

# WHAT WE'RE HEARING **from the Church**

## LISTENING, LEARNING, AND LEADING TOGETHER

Luther Seminary's vision to lead faithful innovation for the sake of the gospel of Jesus Christ calls us to listen deeply to our church partners. This helps us discern together what the Spirit is innovating at the grass roots, where current practices are breaking down, and what challenges and opportunities Christian communities face.

In fall 2018, faculty/staff teams visited a dozen ELCA synods across the country to listen to local pastors, lay leaders, and synodical staff. Our key question was:

**What do leaders need to know, or know how to do, to be faithful and effective in a rapidly changing world?**

We combined the answers we heard in this listening with other research we've conducted since 2015. Taken together, some important themes began to emerge.

This report is an initial summary of these themes. It will guide our innovation work at Luther Seminary. As our listening to the church deepens, we expect to add to it in the coming months and years.

This is a time of disruptive change for many congregations, yet it is also full of promise, energy, and hope. Please join us in listening, learning, and leading together as we discover where God is calling in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## KEY THEMES

**Connect with God**  
**Cultivate Community**  
**Innovate Faithfully**  
**Connect with Diverse Neighbors**  
**Equip the Saints**  
**Shift Ministry Models**  
**Deepen Administrative Leadership**

## OUR LISTENING PARTNERS (SO FAR\*)



**58** Ministry Sites in  
**12** ELCA Synods



**12** Large ELCA  
Congregations



**15** ELCA Synods  
and Episcopal  
Dioceses



**550** Pastors via  
Lifelong Learning  
Survey



**33** Churches  
from the Vibrant  
Congregations  
Project



**75** Lay Leader  
Developers

**\*JOIN THE CONVERSATION!**

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# EXPLORE THE THEMES (January 2019)

## CONNECT WITH GOD

**Leaders and congregations need a Christ-centered identity, embodied in a life of discipleship and nourished through spiritual formation.**

Thriving churches and their leaders evidence a living relationship with the Triune God. They cultivate practices of listening to and being led by God's Spirit. Where congregational identity is about deep connection with God and neighbor, there is willingness to grow spiritually and risk changing; where it is primarily about social or cultural affinity, they lack such urgency. Pastoral leaders must be able to articulate why theology matters in ordinary language.

## CULTIVATE COMMUNITY

**Leaders need to cultivate community by listening to people, loving them, and building trust within and beyond the church.**

In an increasingly fractured society, people yearn for community yet don't know how to live into it, especially across cultural, social, generational, and political differences. Leaders must meet people where they are and involve the community in intentional practices of mutual listening, relationship, and reconciliation.

## INNOVATE FAITHFULLY

**Leaders need a spiritual and theological purpose that frees them to renegotiate established cultural norms.**

Many churches know they need to change, yet don't know how or are unwilling to risk it. Thriving congregations experiment, adapt, and innovate in response to shifting cultural and social norms, guided by a clear theological purpose they have discerned in context. Without such a purpose, churches are often caught by a spirit of inertia, scarcity, and fear.

## CONNECT WITH DIVERSE NEIGHBORS

**Leaders and congregations need intercultural competency to connect with neighbors across all dimensions of diversity.**

Churches that are able to form Christian community amid diversity are deeply engaged in their local contexts and practice listening, presence, and mutual welcome with their neighbors, fueled by a distinct theological witness.

## EQUIP THE SAINTS

**Laypeople need opportunities to develop as disciples, ministers, and leaders.**

In many churches, there is an expectation that professional clergy will perform ministry for the people rather than equip the people for ministry. Some of the most hope-filled sites we visited do not rely on professional clergy. Others focus on multiplying lay leaders, not for committee work but front-line ministry in the church and world.

## SHIFT MINISTRY MODELS

**Leaders need to know how to start, tend, and manage entrepreneurial models of structuring and financing ministry.**

As church participation declines, many churches are experimenting with new organizational models and alternative sources of income beyond congregational giving. Regional/ecumenical partnerships are creating opportunities to share resources and expand reach.

## DEEPEN ADMINISTRATIVE LEADERSHIP

**Leaders need to be skilled in organizational leadership, management, and administration for a 21<sup>st</sup>-century world.**

Skilled leadership empowers ministry. Lack of training in this area causes frustration for leaders and those they serve.