

10 Keys for Understanding the New Normal

June 2024

1. **What we might have called ‘Small’ in the past is normal.** According to the Faith Communities Survey, the median onsite attendance at a congregation was 65. In the Virginia Synod, 116 congregations reported that in 2022 they have 125 or fewer active participants in the life of their congregation.
2. **Digital Ministry is here to stay.** The pandemic changed our relationship to the digital world. Online worship allowed congregations to reach a group of people who couldn’t or wouldn’t come into a building. Zoom changed the way we conduct meetings and opened the door to connect with friends and members who physically live elsewhere. While every congregation’s context is different, most people will now expect some level of digital ministry. At a bare minimum, nearly everyone who attends your church will have looked at your website and/or Facebook page before they come to your church building.
3. **Focus on the people who stayed, not the people who left.** In many congregations, there is a tremendous amount of grief over the people who actively left or who simply have not returned. The grief is understandable, but as Carey Nieuwhof points out in his article “Why They’re Not Coming Back,” it is more helpful to focus on who is currently a part of the ministry than on who is no longer a part of the ministry. Building relationships and focusing on nurturing discipleship is far more productive than dwelling on what was lost.
4. **Volunteering has changed.** People’s habits changed dramatically during the pandemic and it appears that there are now fewer volunteers to support the ministry of nearly every congregation. Moving forward, congregations will need to evaluate and prioritize needs, change their approach to recruiting volunteers, and in general re-imagine volunteerism. Congregations will also need to consider the shift in volunteering from an emphasis on the needs of the institution to get a job done to an emphasis on the needs of the individual to put their faith and gifts into action.
5. **Community, Compassion, and Hope are far more powerful motivators than Challenge, Commitment, and Reasonability.** We live in a time of movements, not institutions. We live in a time when loneliness is rampant, when “me” is more important than “we,” and when hope seems fleeting. The good news about Jesus can speak powerfully to today’s world, if we can share it in a way that can be heard.
6. **Authenticity matters.** We live in a time where people, especially younger people, place a high value on authentic relationships. We live in a time when what a church says and what a church does must align. There are a whole group of people in the world who would gladly choose a small congregation where people live their faith and care for one another deeply over a large congregation where they can be more anonymous. Finding and connecting to those people isn’t necessarily easy, but it is possible.
7. **Diversity is expected, not optional.** While churches in America have historically been divided along racial, social, and economic lines, younger generations expect organizations, especially churches, to reflect the diversity they experience in school and at work. Take a look at <https://data.census.gov/> if you want to learn more about your community.

8. Partnerships will be key to accomplishing the mission to which God is calling you.

Collaboration between churches, organizations, and individuals with missional alignment can significantly increase the likelihood of accomplishing a congregation's mission and goals. Diverse voices open the door to better ideas. Inviting others to walk with you in a mission you identified or accompanying others in the mission they identified will add people, creativity, and financial resources to a project.

9. Everything old is new again. Welcome to the 21st Century, welcome to the 1st Century. Many of the 'new idea' that churches are trying have actually been a part of ministry for centuries. Churches sharing pastoral leadership across multiple churches was the norm for most of Lutheran history in America. Lay leaders serving in teaching, preaching, and congregational care roles was the norm for most of Lutheran history in America. The church of the 1950s – the 1990s where every church had its own full-time pastor was actually an outlier in church history. In many ways, we are simply reverting to a historic norm.

10. Having fewer ordained pastors impacts the call process. Last year, all of the seminaries of the ELCA produced a total of 155 graduates. Within the last 30 years, there were years when one of the eight seminaries had more than 155 graduates in one graduating class. With fewer pastors, Synods and congregations are exploring ways to share pastoral leadership across multiple congregations and to raise up Synod Authorized Ministers to serve in congregations. Part-time calls are extremely difficult to fill and pastors who are looking to move have far more options than in years past.

Understanding the New Normal: Resource Articles

The 2020 Faith Communities Today Overview (Collaborative Survey conducted by 21 Denominations including ELCA)

- **Graphic:** <https://vasynod.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Faith-Communities-Today-2020-Summary-Report-and-Graphic.pdf>
- **Full Report:** <https://faithcommunitiestoday.org/fact-2020-survey/>

Why They're Not Coming Back to Church (And What To Do with Who's Left) by Carey Nieuwhof

- <https://careynieuwhof.com/why-theyre-not-coming-back-to-church-and-what-to-do-with-whos-left/>

Re-engaging the Volunteers by Susan Beaumont

- <https://www.congregationalconsulting.org/re-engaging-the-volunteers/>

From the Age of Association to Authenticity by Dwight Zscheile

- <https://faithlead.luthersem.edu/from-the-age-of-association-to-authenticity/>

Imagining a New Model for the Church by Sarai Rice

- <https://www.congregationalconsulting.org/imagining-a-new-model-for-the-church/>