

Southwestern Texas Synod Strategic Planning Task Force (SPTF) Report to Synod Council – September 9, 2017

Project Overview

In response to the 2016 Synod Assembly action and in anticipation of a leadership transition as we elect a new bishop at the 2018 Synod Assembly, the SPTF was commissioned for the work of listening to God through Scripture and prayer and listening to the synod – that is, the members of all of the congregations and institutions in the Southwestern Texas Synod and to synod staff.

The goal of this deep listening to God and to ourselves was to discern who we, the Southwestern Texas Synod of the ELCA, are right now and who we aspire to be, identifying a clear purpose and goals as we seek to be the Church in the world.

At its September 2016 meeting, the Southwestern Texas Synod Council appointed to the SPTF: Pr. Drew Ingram, Spirit in the Hills, Spicewood; Pr. Susie Schnelle, Gethsemane, Austin; Rhonda Balsley, Grace, Bandera; Pr. Chris Gentile, Grace, San Antonio; Sergio Rodriguez, House of Prayer, San Antonio; Pr. Dawn Silvius, retired, Seguin; Mark Helmke, Synod Attorney; and Bp. Ray Tiemann, staff liaison.

The synod acquired two partners in this process. The first was LEAD (Living Everyday As Disciples). They are a ministry within the Texas-Louisiana Gulf Coast Synod with which we have close connections. They provided evaluation and training for congregations to better “make disciples.” They also work with synods to listen well and help develop strategic plans for mission and ministry. We contracted for a one-year process which is coming to a close.

Our other partner was Research and Evaluation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Dr. Kenneth W. Inskeep, its director, regularly works with synods in all kinds of research projects, including what are commonly called “synod audits.” In this process they looked at the wide variety of statistics available on the synod through demographics, congregational annual reports, congregational vitality survey results, etc. They provided a wealth of statistical information (ministry and financial trends in congregations, population changes, etc.) on the synod. They were also able to provide an online survey through the Remark Web Survey that was available to anyone in the synod for gathering information. They provided an analysis of the statistics and survey results and options for consideration. As this was provided through the ELCA, there was no cost to the synod.

The SPTF identified two Biblical texts (Leviticus 19:33-34 and Luke 15:11-32) that shaped our gatherings, our listening, and our work together. We heard God’s call to love and serve all our neighbors, especially the immigrant, stranger, and alien among us. We also read of God’s deep love for all of God’s children, particularly in the parable of the Prodigal Son. In that text, the father’s love, God’s love, is for persons and congregations who are called to celebrate new life springing up around us.

Beginning with the belief that the synod is more than the bishop and the synod office - but is indeed all of the congregations, institutions, worshiping communities, and their members across Southwestern Texas - the SPTF set out to hear what God is doing among these people. As the SPTF planned its work, there was opportunity for face-to-face conversations (conference deaneries, conference meetings, the Synod Council, etc.) for communal conversations and the electronic survey. The electronic survey opened on March 15 and closed on May 15. At the May 5-6, 2017, Synod

Assembly, the SPTF delivered an updated report to the assembly and developed a conversational process that was conducted during the plenary time.

Through a widespread survey, conference gatherings, synod assembly, and other focus group listening, the taskforce heard the joys, hopes, and struggles of all the people, congregations, and groups who make up the Southwestern Texas Synod, as well as the goals we have for all of us together as a synod. Through this listening, we learned that rural, suburban, and urban congregations are experiencing the same struggles as we seek to be sustainable and vital communities of faith. While the struggles are present and difficult, the SPTF also heard an overwhelming sense of hope that the God who creates something out of nothing and who brings life from death is making all things new, empowering us to work together, enlivening us to be vital expressions of God's love, and is calling us to take part in the work of God for peace and justice for all people.

Over the summer the SPTF met three times to collate all the information and develop the proposal for a new synod Purpose Statement and the skeleton of a strategic plan to be presented to the Synod Council at its September 8-9, 2017, meeting. We discussed your concerns, your expectations, and your deep hope for our synod. We invite you to review the reports and collected data that offers some highlights of what you told us at <http://www.swtsynod.org/strategicplanning>.

Based on what we have heard from God through Scripture and through you, we have identified a Purpose Statement and set of goals for the synod moving forward which are presented below.

When that is approved by the Synod Council, the SPTF will contact graphic artists to create a logo that expresses our future calling together. Also, the SPTF will meet with synod staff this fall to "put meat on the skeleton," developing implementation steps for each of the major goal areas. It will be widely distributed so that synod members can see the synod's new focus on programs and goals. It will formally be presented at a special meeting in each Conference in February, 2018, as names are gathered for potential bishop candidates in that pre-identification process. The intended hope is that synod members will consider the leadership gifts necessary in the next bishop to lead this strategic plan.

Implementation

As noted above, following the Synod Council meeting the SPTF is scheduled to meet with the synod staff to develop short-term and long-term (2-year) goals for alignment, and execution, of the strategic plan. This work may include goals to stop doing some ministries in order to take on new opportunities. The framework below is the beginning of moving from a visionary purpose and core convictions to regular core practices to create traction across the synod. These next steps include a plan for setting metrics that will help the synod see progress, share stories, and create momentum for being the church in a changing world. In response to the deep listening done by the SPTF, the primary focus areas of the synod will include pastoral care, congregational vitality, justice and peace, and engagement with the neighborhood. Each of these focus areas will live out the synod's new core convictions to grow as adaptive leaders as God's grace transforms and connects us to learn, love, and lead.

Strategic Plan

As the SPTF considered the reports from the many face-to-face conversations, the synod assembly, and the electronic survey, they began to brainstorm ideas on how to pull this information together into a guiding Purpose Statement. In particular we focused on the top responses from these two questions from the electronic survey.

Question 4

The most important responsibilities of the synod are:

1. Providing for pastoral care of congregation, minister of Word and Sacrament and ministers of Word and Service;
2. Encouraging congregations to respond to human need, work for justice and peace, care for the sick and the suffering and participate responsibly in society;
3. Developing of new ministries, redevelopment of existing ministries ,and support and assistance in the conclusion, if necessary, of a particular ministry;
4. Leading and encouraging of congregations in their evangelism efforts.

Question 7

How should the synod best support congregations and leaders?

1. Help congregations increase vitality and sustainability;
2. Help congregations connect with their communities;
3. Encourage identification and development of leaders;
4. Identify ways congregations can collaborate;
5. Promote spiritual behavior and discipleship.

After hours of conversation, several things became clear. First, we are confident that God has been active in this process for our synod. The honesty and wisdom of responses, the passion for the ministry and mission we do together, and the hope for the future in spite of challenges was inspiring.

Second, there was a clear emphasis that the work of the synod involves all of us in reaching out beyond ourselves and our congregational settings. While congregations form the base of worship life and spiritual growth, reaching beyond ourselves into our neighborhoods and around the world in love and service is our calling.

Third, we wanted to recognize that we can't do this work by ourselves. It is God's grace that will "transform" individuals, ministries, institutions, systems, etc. We trust that "the Holy Spirit has called us through the gospel, enlightened us with his gifts, made us holy and kept us in the true faith, just as he calls, gathers, enlightens, and makes holy the whole Christian church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one common, true faith." (Apostles' Creed, Third Article)

Finally, an important theme that kept emerging was the need for us to find more effective ways to "connect." That might be through cooperative ministry ventures, more effective communication, or finding ways to share resources to fund a new mission opportunity. We will do that by learning together, loving each other, and being strong and faithful leaders in the joint mission of Jesus Christ in the Southwestern Texas Synod.

Purpose Statement

God’s grace transforms and connects us to learn, to love, to lead.

Scriptural Foundation

Romans 12:2 – “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God - what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

Core Convictions and Goals

God’s grace transforms and connects us . . .

Goals / Core Convictions	Pastoral Care for Leaders	Congregational Sustainability and Vitality	Justice and Peace	Engagement with Neighbors
<i>. . . to learn</i>	Accompany leaders in developing and executing a plan for growing in their faith and leadership.	Experiment with models to teach the faith and deepen discipleship.	Train people to listen and amplify messages.	Motivate both urban and rural congregations to move beyond their comfort zones to build relationships and welcome the neighbor.
<i>. . . to love</i>	Follow the commandment of Jesus to love ourselves.	Determine congregational strengths and weaknesses, questioning and clarifying congregation’s purpose and values.	Equip people to speak and act on issues of injustice.	Following the commandment of Jesus to love our neighbor, we walk with the marginalized, the immigrant, and the refugee.
<i>. . . to lead</i>	Create a movement of leaders who are growing leaders.	Change structures to create a diverse leadership that shares power.	Confess and confront our blind spots and sinfulness around race, gender, age, sexuality, culture, and ethnicity.	Facilitate opportunities to work together meeting the needs of and with the neighborhood.