

FOR FAITHFUL SUPPORTERS OF ELCA MINISTRIES

# CIRCLE

# *Leadership*

Spring 2026

NEWSLETTER

ELCA.org



Evangelical  
Lutheran Church  
in America

**"For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body." —1 Corinthians 12:12-13**

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

Lately it seems that everywhere I look, I am reminded that the ELCA is a web of deep, meaningful relationships that make our work possible, from small groups in our congregations to massive international efforts like ELCA World Hunger and Lutheran Disaster Response. On scales both large and small, our church is always at its best when it is connected — one faith, one baptism, one body, one mission. In our many expressions and contexts, together, we are Christ's church.

As members of the Leadership Circle, you play such an important role in maintaining these relationships and forging new ones. Your consistent support creates new pathways to church leadership, empowers our global partners, funds creative ministries, fills food pantries, rebuilds communities and so much more. When you join together, the impact is profound. Our wildest imagination can only scratch the surface of what we are able to do together as Christ's church at work in the world.

In these stories, you will see the ripple effect of real, transformative relationships throughout the ELCA and the world. I hope they will remind you of those individuals and communities who have shaped you — where you were named and claimed in the waters of baptism, where you encountered God's immeasurable grace, and where God's unending love for the world caught fire within you. May these stories inspire you to look for opportunities to find further connection in your congregation, in your community and in the global family of Christ.

Friends, we are so grateful for you! Your consistency allows us to live out our baptismal calling with boldness and hope — 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: Donor Immersion Trip participants standing in front of the tallest Jesus statue in the world, Jesus Christ the Savior, that overlooks Lake Toba in North Sumatra, Indonesia, standing at 200 feet. Learn more about this trip on page 6.*

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**HOW TO GIVE**

**Online:**  
ELCA.org/donate

**Phone:**  
800-638-3522

**Mail:**  
Make a check payable to "ELCA" and mail it, using the included envelope, to:  
ELCA, P.O. Box 1809,  
Merrifield, VA 22116-8009



Scan to support the work of the church!

**YOUR GIVING IN 2025 – AND ITS IMPACT!**

In 2025, you joined together with **6,127 households** in the **Leadership Circle** to give more than **\$16.1 million** to make the life-changing work of the ELCA possible, including:

**COMMUNITY AND LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT**

**52** Gather small groups engaging more than **1,000** young adults

**351** grants helping launch **219** new-start communities and fuel **114** strategic communities.

**179** Lutheran campus ministries reaching more than **11,000** college students.

**LUTHERAN DISASTER RESPONSE**

Coordinated responses in **52** countries and **35** U.S. states and territories.

**GLOBAL ENGAGEMENT**

**24** Young Adults in Global Mission volunteers serving in **6** countries.

**68** missionary families serving in **37** countries.

**ELCA WORLD HUNGER**

Addressing hunger and its causes in nearly **60** countries around the world.

**142** Domestic Hunger Grants and **665** Daily Bread Grants throughout every ELCA synod.

*Thank you!*

Dear siblings in Christ,

In the life of our church, relationships are often what sustain us. That is certainly true of the partnerships between congregations and the missionaries who serve around the world through ELCA Global Mission. The stories missionaries share during home assignment — stories of ministry, friendship, challenge and hope — help us see the global church more clearly and remember that we are part of something larger than ourselves.

Congregations often tell us that hosting a missionary deepens their own sense of calling. A sermon at worship, a conversation over coffee hour, an adult forum or a shared meal becomes an opportunity to learn, pray and grow together. The mission that once felt far away suddenly feels close and personal.

Home assignment visits remind congregations that the work of the gospel does not stop at our neighborhood or synod boundaries. That is one of the gifts of these relationships: We remember that mission is not something done "over there," it is what we share together as the body of Christ.

Thank you for all the ways you participate in God's work across the world, including supporting our missionaries, through your encouragement, generosity and prayers!

Yours in Christ,



*Benjamin Hogue*

Rev. Benjamin Hogue  
Director, Ministry Engagement  
and Support

P.S. There is still time to host a missionary during home assignment this summer! If your congregation is interested, please reach out to [GlobalChurch@ELCA.org](mailto:GlobalChurch@ELCA.org).

## IN THIS TOGETHER — ELCA MISSIONARY HOME ASSIGNMENTS



During Dr. Jacqueline (Jackie) and Patrick Bencke's first home assignment (then called a "furlough"), Jackie was eight months pregnant with the couple's second daughter. This spring, Jackie is visiting potential colleges with this daughter. The couple has served in Japan since 2006 and is looking

forward to their 10th home assignment to see the congregations and individual donors who have made their service possible — and who have watched their children grow up from afar.

What is a "home assignment?" For two months every two years, ELCA Global Mission personnel step away from their service sites and return to the United States. During these 60 days, missionaries engage in learning, build community with one another, gather with family and friends, attend to their own care, and visit congregations that support them through financial gifts, prayer and relationships.

As they reflect on two decades of missionary service, the Benckes recount with joy the wonderful people they've met during every home assignment. They remember good friends like Dorothy, who made sure the women of her church had a luncheon for the family after the service, and Joyce and Lou, who kept the Benckes' daughters busy so the couple could prepare for their presentation and meet everyone (and slipped the family gift certificates for easy meals on the road between churches). For the Benckes, these friends (and many more like them) are more than supporters — they are cheerleaders and even pseudo-grandparents.



*Hannah and Emilie Bencke like to go off on adventures while their parents are leading programs at the churches they visit.*

To learn more about sponsoring a missionary, reach out to [GlobalChurch@ELCA.org](mailto:GlobalChurch@ELCA.org). You can also scan the QR code to view the 2026 Global Mission Directory to learn more about all of our missionaries, including how to support them.



*John and Judy Mouw of Cormorant Lutheran Church (Lake Park, Minn.) enjoy hosting the Benckes during their home assignments. The Benckes always get a ride on their pontoon (and ice cream).*

These relationships mean as much to the donors and congregations stateside as they do to the Benckes halfway around the world. If your congregation does not currently sponsor a missionary, the Benckes offer a great reason for you to consider doing so: "The congregations that sponsor us are part of everything we do. Our mission becomes their mission. We are all reminded that our work crosses borders and oceans, and we are all part of one mission."

**"The congregations that sponsor us are part of everything we do."**

**—Dr. Jacqueline and Patrick Bencke**

### The Benckes' Favorite "Little" Things During Home Assignment

- Big parking lots
- So. Much. Cheese.
- Coffeeshops
- Cable TV
- Grandparents
- Being with the people they love with no screen (and thousands of miles) between them

For more stories about the impact of your gifts to ELCA World Hunger and Lutheran Disaster Response, read the latest issue of "LifeLines."



## FROM TRIP TO GIFT

When Dr. Phyllis Cavens agreed to join ELCA leaders and donors on a Donor Immersion Trip in spring 2025, she was no stranger to international medical missions. “I didn’t *decide* to go as much as I was *nudged*,” she recalls. “My hope was to grow spiritually in hope and generosity. That’s exactly where the Spirit led me on our journey to Indonesia.”

As is true for all trip participants, Dr. Cavens will never forget the people she met or how they opened their hearts to her. Her face lights up as she remembers a visit to a school for children with physical and developmental disabilities. As she accepted the gift of a handmade stole, Dr. Cavens couldn’t help worrying that the children were performing for the group. After the ceremony, however, the boy’s mother beamed at Dr. Cavens, gesturing for them to take a picture. “I could see in that mother’s eyes that this was not a show,” she remembers fondly. “She was placing her son and her family on my heart so that I would carry them home with me. And I did.”

One year later, these people are still on Dr. Cavens’ heart and mind. So, too, are those answering the call to give others like them a better life and a more just future. In fact, it’s impossible to tell the story of her journey without talking about its impact after her return!

Dr. Cavens had just one goal going into her trip to Indonesia: she wanted to make a sizable one-time gift that would make a real difference to help end global hunger. As a pragmatist, she recognized the immense challenge, yet she knew few organizations possess the expertise and relationships to execute it like ELCA World Hunger.

Early in the trip, Dr. Cavens was struck by how the work of the ELCA, the Lutheran World Federation, ELCA World Hunger and Lutheran Disaster Response was deeply intertwined. While each had their part to play, it was clear that Lutherans were present, working together and with local communities. “We hear so often that we are part of a global fellowship, but seeing it firsthand was remarkable,” Dr. Cavens says.

Seeing ELCA World Hunger’s work up close was especially important to Dr. Cavens since she holds a deep desire to help address global hunger in a meaningful way. Her Donor Immersion Trip to Indonesia provided a unique opportunity to see ELCA World Hunger in action, helping her maximize the impact of her giving.

Given her experience in medical missions and her passion for helping refugees, Dr. Cavens found herself continually thinking about the crisis in South Sudan. Among the many serious issues facing this refugee population are surging maternal and infant mortality rates. Inspired by ELCA World Hunger’s long-term commitment to address this through the Reconciliation Lutheran Center and Clinic, Dr. Cavens joined its efforts. As a doctor, she felt drawn to ELCA World Hunger’s realistic approach to addressing these issues over the years, with practical and specific plans.

Working with ELCA churchwide staff, Dr. Cavens decided to give a matching gift to ELCA World Hunger. “I knew my gift would go a long way, but the match could go further. **ELCA World Hunger believed in that as much as I did,**” she wants Leadership Circle members to know. “I was confident in the wisdom and integrity of the people I met – I was so confident in what we could do together.”

The result? ELCA donors like you showed up in droves, quadrupling her gift and going further than she hoped to better the lives of refugees in South Sudan. Dr. Cavens is amazed and inspired by what ELCA members can do when they join together. “This is what our church is about,” she says.



*Dr. Cavens receives her stole – and a lifelong memory – during a special ceremony on the Donor Immersion Trip.*



Hear more about the clinic in this clip from one of 2025’s FIRESIDE CHATS.

NOV  
6-16

Inspired by Dr. Cavens’ story? **Join us this fall, Nov. 6-16, on a trip to Central Europe to see God’s work firsthand in Hungary, Slovakia and Poland.** You will witness ministries with refugees, meet with teachers in the Central Europe Teachers Program, and learn about the context and culture of Lutherans in Central Europe. 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](mailto:Jennifer.Kenyeri@ELCA.org) or **773-380-2872**.



*Horizon apprentice Joaquin serves at The Healing Center, one of 10 ministry sites participating in the program.*

## WHAT'S POSSIBLE FOR ME?

To answer the call for more leaders from a wider variety of backgrounds, the ELCA continues to reimagine not just *who* we are calling to leadership but *how* we are calling them. Your gifts to ELCA Where Needed Most support many exciting initiatives, including the **Horizon Apprenticeship Program**, which equips a new generation of diverse young leaders to shape the future of the church.

Rooted in faith, Horizon engages young people ages 16-20 in about 10 hours per week of hands-on ministry, mentoring and leadership development. Participants receive stipends spaced throughout

the nine months of their apprenticeship, which affirms the value of their work and learning, along with guidance and special coaching. Together with their mentor, each apprentice plans and carries out a project that reflects their gifts and benefits their congregation or community. This helps apprentices feel empowered to lead today instead of waiting for “someday.”

This year, the program boasts 13 apprentices serving in 10 ministry sites – congregations, social service agencies and camps – who are bridging faith with real-time impact and learning how leadership extends beyond church walls to meet pressing local needs.

“It has been meaningful for us to pass on what we have learned about nonprofit administration and to see that this work is making a tangible impact on Joaquin’s life and goals. We have been especially moved by seeing Joaquin’s thinking evolve through new experiences and knowledge that support his goals and dreams. Joaquin’s passion is tangible, and we absolutely recognize him as a future leader.”

—Stephanie Rovine, program and development director at The Healing Center, one of the Horizon ministry sites



Cynthia Zamora, director of Horizon for the ELCA churchwide organization, highlights that the program “focuses not to the next generation but to the current generation and the future they will create as they develop their skills and theological grounding in the present.” Reflecting on the program and its long- and short-term benefits, she says, “Horizon apprentices bring these skills back right now in their communities. Most won’t go on to seminary, but they are all growing as leaders and prominent voices in their ministry sites and communities *right now*.”

Several years ago, Presiding Bishop Yehiel Curry joined Horizon apprentices in a virtual program where he shared his pathway to leadership. “It was amazing to hear someone with a background like mine who was able to make it,” an apprentice says. “He’s a bishop now. ... **What’s possible for me?**”

These young adults have a world of possibility in front of them. Thanks to your gifts to Where Needed Most, leadership programs like the Horizon Apprenticeship Program will be there to meet them where they are, nurturing their gifts and empowering them to lead boldly in our church, **right now**.

AUG  
6

Be sure to join us on **August 6** for our next **FIRESIDE CHAT** featuring conversation and connection with the Rev. Yehiel Curry, newly elected presiding bishop of the ELCA! To update your email address and ensure that you receive your invitation, contact us at [Events@ELCA.org](mailto:Events@ELCA.org) or **773-380-2872**.



*The Tapestry community loves finding reasons to gather, celebrate and share a meal together.*

**CALLED TO HARD MOMENTS**

“During seminary, I realized that people feel especially lonely around a table,” Melissa Gonzalez recalls. “We feel together around a table, too.” Years later, she is now Pastor Melissa, and her belief in the power of food to connect people is at the core of her ministry at Tapestry, a worshipping community in Richfield, Minn.

It’s no surprise, then, that the people of Tapestry eat together a lot. They share meals on education and community nights as well as every time they worship. For this congregation largely made up of immigrants, these meals are opportunities to celebrate the many cultures represented and share reminders of home.

As the community grew from a dozen people to its current Sunday attendance of around 50, Pastor Melissa found that Tapestry’s members had needs that went far beyond a few shared meals each week.

Tapestry’s hunger program, supported by your gifts to ELCA World Hunger, is not seen as a separate ministry or outreach. As Pastor Melissa says, “It’s all part of one big table.”

Tapestry is grateful to be supported by local churches, synagogues and community organizations, including its host, Oak Grove Lutheran Church, which generously shares its well-stocked kitchen. Funds from ELCA World Hunger cover food costs above and beyond what is donated, and these funds have been especially vital amid rising food costs and challenges faced by the immigrant population of the Twin Cities. Tapestry is feeding more people than ever – both at its gatherings and throughout the week. In early 2026, its weekly food deliveries were going out to more than 65 families. “We started out just wanting to help, but this quickly turned into a lifeline for our neighbors,” says Pastor Melissa.

Because of the grants Tapestry receives from ELCA World Hunger, which include the recent Daily Bread

grants that address rising food insecurity across the country, the community has been able to put plans into action quickly without needing to fundraise first. One simple but effective addition has been offering small stipends to cooks who prepare food for larger groups. These stipends cannot replace a job, but they remind these volunteers that they, their skills and their time are valuable.

Pastor Melissa expresses her appreciation for the generosity of Leadership Circle members: “Thanks to your gifts, anyone who comes to our church will eat so well and experience hospitality that they might never have experienced here before. **Together, we are living into the reality of the church as one body.**”

“In response to increasing food insecurity across the U.S., ELCA World Hunger was able to initiate an unprecedented round of Daily Bread grants. ELCA World Hunger received over 1,000 applications for these \$500 grants for congregations and Lutheran-affiliated nonprofits, which serve their closest neighbors through local feeding ministries, compared to just 66 the year prior. With your support, we fulfilled 665 of these requests – a record number for the program.”

—Haemin Lee, director of ELCA World Hunger

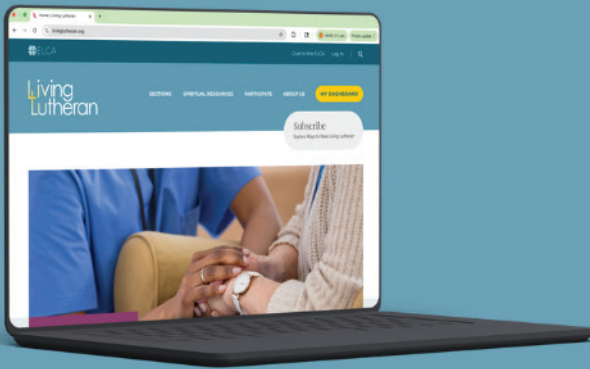


To hear more domestic ELCA World Hunger stories, be sure to watch the recording of our most recent FIRESIDE CHAT by scanning this QR code.

# CIRCLE Leadership

Spring 2026

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