



122 West Franklin Ave Suite 600, Minneapolis, MN 55404  
Phone: 612-870-3610 Fax: 612-870-0170  
E-mail: [info@mpls-synod.org](mailto:info@mpls-synod.org)

---

**Annual Report to Minneapolis Area Synod Congregations  
From Bishop Craig E. Johnson  
January 2010**

I have struggled this year on how to frame this report in a way that would be helpful to congregations. This year I have decided to give a straightforward assessment as to the present reality of our Church and look at our hope in the future which is always based upon the grace of God in Christ our Lord.

As I reflect upon 2009, I can't remember a more difficult year for our Church and/or our nation in my 36 years as an ordained minister. I feel like this year has been the "winter of our discontent."

The financial crisis that hit every one of us this year has indeed been felt in the offering plates across our synod. Benevolent giving to the important ministries of our Church like seminaries, colleges, missions, World Hunger, Disaster Response and many others have all experienced downturns. The Minneapolis Area Synod Executive Committee projects our income will be \$500,000 below budget in 2009. We are now in the hard process of balancing our budget and hope to keep important work of the Church intact like finding new pastors and rostered leaders, missions, Book of Faith Initiative, and support of mission and partnerships for congregations. We will use the necessary means to be fiscally responsible in these difficult times. Already our churchwide organization has taken deep personnel cuts that will be felt by ministries around the world.

### **Leadership**

The social statement "Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust," which was passed by our Churchwide Assembly this summer, is deeply appreciated by most people. The difficulty came for some and a joy for others, when ministry policies were changed which made it possible for some congregations to call persons in publically accountable life-long monogamous same-sex relationships. This has been known as "local option" which means if a congregation believes that the best possible pastor or rostered leader happens to be homosexual in orientation and is in a committed relationship that person may be considered to be called by that particular congregation.

The vote was passed by a majority, but that also means that a little under a half of our voting

members at assembly did not want this change. We have had tough votes before (i.e. women's ordination), but we have always been able to live together with our different opinions. At this time as congregations are dealing with the aftermath of this decision, I would speculate that 95% of our congregations will be able to live together with this kind of divergent opinion and 99% of the baptized in the Minneapolis Area Synod will be able to live together with this diversity of opinion. What that means is we will be able to respect the bound consciences of our neighbors on this leadership issue. What remains intact is our polity of congregational autonomy in choosing pastoral or lay rostered leaders. I am deeply grateful for that polity.

During these winters of discontent, I would encourage your patience, prayer, and openness to divergent opinions about difficult issues. I know there are faithful people on both sides of this issue and we rely upon God's strength during the most difficult of times and through conflict that could divide.

## **Mission**

Being close to God's heart, when the people of God come the closest to grace upon grace, is what defines mission. It is, the Word made flesh. This past year has been thumping with the rhythms of God's heart in the life of the Minneapolis Area Synod. Congregations responded with generosity and compassion and abundance when the churchwide organization's budget cuts meant limits to new congregations, ethnic specific and renewing congregations. Mission sprouted up in newly identified leaders from Sudan and Liberia, Tanzania and Mexico. After nine years of preparation and hard work, Spirit of Joy, Buffalo, completed and is now worshiping in their first freshly-built worship space. In a new partnership with Luther Seminary, two teams of seminary students probed possible sites for new ministries in the southwest and north central parts of the synod. The year ended with a gathering of veteran mission developers and their on-the-ground counterparts—wisdom, energy and passion for the Gospel described the time together.

Being close to God's heart will define 2010 in its mission. First ring suburban congregations will band together to explore new ways to be the faithful people of God. Love of neighbor and its call to tear down barriers of race and economic disparity; gender and class; and sexuality will push communities into new relationships. Creating sustainable and designated revenue streams of mission funding will be the challenge of 2010. Emerging mission must be supported among seekers and probing young adults, among refugees from Somalia and southern Sudan. How can we dare to say no/not yet to Spanish-speaking evangelists passionate to start new mission in trailer parks near you and me? 2010 will shape covenant communities around these new and emerging mission sites. Will your congregation be a part of this movement of the Spirit? There is no better place to be than near that life-giving beat of God's heart!

Just as God provided manna in the wilderness for the faithful, God in 2009 provided manna of all kinds to the Lutheran faithful of urban Minneapolis:

- Nine new pastoral leaders to guide congregations into their futures. These new leaders are of great passion, creativity and energy who have much to offer our synod.
- Renewed spirit of congregational cooperation. In northeast Minneapolis, three congregations became one in order to be an even more powerful witness to Christ's presence. In north Minneapolis, a youth ministry cooperative has formed. In south

Minneapolis, congregations that speak different languages are coming together for a neighborhood-to-neighborhood evangelism initiative.

- God rained down the courage and the conviction to our urban leaders to take on the challenge to lead our Church into becoming the multiracial Church that God intends us to be.
- God continues to feed the faithful.
- Presently, the Minneapolis Area Synod leads the nation in the number of candidates for ministry with 130-140 people going through this process.
- We will continue to foster encouragement to congregations that wish to start new missions. Already we are planning congregations in areas where there will no longer be an ELCA presence and strong united congregations are asking how they can help.

We give thanks for the manna which God continues to provide. We rejoice that God continues to supply pastors and rostered leaders for our Church across the nation.

As this year unfolds and the U.S. economic recovery progresses, I ask for every blessing upon your congregation and I will continue to look for and seek a new day of revitalization with Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. Our Church will continue to proclaim Christ crucified and resurrected for the whole world. The foundation of our theology will continue to be justification by grace through faith. And we will continue to hold fast and be shaped by our biblical interpretive foundations of Law and Gospel.

I wish you God's presence and peace in the new year and I look forward to our partnership in this great life changing work.



Bishop Craig E. Johnson  
Minneapolis Area Synod  
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America