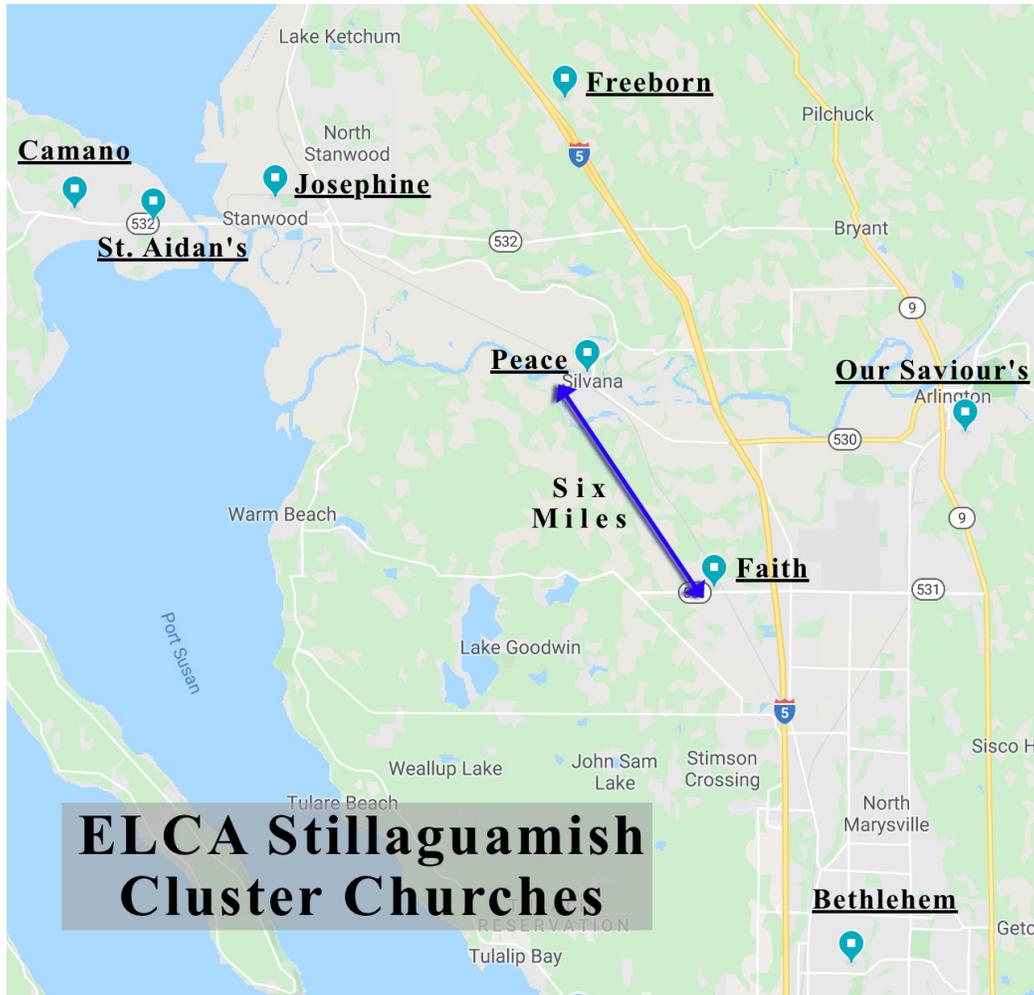


# North County Missional Learning Experiment Proposal

April 17, 2020



## Concept:

Launch and develop a missional learning laboratory among the ELCA congregations in the Stillaguamish Valley developing experiments in creative sustainable ministry among small and medium size congregations in the Pacific Northwest and beyond, with a particular focus on diaconal leadership.

## Vision:

The network of small and medium sized ELCA churches in the Stillaguamish cluster becomes a learning laboratory for a variety of interconnected missional experiments. These collaborative projects explore and embody models for sustainable small-church ministry in the second-Reformation context of the 21st Century. At the heart of these experiments is a desire to create

space and congregational imagination for the emerging ministry of the Deacon, which we believe has a central role to play in the way the Church is being called into the future. By embodying and practicing these ways of ministry, we intend both to bring increased vitality to these congregations as well as provide stories and concrete examples of new ways to participate in God's work in the world, which we hope will inspire other congregations and clusters to create their own experiments and bring renewal to the wider Church.

#### Building a model for Deacon-led and Pastor-supported ministry:

This project builds on the success of experiments in 2018-2019 with a ½ time Deacon-candidate led mission outreach focus at Faith Lutheran Church alongside a ¼ time Pastor in a supporting role. This has been a wild success, has increased mission engagement exponentially, and has led to a pathway to sustainability for a congregation on the edge of closure. This approach allows congregations to call Deacons to serve as specifically focused missional leaders (youth and community outreach in this case) based on the contextual needs of the congregation in this particular season, while also providing the ongoing pastoral support, consistency, and Word and Sacrament ministry that leads to healthy and vibrant congregational life. We would like to see this model expand to the other congregations in our area, beginning with Freeborn Lutheran Church, which is poised to deeply engage in vision and mission work outside its walls. Central to this project is working to overcome the dominant "independent church" model of the 20th century, and leaning into more interdependent and parish-based understandings of church that will be much more sustainable and mission-centered for the 21st century.

#### Outcomes:

- Learnings that will enhance ministry in the Northwest Washington Synod and can be shared with other Synods
- Increased engagement across the participating congregations with underrepresented populations including: unchurched, young adult, non-Anglo, economically disadvantaged, LGBTQ+.
- Deeper connection with the Fresh Expressions movement
- Cultivation of congregations that are thriving due to an emphasis on missional diaconal ministry
- Inspiration for other congregations to call Deacons as mission leaders
- New imagination for pathways to small/rural church sustainability
- Stories of God at work in rural, small town, and small church contexts
- Interconnected ministry based on increased mission opportunity not on survival
- Deeper connection to mission in the neighborhood, wider community and region
- Early fruits are already happening:
  - Renewed energy in participating congregations

- A new shared approach to youth ministry, mentoring, and outreach (North County Youth)
- An exploration for a collaborative “Dinner Church” potential new start
- Ecumenical relationships and energy with PCUSA, Episcopal, and UMC congregations and judicatories

Inputs required:

All the groundwork has been laid and this project is “shovel ready”. We need startup funding for year one (March 2020-March 2021) to take an informal network of congregations to the next level. We see this year as building a prototype and giving the participating congregations an experience of the benefits of collaborative ministry so they can increase their imagination and find sustainable funding from within.

A grant for first-year startup costs for 2020 will launch this experiment giving us the extra capacity we need, providing a boost of encouragement to the congregations and giving them the imagination space to experiment together. The grant funds an additional Deacon who will work in and among the participating congregations, leading efforts to engage more deeply together and leverage partnerships into mission in the community. It also funds a ¼ time coaching, leadership, and consulting contract with the ELCA Pastor currently serving the two primary congregations (in a combined ¾ time call—bringing him to full-time).

We are asking for \$60,000 in funding from the following sources:

- \$25,000 grant from ELCA Churchwide (secured)
- \$10,000 grant from Northwest Washington Synod Evangelical Outreach (secured)
- \$5,000 in local partner funding (secured)
- \$20,000 “Grace Grant” from Northwest Washington Synod

Expenses:

- \$35,000: Half-time Deacon (first call) including benefits and expenses.
- \$25,000: Coaching, leadership, and oversight Pastor contract.

Sustainability:

If fully funded for a strong launch, we expect that in the course of 12 months, the impact will be significant and that by month 10 we will have a plan in place to make this model sustainable in 2021 and beyond. We believe that God is calling us to do this quickly and to start now.

Within the first 9 months of this experiment we will assess the congregational engagement on a variety of levels:

- Changes to lay-leadership participation
- Outside-the-walls ministry engagement
- Cross-congregation events and shared ministry
- Development of shared-resource arrangements
- Interest in deeper relationship between congregations
- Increase in participation by underrepresented populations (unchurched, young adult, non-Anglo, economically disadvantaged, LGBTQ+.)

Following the start-up year, funding for continuing the project at the current levels would be picked up by the participating congregations. If next steps beyond year one include an expansion (more congregations, more ecumenical ministry, developing a full parish model, etc) then additional funds would need to be raised from grants and other sources (including particularly ecumenical partners.)

We expect this experiment to be wildly successful and generate increased engagement and energy within and among the congregations involved. As this movement builds, we plan to share widely our successes, and bring exciting new possibilities to the wider Church. Recognizing that this request involves a significant financial risk to our ministry partners, it is our hope that eventually we can “pay it forward” and offer another community of small congregations not just the learning we have discovered through these experiments, but ongoing partners in the work, and the start-up funds they will need to launch their own missional experiment.

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## Additional information and background

### Values:

- Jesus is Lord
  - “We aren’t ultimately in charge of what comes of this, but we are called to be part of it.”
- Listening
  - “What are we hearing from (God/scripture/each other/our neighbors)?”
- Creativity
  - “Of course we haven’t done it that way before.”
- Experimentation
  - “Let’s try it and see what happens.”
- Learning from failure
  - “What did we learn from that and what will we do differently next time?”
- Abundance mindset
  - “We have (or can find) what we need to do what we are called to do.”
- Sustainability
  - “How will we set this up to continue long term?”
- Ministry partnerships (especially Deacon/Pastor)
  - “Who is best to lead this? What resources and support do they need?”
- Ministry of all the baptized
  - “How are you called to be part of this?”
- Collaboration
  - “What would work better if we worked together?”
- Interconnectedness
  - “We aren’t doing this work alone.”
- Outward facing mission and ministry
  - “How will this make a real difference in the world?”
- Death and resurrection
  - “What needs to die so that something new can emerge?”

### Background:

In the early part of the 20th Century, many now-ELCA churches across the country were founded in communities where a critical mass of immigrants of a particular nationality moved and established a Lutheran church (or several). By the mid-part of the 20th Century these churches were thriving in a context of multi-generational, place-stable families with consistent

employment, prosperous family farms, a growing middle class, and in a culture that encouraged church participation. As people moved into the cities and suburbs, even more Lutheran churches were planted to respond to the need, and existing rural churches continued to thrive. The Lutheran denominational mergers of the 1960s and 1980s created a situation where often several ELCA churches exist in close proximity to one another. However, because of the continued population growth and high level of engagement of members, most of these churches continued to be vibrant, and so few congregation mergers or closures took place in that period. Even small and rural congregations had full-time pastors, engaged social outreach, and a full calendar of volunteer-led programming and faith formation.

The later decades of the 20th century and the first two decades of the 21st century were a time of dramatic changes in church and society. These factors have led to a steep decline in membership and participation in ELCA congregations, particularly in the Pacific Northwest, and this is a trend that is likely to continue. As a result, many of our congregations are struggling, particularly small and rural congregations, and they expend a great deal of their energy and resources simply to keep the lights on and the doors open. In contrast to the mid 20th Century, we now find ourselves with too many church buildings too close to one another, and at the same time a population used to commuting for work, school, and shopping who can travel to the church of their choice. Understandably, for a wide variety of reasons, congregations are reluctant to close or merge, and generally are unable to envision a future that looks different from their thriving past ministry--often with the idea that they can only function with a full-time Pastor and a full menu of programming at each essentially independent congregation. Even in congregations who are ready to face this reality head on, various programs over the last few decades for congregational renewal have not proved effective, leading to a state of hopelessness that deepens their decline. A posture of scarcity, a perceived shortage of resources, a sense of despair, and the lack of imagination and space for creative experimentation causes innovative leaders in these congregations to become frustrated and find other places to share their gifts. This leaves our congregations with a discouraged skeleton crew struggling to maintain a building and some semblance of ministry until they simply can't do it anymore. This is hardly the Church that Jesus imagined.

We find ourselves in a situation now where we recognize the challenges before us and know we need to do things differently. Yet, we have few examples of how to imagine our ministry differently and we simply don't know what to do.

But there is hope. In this season of institutional decline, we who are part of the dying system aren't seeing the work God is doing underground. Some of those innovative leaders who have dropped out of our congregations have been dreaming and experimenting--seeking embodied,

interconnected, relational, and sustainable ways of being and following in the way of Jesus. People outside of our circles are longing for authentic experiences, deep relationship, meaning-making communities, and a connection to the Holy. Struggling congregations, unable to make it on their own, are starting to wonder if creative collaboration might be a path forward--not just to maintain what they have, but to reconnect with God's mission in the community. And we have seen the Word and Service ministry of the Deacon reemerge in the ELCA and in our ecumenical partners, with a call to equip and nurture the call of all the baptized and reconnect Church and world--the very leadership needed for renewal.

If we can look beyond maintaining our crumbling buildings, we might recognize that God has given us an abundance of resources that we no longer need and gifted leaders to employ them in new ways. If we can move away from focusing on our own challenges, we might have the courage to listen to God's call to listen to our neighbors in new ways. If we can see past our struggles to maintain what we have, we might recognize the Holy Spirit prompting us to let go and see what God has in store for us next. Perhaps it's time to leave these boats on the shore and fish in other waters, to sell all that we have to follow Jesus, to spread fertilizer beneath trees struggling to grow and see what new fruit they bear.

Congregations struggling to make it on their own won't be able to make it happen, particularly if they feel alone and under resourced. Now is the time for our Synods to invest in leaders and communities ready to experiment and practice new ways of being Church together--not in small ways or in grants tied to old church-building-and-pastor metrics--but by funding the research, development and start up costs of new ways of being Church in the context in which we find ourselves. We need to reinvest the mission funds given in previous decades that have borne fruit in valuable buildings we no longer need. We need to act less like franchise managers operating in known markets with proven methods, and more like venture capital investors who are willing to take big risks with the hopes of seeing great rewards. And we believe that today, conditions are just right in the Stillaguamish Valley to launch a prototype of what this new way of innovative ministry might look like.

What we have:

- Two increasingly interconnected congregations (Faith and Freeborn) who in one year (2019) have both gone from the brink of financial disaster to sustainable, balanced budget ministries through engaging this model of ministry.
  - Includes creative staffing model: Freeborn half-time pastor (shared with Faith). Faith half-time lay leadership (in Deacon role), quarter-time pastor.

- Faith has transitioned from declining congregation without a vision beyond survival, to a still-struggling-but-stable congregation energized to engage an outward looking, community focused mission with youth in partnership with the Lakewood School District.
- Freeborn has transitioned from a congregation beholden to the funding and vision of a single donor to an engaged, multi-generational, congregation with a strong base of leaders and donors, and a desire to deeply engage in ministry in the community. Their vision is simply to be a vibrant sustainable small rural congregation.
- A very interconnected cluster of congregations (all within 6-9 miles of each other) with collaborative leaders who trust each other and want to experiment together.
  - Faith, Peace, Camano, St Aidan's Episcopal, Josephine, Freeborn, Our Saviors, Bethlehem.
  - Have experimented in the last 18 months with North County Youth shared youth ministry (which is now evolving into congregation-based one-to-one mentoring).
  - Also potential and emerging partnerships with St. Philip's Episcopal, Marysville UMC, and Tideland's PCUSA.
- A variety of contexts: rural, small town, medium town, freeway growth center, retirement/vacation community.
- Five of these congregations are facing major transitions in 2020
  - Camano--developing new vision and mission
  - Josephine--calling new Chaplain
  - Peace--adapting to reduced staffing and ongoing budget cuts
  - Our Saviors--calling a new pastor in the spring
  - Faith--turning its building into a community youth center
- A congregation with a decade-plus history of Deacons leading in ministry (Faith)
- A pool of deacons (and one deacon in discernment)
  - Deacon Kathy Mutchler
  - Deacon Marie Preftes Arenz
  - Deacon Candidate Sister Le Brandes
  - Soon-to-be Deacon candidate Ryan Brown
- Leaders trained in Congregation Based Community Organizing and part of the ELCA's Organizing for Mission Network, in which Erik Samuelson is a trainer.
- A new program growing out of our cluster's shared youth-ministry experiment: congregation-based one-to-one mentoring of youth across the cluster in partnership with LINC NW.
- An emerging "dinner church" church plant experiment
- A recognition that shared ministry could assist the congregations in a variety of ways:

- Shared staffing with multiple leaders to reduce costs while increasing leadership gifts
- Shared youth programming that congregations can no longer provide
- A desire to share infrastructure (bookkeeping, communications, etc)
- Emerging conversations about a parish-based model
- Recognition that different contexts can allow for specialized outreach
  - eg. Faith's proximity to schools that other congregations don't have but can participate in
- Utilizing musical gifts creatively (rotating worship styles, shared choirs, sharing bulletins/slides, vacation coverage)
- A track record of innovative, interconnected, sustainable ministry experiments in this context the past 4 years.
- All the leaders, relationships, contexts, and conditions needed to launch something new.
- Mission minded leaders in our Synod who are stewarding funds from the closure of congregations in 2019 and who desire to use these funds for mission experiments that will have a big impact and inspire other leaders and congregations in mission.

#### What is possible:

- Increasing the cluster's ability to work together and come up with creative, collaborative solutions to our common challenges in ways that make us more interdependent and sustainable.
- Utilizing Sister Le Brandes's leadership between Faith and Freeborn to build stronger connections, highlight the ministry of the Deacon, coordinate administration toward more collaborative organizational structures, and increase lay ministry participation inside the congregations and in the community. (half-time call envisioned)
- Capitalizing on Freeborn's lay music leader Josh Smith, now also coordinator for one-to-one congregational mentoring, and creating a full time position from a variety of sources, including exploring (and hopefully developing) the new "Dinner Church" worshipping community and building the Youth Services Center.
- Freeing Pastor Erik Samuelson from administrative and maintenance elements of ministry at Freeborn to be able to engage in this cluster-level work, and lean into his gifts of coaching, guiding discernment, developing leaders, and catalyzing transformational change. We envision shifting the model of ministry at Freeborn to be more like what we have done successfully at Faith in 2019--Deacon led and Pastor supported.
- Freeing soon-to-be-Deacon-candidate Ryan Brown from administrative and maintenance elements of ministry at Faith to more fully lead the community youth center transition.

