



**Southwestern Minnesota Synod**  
**Evangelical Lutheran Church in America**  
God's work. Our hands.

## 2016-17 Annual Report

### “Rural Minnesota is changing, not dying,”

- Kelly Asche Center for Small Towns at the University of Morris

Not everyone in our synod lives in rural Minnesota, but we all are part of God's church which is facing new challenges and opportunities. “The church is changing.” Inside the challenges, we find opportunities that are a call from God for personal and communal renewal.

- We have less cultural support for our people's participation in a church, professing and living our faith. It is an opportunity to deepen people's sense of identity.
- We have over a hundred congregations with fewer than 50 people at worship a week. This means almost every pastoral transition requires a frank assessment of the sustainability of the current ministry model of staff, solo, multipoint parishes. We are always reforming.
- Many of our congregation's average age has grown significantly older. This is raising questions about their future. With intention, congregations can invite new generations into leadership.
- In many communities, we are having difficulty connecting to people who have fewer resources and who have participated in less formal education. Some of our congregations have difficulty reaching out to young adults. The Good News is for all people.
- Our seminaries have 40% fewer students than thirteen years ago. This creates a challenge to attract leaders and extend the length of calls for congregations and rostered ministers. Together we have all that we need.
- Many generous giants, who have previously supported the lives of our congregations, are no longer able to do so. We are learning new ways to gather resources to sustain our congregations, synod, and churchwide ministry.

We have prayed and wrestled with the question, “What does this mean?” After much prayer, thought and conversation we have come to believe we are called to, “**Embrace God's Mission + Equip God's People.**” God has embraced us in God's mission through Jesus Christ. God invites us to embrace the mission field of today with its challenges and opportunities. God calls us to equip all God's people to live their lives of faith, to gather and serve in communities of faith, while also hearing God send us to care for all people and God's world. Our callings are all about inviting people into a relationship with our gracious God we know most deeply in Jesus through word, sacrament, and community.

We are called to **Deepen Congregational Vitality.**

Congregations are called to be “mouth houses” where we hear the Gospel in many ways and where we share and build up our faith. We are called to deeper faith, hope and love together in Christ. Renewal begins with you and me.



This year we will be lifting up faith practices because God works in and through these ancient practices to transform our lives, our communities and our world. Our inviting, forgiving, generous, encouraging, loving God calls us to be inviting, forgiving, generous, encouraging and loving people. God sends God's Holy Spirit to call us to faith, call us to worship, to grow and study and be strengthened so God can send us out to live out our callings and love God's whole world. During this coming year, in Facebook posts, we will highlight faith practices like we did in December with our 30 Days of Prayer.

God calls us to deepen our capacity and open doors to all people, those who have many resources and those who have little. We are called to be inviting people back into the community of Jesus who have struggled in faith or in relationship to God's people. We pray for them and find ways to listen and learn. We are called to care for those who have never had much contact with our faith and its traditions. Instead of seeing people who are different as a problem, we need to see our new neighbors as gifts and opportunities. In the coming year, we will work on communication, learning from one another and deepening our capacity to engage people with new doorways.



We believe God is calling us to **Enhance Local and Global Mission**. A recent conference in our region emphasized that we are called to grow and love all our children in our families, congregations, and communities. In our research for our strategic planning, we learned that we have a serious issue with food insufficiency in the communities of Southwestern Minnesota. We also know we are called to develop the capacity to competently receive the gifts of neighbors whose history and culture is different than ours. What an exciting time to be synod together.

Our long-standing commitment to global mission helps us as we seek to reach out to the world of people God is bringing into our synod. Most people who are moving here come from other parts of our state and our country, but some come from other parts of this amazing world. We want to sustain our work with our companions in Christ from Southern Africa, while also encouraging congregations to engage their local communities and be more aware of the needs of people in their midst. Whether our new neighbors become Christians or not, we are called to love all our neighbors and witness to our Lord Jesus. One thing we can share with people of no or other faiths is caring for people who are hungry. One of our best events this past year had us working with people of many kinds in St. Cloud making food for people who did not have enough. We are "Better Together."

Healthy congregations function like our circulatory system. We are called by God toward God's heart and God's word and sacraments in public worship and personal devotion. In the Bible Study, prayers, hymns, sacraments, mutual conversation and consolation we are nourished with what we need to go and be sent to our many callings in this world as family, neighbors, citizens, workers and stewards of this creation.

Finally, we hear God calling us to **Develop Servant Leaders**. While we need to talk about pastors and other rostered ministers, every one of the baptized is called to grow deeper in faith, hope, and love as followers of Jesus. All the baptized serve in a gathered and scattered church. We are called to equip, knowing that God does the most important equipping for lives of faith, meaning, and purpose.

Our synod has a history of depending on other synods to help us grow our pastors. We have been a consumer of pastoral candidates requiring other synods to provide 30-50% of the pastors we need to serve our congregations over the past decade. As retirements increase and fewer candidates attend seminary, we must deepen our ability to encourage people who have the gifts for ministry, invite them to listen to the question of God's call to ordained ministry and support them in their formation.

If you had to boil down the work of our synod to a single word, it is the word "Equip." It is what God does through the Holy Spirit. It is what each of our congregations is called to do for all God's people. Two weeks before Christmas we took three phone calls from people who God have been wondering if God is calling them to serve in some way. In the coming years, we will walk with these people and seek to help them discern if God is calling them to become pastors: it requires an internal and external call.



We give thanks for all the mentoring and supervising pastors and internship committees and many others who support seminarians with prayers, encouragement and resources. I am thankful for the many gifts of the past year, the great team of rostered ministers, synod governance, and staff I serve alongside.

"Together, by God's Grace, together we have all that we need in the Southwestern Minnesota Synod and our lives together in Christ. "

**+Bishop Jon V. Anderson**  
Southwestern Minnesota Synod