

Verbal Report of the Bishop Eastern Synod Assembly 2021

When I first began my term of service as your bishop in 1998, I never imagined convening a Synod Assembly in the midst of a pandemic, much less using technology that at that time, had not yet been invented. But here we are! Calendar years 2020 and 2021 turned out to be years of unprecedented disruption and change for the entire human family. Virtually everything about our lives has changed, from how we shop; how we work, how and with whom we spend our leisure time. And for “we Christians”, it has changed just about everything about how we engage our life as a church.

Those first weeks of lockdown, in retrospect, only seemed like a passing annoyance. We thought we’d all be back in church by Easter. But as Easter became Pentecost, we began to realize that this was going to go on indefinitely. How are we going to worship together? How do you provide pastoral care? How do you continue to support outreach and service ministries? What about the finances? How do you fulfill basic governance functions of congregational life and make decisions? There were so many questions, so many challenges!

And surprisingly – or not, depending on your perspective – to a significant extent, we met those challenges!

It was a phenomenal testimony to the giftedness with which the Spirit has endowed Christ’s church. And I confess that I would have never thought it imaginable. But here we are. And although we still have significant challenges before us – we have not come through this unscathed – for the most part, the state of the church is healthy, engaged and very much alive!

The theme of this Synod Assembly is drawn from the words of Isaiah 43:19. “Behold I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth. Do you not perceive it?” I think that many of us, *have* perceived that God is doing something new with us and celebrate the new things that God is doing, in, among and through us. For many of us; that new thing is welcome.

A lot of us feel like some cobwebs have been blown off and that we don’t have quite so strong a whiff of mothballs hanging over us. Yes, the pandemic has identified some very significant challenges for us; but its also identified some new opportunities that many of us are inspired to engage.

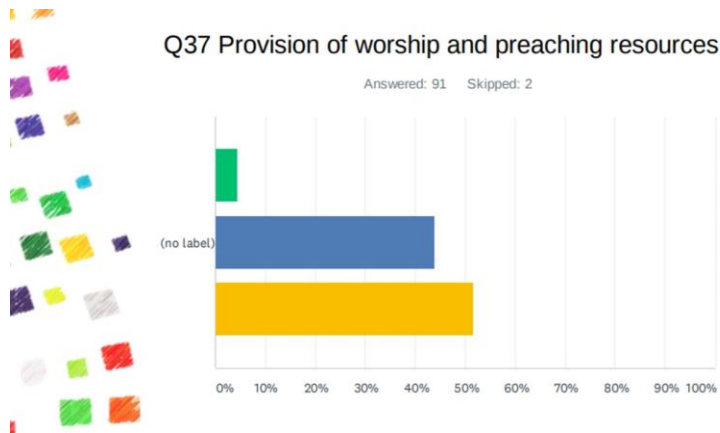
One of the big learnings coming out of this pandemic, is that the Spirit has granted us the capacity to remain nimble and responsive in an ever-changing environment. Your Eastern Synod Council has worked to express this learning in its planning. In November 2020, the Synod Council reviewed our Strategic Plan with a view to identifying priority items for calendar year 2021. I would like to identify and make brief comments on some of them. If you’ve not already done so, I encourage you to read my full report in the Bulletin of Reports.

I’m also going to share some data from the survey we did earlier this year asking you to reflect on how the Covid-19 pandemic has impacted congregational ministries in the Eastern Synod. Of our 182 congregations, we received responses from 93 with most surveys being completed by congregational councils and their rostered ministers. It was a solid response

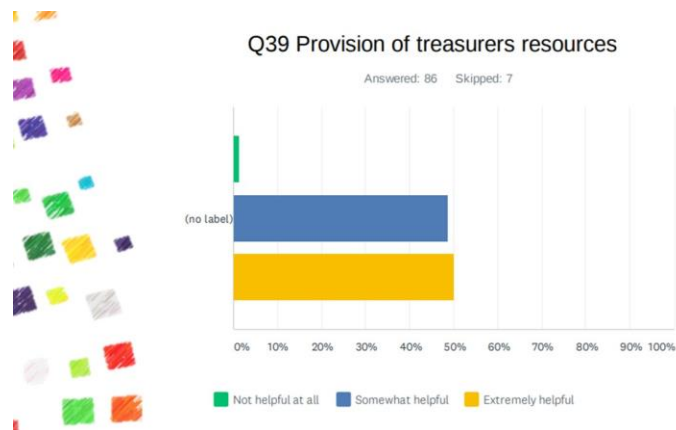
We quickly identified the priority of Providing synodical leadership and resources to support congregations and rostered leaders with pandemic related transitions.

Much about the life of our church has changed in the past fifteen months. Some of those transitions may be temporary but others will be permanent. We need to continue to assist our rostered leaders and congregations in identifying best practices moving forward.

In our survey we asked you (slide 11) "how helpful have the following national and synodical supports been to your congregation during this time of pandemic?"



52% of you found the provision of worship and preaching resources to be extremely helpful and another 44% somewhat helpful. One respondent wrote that, "The Eastern Synod has been fantastic in supporting and providing worship options/materials through the pandemic. In particular, the support of our Pastor, and the sermon series were a tremendous boon."



With regard to the provision of treasurer's resources, 50% found them extremely helpful and 49% somewhat helpful. One respondent commented, "Keith Myra and Synod staff have been available literally 7 days a week to answer questions or provide advice on a wide range of topics." Another wrote, "We love Keith Myra - you are not allowed to retire!"

Our first priority, however, was to do everything we could to support, encourage and walk alongside our rostered leaders and it seems those efforts were well received. 55% of you found this to be extremely helpful and 41% somewhat helpful.

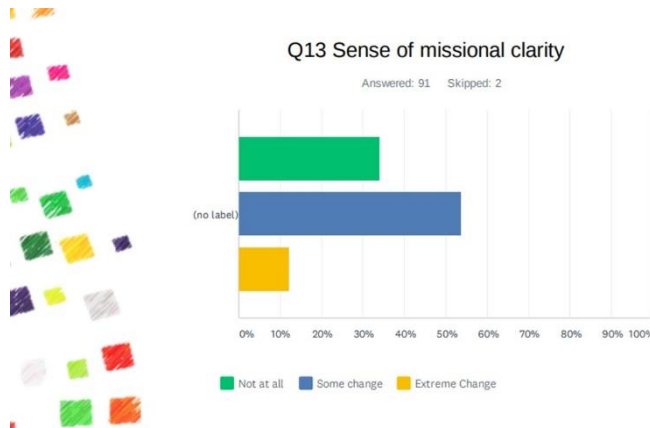
I'm gratified to know that the synod's efforts have been appreciated and am committed to carrying some of our best practices forward. In many ways, we've never been better connected to one another. It's been good; it's been lifegiving. And it needs to continue.

A second priority is to Identify, encourage, and support new forms of ministry.

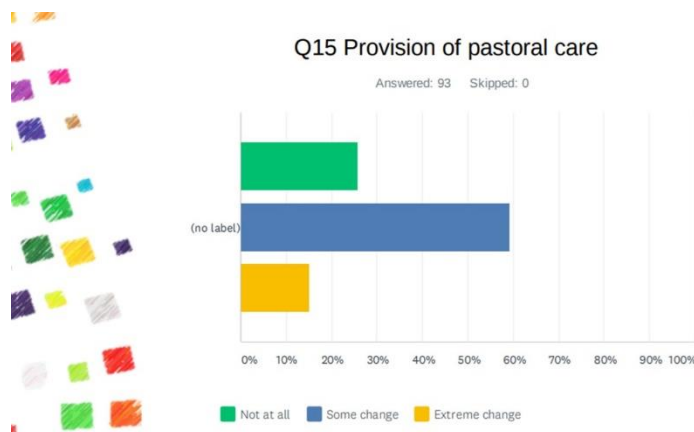
We need to become more courageous and generous in our support of emerging forms of ministry. We can't rely solely upon status quo models for ministry which in many contexts are unlikely to advance God's mission in the ways that they once did. We need to engage in experimentation, learn from the experience of others, and overcome our debilitating fear of failing.

According to your survey responses, you are very open to the potential for further change.

We asked you to identify "what elements of your congregation's ministry you believe will change, post-pandemic vs. pre-pandemic."

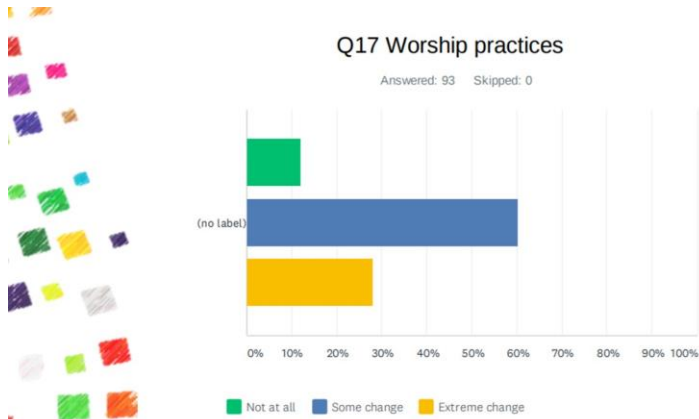


With regard to "missional clarity" or "knowing what business you are in," 53% see some change and 12% extreme change. One of you wrote, "Post-pandemic realities will reinforce sense of urgency to sharpen missional energy." Another wrote, "We've made of an effort to reach more people than we did before. We have more volunteers to connect with others via phone, personal deliveries. It's been a huge learning curve to figure out that we can get out of our building and be the voice of Jesus."



With regard to the provision of pastoral care, 60% see some change on the horizon and 15% expect extreme change.

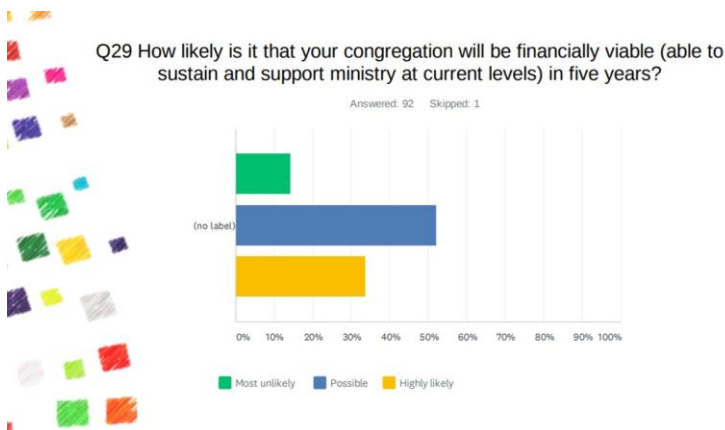
One of you reported that, "Pastoral care and pastoral interaction with members increased significantly throughout the pandemic and will likely continue in post pandemic." Another wrote, "This time of pandemic has now guided us to use technology to its fullest. We plan to use these resources as well as the traditional means of pastoral care to reach out to people and allow for what is most helpful and needed. We also have now incorporated a "care-team" - a group of people reaching out and being there for their congregation and extended community as needed and helpful."



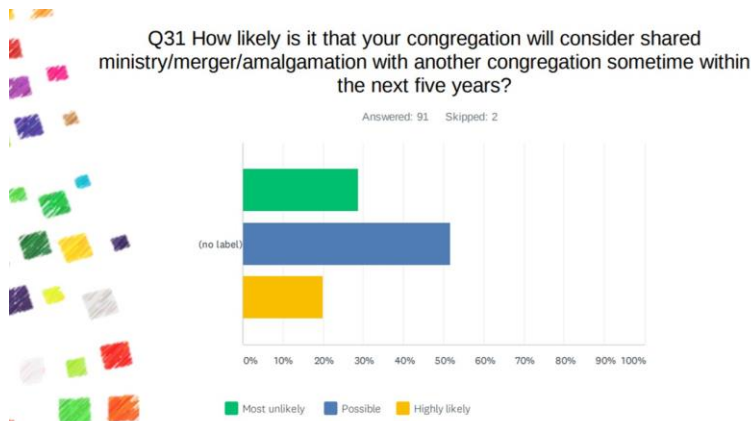
And it seems that significant changes have and will continue to impact our worship life – 60% in some ways and 27% in extreme ways. One of you wrote, “The pandemic has opened up possibilities for us and has shifted the posture of the community. A more missional posture and multiple access points.” Many of you anticipate going into a hybrid worship model with both face to face and online worship, but have very real anxieties about how that can be done effectively.

Synod Council also believes that it is a priority for us to Increase the number of viable congregations that are highly engaged in mission by proactively encouraging congregations who are at a crossroads to intentionally consider all options, ask the hard questions, and act decisively when determining future direction.

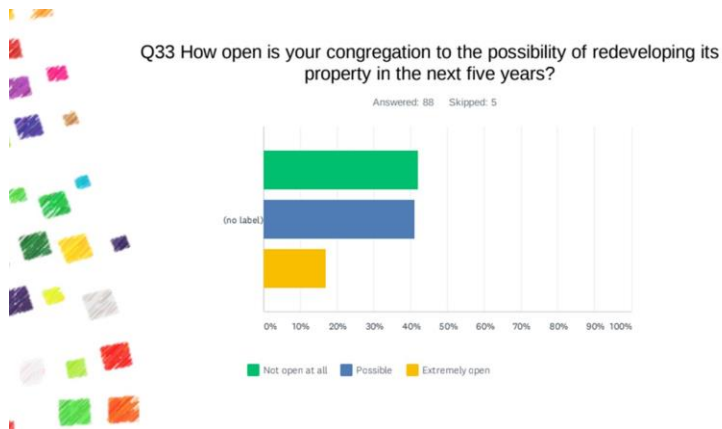
The synod needs to take a more proactive role in encouraging difficult but potentially life-giving conversations about the viability of some local ministries. The trajectory for many of our congregations is quite clear if we slavishly cling to current ministry models that may have gone well beyond their best-before dates. We need to discern and boldly engage new partnerships while we still have the capacity to do so. And it seems that many of you are keen to embrace this priority.



When we asked you how likely is it that your congregation will be financially viable in five years, only 33% of you think that is highly likely. 52% of you think it is possible and 14% most unlikely.



When we asked you how likely it is that your congregation will consider shared ministry/merger/amalgamation with another congregation, only 28% of you said it was most unlikely. 20% believe it is highly likely and 50% see it as possible.



And then, finally, when we asked how open your congregation would be to the possibility of redeveloping your property within the next five years, 17% are extremely open and 40% possibly. 42% of you don't see this as an option, I suspect due to a lack of redevelopment opportunities in many of the places our churches are physically located.

All of this tells me that we are going to be engaged in a lot of shared ministry, merger, amalgamation conversations in the next five year. It also tells me that our investment in staffing Congregational Redevelopment Services were wise and prudent. This work is going to be an important priority moving forward.

The last priority that I want to emphasize is **the provision of synodical leadership and resources in support of social justice initiatives, such as racial justice and reconciliation with increased emphasis on climate change.**

This pandemic has exposed and increased our awareness of deep inequalities that are present within the life of our church and within broader society. At our 2018 Synod Assembly we made commitments to addressing issues of racism and its presence within the life of our church. Our Racial Justice Advisory Committee and Circle for Reconciliation and Justice have provided fine leadership and direction in doing so. But much more remains to be done. Many of us, particularly our youth and young adult members are also challenging us to address and engage these issues as well as the climate crisis more fulsomely.

I've seldom done a town hall meeting where I haven't been asked what we need to do to help bring more young people into, or back to, church. And I always respond, "Why don't you ask them?" I believe that many of our children and grandchildren, whether they are in church or not,

have heard the prophet Micah's call to 'do justice, love kindness and to walk humbly with our God.' They want to be a part of a church that is serious about addressing injustice and inequity. We need to listen to their voices, not as a means of coaxing them back to church, but because their voices and passion have the capacity to lead us all into a more faithful discipleship.

Words of Thanks and Appreciation

In conclusion, please allow me to share some words of appreciation. I want to thank the Eastern Synod staff team for all that they have done to serve and support me and the wider synodical constituency. I have named each of them individually in my written report. But let me say now, to each of you and to the synodical community whom we serve, that I am incredibly grateful to have you as colleagues. You are a joy and a delight to work with. Thank-you so very much.

Thanks also, to my fellow officers, Laurie Knott, Wendell Grahlman and Keith Myra who met with me, often weekly and at least bi-weekly throughout the course of the pandemic. Each of them devoted themselves to specific aspects of the pandemic related supports we provided to congregations with dedication, forbearance, and good humour.

Thank-you to our synod archivist, Karen Kuhnert. I apologize for neglecting to thank-you in my written report. Your committed efforts and that of your colleagues at Laurier archives, to help us both preserve and learn our own history, are deeply appreciated.

I also wish to thank our Eastern Synod Council, Ministry Area Deans and those countless persons who provide leadership in the life of our synod through their membership on Area Leadership Teams, boards, committees and working committees that guide and administer the ministries of candidacy and worship, advocacy, mission and service, women, youth and young adults, professional leadership, camping and campus ministry.

And lastly, and in closing, let me thank all of you, the rostered ministers and congregation leaders, for the honour and privilege of serving as your bishop. I do so with a heart that continues to burst with gratitude.

I am so grateful to you, dear disciples, for your faithfulness in ensuring that the vital work of Christ's church has continued, and in many ways grown, over the course of what has felt like a year-long season of lent.

Dear church, God has blessed and equipped us to be God's faithful people in ways none of us would have thought imaginable and I have never been prouder to be counted among your number!

"Behold, I am doing a new thing," says the Lord. "Do you not perceive it?" Absolutely! And I hope that you do too!