

## ELCA Macedonia Project Story

### Finding the Art in Stewardship

A blank canvas and some paint or oil pastels can be powerful tools for realizing one's imaginative potential. Not bad, either, for helping pastors in their first calls to explore the essence of what it means to be a steward leader.

At least that's the thinking in the Southeastern Iowa Synod where synod leaders involved in the ELCA Macedonia Project held a First-Call Theological Education retreat. It was devoted to helping first-call pastors — in the first three years of their calls — explore their understanding of stewardship and their capacity to be steward leaders.

Grounded in the Macedonia text, 2 Corinthians 8:1-7, event programming centered around this key passage about how the churches of Macedonia, in their most trying times, gave beyond their means despite great poverty.

Then came a twist.

During the second evening of the event, a time when — at the end of the day — darkness and long hours of learning and thinking can challenge one's attention span, participants were greeted with a welcome change of scenery. On their gathering tables lay canvasses, paper, sketch pads, graph paper, drawing pencils, paints and oil pastels.

According to the Rev. Gloria Dovre, director for evangelical mission in the synod and a key event planner, participants were asked to draw on the 2 Corinthians text and, through unrestricted creativity, draw on their artistic skills to express their own ideas of stewardship, both personally and what that might look like in their congregations. One participant even wrote a song based on the text, according to Dovre.

"In the church we don't often think about art as a medium through which to talk about stewardship," said the Rev. Erika Uthe, a first-call pastor at St. John Lutheran Church in Ely, Iowa, who participated in the event. "It allows you to use a different part of your brain. I think that when you use all parts of your brain and all your senses — not just thinking but actually visualizing what it means to be a good steward, what it means to live in stewardship and be a good steward leader — that was the kicker. It was a totally different method of thinking about and visualizing stewardship."

Pastor Uthe took this activity, and what she learned at the event, to heart.

"I have grown a lot in my own stewardship leadership since the retreat, not only in terms of talking about stewardship but also in terms of making it more a part of every day and every Sunday — specifically our worship services," said Pastor Uthe. "We have begun to video temple talks, right before offering, where someone from the congregation shares a little bit about what the ministry of St. John means to them and how God is working through the church. It's the perfect segue into, 'Without your gifts, we as a congregation couldn't do this ministry.'"

Participating in the first-call retreat and learning about the Macedonia Project continues to challenge Pastor Uthe and her vision of steward leadership.

"[This experience has made] me more aware of what God has done and why it is we do what we do in terms of giving back, being good stewards, and steward leadership ... how we as pastors have the responsibility to help people in our settings talk about and understand stewardship."