

**Synod Assembly**  
**May 18, 2024**  
**Bishop Finegan's Report**

In the ordination rite, the new pastor is charged to care for God's people, bear their burdens, and do not betray their confidence. Further, the new pastor is instructed with the words, "So discipline yourself in life and teaching that you preserve the truth, giving no occasion for false security or illusory hope." When I was ordained, I too was charged and instructed in this way. Today, in my report, I will take that charge very seriously and lay before you the current reality of our synod, so that I give no occasion for illusory hope or false security.

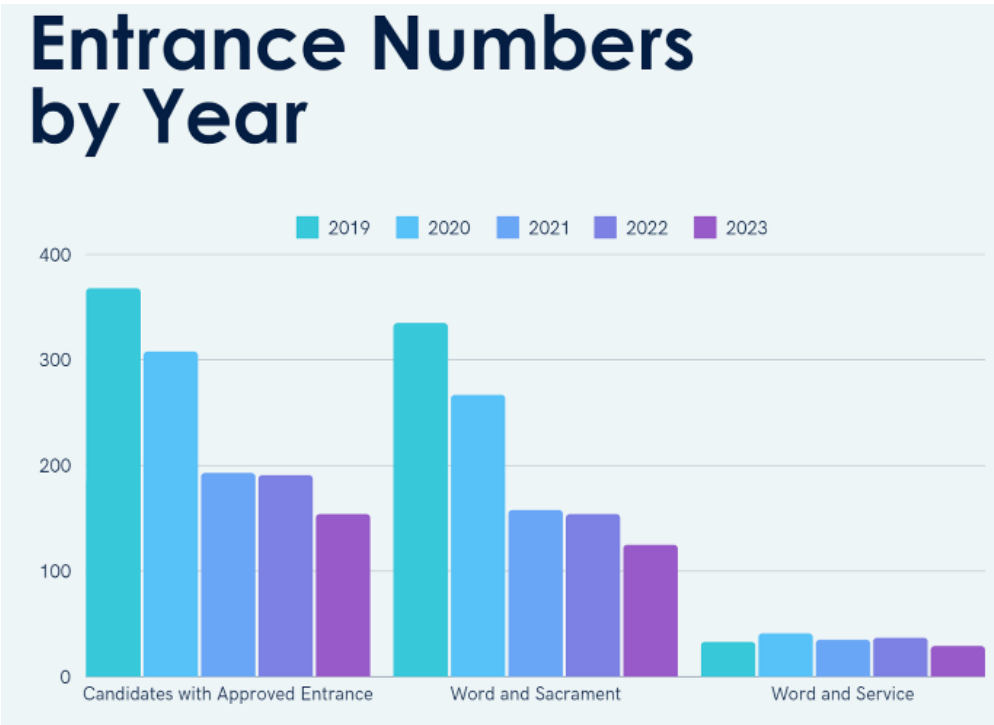
So prepare yourselves for something of a reality check. It will feel like bad news. It will raise your anxiety. It will make you wonder and even worry about the future of the Church that we all love, and the congregation that you love.

But know this, my aim, in sharing with you the current reality and very present challenges, is not to bring us to despair, but to prepare us for change and transformation. God is at work in all of this. So first, I will do my best to gently but clearly dismantle any false security or illusory hope. And then, proclaim God's ever present and creative activity as the church we love is Christ's church and we are blessed to participate in what God is doing. Together we will reach for solid hope and creative strategies as we meet the challenges of change together.

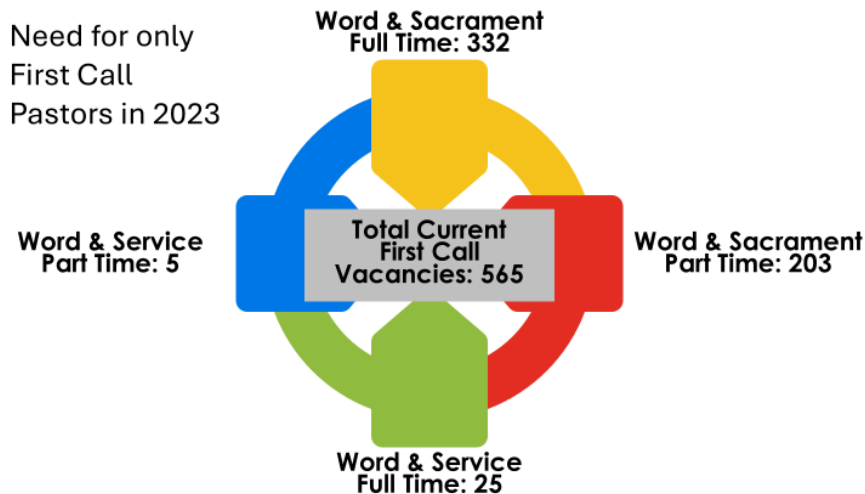
First, the reality check. I present to you some statistics compiled by the staff of the ELCA. These numbers will give you a picture of where the church is in regard to the emerging future of theologically trained and ordained pastoral leadership.

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Candidates with Approved Entrance	368	308	193	191	154
Word and Sacrament	335	267	158	154	125
Word and Service	33	41	35	37	29

In only five years, the number of Word and Sacrament pastors that entered Candidacy, that is, began an up to four year journey of preparation to become pastors, went from 335 in 2019 to 125 in 2023. I'm not going to focus on the Word and Service candidates as the overwhelming need currently in our synod is for Word and Sacrament ministers. These candidates for ministry, entered in 2023, will graduate in 2027 if they complete a four-year course of study.



Here are the same numbers in a graph format which provides a clear visualization of the steep decline in numbers of students entered into candidacy and seminary since just before Covid to last year.



This slide shows how many full time and part time first call vacancies there were in 2023. A First Call congregation is one that needs a candidate who is more affordable, and it is a congregation that is a less complex system, more healthy and willing to extend grace to a pastor who is unseasoned. So this number of 332 full time First call Word and sacrament pastoral vacancies does not reflect the additional number of congregations looking for a pastor with experience. Adding together part time and full time first call positions, the ELCA records that there were 535 pastoral vacancies across our church with only 170 total seminary graduates in 2023 to fill them.

Congregation	Date of Vacancy	Staff Responsible	Interim Factor	Initial Meeting
All Saints, Wakefield	7/1/20	Bishop Finagan	Rev. Leon Maki	8/18/20
Sharon, Beesomer			Administrative Interim	
First, Iron River	8/1/20	Bishop Finagan	CL Student Lance Crevier	7/19/20
Bethany, Ishpeming	7/1/21	Bishop Finagan	Rev. Schellbogens	4/26/21
Faith, Ishpeming			Administrative Interim	
Trinity, Ishpeming	8/1/21	Rev. Dushring	Rev. Tom Skeneza	7/12/21
Zion, Marinette	5/1/22	Bishop Finagan	Rev. Douglas Schoen	4/19/22
			Part-time Interim	
Immanuel, Rhinelander	5/3/22	Rev. Dushring	Rev. John Kozaj	4/27/22
			Administrative Interim	
Porterfield, Porterfield	7/2/22	Rev. Dushring	Student Dan Maschea	6/19/22
Beaver American, Pound			CL-Lite	
United, L'Anse	8/1/22	Rev. Dushring	Rev. Julie Bekow	7/15/22
			Administrative Interim	
Ascension, Minocqua	8/22/22	Bishop Finagan	Rev. Philip Johnson	8/4/22
			Full-time Interim	
Pioneer Lake, Conover	10/1/22	Rev. Dushring	Rev. Peggy Rose	9/12/22
			3/4 Interim	
Emmanuel, Menominee	11/14/22	Bishop Finagan	Rev. Christine Olson	11/8/22
			Full-time Interim	
Grace, South Range	4/16/23	Bishop Finagan	Rev. Bucky Beach	none
			Administrative Interim	
Northern Light, Pariah	6/18/23	Rev. Dushring	Rev. Bill Jacobson	6/7/23
			Administrative Interim	
Calvary, Rapid River	11/1/23	Bishop Finagan	Rev. Tony Frankenstein	10/12/23
First, Trenton			Administrative Interim	
Christ the King, Escanaba	2/1/24	Bishop Finagan	Rev. David Johnson	1/31/24
			LLM Sarah Sleeter	
			Administrative Interim	
Faith, Rock	2/1/24	Rev. Dushring	Rev. Jack Busche	1/24/24
			Administrative Interim	
Bethany, Negaunee	4/1	Rev. Dushring	Rev. Dave Van Kley	3/21/24
Emmanuel, Skandia			Administrative Interim	
Eden, Munising	4/1	Bishop Finagan	Rev. Lon Hider	3/15/24
			Administrative Interim	

77 Congregations in the NGLS

Pastoral Vacancies  
17 calls  
23 Congregations

2 with student leadership  
3 with intentional interims

11 Full time  
6 ish less than full time

5 of 77 congregations served by Licensed Lay Ministers less than full time

This next slide shows the pastoral vacancies in our synod. Of our 77 congregations, there are 17 calls which involve 23 of our congregations. The congregations in grey either have a seminary student that is providing pastoral leadership or the congregation has a full time interim and so may or may not be immediately in the call process.

These numbers, while they may seem high, have been much worse. During my time as bishop, I think we peaked at 32 or 33 pastoral vacancies during and just after Covid. However, the average wait for a pastor used to be about a year. As you might be able to see in the small print, we have congregations now in their second, third, and fourth year of pastoral vacancy. Such a long wait time is new for us.

One reason for this is that there used to be more or less a steady stream of first call pastors. We were in the habit of getting at least one or even two first call pastors a year. While there is still a small stream of new seminary graduates, many of them are not willing to move. Perhaps they are second career, and their spouse is a farmer. Perhaps they have children or grandchildren that they want to live near. Perhaps they have been serving in a congregation during seminary and that situation naturally becomes a call. Suffice it to say that today, there is a pastor shortage, both of first call and experienced pastors, and congregations find themselves in competition for the pastors who are looking for a first call or a new call.

If a candidate is unfamiliar with rural ministry and northern climes, if they are uncomfortable with the unknown and unaccustomed to throwing themselves into the wind of the Spirit, we in the Northern Great Lakes Synod are at a disadvantage. If there is a first call candidate who is willing to serve anywhere and embraces a sense of adventure, then that one candidate is in demand by many synods and up to 11 of my region 5 colleagues will be in conversation to decide which synod has the privilege of working with this candidate first. We try to take turns, we try to be equitable regarding how many pastoral vacancies each synod has and what

setting might be the best fit for a given candidate. But the reality is that there simply are not enough candidates to fill the current number of pastoral vacancies.

So where does that leave the congregations that would like to welcome their next pastor?

In short, I cannot make any promises. Nor will I offer false assurances like – “it’s only a matter of time.” While it is good to prepare for your next pastor, as you can see from these figures, nothing is certain. We continue to pray that God provides, either a new pastor or creative solutions that keep ministry in motion - Which the congregations on the chart that you saw are already doing. I thank God for the congregational leaders that have stepped up, for the retired pastors who continue to serve, for neighboring conference pastors and congregations that continue to offer support.

Know that I continue to recruit, advocate, negotiate, pray, leave messages, review paperwork, and do what I can to search for pastors. I continue to pray that God provides, that the Spirit moves. It may well be that the solution is not finding a pastor or creating more of them, but something else, and something new. The Spirit of the Living Christ is with us and will lead the church into its future, no matter how uncomfortable or unfamiliar it feels to us.

But in the spirit of being seed sowers, there is something that you can do too. You, every congregation and individual, can plant seeds and support ministries that are vital to faith formation and equipping people to serve the work of Christ through the church, whether as dedicated participants or as ministry professionals.

The following ministry efforts and partners have shown themselves as effective in the area of pastoral and leadership development.



- Lutheran Campus Ministry. More than a few pastors first imagined and were initially equipped for church leadership through Lutheran Campus Ministry. It has been through participation in LCM that many a pastor has first discerned a call to professional ministry. I lift up the “Feed My Sheep” matching grant challenge of LCM at MTU with Pastor Sarah Semmler Smith.



- and I lift up the efforts of Pastor Alex LaChapelle at NMU, who will be officially installed during our worship service today. In addition, the NGLS also supports the Campus ministry efforts at Bay College in Escanaba. Of course, current support of LCM efforts will not immediately serve the needs of our congregations. But by financially supporting LCM efforts today, you plant seeds for future ministry and the future church.



- Another effort that effectively provides opportunities for discernment and equipping people for ministry is Lifelong Faith Formation which evolved from our synod's Lay School for Mission. More than a few of our Licensed Lay Ministers first imagined and were equipped for ministry through the NGLS Lay School for Mission. Lifelong Faith Formation continues to provide education and discernment for deeper engagement. And Lay school opportunities abound. This more intentional and structured effort to equip lay people for leadership continues in our neighboring synods of the ECSW and the NWSWi. Additional opportunities are offered through Faith Lead at Luther and



more are becoming available in synods across the country. Scholarship funds are available for any lay person or LLM who wishes to engage in these opportunities. Again, this is not an immediate “fix”. But congregational leaders can be equipped now for future ministry, especially for our smaller and less than full time congregations.



- And more than a few of our Licensed Lay Ministers, current seminarians and currently serving pastors first imagined and were equipped for leadership through outdoor ministry such as Fortune Lake Camp. Supporting the participation of youth, encouraging the involvement of young adults, making use of the camp and financially supporting its mission is an investment in the present life and future leadership of the church.

And of course, the encouragement you offer the people, young and old, in your congregation who have gifts for ministry is important. Encourage their involvement, their participation in congregational life and leadership, deeper engagement in learning and ministry.

Again, it is not an immediate fill for our current pastoral vacancies, rather it is planting seeds for future leadership, future faith, future church, and whatever God has in mind for what that will look like. I believe we are in a moment of history that will last some years, and when the dust of transformation settles, the church, will be different than what we're used to, it will look different than maybe we want it to. There are things we are going to miss. There already are. But God is moving the church, nudging, pushing even, towards a new something. Some possibilities that I have heard imagined:

- A return to the kind of circuit rider pastor. Perhaps the shape of the future church is lay led congregations equipped and supported by an ordained pastor who preaches and presides perhaps once a month, is available for consultation, and mentors more than one lay minister. This model is currently being employed by our Tanzanian partners, where an evangelist provides leadership for the day to day needs of the congregation and a parish pastor provides continuing supervision and support to several leaders and congregations.

Currently, we are not yet set up for this, both in our structure and in our expectations. Congregations, generally speaking, want to have their own leader. While we have several shared pastor situations, geography can get in the way. Continuing education and support for our lay leaders is still evolving. Currently serving pastors have their plates full as it is, without adding supervisory responsibilities. But this is an area we are mindful of, to prepare the soil, the people, and our structures, for this potential emerging model of ministry.

- With this possibility comes a marked increase in lay leadership, where the church leans into what it has always proclaimed and celebrated, the priesthood of all believers. More congregations will be served by lay ministers, and more pastors will rely on more lay leaders to be partners to meet the demands of ministry. Equipping people to take more ownership, more initiative, and be more confident in the gifts for ministry that God has given them is a current goal. Achieving a balance in support and accountability, authority and servant leadership, education and theological depth is at the fore.
- Another reality that we are already observing, is that more of our congregations will discern that their work is accomplished. The NGLS, and the ELCA as a whole, will be comprised of fewer congregations. As you may know, St. James Lutheran Church in Marinette celebrated worship for the last time as a congregation on April 14 of this year. I commend them for their prayerful discernment, the seeds they will plant for future ministry and the current efforts they will support through the distribution of their assets. Make no mistake, the grief is real and painful. We celebrate the life and ministry of St. James as we celebrate any beloved who has passed to life eternal. There is a sense of loss, of sorrow, of remembering when, of wondering what if... the grief is real. But what is also real is that the Church is bigger than one congregation and the mission of Christ was here before us and will continue after us. Placed into the larger context of wider and deeper ministry, St. James contributes to the growth of the whole and lives on in the efforts and proclamation of other congregations that carry the mission forward.

St. James will not be the last congregation to discern that it has accomplished that which God set before them. Some of our congregations have the money but not the people. Some have the people, but declining finances. Some have the people and the money, but an ageing population that has spent its energy and no longer has the strength to be up to their elbows in ministry efforts. And that, all of that, and more is no one's fault. It is not that struggling or challenged congregations have been doing ministry wrong. There are a host of reasons why the church as we know it, as we knew it, is changing, and none of them lay blame on those who love their church and the work of Christ. Yet, it is true that a desire for growth and ministry can get easily confused with the anxiety around survival. It is so very important that whether your congregation is thriving or struggling or somewhere in between, that sharing the good news of Jesus remain central. As you discern future steps, keeping the mission of

Christ as the focus will help shape future actions as your congregation responds to the moment we are in.

In my time as bishop, both First, Dollar Bay and St. James, Marinette, so far, have discerned that their most faithful next step is to proclaim, "It is finished." For other congregations, for you, it might mean joining Faithful Innovations to be equipped for deeper listening to God, the community, and each other. It might mean a Holy Experiment of some kind, or selling your building but remaining a congregation who meets in a new place. It might mean a new collaboration, a new partnership, a shared pastor or licensed lay minister. It might mean exploring what it takes to be a Reconciled in Christ congregation, adding staff, or supporting people in your congregation to attend Lay School through one of our partner synods, just to be more equipped and be of greater use to the work of Christ.

And it might mean that as a congregation, you will discern that you have accomplished the purpose for which God created you. Know that if your congregation has diminished to the point where you cannot legally make that decision with a quorum vote at a congregational meeting as per your constitution, the Synod Council is then obligated to bring the congregation under synodical administration as per S13.24 in our NGLS constitution. So I encourage you, if you are close to that tipping point, please make these difficult decisions while you as a congregation still have legal agency. Because that is not what I want to happen. Pastor Jim and I are a resource, here to help you think through the details and possibilities, both of Holy Closure and ideas to build vitality and strategize creative solutions.

So together, we reach for hope that is not illusory and security that is not false. Our job is not to save the Church but to be the Church. God in Christ Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, began the church as a vehicle and community to proclaim Christ. We proclaim Christ in all that we do, from feeding the hungry to sewing quilts, from comforting the bereaved to enjoying Christian fellowship, from learning to teaching to serving to gathering for worship. Our lives are shaped by the rhythms of faith, worship and traditions, liturgical seasons, being gathered and sent. And the shape of the Christian life is in dying and rising. In baptism, we die to sin and rise to newness of life. We suffer Good Friday and celebrate the risen Christ on Easter

Each of us, and each congregation, experiences death and new life over their lifetimes. And while each congregation has experienced some loss, know that there is much new life to celebrate in our synod. The Holy Spirit is on the move. I rejoice in our many congregations that gain momentum with each ministry effort. When I visit, I can feel the Spirit at work among you. And each of our congregations in transition has found ways to keep ministry in motion. We have more than a few small but mighty communities of faith - Tenacious and faithful and Spirit led. I am thankful to the many retired and serving pastors who are walking alongside these congregations, providing any guidance and support that is needed. Shut-ins are still being visited, still receiving communion. Lay preachers and visiting pastors provide worship leadership. Musicians still play. The bereaved are still comforted. Bible studies, Sunday school, feeding programs and more continues. God is with you and you are with God. Councils, office administrators and church secretaries have their fingers on the pulse



on the needs of their community of faith. There are a few things in the works, possibilities that are not evident on the grid you saw. I remain hopeful that some will come to fruition.

All of this is to say, yes, we are in the midst of transformation, yes, the challenges are real, yes, we are working to put some pieces in place to prepare for a future reality that may look very different than the past, but ultimately, the future of the Church and of our churches is in God's hands. I encourage you to keep being church, keep ministry in motion, keep planting seeds, and I remind you, to pray for guidance, to listen together, and to keep the mission of Christ and the love of God as the lens through which you discern future steps and action. Our hope lies in the living and active presence of God in Christ Jesus. God is with you, and with me, and with us together and that hope is sure.