



**October 13**  MOORHEAD  
 ALEXANDRIA

**October 14**  DETROIT LAKES  
 THIEF RIVER FALLS

**October 15**  ROSEAU  
 CLEARBROOK



# Road Trip Agenda

**12:00PM | 6:00PM:**



*Fuel Up (dinner)*

Pull into the pit stop and refuel with good food and even better company.

Menu: sloppy joes, chips, veggies, dessert, and conversation.

**12:30PM | 6:30PM:**

 *Soul Stop (Devotion)*

Pause for a moment of reflection and renewal with devotion and song. This is our roadside chapel moment—where the Spirit meets us on the way.

**1:00PM | 7:00PM:**



*Map Check and  
Roadside Chat  
(Meeting)*

Hear synod updates, share stories, and get equipped for the journey ahead.

**1:55PM | 7:55PM:**



*Final Stretch Blessing  
and Farewell*

Receive a prayer for the road before heading back out. You're not traveling alone—grace goes with you.





## Let Us Talents and Tongues Employ



- 1 Let us tal - ents and tongues em - ploy, reach - ing out with a shout of joy:
- 2 Christ is a - ble to make us one, at the ta ble he sets the tone,
- 3 Je - sus calls us in, sends us out bear - ing fruit in a world of doubt,



bread is bro - ken, the wine is poured, Christ is spo - ken and seen and heard.  
teach - ing peo - ple to live to bless, love in word and in deed ex - press.  
gives us love to tell, bread to share: God (Im - man - u - el) ev - 'ry - where!

*Refrain*



Je - sus lives a - gain, earth can breathe a - gain, pass the Word a - round: loaves a - bound!

*the walk to*

**EMMAUS**

**LUKE 12:13-35**



Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" They stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?" He asked them, "What things?" They replied, "The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but they did not see him."

Then he said to them, "Oh, how foolish you are and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, "Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over." So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him, and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?" That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem, and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!" Then they told what had happened on the road and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.



# Synod Staff

Our synod staff is made up of both full-time and part-time team members who work together to support congregations, leaders, and ministries across Northwestern Minnesota.

Full-time staff serve in ongoing roles and provide leadership, support, and coordination across a wide range of synod ministries and operations. You'll find them regularly engaged in day-to-day synod work, available for questions, and present at most synod events.



*Rev. Bill Tesch*  
Bishop



*Rev. Genelle Netland*  
Associate to the Bishop  
for Leadership



*Rev. Rebel Hurd*  
Associate to the Bishop  
for Mission  
Director for Evangelical Mission



*Rev. Keith Pearson*  
Minister for Generosity



*Morgan Olson*  
Communications &  
Events Coordinator



*Rachel Haun*  
Office Administrator



# Part-Time Staff

Part-Time staff serve in part-time or specialized roles. They bring unique gifts to the synod for a particular project, area of ministry, or time-limited need. While they may not be involved in all aspects of synod life, their contributions are essential to our shared mission.

## Engagement Ministers

### CONFERENCE 1

*Roseau*

Rev. Dave Swonger

### CONFERENCE 2

*Thief River Falls*

Rev. Genelle Netland/  
Rev. Bill Tesch

### CONFERENCE 3

*Crookston*

Rev. Chris Leach

### CONFERENCE 4

*Bemidji*

Rev. Chris Leach

### CONFERENCE 5

*Moorhead*

Rev. Laurie Skow-Anderson

### CONFERENCE 6

*Detroit Lakes*

Rev. Laurie Skow-Anderson

### CONFERENCE 7

*Fergus Falls*

Rev. Dennis Preston

### CONFERENCE 8

*Alexandria*

Rev. Dennis Preston

## Financial & Data-Systems Specialist

Joan Meulebroeck

## Synod Authorized Ministers Coordinator

Kip Fontaine

## Minister for Vocations

Rev. Jon Olson

## Minister for Mental Health and Wellness

Rev. Dr. Aaron Suomala Folkerds

## Minister for First-Third Ministry

Kristina Johnson-Dernier

## Behold The New has Come! Project Coordinators

Jody Johnson  
Rev. Melissa Pickering

# Where WE'VE BEEN



## CHURCH LEADERSHIP



# Where WE'RE GOING



## PATHWAYS TO PROMISE



### Faithful to the Finish

Some congregations may be called to close. The synod provides guidance for faithful endings—covering legal steps, property decisions, member care, legacy giving, and farewell worship.



### Fresh Expressions

Not every congregation needs a dedicated building. House churches and other innovative models offer new ways to gather and live as God's people.



### Synodically Authorized Ministry (SAM)

Lay leaders are being raised up to serve congregations with Word and Sacrament ministry under synod agreements, SAMs commit to core classes, mentoring, boundaries and anti-racism training, and ongoing education.



### Partnership Models

Congregations can share leaders, staff, finances, and buildings. Partnerships can be ELCA-to-ELCA or ecumenical with full communion partners. Instead of forming new parishes, congregations covenant together for shared ministry.

# Our Road TODAY



## CHURCH DETOURS



While the goal is to call a rostered minister for every worshipping community, real-life circumstances sometimes require a different route. These detours aren't failures — they're faithful adaptations for the sake of ministry.



Congregation unable to afford a full-time called Minister.



No rostered minister available.

Or maybe your congregation's context and situation has changed.



The town has shrunk and there are no longer people to attend and fund ministry.



Maintaining the Building has become a hardship and has taken away from the mission of the church.

### What next? In some cases...



The synod may provide names of available interims, vice pastors, contracted pastoral partnerships, or shared ministry arrangements.



The synod may wonder with you about raising up leaders from within, like Synod Authorized Ministers.



The synod may affirm your faithfulness and encourage congregations to participate in Vitality Programs.



Explore options: part-time rostered ministry, bi-vocational leaders, or partnering with neighboring congregations.



The synod walks alongside as the congregation considers:

- New Congregational Partnerships,
- Becoming a worshipping community without a building (like a house church or a church that gathers in a public place like a coffee shop).



The synod celebrates with you the ministry your congregation has done, and walk with you as you are Faithful to the End through Holy Closure.



The synod may recommend an Area Collaboration, with local congregations, to help refocus on God's mission (and yours) for the church.



Extended supply preaching – In seasons of uncertainty, pulpit supply may cover worship while lay leaders take on more administrative roles.

# Table TALK



- **Look at each vitality question. Take turns reading each.**
- **Imagine your congregation as it is today.**
- **Talk about:**
  - **How would you answer these questions?**
  - **What signs of health and vitality do you see?**
  - **Where are there areas that are hurting right now?**
- **No need to write anything down or worry about wrong answers!**

Our congregation's vision for ministry:

- Is to keep our doors open
- Exists, but is not woven into daily life
- Is shared and shapes our everyday life together

How are people in our congregation being formed in faith outside of Sunday worship?

- Very little happens outside worship
- A few options exist for those who seek them
- We offer regular and accessible opportunities for faith growth

When new people visit our church:

- We do not have visitors
- It is nice to have visitors, but they are treated as strangers
- Most are warmly welcomed and find places they fit

Compared to our town's population (ethnically, economically, generationally), our congregation:

- Looks very different
- Shares some similarities
- Reflects our wider community

Do our monthly offerings we receive cover our monthly expenses?

- Yes
- No
- I hope so / I'm not sure

Leadership in our congregation, including church council, committees, and ministers, are:

- Inconsistent or Burnt out
- Generally healthy with challenges
- Strong and collaborative, and leading with passion

Our congregation's overall quality of ministry is:

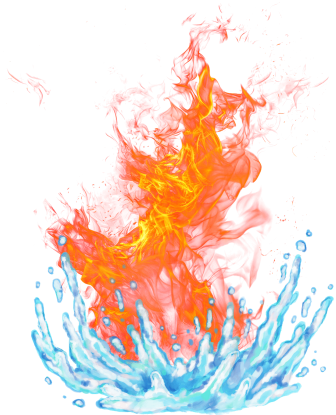
- Struggling
- Good
- Excellent

# New HORIZONS



## REIMAGINING RURAL MINISTRY

*A Baptismal Way of Being Church*



**BEHOLD**  
the new has come!

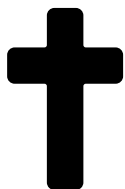
We are excited to introduce the Behold, the New Has Come! Project (a grant from Wartburg Seminary).



This is a five-year, synod-wide initiative aimed at congregational renewal through rediscovery of baptismal identity and lay discipleship.



Walking alongside 20-30 congregations served by Synod Authorized Ministers (SAMs), the project unfolds in five integrated phases: Engage, Energize, Equip, Empower, and Embark. Each phase deepens congregations' understanding of their call to live out faith in daily life.



Through worship, storytelling, and direct vocational visits, ultimately, Behold, the New Has Come! seeks to awaken all lay leaders in each congregation to their baptismal calling, empowering them for resilient, Spirit-led ministry, and sustaining a vibrant culture of daily discipleship well beyond the life of the grant.

### Key Activities:

- Baptismal Affirmation Sundays
- Monthly Equipping Sundays
- Vocational site visits
- Regional leadership gatherings
- Development of vocational discernment toolkits.

By shifting from an inward focus to equipping people to follow Jesus in daily life, the project aims to deepen baptismal identity and nurture thriving, Spirit-led communities serving every day beyond the walls of the church.



The  
CaSTLE  
Project

# Reimagining Rural Ministry

## *The CaSTLE Project and a Baptismal Way of Being Church*

Wartburg Theological Seminary has long been known for forming leaders deeply rooted in the communities they serve, especially in rural and small-town contexts. Now, through an ambitious and Spirit-led initiative, Wartburg is leaning even more fully into that call.

Introducing The CaSTLE Project—short for Country and Small Town Lived Ecclesiology—a bold undertaking that reimagines how church life is understood and embodied in small congregations across the country. At its heart, the project reflects Wartburg's mission to “engage, equip, and send leaders who interpret, proclaim, and live the gospel of Jesus Christ.”

We sat down with Pastor Ramie Bakken, the director of the project, to explore how The CaSTLE Project, enabled by a generous grant from Lilly Endowment, Inc., is revitalizing ministry in small town and rural communities and forming leaders for a new era of congregational life.

### **A New Way of Being Church**

According to Pastor Bakken, The CaSTLE Project is more than a grant initiative—it's a theological and practical reframing of what it means to be church in today's rural landscape. “This project invites congregations and leaders to shift from an attractional model where ministry is

defined by what happens inside the church building—to an equipping model that recognizes and supports the ministry already happening in daily life.”

This renewed vision asks: What if ministry isn't something confined to Sunday morning or church programming? What if it's already happening—in conversations at the feed store, in classrooms, on tractors, and around dinner tables?

### **What is Lived Ecclesiology?**

The theological backbone of The CaSTLE Project is what Pastor Bakken calls a lived, or baptismal, ecclesiology. “Ecclesiology refers to how we understand and organize ourselves to participate in God's mission. When we add ‘lived’ to that, we're talking about embodying faith in everyday life—rooted in the promises of baptism, not the presence of a building or even a pastor.”

In other words, this project is returning to an early, Spirit-filled model of church life described in the New Testament—one that centers discipleship, witness, and formation in all occupations, not just traditional congregational roles. The CaSTLE Project affirms that the church is alive wherever God's people are gathered and sent to love and serve their neighbors.

**Lifting Up Local Leaders** Leadership formation is a central component of The CaSTLE Project, especially in areas where congregations often gather without a called pastor. As Pastor Bakken notes, “We are seeing increasing reliance on synod-authorized ministers and lay leaders in small-town and rural contexts. This project supports and equips those leaders through coaching and mentoring that's rooted in our baptismal identity.”

The vision is clear: to shift from a church-life and pastor-centered model to an everyday Christian life and people-centered model—where congregations become places of formation for faithful living beyond the walls of the church.

**Introducing the First Cohort** Wartburg recently announced the first cohort of CaSTLE Project sub-grant recipients—18 synods spanning eight of the nine ELCA regions. These synods proposed creative, context-specific projects in four main categories:

- Education for synod-authorized ministers
- Training and coaching for mentor pastors and lay leaders
- Congregational transformation
- Ecumenical experiments

Each project reflects the theological core of CaSTLE and is tailored to the unique challenges and opportunities of rural and small-town ministry.

“The response has been incredibly encouraging,” Pastor Bakken shares. “We're thrilled that so many synods are eager to explore new ways of living as church in their contexts.” The next application cycle opens in October 2025, with grant recipients announced in December. Selected synods may receive up to \$50,000 for projects to be implemented in 2026.

**Living Into God's Faithful Future** The CaSTLE Project is ultimately a call to live more deeply into the promises of baptism and the mission ecclesiology. “Ecclesiology refers to how we understand of God in the world—not by returning to old models, but by trusting the Spirit's movement in our present context.

“In many places, the church is already changing,” Pastor Bakken reflects. “But God is faithful. And that means we can step forward in hope—equipping all God's people to share the good news of Jesus Christ in word and deed, wherever they are.”



**ROOTED**  
and **RISING**

**“But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us... through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.”**

**—Titus 3:4–7**



## *From the prairie to the lakeshore....*

the seeds of faith are being nurtured through the daily witness of the baptized. In worship and service, around tables and altars, God’s people are living out the promises of baptism in faithful, grounded ways.

But in many places, the soil feels dry. Congregations are stretched. Leaders are weary. And the harvest, at times, seems uncertain.

And yet—we believe this is not the end of the story. We believe in the One who gives the growth.



## *A Shared Call to Action*

We were never meant to do this work alone.

The Northwestern Minnesota Synod exists to walk alongside congregations, leaders, and communities—nurturing what God has planted.

It is the shared labor of 220 congregations, 79,000 baptized members, 300+ rostered ministers, and countless lay leaders. Together, we are the body of Christ—rooted in grace and rising in mission.

**“You are God’s field, God’s building.” —1 Corinthians 3:9**



## *What’s at stake*

Without continued support, we risk:

- Congregations struggling to sustain ministry, especially in rural and underserved communities
- Faithful leaders stepping away from their call due to isolation, burnout, or financial burden
- Essential partnerships weakening—leaving ministries disconnected and communities underserved

# YOUR GIFT POWERS THREE PRIORITIES

**Just as healthy, productive fields require many hands so too the church requires shared labor. Our faith is rooted in relationship and collective care. We cannot do this alone.**

## Revitalizing Congregations - \$400,000

Your gift supports:

- 4,000+ hours/year of Synod staff walking alongside congregations
- Vitality Days to reimagine mission in changing communities
- Rural Revival & "Go for It" Grants that spark new ministry ideas
- Leadership transition support to keep momentum strong
- Creative leadership models, including shared and lay-led options such as Synod Authorized Ministers

## Growing and Encouraging Leaders - \$300,000

Your gift helps us:

- Accompany pastors from candidacy through first call and beyond
- Train Synod Authorized Ministers (SAMs) for lay-led ministry
- Guide Jeremiah 29 cohorts for spiritual and leadership growth
- Provide Seminary Debt Grants to keep leaders rooted here
- Support First Third Ministry for youth, children, and family leaders

**And he gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ."**

—Ephesians 4:11–12

## Widening Impact through Partnerships - \$150,000

Your gift strengthens:

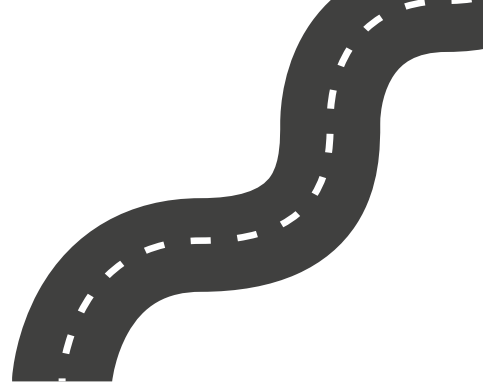
- Specialized ministries and ecumenical partnerships
- Outdoor ministry and camps that shape faith and leadership in every generation
- Transformational relationships like the Native Neighbors Table, rooted in listening and mutual respect
- Justice-focused initiatives including racial equity, disaster response, and ELCA World Hunger
- Global partnerships that support leadership development and shared witness



**JOIN US IN THE ROOTED AND RISING CAMPAIGN**

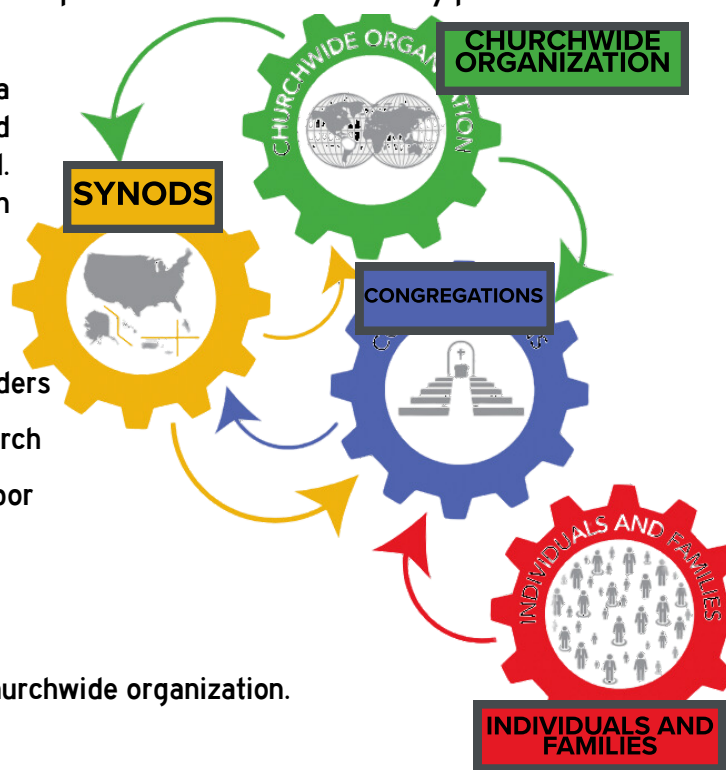
**Rooted in baptism, we rise together—so that God's love may flourish in every community.**

# Understanding MISSION SUPPORT



When the offering is collected in your congregation, a portion of that money is shared with the Northwestern MN Synod. The portion that is shared is called Mission Support. Offerings and Mission Support are the primary ways we fund mission and ministry in our congregations, synods, and the churchwide organization. In 2024, congregational mission support funded 83% of the synod budget, also known as our Synod Mission Plan. Individual generosity, congregational commitments, and churchwide partnerships make mission and ministry possible in the Northwestern MN Synod!

Our Mission Plan is more than numbers on a page—more than a budget. It tells the story of how we live out our mission and share Jesus through ministry in the Northwestern MN Synod. Through our synod mission plan, mission and ministry happen throughout our synod, across the country, and around the globe!



Campus Ministry

Youth Ministry

Candidacy & First Call

Accompanying Congregations Global Companions

Supporting & Equipping Leaders

Gathering Together as a Church

Loving & Serving Our Neighbor

In 2024, we shared 47% of mission support received with the churchwide organization.

Mission Support to the Churchwide Organization:

- Supports Missionaries
- Stewards World Hunger and Lutheran Disaster Response
- Creates new worship resources



- ELCA Youth Gathering
- Provides for ELCA presence at the Lutheran World Federation
- Funds new ministries

Churchwide mission support also returns to the Northwestern MN Synod through partnership grants:

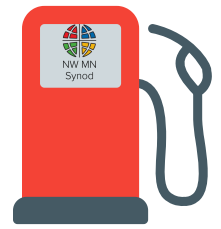


- A Community Called Grace
- White Earth Lutheran and Episcopal Partnership
- Peoples Church
- Rural Revival
- Director for Evangelical Mission (Pr. Rebel Hurd's position)

As you can see, the gift you put in your congregation's offering plate has a local and global impact!

**Thank you for being the Church together in ministry!**

# Fill the Tank. Fuel the Mission.



## What It's All About

The Northwestern Minnesota Synod is on the move—literally and spiritually! As we travel across the synod, connecting with leaders and congregations, we're inviting everyone to help fill the tank and fuel the mission that keeps our shared ministry rolling.

Mission Support makes this possible. Your congregation's gifts fund the very ministries we plan, vote on, and celebrate together at Synod Assembly. Every dollar helps keep the church's ministry moving forward.

## Why it Matters

We're currently experiencing about a 10% shortfall in Mission Support compared to the approved mission plan. This represents a small but significant gap in the ministry we've committed to doing together.

Your congregation's additional gift—\$100, \$500, or \$1,000—this season can make a big difference. Together, we can close the gap and keep vital ministries on the road.

## How to Participate

Choose a Sunday in **September or October** to highlight generosity in your congregation.

- Invite members to give a **special offering**—through a passed plate, basket, or online option.
- Use the red gas tank graphics as visual reminders of generosity.
  - Write your congregation's name and most recent Mission Support gift on one tank and post it in your building.
  - Bring or send the second filled-out tank to a Synod Road Trip event this fall.

Your congregation will be entered in a drawing for a no-cost pulpit supply Sunday from synod staff—a small thank-you for fueling the mission!

## Bonus Opportunity

**Tuesday, November 11 | 6PM | Zoom**

You're invited to join us for A Ripple of Thanks—a virtual evening of Stewardship Conversation.

Come be encouraged and reminded of the ways your giving ripples outward through the body of Christ!

## Let's Keep the Tank Full

The road ahead is Spirit-led, and we're not traveling alone.

Thank you for fueling the ministry that connects, equips, and sends the church of Northwestern Minnesota.

# Upcoming Synod Events



-  September/October (You pick the date) | **Fuel the Mission Sunday** | In Your Congregation  
September 29-November 3 | Boundaries Training | Online  
October 10 | Boundaries Training | Crookston  
October 12 | Hunger Sunday  
October 13 | Indigenous Peoples' Day  
October 13 | NWMN Synod Road Trip | Moorhead & Alexandria  
October 14 | NWMN Synod Road Trip | Detroit Lakes & Thief River Falls  
October 15 | NWMN Synod Road Trip | Roseau & Clearbrook  
October 17 | Mental Health First Aid | Zoom  
October 23 | Synod Council | Zoom  
  
November 11 | The Ripple of Thanks: A Stewardship Conversation | Zoom  
November 20 | Give to the Max Day  
December 11 | Candidacy Interviews | Dilworth

## 2026

- January 11 | Global Mission Sunday  
January 27 | Treasurer 101: Dollars, Sense, & Stewardship | Zoom  
February 12 | Giving Hearts Day | Online  
February 19 | Synod Council | Zoom  
March 21 | Great NWMN Synod Get Together | Calvary, Bemidji  
April 16 | Joint Theological Day | Trinity, Moorhead  
April 18 | Synod Council | TBD  
April 18 | EcoFaith Summit | Duluth  
April 26-28 | First Call Core Event | TBD  
May 30 | Virtual Synod Assembly  
June 13-23 | Journeys of Paul Tour

**Check the Northern Lights  
e-Newsletter & the synod  
website for additional  
opportunities and events!**