



## We are Church **TOGETHER**

**Lilly Endowment Grant:** We are in the midst of a six-month (Feb. – Aug. 2015) Lilly Endowment planning grant regarding financial challenges for pastors and congregations. I am learning again that one of our greatest assets becomes whatever we share together in Christ's name. Accompaniment takes us farther together and in directions we could not have imagined alone.

This Lilly Endowment grant is shared first of all between New Jersey Synod and Southwestern Minnesota Synod. It was someone's bright idea (Holy Spirit?) to suggest that we be partners in this project. We are somewhat unlikely partners and therefore also excellent partners in our differences with one another. Country mice and city mice! We do share similarities of being places of spirited service in Christ's name, hard-working and innovative as well. Differences are obvious in terms of demographics. New Jersey is the most densely populated state in the nation, located right next to and between the metro areas of Philadelphia and New York City. SW MN is densely populated with Lutherans, but rather sparsely populated in general. Minnesota has six ELCA synods; New Jersey synod and state have the same boundaries.

"We have silos" . . . separate spheres of ministry. This self-descriptive phrase was one of the first things I heard from our New Jersey colleagues when visiting the New Jersey synod office on March 12<sup>th</sup>. I attended 8 hours of meetings with 3 different groups of leaders that day: the Lilly Research & Planning Team, the Discipleship & Witness Team, and the Stewardship Team. I responded that we have silos in SW MN also, but we try to keep grain in them and our relationships out of them. Everyone laughed!

Warmth and welcome were extended to me, a visitor from the prairie. I did not personally experience any "silos" or walls in my direction. I felt a wonderful spirit of comradery and good humor among colleagues. This joint project is bringing us together to brainstorm new solutions to stewardship challenges that continue to grow for our congregations and leadership.

We are indeed in this boat together. It can seem like a tiny boat on a large sea of change of economic challenge. But as the disciples in the storm at sea, we are not alone in the boat. Jesus is with us and we have one another! We have partners in ministry across the nation and around the world. Most importantly, we have partners in one another right in this place where our pioneer ancestors shared whatever tools they had and then made or invented new ones when the old ones didn't work effectively anymore.

Thanks to everyone participating in the study and planning phase of this Lilly project. Pastors and congregation financial chairs/treasurers are filling out brief surveys and participating in focus groups. The surveys are available at synod gatherings or from the synod office. One-hour interviews of 12 pastors and 12 financial chairs serving in a variety of settings will be completed by our conference ministers. Our Lilly Planning Team relating to staff overseeing this project includes Kirsten Rabbe (Trimont), Marv Isder (Fulda), Pr. Tim Wrenn (Windom) and Pr. Mark Yackel-Juleen (Shalom Hill Farm).

**Candidacy:** Right when we need it most we are experiencing a larger number of candidates from Southwestern Minnesota Synod being called to rostered ministry! Seminary enrollments have declined in recent years, probably due to several factors including the increased costs of higher education, changes in congregational life and pastoral roles, and the possible draw of other vocations requiring skills similar to ministry. In our most recent assignment process in March 2015, our synod and our Region 3 (nine synods in Minnesota and the Dakotas) received 48% of the number of seminary graduates needed for currently available first-call pastoral openings. SW MN typically receives 5 or 6 seminary graduates in the spring and received just 3 this time.

The good news is that 12 new candidates for rostered ministry contacted our synod office from Dec. 2014 – March 2015. These new candidates of various ages and experiences include two students at ELCA colleges, several directors of youth and family ministries, and many other lay leaders who bring second-career gifts of music, business and teaching to ordained ministry. The Holy Spirit is very active in our midst at this time, calling a variety of gifted leaders who are passionate about learning and serving in word and sacrament ministry. A common thread in all their stories of call to ordained ministry is often a mentoring relationship with one or more pastors in their life journey. Gifts for ordained ministry are often recognized and encouraged in others by pastors who extend invitations and opportunities to serve in faith-nurturing ways. Our families, congregations, bible camps and campus ministries are the places where seeds for seminary are planted and cultivated. Passing on a living relationship with Jesus Christ in these places is the pathway to nurture all vocations.



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ELCA Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton, spoke at our ELCA's Congregational and Synodical Mission (CSM) unit 2015 annual All Staff Gathering in Chicago. During her time speaking, she raised up the four foci she is using to describe who we are and what we are called to do as the ELCA, saying, "We are Church. We are Lutheran. We are Church Together. We are Church for the sake of the world."

I am grateful for each of those four descriptions. Especially I am grateful for the words we are lifting up as a synod this year in our 2015 assembly theme, "**We are Church Together.**" That word "**together**" has come to mean a great deal to me. We continue to grieve and live into the reality of lives and callings after the death of a child. Daniel's death in December 2014, as difficult as it continues to be, has become a reminder that we need each other. **We are Church Together.** So first let me say, "We thank God for you and your love and prayers."

Much of my work is about getting people together to notice and experience the Holy Spirit's work in our midst. Out of that *noticing* comes action as we together respond in appropriate, meaningful and purposeful ways to the Spirit's work. In the fall 2014 ELCA Networking Event, several leaders from our SW MN Synod gathered to realize new ways we are being called as storytellers of our work together.

A fellow Director for Evangelical Mission—sometimes referred to in abbreviated form as a DEM\*—Pr. Deb Stehlin, Minneapolis Area Synod, was asked, "What is a DEM?" Without a moment's hesitation she said, "It's the 'we just want people to know more about Jesus position' in our ELCA." (\*Note: I prefer **D4EM** to **DEM** for obvious reasons in our politically charged world!)

Deb's description reminds us that our work together is helping people see Jesus in the neighbor, especially our newer neighbors who often do not share the same racial or cultural backgrounds to the dominant population groups in our congregations and communities. Working together with leaders from St. Cloud, Willmar, and Worthington, we, together, tried to address this sometimes hidden and thorny issue in our synod. Racism is real. And it hurts everyone. In January 2015 we helped sponsor three work-shops with Pr. Ron Duty and Dr. Joseph Bocko, staff of our ELCA, leading trainings in Cross-Cultural Conversations. The events were well attended. Although evaluations showed the workshops could have been presented better, we were pleased with this: Communities discovered there are others who wanted to work for a better community and address issues of racism. It felt like the Spirit was at work as we learned how "We are Church Together" for the sake of the world, a world God loves in Jesus and through the Spirit's work of reconciliation and renewal.

In his book, *The Agile Church: Spirit-Led Innovation in an Uncertain Age*, author Dwight Zscheile, Luther Seminary, writes, "To be a disciple of Jesus is to be a student, learner, or apprentice in a **COMMUNITY** of mutual growth in love." (**emphasis mine**) As the Spirit leads **we** are learning **together**. Innovation continues to be key. In the communities, River of Hope (Pr. Laura Aase) and House of Grace (Pr. Kimberly Buffie) we are seeing this mutual growth in love being formed within new communities of faith as the Spirit teaches people to love through innovative ways, things like "Beer and Hymns" or "Sunday night worship." I hope you take time to visit these exciting communities in Hutchinson and Montrose. Your mission support-your "We are Church Together" dollars from offerings- helps fund these congregations. And it helps some 220+ other new communities being

formed in our ELCA. If you have mission funds beyond what you share in Mission Support consider becoming a mission partner. The Spirit's innovation is being lived out in these newest communities of faith, ones you are helping to form in our synod. Join them in mission partnership.

Working with ELCA Planned Giving Coordinator Amy Bigot on our "P.I.E. (Prosper Invest Endow): A Recipe for Generosity" continues to be rewarding. Events where people find out about the value of stories and using the tools of the planned giving process to grow families at the death of a loved one is valuable work in our synod. We have many members who have deeply loved their congregations during their lifetime and showing ways they can continue this through generosity is valuable work.

Work with our synod's Serving in God's World Board (SIGWB), especially chair Pr. Marlaine Doidge is beginning to produce some "together" work. For example, the SIGWB embraced a pre-assembly "Hunger Awareness and Food Packaging" event on Friday, June 12, 2015. It will likely result in packaging of more than 92,000 meals to be distributed to local food shelves, backpack programs, and to disabled veterans; \$23,000 worth of food is being spread out among our 27 counties. Working **together** with the SW MN Synod Women of the ELCA has produced strong support toward this event and raising hunger awareness beyond the event. We are expecting other support from congregations, individuals, and endowment funds to make this a special memory for assembly participants and others. It is a strong sign of our working together so others see Jesus.

Other work by the SIGWB includes its support of ministries including the African Descent ministry at Bethlehem/St. Cloud and Paz y Esperanza, whose ministry is to all people in the Willmar area but especially among persons of Latino descent. And it is exciting to explore possibilities for leadership development using Agora, a leadership development among multi-cultural neighbors hosted at Luther Seminary. The SIGWB will monitor development of a Laotian "probe" expected to start in the St. Cloud area during the summer months of 2015 as Pr. Thiem Baccam works with leaders at Atonement, St. Cloud.

Innovation in ministry and working together is constantly our goal as we work with Bishop Jon Anderson and his support of technology to do ministry. Our emphasis on evangelism as an intentional practice among our congregations will be addressed as our synod participates in an innovative way to present the resources found in "Discovering Hope." Using virtual locations throughout the synod, we are trying to engage our smaller member and rural congregations in a day of learning on Saturday, June 27, 2015. The teacher, Nancy Nyland, D4EM in Indiana/KY will teach FROM Concordia College, Moorhead. We have virtual locations with trained facilitators planned in at least 7 locations.

There is always more to celebrate as we pay attention to the ways the Spirit is leading us to be "Church Together," as we steward the resources God gives us, as followers of Jesus are raised up to be leaders. So let me close by praying the dawn prayer, one I try to pray daily, remembering that "We are Church Together." With Zechariah we pray, "By the tender mercy of our God the dawn from on high is breaking upon us, to give light to those who dwell in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."



## We are Church **TOGETHER**

As elected leaders in the governance of your synod, we are grateful for the partnership we have with all the baptized in the SW MN Synod and beyond to work together in the mission we have from God. It is a privilege to serve in this capacity, and we ask for your ongoing prayers for this important work as we are indeed, “Church Together.” Just as you find in the rhythms of your daily work, there are also anticipated routine matters addressed by your Synod Council throughout the year. For us, that includes roster matters, congregation constitutional review, treasure hunting for and making appointments to boards and committees, and stewarding financial and human resources to the best of our ability.

Since the 2014 Synod Assembly, your Synod Council and Executive Committee have engaged in a variety of conversations and actions with the common prayer that our work will be fruitful, done to the glory of God, and build up the body of Christ in this place, including:

- Using a board exercise tool to teach us about energy and satisfaction where we discovered that we had Transformational Board capacity for visioning and putting into action ideas that would help move us into the future.
- Supporting the formation of a new start congregation in Montrose, MN, and voting to call Kimberly Swanson-Buffie as the mission developer for the congregation; and receiving River of Hope in Hutchinson as a new congregation.
- Welcoming Jay Beech from The Center for Worship and Music Studies, an endeavor supported by the SWMN, Minneapolis, and South Dakota Synods, to one of our meetings to teach us about this learning opportunity as it unfolds.
- Authorizing and beginning work on The Listening Project in our synod, with assistance from consultant Rev. Jeff Kjellberg, KAIROS and Associates, to sharpen our vision and help the synod’s leadership better understand our mission field, our areas for growth, our areas of strength, and discern our sense of priorities for the coming years. We also arranged for lay and rostered folks to come together in conversation and listening at Bishop Summits held in various locations.
- Working to continue to deepen our relationship with and learn from our Partner Synod – the Virginia Synod – as Bishop Jon Anderson and VP Gwen Arneson attended the Virginia Synod Assembly in May 2014.
- Saying goodbye to a Synod Minister, Pr. Andrea DeGroot-Nesdahl, as she retired at the end of 2014, and examining models and staffing options for synod ministry in the future.
- Arranging for the unfolding of the bishop election process for the 2015 Synod Assembly, and receiving feedback from the Synod Nominating Committee that is working to facilitate this process.
- Continuing to ask ourselves what we might consider to best align ourselves with the mission field in which we find ourselves as we listen to God, our neighbors, and our contexts.

With gratitude and joy,

Gwen Arneson, Southwestern Minnesota Synod Vice President

# Report on the Disposition of 2014 Synod Assembly Resolutions

*The full text of this resolution can be found on the synod's website.*

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## **Resolution 13.02**

### **Regarding Southwestern Minnesota Synod Constitutional Change for Election of a Bishop**

This resolution to amend S9.04 of the synod's constitution was approved at the 2013 Synod Assembly and required a second vote in 2014 to be adopted. The current language of S9.04 was deleted and replaced with the following: "The bishop shall be elected by the Synod Assembly in accordance with the process specified in the bylaws and continuing resolutions."

Because this constitutional amendment passed, continuing resolution S9.04.03.A2014. regarding the bishop election process was introduced and approved.

## Youth Ministry

*I am the church. You are the church.  
We are the church together.  
All who follow Jesus,  
All around the world,  
Yes we're the church together.*

*The church is not a building,  
the church is not a steeple,  
the church is not a resting place,  
the church is the people.*

I could not help but quote that favorite song from my childhood. I also really want to quote Jay Beech's "We are the Church" because it's really good, but you'll have to look that one up on your own. It's true; we are the church together and the church is the people. I have seen that all over our synod in the area of youth ministry. Let me highlight a few of the ways we are church together.

### Preventing and Responding to Abuse

I have learned that 1 in 5 people are abused. As congregations we have a responsibility to prevent abuse within the ministries we shepherd. I've put together 4 steps you can follow to prevent and respond to abuse in your congregation. [http://www.swmnelca.org/preventing\\_responding.html](http://www.swmnelca.org/preventing_responding.html)

### Practice Discipleship

Grow deeper in your knowledge and practice of youth ministry through online webinars and in-person trainings. We have a team of youth ministers who will come to your context to teach courses based on "Story," – God's story and our story. Thanks to the ELCA Youth Ministry Network and the ELCA Youth Gathering, the courses are free! Contact our synod's Practice Discipleship Coach, Pastor Kathleen Ulland-Klinkner to schedule your Practice Discipleship experience. [prkathleen@embarqmail.com](mailto:prkathleen@embarqmail.com) 507-375-4792

### Youth Ministers in Congregations

Young people need adults who walk on the road with them as they discover Jesus. Our synod is full of these adults, both paid and volunteer. God is doing amazing things through you. Thank you.

### The SW MN Synod Lutheran Youth Organization

This board of 15 youth and 10 adults serves as a leadership lab for young people who want to grow in faith and share God's love. They work hard to create youth gatherings that will open the eyes of youth to Jesus in their midst.

### Jr. and Sr. High Youth Gatherings

Youth gatherings planned and coordinated by the SW MN Synod Lutheran Youth Organization are super events where the love of Christ is proclaimed with creativity and joy. Gathering participants particularly appreciate Faith Talks shared by youth, Christian music and service projects.

### **ELCA Youth Gathering**

Pastor Tim Wheatley has done an incredible job of teaching and informing people about the ELCA Youth Gathering and how to best navigate it. Pastor Chris Zuraff is working with a team of people to plan the day we'll spend together as a synod in Detroit. Everyone who has been involved in this gathering has seen that God is up to something in Detroit.

### **Youth Worker Retreat**

Our annual retreat this fall was held at Shetek Lutheran Ministries and titled, "Framing Youth Ministry" and featured our synod's Practice Discipleship Team.

### **Youth and Family Ministry E- Newsletter**

Please join our mailing list to receive bursts of information on events, resources, education, and more regarding youth and family ministry. Go to [www.swmnelca.org](http://www.swmnelca.org) to join.

### **SW MN Synod Youth Ministers Facebook Group**

When youth ministers have a question for their colleagues or want to share news of an upcoming event, they often turn to our synod's youth minister Facebook group. If you're a youth minister in our synod, please know this is a resource for you. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/swmnsynodyouthministers/>

In addition to these amazing ministry opportunities, I was blessed to journey through the candidacy process and was commissioned as an Associate in Ministry!

What is an Associate in Ministry? Associates in Ministry serve, lead and equip the whole people of God in service to God's world. Having completed specific educational requirements and candidacy, I will be recognized as a rostered leader of the ELCA for Word and Service.

The SW MN Synod has called me to serve as an Associate in Ministry as Synod Youth Ministry Coordinator. This is the same role I've been serving for nearly 15 years. While my job description does not change, becoming an Associate in Ministry affirms my life's calling of serving others through the church and strengthens my commitment to the church and the church's commitment to me.

I have experienced first-hand once again the way we are church together. I have enjoyed incredible mentors and colleagues in ministry and I'm grateful to serve alongside you.

Thank you for being church together!

In Christ,

Sarah Hausken, Synod Youth Ministry Coordinator





## We are Church **TOGETHER**

Since our last Synod Assembly, the past year has been filled with many wonderful highs and lows. Practicing FAITH 5 continues to be a devotional model I share and invite others to use. It involves naming the day's highs and lows, reading a Bible message, connecting the highs and lows to Scripture, praying and blessing each other. So here are some of the highs and lows I have witnessed and been a part of with the Southwestern Minnesota Synod this year.

I will limit myself to three highs and three lows. First the highs:

**Equipping Congregations Day** continues to gain energy in providing a rich variety of opportunities to learn, reflect, and share resources in order to address our life of faith through our SW MN congregations. This past February we filled two Willmar church buildings with the help of many other congregations to offer a full day of equipping around the theme of "Innovating With Integrity." About 900 people attended to hear Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber address this theme and attend two of the 30 different workshops that were offered. The planning team for next year's Equipping Day is already well on its way for the February 20, 2016, event with the theme "Seeking Aliveness" featuring Dr. Dwight Zscheile as the keynote speaker. We are grateful that the SW MN Synod can offer this event at such a minimal cost with your congregations' Mission Support dollars and help from a SW MN Endowment Grant.



**Companion Synod Relationships** keep getting stronger. From the beginning of this work in the ELCA, the relationship between a particular synod and a global partner synod/diocese has been more about relationships when learning, growing, and celebrating ministry together. Our 10 conferences in the synod are paired with the 10 circuits in the Southeastern Diocese of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa. Most recently we have worked together in ministry to alleviate the suffering in families caused by HIV/AIDS. Plus, our conferences have built relationships of prayer and friendship helping to shape the ministries they share including scholarships for children and seminary students, agricultural work to address food production and hunger, building and repairing church-owned buildings and supporting pastors and lay leaders. More and more companions have traveled to and from Minnesota and Southern Africa in building this faith-based relationship between brothers and sisters in Christ. In addition to this formal companion relationship, we celebrate with many of the congregations in our synod that have meaningful partnerships in other places around the world through ministry relationships.



**Endowment Fund Grants** have expanded to include pension equity payments. Southwestern Minnesota Endowment Funds have been making a difference for many years by providing scholarships for seminary students, money for education debt reduction to rostered leaders in our synod, and funding programs to better serve the ministries of our synod. You can read more about the generous use of these gifts in the Endowment Committee report. But this year we provided the first pension equity grants for pastors serving in calls in our synod where they are receiving less than the recommended synod guideline compensation. We know these underfunded calls will both affect the present financial life of these pastors and have a negative effect on their retirement years. Generous supporters of this vision to help address pension equity concerns have contributed almost \$123,000 of which 4.5% can be distributed annually. We were able to make eight awards for a total of \$5,521, which over the years ahead will make a difference to retiring pastors of thousands of dollars in retirement income. If you would like to know more about making a gift to our synod endowment funds or planning an estate gift, you can contact Amy Bigot, our SW MN Synod Planned Giving Coordinator.

Now the lows:

**Mission Support** received from congregations to do ministry locally, synodically, and globally dropped in 2014. Almost 65%, that is \$65 out of every \$100, passes through your synod office to ministries like campus ministry sites in Minnesota, seminaries like Luther in St. Paul to educate our future pastors, global missionaries and Young Adults in Global Mission, and funding for Pastor Larry Strenge to be a full-time Director for Evangelical Mission in our synod office. The other \$35 of every \$100 provides synod staff support to congregations by raising up leaders, assisting with pastoral transitions by providing interims and pastoral candidates, plus offering continuing education events like the Equipping Congregations Day. It is a low when most members of our congregations have little or no idea how much good they are providing through their Mission Support.

**Challenging Conversations** are increasing as congregations face hard choices about staffing and even future viability of their congregation. The number of congregations moving from two full-time pastors to one, or discussing the possibility of closing their church, has increased. We continue to look for resources to help congregations have difficult conversations and help them know that they are not alone as they engage these challenging questions.

**Availability of Pastors** has decreased. We in the SW MN Synod, for years, have produced about half of the pastors we hope will come to serve in our synod. We continue to pray for more candidates to be identified by our congregations to seek full-time ministry positions. God is raising up more candidates, but the number of pastors seeking calls in our synod is decreasing. This is both a low and an opportunity.