

# I-K Lutheran

## *Where God is doing new things*

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*Speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love. [Ephesians 4:15]*



Across the church there is a good bit of talk these days about a “clergy shortage.” This is certainly understandable. Across the ELCA 28% of congregations are without a called pastor. As I have shared before, in this synod about 40% of our congregations are without a called pastor. As with other ELCA congregations, some of that 40% are being served by interim pastors or another form of temporary or transitional ministry. Nevertheless, it’s no wonder that the phrase “clergy shortage” slides so easily off our lips.

I must admit, however, that I am not a big fan of this phrase. It’s not that I am a Pollyanna who doesn’t see the number of faith communities that need and do not have called pastors, or a bishop who does not know and appreciate the important and key role that word and sacrament ministry has in our tradition. I also know and understand the uncertainty and struggle that congregations without pastors often experience. We need more pastors and we need them as soon as possible. I hope that you are praying along with me that God will raise them up. I also hope that, with me and many others across this church, you are doing what you can to be a part of the answer to that prayer. I hope you are inviting people you know who have the kinds of gifts needed for public ministry to consider becoming a pastor or deacon. And I hope that you are looking deep enough into your own heart to discern whether you are one of those people.

Meanwhile, sisters and brothers, we can’t just loiter in the narthex until the next wave of pastors arrives.

As concerned as I am about providing the pastors and deacons that the church needs, I am equally concerned that if we focus obsessively on what we don’t have – enough clergy, for example – we may very well succumb to the temptation to believe that until we have what we don’t have we can’t do what God needs, calls, and gifts us to do for the sake of the good news of Jesus.

So I wonder: Are we willing and able to engage the hard work of looking deeply into ourselves and our communities for what God has, in fact, given us? Are we willing and able to open ourselves to the unpredictable work of the Holy Spirit in discerning what the world needs of us, and then energetically gathering and generously and creatively sharing those gifts and resources that we have been given for the sake of God’s mission of offering the new, abundant, and lasting life of Jesus to us and to the world of which we are a part?

If there was ever a time, the time is now for us to look deep within and around the gathered community of disciples, however large or small that local assembly might be, to see the many gifts God has given to engage the mission and ministry for which we exist. Now is the time, whether we have a pastor alongside us or not, to look around the neighborhood for both what’s needed and for what God has already placed there to address those needs. Now is the time to be the ones – even those of us who are shy Lutherans – to initiate conversation and partnership with anyone and everyone in our vicinity who is committed to the good news of Jesus and the well-being of our world.

I wonder: Can we trust the One who has marked us with the cross of Christ and gifted and sealed us with the Spirit just enough to let go of the idea that we are not a real congregation unless we have a full-time (or even part-time) pastor to ourselves?

Can we use our baptized, Spirit-opened eyes to look around the neighborhood and into our full-communion partner denominations, even if that neighborhood is miles across, to see who God might have already given to us as partners in mission and ministry – and perhaps even to share the leadership of pastors and deacons – for the sake of God’s gospel mission in the corner of God’s kingdom that we share?

Can we listen deeply enough to the Spirit to imagine new – or old and renewed – ways of engaging public ministry shared by clusters of congregations, or partnerships of pastors (word and sacrament) and deacons (word and service).

Is our imagination broad enough to include effective leadership, energetic evangelism, and compassionate outreach by lay people, by the priesthood that includes all the baptized?

All across this territory many of our congregations and other communities of faith are answering questions like these with an enthusiastic “Yes!” Where that “yes” resounds, where God’s people trust God’s promises and take a leap of faith to step toward an unfamiliar, but God-formed future, new life is blooming. Now is the time, sisters and brothers, for every one of us and all of us together to be the church in all its Christ-centered, Spirit-soaked, hope-fueled, abundantly-gifted fullness.

{ This article is an excerpt from Bishop Gafkjen’s report to the 2018 Indiana-Kentucky Synod Assembly. The full report may soon be accessed via the Synod Assembly section of the synod website: <http://www.iksynod.org> }

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