

Metropolitan New York Synod Ministry Audit Report

February 28 – March 1, 2008

A ministry audit of the Metropolitan New York Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) was conducted February 28 – March 1, 2008 by the **Synodical Relations section of the Office of the Presiding Bishop**. The audit was **requested by the Metropolitan New York Synod Council at the suggestion of the synod conference of clergy deans**. Interviews were conducted in **three synod locations**: St. Peter's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Huntington Station; St. Luke Lutheran Church, Manhattan; and St. John Lutheran Church, Poughkeepsie. At each location separate meeting times were established for clergy, synod rostered deacons, and laity. Additionally, **time was set aside for individual interviews** and conversation for those who requested.¹

A total of approximately **140 individuals participated** in the interview process. Weather and the weekend timing of these gatherings contributed in some part to a lighter attendance than expected at some sessions. There is always a concern that an audit involves an appropriate cross-section of members of the synod. It is possible that some in the synod may have been under-represented at these sessions. However, the interview team is confident that a fair representation of concerns and opinions within the synod has been heard.²

It is important to note that **in the summer of 2006 and in the fall of 2007, Town Hall meetings were held across the synod**. A number of individuals reflected positively with the interview team on the importance of having those kinds of meetings in the synod. At the same time, **the issues raised by those town meetings continue to be the issues and concerns which we heard in our interviews**.

Strengths

When asked to highlight the major strengths of the Metropolitan New York Synod, interviewees were nearly unanimous in their first response: **diversity**. Diversity was described in a variety of ways—ethnic, multicultural communities, urban/rural/suburban, language, ecumenical, sexual orientation, approaches to proclamation and ministry, economic. **Diversity was described as the overall encompassing reality of this synod's mission and ministry, as well as its hope for the future**. At the same time, there was a clear acknowledgment that the very gift of **diversity is also at the heart of many differences and difficulties within the synod**,

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² Included in the interviews were a number of synod staff members, a number of Synod Council members, including all the officers of the synod, and a high percentage of conference clergy deans.

complicating how diverse groups communicate with one another and how groups understand and appreciate their differences.

A second strength of the Metropolitan New York Synod could be described in terms of **legacy**. There is a rich heritage and history in the Metropolitan New York Synod. The unique circumstances that make New York City the “crossroads of the world” also offer this synod **a distinctive perspective and world view** to share with the wider church. The ministry and legacy of numerous social service agencies in this synod were often referenced by members interviewed. Connected with that was a sense of open-mindedness and a willingness to wrestle with important issues. **A most recent addition to the legacy of this synod, which was frequently noted, is the strong sense of vision established during former bishop Stephen Bouman’s tenure.**

Finally, the pastors, deacons, and laity of this synod, along with those in synodical leadership positions defined the strength of this synod in terms of **its witness**. That witness is seen in the “mission-mindedness” of the synod, outreach in social ministry areas, ecumenical strengths, prophetic witness, worship which is taken seriously, and care for people who are marginalized. Witness is personified in the generosity of the people of the synod, the dedication of faithful pastors, the gift of the diaconate, and the resources provided by the synod office.

Challenges and Opportunities Facing Congregations

When asked about **primary issues facing this synod**, an active synod member voiced the theme that was heard repeatedly in response to this topic: **“This is a synod that is in crisis, and it has been denying this over the last 20-30 years.** Now, the crisis is **more acute**. The **viability of congregations** needs to be addressed, even though it is awkward.” The **root causes of the viability question** are numerous, and very apparent to members of the synod: declining congregations; changing demographics; fewer Lutherans; property that is old and in need of repair and upkeep, particularly in the inner city; inability to change and adapt to changing circumstances; protracted pastoral vacancies in smaller congregations; a shortage of pastors; and the increasing financial burden of parish expenses.

How to address the issue of congregational viability is obviously much more complicated, and elicited a variety of responses. It was recognized by some that synod leadership has been working more in recent times with congregations at risk. Among struggling congregations there is **a fear that synod involvement will lead to closing congregations**. When the effort is to merge two smaller ministries together, the effort to create change is often seen as interference. There was a strong consensus in these interviews that this is a critical issue facing the Metropolitan New York Synod. The consistent response we received was that the synod will have to be willing to make the **difficult decisions** of closing and/or consolidating congregations in the future, but needs to approach this task with genuine care for congregations and a new creativity as to how ministries and properties might better be redeveloped and refocused for the betterment of the community and the church.

Another series of responses spoke to a more proactive response to congregational viability. Those responses highlighted a desire for additional ministry resources, and training for pastors and congregations. There was a **feeling that congregations had not been challenged and needed to be pushed in new directions**. Specific areas of opportunity that were highlighted include: youth and family ministry; evangelism; developing new models for ministry; lay leadership; and stewardship (although stewardship was also noted as an area where resources were available). It was suggested that **more expertise** in these areas needed to be brought into the synod and into the congregations.

As part of the discussion in this area the question was asked, “In what ways is the synod helpful in addressing these issues?” The responses indicated a **significant feeling of disconnectedness between congregations and synod office**. There was a request for more information and communication from the synod to pastors and congregations. The desire for the synod to be more present, proactive with, and attentive to all congregations was expressed, along with the recognition and concern that considerable time and energy is being spent on declining congregations. The **sense of disconnect** for congregations outside the five boroughs often seemed greater, although it was generally accepted that all congregations **needed to work harder** at finding ways to connect with one another and with the synod. A number of participants were asked to rank the connectedness of their congregation to the synod on a scale of 1 to 10 (with “1” representing a low feeling of connection and “10” representing a high feeling of connection). Responses varied widely, but the average was approximately 4.5.

The issue of diversity again received attention in this topic. It was recognized that the strengths of diversity can also be impediments in the parish. Discussions over racism, immigration issues, and sexuality issues highlighted the concerns often felt in congregations among various social, economic and political positions. It was noted that unchurched people often find the public face of Lutheranism very confusing. Finally, internal issues, such as ministry diversity (pastors, rostered deacons, congregational deacons), are also in need of more information and clarity.

Challenges and Opportunities Facing Pastors, Rostered Leaders, and Synod Deacons

Many of the same challenges and opportunities facing congregations were also highlighted by individuals during the interviews. This list included doing ministry with congregations that were operating in a crisis mode; dealing with declining attendance; lack of finances and human resources within congregations; and the need for additional training in areas of outreach, hospitality, youth ministry, and other discipleship ministry areas, particularly as pastors and congregations **face the reality of a post-Christian culture surrounding them**.

A deep personal challenge for pastors can best be described as “**clergy burnout**”. It is the stress of high expectations for growth in settings where congregations are declining or dying. It is the stress of doing ministry in a setting which is often **factionalized and where the pastor is expected to be both traditional and innovative at the same time**.

Included in this area of personal care and concern is a high level of **loneliness**. Clergy repeatedly referred to several common descriptors of their experience: the sense of being alone in their ministry; a **lack of collegiality** with the clergy roster (although this was not experienced by all, and some made the clear point that the clergy themselves needed to take responsibility for this); **low morale**; concern about **cliquishness** among various clergy groups; and a feeling of being outsiders (for those serving outside of the city). At the same time, there was a notable commitment to and love for the environs in which they served. While we heard considerable concern and even anguish about some of these personal issues, no pastor or rostered leader ever expressed to us a desire to leave the synod.

In terms of the above issues, the synod office/staff/leadership structure was not generally seen as a supportive or collaborative partner. A frequently heard concern was the **lack of pastoral care for pastors**, and the sense of alienation or isolation from the synod office. Part of that alienation was defined in terms of process. Pastors, rostered lay leaders, and congregational lay leaders believe they are often left out of synod decision-making processes, and often feel **that opinions or ideas are not valued** or heard by synod staff. There is a strongly felt **need for strategic planning** to be done in the area of synod support for clergy and rostered leaders.

A specific issue of concern which was frequently voiced was in the **area of mobility and candidacy processes**. Mobility concerns included the perception that there is “no mobility” in the synod, or that mobility is lateral, at best. Perception is perhaps the most accurate word here, but perceptions about the call process include: call processes take too long; call committees don’t seem focused; in an already tight mobility situation, too many pastors are brought into the synod from outside of the synod; call processes seem handled inconsistently by synod staff; and, a lack of creativity exists in the call process and mobility.

Distinctively defined groups also voiced concerns over issues felt particularly within each group. While the synod is recognized as a leader in establishing multicultural and ethnic-specific ministries, clergy and rostered leaders within the **African-American** community felt all of the issues and concerns listed above, exacerbated by the issue of race. Concerns were expressed over the willingness of white congregations to issue calls to black pastors, or support the ministries of black congregations. It was hoped that a proposal for a “Black Pastors 2nd Internship” would be given serious consideration by the synod. African-American women clergy were particularly concerned about mobility issues, and the opportunity to secure full-time calls. It was noted that **women clergy**, in general, are perceived to have a lack of longevity in the synod.

There are unique concerns among **gay and lesbian clergy**. There is recognition that this synod and church is divided on the issue of rostering gay and lesbian clergy in committed relationships. There is appreciation in this community for the support that has been offered in the past, but also **concern about the new course a new bishop might choose to follow**. Among some gay and lesbian clergy, there are fears for the future of their ministry.

Synod rostered **deacons** are a **unique group** within the Metropolitan New York Synod. The willingness of individuals to often take a non-stipendiary call of this kind in the church is very inspiring to many. The rostered deacons seem to experience a higher degree of mutual support and collegiality with one another than do the clergy of the synod. Additionally, the Diakonia program offers education and practical experience of ministry consistent with the needs of the parish. There are certainly concerns and issues related to the rostered deacon ministry, however. Many of those concerns have to do with synod/pastoral/congregational perception and confusion of the role of a synod rostered deacon (compared to a congregational deacon). The recognition, utilization and appreciation of rostered deacons varies across the synod. The frequently expressed hope of rostered deacons who were interviewed is that the synod and next bishop will continue to recognize the value of the Diakonia program and rostered deacons; will work to provide leadership in understanding the role of deacons (both rostered and congregational); will work to more carefully define and clarify the role and ministry of deacons with the clergy of the synod; and will be an advocate for deacons with pastors who do not understand or trust the program.

Future Synod Foci and Priorities

Interviewees were asked to identify the **primary areas in which they would like to see the synod place its energies and attention in the coming years**. The responses varied widely. **“The outside perception is that this synod is a leader...the inside perception is that it is very fragile and there is a significant lack of trust.”** That sense of fragility defined much of the conversation related to future synod priorities.

It seemed apparent to the audit team (based on the number of responses), that the **number one issue for pastors, rostered lay leaders, and laity in the synod is the issue of congregations in crisis**. There was a clear understanding that this is a critical and difficult situation to deal with. **Declining congregations and congregations in a crisis mode often become more resistant to change, advice, and counsel, rather than less. At the same time, it was recognized that congregations in crisis affect the ministry of the whole synod**, and if it is a synod concern, it should be a synod priority to be proactive rather than reactive in these situations. A number of proactive suggestions were offered: Having a staff person whose primary responsibility was working with congregations in crisis; more careful attention to congregational situations so that assistance can be offered to a congregation before the ministry reaches a crisis point; helping congregations in decline find better ways of utilizing their resources; being honest with struggling congregations about the reality of their situation; developing a synod-wide approach that helps congregations (declining or not) celebrate the wealth and resources they have and utilize them for Christ’s mission, rather than holding on to the resources; and developing a strategic growth plan related to declining congregations and growing congregations.

Related to the issue of congregations in crisis was the corollary priority of building healthier congregations across the synod. **There was a strong desire to have synod staff in closer contact and working relationship with all congregations.** A closer working relationship could lead to: building up the lay leadership in congregations; better means of

training congregations to deal with their own problems; retraining congregations in methods of outreach, particularly with the variety of cultures within the synod; working with congregations to develop a creative analysis of each ministry situation; focusing on congregational resources and assets; and working on strengthening and increasing Mission Support in congregations across the synod.

A second synod priority for the future has to do **with synod vision**. The interview team repeatedly heard words of deep appreciation for the previous bishop's sense of vision and calling the synod to be people of vision. At the same time, we heard frequent frustration expressed over **the number of visions that had been placed before the synod**. The visions themselves were wonderful, but the concern was the lack of appropriate attention or energy that had been spent to complete each vision. A strong feeling expressed was that there were **too many visions**. A strong priority expressed was the desire to narrow the focus; finish the projects that have been started; provide consistency in addressing the visions of the synod; and put a moratorium on any new projects.

Increased connections between congregations and synod and between synod and churchwide were also listed by several individuals as a priority. The previous town hall meetings and this ministry review were both listed as positive ways of connecting. The concern expressed was that not everyone knows what's happening in the synod. There was a sense among some that the synod could be more involved in regional and churchwide efforts.

A strong priority was placed on creating better support for various areas of parish ministry. **Youth ministry was most frequently mentioned as an area of concern across the synod, both as a synod-wide effort**, and the need for help in developing or strengthening local youth ministry programs. Strengthening the synod's support for Youth and Family Ministry was seen as critical in this approach. Another area frequently mentioned was the area of evangelism and outreach to the unchurched. Pastors and congregations are looking for resources and support from the synod in this area. Those interviewed were aware of the "Reroooting" emphasis, but felt there had been little conversation in that area. In short, there was a desire that the synod office be more like a parish resource center for pastors and congregations. Help with basic congregational ministry concerns was seen as a critical need by many. As one person expressed it, **"Congregations are dull places, pastors are dull, preaching is dull...we need help."**

A final priority area could be cumulatively described as a concern for pastoral health. Pastoral morale was frequently described as low, with words of encouragement and positive steps toward establishing collegiality and developing better support relationships needed. Personal accountability of pastors for their own health and well-being was clearly understood. **Concerns about mobility and the call process were seen as a detriment to pastoral health in the synod**. Finally, while recognizing the importance of synod discussion on the issues of sexuality and immigration, several pastors noted their **weariness with discussions about these issues**, and the concern that these issues were tearing the synod (and pastors) apart.

Synod Structures and Staffing

Throughout our interviews, we continually heard words of appreciation for individual synod staff members, and for particular relationships and efforts by synod staff members which were appreciated by pastors, rostered leaders, and in congregations. Synod staff members were repeatedly **recognized for the commitment to their calling and for the difficult task they faced. At the same time, the questions around synod structure and staffing elicited more lively debate and passionate conversation than perhaps any other topic in the interviews.**

Many of the particular topics in response to this category were voiced in other areas as well. The **overall sense of disconnect between the synod staff and clergy was frequently mentioned.** The synod staff was described as creative, but the roles and job descriptions each carried was confusing. **A desire was expressed that pastoral care of pastors and congregations needed to be a top priority, with one staff person dedicated to that task.**

There was a strong opinion that the **synod staff “needed to stay home more”**, specifically referring to travel time spent outside of the synod, or in areas not specifically related to congregational ministries. The suggestions in response to this concern included consideration of a staffing model that included deployed staff, with staff assigned to a particular area, or regional offices so that certain areas of the synod (particularly Long Island, and the northern counties) would not feel so isolated. There was a feeling that this could help free up some time for the bishop. The desire for a **synod chaplain** was also voiced in response to this set of questions.

A frequent concern expressed was the need for synod staff to **be a presence** in congregations. The feeling was that synod staff was not visible in congregations, and **only appeared in times of crisis, or when money was needed.** The desire is for a synod staff to proactively **reestablish relationships with congregations**; to develop a synod strategy for regular visits by synod staff to congregations; and to listen more carefully to the needs and concerns of congregations. One suggestion is that the synod staff itself perhaps needed more diversity: people of color, women, deacons, and lay people.

The concern for “clergy care” was a part of this discussion as well. The suggestion was that the synod needs to build a mechanism or structure for caring for pastors and rostered leaders in the synod. Part of that clergy care was also the felt need for a candidacy and call process that is faster and more efficient. There is a perception among many clergy that there are different rules and different responses for different congregations and different parts of the synod.

Frustration was expressed around communication with the synod staff and office. More open lines of communication, more transparency in communication, and more information sharing with pastors and congregations was requested. One suggestion was that the synod office needed someone at the front desk to locate the appropriate staff person

needed. Another suggestion was that congregations need to hear more words of “thank you”.

The concept of “consolidating visions” received much attention and conversation. Suggestions in this area included prioritizing tasks for the synod and staff; completing current visions and building on what has been done; clarifying the portfolios of the synod staff; and ensuring that someone on synod staff is always assigned to follow-through and accountable for any projects begun or promises made. It was suggested that the strength of the synod staff is its range of abilities, but **the weakness is that it is pulled in too many directions.** One lay person stated their frustration this way, “The staff has to be structured around the mission...not the other way around.” It was noted with appreciation that the previous bishop was working on this.

Concerns about the decision-making process within the synod were also raised. Several individuals felt the synod staff was too heavily involved in some areas of **decision-making.** Some Synod Council members voiced the concern that the council needed to have more input in the decision-making process. We also heard the concern that lay leadership in the synod was not encouraged to participate in the decision-making process. Connected with this was a desire to address the role of synod deans, perhaps with the view of strengthening their roles for the purpose of building better communication and diversifying the decision-making process.

Characteristics Desired in the Next Bishop

The “Metropolis” home for superheroes Superman and Superwoman is often associated with New York City. These superheroes are expected to stop speeding bullets, be faster than a locomotive, and leap over tall buildings. The range of **criteria which we heard in terms of the characteristics and expectations of the next bishop rivaled those of these superheroes.**

Perhaps because there are such high expectations of whoever fills this office, there were several comments of frustration with the process itself. There was a desire to have more information on potential candidates, a process that highlighted candidates before the assembly, and more time to discuss issues and candidates synod-wide. It was widely recognized that Bishop Bouman had a strong rapport with many individuals and congregations and that the synod had difficult shoes to fill in this election process.

In terms of personal characteristics the following were cited as important for the next bishop of the Metropolitan New York Synod: **approachable; personable; optimistic; a healer; a mover and shaker; young and energetic; older and wiser; inspirational; inclusive; possessing evangelical fervor; visionary; willing to take a risk; able to motivate; accessible; and spiritual.**

Characteristics perhaps more related to carrying out the duties of the office of the bishop included: ability to address the conflict and uncertainty of the synod; pastoral presence concerned about the care and spiritual health of congregations and

pastors; administrative skills; solid theological foundation; someone who deals well with diversity; able to build a good team; visibility to the world; prophetic voice; commitment to spending more time on synod territory and with congregations and pastors; ecumenical relationships; more direct involvement in crisis situations from the beginning; a “practical visionary”—vision and the ability to implement the vision; not issue-driven; missional focus (on the mission of congregations); ability to unite congregations in a common purpose; and spiritual leadership.

There were some expectations about the next bishop’s ability to relate to specific groups. There was a strong concern expressed that the bishop appreciate and continue to support the Diakonia program and the role of rostered deacons in the synod. The ability to relate to youth, encourage their participation, and support programming and resources to support youth was strongly encouraged. A solid understanding of the needs of inner city ministries was listed as a priority. The ability to walk faithfully with pastors and congregations in crisis situations and with congregations which are closing was considered to be a primary responsibility.

A number of comments focused on the expectation that the next bishop would need to be firm in certain areas of decision-making, speaking the truth in love, but saying “No” when necessary. It was expected that the bishop would not be afraid to take a stand, particularly in regard to decisions involving congregations in crisis, including making the hard choices on which missions to start and which to discontinue.

The issue of rostering gay and lesbian clergy in committed relationships evoked a wide range of response. It was generally understood that the next bishop would have to address this issue, ideally with a sense of healing. But the hurts were obvious in our interviews. There were those who hoped for a bishop who embraced Lutheran tradition and was willing to support the provisions of the “Vision and Expectations” document of the ELCA that relate to the issue of sexuality; those who hoped for a bishop who would strongly support gay and lesbian rights; those who expressed the importance of dealing biblically and confessionally with the issues of sexuality; and those whose prayer was that the next bishop would be able to deal with any fallout that might occur regarding decisions on sexuality. In the words of one rostered deacon: **“Whatever happens regarding sexuality in 2009, the Metro New York Synod will not be comfortable. The bishop will have to be prepared for that and able to interpret that.”**

As part of our discussion we offered four general characteristics as descriptions needed in the next bishop: 1) administrator; 2) theologian; 3) pastor to pastors; 4) and visionary. The responses we received were widely mixed, and there was no clear consensus among those interviewed as to which of these four characteristics seemed most critical. Each of these was considered a priority by a significant segment of those interviewed.

Summary

During the course of these interviews with pastors, rostered leaders, lay people, Synod Council members, synod officers, and synod staff there were a number of recurring themes. **The themes we heard are not dissimilar to the summary categories reached in the 2006 Town Hall Meetings.³ The issues and concerns that were voiced in 2006 and in 2007 have not dissipated and are worth reviewing as well.**

These four themes are a summary of what was heard and experienced:

1) Consistency and inconsistency. It seems that many issues, ministries, congregations, leaders, programs and visions have had inconsistent attention and inconsistent action over the past number of years. Many people we spoke with expressed a deep desire for consistency in the new administration. The difficulty, however, is that consistency can come across as inflexibility. Making the distinction will be critical.

2) Fear and anxiety. While much of the fear and anxiety was openly voiced, there seems to be a broader layer of fear and anxiety underlying much of the mission and ministry of this synod. Many individuals and congregations are operating in a crisis, and many are focused primarily on the scarcity of resources. There was more conversation about scarcity than abundance. In the interview team's debriefing we noted that we did not hear much language about the potential or opportunities that exist within the synod in any of our conversations. This is not an attitude that will change overnight, but it needs to be creatively and firmly addressed.

3) Accountability and communication. Accountability was talked about frequently, often related to the need for follow-through. There is a strong sense that many things have been started in the synod, but not completed. A part of accountability is more transparent communication and engagement in the synod decision-making process.

4) Care and connection. We heard the need for stronger, more proactive pastoral care of pastors, rostered leaders and congregations. Building stronger connections between congregations, between congregations and synod, and between the whole synod and churchwide seems tied to that need for mutual care and concern.

Finally, this report recognizes that these are not easy conclusions to reach, easy to receive, or easy to act upon. We do trust the Spirit of God, however, to be moving, challenging, and guiding the people and leaders of the Metropolitan New York Synod. It is that collaboration among the saints of God and with the Spirit of God that moves us forward in Christ's Name.

³ Those three summary findings were: 1) People are seeking to renew a struggling church; 2) People are looking for leadership from the synod office; and 3) People want more communication and connection.

