



What is God doing in the church in Western Iowa?

By Bishop Rodger Prois

Over the past few months, members of the Western Iowa Synod (WIS) leadership team (aka synod staff) and members of the Synod Council visited with over 40 congregations, meeting with councils and members, in the 2018 version of "Thankfulness Events." These conversations were an opportunity for congregations to tell their story and give thanks for what God is doing in their locale and a chance to update those visited on what we are able to do together, with God's help and guidance, in the geography of the synod. This edition of the *WIS/Living Lutheran* is dedicated to what we heard and learned.

One of the first questions congregation members responded to was "What do you see God doing?" It was exciting to hear of all the things God was, and is, up to in this area. They spoke of food banks, community meals, youth groups, mission trips, good pastors, inspiring choirs, children's energy, comfort in times of sorrow and potlucks.

While it was good to hear all the particulars of ministry, behind the question was an attempt to go deeper. Our hope was to give people the opportunity to be theologians. Our working definition of a theologian is someone who

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and it consists of words written or spoken among two or more people for a specific purpose."

We engaged leaders in conversation about things above—"Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth ..." (Colossians 3:2)—and in doing so urged them to think not only of what God is doing in their local context,

studies and observes the work of God. The ELCA website states this about theology: "Theology is a conversation. It involves speaking and listening, understanding and sharing understanding,

but to also consider what is happening in their communities, in the synod and in the world. When we allow our minds and hearts to move beyond our personal wants and needs, we enter the world of God's mission.

A 20th-century teacher, Lesslie

Newbigin, is quoted as saying: "It is not the church of God that has a mission in the world, but the God of mission that has a church in the world. ... God is on the move and the church is always catching up with him."

God is on the move and calls us to follow. One of the core reasons for the Thankfulness Events was to learn where God is leading us as local expressions of the church and as the Lutheran church in Western Iowa (Western Iowa Synod). Our intent is to continue connecting with congregations to develop a broader sense of what we can be about, and then interconnect these ministries via networks and clusters to assist each other.

In the events we heard often about the diminishing numbers and financial challenges that are hindering new ideas or preventing people from stepping out in faith. Our sense is by joining together, as the many parts of the body work together for the good of the whole, so our many congregations can work together for the betterment of the church. One of the advantages of a synod is no congregation need stand alone and resources can be shared. It is important that



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The many faces of ministry

By the Rev. Marsha Smith

Nestled in the heart of Western Iowa's surprisingly picturesque Loess Hills is a small but mighty congregation named after its location, Soldier Lutheran. Just 20 miles west, settled on the Missouri Valley plains is another small but fighting congregation called Faith Lutheran. Like so many congregations they are declining in size, yet their worship numbers have remained steady for the last decade or so. Both have heart and hope, and are steadfastly committed to the ministry of Jesus Christ.

Soldier's ministry will surprise you when you realize the community itself is only around 150, though they also draw in from the many homes sitting in those stunning hills. They have a good group of mothers and grandmothers committed to keeping their Sunday school thriving. The children sing once a month at worship led by a busy young mother who has a beautiful voice and a true heart to bring joyful music to those children.

The handful of gals that lead their Women of the ELCA organization have a huge heart and passion for service in the congregation and beyond. Besides the usual meetings and lay-led Bible study, their Christmas Fair was pretty classy, and I hear they do a sophisticated and stylish spring lunch. When they wanted to encourage participation of the younger women, I suggested a wine and cheese party. They jumped on board with gusto and a classy evening was planned—26 showed up and had a lovely evening.

They also help care for homebound members by visiting and delivering 50 goodie boxes at Christmas to them and others in the community who just need a little gift of Christmas cheer. They do all of this with a joyful humility, readily acknowledging most of it would not be accomplished without the generous help of the many other women of the congregation.

Faith in Onawa is recovering from turbulent times but has arose with a small but mighty handful of



folks who decided this was not the beginning of the end, but a new beginning. They have renewed investment in their Wednesday school children's ministry. They have started a new women's Bible study and a yoga class. All together they are figuring out how to do ministry in a new normal, and many are stepping up to do their part.

Their long-running Wednesday school was run by one faithful individual, who was ready to quit from exhaustion but reluctant to do so because her love and passion for the children. A few decided to redesign and join her in ministry. Unbeknownst to them, they are doing outreach ministry to the community's children, who mostly come from difficult circumstances and need those extra gestures of care and love. The only child who is actually a member of Faith has parents who travel 60 miles back and forth every day to work 10-hour days—yet they still make it to Sunday worship more Sundays than not.

Together, the congregations have eight confirmation students who come from four different schools. Their parents drive them from as far as 30 minutes away to ensure their children learn some of the basics of the faith, as they did growing up in these communities.

Finally, they have a Facebook Messenger group called Faith/Soldier Lutheran Ladies that does all sorts of ministry—from keeping their church family

informed of those in need of prayers, coordinating a meal ministry for a husband and wife who is walking through brain cancer, recruiting salads and desserts for many funerals, and simple reminders as to when the next community book club is meeting. ♣

Marsha Smith is interim pastor of Soldier and Faith Lutheran churches.

God turns our world around!

Our faith is in the one who makes the broken whole, the sinner clean and the downtrodden powerful. We live in a place in the creation where faith is less difficult, and where it is often heard said, “Have you chosen Jesus as your personal savior?” This question has bothered me from the time that I was young.

Fortunately, I had many mentors in the faith through the years who opened my eyes (and my ears!) to the Lutheran understanding of Faith. It is not a question of what we chose but a statement of what God has done for us!

It is important to me to mentor the youth of our church to see that same understanding that those who traveled this life and this faith tradition have passed on to us. We are chosen, we are blessed, we can now go out into our world and be God’s hands to the world secure in our faith and be the difference to others. We do not need to concern ourselves about being good enough or talented enough.

We are God’s chosen people, we are freed from the doubts and self-questioning that seems to get in the way of being that which we should be. God tells us, God chooses us, God shows us that we are good enough to be the very hands to do God’s work! ♣

Submitted by Dr. Tracy Gayer, Bethlehem Lutheran Church, Inwood.



Team member reflects on “Thankfulness Events”

By Kay Broich

As the “Thankfulness Events” are not a normal part of my job as the financial administrator for the synod office, going out into congregations and sharing the stories of faith happening in the Lutheran church of Western Iowa has offered me a unique opportunity for growth.



first call, education, vitality and renewal, and being stewards of the earth by cleaning up the river. These stories came from lifelong members of a congregation, as well as those members we would call “New Lutherans.”

I feel I have been truly blessed as I was able to build relationships with members of the church all across Western Iowa and hear the stories of the many great ministries happening in the church. The stories were bountiful, from hosting meals for veterans, working with youth musicals and organizations like Habitat for Humanity, flood buckets, Church of Damascus Road, creating Christmas baskets, food pantries and backpack programs, to supporting missionaries, candidacy,

Hearing the stories of tragedies and how church families have come together to heal hurts in their community has been life-giving.

One devotion that I shared focused on the story of Lazarus and the unbinding. Within that devotion, we each shared prayer concerns, writing them down and tying them to a large ring. Then, as I moved around the synod with these intentions, others would read them and we would remember those who were suffering and ask Christ to unbind us all from what is holding us bound.



Sharing these struggles and working together to better love and serve God and our neighbors has given me a true sense of the community that exists within the Western Iowa Synod. I have been blessed and look forward to working together with congregations into the future. 4

Broich is the Mission Center financial administrator.

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we avoid scarcity thinking and remember that our God is a God of abundance and will provide whatever we need to do God’s work.

These events, and the ones to follow, have focused on what God has done and on our grateful hearts for all the grace we are given. I feel it is equally important for us to be looking forward and consider being hopeful. Paul writes in Romans: “Now hope

that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience” (8:24-25).

Maybe what we need next are “Hopefulness Events”?

Your fellow servant,
Bishop Rodger Prois