

Bishop's Report to Synod Council Executive Team
August 22, 2026

I want to start by telling you what an honor it is to serve as the bishop of the Central States Synod. I will never take for granted the trust that the synod has placed in me, and I promise you to work every day to be worthy of that trust. It is a privilege as well to serve with the dedicated and faithful leaders of our Synod Council and with my profoundly hardworking and talented staff.

We are coming to the end of our first term, and it is clear to me that every member of the team feels ownership of the mission we share: resourcing and caring for the congregations and ministries of this synod. It is also clear that the challenges facing our congregations are great. Three have voted to close in the last three months. There will be more closures, I'm afraid. Some of our congregations have probably reached the point where interventions will not turn things around. Many of our congregations are still doing good ministry and able to refocus and retool for the future. Resourcing those congregations is our priority, along with providing leadership.

As you will see in Chad's report, we have hit the ground running in the area of leadership formation. Chad held five Discernment Events over the summer. You can read the details and numbers in his report; I think they are very promising. I believe we will have made significant progress on my goal of one hundred new leaders in the next two to three years. That goal is audacious, and that is how I want us to meet these challenges: audaciously, by trying everything we can and learning from our successes and failures.

Learning is the key. I asked Adam DeHoek, Research and Evaluation Director, to be our ELCA rep at synod assembly because I want us to foster and continue a culture of learning in our synod, and I want that learning to be research- and data-driven. I'm meeting with Adam at the beginning of October to begin to talk about how they can help us work from the most up-to-date information from our ministries and the wider church.

As we go into our second year, here are a few things on which we are focused:

Staff:

- Synod Staff have been to about seventy percent of our congregations. We are working on getting to all of them.
- We are meeting to plan for the coming year next Tuesday. This includes sketching out the calendar, planning for upcoming events, and talking through priorities.
- The synod staff continue to be our greatest resource. They are not only all good at their jobs, but working with them is a delight.

Grants/Funding

- We will apply for a CASTLE Grant from Wartburg Seminary this fall. CASTLE stands for Country and Small Town Lived Ecclesiology
- I am serving as one of the two bishops on the new Exploration Team assembled by Presiding Bishop Curry. That team will offer grants for synods to explore new lay-led ministries. We will apply for one as soon as they are released.
- I'm putting together a team to oversee this year's Annual Appeal. We'll have a theme and target for the appeal and send multiple communications. Nancy and

Julie have agreed to serve and I am inviting Alesia and two non-Council members. Pastor Chris Naig has already agreed to serve.

Youth and Young Adults

- We want to emphasize ministry with youth and young adults in the coming years. The goal is to create opportunities for youth to come together both online and in person at least a couple of times a year. During the listening process for the Transformational Ministry Fund, we heard a lot of lament about lack of opportunities for youth and the challenges of programming for just a few, or even one, kid.
- We are starting synod-wide Confirmation online in September. That is our first experiment in gathering our youth. We hope to have at least one in-person gathering during this session (September to April). Confirmation is twice per month, taught by Chad, Kristen, and I, along with some of our synod pastors.
- The ELCA Youth Gathering is next year, and we would like to have a synod delegation to Youth Gathering. Many churches don't have the infrastructure in place to get kids to Gathering; we can help. Jordan Pfeiffer from Camp Toma Shinga would like to help lead that group.
- We will turn our minds to young adult programming in the coming church year. I hope to have some ideas in place by the October Synod Council meeting.

I had a wonderful vacation with my family in Florida a few weeks ago. I am strongly encouraging all of our staff members to make sure they are getting blocks of time away (or at home—wherever they can unplug for a bit). We are all working really hard, and approaching the work with real joy. I want to ensure that the joy remains.

I'm considering inviting our congregations to offer some time to their leaders, as a gift. This challenging time in the life of the church is hard on those leaders. Most of them are working considerably more hours than their paychecks show. As our resources diminish—human, financial, and at times even the hope we have stored away—leaders struggle with guilt and frustration. I really want to find ways to support our leaders at both the synodical and congregational level. If you all have other ideas for that support, please pass them on to me.

Thank you for your service and for getting through this long report! I feel blessed to serve with you all.

In gratitude and commitment,
Bishop Donna