

MAKING A *Difference*

NORTHEASTERN IOWA SYNOD, EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH IN AMERICA

Transformation Strategy strives to equip lay and rostered 'saints'

By: Karris Golden

"There is a phenomenon the synod can't ignore: The church appears to be less of a cultural priority," said Susan Armstrong of Mason City, Synod Council vice president.

"The idea of viability is changing," she explained. "It's no longer little churches that are independent of each other. We're pooling our resources, particularly in the idea of the geographical parish."

"In times of great change, it's important to differentiate between 'our culture's values and our spiritual, Christian values,'" Armstrong said.

"For example, if a congregation closes its doors or fails to reach its mission support goals, it's easy to look to the horizon of our culture and say, 'What do you expect? Our congregation is dwindling; our economy is bad.' Or do we pick up the cross and carry our struggle to the cross and find transformation? That's about not being conformed to the world but being transformed," said Armstrong, referencing Romans 12:2.



Susan Armstrong

The synod chose the latter and developed a transformation strategy to face changes head on: “The Northeastern Iowa Synod makes Christ known by strengthening the witness and service of the whole church.”

“The transformation will sometimes mean having the courage to turn things upside down a bit,” said Armstrong. It reminds her of something Mother Teresa said: “In this life we cannot do great things. We can only do small things with great love.”

“It’s as much about our servanthood and our own humility and attitude that we do the work as it is about reaching the goal,” Armstrong explained. “Maybe we can do something else. You begin to look at your goals differently and your defeats differently.”


“Equipping the saints” is key to the transformation strategy, she added. Doing so includes nurturing and affirming clergy, synod staff, lay leaders and members.

“Rostered leaders benefit from Colleague Groups,” said the Rev. Melissa Lane, associate pastor at Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church in Waterloo. These small groups of people in ministry meet regularly for personal and ministry support, encouragement, prayer and spiritual growth. The groups are intentional and structured, meeting a total of 18 to 25 hours per year.



Melissa Lane

Lane began in a “first call” Colleague Group. They enjoyed the company so much that they broke off and formed their own group. She serves as the facilitator for her group.



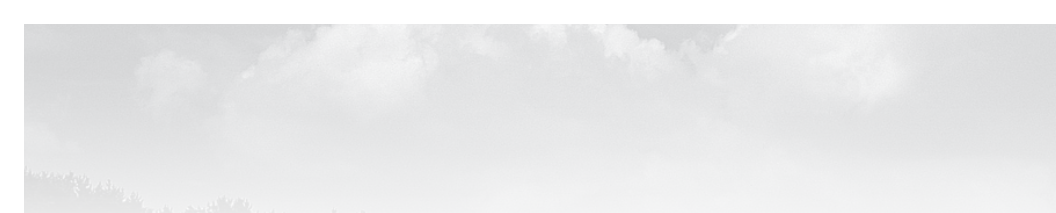
“It’s highly recommended by the synod that we stay involved,” she explained. This includes conference clergy groups that generally meet weekly, often for text study, advice and other professional support. Colleague Groups offer a different fellowship dynamic.

Colleague Groups are generally comprised of pastors linked by common interests, not necessarily geography. During monthly meetings, Lane’s Colleague Group discusses their ministries—what’s going well personally and professionally and what’s not.

“It’s not a group where they advise you. It’s just an opportunity to share and to vent about what’s going on in our lives. Afterward, we usually go and have something to eat,” she said. “It’s an additional support system for my ministry where there are people to bounce ideas off of. ... It prevents that isolation and gives you an opportunity to grow.”

“Experienced pastors can reach out to new rostered leaders through the synod’s candidacy process, which is integral to sustaining current and future leadership,” said Lane.

“My main goal of being on the candidacy committee is to help students,” she said. “I’ve been on the other end just a few years ago, so I know what it’s like to work through the seminary education aspect of their lives and make the transition into what full-time ministry can look like and be like. I want to help them and be a support system and colleague through that important time of their lives.”



Lane did not grow up in the synod, and her previous experience with candidacy is “extremely different.” She appreciates the Northeastern Iowa Synod’s candidacy process and has heard that other synods seek to model theirs after Northeastern Iowa’s.

“I know Northeastern Iowa didn’t get this way overnight, but I also know a lot of synods don’t do what Northeastern Iowa does,” she said.

In particular, Lane is proud of the candidacy retreats, where candidates and the committee “get together, grow with each other and equip and minister to the candidates.”

“They’ve been in seminary for four years. Unless they went to seminary in the synod, they’ve been all over the United States and may not know any of the other candidates from the synod. This retreat gives them a good foundation to start from,” said Lane. “It’s a time for us as a synod to say, ‘Here’s what’s going on. What can we do better? How can we help you?’”

The annual Fall Conference is a theological education time for the synod’s rostered leaders. The two-day event usually includes fellowship, keynote speaker and other continuing education and opportunities for reflection.

“I would say it gives an opportunity for people to connect with colleagues around the synod that they don’t normally have the opportunity to see,” said Lane. “This allows us to broaden the collegiality within the synod—to come together and grow as colleagues. We can share information, learn from each other and be more in tune with what’s going on.”

Lane has served on the conference's coordinating committee for four years. Among past keynote topics are congregational conflict and science and theology.

“Fostering an ongoing support network for aging congregation members is equally essential to the vitality of the synod,” said the Rev. Barbara Wills, visitation pastor at First Lutheran Church in Northwood.



Barbara Wills

The synod's newest work group focuses on aging and was started by Wills and others three years ago. She developed the idea while finishing a year of Clinical Pastoral Education in a nursing home.

Wills noticed that many among the synod's aging population had been “ignored.” But as the critical mass of Baby boomers has reached—and passed—the 60th birthday milestone, new attention is being paid to aging.

“One thing is to be a bridge between the synod and the congregations,” Wills said. “The goal is to help the congregations in their ministries and programming for aging adults.”

The work group strives to honor the process of aging and those going through it.



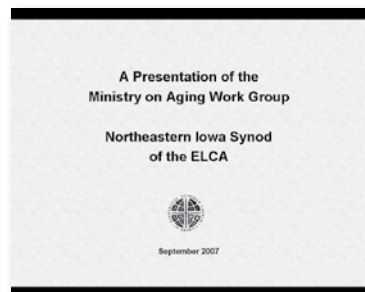
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“There is a certain amount of denial of aging. Take this drug and you’re vital again; color your hair because there is something wrong with having gray hair,” said Wills, who is 62. “What’s wrong with slowing down a bit and moving into a different stage of life and looking at your ministry? Celebrate that instead of covering it up and pretending we’re as young as we used to be. ... Some of what I’m reading treats aging like it’s a disease we need to cure instead of like a natural process of life that needs to be lived fully for what it is. It’s all right to be over 60 or 70.”

Issues of aging can be vast and sometimes unwieldy. “In addition to health, care-giving, physical, emotional and professional concerns, ‘aging’ congregation members aren’t ready to be ‘old’—but they’re not ready for a rocking chair, either,” said Wills.

“There are people who are 100 who are still working and people who are 70 who are in nursing homes,” she explained. “You can’t just lump people together. In so many of our congregations, it’s older people who are doing the ministry.”

The work group developed a Power Point presentation that can be used to help congregations brainstorm about their own work. Members of the Ministry on Aging Work Group are available to make the presentation and facilitate discussion, and it is also available at www.wartburg.edu/socwork/aging.html for individuals to take and use in their own contexts.



A link to this powerpoint presentation can be found at www.wartburg.edu/socwork/aging.html