



METRO D.C. SYNOD
EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN
CHURCH IN AMERICA

Metro D.C. Synod 90-Day Conversation Research Report

December 2025

Prepared for: Strategic Priority-Setting Workshop

I. Executive Summary

High Level Themes:

1. Congregational resilience with significant underlying strain

Many congregations describe stable or hopeful ministries, but nearly all face capacity limitations, aging buildings, financial challenges, and/or community demographic shifts.

2. Synod relationships are widely perceived differently

Some Rostered Ministers (RMs) feel strong connection and support; others experience distance, lack of visibility, or confusion about the synod's direction and resources.

3. Rostered ministers carry high levels of personal and vocational pressure

RM personal health varies widely: some thriving, many navigating burnout, family stress, surgeries, or long commutes. Several express vocational uncertainty.

II. Current State Overview

1. Congregational Health: Doing well...but tired

Overview

- The majority of leaders reported that they were stable or better: 64% of congregations are stable (37) or growing (12).
- Most want to stay where they are for now, but some exceptions: 18% are growing.
- 17 Declining or below critical mass.
- Of the of congregations that are declining: only majorly concerned about 1-2 of them. (Congregations that scored low in discipleship and resource on LODR).



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- Several churches in District of Colombia and predominantly Black and Latino congregations are congregations with “1” on LODR – this priority has been established and named, and we already do have a starting point.
- On the whole people seem less conservative (more progressive).
 - Desire to make public witness seems to have a lot of support.
 - Robust enthusiasm for lawsuits.
 - Guardian Angels and Racial Equity work progressing.
 - Few noted exceptions.

Strengths

- Strong community identity or history.
- Active worship attendance or renewed post-pandemic engagement.
- Missional creativity (interfaith partnerships, community centers, outreach programs).
- Healthy staff teams in some larger congregations.
- Perceived slight increase in diversity (more RIC).

Challenges

- Aging buildings and financial burdens: repair and rental considerations, but more than a couple of congregations have successful modest capitol campaigns.
- Generally, ministries and the synod are smaller than they were before COVID.
 - Closed 4 congregations and 1 left (66 and 1 SAWC remain).
 - From 25,000 to about 20,000 members
- Low volunteer capacity.
- Unclear governance or conflict history.
- Children’s Ministries are uneven.
 - Some have larger youth programs.
 - Most are re-building after COVID. A few have no children.
 - Synod overnight retreat had a lot of participation.



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- Synod Virginians going to Maryland for the day do not have a lot of participation.
 - Smaller congregations banding together for critical mass.
- Preschools can use some attention in terms of purpose and relationship with congregations and their mission.
- Difficulty filling calls.
- Very small congregations questioning long-term viability.
- External factors: current political context (economic stability, concern for POC disproportionately affected by government, concern for future of the progressive church, immigration, housing, food insecurity).
- Internal factors: Staff turnover, leadership transitions, call-process fatigue, and community needs that exceed volunteer capacity.
- Decreasing mission support.

Representative Quotes

- *"People are tired and I am worried about the impact of politics on an otherwise positive church."*
- *"I don't know how to help inspire people to increase mission support."*
- *"Strains are inside and outside the church...we need revival, something to bring us back."*
- *"The synod had a really hard time between COVID and everything that happened after."*

Overall pattern: Most congregations have identifiable assets and energy, but almost all are stretched, often with leadership capacity and building maintenance as the primary pain points.

2. Synod Connection: Helpful, but inconsistent

Positive Experiences

- Most ministries desire a stronger connection.
- Appreciation for synod staff visibility.
- Helpful support during crises (e.g., health challenges, brain surgery recovery).
- Affirmation of initiatives like Synod Council listening or Bishop visits.



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- Youth events seem to be well received for those who have been, but youth numbers dwindling after COVID and youth events were not always accessible to attend. Communication for the events did not reach everyone.
- Sacred Ground small groups: a growing ministry, video and reading materials helping to establish more racial equity.
- Camps, LSSNCA, Campus Ministries, National Lutheran Home, Lamb Center, Food for Others and Crossroads Connections are doing well.

Negative or Mixed Experiences

- Descriptions of depletion, distance, or confusion.
- Past trauma or mistrust of synod interactions.
- Limited communication during pastoral transitions.
- Lack of clarity about process or purpose.
- Some have never met synod leadership.
- Occasional tension between synod expectations and congregational autonomy.
- Some feel that they are not recognized for their accomplishments.
- Geographical relation to the synod can strengthen or weaken the relationship.

Representative Quotes by Relationship

- Reported a good relationship – 27
 - *"I don't hear a lot of negativity toward the synod."*
 - *"I'm very happy with the synod."*
 - *"There is a desire for collegiality even though people may feel isolated."*
- Reported a negative relationship – 13
 - *"My relationship with the synod has been significantly strained."*
 - *"Whenever anyone from the synod came out, it was to talk about money."*
 - *"Did not feel supported, lack of communication."*
- Reported a mixed relationship – 22
 - *"The congregation wants to have a good relationship with the synod...have not had a bad one but they don't feel like they have had a good one either."*



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- *"Would like to do more with youth with other conference congregations."*
 - *"My goal has been to mend the breach with congregation and the synod."*
 - *"Better to work as connectors rather than content creators or suggesters."*
- Reported lack of a relationship – 28 (confusion about the synod, new to the synod, geographical distance, RMs have a good relationship but congregations and lay leaders still feel distant, etc.)
 - *"I know bishop's staff are busy, I didn't ask for much."*
 - *"It seemed like a lot of things were happening that I could not see."*

Overall pattern: The synod is seen as caring but operationally inconsistent. There is a call for clearer communication, predictable structures, and a more relational presence. Good things are happening, but do not always respond to what the communities need.

3. RM Personal Health: Some thriving, many stretched thin

Signs of Well-Being

- Many describe themselves as “doing well,” “loving ministry,” or thankful for supportive teams.
- Some entering seasons of renewal (sabbaticals, healthier staffing models).
- Gratitude for sabbatical and partnership grants.
- Encouraging stories – people shared that they were generally doing well. Lots of care for their work.

Stressors & Concerns

- Medical concerns (surgeries, long-term recovery).
- Burnout, exhaustion, and persistent stress.
- Two-career families balancing ministry demands.
- Long commutes (45 minutes to 1+ hour each way).
- Family responsibilities (young children, caregiving).
- Vocational uncertainty or transition periods.
- Concerns about congregation’s health impacting personal wellbeing.
- Relationships between RMs themselves are spotty and inconsistent.



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Representative Quotes

- *"I am enjoying this, really like the staff and being here."*
- *"Excited about the new people in our conference."*
- *"I'm 2025 OK."*
- *"I am prophetic but not in the way that has been valued by the synod."*
- *"Everyone is spread thin doing the same things."*
- *"I have been supported, loved, cared for by the church in this role."*

Overall pattern: RMs are human – nothing overwhelmingly concerning and no trends uncovered. Normal levels of burnout and stress, most strain comes from external factors in the RMs lives. The system creates personal load that RMs carry alone or with limited support.

III. Major Cross-Cutting Themes for Strategic Priority Setting

Based on the full dataset, these are the most consistent system-level themes:

1. Ministry Strains

- Aging buildings are a universal challenge—expensive, labor-intensive, and energy-consuming.
- Difficult transitions.
- Volunteer capacity and lay leadership.
- Many RMs carry administrative loads far beyond their call descriptions.
- Desire for emphasis on discipleship.

2. Call Process & Leadership Transitions Are Pain Points

- Persistent difficulty securing candidates.
- Unclear processes or inconsistent communication amplify stress.
- Interim periods are prolonged and draining.

3. Need for a More Relational, Predictable Synod Presence

Requests appear in multiple forms:

- More hands-on support.
- Consistent processes.



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- Better follow-up after crises.
- Transparent expectations.
- Better communication, especially for events.

4. Pastoral Wellbeing Requires System-Level Support

Indicators of burnout or personal strain:

- Family pressures.
- Health challenges.
- Emotional weight of ministry.
- Long commutes.
- Navigating congregational conflict alone.

5. Strong Desire for Collaboration & Shared Identity

Many RMs want:

- To be connected to peers.
- To partner with other congregations.
- A clearer shared synod identity.
- Ecumenical relationships, and relationships with ministry partners/organizations.
- A stronger sense of belonging and mutual accountability.

6. Sustainability and Mindset

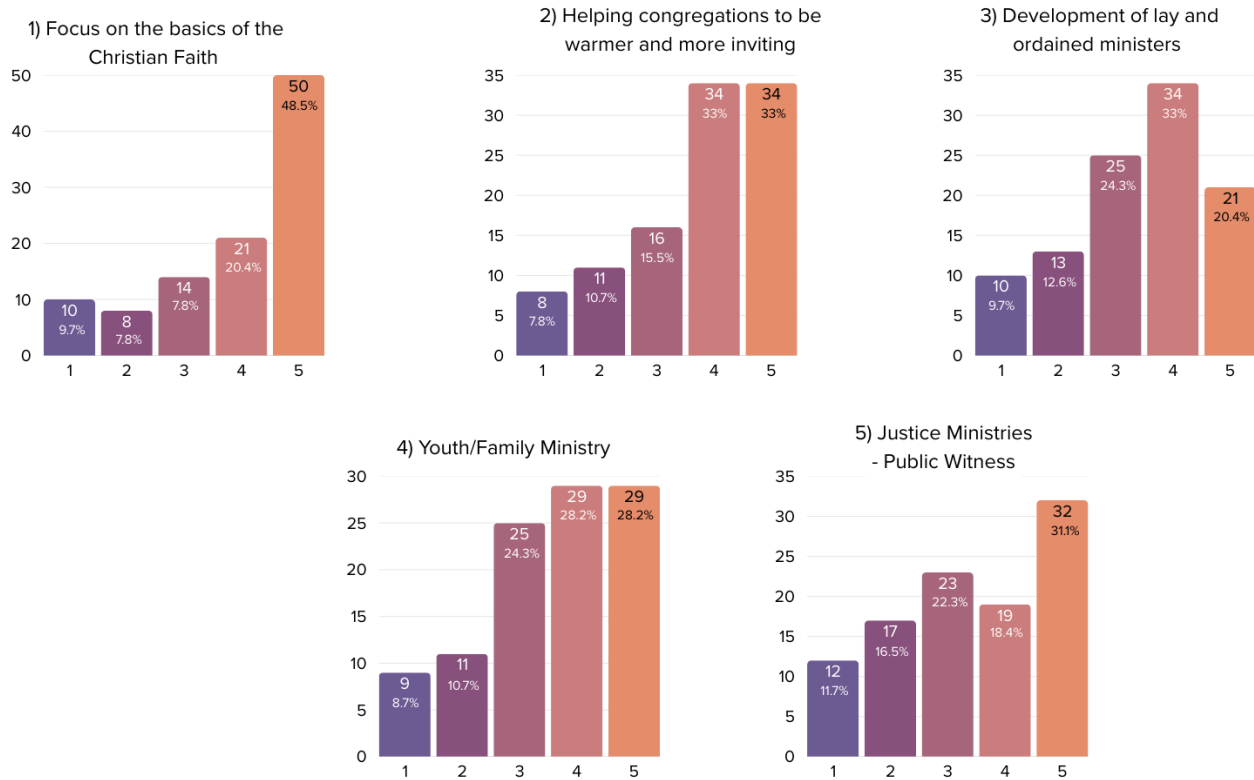
- How do congregations view their ministry stability?
- Encourage ministries in their sustainability by sharing stories and examples.
- Feelings of helplessness.
- Stay grounded in faith and love.



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Metro D.C. Synod Priorities: Synod Leader Survey Results

103 Responses, 1 being the lowest priority, 5 being the highest priority



Comments on Priority Selection

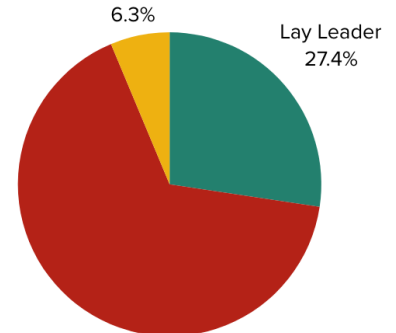
Focus on the basics of the Christian Faith

- The teaching and practice of both Christian faith and advocacy invite sharing stories of our lives, including our neighbors for whom we care, about whom we are curious, and with whom we disagree.

Helping congregations to be warmer and more inviting

- Physical and financial complexities of being more inclusive.

Rostered Minister Word and Service



Rostered Minister Word and Sacrament
66.3%



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Youth/Family Ministry

- “I gave ‘Development of lay and ordained ministers’ and ‘Youth/Family Ministry’ equal priority. We're talking about developing disciples at all ages.”
- “I think we are moving into an era in which an intergenerational model seem more realistic, even though I can appreciate youth ministry.”
- “I ranked youth/family ministry low because I wouldn't include young adult ministry there.”

Development of lay and ordained ministers

- Encourage more recruitment of pastors to the metro DC synod to fill long standing pastor vacancies.
- Rostered leader wellness and fostering collegiality amongst rostered leaders.

Justice Ministries - Public Witness

- “I ranked justice lower because I think we already are and will continue to do this, and there's a commitment to it among our congregation and clergy.”
- Actively counter the false Christian Nationalist agenda with Jesus’ teachings.
- Prayer, specifically contemplative prayer and worship, is important enough to consider on its own. Contemplation and contemplative worship can serve as the counterweight to the active and difficult work of Justice and Public Witness.

Other Priorities Listed

Items named multiple times:

- **Stewardship leadership and development.**
- **Focus on young adults:** What are their needs? What resonates with them from a faith community perspective, how can we engage and then hold onto them?
- **Caring for the environment.**
- **Ecumenical Relationships.**
- **Multiethnic congregations and lifting up POC leaders.**

Others noted:

- Preschools.



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- Buildings and maintenance.
- Connecting faith and work/daily life/vocation.
- Giving congregants spiritual tools to help their mental health in their daily lives.
- Shift from outdated church structures to a more flexible model that recognizes our parishioners' limited time and capacity.
- Many folks are not well-informed about the particularity of Lutheran theology, but it is a challenge to gather people for instruction and study.
- Meals and groceries for people who are food insecure.
- Several responses indicated a need for merging congregations and caring for congregations with dwindling leadership/membership. Increase shared ministry between congregations, especially smaller ones.

General Comments

- "I voted each as a high priority because I believe they should be the Top 5 priorities for the synod under Bishop Hirsch's administration."
- "I think all five areas are important priorities and I am eager to support in any way I can."
- Several comments referenced that some of the priorities can influence other priorities.
- "These were difficult to rank; they're all so important. On any given day my response might be different."