



June 6, 2026

“What does the synod do?” I know y’all ask this question. Particularly around budget time, when you have to decide how much mission support to share with us.

And let me stop right there, three lines in and thank you for that mission support. The congregations of this synod are generous. We know that you could hold on to the money you share with the synod and in turn the ELCA—half of what we receive goes on to the ELCA to support the work of leading this whole denomination.

We know you have choices. And we know that you choose to give generously in a time of economic difficulty, to fund the work we do on your behalf. There are honestly not adequate words to express our gratitude for your partnership with us. I will simply say “Thank you.” And promise that we are doing all that we can to return value on your gifts.

What does the synod do? That’s a good enough question...but sometimes there’s more, right? Particularly if you’ve been waiting for a pastoral leader...or if you’re just chugging along and haven’t needed any help from us, perhaps you’ve asked—or heard someone else ask, “what does the synod do for us?”

Here’s the thing. These are good questions. You *should* be asking them. I hope that in the coming years you will have a clear answer if you’re asked, “What the heck is a synod and what does it do?”

We do try to get the word out about what we do. We have the best Communications Director in the ELCA, and he writes a newsletter every week, full of stories about what we’re doing. But not everyone gets the newsletter.

Good news! You can sign up for the synod newsletter by either using the QR code or the web address on the screen.

I know a lot of you *do* know what we are doing and what we’re doing for you. And others are wondering—Who are these people, these “synod staff” and why aren’t they at my congregation every few months?

We can’t do every few months, try as we might. There are three of us who travel, and 146 congregations, plus campus ministries, and outdoor ministries. We *have*, since each of us started—Chad and I in September, and Kristen in mid-December—we have gotten to over half of the congregations in the synod, and we’ve had contact with most of the rest. We’d like to get to all of you by the end of 2026. We’ve gone every place we’ve been asked to go, or you’re on our calendar.

If you haven’t seen one of us, please reach out. It is the highlight of our week to spend time among the people of this synod. We *love* visiting with you and learning about your churches and what God is doing with your people. We love small town churches and lake churches and prairie churches and churches in busy suburbs and churches in the middle of the city. All y’all. We love you and we *want* to spend time with you.

So, traveling the synod is a lot of what we do. It's why the synod cars that were bought last year both have over 30,000 miles on them. Which is impressive if you consider that those cars are driven one to two days a week. And here a shout-out to our predecessors, Bishop Susan Candea, and Bishop's Associate Dave Whetter, who had the foresight to buy reasonably priced hybrids that get really excellent gas mileage, right before the price of gas nearly doubled. And if you're wondering why we buy cars rather than just paying mileage, you should know that over the last year and a half, the mileage put on those cars would have cost us over \$20,000 for each car. Synod cars are a thrifty and smart investment that pays for itself in the first two years.

We do more than drive around enjoying the beauty of Missouri and Kansas, though. I made a little diagram of some other things we do, for those who have wondered. Here's some of what we do, hopefully some of it already known to you:

- We handle candidacy and mobility and oversee the Roster. This work is primarily done by our Bishop's Associate, Chad Langdon, but every staff member has a role to play in it.
- We bring you educational opportunities—the Fall Theological Conference, book studies, continuing education, boundary and cultural awareness events and more.
- We train lay and rostered leaders for ministry. I'll say more about both of these things in a moment.
- We oversee mission congregations like our South Sudanese Congregation and our two Latiné ministries—Sagrado Corazon do Jesus and Mision San Juan. And new ministries formed to meet the Holy Spirit where the Spirit is at work creating opportunities for mission.
- We make grants to congregations, leaders, and ministries through the synod's Mission Endowment fund. These grants help new pastors pay off school loans, support seminarians and lay leaders in training, and provide assistance on congregational projects.
- Having heard of the need in several of our congregations, we are launching a Synod-Wide Confirmation process this fall. Any confirmand from across the synod is welcome to join us for online sessions and occasional in-person retreats. This is a great opportunity for those congregations that have smaller numbers of confirmation-age youth to offer them the opportunity to learn alongside others. Synod Staff will take the lead in teaching, but we'd love to have some experienced confirmation teachers come alongside us. If you're interested, please let one of us know.
- Finally, we work with any congregation that asks in assessing and growing Congregational Vitality. This work, along with the oversight of Mission Congregations, primarily belongs to our Director for Evangelical Mission, Kristen Koch.

That's the stuff we do that you might know about. There's more though, that you might not know about. Some stuff you definitely don't know about, and that's by design.

- We tend to the care of lay and rostered leaders, when they need some support, or experience a loss, or just need someone to talk to.
- We support congregations and ministries struggling with difficult situations of all kinds.
- And we act swiftly when trust and/or rules have been broken in one of our ministries.

You don't know specifics about these things when they're happening, because we have a duty to be trustworthy and worthy of your confidences. The same is true of your pastors; you don't always know about the time they spend caring for members in some of the most difficult days of their lives.

There are a couple more things that we do want you to know about:

- We'll be working to raise money for mission—to start new congregations and communities, to train new leaders for our ministries, and to support congregations in embracing what the Holy Spirit is doing in their midst. As generous as your mission support is, it doesn't cover the cost of doing what we do, and there is quite frankly nothing left to cut. When I arrived in this synod in 2000, the synod staff was nearly twice the size it is now. We simply cannot work with fewer staff members than we have now, and we have pared back everywhere we can to make our operation as lean as possible. We want to be doing more, not less, so we'll be writing grants, and we'll be looking for major donors and congregational partners who want to help us address the current realities of the church in our time.
- We are also working to strengthen our ecumenical partnerships. I have met with the leaders of six judicatories in our synod, and more meetings are planned. In August, the leaders from at least four full communion partner denominations will meet Kansas City for a summit, to talk about how we can work together. The future of the church is ecumenical—it is in the breaking down of walls that have separated us from like-minded Christians for years. We need each other and we are stronger together.

So that's some of what the synod does. If I were to sum it up in a single phrase, I would offer the statement that has become a mantra for our office: “the synod exists to resource congregations and ministries.” We are here for you. We exist for you.

A crucial part of resourcing all of you is understanding this moment in the church. Some of you have heard me say this, because I say it a lot:

God is doing something with the church. A new way of being church is being born in our midst, and it is highly collaborative, creative, experimental, and **fearless**. Being part of

this transition is both exciting and painful, as birth usually is. None of our congregations have been untouched by the gradual decentering of the inherited church from our culture. We don't like that soccer is played on Sunday morning, or that kids miss Confirmation Class because they're on a travel baseball team, or that your kid tells you that you have to come to Career Day at his school because none of his friends know what a bishop is.

Okay, that last one might just have been about me.

But this is about all of us: God is doing something with the church. Some of you are embracing this moment and some of us are bracing against it and your synod staff is here to resource all of you. I know change is scary. Change is always experienced as loss. But here's what we can no longer ignore: refusing to embrace this moment means bigger loss. We've got to rise to the moment, and I am here to tell you that we are doing all that we can to create the conditions in which every congregation and ministry in the Central States Synod can rise.

Which means we're going to have to learn some new skills. We're going to train 100 new lay leaders in the next five years. I hope we train more, but I think a hundred is a transformational and achievable goal.

We're also going to send more people to seminary, to increase the number of rostered ministers in our synod. Chad is actively working on this and we're already seeing interest.

We'll also be offering training to the rostered ministers we have now, in skills our seminaries are not all teaching. Our Fall Theological Conference theme is *For Such a Time as This*, and there we will be exploring some of the basic skills of community organizing and how they can help us encounter and understand our communities better. Bring your walking shoes - this is going to be an interactive experience. We'll learn the art of the one-to-one meeting, how to map a community, and how to tell the story of what you learn. All through the lens of the story of how Queen Esther finds her power and voice and secures the future of her people.

We're going to take advantage of the fact that our young people are showing some interest in church by making sure they know that we have interest in them. More youth events. Synod-wide confirmation. Better support for campus ministries—that one is going to take all of us. And a deeper relationship with Bethany College—*our* ELCA college right here in *our* synod.

Finally, we're going to explore new ways of being church together and new ways of introducing our neighbors to the "E" in ELCA—the good news of God made manifest in Jesus Christ. Already in this synod, congregations and individuals are embracing new ways of encountering God—Pub Theology, Dinner Church, and Wild Earth Church.

We'll look at what's already happening here, and what is happening other places. When I met with Bishop Deon Johnson of the Episcopal Diocese of Missouri, we talked about the Anglican Diocese of London, where attendance has risen 70% since 1993, and giving has doubled. You can read about it in Jason Fout's book, [\*Learning from London\*](#). The

congregations in and around London began to embrace their parishes and listen to their neighbors. They created green spaces and multiuse spaces for the community, new forms of worship that appeal to all of their neighbors, and an introduction to Christianity that is now used worldwide. All growing out of a simple mission: for every Londoner to encounter the love of God in Christ.

We're going to learn from London, and from everyplace and everyone who is finding a way to meet this moment in the Christian church. We're going to learn some new skills and rededicate ourselves to a tradition that has a lot to say to the World as It Is. Our Lutheran distinctives: justification by grace through faith apart from works, the priesthood of all the baptized, a focus on the gospel of Jesus Christ—these are not the old-fashioned values of the church of yesterday. They are the joyful hope of the church of tomorrow, and an essential counterweight to a contemporary public proclamation of faith rooted more in religious nationalism than in the love of God in Christ.

What if we became known as the people who introduced every person in Kansas and Missouri to the love of God in Christ? What if in a few years there are scholars studying *our* ministries, and writing books about Learning from Missouri and Kansas?!

God is doing something with the church. This church. Our church. The Lutheran congregations and other ministries of the Central States Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. God is working in us and through us to help our neighbors encounter the love of God in Christ. Travel the way of Jesus. Join God's reign of justice and radical love in the world. I hope you are as excited about going on this ride as we are.

When I was in the Holy Land in January, I bought this little olive wood set of loaves and fishes. Little loaves and little fish. I thought it would make a nice illustration for a children's message, but I think I'll let it have the last word this morning.

Dear people of the Central States Synod, we are these loaves and these fish, and God is going to work a miracle through us that will open many eyes and fill many hearts—multiplying our numbers and feeding a world **hungry** for a word of grace, justice, and peace that comes directly from our Lord, Jesus Christ. Thank you for trusting us to walk with you as we enter into this fertile and miraculous space, this New Thing that God is doing with the church.