

# CROSS

# Connection



*The Cross Connection is a monthly publication of the Eastern Washington-Idaho Synod published for its clergy, associates in ministry, lay leadership and ecumenical partners.*

## From the Bishop

July 2015

God's beloved People,

At the risk of drawing too much attention to the work of the synod I want you to know where our focus will be in these remaining two months of summer. The purpose is to keep your interest high and set the stage for good work to come.

**Call Process:** Of the 92 congregational sites in the synod, 13 are in active call process and 7 are in a quieter holding pattern with little activity. This number of active call processes is high at 14%, our more normal average being around 10%. As with other synods we're seeing a retirement boom among pastors from the Baby-Boom era. We're very fortunate to have three new graduates interviewing for call in our synod and we can look forward to new and bright pastors at Faith, Caldwell; Immanuel, Grandview; and Shepherd of the Mountains, Jackson.

Please keep our eight Interim Pastors in your prayers as well as the congregations who are defining their mission for the future.

**Net-Worker Support:** The four Net-Workers, Helga Jansons and I just finished a half-day of training at this 10 month mark in the first year of their work. I think there is some excellent planning going on in the Net-Work areas and new assets will be available for congregations this fall, especially around youth ministry and discipleship. I hope we're able to offer excellent stewardship support in each area this fall. By then we'll have the Net-Workers trained in part of the call process and will welcome their support. Please keep Jim Peterson, Linda Howell, Kristin Koskella, and Dave Kappus in your prayers.

**The EWAIID Campaign for Mission:** We haven't named our capital campaign yet, but we've heard the suggestion that "capital" should come out of the title since we're not building buildings! This campaign is still in the build-out stage following approval to mount it as voted at our Synod Assembly. But we've also heard "readiness," so we'll get things organized and going as soon as possible! Please keep this effort in your financial plans for the fall and next year because we'll be coming by to ask for your support for campus ministry, new synod mission sites, seminary scholarships, Lutheran Community Services, our national and international mission, especially for the new Assembly Hall in Ifakara, Tanzania!

**Pastoral Care:** Right now nine clergy families and at least four congregations are in deep confusion, despair and hurt. Most of this pain is related to intractable human conflict, anxiety, or serious disease. In particular we ask you to remember Tim McHugh, husband of our faithful synod treasurer, Tami McHugh, following a stroke. Tim is fighting his way through all sorts of rehabilitation therapies right now and we give thanks for healing ministers of all types.

And I give thanks for the faithful work of Cathy Steiner, Gib Dominguez and Helga Jansons, besides our faithful Synod Council members and officers. May we all find some rest in these warmer days even as the work goes on!

Blessings,

Bp Martin Wells



## A New Look at Death

by Pastor Helga Jansons Director for Evangelical Mission

I would gladly avoid the topic of dying and death. My husband is a hospice chaplain, and as you might imagine the topic comes up often in our home, so it is difficult to run away from it. Neither can I escape the subject since our 2014 EWAID Synod Assembly when a Resolution was passed to encourage conversations and education around end-of-life issues. A twelve member task force has been working to develop a curriculum called “Estate Planning for the Heart; Conversations that Nurture Life”.

What started me down a different path was when I prepared for Synod Assembly by reading Benjamin Stewart’s book, *A Watered Garden*. Dr Stewart was the key note speaker at the 2015 Synod Assembly. I didn’t understand why, of all things, he would lead a workshop on “Green Burials” until I read the last chapter of his book. It hadn’t occurred to me before, how unnatural the embalming chemicals and the elaborate coffins and vaults were. It really doesn’t fit with our liturgical words of committal at all; “we commit his/her body to the ground/ the elements; earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.” I discovered that what I have accepted as the norm doesn’t have to be that way. Also, I didn’t know it was even possible to have a “home viewing” like what I had witnessed as a child. It seemed so natural to see my mom’s deceased aunt in the bed where she had always slept.

I wanted to know more about this. Was it possible to have a “green burial” somewhere in our synod territory? I went online and I found out that there are different levels of what are called “green burials”, such as sections within some regular cemeteries that have such options. Then I discovered that there is one “Conservation Burial Ground” in the Northwest and it is just outside Goldendale, WA. I used my leverage on Mother’s Day to invite the family to go to visit White Eagle Memorial Preserve and see what it was like. It turned out that it is a part of Ekone Ranch where there are horses and goats and a place for retreats and horse riding camps. It was beautiful to see my 13 year old son hang out with 10 goats. We were met with extraordinary hospitality and given a tour of a valley where the burial sites were. On this nature walk we saw a deer, lizards, a variety of birds, and along the way large plots where people can camp around the mounds of dirt where a loved one had been buried in a shroud or quilt. Each one was different, surrounded with rocks and other symbols that showed what the person had loved. The last thing I had expected to say to my husband was “If I die in the next year, bury me here!”

Pastor Paul Palumbo’s congregation Lake Chelan Lutheran Church had so many funerals for people in the prime of their lives that they developed a ministry to accompany the dying. From these experiences came the idea of creating a liturgy that was accessible for anyone to use. People gathered prayers, wrote musical pieces, scripture, and one member painted watercolor pieces that framed each page. It is called *Peace at the Last: A Liturgy for the Visitation of the Dying* and hopefully will be in print soon. It is ironic that a congregation that is focused on death and dying well in our synod is absolutely full of life. The Pastor and members of this church are also reaching out by visiting churches that are in decline.

I am beginning to think that there are some ways in which we can choose to die well. It makes a difference for me to imagine being buried in a beautiful and natural place. So too if people I have known from the church could accompany me with the beauty of song and art I could look forward to that. If the Church accompanied the dying well, could it renew the life of the Church in some way?



## Call Process Status

<b>A</b> Process beginning/congregational study	<b>I</b> Interim	<b>AP</b> Associate/Assistant Pastor
<b>B</b> Names received or on-site visits in process	<b>P</b> Pastor	<b>VP</b> Visitation Pastor
<b>C</b> Call in process/issued	<b>CP</b> Co-Pastor	<b>AIM</b> Associate in Ministry
<b>NV</b> New Vacancy	<b>LP</b> Lead Pastor	<b>L</b> Lay Position
<b>TC</b> Term call	<b>SP</b> Supply Pastor	<b>TM</b> Transition Minister (available for the open-ended call)
<b>VP</b> Visitation Pastor		

<b>POS</b>	<b>LOCATION/CONGREGATION</b>	<b>STATUS</b>	<b>PASTORAL CARE</b>	
<b>P</b>	Boise, ID – Immanuel Lutheran	<b>NV</b>	Kimberly Meinecke	<b>I</b>
<b>P</b>	Boise, ID – King of Glory	<b>NV</b>	Kristi Bummer	<b>I</b>
<b>P</b>	Boise, ID – Shepherd of the Valley	<b>NV</b>	Joel Westby	<b>I</b>
<b>P</b>	Caldwell, ID – Faith Lutheran	<b>C</b>		
<b>P</b>	Chewelah, WA – St. Paul Lutheran	<b>NV</b>	Betty Krafft	<b>SP</b>
<b>P</b>	Firth, ID – Bethel Lutheran	<b>A</b>	Paul Malek	<b>TEEM</b>
<b>P</b>	Gifford, ID – Good Hope Lutheran	<b>A</b>	Valerie Beesley	<b>TEEM</b>
<b>P</b>	Grandview, WA – Immanuel Lutheran	<b>C</b>	Gary Rhode	
<b>P</b>	Jackson, WY – Shepherd of the Mountains	<b>C</b>		
<b>P</b>	Kennewick, WA – Lord of Life	<b>A</b>	Ron Shipman	<b>I</b>
<b>P</b>	Mattawa, WA – Grace Lutheran	<b>A</b>	Ginny Kreckling	<b>S</b>
<b>P</b>	Pasco, WA – First Lutheran	<b>NV</b>	Phylis Stromme	<b>I</b>
<b>P</b>	Sandpoint, ID – First Lutheran	<b>C</b>	Bob Chenault	<b>I</b>
<b>P</b>	Spokane, WA – Bethlehem Lutheran	<b>NV</b>	Steve Wee	<b>SP</b>
<b>AP</b>	Spokane, WA – St. Luke's			
<b>P</b>	Spokane, WA – St. Mark's	<b>NV</b>	Eric Dull, Kate LePard	
<b>P</b>	Spokane Valley, WA – Zion Lutheran	<b>A</b>	Mike Grabenstein	<b>I</b>
<b>P</b>	Terrace Heights, WA – Tree of Life	<b>NV</b>		
<b>TM</b>	Toppenish, WA – Faith Lutheran	<b>NV</b>	Jillian Ross	<b>TM</b>
<b>P</b>	Yakima, WA – Central Lutheran	<b>NV</b>	Joel Martyn	<b>AP</b>

### **Retirements**

Rev. Gary Rohde, Immanuel – Grandview, WA will retire June 30, 2015  
 Rev. Bob Chenault, First – Sandpoint, ID will retire June 30, 2015  
 Rev. David Ophus, Emmanuel – Cheney, WA will retire August 31, 2015.

### **Resignations**

Rev. Dale Larson has resigned from Grace Lutheran Church in Mattawa, WA. His last Sunday will be June 28, 2015.  
 Rev. Steve Pannkuk has resigned from Advent Lutheran Church – Spokane Valley, WA. His last Sunday will be June 21, 2015.

### **Calls Accepted**

Seminarian John Guthridge has accepted the call to serve Immanuel Lutheran in Grandview, WA

### **Ordinations**

John Guthridge will be ordained July 1, 2015 6:30 pm at St. Luke Lutheran in Spokane, WA.

# Presiding bishop Luther's quote got it right

We've fallen but are also raised up—a prescription against paralysis



MICHAEL D. WATSON

The account of the Ascension in Acts has two great questions. The disciples ask Jesus, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” (1:6). Then, as the disciples watch the Lord ascending to heaven, the angels ask the disciples, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards heaven?” (1:11).

The disciples had walked with Jesus, they had experienced the crushing defeat of his crucifixion, they had seen the risen Christ, and yet they seem to be afflicted by nearsightedness and farsightedness at the same time. They are looking for a restored kingdom and a vanishing Messiah.

I wonder what we as the church want to have restored. Do we get a little nearsighted or shortsighted about the church and about the earth-shattering, life-changing power of the death and resurrection of Christ? When we long for some remembered golden age are we blind to this new thing that God is doing in the church?

We are in the middle of a seismic shift in the church. In her book *The Great Emergence* (Baker Books, 2012), author and lecturer Phyllis Tickle points out that every 500 years or so the church goes through a major upheaval.

I think that's where we are now. And while it is interesting to read of church upheavals in the past, living through one can be pretty uncomfortable. What is emerging? What is falling away? When will we know that the new thing has come into being? What is going to happen to us?

But hey, take heart, I don't think anyone woke up on June 7, 1518, and said, “How's the Reformation going today?”

When we ask that the kingdom be restored to the church, we are really asking for the kind of certainty that arises from human need. We want clear, measurable, tangible signs that

our world will be ordered to our specifications. That certainty will never be achieved this side of heaven. That is not the certainty we really need and it is not the certainty God has given us in our new life in Christ.

Which leads to the second question, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards heaven?” Or more to the point, “People of God, why do we stand looking up toward heaven?” Maybe because a vision of glory is a lot more appealing than what we have facing us right now. But that is not what we are called to do.

We are not called to be the church of the past nor the church of some distant future, but to be the church right now. For whatever reason, we are the ones God is using at this time, in this messiness. We are not going to get it right all of the time. We are broken and sinful creatures, but we are also redeemed creatures. In baptism we have already died the only death that really matters. Can we start to live like we believe that?

Martin Luther is often quoted as saying “sin boldly.” He actually said, “Be a sinner and sin boldly, *but believe and rejoice in Christ even more boldly.*” It's an honest acknowl-

edgement that we have fallen, but is an even more joyful acknowledgement that we have been raised up. It's a prescription against paralysis. It is not up to us to fix the church or the world—that has already been done in Christ.

And since the victory has been won we are free in this

in-between time to live into the new life God has brought about in this world.

So here we are dear church. Living in the absolute certainty that we and all of creation have been redeemed, we don't have to fret about getting it right. We don't have to chart a perfectly accurate course. We don't have to conserve our assets, physical or financial. We don't have to worry about saving our lives.

What a powerful freedom the certainty of God has given us in this uncertain time. Let's not waste this gift. □

**We are not called to be the church of the past nor the church of some distant future, but to be the church right now.**

A monthly message from the presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Her email address: [bishop@elca.org](mailto:bishop@elca.org).



## ***Lutheran Disaster Response wins ‘Innovative Program of the Year’***

CHICAGO (ELCA) – Lutheran Disaster Response received the “Innovative Program of the Year” award for its storm-shelter pilot program at the 2015 National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster annual conference held May 11-15 in New Orleans. Lutheran Disaster Response is a ministry of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA).

The award recognizes the ingenuity and success of the storm-shelter pilot project team, which comprises Lutheran Disaster Response, Upbring (formerly Lutheran Social Services of the South based in Austin, Texas), and the Federal Alliance for Safe Homes.

The pilot project was developed to assist families living in tornado-prone areas by providing the resources and technical support to install storm shelters on their properties. The yearlong pilot was focused on two areas that have been recently affected by tornadoes, and during its course, 206 families in the Oklahoma City area and 19 families in Louisville, Miss., received storm shelters. The pilot-project team worked with long-term recovery groups in these two tornado-affected areas to identify families that needed a storm shelter and to provide case management for the storm-shelter selection and installation process.

“We are grateful for all of our partners who took part in this project that will not only physically keep people safe but will also provide emotional comfort for them when a storm is heading their way,” said the Rev. Michael Stadie, program director for Lutheran Disaster Response. “I am pleased that all of our efforts were recognized. We look forward to working with communities across the country [that] are interested in providing storm shelters.”

More storm shelters are planned for installation as the program continues beyond the pilot. The knowledge gained from the pilot program will be applied to creating a foundation for national guidelines that can be used for other storm-shelter programs in tornado-affected areas around the country.

This award marks the second time Lutheran Disaster Response has been a recipient of an award from National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster. Lutheran Disaster Response was awarded “Member of the Year” at the organizations’ 2010 annual conference.

Lutheran Disaster Response has a long history of responding to disasters, both domestically and internationally. With a focus on long-term recovery, it is committed to working with local communities impacted by disasters, accompanying them and providing assistance as they navigate their way through recovery. Information is available at [www.ELCA.org/Our-Work/Relief-and-Development/Lutheran-Disaster-Response](http://www.ELCA.org/Our-Work/Relief-and-Development/Lutheran-Disaster-Response).

## ***Hunger Grant Applications Now Being Accepted***

The ELCA World Hunger-funded Domestic Hunger Grants support ministries that offer hope and assistance to many thousands of people who experience poverty and hunger in the United States. These grants do more than just give food to people who are hungry — in addition to immediate relief programs, ELCA World Hunger Domestic Hunger Grants fund projects in community development and community-based organizing and advocacy that strengthen the foundations of communities impacted by hunger and poverty.

In 2015, this program allocated a total of \$739,075 to support 324 domestic projects and programs ranging from congregational food pantries to weekend backpack programs for children to job training and living-wage advocacy campaigns. ELCA World Hunger-funded Domestic Hunger Grants make a difference.

- See more at: <http://www.elca.org/Our-Work/Relief-and-Development/ELCA-World-Hunger/Get-Involved/Domestic-Hunger-Grants#important>

## ***NAMPA CHURCH EXPANDS ITS BENEVOLENT MISSION***

On April 30, Trinity Lutheran Church (Trinity) acquired 16 single family homes from Mercy Housing Inc. (Mercy). The homes, now called Trinity New Hope, LLC., border the church's east and south sides at the corner of Midland and Lone Star Road in Nampa. The homes were built in 1994 when Mercy approached Trinity about building affordable housing on Trinity's land and the congregation entered into a 50-year ground-lease agreement.



Wanting to focus on other geographic areas, Denver-based Mercy approached Trinity in mid-October 2014 about purchasing the land in order to sell the land and houses together. However, a potential buyer would need to keep New Hope as affordable housing for the remaining term of the regulatory agreement with Idaho Housing and Finance Association (IHFA). Instead, the members of Trinity voted to purchase the houses from Mercy with financing from IHFA. Julie Williams, Executive Vice President of IHFA said, “The need for additional affordable housing and the preservation of existing affordable housing is growing across Idaho. As the population increases in more populated areas such as Canyon County, living wages don't keep pace with housing costs. IHFA is proud to support New Hope and the commitment of Trinity to sustain this neighborhood through the unique collaboration between a faith community and its neighbors.”

Trinity Lutheran Church established Trinity New Hope, LLC., and appointed congregation members to the board of directors. Board members include President Tami McHugh, Vice President Bob Torrey, Treasurer Dean Metzger, Secretary Judy Kellar, liaison to church council Cathy Winwood, Danny Braudrick and Elwood Webb. McHugh summed up the endeavor, “Trinity has always been a supporter of affordable housing but we have never had the opportunity to directly provide and manage these types of properties. It is venture of great faith and hope.”

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- Prints a variety of sizes, including envelopes and 11" x 17" size paper
- Easy to use operation panel
- Color/tint capabilities

Any questions, contact Advent Lutheran Church at 509-928-7733. Thank you.

**Lutheran Campus Ministry at EWU  
Annual Golf Tournament  
(4 Person Scramble)  
West Terrace Golf (The Fairways)  
9810 W. Melville Rd, Cheney, WA 99004  
July 16, 2015 at 2 PM  
(Check-in at 1 PM)**



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<https://www.facebook.com/EasternWashingtonIdahoSynodELCA>

- Hole Sponsor \$175 (one free entry)\*
- Foursome \$315 (one half-price entry)\*\*
- Hole Sponsorship & Golfing (one free entry)
- Individual \$90
- I am a Pastor (Entry fee waived with foursome)
- Non-Golfer Dinner \$25

\* One discount per foursome—whatever is the best discount will be applied.  
\*\* Foursome discount applies for registrations received before July 12, 2015

- **To register by phone:**  
Pastor Shelley at 509.951.5701
- **To register by mail:**  
LCM-EWU  
639 Elm St  
Cheney, WA 99004
- **To register online:**  
[www.lcmewu.com](http://www.lcmewu.com)
- **Questions:**  
Pastor Shelley at 509.951.5701  
[pastor@lcmewu.com](mailto:pastor@lcmewu.com)

Lutheran Campus Ministry is dedicated to offering worship, Bible study, counseling, community, home-cooked meals and service opportunities in a safe, welcoming atmosphere for all students at Eastern Washington University. Without your support we could not do this vital and important work. **Thank you!**

## 79 ELCA YOUNG ADULTS CALLED TO SERVE IN GLOBAL MISSION

Seventy-nine young adults have accepted the call to serve with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) Young Adults in Global Mission program, an international mission opportunity for 21- to 29-year-olds. In August these young adults will embark on a year of service with ELCA companion churches and organizations around the world.

But qualifying for the program requires more than simply filling out an application and answering questions. To determine where and how they might serve, young adults participate in a focused and contemplative process known as the “Discernment-Interview-Placement” event, called DIP. “In my experience, there are very few spaces in our lives that we set aside specifically for the purpose of listening,” said the Rev. Heidi Torgerson-Martinez, program director for ELCA Young Adults in Global Mission. “And that, at the core, is what the Young Adults in Global Mission Discernment-Interview-Placement event is about. It’s a space for young adults to come alongside one another and listen for what God might be calling them to be about in the coming year.” The DIP event, held every April in Chicago, presents workshops and conversations with global mission staff, providing participants the opportunity to learn about the various country programs. Prayer and worship are also important aspects of the event. On the last day, the young adults receive a placement offer to serve in one of nine country programs.

“In the Lutheran tradition we understand the work of discernment to be something that happens in the context of community,” Torgerson-Martinez said. “At DIP the individual sense of call that each of our candidates carries comes into conversation with the voices of the ELCA, the global mission unit, Young Adults in Global Mission staff, and our global companion churches and organizations. And somehow, some way, the Holy Spirit shows up. It’s a pretty amazing gift to be part of that holy listening with such a community.”

The Young Adults in Global Mission program started in 1999 with 10 participants who served in the United Kingdom. Since then, almost 600 young adults have served in country placements throughout the world, helping with programs that include sustainable agriculture, education and child care, church leadership support, congregational ministry, and rural health care and development. Torgerson-Martinez said the new group of 79 young adults is the largest since the program began.

“The energy at the DIP event is always powerful, but as I walked into the plenary space that first evening I was completely overwhelmed by how big the collective energy felt,” Torgerson-Martinez said. “The tremendous diversity of gifts and experiences and vulnerabilities and hopes represented by this huge group of faithful young adults is something that will reverberate throughout the church global in the coming year and throughout the ELCA for years to come.” “We are so grateful for this group of thoughtful, grounded young adults and their openness to the process of discernment,” said Stephanie Berkas, manager of the ELCA Young Adults in Global Mission program. “Participants show up to this event with all sorts of hopes and anxieties, but we are consistently blown away at their willingness to trust the Spirit in this process.” Berkas said many alumni remain involved in the program, and a number were on hand during the DIP event to help interview participants and share stories about their year of service.

“After 15 years of the program, there are over 550 alumni back in the United States and we couldn’t be more grateful for the ways that they’re engaged in the work of the program, as well as the wider ELCA,” Berkas said. “Their accompaniment with these young adults is remarkable. They welcome them into this life-changing experience and share stories from their own host communities.”

Torgerson-Martinez said, “Every year I am struck by what a privilege it is to be part of this little corner of Christ’s church that is the ELCA. As we talk with these young adults over many months leading up to the DIP event, it is so clear that they have been formed by a church that loves and cares, not just about them as young people, but about the life of the world that God so loves. The ways in which the wider ELCA rises up around these young leaders in formation – and in prayerful and financial support – is nothing short of remarkable.”



# Pray with us

*We ask that you keep the ministry of the church, our synod, and the whole world in your prayers, as well as the people listed below . . .*



For congregations and pastors in call process.

For those who suffer loss, may they find hope.

For families that are torn, may they be mended.

For those with medical concerns, may they find comfort and healing.

For those facing the struggles of aging, may they find the joy of youth.

For those struggling to make sense of their world, may they find peace.

For those trying to make the world a better place, may their work be fruitful, and appreciated.

For retiring pastors, may their body of work be appreciated, and their retirement be as fruitful.

Please let us realize that we should make peace with the past, there is no way to change it.

*Prayer Requests . . .* to be included or removed from the Synod Prayer Request list, please send your request to the synod [office@ewaidsynod.org](mailto:office@ewaidsynod.org), or call 509-838-9871.

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## Theologically Sound Resources

Times are changing quickly and the Association for Lutheran Resource Centers (ALRC) is looking at ways that it can be most helpful to synods - and particularly people in congregations who are looking for theologically sound resources.

One step the ALRC has taken has been to create our own Pinterest page where resources are posted. As the coordinator of ELCA resource centers, the Pinterest page currently falls under my name. But, I have invited my ALRC colleagues to post the "theological sound" resources they come across to the boards on this particular Pinterest page as well. Along with ELCA resources posted, there are many wonderful ecumenical resources that can be helpful to ELCA congregations - whether they are stewardship, Christian education, leadership development resources, or other congregational resources!

Here is the link for ELCA Resources Pinterest page: <http://www.pinterest.com/KMatthiasLong/boards/>

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# EASTERN WASHINGTON IDAHO SYNOD

of the  
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

314 S. Spruce St., Suite A  
Spokane, WA 99201-5823

## July 2015 Newsletter



### Let Down the Nets

Lifting Our Vision  
Jesus First, Last, Always  
God's Grace, Our Gratitude  
The Spirit Powers Us  
No Fear! Transformation  
Connections Multiply Miracles  
Go, Tell & Serve



Please reproduce any and all articles for publication in congregational newsletters or bulletins.

The **Cross Connection** is also available on the synod website at

<http://www.ewaidynod.org/synodpublications.html>.

*Deadline for articles is the 5th of each month.*

## Synod Calendar

### June 2015

27 Installation of Directors at Holden Village

### July 2015

15-19 ELCA Youth Gathering in Detroit

16 EWU Campus Ministry Golf

### August 2015

14 Net-Worker Training

### September 2015

11-12 Synod Council

13 God's Work. Our Hands Sunday

17 Rural Ministry Network Meeting

### October 2015

10 Global Mission Meeting



## Eastern Washington-Idaho Synod

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our Hands

### Staff

Bishop ..... The Rev. Martin Wells  
Director for Evangelical Missions .. The Rev. Helga Jansons  
Program Administrator ..... Cathy Steiner  
Assembly Manager ..... Julia Bennett  
Communication Director ..... Gib Dominguez  
Net-Worker ..... Linda Howell  
Net-Worker ..... The Rev. David Kappus  
Net-Worker ..... Kristin Koskella  
Net-Worker ..... Jim Peterson

# THE PARISH PAPER

IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

EDITOR: CYNTHIA WOOLEVER—WWW.THEPARISHPAPER.COM

July 2015—Volume 23, Number 7

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## CONGREGATIONAL STRENGTH IS ALWAYS PLURAL

What are the common denominators among churches that do effective ministry? Do they all have a thriving youth group? Or a large membership? Or great facilities? No! Strong, healthy, and effective congregations of all types thrive in many different kinds of circumstances. In all congregations, something already works well. The getting-stronger congregations focus on those strengths.

### A Language of Strengths

The words that people use to describe healthy or thriving congregations number in the hundreds. Often their language about effective ministry reflects who they are and their theological orientation. Through research with thousands of congregations, we discovered ten areas of strength in American congregations.<sup>1</sup> Surprisingly, leaders and worshipers possess acute awareness of where they believe they are failing and often little recognition of where they are succeeding. Of course, not a single congregation showed strength in all ten areas. Rather, the typical congregation possesses three to five strengths. Further, the specific cluster of strengths makes a unique multiple-strength fingerprint.

### What Are the Qualities of a Strong Congregation?

More than half a million worshipers in over 5,000 congregations (randomly selected from throughout the United States) completed a survey during worship services. From their descriptions of how they experience their congregation, we identified ten areas of strength. The data revealed a strong church is one that

- promotes participation in congregational activities. Beyond worship services, many worshipers are involved in leadership, decision making, service, small groups, mission projects, and outreach.
- develops a sense of belonging. Worshipers sense that they are part of a community and enjoy many close friends in the congregation.
- cares for children and youth. Attractive offerings for young people bring satisfaction and support to families. Ministry for children or youth is a valued aspect of the congregation.
- focuses on the community. Many worshipers are involved in social service or advocacy work either through the congregation or with community groups.
- helps worshipers share their faith. Worshipers take part in evangelism activities, share their faith, and invite friends or family to worship.
- welcomes and assimilates new worshipers and participants.



"STATISTICALLY, WE'RE SUPPOSED TO HAVE  
3 TO 5 STRENGTHS...  
NAMING THEM IS OBVIOUSLY NOT ONE OF THEM."

- benefits from empowering leadership. Leaders inspire others to action and take into account worshipers' ideas.
- looks to the future. Many worshipers are committed to the congregation's goals and vision. They believe that the church is always ready to try new things.<sup>2</sup>

A strong congregation also values the best of the past and builds on that to create a vision for the future.

### Playing to Strengths

Congregational leaders often ask what is working well for another congregation. Such inquiries reflect limited awareness of and unproductive coping with their own congregation's uniqueness. Facing the reality of your church's one-of-a-kind mission requires courage. The perception of risk is accurate. The nature of congregations is to avoid failure, yet pursuing distinctive strategies move a church toward greater strength.

Religious leaders like the tempting idea that one key factor will insure church vitality. The notion that a single essential resource will give a congregation the decisive advantage is false. Examples of touted trump cards include congregational size, worship style, worship music, leadership style, or mission orientation. But there is no evidence that such a single winning factor exists.

Another variant of the peddled one-trick solution is the idea of naming the congregation's weakest area and then making efforts to improve it. Unfortunately, this version is based on the myth that weaknesses can be fixed and unintentionally disempowers a congregation by causing their leadership to focus on some aspect of its system that may never become one of its strengths.

Research demonstrates that all congregations have multiple strengths and require these building blocks to be effective. For example, a congregation that excels in serving the community but lacks any other strength is little more than a social service agency. Just as a congregation that excels in providing a sense of belonging where people care deeply for one another but lacks other strengths is little more than a social club. Congregational leaders must focus on multiple strengths to do all that is expected of people of faith.

If congregational leaders can move beyond their current mental maps, they can see the opportunities for their church by building on its strengths. Church strengths are always multiple, interdependent, and mutually reinforcing. Thus, the strength-building process entails:

- Identifying and appreciating our congregation's present strengths
- Dreaming of how we can build on these strengths
- Examining and prioritizing action possibilities for building on our strengths
- Pursuing selected options to create a stronger future

### Are Congregations Really That Different?

The range and richness of congregational life is impressive. Yet there are some broad patterns that suggest congregations are more alike in some ways than in others. Three strengths pop up as the most common expressions of effective church life:

- Providing meaningful worship: current attendees tend to be satisfied with their worship experience
- Promoting participation in the congregation: the range between the highest and lowest percentage of worshipers engaged in activities across all congregations is fairly small
- Fostering spiritual growth: worshipers describe their growth in faith in highly similar ways

If congregations tend to be more alike in these three ways, they are most different when it comes to the percentage of new people (those who started attending in the past five years) in their midst. Obviously, the long-term effects of failing to attract and assimilate new people have huge consequences. However, churches draw newcomers only when they show signs of vitality in multiple areas.

### Avoiding Myth Traps

Myths lure us to beliefs we want to be true. Believing myths is its own reward because it allows us to avoid change. By using the same old methods, we get the same old results. Myths immobilize and trap us into dead ends, blocking us from fully living out our church's ultimate mission: What is God calling us to be and do?

Strong congregations exhibit imagination, intelligence, heart-felt enthusiasm, and courage. Their members ask, What gives us joy? What are we really about? What are we going to courageously seek?

1. Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce, *Beyond the Ordinary: Ten Strengths of U.S. Congregations* (Louisville, KY: WJK Press, 2004).

2. Congregations can discover their strengths with the U.S. Congregational Life Survey and resources ([www.USCongregations.org](http://www.USCongregations.org)).