

# Rev. Dr. Dan Poffenberger (He/him)

**Current Position: Lead Pastor, Shepherd of the Lake Lutheran, Prior Lake**



---

**Date and Year of Ordination:** December 1, 1986

**Previous Calls and Positions:**

- Shepherd of the Lake Lutheran Church, Prior Lake, MN - 9 years
- Trinity Ev. Lutheran, Stillwater, MN - 10 years
- Rejoice Lutheran (Pastor-Developer and Pastor) Geneva, IL. - 10 Years
- Zion Lutheran, Anoka MN - 3 years
- Trinity Ev. Lutheran - Walnut Grove, MN - 4 years

**Education and Earned Degrees:**

- Dr. Of Divinity, Semiotics - Portland Seminary - 2018
- Masters of Divinity - Luther Seminary - 1986
- B.S. Economics - Gustavus Adolphus College - 1982

---

**Describe your process of discerning this potential call to serve as our next bishop:**

- Conversations with my closest friends and colleagues
  - Reflections on my journey within the ELCA - and the growing desire over the past four years to innovate
  - Creating and running Leadership on the Way (Lilly Funded grant \$970,000)
  - Obtaining a grant to develop a new missional model for a church expression in the Twin Cities - ready to take to potential funders
  - Lessons learned as Chair of the Board of Trustees at Gustavus Adolphus College as that institution navigates significant challenges and reimagines its future.
  - Ongoing discussions with the executive leadership of the ELCA
  - Participating in the process - committed to creating a conversation that focus on the most important questions facing our synod
  - Time spent in spiritual practice - centered around gaining perspective and honesty.
-

## **What is your vision for the Minneapolis Area Synod?**

My vision is for the Synod to:

- Convene the right conversations
- Focus on strengths and opportunities
- Engage and support the faith communities/leaders who are experimenting and learning
- Prioritize congregational vitality
- Create a vital new missional community lead by a team of multi-racial, multi gendered leaders and funded boldly, to meet the hope of the people who are rightfully cynical of the church, but who wish to join in the work of loving their neighbor, stewarding the creation and offering abundance for all.
- Create a digital presence – giving voice and audience to a diverse group of theologically grounded, culturally relevant creatives – an effort adequately funded, boldly conceived and daring to innovate
- Engage funders in new and meaningful ways – to create an unprecedented investment in the synod
- Revitalize the brand of this synod – counter the dominance and the toxic narrative of the evangelical churches in the metro

---

## **What do you see as principal challenges and opportunities to this synod in the next six years, and how would you approach them?**

- Reimagine the Bishops office as the catalyst for experimentation and innovation.
  - Find the places of health and vitality and learn from them, invest in them, replicate them.
  - Prioritize the health, vitality and skills of our rostered leaders.
  - Resource our ethnic ministries and missional communities adequately.
  - Energize funders who can invest in the creation of radically new endeavors.
  - Find practical ways to help struggling congregations share staff and resources.
  - Call on the amazing partners in our community – Our Lutheran Colleges, Thrivent, Portico, Luther Seminary, 1517 to do something new.
  - Have the Synod and the Bishop act as catalyst for change within the ELCA. Claim a voice and a role to inspire, challenge or demand structural change in the ELCA
  - Building from places of strength and vitality is necessary. How can the synod provide the needed partnerships, encouragement and support to help those congregations thrive? And, can we have the courage to make the hard decisions when a community cannot sustain?
  - How we recruit, develop and support new leaders is also a concern and must be addressed. We need more care to have individuals serve where they are best matched.
  - Be a catalyst to reach the young adults and their peers who no longer find a home in the congregations of their parents and grandparents – do something audacious and well-funded, led by a team of dynamic, diverse leaders.
  - Be a catalyst to create a digital space. We have many creatives – charismatic, smart theologians, culturally relevant, deeply caring. They need funding and platforms to build larger audiences and communities.
-

## **What has prepared you to be effective in creating belonging among various cultural groups?**

The work of developing Leadership on the Way. Designed to prepare early in their career clergy to lead and serve in larger or more complex ministries, Leadership on the Way (LOTW) has selected and engaged 50 clergy over the past five years in two cohorts of 25. These cohorts were 60% female; 40% LGBTQ and 18% POC. Much of the curriculum and discussion centered around race, trauma, difference and its impact on leadership, on leaders themselves and the communities that we serve. Over these five years, it has occasioned my most significant personal experiences serving and working with a diverse community.

I have built a significant relationship with the Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux Community. Pastoring to members of the community and becoming close friends with the former Chief of the SMSC has been life-giving to me.

More than anything else, I am curious about people, and value relationships. I am aware of my privilege and that there is much more for me to learn and experience.

---

**Describe up to five recent or past synod, churchwide activities or community-related activities that have significantly impacted you. How do these experiences inform your vision for serving as our next bishop?**

A general comment: I have had significant interactions with the senior leadership of the ELCA, Sr. Pastors, College Presidents, Bishops and Mission developers. The level of discouragement and lack of trust in our denominational structures is widespread and discouraging. Everyone seems to know that our structure, more than our people, is incompetent. Something needs to change in how we are the church. Maybe it can start in Minneapolis.

A specific activity: Over the past five years, my interaction with the 50 clergy that LOTW has served has given me 50 different glimpses into the church. This involved six different multi-day intensives, monthly coaching sessions, various on-line interactions, emails and phone calls. Every week for five years, I have had a glimpse of the denomination through their experiences shared with me. Also, I interacted with the Board and coaches of LOTW – several senior clergy within the ELCA.

What I have learned is this: We have gifted, strong, passionate leaders within the ELCA – they are more diverse, smarter and more creative than my generation. They are working with too few resources, too many demands and too little support from the denomination. They are tired, stressed and we have a very tenuous hold on them – many contemplate quitting.

These leaders are our most precious resource as a denomination, and as a synod – yet we fail them regularly at every level – in the candidacy committee relationship, in the assignment process, in first call placement and in caring for them once they are in a call. They are isolated. The most creative are ignored, and their gifts are not maximized.

I have also found that by investing in them, giving them safe space to create relationships, be mentored, rest and be spiritually nurtured, they are resilient and capable of growth and new levels of leadership.

What this has taught me is that we need a whole new intention of what it means to develop, support and sustain leaders.

---

## **In what ways have you applied new learnings to your current context?**

“Wherever you are on your faith journey, we will meet you there with Open Hearts, Open Minds and an Open Table” From the values of SOLLC.

SOLLC welcomes questions, celebrates differences, holds space when we are fragile, and stands together at the table.

Leadership is seeing the particular beauty of a person and letting them shine. Most of my work over the past decade has been with staff and leaders – and I work hard to create culture, shape the focus of the ministry and then let everyone shine.

I am a good talent scout – I get the right people in the right places and give them space to shine.

I work to build a climate – joyful, collaborative, quirky and authentic. It results in learning, teamwork and a ton of fun.

I manage resources. The congregations I have served have sold, developed and created numerous properties and partnerships. Organizing the Synod’s resources of people, communities, capital and partnerships could change the trajectory of our synod.

---

## **What specific leadership skills and spiritual gifts have you used in developing lay and clergy leaders that you would bring as bishop of this synod?**

As Chair of the Board of Trustees at Gustavus – led and served a talented Board and supported the President of the College – I managed the complex work of a Board with significant fiduciary responsibilities.

As Director of LOTW – curated a learning environment for clergy that was innovative, responsive to the needs of cohort and impactful. Focused on innovation, leadership sustainability and creating a supportive environment of peers.

As Lead Pastor – Hired and leads a staff of 30 individuals and an annual budget of \$2.25M. Came into one of the most conflicted, indebted congregations in the ELCA and brought stability, competence, mission focus and now a long season of thriving.

As Mission Developer – scrappy, entrepreneurial, evangelist...failed a lot, learned a lot.

I have done a lot of things, made lots of mistakes. I have some skills. I am passionate about the need for our denomination to become nimble, focus on our mission and find our future.

---