



Evangelical
Lutheran Church
in America

Fall 2026

Leadership

FOR CONGREGATIONS

TOGETHER WE HAVE ALL WE NEED



Davin and the Mississippi Urban League offer community partners Mental, Emotional, and Spiritual Support (MESS) training in Jackson.

Recent disasters and crises have provided a stark lesson to Lutherans around the country: they need local, well-connected leaders equipped to jump into action. Synods and organizations have worked with Lutheran Disaster Response (LDR), funded by your generous gifts, to bring back a specialized, localized role: disaster response coordinator.

Maryn Olson, director of LDR, says, “These positions look very different because every disaster response starts and ends locally. We work with our partners to name what and who they need, then we figure out how to make it possible.”

LDR works with synods to ensure that these roles are sustainable, and the Southeastern Synod now funds its director of disaster ministry role completely out of its own budget. Davin Henrik serves in that role and

reflects, “My job is to help people understand that when a disaster happens, that is still a ministry. No single person or church has everything they need, but **together we have all we need**. I just want us to see ourselves as neighbors rather than adversaries.”

A powerful example of this plays out regularly at the synod’s shower trailer. “With every disaster response, people come together and find themselves needing the same things,” Davin says. “So we have Baptists and Amish and Mennonites and Lutherans sharing the shower trailer and then sharing a table. **In that moment, we’re all just neighbors.**”

When asked what the support of Leadership Circle members means to LDR, Maryn replied, “When responding to a disaster, the worst thing you can do is nothing. But the second worst thing you can do is not dream big enough. Thanks to our donors, we dream big — and so do countless communities around the world.”

“We make room for grief and hope to live alongside each other. Because that’s what happens when you experience loss — you have conflicting emotions. There’s joy for all the memories and grief for what’s no longer there. It’s a privilege to hold that space.”

—Victoria Villa, disaster response coordinator for the Southwest California Synod

This year’s series of Advent devotional emails will feature videos from New Ministry Development and Evangelism leaders and grant recipients! These emails run throughout Advent and highlight unique perspectives as we anticipate the arrival of Christ. The series will culminate with a message from Presiding Bishop Yehiel Curry.



For more resources and longer version of these stories, check out the new [ELCA.org/LeadershipCircle](https://www.elca.org/LeadershipCircle)!

DESIGNED TO BELONG



Participants and ELCA churchwide organization staff gather at the Lutheran center for Design for Belonging.

Last October, the Lutheran Center played host to Design for Belonging, a first-of-its-kind intergenerational event where 60 young adults representing ELCA synods joined 40 innovators from congregations across the ELCA to learn about new methods for ministry and engaging communities. Staff from the Innovation and Young Adult Communities teams of the churchwide organization joined together to equip young leaders to create their own Young Adult Network, inspiring and training lay leaders to try something new in their congregations to meet community needs.

Because the event was intergenerational, it allowed for organic opportunities for Lutherans from all around the ELCA to dream about the church together. Leaders discussed their challenges and their hopes with each other, sharing in struggles as well as joys. Participants left feeling not only inspired but less alone in their work. Now they have partners – and friends – for collaboration, resource-sharing and support.

Through your gifts to the churchwide organization, the Innovation and Young Adult Ministries teams can provide programming such as Design for Belonging that support ELCA congregations just like yours. Together we are forging new paths forward while still rooted in our shared Lutheran identity.



A DROP IN THE BUCKET

The Rev. Katie Rode, pastor of First English Lutheran Church in Austin, Texas, thinks her call story is also about the generosity of the many people who confirmed her calling – and made it possible. She began her seminary journey at Wartburg Seminary in a special program that allowed her to serve at Immanuel Lutheran Church in Comfort, Texas, while taking classes part-time. A Fund for Leaders scholarship covered Pastor Katie's tuition, and church members stepped up in creative, loving ways to support her however they could.

Her experience taught her the importance of building a real community where members share gifts, talents and resources to accomplish more together than they ever could alone: "A donor that has the ability to give generously but has no time might look at someone like me and think, 'She has the time, gifts and ability. I can support her, and we can accomplish great things as a team.'"

Pastor Katie believes that our theology is a gift to the world: "I don't give to spread our theology, I give to *exemplify* it. It's about who we are. My identity and my mission align with my church by giving to it." Because of this alignment, Pastor Katie has planned future giving to make sure that our theology can be exemplified for years to come.

Pastor Katie talks about her own giving modestly, but she is filled with joy when she speaks about what her gifts can do when combined with those of other Leadership Circle members. "**My giving is just a drop in the bucket,**" she says. "**But the bucket doesn't get filled without drops.**"