

Living Into the Future Together: Initial Discussion Guide for Synod Councils

*Prepared for the Vice President's gathering at the 2011 Churchwide Assembly
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Introduction

The LIFT Task Force was asked to consider two questions: "What is God calling this church to be and do in the future?" and "What changes are in order to help us respond most faithfully?" As we prepare for the 2011 Churchwide Assembly the report from the LIFT Task Force moves through the review process. While the report has not yet been finalized, themes have emerged which will become action items and implementing resolutions. Some of these themes can be contemplated by synods even before the LIFT report comes before the assembly.

In part, LIFT found that the church needs a renewed focus on mission. During the year that the LIFT Task Force did its work, a clear, consistent message came from nearly all quarters of the church. That message was the need for renewal to be centered in synods. Doing so allows renewal to be contextual and strengthens relationships where they are most important.

The three LIFT themes of most immediate concern to synods include: congregational vitality, leadership development and support, and synodical capacity. These are three prominent priorities within the LIFT report that will need to be lived out intentionally and uniquely in each synod. This document seeks to outline each of the three themes, describing them in four sections: Vision - what we hope for, Assessment - some key findings from research- *see LIFT report for more details*, Potential Strategies- what tools might be used to address the gap between the assessment and vision, Discussion Questions - questions to get you started.

The LIFT report further identifies tools that may be used by synods and throughout the church. Two key tools are the intentional development of networks and the creation of interdisciplinary teams. These tools are described here and referenced within each of the theme areas.

- Networks are intentional ongoing relationships formed among people with a common interest or purpose. Participants in a network support each other by sharing resources and stories of success as well as lessons learned. These networks may range in size and may be within or across synods. Members of networks can gather in person at occasional events and gather "virtually" using conference calling, webinars, various online social networking opportunities and websites. While networks may require assistance in getting started, they can become self-sustaining with leadership and coordination coming from within the network membership itself. In this way networks can be owned, controlled and resourced by their membership. Once established, the synod council and Office of the Bishop may play no role or only a minimal role (e.g. making communication and coordination resources available to the networks).
- Interdisciplinary teams gather expertise and resources from diverse sources to join as partners in addressing a common priority. Teams should include people from across and outside the church who have expertise related to the priority. When contemplating potential partners, synods should remember all ministry partners including seminaries and colleges, outdoor ministries, ethnic specific ministries, campus ministries, advocacy ministries, members from

various boards and committees within the synod, synod staff, council members, agency partners, expertise within the region, in other synods and at the churchwide office, etc. They should also consider the resources and wisdom of their ecumenical partners.

Please note that this document is intended to get the conversation started among Vice Presidents and within Synods. It is not intended to be prescriptive or all inclusive of the many conversations that will flow out of LIFT.

Congregational Vitality

Vision

Congregations are vital centers for mission in their community. In addition to Word and Sacrament, congregations focus on making disciples. Congregations emphasize faith formation and helping their members understand and live out their vocation through evangelical witness and addressing social concerns.

Congregational Vitality spelled out:

A congregation's vitality can be understood by looking at the relationships of its members with God, with each other and with the world.

God: member's report that the congregation helps deepen their faith. They report continued spiritual growth, sensing God's presence and practicing spiritual disciplines such as prayer and study.

Each other: members express a sense of community within the congregation. Conflicts are resolved in a healthy manner.

World: Members live out their vocation in the world by sharing their faith with others (evangelism) and/or helping those in need (social outreach/justice). The congregation helps people live out their vocation by educating and empowering members and by connecting members with opportunities to participate in evangelism and social outreach/justice.

Congregations and members doing these things well are considered vital. Vital congregations often grow in the number of members, however, a congregation that is not growing is not necessarily less vital than one that is.

Assessment

Within the ELCA there are many thriving congregations and many others that are struggling. The ELCA is smaller today than it was when it was founded in 1987. The average number of people attending worship has declined over the last 10 years and those attending tend to be older and less diverse than the general population. A questionnaire created by the LIFT Task Force asked lay and rostered respondents whether their congregation was thriving. While 73% of clergy agreed only 65% of lay leaders agreed and of those only 12% agreed strongly. Forty-five percent disagreed and 12% of those disagreed strongly that their congregation was thriving.

Several multi-denominational surveys have measured elements of congregational vitality over the years. There is evidence that ELCA congregations are at a disadvantage when compared to other congregations

in the United States. For example, the pastors of congregations in the ELCA, when compared to a national sample of congregations in the United States, were less likely to say that their congregations:

- are spiritually vital and alive;
- foster an intense, intimate experience with God;
- have a clear mission and purpose;
- are engaged in and energized by the serious study and discussion of scripture and theology;
- are close-knit;
- are an exciting place where people can get involved in a variety of meaningful activities;
- are willing to change.

While the LIFT survey found financial and societal pressures as having the most negative impact on their congregation, other issues that had a negative impact included conflict in the congregation, Churchwide Assembly action on the human sexuality social statement and policy changes, and competition from other local congregations.

Potential Strategies

- Intentionally describe and discuss the elements of vital congregations with congregation members and leaders.
- Encourage and/or expect each congregation to create a mission plan based on their own unique identify. The plan should include a vision, assessment, strategies and a way to evaluate success. (The hope and expectation in the LIFT recommendation is that all congregations would accept the invitation to complete a mission plan or be engaged in the process by December 31, 2012.)
- Encourage/expect congregations to share their mission plans with each other on a regular basis.
- Identify specific areas relating to congregational vitality and make them a synod-wide priority.
- Initiate and support networks of congregations or individuals interested in a particular aspect of congregational vitality.
- Work directly with congregations to assess their vitality and develop plans to further their mission. Often this is done using a particular model (e.g. Natural Church Development, Healthy Congregations, Healthy Starts, etc.).

Discussion Questions

- In every synod some congregations are vital while others struggle. Likewise, every congregation experiences times when it is vital and times when it struggles. How are synodical time and resources presently distributed among congregations that are healthy compared to those that are struggling? What impact does this have on the overall wellbeing of congregations and the overall synodical mission?
- How does the synod support congregations in becoming more vital? How does it support those that are already vital? (Consider all kinds of synod support from Office of the Bishop's work to workshops, training, synod council visits, etc.)
- How do congregations support each other? What are examples of congregations sharing wisdom, strategies, resources, etc? How can congregations that are vital model and strengthen those that are less so?
- How does the synod engage expertise and resources of ministry partners (outdoor ministry, campus ministry, colleges/universities, seminaries, agencies, etc.) to support congregational vitality?
- What will it mean to make congregational vitality a priority within the synod?

Leadership Development & Support

Vision

Lay and rostered leaders in all expressions of the church have a strong understanding of Scripture and Lutheran theology, the work of the wider church, and their own responsibilities within God's mission. Lay Leaders are connected to other lay leaders and the wider church so that they can learn from each other and gain a better understanding of the whole church and their role within it. Rostered leaders are connected to other rostered leaders and supported throughout their careers, particularly in times of transition. Both lay and rostered leaders are equipped to fully participate in mission. Each person's effort and unique skills are magnified as lay and rostered leaders partner in ways that strengthen and advance the mission of the church.

Assessment

Research confirms that strong, capable rostered and lay leadership are key to vital congregations. Various surveys and interviews describe significant amounts of synodical time and resources taken up by congregations in conflict. It is likely that some conflict could be avoided or managed more effectively if more proactive steps are taken to support leaders and congregations in developing and maintaining vitality.

Seminaries and synods work to identify, lift up and train candidates for rostered ministry. New pastors are supported through First Call training. Synods and seminaries continue to look for ways to strengthen their efforts so that rostered leaders are equipped to meet the changing requirements of the church in each place. Yet, many of these efforts focus on the beginning of a rostered leader's career. There is considerably less consistency in the way in which pastors are supported through the rest of their careers. Synods have different expectations and opportunities for continuing education, different support systems for rostered leaders overall, different ways of shepherding congregations through the call process and other important transitional periods, and different ways of providing pastoral care to rostered leader beyond the support of the Bishop. Some synods have successful models while others struggle in these areas. While seminaries are deeply connected to rostered leaders at the beginning of their careers, they are far less connected to them later in their careers and even less connected with lay leadership.

The ELCA is unique because it includes lay leaders (rather than rostered leaders) as the majority group in each of its governing bodies. Furthermore, lay leaders as members of their local congregational councils are critically positioned to determine the level of support, financial and otherwise, for the wider ecology of the ELCA. This makes assessing the capacity and commitment of ELCA lay leaders to the wider ecology of the church critical.

Throughout the LIFT survey significant differences emerged between lay and clergy respondents. Some of those differences are summarized below:

- Lay leaders felt less connected to the wider church.
- Lay leaders were less likely to agree that there was anything unique about ELCA Lutherans as compared with other Christians. They were also less convinced that the world needs the ELCA message.
- Clergy have higher hopes and expectations of the wider church than lay leaders.

- Lay leaders were less convinced that their congregation is stronger because it is part of the wider church.
- While agreement with ELCA theology was an important reason why they attend an ELCA congregation, only 33% of lay leaders said it was very important compared to 58% of clergy.
- Lay leaders were more likely to emphasize the importance of a traditional teaching of the Bible and Confessions and less likely to emphasize strong public advocacy.
- Clergy were more likely than lay leaders to say that significant involvement of laity in ministry was very important.

Potential Strategies

Overall:

- Educate both rostered and lay leaders as well as congregations about the roles leaders play in congregational vitality. Talk specifically about the importance of effective lay leadership and healthy partnerships between lay and rostered leadership.
- Model healthy leadership and lay/rostered partnership on synod council and in other synodical leadership areas.
- Intentionally identify, lift up, train and support lay and rostered leadership for all expressions of the church, particularly among younger and racially/ethnically diverse members. Look for successful models and share them.

Rostered Leaders:

- Identify and promote additional forms of pastoral support for rostered leaders - beyond the Bishop and Office of the Bishop. This may include developing or expanding networks of rostered leaders who serve as supports to each other. These groups can also hold each other accountable.
- Synods partner with seminaries and others to establish continuing education expectations and means for rostered leaders to participate.
- Find ways to educate congregation members and leaders to have healthy expectations of pastors and to understand the role pastors play in congregational vitality.
- Explore different ways of supporting congregations and rostered leaders in times of transition.
- Explore different ways of supporting congregations and rostered leaders in times of conflict before the conflict has become destructive.

Lay Leaders: (Note: lay leaders include congregational council members as well as other kinds of leaders like Sunday School directors, Preschool directors, church office secretaries, music directors, youth directors, youth leaders, leaders of congregational committees, people who participate in synod committees, conference leaders, network leaders, etc.)

- Synods, seminaries and others partner to establish or expand opportunities for lay leaders to participate in structured theological education that addresses their yearning for greater biblical and catechetical fluency. Several synods already have established programs that could be shared or used as models. Regional solutions may be appropriate in many cases.
- Networks of lay leaders can be established to share ideas and support. Networks may be within conferences or cross synods. They may also connect synod council leadership with congregational leadership. Some synods and regions have regular gatherings or other means of supporting lay leaders which could serve as models.

Discussion Questions

- How does synod council model leadership, communication, collaboration and partnership between lay and rostered leaders?
- What are examples of strong lay/rostered partnerships within the synod? What impact do those partnerships have? How can they be shared?
- How are lay and rostered leaders identified and lifted up in congregations and within synodical ministries? Who does a good job and how do they do it?
- How are rostered leaders supported within the synod throughout their careers? (e.g. Office of the Bishop, continuing education opportunities, networks of pastors, other kinds of support...)
- How are lay leaders supported within the synod? Are there opportunities for lay leaders to network with each other?
- What opportunities are there for lay leaders to further their study of the Bible and Lutheran faith - beyond the basics?
- How is the expertise and resources of ministry partners being leveraged to support lay and rostered leaders?
- How are lay and rostered leaders held accountable? How can they hold each other accountable?

Synodical Capacity

Vision

Synods are understood as vital centers for mission that include many partners (Synod Council, Office of Bishop, Congregations, Ministry Partners, etc.). Each synod has a clear sense of purpose which is owned by all partners within the synod. Each partner understands and contributes to their role within the broader synodical mission. Synodical partners are able to support one another and hold each other accountable for mission.

Synods prioritize congregational vitality. They play a primary role in connecting congregations and leaders to each other and connecting ministry partners to congregations and leaders.

Assessment

Synods vary widely in their size, staffing, organizational structure, budgets, etc. While all synods share a common purpose as described in the constitution, each synod differs in its approach and emphasis on those priorities. Recent economic challenges have caused many synods to make significant changes to their budgets and priorities. Some synods question their long term financial sustainability within the current model.

A synod's ability to live into the vision above will depend on its capacity not only to implement strategies but also to rally the energy and resources already present within the synod among congregations and ministry partners. This will require strong relationships and connections among these partners. Unfortunately, the respondents to the LIFT questionnaire described a lack of connectedness between congregations and other congregations, the synod, and the churchwide organization.

The most common reason for this lack of connectedness was conflict within the ELCA - primarily around the 2009 Churchwide Assembly actions. The next most common reason respondents reported for feeling less part of the wider church was their congregation's lack of connection. Reasons for this disconnect ranged from geographic isolation to a lack of communication, trust, interest and/or participation. When asked what they would most like to change about their outside relationships. "The

most common response was more cooperation and less competition between churches (28%), followed by a better connection with others that would enable partnership (25%)¹.

Potential Strategies

- Synods develop a clear sense of mission and purpose through a synod-wide process involving partners from across the ecology.
- Synod councils review their own capacity and the capacity of their organizational structures and relationships (boards/committees, liaisons, relationship with synod staff and Office of Bishop, etc.).
- Synods look for new ways to do things that continue to be priorities. Synods will also need to determine if some activities should stop so that new priorities can take their place.
- Develop or create networks of congregations and individuals around specific synodical priorities.
- Develop or create interdisciplinary collaborations to address synodical priorities.
- Synods review and strengthen their communication styles and strategies so that information can flow to throughout the synod including ministry partners and people in the pews.
- Synods consider developing behavioral covenants between and among congregations, ministry partners and synods. These covenants can outline roles and expectations of congregations, ministry partners and synods so that they can hold each other accountable. Covenants should be reviewed and renewed regularly.
- Synods work as regions to find ways to collaborate, combining resources and expertise from multiple ministry partners.

Discussion Questions

The LIFT report recommends several steps that will include gathering leadership from across the church to explore the markers of synodical vitality, identify opportunities and strategies to strengthen synods and congregations, discuss the roles of each part of the ecology and the role of mission support. While this is happening, there are several issues synods can begin to discuss.

- Does the synod have a mission plan that includes a vision, priorities, strategies, means of evaluation? If yes, has it been revisited recently and is it still valid and is it widely known and accepted? If no, is there interest in and energy to develop one?
- How do the LIFT priorities of congregational vitality and supporting lay and rostered leadership fit within the current synodical priorities?
- Examine synod capacity as it relates to mission plans. This effort should explore all aspects of synod including synod council, Executive Committee, Office of the Bishop, synod boards/committees, ministry partners, conferences, etc. On what do these groups spend their time? How well do they function? How do they communicate and coordinate with each other? Do they support and complement each other in a way that furthers the broader mission of the synod? Is there mutual trust and a sense of common mission among the groups?
- What is the state of relationships between the synod, congregations, and ministry partners? What is the state of relationships among congregations and within conferences?
- Consider what the word "Synod" means to various constituencies within the synod. Is it synonymous with "Office of the Bishop"? Do congregations and ministry partners know and feel part of the wider synod? Do they have a sense of membership, ownership and partnership with

¹ *Synod Assembly Responses to LIFT Surveys*, Rebecca Sims, Research and Evaluation, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, August, 2010.

other parts of the synod including other congregations, Office of the Bishop, synodical ministries, etc.?

- In what ways does the Office of the Bishop and synod council communicate with congregations and ministry partners? What are ways for people in the pews to know what is happening throughout the synod?

Conclusion

As a leader of your synod, contemplating these priorities in light of current synodical circumstances may seem daunting. Indeed undertaking any of the potential strategies will require considerable commitment and effort. It will likely involve difficult discussions and decisions. It will challenge the status quo. However in many cases key strategies will not represent more work for a synod, rather a different way of working.

Synods are encouraged to start talking about these themes and determine how they might prioritize and address each for the good of God's mission. It is understood that each synod will have its own ways of doing things. There is no single solution that will work for everyone. However, synods can and should learn from each other. As the LIFT Task Force did its work, examples of successes in each area were lifted up. It became clear that this church already has the resources and knowledge it needs to meet these challenges. The research also showed that strong relationships and intentional cooperation and collaboration are keys to success. Progress will only come when we identify resources across disciplines and throughout the ecology of the ELCA and then connect them with each other. Together can we renew the ecology of the ELCA.

Go in peace, serve the Lord!