

Mission Clusters

Mission Clusters are one of the cornerstone pieces of the new Synod structure. For Mission Clusters to work, we need to think differently about what it means to be Church and what it means to be a local congregation.

We need to stop thinking about congregations as independent franchises loosely connected to one another through something we call “synod”. Currently, many only think about “synod” once a year when (or if) we attend the Synod Assembly. Congregations may also think about “the synod” (meaning the synod office) if they are in a call process, have a question about the “larger church” or are facing a challenge, conflict or crisis. Other than that, each congregation exists pretty much on its own. There are congregations in the Synod who can function quite well for a long time in this kind of loose confederation. They have the financial strength, membership numbers, and leadership to function independently of other congregations or the broader institution. Increasingly, many of our congregations cannot. The evidence is overwhelming: “Every congregation for itself” simply does not work. If we keep thinking in these terms, the Arkansas-Oklahoma Synod will be comprised of about seven to ten congregations in less than 20 years. This decline in membership will continue until we start to think of Church differently.

Instead of thinking of our congregations as independent franchises loosely connected around something called “Lutheran” we need to think of our congregations as a network of faith communities or mission centers that work together to embody and proclaim the Gospel in a particular area. Jesus did not command his disciples to gather communities of the faithful in order to care for their personal spiritual needs. Instead he sent them out to both proclaim the Reign of God and care for all those in need. Love of God and Love of neighbor must be the hallmark of the mission of the Christian Church. In order to effectively carry out this mission, we must work together. Independent franchises that see their mission primarily as caring for their members do not reflect the mission and ministry entrusted to us as disciples of Jesus Christ. We must work together not only with other “Lutheran” congregations, but with other Christian communities that share our commitment to proclaim the Reign of God and care for those in need.

Mission Clusters are, therefore, intended to be networks of congregations intrinsically linked to one another to proclaim the Reign of God and care for neighbors in a specific geographic area. Each Cluster is led by a Dean who works with his or her colleagues to provide ministry and equip the saints in the congregations of the Cluster for the sake of God’s Mission in the Cluster’s geographic area. The clergy and diaconal ministers in the Cluster form a team responsible for leading and equipping all the mission centers in the Cluster for mission and ministry. These leaders **MUST** work together for this design to function properly. Independent operators who are not team players will not function well in this model of ministry.

Working together, the mission centers (congregations and other ministries) that make up a Mission Cluster:

- Develop creative strategic mission plans for reaching out to spiritual seekers, the lost, the lonely, the suffering, the poor and the disenfranchised in the geographic area served by the Mission Cluster. Each mission center will play a role in developing and implementing a plan that is appropriate to their geographic area.
- Support one another in mission and ministry by sharing gifts, skills, leadership and human resources with one another. Stronger congregations will support and encourage the weaker congregations following the example of Jesus Christ. The gifts of the “weaker” congregations

would be shared with the “stronger” congregations. In this way, existing congregations will be strengthened and renewed in their mission and ministry.

- Focus on equipping disciples for mission and ministry in their daily lives rather than recruiting members to fill empty pews. We will work together as a Synod to provide and share resources for equipping disciples.
- Identify new fields for mission and ministry, develop plans for moving into those mission fields and launching those new ministries.

For example...

Congregations in the Mission Cluster identify a community or neighborhood in their mission area that presents a possibility for new mission. Each congregation commits to recruit individuals to begin a new ministry in this location. Those individuals are trained and equipped for this work. Congregations commit to praying for and supporting these individuals in their work. A location is found (i.e. a common room in a local library, a room in a school building or someone’s residence) to begin to gather newcomers into the new ministry. Programmatically, this could be a bible study, a group dedicated to providing a specific community service (rooted in the Word and prayer), a coffee house, café or pub, or some other way of planting a new community. As the new community grows, they are supported by the Mission Cluster congregations. Once they reach 50 participants, they could apply for status as a Mission Center under development, and apply for Synod-wide funds. Once they reach 100 participants they could call their own pastoral or diaconal leadership (depending on the type of ministry). This strategy for beginning new ministries would be inexpensive and creative, seeking new models for ministry while energizing and renewing existing ministries.

Mission Cluster Coordinators, would work with Deans to facilitate communication and coordination of these projects between local Mission Centers. Through the Synod Council, Mission Cluster Coordinators would also collaborate across Mission Clusters to share ideas and resources. Mission Cluster Coordinators would also provide a link between Mission Clusters and the resources and programs of the ELCA.

The Synod staff would support the work of Mission Clusters and local Mission Centers by providing training, encouragement, guidance, mission planning consultation, conflict transformation and transitional support. Synod staff would also work with Mission Cluster Coordinators and Deans to coordinate the support of partner ministries, global missions, and the ministry we do together around the world as the ELCA.

Cluster Mission Centers and leaders would use technology to connect with one another over large distances. Upgrading local technology to make this possible and support for these efforts would come from the Synod office and Synod staff.

In order to achieve or exceed our goal of 60 thriving, growing ministries by 2025, we will need to work together to plant new ministries (congregations and other mission centers) and strengthen existing ministries. This cannot be done just by the Synod staff. It cannot be done just by pastors and diaconal ministers. All the baptized must participate in doing this holy work that Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, has called us to do.

Peace,
Bishop Mike