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Devotions for
Congregational Meetings
in the
Northern Great Lakes Synod

September 2026— May 2027

September 2026



*For as the rain and the snow
come down from heaven and do
not return there until they have
watered the earth, making it
bring forth and sprout, giving
seed to the sower and bread to
the eater, so shall my word be
that goes out from my mouth; it*

shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose and succeed in the thing for which I sent it. ~Isaiah 55:10-11

One of my many new delights of living in the north woods is seasons. We did not have seasons growing up in Texas...or sometimes they would all come on one day in February. The seasons provide a constancy of endings and beginnings. With this constancy, I am learning that you have to keep responding to the season you are in. When the rains slow down in mid-summer, the plants need a little extra water, in spite of having been covered by seven feet of snow in May. The snow, the rain, the sowing, the reaping, the baking, the eating...seasons provide a stabilizing rhythm that carries us forth in hope, as we look back in gratitude.

How is God acting for good through the changes of the seasons in congregational life? In our own lives? In the wider church? God is with us in these changes! And yet it is hard to see the rhythm of change as *normal* when some patterns happen over generations. How are you living fully into the present season of life together in your congregation? What in your context is a new experience for you? As you are responding to this new season, what new life is springing forth? As we begin to welcome the autumn cold, what is coming to an end in your ministries, that will awaken something new in an Easter spring?

Gracious God, make us nimble and curious for what the seasons have in store for us, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

~Rev. Sharolyn Swenson,
Assistant to the Bishop and Director for Evangelical Mission

end “**2 years later...**” when the seedling can **hopefully** be transplanted from its second growing container into the ground.

What a great analogy to the church! How often do we plant seeds of faith and want to yell, “Wake up and grow!” only to find out the seeds need more tending? We all experience different seasons in our lives and in our faith communities. Growth takes time, but what if we are proactive and initiate new seasons to help with that growth, just like creating a mini spring to invite those seeds in my fridge to wake up and grow?

Questions for reflection:

- What does “Future Old Growth” mean to you?
- How is your church similar or different to a Giant Sequoia tree?
- What kind of “winter” is your congregation experiencing right now?
- How can you be like spring and provide an invitation for someone or something to wake up and grow?



Let us Pray:

Creator God, help us to appreciate all of the seasons you provide. Give us the strength and courage to be your agents of change and help us create environments to encourage and sustain growth. Remind us to be patient and humble in the vastness of your creation. Amen.

~Stefanie Ehle, NGLS Youth Ministries Coordinator

May 2027

***For everything there is a season
and a time for every purpose under heaven:***

Spring is my favorite season. I look forward to warmer days and new growth that emerges after winter's chill. As I am writing this devotion (in the summer of 2026), I have a small plastic container in my refrigerator that contains pebbles, soil, water, and seeds from a Giant Sequoia tree. Yes, you read that right – a Giant Sequoia tree. If you're not familiar, Giant Sequoias are the largest coniferous trees on earth and grow along the Sierra Nevada mountain range in California. The seeds were a gift to my children and came in a brown cylindrical container claiming "100% Future Old Growth Guaranteed!" Sounds like a simple summer project, right? Just plant some seeds and watch them grow into giant trees!

Upon further reading, we discovered that after the seeds are planted in their mini plastic greenhouse, they need to be placed in the refrigerator for 20 days. Time in the cold, dark environment of the fridge provides a kind of "winter" for the seeds which prepares them for germination. After the 20 days of cold stratification, the seeds are ready to come out of the fridge and spend time near a sunny window to break their dormancy. The warmth and humidity imitate springtime's invitation to wake up and grow!

But wait – there's more! The seeds *still* need more care and attention after emerging from the fridge. The multi-step instructions go on (and on, and on...) to indicate additional steps that finally



October 2026

~God gives the growth.

Our gardens have been put to bed by now. Tomatoes canned. Beans frozen. Summer fruit transformed into jellies and jams. We give thanks for a bountiful harvest and for how God has given the growth before our gardening season came to an end.



In our congregations, the programming season has only just begun. We pray that momentum builds, that volunteers appear, that we witness an increase in energy for ministry that will bear fruit.

There is that saying, "Work as if everything depends on you. Pray as if everything depends on God." Of course, not everything depends on you. The Holy Spirit of Christ is at work through and with you to further the purposes of God. As congregations consider their goals for the year, naming goals without a strategy to reach them, is just wishful thinking.

For example, perhaps a goal you have named is that worship attendance increases. A good goal. Now decide on a strategy. What will each of you do to attain that goal? What makes worship meaningful for those who attend? How can the worship experience be improved? Who will you invite? Does anyone need a ride? What are the barriers to inviting another? Are there opportunities besides worship that make for an easier invitation? Book club? A bazaar? A ministry project? A volunteer opportunity?

- Name one goal.
- How will you as a group attain it?

Let us pray,

Gracious God, we know you are with us in our efforts. Help us to clarify our goals and take the steps to reach them, even as your hand is leading us. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.

~Bishop Katherine Finegan

November 2026

"I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth." – I Cor. 3:6



My father was a gardener extraordinaire. Beautiful flower beds flanked the front and one side of the house I grew up in, with mountain ash trees and hydrangea plants adorning the yard. His vegetable garden

grew year by year (as the family did) and he took great delight in offering "tours" to anyone who stopped by. His greatest joy was filling bags of corn, green beans, potatoes, carrots, squash, and other vegetables to give to his children and friends.

His work did not end with planting the seeds. He knew that for his garden to grow he would need to be responsible for keeping it watered when needed, weeded, fertilized, and safe from the deer and rabbits that roamed the woods. He devoted hours to these tasks, lovingly caring for each plant. Despite all his work, he never lost sight of the mystery of growth. From a tiny seed germinating in the ground to a tall cornstalk bearing tasty cobs of corn, he knew that while his work helped things along, he did not create the process of growth.

November is traditionally stewardship month in many congregations. Many of us worship in places that were founded decades, even more than a century ago, where the seeds of faith were first planted. Through the years, countless members have built on the foundation of the original founders, giving their time, talent and treasures to further the mission of Christ in their community. We are blessed to be able to worship in these places today.

I feel in our world, we do not laugh enough.

Think of how your body aches in pain from the sheer gladness shared... How our lungs do not know how to exist because the laugh soaks up the air. There is a time to laugh and you have permission to laugh more.

This passage in Ecclesiastes is giving us permission to feel. Not only permission to feel and exist and be, but that we do not have to feel everything all at once all of the time. And that these emotions, tasks and movements are not meant to be done alone always. Mourn, laugh, cry, and dance with others. Share in the beauties, the complexities, the sorrows that life carries. These four actions can be a balm, an aid, a medicine in times so overshadowed that all you can do is laugh or cry or mourn or dance. There are moments, glimpses in life where we can mourn, lament, cry, laugh, dance, and exist as our authentic selves that God created enthusiastically.

Spirit of all circumstances,

you have journeyed with us through our lives. Through every step, every tear, every laugh, every failure, every worry, every loss and every smile. Remind us to live into our bodies. Remind us of the permission to lament, laugh, love, cry and mourn for ourselves and others who are lost or forgotten or unknown to others. Guide us. Hold Us. Love Us. In the name of the One Who is, Who was and Who is to Come. Amen.



~Pastor Morgan Simmons, Immanuel, Rhinelander

April 2027



*"a time to weep and a time to laugh;
a time to mourn and a time to dance;"*

~ Ecclesiastes 3:4

I feel in our world, we do not dance
enough.

When was the last time you danced?

Think about it. When was the last time you let your body release to a tune? When have you felt safe enough to dance? Do you ever dance alone or do you only dance with others around you? I believe we do not lean into joy as often as we could. There is a time to dance. And there is time to dance some more.

I feel in our world, we do not cry enough.

Crying is one thing...but to *Lament*. It is a full body exaltation of fear, anger, frustration, grief, worry, concern that we scream to God. The Hebrew word for weep, "כָּה (ba.khah)" is also to lament, bewail, shed tears. There is a time to cry. To lament. To be angry with God. There is time to cry more.

I feel in our world, we do not mourn enough.

When did you last mourn? And not just for a loved one but for the world. Beloveds, everyday there is a shooting in our country. We have become complacent. Everyday someone loses their life due to lack of healthcare or food. We have become complacent. Not only that, we have become numb to horrible tragedies, and I believe we have allowed that to happen because we have numbed ourselves. We have come to believe that if we care too much, if we let our bodies feel the pain, the loss, the emptiness of another life gone, we will fall apart. This is a different Hebrew word, "פָּדָה (sa.phad)" meaning a more is intent lamenting what is gone. There is a time to mourn. There time to lament and mourn more.

It is now our turn to continue the work of bringing the life-giving Word of God's love and forgiveness to others. Growth can be seen in many ways – too often we only look at the number of people sitting in the pews or the bottom line of the budget. But the Holy Spirit moves within our congregations to share the love of Jesus through our compassionate service, teaching and fellowship – deepening our faith, strengthening us, encouraging us, guiding us – and touching people that may never sit in our pews.

Our mission is to spread the Word of God; we simply tend to the work, offering our time, talent and treasures in the assurance that God will provide the growth when and where God sees fit. We entrust the mystery of growth to our Lord. Thanks be to God!

~How is our congregation spreading the love of God outside of our walls?

~Where do you see God at work in the community?

~How has your faith grown/changed in your lifetime?

Let us pray,

God of growth and new life,
Increase our generosity and our investment in the current and future church. Thank you for the inspiration of those who began this community of faith. Bless our efforts to continue their work. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen



~Betsy Koski
NGLS Bookkeeper

December 2026

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

A wise colleague gave me this nativity. She brought this carved image back from Tanzania. She'd lived there for a time – finding healing and wisdom, as she grew in God's transforming love in the midst of stirring chaos in her life. Each time I look at the carving, I dwell in the gift of her shared wisdom as she daily invited me to breathe in *Emmanuel, God with us*, knowing the contrasting emotions that stirred my soul in a particularly dark December.



The swirl of contrasting emotions – grief and joy, defeat and hope – were complicated as I held the nativity and faithfully walked through Advent waiting. Listening with the Spirit, I experienced the depth of God's hope, peace, joy, and love anew. *God is with us.*

I keep this nativity out all year as I dwell in *God with us* – breathing in the transforming love and motivating growth that sustains us in the rawness of life and systems that stir fear or lament, even as we hold hope.

- How is your community of faith, individually and corporately, invited to dwell in the contrasting emotions that may be stirring through these days of Advent?
- What calls your community of faith to pause and grow in God's transforming hope, peace, joy, and love—individually and corporately?

Come Emmanuel, move with us through these Advent days of waiting, strengthen us in your transforming radical love – calling us to breathe and grow in your hope, peace, and joy as the rawness of life swirls through our days. Amen

~Sister Noreen Stevens, Synod Missioner

Ecclesiastes 3:11 also reminds us that God has made everything beautiful in its time. We don't simply wait for God's redemption at some future date, we can find love and beauty in the present as well. Because of that beauty, the Teacher ultimately commends the enjoyment of life (8:15). We may not enjoy everything under the sun, but we can find joy and beauty in the times that God has given us "under the sun."

Questions for reflection:

- As you read Ecclesiastes 3:1-8, what on this list best describes our times?
- What does it mean to live faithfully in response to our times?
- Where are you finding beauty and joy today?

God of wisdom,

You have created and gifted us with a world and a life full of beauty. You bring new life from death, joy from sorrow, and a promise the despite the uncertainties of life, your will is for our salvation. Help us to trust that in all that we do not understand, you hold us in your loving hands. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

~Pastor Alex Ross
Bethany, Republic

March 2027

For everything there is a season and a time.

"Everything?" Are we sure that we want *everything* to have a season and a time? Some of the things listed in Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 make sense. Who doesn't love laughter, dancing, embracing, love, or peace? If we think about it for a moment, we can even accept that there is a time and place for death, mourning, and tearing down. We may not like them, but at the right time, they aren't necessarily evil. Yet this list includes other things like war, killing, and hatred. Why would the au-



thor of Ecclesiastes include this the list?

Ecclesiastes is Wisdom Literature. Its author adopts the voice of someone known only as "The Teacher," who has spent his life

seeking wisdom, but who has found that even wisdom has limits. After all his searching, he realizes that he simply cannot understand or control everything. Trying to do so is like "chasing after the wind."

This insight puts his claim that everything has a time and a season in a different light. The Teacher is describing reality, not prescribing behavior, or even pretending to understand it. Just because every activity has its time doesn't necessarily mean that it is good. Laughter and weeping, love and hatred, war and peace are simply a part of our lives. Our job isn't to make sense of all these things (many of them don't make sense) but to live faithfully in the midst of "everything" in its time.

January 2027



On the wall of the office of the Northern Great Lakes Synod, we have two clocks, one for Eastern time and one for Central time. This keeps us mindful that our synod spans two time zones so that we do not schedule events too early or too late, and we are reminded that every visit to one of our congregations and conferences requires checking the time zone. A trip from ET to CT might only take a few minutes, but the ride home is always an hour longer.

Between the two clocks is another reminder, that even as we fill our calendars with events and visits, plans and strategies, still ... everything happens in God's time. A pastor is called or resigns, a congregation closes or experiences new life, a person discerns a call to ministry or a pastor discerns it is time to retire. All of these things, and so much more, is completely outside of our control. Forward thinkers might be "ahead of their time" but the time still needs to be right for some things to happen. We talk about Kairos time, when everything comes together for the good of God's purposes.

I remember being at a conference my first year as a pastor. A colleague and I were walking in the woods near the retreat center, standing on the path and chatting. Suddenly, we both heard a loud crack and a tree near the path chose that moment to fall. It fell away from us, so we were not in any danger, but it was surprising nevertheless. The base seemed to shift and the tree, no longer supported by

its base, fell from the top, gracefully, slowly, until it crashed and quivered on the forest floor. Yes, we heard it. 😊

It felt like a gift...to be at the right place, at the right time, present in the exact moment to bear witness to this tree's collapse.

For the next three years, our synod will focus on the theme, **"To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven."** In Ecclesiastes 3.1, the writer goes on to name seven couplets of things that have their time. As the next three years unfold, we will consider together how things happen in God's time and what our faithful response is in the time that we have.

- What is coming together for the good of God's purposes in your congregation?
- What is it the right time for?
- What may need to wait?

Let us pray,

God of all time and purpose,
give us wisdom to discern your timing. Give us a sense of your Kairos time, that all may come together as needed so that your purposes may be fulfilled in us and through us. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.



~Bishop Katherine Finegan

February 2027

*A Time for Love, a Time for Hate,
A Time for War and a Time for Peace.*



February is a time for love, at least on St. Valentine's Day. The commercialized and secularized version of this holiday has left some of the myth and accounts around the 3rd century Roman Priest of St. Valentine behind. The legend was that Valentine secretly married Christian couples to keep young men being drafted. This led to his martyrdom. The legend of his work fits into the first part of this couplet where there is a time for love. We can think of love as what we do to bless others—that love is not just a feeling that is internalized but rather moves us to tangible actions of love. But is there a time for hate?

Isn't hate what we often try to avoid? How could God who in Christ proclaims "love your enemies" ordain hate? Consider that we are called to hate what takes away life, what deprives us and others from the abundant love and grace that God extends to us. We hate systems that tell others they are not equally created; we hate structures that perpetuate cycles of poverty and abuse.

As we celebrate February as Black History Month, we hate the historic and current examples of racism in our society that have told others that God's love does not extend to them equally. Where in our world do you see love that builds people up and allows them to live their full lives? Where in our world do you see forces that deprive ourselves and others from life?

God of Love and Hate, there is a season for everything. Reveal to us where in the world you are bringing life and wholeness to your creation. Invite us to love and partner in the spirit-filled work which extends your limitless grace, love, and hope to all. Show us where to hate, to not be content with the status quo which deprives your beloved creation of life and wholeness. In your name we pray, Amen.

~Pastor Mike Markwell, Immanuel in Escanaba