

Document # 2 A NARRATIVE VISION
2025 Synod Assembly, Report of the Bishop

Stronger and better together: Joining Jesus in the restoration of the world we are the Southern Ohio Synod - congregations, individuals, clusters, organizations and Synod staff. To quote a former ELCA Bishop, “We are sinners utterly dependent on the crucifixion, which not only destroyed sin and death but put to death the false hope of good intentions and human agency. We are saints made righteous by the cross and joined to the resurrected life of Christ that makes it possible for us to bear God's creative and redeeming word to the world.”

Here on the mission territory of the Southern Ohio Synod (SOS) every day we see and experience a broken culture of loss, pain, loneliness and death; we hear the cries of those who live on the margins of our society. We will not yield, but rather we will respond to the call of the Gospel, a call that begins in the present - in our neighborhoods, cities, homes and congregations – and draws us into the future.

As restorers, we choose to shape our life together in Jesus by our values to **Clarify** the Gospel and **Collaborate** together so that we can **Cultivate** the mission field around us. We believe that we are better together, and being part of the ecosystem of the ELCA and the SOS provides a platform for a more comprehensive response to the needs of this world. We need interconnectivity to thrive. It is all about relationships. To that end, over the last 10 years, we have begun numerous new initiatives that have more fully enabled us to live into our vision and values. I am pleased to report all of the changes that have been made, along with their impact here in Southern Ohio over the last year.

Stronger and better together: Joining Jesus in the restoration of the world we **Clarify** through a more robust communications infrastructure. As you know from the monthly web blasts sent by our Communications Department, as well as my quarterly *Online Town Hall Meetings*, every Synod Council meeting, as well as my weekly staff meetings, begins with updates from teams, committees, staff members and myself regarding the pursuit of our vision. More than three-fourths of our congregations in this Synod reported that they now include the Synod’s vision and a link to the Synod website in their newsletters and other formal communications. This increase helps us reach more individuals on the Synod’s territory to let them know what we are doing together. We know this is true because we have seen a substantial increase in participation in our weekly online Synod Bible studies, bringing the total number of participants to more than 800. That is a far cry from where we started, which demonstrates that our relentless efforts to share our mission have been paying off. Rostered leaders are facilitating these studies on a rotational basis using technology to communicate the Gospel. Nearly one-fifth of the people taking part in these online studies are not members of any church. They are friends of members, or people who have stumbled upon our website and found the Bible study opportunities to be helpful to their own spiritual growth. This has led to forty-one formerly non-affiliated people joining our congregations this past year – eight by adult baptism!

Stronger and better together: Joining Jesus in the restoration of the world we continue to dedicate a great deal of time and effort into promoting initiatives in which we **Collaborate**. We desire to leverage the wisdom of all within the Synod to increase our capacity to bear God's creative and redeeming word to the world. This year's Synod-wide Lenten journey, *Thy Kingdom Come*, was well received. Nearly 60 percent of our congregations participated. A team of pastors, seminary professors and congregational leaders produced the program. During Lent, every participating congregation preached on an identical theme, then members and friends of each congregation gathered during the week at homes in small groups to discuss each weekly theme in more detail using study guides and videos made available online. I am pleased to have had a part in each video segment and, thereby, to have been able to "pay a visit" to the homes of many as we took a serious look at how we can work together for God's kingdom in our communities. As a result of the Lenten journey, six congregations in southeast Ohio and four congregations in the Dayton area have established new partnerships for doing outreach. The Synod staff is continuing to help two clusters of congregations, identified last year, to further develop collaborative youth and adult confirmation ministry. One is a group of rural churches; the other consists of one large and three smaller congregations in a suburban/small town setting. Such collaborations have not only strengthened connections and relationships, they have also led to a 15 percent growth in membership and a 9 percent growth in average worship attendance in our Synod over the past decade. As we have continued our work together, congregations and individuals excited about our mission have demonstrated their support through increased financial support. This has allowed the Synod to expand the *Future Leaders Lay Person Training Program*, create several new resources for the online training library such as the just released *Engaged Worship*, and provide five scholarships to seminarians who otherwise might not be able to pursue church vocations.

Stronger and better together: Joining Jesus in the restoration of the world we have seen God do amazing things in the mission fields that we are called to **Cultivate**. We believe when the Synod operates as a platform for connection that empowers mission rather than as a top-down organization that directs mission, the baptized are released to join Jesus in this restoration project of love. This has been the key paradigm shift for us, to form more platforms of connection. After having reinstated the *Rostered Leaders' Event* and the *Bishop's Convocation*, we have seen more and more clergy and lay leaders connecting with one another in meaningful ways. This past year more than half of our rostered leaders attended our annual gathering at Salt Fork Lodge and Resort. Combined with our new initiative, the *SOS Restoration Week*, our bi-annual gathering of rostered and lay leaders, we have seen multiple strategic plans developed within congregations, clusters and conferences, not to mention new friendships developed with leaders across our Synod. Fifty-five churches across the Synod, an increase of 12 percent from last year, chose to attend. This is in addition to the 12 churches already participating in the Leadership Institute that has been going on the road to congregations which are hungry for leadership training. As a result, two new church plants have been launched through the collaborative efforts of those who have attended and committed to the accountable planning process of the *SOS Restoration Week*. Furthermore, four new pastors in our Synod have enrolled in our new intentional coaching and mentoring initiative that has paired experienced veterans

with those newly-rostered leaders. We have seen three successful congregational redevelopments emerge.

We are the Southern Ohio Synod, **Stronger and better together: Joining Jesus in the restoration of the world.** Therefore, the future is no longer a thing to be feared but to be embraced! Together we walk into that future boldly and with hope! We embrace our distinct calling as a Synod. To paraphrase St. Paul in his letter to the Philippians, we embrace the opportunities that bring to life truth, honor, justice, peace, excellence, things that please God and build up the Church, and things that are worthy of praise.

Thank you for listening, and to God be the glory!