

VISION, PASSION, ACTION

REPORT TO 2008 ROCKY MOUNTAIN SYNOD ASSEMBLY

Vision Passion Action has now invested three years lifting up the voice of the Rocky Mountain Synod from the voices of the participating congregations and ministries. Through two rounds of regional meetings and a multitude of team efforts we have produced a bold statement of what we are called to be and do.

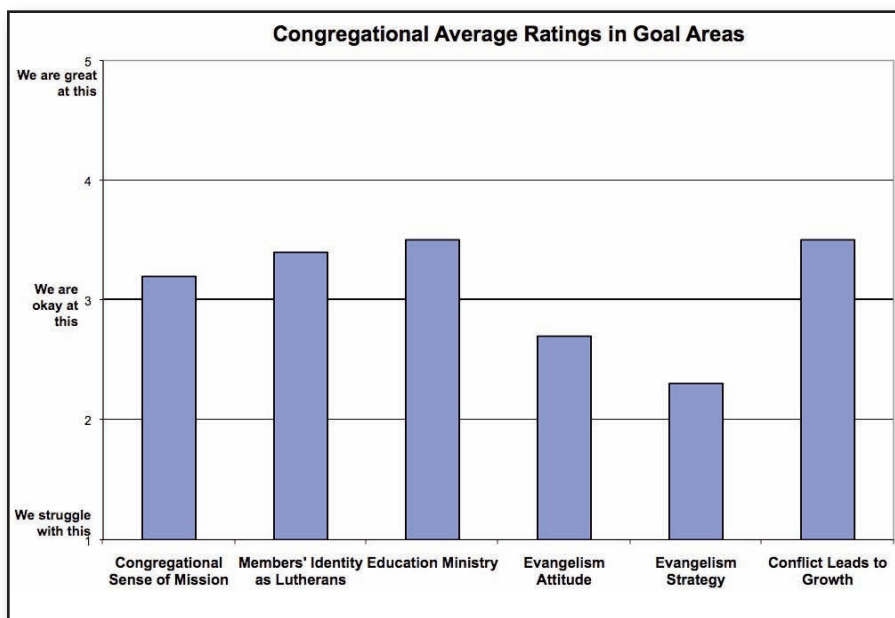
Our vision is outlined in the VPA brochure. It includes a proposed purpose statement for the Rocky Mountain Synod as well as goals and guiding principles. Specific strategies and measurable outcomes will be developed for each goal. Before continuing, please take a few minutes to carefully read and contemplate each section of the VPA brochure.

This report outlines the findings from the past year of work and charts the next steps of the process.

Findings from 2007-2008 VPA Conversations

This year marked the second round of synod-wide conversation. Conversations focused on building congregation connections and articulating our identity as Lutheran Christians.

Seventy-one focus groups took place in 13 different locations, with more than 350 participants from over 100 congregations (2/3 of congregations). At each gathering participants ate, prayed, and participated in three small group discussions. During the first discussion, participants shared examples of their congregation's experience with the five VPA goals. Stories were written on "Idea Sharing" cards so they could be shared throughout the synod (see *ideas* on page 2). The second discussion invited participants to reflect on the brochure. Each group recorded comments which were later analyzed by an outside researcher. For the final discussion participants contemplated ways to bring this information back to their own congregation.



TIMELINE

2005 Assessment

- Call to Conversation – 16 gatherings

2006 Planning Workgroups

- Identity
- Discipleship/Evangelism
- Conflict

2007 Phase 1 Implementation

- 13 Conversations focused on Articulating Identity & Building Connections,
- Book studies for rostered leaders
- ID resources for congregational health
- ELCA Brand Campaign
- Parochial Report Benchmarks

2008 Phase 2 Implementation

- Youth & Household Ministry
- Congregational Discussions
- Collaborative Laboratories
- Catalytic Leadership Gatherings (Lay + Rostered)
- Synod Roles & Structure conversations
- Transition Roadmap, Employee Assistance Program (EAP) dev.

2009 Phase 3 Implementation

- Set specific targets based on parochial reports & learning's
- Expand on success from Labs
- Implement changes called for in structure/role conversations
- Implement Transition Roadmap synod-wide. Continue EAP dev.

2010 + Evaluate & Adjust

- Continue implementation
- Annually evaluate progress and adjust.
- Periodically re-evaluate goals.

RMS PURPOSE, GOALS & VALUES: FINDINGS FROM PAROCHIAL REPORTS & CONVERSATIONS

■ Goal 1: Identity

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

On parochial reports, congregations were asked, “Would you say the members of your congregation know who they are as Lutheran Christians?” The average response was 3.4 with 90% rating themselves between “We do okay at this” and “We are great at this.” When asked, “Does your congregation have a clear sense of mission and purpose?” the average response was 3.2.

Identity was discussed during the conversations in the context of guiding principles. Groups emphasized that identity is grounded in the Bible and confessional documents. The most comments, however, related to the centrality of grace.

Participants struggled with the relationship between tradition and identity. Some were concerned we may be losing our identity by becoming more contemporary. Others understood that crisis can be used to clarify who we are, what we believe, and what we value. Some described the need to *live grace*:

“To live with diversity is a difficult and promising calling. Need for balance between law and grace.”

“We can be different in ideas and concepts and still work together.”

■ Goal 2: Discipleship

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

Discipleship is living out God’s call. A critical precursor to discipleship is faith formation. Parochial report numbers confirm that many congregations struggle to provide adequate faith formation, particularly for high school youth and young adults (33% said they did less than “okay at this” with youth and 54% with young adults).

To live out God’s call, each of us must feel empowered. The theme of empowerment rang out for many—that **“God is working inside each one of us. How can each of us take ownership?”** Many emphasized and appreciated that mission and vision are God’s, not ours. Some people came to a new understanding of how discipleship relates to identity, as well as to evangelism, health, and connections. **“Discipleship is the key to evangelism.”**

■ Goal 3: Evangelism

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

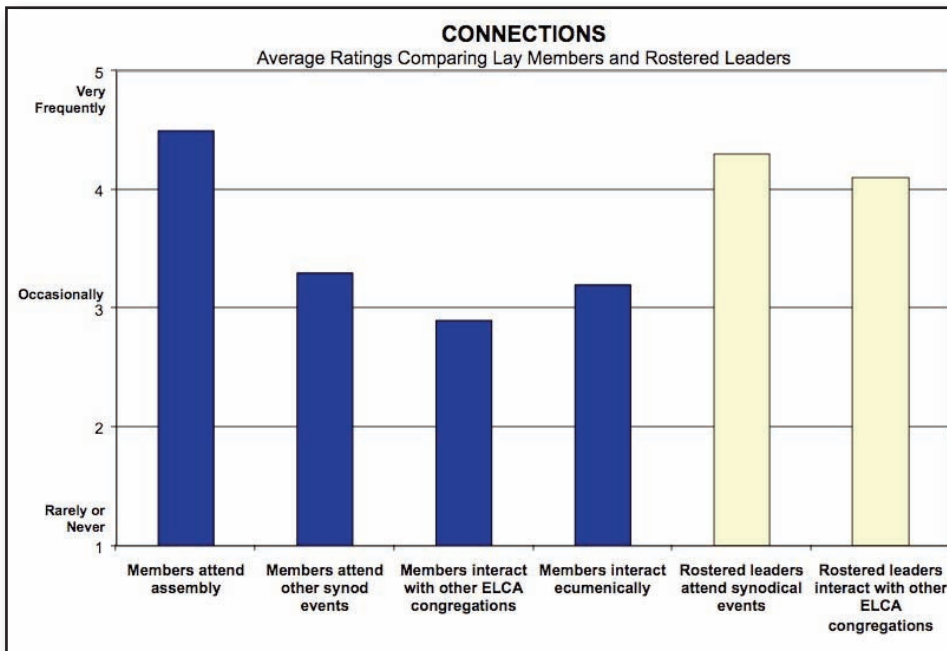
As in the 2005 conversations, practicing evangelism is the area where congregations rated themselves lowest. Still, in 2007 parochial reports 59% of congregations reported that their members did “okay or better” possessing an attitude that **“we have something to share.”** A strategy to share the faith outside the congregation was more elusive. In this area only 42% reported doing okay with this or better.

The tension between wanting to share and knowing how was more evident in the VPA discussions. This guiding principle received the most comments. It was a lightning rod for both passion and struggle. There was clear acknowledgement that Lutherans are not typically associated with the word “evangelical.” One group considered it a “loaded” term. Another group said it has been “hijacked” as a term, having lost its true meaning. Some think the term is problematic because it has different meanings. One group, getting to the

ideas

The ideas shared at the recent gatherings demonstrated the creativity and initiative that blesses many of our congregations. Some ideas included:

- Casper congregations share a youth worker and combine confirmation classes. – All four congregations in Casper, WY
- Train lay people to present sermons. – Christ the King, Durango, CO
- Host forums where community agencies describe local needs and focus congregation’s ministries on those needs. – Immanuel, Greeley, CO
- Intentional interim periods helped discover healthy leadership, opportunities for growth and optimism.- Shepherd of the Mountains, Park City, UT and Mt. Tabor, Salt Lake City, UT
- Teen Deacons trained to provide care to children and youth, serve as assisting ministers, and participate as leaders. – Abiding Hope, Littleton, CO
- Purchase land and build homes in Mexico creating affordable opportunities for families. – Trinity, Boulder, CO
- Formed Conflict Transformation Team. – St. Philip, Littleton, CO
- Golden Family of Churches interfaith collaboration provides youth and health ministries. – Faith, Golden, CO
- Teach Martin Luther’s theology to members. – St. Timothy’s, Albuquerque, NM
- Second offering taken to support specific projects matched by Thrivent. – Lord of the Mountains, Dillon, CO



“We have a unique message to tell about love”

levels of unhealthy conflict from getting personal to dividing into factions. Another 14% said that they avoid conflict, sometimes going along with outspoken members even when many don't agree.

A critical aspect of congregational health is leadership. One key theme that emerged is the need for cultivating leadership, among both pastors and lay people. **“Deliberate and intentional cultivation of lay leaders is crucial.”**

heart of the matter, suggested that its positive meaning needed to be “reclaimed.”

Many loved the idea of reaching *beyond our walls*. Others reminded that **“early church growth was based on individuals reaching out; that it is not just the job of the pastors.”**

Though participants wanted to do better at evangelism they struggled with both the definition of the word and how to live it out. We need to effectively express how we are “evangelical,” particularly in a way that fits our heritage. Some expressed the desire for an “elevator speech,” a simple, brief statement that can answer the question: “You’re Lutheran? What’s that?”

■ Goal 4: Congregational Health

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

Congregational health is critical to God’s mission. The Parochial report asked, “Over the past year when the congregation has experienced transition and/or conflict, has your congregation been able to work through it in a way that leads to growth?” As the chart above shows, congregational ratings averaged 3.5, between 3 (we do okay at this) to 5 (we are great at this). Still, there are a number of congregations struggling with conflict. Twelve percent reported various

Leadership facilitates change. Change was regarded differently: some believe it is very important for growth and progress, while others desire meaningful change, not “change for change’s sake”. It must be driven by mission: **“Mission and vision are God’s, not ours. We are empowered by God.”**

■ Goal 5: Connections

We have increased synodical capacity to do God’s work by strengthening connections between and within all expressions of our church.

Congregations report that a large number of members and rostered leaders participate in synodical gatherings. Rostered leaders are very likely to interact with each other except when geographically isolated. The weakest connectional link is in members of congregations interacting with each other. The chart shows the difference between rostered leader and member interactions. Members are more likely to interact with people from other faiths than with people from other ELCA congregations.

Many comments related to interdependence as a basis for growth and communication. Pre-conversation surveys stated a longing for greater collaboration among congregations. **“We wish for more interaction, joint ministries, collaborative activities, cooperation in evangelism and faith formation.”**

Sources for this report:

- Parochial Reports from ELCA: This year a survey was added to the annual reports that all congregations complete for the ELCA. This survey will serve as the baseline and ongoing measurement of health and progress for the Rocky Mountain Synod in each of its goal areas.
- *Congregational Perspectives of the Rocky Mountain Synod’s Purpose, Guiding Principles and Outcomes* by Sheridan Green. (Report commissioned by VPA to evaluate 2007-2008 conversations.) The full report is posted on the web at www.rmselfca.org/vision

NEXT STEPS

STRATEGIES BUILT ON STRENGTHS

2008 VPA strategies are designed to address our goals by building on our strengths.

■ **Strength: VISION ignites PASSION**

VPA participants felt empowered by mission focused conversations. They called for expanded participation in mission discussions and the cultivation of lay leadership. We must keep the momentum going, allowing as many people as possible to be involved in the renewal of their congregations and the Rocky Mountain Synod.

Strategies

- Congregational Vision Discussions will involve more congregations in talking about their own purpose and how they live it out. Provide materials and facilitators where requested
- Living the Vision Together conversations at Bishop's retreats will ask participants to discuss roles and expectations for how they live out our purpose together as congregations, conferences and synod.
- Catalytic Leadership Trainings (for Lay + Rostered leaders) will explore the unique roles of rostered and lay leaders and the power of a strong, healthy partnership.

■ **Strength: Innovative congregations ready for ACTION**

People told us they are ready for ACTION. They also said that they longed for increased collaboration including the sharing of successful ideas. Ideas can be shared and expanded across congregations. Synodical resources can be used to connect and expand synodical and congregational resources so that we can learn and grow together.

Strategies

- Collaborative Laboratories engage congregations in partnerships to try new ideas or expand existing programs in each Goal area (Identity/Visioning, Discipleship, Evangelism, Congregational Health, Connections). Learnings will be shared synod-wide.
- Youth & Household Ministry Staff Position to help enhance these ministries within and across congregations.
- Create a Transition Roadmap to guide congregations through times of change using proven strategies; Create Employee Assistance Program style of support for rostered leaders.

2008-2009 STRATEGIES

- **Congregational Vision Discussions Expanded**
- **Living the Vision Together Conversations**
- **Catalytic Leadership Gatherings (for Lay & Rostered leaders)**
- **Collaborative Laboratories**
- **Youth & Household Ministry**
- **Transition Roadmap and Employee Assistance Program**

“Grace is a hallmark of being Lutheran”

Vision Passion Action is not a program, but a movement, a development, an invitation in the life of the Rocky Mountain Synod for every person, every ministry, and every congregation. Its impact is not a package to be received or a product to be pushed, but it is to help create bolder leaders, courageous congregations and a true reformation spirit that allows us to adapt well to a changing world and changing needs.

Thanks to all of you who have participated in the Call to Conversations, Vision, Passion, Action gatherings, working groups, Synod Assembly gatherings, the traveling Synod Cross, prayer support, and providing us with resources, ideas, and encouragement. As we continue to work together in new ways, may God bless our efforts in this ministry together!