
Report to the 2017 Indiana-Kentucky Synod Assembly
Bishop William O. Gafkjen

Empower, equip and encourage one another to make Christ known



*Cultivate congregations as mission centers...form and send faith-filled disciples...
expand and deepen communication & collaboration...support and develop missionary leaders*



Every person a missionary, every community a mission center, every leader a mission developer

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Two or three years ago, after a great deal of prayer, conversation, and discernment, the Synod Council affirmed the four priorities in the middle section of the diagram above as the key priorities for synod ministry. Clear focus on these priorities in planning, decision-making, and action is what will move us from the mandate of our mission – *to empower, encourage, and equip one another to make Christ known* – to the embodied reality of our vision – *every person a missionary, every faith community a mission center, every leader a mission developer*. Since last year’s Assembly in South Bend, IN, a great deal of the ministry we do together has continued to be formed, reformed, and transformed by the Holy Spirit around these four priorities in service to God’s mission of healing, hope, and reconciliation – new, abundant, and lasting life – in the world.

In fact, there has also been some movement across the ELCA, especially in our three key leadership groups – ELCA Church Council, Office of the Presiding Bishop and churchwide staff, and Conference of Bishops – that closely aligns with the priorities that we have been working on, and continue to work on, in this synod. The strategic directions that have emerged are captured in a document entitled “Called Forward Together in Christ.” You can read about it and download a copy of it here: <http://www.elca.org/Future-Direction>.

Five strategic directions or goals emerged in the process that led to this document. In broad strokes, these five directions focus our attention, resources, and energy – together as the ELCA and in the name of Jesus and empowered by the Spirit – toward being:

- A Thriving Church
- An Equipping Church
- A Welcoming Church
- A Deeply Committed Church
- A Well-Governed Connected Church

This spring, all three leadership groups decided to focus our work together on two key themes that permeate these five aspirations: **developing and supporting leadership** and **cultivating congregational vitality**. Again, these align very closely with the priorities we share in this synod.

At the March meeting of the ELCA Conference of Bishops, as chair I introduced our discussion of these two foci with a story about how some things have changed over the last 30+ years. I shared this same story with in my report to the April meeting of the ELCA Church Council. It’s important that you hear it, too.

I recently ran across an interesting letter in the file of a deceased retired pastor as I prepared for his funeral. In 1983, this pastor inquired about returning to ministry in the Indiana-Kentucky Synod, having moved from this synod to another a few years before. In 1983, the Indiana-Kentucky Synod, LCA, consisted of about 250 congregations, plus campus ministries, social ministries, camps, and other mission centers. In reply to the inquiring pastor, then Bishop Ralph Kempinski reported that there were only seven congregations in the synod in need of a pastor and six of them were interviewing. Seven congregations out of 250 without a called pastor = .3%.

Today, the Indiana-Kentucky Synod has 185 congregations, plus other mission centers. At this moment, fifty of those congregations are in some part of the process of praying for and waiting to welcome a pastor. Another thirty are on our “long term” list. These are congregations that, for one reason or another (or, more likely, a combination of reasons) and unless some things change significantly, will not be able to call a pastor for a very long time, if ever. Eighty congregations out of 185 without a called pastor = 43%.

Things have changed in thirty-four years. These numbers are just one indicator, a significant one for sure, of the profound challenges we face today. Of course, the changes that give rise to the challenges are complicated and involve more than the number of pastors per congregation. They also affect every aspect of our life together as church and the ways in which we engage God’s mission in the world.

This is a sobering reality accompanied by all sorts of temptations. We are tempted to despair. The temptation to fear-driven, frenetic, desperate and most often destructive do-anything-to-survive behavior looms large. We’re tempted to argue and blame and accuse. We’re tempted to try to make our own way through this wilderness, turning away from others with whom we are in relationship, thinking we will be better off on our own.

All of these temptations are natural human responses to alarming situations. But they are also, in the end, temptations. They are temptations rooted in the belief that if a way is going to be made, it’s going to be made by us. Yet, our call, dear sisters and brothers, is to repent of succumbing to this grand temptation, which has made its way to us all the way from the garden of Eden, and to turn again and again toward, and give ourselves to, the forgiveness and new, abundant, and lasting life that is ours and the world’s in Jesus, crucified and risen. Turning from these temptations, we entrust ourselves to, and by the grace of God, live into the promises of God that meet us right in the heart of these challenging times. After all, God is the one who will make the way(s) in the wilderness and provide the sustenance we need to engage and follow. What’s that verse again? Oh, yes, Isaiah 43:19 ☺, this time as Eugene Peterson interprets it in The Message:

*Be alert, be present. I'm about to do something brand-new.
It's bursting out! Don't you see it? There it is!
I'm making a road through the desert, rivers in the badlands.
Wild animals will say 'Thank you!' —the coyotes and the buzzards—
Because I provided water in the desert, rivers through the sun-baked earth,
Drinking water for the people I chose, the people I made especially for myself,
a people custom-made to praise me. [Isaiah 43:19-21]*

So, how are we in this synod “alert” and “present” to see and engage the new things God is doing in forming and sending leaders and growing vital congregations and other centers for mission?

We begin, as always, by joining the rest of the church in prayer. In March, the Conference of Bishops issued a call to prayer rooted in the words of Jesus from Luke 10:2: *The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.* That call to prayer can be found on the synod website at <http://iksynod.org/2017/03/23/a-call-to-prayer/>. Included with this call are some beautiful prayers written by a couple of synod bishops as examples of prayers

that might be appropriate for use in worship and in personal or family devotion. Similar prayers may be said for the growth and vitality of congregations. These are prayers your synod staff pray when we are together on Wednesday mornings and in our personal prayer lives, for leaders and congregations across and beyond the synod, trusting that God will provide what we need to get where God is calling us. I encourage you to pray with us in your congregation's worship life, committee meetings, Bible studies, and any other time two or three gather in Jesus' name.

Leadership

We are addressing, and will grow in addressing, leadership concerns, both rostered and lay, in a variety of ways. Near the end of this report (which is coming soon, I promise), I describe how we have reconfigured our staffing to bring the range of rostered leadership concerns, from discernment to formation to first call to call process, interim ministry, and general leadership development and support into one Assistant to the Bishop position.

We are very close to launching robust and exciting theological and ministry formation opportunities through the Lutheran House of Studies at Christian Theological Seminary. I'll say more about this at the assembly, the LHS will include or be an aspect of the reconstruction and reinstatement of Lay Worship Leadership ministries, beefing up equipping events for congregation council members, supporting Synodically Authorized Ministry (the appointment of lay persons to serve in limited pastoral roles for congregations without a called pastor), first call formation for both rostered ministers and the congregations they serve, and both lay and rostered minister "continuing education."

I also hope to initiate a renewed focus on Christian vocation in our life together. We will find ways to encourage the exploration of core and crucial questions like, What is God calling you to do and be that is beyond the place where you are right now and that will faithfully serve the church and God's mission in this new and challenging day? How might you more energetically discover your own gifts and begin to share them as servant leaders in the church and the world, whether as a congregational member or as a pastor or deacon?

At this assembly, after almost three years of discussion among conference deans, synod council, and others, it is likely that we will consider by-law amendments that will refocus, redefine, and reshape the role of Conference Deans to redeploy them as Deans for the Conference Ministerium in partnership with Chaplains for the Ministerium. The hope is to focus the ministry of deans almost exclusively on rostered ministers in the conference. Other functions that have landed in the laps conference deans over the last few years, mostly related to congregations (e.g. installations, concerns during pastoral vacancies, call process) will return more directly to the Office of the Bishop, while reserving the possibility of the bishop delegating particular responsibilities to deans as needed. More about this experiment at the assembly...

Vital, Vibrant Mission Centers (congregations and other faith communities)

Much of what we are doing and will be doing in supporting faith communities to grow in vitality can be read about in the report to the assembly from Pastor Nancy Nyland, your Director for Evangelical Mission. From her you'll learn about area mission strategy gatherings, the Connect transformational ministry initiative (which other synods are adapting and adopting), and the creative, innovative, and energetic engagement on the part of so many of our congregations in the communities in which God has planted them. In addition, Nancy and her team provide workshops and other opportunities for all congregations, including those in transition, to explore and clarify the mission to which God is calling them and how to get there.

As with leadership, near the end of this report (which is even closer now), I describe how we have reconfigured our staffing to bring the range of lifelong faith formation, youth and young adult ministries, and other aspects of making disciples into a new position, Assistant to the Bishop for Discipleship.

All of what we do in synod ministry is engaged in trust and hope that God is making the way in the wilderness and providing sustaining water in the desert. We let go of the temptation to do it all ourselves or to insist on our own way and, rather, follow the encouragement of the apostle Paul:

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus...

Along the way, we have bid farewell and Godspeed to three colleagues who served faithfully and well as part of the synod's leadership team: Pastor Rudy Mueller, Ms. Leslie French, and Deacon Marilyn Smith.

Pastor Mueller's discernment moved him to leave the synod staff in late January when he began interim ministry with Pilgrim Lutheran Church in Carmel, IN. We give thanks to God and to Rudy Mueller for his passion for the gospel, his energetic commitment to rostered ministers and congregations, his wise worship stewardship, and his support and encouragement of other team members.

Leslie French served just over a year as our Synod Communicator. She did this part-time while also working full-time at King of Glory Lutheran Church, Carmel, IN. When we moved in the direction of a full-time Synod Communicator, Leslie decided to stay with her position with King of Glory. We give thanks to God and to Leslie French for her delightful embrace of the very steep learning curve around synod communications, her strong support of and work with other synod staff, her creative and excellent stewardship of synod communications, and her positive passion for what we do together.

Late in 2016, ELCA churchwide leadership discerned that, primarily for financial and other reasons, the nine Regional Coordinator positions would be eliminated effective March 1, 2017. This meant an unexpected transition for Deacon Marilyn Smith, who served in that position for our region, Region 6. While Marilyn was not synod staff, her office was part of our office suite and we considered her one of us. She is currently serving under my appointment and authorization as Interim Minister for Risen Lord Lutheran Church, Bargersville, IN. We give thanks to God and to Marilyn Smith for her passion, her wisdom, her deep care for the church and its leaders, and her unrelenting support of synods and their leaders.

These transitions moved us to seek ways to reconfigure synod staffing to bring it into closer alignment with the four priorities we had established for synod ministry and to bring support and leadership to some of the places where we have seen God's new things springing forth in our life together across this territory.

Pastor Heather Apel, who has served as Assistant to the Bishop since 2011, is transitioning to Assistant to the Bishop for Leadership, signaling significant changes in her responsibilities. She is still responsible for candidacy, but has let go of office management and synod assembly and, in their place, now works with call process and mobility, interim ministry, first call concerns, and rostered minister and other leadership support and development. Heather is now also the liaison from the bishop's office to our relationship with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Chile (IELCH).

Pastor Dan Fugate has joined your synod staff as Assistant to the Bishop for Discipleship. Dan brings rich experience from his years as Associate Pastor for Children, Youth, and Family Ministries with Trinity English, Fort Wayne. Dan is responsible for lifelong faith formation, youth and young adult

ministries, and the program aspects of synod assembly. Dan will also serve as the liaison from the bishop's office to our relationship with the Huria Kristin Batak Protestan (HKBP), our companion church in Indonesia.

Mr. Tom Dearchs is the other welcome addition to your synod staff. Tom is our Communications, Office, and Synod Assembly Logistics Coordinator. Short form title for Tom is Synod Communicator. In addition to spearheading all synod communications, Tom will also provide office and personnel coordination and work with the synod's contracted meeting planner, Stephanie Dillon, to handle the logistical aspects of synod assemblies, like venue relationships, contracts, room sets, and the like. With his extensive musical and worship experience and gifts, Tom will also serve as the liaison from the bishop's office to the synod's worship life.

Tom and Dan have come up alongside the rest of your sterling synod staff to steward the ministry of empowering, equipping, and encouraging the congregations and other mission centers and their leaders across this synod to make Christ known. I give thanks, too, for Jerry O'Neal (Director for Stewardship), Nancy Nyland (Director for Evangelical Mission), April Lynch (Administrative Assistant to the Bishop), Sylvia Ore (Administrative Assistant to Heather Apel), and Carol Ann Webb (Administrative Assistant to Nancy, Jerry, and Dan), who continue to engage their ministries with vigor, vision, and vitality.

And thank you, dear sister, dear brother, for your faithful and energetic companionship and partnership on this journey. As we each take the risk of putting our few loaves and fishes on the common table, entrusting them to the grace of God, it is amazing to see how the Holy Spirit multiplies them to nourish many thousands more than any of us could do alone and in ways that none of us could ever have imagined. It is an honor and a joy as your bishop to walk toward God's unfolding future with you, my sisters and brothers in Christ.

Thanks be to God!

The Rev. Dr. William O. Gafkjen, Bishop