



Rocky Mountain Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Congregational Perspectives of the Rocky Mountain Synod's
Purpose, Guiding Principles and Outcomes

Findings from Surveys and Focus Groups

Spring 2008

Introduction

In fall 2007 and early 2008, the Rocky Mountain Synod initiated an inquiry into congregational members perceptions of the recently proposed purpose, outcomes, and guiding principles identified in the VPA conversations. They were developed to help provide a way to measure congregational wellbeing on an ongoing basis. The purpose states: *Every person, every congregation, every ministry, boldly serving God's mission in Christ.* The guiding principles include: *We are Lutheran, We are Church, We are Evangelical, We are Empowered.*

The initial purpose of the inquiry was to guide preliminary modifications of the purpose, outcomes, and guiding principle statements as presented on the tri-fold brochure created for dissemination of these ideas. A second purpose of this inquiry was to obtain preliminary information on congregations' progress toward meeting the proposed outcomes. The extent to which organizations are meeting the outcomes is indicative of their congregational wellbeing. In addition, the information may be used as a baseline for future growth in the five outcome areas: *identity, discipleship, evangelism, congregational health and connections.*

A further purpose was to understand congregation members' reflections on the purpose, outcomes, and guiding principles. It was hoped that these reflections would offer significant insight regarding areas of focus, meaning and growth for congregations with the Synod. The following report presents the results of the Synod's information gathering efforts.

Method

Information gathering for this inquiry involved obtaining the perspectives of members through: 1) "pre-conversation" surveys, and 2) a group reflective process (focus groups). The survey was given to every congregation to complete before attending a gathering. For the survey, congregation members were given instructions to rate their congregation in the five outcome areas established, as well as to give open-ended comments regarding each of the outcome areas and their wishes for their congregation and neighboring ELCA congregations, the ministries of the Synod, the Office of the Bishop and for the ELCA as a whole. Items were rated on two different five-point scales (1=we struggle with this to 5=we are great at this; 1=not supportive to 5=very supportive) and one four-point scale (1=never to 4=often). After 13 gatherings, 46 completed surveys were returned. Survey results were entered in Microsoft Excel and percentages and averages were computed.

The group reflective process at each gathering (i.e., focus groups at different tables) involved a review of the brochure with the purpose, outcomes and guiding principles. After eating and praying, participants were asked to tell a story that related to the outcomes. They were additionally asked to write ideas on the idea sharing cards, if they had other stories or ideas to share. After this, participants were asked to discuss their thoughts in a group and document their reflections on a worksheet designed for that purpose. The worksheet provided a structure for groups to respond to objective, interpretive, reflective, and decisional questions. In essence, groups were asked 1) to

identify which elements of the brochure stood out and why; 2) what new understandings the elements stirred; 3) which of the elements stirred a sense of vision and passion and which do they struggle with; and 4) where the elements lead them.

Seventy-one focus groups were held in 13 different locations, with more than 350 participants comprising a variety of congregations. Table 1 shows the locations and numbers of participants. If a plus is indicated, the exact number of participants was not indicated for one or more of the groups at a given location. Responses were examined using qualitative thematic content analysis. Majority responses were estimated by counting the number of groups indicating key themes.

Table 1. Focus group participants

Location	Number of Participants	Number of Groups
Albuquerque, NM	44	7
Aurora, CO	46+	7
Carlsbad, NM	13	2
Casper, WY	15	4
Colorado Springs, CO	29+	6
Durango, CO	16+	4
El Paso, TX	22+	6
Grand Junction, CO	18	4
Greeley, CO	35+	7
Littleton/Highlands Ranch, CO	36	7
Longmont, CO	33+	6
Salt Lake City UT	23+	5
Wheatridge, CO	24	6
Totals: 13 gatherings	354+	71

Findings

Pre-conversation survey results

Participant ratings of their congregations were averaged for each survey item across surveys. Table 2 shows the average score on the four and five point scales and provides the percentage of participants who have very positive perceptions of their own congregation in a given area (i.e., the percent who rated the item a four or higher on the scale).

Table 2. Survey results

Outcome area	Item	Average score (out of 5)	Percent with highly positive perceptions
Identity	We know who we are as Lutheran Christians	3.3	35.5%
Identity	We have a plan to live it out	2.7	13.3%
Discipleship	We are intentional in nurturing faith formation at all ages	3.3	39.2%
Discipleship	Age ranges	2.0 to 3.9*	N/A
Discipleship	Every ministry, every congregation, every person is	2.3	5.3%

	boldly serving Christ in the world.		
Evangelism	"We have something to share" is the attitude of most of our congregation.	2.9	26.6%
Evangelism	"We have a strategy to share our faith".	2.4	11.1%
Health	When we experience transition and/or conflict in our congregation we are able to work through it in a way that leads to growth.	3.2	34.1%
Connections	Our congregation sends people to synod-wide gatherings.	3.4**	48.9%
Connections	Rostered leaders interact regularly.	3.4**	54.5%
Connections	Our congregations' members interact with members of other ELCA congregations.	2.3**	4.4%
Connections	Our congregation interacts ecumenically with other faiths in our community.	2.6**	15.6%
Connections	Our congregation is (not) geographically isolated	3.1**	48.8%
Connections	Have support of other congregations in your conference or community.	3.2	31.1%
Connections	Give support to other congregations in your conference or community.	3.2	25.5%
Connections	Have support of the Office of the Bishop.	3.5	51.2%
Connections	Give support to the Office of the Bishop.	3.7	65.1%
Connections	Give support to synodical ministries and activities.	3.8	75.1%
Connections	Give support to the ministries of the ELCA.	3.7	59.0%

*Young adults (lowest score) to confirmation age (highest score)

**On a four-point rather than a five-point scale.

Congregations have highly positive perceptions of themselves with regard to connections, e.g., support they give to synodical ministries and activities, and support they give and receive from the Office of the Bishop. They have less positive perceptions pertaining to their member's interactions with other ELCA congregations, living the purpose, and "having a strategy to share our faith" suggesting some intentional improvement efforts in these areas.

Focus Group Results

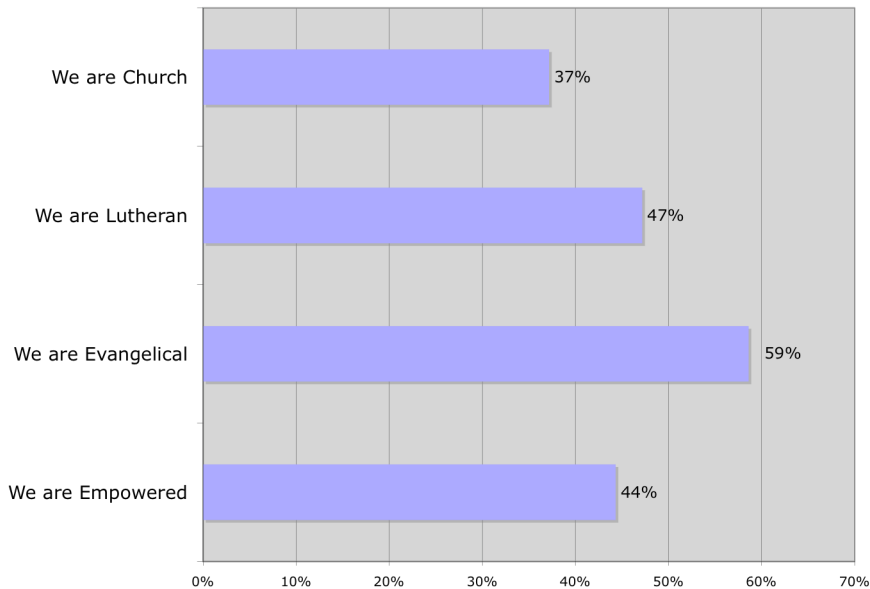
"Out of a strong sense of identity and 'family' we find the incentive to venture out into the more challenging, more unknown areas of becoming evangelical and empowered".

Elements that stand out

Groups indicated the topics that *most stood out* for them. The majority of groups (91%) focused on the guiding principles, seven percent (7%) mentioned the purpose statement, and 17% pointed out elements of the outcomes that stood out for them. Of the outcome areas, congregational health was mentioned the most (9% of total groups, 38% of those indicating outcomes that stood out). Several group comments pertained to working through conflict. Another comment queried how one might measure success in

this area. Chart 1 shows the percent of groups by guiding principle. Below the chart are specific themes mentioned and comments made by participants for each area.

Chart 1. Percent of groups highlighting guiding principles



We are Lutheran: There was much emphasis by groups on the idea that identity is grounded in the Bible and confessional documents. A majority of groups appreciated the emphasis on being grace-centered. One comment was that Lutherans are highly focused on being saved by grace – "I don't have to beat myself up for my failures." Other comments included:

- "Our grace-centered beliefs give us a solid footing."
- "Grace is a hallmark of being Lutheran".
- "Being Lutheran through grace that promotes faithful works."
- Also, renewal stood out – "it comes through experiencing this life in a congregation or personal mission, worship."

We are Church: There was clear agreement that worship is central to growth. One group said that it was "Important to share our stories and worship and to establish collaborative partnerships with ELCA and other denominations." With regard to collaborative partnerships, one group suggested holding Lenten services from one congregation to another. There were many comments related to interdependence as a basis for growth and communication. Another common theme: "The word and sacrament are what draws us together as a church." Many groups mentioned the idea of global magnification of the church. A question arose: "How do we connect with other Christians globally?" Other believed that the church "Really is global - not self-contained."

We are Evangelical: This guiding principle was mentioned most frequently in terms of standing out for the groups. There was clear acknowledgement that Lutherans are not associated with the word "evangelical" as it is typically known. One group considered it a "loaded" term. Another group said it has been "hijacked" as a term", meaning it no

longer retains its true meaning. Some groups felt the term was problematic because it means different things. One group, seeming to get to the heart of the matter, suggested that its positive meaning needed to be "reclaimed". Other groups wanted to clarify definition: e.g., pointing to "social ministry as evangelism" and "values agenda versus experiential without being pietistic" were potential ways to explain. Another related comment: "We are exclusive in our awareness of the terms. How do we share these things with people who do not know these things?" Clearly, this guiding principle is among the topics for further discussion.

Many loved the idea of reaching *beyond our walls*. Others wanted to give a reminder that "early church growth was based on individuals reaching out; that it was not just the job of the pastors." Other comments:

- "Exciting but difficult to do. Hard to compete with evangelical mega-churches."
- "We should be extravagant with God's love and grace – spreading it around."
- "It stands out because it is inclusive and gets the focus off of ourselves."
- "We don't feel comfortable sharing our faith."
- "Every person, every place can make a difference."
- "We have a unique message to tell about love."
- "If you are evangelical, you must be welcoming, too. Grace is for all."

We are Empowered: Many groups focused on elements of empowerment in their discussions. A commonly emphasized theme that stood out for groups was the idea that "God is working inside each one of us." The question arose: "How can each of us take ownership?" There was heavy emphasis on the idea that the mission and vision are God's not ours – participants really appreciated this idea.

Another key theme was the idea of cultivating leadership, both among pastors and lay people. One group acknowledged, "Cultivating leaders is difficult." Another said that the "deliberate and intentional cultivation of lay leaders is crucial." Interest in *how* to cultivate leadership was brought forth. One group suggested using a spiritual gifts inventory and providing leadership training for lay people. Along with this there was an acknowledgement that leadership is a facilitator for change. Change was regarded with different views: some felt that it was very important to growth and progression, others encouraged meaningful change, not "change for change's sake".

Stirring vision and passion

In addition to areas that "stood out", participants were asked to share which areas *stirred a sense of passion and vision*. To a large degree, their comments reinforce the findings from the "what stood out" query. Comments and themes are presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Key themes related to elements that stir a sense of vision and passion

We are Lutheran	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The idea that we are Bible based and grace-centered. • There is a passion about Lutheranism. <p><i>Struggles:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identity, particularly with traditions versus contemporary struggle.
We are Church	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Worshipping together. • "It is great to share this grace-centered belief with those who do not

	<p>know about it.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increasing interfaith dialogue/discussion. • Several mentioned the idea of being “proud to be a Lutheran”. “It’s authentic...we’re in it together.” • We should connect with the worldwide church, ministries that have a worldwide impact. Need to share ideas, start small. • Many emphasized the idea of expanding collaborative partnerships. • Emphasis on community service. <p><i>Struggles:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is difficult to establish and maintain connections with the synod and national. Need to improve communication and stay focused on the vision. • Ways to increase collaboration.
We are Evangelical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good visual images in the wording – “flung”. Many commented on this. One group said: “How can we fling better?” and “How can we break from just “flinging to the choir?” • People would like to spend time on this area because it brought forth new insights and passion. Want to be open, gracious, strong and forgiving to everyone. Want to reclaim the word evangelical. • Success is measured by how far we extend out. • “Thinking beyond ourselves.” Inclusiveness. • Discipleship – including tithing and service work. <p><i>Struggles:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The definitions of evangelical. Need to find a way to express how we are evangelical. Particularly in a way that fits our heritage. “Need better training”. • It may be difficult to measure success. Many viewed this as a positive challenge, though. Also there were some struggles again the word success, they felt it ought to be more about faithfulness. • Struggle to coordinate volunteer efforts. • How to minimize the “fall off” after confirmation. Re-engaging youth and young adults. • Articulating message of forgiveness.
We are Empowered	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People liked the idea of having more capacity for change than they have imagined. • Embracing change – “need for constant change, must grow or die”. • Mission and vision are God’s not ours. We are empowered by God. <p><i>Struggles:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Balancing some members’ preferences for traditions with adaptations to increase inclusiveness. • Spiritual leadership among the council. • Change comes painfully slow. Wanting to see immediate results. • Difficult to empower leaders, no one wants to serve. • What are ways that we inhibit empowerment?

Other Comments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficulty with conflict – “why we can’t get along”. • Helping people understand a deeper meaning from their church experience. “Where’s the joy?” • Difficulty reconciling too much visioning processes versus “doing the vision given to us by Christ.” • We are minorities as Lutherans – that is good. • What are the resources we need to get these purposes and principles out? • What makes us unique as Lutherans?
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Key new understandings

Identity:

- How discipleship is related to identity, and thus evangelism, health and connections.
- Realization that we may be losing our identity by becoming more contemporary.
- That having a clear identity is crucial to having a more ecumenical approach to sharing the gospel.
- Must be sound biblically. “Bible study is not just history, but application.”
- Need to live grace – to live with diversity is a difficult and promising calling. Need for balance between law and grace.
- Crisis and loss cause us to clarify who we are and what we believe and what we value.
- We can be different in ideas and concepts and still work together.

Evangelism:

- We need more evangelism and may need to reframe what that means.
- How to be evangelical—a messenger of faith, sharing our experience.
- “We don’t just need to be Lutheran’s to Lutherans, but to other faiths.” “Our focus must be outside the threshold of the church.”
- “Discipleship is the key to evangelism.”

Empowerment:

- How to empower lay leaders to make some of the decisions. Need to cultivate leadership and understanding.
- Reminder of God’s role in our empowerment. “God is at work in our congregations, in our families and in ourselves.”
- “We are constantly changing and growing to meet our needs and the needs of our faith.”

Other:

- Clear importance of congregational health.
- “Need to collaborate and be open-minded.” “Relationships are essential.”
- “Need to build community among our congregations.”
- This document is good reinforcement of what we should adhere to.
- We are unique as Lutherans.
- “Our faith has been a well-kept secret.”

Next steps/actions: Where do these purpose statements, outcomes and guiding principles lead congregation members?

Inclusiveness:

- Need to encourage the entire congregation to become disciples, increasing ownership and empowerment.
- Need to extend these conversations to more people throughout our congregations. Address these principles in Bible study groups.
- Need to be more involved in general and increase the understanding that the purpose involves everyone. Keep members active.
- Realize that “we need to work on being evangelical”.
- “We need to learn to respect others’ experience of God.”
- We need to invite people to come to church and reach out to those in our churches already. Follow up with visitors.
- Decide if the brochure is for insiders or outsiders or both. Use the brochure to show people who we are.
- Hold inter-congregational retreats.
- Would like more synod guidance and support.

Planning and design:

- Be intentional and have a plan. Realize that formation is going to be a constant. Need to strategize for growth.
- Use these principles as the formative principles for a congregational strategic plan. “Strong strategic planning efforts.” “Need a blueprint to accomplish these goals.”
- Need to determine the next steps to put this into action. Move to action phase. Decide on how to implement. Take action.
- Need a good method of designating leaders and the responsibility for leadership.
- Create environments that are welcoming and meet the needs of the church.

Use new strategies:

- Use alternative strategies to engage youth: internet, service projects.
- Need instructional materials for training, need hands on experience, Webinars, DVDs and teleconferencing capability. Hold lay leadership training events (especially for Church Councils).
- Have live nativity and passion play stations to increase evangelism.
- Have progressive dinners—invite someone new.
- Teach those in the post-confirmation stage about these principles and their meanings, especially through relationship building.
- Encourage Synod to apply its resources for ads or public service announcements more widely. National advertising campaign.
- Other alternative invitation methods: have a block party and invite the whole neighborhood.
- Ideas for increasing Evangelism: “One church did a ten ways for bashful Lutherans can tell others about Jesus.” One idea was presented on each of 10 Sundays. “Another way is to connect by family and person-by-person.”

Conclusions

Congregations expressed a great deal of enthusiasm for refreshing the understanding and mission of Lutheranism through the use of this document. This was paired with a feeling of being overwhelmed with how to move forward. Congregations have highly positive perceptions of themselves with regard to connections and less positive perceptions pertaining to their interactions with other ELCA congregations, living the purpose, and “having a strategy to share our faith”.

In order of strength, key elements that congregations are excited about include:

- Finding ways to re-define or positively define evangelism and evangelical activities. They seek new ways to expand in this area. There were many positive comments about the wording of the elements of this guiding principle. How this interacts with discipleship and connectedness is of great importance.
- Increasing empowerment by cultivating leadership. They are interested in ways to do this while maintaining a delicate balance between change and their traditional foundation and heritage. Also, they are pleased to acknowledge that it is God’s mission and vision and that we are doing God’s work – this seemed to provide a solid platform from which to move forward.
- The guiding principles sparked new understandings with regard to identity, evangelism and empowerment. Key ideas were that developing and maintaining a clear sense of identity will lead to success in the other areas. In addition, this was closely tied to the perception of congregational health and the strategies used to deal with conflict and to improve communication.
- While there were concerns about change, most groups emphasized the need for forward movement to include changing and adapting current strategies in increasing evangelism and empowerment.