



2022 BISHOP ELECTION SURVEY RESULTS EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In January 2022, the Bishop Election Committee of the Nebraska Synod launched an electronic survey to gather information intended to help individuals discerning a call as Bishop as well as the voting members of Synod Assembly understand the missional vision of the people of the Nebraska Synod. The survey was open from January 5-19, and was completed by 242 people. Full survey results are available on the Synod's website. This document attempts to summarize key information and recurrent themes.

Q1: Which of the following best describes you?

Nearly 48% (116) of respondents identified as lay persons, 38% (91) as rostered leaders, 5% (12) as Parish Ministry Associates, 1% (3) as Serving Arms partners, and 8% as Other, several of which could have been captured in the more specific categories.

Q2: What is your age?

No survey respondents were under the age of 25. Nearly 6% (14) of respondents were aged 25-39 years, 17% (42) were aged 40-54 years, 50% (120) were aged 55-69 years, and 27% (66) were 70 years of age or older.

Q3: What is the average weekly worship attendance of your congregation?

Nearly 27% (65) of respondents are part of a congregation where weekly worship attendance is 1-50 people, 39% (95) from congregations with 51-150 weekly worshippers, 18% (43) from congregations with 151-350 weekly worshippers, and 9% (22) from large congregations of more than 351 weekly worshippers. About 7% (17) respondents did not respond to the question.

Q4: Where is your congregation located?

Nearly 36% (86) of respondents were from the Omaha area, 16% (39) from the Lincoln area, 15% (37) from Southeast Nebraska, 12% (29) from Central Nebraska, 11% (27) from Northeast Nebraska, 5% (13) from Western Nebraska, and 5% (11) from Other locations, including several from outside Nebraska.

Q5: Where have you seen God active in the Nebraska Synod?

Those who responded to the survey described seeing God active in their congregations, in faithful clergy and lay leaders, and in how congregations have responded to the call of their neighbor. This care of neighbor is consistently where the people of the Nebraska Synod see God active, not only by the ministry of the congregation but how the synod staff and committees have provided meaningful programming and ministry opportunities to strengthen and equip rostered and lay leaders for ministry in their own context. The ministry partners and serving arms of the synod are also places where God's activity has been witnessed.

Key themes:

- **Congregational life:** worship, learning, and service for and by people of all generations
- **Responding to real needs in our communities and world:** though disaster relief, hunger programs, support for immigrants and refugees, creating welcome for LGBTQIA+ people
- **Synod Staff:** call process support, communications from synod staff especially Bishop Mass, working on the PMA program, developing content to support lay and rostered leaders,
- **Ministry Partners:** Prison Ministry, Campus Ministry, Nebraska Lutheran Outdoor Ministries, Lutheran Family Services, Lakota Ministry, Sudanese Ministries, Mosaic
- **Synod offerings:** Emmaus, Seeking the Spirit Within, Vitality Initiative, RARE, How Then Shall I Lead, 4G, Youth Events
- **Resilience through change:** clergy, congregations, and the synod all being open and flexible to the changing needs especially during the pandemic, people using their gifts for the good of others

Q6: What are your primary hopes for the Nebraska Synod and the ELCA as a whole in the next 6 years?

While a number of responses described a hope that we would work for increased numbers in our congregations, there were also many responses describing a hope that we would not be motivated by increased numbers, but instead by a call to follow God's will. Responses describe a conviction that the good news of God is relevant for our communities and world, and that we are called to proclaim and live that message.

Key themes:

- **Membership:** increase attendance and more engaged members in the ministry of the church
- **Spiritual and Theological formation:** raise up leaders for both seminary and lay leaders, continuing education for leaders, faith formation, accountability for leaders
- **Centered on God:** preach the Gospel, centered in the Bible, discerning and doing God's will
- **Discern structure:** perhaps a different synod structure could more effectively support congregations with differing needs, potentially more shared ministry sites, more effectively support rural ministry
- **Mending what is broken:** our culture divides us, but we are one in Christ, we are equipped as disciples of Christ work for healing and to work with others across difference
- **Work for Justice:** work against racism, help refugees and immigrants, be supportive of LGBTQIA+ people and those struggling with mental health issues
- A number of responses note a hope that synod and ELCA will stop being political and left leaning, and a hope that we will be less focused on "social justice" and instead on Christ

Q7: In your local setting, what aspects of mission are most exciting or compelling to you?

Many respondents focused on ministries outside the walls of the church building such as caring for those with basic needs (food, clothing, shelter), helping immigrants, giving voice to the

disenfranchised, feeding people's minds, bodies and spirits, sharing the Gospel and welcoming people to the table. Additionally, they mentioned resiliency given the pandemic, social justice matters, inclusivity, ecumenical partnerships, and aiding those affected by natural disaster.

Key themes:

- **Addressing Basic Needs** like hunger, poverty and homelessness
- **Community Engagement/Involvement** including activities that "reach others through love" such as *God's Work, Our Hands* projects, backpack programs, school supply drives, angel trees
- **Social Justice, Inclusiveness and Serving Diverse Communities** including welcoming newcomers/refugees/immigrants, LGBTQIA+ outreach, prison ministry, reaching out to seniors, "meeting the needs of our members whose voice is weakest and typically not heard" and "standing up for and including marginalized people"
- **Responding to Disasters** both at home and abroad
- **Worship/Preaching the Gospel** including spiritual practices, intergenerational faith formation, women's ministry, committed lay leaders/PMAs/Deacons, pulpit supply, music ministry, multipoint parishes focused on shared mission
- **Ecumenical Partnerships**
- **Adaptability and Resiliency** given the pandemic including using technology to reach a wider community; creativity with regard to worship life online; and continuing ministries or starting new ministries that meet the needs of "post"-Covid times

Q8: What are the biggest challenges facing your congregation today?

Respondents mentioned a wide array of challenges including those related to the pandemic, declining membership and finances, pastoral and staff vacancies, fewer leaders and volunteers, politics and polarization, competition for young families' time, relevance and apathy.

Key themes:

- Pandemic fatigue, getting people back to the building to be in communion with others, maintaining connections with those who must or choose to only worship online
- Relevance: getting new people to buy into church in general and getting them involved and fully engaged in meaningful ways
- Diminishing attendance, aging membership, declining population
- Competition for young families' time
- Declining finances, increasing debt, and aging facilities
- Pastoral vacancies and staff resignations
- Supply of ordained and lay ministers, including interims and pulpit supply
- Affordability of ordained ministers
- Unrealistic hours and expectations of ministers leading to burnout
- Moving the church more and more into a mindset of lay leadership and away from seeing the staff as the ones that do the work
- Fewer volunteers and lack of new leaders to fill voids
- Lack of musicians
- Politics and polarization (both at the local level and the ELCA); a deep sense of institutional mistrust of the larger church
- Whiteness, Privilege
- Technology

- Stagnation: openness to letting go of things that haven't been working, willingness to change
- Apathy
- Lacking vision and goals of what we want to be and do; trying to do too much
- Staying true to Lutheranism

Q9: How satisfied are you with how things are going in the Nebraska Synod?

Slightly more than 14% (33) respondents indicated they were very satisfied, 51% (118) satisfied, 20% (46) neutral, 11% (25) dissatisfied, 5% (11) very dissatisfied. Nine (9) respondents did not answer the question.

Q10: What would make you more satisfied with the Synod?

Almost one-fourth of those taking the survey either did not respond to this question or indicated they were not aware of the Synod's functions. This may be consistent with many responses indicating a need for more and timely communications, plus personal visits from Synod staff to see what congregations are doing.

Key themes:

- **Pastor & Congregation Support:** Continue focus on leadership development; help us grow church attendance; more outreach and education to lay leaders; offer more practical continuing education; offer more opportunities for spiritual education and retreats; support pastors and congregations that are doing good things and use them to mentor other churches; proactively help pastors through congregational conflict
- **Social Issues:** Responses ranged from "We are too liberal!" to "We are too conservative!" to please focus on the middle. Comments indicated that we are losing our young people because of our Synod's lukewarm response to issues of social justice, equity and acceptance of all people. Several responses suggested more of a focus on Jesus Christ and the Bible rather than using the pulpit for politics and personal opinion. The ELCA and Bishop Eaton specifically were seen as too political and not representative of Nebraska. The Synod should provide practical training for first call candidates that aligns expectations with his/her ability to effect social justice changes.
- **Call Process:** Need for strong leadership and support in the call process; help congregations merge/share ministry; we don't have a clergy shortage, we have too many congregations! Clergy can't be expected to work part-time at small congregations.
- **Rural Ministry & Western Nebraska:** Greater emphasis on training for rural ministry and those who are entering their first call in a rural setting; allow PMAs doing pulpit supply to offer communion; help rural parishes attract non-attending folks in their communities; move Boundaries classes to a location farther west occasionally, CJH may be convenient for Synod staff but not so much for those who live west of Grand Island; pay more attention to Western Nebraska churches; and continue presence (office) in the Panhandle.
- **Financial:** Dozens of congregations are seeking new leaders but they are unwilling or unable to pay wages for the dozens of experienced leaders seeking new calls; better pay for hard-working Synod staff; help congregations understand the cultural changes in philanthropy and not rely on "generations passing down" for financing a congregation
- **Satisfaction:** Maintain present activities; one of the best synods in the ELCA; people don't realize the benefits of having a Synod and what they do; having Synod staff that travel is very helpful

- **Bishop Maas:** Doing a good job; desire that he “stay put”; a steady and consistent voice in support of greater civility; present leadership has done an excellent job in leading and setting examples of living as disciples of Christ; congregations want to see more of the Bishop; he has brought the Synod to living sustainably again by tightening up the administration and organization
- **Next Bishop:** Be able to understand and lead in all contexts – urban, suburban and rural; we don’t want to lose the Vitality Initiative and partnerships built under Bishop Maas; be a confident leader who helps determine an overall vision and master plan for the Synod

Q11: What challenges lie ahead of the Nebraska Synod in the next 6 years?

Respondents described many challenges faced by the Nebraska Synod in the next six years. The first three items were noted by a quarter of all respondents and so represent what members believe are the most pressing issues:

- “Filling our pulpits” is a huge concern. A shortage of available pastors or other leaders to replace those retiring or accepting other calls leaves people feeling vulnerable and worried about the future of their congregations.
- A decline in membership, church attendance, finances, and relevance are also troublesome to respondents. What is going to happen to their churches, they seem to wonder.
- Partisanship, politicization, and cultural divergence between “synod,” pastors, and congregational members is disconcerting. Strong opinions were noted on both sides of the cultural divide, along with hopes that these can be bridged.
- Post-covid engagement in meaningful ways will be a challenge as we begin to realize what is “normal” now.
- The need to embrace diversity was a concern for a small percentage of respondents.

Q12: Please rank from 1 (most important) to 10 (least important) the following attributes/abilities of the Nebraska Synod’s next bishop:

1. Strategic Leadership/Vision
2. Preaching/Proclaiming the Gospel
3. Pastoral Care
4. Conflict Resolution
5. Change Management
6. Coach/Train
7. Administration
8. Stewardship & Development
9. Participation within the ELCA
10. Ecumenical Relationships

Q13: What should be the top priorities of the new bishop?

Respondents described dozens of potential priorities for the new Nebraska Synod bishop. There was a fair amount of convergence, however, in several areas. Those key themes are summarized below, with the most frequent ones being nearer the top:

- To lead in developing renewed vision and a new strategic plan for the synod
- Proclaiming the good news and inspiring and communicating with our constituencies

- Keeping a focus on this time of change and pointing to a joint vision toward the future; training for the 21st century rather than longing for the past
- Care and support and accountability for rostered ministers and PMAs; pastoral care, especially in light of the pandemic experience of the past two years
- To be engaged and visible in visiting and meeting congregations and members; strengthened relationships and getting to know the churches and ministries
- Selecting and building a strong group of bishop's assistants with the gifts to work well with congregations and ministries; renewing and strengthening the call process
- Dealing with conflict and ability to have hard conversations
- Recruiting and developing and maintaining pastoral leaders; strong support for candidacy and finding new ministry leaders in our changing contexts
- Modeling a deep and authentic spirituality
- Being present and approachable and willing to listen and learn in this new call

Q14: Is there anything else you would like to share with those discerning a potential call as bishop of the Nebraska Synod?

Respondents provided an extensive collection of opinions and expressions of support and advice for those discerning this call. Candidates would do well to read through this section of the survey to get a flavor of the wide range of concerns and ideas. It is difficult to know how to summarize this question, but these are some of the significant items that were communicated:

- Many gave assurances of their prayer and support for whomever is elected; people expressed hope for a gifted leader in continuity with their appreciation for this synod's previous bishops
- It is a challenging time for all leaders in our divisive society; one needs to be prepared for a difficult and demanding call
- There is a longing for a person who can be a unifying force in a time of perceived political divisiveness within the constituencies of the ELCA
- Given the realities of pastoral shortages, the bishop needs to encourage and develop the leadership of a variety of pastoral leaders, including rostered ministers, PMAs, TEEM candidates, etc.
- The bishop should have the ability to relate well in the synod's diverse contexts, both urban and rural
- The bishop can't be averse to conflict and also has to be willing to challenge us
- It is an important skill to be able to inspire our faith communities and the people of the synod to further God's mission
- One should not think of the bishop's call as a "solo" job, but rather think of the synod as a team you are called to mobilize