

**SIERRA PACIFIC SYNOD REVIEW**  
**Report on the Interviews**  
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At the request of the Sierra Pacific Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), a review of the synod was conducted Tuesday, September 4 through Thursday, September 6, 2007. The review consisted of interviews with a total of 46 people, including synod council members, discipling team members, conference deans, and other clergy and lay persons from the synod. All the interviews were held at Lutheran Church of the Cross in Berkeley, California.

People were interviewed either individually or in groups of two to four people. Each session lasted approximately one hour. The interviews were conducted by Margy Schmitt Ajer from Region 2 of the ELCA, Craig Settlege from Synodical Relations of the ELCA, and Rebecca Sims from Research and Evaluation of the ELCA.

### **Opportunities and Challenges Due to the Size of the Synod**

The most common opportunity and challenge listed by participants was the diversity in the synod. Not only diversity ethnically, but also politically, with more “liberal” people on the Coast and more “conservative” people in the Central Valley. Many participants also mentioned the geographical challenges, making travel to meetings difficult. For example, several participants in the ministry review traveled 3 hours or more for a one-hour meeting. This physical distance makes it difficult to get representation across the synod. There is also the potential for isolation, especially among the rural congregations. A few participants talked about the lack of connection to the synod and the lack of community among the congregations. Many felt the synod is too big with too many congregations, 220. This is a very large territory for a bishop and three assistants to cover, and many congregations have not had a visit from synod staff in recent years.

As for opportunities, a few participants talked about the potential for evangelism in the synod because there are so many unchurched people and non-Lutherans in the territory. Others mentioned the beautiful natural resources and the technological resources in Silicon Valley as opportunities unique to the synod.

### **Strengths of the Synod**

As mentioned above, many of the participants felt the diversity of the synod was a strength, with many opportunities for mission. The bishop’s five-point plan was mentioned positively, specifically the focus on “building healthy, multiplying congregations.” Some participants felt Bishop Mullen makes genuine efforts to be attentive to the synods’ congregations and rostered leaders, and he demonstrates pastoral care. Others appreciated the bishop’s emphasis on “pray first.” The seminary was listed

as a strength, as well as many educational centers and the highly educated people in the synod. A couple participants mentioned the social ministry in the synod, the camp, and the public policy office in Sacramento as strengths. The synod is also rich in resources, such as high caliber leaders, land, buildings and dollars. Some felt the coaching program was good for the relationships it created between congregations. A couple participants felt the synod was adept at discussing difficult issues, such as sexuality. Even though people often do not agree, there has been productive dialog on the issue at synod assemblies. One participant listed the professional leadership conferences and new start programs as strengths of the synod.

## **Conferences**

The effectiveness of conferences varies widely, with some functioning well, such as the Santa Clara Parish, and others barely functioning, like the San Francisco conference. The conference dean appears to be a key factor in how well the conference functions. The other significant issues seem to be the size and location of the conference. A couple participants suggested a realignment of the conferences. There was also some discussion of what the expectations of a conference and a dean should be. One dean suggested better leadership training for conference deans, more funding for conferences and more accountability. Some of the deans questioned the practice of deans installing new pastors, calling this a “missed opportunity” for the bishop to interact with the pastor and congregation at an important time. One participant mentioned a new practice of bringing lay people into conference meetings, but the effectiveness of this remains to be seen. Overall, the conferences are most effective in providing supportive networks for pastors.

## **Synod Council**

The synod council elicited a range of opinions, with council members generally expressing positive comments and non-council members less positive or critical. Some participants felt the group was too big and could not effectively make decisions, while one participant felt a smaller council would not be representative of the synod. One concern expressed was the absence of members from large-membership congregations, which was seen as a weakness. Another theme was that the council primarily serves an administrative function or “rubber stamp” group as opposed to visioning or long-range planning. Some participants felt the synod council was a “secret society” and did not have much transparency to people in the synod. A couple participants expressed appreciation for the new budgeting system and the document on healthy congregations produced by the synod council.

## **Structure and Discipling Teams**

Three discipling teams (Leadership, Witness and Service, and Word and Sacrament) were established through a restructuring of the synod a few years ago. Most of the participants were aware of them, but many did not know what they were accomplishing. Some felt the new structure was an improvement over the past committees that aligned with the churchwide structure. One concern was that the teams have “dropped” some areas that

were formerly addressed, such as social ministry and youth ministry. This was especially true of the Witness and Service team, which covers a wide range of responsibilities. Members of this team were concerned that most of their focus was on witness and new starts, with very little time and energy given to service. It was suggested that these two areas might be split into two separate teams. A couple participants questioned the presence of a synod staff member as part of the team. Although the consistency of leadership is good, there was some concern that this causes the teams to become too staff-directed. Another common theme was that the discipling teams are not funded adequately, do not have accountability, and do not have a clear vision, making them not very effective.

### **Synod Programs and Resources**

A couple participants mentioned the synod resource center as very helpful, and said they were able to request materials easily. A couple pastors felt the professional leaders' conference was generally good, but one participant suggested meeting with other synods, similar to the Tri-Synodical conference in Texas. One participant mentioned "Link to Lead" and the demographic information provided by Percept as a good resource. As for events and workshops, one participant felt they were good, but it was expensive to hold them more than once in different locations. Another participant felt the lay workshops were "one-time shots" with no follow-up afterwards. Many participants commented that they would rather have the synod function in a networking role, rather than as a provider of resources.

A couple participants commented positively on the listening posts for clergy and the council presidents' workshop. Other resources listed as helpful were lay leadership forums, coaching training/NCD, deans' retreats, assembly workshops, and theological convocations. Other participants listed support for ethnic ministries, the call process, support for pastors with substance abuse issues, the women in ministry network and gatherings, and Healthy Start as positive. Epiphany events, anti-racism training, FCTE events and colleague groups, youth ministry, pastors' retreats, and stewardship training and resources were also listed as helpful resources provided by the synod.

### **Communication**

The overall theme was that communication is a huge issue: Communication from the synod to congregations and leaders is seen as not adequate, not timely, and not effective. Some participants felt the synod Web site is outdated and not easy to navigate. One participant said he had seen both better and worse synod websites. The weekly e-mail "Byte" was generally seen as helpful, but most of the participants did not read Praxis, the monthly newsletter available online. There were very mixed comments about the synod vice president's e-mail communication, ranging from concern that it violated "appropriate boundaries" to appreciation for the opportunity to comment on various issues facing the synod. One participant felt that clergy were not good at disseminating information, especially in smaller congregations where the pastor does everything. Another participant commented that the use of e-mail announcements was good to get

information out quickly about illnesses, funerals, etc. Several participants commented that the communication framework is there, but there needs to be more of an effort to connect people with it. In addition, several participants felt there was a lack of information passed on about ELCA resources.

### **Synod Staff**

There were complaints about the synod staff not returning phone calls and a fairly widespread perception of a lack of communication from the staff. There is a low level of trust and dissatisfaction to the point of one participant stating that “we’re tired of paying for the little we receive” for present staff. At the same time there were participants who affirmed the commitment and dedication of the staff.

There is a fairly widespread belief that the new bishop will need to begin anew in the selection of staff for the next six years with a “new perspective” needed. Two of the bishop’s assistants have been there for almost 20 years, and many people feel betrayed because the current and previous bishops both promised to “clean house” and then failed to follow through on that promise. There is concern that the synod staff have far too much control over what happens in the synod, that they are over-reactive to change and the attempt to do things differently, and it is unhealthy for a system to have so much history residing in one or two people, making them appear indispensable. There was concern about the bishop’s lack of presence in the synod office, and many felt it is important for the bishop to live closer to the synod office, so that there is better communication and management of staff.

There was much appreciation expressed for Bishop Mullen as being a pastor’s pastor, of setting a vision for the synod, and being genuine and compassionate. However, several participants commented that the bishop lacks some of the administrative skills needed for the position. The new bishop would benefit if the visioning and planning process were consultative rather than being the bishop’s personal view only. One participant stated, “What is needed is a bishop who will challenge the synod with a vision that is compelling and that will help the synod find a common ground in its mission.”

Overall, the staff got high marks in responding to crisis, supporting the ministry team, the call process and other transition issues. Many participants spoke of the need to have the bishop and bishop’s staff in congregations more often, not only at times of conflict or transition. Some participants felt the bishop and his staff spend too much time “putting out fires” and not enough time with healthy congregations. Several participants also questioned the viability of some congregations in the synod and the resources expended to “keep them alive” when it might be better to let them die or redirect their resources to another ministry.

### **Issues Facing Congregations and Lay Leaders**

Several issues facing congregations and lay leaders were mentioned, including stewardship education and funding, a challenge to become more diverse, and holding a

stable membership and lack of growth. Other participants listed synod-wide events that will help mold the “identity” of the synod and the ELCA, and staffing for larger congregations, such as youth, music and family ministry. There was also concern about small membership congregations and helping them or assisting them to close when it is appropriate. One participant was concerned about the age of his congregation members and the lack of younger families. Another participant talked about the internalization of congregations and the lack of mission or sense of community with other congregations. One participant listed the fear of change and the dis-ease people feel about the “new way of doing church.” Equipping lay people and training them to be missionaries is another issue facing the congregations of the synod.

### **Issues Facing Clergy and Lay Rostered Leaders**

Several pastors commented on the need to bring life into the synod assembly, and felt it was a “poor stewardship” of the synod’s resources. A couple pastors felt that clergy and lay rostered leaders were working alone in isolation, and more collaboration and collegiality is needed. There was also concern about clergy and lay rostered leaders’ lack of healthy ways of living and lack of pastoral care for self and families. Other concerns were dealing with conflict, fatigue, burn out and lack of joy in ministry. Church political issues are also affecting clergy and lay rostered leaders, such as the split on the homosexuality issue. A couple participants talked about the high housing prices in the synod and how this affects decisions to take calls.

### **Priorities for the Future**

When asked about priorities for the synod over the next five to six years, many suggestions were made. A focus on mission that acknowledges the diversity of the synod was suggested as a top priority. Some participants felt the focus on new starts is good, but questioned whether it is sustainable. The viability of congregations is also a high priority, and the need for mergers and dissolutions in some cases instead of trying to keep dying congregations alive. Some participants suggested a focus on commonalities and shared identity as Lutheran Christians, and finding a clear, shared vision for the mission and purpose of the synod. A couple participants suggested the Lutheran church needs to be public and visible. There is a need to get beyond the focus on homosexuality and move towards how to address the gay/lesbian reality.

Many participants suggested a restructuring of the synod staff and office, stressing the need for new staff. Transparency, collegiality and team-building were also listed as priorities for the future. A couple participants felt there needs to be more accountability for clergy and congregations in the synod. Other participants felt the call process needs some work, as there has not always been a good match between the candidate and the congregation. Some participants felt the synod council could be used more effectively, not just as a “rubber stamp” group. A couple participants wanted the bishop to be a “pastor of the pastors” and be more visible in congregations, not just during times of conflict or transition. Others talked about the suspicion and general lack of trust in the synod, which will need to be addressed. Other priorities mentioned were stewardship and

clear expectations of the synod, staff, teams and leaders. One participant felt the bishop should model healthy work habits for the clergy in the synod.

## **Summary and Conclusions**

As the Sierra Pacific synod enters into a time of transition with the election of a new bishop, there are many opportunities and challenges. The large size and geography of the synod presents a challenge, but there is also great diversity in the synod. The synod has many strengths, including highly educated and talented leaders, the seminary, and the financial as well as beautiful natural resources of the territory. There is also great opportunity for mission in the synod, with a large number of unchurched people and non-Lutherans in the area.

The effectiveness of the conferences varies widely, with the leadership appearing to be a key factor, as well as the size and geographical location. The synod council is not transparent to most of the people in the synod, and is seen largely as a “rubber stamp” group. It was also not clear to most people the functions of the discipling teams and their effectiveness. The synod provides many helpful resources and events, especially professional conferences. Communications could be improved, perhaps by updating the synod Web site and making people more aware of all the communication tools available to them.

Synod staffing was an important issue discussed by the participants. There was a strong feeling that the two assistants who have been there for almost 20 years need to be replaced with new staff. A feeling of betrayal was also associated with this issue, as the two previous bishops promised to “clean house” and then failed to follow through on that promise. The new bishop will need to address the staffing issue, as well as the feelings of distrust. There was also a desire for the bishop and synod staff to be more visible and get out into the congregations more, not only at times of conflict or transition.

One of the main issues facing congregations is the issue of viability. With a large number of small congregations in the synod, the question of whether to keep those congregations going or to let them die gracefully was raised. In some cases, mergers or channeling of those resources into new ministries would be more effective. Issues facing clergy and lay rostered leaders included healthy living, pastoral care for self and family, and church political issues, such as homosexuality.

Looking to the future, participants had many suggestions for the most important priorities for the synod in the next five to six years. A clear, shared vision for the synod was a top priority for many. This should be a collaborative process, rather than a new bishop coming in and setting the agenda for the next six years without consultation. Another theme was the need for greater transparency and visibility of the synod. Many participants were unclear on what the synod does, what are the expectations of the synod, and what they are getting for their mission support dollars. Improving communication might be one way to address this problem, as well as the new bishop and synod staff being more visible and present in the congregations. This was a criticism voiced by

many participants, that they only receive a visit in times of conflict or transition, not when things are going well. This is a challenge with over 200 congregations in the synod and only three assistants, but helping congregations feel more connected to the synod and fostering a sense of community is needed. The new bishop will have many challenges to face, but in such a large and diverse synod, there are also many resources and exciting opportunities.