaders.**

A significant portion of my role focuses on the call process, partnering with congregation lay leadership as they discern and call a pastor or deacon. Each call process is unique. There is no one-size-fits-all approach, as every congregation brings its own history, context, challenges, and hopes for the future. Through many modes of communication, we move through the steps of discernment and visioning, the development of a Ministry Site Profile, the review and interview of candidates, and ultimately the extension of a new call. My goal is that congregations feel supported, informed, and confident, knowing they are not navigating this season alone but are accompanied by their Synod every step of the way. At its heart, this work is about helping congregations articulate who they are, who God is calling them to become, and what kind of leadership will help them live into that calling.



### **Equipping Rostered Ministers.**

On the other side of the call process, I work closely with rostered ministers who are discerning a new call within our Synod. Like congregations, each leader's journey is personal and nuanced. I strive to provide guidance, clarity, and encouragement as they navigate prayerful discernment about their next chapter in ministry.

### **Equipping Youth & Families.**

Faith formation looks different in every congregation. Some rely on traditional Sunday School models; others lean into intergenerational ministry, small groups, or seasonal programming. What is consistent across the Synod is the deep desire to nurture faith in children, youth, and families. One of my primary goals is to serve as a bridge between congregations, helping leaders share ideas, resources, and encouragement with one another. Youth and family ministry is holy and demanding work, and no congregation should feel isolated in it.

I have also continued working alongside the Lutheran Youth Organization (LYO) Board to host engaging, faith-centered events for youth across our Synod. These gatherings provide space for young people to build community, explore their faith, and experience the wider church beyond their local congregation.

### **Looking Ahead.**

In each of these areas - congregations, rostered ministers, and youth & families - I am reminded that the church is not simply a building or a set of programs. It is a living, breathing community of people seeking to follow Jesus together. It is imperfect and beautiful, challenging and grace filled. I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to walk alongside our congregations, leaders, and young people in this sacred calling. I look forward to the year ahead, trusting that God is already at work among us, equipping us for what comes next.



Southwestern Minnesota Synod  
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America



**Rev. Troy Pflibsen**  
*Director for Evangelical Mission.*

## 2026 Synod Assembly Report.

These are the ministries in which I have been blessed to see and experience hope in the past year:

The outdoor ministries of our church are a place and a people that offer faithful community in a way that is unique in the church. It is a significant part of my faith story, and they continue to be a significant part of many faith stories. They are peoples and places of hope.

Lutheran Advocacy Minnesota works with state leadership to promote possibility and opportunity for all. This past year its focus was on disaster relief and environmental concerns. Harold (John) Wolle and Pastor John Gabrielson are a part of this team. Lutheran Advocacy is a voice of hope.

This past year the Synod Hunger Team helped to connect congregations with the ELCA's Daily Bread Grants of \$500 each. Typically, there is a round of these grants in the spring and summer. This year the ELCA funded a second round in the fall and 13 congregations of our synod received them. This was hope made manifest at the table.

The work of creation care continues to grow in our state and region. There are a variety of perspectives in this effort, but all agree that our earth needs our attention. In this agreement there is hope for our planet.

This year the synod organization partnered with River of Hope, Hutchinson to sponsor anti-racism training with David Scherer (Agape). Those present did the hard work of facing both their own racism and the racism in our communities. In the midst of wrestling with this difficult truth, David also pointed to the hope that was in the room, hope that keeps us moving forward.

House of Grace's ministry is rooted in worship, but its heart is in social service. This summer when a review team interviewed the Montrose mayor and asked what would happen if House of Grace closed its doors, he said, without hesitation, that it would be devastating for the entire community. This was an affirmation of the hope that House of Grace brings into the Montrose area.

Iglesia Paz y Esperanza is our Strategic Ministry in Willmar. This year its advocacy and support for the Latino community has been life giving. Esperanza is in its name. Hope is central to its work.

Reborn Lao Lutheran is our intentional outreach into the southeast Asian community in the St. Cloud area. But its ministry is known as a welcoming community for all immigrants that are seeking a safe place as they build a new life here in the United States. This is hope for those new to our community.

This year the synod organization formed a team to do intentional work with building connections with our Dakota neighbors. They arranged visits to Jeffers Petroglyphs and the Lower Sioux Agency historical sites. They listened to the stories and engaged with the history. They also started to gather resources that congregations and communities can use to begin building their own connections. And they have encouraged area faith communities



to support the Makatoh Reconciliation and Healing Horse ride that takes place every November and December. Hope is an important theme for the Dakota in our area, and we are working to accompany them in hope.

Many of our faith communities are blessed with wonderful buildings, filled both with memories and possibilities.

This year the ELCA formed a new effort called the Church Property Resource Hub to walk with congregations as they explore the opportunities that their buildings hold. Several have already begun this work and have indeed found it full of hope.

This year has been both difficult and yet full of hope. Hope through the work of our faith communities and their people. Hope through the work of the ELCA and synod. Thank you for letting me be a part of the hope that you proclaim and share.

Shalom,

Troy

