

## **Bishop Scott Johnson - Report at the 2024 Synod Assembly**

“Cultivating” brings up memories of long, hot days hunched over the steering wheel of a John Deere tractor, focusing intently on the rows of beans and corn in front of me. For much of my early life, a cultivator was a farm implement that dug up weeds. Our family farm used Buffalo brand cultivators, and when we got off track and wiped out small patches across four rows of crops, we called them “Buffalo tracks.”

When my parents heard that this year’s Synod Assembly theme was “Cultivating Love,” and that I’d mentioned our old Buffalo cultivators, they reminded me that there was visual evidence confirming what I’d written.

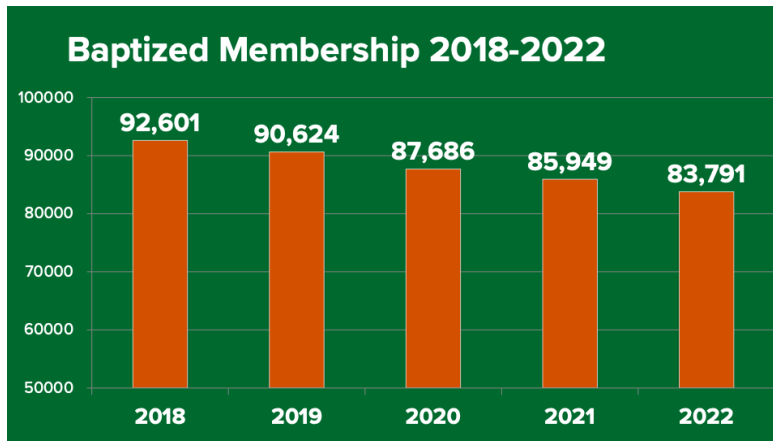
Here’s a younger, much dustier version of me cultivating corn - and please note that there’s not a single “Buffalo Track” or case of “cultivator blight” to be found!



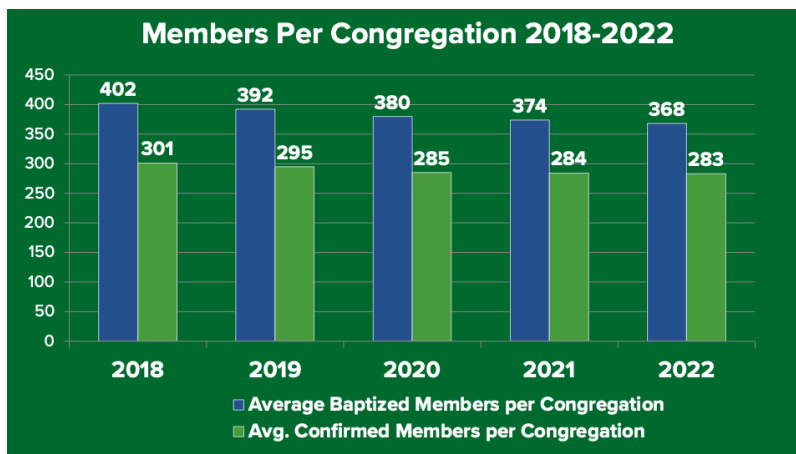
“Cultivating” is the act of trying to develop or improve something. Removing weeds is an act of cultivation, yes, but so is amending the soil itself. When we add fertilizing or aerating elements to the soil, we make it more fertile: we create a better environment for deeply rooted, fruitful crops. That said, cultivation starts with knowing the soil at the start. Every spring, before a single inch of earth is tilled for planting, farmers and agronomists and agriculture specialists of all types venture out into fields across the world to measure and test the soil in which crops will grow in that season. They’re assessing the reality in which they will be working - and so should we.

Let's start our time together this morning with an assessment of where we are as God's good soil in the Nebraska Synod. Agronomists and farmers assess their soil so they can know what they're working with from year to year: let's do the same with some of the assessments we have available to us as a Synod. Some of you have likely heard the adage, "Not everything that matters can be counted, and not everything that can be counted matters." This is true, but knowing the soil we're cultivating means paying attention to the information available to us in such a way that it informs the work we do together as a church. What you will see here won't surprise you, for the most part, but let's approach this from a perspective of pondering what could be possible. What's the soil of the Nebraska Synod like today, and what kind of growth is possible in this soil, in this time? Where are the signs of life?

Here's a look at the baptized membership of the entire synod from 2018 to 2022:

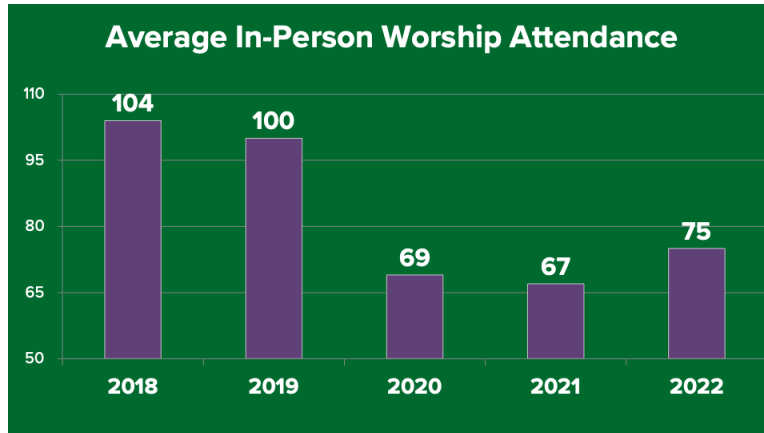


That's a decline of 9.5% over the past 5 years for which we have statistics. Again, I'm going to ask you to just ponder and consider what's going on in the soil that is the Nebraska Synod for a minute or two while we look at a few more statistics. First, average congregational membership for the same time period:



That's a decline of 8.5% for baptized members per congregation and a decline of 6% for confirmed members per congregation.

Next, let's take a look at average in-person worship attendance:



The Nebraska Synod is matching what we're seeing nationally across all denominations: after the worst of COVID-19 was done, approximately 75% of pre-pandemic worshipers returned. This is true across the board, for everyone from devout Roman Catholics to mainline Protestants to non-denominational or Pentecostal churches. Again, there could be a lot of reasons for this. When it comes to competition for Sunday mornings, the church could write a litany of frustration and woe that would rival the length of the Athanasian Creed – and the world around us would likely pay about the same amount of attention to that litany as it does the Athanasian Creed.

Looking in a slightly different direction, let's consider Mission Share, which can be a hallmark of faithful stewardship and discipleship. It won't surprise you to note that there's been a decline in Mission Share from 2018-2023:



That's a decline of 11.5% over the past six years. Again, there are a number of contributing factors here to consider, but I'd prefer we focus just on where we are as a synod. What's the soil like today, and what kind of growth is possible in this soil, at this time? Where are the signs of life?

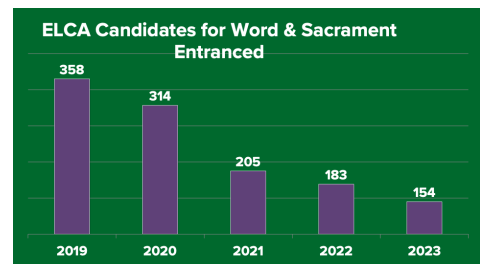
Speaking of which, here's a look at Average Annual Giving per Confirmed Member in the Nebraska Synod from 2018 to 2022:



This statistic is one which gives me hope. In a season when we've seen an almost 10% decline in congregational membership, almost 12% in Mission Share, and a 25% decline in average weekly attendance, also taking into account COVID-19 and the overwhelming economic uncertainty that continues to surround us, giving per confirmed member in the Nebraska Synod has only declined by 2.5%. We have suffered membership and congregational losses, but those of us who remain have been, and continue to be, generous supporters of God's mission in our local congregations, the synod as a whole, our partners in ministry in Mission Field Nebraska and our serving arm agencies, and the abundance we pass on to the Churchwide Organization of the ELCA. AND, we can do more.

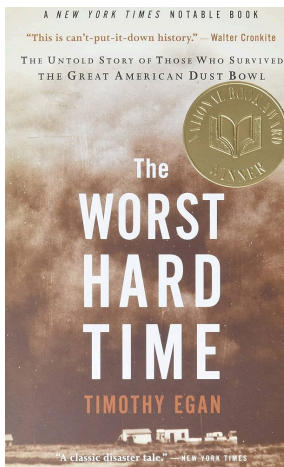
Finally, let's consider who is called to cultivate love in the Nebraska Synod, to tend the loamy soil in which we find ourselves. In much of the history of the Nebraska Synod, leadership has often come first and foremost from the clergy. The same is true of the entire ELCA: we have traditionally been a church led by its clergy, particularly its ministers of Word and Sacrament. In recent years, however, we are also a church which has struggled to raise up the number of pastors needed to maintain that self-understanding.

"Entrance" is the first step a candidate takes toward becoming a rostered leader in the ELCA. In 2019, 358 candidates took that first step across the ELCA. In 2023, in the entire Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 158 candidates took that first step. In the Nebraska Synod, 4 candidates entered the process in 2023.



As of July 2023, there were a total of 15,071 rostered ministers of Word and Sacrament in the ELCA. 7,632 of them, over 50%, were retired. The percentages are similar for ministers of Word and Service. Throughout its history, the ELCA has been a clergy-led, lay-supported church. The future of the ELCA will be lay-led, clergy-supported. We need to move toward that future NOW.

So, that's a look at some of the soil in which we are working as a synod. The statistics for all churches across the entire country are very similar to what we're seeing here. Each successive generation in modern America has less and less interest in being part of the institutional church. We've seen it coming for years, looming on the horizon like the thunderstorms that most of us can see sweeping in from the west. It reminds me of another looming storm that was described in a book about the Dust Bowl: *The Worst Hard Time* by author Timothy Egan:







“On May 9, 1934, a flock of whirlwinds started up in the northern prairie, in the Dakotas and eastern Montana...The sun at midmorning turned orange and looked swollen. The sky seemed as if it were matted by a window screen. The next day, a mass of dust-filled clouds marched east, picking up strength as they found the jet stream winds, moving toward the population centers. By the time this black front hit Illinois and Ohio, the formations had merged into what looked to pilots like a solid block of airborne dirt...Carrying three tons of dust for every American alive, the formation moved over the Midwest. It covered Chicago at night, dumping an estimated six thousand tons, the dust slinking down walls as if every home and office had sprung a leak. By morning, the dust fell like snow over Boston and Scranton, and then New York slipped under partial darkness. The storm was measured at 1800 miles wide, a great rectangle of dust from the Great Plains to the Atlantic, weighing 350 million tons.”<sup>1</sup>



Almost all of you know that the Dust Bowl was one of the most devastating disasters in American history. There’s one component to that worst hard time, however, that made it one of the most unique as well. Anyone want to hazard a guess? **The Dust Bowl can be mainly attributed to human causes - and the most devastating cause was over-cultivation.** Homestead expansion in the panhandles of Texas and Oklahoma, western Kansas and southwestern Nebraska and market booms for first cattle and then wheat led to cultivation that extracted far more from the land than it gave back:

“In 1879, ten million acres [of the Great Plains] was plowed. Fifty years later, the total was one hundred million acres. Grass was needed to hold the soil in place; it was nature’s way of adapting to the basic conditions of the plains, the high wind and low rainfall. Buffalo grass, in particular, short and drought-resistant, was nature’s refinement over centuries. The turf was intact for thousands of years, and then in two manic periods of exploitation – the cattle boom, followed by the wheat bubble – it was ripped apart. ‘Thus there was not only a progressive breaking up of the native sod but a thinning out of the grass cover on lands not yet plowed.’”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Egan, Timothy. *The Worst Hard Time: The Untold Story of Those Who Survived the Great American Dust Bowl*. © 2006 by Timothy Egan. p. 150.

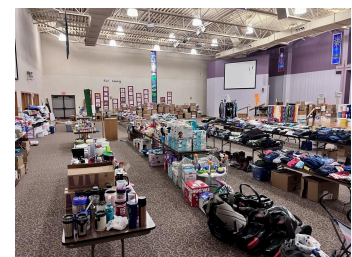
<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 267.

There are ways to cultivate land for maximum profit. They tax the soil, and often wind up destroying precious topsoil that cannot be easily replaced. Those ways of cultivating led to the Dust Bowl. People did not understand that the boom years for cattle and wheat were the exception, and that it was far more important to tend the soil in harmony with its overall environment. They didn't love the soil for what it was: they loved the soil for what it *produced* for them. In the decades since those terrible dust bowl days, we've learned that farming is as much or more about practices that develop and support good soil as it is about raising livestock and crops. We've changed how we cultivate our soil – have we changed how we cultivate our faith and our love?

Cultivating soil builds energy and health in the dirt itself, so that everything connected with it might flourish. Cultivating love can work the same way in God's church. Cultivating love helps us care for one another based on who we are as children of God, not on what others have produced for our benefit. Cultivating love is adopting those practices that draw us more deeply into God's story and into our own communal stories of love and faith. Cultivating love is the work of developing and enriching relationships in ways that bind us together and help us walk together as people of faith. Cultivating love means being rooted in Christ, being grounded in grace, and being connected to our communities.

Cultivating love helps us accept the statistics for what they are, but also to understand that statistics do not define who we are as this particular part of the body of Christ. Cultivating love helps us be theologians of the cross, and call a thing what it is, but also to remember that we are the beloved children of a God who delights in healing the sick, forgiving sinners, and raising the dead. Cultivating love means we steward this church God has entrusted to us in such a way that the world knows the love of God through us. On that score, friends, I'm happy to tell you we are *already* cultivating love in the Nebraska Synod. Here are just a few examples.

When the Arbor Day tornados struck the Waverly, Elkhorn, Bennington, and Blair communities, we were responding as a synod before the sirens stopped sounding. Would the pastors, staff, and voting members from Bethany/Elkhorn, St John's/Bennington, and First/Blair please stand? Within hours, these three churches were providing resources to community members who'd lost everything, and they're still working with their communities to provide that help. Lutheran Disaster Response and our local Disaster Response Team have been checking in regularly to make sure we keep doing the work that needs to get done.



The Nebraska Synod Response Team deserves some applause as well: Deacon Timothy Siburg, Stephanie Lusinski, Carol Flores, David Siburg, and Pastor Sandra Braasch. If those of you I just named are here, would you please stand and be recognized?

That's one example of cultivating love – here's another. Last spring, a congregational president and that church's interim pastor asked for a meeting with me to discuss something they felt was very important. In that meeting, the two of them described the difficulty the president had faced arranging for her congregation to have communion on Christmas Eve the year before, when there was no interim available to serve that congregation. In conversations with other congregations, they'd found that other congregations in transition were facing the same difficulty. We formed a task force out of that conversation: would the members of the Task Force for Sacramental Practices please stand and be recognized? This group of folks has spent the last year working on this important question: how can we address the deep hunger for the Lord's Supper in a significant clergy shortage in ways that are faithful to our confessions, our relationships to one another, and our relationship to the ELCA as a whole? It's not been the smoothest process, but we are hammering out an answer that should be presented for approval at the next Synod Council gathering, and implementation throughout the synod upon approval. This isn't the most glamorous way we're cultivating love as a synod, but it's crucial to our relationships as 226 congregations walking together in one synod. Like many other things, it needs a bit of experimentation to find a workable solution; the members of this team are doing some good work to get us there.



There are also the ministries of the Nebraska Synod which are part of the work we do together that we couldn't do separately. Would our representatives from Mission Field Nebraska please stand? Followers of Christ Prison Ministry; Iglesia Luterana San Andres; Lakota Lutheran Center; Seeking the Spirit Within; Sudanese Outreach Ministries; all of these are ways that you are cultivating love through Mission Share and direct support as part of the Nebraska Synod. We also have our partnerships with the Serving Arm agencies; you met some of those folks yesterday, but would those representatives in the room please stand? We are blessed to serve in partnership with you, cultivating love in Nebraska and throughout the world through your ministries.



There are many, many more stories I could tell you about the ways we are already cultivating love here in the Nebraska Synod. You can see it all over the place if you know where to look: congregations supporting or even running local food pantries; making quilts for Lutheran World Relief; hosting ESL classes or AA meetings in Sunday School classrooms during the week; volunteers heading off to service learning trips with vans full of high school students; communion ministers bringing the gift of the meal of promise to those who can't attend worship in person; Sunday School teachers; confirmation mentors; Church Council members faithfully tending to the work of their congregations; all of these are examples of love that is already being cultivated here in the Nebraska Synod. But we can do more.

A few months ago, Deacon Sunni Richardson shared a story with me from a member of St. Matthew Lutheran Church in Omaha. St. Matthew was one of the churches in the first Vitality Initiative cohort, and one of the ways St. Matthew is living out their calling to cultivate love with their neighbors is to open their doors to community use as often and easily as possible. This is what one of their members had to say about their connection to their community:

It is [possible that] twice the number of persons use Saint Matthew's building during the week than attend worship service on Sunday morning. Perhaps, at some point we may have felt this to be some sort of "failure" on our part. I believe most of the members of Saint Matthew now recognize how we have been "blessed to be a blessing," to our community.

The Vitality Initiative is centered on three primary questions: who are we?, who are our neighbors?, Where might God be calling us to go together?. What we're finding as we continue the second cohort of the Vitality Initiative is that rebirth and growth are happening as congregations learn to open their doors to their neighbors and engage in their communities: to love their neighbors for who they are rather than loving them for what they produce. This is one of the ways we can cultivate love as a church.



In 1991, the ELCA passed its first social statement, *Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective*. That statement includes the following in its closing paragraphs:

“The proclamation of the Gospel as the good news of God’s salvation given in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus distinguishes the Church from all other communities. The Gospel liberates from sin, death, and evil and motivates the Church to care for neighbor and the earth. The witness of this church in society flows from its identity as a community that lives from and for the Gospel. Faith is active in love; love calls for justice in the relationships and structures of society. It is in grateful response to God’s grace in Jesus Christ that this church carries out its responsibility for the well-being of society and the environment.”

This church has stated publicly from its very earliest days that we have a calling to cultivate love in three directions: love between ourselves and God, love for one another as the body of Christ, and love between ourselves and the neighbors with whom we have been called into community. This is the time to lean into cultivating love, to actually work towards living out the ideals that have been part of our identity as a church from the very beginning.

If we know anything about living in 2024, we know this: love is in precious short supply. Our communities are anxious, afraid, and angry. By the time we get to November, all of that anxiety, fear, and anger will be ramped up even more.

Cultivating love in this environment will not be easy. God isn't calling us to do what's easy – God is calling us to what's

needed. This soil we call home already has plenty of toxicity, division, and scapegoating: this is the time to do the hard but necessary work of cultivating love, even if we're doing it in an environment that might not be hospitable to it. On top of that, I can't promise you that cultivating love will surely and certainly change the numbers I shared with you at the beginning of this hour together. Cultivating love means exchanging certainty for possibility, security for opportunity, membership for discipleship.



God does not call the church to live in an endless cycle of production and consumption: that's the kind of thinking that leads to burned-out ministers, checked-out congregations, and faith that flies away like dust in the wind because it's rooted in nothing. God calls the church to live FAITHFULLY, rooted deeply in a nourishing, cultivated love that can withstand wind and drought and sin and fear and uncertainty and a changing world that doesn't shape itself around the church calendar the way it once might have done. Love adapts to meet the needs of the beloved - a church that is cultivating love will adapt to root itself deeply in God's love in order that others may come to know that love through us.

BE CURIOUS

BE HONEST

BE BRAVE

BE KIND

Cultivate love, beloved in Christ, and God be with us all.