



EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH IN CANADA

MANITOBA/NORTHWESTERN ONTARIO SYNOD

*Empowered by God, shepherding the church,
serving the world.*

MNO SYNOD REPORT TO CONGREGATIONAL ANNUAL MEETINGS JANUARY 2026

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Christ our Saviour.

I want to thank all of the congregations of the MNO Synod for your faithful partnership over the last year. We have had many blessings and have faced some challenges over the year. But we trust and know that God will continue to be good and move us into a future full of life.

I especially want to thank leaders in congregations without a regularly called pastor or deacon for their ongoing care and support of congregations. Your congregations are blessed to receive your faithful service, and you are helping to continue the growth in faith of entire communities. I also want to thank those retired pastors and deacons who continue to faithfully serve and take on interim roles in leadership. Our leadership challenges would become crises without your support and service.

Over the past 7 years, the work of the synod office staff has been guided by four Ministry Priorities: **Empowered Discipleship; Community & Connections; Faithful Transformation; and Mutual Support**. These have directed our work and helped us understand God's call. (see <https://elcic.box.com/v/2022-MNO-Ministry-Priorities>)

These Ministry Priorities have helped us focus on building relationships and partnerships; redeveloping youth and young adult ministry to focus on discipleship; support congregational ministry through grants; walk with congregations in times of change and challenge; test the waters of small group ministry; build collegiality and collaboration between clergy and congregations; help congregations with visioning and future planning, and more.

While these priorities are still in place, the MNO Synod Council has been at work discerning how God is shaping the ministry of the Synod Office in the next few years. We continue to evaluate what has been working, where we need to make adjustments, and the support that congregations need. Over the next 6 months we will be working to clearly define our Mission, Vision, and Values that will inform our work moving forward.

While we do that work, it is important to note a subtle shift in the approach of the MNO Synod Office. For many decades we have tried to provide programs and training that we believed would support congregations in their ministry. Sometimes these programs were wildly successful. However, more often, they were not well supported, poorly attended, or had little lasting value. Our approach to ministry in the coming years will be more focused on supporting the ministries already happening (or hoped for) in congregations. We want to help plant seeds for ministry to grow into something substantial.

This work will include: facilitating conversations around purpose, identity, and strategic planning; supporting youth and young adult ministry leaders; building relationships between congregations and rostered leaders; support and training for lay leaders; navigating congregational changes like rostered ministry staff changes, closures, mergers, and shared ministries; and many other areas.

Below are some highlights from 2025.

Blessings

For the past year we have shared a staff person with the ELCIC National Office in the area of administration and finance. We were blessed to work with Tatiana Aguirre for the past year until her departure, but welcome **Ashwanpreet Kaur** into the role. Ashwanpreet is in our office on Thursdays and Fridays only, so please be patient if some responses are delayed.

Congregations are relying more on lay leaders, and in some cases, lay leaders are entirely responsible for the leadership of congregations. This is truly an important calling, and we are so thankful for those who continue to serve our congregations in this way. Without your dedicated and faithful work, many congregations would be hard pressed to maintain their ministries or worship lives.

Synod Council has had some in-person retreats dedicated to developing mission, vision, values, and strategic planning to help our shared ministry thrive. It has been good to meet more often in person, and we believe that this renewed attention to future direction and mission will help our synod move forward into God's promised future for us.

Several retired pastors have answered a call to serve congregations in an interim capacity through ministry changes. We cannot overstate how appreciative we are for this as it ensures that these congregations have regular pastoral support through what can be a long process of calling a new pastor.

After a few years with no candidates, our Candidacy Committee is now walking with three candidates. It is important to see how our congregations are passing on faith and encouraging members in their call to leadership. If you have wondered about a call to ordained ministry, or need someone to talk to about it, please reach out to your local pastor or deacon, or call the Synod Office to speak with Bishop Jason.

We are working on a partnership with the Diocese of Rupert's Land and St. John's College at the University of Manitoba to support and grow campus and young adult ministry. There are no defined timelines yet, but we continue to look at how we can support our students at the UofM campus.

Synod Council and staff are focused on helping all congregations, leaders, and members of the MNO Synod understand our purpose and direction as the church. We are committed to helping MNO Synod congregations grow in faith and discipleship as our primary vocation. Deacon Michelle and Bishop Jason have been in congregations to facilitate discussions and lead workshops to help with this discernment.

At National Convention, the ELCIC elected **Bishop Larry Kochendorfer** as our new National Bishop. Please pray for Larry and his family as he leads our church over this next term.

Facing Today, Dreaming for the Future is an ELCIC initiative that began at National Convention 2025. It is aimed at opening conversation with all members of the ELCIC to determine shared purpose, vision for the future, and potential changes to how we organize and operate in order to

Thank you for your continued prayers. We appreciate and need them in our ministry. Please continue to pray for:

Synod Council

Gabriella Balog - Chairperson
Dan Brunet - Treasurer
Bev Wahl - Secretary
Martin Kruse
Sandra Tymchyshyn
Nina Niemisto
Michelle McConomy
Caitlin Kostna
Rev. Jennifer Marlor
Rev. Debra Johnston

Staff

Ashwanpreet Kaur
Deacon Michelle Collins
Bishop Jason Zinko

Synod Committees, and partners

realize that vision. This initiative is similar to the process that MNO intended to start this past year, so we deferred our discussion to the National process. Stay tuned for more news and dates to bring people together for these important conversations.

We are thankful for the strong sense of collegiality and support that has developed among our clergy. Since Covid we have continued weekly meetings (Zoom and hybrid) in which clergy can opt to gather for conversation, support, learning, and sharing. We continue to invite all clergy to attend.

We have been trying to replace the term 'benevolence' with 'Common Mission Support'. We feel that this better describes the importance and function of congregational support for the MNO Synod and the ELCIC National Office. It shows that we are in ministry together and mutually supporting one another in our calling to follow God. We want to thank our churches who have been, and continue to be, generous in their support of our common mission, including those who have reached out to ask how best to direct their giving so it has the most impact. We appreciate your faithful generosity and look forward to serving our congregations and ministries.

Challenges

Over the past year we have been called to care for congregations who were unable to continue their ministry in its current form. Please pray with me as we remember and celebrate the faithful ministry of **Sherwood Park Lutheran Church** and **Lutheran Church of the Cross**, both of Winnipeg, MB.

In 2025, we said our final goodbyes to several leaders who have faithfully led our congregations and synods. We hold up: Pastor Leslie Poulin; Bishop Lee Luetkehoelter; Pastor and Gordon Hendrickson.

Before the end of the year, we had several changes in our rostered leadership announced. With thanksgiving for their gifts and ministry here, I want to pray for the continued ministry of: **Rev. Theo Robinson** (Anglican) who departed from the Interlake Regional Shared Ministry; **Pastor Michael Kurtz** who retired from First Lutheran in Winnipeg; **Pastor Courtenay Reedman Parker** who announced her departure from Messiah Lutheran in Winnipeg in early 2026; **Pastor Erik Parker** who departed from Sherwood Park Lutheran Church in Winnipeg; **Pastor Jennifer Marlor** who departed from the Interlake Regional Shared Ministry; **Pastor Val From** who retired from St. Mary Magdalene (Anglican); **Pastor Zsófi Schmiedge** who announced their departure from St. Mark's Lutheran Church in Winnipeg in early 2026.

Our supply roster is stretched thin and many of our retired ministers are finding themselves in part-time employment and/or interim ministry. In fact, some congregations would not have any leadership if it weren't for the faithful and generous work of our retired pastors. We continue to be grateful for their ongoing ministry, but our current situation is not sustainable. We hope that congregations will be willing to work with us contemplating different models of ministry, shared ministries, and potential mergers. As we wrote in this report last year, we must find ways of prioritizing ministry while also being faithful stewards of our financial resources and people. Without these conversations, we are simply planning to die slowly.

Looking Ahead

We trust that God continues to make all things new, and that we are invited into co-creating that new thing. Our hope is that our leaders, members, congregations, and staff – the whole MNO Synod together – will have the courage and faith to wonder about what that could be. We live in changing times and, like everything else, must learn to adapt while holding on to the central things of our faith and calling.

We hope that 2026 will be a year of conversation, a year of vision, a year of faithful discipleship as we live our baptismal call to be God’s children in all we do.

We also hope that we will continue to grow in our ability to work together, to build relationships, and to become a more unified and supportive MNO Synod. Please reach out to our synod office staff with any ideas of how we can do that in your context and for your people.

Thank you again to all of you who continue to explore and grow in faith, serve your congregations, serve your communities, support one another, and follow Christ in your daily lives. We hope that God continues to bless you and show the path forward. We look forward to your ongoing partnership in ministry, knowing that we can only be the MNO Synod when we work collaboratively as the body of Christ.

Blessings for the year ahead.

Yours in Christ’s Service,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'J. Zinko', with a small cross symbol to the left of the first letter.

Bishop Jason Zinko
Manitoba Northwestern Ontario Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada