Almighty God, your mission is to redeem the world. Inspire us by your Holy Spirit with passion and courage so we can join you in that work. Open our eyes to see you moving in our community. Open our ears to hear your call. Open our hearts to love our neighbors. Open our minds to imagine new ways of sharing the good news about Jesus in the world.

AMEN
There is strong hope that we are emerging from this long pandemic which has truly had an affect on the way that we have been the church for the past two years or more.

This, in conjunction with the apparent decline of mainline denominations, including the ELCA, has left many wondering what the future of our congregations might be in a rapidly changing culture.

We have been isolated from one another, dependent on our digital communities for worship and our need to connect. Milestones and life-passages have been altered or postponed because of regulations and recommendations from health officials. Many of us have missed singing with others as an active contribution in worship.

Youth groups and Bible studies have been modified leaving participants craving closer social interaction. There is great worry about the financial position of congregations as leaders are caught predicting whether people will return to church or not. Pastors, Deacons, SAMs, and church leaders are exhausted from pivoting, learning new technologies, and working tirelessly to accommodate multiple means for connection. Mental health resources have never been so needed or requested.

Although we have faith in the One who holds our future, this is a critical time for all the baptized to be called forth to a new way of boldly living out our renewed faith and reflecting Christ to our hurting world. Martin Luther wrote in the Small Catechism, “God’s kingdom will come without our praying for it... but we ask in this prayer that it may also come to us.” He expresses our Lutheran understanding that God is in charge, and it is all about God’s activity in the world. But Luther also ended this section with the importance that we connect what God is up to with our own lives. Life changing ministry begins when we help people to hunger for what God is doing right now, rather than simply settling for getting by - comfortably doing ministry as we have always done it before.

It is God’s mission that sparks everything else, even for those of us who have been in the church for a long time. Dietrich Bonhoeffer dreamed of a church that did not exist primarily to serve its members,
but to stand as Christ’s body committed to being a part of manifesting God’s dream. He wrote, ‘the church is the church only when it exists for others’ (Letters and Papers from Prison).

As your newly elected bishop in 2020, I made the commitment to enter a time of self-reflection regarding who we are as the Northeastern Minnesota Synod and to engage a new strategic direction to guide us as we move forward. It had been years since such a process and plan had been completed. The old plan had been guided by only a few leaders and needed a fresh approach. I felt it was necessary to engage as many voices as we could to develop a plan that reflected the synod in our current context.

The Synod Council and your synod staff unanimously agreed. We are grateful for the skilled leadership of Deacon Peggy Hahn from LEAD who has been our consultant and advisor through this process. We are also indebted to the work of the Core Team, a group of dedicated individuals from across the synod who did the listening and compilation of ideas, including incorporating what they heard into the goals you will see set forth. Their work came from all of you.

Completing a strategic plan in the throes of a pandemic could be seen as an enormous challenge. However, it has also emphasized that God’s mission continues no matter the time or place. Claimed as the body of Christ for the world, God calls upon the church to be the incarnational witness of the risen Christ. This is a dynamic call that has no interruptions or end.

In fact, it is precisely amid chaos, isolation, exhaustion, and despair that we are reminded, “neither death, not life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Romans 8:38

This process has also revealed that God’s people and congregations of this synod are resilient. There is a great hopefulness and a palpable sense of determination to learn and grow as individuals and with each other as the church. We are constantly being renewed in Christ, and I invite you to see where God is active in that work around us and within us as we move toward the future.

This is not a strategic plan that has been developed by only a few leaders – this is a plan that has bubbled up through the extensive listening and input of hundreds across the various ministries of this synod. Lay people, candidates for ministry, clergy, deacons, and SAMs have given honest input on what you will find here. There are many fingerprints on the pages of this living document - and it is just that – a living document that I invite you to experience for yourselves. Living into these new values and our strategic goals will require commitment, new teams, and staff time.

Yet, what was heard from passionate leaders throughout this planning process is a willingness to do what it takes to help our church reclaim a vision that is bigger than going back to the past. This plan is the result of imagining a future which includes honing discipleship and working together in new ways with a heart for neighbors both near and far. Join others from your own communities of faith and with friends across the Northeastern Minnesota Synod as we implement our hopes and dreams expressed in these pages.

I pray that you will be renewed by encountering and sharing the love of God in Christ Jesus in new ways - and in doing so, deepen your own relationship with God, with others, and with the world that God so loves.

Bishop Amy Odgren
April, 2022
The Strategic Planning Team: Who are we?

The NEMN Synod strategic planning team began meeting this past fall. Most of our work involved listening to God and to you. The team is made up of both rostered and lay leaders within our synod: Liz Branum, Pastor Liz Cheney, SAM Dave Erdmann, Pastor Rebecca Hinz, Lauren Jackson, Dave Johnson, Dave Nichols, Pastor Dean Oelfke, Jennifer Svatos, Pastor Vicki Taylor, Dan Thureen, Pastor Sierra Westerman, and Deacon Susan Williams. Deacon Peggy Hahn of LEAD served as our consultant.

What did we do to think about where our church will be in five years? How can our congregations respond to the challenges of ministry in this time and place?

To share ideas about the future of ministry in northeastern Minnesota, the Synod strategic planning team, led by Deacon Peggy Hahn of LEAD, spent the months of November, December, and January facilitating listening sessions throughout the synod. This team of rostered and lay leaders listened to various groups, congregations, organizations, and communities within our Synod to discern the future of our church.

The next part of our work was to go through the results of those listening sessions, find shared values within those conversations, and draft a future plan for our synod as we lean into the future together. Thank you to everyone who has been a part of this so far, and for the thoughts you shared with our listening team!

Who did we listen to?

During the months of November, December, and January the team tried to listen to as many voices as possible from the communities within our synod. These included: Synod Council, Outdoor Ministry/Camps, the five conferences of our synod, Together Here, Food Insecurity Ministries, First Call rostered leaders, congregational council members, Eco Faith Network, rostered leader candidates, SAMs, Music Ministry Leaders, Bible Study Groups, Campus Ministry participants, Youth Ministry leaders, LYO, LGBTQIA+/Reconciled in Christ Congregations, Lay Leader Network, elderly members, Anti-Racism Team, and anyone else who wanted to be included. We used in-person and Zoom meetings to ask four questions, and members of our team took notes to record everyone’s answers.
Who are the people entrusted in our care?

Our synod is made up of congregations that stretch from the Canadian border to the edge of the northern suburbs of the Twin Cities, from big cities to rural and north shore communities. Five conferences make up our synod: Heartland, Kettle River, Lake Superior, Laurentian, and Living Waters Conferences. With this variety of membership and settings, our congregations are called to minister to many different needs and situations.

We have been listening! by Dave Johnson

What strikes me about the notes from these listening sessions is that the gap between experiences and mindsets across our congregations and organizations is wide. Some are thriving during this pandemic while others are afraid of closing. Some are thinking of church as an opportunity to bring God out into the community while others are counting people in the pews. Some are hoping and dreaming about change while others want to go back to staying within the hymnals. Some welcome ideas and change that comes from networking with others while some want to stay within the groups of people they know and are part of their church. The good thing is that the one thing we have in common is the God who created us and wants us to have abundant lives filled with a purpose he gave each of us.

It might be helpful to find a way to connect those that are thriving in certain areas with those who could benefit from that knowledge and experience. Those who are strong in mission could be a resource for those who are looking to expand their mission ministry. Those who have built food ministries could share with those who might be dreaming of starting a similar ministry. Those who are reaching out through technology or social media could help those who have less experience. Together we are stronger. A bigger challenge is how we change into the new world. I see power struggles being our biggest hurdle.
We asked: How is your congregation (or group, community, or organization) growing disciples with a deepening faith in Jesus Christ? The themes we heard can be grouped under these headlines.

CONNECTION
- People want community and look forward to becoming involved so they may connect with others.
- People are eager to gather for all sorts of things, including worship, fellowship, and service.
- Congregations are looking for different ways to be in relationship with their neighbors.
- Our camp ministries want to stay connected with participants year-round.
- There is consensus that holding meetings over Zoom is efficient, but we miss out on the connections and physical presence.
- Pastors found that texting people has led to connection for some.
- Not having in-person gatherings has made it tougher to connect with others.
- People come because they feel they are accepted for who they are.
- When we don’t do things together, we don’t feel connected.

RE-INVENTING (self/congregation/group/organization)
- Congregations and ministries have re-invented themselves throughout the past two years.
- The suspension of in-person worship due to the pandemic prompted many congregations to have online presence, whether it is worship, devotions, Bible studies.
- Some congregations have committed to investing several thousands of dollars in equipment, and countless staff time.
- COVID has forced many to look at how they do things; “We’ve always done it that way” no longer works and they are utilizing new tools and techniques.
- Many have brainstormed different ways to accomplish Sunday School, Bible study, and other activities.
- Some leaders have started, and continue, a phone ministry.

by Jennifer Svatos

We asked: How are new people invited to share in the ministry and leadership of your congregation (or group, community, or organization)?

- Congregations carry a pervasive sense that they are not skilled at asking people to fill leadership roles. Yet we have many examples of successful invitations to participate.
- Congregations have successfully filled key roles for a long time, although with a smaller number of people attending church in person, leaders feel fewer people are available to volunteer.
- Individual invitations are more successful than corporate. Spiritual gifts assessments are less popular than years past, response rate is dropping, some lack capacity to follow up.
• Responding and adapting to COVID has stressed leaders in congregations of all sizes. Those with small leader bases have been stressed to the breaking point; some almost don’t have enough leaders to run things. Leaders who stepped up during the pandemic may need support to transition out of those crisis/survival mode roles and pass the baton to new leaders.
• COVID also has been rich with exploration and experimentation. Congregations tried teams not committees, ad hoc rather than permanent, and gave people permission to try things. They recognize leaders in the future will likely be leading in hybrid congregations that offer online and in-person worship and ministries.
• Most congregations express a desire to have leaders that “better reflect their community.” Seeing and reaching segments of community outside longtime members is a challenge.
• Groups missing from church leadership right now: new members, men and boys, LGBTQIA+, BIPOC.
• Congregations are looking for folks with passion and vision to lead on topics of pressing social concern: LGBTQIA+, BIPOC/race, poverty, historical trauma, etc. They recognize these folks may have different skills than leaders in past times: empathy, gentleness, quietness, ability to build toward and from equal power are valued.
• Leadership skills were repeatedly mentioned as a need, “Skills building is key and often missing. We need to give people the equipment to do the ministry.”
• Positions chronically difficult to fill: treasurer, secretary, music leaders, youth class teachers. Congregations provide hands-on training for some roles, especially sound/tech, worship assistants, and Sunday School teaching. Less often for formal leadership roles like council. Many resources available to congregations are geared to much larger churches and assume the church is located in a larger community, or urban area.

Actions and requests
• Synod training on council secretary, and treasurer
• Leadership training for council retreats
• Synod learning opportunities on marginalized communities (LGBTQIA+, BIPOC) that resonate. Rostered leaders see sessions offered, members not participating
• Synod training on leadership succession
• Re-introduce “calling and caring” classes
• Continue showing and telling importance of lay leaders as integral to ministry
• Creating a Music Ministry Network

Good ideas and things folks are doing
• T-shirts/sweatshirts to wear in community
• Following up online with people watching online services, especially Facebook
• Providing QR code for online offering
• Create nominating committee for more roles, not just council
• Handout: 5 things to be an impactful sponsor (today) for a new member
• Intergenerational learning opportunities
• Connecting with school counselor to see what needs students have
• Reviewing list of existing committees to identify opportunities to condense / “right-size” committee structure to better match available volunteers
• Offer interest-based activities that may not be church-related: summer “weekend groups” that go to the beach, health ministry – exercise for seniors, Trunk or Treat for Halloween, eco-faith activities geared to younger adults
• Jonah groups: monthly dinner, devotion, and discernment conversations
by Vicki Taylor

We asked: What are some of your hopes for the Church beyond the pandemic?

Chaos. Confusion. How did we get here? Where are we going? And suddenly into the space comes a sound like a violent wind. Wild and untamed, the Spirit fills the room and those who reside within it.

This question assumes and mirrors societal upheaval as a result of the pandemic. As a further result, the institution of the Church, as we all know, has been deeply affected. On the practical side, the Church has lost revenue and attendance and on the spiritual side the Church is, perhaps, floundering and maybe in some ways flourishing within the newness of it all. There is some chaos and confusion present... and yet, that same Spirit is afoot.

One of the dominant themes that surfaced in response to this question was a yearning, a hunger to return to the way the Church was before the pandemic. The response is more complex than simple. Some respondents were speaking to a return of normalcy in worship and activities in their context. However, many others were speaking to the return of being able to come together face to face in community. TO BE IN RELATIONSHIP with others and care for one another, as well as to participate in missional aspects of ministry. They were looking forward to a time of coming together to prioritize what to keep about the Church in this new era, but especially about how to build RELATIONSHIP. It's as if the Body of Christ has been dis-membered during this pandemic and people are looking forward to a time of being re-membered. How one does that was the bulk of the conversation -what does it look like if the Church prioritizes building relationships?

Another significant perceived value going forward is collaboration in ministry - collaboration between congregations, groups, the sharing and pooling of resources to facilitate the Church’s mission. A rethinking of how church buildings ARE being utilized and how they COULD be utilized to fulfill outreach to the community within a particular context. How do we work together --congregations, synod, churchwide, ecumenically--to address the needs of our communities and so that everyone has an opportunity to experience Jesus. How do we come together to use the various 'languages' the Spirit has given us to proclaim good news?

The final dominant theme revolved around the use of technology as we move forward as the Church. Most respondents were positive in their assessment of using technological resources to reach people and that the Church, depending upon context and availability, needs to embrace those ways in which people can 'participate' via Facebook, Zoom, YouTube, etc.

There is too much to consider here in this question--some despair, but most express hopefulness for a future that will look very different and yet will be filled with God's Spirit.
We are experiencing isolation and a need to connect.

Our synod makes us feel part of the whole.

by Dave Nichols

We asked: What do you value most about being a network of congregations/organizations like our synod?

Congregations can create unity, stability, and faith with one another through networking, opportunities, and collaboration. Some ways this can be done is through mutual and joint worship services, musicians text study, community service projects, and combined youth gatherings. We can strengthen our community through intergenerational gatherings for Bible study, indoor and outdoor activities that create togetherness, camaraderie, and life long friendships through a shared faith.

We are experiencing isolation and a need to connect. This is most deeply felt by the elderly, youth, and single people. Those in long term care are even more isolated. We can strengthen networks and create deeper connections through youth musicians, church musician networks, congregations near each other, including ecumenical neighbors, and our geographic neighborhoods. We look forward to increased participation by youth and people across the generations.

Our hope is to grow closer together, and to welcome new people. We imagine book clubs, game nights, Bible study, Bible and brew or bobbers, paddle or peddle with the pastor, etc. We can create many new ways of collaborating as congregations lean on each other to envision new ideas. No one wants to be isolated. Our synod makes us feel part of the whole. We heard affirmation for resources coming from youth ministry and mental health education.

We have grief over being the whitest denomination. Living in the whitest area of Minnesota means we have limited local diversity. Together Here is the primary spot where we can find the greatest diversity and work together for equity and inclusion of Indigenous people. We also recognize the possibilities to expand the conversation about diversity to talk with our LGBTQIA+ neighbors. There are real opportunities for us to grow here in diversity, equity, and inclusion.
OUR PURPOSE

The Northeastern Minnesota Synod is empowering congregations and ministries to encounter and share the love of God in Christ Jesus.

OUR CORE VALUES

WELCOME
How can we learn the art of gathering so people feel they belong? How could our buildings be used now? How can we welcome new people and new ways of being church?

CONNECT
How can we build networks and systems that reach across the church and out to the community? How can we be authentic neighbors as we move from isolation into deeper connection?

REFORM
How can we rekindle the faith? In this changing world, how can we do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God? How can we embrace our baptismal call to love all people and the world God made?

SUPPORT
How can we respond to everyday needs? How can we learn together, train leaders, and care for each other as we experiment with new vision?
Welcome Connect Reform Support

Encounter and share the love of God.

LISTEN TO ADVICE AND ACCEPT INSTRUCTION, THAT YOU MAY GAIN WISDOM FOR THE FUTURE. THE HUMAN MIND MAY DEVISE MANY PLANS, BUT IT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE LORD THAT WILL BE ESTABLISHED.

—Proverbs 19:20–21 NRSV

Our purpose in developing this strategic plan was to work on finding the purpose of the LORD for our synod. We did that by listening to as many people from the synod as we could so that we could be instructed by you and gain wisdom about our synod. Then, we worked on forming a plan for the future, which hopefully is in sync with God’s purpose for us.

Dean Oelfke
How will we make this vision a reality?

Living into these values and our strategic goals will require commitment, new teams, and staff time.

The strategic planning team knows our denomination is struggling, that many congregations are in decline, and that people are not rushing back to church. At the same time, we have heard from passionate leaders willing to do what it takes to help our church reclaim a vision that is bigger than going back to the past. We are imagining a future that includes working together in new ways.

Our synod has the capacity to contract with outside organizations to support teams of leaders who will help congregations carry out this vision. The challenge may be to add staff as we build on our successes with mental health resources, with Together Here, and many other teams already in place. New teams will be added to carry out this vision.

The theology and traditions that grow out of our Lutheran heritage are a gift to the future church. Our work as people in the church is to discern how to best steward these gifts.

The strategic planning team is not imagining a fast turnaround. Rather, we are envisioning pastors, deacons, and leaders across the synod engaging together to build new habits and have new conversations. We can work together to learn how God is calling us to be church now.
1. Make a plan to invite people into the Body of Christ and into relationship with God and one another. Support every congregation in understanding their physical and/or digital neighborhood as we work together to be the church. Encourage congregations to work together to better understand what it means to make all people feel welcome.

Equip pastors, deacons, leaders and congregational teams to be places of hospitality, welcoming, and engagement, as people are introduced to the faith and participate in ministry we cannot imagine yet today.*

2. Think outside the building. Imagine new ways of being church, showing up in unusual places and ways, new uses of technology, welcoming diversity, getting a bigger vision of what God is doing in our part of the world.

3. Visibly welcome the full diversity of God’s people. Equip congregations with resources and training to welcome people of various age, ethnicity, gender, sexual identities and socio economic diversity.

4. Develop and encourage new networks to make it easy to teach each other. We can share resources, social media, copyright issue management, training treasurers, growing a hybrid church, Bible studies, faith stories, and so much more.

Create a gift sharing network across organizations and congregations so we are equipped to welcome new people. This includes a musicians network, rural congregation network, anti-racism and LGBTQIA+ training. The possibilities are endless as we do this and work together.

5. Network, share, and learn from people outside of our denomination. Expand ecumenical partnerships and community-based ministries that are mutually valuable. This is an opportunity to discover why some congregations are growing and to learn from them.*
6. **Build new habits.** Every congregation and synod meeting can begin deeply rooted in scripture and end with heart-felt prayer. We can launch this as an initiative with a 10-minute goal, supported with curriculum and/or videos that engage people in scripture.*

7. **Explore new ways of being church.** Create innovation hubs that experiment with new ideas, encourage risk-taking, learn from mistakes and share what is learned.*

8. **Advocate for social justice.** Educate, empower, and engage leadership in anti-racism work, creation care, LGBTQIA+, mental health, and reconciliation work to strengthen our congregational ministries in these areas.*

9. **Expand the mental health resources.** Support education and provide curriculum, articles, and resources to foster a climate of healthy behavior and remove the stigma of mental illness.*

10. **Curate, create, or contract for Christian leadership formation.** Encourage congregations to create systems for growing leaders of all ages with a deepening faith. Add staff to support congregational leadership formation.*

11. **Design a synod-wide initiative for preaching and teaching these values as we journey together from isolation to connection.** Create an implementation plan that includes:
   - Calling every congregation to participate.
   - Creating resources for preaching and teaching values.
   - Sharing in small group Bible studies. (all ages.)
   - Creating space for congregational members engaged in conversation about these values.*

*Some goals may have the potential to add new roles to the bishop’s staff to support new ministry in partnership with congregational leaders.
The Northeastern Minnesota Synod is filled with faithful people curious about the world that is unfolding before our eyes. There is a real opportunity to find ways to share our faith in Jesus with those around us that have not been raised in the faith. There is an urgency for us to build on our strengths in faith formation as we create new ways of supporting our young people and their families. It is our prayer that every congregation in the synod ask hard questions about their own purpose, values, and goals.