

Bishop Smith's reflections—April 26, 2016



Given that synods formed in this country over 200 years ago to help with theological education and providing clergy to congregations, an obvious and ongoing challenge of the office of bishop is the growing number of congregations who are too small to afford a pastor. Given that our church requires four years of college and four years of seminary in preparation for ordination, few are able financially to pursue this vocation only to serve in a part-time call.

The rising costs of college and seminary exacerbate this situation even further. From the congregational side, diminishing worship attendance and frequency and dwindling offerings combine with spiraling health care costs to make a full-time pastor for at least 60 of our 193 chartered congregations in the NC Synod a great unlikelihood any time soon, if ever again.

A recent (March 2016) report by Adam DeHoek and Kenneth Inskeep in the Research and Evaluation Office of the ELCA is both revealing and disturbing. I want to share it with you to ponder and pray about. Read the [whole report](#).

It would seem to me that continuing to do things the way we have for decades is neither a prudent nor faithful option. We clearly have much creative work to do in terms of structure, strategy, and yes, spiritual formation, evangelism, and stewardship.

You need to know that I don't think the sky is falling, given that Jesus is risen from the dead and establishes and guides his Church, but clearly the sky doesn't look like it once did. Part of the reason may well be that we've become less and less worshipers and followers of Jesus and more and more consumers for whom the value of church is basically the same as everything else to us, i.e., what's in it for me? I probably could write a book on my own individual and our collective sinfulness in this regard, but for now allow me to share just a few highlights (lowlights?) of the report. What follows for the rest of my reflections is directly copied and quoted from the DeHoek and Inskeep report.

Table 11: Retirements, ordinations, and the number of congregations that can afford a full-time, first-call pastor with the number of congregational clergy available to serve those congregations (actual figures through 2015, with projections for 2016 through 2019)

	Retirements	Ordinations	Difference	Congregations	Can Afford a Pastor	Number of Pastors Serving Congregations
2010	315	300	15	10,008	7,638	7,625
2011	335	297	38	9,638	7,411	7,408
2012	388	278	110	9,533	7,385	7,255
2013	447	225	222	9,464	7,365	7,062
2014	432	257	175	9,392	7,383	6,868
2015	455	249	206	9,326	7,278	6,713
2016	449	213	236	9,260	7,173	6,477
2017	436	212	224	9,194	7,069	6,253
2018	422	210	212	9,128	6,966	6,041
2019	404	207	197	9,062	6,864	5,844

What can be done?

In 2019, we believe that about three-fourths of ELCA congregations will be able to afford a first-call, full-time pastor and of these congregations, nearly 20 percent will be in pastor-sharing relationships. There will be just over 2,000 congregations that will not be able to do so and since the vast majority of these congregations will remain open; their alternatives for pastoral leadership are fairly straightforward.

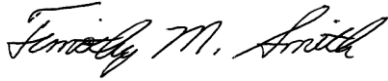
Either these congregations will become part of sharing relationships or they will find supply, part-time or lay licensed pastors. In places where there is ready access to a significant number of retired pastors, an alternative is to use this pool of clergy. If not, another alternative is to find local people who are willing to

become authorized/ licensed lay ministers or who are willing to complete a certificate process such as TEEM (Theological Education for Emerging Ministries).

The church needs more persons who will consider ordained ministry and become ordained pastors. Clearly, those concerned about the future of the church should seek out and encourage people they believe might be good pastors and open to the call. Programs to do so should be encouraged and supported by the church.

Finally, it is also possible that the supply of pastors could be increased by making the process of becoming a pastor more flexible, less time intensive and less expensive.

In Christ,



Bishop Timothy Smith



North Carolina Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.