

⁶I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.

⁷So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.

⁸The one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose,

⁹For we are God's servants, working together;...
~I Corinthians 3: 6-9

Dear People of the Northern Great Lakes Synod,

As God's servants working together, we begin the Year of our Lord 2026 and the third year of our three-year theme of Seed Sowers. 2026 is the year we focus on "God gave the growth." Paul asserts in his letter to the Corinthians that all believers are part of the life cycle of ministry; one planting seeds- for the next one to nurture- for the next one to enjoy the growth given by the grace of God, which in turn enables seed planting for future ministry.

Together, all of us are Seed Sowers with a common purpose, even as we ultimately rely on the Spirit of the living God to give growth to the seeds that have been planted and that we and others have strived to nourish.

As congregations celebrate anniversary milestones, and even as you read the annual report of your own congregation, it is natural to look back and see what has been accomplished. We celebrate the efforts of our committees and leaders, of our volunteers and members, but remember also to give thanks to God for it all. God gives the growth.

I think of the many times I worked so very hard for a particular outcome, and it did not succeed. And I think of the many times a small effort simply took on a life of its own and made a huge difference to congregational or community life. We do what we can, we experiment and try and

fail, and try again, but growth and success of any ministry effort is only by the grace of God. Perhaps we are too quick to take credit, when really, we were simply in the right place and the right time, participating in what God has been doing all along.

In the focus of this year, I encourage all of us to be mindful to give God the glory. Whether we have a growing Sunday School or a well stewarded ending, increasing worship attendance or deeper discipleship for the faithful few, it is because of what God has done and is doing. This is the Holy Spirit of Christ at work, who according to Luther's Small Catechism: *Calls, gathers, enlightens, and makes holy* you, me and all of us together.

I encourage you, when writing reports for the year or some anniversary booklet, be careful of the "We did..." and amend that to something more like "God blessed us in this way...". It is a small change in language but a huge change in understanding of who is at work and to whom we ascribe agency.

I have said this before, but I say it again because I believe it captures so well what Paul has proclaimed and where the source of our hope lies for future growth, "You cannot make a bean grow by pulling on it." We do everything we can, investing our effort and resources, nurturing seeds of faith and ministry, but it is God who gives the growth. We thank God for the gift we receive in each other, for this gift of the community of faith, through which we are invited to participate in all that God is doing to make a difference in our world for the sake of Jesus, our Savior. Amen.

Yours in Christ,
Bishop Katherine Finegan

