



Eastern North Dakota Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

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Dear Friends in Christ,

In an effort to maximize Eastern North Dakota's Synod's calling to participate in God's mission, we conducted a **Synod Ministry Review** process in February.

We invited a team to come into our mission territory and engage in a process of evaluating the present and imagining the future. It was a spirit filled time of sharing hopes, dreams and desires for the future of this synod. Thank you to all who participated in conversations centered on ***strengthening*** and ***increasing*** the church.

I invite you to review the findings of this process. The synod council and synod staff has begun digging into this and will be developing a plan of action to live out our mission to "live in love as we serve, equip and challenge God's people."

As we move into this changing, exciting, and sometimes overwhelming future, I invite you to think and pray about what God is calling you to do to carry out his mission in the world. What a wonderful topic for discussion, prayer and discernment. Yes, indeed, it is a great time to be the church!

May we be certain God will continue to bless our synod! God is up to something new and exciting and I am confident God is calling us to be a part of it.

In Christ,

Bishop Terry Brandt

"Jesus Christ calls us to live in love as we serve, equip and challenge God's people."

Eastern North Dakota Synod Ministry Review
John Hessian and Kenneth W. Inskeep
Research and Evaluation
Office of the Presiding Bishop
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
March 2015

A ministry review of the Eastern North Dakota Synod (EaNDS) of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) was conducted from February 20-22, 2015. The ministry review was requested by Bishop Terry Brandt.¹ His goals were the following:

- to identify and enhance the synod's strengths;
- to identify the synod's most significant challenges; and
- to hear possible recommendations for addressing those challenges.

The ministry review included meetings with Fargo area community leaders, synod staff, conference deans and the synod council. Listening posts also were held at three different congregations.² The congregational visits provided input from clergy and lay members of the synod. The listening posts were advertised throughout the synod. The ministry review team³ also visited the Dakota Oyate Lutheran Church and Red Willow Bible Camp. In addition, a short survey (5 questions) was available on the EaNDS website from February 25 to March 9, 2015. The results of the survey are in Appendix 1.

Strengths of the Synod

The following were listed as strengths of the EaNDS.

- Strong sense of cultural identity/heritage
- Central role of the organized church in the life of the people of the EaNDS
- Lay leadership
- Wealth of the area
- Endowment for new clergy
- New and continuing synod staff

Challenges Facing the Synod with Recommendations for Addressing the Challenge

The following were identified as challenges facing the synod. They are listed roughly in the order of the importance with which they were discussed.

1. Biblical illiteracy/Lack of knowledge of the Christian narrative
2. Competing Demands of the Culture/Sports

¹ Bishop Brandt was elected synodical bishop in May and began his call August 1, 2014.

² St. Olaf Lutheran Church, Devil's Lake; Faith Lutheran Church, Valley City; Our Savior's, Hillsboro.

³ The ministry review team facilitated the meetings, listening posts and visits. The members were: Pr. Paul Baglyos, Region 3 Coordinator for Missional Leadership, Ms. Victoria Flood, Program Director for Evaluation, Office of the Presiding Bishop; Mr. John Hessian, Research Analyst, Office of the Presiding Bishop; Ms. Marcia Johnson, Program Director/Synodical Services, Office of the Presiding Bishop; Bishop Mark Narum, Western North Dakota Synod.

3. Geographic Divide (Fargo/Grand Forks and the western part of the synod)
4. Fear of losing pastor or church building/ Pastor-centric church culture
5. Communication
6. Declining Populations/Parishes/Lay Leadership
7. Youth/Young Adults/Young Families
8. Stewardship/Mission Support/Benevolence
9. Economic Disparity and Large/Small Congregation Divide
10. Insider/Outsider Mentality
11. Substance Abuse

1. Biblical Illiteracy/Lack of Knowledge of Christian Narrative

This theme was mentioned regularly even as some participants noted the perceived uniqueness of the synod's territory. In the wider culture, much has been made of the lack of connection to the institutional church and the rise of the "nones" or people who consider themselves "spiritual" but not "religious." Nevertheless, in eastern North Dakota, many participants at the listening posts suggested the church retains a central place in the life and culture of the area. As one pastor put it, "Christendom has not died here." In eastern North Dakota, there is a perceived duty or sense of obligation to participate in/with the institutional church. The concern expressed was that people participate out of this sense of obligation rather than from a sense of personal vocation or spiritual calling. One pastor said that many are "religious but not spiritual."

While there is little empirical data that could shed light on why people do or do not get involved with a church in eastern North Dakota, there are some data which suggest adherent rates are higher in the EaNDS than in some other places. According to data collected in 2010 (which is the last time this data was collected), 64 percent of the population of the territory of the EaNDS were claimed by a congregation (of any denomination) in the synod.⁴ This compares to 35 percent of the population in the Northwest Washington Synod. In the EaNDS in 2013, there were 93,435 baptized members of ELCA congregations, which means ELCA Lutherans make up about a quarter of the population in the territory of the synod. This compares to the Northwest Washington Synod where there were 38,948 ELCA Lutherans, which is about one percent of the population of the territory of the synod. At the same time, in the EaNDS in 2013, 21,068 attended worship on a weekly basis, which is about 23 percent of the baptized membership. In the Northwest Washington Synod, about 32 percent of the baptized membership attend worship on a weekly basis. Perhaps this is the precise situation noted in the listening post sessions. A large portion of the population is affiliated with a church but, at least in ELCA Lutheran congregations, a relatively small percent attend worship regularly. In contrast, very few in the territory of the Northwest Washington Synod are affiliated with a church but, at least for ELCA Lutheran congregations, nearly 10 percent more of the baptized members attend worship on a weekly basis when compared to the EaNDS.

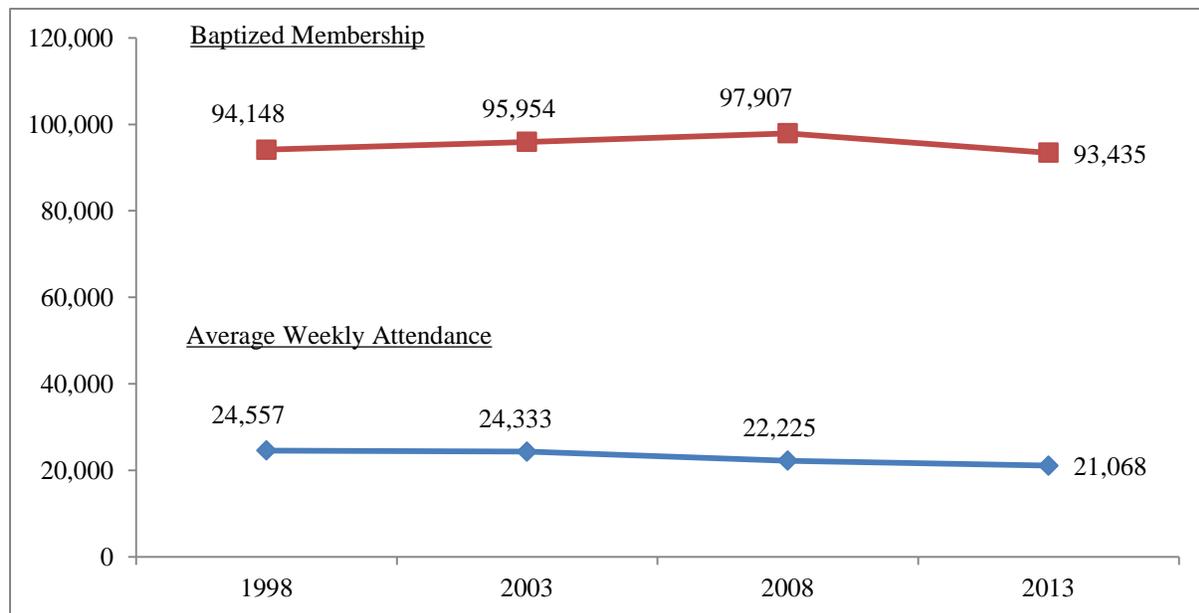
Increasing the number of committed disciples is a challenge. What part of this work is God's and what part is the church's? The church is called to proclaim the Gospel. It does this in worship and in promoting and teaching the faith, which includes the development of Biblical literacy and a strong

⁴ 2010 data were collected by the Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies (ASARB).

knowledge of the Christian narrative (as expressed, for example, in Luther’s Small Catechism). However, there were few with recommendations for addressing this challenge in increasingly demanding social settings. Several pastors referred to “confirmation as graduation.” Others noted the church has something to do with rites of passage—it is a place for baptisms, weddings and funerals, but many do not see “God at work in their lives outside that one hour a week.” A couple of participants noted that parents are afraid of saying the wrong thing to their children about theology and therefore, avoid discussing it. Participants said these things despite the feelings of others that there still is a deep faith in the synod.

Figure 1 presents the baptized membership and average weekly worship attendance for the synod between 1998 and 2013. To control for the number of congregations in the synod that left after the 2009 Churchwide Assembly, figures are included only for the congregations which were part of the synod in 2013. For baptized membership, the decline between 1998 and 2013 is very, very modest at less than one percent.⁵ For worship attendance, the decline is considerably more significant at 14 percent. For comparison sake, the Northwest Washington Synod baptized membership declined by 25 percent from 1998 to 2013 while worship attendance declined by 27 percent.

Figure 1 Baptized Membership and Average Weekly Attendance for the Eastern North Dakota Synod for 1998 - 2013



The average attendance for a typical congregation in the EaNDS declined from 105 in 1998 to 99 in 2013.

Absent ideas about how to address the challenge of strengthening discipleship in the synod, perhaps the bishop (or other appropriate group) should set out a plan or put in place a process which would lead to a plan.

⁵ Baptized membership actually increased for a decade and then declined 4.6% in the five years between 2008 and 2013.

2. Competing Demands of the Culture/Sports

At one of the listening posts a pastor said: “Sports rule. It is a sacred duty to be at games.” Another pastor noted “as pastors, we have to pray for both the Sioux and the Bison.” Some referred to the Alerus Sports center as “a shrine”. And, sports is only one of the distracting commitments. A lay person said, “There are so many distractions. We are so busy and work takes priority.” Another lay member described her Women of the ELCA circle: “The old women are dying, the middle-aged women are too busy and the young women don’t care.”

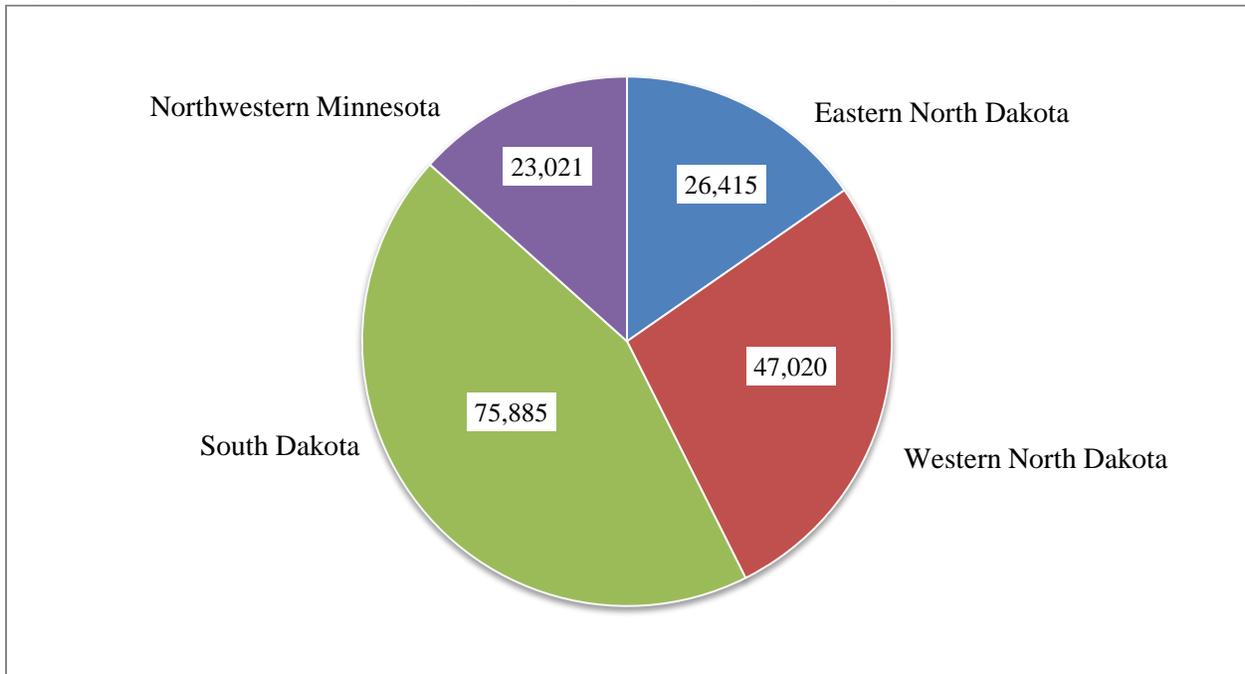
Despite all this, the culture is still somewhat deferent so that in at least one eastern North Dakota town Wednesday night is still reserved for confirmation class. The challenge is to honor (or at least acknowledge) that sports function to provide a strong sense of community and pride in eastern North Dakota while trying at the same time to find a balance that supports teaching the faith to the young and old alike.

Part of finding this balance was the recommendation which is simply to get outside the church’s walls. Members need to express their faith in their daily lives and clergy need to hone their relational skills. For pastors, this means being visible and active outside the wall of the church. Pastors need to go to basketball games, organize and participate in reading groups and perhaps, following Luther, renew the tie between beer and hymns. The sentiment was, in order to be part of the community, clergy need to get out. In addition, lay people could adjust their priorities to include more engagement with the church.

3. Geographic Divide/Distance

The EaNDS encompasses 26,415 square miles. To put this in perspective, the smallest area covered by a synod is the Saint Paul Area, 1,535 square miles; the largest area covered is Alaska, 571,951 square miles. The median territory covered is 22,000 miles. Twenty synods in the ELCA cover 10,000 square miles or less. Figure 3 shows the territory covered for the EaNDS and its three neighboring synods.

Figure 3: Territory of Four Neighboring Synods in Region 3 in Square Miles

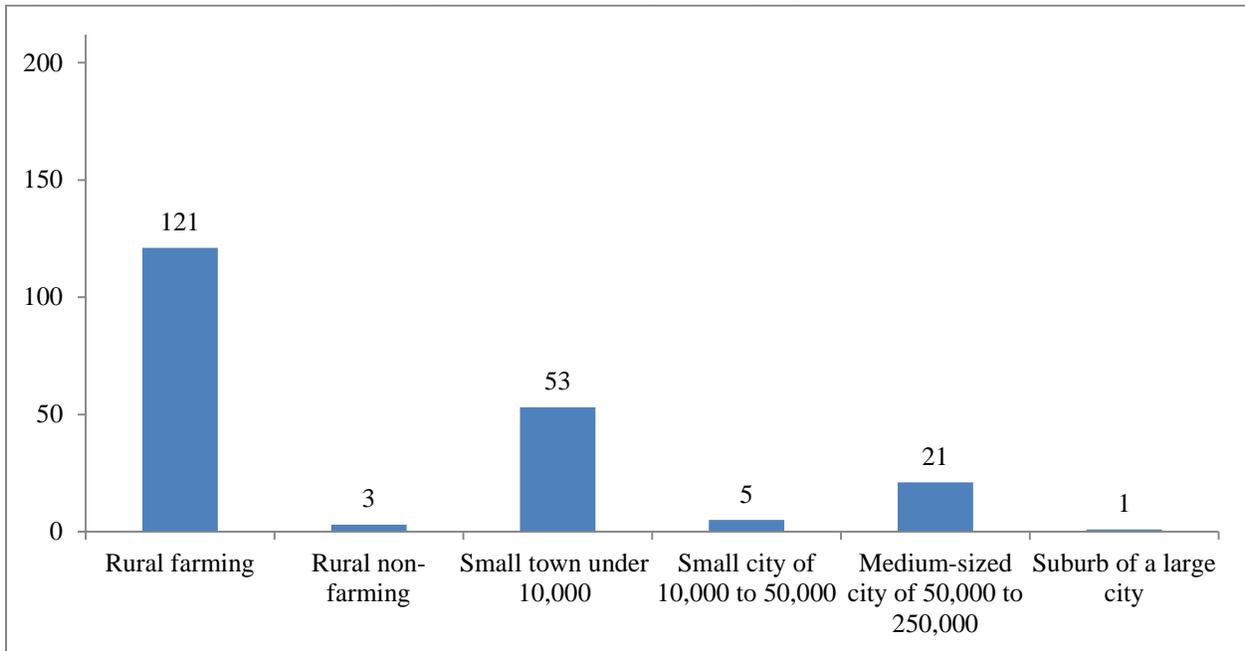


Many people talked about the challenges of distance (e.g., 45 minutes to the nearest grocery store, driving to and from different congregations in a multi-point⁶ parish). Actual distance is one thing but there is also perceived distance. There were comments about the synod office being too “Fargo-centric” and/or talk about the “metro Fargo/rural divide.” The conference deans and clergy from one of the conferences talked about isolation of some rural congregations and how they “turn in on themselves.”

A majority of the congregations in the synod are in rural farming settings (57%). Another 25 percent are in small towns with populations under 10,000, and ten percent are in medium-sized cities of 50,000 to 250,000 people. Figure 4 is a visual representation of the congregations and their geographic contexts.

⁶ “Multi-point parishes” will be referred to simply as “parishes”.

Figure 4: Number of Congregations According to Geographic Context (N = 204)⁷



At the same time, the participants in the listening posts also felt that this geographic division was improving. Shar Gumke’s working from Jamestown and Bishop Brandt’s residing in Valley City were both repeatedly mentioned as very positive. Also, there were several comments that synod staff need to come to congregations, cluster meetings, etc. on a routine basis (not just in times of conflict). It was suggested that attending a congregation for worship builds trust. If congregations only see synod staff in times of crisis, that negative emotion can be transferred to the synod office. Participants expressed appreciation for the increased presence of synod staff visiting congregations in rural and western areas of the synod. This promotes collegiality, especially among congregations that have felt disconnected from Fargo. The best advice for synod staff came from the Valley City clergy group who said, “Take care of your vehicles and make winter survival kits.”

4. Fear of losing the church building or pastor/Pastor-centric culture

There also is a feeling that for some congregations all energy is about maintaining the church building. The fear of losing the church building is very real for many in the synod. The church building is sometimes the last symbol of a shrinking community and people do not want to give that up.

Some groups also mentioned the fear of losing their pastor and being unable to replace him/her. The endowment for new clergy (described in more detail later in this report) has been an effective way of attracting young and talented clergy to Eastern North Dakota. However, the realities of consolidating congregations and lay members assuming more responsibility within a congregation are realities that some congregations in the EaNDS need to acknowledge.

⁷ Categories are self-selected by each congregation when they complete their parochial reports.

Part of this fear of losing the pastor comes from what a few groups referred to as a “too pastor-centric culture.” This culture was described as, “The pastor teaches about God. S/he knows about God,” instead of “We are in this together for the sake of God’s mission.” Although this focus on the pastor may co-exist with disagreement, many people in the pews still expect the pastor to take on most of the responsibilities of a congregation. There also was more of a feeling of optimism among clergy who felt they had strong lay leadership compared with those who felt they lacked that in their ministry settings. To address current realities, this pastor-centric mindset will have to change. Congregational leadership will likely look different in the EaNDS in 10 to 15 years from what it looks like now.

5. Communication

The topic of communication was raised. The participants in the listening posts identified the following issues. Sometimes information is inconsistent or not complete/transparent (e.g., the reduction in the resource center or the lack of an updated pulpit supply list). In terms of timeliness, the synod council would like information sooner and for the broader synod, newsletters sometimes arrive too late. Some attributed these issues to the newness of the synod’s staff. Some indicated there is simply too much information to digest.

In the case of communication, the participants in the listening posts did make a variety of suggestions for improvements.

- The synod staff should use, as much as possible, “permission-giving” language which will allow for congregational flexibility.
- Cluster deans and synod council members could be communicators for the synod office in their contexts throughout the synod.
- The synod office could see one of its important functions as being a facilitator/clearinghouse for connecting and informing members of the synod. This might include the following (most of which would be electronic):
 - Bishop Brandt could make YouTube videos to share with the synod.
 - providing networking resources for pastors to communicate with each other when facing specific issues
 - maintaining a listserv (lay and clergy) for those who want to be more involved with the synod
 - creating a clergy website portal with resources for clergy (e.g., pulpit supply list, rostered leader contact information, etc.)
 - providing a bi-monthly email from Bishop Brandt (Bishop Brandt’s devotional on vision was greatly appreciated)
 - providing more e-books as part of the resource center
 - improving the current synod Facebook page and mobile app

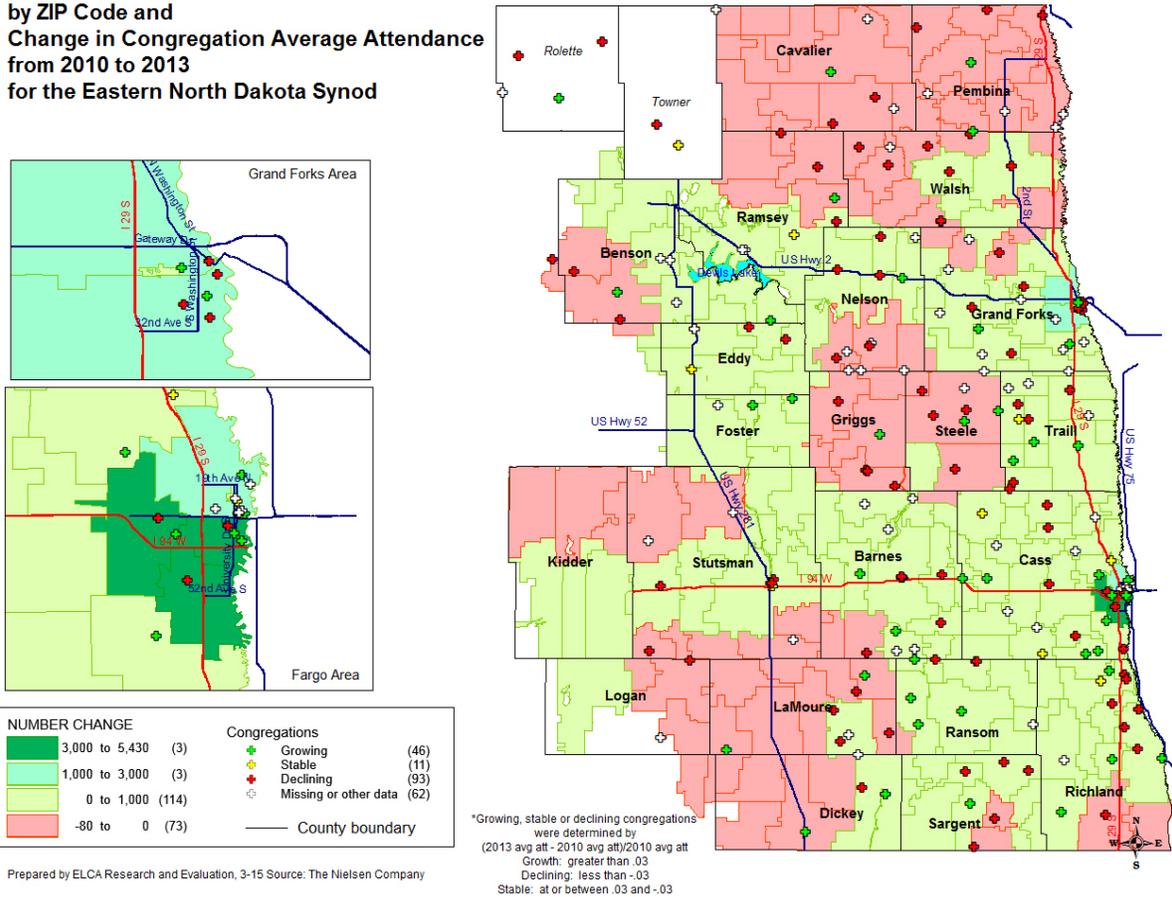
Having made the case for considerably more e-based communication, some noted that many people continue to rely on paper. Finally, a few made suggestions to improve interpretation, including more newsletter stories showing how the synod is using its resources outside of Fargo.

6. Declining Populations/Parishes/Lay Leadership

These three items are grouped together because the challenges they pose and the strengths inherent in them are interrelated. The population of Fargo has practically doubled since 1980 (61,383 in 1980 and an estimated 113,658 in 2013). As the Fargo-Moorhead area has grown, rural eastern North Dakota has seen declines. Figure 2 shows which ZIP codes are expected to decline in population in the next five years. Also of note is that of the ELCA congregations for which we have data, 57 are stable or growing in attendance while 93 are declining.

Figure 2

Projected Change in Population from 2015 to 2020 by ZIP Code and Change in Congregation Average Attendance from 2010 to 2013 for the Eastern North Dakota Synod



In addition, there were several stories tied to population decline and the implications for congregations. For example, one synod council member said there are 22 children in the junior high school in his town and seven churches.

In the synod, parishes are the norm. Of 210 congregations, a minimum of 143 congregations are part of parishes (or in some other multi-congregation pastor sharing agreement). This does not include ELCA

congregations in relationships with ecumenical partners.⁸ Table 1 shows the distribution of the ELCA congregations in these sharing relationships.

Table 1: Number of ELCA Parishes in the Eastern North Dakota Synod

2-point	3-point	4-point	5-point	6-point	7-point
35	9	6	3	0	1

On average, the congregations in these sharing relationships average 40 in worship. In 132 of these sharing relationships, a single pastor serves two or more congregations. This stretches thin the ability of a pastor to do all that needs to be done. One approach to this challenge, is to rely more heavily on lay leadership. This alternative was mentioned by the synod staff, the lay members of the synod council and the clergy at all three listening posts. Lay leaders were identified as “crucial” for home visits and assisting ministers. While there was some minimal dispute, clergy in two listening posts said that the synod office is a great model of shared clergy/lay leadership.

There also was considerable approval of the congregational council trainings that are about to begin (with the only caveat being that the time and place of the trainings/retreats were not always communicated early enough). A few noted it was important to clearly define the roles of congregational councils while at the same time move away from a church that is too pastor-centric. Having these congregational council trainings, therefore, is a concrete step toward the more effective use of lay leadership which, in turn, could have a positive impact on clergy and on the vitality of the congregation.

7. Youth/Young Adults/Young Families

Just as there is concern about the most generous givers passing on, there is concern about attracting young people and young families. There was much discussion of this topic (specifically The Project F-M in the Fargo-Moorhead communities) at the meeting with community leaders. All the lay groups at the three listening posts talked about their desire to attract young families but they claimed they did not know how. Even if they felt the future of their congregation was unsure, they hoped that young families would get involved in planning for the future. One lay person stated that many older people are uncomfortable with the “casualness” of church today and wondered how to incorporate newer ways of worship that would attract younger people without driving away other members. Another lay group spoke of the difficulty in getting young adults with children to stay in church. They felt too many families drop children off for Sunday school and leave immediately after worship without staying for fellowship. One congregation in the synod has looked for ways to explore more opportunities for children in worship by providing a child-oriented service on Wednesday evenings during its other activities for children.

Part of the issue is making changes in the very structure and function of congregational life which make it more recognizable and comfortable for young adults and young families. Even contemplating these

⁸ The churchwide organization does not keep records of congregations in multi-point ministry with full-communion partner congregations. The number of 3-point, 4-point, 5-point, 6-point and 7-point parishes served by ELCA clergy is higher if UCC, TEC, UMC, RCA and Presbyterian USA congregations are included.

changes can be difficult for a congregation with a very long established history. There are, however, some resources or, at the very least, ideas about how to move forward. (See, for example, “Two Routes to Resilience: Rebuild Your Core While You Reinvent Your Business Model,” Harvard Business Review, December, 2012 or <http://www.day8strategies.com/>.)

8. Stewardship/Mission Support/Benevolence

There were specific comments about the challenge of stewardship and the financial sustainability of congregations. The synod staff suggest it is best to think of mission support as an opportunity rather than an obligation. Some clergy were concerned about the future because they believe the most generous donors are passing on. In their experience, younger members (30s to 50s) are more apt to volunteer their time than their money. They also said that benevolence needs to be presented as a “spiritual practice” and suggested re-printing and sharing an article from *The Lutheran* about this. Other clergy identified the financial wealth of the farmland as a strength. The synod council challenged congregations to be timely in filing year-end financial reports and in sending mission support to the synod office just as members are encouraged to be timely in their support of the congregation.

It is fairly well established that as the density of the number of Lutherans goes up, giving to congregations goes down. There is no research in eastern North Dakota (as far as we know) on per capita giving for members based on their income, but overall, the incomes in eastern North Dakota are more modest and below the national average. For example, in 2013 the per capita income estimate in the territory of the EaNDS was \$26,197 compared to the national figure of \$28,912. At the same time, estimates can be made which show comparable differences in giving levels. Using the per capita income figure as a base, a typical worship attendee in the synod contributed about 5.8 percent of their income to the church. (In 2013, regular and designated giving or total giving was \$31,828,328. There were 21,068 worship attendees in the EaNDS. Total giving divided by worship attendees is \$1510.74 and this figure divided by the per capita income of \$26,197 is 5.8 percent.) For the sake of comparison a very similar income area where the number of Lutherans is very low is the ELCA’s Southeastern Synod (Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, and Tennessee). In the Southeastern Synod, the per capita income estimate for 2013 was \$25,473. The total giving was \$40,629,676 and the worship attendance in the synod was 16,174. So, in the Southeastern Synod, a typical worship attendee contributed about \$2512.04 or 9.9 percent of income.

Assume moving from \$1511 in giving per worship attendee to \$2512 is unlikely. Then, what would be a reasonable goal and what would it take to achieve that goal? A modest increase of \$23 per year (1.5%) would increase per worship attendee giving to \$1534 (\$29.50 per week). This would increase total giving to the congregations in the synod by \$489,984.

9. Economic Disparity and Large/Small Congregation Divide

In addition to the geography, there are a couple of other lines of division in the synod. In two listening sessions the clergy spoke about the economic divide in their communities. One pastor referred to his part of North Dakota as a “feudal society” where the divide between those with and without resources is substantial. Other pastors indicated that even though the congregants who are well-off give freely, other members of the congregation perceive them as having an undue influence in the congregation. The

economic boom that has occurred in North Dakota was mentioned by many in the meeting with community leaders. However, the rate of poverty in greater Fargo has not declined. There is a shortage of affordable housing and homelessness is a pernicious problem. Community members talked about the positive benefit of rotating homeless shelters in congregations throughout Fargo.

Not only is there a divide within certain congregations, there can be a divide among congregations. There were comments about some larger congregations and how they were “kingdoms unto themselves.” It could even be characterized as jealousy of the programs that the larger congregations could provide. There also were comments about a lack of collegiality between pastors of smaller congregations and those from larger congregations.

10. Insider/Outsider Mentality

History and heritage are part of the cultural identity of Eastern North Dakota; however, these forces can also lead to an insider/outsider mentality. There has been a South Sudanese population in Eastern North Dakota for twenty years. Just as one participant noted that fact and how his church has minimal contact with the South Sudanese population, another participant noted that twenty years “is not long in North Dakota time.” And this lack of participation by the South Sudanese community is evident by the 2013 Parochial Report from Eastern North Dakota that lists eight African Nationals as active participants in the synod. In addition, the Native American population, which is not new, is also not fully integrated into the life of the synod. The 2013 Parochial Report for Eastern North Dakota lists 134 Native Americans as active participants despite Native Americans comprising five percent of the state’s population.

As different groups talked about serving the neighbor and asking, “Who is the neighbor?” the consensus was that the people of EaNDS are very welcoming on their own territory but are not willing to go out and engage those who may be considered “outsiders” to the typical members of ELCA Lutheran congregations.

11. Substance Abuse/Mental Health Issues

This was mentioned by four groups and seemingly a challenge for the community and not just the congregations of the EaNDS. In one of the listening sessions the clergy spoke of having multiple Al-Anon and Alcoholic Anonymous meetings in their churches weekly. Substance abuse and suicide were frequently mentioned in some groups. There were no specific recommendations made with regard to these challenges.

Endowment for New Clergy

The synod staff, synod council clergy and clergy in at least one listening post all identified the endowment for new clergy as a specific strength of the synod. The endowment, which covers 33 percent of a new pastor’s student loan debt, is reportedly excellent; however, it could grow even more if more congregants were aware of it and donated to it. The endowment also attracts young clergy to rural locations where many people are afraid they will never have another pastor. The synod council clergy spoke highly of the new clergy coming into the synod as having talent and commitment.

Community Leaders

A meeting of community leaders and church partners was held on the afternoon of February 20, 2015. The purpose of the meeting was to assess the changes in Fargo in the next three to five years and what ideas these leaders have to meet these challenges. In addition, participants broke into small groups and discussed how the congregations/synod of Eastern North Dakota could partner with these community organizations to address these challenges.

Some of the themes expressed by the community leaders were mentioned earlier: aging population, substance abuse, economic growth along with static poverty rates, Biblical illiteracy and reaching out to youth and young adults. However, the community group focused more on how the faith communities of Fargo and the rest of the synod can help address the challenges facing the larger community.

The prominent thread was how to define community in the face of changes experienced in recent years. For example, there were references to flooding and how even though it was a disaster, it brought people together. In addition, there was a sense of pride and of shared values of the people in the Fargo-Moorhead community. Here are some direct quotes:

“There is religious and ethnic diversity but there is unity in shared values and commitments.

Fargo has been spared much of the contention that has hit the rest of the US.”

“The quality of life in Fargo is very good. In order to maintain this and keep crime levels low, the population has to embrace their community and be part of it.”

Another theme was diminished loyalty to the organized church, especially among people in their 20s and 30s. However, there is a high ideal of wanting to do good. The two initiatives to address this issue with young people are The Project F-M and campus ministry at UND and NDSU. Since many young people see traditional congregations as outdated and take a more global view of the church, The Project F-M engages young people by meeting in other locations (theology pubs, coffee houses, etc.). The campus ministry welcomes all (Muslims, Buddhists, those of no faith) and this challenges young Christians to express their faith in a deeper way, hence learning more about the Christian narrative. Young people and young families want to DO rather than just BELIEVE. The feeling is that once they are involved with the church through service, they will come back and be part of a church community. Since Fargo is a more fluid community now, people are not born into a congregation. They must choose a church and they will choose and stay with a church that is dynamic both internally (within the congregation) and externally (outside in the community).

Homelessness was discussed. For example, there are 800 homeless people in Fargo every night. Thirty-five to forty individuals are housed in churches on a rotating basis. One concrete solution to this problem would be for congregations to purchase a building, have it zoned as affordable housing and use that as a homeless shelter.

Here are other ways churches are working or could work to promote community and help those in need:

- Provide volunteers to distribute meals from the Great Plains Food Bank in the summer to low-income children and seniors.

- Invite low-income children to Sunday School and provide healthy models for them (nutritious food and space for physical activities).
- Provide scholarships for nurses.
- Explore other areas such as education, ministries to and from older people (isolation, caregiving, transportation), mental health (suicide, depression), violence (elder, domestic, bullying), parenting and relationship building.

Finally, it should be noted that these community leaders would like to schedule another meeting similar to this one to see how they can continue to work on issues concerning the community.

What would you like the Synod Staff and Bishop Brandt to know?

This question was posed at the listening posts. All groups shared positive comments about the work of the synod staff and specifically Bishop Brandt. There were repeated expressions of gratitude and specifically about valuing small congregations as much as large congregations and making the effort to be in congregations outside of the I-94/I-29 corridors. There were repeated affirmations of synod staff coming to congregations during times of no conflict. This cannot be emphasized enough. All groups felt the synod staff was there for pastoral support to parish pastors. “They are the pastors to the pastors.” Participants also want the synod staff to maintain healthy boundaries between their own working and personal lives and take care of their own health (emotional, mental, physical and spiritual).

Other items in response to this question have also been discussed previously in this report:

- Communication – Timeliness of communication about events/opportunities in the synod is important. Some were advocating more electronic communication and improvements to the website while others still want newsletters and paper. One person felt the staff was new and still not accustomed to the “life cycle of a synod” and that the timing of communication would improve as the staff continued in their roles.
- Stewardship - Since many small congregations are declining, it is good for them to hear stories about growth in the wider church (e.g., Central African Republic, South Sudanese community in North Dakota). These stewardship stories help them to feel connected to the body of Christ throughout the world.
- Endowment - Again there was appreciation expressed for the endowment for recent seminary graduates and how this program is attracting talented clergy to rural areas.

Areas of Concern

There were very few negative comments about the synod staff or the way the synod carries out its work. However, there were a few concerns and they need to be named:

- There were comments from the synod council members, primarily clergy, that its role has largely been a rubber stamp for the synodical bishop. There were comments about a lack of transparency and/or communication between the bishop and the council. There has been tension about concerns that information was not provided in a timely manner to allow for discernment by the council. It was also felt that the council was not listened to. There was one strong negative voice in the synod council; however, this voice was challenged by others on the council. In addition,

there was a feeling from the review team that some things were left unsaid by some members, possibly indicating there are unresolved issues.

- One clergy person mentioned that the lay members of synod staff should not be working with clergy on certain matters because lay clergy lack the experience of attending seminary and being a pastor. This was only *one person*. Any other comment related to the lay/clergy staffing of the synod staff was positive and even named the fact that this was a good model for congregations to follow as they look to utilize more lay leaders in carrying out their mission.
- There were three comments in the online survey that were somewhat negative in that they defined their relationship with the synod office as “skeptical” or that “the people in Fargo don’t have a real understanding of what ministry, indeed life, is like in the rural areas,” and “Our church basically ignores the ELCA due to philosophy disagreements and desire to be independent. [We] would likely have voted to leave in 2009 except for concern with splintering and losing membership.”

Conclusion

The people we met and heard from during the synod ministry review were positive about the direction the synod is moving and very hopeful about the increased involvement of synod staff with the congregations of the synod. There were worries about depopulation in rural areas, aging populations and the economic disparity in the region. There were many areas where the challenge was simultaneously the strength. Parishes are difficult to manage logistically and maintaining a church building is often costly, but many clergy said they love the diversity of serving different congregations. History and heritage were seen as strong parts of the culture that bind people while at the same time making it difficult for outsiders to become insiders.

As the synod moves into the future, it is important that synod staff visit congregations in times of no crisis or conflict. This creates trust in an environment where many said there can be a resistance to perceived hierarchy and outsiders.⁹ This also is important so that congregations do not view the synod office only as an administrative human resources office where the only job of the synod office is to help congregations find pastors and remove them if there are problems.

Another common refrain was lay leadership. As parishes are the norm and will increase, lay people must take on some of the responsibilities of church. People referred to the church as having been too pastor-centric and how overcoming this is important. All who mentioned the upcoming congregational council trainings thought these were a great way for church councils to understand their roles and also to feel empowered to take on some of the church responsibilities that have been left to the pastor.

Overall, the people we heard from were positive about the new and continuing staff in the EaNDS office. The Fargo area is growing and becoming more diverse; those we heard from seemed ready to embrace these changes, work for social justice not put up with any kind of intolerance toward new neighbors. There was a strong sense of identity and pride in being from North Dakota and having shared values

⁹ The University of North Dakota relinquishing the nickname and logo “Fighting Sioux” by the NCAA, and the Sexuality and Genetics social statements passed by the ELCA Churchwide Assembly were issues that were seen as being forced from the outside.

while simultaneously maintaining ethnic identities (Norwegian, German, etc.). The strong faith of people was repeatedly mentioned while there was concern about a lack of knowledge of the Christian narrative (surprisingly among those who go to church weekly). Finally, the people in the synod want to stand behind the bishop and the synod staff as they move forward in Christ's call to serve, equip and challenge God's people in Eastern North Dakota.

Appendix 1

Eastern North Dakota Online Synod Review (N = 42)¹⁰

1. What motivates and equips the members within your congregation or parish to be active leaders in its ministry and mission?

Gospel, Love of God, Great Commission, Faith, Bible Study, Worship	23 responses
Sense of duty not call, Need a push, Guilt	6 responses
Perceived need (in the community, for youth, disaster)	6 responses
Personal/direct invitation	5 responses
Trust/Relationship with staff, Teamwork	5 responses

2. What types of support, and from whom, would help your congregation or parish to address current challenges?

Communication/Support/Advice from the Synod Office	12 responses
Way to communicate with/network with other congregations	11 responses
Stewardship advice/Planned giving advice	7 responses
Training/Education events (online or in-person, e.g., education about the mission of the wider church, how to deal with conflict, etc.)	7 responses
Other topics (building contractor help, spiritual advice, advice to motivate laity to leadership roles, appreciation for rural congregations, etc.)	Varied

¹⁰ The survey was available on the Eastern North Dakota website from February 25 – March 9, 2015.

3a. What is the relationship your congregation currently has with the Eastern North Dakota Synod staff?

Positive, close, comfortable, healthy, strong	12 responses
Not bad but not close (e.g., only when we need them, in times of crisis or during the call process)	8 responses
Very little, not much, marginal	7 responses
Pastor and/or the council are close but the general laity have very little knowledge and no relationship	6 responses
Cordial distance (e.g., They don't understand our situation, skepticism about larger church)	4 responses

3b. In what ways, if any, would you like this relationship to be different?

More visits from synod staff (e.g., unannounced, not in times of conflict, attend annual meeting, attend congregational council meeting, attend worship, etc.)	11 responses
Some resource or way for congregants to understand what the synod is/what work the wider church does	4 responses
Various (comments about rural vs. metro FM, electronic/digital communication, etc.)	Varied

4a. Have you heard of a resource called the Congregational Ministry Review?

Yes	No	Not Sure	Missing
26	9	6	1

4b. Is the Congregational Ministry Review a resource you think might benefit your congregation or parish?

Yes	No	Not Sure	Missing
13	3	10	16

Please explain why you responded as you did.

A ministry review would show what was vital, what opportunities are out there, how we can grow, allow unheard voices to be heard, etc.	7 responses
Already conducted a ministry review and it was helpful, and would advocate it to other congregations	4 responses
Various comments related to reluctance (not sure what it is, not sure how to conduct one, people are too busy, it would be too cumbersome, now is the not the right time, etc.)	8 responses