



Northern Illinois Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America



Report of Northern Illinois Synod Bishop Stacie Fidler

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone.

1 Corinthians 12:4-6

When I was young (and even now!), one of my favorite activities was to play with kaleidoscopes. With every twist and turn, a new pattern, a new mix of shapes and colors, would appear before my fascinated eyes. Even the slightest tap on the fragile cardboard tube would shift the vision of color before me.

The makeup of those intricate patterns and colors is much simpler than it ever seemed to my young mind. The designs of a kaleidoscope are created by basic chips of glass; their brilliant colors lit through a simple reflection of light. These small pieces of glass come in many different shapes and colors, each with their own particular beauty. When they come together, however, they create an even more wonderful scheme. Each piece retains its own color and integrity, but together they form an even more complete whole.

That individuality of shapes amid an even greater and more beautiful whole is not something exclusive to kaleidoscopes. It is a characteristic of the body of Christ as well. Each individual disciple has something beautiful to give, their own gifts and talents to share with the greater whole. Each individual member comes together in community and forms the body of Christ.

The beauty of that body is always shifting and changing - with the addition of a new member, the discovery of a new gift - but the beauty remains. Like the patterns of a kaleidoscope, as long as we are part of this whole, we are never really sure what will come next. But our faith as individuals and as a community holds us together. We come together as one body, and the light of Christ reflects through that body revealing the beauty and the wonder and the mystery of God. Even the slightest tap or shift could reveal something new and wonderful about who we are as individuals and as a people.

As your synod staff, our continual goal is to find those wonderful images of God at work among you. We join you in your journeys of discernment and ask questions with you and wonder with you. What is God already doing? Where would Jesus be in this world now? How is the Holy Spirit blowing new things into being? What does this mean for our worshipping community?

We are all being called in these days to intentionally examine the pieces that make up our life of faith and what it means to come together as a community centered in Christ. How are we called to serve in our neighborhoods and towns? Is there a shift in the way all these congregations are organized that could reveal a new way of doing ministry? Are there beautiful pieces of the whole that we have stopped seeing or appreciating? Times of change, as difficult and confusing as they

can be, are an opportunity for us as a synod to shine more brightly the light and wonder of our faith. Even the slightest effort could reveal some new and wonderful glimpse of who we could be as a people of God.

I hope that you can see how we are working together and walking together with you to explore new places Jesus is calling us and the Holy Spirit is nudging us, even if it's ever so slightly. Sometimes it is those slight nudges that open something completely new.

You will notice one shift in our budget that hits deep in our hearts. It is about Lutheran Social Services of Illinois, which was born in the homes and congregations of this synod. We have walked with its growth and service, with many of the LSSI commitments emerging from our communities. There have been days in the past where congregations, leaders, and bishops would descend on Springfield and plead for the state to pay their back debt and bills so that LSSI could continue to serve the most vulnerable among us. Through continued faithfulness and restructuring, those days are past. LSSI is on solid financial footing and poised well for the future.

As a result, you will see a practical shift in how the synod is encouraging you to relate to LSSI. Instead of supporting them with significant finances in our synod budget, we are asking the congregations of Northern Illinois to develop relationships with the clients and ministries of LSSI. For example, the Tri-Church group in Sterling/Rock Falls serve as Birthday Buddies with the LSSI Sterling Group Home and the Partnership House in Sterling. The impact on these residents is important and the congregation lives out the love of Christ among them. Some of the other relationships are:

LSSI Site	NIS church partner(s)
Anderson Apartments, Stockton (DD)	Christ Lutheran, Stockton
Dixon Group Home, Dixon (DD)	St. Paul, Dixon (WELCA)
Shady Oaks, Homer Glen (DD)	Cross of Glory, Homer Glen Shepherd of the Hill, Lockport, Peace, New Lenox (all work together)
Sterling Group Home (DD)	Tri-Church Partners
Lincoln Manor Senior Housing, Rochelle	<i>NEW!</i> Faith, Rochelle (will start in 2024)
Greenbrier (senior) Apartments, DeKalb	First, DeKalb
Spring Ridge (senior) Housing, Rockford	GPS Faith Community, Machesney Park

Full sites are not available in every community, but there are other ways to live out relationships with LSSI. There are hundreds of families served by LSSI in children's services and substance abuse recovery in Northern Illinois. We are working with Pastor Kelly Nieman-Anderson, manager of Church and Community Engagement, to find ongoing possibilities for relationship for our congregations, from personal needs in foster care to staff support.

This is **NOT** a budget cut. You will see in the agencies and institutions portion of the budget that the dollars previously committed to LSSI have been redistributed to other agencies and institutions we support. They are still there (less the overall 3% reduction), assisting other ministries which need more financial support right now.

As a synod, we are working to do what LSSI has done: establish a solid financial foundation for the future.

At the fall Conference of Bishops meeting, a pilot partnership project with the ELCA Foundation was proposed to all the bishops. This partnership would be an opportunity for synods to work in partnership with the ELCA Foundation and congregations to do intentional work on planned and annual giving. The Foundation head Rachel Wind expected around 5 synods to volunteer. Instead, she received 18 responses. She has worked with her team to develop 4 different levels of engagement with all 18 synods on the hypothesis that all our development efforts will be stronger when done collaboratively rather than in parallel (aka competition).

One synod was selected for the highest partnership level, like the DEM model: a full-time deployed staff person for development, employed by churchwide but working for the synod. Northern Illinois was offered this person for a 3-year experiment. The Foundation is asking for \$150,000 from the synod in partnership, while it provides the other \$250,000 and all the administrative support and back support.

We already have \$50,000 set aside for this work. I will be seeking gifts for the remainder.

This partnership comes with the possibility of tremendous benefit for Northern Illinois and we were chosen as the synod with the most potential for making this work. When I was called as your bishop, it was clear from the beginning that I would need to do some work on fundraising for the endowment and the funds that make innovation and agility possible in the current climate. This partnership will align us with all the right resources for that work, setting up the synod – and in turn our congregations – for longer term stability.

In addition to the deployed staff person for Northern Illinois, all 18 synods will participate in quarterly educational cohorts, which will include a learning team from each synod. The intent will be to multiply the number of people empowered for the work throughout the church. (This is one of our goals for everything we do in Northern Illinois!) There will also be quarterly bishops' meetings to evaluate, adjust, and learn together.

If you know of someone who would be a good addition for this development team, please let me know! The reorganized Stewardship Committee for Northern Illinois will continue to provide practical, faith-based resources and training for congregational stewardship. The development staff will be doing faith-based work on planned and designated giving.

2024 Synod Assembly

This has been a guiding map for NIS staff for a little over a year. It names the 5 strategic area where we have focused our ministry. Members of the Synod Council will recognize it, with a little bit of tweaking to a couple of the areas.



We also have several value filters that guide us. The most frequently referenced is:
(1) Spirit Empowered (2) Lay Led and (3) Rostered Minister Supported
These 3 weave together as we look at the future of the church.



Equip/Support Lay Leaders

- Supporting deeper lay education (Preaching Among Friends, DIAKONIA)
- Building a lay preaching and lay leadership team (Synod Authorized Ministers - SAMs)
- Supporting current SAMs by a complete bottom up assessment of how SAMs are selected, supported, placed, and mentored.
- Connecting congregational leaders with deeper support (current example: group zooms with congregations in transition)

Clarify Congregation Paths/Purposes

- Vitality and Visioning consults
- Pathways program (1 year discernment process)
- Creating shared ministry strategy and initiating umbrella conversation in all the conferences
- Nurturing shared ministry opportunities already in process
- Support and equip congregations in transition
- Anti-racism awareness
- Focus on innovation opportunities
- Assist congregations in right sizing ministry to context

Appraise/Generate Care for Ministers

- Crisis care and ongoing support
- Generate resources for spiritual direction, coaching, and continuing ed opportunities
- Identify and provide places and spaces for connection & collaboration
- Creating 3 year cycle for boundaries training (fall 2024 Region 5 initiative)
- Create and support network of interims
- Seek out new partners/leaders for ministry in NIS

Maintain and Revise Operations

- Be transparent in our processes AND agile in our implementation
- Utilize database for effective and clear purposes
- Maintain, adapt, and utilize financial goals in ways that adhere with internal controls
- Implement endowment fund committee and goals
- Devise mission support strategy
- Identify grants and funding streams beyond mission support
- Maintain all the necessary lists, rosters, supports and logistical area

A Glimpse of What's Happening: Synod Strategies

- ### Daily Work
- Lift up abundance of Portico resources
 - Build in areas of diversity and inclusion work
 - Presence at conference and congregational levels - we want to be with you!

Devise/Implement Communication Methods to "Tell the Story"

- Twice monthly e-news
- Quarterly bulletin insert
- Video messages and sermons from Bishop Fidler
- Website refresh
- Resources for all aspects of ministry
- Social media channels
- Communicate the work of Synod Council and committees



I shared a version of this map last year; I share it every synod council meeting and frequently when I gather with groups. It is a transparent guide to how we are Walking Together with Northern Illinois. This guiding document has been updated, shifted, and refined regularly to sharpen our view of how we can live and share God's mission among us. The strategies and the way they are being lived out lift up gifts we have often forgotten, like the baptismal call of ALL God's beloved children. They push us to remember our spiritual grounding and our purpose. We are reminded in every area to name the why of what we are doing – that is, to follow Jesus faithfully, we are doing these things in this time and this place. And they remind me, our staff, and you that we are doing all of this together, with the gifts that all of us bring to the one body of Christ.

We will continue to build paths that offer opportunities for discernment and exploring gifts among our lay leaders. A history of clericalism left many of us thinking that ordained pastors were needed to do all the work of the church. That ignores the beauty of all the parts of the body of Christ and the many gifts that Paul reminds us are alive among us.

Growing our sense of discipleship is key to that. How might we Open God's Story in ways that deepen how we follow Jesus AND support one another in ministry AND open our hearts to the work of the Spirit? Can we collaborate more fully? Step out of our comfort zones, knowing the Spirit holds us? Consider that new things can be born from tiny mustard seeds? Grieve and release those systems and expectations that no longer bring life abundant?

These are all tough asks. But the Holy Spirit is nudging. Tapping at us, urging us to see and live and shift in new ways in the Body of Christ. And we create that together, all of us, all the pieces and people and places of Northern Illinois. May the light of Christ shine through us and in us in ways that show Christ's new creation.

I know this is at the end, but **PAY ATTENTION** here.

I am grateful each and every day for synod staff, my co-workers in this ministry. Current staff members include:

***The Rev. Jennifer Beamsley**, who is transitioning from Lead Staff Assistant to guru of all things for vacancy and mobility. She will be part-time beginning in August, but this will actually open up more time for her to focus solely on this work.

***Laura Bergren**, who encourages, welcomes, keeps my schedule in line (*no Bishop, you cannot be in 5 places in one day*) and brings joy to each day.

***Joan Brooks**, our intrepid CPA support, who does remarkable things with numbers and reports and keeps us all on track with a hear for the Gospel.

***The Rev. Josh Ebener**, who has been on the run as our Director of Evangelical Mission and helping us to look for new paths of ministry and mission.

***The Rev. Mark Juliot**, who is part-time coach of the Pathways program, using his gifts and insight to guide congregations through future options.

***The Rev. Julie Monnard**, who quietly and wisely keeps us on track and thinks of many things before the rest of us have remembered to think of them.

***The Rev. Mack Patrick**, who has shifted to full-time and keeps reminding all of us of the many ways to tell God's story and has the best facial expressions at the table.

***Lori Whalen**, Synod Authorized Minister, who builds pretty spreadsheets like the best kaleidoscope creator and explains the complex with elegance.

We give thanks for those who retired from staff in 2023:

***The Rev. Pat Esker**, who by sheer force of will and amazing questions brought us through transition.

***The Invaluable, Wise, and Instrumental in all things Julie Lewis**. What more can I say?

Thank you for this ministry we live and do together.

Peace,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading "Bishop Stacie Fidler". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style. The word "Bishop" is written in a larger, more prominent script, while "Stacie Fidler" follows in a similar but slightly smaller script.

Bishop Stacie Fidler