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CIRCLE

Leadership

Fall 2026

NEWSLETTER

ELCA.org



Evangelical
Lutheran Church
in America

"I thank my God for every remembrance of you, always in every one of my prayers for all of you, praying with joy for your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work in you will continue to complete it until the day of Jesus Christ." —Philippians 1:3-6

Dear members of the Leadership Circle,
Grace and peace to you!

During my time working for the churchwide organization of the ELCA, I have been so grateful to see the tremendous work of this church all around me every day. Not only do I get to witness the ministry of my colleagues here and around the church, but I also get to meet donors such as you, who deeply believe in the ministries of this church and want to see them thrive. I have treasured getting to see this whole picture, because it has been a constant reminder that none of us is asked to work alone. Whatever our gifts, passions or resources, we are all an essential part of this church and its work in the world.

As you read this, I am transitioning to a new role at the churchwide organization: executive for administration. Soon you will get to know a new executive for development, who will be blessed by the role just as I have been. I want to thank you for the ways that you have responded to this team's stories, phone calls, newsletters and so much more. I have enjoyed bringing you these newsletters and our Advent series each year. Your steadfast dedication to the ministries of the ELCA is truly inspiring. The Leadership Circle is such a special group. You always show up for the ministries of this church, and your love for them is so clear!

I am so proud of the Development team, and I look forward to many more years of inspiring stories and bold calls to action from my colleagues and friends who will continue to do wonderful things. For the many changes that the last year has brought, it also has brought excitement and renewed energy. This is an exciting time for the ELCA, and I hope that is as unmistakable in the pews of your local congregation as it is here. You will see it in the stories that follow — I am sure of that.

While my role at the churchwide organization is changing, my belief in our shared mission is as strong as ever. When we join together in that mission — living faithfully, witnessing boldly, serving joyfully and giving abundantly — we step into the future with hope and courage. And by the grace of God, we do not walk alone!



In Christ,

Rachel Wind

Rachel Wind
Executive for Development
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

ON THE COVER: Mohammad Kabaja, head nurse of the specialized pediatric care unit at Augusta Victoria Hospital in Jerusalem, shows that care goes beyond treatment as he brings comfort and joy to a young patient.

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Scan to support the work of the church!



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

What is human-centered design? It seeks to make solutions more useful and usable for the people who will actually use them.

Dear siblings in Christ,

In communities across every synod of the ELCA, Lutherans are imagining new forms of ministry and new ways of being the church for their neighbors. I hear so many of these stories, and I am excited to bring one of them to you here!

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 innovative methods for ministry and engaging communities. Staff from the Innovation and Young Adult Communities teams of the churchwide organization joined together to teach human-centered design concepts to volunteer leaders. The event aimed not only to equip young leaders to create their own Young Adult Network but to inspire and train 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 ELCA Where Needed Most, 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 remaining rooted in our shared Lutheran identity. Thank you for all the ways you participate in God's work across the world, including your generosity and commitment to the ministries of the ELCA.

Yours in Christ,



Benjamin Hogue

Rev. Benjamin Hogue
Director, Ministry Engagement and Support



Our August **FIRESIDE CHAT** featured a special guest, Presiding Bishop Yehiel Curry! To rewatch the event or share it with members of your congregation, scan here.





Elitha shares remarks with the Tashinga Women's Group, an ELCZ Gender Justice Ministry site in a rural area near Mberengwa.



Elitha smiles and shares a greeting with the community at the Burure Mission.



Elitha joins a dance with street performers in Victoria Falls.



Emilie (center) and Elitha (in black) with program leaders from Lutheran Development Services and the ELCZ Eastern Diocese office.



Elitha and her husband, Clever, enjoy a sunset cruise in Victoria Falls.

EMPOWERING WOMEN FROM ELCA TO ELCZ

The Rev. Dr. Elitha Moyo is a woman of many talents and almost as many titles. She serves as ELCA Global Mission's regional representative for Southern Africa (funded by your gifts to Global Mission) and advocacy resources and as a gender justice coordinator for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Zimbabwe (ELCZ, with a zed). She honed her passion for gender justice while earning her doctorate in pastoral theology. Now she is a beloved and effective leader, even winning the 2023 People's Choice Women Changing the World Award in the category of Gender Equality.

Despite her many accolades and titles, she simply goes by Elitha, and she is most proud when talking about the progress made toward gender equality within Zimbabwe and the ELCZ, which she has championed for years. With her help, Zimbabwe outlawed child marriage and reduced rates of domestic violence, and the ELCZ has built up a staff of men and women in equal numbers. Elitha is also proud to say that it was funds from ELCA World Hunger that drove ELCZ's gender justice work from its earliest days. Your support of the ministries of the ELCA helped establish roles and programs that ensure that future generations of women in Zimbabwe will be safer, have more possibilities and be able to thrive. What a remarkable gift to the world!

Elitha's contributions to gender justice in Zimbabwe have also involved work on a much smaller, but equally important, scale: livelihood projects focused on women and their home lives. During a recent Donor Immersion Trip with Leadership Circle members and ELCA churchwide organization staff, a woman from one of these groups bounded up to Elitha and said, "You won't remember me, but I remember you. I remember the *date* you came. I remember because my life has been different ever since." She went on to share that, before that day, she had so little support and so little agency that she felt more like a servant than a wife. The livelihood program Elitha led gave her the skills she needed to imagine a path forward. Before long, she started

making money for her family. Now her household is thriving and her marriage is a partnership of equals.

The impact of Elitha and her tremendous colleagues in the ELCZ in the struggle for gender justice in Zimbabwe is a truly remarkable reminder that Lutherans around the world are making a tangible difference in people's lives every day — and that they

do not work alone! Your gifts to the ministries of the ELCA help realize our shared hope of a more just, equal and safe world for all people.

ELCA Good Gifts are a great way to support gender justice around the world. Learn more by scanning here.



"Elitha is a champion of women. She sees their possibility and has spent years fighting for it when no one, including the women, wanted to see or value what they had to offer. Elitha has this infectious goodness that will pull you in (sometimes quite literally) — not dragging but inspiring. I can't imagine a better example of the ongoing power of showing up every day and building relationships."

—Emilie Bouvier, Mission Funding Director, who also provided the pictures that accompany this story

You are invited to join us next spring as we travel to Argentina and Chile on a Donor Immersion Trip! To learn more about how you can see the impact of your gifts firsthand, contact **Jennifer Kenyeri**, manager of development events, at **Jennifer.Kenyeri@elca.org** or **773-380-2872**.



Pastor Katie rides in a fire truck with the assistant fire chief on their way to the graveside service of a fellow (retired) first responder.

A DROP IN THE BUCKET

When the Rev. Katie Rode, pastor of First English Lutheran Church in Austin, Texas, talks about giving, she rarely mentions money. Instead she talks about identity and relationships. “Everything that we do as disciples comes from relationships,” she says. “When you’re thinking about giving, start with what you’re doing, who you’re around and what matters to you.”

As she relates her call story, it becomes clear that Pastor Katie’s wisdom about giving is a gift from the many people in her life who confirmed her calling – and made it possible. She began her seminary journey in 2019 at Wartburg Seminary in a special

contextual education program that allowed her to serve at a church in Texas (Immanuel Lutheran Church in Comfort) while taking classes part-time. A Fund for Leaders scholarship covered Pastor Katie’s tuition, and the people of Immanuel stepped up to help with the trips to and from Iowa for classes. “I was in my pastoral role before I ever went to class,” she recalls. “My people packed me snacks, got me safely on the road and made the entire journey possible. They were generous in creative, loving ways that I will never forget.”

Once the congregation was able to formally call her as its pastor, it continued to find creative ways to support Pastor Katie and model generosity. As

a result, she became a volunteer firefighter and eventually an emergency medical technician, which makes her – and, by extension, Immanuel – a core part of the community. Throughout the experience, she learned 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.’”

One of the reasons Pastor Katie feels so confident giving her time and her money to the ministries of the ELCA is because she 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. We are churches, we are Lutherans, we are Christians. 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 they join together 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.”

“I don’t give to spread our theology; I give to *exemplify* it. It’s about who we are. We are churches, we are Lutherans, we are Christians. My identity and my mission align with my church by giving to it.”

—Rev. Katie Rode, pastor of First English Lutheran Church in Austin, Texas



CARE AMID CHAOS

Atop the Mount of Olives in East Jerusalem stands Augusta Victoria Hospital (AVH), a medical facility operated by the Lutheran World Federation. The hospital was established in 1950 in partnership with the United Nations specifically to provide medical care in the middle of the disputed territory. The ELCA is proud to have been a long-term partner of the hospital for more than 75 years through ELCA World Hunger and Lutheran Disaster Response (LDR). With your support, AVH continues to care for its community despite the ongoing conflict and has even expanded many of its services to meet growing and ever-changing needs.

The second largest hospital in Jerusalem, AVH is the region’s sole provider of comprehensive cancer care. The hospital is also the only option available to children in the West Bank needing dialysis treatment. Indicative of the facility’s vision to see people thrive, AVH also runs two mobile outreach clinics that focus on diabetes prevention and breast cancer screening. Even when checkpoints, restrictions and a lack of safe, accessible travel routes cut off many of its patients, the hospital quickly adapted to provide remote treatments when possible, work with other hospitals to share services and supply those hospitals with essential cancer medications.

LDR has been able to provide special forms of support to AVH because of your generosity as well. Patients from Gaza faced difficulty returning home when crossings closed, and LDR funds allowed the hospital to safely house the patients and their caregivers in addition to providing them with transportation, support and psychological care. These resources enabled AVH to adapt when needs changed, providing continuous, holistic care in the face of tremendous adversity.

One of these patients, Saleh, expressed her gratitude for the breadth of support the hospital offered and for donors such as you, who made it possible: “Social workers constantly visited us to assess our situation and conduct art expressive-therapy sessions. We arrived at the hospital during summertime, so we didn’t have anything to wear as

winter approached. We were provided with winter clothes, hygiene kits and everything we needed. Thanks to everyone who supported us during this difficult time, including donors from around the world. Thank you for remembering us.”

As a wave of stories continues to come out of the region about the conflict and growing need, AVH stands out for striving to be consistent for a community in dire need of consistency. For all the many changes the hospital has made, by choice or otherwise, AVH maintains an exceptional level of care at remarkable scale. In 2025, the facility provided more than 14,000 chemotherapy sessions, almost 17,000 radiology sessions and over 22,000 kidney dialysis sessions. Your generosity ensures that AVH will never stop caring for especially vulnerable patients in the region, no matter the challenge. Together we remind AVH and its patients that the world has not forgotten them.

“Accompaniment is at the heart of our ministry in the Holy Land. Our support of Augusta Victoria Hospital (AVH) is about more than providing resources — it is about walking alongside people in their greatest moments of need, honoring their *sumud* (steadfastness) and the remarkable resilience they embody each day. Through this partnership, we remind patients, families and the dedicated medical staff that they are not alone. The church stands with them in hope, faith, trust and love.”

—Rev. Gabi Aelabouni, Director for the Middle East and North Africa Desk



A mobile mammography unit attached to the oncology department at AVH (known as the “Pink Bus”) reaches communities around Jerusalem to promote breast cancer awareness and early diagnosis. Abdalla Elayyan/LWF



Atta Jabr/LWF



Davin and Sheronda Armstrong participate in Alabama Arise Legislative Day at the Alabama State House.



early success of establishing long-term sustainability came in the Southeastern Synod, where Davin Henrik serves as director of disaster ministry. LDR and the Southeastern Synod prioritized long-term sustainability in the grant and now fully fund Davin's role out of the synod's budget.

Davin encourages people to view disaster ministry much as they would any other kind of ministry: "My job is to help people understand that, when a disaster happens, that is still a ministry. It is still something that is solved and healed in deep relationships. It's solved by community and leading with faith." He is especially passionate when he speaks about every church and community having a role to play, saying, "No single church has everything they need. **Together we have all we need.**"

When asked about where he finds the most joy in his work, Davin reflects, "My job is to connect people so we can get through stronger. I'm just looking for us to see ourselves as neighbors rather than adversaries." A powerful example of this plays out regularly at the site of a shower trailer owned by the synod. The trailer is owned by Lutherans and housed at a Baptist church. "With every disaster response, people come together and find themselves needing the same things," he says. "They need a shower and they need a meal. So we have Baptists and Amish and Mennonites and Lutherans sharing the shower trailer and then sharing a table. That would never happen in any other circumstance. **In that moment, we're all just neighbors.**"



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

TOGETHER WE HAVE ALL WE NEED

In recent years, disasters and crises around the United States have necessitated swift responses for which many regions and communities were ill-prepared. Lutherans around the country realized that they needed to develop their capacity for a response, including personnel. They knew that future responses would benefit from a local, well-connected leader equipped to jump into action when the need arises. Fortunately for these synods and organizations, Lutheran Disaster Response (LDR), funded by your generous gifts, was ready and waiting to share hard-won wisdom developed over decades of relationship- and capacity-building efforts.

The result of these conversations is the resurgence of a specialized and localized role: disaster response coordinator. Maryn Olson, director of LDR, says of these coordinators, "The gift and challenge of these positions is how localized they are. They might share the same name, but each position looks 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."

For partners starting from scratch, LDR provides short-term grants to get the role established while a longer-term sustainability plan can take shape. An

Your gifts to LDR do so much more than address today's challenges – they fuel development efforts long after disasters and thoughtful, practical preparedness plans long before them. When asked about what support from 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." Even in the worst situations, together we are dreaming of a better future and making it real.

"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



For more updates on LDR's work in 2026, scan here to read the latest issue of "Thrive."



CIRCLE *Leadership*

Fall 2026

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
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We are excited to announce this year's series of Advent devotional emails, featuring videos from the New Ministry Development and Evangelism team of the churchwide organization! These emails will run throughout Advent, highlighting unique perspectives and enriching your spiritual journey as we anticipate the arrival of Christ. The series also will feature a message from our presiding bishop, the Rev. Yehiel 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.



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