



## Branches of the Same Vine: Healthy shared ministry

This fall, the Nebraska Synod hosted a two-day event to train congregational coaches and educate church leaders (lay and clergy) about shared ministry between congregations. This came about as almost half (47 percent) of our congregations are already sharing ministry with at least one other congregation or are in conversations to do so.

For this event, we invited specific pastors and laypeople to a two-hour training for coaches who will walk with congregations as they consider, begin and live into shared ministry with other congregations.

We also hosted the Rev. Marcia Kifer from the Texas-Louisiana Gulf Coast Synod who did presentations on:

- **“Vision for Mission.”** This Bible study looked at Jesus’ vision for his followers and how that relates (or doesn’t) to our contemporary churches.
- **“Surviving toward Thriving.”** Why churches are considering sharing staff and resources, shared ministry types and examples that have helped congregations move from just surviving to thriving.
- **“Building Blocks for Sustainable, Successful Shared Ministry.”** What are the key things to have in place for ministry to be successful in a shared ministry? Building trust, for example, is key.
- **“Nuts & Bolts.”** Models of administration, finance, structure and mission and how to get from here to there.

In addition, we talked about ELCA parish formation, ecumenical partnerships and the transformational ministry renewal process available in the Nebraska Synod.

We had 62 registered for the two-day event, but due to a blizzard, only 38 from all over the state were able to attend—more than we expected in the midst of the weather!

Participants were able to meet others in similar situations who are struggling with similar issues and questions. This helped them realize that they aren’t alone and offered a chance to swap ideas and resources. The training and education provided insight, information and models for ministry that could then be used in local settings around the state to foster creativity in congregational ministry.

Participants also experienced a renewed sense of God’s purpose and mission for their area in this challenging time of great change across the church. By helping people move from the mindset of survival to one of abundance and thriving, it is our hope that people are inspired to live generously with reduced fear and more faith in God’s faithfulness.

The Nebraska Synod has created a page of resources from this training for congregations that are considering shared ministry. Visit [nebraskasynod.org](http://nebraskasynod.org) and go to News & Resources—Resources—For Congregations to access videos and downloadable files to help in your planning. Please also be in contact with your local assistant to the bishop to connect with a coach, explore possibilities and ask questions. **L**



The Rev. Marci Kifer gave presentations on shared ministry at the Nebraska Synod’s Branches of the Same Vine event.

## How then will I lead?

By Deacon Timothy Siburg

The church is entering a new reality. The ELCA is facing a rostered minister shortage that is nearing 1,000 full-time pastors across the ELCA, and at least 40 currently in the Nebraska Synod.



Timothy Siburg

At the same time, the world is changing—perhaps even more rapidly than it ever has in the past. These realities and challenges exist. Amid them we hold fast to the promise that God is with us, loves us, and is for us; and the belief that God is up to something and calling us to be part of it.

The question then is, “How will we lead and serve amid these changes, questions and challenges?” And, more individually, “How will each pastor, deacon, parish ministry associate and every leader in a congregation lead?”

This question of “How then will I lead?” is an invitation. It’s an invitation to learning and growth. It’s also an invitation to introspection, self-reflection and, hopefully, a greater sense of self-awareness.

Emotional Intelligence expert Daniel Goleman has argued: “If your emotional abilities aren’t in hand, if you don’t have self-awareness, if you are not able to manage your distressing emotions, if you can’t have empathy and have effective relationships, then no matter how smart you are, you are not going to get very far.” This is true for anyone. But it is especially true in ministry.

Part of the reason for a rostered minister shortage is poor leadership. Our leaders, pastors and deacons are burning out. Like teachers and nurses, if pastors can make it past their five-year mark in ministry (usually their first call), statistically they are much more likely to last long-term in ministry. Though burnout can be caused by many factors—unhealthy congregations, financial stress, undue burdens and unhealthy expectations of ministry on selves and families, etc.—much of these pieces can be mitigated with increased self-awareness.

It’s with this in mind that the Nebraska Synod has launched “How Then Will I Lead?” It is an extremely selective application process and group-based model of growth, learning, and in-depth training, coaching and mentoring primarily for congregational leaders. Over the course of about six months, 20 to 24 leaders will

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dig deep, dwell and listen to the Spirit's movement. They will learn about themselves, how to "read" others and, in turn, how they might operate healthier as a leader.

These aspects of leadership are not generally taught in seminary, yet years of research has shown that emotional intelligence can be developed and improved, resulting in more effective leaders. We hope this will be especially true for pastors, deacons and parish ministry associates.

The goal of this initiative is to help equip current leaders to grow in their leadership capacity to continue serving and growing in ministry. Another goal is to multiply healthy leadership by their example and through the way they can uplift and recognize leadership gifts, vocations and callings among others in their midst.

The first group has begun. Based on what is learned from their experience, a second group will launch later in 2019. Currently this experience is open to leaders serving a congregation who want



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to grow deeper in their leadership and awareness of self and who are no longer serving in their first five years of ministry. This does not include those within five years of retirement.

This is an exciting experiment in Nebraska. We ask for your prayers for God's guidance in it and for it. We also invite you to consider being part of it yourself.

If you are a leader in a congregation who might be interested this program, find out more and apply on the Nebraska Synod website ([nebraskasynod.org](http://nebraskasynod.org)). ☒

**Timothy Siburg** is a deacon and director of stewardship for the Nebraska Synod.

## “Go & tell the story”: “We Are Church Together”

By Bishop Brian Maas



Bishop Brian Maas

“We are Church Together” ... in fact, I’m not sure we can “be church” at all if we’re not. “We Are Church Together” describes who we are as the ELCA—and in its ideal, the whole of the church.

The concept of a solitary Christian is foreign to the New Testament. Acts, the Epistles, even Revelation all presume community—even as they acknowledge disagreement and division. There is no *not* being the church together. Even Jesus spoke of “two or three” gathered as the setting for his presence. Community, if not always unity, isn’t just something nice to shoot for—it’s the essence of church.

Likewise, we Lutheran Christians define the church as “the *gathering of saints*” among whom the gospel is preached and the sacraments celebrated. As church, we exist when we’re together.

This has been a tough sell in the U.S. since at least the early 18th century, when the Great Awakening and the revivals that followed stirred in people a great concern—rooted primarily in fear of damnation and a concern for being “saved” individually. It was a short leap from individual salvation to individualized religion. Consumerist Christianity became part of the American religious landscape.

Claiming our identity as “Church Together” is about renewing the convictions of the early church and the Lutheran Confessions, that we find Christ in the community that is his body on earth.

We are now experiencing new levels of division within our culture. Not only have common civic institutions—and churches—seen their influence wane, even the foundational glue that once grounded us all—truth, facts, rationality, objective reality—have now become relative and personalized. The truth is what I determine it to

be, and I believe you to the degree to which you agree with me. I am the standard by which the world is judged.

But it’s foolish to think this is in any way new. Martin Luther, following Augustine’s lead, spoke of original sin as being *incurvatus in se*, or “being turned in on oneself.” This is the human condition. Right now, it seems a little more public, a little more visible, maybe even a little more acceptable. But it’s always been a problem, a problem to which the only solution is the gospel—the good news of Jesus’ invitation to die to self and selfishness in order to rise to life, life in community even with those with whom we disagree.

This life is God’s gift to us—not because it’s easy but because it’s powerful. Being “Church Together” is about being truly alive. Where the spirit of community is strong in a congregation, there is life, and where there is life, people feel drawn.

Just as important, when we’re “Church Together,” things happen. Individuals together as a congregation, congregations together as a synod, synods together as the whole of the ELCA—*together*, we are being used by God to change the world. Feeding children through backpack programs, raising up new leaders for the church, responding to disasters, defeating malaria—in so many, many ways we experience the privilege of being the church. Together, we get to be the way in which God spreads hope, lessens suffering, overcomes division, and transforms lives and communities.

We *are* church—always, only, powerfully and beautifully, church *together*. **✠**

“Go & Tell the Story” is the Nebraska Synod blog. To read more from Bishop Brian Maas and the Nebraska Synod staff, visit [nebraskasynod.blogspot.com](http://nebraskasynod.blogspot.com).