

Making Disciples

Evangelism Strategy for
The Texas/Louisiana Gulf Coast Synod
2010-2015

Introduction	2
I. Mission and Vision	2
II. Core Values of Effective Evangelism	3
III. Best Practices of Evangelistically Effective Congregations and Leaders	4
IV. Impacting/Encouraging Local Congregational Growth	5
V. Mission Expansion through New Starts and Ministry Development	6
Local Area Mission Strategies	6
VI. The Blessing of Diversity as an Opportunity for Congregational Growth	7
Ethnic Specific Congregations	7
The Transformational Model	8
The Convergent Model	9
VII. Missional Strategy Summarized	9

Introduction

We believe that every single congregation and congregational development on the soil of our synod has the potential to grow! Every one of them was birthed with the best intentions. They were prayed into existence and repeatedly blessed along the way. We believe and we can trust that our every effort grows out of the missional vision of the Triune God – the will of the Father for the increase of the kingdom, the incarnate love of the Son expressed in hospitality, service and sacrifice, and the power of the Holy Spirit to guide, encourage and empower.

The single best way to grow congregations is to grow pastors. Every effort needs to be made to influence how pastors think, how they lead, how they learn, and how they help congregations become centers for mission rather than centers for memory. We need to continue to encourage pastors to think and act like missional leaders rather than local chaplains. Nothing in this, or any, strategy will work without the leadership, cooperation and vision of local pastors working in partnership with their people.

We do well to see the synod as a whole – and every mission center and pastor individually – in thinking through the best vision and best strategies for meeting our God-given goals of reaching more, and more diverse, people for the Kingdom.

This document represents an overview of the evangelism strategy for the congregations of The Texas/Louisiana Gulf Coast Synod. It has been prepared – and will continue to be developed and nurtured – by the synodical Mission Strategy Table.

The Texas/Louisiana Gulf Coast Synod consists of 124 congregations working in partnership with Bishop Rinehart and the synod office staff. The Mission Strategy Table consists of congregational leaders from across the synod who come together to discern and shape a vision and strategy for doing effective evangelism.

The Mission Strategy Table has primary responsibility for shaping a synod-wide strategy to grow our congregations both deeper (spiritual depth and maturity) and wider (connecting with new people and starting new ministries.) **Participation on this strategy table is open to any person with a passion for evangelism and outreach.**

The hope of the Mission Strategy Table is that all congregations and congregational leaders will study this document, assess their ministries in light of its recommendations, and engage in an intentional process to transform their ministries into effective centers for outreach and mission.

I. Mission and Vision

As the Mission Strategy Table, and as members of the congregations of this synod, we believe that **making disciples** - living out the mission/ministry mandates of the Great Commission (Matthew 28) and the Great Commandment (John 13) - **is God's purpose for us.** This ministry we share is rooted deeply in the spiritual disciplines of worship/prayer, listening to scripture, gathering with others and using our gifts of time/talents/treasure to further God's purposes in the world. This is where we begin.

As we join together in doing whatever it takes to live into this mission, we will become what we envision: **a network of growing, Christ-centered, outwardly-focused congregations passing the faith on to the next generation.**

II. Core Values of Effective Evangelism

Our “values” are the beliefs we hold dear which inform how we behave as individuals and communities of faith. The hope of the Mission Strategy Table is that every congregation take time to prayerfully consider the following list of evangelical values. If these are not in place, a conversation might happen around what the true values are that are driving a congregation’s ministry/mission. We believe that alignment with the following values creates the best possibility for effective evangelical ministry/mission.

Effective evangelists believe that . . .

- God desires all people to come into life-giving relationships with God and one another. Christian community is God’s hope for the good of the world.
- God desires our congregations to grow and leads us, by the life of Jesus Christ and through the power of the Holy Spirit, in making this growth happen.
- The time is **now** for the people of God to embrace the urgency of our purpose in calling men and women into relationship with Jesus, for the good of the world. If not us, who? If not now, when?
- The diversity of people is a great gift of God who wants to grow congregations that are inclusive and representative of the communities in which God has planted them.
- Every person has an important “God story” to tell: both the good news of God’s love in Jesus for all, and the story of our own personal faith journey.
- Effective evangelism is responsive, not intrusive. Listening closely to others guides us in effectively sharing our faith with them.

Effective evangelists are committed to . . .

- A balance between time spent in personal spiritual growth, congregational life and outreach in the wider community.
- Fostering passionate, Christ-centered, preaching and worship that cuts to the heart, transforms people and inspires the people of God to deeper and wider discipleship.
- Helping our congregations focus on the betterment of our communities and the people in them. Find a need and fill it; find a hurt and heal it.
- Helping our clergy and church leaders become better evangelists by discovering, developing and deploying their spiritual gifts.
- Focusing on the quality of what we do (developing deeper spiritual faith practices) will be the key to unlocking the quantity of who we could be. It takes disciples to make disciples.
- Making every decision on behalf of, and in the best interests of, those who are not yet here. We are open to new ideas and willing to try anything it takes to reach new people. We don’t ask “What will it cost **us** if we do this for them?” but rather, “What will it cost **them** if we don’t?”

III. Best Practices of Evangelistically Effective Congregations and Leaders

In the real world, the values we hold undergird the behaviors we practice. We recognize that congregations vary - different sizes, histories, locations – and have varying gifts for ministry/mission. While they might look different in different settings, the following list of best practices hold the most promise for effective evangelical mission:

1. **Vision:** Christian mission/ministry are the shared responsibility of all the people of God, both pastors and lay members, all working together for the good of the world. They share a compelling vision that others will want to join that is based on discerning the will of God for their ministry context. They develop strategic missional plans to bring this vision to life. They are willing to take risks, to stop doing some things to prepare room for new things. They measure and evaluate their progress, always with openness to the guidance of the Spirit.
2. **Community Context:** They study the demographics of their community and engage in relationships with local community leaders and ecumenical partners so that they can plan their ministries in a manner which is relevant to the needs of their communities. Congregational leaders wrestle with issues of diversity, seeking understanding of the multicultural reality of life, and opening their hearts, minds and doors to the “other.”
3. **Hospitality:** They are fully inclusive, extending invitations to all, and practicing excellent hospitality on Sundays and throughout the week. They take good care of their property. They communicate well. They have attractive and carefully maintained websites. They practice excellent relational follow-up practices with all who visit their congregations.
4. **Worship:** Their worship life is Christ-centered, transformational, vibrant, creative and relevant to the communities they wish to reach. Preaching is passionate, theologically grounded and relationally astute.
5. **Raising New Disciples:** They regularly schedule opportunities for new people to learn about, grow in, and find a home for their faith.
6. **Deepening Discipleship:** They take spiritual formation seriously. They help people to grow in their personal prayer lives, their use and appreciation of the Bible, and in faithful stewardship of their time, talents and treasures in service to the congregation, their daily vocations and the needs of the wider community. They find creative ways to deepen Christian friendships through networks of small groups, fellowship opportunities and service experiences.
7. **Youth/Family Ministry:** They practice “life cycle” ministries with care for faith and leadership development for people of all ages. They have excellent youth and family ministries.
8. **Witness:** They constantly encourage their members by helping them learn their own God-given abilities to share their faith with others. They provide opportunities for all people to discover, develop and deploy their spiritual gifts.
9. **Healing Ministries:** They take seriously the meaning of salvation as “healing” and both provide and host healing ministries on a regular basis.
10. **Mission Partnerships:** They engage in mutually beneficial mission partnerships with other congregations in local area mission strategy groups, including national and global outreach.

IV. Impacting/Encouraging Local Congregational Growth: Congregational Resources toward Developing Best Practices

The ten best practices listed above are the key congregational behaviors that open doors and hearts to new people. The degree to which they are firmly and effectively in place is the degree to which we will function as evangelical mission centers.

We live in the Information Age. The big question in our day lies not in the lack of information but in sifting through “what’s out there” to discover what might be helpful for us. The Mission Strategy Table recognizes that it isn’t easy to turn a declining congregation around but it can be done. Like eating an elephant, one bite at a time.

The most significant decision that pastors and local congregational leaders need to make is the decision to open themselves to God’s guidance and leadership in doing whatever it takes for their congregation to connect with new people and to grow. This decision cannot be made without prayer, without open-mindedness, without listening to the Bible, and without opening the congregational system to new ways of thinking and behaving.

We are very aware of the various levels of internal resistance. We see that resistance when we hear comments like: “We’ve never done it that way before.” “We tried that before and it failed.” “We like our church just the way it is.” We also know that such resistance can also be largely invisible – new people will challenge existing congregational dynamics, more people (and doing what it takes to reach them) will mean more and/or different work for pastors.

And yet, if we are to experience any kind of meaningful evangelical growth, those resistance factors must be overcome.

Today, like never before, there are ample resources available for congregational leaders who honestly seek to reach new people for Christ. Effective congregational leaders continue to produce books, learning events and online resources. In many areas, a simple Google search reveals new sources of information that can be very helpful to congregational leaders looking for new ideas, new resources, new training programs, etc.

This strategy document has highlighted the best practices that help congregations connect with new people and grow. The task of each local congregation, each pastor, each staff person, and each leadership team, is to evaluate their congregational ministry in light of these practices. Where a best practice is not in place, the task becomes finding the right resources and guidance for learning about and then adjusting their ministry to include that practice.

If every congregation does this – especially if they do it in partnership with other congregations – we can turn a new corner in the ministries across this synod.

V. Mission Expansion through New Starts and Ministry Development

In addition to encouraging effective evangelism through existing congregations, we will also seek to reach new people by beginning new ministries. Where, how and when will we start new congregations and launch new ministries on the territory of our synod? This is an important question and the answer today is very different than it was 20+ years ago when the ELCA was born.

There are four ways that new missions will begin in our future:

- Sometimes a local congregation will seek to grow its ministry/mission by **intentional outreach** to a local population of people of a different culture or ethnic group.
- Sometimes we will choose to start a brand **new ministry**, grown out of a Local Area Mission Strategy (LAMS, see below), with local financial and material support.
- Sometimes an existing congregation will decide to start a new **satellite ministry**, to seed a new congregation with people and financial support, in the hope that it will become a separate self-sustaining ministry.
- Sometimes a congregation will decide to start a **second site ministry**. The second site will carry the DNA, the staff and the resources of the founding congregation. They will have one ministry meeting in two or more sites.

In addition to established congregations, there are several other styles of Christian community in our synod, all seeking to expand the Kingdom by connecting with new people:

- **Probes or Preaching Points** – a cost effective means of determining whether or not a new ministry might be considered.
- **Synodically Authorized Worshiping Communities (SAWC)** – A SAWC is a small worshiping community that will hopefully grow to become a new mission congregation or an existing congregation in the process of becoming part of the ELCA. SAWC's are often led by Synodically Authorized Lay Ministers (SALMS), or candidates for ordination in the Theological Education for Emerging Ministries (TEEM) path. They may also be led by ordained clergy.
- **New Mission Development** – A new congregation under development.
- **Renewing Evangelizing Congregations** – These are congregations receiving churchwide (EOCM) financial partnership support with the expectation that they are undergoing intentional efforts to grow.

Local Area Mission Strategies

Central to any effective strategy for launching new missional efforts is the creation of a Local Area Mission Strategy (LAMS). In an era of limited resources, the only way we will be able to launch new mission efforts is through creative partnerships between congregations, usually organized into a Local Area Mission Strategy (LAMS) team, the synod, and the church-wide office.

There are few congregations in our synod with the resources to launch a new ministry on their own. But when we work together with others, combining our resources, trusting in God's provision and abundance, we can do more together than we can separately.

Currently our synod is organized into 12 or more clusters of congregations called "ministeriums." **Our "default setting" is that each ministeriums will function as a LAMS team.** Or, especially in areas where the ministeriums are quite large or geographically diverse, congregations could create a new LAMS team that might make better sense in their context.

What comes first, the development of a LAMS team who then meet to dream and plan new missional efforts OR a new mission effort is proposed and then local congregations are encouraged to organize themselves into a LAMS team to make that mission happen?

The answer is yes. Across our synod, we will work both ways.

Any new mission effort, any new SAWC or preaching point, could begin by, and would need the approval of, the various ministry partners:

- The Local Area Mission Strategy (which in many cases will consist of the congregations of the local ministerium)
- The synod office, the Bishop, and the Mission Strategy Table
- The Evangelical Outreach and Congregational Mission (EOCM) Unit of the ELCA church-wide office

Each of these partners brings gifts and capacities to the table which will provide support and resources in the establishment of the new ministries.

VI. The Blessing of Diversity as an Opportunity for Congregational Growth

Every corner of our synod is rich with the diversity of God's people. We see three models of ministry being lived out within the congregations of our synod that are reflective to our response to diversity. Each carries both blessing and challenge as we seek to become growing, Christ-centered, outwardly focused congregations sharing the faith with the next generation, through Christian ministries that look like the communities in which God has planted them.

Rather than adopting one model as our chosen path, we will continue to develop all three paths forward and we will encourage both individual congregations and LAMS to include these new paradigms in their thinking.

1. Ethnic Specific Congregations

Ethnic specific ministries are those intentionally (or in some cases unintentionally) targeted to specific ethnic communities. Such congregations embrace the culture styles, worship styles and languages of their target community.

Many people are uncomfortable with a strategy to grow ethnic specific ministries. However, this strategy grows out of the recognition, not only that this is where we are, but also that we have to start somewhere. The Christian faith is relational and the easiest relationships to work

are those within our same tribe. The strength of ethnic specific ministry is a shared heritage, language and culture.

Among first-generation immigrants, ethnic specific ministries open doors to reaching new people through incarnational ministry that affirms a community's cultural giftedness. It allows room for practicing the faith in culturally effective patterns of congregational ministry. It enables us to tailor ministry to the needs of an immigrant community through specialized efforts such as providing assistance through the process of immigration, citizenship classes or English as a second language programs.

In the face of changing demographics, ethnic specific ministries tend to suffer over time. Predominately Anglo congregations, especially those located in quickly changing neighborhoods, can become increasingly isolated and alienated from the context of the communities in which they are planted. Other ethnic specific congregations built around languages other than English often discover difficulties in retaining their second and third generation family members – even an increasing inability to engage in ministry with their own ethnic communities – unless they also learn to operate bilingually.

The challenge to ethnic specific congregations is to discern a God preferred future that reaches beyond culture to a missional emphasis that embraces increased diversity. Each congregation must be sensitive to its context, and with open hearts and open minds, discern which multicultural direction they are being called to. For many congregations, this might include movement toward bilingual ministry. For many others, this would mean intentional outreach to African Americans or other persons of color who speak English but are under-represented in the congregation.

The growth key for this model is a deepened spiritual desire to reach new people, growing excellence in congregational ministry and worship that encourages those who visit to return, and the need for gifted lay and ordained leadership to lead the way.

2. The Transformational Model

Sometimes, driven by a healthy sense of ministry within the changing context of a changing community, the ethnic makeup of a congregation will naturally change over time. This is the transformational model of ministry and is evidenced by several congregations in our synod.

This model of ministry requires gracious hospitality and humility on the part of the “old” congregation and a willingness to adopt changes that open the doors to a very different “new” congregation.

The cutting edge in such ministries includes mutually learning one another's culture and language and seeking partnership support that will enable the right staffing and programs to further evolve into a blended congregation that reflects both its heritage and its ministry context.

3. The Convergent Model

The convergent model of ministry is one in which an existing congregation intentionally seeks to move beyond an ethnic specific model through an outreach ministry into a locally identified different ethnic population. Initially the outreach will result in a separate worshipping community under the tent of the host congregation, with the intention of being one increasingly diverse congregation. Over time, a single congregational identity will emerge even as the congregation continues to express itself and do ministry in very diverse ways.

This convergent model can be a dynamic way of doing mission. It creates open doors to new ethnic members, creates missional partnerships, teaches the width and breadth of the Kingdom of God. But it can also be a very challenging process as participants in the congregations work their way through issues around cultural distinctions, use of the facility, and finances.

VII. Missional Strategy Summarized

The bottom line for the Christian movement is fidelity to and effectiveness in the twin callings of the Great Commandment and the Great Commission. To love and serve the world around us, to strive toward peace, justice and wholeness of individuals and communities (the Great Commandment) and to invite people into lives of discipleship, to baptize and to teach (the Great Commission.)

At the end of the day, we want to get to a place where, in the Texas/Louisiana Gulf Coast Synod, there are more Lutherans, of greater ethnic/cultural diversity, for the good of the world.

There are five common needs that must be met to fulfill our missional vision.

1. A deepened spirituality rooted in prayer, Bible study, conversation and training toward a new and renewed heart-felt desire to reach new people and walk with them into Christian fellowship and service.
2. New leaders, both lay and ordained, with a passion for mission, an appropriate skill set to reach new people and a deep desire to embrace the challenges of increasingly diverse ministry.
3. The development of a local missional school where people can be trained as lay and ordained leaders to recapture and rekindle the desire and ability to reach new people for the Kingdom.
4. A organizational redevelopment and revisioning of the ministerium structure as a key component to lift our people's eyes to the opportunities that open when we work together.
5. A synodical Partnership Fund that can stand alongside the Mission Endowment Fund and EOCM/ELCA partnership grants to provide strategically targeted resources to begin new ministries or assist established congregations in walking the path toward increasingly diverse ministry.