



ELCA Innovation

IMPACT REPORT 2025



Evangelical
Lutheran Church
in America

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Introduction

Rahel Mwitula Williams
Interim Executive Director,
Innovation



Dear Partners in Ministry,

It is with deep gratitude and hope that we share the ELCA Innovation 2025 Impact Report with you.

At ELCA Innovation, we see ourselves as a footprint in the story of those we have the honor of walking alongside. We are a presence that connects, engages, trains and equips leaders across this church as they step faithfully into new and useful expressions of ministry. Our work is about collaboration. It is about walking alongside bold, Spirit-led leaders who are responding to the needs of their churches and communities with courage and imagination.

In 2025, we have witnessed life emerging in powerful ways: congregations reimagining their presence in their communities; leaders experimenting with fresh expressions of church; communities forming in unexpected places; ministries rooted in justice, belonging and proclamation taking shape in real time.

We have had the privilege to:

- Connect leaders to one another across synods and contexts
- Engage ideas that challenge and stretch the church forward
- Train cohorts and teams in practices of experimentation, discernment and adaptive leadership
- Equip partners with tools, coaching and resources that sustain long-term impact

It is a joy and an honor to see what comes alive when leaders are trusted, supported and resourced as we continue to build pathways that allow those ideas to take root and grow.

This report reflects more than metrics. It reflects culture shift. It reflects relationships. It reflects a church that is learning to pay attention to where the Spirit is already at work and to join in.

Thank you for walking with us. Thank you for believing in a church that is courageous enough to experiment, humble enough to learn and faithful enough to continue showing up.

We look forward to the continued journey together.

Rahel Mwitula Williams

Interim Executive Director, Innovation

Overview

ELCA Vision

A world experiencing the difference God's grace and love in Christ make for all people and creation.

ELCA Purpose

Activate each of us so more people know the way of Jesus and discover community, justice and love.

16.12.B20. Responsibilities of the Innovation Unit (named in the ELCA Constitution)

The Innovation unit shall promote, coordinate, and facilitate organizational collaboration, culture, and development, including innovation processes and leadership development for churchwide organization staff, members of this church, and others. This unit shall:

- a. provide, manage, and design experiments and processes (including related goals, metrics, and measurement) to assist this church to develop and evaluate new and existing programs and initiatives;
- b. be responsible for leadership development through teaching and promoting innovation culture, skills, and tools within the churchwide organization and throughout this church; and
- c. equip the churchwide organization and this church to conduct relevant research, data collection, analysis, and evaluation to make data-informed decisions; in collaboration with the Office of the Secretary, provide for required reporting and other items related to policies established by the Church Council and the Churchwide Assembly.

2025 Innovation Unit Objectives

- 1) Train leaders with the skills to create a culture of collaboration across the church.
- 2) Improve the ELCA's ability and reputation for trying new things.
- 3) Equip leaders to make decisions based upon the experiences of their users and constituencies.

Impact Across Expressions

In 2025 we engaged each of the expressions of the church, helping to build connections as we trained leaders, improved the church's ability to try new things and helped leaders make decisions based on the experiences and needs of their constituents.

Congregations



Our team enjoys the opportunity to work directly with congregations who are exploring a new pathway of ministry, or who may be interested in getting to know their community in a new way. Whether led by rostered or lay leaders, these worshipping communities, along with campus and outdoor ministries, are natural problem solvers, leading the way in innovation.

Synods



Through proactive partnership with ELCA synods, Innovation staff are able to make connections across the wider church to encourage open dialogue among synod leadership and strengthen relationships between congregations and the churchwide organization.

Churchwide Organization



Our objective within the churchwide organization is to be a catalyst for organizational culture change and process improvement. We equip colleagues with tools and strategies to focus on their users when designing and evaluating programs, events and projects.

Beyond the ELCA



Our strategic and active participation in ecumenical partnerships gives us insights into trends across denominations and the ability to share research and best practices with innovation-minded ministry leaders, particularly in the Presbyterian Church (USA), The Episcopal Church, and the United Methodist Church, among others.



Evangelical
Lutheran Church
in America

20 IMPACT 25 OVERVIEW

ELCA Innovation

2025

\$237,678

Total amount of deep impact Grants for Innovation awarded to congregations and synods in 2025

16

Number of synods visited by ELCA Innovation staff in 2025

85

Number of Churchwide Organization staff trained in Facilitation Fundamentals in 2025

TO DATE

\$712,078

Total amount Grants for Innovation awarded to congregations and synods from 2023-2025

26

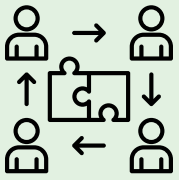
Number of unique synods visited by ELCA Innovation staff in-person from 2023-2025

125

Number of Churchwide Organization staff trained in Facilitation Fundamentals from 2024-2025

2025 Objectives

A Church with a Culture of Collaboration



Shared language

With 125 staff trained in quality facilitation, we are building a common language to connect with each other and to support synods.

Innovation as infrastructure

We partner with colleagues on all projects to help infuse collaboration and innovative best practices across the ELCA.

A Church with a Reputation for Trying New Things



31

Design sprints, workshops and training sessions facilitated by ELCA Innovation in 2025

24

Experiments launched with grant support from ELCA Innovation in 2025

A Church with a Human-Centered Approach to Decision Making



170

Innovation-supported Listening sessions across every expression of the ELCA in 2025

1750

Users engaged in sharing feedback throughout 2025



innovation@elca.org



[@ELCAInnovation](https://www.instagram.com/ELCAInnovation)



elca.org/innovationlab



Innovation Leadership Academy and Young Adult Network track participants at the Design for Belonging event in October 2025.

2025 Congregational Support

Congregations Lead Initiative

Through the Congregations Lead Initiative (CLI), the ELCA is equipping and inspiring congregations with innovation and design thinking tools to spark a renewal of congregational ministry and community partnerships to create adaptable, relevant, and thriving faith communities. The initiative, funded partly by a Thriving Congregations grant from the Lilly Endowment and partly by ELCA Innovation, completed its third cohort cycle in fall 2025. So far, CLI has equipped congregations in 31 of the ELCA's 64 synods. 2025 CLI partner synods included Montana Synod, Northwest Intermountain Synod and Virginia Synod.

Grants and Support

Grants for Innovation are open by invitation to ELCA affiliated ministries working on a project that meets ELCA Innovation criteria for project support. The types of project proposals we seek include those that are focused on program development, systemic change, education and training, listening and feedback loop development, and experiments. Our team embraces the opportunity to learn alongside grantees as they bring their projects to life over the course of the grant cycle. In 2025 we granted over \$200,000 to nine recipients, providing resources to local projects at ELCA ministry sites.

Congregations Lead Initiative

A 2024 Evaluation Report conducted by Faithful Futures studied the impact of the first two cohorts of the Congregations Lead Initiative, from 2022-2024. [The full evaluation report is linked here.](#) Key impacts from the program through fall 2024 are as follows:

- CLI encouraged congregations to adopt inclusive decision-making, prioritize community needs, and increase trust within teams.
- CLI's coaching and grant funding emerged major contributors to success. [ELCA Coaching](#) provided guidance, and funding enabled congregations to pursue bold ideas and connect with their communities.
- CLI inspired congregations to experiment with new practices, respond to feedback, and embrace community needs.
- CLI extended its reach beyond individual congregations, inspiring community-oriented programs and cross-congregational collaboration.

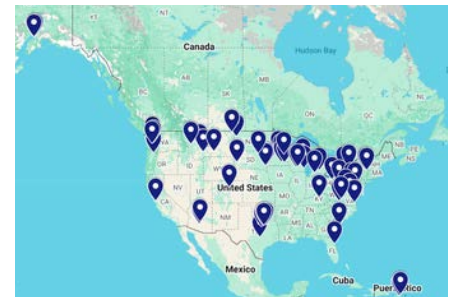


Rebecca Payne
(she/her)
Program
Director,
Congregations
Lead Initiative

Empowered Leaders in Thriving Congregations

The third cohort in 2025 has given Program Director Rebecca Payne the opportunity to continue the success of the first two cohorts, while making iterations on the previous models to strengthen the experience for participating congregations. One notable iteration since the first cohort has been to partner directly with specific synods for the year. In 2025, the congregations participating in CLI were from the Montana Synod, Northwest Intermountain Synod, and Virginia Synod. Each congregation designed a capstone experiment to test a new ministry idea. A few highlighted ministry experiments included:

- Christ Lutheran Church in Roanoke, VA identified a community need to provide an opportunity for people to express what they termed “Civic Anxiety”. In response, they developed a series of Civic Anxiety Listening Posts to offer a safe place for sharing and listening within their community.
- Good Shepherd Lutheran Church in Lexington, VA, a small but mighty congregation, sought to connect with diverse members of their community seeking purpose and a sense of meaning. In response, they developed a series of events that gathered a crowd much larger than their worshipping community, and these events served as a launch point for reimagining what is possible in their ministry context.
- Confluence Collective in Missoula, MT used their grant funds to launch micro-Innovation grants in their congregation providing seed funds for new project led directly by members to bring easily implementable ideas to life as a prototype.



This map depicts the locations of the 62 congregations across 31 ELCA Synods who have participated in a Congregations Lead Initiative cohort.

Resources for Congregations

While these guides have been developed for the Congregations Lead Initiative, they can be used by any congregation or faith community seeking to learn from their community and experiment with something new to meet community needs. Click the resource name below to view and download.

[User Interview Guide](#)

[Congregational Experiments Workbook](#)

[Libro de trabajo en español](#)

Grants for Innovation

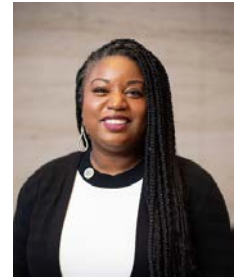
The following organizations were awarded grants in fiscal year 2025. These deep impact projects will come to fruition throughout 2026, and we look forward to reporting on them at the end of 2026.

Project	Organization + Location	Summary
Accompanying Across Difference	Metropolitan Chicago Synod	Partnership and leadership development support for an experimental shared-ministry model for St. Andrew and Geneva Lutheran Churches
Adventurous Preaching	King of Kings Lutheran Church in Pueblo, CO Rocky Mountain Synod	New initiative support for a preaching festival providing opportunities for preachers to receive feedback and for lay leaders to be trained
Community Push	Trinity Lutheran Church Jersey City, NJ New Jersey Synod	Sustainability support for growing food pantry ministry and new initiative support to provide a STEAM-focused youth program for foster youth and mental health workshops
The Gathering Project	Shekinah Chapel Riverdale, IL Metropolitan Chicago Synod	New initiative support to reimagine underutilized neighborhood space in a way that fosters community and supports local needs
Green Burial Ministry	Inspired Arts and Sound North Carolina Synod	New initiative support for an outreach campaign to invite congregations to consider a green burial ministry, revisiting the church's role in end-of-life care alongside environmental impacts.
Pray Without Ceasing	Minneapolis Area Synod	Pilot project support for ELCA-wide prayer initiative
Reimagining Church	Fabric Minneapolis Minneapolis Area Synod	New initiative support for young adult outreach, offering alternative environments for spiritual development
RRR Innovation	Rescue, Release and Restore Lutheran Outdoor Ministry	Sustainability support for Summer Empowerment Camps and the launch of four new initiatives to strengthen leadership development and evaluation
Safe Haven and Re-Entry Table	Bethel Lutheran Church Chicago, IL Metropolitan Chicago Synod	New initiative support for a holistic program designed for community members navigating food insecurity, gun violence and trauma.

Stories from Past Grant Recipients

Highlighted 2024 Grantees:

Creative Dreamers and The Gift musical at Community Lutheran Church in Sterling, VA received a Grants for Innovation award in 2024. Director Jennifer Quinones used the grant funds to bring to life a neurodivergent choir and a stage production spotlighting the contributions of young people of all abilities. This project is a true example of designing on the margins to bring populations often left out of worship communities directly onto the stage. Creative Dreamers choir members are pictured in rehearsal with Director Jennifer, below. The Gift musical is viewable [at this video link](#).



Tyra Dennis
Program
Manager,
Innovation and
Ideas

Messiah Lutheran Church in Schenectady, NY was a member of the first Congregations Lead Initiative Cohort. In 2024, Messiah Lutheran Church received a small Grants for Innovation award to partially fund an organizational assessment in preparation for establishing [Rotterdam Community Center](#), a community space using a former church's property in Messiah's care. This creative repurposing of space with the explicit purpose of meeting community needs has resulted in new life for Messiah's ministry and the ability to host intentional outreach events designed for non-church members, ranging from a county-wide MLK Day Observance and Celebration to a Winter Indoor Balance Bike Class, pictured below.



Maddie Fairfax
(she/her)
Innovation
Services
Coordinator

Highlighted 2023 Grantee:

[Worthy Christmas Cantata](#) in Fort Wayne, IN is the result of passionate leadership by producer and presenter Stephen Styles. This project received a Grants for Innovation award to support the annual musical event, which intentionally brings together music lovers across races and denominations for a worthy cause. Donations collected at the event attended by over 1,200 people each year are donated to a local non-profit organization. This event promotes racial healing and dialogue across denominations in an innovative way that continues to grow. Mr. Styles and team plan to extend the racial unity Christmas concert to eight cities in 2026.

Highlighted 2022 Grantee:

[Salam Radio Station](#) led by Pastor Charbel Zgheib received a Grants for Innovation award to support Sacramento, CA-based radio studio build-out in January 2023. After administrative delays and a cross-country move, Salam Radio Station will celebrate its grand opening in Staten Island, NY in March 2026. This Arabic language ecumenical Christian online radio station is the first-of-its-kind in the U.S., streaming music and content that stems from ideas collected during ELCA Innovation-funded user research with Arabic speaking Christians in four states across the U.S. in 2023.

Innovation Leadership Academy

In October 2025, Design for Belonging, a first-of-its-kind event was hosted at the Lutheran Center in Chicago, IL. Sixty young adults representing ELCA synods joined 40 innovators from congregations across the ELCA to learn about innovative methods for ministry and engaging communities. The young adult track focused on equipping young leaders to create their own Young Adult Network. Our track, the Innovation Leadership Academy, focused on inspiring and training lay leaders to try something new in their congregations to meet community needs. Participants also received an [ELCA Innovation Workbook](#).



Participants experienced a whirlwind introduction to human-centered design for lay leaders.



An intergenerational event allowed for organic opportunities to dream about the church, together.



Staff from Innovation and Young Adult Communities collaborated to host this event.



Left: Shekinah Chapel youth learn hair braiding skills in the barbershop training program. Above: Pastor Jason Williams and Geronimo Speaks with ILA participants and shirts printed from the church's screenprint shop.

Right: Pastor Jason provides creative pastoral care via hair cuts.

Session Highlight: Guest Speaker Pastor Jason Williams whose congregation, Shekinah Chapel, was a 2023 Grants for Innovation recipient, shared about their project, "Play for Keeps". Shekinah Chapel used grant funds to create a barbershop training program and a screenprint shop as a way for church and community members to learn skills and generate revenue for church outreach programs. Pastor Williams himself uses a barber chair to engage in creative pastoral care for community members. Shekinah Chapel also hosts a community outreach event called Ribs, Rhymes, and Riverdale which the congregation initiated as a way to meet neighbors. Pastor Jason and church member Jerode Rodgers (Jeronimo Speaks) both performed powerful spoken word pieces for ILA participants. This session gave participants the opportunity to see the design thinking process put into action, from first insights into community needs to creative ways an ELCA congregation met those needs in a meaningful way.



Rahel Mwitula Williams and Rebecca Payne with several Rocky Mountain Synod staff members in April 2025.

2025 Synod Engagement

Outreach Strategy

As practitioners of human-centered design, our approach to synod outreach is rooted in a desire to meet ministry leaders where they serve. Each year, ELCA Innovation staff optimize the unit's travel budget to visit synods in their unique contexts. The theme for 2025 synod engagement was Rural and Island Communities; Innovation staff travel was focused on synods within these target populations. In partnership with synod staff, ELCA Innovation invites congregational leaders to share the joys and pains of their ministry, in-person. These opportunities for connection and deep listening provide our team with insights from the synod about innovative ministry, resources needed and raise up potential networking opportunities across expressions of the ELCA, for like-minded leaders navigating change.

Facilitation and Support

In addition to synod visits for listening and learning, ELCA Innovation offers facilitation services to synods interested in partnership. Highlighted 2025 projects include:

- Conducted listening sessions and compiled user interview data in the Metro D.C. Synod.
- Facilitated staff development sessions for Northwest Intermountain Synod staff.
- Provided grant support for a pilot ministry partnership between two congregations in the Metropolitan Chicago Synod.
- Served as facilitators for the duration of a Region 3 Quality of Call event.
- Served as keynote speakers and workshop facilitators at the Northern Illinois Synod Congregational Resourcing Event.

Making Connections with Synods

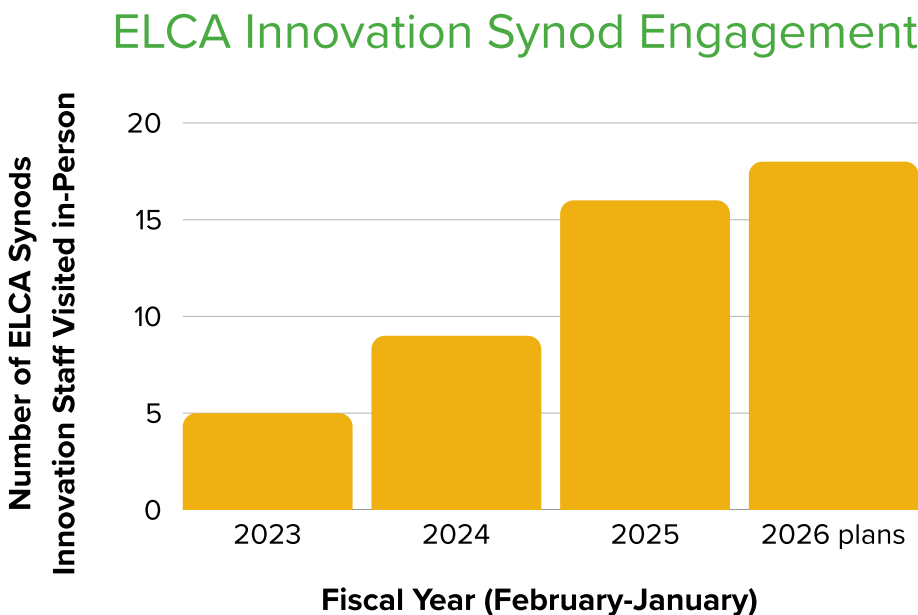
In 2024, the first full year that the ELCA Innovation team was fully staffed, we developed a strategy to prioritize in-person synod visits. These visits have been primarily conducted by three Innovation staff, with additional staff support when needed. The goal of these visits over the past two program years has been trust building, listening and learning directly from synods about the innovative ministries taking place at the local level. Typically, synod staff invite rostered and lay leaders from congregations who are already exploring or willing to explore new ideas to meet directly with Innovation staff to share about their ministry contexts, joys and challenges.

In 2024, ELCA Innovation visited the following nine synods in-person:

- Alaska Synod
- Delaware-Maryland Synod
- Metro D.C. Synod
- Montana Synod
- North Carolina Synod
- Northern Texas-Northern Louisiana Synod
- Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod
- Upstate New York Synod
- Virginia Synod

In 2025, ELCA Innovation visited the following sixteen synods in-person:

- Caribbean Synod
- Eastern North Dakota Synod
- Greater Milwaukee Synod
- Metro D.C. Synod
- Montana Synod
- New Jersey Synod
- Northern Illinois Synod
- Northwestern Minnesota Synod
- Northwest Intermountain Synod
- Rocky Mountain Synod
- South Dakota Synod
- Southeastern Iowa Synod
- Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod
- Western Iowa Synod
- Western North Dakota Synod
- Virginia Synod



Western Iowa Synod visit in Spring 2025.

Stories from Synod Visits



In Spring 2025, ELCA Innovation staff members Tyra Dennis and Rebecca Payne visited Western Iowa synod. Deacon Eric Haitz served as tour guide, introducing rostered and lay leaders from across the synod at stops to visit congregations along the way. One memorable stop was in Omaha at Urban Abbey, a coffee shop, bookstore, and inclusive United Methodist faith community, founded and led by Pastor Debra McKnight, pictured above with Deacon Eric Haitz, Tyra, and Rebecca. After the visit, Western Iowa synod was invited to join the 2026 Congregations Lead Initiative cohort.

In 2025, the Innovation and Ideas team, which focuses on ELCA Innovation's outreach to synods and congregations, chose a focus on rural and island ministry. Another story from Western Iowa synod was featured in this [December Living Lutheran article](#) titled "[Innovation in Rural Ministries](#)".



Rahel Mwitula Williams' 2025 visit to the Caribbean Synod was in partnership with fellow executive directors Rev. Khader El-Yateem and Rev. Phil Hirsch. This collaborative visit allowed for a strengthened strategy for churchwide organization support for this unique

synod. Above, Rahel Mwitula Williams is pictured in the sanctuary of St. Frederick Lutheran Church, the oldest congregation in the ELCA, established in 1666. After the visit, a number of ELCA lay leaders from the U.S. Virgin Islands were invited to the Innovation Leadership Academy.



Tyra Dennis visited Trinity Lutheran Church in Jersey City, NJ to see a granted project in action. Community Push is a thriving ministry that draws volunteers from across the New Jersey synod to provide prayer, food, feminine hygiene products, baby food and products, and sanitation supplies to neighbors. The awarded grant is for an expansion of the existing program, led by Valerie Johnson and Pastor Dianne Lewis, to include trauma-informed care for African American foster youth. Pictured at left is Tyra with Community Push volunteers.



Organizational Innovation staff engage in professional development at the Service Design Global Conference in Dallas, TX in October.

2025 Churchwide Organization Leadership

A Human-Centered Approach

Many of the churchwide organization projects ELCA Innovation staff worked on this year had an emphasis on learning from the lived experiences of constituents across and beyond the ELCA. By launching surveys, creating feedback loops and evaluating existing programs and initiatives, project conveners were able to make data-informed decisions based on real-time user insights. Innovation staff walked alongside these project partners to craft survey questions, create metrics and map existing and potential opportunities to request and implement feedback.

A Collaborative Model

Churchwide organization colleagues can request project support from ELCA Innovation staff right at the beginning of a new project. In consultation with Innovation staff, project conveners decide on project roles, a timeline and other possible areas for additional collaboration across the organization. Within these projects, Innovation staff offer facilitation, user research, consultation, training or design services. Innovation also offers project funds for new projects as needed. By using collaboration as the foundation of all projects, ELCA Innovation is able to serve in a networking role throughout the organization.

Churchwide Organization Projects

ELCA Innovation staff work in collaboration with churchwide organization colleagues to infuse projects in each unit with insights from users to implement human-centered solutions. The chart below details a sampling of the dozens of projects completed throughout 2025.

2025 Project Highlights

Project	Collaborations	Summary
Region 3 Quality of Call Gathering	Emilie Moravec, Sarah Weaver and Rebecca Payne supported the event planning team at the invitation of Deacon Erin Power, Eastern North Dakota Synod	Facilitated a gathering focused on improving the quality of call processes for non-binary and female-identifying leaders alongside synod bishops and staff, congregational leaders and churchwide organization employees.
Metropolitan Washington, D.C. Synod Strategy Design	Sarah Weaver and Tyra Dennis were invited to support this project by Metro D.C. Synod Bishop Phil Hirsch	Partnered with synod leadership to synthesize insights from congregational interviews and design a new synod strategy rooted directly in rostered leader feedback.
Companion Synod Leadership Network Design Sprint	Emilie Moravec and Sarah Weaver were invited to facilitate this design sprint by Alison Richard, Program Director for Companion Synod Engagement	Designed a new support model for leaders walking alongside global companion synods, strengthening relational and mission alignment across synods.
ELCA.org Redesign	Aditi Shukla and Phillip LaDeur have worked alongside the Strategic Communications team on this ongoing project.	Implemented the first usability feedback technology in ELCA history, moving us beyond tracking how many people visit our website to understanding <i>who</i> is visiting, without collecting personal or contact information.
Transformation Tank Design Sprint	Innovation staff partnered with Development colleagues and others to convene this project.	Facilitated a sprint that resulted in a \$30,000 grant from the Carpenter Foundation to support a Queer Lutherans Gathering.

2025 Objectives in Review

Deepening Our Understanding of Who We Serve

In 2025, our team significantly strengthened the ELCA churchwide organization's ability to understand and respond to the experiences of those we serve.

- Engaged 1,750 individuals through ELCA digital products, primarily ELCA.org.
- Implemented the first usability feedback technology in ELCA history, moving us beyond tracking how many people visit our website to understanding who is visiting, without collecting personal or contact information.
- Through a brief, one-time homepage survey, we learned that 1 in every 7 visitors to ELCA.org identifies as "New to the ELCA."

This insight fundamentally reshapes how we think about digital hospitality, messaging, and engagement with new audiences.



Phillip LaDeur
(he/him)
Director,
Organizational
Innovation

Expanding Listening Across the Church

We led or enabled 107 listening sessions across every expression of the ELCA through:

- Leadership Development and Research & Evaluation focus groups
- Interviews with leaders connected to Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago (LSTC)
- Synod and congregational leader conversations with people unfamiliar with the ELCA

This represents one of the most extensive coordinated listening efforts in recent churchwide organization history, ensuring decisions are informed by lived experience across the denomination.



Aditi Shukla
(she/her)
Innovation
Partner, the
Offices



Phil and Aditi facilitated sessions at the 2025 IT Summit for CWO staff in Information Technology.

Broadening Our Reach Beyond the ELCA

Through our investment in the User Interviews research platform, we now have access to a research network of over 6 million individuals who have consented to participate in research studies.

- The vast majority of participants in this network have never interacted with the ELCA.
- We can ethically and securely learn from people based on geography, lived experience, age, gender identity and specific life experiences.
- This allows us to understand not only our current members but also people we hope to reach in the future.

This capability expands our ability to design ministries and communications that resonate beyond our existing base.



Emilie Moravec
(she/her)
Innovation
Partner, Service
and Justice

Building a Culture of Collaborative Leadership

During fiscal year 2025, 85 additional staff were certified in Facilitation Fundamentals, bringing the total number of trained ELCA churchwide organization staff to 125. This has created a shared approach to collaborative problem-solving across units. It also enables churchwide organization staff to partner with synods using a consistent, high-quality facilitation framework. For the first time, we are building common tools and language for innovation and collaboration across the churchwide organization.



Sarah Weaver
(she/her)
Innovation
Partner,
Christian
Community
and Leadership

2025 Objectives Summary

In 2025 within the churchwide organization, ELCA Innovation:

- Increased our ability to understand new audiences
- Expanded denomination-wide listening efforts
- Strengthened collaborative leadership capacity
- Helped secure new funding for emerging ministry expressions
- Built infrastructure that enables more informed, inclusive, and responsive decision-making

This work positions the ELCA churchwide organization to become a more human-centered, data-informed and relationally grounded church in the years ahead.



At the foundation of each partnership in 2025, was a stack of sticky notes, waiting to be opened and filled with insights and ideas.

Partnerships Across and Beyond the ELCA

Connecting the Expressions

The work of ELCA Innovation spanned across and beyond all three expressions of the ELCA this year. As Presiding Bishop Yehiel Curry announced the ELCA's priority of a connected, sustainable church after his installation in October, we look forward to the opportunity to build upon the connections made in 2025 as we move into 2026. We embrace the invitations we receive to serve as mappers and connectors within the ecology of the ELCA. We serve in a way that models bringing more perspectives to the table and amplifying voices on the margins of the church, to make effective, human-centered decisions. By making these crucial connections across the church, we can work to build a more sustainable way of ministry.

Ecumenical Presence

At one point in 2025, a frequent participant in ecumenical events mentioned that the ELCA's participation in ecumenical spaces is crucial to the stability and sustainability of ecumenical dialogue. Our denomination's ability to navigate relationships with ecumenical and inter-religious partners serves as a bridge builder in what can sometimes be tenuous spaces. Within ELCA Innovation, we strive to be both a leader and a conversation partner in ecumenical spaces on innovation-related topics such as new and emerging ministries, leadership development, technology, ministry experiments and network building. We are grateful for the role that we can play to make connections between other denominations who may not be in conversation with each other on a regular basis.

ELCA Partnerships

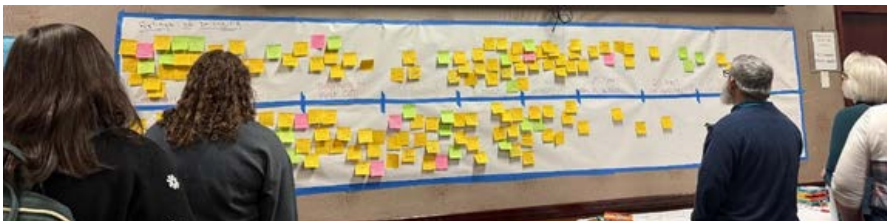
Region 3 Quality of Call Gathering

In 2025, our team received an invitation that felt both deeply humbling and deeply aligned with our shared purpose. Deacon Erin Power, Director for Evangelical Mission in the Eastern North Dakota Synod, reached out after our Innovation site visit earlier that spring. Region 3 had recently received a Quality of Call Grant—a collective commitment to confront and transform the systemic inequities that too often shape the ministry experiences of female-identifying and nonbinary leaders.

Their charge was bold and rooted in a clear vision:

To cultivate a region where powerful women and powerful allies together build communities of support, connection, and accountability.

We were honored when they asked ELCA Innovation to help facilitate part of a multiday gathering focused on connection, learning, and collective discernment. This gathering offered us, as Churchwide staff, the gift of listening deeply to the lived experiences of our ELCA leaders and imagining, together, the future God calls us toward.



Participants at the Region 3 Quality of Call event map moments of belonging as part of an Innovation-facilitated session.

Project Starling at LSTC

ELCA Innovation has partnered with Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago's Project Starling to support feedback gathering and insights from the user experience of the pilot program for remote lay-leader training and formation. The Winter 2025 edition of Epistle featured an article about the partnership titled "[Opening the Digital Doors](#)". (The article can be found on page 10 of the linked digital publication.) In this project, ELCA Innovation and seminary staff work together, creating a new pathway for collaboration, to reimagine theological education.

Ecumenical Events

AI and the Church Ecumenical Summit

Each year, ELCA Innovation staff invite other ELCA leaders to form an ELCA coalition at this ecumenical event which we help to sponsor. Participants include theological ethics leaders, rostered leaders, lay leaders, and those interested in faith and technology. The inaugural 2024 event took place in Seattle, WA and the 2025 event took place in Minneapolis, MN.

The 2026 AI and the Church Summit will be held August 24-27 in Nashville, TN. The theme for the event will be: Caring for Creation, in which hosts and guests will engage thoughtfully at the intersection of technology, theology and our call to stewardship of creation. ELCA Innovation will invite 15 guests to participate in-person in Nashville. There is a space for a much larger number of participants to engage in online learning and dialogue during this hybrid event. More information about joining virtually will be shared on our website and Instagram feed in summer 2026.

The ELCA delegation at the
AI and the Church Summit in
August 2024.



Ecumenical Research

Each year, ELCA Innovation partners with TryTank Research Institute (affiliated with the Episcopal Church) and the Presbyterian Church (USA) to conduct ecumenical research on relevant topics.

In 2024, this group initiated research around young adult parents, particularly those without a faith tradition of their own. The full study is linked here: [Young Adult Parents Research Study](#)

The 2025 research focus has been a study of lay-led ministries. The project seeks to understand the growing reliance on lay leadership within both established and emerging ministries, across mainline Protestant denominations. A comprehensive survey has been deployed to capture the scope and characteristics of lay-led initiatives and assess the motivations behind them. See our website and social media in 2026 for an invitation to a webinar where wider learnings from this study will be shared.

Future ecumenical partnerships in 2026 and beyond include involvement in an ecumenical storytelling project that is part of a Lilly Endowment grant and a possible shared ecumenical research repository.

Testimonials from our partners in 2025

"I am so thankful for something geared towards non-rostered members/leaders! I really enjoyed the energy of young adults and us adult 2.0 members. You all really knocked this out of the church!!! Thank you for continuing to lean into your gifts and calling from the Holy Spirit. You all are beautiful spirit-filled and relatable children of God."

-Innovation Leadership Academy participant

"Our synod staff had a wonderful and FRUITFUL TIME with Tyra and Rebecca. I have better ideas and questions for the year ahead."

-Bishop Meggan Manlove, Northwest Intermountain Synod regarding synod staff visioning session facilitated by Innovation staff



"I cannot tell you how important this work was for our congregation. The experience of successfully reaching out with both intention and openness to learn has been invaluable. Members, our pastor, and friends of the congregation all learned something about what it feels like and means to be welcomed with open arms; our Lutheran theology in action!"

-2025 Congregations Lead Initiative cohort member

"I loved the inclusive, mutual, innovative, iterative-ness of the experience. Well done! I hope this design sprint experience can be brought back to other ELCA groups."

-Companion Synod Design Sprint participant

With Gratitude

ELCA Innovation would like to thank you for your partnership in ministry in the past year. We are grateful to have a growing network of stakeholders across and beyond the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. It brings us such joy when congregations reach out to share their innovative ideas and bring us tough questions, when synods request facilitation or partnership, when churchwide organization colleagues are willing to try something new, and when ecumenical partners gather around a table to generate ministry solutions together. We look forward to continuing collaboration in 2026 and beyond!



The entire ELCA Innovation staff at the Lutheran Center in Chicago in January 2026.



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