

Dear People of the Northern Great Lakes Synod,
Grace and peace to you in this new year of our Lord 2025. I remember as a senior in high school, we were asked to write an essay describing ourselves ten years in the future. I imagined myself as a single woman working as an English teacher, living in some small town in Wisconsin or Minnesota.

My real life-ten years out of high school-looked very different. By then I had moved away from any aspirations that involved teaching high school English. I was living in East St. Paul and going to seminary while serving as a Youth Director at a church. I was married, with a new baby, and considering where a seminary education might lead.

My high school essay was not meant to be a future plan or an exercise in goal setting. I was not striving to make what I had imagined into a reality. However, considering that my real life unfolded so differently than my imaginings makes me wonder about our imaginings, and even our future goal setting, as a church.

I think it used to be that the church of my youth thought that church was always going to be the way we were experiencing church then. Church councils developed five, ten, even twenty year plans with no imaginings that culture would shift, that worship attendance would decline, that the classroom and fellowship additions to their buildings would not always be full of Sunday school children and adults in Bible study.

We know better now. Our current reality is not something we imagined. Plans and goals are well and good, but I think we have learned that being able to adapt to what is, rather than holding out hope for what was, is a far more realistic approach to the changes we are experiencing.

The emerging model for some of our congregations is Lay-led and Pastor-supported ministry. Effective adaptation would then include:

- Equipping lay people, not only for ministry, but for leadership. This includes education, support, and accountability.
- Encouraging attendance at Lay School. Both the East Central Wisconsin Synod and the Northwest Wisconsin Synod offer in-person and online education opportunities. In addition, Faith+Lead through Luther Seminary and our ecumenical partners. NGLS scholarship funds are available.
- Some adjustment of congregational expectations. In many of our congregations, small teams of people are being trained to bring communion to shut-ins, offer hospital visits, provide crisis care, lead Bible studies, and more. What was considered the sole realm of the pastor is being shared among the priesthood of all believers, that is, people willing to contribute in new ways.

As our three-year theme of Seed Sowers continues, we focus this year on “Apollos watered.” We not only water seeds of faith in people, but we water talent for ministry, nurturing spiritual gifts that give glory to God and further the work of Christ.

And as so often happens when the Spirit gets involved, we find ourselves doing something we never thought we would do, beyond our previous imaginings. From reading the lessons in worship to preaching, from having conversations of faith to leading Bible Study, from greeting someone at church to holding their hand before surgery, God is at work in you, and through you, the Spirit moves in your congregation, and through your congregation, God is present in your community and the world.

I pray God’s blessings upon your efforts as together we meet the challenges of our time and adapt to being Church for the future.

Yours in Christ,

Bishop Katherine Finegan