



**GO.  
PREACH.  
EQUIP.  
SERVE.  
LIVE.  
INVITE.**

SOUTH DAKOTA SYNOD STUDY  
2019 BISHOP ELECTION



**South Dakota Synod**  
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America  
God's work. Our hands.

# Executive Summary

## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The election for the South Dakota Synod Bishop will be held at the 2019 Synod Assembly. Bishop David Zellmer has served two terms and by the South Dakota Synod Constitution Bylaws (S8.51.10) is ineligible for a third term. When Bishop Zellmer was first elected, there was no requirement for a Synod Study. At his reelection in 2013, there was not requirement for a study if there was an incumbent Bishop. Churchwide ELCA now requires a synod study for every election and this is incorporated into the South Dakota Synod Constitution as S9.04.A18 , which states “the Synod Council shall arrange for a synod study to be completed by the Synod Council meeting the fall prior to the beginning of the election process. The synod study shall be distributed to rostered ministers and congregations of the synod six months prior to the election providing guidance throughout this synod as potential nominees for bishop are identified.”

In compliance with this requirement, the Synod Council appointed a committee to complete the Synod Study. The committee consists of:

Rev. Jackie Braun, co-chair  
Dennis Thompson, co-chair  
John Rasmussen  
Scott Parsley  
Rev. Marcia Sylvester  
Reid Christopherson  
Revs Ben & Kristen Eisele

Working with the ELCA Department for Research and Evaluation, the committee developed and distributed the survey. In July and August, Synod leaders, rostered leaders, congregations and members of congregations in the South Dakota Synod were asked to participate in the online survey. Three hundred twenty one responses were received. In addition to assisting with the survey, the Department of Research and Evaluation also provided report titled “A Statistical Overview of the South Dakota Synod, with Comparisons to the Montana, Southwestern Minnesota, Western North Dakota and Eastern North Dakota Synods”. These are the Synods that border the South Dakota Synod. The complete reports for the survey and the statistical report are included after this summary as Appendix I and II.

During the same time as the survey, the SD Synod Evangelical and Outreach committee held Rural Round-ups in each of the seven conferences. These focus groups results were not part of the survey but the results are similar to the survey results and provide insight into the South Dakota Synod. Their executive summary is included as Appendix III to this report.

## WHO WE ARE – THE SOUTH DAKOTA SYNOD

### Vision of the South Dakota Synod

That All May be Fed

Nurtured in Word and Sacrament, God sends us to become a joyful sign of God's abundant blessing as we:

- **proclaim** the good news of Jesus to every hungry soul,
- **share** compassion with all who suffer, and
- **feed** all whose bodies lack nourishment.

### CORE VALUES

Prayer, Human Dignity, Gratitude, The Neighbor, Grace

### WE COMMIT OURSELVES TO

- Pray without ceasing,
- Respect the sacred dignity of every human being,
- Cultivate a deep sense of gratitude to God, the giver of all good things,
- Seek out and befriend the neighbor,
- Remain humble in the conviction that our calling comes purely by the grace of God.

The South Dakota Synod covers the entire state of South Dakota. South Dakota has an estimated population of 889,876 as of 2018. The largest concentrations of population are Sioux Falls and Rapid City. The two counties in which Sioux Falls lies (Minnehaha and Lincoln) have a combined population of 253,803. Rapid City is in Pennington County, which has a population of 112,929. Sioux Falls and Rapid City are also experiencing the greatest growth. While the three counties account for 41% of South Dakota's total population in 2018, they are projected to account for 69% of the state's growth of 47,560 people over the next five years. More information on South Dakota demographics can be found at the churchwide website, [ELCA.org](http://ELCA.org) under Research and Evaluation.

There are 205 congregations in the Synod, which are further subdivided into 7 conferences. The 2017 estimated baptized membership is 100,764 or about 494 baptized members per congregation. Baptized membership, both as a percentage of the population and in actual numbers is in decline; however, the gap between members received and removed is narrowing in recent years.

In addition to its 205 congregations, the Synod includes other ELCA ministries such as: Augustana University (where the Synod Office is located), Lutheran Campus Ministries in Vermillion, Brookings, Aberdeen, Spearfish and Rapid City, Lutherans Outdoors Bible Camps, Table of Grace, Church on the Street and Multicultural Ministries, such as Lutheran

Lakota Shared Ministries, Woyatan Lutheran, Pueblo De Dios, and First Lutheran African Ministries. We also join hands with two companion Synods, Nicaragua and Cameroon.

## Summary of Survey Responses

### Strengths of the Bishop

Participants of the survey felt that the next Bishop's most important strengths will need to be working with congregations during crisis and transitions (47% of participants), developing and caring for rostered leaders (42%), and developing leaders (35%). Also included in the top five strengths are talent around conflict management (27%) and strategic planning (24%).

### What areas do you hope the SD Synod will develop, grow and/or support in the coming years?

The respondents to this question rated developing church leaders as the highest area of growth, development, and support for the South Dakota Synod (54%). This was followed by rural ministry (36%) and by children and youth faith formation (26%). More than one in five ranked financial stewardship & sustainability as important (23%). Lowest in the ranking was international mission partners at 2.5%.

Several of the survey questions requested a narrative answer. The following is a brief summary of the responses to those questions. Keyword searches were used to gather general trends and information. Isolated responses or sentiments are generally not in this summary.

### What should the synod's bishop expect of congregations in the synod in the next six years?

- The question's language of "should" was answered in roughly two slightly different but still useful ways. Responders seemed to answer this question either as...
  - Suggestions or criticisms of what congregations *should* (i.e., "ought to") do in support of the bishop, or
  - Reporting what a new bishop *can* reasonably expect in congregations.
- The keyword "support" occurs 112 times.
  - Most uses were referring to support in prayer, financial contributions to the synod, support of ministries, and involvement in synod activities.
  - "Prayer" occurs 41 times, all in terms of a support offered to a bishop.
  - Support through "Ideas," "feedback," and "engagement" also occurred (~10 instances).
- A number of responses (~25) mention community and context. Most of these suggest that congregations *should* be expected to innovatively serve their own communities and contexts and reach beyond their walls.
  - Responses are unclear as to whether this is a lacking/growing edge that is *not* happening, or whether it is ongoing mission practice.
- Leadership (from congregations) was a prevalent theme in several senses:

- Partnership in identifying and *raising up* new leaders.
- *Participation of* congregational leaders in the synod's activities.
- Encouragements of leadership and congregations to better connect with the synod and one another.
- (Related to the above,) Several responses suggested an expectation of unity and community between congregations and leaders for common mission.
- A portion of the responses (~20) suggests an experience or expectation of decline in small town and rural congregations.
  - Some responses also expect financial difficulties related to waning memberships, with related concerns about mission support and calling/retaining pastors.
  - Change was also a keyword here regarding willingness to change, a fear of change, and the necessity of change in focus to rural areas.

**What should congregations in the synod expect of the bishop in the next six years?**

- “Leadership” and “Leaders” were recurring words, in terms of:
  - Providing visionary leadership in a variety of situations.
  - Supporting existing leaders of all kinds in congregations
  - Raising up and recruiting lay and rostered leaders.
- Relationship and interaction: Many responses indicated continued or increased desire for developing and continuing contact and relationships with congregations.
  - Words such as “communication,” “visibility,” “engagement,” “connections,” and “visit” occur throughout the responses, indicating desire for attention to relationship.
  - Continued contact through vacancies, transition, or closing were mentioned.
  - Attention to and interaction with rural areas was repeated.
  - Some suggested encouraging relationships and resource sharing between churches.
- “Support” occurred 53 times:
  - in transition, in finding leaders, of pastors, in crisis, of rural congregations, and more.
- “Pastor” (or “pastors”) occurred ~50 times:
  - Most occurrences were in the sense of supporting or “being a pastor to pastors”
  - Many referred to finding new or retaining pastors, or positioning helping mid-late career or transitioning pastors.
  - A few indicated being a model or example for pastors, and enforcing ethical behavior.
- Advocacy, understanding, and politics: Responses included hoping for (new or continued) work in advocacy, community, ecumenical, and social issues. There were a small number of responses that were wary of overly focusing on social issues.

- Similarly, some responses indicated a greater interest in the ELCA and churchwide, while a few others asked for greater focus locally and minding a conservative social climate.
- Rural communities were again mentioned: advocating politically for rural communities is appreciated, while understanding differing political and social climates.

### **What is your congregation celebrating right now?**

- Forty-two responses celebrated youth ministry and engagement in some manner.
  - Nine were proud of the fact that the congregation was able to send their youth to the ELCA Youth Gathering.
- “New” and “Growth” of the congregations were also being celebrated; 21 responses indicated something “new” with 14 responses indicating “growth”.
- Pastors and leadership were important to many congregations with 36 responses indicating the celebration of having a great pastor, celebrating ordination anniversaries, and good pastoral leadership. One response lamented about the need for a full-time pastor.
- Six responses indicated “Nothing” or “Not much” was being celebrated.

### **With what is your congregation struggling?**

- Two issues (that seem to be connected) emerged as common struggles for most congregations; lack of attendance and financial struggles.
  - Lack of members (51 responses), low attendance (40 responses), lack of youth or young families (17 responses), low numbers (16 responses) and no or weak leadership (13 responses).
  - Financial struggles (30 responses), building maintenance (6 responses) and low giving (8 responses) were also identified as struggles for congregations.
  - Demands on the pastor, transition between pastors, lack of permanent pastors, shortage of pastors in the Synod, lack of Synod support and lack of church personnel seem to be issues for several churches.
  - Other issues that seem to cause struggles for congregations is the status quo; no vision and no change because “this is the way it has always been done”.
  - Specific struggles include two congregations joining together, competition with other churches in area, aging congregations, rural congregations, and competition with other activities.

## **For what is your congregation hoping?**

- There are common themes that emerge from the responses: increased growth of the church, increased congregation and community involvement, and the longevity of the greater church.
- The keyword “more” was used 40 times in the responses. These included reference to more members, more member involvement, more community involvement, and more financial security.
- The term Pastor yielded 22 responses, several were for continued support of their pastoral leadership, but many were for newly called pastors.
- Many congregations are hoping for younger families to join the church and bring their youth back with 21 responses indicating this.
- The keyword “growth” appears in 23 responses. Interestingly, growth of numbers was certainly one of the categories, but growth in mission, faith, relationships were also very prominent.
- Several responses were concerned about financial security and the quality of leadership in the congregation.

## **Respondents**

About half of the respondents said they or their congregation interacted with the current bishop at a synod assembly or invited the bishop to preach at their congregation. Some respondents (30%) noted they were at a congregational meeting with the bishop or had direct contact with the bishop (38%).

More than half of the respondents (60%) are members of an ELCA congregation and nearly 44% held or currently have a leadership role in a congregation: 25% are rostered ministers in the ELCA. About two in three respondents were over the age of 50 while 32% are between 61 and 70. More than 60% have attended worship at a South Dakota synod congregation for more than 25 years. About half (45%) are in a rural or small town and 53% identified as female.