



## Time to think about education

By Bishop Rodger Prois

I pray this *Living Lutheran* finds you well and at peace deep into the season of Pentecost. It's August, and many are planning for the return to classrooms and the busy schedules of schools, sports, church programs and Sunday school.

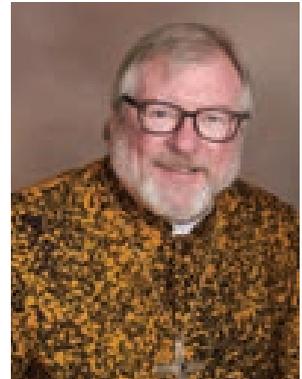
It's good to remember that the Sunday school movement began due to the commonality of child labor. The only way children could learn the basics of reading, writing and arithmetic was from pastors and well-meaning educated people on Sundays—thus Sunday school. The movement has been claimed by the church for three centuries and goes back to writings of our own Martin Luther.

In "A Sermon on Keeping Children in School" (*Luther's Works*, Vol. 46), Luther encouraged parents to have their children educated for vocational purposes, but specifically so there would be those who became preachers and teachers of the faith. His appreciation of all forms of work (vocations), and the attitude that God calls people to serve the neighbor in varied occupations, was superseded only by his sense that an educated person who is called to ministry and prepared to serve is directly working on behalf of the Spirit.

He stated: "For this office (pastor) not only helps to further and sustain this temporal life and all the worldly estates, but it also gives eternal life and delivers from sin and death, which is its proper and chief work." Parents were keeping children from school so they could add to the family income, and Luther was concerned about a shortage of those who would be called to preach the word.

His concern continues today. A good portion of my work, and that of my team members, is identifying candidates for congregations to consider as their spiritual leaders. It's difficult work because fewer students are graduating from our seminaries and those currently on the ELCA ministry rosters are aging, with many thinking about retirement soon.

Of equal concern about the number of people preparing to serve is the reality that the cost of that preparation is increasing and congregations in places like Western Iowa can't pay salaries that allow for high amounts of debt service. While the tuition at ELCA seminaries has remained



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somewhat static in recent years, the cost of living has increased, especially for health insurance and housing. It's not unusual for a recent seminary graduate to have loans in excess of \$80,000. So we are "holy dreaming" (aka brainstorming) about how we might address the realities.

I'm inviting conversations around the issues of educational standards, synodically called ministers, the Theological Education for Emerging Ministries program (an alternate route to ordination), identification and encouragement of potential leaders, and how we fund the education and preparation. The Western Iowa Synod currently has a small account in the ELCA Fund for Leaders scholarship program, which is a good thing. If it were larger, we would be able to help defray the cost of education for more students.

I've also been dreaming and talking about another fund to aid new pastors who might not consider our synod or those who are here but are looking for greener pastures. Other synods have received significant gifts to establish scholarship and debt relief programs. I'm hoping some in our synod might feel the future needs of the church would speak to their hearts and support this initiative.

Serving in hope  
+Bishop Rodger Prois

## Fall kickoff for faith formation

Some still call it “rally day.” Others refer to it as a “family reunion,” as many families are gone over the summer or miss each other when they do attend. By either name, families just enjoy gathering together again with their church family as they get back into their fall routine.

Here is how a couple of congregations have begun their faith formation year:

**Bethany Lutheran Church, Spencer:** In the past, we’ve done carnivals, puppet shows and invited camps down to help out. This year, we hope to have a local puppet group come in and perform a show. The age group for our rally days is really prekindergarten through junior high. For carnivals, we pull in older students to help out with face-painting and ticket games. But all parents/adults are invited to join in the fun and fellowship.



A “God’s work. Our hands.” project at St. Paul.

**St. Paul Lutheran Church, Holstein:** For the last few years, we’ve been doing “God’s work. Our hands.” activities for rally day since the given date of that has usually been our first day back to Sunday school (the weekend after Labor Day).

The day has taken different forms, but it has included activities like assembling health kits for Lutheran World Relief (LWR), boxing up LWR mission quilts, creating simple crafts for care facility residents and sometimes going on a hayride to deliver them, general church cleanup inside and outside, etc. Every couple of years, the big project has been adding new mulch under the play equipment at the city park.

These activities have been intergenerational, with all ages participating. We usually also have our Junior Luther League ice cream social meal on this day for congregational fellowship.



Members of St. Paul Lutheran Church, Holstein, work on a “God’s work. Our hands.” project for rally day.

Other rally day or family reunion ideas to kick off the year:

- A fall harvest theme, including a bonfire and s’mores of course!
- Sports theme, such as “God’s Team” or “Kick-off for Christ!”
- Circus theme.
- Country picnic theme (maybe with an outdoor worship), including old time games such as a wheelbarrow race, three-legged race, watermelon bowling, bobbing for apples and, of course, a fun photo booth for all to enjoy.
- Minute-to-win-it games.

Whatever your plan, be sure you invite *all* members of your congregation! Don’t just say families are invited—be specific and make sure God’s children of all ages are personally invited. Wonderful things happen when you bring together the wonder of a child and the wisdom of the “wiser generation.” ✚

## Forum news

**Fort Dodge Forum:** The Fort Dodge Forum is a continuing education event for pastors and lay professionals. While ecumenical in vision, most who attend are ELCA-connected. Topics explored include worship, music, preaching, pastoral care and outreach. Organizers invite local talent as well as seminary professors and teachers to present. The forum generally meets the second Thursday of the month, September through May, at Grace Lutheran Church, Fort Dodge. Cost is on a per year (\$225) or per session (\$40) charge. Planning is underway for the 2018-19 year. Join us!

**Siouxland Forum:** This is a chance for pastors and congregational leaders to come together for learning and discovery with one another and to hear insightful guest speakers from the area and region.

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# Ending hunger—faith-filled service

By Julie Cook and the Rev. Jen Henry

The earth can produce enough food for all. None should ever be hungry. Ask a farmer. But ending hunger isn't only about food. All people need access to clean water, education, health care and economic stability. These hopes can only be gained by the attention and care of all human beings in God's good world.

Here in Iowa, 1 in 5 of our children is extremely hungry, and more than 2,000 children are homeless each year (State of Homelessness Symposium 2015). Iowa's landfills are made up of 13.3 percent food waste. Each year in the U.S. we waste 30 to 40 percent of the food supply (**IowaHungerDirectory.org**). Iowa is ranked 50th for consumption of fruits and vegetables in the country. In conjunction with this statistic, 1 in 8 Iowans are food insecure, which corresponds to challenges and barriers for how our communities develop (Shirley Burgess, volunteer engagement officer, United Way of Central Iowa).

We're proud to say that many are paying attention to the needs of others in Iowa.

Three events are planned for October, November and December. Patterned (with gratitude) after the Fort Dodge Forum, the Siouxland Forum's events are held on a Tuesday morning and continue through (or beyond) lunch at St. Mark Lutheran Church in Sioux City. Those attending are asked to register in advance and contribute toward the cost of the speaker and meal.

Speakers have included the Rev. Mike Kroona of Webster City (Lenten biblical texts), the Rev. Torey Lightcap of Topeka, Kan. (The Church and Change), and the Rev. Judith Johnson of Melvin (The Challenge of Pastoral Care in the Midst of Co-dependency).

To receive announcements from the Siouxland Forum, contact the Rev. David Halaas (**david.halaas.rev@wisynod.org**). ☞

For instance, recently almost 180 elementary school students in Spencer received a "backpack" of food through the community-led Feed Our Children initiative. Each child in the program receives a bag at school every Friday with enough food for four meals and two snacks to help nourish them over the weekend. All food is ready-to-eat and comes in a plastic bag.

Each week, elementary students whose parents are behind on lunch money receive their daily carton of milk anyway. These same children, once sent to the opposite end of the lunchroom and unable to eat the Thanksgiving meal like their classmates, now have adequate funding—and room at the table.

Ask. Listen. Respond.

A revitalized Hunger Network is emerging for the Western Iowa Synod. As we begin to develop this network, we must acknowledge that hunger isn't just a problem in developing nations, but also within our country, state and communities. And it has many faces. It is our hope that hearts will be opened to walk together to combat hunger and to become part of the network. If you are interested in participating, contact Julie Cook at **julie.cook@wisynod.org**. We are working with the ELCA World Hunger team and have received a grant that will be used for a training retreat this fall. After the retreat, the network will begin working throughout the synod, focusing on organization and building awareness.

Through prayer and action, we can do miracles in the synod. And we will be fulfilling a mandate from Jesus: "I was hungry and you gave me food, thirsty and you gave me drink ... just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me" (Matthew 25:42-4). ☞

**Julie Cook** is administrative assistant for the Western Iowa Synod. **Jen Henry** is pastor of Bethany Lutheran Church, Spencer.

## From “welcoming” to “inviting”

With an average Sunday worship attendance of 62 in 2017, Trinity Lutheran in Alta began participating in the Western Iowa Synod’s congregation vitality ministry. Along their journey, members have found many joys and challenges. One challenge that its vitality team accepted was helping the congregation move from *welcoming* to *inviting*. The Rev. Denise Parrello explained that the only way to grow a faith community in terms of numbers is to invite people.

The Lenten midweek service theme was the “I am” statements from John. The final week was about Jesus saying “I am the bread of life.” The congregation “decided to use the loaves and fish story in a practical way,” Parrello said. “An easy way to invite people to come is to include a meal. ... The vitality team at Trinity thought this would be a great way to experience the church. Our attendance that night for the fish fry and the worship service following the meal was twice the average attendance we had experienced in previous weeks and even years.”

Part of the vitality process involves recognizing that being a welcoming congregation implies that when people come, they will be welcome. Although that is a good thing, this is a passive technique that seldom yields new guests to attend worship. Inviting someone to church isn’t in our DNA, but Trinity learned that it is fun and rewarding.



Russ Winterhoff, congregation council member and fish fryer extraordinaire, said, “We were concerned about having enough food and doing the fish fry well since this was our first time. We sent out postcards to members asking them to help and to invite others to come. I was pleasantly surprised at how many members volunteered to help prepare and cook the food. When I was done cooking and went into the church, the room was filled with exuberance! It was a great experience, and there was more than enough food for everyone.”

Kelli Ungs baked bread for the event. “I made 100 dinner rolls, as well as fresh baked white bread loaves, French bread, whole wheat, and a mix of white and wheat buns, and some rye bread,” she said. When asked what they should do with all of the bread, she replied: “You can feed the people tonight, you can give it away, you can sell it. Just let others have it to enjoy.”

Those in attendance said both the meal and worship service brought in many new people who accepted their invitations to this event.

Trinity invited members to use their gifts to prepare and serve the food, and they invited the community to come and participate in a modern-day loaves and fishes story. They went from being a *welcoming* church to being an *inviting* church. It wasn’t initially easy for members to invite others to come to church. But many came who probably would not have done so without a personal invitation. Just as Jesus invited his disciples to break bread and dine with him long ago, Trinity members invited others to come and share the bread of life.

To learn more about the congregation vitality ministry, call the Rev. Jeff Ungs at 641-529-2479. 4