

Living Out the Gospel

A 2023-2026 Strategic Plan for the Texas-Louisiana Gulf Coast Synod



Texas-Louisiana Gulf Coast Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Unless the Lord builds the house,
those who build it labor in vain.

Psalm 127:1

Which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost,
whether you have enough to complete it?

Luke 14:28

Then the Lord answered me and said: "Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may
read it. For there is still a vision for the appointed time; it speaks of the end and does not lie.
If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come; it will not delay."

Habakkuk 2:2-3

Council

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Ms. Irene Del Arco
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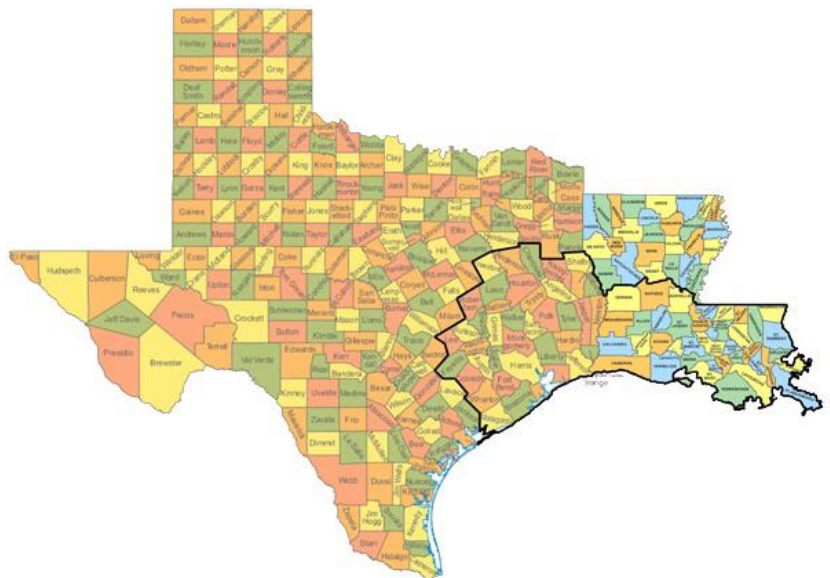
Staff

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In January of 2023, the Gulf Coast Synod asked The Blackberry Collection to help us engage in a strategic planning process. Where did the Lutheran church in Eastern Texas and Southern Louisiana need to focus its energy over the next few years in this post-pandemic environment? They hit the ground running with a listening process that involved digital surveys and conversations in focus groups.¹ Once the listening phase was completed, a Strategic Planning Team was formed. The results of the listening team were shared with the team, the staff, the council, and the assembly. The team took this feedback and shaped it into this plan, with its two pillars/goals of leadership and diversity. Every step of the process adapted this plan, including a youth ministry resolution at the synod assembly in May. During the



summer, the plan was reviewed by staff and council. This plan does not encompass the entirety of all we will do in the next few years, but rather focuses on two big priorities that emerged:

Diversity is a clear mandate in French/Spanish/Cajun/Haitian/African New Orleans, a city that today is 50% African American. This priority is equally important in Houston, the most diverse city in the U.S.,ⁱⁱ where half the population speaks Spanish. Immigration has made these cities and the surrounding areas what they are today, where the cuisine reflects a *mélange* of cultural richness. Since this synod seeks to reflect this rich diversity, the whitest denomination in the U.S.ⁱⁱⁱ will need to intentionally engage this opportunity.^{iv}

Leadership has always been a priority in this synod, but it has often focused heavily on the clergy. This plan continues and even augments resources for clergy, while adding an emphasis on lay education, including a lay school. These efforts will offer training that will help the church, lay and clergy alike, live out the gospel in the church and in the world. These efforts will ground us in Scripture and theology. They will teach ministry best practices. They will broaden our perspective so that our ministry will reach all people, undergirding the diversity priority above.^v

Accomplishing these goals and objectives will take all of us, working together. It will require commitment, human resources, financial resources, sacrifices, and focus. No doubt, some efforts will succeed, and some will not. Good things will come of it. Past strategic Plans have resulted in things like [LEAD](#), with its constellation of tools and coaches. Former plans have given us resources to deepen faith, like [Deepening Faith](#). Former plans have focused us on planting new missions, reconnected us, reorganized us, and strengthened ministry. This one will too, if we pitch together.

As you read these pages, consider how you and your congregation might both benefit from and help achieve these goals and objectives. This is what a synod is: faith communities doing together what we cannot do alone.



Diversity Objective 1:

Because “diversifying membership” was lifted up as a high priority in the listening process, we will create opportunities to engage with skillsets and postures that fortify a broader and deeper experience of living out the Gospel.

1. We will develop a published, re-usable Bible study resource to ground the skillsets and postures that fortify a broader and deeper experience of living out the gospel.
2. We will offer on an ongoing, updatable, and timely basis, a slate of educational opportunities in support of the objective, along with pertinent promotions through website, weekly updates, and monthly newsletter. We will cross-connect with and include offerings by ELCA seminaries as well as other reliable sources to allow a wide variety of options and timeframes for participation and completion.
3. We will commit to new action by creating partnerships informed by the study and learning.

INTERNAL: How will we do this with Synod Staff, Council, Deans?

1. **The Strategic Planning Team** will initiate and craft the overall a Bible Study, beginning with the SPT notes from 6-26-23.
2. **Synod Staff** will promote training support from already-existing organizations such as:
 - the African Descent Lutheran Association,
 - the Association of Latino Ministries
 - the Office of Indigenous Ministries & Tribal Relations of the ELCA, and
 - [Houston SURJ](#) (Showing Up for Racial Justice).
3. **Synod Staff** will begin to accumulate a list of granting resources to be available for faith communities for the purposes of new initiatives.
 1. ELCA: at the three levels
 2. Non-ELCA: Local, State, and National
4. **Deans** will work within conferences to monitor, encourage, manage, and coordinate support for new initiatives resulting from the investment in the grounding study and other educational endeavors.

EXTERNAL: How will we help congregations do this?

1. Leaders of faith communities will utilize the SPT-crafted Bible study resource in their own context, paying attention to key postures and skill sets that help broaden and deepen their community’s experience of living out the gospel.

EVALUATE: How will we measure progress?

- Tracking the number of faith communities and individuals downloading and studying the Bible study document.
- Tracking, from that number, the number of people requesting additional training to develop the skillsets and postures that fortify a broader and deeper experience of the Gospel.
- Offer a pre-test with Deans (to discuss intended new community partnerships). Subsequent to this test: starting of partnership with guidance of “special interest” teams of the synod (LGBTQIA+ Coalition, Mesa Latine, ADLA, etc.
- Offer a post-test with the Deans (to discuss how the partnership(s) have been lived into. Here in particular, track postures and skillsets as they are expressed.
- Identify behaviors and skillsets.
- Possible tools to help people move forward and tests to know if we have moved: IDI, UH school of social work, LEAD
- Offer the same tests and tools to congregational leaders.

2. Collective leadership (rostered and lay) of faith communities can undergo context-specific training with the aim of developing the postures and skillsets presented in the Bible study. Co-ordinate this work with Synod Staff.
3. Through official channels of each faith community, postures and skillsets will be exercised through newly developed initiatives which are supported by the Dean of the conference.

WHO will be primarily responsible for this?

- Council will establish the Bible Study Team.
- The Bible Study Team will work with a seminarian to help curate the Bible study.
- Staff will promote training.
- Staff rep will be our new Director of Evangelical Mission.
- Writers
- EDITOR: Perhaps a seminary student to serve as editor and handle layout, and translators.

BENCHMARKS: What milestones will we need along the way?

- 2023:** Complete the Bible study
- 2024:** Train for the Bible study and implement.
- 2025:** Evaluate.

FINANCIAL RESOURCES

- **Financial:** \$25,000

Diversity Objective 2:

Because “diversifying membership” was lifted up as a high priority in the listening process, we will maintain consistency with our RIC welcome statement through an active and reflective method.

INTERNAL: How will we do this with Synod Staff, Council, Deans?

- Synod Council moves to establish an “RIC” TEAM focused on analyzing the synod RIC process and faith communities willing to participate in seeing how they complement the RIC Welcome Statement.
- From the analysis, the RIC Team (in conjunction with Deans and Team) establish written guidelines of accountability for the Synod and faith communities to adjust their actions and behaviors. Each guideline will be contextual.
- Through Deans and this team, recommend to faith communities, partnerships that embody the desired changed behavior. E.g. La Mesa Latine, or the LGBTQIA+ Coalition, Anti-racism Committee and/or St. James Family Life Center may have a more active role.

EXTERNAL: How we help congregations do this.

1. Faith communities may choose to undergo the RIC Team’s review of how the faith community complements the RIC Welcome Statement.
2. These faith communities, with the guidance of the RIC Team and the Dean, develop a contextual guideline for accountability to new action and behaviors, and commit to follow through.
3. These faith communities embark on the process of embodying their guideline for new actions and behaviors by following through the wisdom of the “special interest teams” of the synod. Together, recommendations for new partnerships consistent with the RIC welcome statement will emerge.

EVALUATE:

How will we measure progress?

- Percent of synod faith communities undergoing the RIC Team’s evaluation process and the completion of the Synod RIC analysis.
- Percent of those faith communities committing to written guidelines for accountability.
- Pre-Test with the Deans (to discuss intended new community partnerships).
 - Subsequent to this test: Starting of partnership with guidance of the “special interest” teams of the Synod.
 - Post-test with Dean (to discuss how the partnership(s) have been lived into).

BENCHMARKS: What milestones will we need along the way?

- **October 2023:** Before disbanding SPT recruits an “RIC Team.” November: Synod Council moves to establish the team
- **2024:** RIC Team analyzes the Synod RIC process and gathers faith communities willing to participate. Contextual accountability guidelines are written.

WHO will be primarily responsible for this?

- RIC Team
- Council
- Deans
- Staff (through an appointed staff rep)

FINANCIAL RESOURCES

- \$25,000

Diversity Objective 3:

Because “diversifying membership” was lifted up as a high priority in the listening process, we will diversify leadership within the synod.

- We will utilize asset-based community organizing (ABCO) as a discovery method for initial and/or informed action and relationship.
- We will participate in or mobilize around community-related issues.
- We will identify where organic diversity in leadership may emerge and nurture complementary relationships.

INTERNAL: How will we do this with Synod Staff, Council, Deans?

Through its authorizing powers **Synod Council** will be responsible for the introduction of this objective. Council will authorize and enable actions by Synod staff and other leadership bodies and will approve funding as needed.

A. **Synod Staff** will be responsible for the research and assessment of a demographics tool (or tools) to be used with funds approved by the Synod Council.

B. **Synod Staff** will identify an ad hoc working team, when and as needed, to assist with the creating of or patterning of a streamlined grant process similar to the ELCA's Domestic Hunger Grant (DHG) process. This process opens doors for grants to initiate actions discovered in the asset-based

EVALUATE: How will we measure progress?

- Number of rostered leaders and seminarians attending ABCO training and their independent reports of insights gained.
- Before and after reporting from those pursuing grants for asset-based community organizing
- Marking the number of new leaders emerging from across the spectrum of diversity.

BENCHMARKS: What milestones will we need along the way?

1. Ethno-centered collaborations and teams will find ways to **teach and learn across groups** that center on the “up” side of fellowship.
2. Youth, particularly high school and college students who are already a part of multicultural groups can help provide examples and leadership that are positive from their experiences. **The engagement of youth** in this work is a benchmark.
3. Supported by the Conference Deans we will utilize the assessment provided by the demographics tool(s) to challenge each congregation to enlist and nurture persons in their congregation or broader community of participants to consider leadership roles. Ground zero of this understanding is the possible lack of information about who can serve as a leader. NOTE: A critical nurturing process may take time, depending on the congregation demographic. Resistance by persons of color is to be expected and nurturing therefore becomes a definite step. Benchmark: Conferences will craft examples of **leadership steps that are basic and manageable** for congregations new in the boundary-crossing adventure and will lead in implementation.
4. The conference (as a group of congregations) under the leadership of the Dean will collaborate in shared human resources across culture and financial capacity to enable congregations with limited capacity in diversity to engage in and experience leadership across culture. Supply pastors are one way many congregations already engage in this. Intentional **conversation and collaboration** are the actual benchmarks.

community organizing activity. (Note: The DHG process calls for engagement with the community.) Grants would be for new partnerships emerging from the ABCO process.

C. Synod Council and Staff will evaluate progress by recognizing the achievement of the benchmarks outlined to the left.

EXTERNAL: How will we help congregations do this?

By modeling this across the synod with rostered leaders, we hope this will grow within faith communities.

WHO will be primarily responsible for this?

- Ethno-centered collaborations and teams
- Highschool and college youth already involved in multicultural educational settings.
- Synod Council
- Staff
- Conferences, in collaboration with congregations will take the lead in contextual work in this objective. Not all conferences are alike in demographic and capacity, so the freedom to work within their demographic structure is important. However, lack of movement is not an option. Conference reporting on this issue must be included in their job description in whatever way it can be described.

FINANCIAL RESOURCES

- Conferences and participants can fund depending on event.
- Market or festival events can include a fee structure for booths, and a minimal attendance fee that includes a gift prize that is geared toward learning and interaction, e.g. learning how to make tortillas in a church kitchen.
- \$5,000 ACBO training

Leadership Objective 1:

Because “educating and equipping of leaders” (both clergy and lay) was lifted up as a high priority in the listening process, we will engage for rostered leaders (deacons and pastors) in existing ongoing leadership opportunities and augment them.

- Anti-racism/diversity training
- Boundaries training
- Respite/preaching
- Retreats
- City-wide leadership
- SURJ
- University of Houston
- Rice University, etc.
- Festival of Homiletics
- Ethnic specific opportunities
- First Call
- Accompaniment
- Stewardship
- Companion Synod Trips and Engagement

INTERNAL: How will we do this with Synod Staff, Council, Deans?

To foster leadership excellence, we will form a continuing education team to plan events, immersions, and suggested readings, helping leaders take resources to their congregations.

- In the next two years, the synod will offer required anti-racism/diversity training for pastors and deacons, staff, and council (outsourced to a non-church organization).
- In the next 3 years, the synod will offer required healthy boundaries training for pastors and deacons, staff, and council (outsourced to non-church organization).
- We will appoint a team to bring our policies and website in compliance with ELCA sexual harassment report.
- We will continue the January preaching event.

EXTERNAL: How will we help congregations do this?

- We will create Bible studies geared toward diversity in Spanish and English.
- We will recommend book discussions.
- We will plan a companion synod trip and events each year, as our companion synods broaden our perspectives on life and ministry.
- We will encourage leaders to offer the boundaries and diversity training in their congregations in English and Spanish.

EVALUATE: How will we measure progress?

Has the team been created? Track the percentage of those who participate and work toward growth. We will follow up survey to determine if the training had impact.

BENCHMARKS: What milestones will we need along the way?

- 2023: Team formed, preaching retreat
- 2024: Diversity workshop, preaching retreat
- 2025: Boundaries workshop, preaching retreat

WHO will be primarily responsible for this?

- A newly created leadership development team, with staff representation from Pastor Tracey Breashears Schultz.
- Council
- Deans

FINANCIAL RESOURCES:

- \$25,000.
- Grants?

Leadership Objective 2:

Because “educating and equipping of leaders” (both clergy and lay) was lifted up as a high priority in the listening process, we will create a 2-year Lay Ministry School in English & Spanish.

INTERNAL: How will we do this with Synod Staff, Council, Deans?

We have heard requests for training in the youth ministry, rural ministry, stewardship, Latino ministry. There has also been a yearning for more biblical and theological training. This school can raise the bar across our congregations and even become a pipeline for future pastors and deacons who sense a call and desire to go further with their training. To our knowledge this synod has not has a school like this in the recent past, if ever.

We will create a team to develop and oversee the lay ministry school. This work could be done with the same team as in the previous objective.

English: We will consider other synod models such as the NTNL Parish Lay Ministry Academy.

Spanish: Our Mesa Latine has landed on the *Academia Ecumenica de Liderazgo*.

Everything will be on the synod website. Everything clickable. Information will be available on how to get grants.

EXTERNAL: How will we help congregations do this?

We will make create and promote the lay school, making it accessible, and shaping it around the leadership needs of congregations that seek to reach their communities in this diverse context.

Scholarships will be provided, and mentors.

EVALUATE: How will we measure progress?

- Team created.
- School created and implemented.
- Students registered.
- Participants surveyed to evaluate and gather stories.

BENCHMARKS: What milestones will we need along the way?

- September 2023: Planning team formed.
- December 2023: Plan created.
- Spring 2024: Registration
- Fall 2024: Classes

WHO will be primarily responsible for this?

A newly created lay school team (could be the same as the Leadership Development team above), with staff representation from our new Bishop's Associate for Mission. Help from Deans.

FINANCIAL RESOURCES

- Individuals pay per course or semester.
- Congregational rates.
- \$25,000 start up costs for materials, teachers, scholarships, registration.

Leadership Objective 3:

Because we heard your overwhelming yearning for more collaboration around youth ministry, will create a Synod Youth Ministry Team to learn, discuss, respond, and report back to the Synod Assembly in 2024.

A youth ministry team will be formed of adults and high school youth leaders from across the geography of our synod to develop relationships between youth and youth leaders across the synod and to foster partnership opportunities. The report will include methods to develop family and youth leadership opportunities and ways in which the synod may support congregations implementing successful youth leadership ministries.

INTERNAL: How will we do this with Synod Staff, Council, Deans?

- We will create a youth ministry team, by invitation, with geographical diversity, ethnic diversity, age diversity.
- This team will define the struggle of youth ministry.
- We will broaden the perspective of youth ministry beyond those who are members of the congregation, to include the community.
- We will think about ministry to Latino youth (half of Houston).
- This team will be cognizant that the majority of our congregations are under 100 in worship and doing youth ministry with volunteer leaders.
- For smaller congregations we will consider synod-wide youth mission trips.
- We will capitalize on things that are working well, like Camp Hope.
- We will focus on middle school, but also look at elementary and high school.
- We will start with listening. What are the needs? Who is doing youth ministry in our congregations? What do they want/need?
- We will consider creating a youth gathering if there is sufficient interest demonstrated in the listening. We could consider having it concurrent with Synod Assembly.
- We will consider training for congregational youth ministry leaders.

EXTERNAL: How will we help congregations do this?

- Connecting congregations.
- Curating resources.
- Equipping volunteer youth ministry leaders.
- Possible synodical events.

EVALUATE: How will we measure progress?

- Has the Youth Ministry Team been created with ethnic, age, and geographical diversity?
- Has the listening been done?
- Have the bullet points to the right been addressed?
- Has the team reported to the assembly?

BENCHMARKS: What milestones will we need along the way?

- 2023: Team formed
- 2023: Listening process
- 2024: Report to assembly

Zoch and Chon Pugh, with staff

FINANCIAL RESOURCES:

- \$5,000

ⁱ A copy of the After Action Report from the listening can be found here:

<https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/gylgqyr5u4twh0nbaue/d/2023-04-TBC-After-Action-Report-Texas-Louisiana-Gulf-Coast-Synod-Final.pdf?rlkey=rfaselzzvqtu28gl060hnadz5&dl=0>. The Blackberry Collection (TBC) spent several weeks (totally about 25 hours) interviewing and listening to a cross section of over 80 Texas-Louisiana Gulf Coast Synod stakeholders, including over a fifteen conference focus groups, to shed light on some of the root causes that impact the Texas-Louisiana Gulf Coast Synod's culture and climate. An electronic survey was also utilized. The discovery process illuminated strengths, challenges, and the need for stakeholders to continue to engage the interrogation of inequitable practices and how those practices show up systemically in Texas-Louisiana Gulf Coast Synod, ELCA's culture. In the listening “living out the gospel was the most relevant and highest priority for respondents, hence the title for this Strategic Plan. Respondents felt “Serving our neighbor” was where they/we were most effective. There was a strong sense that regional and geographical nuances need to be taken into consideration as we serve our neighbors. “Diversifying membership” was lifted up as a high priority, but respondents felt we had the least capacity and support for this work, and thus were ineffective. Diversifying referred to both the ethnic diversity of our faith communities and also a more diverse understanding of “membership.” It was discovered that “synod” is used in different ways. By some “synod” refers to the congregations of the synod and its members. By others “synod” refers the synod leadership (staff and council). Cooperating ecumenically, while important, was considered the lowest priority when setting large goals for the next few years. The report referenced a sense of disconnect and called for the educating and equipping of leaders as a high priority. As a result of the listening, two priorities emerged: Diversification and Education.

ⁱⁱ Morgan Brennan, Morgan. n.d. “Houston Tops Our List of America’s Coolest Cities.” Forbes. Accessed January 15, 2022. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/morganbrennan/2012/07/26/houston-tops-our-list-of-americas-coolest-cities-to-live/amp/>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Michael Lipka, n.d. “The Most and Least Racially Diverse U.S. Religious Groups.” Pew Research Center. Accessed January 15, 2022. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/07/27/the-most-and-least-racially-diverse-u-s-religious-groups/?amp=1>.

^{iv} Strategic Planning Team members who worked on the diversity priority were Pastor Ele Clay, Pastor Morgan Gates, and Pastor Sergio Rodriguez.

^v Strategic Planning Team members who worked on the education priority were Deacon Jessica Noonan, Ms. Gladys Wilson, Vice President Robert Rivera, and Bishop Mike Rinehart.

Costs

These are just estimates. Actual costs may be more or less.

DIVERSITY

- Objective 1: \$25,000
- Objective 2: \$25,000
- Objective 3: \$5,000

LEADERSHIP

- Objective 1: \$25,000
- Objective 2: \$25,000
- Objective 3: \$5,000

TOTAL: \$110,000 over 2-3 years

Bible Study Texts

- Genesis 1: Image of God. One family. The human family. Inherent dignity of every person. (Jessica)
- Genesis – Tower of Babel. Empire homogenizes. God diversifies language, culture... (Mike)
- Matthew 28 – All nations, baptize, teach. Diversity and leadership (Mike)
- Luke 10 – Sending of the 70. If they receive you. Patience. Hospitality. Relationships. Peace.
- John 4 – Woman at the well. Different mountains. “It is necessary” to go to Samaria. Just do it. (Robert)
- Acts 1 – Witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, & the ends of the earth
- Acts 2 – Every language
- Acts 8 – Ethiopian eunuch (Jessica)
- Paul at the Areopagus (Mars Hill) – unknown God. Your own poets...
- Household of faith (Sergio)
- Syrophenician woman. People not like us.

Implementation Plan

The team began working on how we will be planning and evaluating the work.

- What is the communication strategy?
- What is the marketing strategy?
- Master Timeline spreadsheet or project management software

Work must begin immediately on an implementation plan.