



Northwestern Minnesota Synod  
**Connections**



Connecting the Congregational, Synodical, and Churchwide  
 Expressions of the ELCA

## Healthy congregations focus on mission

By Bishop Larry Wohlrabe

Congregations are not algae or bacteria. That is to say: congregations are not single-cell creatures, concerned solely with their own survival. Congregations are marvelous, complex, purposeful living bodies. They're made up of many "cells" (disciples) who invariably want to accomplish more, make something new, and create fresh possibilities. Healthy congregations have a "life force" within them—the Holy Spirit—that frees them to focus on more than individual survival. Unable to help themselves, they have to reproduce, propagate, grow. When congregations stop doing these things, they die.

This is the third in a series of articles on the marks of healthy congregations. Bishop Larry encourages congregation councils or other parish leadership groups to use these articles for their opening devotions.

If you've been part of a mission church you know the excitement of building a congregation from scratch, rounding up seekers, forming community, starting programs and ministries, looking ahead to a first building project. There is also a keen sense of connection with the wider church—both the denomination (which may invest dollars) and neighboring congregations (which may encourage members to "seed" the mission church). The atmosphere is "electric" in a mission church.

What if our synod thought of itself as having 270-plus mission churches? What if we kept calling congregations mission churches for as long as they live? What if we realized that the only way to survive is to stop focusing on survival only—to turn our churches inside out, giving ourselves away as freely and lavishly as Christ gave himself for all?

Recovering a lively sense of mission is one of our most critical callings in these early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Realizing that a congregation is more than just a place where religious folks gather to "do their thing," is crucial. Reorienting ourselves to understand the church as a people sent on a mission is essential.

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How does this happen? Often it's triggered by a crisis or turning point. A tragedy forces us out of familiar patterns. The old ways simply aren't working any longer. New opportunities rise to meet us.

It would be a mistake to suggest that "focusing on mission" is a piece of cake. No. This is hard work—clarifying and redefining God's purposes for us in the thick of cultural transformation. Resistance from lovers of the status quo is real.

It usually helps if we at least take a stab at *stating* what we think our mission might be. A **mission statement** (or **purpose statement**) is simply a way for a congregation to define itself, to articulate its reasons for living and moving and having its being. Lutheran pastor and counselor Peter Steinke likes to say that a good mission statement includes the following elements:

- Is no more than a single sentence in length
- Is easily understood by a 12-year-old
- Can be recited from memory *at gunpoint!*

Such a mission statement can be "confessed" regularly (in worship and other places), even as it guides the leaders of a congregation in making choices and establishing priorities for the coming years.

Please consider your congregation's mission or purpose statement a *working document*, though. Poke, prod and revise it regularly. It will change as surely as your mission will change in this constantly-changing world. If you'd like to help your congregation get in touch with its mission or purpose, please take a look at a book, *Living Lutheran: Renewing Your Congregation* (2007, Augsburg Fortress), written by Pastor David Daubert.

### Questions for reflection and discussion:

1. What are some ways God has been turning your congregation inside-out for the sake of others?
2. When did your congregation experience a crisis or turning point that led you to take another look at your purpose for existing as a church?
3. Can disciples in your congregation articulate your purpose or mission in a single, understandable, memorable sentence? How could you help your congregation to define its purpose or mission?

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### The Northwestern Minnesota Synod

901 8th St. S. Moorhead, MN 56562  
 218-299-3019 800-452-3692 [www.nwmnsynod.org](http://www.nwmnsynod.org)