

Criteria for Viable Congregations

The Sierra Pacific Synod believes that the viability and vitality of congregations is one of the foundational priorities for its mission. Healthy, multiplying congregations, faithful to the Gospel of Jesus Christ and responding to the Great Commission are the cornerstones of ministry. The purpose of this document is to define some of the basic functions of congregations and to describe factors which may indicate that a congregation is at risk in its ministry. By identifying congregations at risk and those which may be approaching non-viability, the synod can bring the necessary resources to bear which will assist such congregations to discern their potential for future ministry.

The Constitution of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America describes congregations as follows:

9.11. A congregation is a community of baptized persons whose existence depends on the proclamation of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments and whose purpose is to worship God, to nurture its members, and to reach out in witness and service to the world. To this end it assembles regularly for worship and nurture, organizes and carries out its ministry to its people and neighborhood, and cooperates with and supports the wider church to strive for the fulfillment of God's mission in the world.

To fulfill the purposes for which they were begun, congregations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America on the territory of the Sierra Pacific Synod embody the following characteristics:

- A. Provide services of worship at which the Word of God is preached and the sacraments are administered in accordance with the Confessions of the church and by a person duly qualified to do so. This includes:
 - 1. The role of the ordained minister. Congregations retain the services of ordained ministers in cooperation with the bishop of this synod;
 - 2. The role of musical assistance. Congregations arrange for assistance in worship by musical accompaniment, helping to create an environment conducive to praise and honor of God;
 - 3. Congregations furnish materials which aid worshipers (both members and visitors) in their participation in worship; and
 - 4. Congregations provide, through the upkeep of property, an attractive setting for worship and the other activities of the congregation.
- B. Provide for the care of members, through both lay and ordained involvement, which assists persons in particular circumstances. This includes:
 - 1. At all times, including during times of interim pastoral service, arranging for the regular visitation of sick and shut-in members, allowing for the regular administration of the sacrament of Holy Communion and for visits at times of emergency;
 - 2. Encourage the laity to assist in this role, including the opportunities to train such persons who are given to help with these tasks.
- C. Provide a ministry of education to members and all others which seeks to equip them for their service in the world and for growth in their spiritual life.

1. Plan and follow through on regular times, apart from the worship service(s), when the community gathers for the study of scripture and other topics, and annually reviews the effectiveness of such programs;
 2. Seek to involve all members of the congregation in this educational program and relate this to the special needs of persons, e.g. confirmation instruction, pre-marital and pre-baptismal counseling, new member classes, etc.
- D. Provide a ministry of outreach to the community around the church and to the wider community so that the church may proclaim the gospel to all people and grow both in numbers and in diversity.
1. Provide training opportunities for members on the ways in which each person may witness in his/her personal life and conversation, and opportunities designed to challenge the congregation to be open to persons with different backgrounds;
 2. Involve members in efforts to announce to the neighborhood the invitation of the gospel as well as arranging for and supporting the pastoral staff in these ventures;
 3. Practice biblical hospitality so that visitors feel welcome and supported within the congregation and demonstrate to visitors and new members a willingness to involve them in the decisions of the congregation, seeking to integrate new members with others who are longer-term members;
 4. Study the demographic information available for the neighborhood and in other ways seek to increase the sensitivity of members to the needs and backgrounds of those persons living and working in the surrounding community.
- E. Respond to human needs in the community and among members.
1. Provide, perhaps with the cooperation and coordination of others, ways to meet the needs of persons in the community;
 2. Seek to provide accessibility to those with physical limitations to the worship and other activities of the church;
- F. Provide for the proper administration of the church and its property so that these are maintained in good order as stewards of God's gifts.
1. Provide regular ways in which members are challenged to fulfill their calling as stewards of all that God has given them, including their financial commitments to the congregation;
 2. Provide for a regular system for the recording of contributions and the maintenance of parish records, making them available to the general membership, and providing for an annual audit of all congregational records.
- G. Demonstrate an openness to be a partner with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America through the Sierra Pacific Synod and participate in activities which support the work of the wider church.
1. Send voting members to the events of the conference and the synod and report back to the congregation concerning actions taken by the church;
 2. Participate in workshops and seminars intended to strengthen the life of the congregations, especially those which are planned to assist in the congregation's particular needs and challenges;

3. Support the pastor and other rostered persons in his/her regular participation in the synodical leadership conferences and continuing education;
4. Participate financially in the program of the church beyond the local expression through a regular remittance of contributions from members;
5. Work with the synodical bishop and staff in determining the possibilities for cooperation with other Lutheran partners in the area, in ways which might strengthen the overall mission of the church. Consider ways to plan for ecumenical cooperation in a community, including the sharing of facilities.

SIGNS OR FACTORS WHICH PLACE CONGREGATIONS AT RISK

The following factors can be descriptive of congregations whose ministry is at risk or who may be approaching a crisis in the mission of the congregation:

1. **COMMITMENT TO MISSION:** Congregations without a clearly articulated mission which is faithful to the Great Commission and without the passion to carry out their mission, are not likely to have a sustainable future.

Some signs ... Core values, vision and mission are not articulated by the congregation.
 ... Management of the congregation and care of existing members is a high priority to the exclusion of outreach.
 ... more than one year without significant planning for the future, implementation of plans and evaluation of existing ministries.
 ... resistance to be more than the congregation is currently.
 ... expressions that the current reality is fine for those who attend.
 ... low morale and expressions of fear about “outsiders.”

2. **SIZE:** Being small seriously impacts the possibilities of a congregation to respond to the challenges of ministry for its members and its outreach to the community. In part this is a modern problem, since people are not drawn “naturally” to remain Lutherans and we have fewer Lutherans immigrating to this synod from which to draw.

Some signs ... fewer than 70 average worship attendance over a long period of time.
 ... fewer than 175 active adult members.
 ... congregations with one or two large extended families which make up the majority of the membership.

3. **FINANCES:** Having severe financial limitations places additional pressure on a congregation, including:

- a. calling, and maintaining proper compensation for, a pastor;
- b. providing the materials and programs of the congregation necessary for ministry and mission;
- c. increasing the dependence on other financial resources and/or disposing of congregational property to keep going, thus “losing” these for the future.

There are times when a few members give sacrificially enough to sustain ministry; however this can often lead to issues of unhealthy power and control. Smaller congregations generally have members who contribute more, as a percentage of income, because of the need for survival.

Some signs ... less than \$95,000 per year in regular member giving.

- ... a large percentage of congregational income is derived from rentals to outside groups.
- ... selling property (parsonages, vacant land, etc.) with little or no planning for future ministry.
- ... a large percentage of congregational giving is derived from a small percentage of the membership.

4. **LENGTH OF PASTORAL VACANCY:** When congregations experience long pastoral vacancies severe strains may develop within the congregational system. Some congregations where this has happened simply slip into a mode that this is what they want to be, and continue at a vastly reduced rate of pastoral service and program. These congregations then experience very little or no growth during the pastoral vacancy. Related to long vacancies are congregations which, because of severe strain in their ministries, experience high pastoral turnover, with a succession of short-term pastorates.

- Some signs
- ... a succession of pastorates that last less than 5 years.
 - ... a tendency to view the pastor as a hired employee rather than a called partner in ministry.

5. **DYSFUNCTIONAL GROUPS:** These factors are the most difficult to describe and the most difficult to overcome. In one sense it is quite easy to observe dysfunction in a congregation from the outside and it is probably the major reason why some congregations have not grown in the past and why they will not grow in the future. It is also important to make a distinction between the reality that a congregation may consist of some dysfunctional people and that the congregational system itself is dysfunctional. It can be, and often is, the case that congregations may be dysfunctional for a time and self-correct or do so with help from the outside. At the same time, this is the hardest factor to address from the outside, as it often brings about attacks on the intervener and increases fear within the group.

Another factor in the dysfunction of congregations is that people want and sometimes desperately cling to the chance to keep control (and to exercise control over others) in small dysfunctional congregations. Members in these congregations often perceive any attempt to strengthen the ministry as an attack on their autonomy and independence, and experience intervention as a loss of control over their status quo.

- Some signs
- ... long term inability to deal with the basic matters of cooperation between members, between members and pastors, and/or between the congregation and the synod
 - ... evaluations by a series of pastors and others who have entered the congregation for limited periods of time
 - ... cycles of growth, with conflicts brought about by the growth (old guard and new members) which result in the congregation returning to smaller numbers
 - ... a sense (stated or implied) that the congregation does not need to change to fulfill its mission and ministry goals
 - ... an exaggerated sense of being under siege

RESPONSIBILITY OF THE SYNOD TO PROVIDE ASSISTANCE

As those charged with the oversight of the mission of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America on the territory of this synod, the Office of the Bishop and the Synod Council bear primary responsibility for congregations. This document is intended to assist in identifying and describing congregations at risk and will be shared with congregations which may be at risk or approaching a crisis in ministry.

The flowchart (Page 7) describes the process for identifying congregations at risk, beginning with an assessment by the Ministry Review Team, upon referral from the Office of the Bishop and/or the Conference Dean or by the self-identification by a congregation.

If the Ministry Review indicates that the congregation is a candidate for redevelopment, in consultation with the Conference Dean and Cabinet, and the consent of the congregation, through either the Congregation Council or a congregational meeting, the synod may provide resources to support and strengthen the ministry of the congregation, such as the following:

1. Consultations with the Bishop and/or Assistants to the Bishop in the areas of evangelism and outreach, long-term planning, and conflict management.
2. Consultation with the synod Mission Director.
3. Resources and assistance from synodical Discipling Teams in such areas as:
 - Evangelism
 - Education Ministries
 - Family Ministries
 - Parish Leadership Development
 - Multicultural Ministries
 - Financial Support
4. Assignment of a Coach (expenses paid by the congregation) to assist the congregation with redeveloping its ministry, specifically:
 - Development of a Mission Plan and Implementation Plan for the congregation.
 - Holding the congregation accountable to its mission.
 - Brokering resources for redevelopment.

SYNODICAL ACTION

If the Ministry Review determines that a congregation does not have a sustainable future and is no longer able to fulfill its purposes, it becomes the responsibility of the Synod to act. Such action may take several forms. Providing assistance as outlined above, with the objective of transforming and building up the congregation to strengthen the mission of the synod in that particular place, may be the first step.

However, when such assistance is not fruitful, more direct action may be necessary. Some possible next steps may be:

- Yoking or merging the ministry of the congregation with another ELCA congregation, or
- Exploration of joint ministry with another denomination with which the ELCA is in full communion.

Finally, it may be necessary in some cases for the synod to effect an even more direct outcome when a congregation is either unwilling or unable to carry out its mission. The synod's authority derives from the following sections of the synod constitution:

- S13.24.** If any congregation of this synod has disbanded, or if the members of a congregation agree that it is no longer possible for it to function as such, or if it is the opinion of the Synod Council that the membership of a congregation has become so scattered or so diminished in numbers as to make it impractical for such a congregation to fulfill the purposes for which it was organized or that it is necessary for this synod to protect the congregation's property from waste and deterioration, the Synod Council, itself or through trustees appointed by it, may take charge and control of the property of the congregation to hold, manage, and convey the same on behalf of this synod. The congregation shall have the right to appeal the decision to the Synod Assembly.
- S13.25.** This synod may temporarily assume administration of a congregation upon the request of or with the concurrence of the Congregation Council, or upon the written petition of two-thirds of the voting members of the congregation.

Figure 1

