

Delaware-Maryland Synod Vision 2018

Vision Report and Outline of Discernment Process

Introduction

This report outlines the rationale for adopting a new vision for our synod at this time and the decisions leading to its development. This report also gives more detail about the process that the Discernment Team used to gather voices to inform the Vision 2018 Plan.

Changing Context

Since the last strategic vision for the Delaware-Maryland Synod was enacted in 2007, our synod has changed significantly.

Consistent with the ELCA as a whole, our synod has seen a sharp decline in membership and worship attendance.

- Between 2007 and 2012, overall worship attendance in our synod has decreased by 24% from 23,375 to 17,767.
- Since 2000, it has declined by 32% while it has declined through the ELCA by 31% in that same time period.
- The average size of the typical congregation in our synod had dropped from 480 in 2007 to 394 in 2012 and 32% of our congregations worship fewer than 50 per week, up from 23% in 2007.

The membership of the Delaware-Maryland Synod is not the only factor that is different. While individual giving has remained strong and consistent, that giving has not been sufficient to offset the loss of members. When adjusted for inflation, the total giving to congregations in the Delaware-Maryland Synod was down by 22.4% between 2007 and 2012, from \$40.6 million to \$34.7 million.

If just one percent of people unclaimed by any church in our synod were open to worshipping in an ELCA congregation, that number would double the existing worship attendance of ELCA congregations in our synod.

Yet, in the midst of this, there is huge potential for impacting the lives of others with the Gospel of Christ.

- The population of the Delaware-Maryland Synod's territory is growing slowly, but there has been significant growth in number of persons "unclaimed" by any church of any denomination.
- Those who are unclaimed by a church included 58% of the population of our synod's territory.
- If only 1% (26,000 people) of those who are unclaimed would be open to worshipping in an ELCA congregation, this number would more than double the existing worship attendance of ELCA congregations in our synod.

This data compels us to seek a new vision and to recommit our focus and our resources to strengthening each and every congregation within our synod in order that they may more effectively reach out to their community.

Vision 2018 History

The last Strategic Plan for the Delaware-Maryland Synod was formulated in 2007 to provide focus for 2007-2012. In 2011, a Futures Task Force was formed to help prioritize the work of our synod staff and to refocus the resources of the synod in response to declining revenue.

On February 26, 2013, the Synod Council formed a strategic Planning Team to include 3 members of the Synod Council, 2 Deans, 2-4 members at large (clergy and lay) plus the Bishop and Synod vice president. This team first met on April 17, 2013 and identified their process as “Vision 2018 – Discerning God’s Plan” with Beth Yenchko of the Upper Susquehanna Synod serving as facilitator.

In July, 2013 Paul Erbes was asked to take over as facilitator due to Beth taking on a new role in another synod. The full team has met 10 times in addition to conducting 13 Listening Posts and facilitating a synod-wide survey.

Process

In order to discern God’s plan for our synod, the Discernment Team first committed themselves to prayer and participated in on-going Bible Study. The team then facilitated three listening activities to gather input from lay and rostered leaders, as well as synod staff. These three voices together with the time of study and prayer were the foundation for the Vision Plan.

In June 2013, the Vision 2018 Survey was sent via email to 2,513 lay and rostered leaders whose email addresses were on file with the synod office. The survey remained open until July 29, 2013. Of the 2,513 emails sent, 694 individuals completed the entire survey, for an overall response rate of 27%. From there, teams from the Synod Council compiled and analyzed the data into a report, which is included as an appendix.

On four Saturdays in October and November 2013, the Discernment Team facilitated a total of 12 Listening Post sessions, with one session held in each of the conferences and an additional session in the Delmarva Conference. These three-hour sessions included Bible study (Ephesians 4), a summary of the Discernment process, an overview of the role of our synod and small group discussions. In total, 152 rostered and lay people participated in the sessions, averaging 13 people per session.

On December 7, 2013, staff from the ELCA Office Research and Evaluation came to 3 sites in the Synod to facilitate a Synod Ministry Review. The review consisted of small group, hour-long interviews with rostered and lay congregation members from 16 congregations and ministries.

Summary of Voices

From each of these three voices, four themes emerged: Connectedness, Leadership, Discipleship and Communication. Below is a summary of each theme and the voices that contributed to it.

Congregations feel disconnected from what is going on in our synod.

Communication

In general, this listening process has clearly highlighted that congregations feel disconnected from what is going on in our synod and synod ministries. Additionally, many participants expressed confusion about how to carry back things they hear or experience at the synod-level to their congregations.

During the synod ministry review, some participants expressed they feel they hear from our synod most when something bad has happened or during times of transition. Participants expressed an understanding for the fact that the size and resources of synod staff were limited, but called for creative solutions so that congregations can feel connected to our synod and, through that link, congregation members can feel connected as well.

Many participants of the synod ministry review also expressed the desire for the synod to market itself better and to “get out into the synod,” expressing more visibility in congregations by the Bishop and synod staff. When asked what is the single most important step forward to make our synod more supportive of congregations carrying out God’s mission, respondents rated better communication and branding as the most important.

Participants in listening events expressed the desire for our synod to help both lay and rostered leaders serve as better spiritual leaders in their community.

Finally, the Discernment Team heard frequently that our synod should be a conduit for resources on various topics related to living in and growing strong, healthy communities of Christ.

Connectedness

What the Discernment Team heard across all the listening events is that congregations want to feel more connected – to both the synod at large and with other congregations.

During the Listening Posts, many participants emphasized a desire to feel connected with other congregations, primarily for support and encouragement but also for exploring shared ministries, such as youth ministry, community outreach and social ministry – all areas of strong focal interest throughout the synod.

The team also heard the desire for resources and support in analyzing their communities, local contexts and shaping the vision and mission of congregations. The ministry review, conducted by the ELCA, notes the desire that “our synod should strongly encourage local initiatives which seek to develop partnerships and share resources, emphases, strategies, etc.”

In the Vision 2018 Survey, when respondents were asked to identify the single best step forward our synod could take in support of congregations working to carry out God’s mission, the second most frequent answer was to provide training for leadership and growth. In the Listening Post discussions, participants called for sharing and teaching in

areas such as stewardship and evangelism. This was lifted up in many sessions as a process for sharing best practices between congregations, an idea that came up frequently throughout the discernment process.

Leadership

Overwhelmingly, the Discernment Team heard the expressed need for an emphasis on leadership. This emphasis seemed to be two-fold. Participants expressed the desire for our synod to help both lay and rostered leaders serve as better spiritual leaders in their community, but there was also an emphasis on how to grow leadership from within our congregations and communities to carry forward our work into the future.

The need for spiritual growth for leadership was most clearly expressed in the synod ministry review, where participants noted the need for the bishop to help congregational leaders to deepen and strengthen their faith to serve their congregations more effectively. During the Listening Posts, participants also discussed how to deepen the faith and discipleship of church members.

The Vision 2018 Plan is the result of a discernment process of listening to God's voice and the voices of the members of our Delaware-Maryland Synod.

In the Vision 2018 Survey, when asked about ministry priority areas, evangelism appeared to be the top ministry focus. The synod ministry review clearly indicates there is room for the membership of our synod to grow by reaching out with the good news of Jesus Christ. However, to realize that growth, we heard that our synod and congregations need to place particular emphasis on leadership development.

Discipleship

Through the synod ministry report, we heard about the changing context in which we are working. Our synod of 2007 no longer exists. Even within the overall changes highlighted earlier in this report, there are more telling details. In addition to membership decreasing, people are increasingly worshipping differently, in smaller congregations than they did in 2007. This shift seems to indicate changing needs of which we need to be aware in order to effectively minister to the population of our synod.

Participants of all the listening events expressed the need for help reaching out. This need was expressed in various ways. In the Vision 2018 Survey, for instance, one of the main concerns expressed by respondents was competition between church and secular activities, like sports. There was also a strong desire voiced for resources and support with regards to evangelism.

Concurrently, the Vision 2018 report cites a concern among respondents that the traditional Lutheran teachings and values (such as sacraments and grace) be upheld. Put together, what the Discernment Team heard was that while the context in which we work is changing, God has not changed. Congregations feel called to remain faithful to our Lutheran heritage, but need help understanding how to connect their communities to that heritage and affirm connections of members in the face of competing priorities.

Vision 2018 proposes that our synod should walk with congregations that need help forming or revising their vision and mission, taking into account the unique context of each congregation.

Conclusion

Vision 2018 is the result of a discernment process of listening to God's voice and the voices of the members of our Delaware-Maryland Synod. The Vision Plan reflects those voices and forms a strong catalyst to help us be faithful to the Gospel which compels us as companions with the people who need us.

The resulting Vision Plan takes into account the needs expressed through each of these events, alongside the changing context in which we live and minister.

APPENDICES (Available on our synod website)

1. ELCA Synod Ministry Review for the Delaware-Maryland Synod
2. Vision 2018 Survey Results
3. Vision 2018 Survey Report
4. Vision 2018 Listening Post Summary of Findings

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