

Patterns of Synodical Life that Effectively Support Congregational Missional Vitality

A Paper in Response to the Churchwide Assembly¹

Living into the Future Together Implementing Resolution (CA11.03.07)

The Living into the Future Together Task Force (LIFT) requested that the Conference of Bishops, in consultation with synod leaders and the churchwide organization, “prepare a report and recommendations for the November 2012 meeting of the Church Council for consideration by the 2013 Churchwide Assembly that describes patterns of synodical life in the ELCA that effectively support vital congregations, mission growth and outreach.” The 2011 Churchwide Assembly affirmed this request, and this paper is in response to the resolution.

THE CONTEXT OF SYNODICAL WORK

Synods are being asked to become catalysts for missional planning in very different contexts and with very different levels of resources.

- Ten synods, for example, cover over 100,000 square miles, while 22 cover 10,000 square miles or less.
- Twelve synods have over 200 congregations, while 12 have 100 or fewer.
- The synods vary from 21 congregations per staff member (synod bishop, assistants, Directors for Evangelical Mission) to over 100 congregations per staff member.
- Salaries/benefits range from about 20 percent of total synod expenditures to 37 percent of synod expenditures.
- Mission support from synods to the churchwide organization ranges from about 35 percent of total synod expenditures to over 55 percent.
- Grants to agencies and institutions vary from 7 percent of synod expenditures to 16 percent.

Every synod in the ELCA has experienced the same trends of decreasing baptized membership and worship attendance. These trends have been consistent regardless of the differences among synods in geographic context, expenditures, programming or emphases, or level of support for the churchwide organization. Put differently, no synod in the ELCA has discovered a way to set itself apart from these trends—a set of patterns that have produced a net gain in the number of congregations or in the vitality of existing congregations (when defined in terms of membership or their financial resources).

SYNODS AND THE MISSIONAL VITALITY OF CONGREGATIONS

Before it is possible to examine the relationship between synods and the missional vitality of congregations, it is helpful to define missional vitality. One way to think about missional vitality is to understand it as aligning congregational ministry with God’s mission in the world. A missionally vital congregation is a congregation that functions well along three dimensions.

1. Building and strengthening relationships between members (participants) and God (worship, spiritual growth and faith practices)

¹ This is an abridged version of a paper presented to the Conference of Bishops. For the full version, contact Kenneth Inskeep of Research and Evaluation, Office of the Presiding Bishop at: kenneth.inskeep@elca.org.

2. Building and strengthening relationships (caring and supportive) among members (internal)
3. Building and strengthening relationships (evangelism, social justice, local and global community service) between members and the community (external)

These three aspects of missional vitality provide the basis for the emphasis of the Congregational and Synodical Mission Unit on *The Three Great Listeners*: Listening to God, Listening to Our Neighbors, and Listening to One Another. These Listeners are a way to build and strengthen the significant relationships that are critical to congregational vitality.

Various projects have been undertaken within the ELCA to assess the missional vitality of congregations. Each of these projects has its limitations, but they have consistently called into question the missional vitality of ELCA congregations as a group.

The factors that influence a congregation's missional vitality are well known. Congregations with missional vitality have a widely-shared commitment to reaching out into the community and a willingness to change as a means of reaching out. These characteristics are the product of strong adult faith formation programs that stress faith practices and spiritual growth. A reasonable estimate, based on previous studies, is that about a fifth of ELCA congregations share these characteristics, compared to about a third of congregations in the U.S. as a whole.²

What, if anything, can synods do to influence the missional vitality of congregations? One might think more synod expenditures on grants or other synodical programmatic activities for congregations or even more money for synod staffing would positively impact the vitality of congregations in a synod, but this does not appear to be the case.

SYNOD REVIEWS

Over the years a number of synod reviews have been conducted. Each of these reviews identified congregational mission as a priority for pastors and members. A recent review conducted in a synod in the Midwest produced a typical conclusion. According to those participating in the review, it is very important for the synod office to work with congregations to deal productively with change and to help congregations cooperate with each other to maximize their capacity for mission. This same conclusion, however, was reached in a similar review of the synod conducted in 1998, and despite the best efforts of the bishop and staff, the 2008 review noted that there was little evidence that the 1998 recommendations had been substantially achieved or should be significantly altered despite the widespread acceptance of these goals throughout the synod.

THE LIFT SURVEY: SET IN OUR WAYS

The lack of success of synods as catalysts for congregational mission has little to do with effort. The LIFT Survey of congregational leaders showed that people like their congregations just the

² For example see, "The Religious Beliefs and Practices of Lutheran Lay Leaders in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America," 2009, or the "2008 Faith Communities Today Survey of Evangelical Lutheran Church in America Congregations," 2009. These studies are available from ELCA Research and Evaluation, by request.

way they are.³ While these leaders said they like the theology of the ELCA, they do not believe there is anything unique about ELCA Lutherans (that distinguishes them from other Christians). The vast majority of congregational leaders also believe that changes in the broader culture have negatively impacted their congregations and there is little they can do to counter these changes. Less than a majority of both lay leaders and clergy ranked sharing the good news of the Gospel with the unchurched as one of the top three priorities of their congregation.

WHAT IS A SYNOD TO DO WHEN CHANGE IS HARD?

Given the trends, it is easy (and reasonable) to slip into negative or deficit thinking. The trends have a 40 year history and no mainline church has countered these trends. The deficits are real and they should be well understood, but they are only useful if they set the stage for new possibilities or options.

At this point in time, ELCA Lutherans are actually faced with a significant opportunity. Several recent large-scale surveys of religion in America suggest that organized religion, in all its variants, is waning.⁴ A growing segment of the society perceives all religious institutions as narrow and moralistic. This perception is not completely misplaced. While a view of God and God's mission as narrow and moralistic is very popular among a vocal segment of the society, it is rejected outright by the majority born in the late 20th century. Put differently, moralistic religion has a constituency, but its future growth potential is limited. Because God is continually re-forming the church, Lutheran theology has the opportunity to speak a uniquely relevant message to these times.

Those who are rejecting organized religion are relatively young (but not exclusively so); many have never been married; they are predominantly white, well educated and politically moderate. They believe religious people are hypocritical, judgmental, and insincere; that religions are too focused on rules, particularly with regard to homosexuality, abortion, birth control, cohabitation, divorce/remarriage; that different religions may be partly true, but none are completely true; that religious leaders and institutions want money and power, not truth; and that religious people reject science in favor of superstition. In other words, those who are rejecting organized religion are doing so because they believe it represents values they reject. They may be biblically illiterate. They may be unable to differentiate one religious group from another, but their perception of organized religion is that it is out of touch, even antagonistic, to the daily reality of their lives.

Theologically, Lutherans can deal effectively with these criticisms. For example, Lutherans believe, by virtue of the law, that all people are hypocritical, judgmental, and insincere. Lutherans struggle with the fact that believers remain sinners, as imperfect human beings, but Lutherans are equally confident that in the gift of Jesus they become saints—that they themselves can be given to their neighbors as Christ was given to them—freely and without obligation. Lutherans believe that claiming not to be a hypocrite is hypocritical. When accused of being too focused on rules, particularly with regard to homosexuality, abortion, birth control, cohabitation, divorce/remarriage, Lutherans believe what Luther taught—"that the gospel is really not a book of laws and commandments which requires deeds of us, but a book of divine

³ "Report on the Open, Clergy, and Lay Leader Questionnaire," 2010. Available from Research and Evaluation, ELCA.

⁴ For example, see Robert Putnam's *American Grace*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 2012.

promises in which God promises, offers, and gives us all his possessions and benefits in Christ".⁵ When accused of wanting money and power, not truth, Lutherans can respond that such a claim provides the basis for the existence of the Lutheran church—and being wary of such institutional predispositions is a Lutheran thing to do. When accused of rejecting science in favor of superstitions, Lutherans can legitimately respond they have no quarrel with science. Lutherans take the Bible very seriously, but they are not obliged to take it literally. In short, none of these critiques hold Lutherans back, because Lutherans have another understanding of God's mission in the world—that God is about redeeming it.

For Lutherans, the challenge is less theological than institutional. Lutherans like each other and they are not hospitable to outsiders. Lutherans do not like change particularly with regard to long, well-established, institutional practices, and this institutional rigidity has become an obstacle to proclaiming the good news. Lutherans have trouble translating the power and authority of their theology into practices that are recognizable or appealing in contemporary American society. Yet, at their core, Lutherans believe that God is continually forming and reforming the church and that Christians have a vocation in this world that demands their attention to it and their ability to engage it seriously and relevantly. Change is possible, and there is a method to change.

A Methodological Approach to Change⁶

There is a method to change that includes three parts.

Part One. Because people are set in their ways, change begins with defining a clear, positive direction. This often means moving away from trying to fix a problem and moving toward better understanding what is already working.

Put differently, change is easier when the focus is on "bright spots". Bright spots "spark the hope that change is possible". Bright spots are the stories we hear and tell about what God is doing among us and around us in the world. Moving in a new direction often involves seeing bright spots as guides.

Bright spots are not intended to serve as "best practices," but they do point to certain competencies that are helping the church better participate in God's mission in the world. People in various synods are identifying the following as some of the characteristics that are binding them together as they move forward with new missional vitality:

- strategic thinking
- new technologies
- leader development
- a missional focus
- cooperative ministries among congregations
- global relationships

⁵ Martin Luther, "A Brief Instruction on What to Look For and Expect in the Gospels," 1521.

⁶ This section draws heavily from Chip and Dan Heath's *Switch: How to Change When Change is Hard*. New York: Broadway Book, 2010. A more overtly religious use of an identity-based model of change is presented in A Renewal Enterprise's *Seeing Through New Eyes*, Chicago, A Renewal Enterprise, 2010. Also useful is Tim Brown's *Change By Design*, New York: Harper Business, 2009, and David Daubert's *Living Lutheran*, Minneapolis, Augsburg Fortress, 2007.

- resource development (financial campaigns)
- youth and young adult ministry
- conflict (most recently the aftermath of the sexuality decision)
- interpretation

The experience of church people with bright spots is occasional. The Lutheran church is not accomplished in routinely and systematically telling stories or identifying what can be learned and applied from reports of God's activity in the world. The church has occasionally set direction based on its assets (rather than deficits), which has much in common with a focus on bright spots. Most of all, however, this approach to change involves a significant shift in attitude. For Lutherans it means a focus on the promises of God, or on what it means to be a church that says "yes". It is a Lutheran understanding of faith "as a living, daring confidence in God's grace so certain that you could stake your life on it one thousand times. This kind of trust in and knowledge of God's grace makes a person joyful, confident and happy with regard to God and all creatures"⁷

Part Two. Change happens when it engages people's hearts and their emotions. People often know what they should do, but it is more comfortable emotionally (at least in the short-run) to follow habit. Change is hard because it goes against what is emotionally the easiest thing to do.

Regularly in the synod reviews noted above, pastors claimed to be tired or exhausted. Many have attempted to move their congregations and instead of being inspired by the work, they end up exhausted. In the midst of the exhaustion, they would prefer a bishop or synod council or a churchwide staff person (including researchers) not press the case for change. Instead, they want a bishop who is sympathetic to their personal story, their personal trials and tribulations. They want pastoral care. They prefer the status quo because it is routine. Being in a routine is comfortable because it takes less energy. Change uses energy—the energy expended in making decisions and the energy expended in living with the uncertainty built into decision-making, because making a decision often means making a choice to do something different.

When faced with these circumstances, it is important to do several things, all of which build emotional capital intended to counter the emotional drain.

- First, it is important to point clearly to the destination—a destination that can move emotions.
- Second, it is also important to establish small, transitional, and achievable steps along the way. Success gives people hope.
- Third, it is important to distinguish between the two primary models of change. Most congregations operate using a consequence model which typically begins with a cost/benefit analysis. The first question in the consequence model is, What will change cost?

A better approach proceeds by asking a different set of questions focused on our Lutheran identity.

1. Who are we as a congregation, and who does God want us to *be*?
2. It is at this point that the congregation needs to discern. The learning process should include "the three great listenings".

⁷ Martin Luther in "An Introduction to St. Paul's Letter to the Romans," 1522.

- a. What does listening to scripture and our traditions tell us about ourselves and about God?⁸
 - b. What does listening to our neighbors and our communities tell us about the community and ourselves? Put differently, we need a better handle on the kind of situation we are in.
 - c. What do we discover in listening to one another's experience and wisdom?
3. What is God calling us as a congregation to *do* in this situation as we participate in God's mission?

The identity model of change is less emotionally draining because it forgoes the cost/benefit analysis. In fact, the focus on identity can be inspiring especially when a congregation begins to hope and dream. This kind of inspiration is based in a Lutheran understanding of God's grace. As Luther put it: "through faith in God's grace a person will do good to everyone without coercion, willingly and happily; serving everyone, suffering everything for the love and praise of God who has shown such grace".⁹

Part Three. It is important to shape the environment. People do things over and over again because the environment within which they act stays the same. Change means taking some control of the environment. Changing the environment makes right behaviors easier and the wrong behaviors harder.

At the congregational level, for instance:

- This can be as simple as providing specific instructions on how best to engage congregational visitors.
- It can mean regularly changing the patterns of a worship service or congregational meetings so people get used to change.
- It can involve asking the council to act differently to set an example for others.
- It can involve asking people to visit other congregations to see what they do.

The goal is to think about behaviors and how they are habitually shaped by an unexamined routine.

⁸ One resource for discernment is "Story Matters: Claiming our Biblical Identity for the Sake of World," from CSM in conjunction with the Faith Practices Initiative, the Book of Faith Initiative, and Mission Development in the ELCA. Also see <http://www.elca.org/Growing-In-Faith/Discipleship/Mission-Planning.aspx> which is a mission planning Web site including resources developed synodically.

⁹ Martin Luther in "An Introduction to St. Paul's Letter to the Romans," 1522.

A POSSIBLE ACTION PLAN FOR SYNODS

1. As appropriate, devote time as the synod's bishop and staff to understanding the theory and dynamics of organizational change. Practice the steps of change. Refine and adapt them for each synod context.
2. Work with the congregations of the synod to develop a missional profile for the synod. This work should be transferable to congregations. One approach is to develop the missional profile using the identity model of change by addressing these questions:
 - a. As congregations walking together in this synod, who are we and who is God calling us to *be*?
 - b. What kind of situation do we find ourselves in at this point in time? What can be learned from it about ourselves and our relationships to each other and the territory we serve?
 - c. What would congregations walking together as a synod, do in this situation? What does this tell us about who we aspire to be and our plan of action for achieving our aspirations?
3. Work with at least one other synod in the development of the missional profile. Each synod would review one another's profile, and look for similarities and differences, with particular attention to joint missional opportunities, resource development, shared governance, shared program, shared leadership. Pilot several models of inter-synodical visitation by a small but representative group (lay and rostered, other bishops, persons who have good communication skills, and possess both vision and reality sensibility).
4. Use the missional profile in synod/congregational decision-making, including but not limited to the following:
 - the selection of a bishop
 - staffing decisions
 - budget development
 - program development
 - call processes
 - leadership development
 - conflict mediation
 - mission support
 - stewardship
 - the possible reconfiguration of synod boundaries
5. Gather and share wisdom on the development, use, and implications of the missional profile as a means for change in congregations.
6. Gather and share wisdom on the use of non-legislative gatherings on discernment, theology, vocation, mission planning, and preparation for legislative decisions as a means for change in congregations.
7. Develop a group of leaders and staff who would facilitate the above processes and build and promote a body of knowledge on change within the synod (including bright spots).