

STATE OF THE SYNOD 2025

This year our Assembly theme is “More than Enough – Mas que Suficiente” and we have been leaning into the story, told in Mark 6:30-44, of how God provides a feast out of five loaves and two fish. It’s a story of God’s abundance in a world where people live in fear of scarcity. Does Jesus perform a miracle that turns a meager meal into much more, or maybe, the miracle was a chain reaction of generosity, where people were inspired to share and all had enough to eat. Either way, it was a story of God’s abundance.

With God there is always more than enough. We need constant reminders of this, because our world tells us that there isn’t enough to go around – not enough time, not enough \$\$, not enough food, and so we need to hold on to what we’ve got. Our capitalist market thrives on us thinking that we never have enough, so we have to constantly buy more, be more. Bigger is better, right? And this kind of thinking infects our churches as well. We think – if only we had more people, more money, more...you name it...then we could thrive in ministry. And yet... with God there is always mas que suficiente. Throughout this assembly, you’ll see ways in which we’re living out God’s abundance and generosity throughout our synod.

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Last summer, we began a listening process throughout the synod to help discern what the shape of our synod ministry needs to be in the coming years. We are committed to keep listening – to that end, on your table (and in the chat) there is a colored piece of paper for each of you. As you listen and learn throughout the day, I invite you to put down on that paper what it is you want to learn more about – we’ll collect those up at the end of the day. If you want a direct answer, please put your name and contact info. For those more general questions, as we identify themes those can be part of our targeted development of resources as well as possible learning events.
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The leadership landscape is shifting significantly – you’ve no doubt gotten the news by now that there’s a major “clergy shortage”, with many more retirements happening than are new people going into seminary. But this doesn’t tell the whole story. There are also a lot fewer full-time calls available than there used to be, as many congregations, particularly post-pandemic, have gotten much smaller and less financially capable.

At the same time many pastors and deacons these days need to stay in certain geographic areas because of a variety of factors. In the same breath we also hear women, LGBTQIA+ persons as well as persons of color often wait for calls, while congregations fight over the classic white male pastor with 2.5 kids, a dog and a guitar, the one who will bring back the youth.

What does this mean for us as the church? Well, every crisis is also an opportunity for the Holy Spirit to blow in and shake things up, providing more than enough of what we need.

For us this means growing more of our own pastor and deacon candidates right here in Texas, AND at the same time reimagining what it means to equip lay leaders for ministry, both inside the church AND beyond Sunday morning – in our everyday lives.

But we don't have to do it all ourselves! God is providing plenty of loaves and fishes with our Damascus Lifelong Learning initiative, through partners like Luther Seminary's Faith+LEAD, Wartburg Seminary's Castle project and our Episcopal siblings in Christ with their Iona Collaborative. It's a chain reaction of generosity! Together we are providing more access to training than ever before. We're not simply creating more Synod Authorized Ministers, although we still have that learning track, but we want to equip all the baptized, according to their giftedness and passion; for some to be preachers, for others to visit the sick, and for everyone to live out their baptismal call in their everyday lives.

The Candidacy Committee, chaired by Deacon John Dellis and the Leadership Team, chaired by Rebecca Guengerich, work alongside Deacon Darcy to guide all that we do to develop lay leaders and rostered ministers for the church and the world.

We are also being much more intentional about walking alongside our Latine leaders, with their unique opportunities and challenges to deepen their faith and support them with appropriate language and cultural resources to enable our synod to begin to resemble the diverse context we're planted in. Pastor Ricardo also traveling regularly to the Valley as we figure out how best to expand our mission footprint in that beautifully diverse and growing area of our synod.

We're accompanying and resourcing congregations in a variety of ways, experimenting with new collaborative networks and shared ministries. This includes how local congregations and leaders pool their loaves and fishes together to better join God in mission in their neighborhoods. One such opportunity is with our ecumenical partners as we continue to deepen our relationship with several denominations.

We are exploring with congregations how they might reimagine their use of property and facilities by partnering with organizations like The Impact Guild's Good Acres program and Rooted Good to invest in affordable housing, and in economic and social development that support their neighborhoods.

Some examples of congregations taking seriously their call to share their property "loaves and fishes" for the benefit of their neighbors include Good Shepherd, San Antonio, and Holy Cross and St. John/San Juan in Austin.

We are investing in expanding Camp Hope around our synod. This is an amazing neighborhood day camp ministry that grows young leaders as they work with kids. We intend to pilot this in San Antonio and the Rio Grande Valley next summer.

We are also discovering new ways to resource existing congregations to envision futures and legacies that are mission-forward. One of the ways we are doing this is through Ministry360s. This tool brings together stakeholders and friends of a local church to help take the congregation's "missional temperature," celebrating where God is already at work in their midst, and giving outside perspective and perhaps some recommendations for strategically thinking about the future.

We continue to support our new church plants, synod authorized outreach ministries, and strategic ministries. These include Platicas, MacArthur Park and San Pablo in San Antonio, St. John/San Juan and Palabra de Vida in Austin, San Lucas and Eagle Pass Frontera Ministries in Eagle Pass, and Technicolor Ministries.

And, knowing that one of the best investments in evangelism and disciple-making is the starting of new ministries, we are incubating a new approach for mission called Fresh Expressions . This movement helps churches reach new people by forming new Christian communities with those who aren't traditionally involved with church.

These Fresh Expressions, as they are called, are not simply added to a congregation's programs, but are a way for the church to live out its purpose more deeply in everyday places... Think pub church, hiking church, yoga church... it's all done where people already gather... and it doesn't require someone to be a pastor or deacon to lead it.

And to help our synod to coordinate all of this this important and urgent work of mission, Brother Chris gets the privilege of conspiring with our Holy Experiments Team. He's currently guiding our team in rethinking and refocusing our work to better accomplish the synod goals of establishing churches and exploring new mission opportunities. We also want to give a special shoutout for the leadership of our outgoing chair, Pastor Jake Fain.

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We continue with our work welcoming newcomers to our country, and we have been coordinating with 5 other synods in that work through the Sembrando en los Margenes project. Earlier this year, representatives from all 6 synods met in San Diego to learn from and support one another in this challenging yet vital ministry.

Three years ago, our synod assembly passed a resolution calling for us to grow more fully into being the Beloved Community that Martin Luther King Jr. dreamed of so many years ago and to develop a three year comprehensive plan toward this. During the last three years we have offered trainings to clergy and lay folks, as well as DEI audits for

congregations going through the call process. We as a staff as well as our deans and synod council have continued to learn how we become more anti-racist and inclusive. We are also offering clergy ethics, anti-racism and gender justice training for all clergy on a three year rotation, in collaboration with other synods in our region. Clergy need to be up to date on these trainings in order to seek new calls.

The challenge has been tha congregations have autonomy in the ELCA. We are an interdependent church with three expressions and not a hierarchical one. So even though voting members from congregations in our synod brought this to the assembly and approved it, each congregation gets to decide how they respond to the resolution.

Congregations in our synod have worked to become Beloved Community in different ways and to varying degrees. We all have more work to do; we all have more to learn and unlearn. That's as true for me as it is for all of us gathered. Racism and White Supremacy hurts all of us and are not reflective of the Belonging and Belovedness God extends to all people. If you're interested in resources to support your congregation's journey towards expanding Beloved Community, please check the box on the sheet of paper that you have at your table and someone from our office will be in touch.

Related, to this, Bishop Briner has been joining with leaders from around the church in publicly speaking out against Christian Nationalism, which is better termed White Supremacist Nationalism. Their adherents proclaim a false gospel of hate, lies and dehumanization. This unfortunately continues to be a dominant voice in our culture. We have received some pushback on this, with folks arguing that Christians need to “stay out of politics.” Yet the reality is that Jesus was highly political – he was, and continues to be about bringing a new world order with a whole new set of priorities and values. As baptized followers of Jesus, we are called to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ and his values of love, justice, mercy and the dignity of all people. So we cannot keep silent in the face of so much injustice. We invite you to get involved. One way is through the new PROTESTant Faith – Insistent on LOVE initiative.

As you can see, all of us together as the Southwestern Texas Synod are doing amazing things, even in challenging times. This is because in Jesus Christ, God has shared more than enough for us to be activated by the Holy Spirit for the sake of the world. From growing new leaders, to exploring new ways to be the Church, to planting new ministries, and speaking up for the most vulnerable among us, We invite each of us to consider how we are sharing and living out God's promises.

May our sharing spark a chain reaction of generosity and love so that everyone everywhere might know that with God, there is always mas que suficiente!!