

# **SOUTH DAKOTA SYNOD STUDY 2025 BISHOP ELECTION**

## **INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND**

The election of the South Dakota Synod Bishop will be held at the 2025 Synod Assembly. Bishop Constanze Hagmaier has served one term and is eligible for a second term. The South Dakota Synod Constitution (S9.04.A18) 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. Cassandra Lamb, chair	Deacon Christie Meier	Rev. Dell Sanderson
Jack Holmquest	Malcom Chapman	Rev. Michael Jordan

The survey questions were adapted by the committee from a list of suggested questions from the ELCA Churchwide Office. The survey was offered online and was open from July 31 to September 4. Responses were collected from synod leaders, rostered ministers, and lay members of congregations. Two hundred and eight responses were received. The committee met virtually to analyze the results. Note that previously the ELCA Department for Research and Evaluation assisted with further data analysis.

## **WHO WE ARE - SOUTH DAKOTA SYNOD**

### **Vision of the South Dakota Synod**

Journeying Together in Christ

### **Core Values**

- relating with intentionality
- networking across the church
- equipping leaders for ministry
- sharing leadership
- with confidence in Christ's love for all

## **Synod Population**

The South Dakota Synod covers the entire state of South Dakota. South Dakota has an estimated population of 909,824 as of 2022. That is a growth of 11.5% since the 2010 census, ahead of the national growth of 7.7%. The largest concentrations of the population are Sioux Falls and Rapid City. According to the 2020 census, Minnehaha County and Lincoln County, which include Sioux Falls, have a combined population of 262,374. Pennington County, which is home to Rapid City, has a population of 109,222. Between 2018 (the last survey) and 2022, the largest growth happened in Minnehaha County, with 12,721 more residents and Lake County, (county seat: Madison) had the largest decline with 2,073 fewer<sup>1</sup>

There are 186 congregations in the synod, which are subdivided into seven conferences. The estimated baptized membership is 92,239 as of the 2022 annual congregational reports. In addition, the Synod includes other ELCA ministries: Augustana University; Lutheran Campus Ministries in Aberdeen, Brookings, Madison, Rapid City, Spearfish, and Vermillion; three outdoor ministry sites that are part of Lutherans Outdoors in South Dakota; Lutheran Social Services of South Dakota; St. Dysmas; Church on the Street; and multicultural ministries including First Lutheran African, Pine Ridge Reconciliation Center, Pueblo de Dios, and Woyatan Lutheran. Several mission start congregations have sprouted in our synod including, Shepherd's Table, Spirit of Hope, McLaughlin Community Alliance, and the Box Elder exploration. We also accompany two companion synods internationally, Nicaragua and Cameroon.

## **SUMMARY OF SURVEY RESPONSES**

### **Characteristics of the next bishop:**

- Casting a Vision (63.5%)
- Being a Friendly & Approachable Person (47.1%)
- Understanding the Church's Culture & the Secular Culture (46.6%)
- Theology (42.8%)
- Preaching (33.7%)

### **Important areas the next bishop should focus on:**

- Leadership development of both lay leaders and rostered ministers (53.8%)
- Caring for Rural Ministry (48.1%)
- Pastoral Care of Rostered Ministers (43.3%)
- Building Community (41.3%)
- Evangelism/Outreach/Welcome (33.2%)
- Faith Formation/Children, Youth & Family Ministry (32.7%)

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<sup>1</sup> [www.USAFacts.org](http://www.USAFacts.org)  
2025 SD Synod Survey

## **Narrative Answers**

Several questions asked respondents for narrative answers. One response to each question was required, but additional responses were optional. These areas include much diversity of thought. We have sought to uplift the most common themes. The full responses can be found in the appendix.

### ***What are the top two ways your congregation is making an impact?***

Outreach & Service: “Reaching beyond the walls of the church, into community and state,” was the most frequent theme in these responses. The respondents most frequently (129) mentioned their church’s involvement in community highlighting food & feeding (44) and clothing (3).

Youth: “In our youth. We go on mission trips, engage in camp activities with confirmation groups, we help with feeding America and other youth projects to help the community. The youth are very active in fundraising for various projects that they choose. “ An impact of ministering to youth & families (89) is a priority in many congregations.

In addition, many respondents viewed their church as *welcoming* (19). Another impact mentioned somewhat frequently was education (14) and Bible study (19).

### ***Based on your knowledge of the synod office, what are the top two ways the synod office is making an impact?***

Many of the responses indicate that the synod office’s impact lies in incarnational ministry - showing up and having a listening ear to congregations. Respondents classify that way of ministry into two categories.

Support: 71 responses addressed support from the synod office. Giving direct support to clergy and rostered leaders (27); congregations and congregational leaders – particularly in rural ministry (21); and synod ministries, neighbors in solidarity, campus ministry, St. Dymas (14).

Provide: 82 responses cited provision from the synod office. Leadership to clergy and congregations, especially in the area of the call process, developing new leaders/ clergy, and developing new ministries (38); resources to clergy, congregations, and for disaster/physical needs (19); communication regarding ministry in the synod and the ELCA (12).

### ***What are three of the biggest challenges facing the South Dakota Synod in the next six years?***

Leadership/Clergy: This was the answer most often shared by the respondents (87). Issues surrounding the shortage of clergy, pay, education preparedness, vetting, and

an overall decline in seminarian students highlighted the responses. One respondent went as far as to say, “There is a widespread clergy and staffing crisis. There are not enough [clergy] entering ministry/seeking positions, and churches can’t afford the few available.”

Declining membership/church participation: About 52 responses focused on this decline for several reasons, including some of the other top challenges: social issues, divisiveness, changing societal norms/ values, and politics. Other areas highlighted were the overall aging population of churchgoers, lack of youth participation, lingering results from COVID-19, and the need for more outreach for greater engagement.

Financial matters: With a decline in church membership and participation, there is a growing concern about congregations' financial stability (35). This could lead to reduced generosity toward the synod's ministries, an urgent issue that the synod will face sooner rather than later.

Rural Ministries: While rural ministry was not among the top three challenges, it was mentioned frequently enough to warrant attention. There is a need to raise awareness about the challenges faced by this ministry, emphasize its importance, and garner support for it in the future.

***What are three of the biggest opportunities for the South Dakota Synod in the next six years?***

Rural Ministry: References to rural ministry was the biggest opportunity expressed in the survey in terms of raising up rural leaders, supporting rural ministry, and using grants to fund rural ministry (43).

Youth: The second most mentioned category was the need to lift up our youth. Comments centered around: create more opportunities for youth within the congregation and beyond; supporting youth programs, camps, youth gatherings; and discovering ways for the church to be relevant for them (37).

Technology: The use of technology is viewed as a valuable tool moving into the future. Respondents cited the newly created synod website, Pasque, as a great resource; encouraging electronic ways to learn and network with each other online; having a strong social media presence (33).

Other areas that were mentioned often were in the category of leadership (25), such as “encouraging/supporting more lay leadership;” supporting our Neighbors in Solidarity (18) like Church on the Street and Shepherd’s Table; the proclamation of the Good News (17); and inclusivity (20), especially with our relationship with BIPOC, LGBTQ+, and immigrants.

***What are two of the biggest challenges facing those outside of our congregations and throughout our state that the next bishop of the South Dakota Synod should be aware of?***

Politics: Respondents mentioned the challenges of our current political climate (78) – both from a state and national level and how that has led to large divides among us. Several comments specifically mentioned that this is a national election year.

Basic Needs: 71 comments focused on meeting the needs of others and how that is becoming increasingly difficult due to costs and the increase of people who need support. Specific needs mentioned were homelessness/affordable housing (25), hunger/food insecurity (18), mental health (14), isolation/loneliness (6), addiction (4), and childcare (4).

Marginalized Communities: 37 comments shared a struggle of how to work for justice, peace, and wellbeing with people in marginalized communities while also facing racism and hostility in our society. Specific groups mentioned were BIPOC (16), LGBTQ+ (11), and immigrants (4).

Economy: Comments mentioned the hardships folks are facing due to our current economic landscape – with rising costs, poverty has increased (31).

Rural Communities: 21 comments discussed the challenges specifically faced in rural communities. They are working hard to keep a sense of vitality amid uncertainties, divisions, and as population trends towards more urban areas.

***What are two of the biggest opportunities facing those outside of our congregations and throughout our state that the next bishop of the South Dakota Synod should be aware of?***

Outreach: Over 50 responses used words like “help,” “need,” “care,” and “support” which indicates that our biggest opportunity is outreach, to serve the neighbors in our communities by caring for their well-being and providing basic necessities. There were references to assisting with financial need, housing, food, and necessities. “The opportunity to join together as a community to meet the needs of the people in new and creative ways.” Several responses called on the synod to lead us toward solutions by helping to create cohorts for idea sharing, presenting models for rural community development, and education on relating with diversity across people. “Mobilizing congregations and the synod to be a collaborator at the table in communities facing big challenges (mental health, homelessness, poverty, access to affordable healthcare, human rights, equality, etc.)” There was also mention of how technology (10) could assist us in this collaborative work across our large geographical area.

Community: Respondents cited community (30) in primarily two different ways. The church has the ability to create and promote community, which some indicated was

intrinsic to South Dakota values. “People are lonely, and the church is good at community.” Citing the economic and population growth (19) in our state, responses indicate that there are indeed new people in our communities to reach. Respondents indicated an approach of welcome and love (16), represented by our Lutheran lens of humanity being created in the image of God and our call to care for all. A variety of populations were named (unhoused, hungry, youth, elderly, immigrants, indigenous, LGBTQ+, and other faith traditions). “You are a child of God, and you are welcome here.”

### **Advice for the Next Bishop**

**Listen & Connect:** There were two main pieces of advice, both with 18 comments each - to listen to and to connect with people, which included rostered leaders and congregations as well as an attitude of teamwork.

**Authenticity:** Being true to oneself, one’s faith, and being authentic came up 17 times. There was an emphasis on being scriptural/confessional based (9), staying Christ focused (6) and maintaining an active prayer life (7).

**Incarnational:** It was important for the new bishop to show up (5), be approachable (5) and be a good communicator (5). An emphasis also included intentionally remembering rural and small congregations (15).

## **RESPONDENTS**

There were 208 respondents to the survey. Over 68% of respondents are very well-acquainted with or have a relatively good understanding of the synod office’s functions and responsibilities. More than half of the respondents (56.7%) are members and/or active participants of a congregation in the South Dakota Synod while 40.9% of respondents are rostered ministers in the South Dakota Synod. Just over half of respondents (53.4%) have attended an ELCA congregation in this synod for 31 years or more.

The largest reporting came from those ages 61-70 (26.9%). The age categories of 51-60 (19.2%), 41-50 (17.8%), and 71-80 (17.3%) were similar sized response groups. 26.9% of respondents are from a large city (greater than 50,000 people). Another 26% are from a small city (10,001 - 50,000 people). 32.2% of respondents are from a small town (less than 2,000 people) or rural area. 12% of respondents are from a medium town (2,001 - 10,000 people). Just over half of respondents (53.8%) identified as female. 91.8% of respondents identified as white.