



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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## PROJECT DESCRIPTION

For nearly 50 years, mainline churches have experienced declines in the number of people attending and participating in congregational life. This decline, along with other contributing factors, is evidenced in the many small congregations struggling to sustain vital ministries. With the Covid 19 social distancing and gathering restrictions, these congregations are feeling additional stress. In the near future, it won't be surprising if many congregations reach a tipping point in the life of their ministry.

## OBJECTIVES

- Discover new models and strategies for sustainable ministry with small congregations.
- Develop tools and resources for helping congregations and pastoral leaders who find themselves at a critical tipping point in their ministries.
- Find direction and discern the best and most helpful ways to strengthen the partnership between synods and small congregations struggling with sustainability issues.

## PROCESS

This Project has an ELCA focus. It began with surveying Bishops, Assistants to the Bishop, and Directors of Evangelical Mission from 16 ELCA Synods representing North and South Dakota, Nebraska, Iowa, Minnesota, and western Wisconsin. 35 surveys were completed and returned. Those responding represented seven synods. 53% were from pastors serving congregations, 34% were professional synod staff, and 11% were from Bishops.

The survey results were compiled and shared with participants. Those who expressed interest were invited to become part of a planning team. The Planning Team meet online in three 90 - minute sessions. The Planning Team's work is represented by this report.

## PROJECT OUTCOMES

### The Survey

The survey results show the need for practical help for congregations facing sustainability issues to be both important and urgent. These congregations face financial challenges, declining participation, and conflict. While the survey indicated a variety of approaches and tools have been used with congregations, there didn't seem to be agreement that one was more helpful than another.

### Project Team Results

The Project Team's objective was to answer the question "When congregations find themselves facing issues of sustainability, what kind of help and leadership is helpful and beneficial?" This was accomplished by exploring four specific questions:

1. What are the characteristics of a congregation facing sustainability issues? (Current reality)
2. For what do you pray when praying for these congregations? (Vision)
3. What might be blocking the vision or slowing down progress towards the vision? (Roadblocks)
4. What directions for action will deal with the roadblocks and move towards the vision? (Actions)

What are the characteristics of a congregation facing sustainability issues? (Current reality)

- Positive seeds of hope - *in many places there is an acceptance as well as a tenacious hopeful spirit, pushing creativity, and in some instances jump-starting other ministries*
- Unhelpful understandings and attitudes – *often an inward focus, a desire to find fault/blame, polarized thinking, and an attitude of scarcity*
- Solutions which seem unrealistic – *solutions are last-ditch efforts, too little too late, move towards being a club to keep the building open*
- Confusing and dangerous for leaders – *leaders are unprepared for the situation, get caught in the middle, become a lightning rod, deal with informal power structures*
- Stuck using old solutions to new challenges – *there is strong sense of nostalgia and loss, a desire to return to the old ways, stuck in the past*
- Unsettled, worried, anxious – *people are upset, worried, discouraged, anxious, and sometimes angry*
- Multiple generations tangible losses – *the membership and communities have suffered multiple losses – farms, schools, population, financial viability... exhibit the stages of grief*
- Aging membership death is on people's minds – *high average age of membership, missing youth, some want to die before the church closes*
- Challenged to acknowledge the situation and take action – *challenging for people to let go and to change, frozen*
- Loss of hope and confidence – *people are sad, fearful, tired, feeling alone, a sense of hopelessness*

For what do you pray when praying for these congregations? (Vision)

- The building issues are solved
- Overall confidence in the future based on God's promises
- The congregation's focus expands to include community
- An honest, realistic acknowledgement of the current situation
- Vital connections to the wider church
- Faithful, capable leadership

- Members are living out and practicing their faith
- Members working peacefully together

What might be blocking the vision or slowing down progress towards the vision? (Roadblocks)

- Strong feelings and disagreements
- Difficulty adapting and implementing new ways and change
- Fear which seems to be everywhere
- Leadership which is stressed when leadership is crucial
- Faith challenges – “Where is God?”
- Possibilities for the future are limited by inward thinking
- Financial and demographic realities

What directions for action will deal with the roadblocks and move towards the vision? (Actions)

- Cultivating new ministries with cooperation and a local mission focus
- Supporting, strengthening, and improving relationships within the congregation
- Taking advantage of professional resources outside of the congregation
- Developing specialized training, resources, and tools for leaders called to serve
- Building up hope, generosity, faith, and Christian identity
- Promoting patience and appreciation through careful listening

### *PROJECT CONCLUSIONS*

This project was born out of a need for practical tools, training, and resources for pastors and leaders working with congregations facing sustainability issues. The survey results and the Project Team expanded the understanding of this need. The individuals who participated as part of the Project Team represented a broad geographical area, a wide range of experiences, and perspectives. They included congregation members, parish pastors, adjudicatory leaders, and outside consultants. These six directions for action suggest a way forward for the church to address this need.

Next steps might include the development of a specialized ministry training curriculum focused on

1. Increasing the leader’s understanding of the congregation facing sustainability issues
2. Accessing different cooperative ministry models and discerning who, when, where, how, and why a particular model might be helpful given the situation
3. Using tools for accessing sustainability and vitality issues
4. Improving and expanding skills for listening, conversation, and peacemaking
5. Preaching, teaching, and discovering new life in the congregation
6. Resources for ministry, including consultants, coaches, legal help, facilitation, grants, etc.

### *PROJECT LEADERSHIP*

Rev. Peter Soli of Dialog Works has coordinated and facilitate this project. His leadership has been volunteered as an investment in the future of ministry in small congregations. For additional information visit [www.dialogworks.org](http://www.dialogworks.org).