

A Brief Report

“The SMP in the Shared Ministry Context”

INTRODUCTION

“Shared Ministry” in one form or another has existed in the Christian Church for centuries. In some regions of our own church body the concept of shared ministry is receiving renewed interest as congregations establish essential working relationships with one or more sister congregations to enhance a wide range of congregational and regional activities including worship, fellowship, the teaching of God’s Word, evangelism, and social ministry. In other regions of our church body one or more shared ministry models have been effectively utilized by congregations for hundreds of years. In fact, in a sense, the entire LCMS IS a shared ministry model at work at this moment.

The purpose of this Brief Report is to provide further information regarding shared ministry and to offer thought-provoking insights regarding the unique challenges and opportunities in leveraging the Specific Ministry Program (SMP) in designing and conducting shared ministry endeavors. The suggestions offered in this Brief Report are certainly not all encompassing; they are put forth to encourage your own creative thoughts in these matters. Please share your insights and experiences with us and your fellow learners.

SHARED MINISTRY

Perhaps for some, the notion of “shared ministry” between congregations runs counter to their thinking about congregational life. Some may see congregations as independent entities that are to operate in isolation from other sister congregations. Some may see sister congregations as rivals or fierce competitors against whom they must work. Others may be driven by a sense of jealousy or fear that shared ministry only opens the door for “sheep stealing” - convincing others to leave your congregation and to join theirs. Some may see shared ministry as only an admission of failure or a last, desperate resort that is now being forced upon them by the sometimes-harsh realities of church life in the 21st century.

We choose to envision shared ministry in a much more positive and enthusiastic manner. Shared ministry is the heartfelt collaboration between two or more congregations that enhances the proclamation of the Gospel to all nations. We’ve all heard the expression “Two heads are better than one.” So it is in shared ministry; two (or more) congregations engaged in the sharing of resources, hopes, and experiences can, indeed, be better than one acting alone.

To facilitate our thinking about shared ministry it is important to realize that “one size does not fit all.” There are many, many shared ministry models available for your study. These models vary by degree of formality, administrative structures, and practicality for your situation. Some shared ministry models are “affinity based” - collaborations between two or more congregations that may simply enjoy a history of working together. Other shared ministry models are

“propinquity based” - collaborations between congregations that are closely related by virtue of geography alone. In your studies of shared ministry and through your visits with congregations engaged in shared ministry, you will come to realize the enormous possibilities and creativity of shared ministry. In fact, there’s plenty of room for new thinking and new collaborative models, each dependent upon and faithful to the context in which the Lord has seen fit in His grace to place you and your congregation

First, let’s begin with a brief explanation of the “shared Lutheran ministry” model. Pioneered in rural and urban communities (e.g., even as early as the 1860’s in the LCMS), the shared ministry model yokes two or more congregations together to share pastoral personnel resources. Congregations in the shared ministry model also encourage the committees/boards of the respective congregations to regularly meet together to share plans, explore joint ministry opportunities, and to enhance Lutheran ministry across the region. Such collegial enhancements can pertain to worship, teaching, fellowship, community service, and a host of other outreach endeavors. The congregations in the shared ministry model often share costs for the pastoral staff and coordinate these pastoral personnel to maximize each congregation’s corporate life in Christ. There are many, many types of shared ministry; “one size (or style) does not fit all.” In addition, there is always room to design “hybrid” shared ministry models. Be alert to your needs, resources, and creative shared ministry designs that may best suit your context.

Second, let’s say a word or two about what the shared ministry model is NOT. This model does not necessarily merge congregations or replace a congregation’s polity in any manner. Congregations often continue to own their own property, elect their own officers, boards, and committees, and otherwise structurally function as they have chosen to do so in the past. The focus of the shared ministry model is simply upon the enhancement of each congregation’s ministry as they come together to share pastoral resources, hopes, and opportunities to tell everyone what He has done.

The Kansas District of the LCMS has assembled invaluable counsel regarding shared ministry. Be sure and consult their website for further resources. You will be glad you did so. Thank you, Kansas!

“PRO” LIST

“Three-fold cord” advantage: Strength in numbers

Renewed enthusiasm for/understanding of the mission of the Church

Sharper strategic focus

Renewed commitment to outreach

Expanded view of the body of Christ

Expanded view of the mission field

Greater awareness of neighboring congregations and their activities

Encouragement through walking together (“We’re all in this together”)

New ideas from the partner church

Solves supply/demand challenge: A reasonable solution to demographic pressures

Congregations can maintain Word and Sacrament ministry and a Lutheran presence in their respective locations.

Combining programs, events, and activities (e.g., confirmation classes) is an efficient use of resources (i.e., good stewardship).

Shared resources (e.g., expertise of individual members with special skills; equipment)

Shared financial load (e.g., pastor’s salary; program expenses)

Ability to provide suitable support for a pastor and family

Potential for more opportunities for laypeople to serve

Individuals and groups benefit through sacrifices and compromises made for the sake of the larger mission.

“CON” LIST

Won’t be able to satisfy everyone’s preferences; will need to compromise

Loss of control/independence

Requires more time and energy for communication; distance between congregations might make communication and contact difficult

Possible issues with interpersonal dynamics (individual or group)

Might be difficult to merge congregational cultures (but on the plus side, might yield new insights in the process)

Scheduling challenges (worship; classes; other activities)

Lack of available support staff/volunteers (e.g., organists; Bible study leaders) may increase the burden

Could create inefficiencies (e.g., duplication; time pastor spends traveling)

Pastor might not be as available; might not live in your city; family might not be members of your church (i.e., one congregation might feel slighted)

Could lead to pastor burnout

“Fair share” tensions (finances)

Congregation may sacrifice voting privilege (but not voice)

If the arrangement isn’t formalized, ministry activities may not be represented accurately (e.g., in directories; for succession planning).

Lots of preparation work in hammering out details (but on the plus side, could yield dividends later)

Danger of “maintenance ministry”

FOR DISCUSSION

How significant are the factors above, both pro and con, in your deliberations?

PARTNERSHIP CONSIDERATIONS: THE PARTNERSHIP MINDSET

What do churches need to be thinking about when considering partnerships? Below, you’ll find several questions to consider in various phases of the partnership process.

- Why would we even want to have this conversation (look at this option)?
- What does Scripture say?
- How would a partnership benefit the members of the congregations? In other words, what makes the partnership "better" than the two (or more) congregations going it alone? (i.e., How can we be “better together”?)
- How can we best serve the proclamation of the Gospel in this region?
- What are the idols that keep us from doing what is best for the kingdom?
- How do we deny ourselves to serve others?
- What resources are available to help us move in a new direction? Assessment/Exploration (Pre-Partner Stage)
- What are the pros and cons of forming a ministry partnership?
- Who are our potential congregational partners?
- What other organizations are potential partners in ministry? (e.g., RSOs, community organizations)
- What partnership models are available?
- What are our assets as a congregation?
- Does this mean we have to merge?

- Will this force one of us to have to close?
- What are the characteristics and demographics of our communities? What do they need?
- What would energize the congregations involved to serve the community?
- With whom will we partner?
- What partnership model will we adopt?
- How do we manage the transition process?
- Who should be involved in the planning discussions? When?
- How will the congregations intentionally work together?
- What strengths/assets does each partner/pastor bring to the table?
- How will decisions be made among partners?
- What will each congregation/partner need to give up?
- What will each congregation/partner gain?
- How can partner ministries be structured to complement the partnership and joint ministry (with the aim of multiplying ministry opportunities/reach)?
- How can redundancy/overlapping be avoided?
- What will "success" look like?
- What could threaten this partnership? Is there discord or unrest in either/any partner? Is there potential of division? Is there any contingent of disapproving/disgruntled people who could undermine the partnership?
- What language will be used to describe the partnership? (This is key! Is it a partnership or a merger?)
- How will we ensure that as many members as possible are heard in this process (with the goal of ensuring people feel like their concerns/questions have been heard/addressed)? Listening sessions, asset mapping, brainstorming meetings are useful.
- What forms of communication will be used to promote/perpetuate the partnership? Special meetings? Voter's meetings? Council meetings? Worship? Newsletter? Online? FAQ?
- How will partners ensure effective communication between churches? Syncing information across multiple platforms/ministries is challenging. How will partners ensure this is done effectively? How can we utilize technology (especially shared electronic calendars) to ensure communication stays up to date? What regular in-person meetings will be scheduled?

SHARED MINISTRY TYPES: A SAMPLE

DUAL PARISH

Description: Two neighboring churches experiencing similar challenges (e.g., difficulty filling a vacancy) form a partnership that enables them to support a pastor.

Advantages: Solves the vacancy dilemma: “How do we support a new pastor?” Can maintain a Lutheran presence in the communities. Increased awareness of activities in the other congregation. Considerations Distance between congregations needs to be manageable (closer than Regional model). Need to make both congregations feel equally loved.

Possible Challenges: Limiting mindset: “Paying for a pastor” vs. expanding the ministry. Disagreement over share of support for pastor. Death by meetings. Unnecessary duplication (e.g., newsletters, printing).

HELPING HAND

Description: A smaller congregation arranges for essential help (e.g., worship services) from a neighboring larger congregation. Smaller church typically isn’t in a position to call a full-time pastor. Partnering with a larger church might make sense if there’s no dual parish partner available.

Advantages: A congregation can remain a viable outpost for the Gospel. Consistent presence in the pulpit. A congregation might benefit from the health/ideas of the larger church.

Considerations: Necessary ministry mindset: Don’t do ministry IN the building, but rather FROM the building. Can the pastor find a way to be active in the community where he’s assisting? Training needed: Emphasis on the priesthood of all believers. What do members of the larger congregation think about the helping role of their pastor?

Possible Challenges: Operating in maintenance mode. For the smaller congregation: Ministry only one day a week? Outreach is difficult; time for adult instruction?

CIRCUIT RIDER

Description: Multiple small congregations experiencing challenges agree to worship at different times so one pastor can serve them all.

Advantages: Word and Sacrament ministry can be sustained in established sites. Offers a way to provide a suitable salary for a pastor. Considerations Requires more than one partner church. Distance can vary (dictates worship times). Requires good time management and an ability to manage a more complex arrangement. Are congregations flexible on worship times and days? Better if you can synchronize services. Need to keep things simple (same bulletin; same music).

Possible Challenges: Maintenance ministry can be an issue. Challenges caring for property. Pastor burnout. Pastor retention. Accountability of pastor. Potential duplication of resources.

Meetings could be burdensome. Ability for members to communicate and connect with one another. Finding times for Bible studies and other classes.

REGIONAL (3+ congregations)

Description: One church is the hub and partners with 2+ sites around it. Lends itself to multiple staff. Helps if the hub church has resources to share. More flexibility in the kinds of churches involved. Can accommodate more distance between churches.

Advantages: Strength in numbers. Team approach (akin to Jesus sending out disciples in pairs). Increased efficiency. The ministry can grow (add congregations). Promotes a regional mindset. Creates a network.

Possible Challenges: Unequal influence. Communication can be more complicated. Weekly schedule can be hard to figure out. Death by meetings.

Consider if... Smaller congregation is struggling on its own or struggling to maintain a dual parish (i.e., experiences the “aha!” moment of realization that something needs to change). Rapid turnover of pastors; difficulty calling a pastor. Stable, thriving congregation nearby that’s willing to help. Interested in recharging mission focus (not simply in survival mode). Distance between congregations makes it difficult to arrange a workable Sunday schedule. Members are flexible and open to compromise and new ways of operating.

CONNECT WITH TECH (3+ churches)

Description: Multiple small congregations share resources to call a pastor to keep ministry going, with the help of technology. Congregations aren’t close enough to function effectively in a more traditional multi parish arrangement. For worship, might utilize either live streaming or recorded sermons, with elders handling the liturgy.

Considerations: Need to have resources (or be able to obtain them) for tech infrastructure and equipment. Pastor needs to be comfortable with technology. Elders would need training. Churches need to coordinate schedules. Better to work with mileage reimbursement or a vehicle purchase?

Advantages: Spirit of camaraderie. Churches can retain their respective cultures.

Possible Challenges: Decreased motivation to attend. Might affect sense of community. Pastor physically present only every three or four weeks (meaning less frequent communion).

MULTI-SITE MERGERS

Description: Two or more congregations merge their ministries, creating a single unified ministry with multiple sites (in some respects similar to a multi-site church planting effort).

Considerations: Mergers with the greatest chance of success involve at least one partner that’s strong and vibrant (e.g., strong + challenged; strong + strong), with mission-minded opportunity

as a driver. Requires a harmonization of missions and ministry and a spirit of unity; churches must be able to get behind a united vision. What do we have in common? What are the differences?

Advantages: Helps churches move beyond the status quo, providing an opportunity to refocus mission and ministry. Potential to revitalize ministry in a promising location. Might reduce inter-congregational tensions that can arise in dual or multi-point parish partnerships. Amplifies the presence of a ministry and its message.

Possible Challenges: Naming of the ministry. Keeping everyone well informed; allowing too much time to elapse without sharing info with a broader group. Waiting too long. Minimizing doctrinal or cultural differences; lack of clarity about non-negotiables. Lack of attention to transition management (e.g., emotional pain). Tension between multi-site merger models and LCMS emphasis on congregational self-governance/independence. LCMS multi-site examples exist, but the pattern isn't widespread in our Synod. One congregation might feel overshadowed or swallowed up by the other.

CATHEDRAL MINISTRY MODEL

Description: 3-5 churches form a partnership that includes the strongest area congregation (the cathedral congregation/church), other area congregations or partner congregations/churches in an association, and the district (if desired) for the purpose of placing (calling) a pastor on staff of the cathedral congregation who would be deployed to serve several other area partner LCMS congregations for blessing in, and growth of, God's Kingdom in our midst. Partner churches contract for services needed.

Advantages: Partner churches can maintain their own identity. Ministries are stabilized. Strong support for called associate from the cathedral church and association. Potential for growth and expanded view of ministry.

Possible Challenges: Might need to check with your district about representation and governance issues. Staffing costs will decrease, but cost savings might not extend to equipment. Expected equipment cost benefits might be negligible, offset by the need to have equipment in every location, as well as the assistance of a technology specialist.

YOUR INITIAL THOUGHTS?

These are simply samples of potential shared ministry models. You may find a need to create a "hybrid" model or to design an entirely new model that best suits your context. Take a few moments to evaluate the strengths and possible weaknesses of each model summarized above. You may also want to directly contact the Kansas District and interview participants in each respective model. This will likely give you further insights into each model and further encourage your exploration and discussions.

A DEVOTIONAL THOUGHT: HOW THE LORD REGARDS “SHARED MINISTRY”

Just as the church over the centuries has been familiar with the opportunities and challenges of shared ministry, so, too, the Lord of the Church has also been intimately involved with this model. Consider, for example, the complex dynamics of shared ministry that existed in the Old Testament era. The Twelve Tribes were united in mission, but simultaneously each was unique with respect to membership, traditions, and locales. Likewise, in the New Testament era there were many, many congregations that came into being and that boldly carried God’s Word to their respective communities. Although unified in purpose by God’s grace, the congregations were simultaneously unique as we learn from Acts, the Epistles, and from such congregational profiles as those presented in Revelation. And yet, in spite of the obvious challenges to faithfully carry forth with the work of the Church, under the faithful guidance and care of the Lord, the Gospel, indeed, went forth to all nations.

The Lord of the Church is no stranger to the challenges and the opportunities that engage shared ministry partnerships at this time in history. The Lord’s gracious guidance, provisions, counsel, and presence are evident for each congregation and each respective shared ministry partnership. And yes, the Lord’s same gracious care is also poured out faithfully upon the SMP vicars and pastors serving in this rewarding ministry model.

As you embark upon “Shared Ministry” take comfort in His faithfulness. Rejoice in the unity we share. Recognize the uniqueness of each congregation. With confidence in Him, proclaim this day the marvelous truth: “Elect from every nation, yet one o’er all the earth; her charter of salvation: One Lord, one faith, one birth. One holy Name she blesses, partakes one holy food, and to one hope she presses with every grace endued.” (“The Church’s One Foundation” – Lutheran Worship #289)

THOUGHTFUL SCENARIOS

Consider the following “Shared Ministry/SMP” scenarios. What issues do you spot in the respective scenarios? What counsel would you provide?

The shared ministry alliance between the congregations is just getting started and John, the SMP vicar, is hoping the alliance will succeed. But if it fails, where will that leave him? If it’s not one worry on his mind, it’s another. What counsel would you provide to this “shaky” SMP?

Harold is familiar with the four congregations now joining in the Regional shared ministry partnership. He has his own share of experiences with two of the congregations and his impressions of those two congregations are less than positive. He wonders, “How can I put my biases aside and honestly embrace each congregation through my service as the SMP vicar?” Your counsel to Harold?

“It sounds like you’re going to be herding cats,” your friend remarks, “and good luck trying to help them come to any sense of cooperation at all.” As Cal, the SMP vicar, ponders his friend’s

rather blunt assessment, he wonders, “Yes, how can I help them focus on what they have in common and at the same time help them celebrate uniqueness? This sounds like I’m in for a real challenge.” Cal shares his concern with you over a cup of coffee and asks for your wisdom. What would you say to Cal?

“I prefer doing things a certain set way,” Charley, the SMP Vicar, shares with his wife June. “But if this shared ministry board is always coming up with new ideas we’ve never thought of before, I just hope I can be a flexible partner with them. June, do you think I can serve effectively?” Assume for a moment that you are June; how would you reply to Charley? How would you address his concern?

ENGAGING THE POTENTIAL CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES:

THE SMP IN THE SHARED MINISTRY CONTEXT

As you are beginning to realize, there are many potential advantages that shared ministry can provide. However, there are some distinct challenges that shared ministry pursuits also present - to the respective congregations in shared ministry and also to the SMP vicar/pastor who serves in a shared ministry context. Consider the following thought starters. As you do so, feel free to expand upon these initial lists.

Possible Advantages

The opportunity to serve simultaneously with a variety of individuals with diverse church backgrounds, experiences, ideas, and skills

The opportunity to learn from a variety of distinct church and community contexts

The opportunity to exponentially enhance your knowledge and skills through collaborative learning with each distinct congregation and simultaneously in a multiple congregational partnership setting

Could provide you with a sense of “pastoral mobility” - i.e., without relocating to a new call or community you can essentially enjoy a sense of “mobility” and “freshness” by serving each respective congregation and simultaneously serving the shared ministry alliance as a whole

Could help you develop refined skills in such tasks as planning, coordination, stewardship, recruiting and equipping leaders, communication, conflict resolution, etc.

Could provide the “excitement” of new ministry possibilities as the shared ministry partnership identifies prominent community and church needs and creatively leverages resources across a range of congregations and communities

Could help develop a sense of “flexibility” in your thinking, planning, and ministry components

Possible Challenges

Could serve up a state of “continual flux” that can feel somewhat “chaotic” at times

Could generate a feeling of always being stretched too thin with your time, concentration, and energies; simultaneously attempting to focus on the needs in each respective congregation and striving for “unity” across the congregational partners

Could tax your time in building trust between partnering congregations and overcoming any past “negative” experiences/history/attitudes between the partnering congregations

Could tax your capabilities because of the time and effort you have to spend on resolving any of your own “negative” experiences/history/attitudes you may have concerning one or more of the partnership congregations

Requires that you have no “favoritism” toward any of the congregational partners

Could be difficult for your family to settle into a church “home”

Could be incompatible with any longing you may have “to please everyone”

Could foster unrealistic expectations toward you and the shared ministry partnership

Could foster unrealistic expectations you may have toward yourself and the shared ministry partners

Could require patience and time required to build trusting relationships

Could require extra effort necessary to recruit and equip members of the respective congregations to fit a “shared ministry” style of cooperation, planning, mutual support...

Could bring a degree of “nagging uncertainty” regarding the future shape and scope of the ever-changing shared ministry endeavors and partnership

Could require “extra” efforts and skills that may be required on your part (in addition to the more traditional pastoral tasks and responsibilities and your ongoing SMP studies) to serve effectively in a shared ministry model

Could require that you find extra essential time in your busy schedule to maintain your own well-being (spiritual, emotional, physical, intellectual...) and to enjoy and support your family

Processing the Challenges and Opportunities for Yourself

Stop now in your reading and list the blessings you anticipate during your seminary years as you serve in a shared ministry context. Next, list the blessings you anticipate after your seminary years. Compare and contrast your two lists. What similarities do you see? What differences?

Next, ask your spouse and your pastoral mentor, respectively, to complete this same exercise and to share their lists with you. How do their lists compare or differ from your lists?

Next, ask your congregational leaders to complete this same exercise and to share their lists with you. How do their lists compare or differ from your lists?

HELPFUL THOUGHTS FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION

*Practice exceptional pastoral care; visit, visit, visit. Although this disciplined practice may strike some as somewhat anachronistic and of relatively minor importance compared to exemplary administrative skills and the like, the truth of the matter is that building mutual trust and grace-centered relationships in any ministry model (and particularly in the shared ministry model) is of first importance. This still occurs through quality pastoral care and the faithful sharing of God's Word through compassionate listening, Gospel-centered devotions, and the sharing of your Christian faith. Commit time and effort to the provision of exemplary pastoral care. The Christian care you deliver and the lessons you will learn from your brothers and sisters in Christ are essential building blocks in ministry. This is also true in a shared ministry context where obstacles such as mistrust, suspicions, worries, longstanding hurts, and miscommunication need not fester.

*Give adequate attention to building relationships between congregation members across congregational lines (e.g., via joint fellowship activities, joint Bible studies, etc.).

*Strive to take note of the positives. Be among the congregations as an encourager and share the marvelous work God is accomplishing through each congregation and through the collaborative ministry that is delivered across congregational lines.

*Be patient, but deliberative with your care as relationships are developed and strengthened and as Christ-centered care is conveyed through the multi-congregational team. Recognize the blessings of each congregation and simultaneously recognize the blessings of shared ministry.

*With confidence in the Lord of the Church, collaboratively identify priorities and then collaboratively identify realistic goals for your shared ministry. "Take one small step at a time" is a well-suited adage. Don't spread yourself or your ministry teammates too thin. Work at a steady and informed pace, being careful to support one another as you faithfully avail yourselves of the Means of Grace.

*Strive to practice collaborative learning. The Brief Report "Collaborative Learning in the SMP Model" offers keen suggestions to assist you in this essential matter. Learn together with your brothers and sisters in Christ and grow together in Christ.

*Faithfully leverage the experience and the wisdom of your pastoral mentor(s), other pastors in your circuit, and your District staff. Share your thoughts, hopes, and struggles with them as you eagerly partake of their compassionate support as an essential component of your ongoing program of selfcare, overall well-being, and pastoral growth.

*Draw upon the other Brief Reports in this SMP series: "Collaborative Learning in the SMP Model," "The Bi-Vocational SMP Vicar/Pastor"; and "The Second Career SMP Vicar/Pastor."

Deliberately assimilate the lessons offered in these respective Reports with the insights you have gained through this present Report. Do so creatively, confidently, and expectantly!

These suggestions are simply offered to you as merely thought starters. Please feel free to expand upon this list as you see fit and please share your insights with us.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

In His infinite love for us and His fervent will to have all people come to the knowledge of His salvation through the Savior, the Lord reconciles us to Himself and to one another. He brings us into His Holy Church and through this new creation by Water and the Word He carries the Gospel to all nations. The ministry that we have as a gift from His hand is truly “shared.”

Throughout the centuries Christians have enjoyed the shared blessings of the Lord and have worked collaboratively under His direction. In fact, our LCMS is a prime example of shared ministry. Over 6,000 distinct congregations join in the wide variety of collaborative ministries of our Synod that include our seminaries and colleges, social service organizations, the Lutheran Church Extension Fund, and missions here and abroad, just for starters.

“Shared Ministry” alliances continue to be one of many models of ministry through which the Lord carries on His blessed work. The shared ministry partnerships are diverse in terms of their design, participants, activities, and locales. Shared ministry partnerships between congregations offer many refreshing opportunities to further enhance ministry; however, at the same time, there are many challenges in such shared ministries. The purpose of this Brief Report is to further acquaint you with shared ministry models and functions, and particularly the assimilation of the SMP Vicar/Pastor into your shared ministry resources, thinking, and actions.

The Lord of the Church is no stranger to the challenges and the opportunities that engage shared ministry partnerships at this time in history. The Lord’s gracious guidance, provisions, counsel, and presence are evident for each congregation and each respective shared ministry partnership. And yes, the Lord’s same gracious care is also poured out faithfully upon the SMP vicars and pastors serving in this rewarding ministry model.

Rev. Jan Case, 2026