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CIRCLE

Leadership

Fall 2025

NEWSLETTER

ELCA.org



Evangelical
Lutheran Church
in America

"I will sing of your steadfast love, O Lord, forever; with my mouth I will proclaim your faithfulness to all generations. I declare that your steadfast love is established forever; your faithfulness is as firm as the heavens."

—Psalm 89:1-2

Dear members of the Leadership Circle,

Grace and peace to you!

In this time of transition for our church, we should remember that there are many unwavering truths. I am comforted by God's enduring faithfulness; by the love of Christ, which has no end; and by supporters such as you, who partner with the ministries of the ELCA in our shared mission. You never fail to show up for our church. Together we embody our gospel hope in creative, life-changing ways all around the world.

Our church is not alone in facing challenges and transitions. In times of great uncertainty, the witness of the church, through each of us, is one way God's love is made real. In its 51st year, ELCA World Hunger continues to feed the hungry and work toward a just world where all are fed. Lutheran Disaster Response shows up after a disaster and stays long after the news has shifted, empowering our siblings in Christ to rebuild in a manner authentic to their context. Our worshiping communities are embodying new forms of church, reimagining what it means to follow Jesus and preaching the gospel across social divides. When I am overwhelmed by world events, I remember that people of faith are not sitting idly by — we are responding to the world's needs with resurrection hope!

We do not do this alone. Drawn together in common mission, we encourage one another to dream of what might be possible and to empower one another to make those dreams real. I am especially grateful for members of the Leadership Circle such as you. Because of you, the ministries of the ELCA have the resources and support to bring the hope of Christ to a world in flux — living faithfully, witnessing boldly, serving joyfully and giving abundantly.



In Christ,

Rachel Wind

Rachel Wind
Executive for Development
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

ON THE COVER: Chanda (center) and Tiffany (right) embrace Maddie Tong, the director of programs for FedUp Ministries in Ypsilanti, Mich., during one of FedUp's meal and shower services for members of its community.

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Scan to support the work of the church!

LOOKING AHEAD AND SAYING "THANK YOU"

During this summer's churchwide assembly in Phoenix, Ariz., the Rev. Yehiel Curry was elected to serve as the next presiding bishop of the ELCA. His installation will take place Saturday, Oct. 4, at Central Lutheran Church in Minneapolis, Minn. The service is open to the public and will also be accessible via livestream. Scan this QR code to learn more.



Presiding Bishop-elect Curry spoke to the assembly about how support from the churchwide organization, made possible by your gifts to ELCA Where Needed Most, encouraged him to overcome his initial hesitation to vocational ministry: "When I said yes, your support, this church's support, of that ministry meant everything. So if you want to know what your benevolence dollars look like, it looks like me.

"I want to say thank you. Thank you for your investment."



Dear members of the Leadership Circle,

With my time as your presiding bishop drawing to a close, I am so thankful for the witness of this church and the generosity of its members. Your consistent support has allowed us to explore new ways of embodying the gospel, serving our neighbors and working toward Christ's just, hope-filled future. I pray that these ministries — and your love of them — will flourish under the leadership of your new presiding bishop, the Rev. Yehiel Curry. Hope abounds!

In Christ,

Elysiun L. Eaton



“Do not, therefore, abandon that boldness of yours; it brings a great reward.”

—Hebrews 10:35

Greetings in Christ!

As I reflect on the stories in these pages from the Christian Community and Leadership unit of the churchwide organization, I give thanks for boldness and bravery. I am inspired by 25 years of Young Adults in Global Mission, whose volunteers continue to serve in ways they never imagined; by churches dreaming of new forms of ministry, together with the larger church; and by camp counselors from around the world who come here to share their remarkable gifts with us and, we hope, to carry new ideas and passions back home with them.

We Lutherans might not be known for speaking up or bragging about ourselves, but we are doing incredible things in the name of Jesus. I hope that, just as I do, you will take heart in the continued bold witness of this church that you read about here. In difficult, confusing times, I am thankful that God has always and will always bring us hope to lead us on. May we be bold enough to follow!



With bold hope,

Benjamin Hogue

Rev. Benjamin Hogue
Director, Ministry Engagement
and Support

The staff of the International Leaders Program (ILP) is a key part of this work, not only interviewing and vetting applicants but also helping counselors to procure visas after they are hired. The U.S. Department of State has designated the churchwide organization as sponsor of an exchange visitor program, which allows ILP to support applications for U.S. visas and permits camps and counselors to focus on other matters. ILP staff continue working on behalf of these counselors throughout their time in the United States, arranging their transportation, procuring them health insurance and even supporting each counselor as they get a Social Security number and manage U.S. tax responsibilities.

This year, 46 camp counselors from around the world were accepted into the program, but only 22 were granted visas to allow travel to the United States for the summer. Though current political realities pose a challenge to the program, the counselors and camps able to participate this year are forging lasting relationships with companion synods, global companion churches and key partners in future global missionary work. On a much smaller, but incredibly important, scale, the program creates opportunities for mutual cross-cultural relationship building that deepens empathy, broadens worldviews and breaks down the barriers in Christ's church around the world.

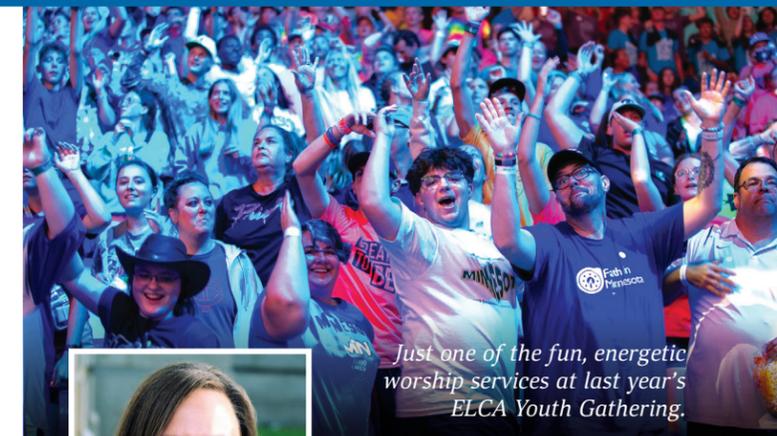
Two of this year's counselors, Ampri and Sem, were excited to bring their culture's warmth to their camps. Interviewed this summer, Sem explained, "In Namibia, we greet and welcome someone every time we see them. It may be small, but it means we always remember that others deserve respect." Ampri expressed excitement to serve at Living Water Ministries in Michigan the way she was taught as a child in Indonesia – with hospitality, friendship and dedication. One can easily see how these counselors would make their mark on campers and fellow staff in even the most ordinary interactions.

Ampri and Sem looked forward to sharing their summer camp experience with their home churches. Sem enjoyed the way Red Willow Ministries and Park River Bible Camp in North Dakota provide spaces to showcase people's talents. Ampri appreciated the intentionality of camp programming: "Camp is so organized! They understand how important training is, and every program and activity is meaningful. Even when we're just having fun, it's clear how important community and service are. I can't wait to lead with that kind of purpose."

All 22 counselors thank Leadership Circle members for making their time in the United States possible. Your gifts to ELCA Where Needed Most fund leadership opportunities that enrich the church of today, encourage the church of tomorrow, and allow Christians from around the world to learn from and better each other. Not only does the program create opportunities for transformative cultural exchange that benefits both participants and the camps where they work, it also demonstrates the ELCA's continuing commitment to its neighbors, reminding our global partners that our partnership in ministry endures when government administrations and priorities change.



Sem (right) and fellow counselors at Red Willow Ministries and Park River Bible Camp in North Dakota create a lighthearted atmosphere to encourage friendship, learning and fun.



Just one of the fun, energetic worship services at last year's ELCA Youth Gathering.



Since joining the churchwide organization, Deacon Jessica (Jess) Liles has dedicated herself to building a bridge

between youth ministry and the ELCA Youth Gathering, the two ministries she leads as director. "I am so excited to shift the ELCA Youth Gathering from a moment to a movement," she says. "In partnership with youth ministry staff, the Gathering staff are working together to create a movement of faith formation in congregations, camps, and synods."

That shift begins with the new Gathering Expedition, designed to be a step away from everyday life for youth to dive into questions of faith, purpose, identity and calling. It's camp-style community meets the heart of the ELCA Youth Gathering – reimagined in a way that's local, accessible and deeply meaningful – beginning this fall in New Jersey, Texas and Wisconsin.

“We have so many new things in the works. We can't wait to announce more new programs and initiatives in 2026... so stay tuned!”

—Deacon Jessica Liles

Learn more about upcoming events at ELCA.org/Gathering



International camp counselor Ampri with two of her campers at Living Water Ministries in Michigan.

CULTURAL EXCHANGE AT ELCA CAMPS

Every year, long before the rope courses open and campers begin arguing over the top bunk, the ELCA Young Adult Communities team is hard at work finding a special, international group of camp counselors to serve at Lutheran Outdoor Ministry sites around the country through the ELCA International Camp Counselor Program. Camp counselors from other cultures have been a fixture at Lutheran camps since before the ELCA formed. They add a unique perspective to the campers' experience while learning lessons to take back to their home countries, strengthening our church and theirs in the process. The program is funded by participating camps as well as your gifts to ELCA Where Needed Most.

25 YEARS OF YOUNG ADULTS IN GLOBAL MISSION (YAGM) — SENT OUT AND CALLED BACK HOME

This year, YAGM turns 25! We're celebrating more than one thousand transformative journeys in international service (made possible by your gifts to ELCA Where Needed Most) by highlighting two program alums whose experiences called them down very different paths of service to Christ's church.

The Rev. Henry Martinez — United Kingdom (2004-2005), country coordinator for Australia (2016-2020)

When I applied for YAGM, I never could have imagined what I was about to experience. I had just suffered my first significant failure in young adulthood as a classroom teacher, so I needed something new and wanted to try something absolutely foreign to me in a place that was just as foreign. YAGM started out as a change of scenery but ended up changing everything for me. It provided a space to ask questions about my values and direction. The program gave me the chance to work these questions out with companions in my country cohort and with those I met during my service.

One important way that YAGM shaped me was by giving me a forgiving environment to experience failure. My education and upbringing prioritized individual accomplishment and success, but YAGM showed me how vulnerability creates connection. YAGM made me more empathetic and understanding as well as a much better listener.

I spent my year at a residential facility for men battling chemical dependencies. My main job was simple but profound: I spent my days befriending the men who lived there. I joined them in chores, devotion and Bible study. I made myself available to them, and I listened more than I spoke. Amid those conversations, one thing became clear: **I was called to ministry, and YAGM was shaping me into the pastor I would become.**



Pastor Henry (right) with his wife, Kim, at the office of the Lutheran Church of Australia and New Zealand in Adelaide.

I was blessed to be able to return and help with several YAGM orientations and reentry events after my year of service. I even became country coordinator for Australia. Now I pastor Servant of the Valley Lutheran Church in Beaverton, Ore., where my commitment to listening to and serving my neighbor informs every aspect of my leadership. I thank God for YAGM and for that change of scenery more than 20 years ago!

Pastor Henry leads a retreat with one of his YAGM cohorts.



Cetera with students at Dar Al-Kalima Lutheran School in Bethlehem.

Cetera Jacobs — Jerusalem and the West Bank (2022-2023)

When I think about my YAGM year, one word rises above the rest: beautiful. Not beautiful in the polished, postcard sense, but the kind of beauty I could discover only when I let go of my assumptions, opened my heart to discomfort and allowed myself to be changed by people who invited me into their lives with generosity and grace.

YAGM is not about fixing, and it's absolutely not about "saving." It's about walking alongside others, listening more than speaking, and building relationships rooted in mutual respect. I love that we have a word for that, because **accompaniment is everything.**

As a Black American woman serving the Palestinian community, I found common ground in our shared experiences of racial profiling, displacement and being misunderstood and mistreated by systems of power. We saw each other. That seeing brought healing. **It lit a fire in me to dedicate myself to the work of justice.**

I peeled garlic in my host family's kitchen, played loud and hilarious games of Bingo with new friends, and bonded with students at the school I served

in Bethlehem. I learned to see God in small acts of love and resistance. YAGM taught me that service isn't a one-way street. I didn't go to Palestine to give something — I went and received more than I ever could have imagined. I was received into families, traditions, sacred spaces and complicated truths. I was loved, challenged and shaped by stories I never would have heard otherwise.

YAGM also reminded me that joy is resistance, that beauty survives destruction, that calling is presence rather than perfection and that, when we show up with open hearts, we find God everywhere. YAGM changed me. It stretched me, humbled me, filled me with gratitude and allowed me to hear my call to work for a better and more just world.



Cetera's community (including her best friend's family, pictured here) made her feel at home during her year of YAGM service.

"YAGM didn't just send me out; it called me back home more whole and more awake."

—Cetera Jacobs



Be sure to attend the next **FIRESIDE CHAT** for more stories from around the church. **Join us on Oct. 2 to hear from YAGM and celebrate 25 years of international journeys.** To update your email address and ensure that you receive your invitation, contact us at events@elca.org or 773-380-2872.



St. Matthew's former pastor, the Rev. Lesley Radius, presides over communion during worship at "St. Matthew's on Tour."

CHURCH ON TOUR

After the COVID-19 pandemic finally subsided, five small Lutheran churches in Fort Worth, Texas, faced shrinking congregations and growing questions about their futures. Each began as a community church, geographically located in the neighborhood it hoped to serve, but today members commute from all over the Fort Worth area. One of these churches, St. Matthew's Lutheran Church, on the southwest edge of the city, drew an especially diverse and scattered crowd because of the congregation's commitment to being fully inclusive and welcoming. Inspired by their own commutes for Sunday morning worship, the members of St. Matthew's came up with an idea to visit their church neighbors. With the help of the ELCA's Congregations Lead Initiative, funded by a grant from Lilly Endowment Inc. and your gifts to ELCA Where Needed Most, "St. Matthew's on Tour" was born.

At first, St. Matthew's "On Tour" experience involved the entire congregation traveling across Fort Worth and the surrounding area to fill another church's sanctuary and worship as one community. Before long, the other churches joined the tour, visiting each other and, in good Lutheran fashion, eating potluck lunches together afterward. Slowly these separate communities started to feel more like one larger community with different expressions throughout the city. Neighbors became friends, and barriers gave way to possibilities.

When ELCA congregations want help exploring possibilities, they turn to the Innovation team of the churchwide organization, which was formed just a few years ago, administers the Congregations Lead Initiative and is sustained by your gifts to ELCA Where Needed Most. This team works closely with ELCA synods and congregations to encourage creative ministries and provide the tools and resources necessary for them to sustain themselves. Innovation partners help congregations such as St. Matthew's to engage their communities and neighborhoods more proactively so that they can make better use of their resources as they seek to love their actual neighbors and meet their real needs. Rebecca Payne, program director for the Congregations Lead Initiative, highlights the Innovation team's core belief in empowerment: "Congregations know this work best. Communities know themselves best. What we do is help them talk to each other. We're here to help our churches do good work better."

The conversations the Innovation team facilitated gave rise to St. Matthew's going on a different kind of tour, packing up the entire service and traveling to nearby Burleson, Texas, to hold worship outdoors in a park. Worshiping off-site in Burleson made for a much shorter commute for many members of St. Matthew's and their new friends across Fort Worth; it also provided an opportunity for them to learn about their community from Harvest House, a Burleson nonprofit dedicated to meeting its community's basic needs. The Congregations Lead Initiative covered the full cost of the event, from rental of an outdoor pavilion to food and drinks for fellowship after the service. Thanks to your gifts to ELCA Where Needed Most, St. Matthew's was able to continue exploring its community and how it could better meet its neighbors where they are (sometimes quite literally).

By partnering with the ELCA as it innovates new forms of ministry, you make stories such as "St. Matthew's on Tour" possible. Churches taking part in the Congregations Lead Initiative are excited by the possibilities of their creative ministries. They also report back to the Innovation team that they are communicating more effectively, fostering trust among themselves and openly sharing what they have learned with other congregations. The work that began with just a few churches is now rippling across cities and even entire synods as the congregations of the ELCA embrace new approaches to ministry and to the neighbors they seek to serve and love.



Does the work of St. Matthew's and the Congregations Lead Initiative inspire you and your congregation? The ELCA Innovation team has a guide to help you get started with your own conversations! Scan this QR code to download the Interview Guide. You can also follow the Innovation team's work on Instagram @ELCAInnovation.



Five small ELCA congregations in the Fort Worth area come together to worship and pray at a park in nearby Burleson, Texas.



We are excited to announce this year's series of Advent devotional emails, featuring videos from program directors of churchwide ministries! These emails will run through the season of Advent, highlighting unique perspectives and enriching your spiritual journey as we anticipate the arrival of Christ. The series will end with a message from Presiding Bishop-elect Curry. If your email address has changed or you want to confirm that you will receive these Advent devotions, please reach out to your Leadership Circle team at LeadershipCircle@elca.org.



“God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as [God] chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be?”

—1 Corinthians 12:18-19

Greetings in Christ!

I recently was privileged to join New Missionary Orientation, where I met 20 individuals who have discerned God's call to serve our church across the world. They serve in a variety of ways: as Horizon Interns completing their

pastoral training, as country coordinators for YAGM, as pastors in the Middle East and South America, and in leadership development and education. All are called to serve in different contexts and ways but for the same purpose: to be the church together in accompaniment with our companions.

Accompaniment is central to mission in the ELCA. For me, it means being in a relationship and walking together. As I sat with these missionaries and heard their stories, callings

and passion, I was honored to tell them about you and how you walk with us as a church — and with them as they serve. I am grateful to sit in this intersection where I experience the body of Christ in its many forms. I am constantly reminded that there is no church without the body of Christ and that each part is important and treasured. We go out into the world, share stories, partner in service and become one body with one mission for the sake of the world. I hope these stories remind you that you are an essential member of that body

and our community of faith, just like those who serve in our communities and oceans away. Together we are so much more than we could ever dream of being alone.



In mission together,

Rev. John Eggen
Senior Director, Annual Giving



FedUp Ministries staff past and present with Pastor Anna's daughter, Laynee (left), who handwrote the application for the grant her mother received. Photo by JD Scott Photography

Scan this QR code to learn more about Pastor Anna and FedUp Ministries — and watch her being surprised with a \$100,000 grant on *The Kelly Clarkson Show*.



CALLED TO HARD MOMENTS

ELCA World Hunger is an important voice for justice in our church, feeding people and addressing the root causes of hunger in 62 countries and 42 U.S. states and territories. That work is carried out by local members of what the ministry calls **the Hunger Leaders Network**. “It’s beautiful to see their work as a bridge, not just between hunger ministries and churchwide, but also to congregations, synods and our communities,” says Lauren Smith, director of the Hunger Leaders Network, whose position at the churchwide organization is made possible by your gifts to ELCA World Hunger. We want to introduce you to two members of the Hunger Leaders Network to show the impact these leaders have in their synods.

Cindy Dobberke of the Greater Milwaukee Synod sees ELCA World Hunger as our strongest outward-reaching ministry: “We can train pastors, we can have worship on Sunday, but if we are to be the church in the world, this is the work that the world sees.” She also recognizes the importance of hunger work in light of current events, noting, “With USAID [the United States Agency for International Development] gone, World Hunger has people that are continuing that work, so that gap is being filled and we know that people will still be fed.”

Even after more than a decade of experience in hunger ministry, Cindy continues to be amazed by how much there is to learn about the work of addressing hunger — and how her faith grows along with her knowledge. In her volunteer role as one of

the synod’s hunger leaders, Cindy prioritizes helping other ELCA members to be similarly transformed: “World Hunger has so much going on, and people only see a sliver. We want our people to get a bigger picture. We want them to understand the nature and breadth of the work and that it only happens because of our deep, abiding faith. World Hunger works every day to give people the abundant life that Jesus desires for all of God’s children.”

On the other side of Lake Michigan, the Rev. Anna Taylor-McCants — lead pastor, mission developer and executive director of FedUp Ministries in Ypsilanti, Mich. — shares Cindy’s core belief that there is abundance for all in Christ. She also sees herself as part of a much bigger dream: “Awakening ourselves to the reality of our neighbor allows us to dream of a more just world and make it real.” These intersecting beliefs give Pastor Anna an unmistakable energy that inspires other hunger leaders through the network. “I feel called to hard moments, and hard moments open people up,” she says. “Being part of the Hunger Leaders Network allows me to fulfill my calling and then pour out that gift to other people. Together we don’t need to be scared to do big things and take a step out in faith.” Pastor Anna’s role as chair of the Southeast Michigan Synod’s hunger team allows her to do just that with leaders of the synod’s 40 hunger ministries.

In 2024, FedUp offered more than 33,000 meals and 4,000 showers to its neighbors in southeast Michigan, thanks to its supporters and a domestic grant from ELCA World Hunger. The support of the churchwide organization and World Hunger have enabled Pastor Anna to grow as a hunger leader



Cindy Dobberke (center) prepares bag lunches with Mount Olive Lutheran Church (Mukwonago, Wis.) for the Milwaukee-area ministry Street Angels.

and have ignited the work of FedUp Ministries, providing the holistic support necessary to build a healthy, sustainable ministry and to make a real difference in its community.

Your gifts to ELCA World Hunger train and inspire leaders, such as Cindy and Pastor Anna, who are called to this vital work.

CIRCLE Leadership

Fall 2025

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
8765 West Higgins Road
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Join us next year on a Donor Immersion Trip to see the impact of your generosity firsthand! **From April 13 to 23, we will journey to southern Africa** to learn about health ministries and the ongoing work of peace and reconciliation. **Then, next fall, we will learn how our partner churches in Central Europe** serve society's most vulnerable populations.

To register or find more information, contact Jennifer Kenyeri, manager of development events, at Jennifer.Kenyeri@ELCA.org or 773-380-2872. You can also **scan this QR code to learn more about our upcoming journey to Argentina** for a preview of what you might experience on one of these trips next year!



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Visit the Leadership Circle website to access the latest updates from the ELCA's churchwide ministries.