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Devotions for  
**Congregational Meetings**  
in the  
**Northern Great Lakes Synod**

September 2025— May 2026



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*September 2025*



I like planting a vegetable garden. Maybe, it's because it gives me hope. Of course, there is an instant gratification from preparing the soil and planting the seeds in their neat little rows with each seed given the correct spacing and depth that it needs. For me, getting down in the dirt and planting the seeds is the easy part.

I work really hard at having garden, but the watering part becomes the real challenge. On my own merit, my garden would tend to die a slow death by dehydration, but my wife carries out plant saving C.P.R. by watering the garden on a regular basis. She keeps the garden alive, but it is God that makes the garden grow, taking our work of planting seeds and watering them, to the next level and gives our work in the garden life.

Doesn't planting a garden seem to parallel the planting of spiritual seeds of faith? All of us can be both the planter of spiritual seeds and/or the one that waters the spiritual seeds planted by others. I remember spiritual seeds of faith that were planted in me throughout my life, and I also remember those who came behind, watering, nurturing those seeds of faith in me. Yet, it wasn't until when I felt God in my life, taking those seeds of watered faith inside me and helping me to grow, that I became alive in my faith. The process of planting seeds of faith, watering and nurturing those seeds of faith and God giving life to our efforts, is the perfect combination of faith gardening that gives the harvest. So, if you are a planter, sow those seeds of faith. If your role is to be one who waters and nurtures, go and do it. Whether it is being in a vegetable garden or the garden of life, you will need to do your part, so God can take those watered seeds of faith and give them life.

~Walter Scanlon  
Immanuel Lutheran Church, Negaunee, MI

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direction of the growth, determine what fruit is borne, maybe even take some credit for the outcome.

But God gives the growth. And the hard truth is, that for some of the seeds we have planted and watered, the growth may not happen in our lifetime, or even in the lifetime of our community of faith. The hardest part of "God gives the growth" is the commendation of our efforts to God's timing, God's action, and God's purposes, which we may or may not be blessed to witness.

Our job, our purpose, our role in the arc of life that God gives the church, is to be faithful in the time we are given.

1. What is your congregation waiting for?
2. What seeds have been planted for that?
3. How do you see God at work now?



Let us pray,

God of dormant energy, God of new growth,  
Give us patience and guide our efforts to plant and water seeds of faith and ministry. We commend the fruit of our efforts to you. May our actions serve your purposes and contribute to the present and future Church. Your kingdom come. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

~Bishop Katherine Finegan

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## May 2026



This is the time of year when I wait, with great anticipation and some anxiety, to see if my plants survived the winter. Did I provide enough mulch to protect my beloved delphinium from arctic temperatures? Did some underground creature nibble on my

tulip bulbs for a winter snack?

Only time will tell.

There's not much that I can do except wait and watch. The warming earth will do its work along with sunshine and rain (sleet?). I cannot make my plants grow nor can I make them bloom ahead of their time. One day, there is only mud and leaves, and the next day I see signs of winter survival. I marvel at the energy of life embedded in the plant itself, this spontaneous release from dormancy spurring growth from roots that are buried deep.

Consider the mystery of this unseen vitality that is finally evident in the green shoot, the small tendril, which becomes the crocus flower above melting snow or the spark of spring color that stands out defiantly against the brown of old decaying leaves.

As the church, as people of faith, we plant seeds and we water them, and then we wait for God's timing and the growth that only God can give. We pray for patience because the wait can be maddening. It comes with a feeling of helplessness as we would prefer more control and agency over any growth. We want some influence in that growth. We want to ensure success, decide the

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## October 2025

The early church in Corinth apparently had some idolatry issues. Some Christians followed the apostle Paul and claimed themselves as his, while others claimed a belonging to Apollos, maybe conflated his leadership with the face of Christianity. It was a dualism of sorts that was splitting the unity of Christ followers into factions. Christianity - which I will define as the body of believers who follow the Christ - was never meant to be divided.

On a more unifying note, both Paul and Apollos had good attributes as servant leaders, both pointing to Jesus as the Christ. We need them as heralds and historians. We need faithful people who plant the seeds of faith and water us with the words of scripture. But Paul reminds us to give God the glory for the whole thing: the gift of Jesus Christ, His beloved Son. Faith in Christ will change us and lead us into action and contemplation. This growth emerges over the course of a lifetime. Just as a seed erupts from winter's rest, a stalk pokes its head to freedom, emerging in due time to the light of day. The rains continue and leafy appendages extend skyward to collect the sun's everlasting gift of itself. There is still the promise of buds and unfolding flowers, a burst of wonder that reflects the glory of the Creator. We are hopeful and we wait for it.

Last October, my husband and I planted 200 daffodil bulbs alongside our driveway. The ground was so dry that we had to run a hose for several hours in order to prepare the soil. Planted and watered, we anticipate an emergence of beauty after the snow melts. We talk about this often. We keep an eye on what is hidden. God will be faithful to it.



**Prayer:** *Blessed Lord, you are faithful year after year to the emergence of new growth, the resurrection of Springtime. Pray that we never lose sight of your love for your creation. All praise to the God of all, Creator of life; all praise be to Christ and the Spirit of love!*

~Donna Ahlberg  
First Lutheran Church, Iron River MI

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*November 2025*



I think about seed planting a lot—in the way that is about equipping the saints, or a culture of permission-giving. Not so much in the way that involves literal dirt. It isn't that I can't garden, I'm just not very good at it. But it seems to me that equipping the saints, or building cultures of permission-giving, are not that different from the literal acts of gardening.

When we talk about equipping the saints, we're talking about recognizing the growth that God offers in each one of us and taking the time to nurture the gift's growth, making space for that gift to grow, and honoring it—In much the same way we might recognize the sprout of new growth from a seed, weed around that new growth, and watering that growth. Whether the outcome is a new ministry or hearing a new voice in worship leadership or experiencing the fruits of new bread recipes for Communion, the acts of relationship are the same. For us, and our opportunities together, it's about partnership in community and less about toiling to make something happen. Patience is key, and trusting that God is working in ways we cannot see, or even immediately identify, is that part that invites us to see God giving the growth, through and with us.

See it. Affirm it (out loud). Offer space around it. Listen and teach while pointing at it. Celebrate it, as it begins to bear fruit. Keep checking in and making sure that this new growth is being tended, cared for, and celebrated. We work to partner with God in all these opportunities to live, and work, and have our being together.

**Prayer:** *New opportunities are being planted all around us. God, you are working in ways that we cannot always see, and so we find comfort in your community where there are many eyes, ears and hearts seeking, and seeing the growth that you, O God, offer us. Give us the strength to speak our noticing of this growth in us and the bravery to trust in your growth is available to us. For these and all things, we hope always, with Christ. Amen*

~Pr. J Mills  
Bethany, Ishpeming

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Questions for discussion:

1. Describe your ability or inability to be patient while waiting . What helps? What makes it worse?
3. How can you we work as a team to advance our goals and visions and eliminate the impatience and anxiety of waiting?
4. How have you seen God's hand at work in advancing the growth of our "gardens"? How are you continuing to nurture those results?

Let us pray:

Dear Lord, we ask that you guide and support us as we work to develop our plans for our church family, our community, and around the world. We trust that, in Your time, you will make the most of our efforts and grow even the smallest seed into a valuable ripened harvest.

In Jesus name we pray, Amen

~Barb Rice, member of Bethany, Norway  
and our Synod Council





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*April 2026*



*Dear brothers and sisters,  
be patient as you wait for the Lord's return.  
Consider the farmers who patiently wait for the  
rains in the fall and in the spring.  
They eagerly look for the valuable harvest  
to ripen. ~James 5:7*

Who among us has never experienced impatience? Whether it is farmers waiting for their crops, an expectant couple waiting for the arrival of a new baby, the anxiety of waiting for results of medical tests, or even the return of sunny days after long periods of clouds or cold; the list is endless.

We are all planters in some sort of garden, waiting for the seeds we have sown to take root, grow, and flourish. The writer of James encourages us to lean into our faith that God will support and guide us however we are investing ourselves for the sake of Christ in the world. God is with us as we wait and work towards whatever the vision for ministry is that serves God's purposes. We are blessed when our faith in God's timing grants us the patience needed for our Spirit-led ideas and plans to grow. Our gardens in life, our efforts in ministry, the seeds of faith that are planted, are built on hope and trust that in the Lord's time, a harvest will come.

As we join our hopes and dreams together in our congregations, may we continue to lift our needs and our visions to God in prayer and commend to God's timing our efforts, trusting that God's hand will bring to fruition all that we have cultivated and nurtured. "God gives the growth!"



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*December 2025*

There is nothing better than finding some old thing in your basement or a box of oddities in an antique store, and wonder... "What is the purpose of this thing?" Humankind delights in building tools that help us solve problems and find purpose...created of iron, wood, fabric, flesh, ideas, music, or words. We, who are created in the image of God, seek purposefulness...to be useful beyond our own existence. We want to matter. We want to have and know our purpose.

The church in Corinth was gathered and split, with divided loyalties to individual leaders. They needed a reminder of their common purpose. Does this sound familiar? Do you ever feel like our congregations, church, family, or civic life are working at cross-purposes? Perhaps we missed the meeting that we all agreed to work together, each bringing our own gifts to the common goal? For ELCA Lutherans, we have a defining purpose and we all play a part in it. The purpose of the ELCA is to "activate each of us so more people know the way of Jesus and discover community, justice, and love."

God is already doing this among us.  
Where do you see it?

**Let us pray:**

*Good and gracious God, activate each of us like the dormant bulbs reaching through the soil to feel the energy of the spring sun. Activate each of us like the rested bear, hungry from her winter sleep. Activate each of us, as if our well-being is interwoven with the well-being of our un-met neighbors. Activate each of us to the aliveness of plants and water, people and populations, made new in the Easter presence of Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.*



*~Pr. Sharolyn Swenson*

*Assistant to the Bishop and Director for Evangelical Mission*

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January 2026



**"I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth."**

~1 Corinthians 3: 6

As the new year begins, we also begin the third year of our three-year theme. Together as the synod, we have considered planting and watering seeds of faith, and now, we focus on what it means to trust that **God gives the growth.**

My trust that God gives the growth was sorely challenged when I served as a Youth Director and taught Confirmation classes. I had serious doubts that any seeds of faith were being planted or that anything I was trying to teach was even being heard, much less remembered. Try as I might to scatter seeds and deluge those seeds with everything I could think of to provide what was needed for growth, there was no evidence that faith was being formed and disciples made.

Until, that is, years later, when I received letters from former youth. To my happy surprise, they expressed their gratitude for the time we spent together in Youth Group and the impact they felt on their faith. And they wanted the same kind of experience for their own children. At the time, there was little indication that my efforts were making any difference. Yet, my role in the faith formation of these young people was not to witness growth. It was to plant and water seeds.

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It's easy to want to be the one who creates or the one who sees things through to completion, but in most cases, we are the ones who are providing water along the way even as we hope for a future outcome. We are members of congregations where seeds were planted long ago, and we continue to water those seeds with the hope that life springs forth. We join with countless others who have gone before us in fights for justice for our siblings in marginalized communities, watering seeds, and march in hope, even when we know that the path is "twisted, and risky, and slow." No matter how long this process may take, and even if we ourselves do not see the final outcome of our endeavors, God is present, continuing to bring forth growth to a weary world.

**We pray:** *Abiding God, you are with us through our journeys of planting and watering new life. Give us the courage to keep marching, looking for signs of your growth in our world.*

~Pastor Brittany Barkus

Sharon, Bessemer and All Saints, Wakefield



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## March 2026



One of the things I struggle with the most is the idea of leaving things unfinished or not knowing how they will end. I love to make plans and see them through to completion, but in ministry that is usually not something that happens quickly...or at all! Often, we start ministries without seeing their full path of growth or knowing that they will grow at all.

This is certainly not something exclusive to the Church. In the recent Broadway musical, *Suffs*, there is a song called "Keep Marching" where the main character, the famous women's suffragist Alice Paul, reflects on the long fight for women's rights after her years of protesting for the right to vote. She sings:

*You won't live to see the future that you fight for.  
Maybe no one gets to reach that perfect day  
If the work is never over,  
then how do you keep marching anyway?*

*Do you carry your banner as far as you can,  
rewriting the world with your imperfect pen,  
'Til the next stubborn girl picks it up in a picket line  
over and over again?*

*And you join in the chorus of centuries chanting to her:  
The path will be twisted, and risky, and slow,  
but keep marching, keep marching.*

*Will you fail or prevail? Well, you may never know,  
but keep marching, keep marching.*

*'Cause your ancestors are all the proof you need that  
progress is possible, not guaranteed.  
It will only be made  
if we keep marching, keep marching on.*

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Questions for discussion:

- What ministry effort is your congregation involved in where you may not see the growth?
- How sure of success do you have to be in order to try something new?
- What growth in your own faith or in the life of your congregation are you experiencing now that a previous generation planted?

Let us pray,

God of growth and new life,  
Help us to commend the growth and impact of our efforts to the work of your Holy Spirit. Be with us as we focus on the planting and the watering and trust that whether or not our efforts bear fruit is up to you, even as we pray that our efforts are not in vain and in our small way, we contribute to your purposes and participate in your kingdom come.

*<sup>9</sup> So let us not grow weary in doing what is right,  
for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up.*

*<sup>10</sup> So then, whenever we have an opportunity,  
let us work for the good of all  
and especially for those of the family of faith.*

~Galatians 6: 9-10

In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

~Bishop Katherine Finegan



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*February 2026*



At the beginning of Lent, the kids and I planted a fig tree as a part of the children's sermon. The intended lesson was about how patience and trusting in God's time is a part of faith. We can plant a fig tree, but we

won't receive fruit immediately or even when we want the fruit because it depends on the tree's growth and if it is the proper season.

An unintended element of this children's sermon is we now having a long-term lesson that planting something is not enough: you have to water and tend to it for it to grow well. The fig tree now lives in our fellowship hall next to a bright window, and each week it is checked. Is the soil too dry or too wet? Does it need water and how much? We must rely on what the tree is telling us to determine if a little extra care, like fertilizer is needed. We don't get to dictate the tree's needs and the proper response. To care for it, we listen to the tree and what it tells us, and ultimately the tree's growth isn't up to us. But we do get the joy of being a part of its growth, as the kids remind me as they excitedly run up to me every few weeks to report on new leaves and the taller trunk.

This tiny fig tree stands in our fellowship hall as a reminder that we are invited to be co-creators with God. To plant and harvest, but to also be a part of nurturing as we wait for growth. We plant seeds when we care for our neighbor and

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invite people to attend and participate in worship, and we rejoice at the baptismal font and the Lord's table. Amid the excitement of a visitor, the joy of a baptism, or the welcome of the Eucharist, the nurturing of faith happens through the seemingly mundane: conversations over coffee, a field game at Fortune Lake, meals shared, and space given to ask our questions. Each response to nurturing faith is as unique as the person and group we attend, and over the years we are privy to the work of God in people's lives as we witness faith being formed. The growth of faith is the work of God, even as we are invited to be participants in creation. What a gift it is to be invited to water and nurture the faith and life of another, and in our own efforts may we be reminded of the cloud of witnesses who nurtured our own.

**Let us pray:** *Creating God, to you be the glory for life and faith. Thank you for the faith you have given us. May we be steadfast partners with you in the nurturing of others, so they may grow strong and steadfast in your love. Help us to be patient for the growth you give, and trust in your timing. Grant us awareness and commitment to foster wellbeing in all the world, trusting in your good works through Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

~Pastor Elise Hynek

St. James Lutheran, Rudyard, Michigan.