

Mission & Ministry Response Forms

DETAILED SUMMARY REPORT

Bishop Ed Benoway

Introduction:

Following our 2007 Synod Assembly, I invited the people of this synod into a conversation about the mission and ministry of our Florida-Bahamas Synod. One very significant part of this conversation was the development of the *Mission & Ministry Response Form*. The forms were dispersed throughout our synod with encouragement for all interested persons, both lay members and rostered leaders, to share their thoughts, hopes and vision with me. I am pleased to share that I received responses from lay persons and clergy representing each of our 15 conferences.

The purpose of this report is to share summary statements regarding responses received to each question on the response forms. As one would expect, the responses shared represented well the divergent thinking and ways of doing ministry in this synod and the world. I rejoice that the common thread was a strong commitment to our mission of *sharing Christ, making disciples and doing justice in the world*. We recognize that we have been entrusted with the wonderfully Good News of Jesus Christ and that we need to be bold in sharing this news within our communities. We celebrate what God is doing in our lives and we open ourselves to the leading of the Holy Spirit for our future ministry.

It should be noted that in addition to the creative and constructive input for strengthening and expanding our vision for mission in this synod, some respondents also took this as opportunity to share personal thoughts about their own ministries and my ministry as bishop. I value these comments and hold them in the spirit in which they were shared: personal notes to me as bishop of this synod.

Summary Statements

Question 1: *How do you see the characteristics of this synod (geographic size, large number of congregations, large number of rostered leaders and diversity) as blessings for ministry and shaping our calling to be God's people in mission in this place? How might this synod better address the challenges that they present?*

Respondents overwhelmingly affirm these characteristics as a blessing for us and source for celebration as a people of God. The challenge of each characteristic is seen as opportunity to be creative in ministry. Regarding size of the territory of this synod, many respondents offered considerations for dividing the synod differently or even partitioning the ELCA to form two or even three synods within this territory. The idea of additional bishops and increased staff is appealing to many who particularly desire the intimacy that the bishops and staffs of smaller synods can provide congregations by presence on Sunday mornings. However, most respondents feel the strengths and benefits of our larger synod outweigh the natural limitations placed upon the capability of my assistants and me being present regularly on Sunday mornings.

There is tremendous response to encourage congregations and the synod to utilize more fully the gifts and skills of those retired rostered leaders willing and able to be involved in our mission. Many respondents feel that retired rostered leaders could serve as mentors and coaches for congregations and called pastors in addition to their work as supply pastors, visitation pastors, interims and bishop's chaplains.

By far and away, the greatest celebration is the diversity of our synod. And yet, most respondents are quick to note that our congregations and synod have a long ways to go in being more inviting and welcoming of those who are different than us. Many realize that we could and should be leaders and examples of the whole ELCA in our diversity and outreach. Most share that it is in our worship and music that we can be most open to other cultures and age groups. As might be expected, the most

significant concerns are raised in the area of our welcoming of persons with different sexual orientations with many respondents sharing the different perspectives of this concern in our church.

The greatest challenge is also seen as opportunity. We need to encourage and strengthen relationships among our congregations, and deepen the support and relationships among rostered leaders. Many share awareness of the area mission strategies being done by many congregations and felt that such strategies should be encouraged throughout the synod to better assess the demographics and needs of the communities that we serve. Most respondents feel that this could best be done within the framework of our 15 conferences recognizing that there could be smaller area strategies involving cluster of congregations. A tremendous expressed need is for congregations and rostered leaders to do more about sharing support, planning, resources and fellowship. The concepts of mentoring, sharing best practices and connecting congregations with one another were most prevalent. While most feel this is best done at smaller regional levels such as conferences or clusters of congregations, there are suggestions that the Synod Assembly, the fall Conference on Ministry and the Bishop's Lenten Visitations & Discipleship Days could possibly provide more opportunity for more small group sharing.

The importance of my visible presence in as many places within this synod as possible is affirmed. It is greatly appreciated within congregations especially on Sunday mornings or at council meetings. The visits to conference colleague gatherings are affirmed with a desire that more such opportunities be provided for conversations. There is a healthy tension between those desiring for me to respond to questions and share information about initiatives in the ELCA and synod, and those desiring that I spend more time listening to the stories and concerns shared by the rostered leaders. It is my hope to develop more DVD recordings that might be used at conference gatherings, congregation meetings and other such gatherings. Many express appreciation for my availability and that of my staff when called upon for appointments or special concerns. Being available to conduct personal appointments with rostered leaders when in a particular geographic area, similar to what is done at the Conference on Ministry, would be appreciated.

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Question 2a: Where do you sense God leading our synod in our mission of sharing the good news of Jesus, making disciples and doing justice? How do you sense God's leading in our commitments to growing God's Church and helping congregations in transitions and in mission?

Respondents express a great deal of uneasiness in regards to our mission as God's people. We need to be doing so much more! There is significant concern that many of our pastors and congregations are either content with maintaining the status quo or uncertain how to move from simply maintaining a chaplaincy ministry to being bold disciples and witnesses to the Good News in our communities. It is commonly expressed that this should be everyone's concern from the bishop to the person sitting in the pew. We must be an evangelizing synod!

The importance of planning and strategy is regularly mentioned. Most affirm that mission needs to happen first and foremost on the congregational level. Congregational action plans are needed. It is our intention to work with conferences in order that conferences might accept greater responsibility for developing missional strategies and plans for the territory of the conference. All congregations within the conference will be encouraged to participate and support such strategies. Congregations, lay leaders and rostered leaders need to hold one another accountable, and provide support and resources to each other. My staff and I, along with the synod council, will work to provide overall vision and encouragement to conferences and congregations as they respond to God's call to be engaged in mission. Many pastors feel ill-prepared for ministry in today's world and express desire for more training regarding becoming missional leaders to complement strong theological and biblical basis provided in seminary training.

There is a strong desire for assessment tools and surveys that would assist congregations and conferences to study demographics, determine the missional priorities of the community or region, and set goals. The conference-wide conversations could well support area mission strategies for clusters of congregations

whose priorities might differ from other clusters in the same conference. Individual congregations need to develop action plans that take into account both their immediate community and the missional needs of the cluster or conference. Most respondents share understanding that what might be important in one conference or congregation will not hold true for other conferences or congregations because of the great diversity of missional settings. The synod as a whole could provide guidance in developing processes and resources to assist congregations and conferences.

It is suggested that mission-minded rostered leaders might work as mentors with struggling congregations and rostered leaders to develop and work plans. Reviews, celebrations, and evaluation could happen annually. Conferences could help to hold congregations accountable. Many desire that rostered leaders be held more accountable for their ministries, missional goals and continuing education.

The Transition Process and mobility of rostered leaders are concerns raised by many of the respondents. There is a desire to streamline the process so that it becomes shorter. Yet there is also significant desire that the process remain highly intentional with well trained interim pastors to deal with conflict issues and matters within the parish about identity and desired profile for mission. Many clergy desire that the mobility papers provide greater requirement that rostered leaders share a ranking of their gifts, skills and interests from strongest to what might be considered their growing edges. Similarly, congregations in call processes might be encouraged to distinguish those areas of ministry and leadership most important to them from those of less importance to the particular congregation. There remains strong support for my staff and me to match the best gifted rostered leaders with the particular situations.

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Question 2b: How might partnerships be strengthened among conferences, congregations, rostered leaders, our Synod Council and the Office of the Bishop to facilitate better use of gifts, expertise and resources for our shared mission?

Respondents who are rostered leaders share a significant need for additional support and pastoral care. Many express appreciation for the care and support provided by me and my staff, while others express that it was not nearly enough to sustain them in the challenges that they face. Some long for more frequent contact through personal emails, notes or phone conversations. Others express disappointments that colleague gatherings are either not held frequently enough or do not provide opportunity for sharing of deeper concerns. There is a sense that there has been a significant decline in collegiality, mutual support and desire to be present for one another. Many express that they are not contacted by other colleagues during times of personal problems or times of congregational stress. Colleague gatherings, including the Conference on Ministry, need to be strengthened and supported as opportunities to be present for one another.

There is tremendous support for meaningful and well-planned conference gatherings whether they are held once or twice a year. Lay respondents share how isolated they often feel from members of other Lutheran congregations even in the same area. Lay and rostered leaders express the feeling that conference gatherings could be excellent opportunities for nurturing connectedness, providing focus on specific missional needs or training events, and sharing of congregational action plans. There is call for my staff and me to develop and support the conference chairs, deans and other leaders within each conference. It is clear that no one appreciates ill-planned meetings where the only agenda might be elections and sharing of a couple reports. The same kind of intentional planning that goes into synod assemblies, conferences on ministry and Lenten visitations needs to go into the planning of conference gatherings.

The importance of communication is lifted regularly in response to this question. The synod's website, Cross+Currents publications, and notices are appreciated but there is a need for much more. Many encourage the establishment of online meetings for various groups within our synod and suggest that I be a regular participant and contributor to such ongoing conversations.

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Question 3: *Where do you sense God’s call for future ministry in our synod? What are your hopes and dreams for this synod?*

This question drove respondents to their deepest spiritual roots and depth of faith. There is great desire that all persons and congregations that make up this synod become passionate about sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ inside and outside the walls of our churches! Others express a need for a renewed sense of community and trust in the Holy Spirit. There is call to celebrate the interdependence of Christ’s body as expressed in our Lutheran church and to make our witness known to our communities and world.

Many express variations on the theme of being not only a ‘called church’ through our baptisms but also a ‘sent church’ as well. We must move beyond our wonderful worship and fellowship experiences to being God’s Church in the world. Many share support for the continued focus on doing justice ministries and walking with the poor and the homeless. There is hope that there will be more encouragement and resources available to assist congregations in learning how to engage with other churches and denominations in addressing matters of justice in the community. There is a sense that God is calling us to strengthen our relationships with each other and become more united in our efforts to do mission. Again, many respondents feel that God is calling our congregations to greater relational bonding in order to do ministry together. Some feel this might include more sharing of staff and facilities so more resources could go towards our mission.

While sharing hopes and dreams, many respondents express concerns that we are not doing well in growing the church or our congregations. We have the best news in the world and we seem to have difficulty sharing it with others and inviting them to become a part of the community of faith. How do we become an evangelizing church/synod? We need to show the world that we care more about others than we do about ourselves and our own needs or desires. Concern is expressed that we place greater emphasis upon multicultural ministries and developing mission congregations in ethnic specific communities. To minister to a diverse population we need to lift up and train diverse leaders, both rostered and lay.

Many share hopes for greater leadership development, equipping and empowering of lay leaders for ministry. There is significant affirmation of the diakonia program which nurtures faith and develops skills for lay leadership. The synod is encouraged to provide greater focus on identifying and affirming spiritual gifts in lay leaders and rostered leaders.

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Question 4a: *How important do you believe each component of the Stepping Out in Mission Capital Campaign, approved at the 2007 Synod Assembly, is for evangelism and growth?*

Note: Respondents were asked to rate each of the components on a scale of 1 to 3 [3=very important; 2=somewhat important; and 1=not important].

Component A - Matching gifts in support of new starts and for the redevelopment of congregations with strong potential

Respondents rate this component an average of 2.6 (very important)

Component B - Training, recruitment and engaging of lay and clergy leaders in the formation of evangelizing and transformational ministries

Respondents rate this component an average of 2.7 (very important)

Component C - Transforming the synod house into a missional resourcing center with improved use of technology for distant participation in training events, seminars, and meetings

Respondents rate this component an average of 2.2 (somewhat important)

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Question 4b: In what ways do you see this campaign strengthening our common mission? How might this campaign better serve your congregation's outreach and evangelizing ministry?

The respondents are overwhelmingly supportive and enthusiastic about the prospects that the components of this capital campaign might have within the Florida-Bahamas Synod! There is affirmation for the intent to move our congregations outward in mission. Respondents are eager to learn more about the specific goals and shape that each component of the campaign will take. Many share their hopes and vision for a synod that will take seriously its call to be an evangelizing church in a world that desperately needs to hear the Good News and be invited to participate in the life of God's community. There is a significant understanding regarding how each of the three components are interrelated and vital to energize the congregations of this synod.

As indicated in the ratings above, the most significant support and greatest number of comments relates to the recruitment, training and engaging of lay leaders and clergy for evangelical outreach into our communities! Many feel that lay members and rostered leaders within our congregations are not prepared or trained to be evangelists. There is a recognized discomfort and anxiety about being asked to be disciples and witnesses out in the community, and yet, there is tremendous awareness that this is our call as followers of Jesus. The hope is that my office and this synod will develop a comprehensive plan for training of missional and transformational lay and clergy leaders to grow the Church of Jesus Christ in the world. A tremendous sense of confidence in the Spirit's power to transform us from wavering church members into bold and spirit-filled witnesses is expressed by respondents. Many express that their congregation's greatest need is the training, equipping and encouraging of persons for such mission.

Strong support is expressed for planting new congregations in communities where there are no Lutheran congregations and helping to revitalize those existing congregations with potential for renewed mission within their present settings. Many feel this is opportunity for congregations to help other congregations by developing common strategic plans within conference or cluster areas. There is call for me and my staff to work closely with missional leaders within conferences to identify the strategic plan for mission outreach in each conference. Representatives and leaders of individual congregations in a geographic area need to be invited to share in conversations about mission outreach.

It is widely agreed that this synod needs to develop and use more effective technology to provide far greater possibilities for distant areas of our synod to be more fully in communication with one another and to share in seminars and workshops through remote inter-conferencing techniques. Speakers and specialists could be engaged from a central site within our synod or from remote sites such as our seminaries or colleges. Technologically gifted resource persons from throughout our synod could be invited to share ideas and possibilities to assist our congregations in developing and planning their own websites, blogs and interactive chat rooms. As a missional resourcing center, the synod office and staff will support, encourage and provide resources for the mission outreach within conferences and congregations.

Concern is expressed that the Synod Council, bishop's staff and the campaign's steering committee need to more fully describe and report the vision, scope and goals of this campaign. There is an inherent eagerness within this synod to become more of an evangelizing church and congregations are looking for clarity in the plan and approach to make it happen.

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Question 5: Anything else that you would like to share?

This question invited a wide range of responses and suggestions for me as bishop and for the ministry of our synod. Appreciation is expressed for the invitation to participate in this important conversation with hopes that the conversations will continue in different forms. I am thankful for the support and encouragement offered to me and my staff by so many of the respondents.

Here are some quotes to highlight many of the responses to this question:

- find ways to better incorporate clergy who are new to the synod into the life of the synod and its conferences;
- address problems within congregation as soon as possible to help avoid deep divisions and splits;
- strive to increase the number of active clergywomen serving in this synod;
- improve the call process;
- hold congregations and pastors accountable for performance;
- provide greater care and support for rostered leaders;
- share and articulate a greater vision for this synod and its mission;
- consider restructuring the synod territory and staff;
- the answers to all of our problems is not with the bishop but with our faith in Jesus;
- encourage quality Lutheran liturgy and preaching;
- thanks to you and your staff for the ways you reach out to congregations and our members;
- continued concern about sexuality studies and issues, expressed from both sides;
- rostered leaders need to put in the effort to be better connected;
- consider in-synod candidates for call lists before out-of-state candidates;
- share local success stories of congregations;
- hope the campaign is not a colossal waste of time and money;
- make us believe we can be something greater than ourselves; lead us;
- encourage more congregations to participate in the synod's deacon training program; it has completely changed my life;
- be more visible in congregations;
- clarify and publicize the expectations and responsibilities of the bishop for those who don't know;
- provide support for Lutheran schools and pre-schools;
- encourage congregations and pastors to move out of their comfort zones;
- work for full inclusion of persons with different sexual orientations;
- we need more intensive prayer by all;
- revamp the call process so that there will be fewer mismatches between pastors and congregations;
- I see the support of the synod and want everyone to know how much it is appreciated.

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Conclusion to Detailed Summary Report:

The response to my invitation to share in a synod-wide conversation is most heartening! I appreciate that lay members and rostered leaders from throughout our synod took the time to share their thoughts, insights and dreams with me. The information shared in the *Mission and Ministry Response Forms* is already helping to inform my ministry as bishop in this new term.

In our baptism, we are called to be children of God and inheritors of eternal life. And, we are also sent into the world to share that Gospel message with others. Jesus declares: ***“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you (we have that power as baptized children of God) and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth!”*** [Acts 1:8]

As God's sent people, let us use our imaginations, gifts, skills and resources to be an evangelizing church stepping out boldly in mission to grow God's Church! Together, I am confident that we can make an incredible difference in our communities for Christ.

In Christ and His Love,
Bishop Ed Benoway