

# North/West Lower Michigan Synod – ELCA

## CONGREGATIONAL PARTNERSHIP STRATEGY



As we enter the 2020's we know that it will bring new models of churches working together. The shortage of clergy, the growing number of congregations that cannot financially support their own full-time pastor, and the need to work together to renew the church all contribute to the need to build intentional partnerships. Furthermore, church is much more fun and life-giving when it is not in survival mode.

In reflection of the biblical witness, God calls us into partnerships. We are partners with God in mission. God could do God's work alone, but God chooses to work in partnership with humans to accomplish God's mission. God partnered with:

- Abraham and Sarah to lead God's people in a new place
- Isaiah and Jeremiah to care for God's people in exile
- Jesus and the disciples to create a new community
- Peter and Paul to work out their difference and be the church together in order to bring the Good news to the ends of the world

God's desire is not for the people of God to be isolated, but to work together for the common good. Jesus prays at the end of the last supper for the unity of his followers: *"...that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. <sup>22</sup>The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, <sup>23</sup>I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me."* John 17:21b-23.

Jesus says that when we work together it is a clear sign of God's love and mission.

Partnerships between congregations come in many forms:

- informal relationships with neighboring ELCA congregations and/or agencies
- informal relationships with neighboring ecumenical partner congregations
- formal contractual relationships between ELCA congregations and/or agencies
- formal contractual relationships between ELCA congregations and ecumenical partners
- Anchor Church agreements
- Area Ministry Strategies

Partnerships are formed so that the mission and ministry of Jesus can be supported and grow. Partnerships formed solely for economic purposes do not serve God's mission and ministry in the community or the world, and are not blessed by the Holy Spirit.

Experience has shown that faithful partnerships grow and develop in this way:

**1) Prayer and listening to God.**

Those desiring a congregational partnership, study God's word together through studies of the book of Acts and other biblical text

**2) Build trust with each other by:**

(Experience has shown to commit to a 6 month process)

Worshiping together.

Having fellowship together.

Doing service projects together.

Building relationships together.

**3) Cast a vision**

Work together on a mission statement, purpose, core values for the partnership.

What is God calling these congregations to do and be together that will foster the kingdom of God both inside and outside the church.

**4) Work out the details**

When the first three steps have been completed then details of finance, governance, leadership, and mission and ministry can be worked out.

It is important to proceed in the above order. The temptation to immediately discuss compromise on building and worship times will subvert the process or kill it all together.

When congregations begin a partnership conversation, synodical/judicatory officials need to be consulted. Even though there is a great deal of congregational autonomy within ELCA congregations, when two or more congregations seek to work together it is the responsibility of the synod/judicatory to walk with them. Conversations with ecumenical partners often require consulting judicatory to judicatory before conversations can begin. This consulting works better when done sooner rather than later.

## **Types of Partnerships**

### **Informal**

It is expected that ELCA congregations in close proximity to each other will cooperate and plan mission and ministry to the community together. In many areas congregations have worked together to each take a different roll in support to the

community and those in need so that every congregation does not have to be all things to all people. Congregations may even consult on offering different styles or ministry, different styles of worship, and ministry of different age groups or demographics. Cooperation on special services of worship, commemoration days, and festival days gives the opportunity to know ELCA neighbors and feel the strength in numbers to empower mission and ministry.

Local ecumenical partner congregations are expected to be in partnerships for the sake of the Gospel and its proclamation in the local community.

### **Formal Contractual: ELCA and Ecumenical Partners**

Most often congregations form a partnership in order to share staff to enhance their mission and ministry in the community and for pastoral care. Congregations may share pastoral leadership, or staff for youth, outreach, music, or other ministries. As stated above it is important to have a conversation with the synod to assist in this process. The above stated steps are important to build trust, listen to God, work out the details, and cast a vision.

There is a sample covenant for congregational partnerships provided in the appendix of this document. The purpose of the covenant is mission and ministry. The mission statement of the partnership should be spelled out in the covenant.

There is a sample contract for Rostered Ministers provided in the appendix. A Rostered Minister cannot be called by more than one ministry. So one calls and the other(s) contract. In the event that an ecumenical partner Rostered Minister is called to and ELCA congregation, there is a special contract for that.

All contractual agreements between congregations must be submitted to the synod office for approval.

### **Anchor Churches**

There are congregations that are making positive impact in their communities as a result of their depth in biblical, theological and missional thinking. Their strength and vitality has also generated greater levels of generosity and desire to share their experience and resources with other churches. These, Anchor Churches, are being connected with other ministries in their Synods to journey together and pursue enhanced vitality as a community of communities.

Although the recent conversation started with some of the largest ELCA Churches, what was soon discovered is that a church of any size with the resource of vitality can become an Anchor Church. Although it can look different in every context, we believe the strength of this model is in utilizing the vitality of one congregation and being in relationship with a congregation that has potential for vitality. In other words, this model is not to just make the pastor have more work and multiple congregations. It is not for the vital congregation to simply take on the bills of the other congregation. It is to figure out how a relationship can multiply vitality. It strengthens the purpose of the vital congregation and utilizes the resources of their vitality to lift up the vital resources of the other congregation.

In some places, it may mean that the other congregation becomes a satellite/second campus, but more likely it will be an opportunity to simply share resources so that the other partner congregation can also thrive in vitality. Remember, vitality is not about the size of the congregation but about being: Communities of Jesus that nurture life-changing relationships with God, one another and the world.

### **Area Ministry Strategies**

Congregations and community partners in a specific community working together to make a significant impact on their area through community engagement, faith formation, evangelical outreach, and care for those in need. Area Ministry Strategies have four essential elements:

- 1) Paying attention to God
- 2) Engaging all the baptized
- 3) Paying attention to transforming the church
- 4) Clear goals for engaging the community

A more detailed outline of the process is found in Building Healthy Communities

### **Strategy for the Future**

Tools will be provided, like those in the appendix, for assessing the congregation's need for a partnership and its sustainability and vitality.

The synod will provide partnership training including:

- How to build relationships
- Congregational Lifecycle
- Listening process and One on One training
- Asset mapping
- Introduction to the elements of vitality

Appendix

Cooperative Ministry Spectrum

Congregational Vitality Assessment

Sample pastoral ministry contract

Sample covenant between congregations

Steps for Merger or Consolidation between Congregations