

*Report for the*

 **2026 NWMN  
SYNOD ASSEMBLY**



*Submitted by Bishop Bill Tesch*

Thank you for serving as a voting member of this year's Synod Assembly for the Northwestern Minnesota Synod. This promises to be an engaging and meaningful gathering as we meet via Zoom, with support from LiveWire. We are grateful for the opportunity to pilot this partnership and are eager to see how it enhances our time together. If it proves fruitful, LiveWire may also become a partner in future in-person assemblies.

Here are a few highlights to look forward to:

- We will gather under the theme “Grace in a Digital Space.” This year’s theme invites us to reflect on how God’s grace moves through the digital spaces we inhabit—from livestream worship to Zoom Bible studies, from Instagram prayers to text-message pastoral care.
- We will worship together.
- We will hear from our keynote speaker, Pastor Jeremy Steele.
- We will receive a word from our Churchwide Representative, the Rev. Louise Johnson.
- We will consider no fewer than eight resolutions—a record during my tenure—brought forward by both conferences and the Synod Council.
- We will discuss and act on the FY 2028 Mission Plan.
- We will welcome new ministers into the life of this synod.
- We will commission our Synod Authorized Ministers (SAMs).
- We will hear reports from across our shared ministries and initiatives.

# Staff Changes

The following updates reflect recent changes within our synod staff since the last assembly, marking both meaningful transitions and new beginnings, and we share them with a sense of gratitude and genuine excitement for the gifts and energy these leaders bring to our shared ministry. These changes are shared in the order in which they took place.

## **“Behold the New has Come” CaSTLE Project Coordinator**

We are grateful to introduce Jody Johnson, who joined the synod staff last July as Coordinator for Behold the New Has Come. This initiative is part of our participation in the CaSTLE grant through Wartburg Theological Seminary, funded by the Lilly Endowment, and is focused on renewing congregational life through baptismal identity and the strengthening of lay ministry. Jody brings thoughtful leadership, a deep commitment to the church, and a steady capacity to accompany congregations as they discern new possibilities for ministry. We give thanks for her work among us and for the ways this grant is already bearing fruit across our synod.

## **Office Administrator**

In August of last year, we welcomed Rachel Haun as our new Office Administrator. Rachel has quickly become an indispensable member of our synod staff, bringing both skill and care to her work. She shares: “I currently serve as the Office Administrator for the Northwestern Minnesota Synod, where I enjoy supporting people and staying organized. I am a graduate of Concordia College, with degrees in Graphic Design and Communication, and bring a diverse professional background that includes leadership, administrative, and creative roles. Outside of work, I’m grateful to share life with my husband and our four-year-old son.”

## **Finance and Roster Administrator**

We are pleased to welcome Nicholas “Nick” Stanley as our new Synod Finance and Roster Administrator. Nick continues what has become something of a “youth movement” in the synod office. He will graduate from the University of North Dakota in May with a degree in business and brings both strong skills and fresh energy to this role. He has also been active in Lutheran Campus Ministry, with a clear appreciation for the life we share as church. Nick steps into a role shaped by the faithful service of Joan Meulebroeck, who will retire following this assembly, and Cheryl Zeh, who retired last summer but has continued to serve in a limited capacity. We give thanks for their service and look ahead with hope to this next chapter.

## **Minister for Generosity**

We are pleased to welcome Dr. Lisa Sethre-Hofstad as our new Minister for Generosity. Lisa brings more than two decades of executive leadership experience, along with a strong record of cultivating relationships, securing significant philanthropic support, and aligning resources with mission. A lifelong Lutheran, she brings both a deep understanding of the church and a passion for inviting others into meaningful, faithful generosity. We give thanks for her leadership and look forward with anticipation to the ways she will strengthen this vital dimension of our shared ministry.

Pastor Keith Pearson retired earlier than we had anticipated due to health challenges over the past year. While his departure comes sooner than we had hoped, I fully understand and support his decision. Keith’s presence has been a true gift to this synod. We wish him well in this next season.

# Major Trends in Our Synod: Insights from the Synod Data Toolkit

This section draws from the Synod Data Toolkit which you will find in the assembly business folder. This document is prepared by the ELCA Office of the Secretary. I have spent time working through this material, seeking to translate dense data into something usable. The numbers tell an interesting story.

## **Participation and Worship: A Changing Landscape**

When we look at worship attendance over the past several years, the most immediate story appears to be one of decline. In-person worship has decreased from 18,563 in 2017 to 12,020 in 2024—a 35% drop (Toolkit p.4, p.12). But that is not the whole story. Beginning in 2020, we began tracking online participation separately. In 2024, an additional 7,024 people are worshipping online each week (Toolkit p.4, p.12). When we bring those two streams together—12,020 in person and 7,024 online—we see a total weekly worship engagement of over 19,000 people. Taken together, participation in worship today slightly exceeds where we were just prior to the pandemic. Our congregations continue to be creative, and the church continues to find new ways to gather as they navigate current realities, just like the have since early Christians gathered in the catacombs beneath ancient Rome.

## **Mission Support, Nominal Growth Masking Significant Decline**

Mission support has grown modestly in nominal terms—from \$1.35 million in 2017 to \$1.42 million in 2024, an increase of about 5% (Toolkit p.5, p.15). However, over that same period, inflation has risen by approximately 28%. This means that to maintain the same ministry capacity as in 2017, mission support today would need to be roughly \$1.72 million. Instead, it stands at \$1.42 million—a gap of about \$300,000 in real dollars.

## **A Growing Tension: Capacity and Need**

We are living in a moment that creates a kind of catch-22 for synod ministry. As Congregational capacity is tightening, their need for synod engagement is increasing. The rise of SAM ministries requires deeper oversight and formation. Congregations adapting to fewer people require more coaching and support. Leaders facing new and ever-increasing challenges need accompaniment and equipping. We are rising to meet those challenges in innovative ways.

## **Congregational Generosity in Spite of Challenges**

Mission support in the Northwestern Minnesota Synod has seen a modest but meaningful increase in recent years. As of 2024, congregations are sharing approximately 4.55% of their regular giving in mission support, up slightly from prior years. This small increase is impressive, especially considering that most congregations are navigating their own declines in support. This reflects a steady commitment across the synod—even in the face of broader financial pressures—to sustain and grow our shared ministry together.

# *Rooted and Rising: Bridging the Gap – Rising to the Moment*



Rooted and Rising is essential because it enables us not only to address the roughly \$300,000 gap created by inflation-adjusted declines in mission support, but also to rise to the challenges of this moment with renewed clarity and purpose. It allows us to move beyond sustaining what has been toward investing in what is emerging—supporting congregations and leaders through initiatives like Go For It Grants, Rural Revival, Jeremiah 29, the CaSTLE Project, FACES of Leadership, and seminary debt reduction grants, among others. I am grateful to report that, just over a year into this three-year effort, we have already raised nearly half of our \$850,000 goal—a strong and hopeful beginning as we move forward together. I am so grateful for the ways we are rising to meet this moment with clarity, courage, and shared commitment to the Gospel and to each other.

## *These challenging times...*

In recent months, our synod has not been untouched by the tensions unfolding across Minnesota. Immigration enforcement has reached into our communities—sometimes at our church doors, often in the lives of our neighbors. I have witnessed something beautiful: congregations and individuals stepping forward with presence, care, advocacy, and prayer. This is the church at its best, living out our baptismal calling in real time. I have also witnessed something difficult: deep disagreement among us about what faithfulness requires in this moment. That reality cannot be ignored.

Our Lord is clear: “I was a stranger and you welcomed me” (Matthew 25:35). Luther echoes this in the Small Catechism, calling us to help and support our neighbor in every physical need. So, we must be clear: wherever fear isolates, wherever dignity is diminished, wherever neighbors are treated as disposable—the church is called to be present, not silent. Not because it is easy, but because Christ has claimed us and sent us. This is a painful moment. It exposes our divisions. But it also clarifies our calling. Freed by the Gospel, we return to the essential question: what does love of Jesus and neighbor require of us now?

# *Synod Council Focus: Engagement, Storytelling, and Invitation*

Between August and October, members of the Northwestern Minnesota Synod Council will reach out to approximately one-third to one-half of our congregations to schedule a visit. These gatherings will be open to council members and any interested members of the congregation.

The purpose of these visits is to deepen relationships and to share stories of what God is doing within your congregation and across our synod.

As part of this time together, the synod council representative will also extend a gentle invitation to consider growing your congregation's mission support by one-half to one percent of your general offerings—an important way of strengthening the shared ministries we carry together across the synod.

## *Gratitude*

I often tell newly elected bishop colleagues, “This is the hardest job you will ever love.” That has certainly been true for me—and it is a love made possible because of you. I give thanks for the many ways we are joined together in the work of the Gospel, for the depth of our shared discernment, and for the encouragement we offer one another in this common calling to bear Christ's love into the world.

You are served by an exceptional and deeply committed synod staff, whose wisdom, care, and daily faithfulness are a constant gift. You are also guided by a thoughtful and dedicated synod council, whose discernment, steady counsel, and willingness to engage hard decisions help shape a hopeful path forward.

And to all of you—faithful disciples in every walk of life, pastors who preach and teach with conviction and compassion, deacons who embody the Gospel in word and deed, and SAMs who step forward so that Word and Sacrament are present wherever God's people gather—thank you. Your witness, your perseverance, and your partnership are a profound blessing.

Let us all thank God for our shared life in the Gospel.

Respectfully Submitted,

