

Rachel Haun

Office Administrator



Since joining the Northwestern Minnesota Synod in August 2025, I have served as the Office Administrator, where I find joy in supporting people, creating welcoming spaces, and helping the day-to-day work of the synod run smoothly. Much of what I do happens behind the scenes coordinating efforts, running reports, and problem-solving but I see it all as part of helping others focus on their ministry. I truly value the connections I get to build along the way, whether that's with staff, congregations, volunteers, or visitors who walk through the door.

Outside of work, I enjoy life with my husband and our son, who keeps things lively and full of joy. I am thankful to be part of this synod community and for the opportunity to support the work God is doing through it in both big and small ways.

Morgan Olson

Communications & Events



As I reflect on this past year in the role of Communications & Events Coordinator, I continue to be grateful for the opportunity to help tell the story of the Northwestern Minnesota Synod. One of the greatest gifts of this work has been forming relationships across the synod — hearing the stories of congregations and leaders, celebrating milestones, walking alongside communities in times of challenge and transition, and helping share the ways God is continuing to move throughout our region.

From Synod Assembly and leadership gatherings to trainings, retreats, and conferences, I have had the privilege of helping plan and create spaces where people can gather, learn, worship, and connect. I am continually inspired by the creativity, grace, and faithfulness of the people of this synod.

Over the past year, we have also been working toward a refreshed and more accessible digital presence, including the launch of a new synod website. Our hope is that the website will better serve congregations, rostered ministers, leaders, and ministry partners by making information easier to find, communication more streamlined, and stories more visible. Communication continues to evolve quickly, and we are learning how to engage faithfully and effectively across digital spaces while remaining grounded in authentic relationship and connection.

Thank you for the many ways you support, encourage, and collaborate in this work. Thank you for your feedback, your patience, your ideas, and your willingness to share the stories of your ministries and communities. It is a gift to serve alongside you as together we participate in God's work throughout Northwestern Minnesota.

Joan Meulebroeck

Financial and Data-Systems Specialist



Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Philipians 4:4 NRSV

This verse has long been one I have tried to embrace every day. Though my life's path has had many twists and turns, ups and downs and ins and outs, I have never traveled it without knowing Jesus is walking with me. And so, I rejoice in God's love and grace!!

My time with the synod is drawing to a close as I will be retiring after this assembly. I have truly enjoyed meeting and working with the pastors, deacons, SAMs, lay leaders and numerous congregations that are part of our corner of Minnesota. I will miss the time spent at the various events I have been a part of over these past 4 ½ years. My prayers will continue as you endeavor to further the work of the church together!

My sincere thanks goes to the amazing staff I have worked with, both current and past. Each of you brings unique gifts to this call of faithfully serving God's people. Blessings on your continued journey in this ministry!

I am very grateful to have had the prayers and support of so many. Thank you!

Peace,
Joan



Pr. Jon Olson

Report from the Minister for Vocations

This past year we have seen an increase in the number of people interested in Candidacy, many coming from the SAM program of our synod.

Currently, we have fourteen Word and Sacrament candidates who are discerning a call to rostered ministry in our synod, and for the first time in years, we have no Word and Service candidates. The Candidacy Committee and I have the privilege of accompanying these fourteen candidates through Entrance, Endorsement, Internship, and Approval (the steps in Candidacy).

Many thanks to Dr. Lois Malcolm (Luther Seminary), Pr. Amber Kalina, Pr. Tim Megorden, Dn. Krista Anderson, Rebecca Harrington, Dr. Tim Hiller, Pr. Judy Holmen, Cheryl Zeh, Pr. Eric Clapp, Phyliss Neuenfeldt, Pr. Chris Eldredge (Chair), Pr. Greg Billberg, Dn. Ruth Blom, Kale Johnson, and in-coming member Pr. Jonathan Dodson for the many ways they serve the church through the Candidacy Committee. The Candidacy Committee conducts the interviews of our candidates, offers encouragement as relators (mentors), makes recommendations for the Fund for Leaders scholarships, and attends to the other business that comes before us.

As always, it's a pleasure to be your partner in ministry through Candidacy in the NWMN Synod.

God's Blessings
Pastor Jon B. Olson
Minister for Vocations, NWMN Synod

Kip Fontaine

SAM Coordinator



I joined the Northwestern Minnesota Synod of the ELCA as the SAM Coordinator in February of 2025. As such, my role is to:

- Assist potential SAMs in navigating the application process and answer any questions they may have;
- Work with new SAMs to make sure that they have Covenants and Mentor Agreements in place;
- Check in with SAMs from time to time to see how their ministries are going and answer any ongoing concerns;
- Remind SAMs of their ongoing obligations regarding education and boundaries and anti-racism training;
- Track their annual Covenant expiration dates and ask them to work with their congregations to renew Covenants and Mentor Agreements; and
- Assist our SAMs in any other ways I can.

During the past year, Our Northwestern Minnesota Synod Synodically Authorized Minister (SAM) program has been marked by continued growth, Church-Wide recognition in the vitality and maturity of our ministry, and an emphasis on education and training.

We currently have 65 SAMs approved by Bishop Tesch to provide word and sacrament ministry to the congregations in our synod. 49 of those are currently serving congregations or parishes under active Covenants. The remaining SAMs are awaiting assignment or are declining to serve at this time for a variety of reasons. Bishop Tesch reviewed 14 new applications, interviewed the applicants, and approved them for ministry service. The new SAMs come to us from throughout the synod. Of the 14, 10 already have Covenants with congregation or parishes.

In June of 2025 our synod was recognized and chosen by the Church-Wide ELCA to participate in a rigorous and in-depth study entitled "Synod Authorized Ministry in Practice and Context: An Evaluation Study." The research aimed to strengthen support and accountability, and discern pathways for SAMhood, to ensure that SAM ministry is faithful, effective, and responsive to the needs of our local congregations and communities. The study encompassed five learning areas to better understand how our SAMs minister in our synod. The five learning areas of the study were:

- Actual perspectives and experiences of SAMs;
- Actual perspectives and experiences of people served by SAMs;
- Support and Accountability of SAMs;
- SAM formation, education, and training; and
- SAM pathways to ordination.

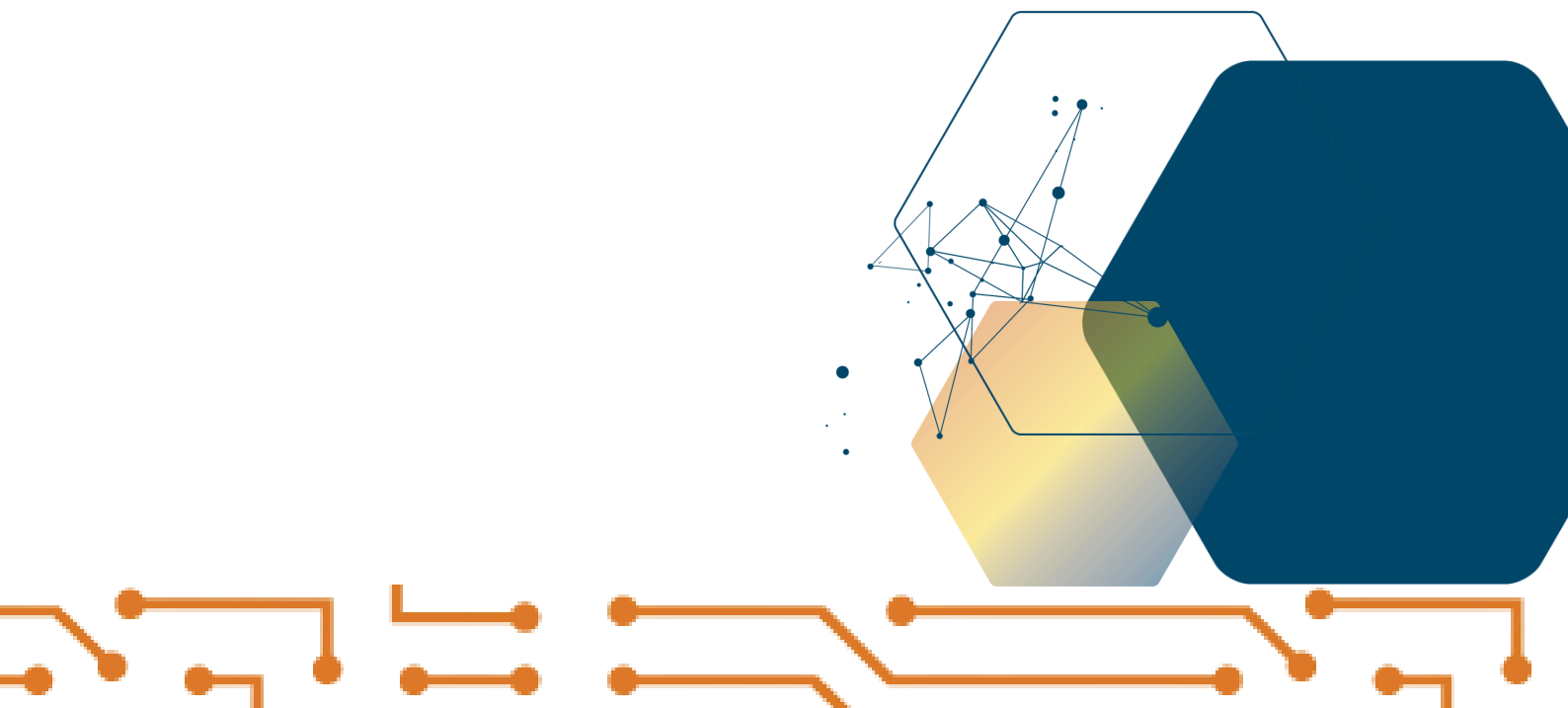
A representative sample of our SAMs and their congregations participated in a survey around the 5 topics listed above. I met (by Zoom) with the researcher, Dr. Timothy Snyder of Church-Wide, on numerous occasions, and participated in roundtable discussions around the 5 topics. We are awaiting the results of the study from Church-Wide.

Church-wide recognizes and our SAM program emphasizes the need for a structured and rigorous education and training program. We continue to offer and require completion of classes in 6 core competency areas: Biblical preaching, Lutheran theology and confessions, worship, leadership, faith formation, and pastoral care. These classes are provided through LED by Faith. In addition, our synod has two SAM retreats every year on topics relevant to SAMhood. Last year, the topic was preaching, led and taught by Pr. Angie Larson, Executive Pastor at Calvary Lutheran Church in Alexandria.

In addition, through Wartburg Theological Seminary, 5 of our SAMs were chosen to participate in Wartburg's SAMs Program: Called by the Holy Spirit. The program is a structured series of sessions providing theological education, mentoring and supervision, and ongoing Spirit-led discernment. Our SAMs meet (by Zoom) once a month with professors from Wartburg for an intense day of study, discussion, and reflection.

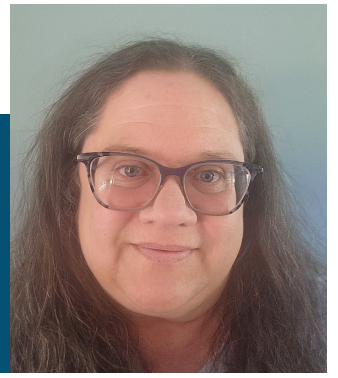
In the coming year, after Bishop Tesch reiterated the important role Mentors play in preparing and supporting SAMs, we will be, among other things, focusing on assisting and equipping Mentors. Our Mentors play a vital role in the preparation and ongoing support of SAMs in the synod. Each SAM serves with and under the supervision of a minister of Word and Sacrament appointed and authorized by Bishop Tesch. The Mentor provides guidance, accountability, and spiritual support throughout the SAM's ministry and covenant term. During this next year, we will be focusing on the needs of our Mentors and how we can better equip them to be effective leaders, teachers, and role models for our SAMs.

As you can see, we are very proud of our SAM program and all the SAMs who serve faithfully throughout the synod. Nationally, we have been recognized as a model for how lay ministry can function in our rural settings. I am excited and honored to be a part of our staff for the Northwestern Minnesota Synod.



Jody Johnson

Behold the New Has Come Project Coordinator



Beginning in August of 2026, the NW MN Synod was excited to launch the Behold the New Has Come! Project. We began the first steps of this five-year grant through engaging and inviting over 20-30 congregations to be a part of the journey of re-envisioning how we do church in the world.

The NW MN Synod is part of a growing movement across the ELCA called the CaSTLE Project—short for Country and Small Town Lived Ecclesiology. The Behold Project is funded by this initiative, led by Wartburg Theological Seminary. At its heart, the CaSTLE Project invites the church to rethink what it means to be the church today.

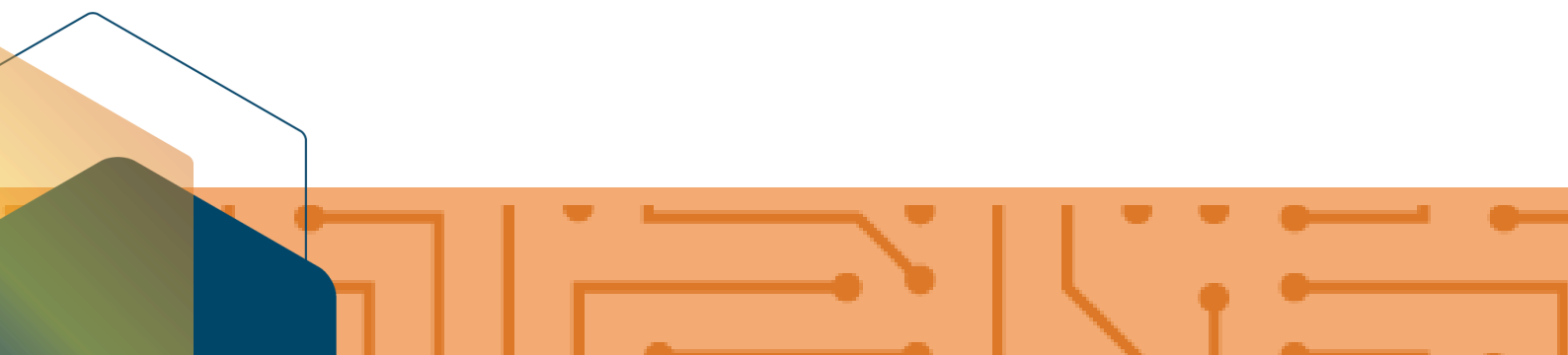
“Behold, the New Has Come! is about helping congregations rediscover that the church exists not mainly to preserve itself, but to form and send baptized people into the world God loves --- and trusting that, in doing so, new life will come.”

Over the next four years, congregations participating in the Behold Project will expand their understanding of how we can be church and do church together, as we live out our baptismal promises in our daily lives through:

ENGAGING in living in community among God’s faithful people;
ENERGIZING our faith as we hear God’s word and share the Lord’s Supper;
EQUIPPING our hearts and minds as we serve all people following the example of Jesus;
EMPOWERING church disciples and leaders as we strive for justice and peace;
EMBARKING on a new understanding of what it means to live out our faith every day, proclaiming the good news of God in Christ in word and deed.

We are just beginning the second year of energizing and equipping congregations and their Behold the New vision teams. We gathered for the first annual Behold Summit on May 1-2 at First Lutheran in Detroit Lakes to hear and share stories about living our baptismal promises beyond the walls of the church building. We also joined in meaningful conversation, devotions and worship, while visioning and creating new ideas and resources.

We are very excited to welcome Laurie Skow-Anderson to the Behold Team. She brings experience and creativity to the great work of the project, and we are looking forward to the next four years.



Rev. Dr. Aaron Suomala Folkerds

Minister for Mental Health and Wellness

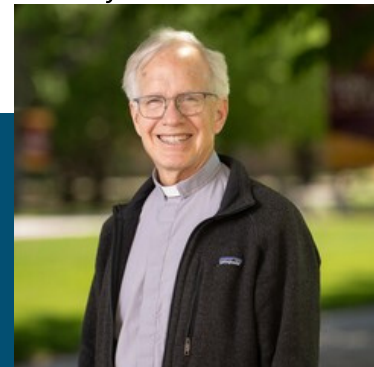


My name is Rev. Dr. Aaron Suomala Folkerds and I am the minister for Mental Health and Wellness for the NW MN Synod. In addition to my part-time work with the synod, I work full time at Minnesota State University-Moorhead as an Associate Professor of Mental Health Counseling. Our counseling master's program prepares students to become licensed professional counselors. I also work part-time as a wellness coordinator caring for the officers and staff of the Moorhead Police Department.

My main role for the synod is to provide mental health support for the rostered ministers of the synod and its congregations. In addition, I lead boundary trainings for the synod and over the last year I led three online sessions and two face to face sessions. I am also a Mental Health First Aid Trainer and please let me know if you are interested in sponsoring a training in your ministry setting. Mental Health First Aid teaches the basic skills to recognize and respond to mental health crises. Please reach out if you need any help navigating issues around mental health and I am always glad to visit your churches to speak on mental health.

Pr. Dennis Preston

Minister for Community & Leader Engagement



I continue to find it a privilege to serve on synod staff with a very spirit-filled and talented group of colleagues. Paul writes in Ephesians 4 quoting from the Message Bible: *“But that doesn’t mean you should all look and speak and act the same. Out of the generosity of Christ, each of us is given his own gift... He handed out gifts of apostle, prophet, evangelist, and pastor-teacher to train Christ’s followers in skilled servant work, working within Christ’s body, the church, until we’re all moving rhythmically and easily with each other, efficient and graceful in response to God’s Son, fully mature adults, fully developed within and without, fully alive like Christ.”* This past year I have continued the joy of walking with pastors, SAMs, and congregation leaders in planting and watering the gospel of Jesus Christ so that we might be fully alive in Christ in the Fergus Falls and Alexandria conferences.

Here are some examples of my work.

- Exit interviews with pastors and SAMs and leaders in the congregation as they conclude a time of ministry together. It is a sacred time as words of appreciation are offered for ministry well done.
- Orientation with councils and call committees for the time of transition; finding interim help, assisting with the call process.
- Walking with pastors and SAMs in their times of transition and beginning new ministries.
- Simply being available by phone, text or email when a need arises. And sometimes, I simply call to check in.

The Lord be with your spirit. Grace be with you. 2 Timothy 4:22



Pr. Laurie Skow-Anderson

*Engagement Minister | Behold the New Has Come Co-Coordinator |
Rural Revival 2.0 Coordinator*



In my work as an engagement minister I am often with congregations in transition asking deep questions about God's will for their next most faithful step in ministry. This is a challenging conversation for many because moving forward in God's mission will require change and even a leap of faith. Exploring digital ministry may be the next most faithful step for your congregation.

I began my work as a Synod Engagement minister in February of 2025. In the past year and a half I have walked with call committees, church councils, SAMs, seminary students, interim pastors, retiring pastors, and pastors moving on to new calls. I orientated call committees, conducted exit interviews, negotiated SAM contracts, checked in with call committee chairs, and candidates. I've attended staff meetings, fall retreat, Great Synod Get Together and spring joint theological day. I provided pulpit supply and consulted with synod staff as needed.

I'm excited to share that Bishop Bill Tesch has asked me to serve alongside Jody Johnson in the role as co-coordinator of Behold the New Has Come! I'm new to this synod project and will be learning with you. So far I've learned that the purpose of Behold is to

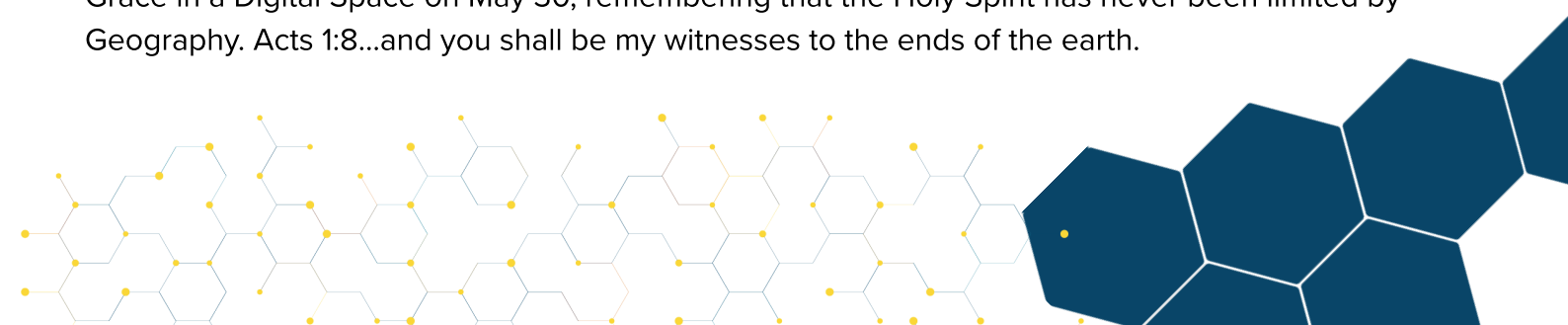
1. Awaken congregations to their baptismal calling,
2. Empower them for resilient, Spirit-led ministry, and
3. Sustain a vibrant culture of daily discipleship.

What I really appreciate about this project is that it encourages spiritual curiosity, curiosity about what the Holy Spirit is up to and where Jesus is leading. Behold All things New invites us to go deeper in personal faith and discipleship, bringing us back to our baptismal promises to live our faith in our daily lives. It helps congregations practice curiosity; to seek, discover and do God's will with whatever they have and wherever they are located.

I will start in this new position right after synod assembly on June 1. At the same time I'll begin to serve as the Coordinator of Rural Revival 2.0. I'll be relying on Pastor Rebel Hurd and building on the work that she and Pastor Melissa Pickering had been doing for the last few years. My hope is to focus on Behold All Things New this summer and re-launch Rural Revival this fall. In addition I will continue working with Pastor Genelle Netland as Engagement Minister for conferences 5 and 6.

Feel free to contact me for more information about Behold or Rural Revival! I look forward to connecting with more of you in the future.

I am grateful to be a part-time member of the synod staff and look forward our virtual synod assembly Grace in a Digital Space on May 30, remembering that the Holy Spirit has never been limited by Geography. Acts 1:8...and you shall be my witnesses to the ends of the earth.



Pr. Chris Leach

Minister for Community & Leader Engagement



Greetings dear siblings in Christ. I am Pr. Chris Leach and I serve as a Synod Minister for Community and Leader Engagement (Engagement Minister) for conferences 3 and 4. I have been serving in this role for over 5 years now and find myself returning over and over again to a deep sense of thankfulness for the faith leaders of our synod, as well as our churches that each share God's story of love in beautiful and unique ways. It has been a joy to see your sacred spaces, meet with call committees, and reflect with leaders during exit interviews.

Much of my work meets our folks in the transitions of life coaching teams through call process and working with churches navigating change. While these are deeply challenging times, I am left constantly in awe of the Spirit's work to meet and guide folks through them. I have seen creativity bring joy, imagination bring newness, and a whole lot of prayer and trust that God has indeed got us all. It is an honor to walk together with you.

Speaking of change, this will be my last synod assembly as an Engagement Minister on the Synod Staff. On May 31, 2026, I will be stepping back from this work. I have greatly enjoyed the opportunity to walk together in ministry, and I will be praying for the future of what God has in store for this ministry. I remain thankful for our faith leaders and the care they offer to each of our congregations of the NWMN Synod. I am also thankful for the love and grace congregants show to their leaders. God's light is shining, and may you be blessed as the journey continues. Peace on that journey friends!

