

## Congregational Discussion Questions

The Sierra Pacific Synod will be electing a new bishop in the spring of 2008. As we enter into this important time, our Synod has undertaken a new venture. A Synod Profile Team has been created and has gathered extensive input from around the Synod. We are the first Synod in the ELCA to undertake such a process. The team has listened to many voices and this input, together with existing Synod information, has been used to create a Synod Profile. The Synod Profile is, in some ways, similar to a congregational profile created when a congregation is seeking a new pastor.

The 13 themes below represent the synthesis of much conversation around our Synod about the current and future direction of our Synod and about the leader we seek in our next bishop. The Synod Profile Team heard 13 major themes and we present them to you for your consideration.

The questions below are intended to allow you to join in this groundbreaking conversation. These questions are similar to questions asked of candidates for bishop. These questions may be used by your congregation in a number of ways:

- 1) To begin a conversation in an adult forum or other setting about the ministry of our Synod and each congregation's role in that ministry.
- 2) To inform people about the ministry of the Synod, both its challenges and its strengths.
- 3) As conversation and preparation with voting members to the Sierra Pacific Synod Assembly.

A hard copy of the Synod Profile has been sent to your congregation as well as a PowerPoint presentation and an accompanying CD containing many of the supporting documents used in this process. The same information is available online at <http://spsprofile.wordpress.com/> where you can download the files and extend this pioneering conversation across the Synod.

Please use these questions and the accompanying materials in any way that would assist your congregation and its ministry. Thank you for adding your voice to the conversation.

In Christ's service,  
The Members of the Synod Profile Team

## ***Bishop's Ecclesiastical Duties***

It was no surprise to the Profile Team that the Bishop's personal schedule is filled beyond capacity. But what did come as a surprise was the significant quantity of ecclesiastical duties and activities that are assigned to the Bishop specifically, not to his or her office. These duties are either mandated by the Synod Constitution or directed by the ELCA.

The list includes:

- Three National Bishop's Meetings per year
- Synod Council work and meetings
- The Professional Leaders' Conference
- Conference Deans' Meetings
- Crisis and Conflict Response
- Ordinations
- Synod Assembly preparation and participation
- Requests to serve the larger Church
- Region 2 consultations
- Region 2 mobility Conferences
- Chief Ecumenical Officer of the Synod

You will note, as the Team did, that this list does not include additional travel time, personal study, prayer and sermon preparation time, continuing education, visits to congregations, serving as a pastor to the pastors, church anniversary visits, working with various Synod groups, working with the call process, routine administrative tasks, and time spent with the staff. If the Bishop were to visit each congregation on a Sunday it would take at least four years, not counting any conflicting Sunday activities.

There are many other functions and activities assigned to the office of the Bishop and not to the Bishop personally.

Fulfilling just the mandated duties and activities, including travel time, can absorb approximately 50 to 70 percent of the Bishop's time. This may vary somewhat from Bishop to Bishop, depending on how much time is devoted to church crises and conflicts. And this does not take into consideration normal administrative tasks and other travel.

- What do you think should be the priorities of the Bishop's time, especially in light of the ecclesiastical duties and activities specific to the Bishop?
- As you think about the work of the Synod, what functions and activities do you think should be handled by the Bishop personally?

## ***Call Process***

The procedure of preparing for and calling a new pastor or other rostered individual is a time congregations are assured of connection with the Bishop and the Synod staff. At the gatherings in Fresno, San Mateo, and Lodi, and in the ELCA audit program report and in the online survey, strong feelings were expressed about this connection. The verbal comments were mixed, mostly positive, but with a still significant number of negative responses.

Whether positive or negative, the comments included such statements as, "This was the only time we ever had communications with the bishop's office and staff." Complaints about the length of time involved in the process were often heard, but many participants were complimentary about the assistance received from the bishop's office. The issue was at the top of the priority list at the San Mateo gathering. "Improve call process (more options on choices or information on having more choices)." Currently there are 30 congregations participating in the call process, 21 seeking a solo pastor, 4 an associate pastor, and 5 a lead pastor or co-pastor.

- If your congregation were entering into a call process, what would you need and expect from Synod staff?
- What steps do you think could be taken to make the call process more efficient?
- What creative solutions can you envision for small, rural congregations who find it difficult to fill the pulpit?
- What do you think might be done to increase the pool of prospective candidates for openings in the Sierra Pacific Synod?

## ***Care for the Pastors***

Comments throughout the process expressed a need for care for pastors, but not necessarily by the Bishop. One suggestion included the design of a specific peer support program with input from those served. There is often a sense of detachment from the Synod staff and this is exacerbated by the inability of the bishop and the small staff to be present in person other than during times of crisis. The report from the Leadership Discipling Team's Listening Posts expands on some of these issues.

There is a sense of ambivalence about the role of the bishop in dealing with pastors and their families. Should the bishop be strong in administration or should the bishop be strong in pastoral care?

- How might the Synod staff, as well as congregations, support your pastor and your pastor's family?
- What programs or ideas might create a stronger pastoral relationship between the bishop's office and pastors?
- Being bishop calls for a great deal of interaction and team building. What skills and experience do you think are most essential for this task?

## ***Communication***

Communication is the broadest and most pervasive theme to surface in this process. It was identified as a crucial issue in and of itself, and emerges as a key factor in discussions of the strengths and weaknesses in other areas. Members appreciate the establishment of communications channels, such as the website and Byte of Synod, along with any information disseminated from the Synod Office, and especially visits from the Bishop or staff. At the same time, most communications efforts were frequently identified as inadequate or irregular. Participants often said that the gatherings, in and of themselves, were “positive” and made them feel they were “heard.”

Four essential areas of communication have been identified:

- face-to-face communication with the Bishop and staff
- digital/electronic communication
- information dissemination
- conceptual/contextual communication addressing mission and purpose.

In particular, congregations in our geographically dispersed Synod would like direct contact with the Bishop at times other than crises situations; an updated, easy to navigate, more complete website; a more effective way to let congregations and members know about the programs and resources developed by the ELCA or Synod; and communications from the bishop that clearly delineates purpose and direction.

- What communication from the Synod might be helpful to you as a congregation and as individual members of the Synod?
- What would inspire you to engage in the mission and purpose of the Synod?
- What kind of personal connection would you like to have with the Bishop and Synod staff?
- How do you think that connection might be best accomplished in our geographically dispersed Synod?
- What kind of digital technology might best assist in communication between your congregation and the Synod office?
- How might the Synod office best make synodical and national resources available to your congregation?

## ***Diversity***

The diversity of the Sierra Pacific Synod is well known. It is one of our greatest strengths, as well as one of our major challenges. The Synod is diverse geographically, politically, theologically, culturally, and in matters dealing with sexuality and sexual orientation. The majority of congregations are less diverse ethnically and socio-economically. One of the Synod's strengths is that it welcomes and encourages diversity, particularly at a synodical level. One of our great challenges is how to work with and speak for such diversity. It can create an "us" versus "them" mentality. It can also create a fragmentation that makes forward movement slow and, at times, difficult. And it should be mentioned that our self-understanding that we are diverse sometimes blinds us from seeing the ways in which we are not.

- How would you define "diversity" both in our congregations and in our mission field?
- What do you consider to be the greatest blessings and greatest challenges of our diverse Synod?
- How shall we, as a Synod, remain focused on our mission?

## ***Finances***

The Synod has a finite amount of financial resources and they are allocated to programs, events, staffing, overhead, and mission. Different groups sometimes see themselves as being in competition for funding. Some churches choose to withhold financial giving for various reasons, some have no idea how their giving is used, and some feel they are not getting an adequate return on their giving.

Since a budget is a planning document for the future, it and financial resources, have a major impact on all the other themes highlighted in this profile.

- What do you think should be the priorities for the allocation of the financial resources of the Synod?
- What major or minor changes do you think need to be made to the Synod's budget and budgeting process?
- How do you think the Synod staff ought to respond to congregations who choose to withhold financial giving from the Synod?
- How would you like to be informed by the Synod office about the use of your financial giving?

## ***Geography***

The Sierra Pacific Synod is one of the geographically largest in the ELCA, and includes the Silicon Valley, extensive agriculture lands, Pacific Rim opportunities, and the capital of our country's most populated state. This provides a large mission field whose energy can be captured for the sake of ministry. The Synod has rich educational resources, including Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary and the Graduate Theological Union. But the geography poses several challenges as well. The Bishop and Synod staff have to serve a vast area and many congregations feel disconnected from the Synod for this reason. The sheer size of the Synod, as well as its geographic diversity, can cause us to feel fragmented from one another and can make it much more difficult for ministry partners to work together. There is a perceived need for nurturing of congregation-to-congregation connections within the conferences. The size also affects several other key issues: communications, the call process, diversity, Synod structure and financial resources.

- What are the key issues facing the Synod as a result of its large geographical size?
- How would you like to see the next bishop address these issues?
- From the perspective of your geography, what specific changes might be made to the Synod structure to address the challenges of our large geographic size?

## ***Healthy, Multiplying Congregations***

Building healthy, multiplying congregations has been a major focus of the Synod for the past few years. The document of that same name provides a detailed overview of the Synod's efforts in this regard, organized under the following categories:

- Pray First
- Lead by Example
- Plan for Mission
- Build up the Body
- See and Speak the Truth in Love

The Synod has had more new mission starts (fifteen in the past two years) than any other ELCA Synod in the country. At the same time, the Synod has a large number of shrinking and aging congregations, some which may not be viable, especially using "Criteria for Viable Congregations."

- Are you, as a congregation, familiar with a Synod document called, "Building Healthy, Multiplying Congregations"?
- Describe a "healthy" congregation.
- How might the bishop and Synod staff best be involved with a congregation on the edge of viability?
- How could the bishop and Synod staff best help you to engage in meaningful evangelism and outreach?

## ***Identity***

As a Synod, we are not always clear about our unique identity as Lutheran Christians. Those outside our fellowship seem even less clear about our identity. In Northern California and Nevada, we live in a multi-cultural, diverse, and secular region of the country. Outreach and Evangelism, especially in the development of Mission Churches, is a challenge since many in our area are unchurched, while the lines differentiating Christian denominations are often perceived as soft. Nationally and regionally, we are recognized by our work with Lutheran World Relief, by our seminaries, Hunger Appeals, and participation in Ecumenical or Interfaith organizations. As individuals, many members see themselves as part of a long tradition as the church of the Reformation, with a strong sense of identity and spirit of pioneering. However, there is a perception that those “outside” are not clear about who Lutherans are, the good work we do, or what we believe.

- How would you articulate our distinct identity as Lutherans in a contemporary, secular and diverse society?
- What do our Lutheran theology and a Reformation mentality mean in 2008?
- How does our Lutheran faith speak to young families? To singles? To an aging population?
- How do we keep “passion for the faith” alive?
- How do we address societal and ethical issues from a faith perspective?

## ***Leadership Development***

Capable leaders, both lay and clergy, are needed for the congregations of the Synod to be effective in deepening and sharing faith. Building “healthy, multiplying congregations” will be more likely to happen if there is good leadership in this direction. There is a desire to attract and equip more young leaders who will lead in new ways with new gifts, and thus help the congregations of the Synod to reach a younger population.

- As you consider the office of bishop, what, in your mind, is effective leadership?
- What kind of leadership do you need and expect from the bishop of the Synod?
- How, as a Synod, might we attract and equip a greater number of younger leaders?

## ***Sexuality***

The discussions and actions surrounding the ordination of gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender (GLBT) clergy have been contentious and divisive for the Synod. There is substantial confusion about what the Bishop is and is not empowered to do. Faithful members have very different opinions on how we should proceed. While those differences of opinion are strongly held and strongly stated, the Synod looks to the Bishop for leadership traversing these uncharted territories, both in the present situation and dealing with the consequences of any policy decisions made at the churchwide level. One dominant message that emerged is that we must “get on with it” and not be defined by this issue.

- What do you understand to be the key issues in the area of sexuality and how do you feel the bishop needs to address them?
- What policies, in this area, would you like to see implemented for the Synod and for the ELCA?
- What do you think should be done, by congregations and by the Synod, to address the divisiveness within the Synod over this issue?
- How might our Synod get beyond this issue rather than being defined by this issue?

## ***Staffing of the Bishop's Office***

The current staffing of the Bishop's Office includes the Bishop and three full-time assistants (two of whom have served since 1988), plus three full-time support staff and one half-time ELCA deployed staff. There are diverse opinions (and lack of knowledge) about the Synod staff. Congregational members expressed a clear desire that the Bishop and staff be more present in their congregations, not just in times of crisis, transition, or when asking for money.

It is also recognized that the current staff possesses a vast amount of knowledge about the past 20 years of mission and ministry in the Synod; that, of course, can be both an asset and a liability. There is strong support for a younger, more diverse staff, one perceived to be less bound to "the way we've always done it before."

- How do you understand the purpose of the Bishop's staff?
- How might the new bishop take advantage of the institutional knowledge of the current staff and, at the same time, create a "new" staff that is effective?
- In what ways do you want to see the Synod staff present in congregations? To do what?

## ***Synod Structure***

What does "Synod" mean? The term is used in different ways: One, the expression of the body of Christ through the ELCA presence in northern California and Nevada; another, the office of the Bishop. The role and the structure of the Synod as an institution are not clearly understood. The perception is that the focus of the Synod office is on addressing problems and that relatively little emphasis is placed on creating a vision for the future and leading the Synod towards that future. The Synod Assembly is viewed as an untapped opportunity to bring disparate groups together and lead them towards a shared mission and common goals. The conference structure works well in some areas and not so well in others. There is a sense that this Synod is unique within the ELCA, yet the potential to leverage that uniqueness has not been addressed.

- What does "Synod" mean?
- What vision do you have for the Sierra Pacific Synod? How might the Synod office lead toward that vision?
- What do you think should be the priorities of the bishop's time? How might the bishop and Synod staff align those priorities with the structure and activities of the Synod?