

# Rocky Mountain Synod Report

A Statistical Overview of the Synod; on Vision, Passion, Action;  
and the Election of a New Bishop

*Kenneth W. Inskip*

Office of the Presiding Bishop, Research and Evaluation  
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America  
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## A STATISTICAL OVERVIEW OF THE ROCKY MOUNTAIN SYNOD

### Territory

The Rocky Mountain Synod (RMS) of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) covers more land area (421,829 square miles) than any other synod in the ELCA except Alaska. Figure 1 shows the territory covered for several synods. These six synods were selected because they provide a good overview of the various contexts of synods within the ELCA.

**Figure 1: Territory of the Synods in Square Miles**

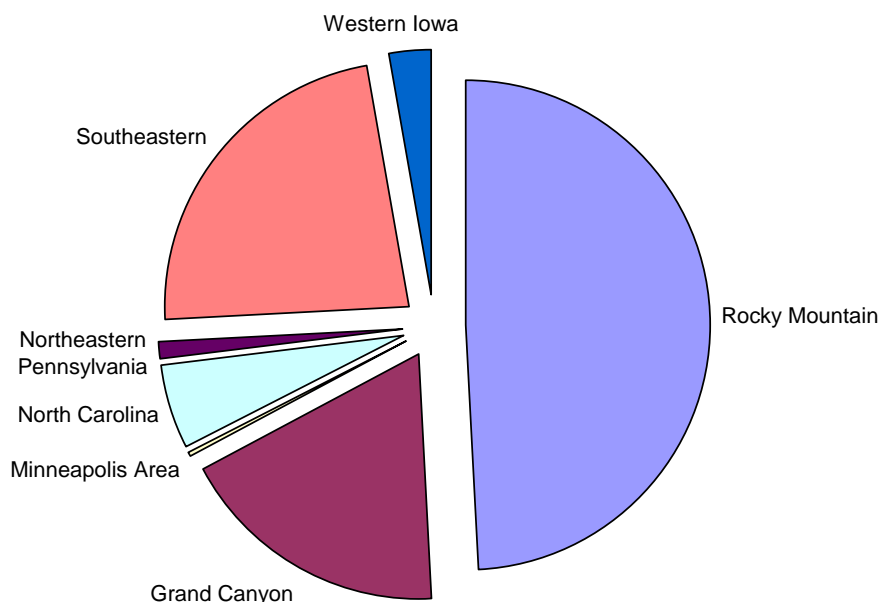
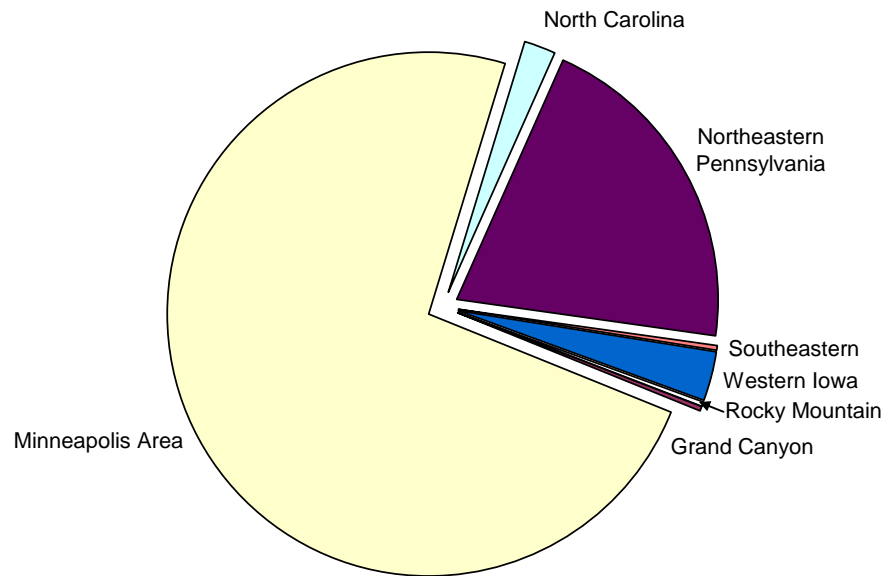


Figure 2 shows the number of Lutherans per square mile in these synods. The RMS has about 0.17 ELCA Lutherans per square mile compared to 58.42 ELCA Lutherans per square mile in the Minneapolis Area Synod. The Grand Canyon Synod has 0.36 ELCA Lutherans per square mile while in the Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod there are 16.38 ELCA Lutherans per square mile.

**Figure 2: Baptized ELCA Lutherans per Square Mile**



The population of the territory of the RMS included about 11.2 million people in 2010 and is projected to grow to 12.0 million in 2015 which is an increase of 7.3 percent. About 22 percent of the population of the RMS is non-White. Baptized ELCA Lutherans account for 0.6 percent of the population of the synod.

### Baptized Membership and Worship Attendance

In 2010, the RMS included 167 congregations. The baptized membership of these congregations was 71,390 or an average of 427 per congregation. In 2010, the congregations of the synod baptized 869 children and 99 adults and affirmed the faith of 1,448 adults.

In 2004, the RMS included 174 congregations. The baptized membership of these congregations was 83,699 or an average of 481 per congregation. In 2004, the congregations of the synod baptized 1,316 children and 133 adults and affirmed the faith of 1,785 adults.

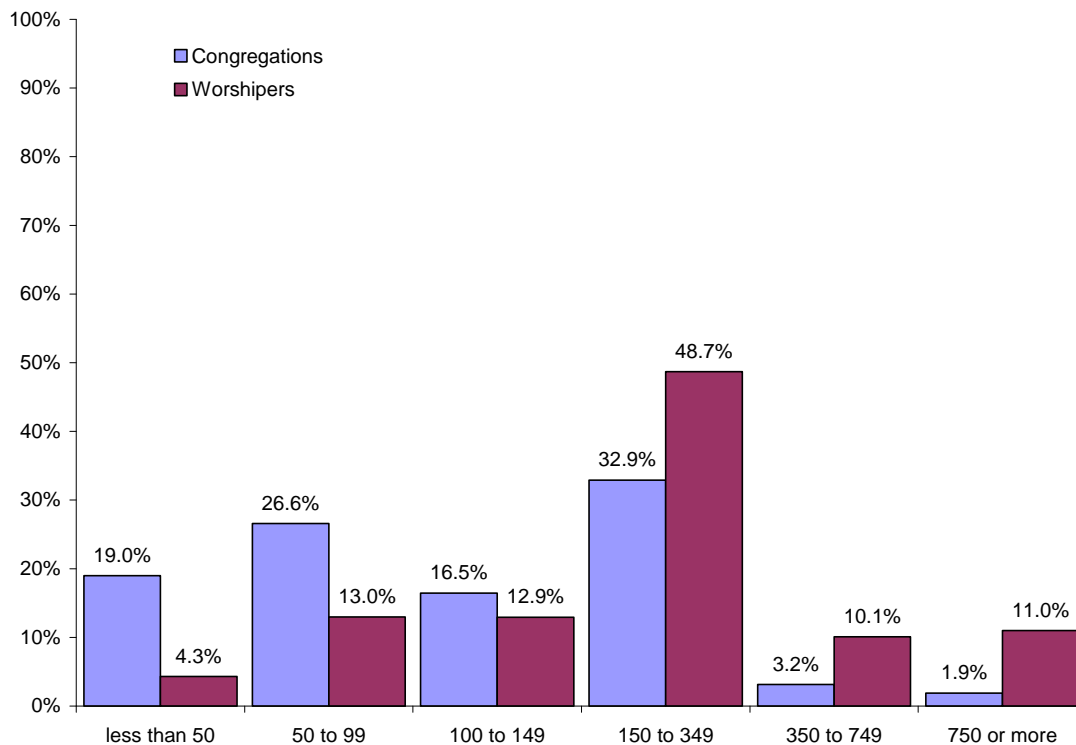
As a result of the actions of the ELCA 2009 Churchwide Assembly to allow gay and lesbian persons in committed relationships to be called into the ordained ministry of the ELCA, some congregations have decided to leave the ELCA. Congregations, intent on leaving, must pass 2 votes both with at least two-thirds of the membership favoring a decision to leave. At least 12 congregations in the RMS had taken an initial vote to leave by November 2011 and 8 congregations had passed a second vote.

In 2010, the aggregate worship attendance on a typical Sunday in the synod was 23,519 (33% of the baptized membership) with an average of 141 in worship per congregation. (The average for the ELCA in 2010 was 118.) Forty-six percent of the congregations had fewer than 100 in worship, while 5 percent of the congregations had 350 or more in worship (see Figure 3). In 2004, the aggregate worship attendance of congregations in the synod was 28,811. The average number attending worship per congregation in 2004 was 166. Since 2004, the percent of congregations with less than 50 in worship has increased from 14 to 19 percent.

Of the 5,292 fewer persons in worship between 2004 and 2010, 2,105 (40%) left with the eight congregation leaving the ELCA.

In 2010, 17 percent of those who typically attend worship did so in congregations that average less than 100 in typical worship service (see Figure 3). Sixty-two percent attend in congregations with 100 to 349 in worship and 21 percent attend congregations where worship attendance is typically 350 or more.

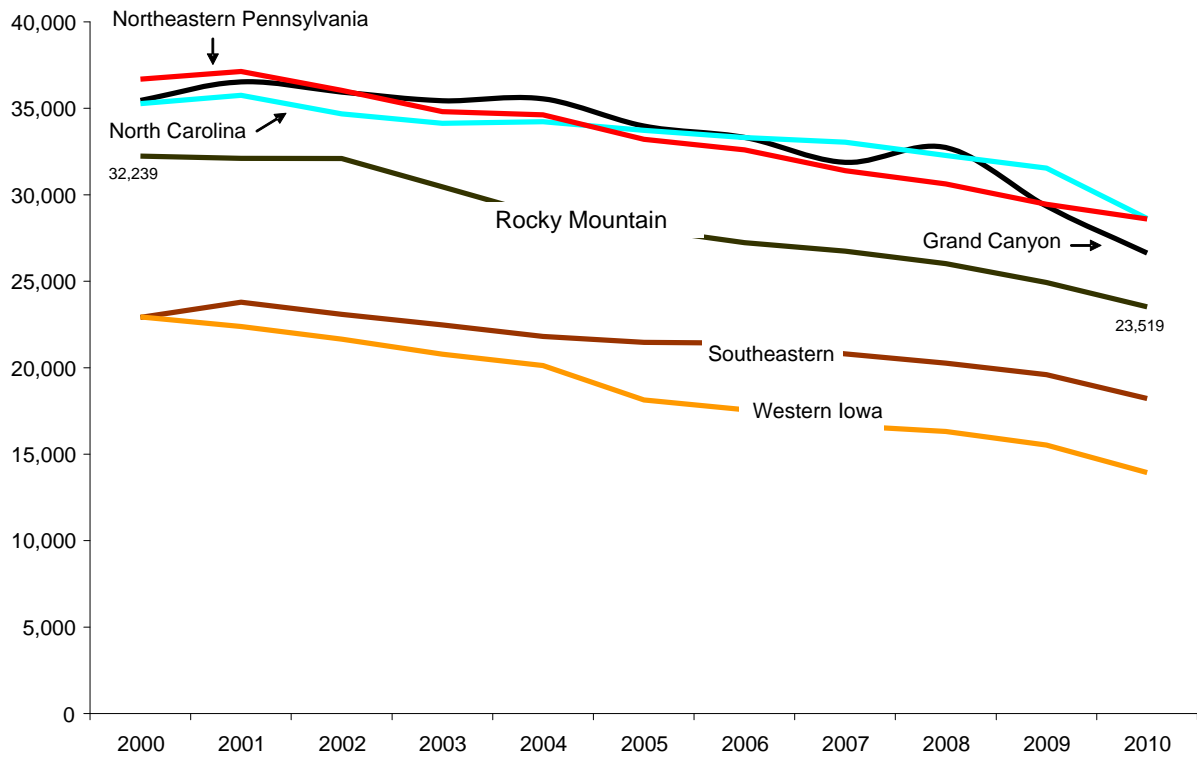
**Figure 3: Percent of Congregations and Worshipers by Typical Worship Attendance for the Congregation**



Seventy-eight percent of all the worshipers in the synod attend in Colorado, 10 percent attend in New Mexico, 6 percent in Wyoming, 4 percent in Utah, and 2 percent in Texas.

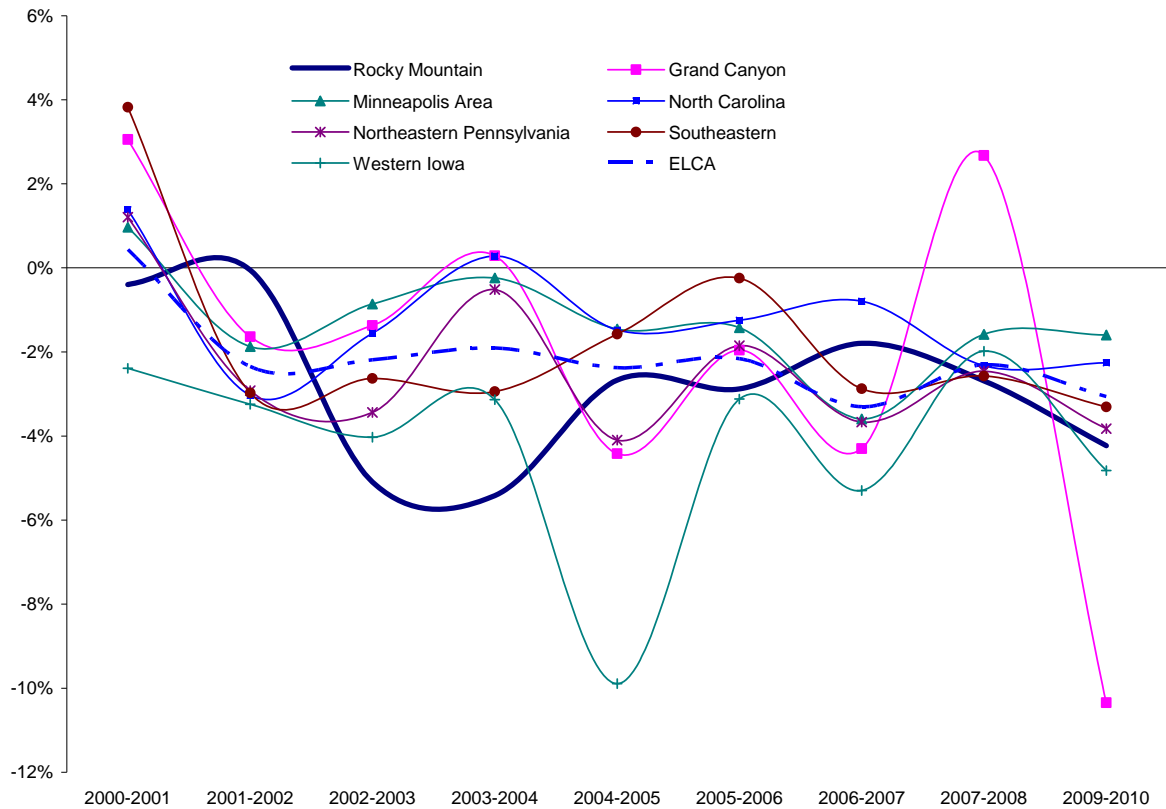
Worship attendance in the RMS declined between 2000 and 2010 from 32,239 to 23,519 which is a decrease of 27 percent. In the ELCA as a whole, worship attendance declined 24 percent between 2000 and 2010. Figure 4 presents the number change from 2000 to 2010 and Figure 5 presents the rates of change by year.

**Figure 4: Change in Worship Attendance from 2000 to 2010**



\* Does not include the Minneapolis Area Synod because of its disproportionate number of worship attendees.

**Figure 5: Rates of Change in Worship Attendance**



Since 2001-2002, the rate of change in worship attendance has been negative for nearly all these synods and among them the RMS has shown losses that are consistent and significant.

Small congregations in the synod have been impacted the most. In 2010, worship attendance in the 38 congregations that average 50 or fewer in worship had an average worship attendance of 27. In 2000, these same congregations averaged 48 in worship (a decline of 43 percent). Table 1 shows the change for congregations of other sizes.

**Table 1: Change in Worship Attendance from 2000 to 2010 by Size (worship attendance) of Congregation (Includes only congregations with data for both 2000 and 2010)**

worship attendance	congregations	average worship attendance in 2000	average worship attendance in 2010	change
less than 50	38	48	27	-43.0%
50 to 99	41	98	71	-26.8%
100 to 349	80	221	183	-17.1%
350 or more	8	651	610	-6.2%
average for the synod		172	141	-18.0%

Table 2 shows change in worship attendance by state. The congregations in Utah and Wyoming have been impacted the most from 2000 to 2010.

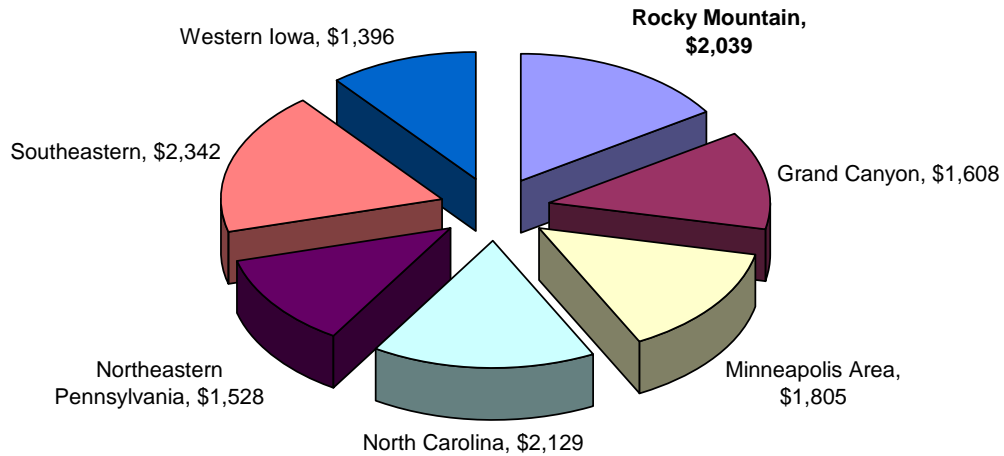
**Table 2: Change in Worship Attendance from 2000 to 2010 by State (Includes only congregations with data for both 2000 and 2010)**

worship attendance	congregations	average worship attendance in 2000	average worship attendance in 2010	change
Colorado	114	189	161	-14.8%
New Mexico	21	134	108	-19.4%
Texas	5	96	81	-15.6%
Utah	12	141	94	-33.3%
Wyoming	15	146	94	-35.6%
average for the synod		172	141	-18.0%

## Giving

Total giving (undesignated and designated giving) from the members of the RMS in 2010 was \$47.9 million. In 2010, the average amount given per worship attendee was \$2,039 (see Figure 6).

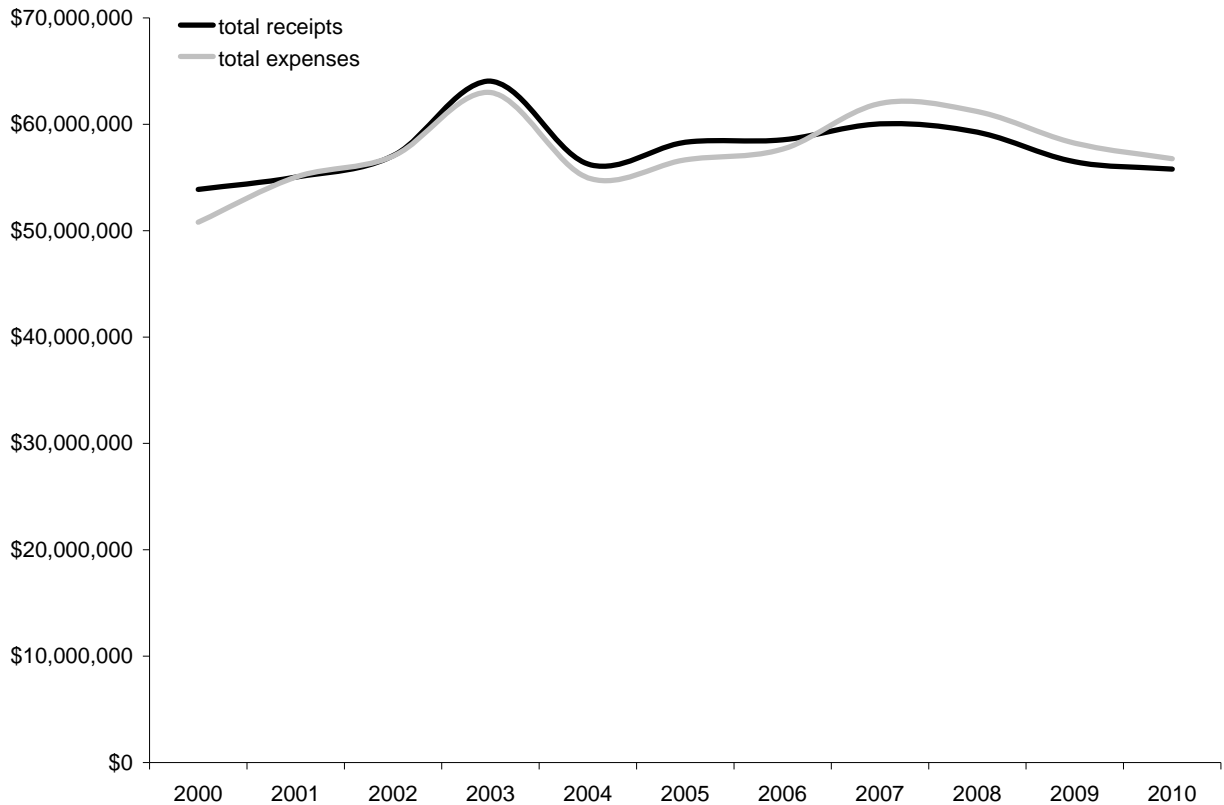
**Figure 6: Total Giving per Worship Attendee**



In 2004, total giving to the congregations in the synod was \$48.1 million. When adjusted for inflation, the total giving to congregations in the RMS was down by 14 percent between 2004 and 2010. In 2004, the average amount given per worship attendee was \$1,510. After adjusting for inflation, the average amount of total giving per attendee increased by 16 percent between 2004 and 2010. Despite giving more, those who remain as members of congregations in the synod were unable to offset losses due to the overall decline in membership.

Since 2007 the aggregate total expenses of the congregations in the synod have exceeded total receipts (see Figure 7). In 2010, 46 percent of the congregations in the RMS reported higher expense than receipts.

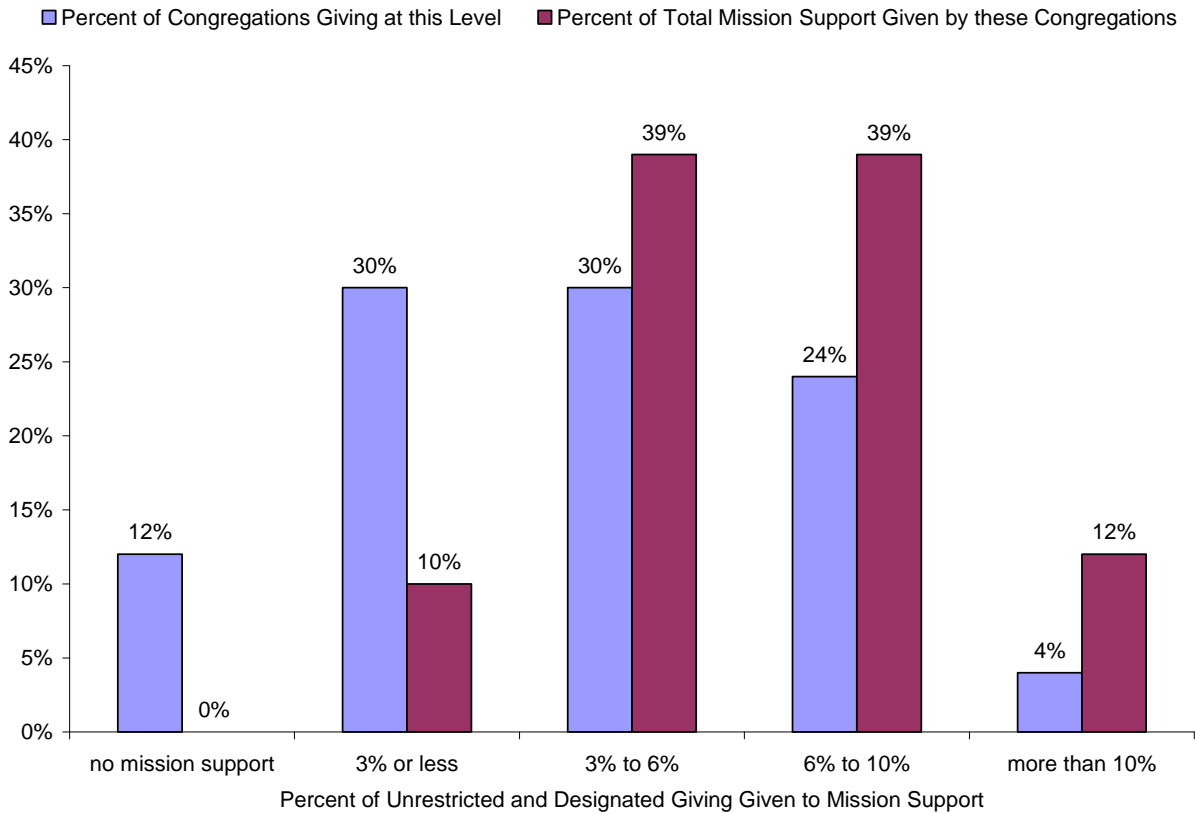
**Figure 7: Total Receipts to Expense by Year for the Congregations in the RMS**



Mission Support is the amount of money given through congregations for the ministry of synods and the ELCA churchwide organization. In the RMS the amount of Mission Support given per worship attendee in 2010 was approximately \$107. In the Grand Canyon Synod it was \$68. In North Carolina, Mission Support per worship attendee was \$112. In the Southeastern Synod it was \$119. The figure was \$93 in Northeastern Pennsylvania, \$64 in Minneapolis, and \$67 in Western Iowa.

Figure 8 shows the percent of congregations in the synod by the percent of their total giving which is for Mission Support. Twelve percent of congregations in the synod give no Mission Support while 4 percent give more than 10 percent. Figure 8 also shows the percent of all Mission Support given to the synod by the congregations in each category. For example, the 30 percent of congregations giving less than 3 percent of their total giving for Mission Support account for 10 percent of the total Mission Support given to the synod. On the other hand, the 4 percent of the congregations that give 10 percent or more in Mission Support contribute 12 percent of the total Mission Support given to the synod.

**Figure 8: Percent of Congregations by the Amount of Their Total Giving Passed On as Mission Support and the Percent of Total Mission Support Given by these Congregations**

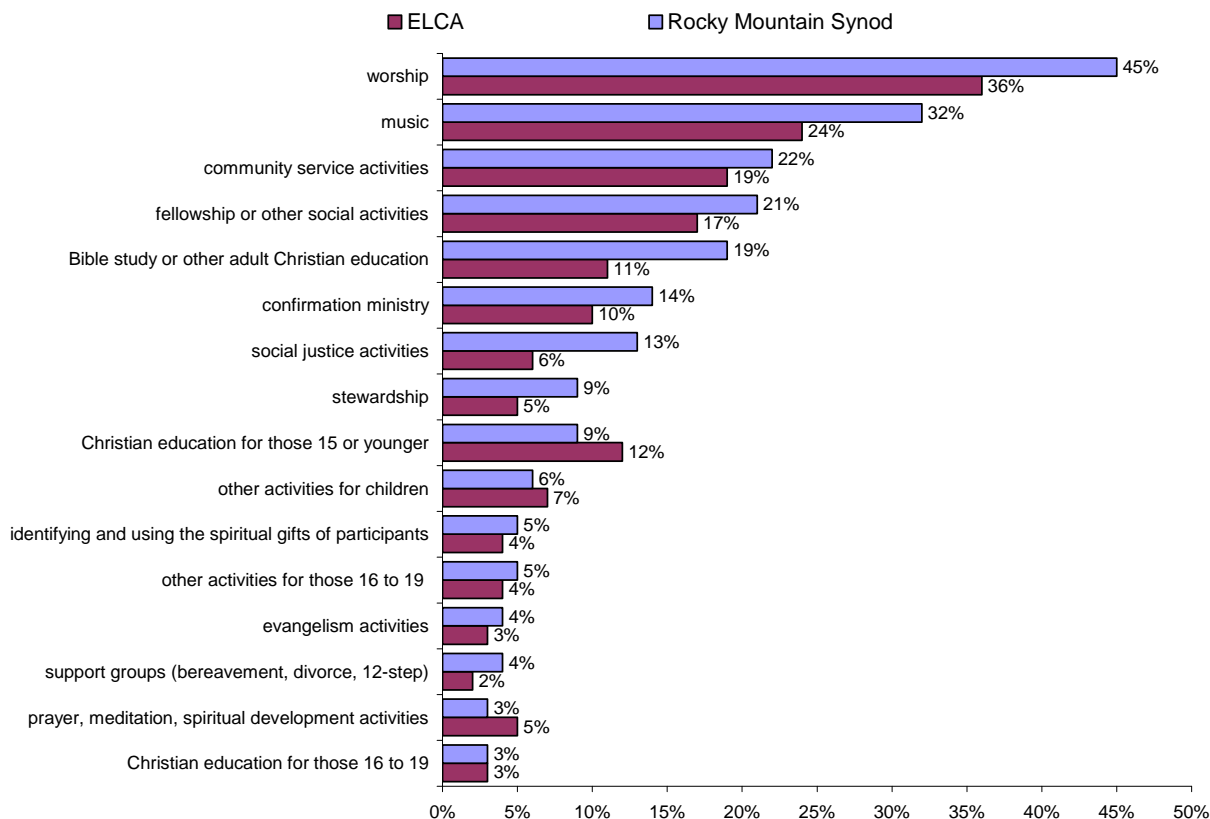


The total amount given to the RMS synod and the churchwide organization of the ELCA has declined from \$2.9 million in 2004 to \$2.5 million in 2010. The synod passes 50 percent of what is received to the churchwide organization.

### Congregational Emphases

In 2010, as a part of the annual report (completed most often by a pastor), congregations in the ELCA were asked how much emphases they give to a variety of congregational programs/activities, including whether they consider the activity a specialty of the congregation. Figure 9 shows the responses of congregations in the RMS compared to congregations in the ELCA as a whole. Overall, the percent of RMS congregations that indicate these activities are a specialty of their congregation was higher than the percent in the ELCA as a whole. The only areas where the RMS congregations were less likely to do so were Christian education for those 15 or younger; other activities for children; and prayer, meditation or other spiritual development activities.

**Figure 9: Percent of Congregations Indicating the Program/Activity Was a Specialty of the Congregation with Comparisons to the ELCA as a Whole (for 2010)**



### The Rocky Mountain Synod Office

Most synod offices in the ELCA focus on the following:

1. providing pastoral support for the pastors of the synod.
2. providing support for congregations (resources, consultation, mediating conflict).
3. supporting and managing the mobility of clergy (candidacy and call processes).
4. providing stewardship education.
5. relating to agencies and institutions (outdoor ministry, campus ministry, social ministry, Lutheran social ministry agencies, colleges, universities, seminaries).
6. supporting and managing global mission and ecumenical relationships.
7. supporting and managing (with the churchwide offices of the ELCA) new congregations.
8. communicating about the wider activities of the church in the synod, nationally, and globally.
9. supporting and managing the administration of the synod office including synod assemblies.

(A full list of the responsibilities of a synod is available on-line at [www.elca.org/secretary](http://www.elca.org/secretary). See section 10.20. of the *Constitution of the ELCA*.)

Despite the consistency of responsibilities, the amount of money available to synod offices to carry out these responsibilities can vary widely. As noted above, Mission

Support giving to the RMS synod in 2010 was about \$2.5 million. Half of that amount was passed on to the churchwide organization. The average percent passed on by synods in the ELCA is 49 percent. The expectation of the Church Council of the ELCA is 55 percent. Table 3 presents the distribution of Mission Support in 2010 for selected synods.

**Table 3: The Distribution of Mission Support for Selected Synods in 2010**

synod	from congregations	percent to churchwide	amount to churchwide	amount remaining in the synod
Rocky Mountain	\$2,525,930	50%	\$1,262,965	\$1,262,965
Grand Canyon	\$1,803,713	50%	\$901,856	\$901,857
Minneapolis Area	\$3,254,892	55%	\$1,791,191	\$1,463,701
Western Iowa	\$937,860	35%	\$328,251	\$609,906
North Carolina	\$3,216,029	39%	\$1,254,251	\$1,961,778
Northeast Pennsylvania	\$2,662,841	52%	\$1,384,677	\$1,278,164

Synods tend to spend their income in consistent ways. Table 4 shows comparisons for the RMS and the mean and median percentages from a representative sample of synods in the ELCA. The RMS synod is higher than average in grant related expenses as a percent of total expense and lower in expenses related to staff salary/benefits than a typical synod in the ELCA.

**Table 4: Distribution of Expenses in 2010 as a Percent of Total Expense with Comparison to a Representative Sample of all ELCA Synods**

	grants	program work	staff salary / benefits	travel	office expense	rent / occupancy	the region	churchwide mission support	other
Rocky Mountain	20%	5%	18%	2%	2%	3%	1%	44%	5%
ELCA mean	12%	4%	28%	2%	4%	2%	1%	43%	4%
ELCA median	11%	3%	27%	2%	3%	2%	0%	45%	2%

## **VISION, PASSION, ACTION AND THE ELECTION OF A BISHOP<sup>1</sup>**

Vision, Passion, Action (VPA) was an effort of the RMS to engage members of congregations in developing a purpose statement for the synod and to set goals and guiding principles with and for the congregations of the synod. The process began in 2005 with 16 gatherings across the synod. (For an excerpt from the 2006 Report on these activities, see Appendix II.) Based on these gatherings the synod's purpose statement became "every person, every congregation, every ministry, boldly serving God's mission in Christ". Also, as a result of these gatherings, five goals were developed with and for the congregations of the synod addressing Lutheran/Christian identity, discipleship, evangelism, congregational health, and connections between and within all expressions of the church. (See Appendix I for the full wording of the goals.)

<sup>1</sup> In writing this portion of the report I appreciate the facilitating and reporting of Margaret Schmitt Ajer (Congregational and Synodical Ministries, Region 2), Tammy Jackson (Global Mission), and Marcia Johnson (Office of the Bishop, Synodical Relations).

Finally, four guiding principles were developed having to do with being Lutheran, being the church, being evangelical, and being empowered. (For more on VPA, see [www.rmselfca.org/synod/vpa/index.htm](http://www.rmselfca.org/synod/vpa/index.htm).)

In 2007, a second round of 13 conversations took place focused on articulating a Lutheran identity and building connections. In addition to these conversations, emphasis was placed upon book studies for rostered leaders, identifying resources on congregational health, a media advertising campaign, and building benchmarks into the annual report for congregations. In 2009, the emphases were on youth and household ministry, and engaging congregations in partnerships to try new ideas. In 2009 and 2010, the emphases were on expanding those efforts that had been successful, and in creating a roadmap for congregational transitions including the development of an employee assistance program to provide support for rostered leaders when needed. The roadmap was not completed but work related to the roadmap was used in the formation of a new synod healthy congregation/leader committee. In 2010, the overall synod committee structure was changed in an attempt to better focus synod committee work on VPA goals. An intention was also to better use the committees as resources given the limitations of staff time and financial resources.

Most recently, in the fall of 2011, pastors and lay members of the synod's Conferences were asked to gather to discuss questions related to the goals of VPA and the election of a new bishop which will occur in April, 2012, at the synod's annual assembly.

### VPA Goals

At the fall 2011 Conference gatherings, in small lay and clergy groups, the participants were asked specifically about the synod wide goals developed as part of VPA. They were asked to indicate if their congregation has been challenged or impacted by any of the goals. Overall it appears that lay and clergy participants were unaware or unaffected by the goals or any other VPA related activities. The small group discussions tended to focus much more extensively on the quality or status of the goals rather than on impact. Most people appeared to be engaging the goals for the first time, and in so doing, for the most part, they expressed support for the goals. Many lay participants wondered why they had not heard of the goals and about what training or assistance might be available particularly related to evangelism, discipleship, and congregational health. The lay participants were also largely unaware of steps already taken to engage congregations and they wondered why their pastor had not mentioned these activities or opportunities to become involved.

There were a few who were less supportive of the goals. Most often they took the position that synod wide goals, if relevant at all, would need to be adapted to local settings or that the goals of local congregations take precedent. This group made the case that local initiatives make sense to people and, at best, synod wide goals are distant. At worse, they argued, synod wide goals are held with suspicion and often viewed as another "top-down" imposition. Again, in the vast majority of Conference gatherings, the conversation about the VPA goals did not take this turn.

A few also expressed the opinion that synod wide goals miss the point of a synod. In their view the synod is about the bishop and the bishop's relationships with the pastors and the congregations of the church. The goals say nothing about the care of rostered leadership. Again, from this point of view, the synod is the bishop and the bishop should be about face-to-face relationships. A bishop should be supportive of the work of congregations and show that support by being with pastors and congregations. A bishop should be comforting, compassionate, prophetic, the guiding hope. A bishop should not be "middle management" trying to make sure the enterprise is viable by setting goals and measuring performance. Again, this point of view was not typically the way conversations progressed in most of the Conference meetings.

Most often, the participants embraced the quality of the goals and the idea of an initiative like VPA, but they held the problem was communication. In an attempt to be helpful, lay participants suggested the synod should improve its communication efforts or more vigorously encourage pastors to talk about synod wide activities related to VPA. The idea that lay people could also take the initiative to regularly visit the synod's Web site took many by surprise. They had never thought of doing so.

### Strengths and New Skills

The participants in the Conference meetings, again in small lay and clergy groups, were also asked about the strengths of their congregation—what they do well. They were asked to address their congregation's impact on members and the local community. Across the groups two sets of strengths stood out. The first set had to do with congregations being welcoming, nurturing, providing fellowship, and being hospitable. The second set had to do with participating in local community social ministry, mostly hands-on service projects ranging from preparing meals for shut-ins, to collecting and distributing clothing, to participating in providing shelter for the homeless, to working with food banks, prison ministries, Habitat for Humanity, refugee families, women's shelters, and so on. There was little conversation on strengths that appeared to be influenced by VPA. No one said anything like: "a strength of our congregation is that we understand and can articulate our Lutheran/Christian identity and we have an intentional plan to live it out". None of the note takers for the Conference gatherings reported someone saying: "a strength of our congregation is that we are healthy and able to go through transitions and conflicts in ways that lead to positive growth." Even if the congregations are not using VPA type language, there was little evidence that they were thinking in new ways about congregational life.

The participants in the Conference meetings, in small lay and clergy groups, were asked about new skills their congregations need for the future. A single set of items stood out which had to do precisely with what VPA is attempting to address. This set of characteristics involves a basic change in the way people see and understand their own discipleship and the mission and ministry of their congregation. The characteristics included members being more open to new ways of doing ministry; to being more open to outsiders; to going beyond the comfort zone; to being able to better speak of their faith and to live it out more intentionally for the sake of others. People spoke of having a bigger vision, of identifying and using their spiritual gifts, of going deeper in their personal faith development, of the productive use of conflict within congregations, of

evangelism, of the ability to use technology and the social media for the sake of mission and ministry, of better youth ministry and stronger stewardship. Despite the fact that people struggled to see how the goals of VPA had impacted their congregations, when they described their needs, they described the needs that VPA identified in 2006.

### Discussion

In initially developing the synod wide goals and guiding principles, VPA sponsored events around the synod and many lay and clergy members of congregations in the synod participated. It is likely due to these conversations that the VPA goals were embraced by the vast majority of participants in the 2011 Conference meetings. Despite the usual Lutheran squabbling over the wording of the goals, the goals expressed something basic to what it means to be a ELCA Lutheran congregation. It is reasonable to believe that nearly all ELCA Lutheran congregations would agree that living out a Lutheran/Christian identity, faith formation and discipleship, evangelism, congregational health, and connectedness to the wider church are central to what it means to be a congregation. In fact, absent an explicit reference to Word and Sacrament, the VPA goals parallel the very definition of a congregation in the ELCA.

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 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 (ELCA Constitution, 9.11).

At the same time, it is clear, despite broad participation in the formation of the goals that the vast majority of Conference participants had not heard of them and could not indicate how their congregation had been impacted by them. It is clear, that despite the fact that the activities of VPA are designed to address the very needs the participants in the Conference meetings describe, steps have not been taken in the vast majority of RMS congregations by their pastors or their congregational councils or other congregational committees to explore the relevance of these goals to their own congregation's mission and ministry or to connect in other ways with the activities of VPA.

This finding suggests several things.

1. Broad based participatory events designed to engage people in planning processes do not significantly increase the likelihood of investment or ownership in the product of those processes.
2. In the minds of some, identifying these goals as "synod" goals distances them from the local context and makes them much less relevant. This also suggests that some hold the view that the synod is about the bishop and his/her relationship to pastors, not about setting and attempting to achieve synod wide goals.

3. It is very difficult to change patterns of congregational life even when people believe those patterns are not living up to their own hopes or expectations for mission and ministry as Lutheran Christians.
4. If VPA type action is not appropriate for addressing the downward spiral of some congregations, then what makes more sense?
5. VPA may have been implemented more effectively by providing clear ways for congregations to engage or work on VPA goals.
6. VPA may have been more successful if communication related to the initiative was consistently and persistently integrated into all the work of the synod.

The rankings of programs/activities by the congregations in the synod on their annual reports parallel conversations in the Conference meetings—congregations are strongest at fellowship/hospitality and community service. (This hospitality may be reserved for members rather than for outsiders, but most congregations still identify it as a strength.) Most congregations also believe they do a good job at worship. Still, the membership losses in the synod are consistent and significant. How can this be? It is reasonable to ask if ELCA Lutheranism is losing (or has lost) its relevance. Is the way ELCA Lutherans understand God, faith, sin and forgiveness, the power of God's grace and responding to God's grace in service at stake? How do the congregations in the synod believe they can address this challenge of relevancy? If not VPA, what are the alternatives? Why do congregations of the synod rate themselves so low on evangelism, prayer, meditation, and spiritual development activities? (See Figure 9, page 9 of this report.) Clearly the bishop of a synod should build relationships. The bishop of a synod should know and support the pastors and the congregations of the synod, but this is not enough. It is not a plan for the future that takes seriously the viability of an authentic Lutheran witness. Maybe what is needed is not some alternative to VPA, but a commitment on the part of the whole synod (by the congregational councils, pastors, the bishop and synod staff) to what VPA was designed to achieve.

### A New Bishop

The participants in the Conference meetings were asked what a bishop should expect of congregations and the other ministries of the synod and what they think these ministries should expect of a bishop. Many of the participants noted that the bishop of the synod should expect support from the synod's congregations including prayer and financial support. And, the bishop should expect congregations to be faithful in their ministries. The bishop should expect open, honest communication from congregations and congregations should expect open, honest communication from the bishop. Many noted that congregations should expect the bishop to be a pastor to the pastors, to assist in times of conflict, to be supportive of congregations, and to lead boldly. There was certainly an emphasis on pastoral care for rostered leaders. The bishop, pastors, and congregations should feel a sense that they are there for each other, but there was also a sense that the bishop should lead by challenging congregations, by pushing them toward a bold vision of what it means to be a church in mission.

Finally, the participants were asked about the characteristics of a new bishop. Personal characteristics that were identified include being approachable, empathetic, authentic,

having inner strength with a sense of direction, self-awareness, being non-anxious, faithful, visionary, interested in other people, humble, enthusiastic, and resourceful.

Skills included the ability to listen and to communicate, the ability to foster communication, to preach and teach, to mentor, to mediate and make peace, to use technology for communicating, to be comfortable with social media and administration. A new bishop should have extensive congregational ministry experience but also a connection to the wider church.

For some a priority for a new bishop is their competency as a Lutheran theologian. A new bishop should be a champion of word and sacrament ministry and care deeply about congregations. A new bishop should demonstrate leadership, be comfortable with diversity and be able to relate well ecumenically.

These are all qualities of a good leader, but there are potentially contradictory expectations. A bishop who is a friend and pastor may sacrifice bold leadership while a bold leader may not always be a comforting friend. There was little in the conversations that showed an awareness of this kind of potential contradiction or how the participants in the conversations would sort out this kind of contradiction.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The RMS covers a large growing territory where ELCA Lutherans are in a small and declining minority. The synod covers all or part of five states and within this territory are distinct cultures which are diverse both ethnically (Spanish speaking and English speaking) and religiously (Roman Catholic, Mormon, and conservative evangelical). The scope of these differences poses significant challenges for ELCA Lutheran congregations in the territory of the synod. The rate of change in worship attendance has been consistently and significantly negative. In terms of giving, the total aggregate expenses of congregations in the synod have exceeded the total aggregate receipts since 2006.

These trends are disconcerting because ELCA Lutherans represent an important and distinctive view of the Gospel that emphasizes a loving God without qualification. Bishop Bjornberg, in his 2009 Churchwide Assembly sermon on Sunday, August 2009, put it this way:

Punctuation is a definitive, certain, clarifying declaration, and theologians, despite their own propensity for proclamation, love questions—the continuing questions. And there are many. But for us as living theologians, the question at the heart of it always seems to be: Is it grace, period, or is it grace, comma? My head knows, but my heart hesitates. Before the reformation days it was, without question, grace, comma. “Yours is the grace and mercy of God, comma, if you, or, comma, when you, or, comma, after you, or, comma, unless you, or, comma, until you ....” Immersed in Scripture, deeply scarred and shaped by their own pilgrimage, Luther and the reformers brought a new editing style.... “Grace alone,” they said. “Period”.

In 2005, the synod engaged members and pastors in the task of developing a purpose statement for the synod as well as synod wide goals for congregations. The VPA process was intended to address the trends noted above. While those who are familiar with the goals and those who become aware of them typically embrace and affirm them, VPA has not had a significant impact on the congregations in the synod or in changing the overall trends. Those who participated in the 2011 Conference gatherings are aware of the trends and some feel them acutely. At the same time, they view their congregations as friendly, welcoming, hospitable places, particularly supportive of members. They see their congregations engaging the community largely through social ministry service projects of various sorts. But, five percent or fewer of RMS congregations, on their annual report forms, indicated that identifying and using the spiritual gifts of members; or evangelism; or providing prayer, meditation, or other spiritual development activities were a specialty of the congregation. And, when asked about new skills needed for the future, the participants in the Conference gatherings talked about a basic change in the way people see and understand their own discipleship and the mission and ministry of their congregation. This included members being more open to new ways of doing ministry; being more open to outsiders; going beyond a comfort zone; being able to better speak of their faith; and living out the faith more intentionally for the sake of others. People spoke of having a bigger vision; of identifying and using their spiritual gifts; of going deeper in their personal faith development; of a more productive use of conflict; of evangelism; of the ability to use technology and the social media for the sake of mission and ministry; of better youth ministry; and stronger stewardship. Despite the fact that people struggled to see how the goals of VPA had impacted their congregations, when they described their needs, they described the needs that VPA is attempting to address. In other words, the RMS has already done good work in identifying a purpose and in setting goals, but there is a way to go before the benefits of this good work are realized. Every congregation and the synod as a whole needs to commit to activities that help realize the goals of the VPA for the sake of the members of congregations and for those who yet to hear the freeing and saving grace of the Gospel.

Finally, what kind of synod do people want? What kind of bishop that is needed? If only because of the size of the territory and the diversity of the synod, ELCA Lutherans need to be connected with one another for support. But, there is also a more compelling reason for connection. The church has never been just about congregations. It is also about the witness of one, apostolic church. Congregations, by virtue of being part of a wider church are called to support each other, to work together, for the sake of the Gospel. One important way of working together is to set common goals and to commit to achieving those goals. In this sense, working together is not an imposition, but an opportunity for a common witness.

At times, and in certain places, the Conference meetings placed considerable emphasis on a bishop that functions primarily as a pastor to pastors. This is certainly an important role for the synod's bishop, but it is not the exclusive role or even the most important role. A bishop is primarily responsible for the care and proclamation of the Gospel. Among many things, this means setting a Gospel vision and taking steps to encourage, challenge, motivate, and expect members and pastors, in their local settings, to serve

the Gospel by proclaiming it, and making it clearly visible both to those within and outside the church.

## **Appendix I: The VPA Synod Wide Goals**

**Identity:** We understand and articulate our Lutheran/Christian identity and have an intentional plan to live it out.

**Discipleship:** We have a transformed culture that considers faith formation and discipleship to be for all ages.

**Evangelism:** We have a transformed culture around evangelism that says, “We have something to share.”

**Congregational Health:** We are healthy and able to go through transition and conflict in ways that lead to positive growth.

**Connections:** We increase synodical capacity to do God’s work by strengthening connections between and within all expressions of our church.

## **Appendix II: An Except from the 2006 Report on the Original VPA Activities**

### **A CALL TO CONVERSATION IN 2005-2006**

Conversations were held during the winter of 2005-2006 in sixteen different sites in the synod. The sites included in Colorado were Brush, Colorado Springs, Denver, Grand Junction, Lakewood, Littleton, Longmont, and Loveland. In New Mexico, the sites included Albuquerque, Carlsbad, Farmington, and Santa Fe. In Texas, the site was El Paso. In Utah, the site was Salt Lake City, and in Wyoming the sites were Casper and Cheyenne.

Overall, about 800 attended the conversations (which is about 2.7 percent of the regular worshipers in the synod).

#### The Conversations

The conversations took place in small groups with the clergy typically in a separate group(s). Members of the same congregation were asked to mix into different groups. The groups were provided with index cards and asked to discuss a question and then write a word or two that describes their response to the question. Many cards could be written in response to a single question. At the conversations these cards were collected and sorted into categories, posted, and reviewed for the entire group. Roughly 8,000 cards were analyzed in total. Despite the wide range of responses, certain themes emerged for each question and though these themes may have received a different emphasis, they were typically characteristic of each site and of both the lay and clergy groups. There was also considerable overlap from theme to theme which made discrete coding a significant challenge. The top ten themes on each question, however are presented below. Each of these themes received consistent attention (with the approximate number of responses within parentheses). It is also clear that there were many more responses on questions related to congregations than the synod. This probably indicates that people have more to say about their congregations because they know them so much better than the synod. For example, the top ten list on what in the congregation is life giving involved the summary of about 740 responses while the question of what is life giving in the synod involved 420 responses.

#### What is God calling your congregation to be? (N=630)

1. evangelistic and growing, to do outreach, and to support and bring to faith those outside the church. (160)
2. open, welcoming, tolerant, forgiving, and accepting of diversity. (100)
3. servants, serving others, helping the disadvantaged, giving aid to those most in need. (80)
4. caring, loving, hopeful, peaceful, compassion, and comforting. (60)
5. faithful witnesses and disciples, Christ-like, Gospel-based, guided by the Holy Spirit. (70)
6. equipping leaders, teaching, educating, leading, learning, growth in faith and discipleship. (40)
7. good stewards, thrifty, financially supporting the church. (40)

8. a recognizable community, a source of stability in the community, a beacon in the community. (30)
9. a mentor to children, youth, and young families. (30)
10. active, vital, relevant, purposeful. (20)

In your congregation, what is life giving? (N=740)

1. fellowship, serving, and caring for other members of the congregation. (170)
2. worship, communion, corporate prayer. (150)
3. outreach, serving the community. (80)
4. youth, children. (80)
5. lay or pastoral leadership. (60)
6. music, choir. (60)
7. acceptance, diversity, friendliness. (40)
8. spiritual gifts, passions, talents, involved and vibrant people. (40)
9. educational activities. (30)
10. small groups. (30)

In your congregation, what takes life away? (N=710)

1. conflict, gossip, petty people, cliques, bickering, pessimism, prejudice. (240)
2. apathy, lack of participation/volunteers, complacency, boredom. (120)
3. fear of change, resistance to change. (90)
4. lack of funding, financial support. (80)
5. burnout, fatigue. (40)
6. lack of vision, unclear roles, no priorities, lack of follow through. (40)
7. aging membership, lack of youth or programs for youth. (30)
8. "poor" theology, emphasis on the wrong issues, "political correctness," divisive social and theological issues. (30)
9. lack of, or poor professional leadership. (20)
10. poor communication. (20)

What is God calling us as the synod (all congregations together) to be? (N=500)

It is clear the participants in the gathering focused on the RMS synod office in response to this question. The participants believe the synod office should . . .

1. provide leadership that is visionary, guiding, building, nurturing, unifying, and distinctively Lutheran. (120)
2. provide general congregational support (sometimes specifically mentioning resources), and help congregations network and connect. (100)
3. be a Lutheran voice in the wider community. (60)
4. promote outreach and evangelism, and start new congregations. (60)
5. promote, advocate for, and support social ministry, responding to need, disasters, and poverty. The office should also advocate for social justice. (40)
6. be faithful, theologically sound, spiritual, and truthful. (30)
7. be inclusive, and embrace and support diversity. (30)
8. promote stewardship and be good stewards. (30)
9. facilitate and manage the mobility of professional leaders, and find and support professional leadership. (20)

10. be a link to the wider national and global church, helping congregations understand the mission and ministry of the wider church and to represent the synod's congregation in the wider church. (10)

In our synod, what is life giving? (N=420)

1. synod gatherings, assemblies, corporate worship. (70)
2. support for pastors, support for the call process. (50)
3. social ministry, hunger network, disaster response, advocacy. (50)
4. youth, youth gatherings. (50)
5. open dialogue, communication with, and input from, congregations. (50)
6. support for congregations (resources, education, networking). (50)
7. leadership from the synod office. (30)
8. outdoor ministry, campus ministries, colleges, seminaries. (30)
9. outreach, support for mission congregations. (20)
10. diversity of the synod. (20)

In our synod, what takes life away? (N=440)

1. lack of communication. (70)
2. the geographic and demographic distances of the synod. (70)
3. synod office not open to change, too many rules, things take too long. (70)
4. bickering, political divisions, the debate over controversial social issues. (60)
5. lack of financial support for the synod. (50)
6. lack of response to, or recognition, or neglect of, congregations. (50)
7. lack of leadership, a vision, a strategy. (20)
8. unresolved conflict. (20)
9. shortage of clergy, call process. (20)
10. not understanding synod's role or about the synod. (10)