



Northwestern Minnesota Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

2023 Synod Assembly Report of the Bishop of the Northwestern Minnesota Synod

Jesus: "The hour has come ..." John 12:23

There are those moments in the story of God with God's people where it is abruptly revealed that a tipping point has been reached, and a new era has begun. Witness Samuel setting up the Ebenezer stone between Mizpah and Shen to mark a new era of Israel's faithfulness, or consider Peter's vision in Acts 10 ushering in the inclusion of the Gentiles in the mission of the Gospel. In John 12, Jesus declares the exact moment when history would now turn on his cross – when the entire world (represented in John by "the Greeks") arrived to see the Son of God. In each instance there were portents that a turn was coming, but then there was that crystalizing moment when it became clear that it had arrived – when the labor pains for what had been struggling to be born were suddenly five minutes apart! I will go out on a limb and say that in years hence, we will look back on 2023 as the year when such a tipping point was reached for the churches of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in Northwestern Minnesota, and just like those biblical tipping points, I believe that this is something God is doing.

We are at the tipping point when it became clear that the way we have been providing Word and Sacrament ministry for generations is no longer viable, and that working harder and harder at what we've always done isn't the answer. My personal belief is that the way we've always done it won't work because God wants something new to emerge! That new thing is what I have been describing as a New Testament model of ministry. In the communities of the first, second and third centuries, most congregations were very small and were served on a weekly basis by "Deacons" who shared the word of God and presided at the Lord's table. These "Deacons" were overseen by a nearby "Bishop" who ensured that the preaching and presiding of the "Deacons" was faithful to the way of Jesus.

The contemporary equivalent of those New Testament "Deacons" is what we now call "Synod Authorized Ministers,"

This first century New Testament model of ministry is where we are headed now in the 21st century.

and the contemporary equivalent of those New Testament "Bishops" would be our seminary-trained, ordained pastors. The church of the 21st century will look more like the church of the first century than all the intervening centuries. Like any act of God, this is both exciting and terrifying. And so, let us hear again the most frequently uttered command of God in the entire Bible: "Do not be afraid."

What was the sign of this tipping point? Numbers. We currently have twenty congregations who are actively seeking a full-time or nearly full-time pastor. We have perhaps three candidates for those calls, and there is no scenario in which we will find pastors for all of those calls in any reasonable amount of time without simply producing new vacancies elsewhere. In a recent assignment process of new seminary grads to the nine synods of Minnesota and the Dakotas, there were 21 candidates for 74 first calls, and of those 21, only one candidate was open to moving outside a metro area. Given that all but a few those vacancies were in rural areas, it is not too much of an exaggeration to say that there was effectively one candidate for 74 calls!

When I first came into office, I knew that we needed to build some kind of structure to support our Synod Authorized Ministers. We created a committee and established policies and practices for support, training, and accountability. We are still learning, building the airplane as we fly it, but it's working. Because we now have a clear pathway for entrance and training, we were able to welcome a dozen new Synod Authorized Ministers just last year alone. However, there is a missing ingredient in our current system. We now need some kind of network to manage and support the other half of that New Testament equation – those “Bishops” or what we would call “Mentor-Pastors” who mentor/oversee our Synod Authorized Ministers. I foresee a day in the not-too-distant future when most of our seminary-trained, ordained pastors will embrace a role in mentoring and supervising nearby Synod Authorized Ministers as a part of their call.

There is much at stake here, not least the integrity of our unique witness to the Gospel. The Augsburg Confession is the document that describes the faith and life of churches that go by the name “Lutheran.” Article 14 of that confession states that “no one should preach the gospel or administer the sacraments without a public call to ministry.” We are proposing a way forward in which that public call has a more limited scope and a different way of emerging for those people who serve as Synod Authorized Ministers. In this model, the integrity of our witness to the gospel is ensured not only by having highly trained professionals with advanced degrees do the work, but also by having those very same professionals provide on-the-job-training to lay ministers in a dynamic, Holy Spirit-led, ongoing interaction of congregations, pastors, and lay ministers. We live and worship God in a part of the world where Lutherans have always deeply valued the role of the laity in providing ministry, and where we have also cherished a (mostly) healthy skepticism of large institutional structures that purport to have “the” way of doing and being the church. This heritage will serve us well in the new era that God is bringing into our midst. There will be MUCH more to come on this topic!

Progress on the Lines of Effort in our Strategic Plan:

These projects are funded with your generous gifts to our two annual appeals: Giving Hearts and Give to the Max. Thank you!

- *Educational Debt Reduction Grants:* We were able to make another substantial increase in these grants. Eleven ministers received grants ranging from \$3k - \$8k. This year we changed our granting formula to address the relative size of each applicant's debt.
- *FACES of Leadership:* This program of leadership formation is now equipping people for greater competency in Faith Practices, Adaptive Leadership, Coaching, Emotional Intelligence and Storytelling. Each of the five areas is championed by a leader in our synod. Champions provide programming as requested, and the team works together with the coordinator, Pastor Kari Van Wakeren, to provide introductory programming in conjunction with already-scheduled synod events.
- *Jeremiah 29:* Ten pastors from around the synod are being equipped with tools to create life and ministry enhancing projects in their communities. Under the leadership of professional coach, Mary Frances, the team will use community organizing, entrepreneurship and community development training to develop projects that “work for the good of the people among whom you have been called.” Jeremiah 29:7. This is a three-year process, and we plan to launch a new cohort every one-and-a-half years.
- *Rural Revival:* In this first year, seven congregations have engaged in this process of discovering new pathways to vitality in rural communities.

Our Global Partnerships:

This year our Companion Synod Team was reformed under the leadership of our DEM, Pastor Rebel Hurd. They are working together toward a January 2024 trip to our Companion Synod, the Andhra Evangelical Lutheran Church in India. This will be the first trip to this Companion Synod in a very long time, and I am hopeful this will foster a vital relationship that has been hampered for many years by overarching political/religious issues in the nation of India.

This last fall I was able to travel with 16 other Bishops to visit with our Lutheran Partners of the ELCJHL (Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land). This is a small, but powerful church that operates seven schools and multiple life-giving congregations and ministries. Our siblings of this church are nearly all Palestinian people who have suffered under Israeli occupation for two generations. While there, I was able to witness first-hand a reality that I vaguely knew existed, but never before fully appreciated. It's complicated, and I would never pretend to understand the depth and complexity of the issues. I think I can say this. Two seemingly opposite things are true at the same time: (1) Israel has real security needs and there is an obvious historic reason for there to be a place of guaranteed sanctuary for Jewish people in the land of Israel, and (2) Israel commits documented human rights abuses and war crimes and land theft against a largely innocent population nearly every day, and in so doing they are creating an unsustainable situation that is likely to explode into a full-blown war unless they make dramatic changes in their behavior toward the Palestinian people. In solidarity with our siblings in Christ of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land, we have a responsibility to speak truth on their behalf to our elected leaders here in the U.S.

When I was elected to serve as your Bishop in 2019, I did not imagine the paradigm-shifting revolutions that we are facing together. From a global pandemic to unprecedented social unrest to the sea-change that I described at the beginning of this report, we have been church together in ways that few of us saw coming, or at least coming so soon. Through it all, God has had us firmly in God's hands. I am grateful for creative and steady pastors, deacons, SAMs, lay leaders, and resilient congregations. The demands of this work often stretch us very thin, and it would be impossible without a strong team. I am grateful for an incredibly gifted synod staff (the best in the whole church, in my humble opinion!) with whom I get to do this work.

Thank you for the privilege of serving in this role, for your generosity of time, talent, and treasure, and for your faithfulness in our shared mission – the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

In Christ our Brother,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Bill Tesch". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned below the text "In Christ our Brother,".

Pastor Bill Tesch, Bishop of the Northwestern Minnesota Synod of the ELCA