



Upstate New York Synod

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

Helping Congregations Discern the Future

When thinking of viable and sustainable congregations there are some marks that indicate longevity. As a Synod we understand that the basic attributes a congregation needs to be sustainable in the long term are:

Connecting with God

- A congregation committed to weekly worship around the Word and Sacrament
- A congregation committed to adult faith formation (Bible study)
- An active congregational prayer life
- Members willing to learn to speak aloud with others in their congregation and families as well as out in the community about their faith and who Jesus is in their lives and the world

Connecting with each other

[which in ELCA congregations means connecting with and through the three expressions of the Church]

- Congregational leaders report regularly to their congregation what we are doing together in mission and ministry as a conference, the synod, and ELCA churchwide.
- Pastoral leader and at least one lay person attends all conference and synod assemblies
- Already contributing or willing to put in place immediately a way to move toward at least 10 % of worshippers' offerings toward Mission Support
- Financial contribution annually to the conference the congregation belongs to
- Submit parochial report annually

Connecting with the world

- Already have in action, or be actively working to create and put into action, a mission strategy centered on effectively engaging the congregation in:
 - witnessing in the community
 - mission through the synod & ELCA

In addition to these mission-centered marks, a viable and sustainable congregation:

- has an average worship attendance of more than 25 people and shows growth in worship attendance
- has 10-12 families tithing

When a congregation is at the edge of long term sustainability and has discerned that they want to grow, engage in renewal and meet the marks of a healthy and vital congregation (see attached) there are a variety of options open for you, but a passion for mission is necessary for any of them to work. These options are not about survival. Jesus didn't call us to survive but to reach people with the Good News of God's love and forgiveness. The two main options are:

1. Enter the **Transformational Ministry** process: an 18 month in-depth faith formation experience that focuses on identity, mission and discerning God's purpose for a congregation. This process requires a leadership team from the congregation to attend three workshops, regularly lead conversation in the congregation and for the entire congregation to engage in Bible study and prayer. Congregations can learn more about the Transformational Ministry process from the Director for Evangelical Mission.
2. **Yoke or merge with another congregation.** The Partnering for Mission Book lays out a discernment process for a congregation that is looking into renewing its ministry by partnering for the sake of mission.

When a congregation has discerned that it does not meet these marks of a viable and sustainable congregation, and that growth is not possible or desired, there are several options for moving forward:

1. **Preaching Point** – the congregation will be provided with a list of available supply preachers they can contact to arrange for Sunday worship leadership; a pastoral leader will be identified to be present for council meetings, funerals and pastoral emergencies.
 - a. If this option is chosen, \$15,000 is to be put on deposit with the Synod to pay for costs associated with closing a congregation, which include legal fees, caring for a building until it is sold, and archiving historical records
 - b. Regular supply fees and a stipend for the pastoral leader are also required, payable directly to the leaders
2. **Legacy Congregation** – Give thanks to God for the life and ministry of the congregation and its faithful witness to the Gospel and make preparations to close the congregation so that new life can spring forth. There is a helpful Legacy Congregation (Holy Closure) Booklet available on the Synod website that includes Bible study, steps and ways to receive support through this process.



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Healthy, Vital Congregations

Over the course of several months congregations were engaged in an Appreciative Inquiry process that asked about what defines a healthy, vital and effective pastor and a healthy, vital and effective congregation. Below are the marks that we, the Upstate New York Synod, use to determine if a congregation is healthy, vital and effective

SPIRITUAL DEPTH

- Christ centered, Mission driven
- Joyfully gathers around Word and Sacrament welcoming all in participation and leadership
- Seeks to effectively use the gifts of all people
- Fosters discipleship; always listening for where God is calling us now.
- Compassionate and generous
- Offers appropriate learning opportunities for all

ADMINISTRATIVE ATTENTIVENESS

- Mutual ministry committee in place
- Constitutions up to date (3 years) and followed i.e. annual meetings held and reports filed
- Annual audit of financial records including periodic outside audits
- Clear policies and procedures
- Synodical, ELCA forms filed annually
- Provide regular leadership training

BROAD CONNECTIONS

- Participate in conference and synod activities: i.e. send voting members to conference and synodical meetings
- Aware and supportive the ELCA and its wider ministries
- Develop and maintain ecumenical and community partnerships
- Participate with others in the life of the broader community; i.e. be aware of, utilize and support local resources. (Aging, Support groups, etc.)

CORPORATE HEALTH

- Welcoming, hospitable and Inclusive
- Prayerful
- Engages openly in conversation; i.e. with each other directly and around difficult issues
- Effectively addresses conflict
- Affirming of each person's ministry