



*How very good and pleasant  
it is when kindred live together  
in unity!*

*Psalms 133*



**Walking Together - 2026**

**Central States Synod**

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

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*“I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5).*

Dear siblings in Christ,

As you gather for your synod assembly, I want to express my gratitude for what you are doing — and have been doing — for this church, *our* church.

In the months since I was installed as presiding bishop, I have been focused on connection. Some of you have heard me talk about what it means to be a connected church. This vision of connectedness grows directly out of one of the three priorities we, as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, have named for this season of our life together.

When we lifted up these priorities, we committed ourselves to them not as abstract ideas but as guiding commitments for how we live and serve as church. As I reflected on them, the third priority stood out with particular clarity: to be a connected, sustainable church, raising the bar together.

That priority has been shaping my thinking and my leadership. It asks not just what we do but how we do it — together, across congregations, synods and the churchwide organization. Connectedness is not a program or a slogan; it is a way of being church that recognizes our shared calling and our shared responsibility. This is not my church. It is yours. It is ours, together. The ministries you carry out in your congregations and synods are not just yours — they are ours together.

Over the next several years, you will hear this priority expressed with greater focus and clarity. In 2026, our emphasis is on connection — strengthening relationships, listening deeply and recognizing how much we depend on one another.

In 2027, you will begin to hear me speak more intentionally about sustainability — how we steward our people, our resources and our structures so that our witness remains strong for generations to come. By 2028, connection and sustainability will come together in a shared language of togetherness, as we more fully live into who God is calling us to be as church.

So, when you hear language about being together, it is about living out the ELCA’s vision of a world experiencing the difference God’s grace and love in Christ make for all people and creation. It matters deeply to me that we know who we are, moving forward as one body, trusting God and one another.

I believe this is how connection is built — not by standing alone but by being church together. With gratitude and hope,



The Rev. Yehiel Curry Presiding Bishop  
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

# Bishop's Report



## Bishop's Report for the Central States Synod Assembly 2026



In the third chapter of the book of Exodus, God appears to Moses in a burning bush, saying, *"I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt...So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt."* (Ex. 3:7, 10) What follows is a story that consumes the rest of the Torah—Moses wrestling with Pharaoh for the release of the Israelites, their dramatic escape from Egypt on that first Passover, and then many years of wandering and being formed in the wilderness. Throughout the decades-long experience of our ancestors in the faith, one thing remains clear: God is at work—for them, in them, and through them.

After twenty-five years as a parish pastor, nine as your Director for Evangelical Mission (time served concurrently) and now almost a year as your bishop, I am convinced that we have entered a time of wilderness and jubilee. The wilderness you have probably experienced, and, as was the case for the Israelites, it's not a comfortable place to be. The wilderness can be a place of loss. Lots of folks think everything would be fine if we just returned to the way things used to be (*"<sup>5</sup> We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic, <sup>6</sup> but now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at."*—Numbers 11:5-6)

The wilderness can be a questioning place. Even Moses had questions for God: *"Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?"* (Exodus 3:11) We have our own questions. Why don't people come to church? Why isn't Sunday a sacred day any longer? How do we reach our neighbors with the message of the gospel?

Trying to be faithful in a church no longer centered in the culture can be challenging. Other pressures of this time—particularly political partisanship—are challenging us as well. But this is also a jubilee time, people of God. We are finding answers to some of our questions. Sometimes we stumble upon answers to questions not yet fully formed. We are finding new ways to worship: Saturday Church, Wild Church, Dinner Church. We are proclaiming the gospel in service to our neighbors: through growing feeding ministries and advocacy for immigrant, LGBTQIA+, and unhoused neighbors. Most importantly, we are learning to ask the right questions. How is God working in our communities already, and how can we join God? How is God calling all of us—young, old, lay, rostered—into leadership and service?

These are the questions my staff and I have been considering each week as we began our time of service to you, the Central States Synod. You may have heard me say already, "God is doing something with the church." Something is happening in this challenging time, and if we slow down for a moment (something we're not always great at and I speak from experience), I think we'll learn some things.

**Thing One:** The Reformers were right about the Priesthood of the Baptized. Each of us was called to ministry when the water was poured (or sprinkled) down over us. A pastor prayed over us and reminded all present that we were now "united with all the baptized in the one body of Christ, anointed with the gift of the Holy Spirit, and joined in God's mission for the life of the world."

Emphasizing the Priesthood of the Baptized is a primary focus for this synod office. God is working through us to create a Lay Formation Academy for the Central States Synod, harnessing the power of our pastors, professors, chaplains, seminaries, lay members, other synods, and frankly anyplace quality teaching is happening. The Academy will connect lay folks across our synod to the opportunity to prepare for service as Parish Ministry Associates and Synod Authorized Ministers (lay ministers serving in pastoral ministry in congregations). It will also—and I am just as excited about this part—create opportunities for all of us to live into our baptismal vocations. Bible Study taught by seminary professors and by some of our seasoned rostered leaders. Pastoral care classes taught by our experienced chaplains. Classes on worship, music, advocacy, theology, parenting, retiring well, service, and more. We covet your prayers, ideas, and support for this vital work.

**Thing Two:** There is a vast mission field all around us. Polling organizations like Pew Research still show that the majority of Americans believe in God and desire relationship with the divine. The latest Pew Religious Landscape Surveys even show a leveling in the number of Christians in the U.S., which has hovered between 60 and 64% since 2019, after a precipitous decline in the previous decade. What does this mean? Well, if we dig deeper into the numbers, we find that 37% of people belong to a church, and only 30% attend at least monthly. So there are more self-identified Christians not attending church than there are attending. As people who understand how vital Christian community is for the life of faith, we have a story to tell those people, and we need to devote time and energy to telling it.

**Thing Three:** (There are always three, right?) We need to talk about worship. We will continue to explore new ways to worship, and new places to worship. The Fresh Expressions movement invites us to take worship to the places where people live, work, and play. We also need to talk about two things (I know, not three!): excellence and participation. Good liturgy is literally “the work of the people.” I’ve seen some creative ways of involving the people at worship in worship, and I want us to talk about finding even more. Worship is the time when the whole church gathers; it should be the most excellent part of our ministry.

I am so excited to be your bishop, and so thankful for the incredible staff team we have: our Communications Director, Tim Anderson; our Synod Administrator, Rich Gates; our Director of Lay Ministry, Adam Wutka; our Bishop’s Associate, Chad Langdon; and our Director for Evangelical Mission, Kristen Koch. Our priority is resourcing the congregations and ministries of this synod, and I promise you, that is where we spend the vast majority of our time. Please reach out to us, invite Kristen, Chad, and I to worship with you and preach in your congregations and ministries, and let us know how we can serve you.

Faithfully,



Rev. Donna Simon, Bishop  
Central States Synod, ELCA



## **Ministry Report for the Central States Synod Assembly 2026**

The Bishop's Associate position is a full-time rostered position that assists the Bishop to provide oversight and support of this synod's congregations, ministries, and leaders to enable all to participate in God's mission through this synod. The following is an update of the key areas of those responsibilities:

### **CANDIDACY** - Currently we have:

- 2 candidates doing final year internships and will be facing Approval this summer.
- 3 candidates who are in the process, taking classes, but aren't on a traditional timeline.
- 1 candidate who is in his 2<sup>nd</sup> year and was Endorsed last December.
- 1 candidate who started classes in January and was Entranced in April.
- 1 candidate who was postponed Entrance last summer and will likely be trying again in August.
- 2 candidates who are in process of applying and will likely be seeking Entrance in August.
- Our next Candidacy Committee meeting is August 7-8<sup>th</sup>.

### **FIRST CALL THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION** -

In the ELCA, all rostered leaders must be part of a First Call Cohort for the first 3 years of ordained ministry in order to work toward these 3 goals:

- Ministerial Identity: The personal development of leadership style and collegiality, spiritual discipline, and ministerial identity appropriate to the respective rosters.
- Ministerial Skills & Practice: Competence in and overall integration of various aspects of the practice of ministry.
- Discerning Context: Discernment of the local and regional context of ministry.

Rev. Dr. Jim Brandt has been helping with this cohort for a couple years and last fall we redesigned our First Call program for 2026. We now meet together monthly over Zoom for about 90 minutes. The first 45 minutes is a time for check-in and mutual support. The second 45 minutes is a presentation by one of the First Call leaders on a topic of their choice. So far we have heard presentations on hospitality, church constitutions, spiritual play, and how to become a Reconciling in Christ congregation. We currently have 7 rostered leaders in this First Call Cohort.

### **TRANSITIONS**

Rostered Leaders:

- As of May 1, we have 7 leaders who have active Rostered Minister Profiles and are searching or open for new calls.
- Throughout the country, there are 20 pastors who have indicated an openness to explore calls in the Central States Synod. I have spoken to or had contact with each of them.

Congregations/Parishes:

- We currently have 8 congregations/parishes that have active Ministry Site Profiles and are searching for new leaders.
- 4 of these are part-time calls
- 4 of them are full-time calls
- We have an additional 7 congregations/parishes that are in transition and looking for leadership, partners, or something else, but they haven't yet completed a Ministry Site Profile.

## **LAY MINISTRY**

I have been working with Adam Wutka to change some aspects of our PMA/SAM training. We have been working with our counterparts in the Nebraska Synod and made significant progress toward more closely aligning our PMA programs. In the future, we hope to do things like share training resources, build PMA cohorts between the synods, and have common educational requirements.

Some of the changes include:

- Education:
  - All PMA/SAM classes will be coordinated through Luther Seminary's Faith+Lead Academy.
  - PMA students will need to earn 4 certificates:
    - Theology & Church History Foundations Certificate
    - Pastoral Leadership Foundations Certificate
    - Bible Foundations Certificate
    - Preaching Certificate
  - SAM candidates will need to earn an additional 2 certificates:
    - Leadership in Difficult Times Certificate
    - Contextual and Cultural Ministry Certificate
- Formation:
  - All PMA students will start off their program in a cohort (along with Nebraska students). Cohorts will launch in May and October. Throughout their formation, the cohorts will meet together quarterly.
  - All PMA students will be assigned a mentor, who is a rostered minister. Each mentor will also take a class & receive training through ELCA Coaching, so they can be more effective mentors.

All of the changes can be found in the updated PMA Handbook found on the Synod's website.

## **OTHER DUTIES/PROJECTS**

### **Central Kansas Interfaith Justice Organization (CKIJO) -**

I am currently serving as the Co-President of the CKIJO. We are working to build a coalition of congregations who can use their people & organizing power to effect justice for communities in central Kansas (Newton, Hutchinson, Salina, Junction City, Manhattan, Wamego, and places in between). This organization is nationally affiliated with DART (Direct Action & Research Training Center), and there are already other DART organizations in Johnson County, Wyandotte County, Lawrence, Topeka, and Wichita. I attended DART's national Clergy Conference from January 26-29, 2026.

There are about 30-35 congregations currently involved in this new coalition, including 6 ELCA congregations.

### **Great Rivers Collaborative -**

I've been working with Rob Corrothers as a consultant to the various congregations within the northern parts of St. Louis, which is a group called the Great Rivers Collaborative. There are 5-7 churches in this group. They all have various, but significant challenges right now, and most of them are currently without a full-time called pastor. Utilizing some excellent part-time pastoral leadership, most of these congregations are doing some kind of transition work on their own. In addition, around April, Rob Corrothers (who is a member of Living Lord Lutheran, Lake St. Louis) and his team started to visit & meet with the various congregations and study the demographics & context as a whole. He hopes to have some kind of objective report & recommendations ready by the first part of July. The congregations will then have the option to use and live into the recommendations (or not), and our hope is that it will help provide a cohesive path forward for this part of our synod.

### **Ecumenical Connections –**

I have been trying to make connections within the leadership of our Full Communion partners, with the hopes of creating more congregational or pastoral partnerships. So far I have met with the UMC Bishop of the Great Plains Conference, the UMC District Supervisor for North Central Kansas, an Episcopal canon, and various leaders from some of the presbyteries of the PCUSA found across our synod.

### **Discernment Events –**

In comparison to other synods, it seems like our pipeline for new candidates for ministry (either rostered or lay) is not as robust. This summer, we will be hosting five Discernment Events across the synod. These are intended for anyone who might be discerning a call to ministry on any level. Over the course of the weekend, they can come explore God's call on their lives, pray & study scripture together, and learn some of details about what each kind of ministry entails and how to get there.

Respectfully submitted,  
*Rev. Chad Langdon,*  
Associate to the Bishop

**Walking Together - Central States Synod, ELCA 2026**

## *Director of Evangelical Mission*

Find a path  
In the woods  
Or the park down the street,  
Perhaps the main street of your town  
Or the bustling city  
And then be still,  
Feel your feet  
Press into the ground,  
Attune yourself  
To the pulse of the earth.  
*Just listen.*

When you're ready  
Look up  
And around.  
Notice the way the breeze moves the leaves  
Then stare into the faces of people who pass.  
Smell the aroma of earth and grass,  
Gaze at the variety of colors of plants, cars,  
and clothes.  
*Just watch.*

Put one foot in front of the other  
Step after step connecting to the ground  
Hands free and eyes open.  
Prepare yourself for a stumble or a subbed  
toe,  
Possibly a broken heart  
For you cannot know what's ahead  
Whether a detour that forces you in circles  
Or a dead end that brings you to your knees.  
*Just know it's ok to go slowly.*

Take your time,  
Bring along some bandages  
In case of cuts and bruises.  
Let someone hold your hand  
And guide you in a new direction.  
Trust yourself  
That you have all you need.  
Take a rest,  
Enjoy a hearty meal,  
Come back another day.  
*Just don't give up.*

A Blessing for Taking the First Step – by Kimberly Knowle-Zeller, from “Small Steps”

This blessing, written by the Central States Synod's own Rev. Kimberly Knowle-Zeller, spoke to me deeply as I set out to write this report. Four and a half months into this position I feel the need to show that I've “done something” in my role as Director for Evangelical Mission. But what I've “done” is difficult to show in a report. I've taken time to listen, watch, and go slowly along this new path; getting to know the congregations of the synod, the resources available through ELCA Churchwide, and the movement of the Spirit in the synod.

Doing ministry in the church these days often feels like a brand new experience. Whether our congregation has been around for 100 years or 10, the changing landscape of the church and the culture makes it feel like we've stepped into a new reality. And we'd like to be able to show that we're doing something to give witness to the good news of Jesus. But I wonder if what we're doing is something that's hard to see or prove.

As Bishop Donna wrote in her report, “Something is happening in this challenging time, and if we slow down for a moment... I think we'll learn some things.” Or as Kimberly writes: *Just listen. Just watch. Just know it's ok to go slowly. Just don't give up.*

As we live into this new reality of the church, I believe the Spirit invites us to us slow down and go back to our roots. Let's spend time in scripture and in prayer. Let's remind each other of God's faithfulness to the church and to the world. Let's remember that the church has always been called to change and adapt for the sake of sharing the good news of Jesus.

This might look very different from how we have given witness in the past. It might mean building communities of curiosity outside of the church walls. It might mean expanding the circle of pastoral leadership in the congregation. It might mean sharing space and resources with other congregations or with community organizations. It might mean leaning into a welcome to the community that stretches our theological imaginations.

Regardless of what it might look like, what you can be sure of is that I and the rest of the synod staff will be with you and your congregation as you faithfully and prayerfully experiment with your ministry and witness in the world. Find a path. Look around. Put one foot in front of the other. And take your time. Follow the path to see where it leads and trust that God "will make away in the wilderness" (Isaiah 43: 18-21)

Rev. Kristen Koch  
Director for Evangelical Mission

Let us pray,  
O God of the universe, give us the strength to believe what you say is true.  
Help us to believe you are with us, no matter what.  
Help us to live out of that belief so we can join you in the new thing.  
Give us eyes to see, ears to hear, and a heart to love like you,  
that we may be ready to find the way in the wilderness.  
Amen

From *Creating Space: A Prayer Book for Peace in Times of Crisis and Chaos*

ISBN 979-8502241304

## Lay Ministry



The Parish Ministry Associate program continues to be a vital resource for the Central States Synod, training and equipping lay leaders in our congregations into deeper ministry and service in the places where they live and worship. Many of our PMAs consistently step up to serve in congregational Word and Sacrament ministry under covenant as Synod Authorized Ministers (or SAMs), fulfilling a crucial role in our multi-faceted efforts to bolster pastoral leadership in our congregations across the synod.



Since the 2025 Synod Assembly, four more students have completed the educational requirements and have been certified as PMAs. We currently have forty-four certified PMAs active in congregational ministry across the Central States Synod, fourteen of whom are actively serving in Word and Sacrament ministry under covenant as a SAM.

As we continue to work with our students currently enrolled in the PMA education process to see them through to certification, we are now partnering with the Nebraska Synod to completely redevelop our educational process for new students, using the Faith+Lead program from Luther Seminary. This spring, we have enrolled seven new PMA students from the Central States Synod into the program, forming a cohort with our partners in Nebraska that will meet quarterly as they navigate their journey of study toward PMA certification. The next cohort meeting will be in September, and we may enroll additional students at that time.



These student cohorts are just the beginning of several collaborative efforts of bolstering the ministry and support of our PMAs and SAMs that will be unfolding over the next few years. Please stay tuned and check out the newly updated PMA Handbook on the synod website: [css-elca.org/pma](http://css-elca.org/pma)



Walking Together - Central States Synod, ELCA 2026



# Lutherans Restoring Creation

The Lutherans Restoring Creation (LRC) Mission Table promotes Creation Care in the Central States Synod through “cultivating a community of dedicated stewards of earth and neighbor who proclaim God’s promise of hope and healing for all.” (LRC Mission Statement)

The CSS LRC Mission Table celebrated 10 years of ministry that began by action of the 2015 Synod Assembly. We were encouraged by the growth of our network across the Synod during the past decade, and at the same time, recognize there is much work to be done.

Collaboration with our ecumenical and interfaith networks continues to grow. Opportunities through Blessed Tomorrow, the EcoFaith Summit of the Upper Midwest, Kansas Interfaith Action, and area conferences and activities have engaged more congregations and individuals in the work of Creation Care and Environmental Justice. Our [annual Creation Care Plan](#) once again provided resources for ministry sites in the areas of Worship, Education, Buildings and Grounds, Advocacy/Public Witness, and Personal Discipleship. Here are some visual examples of our collective ministry across the Synod:



Retreat at Hollis



Earth Charter Grant Project



KIFA Advocacy Day



Time outdoors in fellowship

Working together in partnership with all of Creation, as individuals and groups throughout the Synod and ELCA, with ecumenical and interfaith partners across the globe, we seek healing and hope. We invite everyone to join us – as a member of the Mission Table, as a CSS-LRC Partner, by applying for a grant, in your own setting and context, and in your homes. Many resources are available on our [CSS-LRC website](#) and the national [Lutherans Restoring Creation website](#).

2026 brings an emphasis on participation in the [World Council of Churches' Ecumenical Decade for Climate Justice Action](#). Resources and opportunities will be shared as the effort unfolds.

With Gratitude,

Members of the CSS LRC Mission Table

Larry Erickson, Sheryl Mehrhoff, Cindy Gross,  
Keith Mundy, Gary and Jeani Anderson,  
Janice Hawley, Jane Meyerkord, Kaylie Ines,  
Melissa Woeppel, Christyn Koschmann, Noni Strand





# Hearts Across the Heartland

Hearts Across the Heartland is a committee of the Central States Synods whose charge is to support welcome and inclusion for LGBTQIA+ people in our church and community. HAtH is currently co-led by [Rev. Meagan McLaughlin](#) and [Dee Morin](#).

## Synod Office Transition!

We have joyfully supported the successful transition of our new Bishop Donna Simon, Assistant to the Bishop Chad Langdon, and Director of Evangelical Mission Rev. Kristen Koch. With Bishop Donna’s guidance, we will continue providing education, conversation, and support for all those working on growing capacity for inclusion of LGBTQIA+ folks in our church, and move into advocacy as well.


## Resources for Learning and Conversation

A reminder that our [webpage](http://www.css-elca.org/hath) (www.css-elca.org/hath) has great resources including “New to the Reconciling In Christ Conversation” and “Developing a Welcome Statement” as well as a HAtH sign-up form to facilitate group involvement.

## Reconciling In Christ Congregations of CSS

Three congregations in our Synod have become RIC in 2025, including some larger congregations in which the process to become RIC is harder and takes longer. (It was a 16-year process for Atonement in Overland Park!)



 Atonement Lutheran  
Overland Park, KS  
December 4, 2025

Holy Cross Lutheran  
Creve Coeur, MO  
August 19, 2025

Holy Cross Lutheran  
Overland Park, KS  
May 13, 2025

*A complete list of RIC congregations in the Central States can be found at [www.css-elca.org/hath](http://www.css-elca.org/hath).*

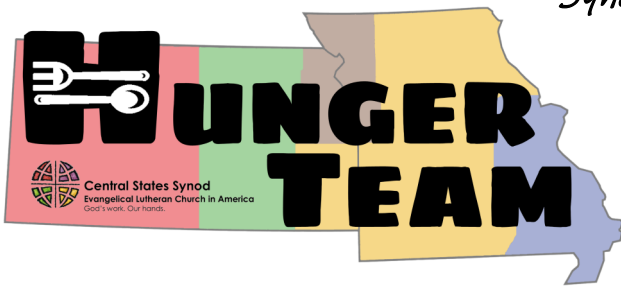
## Advocacy

In addition to education, conversation, and support, as an RIC synod we will be growing our ability to be advocates as people of faith for those whose dignity and lives are under assault on a daily basis in our states and our nation. The Synod Office has a very strong partner in justice and advocacy in Kansas Interfaith Action (KIFA), and we will be building a relationship with PROMO Missouri to learn about and support their advocacy for the LGBTQIA+ community. As we see legislation come forward that takes rights from LGBTQIA+ and other marginalized groups, HAtH will work closely with the Bishop to make statements, support those who are harmed, and provide ways for Synod staff and leaders across the Synod to take action.

## Resolution to the Assembly 2026

Hearts Across the Heartland submitted a resolution to the 2026 Assembly in support of the LGBTQIA+ community, especially our trans siblings whose rights and dignity are being stripped by legislation in Kansas, Missouri, and our country.

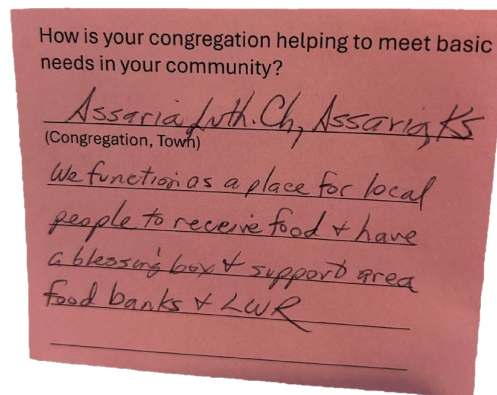
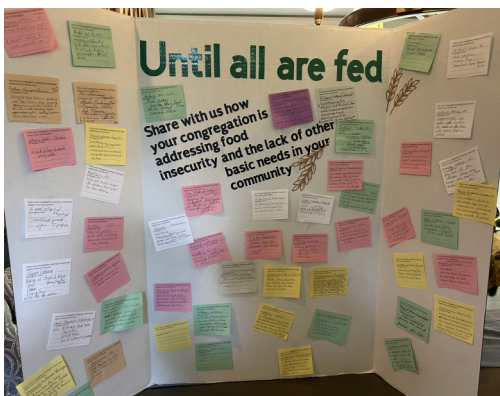
## Synod Hunger Team



In 2020 the Synod Hunger Team was formed. This team began as a forum to evaluate and make recommendations about hunger ministries in the Synod applying for an ELCA Domestic Hunger Grant. From that work, we considered ways to support both the ministries that received grants, and those that did not. We know that food insecurity affects all our communities—urban, rural, small town, suburban. Ninety-six percent of ELCA congregations participate in some form of anti-hunger work, from community meals to food pantries and more! In 2025, congregations and individuals in the Central States Synod gave **\$224,480 to Lutheran Disaster Relief** and **\$370,570 to ELCA World Hunger** directly or through the synod. THANK YOU for generously sharing your abundance!

Our on-going goal is to develop relationships and communication among congregations as they address hunger and poverty issues in their communities, sharing the work of ELCA World Hunger and the many resources developed for furthering this work, as well as the domestic and international projects supported through our donations.

In the ELCA, 280 submissions were received for the 2026 granting cycle and 58 grants were awarded. Our team reviewed 5 Domestic Hunger Grant Letters of Intent (LOI) submitted by ministries within the Central States Synod. Two grants were awarded in our Synod – PeaceFull Pantry, Manhattan, KS and Unity Lutheran, Bel-Nor Senior Program. We look forward to sharing more about their work in upcoming Synod newsletters.



At the 2025 Synod Assembly we also staffed an exhibitor table with examples of ELCA Hunger resources, as well as an interactive display, asking attendees to share about their congregation's feeding ministry on a Post-It note.

Funding for Daily Bread Grants of \$500 was also offered to congregational food pantries last fall in response to the government shutdown and suspension of SNAP benefits. Across the ELCA, over 700 (!) submissions were received. In the Central States Synod, 8 ministries applied for the grants and 4 were awarded: Trinity, Hayes, KS, Messiah Lutheran, Lindsborg, KS, Peace Lutheran, Washington, MO and First Lutheran, Manhattan, KS. Our team is in the process of sharing articles in the Synod newsletter each month, profiling some of the hunger ministries in our Synod and the recipients of these DHGs and Daily Bread Grants. We hope you look for those and become as inspired as we are!

The application process for Domestic Hunger Grants of up to \$10,000 per year, for up to three years, is open April 15 to July 1 annually. The application process and information can be found at <https://www.elca.org/how-we-serve/relief-and-development/world-hunger>

We would love to hear about your congregation's hunger ministry!  
Please consider joining us on the Hunger Team to review the 2027 DHGs this summer.

Cindy Kraft  
CSS Hunger Chair  
Gckraft815@aol.com

Walking Together - Central States Synod, ELCA 2026

# Women of the ELCA

## Our Purpose Statement

*As a community of women created in the image of God, called to discipleship in Jesus Christ, and empowered by the Holy Spirit, we commit ourselves to grow in faith, affirm our gifts, support one another in our callings, engage in ministry and action, and promote healing and wholeness in the church, the society, and the world.*

## Central States Synod Women of the ELCA



One of the highlights of the previous year was our 36<sup>th</sup> Convention, which was held June 20 - 22, 2025 at Hilton Garden Inn, Independence, Missouri. The convention theme was “Vessels of God’s Grace” which was woven throughout the weekend by our speakers, devotions, singing, break-out sessions, prayer and worship. Over 70 women were in attendance.

The women in our synod, along with the Board worked with the Companion Team of our synod to send three travelers, along Pastor Gary Teske to the Kotte District of Papua New Guinea to represent us at the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the ELC-Kotte District Women’s Program. The trip was such a success that the Board has agreed to invite two of the ladies from the Kotte District to attend our synodical convention in 2027.

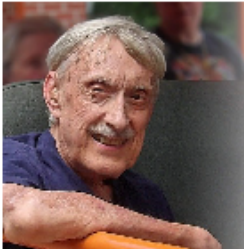


The ongoing activities of the Board and our synod organization include:

- Publishing our newsletter, Walking in the Word. It is our main communication within the Synod. We appreciate Vickie Donnell’s hard work being the editor and publisher for the past few years. As she is stepping back from this duty, we have a new editor, Joyce Uber.
- Maintaining active Facebook page and website. Thank you to Tim Anderson in the Synod office for updating the women’s page on the CSS Website. Debbie Curtis maintains our Facebook page. She is looking forward to receiving all the pictures.
- Awarding Scholarships. We award Scholarships to female members of ELCA congregations who are seeking post-secondary education. We will be awarding the scholarships soon.
- Cluster Events – Border held an event on April 18<sup>th</sup>; Eastern on April 25<sup>th</sup>. Both were inspiring and well attended! Osage will meet on June 13<sup>th</sup> in Camdenton; Central Kansas, August 1<sup>st</sup> in Hutchinson and Western Kansas, August 29<sup>th</sup> in Hayes.
- Convention Planning – we are formulating our 2027 convention.
- Lutheran World Relief Quilts and Kits – in October 2025, 74 churches contributed quilts, personal care kits, school kits, fabric kits, sewing kits and baby care kits.

# BETHANY+VILLAGE THE ART OF LIVING

THE COTTAGES • SUNFLOWER TERRACE • BETHANY HOME



## Who is Bethany Village?

Bethany Village is a non-profit continuous care retirement community providing more than 115 years of Christ-centered services and care for the aging. Located in Lindsborg, KS, the home is a ministry of the Central States Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America. Bethany Village includes The Cottages independent living, Sunflower Terrace assisted living, and Bethany Home, a skilled nursing/rehabilitation, and long-term care center.



## BETHANY HOME

Over the past year, Bethany Village has been working to raise funds for the **Neighborhood Renovation project at Bethany Home**. With the help of the Greater Salina Community Foundation, the Smoky Valley Community Foundation, and the Verlla Coughenhour Trust, as well as donations from our local friends and families, the vision has turned into a beautiful new hallway!



The renovation included replacing flooring, painting walls and adding new wallboard, and replacing some of the light fixtures. The spaces are not only brighter but easier to navigate with low-pile carpet and smoother transitions. The design also incorporated effective wayfinding strategies for better navigation throughout the building (Clear signage, visual and tactile cues for those with visual, cognitive, or mobility impairments).

Our next focus will be updating the HVAC and the east hallway, Hoglund Neighborhood.



## SUNFLOWER TERRACE

**Sunflower Terrace Assisted Living** is the ideal solution for those who need some attendant care or supervision but still have the ability to maintain their own independence. Spacious and bright apartments are handicap accessible and offer private bedrooms and bathrooms.

In the fall of 2025, Sunflower Terrace received a grant to help install a new wander guard system. This addition ensures a safe and secure environment for residents and expands the capacity to serve those with dementia and mild memory concerns.



## FROM THE CHAPLAIN

At Bethany Village, Life Together is celebrated every day! It is celebrated as the Holy Spirit moves doing amazing things. I see how the Holy Spirit works through the care given, the love shown and the many hearts and lives changed. It amazes me as I watch how the Spirit moves in the hugs, the laughter, the smiles and the tears. It amazes me how the Spirit moves in relationships created and made stronger. It moves as people say hello and goodbye. It amazes me how the Holy Spirit moves through the worship, the Word and sacrament shared, and the bible studies offered.

The Holy Spirit moves at Bethany Village, a place where people are going through a change in their lives but realize they are not alone.

Bethany Village is a great example of Life Together. It is a mission that is so important for the Body of Christ that all may know they matter and are important. It is a mission that God works through shining the Light when people seem to be walking in darkness. If you ever need a place that the love of Christ shows itself daily, come to Bethany Village. You will be amazed and blessed at how the Holy Spirit works.

**Rev. Ethan Feistner**

**BETHANY + VILLAGE | 321 N. Chestnut, Lindsborg, KS 67456 | 785.227.2334**

**Walking Together - Central States Synod, ELCA 2026**



Kansas Interfaith Action

# PUTTING FAITH INTO ACTION

## REPORT TO 2026 SYNOD ASSEMBLY CENTRAL STATES SYNOD, ELCA

### ADVOCACY

### KIFA IN THE NEWS

**Rabbi banned from state senate gallery after protesting anti-trans bill: "I'm doing what God wants"**

LGBTQ NATION, 3/30/26

**'Which side are you going to be on?' Kansas faith leaders urge churches to protect immigrants**

KS REFLECTOR, 5/5/26

Check out our newly updated and revamped website!  
[kansasinterfaithaction.org](http://kansasinterfaithaction.org)



Walking Together - Central States Synod, ELCA 2026

KIFA's 2026 legislative priorities included:

- **Supporting public education**, including full funding, and opposing to public funding of private schools;
- **Supporting the right to vote** & to have that vote counted;
- **Protecting the rights of LGBTQ+ Kansans;**
- As part of the Kansas Housing Advocacy Network (KHAN), we helped pass a bill allowing for **expungement of previous evictions;**
- **Successfully protected the right to instate tuition** for immigrant young people who were brought here as children;
- Opposing efforts to further limit access to needed public safety-net programs, including Medicaid and SNAP.

To kick-off the 2026 Legislative Session, we co-hosted a *Human Needs are Human Rights* Rally at the Capitol in Topeka. Over 650 Kansans attended as we called for our legislators to prioritize *people-focused policy*.

KIFA Advocacy Day in March was also well attended, and included civil disruption outside the Senate Chamber in protest of the passing of SB 244, an anti-trans bathroom and ID bill that was rushed through the legislative process.

### INCREASED ENGAGEMENT

- We launched a KIFA Coffeehouse program with events in Hutchinson, Newton, Manhattan, Topeka, Johnson County, Wichita and Winfield, engaging hundreds of people of faith across the state.
- In collaboration with KNEA, the Kansas teachers' union, we hosted a series of events around faith-based support for education.
- We launched a new engagement ladder which identifies KIFA supporters as Advocates, Builders and Champions and helps folks increase their engagement and advocacy through KIFA.
- We hosted immigration vigils in July 2025 and April 2026, decrying Federal ICE enforcement and treatment of immigrants and showing faith community support for our immigrant neighbors.
- We coordinated an Immigration Sabbath in October and a Creation Care Sabbath in April, with over 3000 participants across the state.

## RELATIONAL VOTER ENGAGEMENT

Working with The Voter Network, Kansans United for Impartial Courts, and other coalition partners, we continue our efforts to engage voters across Kansas. In 2026, we will hire voter mobilizers in 6 cities, who will encourage folks to “get out the vote” for both the August primary and November general election.

We’ll host information in each of those six cities about the proposed constitutional amendment that could change the way we select Kansas Supreme Court Judges.



## WE'RE YOUR SPPO

As the State Public Policy Office (SPPO) of the Central States Synod, our relationship with the Synod continues to grow. During Epiphany, Rev. Mandy, Bishop Donna, Rev. Samantha Nichols and Dr. Jim Brandt hosted *We the People: a virtual series on faith and public life*, with dozens of participants. We’d love to come visit your (KS) congregation! Let us know how we can support you.

**RABBI MOTI RIEBER, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR**  
**REV. DR. MANDY TODD, DIRECTOR OF ENGAGEMENT & DEVELOPMENT**  
**SHERI ELLWOOD, RURAL ENGAGEMENT COORDINATOR**  
**TATYANA YOUNGER, ORGANIZER**  
**SAGI RUDNICK, PROGRAM & ADVOCACY ASSOCIATE**

## OUR CRACK STAFF






**KANSAS INTERFAITH ACTION**  
 PO BOX 654  
 LAWRENCE, KS 66044  
 (913) 232-2336



## CONNECT WITH US!

[KansasInterfaithAction.org](http://KansasInterfaithAction.org)

-  [KansasInterfaithAction](https://www.facebook.com/KansasInterfaithAction)
-  [KansasInterfaithAction](https://www.instagram.com/KansasInterfaithAction)
-  [Kifa@KansasInterfaithAction.org](mailto:Kifa@KansasInterfaithAction.org)

# Metro Lutheran Ministries

## Our Mission

With dignity and respect, Metro Lutheran Ministry helps families and individuals break the cycle of poverty, supporting them in achieving housing and personal stability, food security, and self-sufficiency.

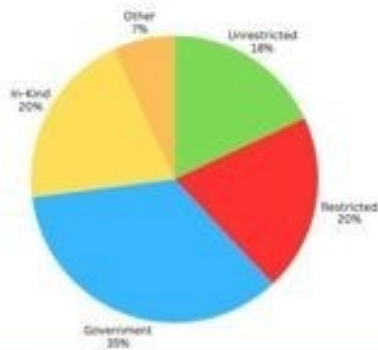
## Our Vision

To be a community that acts justly, loves mercy, and walks humbly with God. *(Inspired by Micah 6:8)*

Learn more at [www.mlmkc.org](http://www.mlmkc.org)



2025 Revenue



2025 Expenses



## 2025 Regional Impact



Central	Northland	Wyandotte
3031 Holmes Street Kansas City, MO 64109 816-931-0027	1100 NE Vivion Road Kansas City, MO 64118 816-454-5295	722 Reynolds Avenue Kansas City, KS 66101 913-342-8333

# How You Helped in 2025

























**30,298** At-risk and Homeless Individuals Received Assistance This Year

MLM believes every person deserves a life of dignity and hope for the future. Yet for far too many people across the metro area, poverty makes that hope feel out of reach.

Poverty's causes are complex—job loss, divorce, illness, underemployment, or an unexpected family crisis can quickly unravel stability. For those living with its effects, each day brings impossible choices. As one participant shared, ***"I cannot afford to buy groceries, pay my light bill, and pay the rent. I have***

***to pick whether I want to eat or keep the lights on. MLM is a blessing to my family because they help me not have to choose between eating or being homeless."*** Meeting one basic need often means sacrificing another.

Because of your support, thousands of individuals and families in the greater Kansas City area are no longer facing these choices alone. You have helped stand in the gap—easing fear, revealing strength, and restoring hope.

 <p><b>28,547</b> Individuals received food assistance from our pantries in KCMO, KCK, and NKC</p>	 <p><b>162</b> Individuals received financial and employment coaching through the Financial Opportunity Center Program</p>	 <p><b>1,818</b> Senior Commodity Boxes given to elderly individuals</p>
 <p><b>377</b> Homeless individuals exited homelessness, moving into their own apartments through Rapid Re-Housing and Eileen's Place</p>	 <p><b>8,000 +</b> Pounds of fresh produce provided to our neighbors through the MLM Orchard and Garden</p>	 <p><b>226</b> Seniors assisted to apply for SNAP benefits</p>
 <p><b>\$3M +</b> Was provided in emergency rent, mortgage, utility, hotel, and emergent needs assistance</p>	 <p><b>11,315</b> Breakfast meals served through the Saturday Breakfast Program</p>	 <p><b>11,152</b> Sack lunches given to hungry individuals who visit MLM</p>
 <p><b>2,233</b> Individuals received gifts from the MLM Christmas Store</p>	 <p><b>454</b> Projects on homes needing weatherization, wheelchair ramps, or repairs through the Minor Home Repair Program</p>	 <p><b>853</b> Children received backpacks and back to school supplies</p>
 <p><b>246</b> Individuals experiencing homelessness served through street outreach and housing assessment services</p>	 <p><b>7,170</b> Bed nights provided to 239 homeless individuals and children through emergency hotel vouchers</p>	 <p><b>11,020</b> Hours of service provided by 1,943 volunteers</p>
 <p><b>172</b> Individuals received assistance obtaining a birth certificate or ID</p>	 <p><b>290</b> Individuals received emergency transportation assistance</p>	 <p><b>78</b> Formerly homeless individuals received furniture vouchers, providing furniture for their new rental housing</p>
 <p><b>36,000 +</b> Hours of case management provided to homeless and at-risk households</p>	 <p><b>18</b> Seniors received Older Adult Care Management services.</p>	 <p><b>24</b> Different counties across Missouri and Kansas served</p>
		 <p><b>346</b> Individuals received medical and dental assistance and supplies</p>

Dear Partners in Ministry,

Grace and peace to you this synod assembly season. **At Global Refuge we remain committed to the work of welcome, no matter the challenges.** For 85 years, Global Refuge (formerly known as Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service) has championed the work of welcome by providing support to immigrants and refugees as they rebuild their lives in the United States. Founded by heartbroken Lutherans in the United States who felt called to provide a home for those fleeing violence of the World Wars, Global Refuge has continued this good work welcoming more than 800,000 newcomers since 1939.

Our mission states, “As a witness to God’s love for all people, we stand with and advocate for migrants and refugees, transforming communities through ministries of service and justice.” With help from Global Refuge, families are welcomed into their new homes with a hot meal, adults are enrolled in English language classes, children are enrolled in school, and Global Refuge partners guide newly-arrived refugee(s) in using public transportation and accessing community resources.

Unfortunately, on January 24, 2025, Global Refuge and the 9 other national resettlement agencies received a **stop-work order** from the U.S. Department of State as it relates to our funding for the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program, effectively cutting off vital support to families who have already lawfully resettled in the United States. The stop-work order directly affects thousands of refugees who rely on resettlement services for essential support such as housing, food, English classes, and job placement. While we were anticipating a pause of the refugee resettlement program and work with future clients, this stop-work order for clients in our care came as an unexpected blow. However, we are committed to carrying out our mission, through our hope in the promise of the resurrection, and remain steadfast in our holy work of welcome.

Despite the challenges, we are heartened by continued and growing support faith communities are providing for our work. **More people of faith are getting involved in our work each year to meet the ever-growing need.** In fact, 85 new faith communities became supporters of Global Refuge in 2024.

With the support of these new partners and Lutheran communities like yours, in 2024 we were able to...

- Welcome **18,622+ refugees** from countries across the world.

- Empower and support **116 clients** and **67 Businesses** through personal and business loans.
- Open **a new office in Mexico** to expand our Camino A Casa programming and serve **1017 clients** start again at home.
- Write and distribute **10,000 Hope for the Holidays cards** that provided messages of welcome and hope to newcomers.
- Attend the ELCA Youth Gathering in New Orleans where we engaged **20,000+** youth on the work of welcome and packed more than a **1000** welcome kits.

In a political season rife with anti-immigrant rhetoric and messages that villainize newcomers, we have a unique opportunity to change this narrative and refocus on all the gifts newcomers bring to community. We invite you to join us in this work!

- **Support Refugees with a gift** – If you or communities you’re connected with are willing to support financially, please use/share this link: [www.globalrefuge.org/give](http://www.globalrefuge.org/give)
- **Learn more and Advocate** – Explore resources with more information about executive orders and accompanying actions: [www.globalrefuge.org/advocate](http://www.globalrefuge.org/advocate)
- **Know Your Rights** – Our partners at AMMPARO have a great resource for communities to read about their rights and those of immigrants in their care. [www.blogs.elca.org/ammparo/the-latest-kyr/](http://www.blogs.elca.org/ammparo/the-latest-kyr/)
- **Explore Resources** – Visit our Congregational Resources page to explore all the resources available to you: [www.globalrefuge.org/congregations](http://www.globalrefuge.org/congregations)
- **Sign up for our Monthly E-newsletters** – Get the latest updates for faith leaders by emailing [outreach@globalrefuge.org](mailto:outreach@globalrefuge.org).
- **Volunteer with us** – Support refugees in your community and beyond: [www.globalrefuge.org/volunteer](http://www.globalrefuge.org/volunteer)

Thank you for your continued support. The many ways Lutheran communities embody Jesus’ ministry through the work of welcome is truly inspiring.

Go in peace. Welcome the stranger.



*Deacon Sarah Kretschmann | Congregational Engagement Specialist*  
[outreach@globalrefuge.org](mailto:outreach@globalrefuge.org)

## Campus Ministries

### Life Together – Campus Ministry Style

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#### Episcopal Lutheran Campus Ministry – Columbia, MO



Episcopal Lutheran Campus Ministry (ELCM) at the University of Missouri continues under the banner “In the Way of Jesus, All are Welcome and All Belong”. This cooperative ministry formed in the fall of 2022 between Saint Andrew’s Lutheran Church and Calvary Episcopal Church. We meet weekly on Monday evenings for Bible Study, Evening Prayer, and dinner accompanied by much fellowship. Highlights from this year include the baptism of one of our students with Bishop Deon Johnson presiding and Living Windows in December with Calvary Episcopal Church. Highlights for the spring semester include collaborating with fellow welcoming and affirming campus ministries (known as TIDES) for Easter Worship and a pizza picnic in Peace Park on Easter Monday, celebrating a final lecture by our student organization faculty advisor, David Schenker, who retires this year and praying farewell and Godspeed to our graduates.

Pastor David Frerichs & Rev. Josh Huber, Chaplains

#### LCM @ Kansas State – Manhattan, KS

“Life Together” so perfectly describes the past school year at Lutheran Campus Ministry at Kansas State University! Our Bible Study of the four Gospels in Parallel reminded students that the Bible is not a single, monolithic document, and we do not all see things the same way, but we are all connected in Christ! Our program activities for the year in so many ways involved welcoming, accepting and appreciating the kaleidoscopic gifts of a diverse community of Christians. We celebrated our pastor’s 30<sup>th</sup> Ordination Anniversary. We welcomed everyone for our 3rd Annual “Tacos & Trivia” Celebration, partied with the Episcopal Campus Ministry in Advent and a ‘real Grandma’ taught us how to crochet. We also made prayer shawls with local youth groups, and raked leaves with a youth group from Russell, Kansas. Fifty new students attended at least one event with LCM this year! We rejoice that we do not believe the same or become the same in order to experience God’s love in our life together!



#### Ekklesia – Springfield, MO



This year, Ekklesia has continued to bear witness to the holy possibility of life together in the midst of a fractured world. As the only progressive, ecumenical campus ministry serving students across Missouri State, Drury, and Ozarks Tech, Ekklesia has created spaces where young adults can find belonging, ask big questions, practice justice, and experience Christian community that is spacious, embodied, and real. Through weekly Liberate Worship, Sunday Night Dinners, social and service opportunities, interfaith exploration, the Transitions Closet, an alternative Spring Break Pilgrimage, and the shared life of the Multicultural House, we have worked to offer students what Bonhoeffer called “incomparable joy and strength” through the physical presence of community. In a time when many students feel isolated, disillusioned, or wounded by religious spaces, this ministry has become a place where division and discord is met with deep listening and courageous conversation. In these spaces, the Body of Christ is made visible in queer joy, mutual care, public witness, and the daily work of building a more just and loving world.

### LuMin St. Louis – St. Louis, MO

Life Together in St. Louis is full of diversity, laughter, love, and journey. This year, five colleges and universities were represented in the students that called LuMin St. Louis home. We came together in community on Friday nights to just be God’s beloved. Upper Room worship and meal was a place to encounter God’s Word in the world and their lives. Apple cider slushies, Sidesgiving, Lessons & Carols, faith rallies, musical performances, & bonfires were the means to grow with one another. Life together also was messy – with craft projects, burnt muffins, and rainy-day Final Give Aways. Through it all, the students grew in belonging and community, as they continued to deepen their faith lives.



### St Mark’s @ SEMO – Cape Girardeau, MO



St Mark Lutheran Church in Cape Girardeau has completed another school year of having Southeast Missouri State University (SEMO) music students participate in our choir. We provide them with a small stipend as a thank you for helping out. St Mark held a Luau for students to end the school year. Games, decorations and even a whole cooked pig enabled the students to unwind and enjoy themselves prior to finals. One of our congregants, a staff member at SEMO, is submitting the paperwork to officially start an ELCA student organization on campus this coming fall 2026. We are excited about being able to provide additional support to those students that are looking for a place they feel welcome.

### Us 4 U – Fort Hays State, Hays, KS

Us 4 U is just wrapping up our 10<sup>th</sup> year as a Recognized Student Organization at Fort Hays State University. From the very beginning, this group has been about “Life Together” bringing together different churches to lead the group, partnering with campus and community groups for events, and welcoming students from all walks of life. This year we leaned into our motto, “Come as you are. Serve as you can.” by continuing to partner with various groups. We volunteered weekly at Feeding Hays at St. Michael’s Episcopal Church, making and serving free, to-go, spaghetti dinners to the community. We partnered with the Gender and Sexuality Alliance (GSA) for our annual holiday meal that we cooked and enjoyed together, raised awareness of myths and facts about SNAP and gathered accessible food items with the Community Engaged Art Program, and sponsored the Red Flag Garden for Sexual Assault Awareness Month with Options Domestic and Sexual Violence Services, Inc. We also helped bring together various faith groups on campus by hosting a prayer service with interactive crafts called Peace by Piece and collaborating on an art project showcasing the various faith groups on campus. We hosted our 9<sup>th</sup> annual Ashes-to-Go/Glitter+Ash Wednesday event to bring the remembrance and repentance of Ash Wednesday directly to the students. We transitioned our monthly Bible Study into “Feeding Tigers” a potluck-style meal with discussions of faith and community. We look forward to the next semester and the changes and partnerships it will bring!



### Westwood House – Lutheran/Methodist Ministry at KU – Lawrence, KS



This year we have seen relationships strengthen and grow deeper—not only in faith, but with our community as well. We celebrated birthdays, went to see performances, tutored in math, and more. While we love being a place of faith, we love even more getting to live as the community of God. Our goal is to not only make sure each person knows they are loved by God, no exceptions, but that they are also loved by the people of Westwood House. We are the ones you call when you get a flat or are in the emergency room. We are the ones you text funny pictures to and celebrate good grades. We are the ones encouraging, pushing and holding each other accountable. Doing this life together as a chosen family has been the highlight of our ministry and year.



## About Us

Bethany College is a liberal arts institution located in Lindsborg, Kansas, and was established by Swedish Lutheran immigrants in 1881. Our mission is to educate, develop, and challenge individuals to reach for truth and excellence as they lead lives of faith, learning, and service.

## Why LUTHERAN Higher Education Matters

At Bethany College, Lutheran Higher Education is more than a tradition, it is a calling to BE. As the only college of the Central States Synod supporting the mission of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, Bethany stands in a unique and vital place of purpose and impact.

At Bethany College, education goes beyond the classroom. Bethany's **holistic** approach nurtures the whole person through body, mind, and spirit. Students are encouraged to grow, change, and transform academically, spiritually, and personally.

Every Bethany College student is **seen, valued, and celebrated** as they pursue a life of meaning.



**"My experience at Bethany College in my first year have provided me with memories and opportunities. From the soccer field to the stage of Presser Hall, I have made meaningful connections and have benefitted from experience that will prepare me for a promising future."**

Andrew Clouse '29



785.227.3380



335 East Swenson St.  
Lindsborg, KS , 67456



[www.bethanyLB.edu](http://www.bethanyLB.edu)



## Experience a Lutheran Liberal Arts Education

### Finding a Common Purpose

From daily interactions to big projects, Bethany College students embrace service in all its forms, learning that leadership begins with showing up. The commitment to service doesn't end at graduation, **it only GROWS.**

Bethany College alumni can be found on the front lines of disaster relief, serving as counselors during crisis, leading churches, and providing care when it's most needed. No matter the path, **Bethany College is dedicated to an education rooted in a lifelong commitment to making a difference where life leads.**



### Why YOUR Support Matters

YOUR support sustains an educational tradition that forms not only skilled professionals, but thoughtful, compassionate leaders grounded in purpose. The TRUTH is, **we need your prayers, advocacy, and financial support** to continue to encourage students to ask BIG QUESTIONS that enable them to grow in body, mind, and spirit.

We cannot do the work alone. To make a financial contribution, please visit [bethanylb.edu/give](http://bethanylb.edu/give) or contact Christie Denniston, Vice President of Strategic Engagement at [dennistconcl@bethanylb.edu](mailto:dennistconcl@bethanylb.edu) to discuss ways your prayers and advocacy can make a difference.

### Bethany College by the Numbers

- 99% of students receive financial aid
- 44% of students are from states within the Central States Synod
- 22% are first-generation, meaning they are the FIRST in their family to pursue higher education



 785.227.3380

 335 East Swensson St.  
Lindsborg, KS , 67456

 [www.bethanyLB.edu](http://www.bethanyLB.edu)



*Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago*  
**Lutheran School of  
Theology at Chicago**

Dear ministry partners in the Central States Synod,

The Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago is grateful to share highlights from our seminary in this 2026 report to supporting synods. Thank you for your continued support of our innovative and thriving seminary. As we reflect on the past year and look ahead to 2026–2027, I am pleased to share some key developments and our aspirations for the future:

This year marked a historic leadership transition as I began service as LSTC’s eighth president on July 1, 2025. [My vision for this new chapter](#) is rooted in accessibility, collaboration, and hospitality: theological education for all who desire it, strengthened partnerships across synods and the wider church, and a community where every learner is seen, valued, and accompanied. My inauguration, held alongside our Seminary Showcase this past November, publicly launched this next era of mission-driven innovation at LSTC.

LSTC is also [pleased to announce the appointment of The Rev. Robert O. Smith, Ph.D.](#), as our new Vice President and Dean of Academic Affairs, effective January 12, 2026. An enrolled citizen of the Chickasaw Nation and an ordained ELCA pastor, Dr. Smith brings deep expertise at the intersections of race, religion, and Indigeneity, along with extensive experience in global mission and ecumenical leadership. In addition to serving as Associate Professor of Authentic Diversity, Justice, and Public Church, he will oversee our academic programs and guide LSTC’s Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice commitments, including the Center of Christian-Muslim Engagement for Peace and Justice and the Pero Center for Intersectionality Studies.

Our 2024–2029 Strategic Plan, [On the Way](#), continues to guide LSTC’s work across four core areas: Asynchronous Education, Philanthropic Campaign, Policy Review, and Staffing Strategy. This past year we celebrated the successful completion of Phase I of our “Time to Re-Imagine, Re-Invent, Reaffirm, and Re-New” campaign, surpassing our initial goal and securing significant scholarship support. Now, we are embarking on Phase II of our Campaign, a two-year journey to support our institution’s programs, pathways, and scholarships.

[Project Starling](#)—LSTC’s asynchronous digital learning platform—has moved from vision to reality. Under the leadership of Vice President for Enterprise Innovation Keisha Dyson, Project Starling is now in its final user testing phase and provides flexible formation for TEEM (Theological Education for Emerging Ministries), Synodically Authorized Ministers (SAMs), and independent learners who seek high-quality theological education beyond traditional degree paths. Through Project Starling, learners can access content at their own pace, engage with LSTC faculty and practitioners, and participate in user-testing cohorts that help shape future offerings. Partnerships with synods continue to inform our design and priorities for this work.

A central expression of Project Starling is the [SAM Development Training Program](#), an asynchronous, certificate-based training pathway for Synodically Authorized Ministers. Developed by LSTC faculty and

aligned with ELCA competency areas, this program helps SAMs:

- understand and assess ministry contexts using public-church and ethnographic frameworks;
- engage key themes in church history and Lutheran theology;
- reflect on identity and vocation through intercultural and intersectional lenses;
- grow in community organizing, contextual leadership, and pastoral practice; and
- deepen spiritual disciplines for lay ministry.

Designed for use in cohorts or as individualized study (with bishop authorization), the SAM program provides synods with a scalable, high-quality resource for forming lay leaders for emerging ministry contexts.

In 2025, LSTC received a [Pathways for Tomorrow implementation grant](#) from Lilly Endowment Inc. to launch a Public Church Hub and expand accessible, community-designed learning for pastoral and lay leaders. Building on Project Starling, this three-year initiative will co-create short, flexible offerings—modules, intensives, workshops, certificates, and cohorts—with LGBTQ-affirming missional communities and Latiné and African-descent ministries. New staffing funded by the grant will support congregational listening, pilot sites, and iterative program design. The Public Church Hub widens pathways beyond degrees, strengthens recruitment into our degree programs, and advances LSTC’s commitment to form leaders in partnership with the communities they serve.

Campus life and formation remain central to our mission. Christian worship continues to be enriched by the leadership of the Gordon Braatz Chair of Worship, Dr. Christian Scharen, and our faculty and student leaders. Homecoming and the Queer Symposium will gather alumni, students, and friends for learning, celebration, and reflection on the intersections of faith, identity, and justice. We look forward to welcoming a new class of learners in the coming year and to celebrating our next commencement, when we send graduates into the world as public-church leaders.

To learn more about LSTC, Project Starling, the SAM Development Training Program, and the Public Church Hub, please visit [www.lstc.edu](http://www.lstc.edu). We are deeply grateful for your prayers, financial support, and partnership in forming leaders for the church and the world.

With gratitude,

Rev. Dr. Shauna Hannan, President  
Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago



## Wartburg Theological Seminary

Forming Valued Leaders for God's Mission

The Rev. Dr. Kristin Johnston Lergen

Dear Partners in the Central States Synod,

Greetings from your siblings in Christ at Wartburg Theological Seminary in Dubuque, Iowa. I am excited to share with you some of the ways Wartburg is fulfilling its mission, with your partnership and support.

Last year marked the completion of the first year of The CaSTLE Project, funded by a \$7.4 million grant from Lilly Endowment Inc., to instantiate a new *baptismal ecclesiology*, focusing not on pastors and programming, but on the formation of Christian discipleship in daily life. To date, we have launched a new website (<https://thecastleproject.org/>), awarded sub-grants to 26 synods, and curated dozens of resources that support leadership formation and thriving congregational life in rural and small town contexts.

This year, we launched *FLOURISH*, a holistic network of support for students and staff in all aspects of life. This program includes coaching, counseling, meditation tools, and financial coaching, all without cost to our community members. We are forming leaders for the long haul, and as a part of their formation at Wartburg Seminary, we seek to include practices that support long-term health and wellness.

Wartburg Seminary is a leader in competency-based education, and our CBE TEEM program, available fully in both English and Spanish, is growing rapidly. Students appreciate the go-at-your-own-pace approach, with a team of advisors and mentors that supports student formation in doing, knowing, and being, a hallmark of the competency-based approach. In fact, this distinct pedagogical model has been so successful that this year, we have launched a pilot SAMs (Synodically Authorized Ministers) formation program. This is a one-year experiment to see how this model might support the distinctive call of a SAM to foster Christian discipleship in daily life, with the congregation as the locus for this transformation.

Let me conclude my report with a genuine expression of gratitude for your prayers, for your crucial financial support, and especially for your partnership in raising up leaders for service to the church and the world in the name of Jesus Christ. Wartburg Seminary forms leaders in intentional Christian community, including in a vibrant residential community, with daily worship as our center. We are a special place, and you are warmly invited to come and see! For more information about Wartburg Seminary, please visit us at [www.wartburgseminary.edu](http://www.wartburgseminary.edu).

Yours in Christ,

The Rev. Kristin Johnston Lergen, Ph.D.  
President

# Mission Investment Fund



Mission Investment Fund

## The Mission Investment Fund: Helping ELCA congregations bring ministry to life



The Mission Investment Fund (MIF), a financial services ministry of the ELCA, has been a **steady and reliable financial partner** for congregations, ministries and individuals for more than 150 years. Through times of growth and uncertainty alike, MIF has remained committed to strengthening ELCA ministries and communities — delivering customer-first support backed by flexible financing solutions.

In 2025, MIF continued to support ministry growth across the ELCA. Your investments helped expand worship spaces, rebuild congregations after fires and natural disasters, provide spaces for people to age with dignity, start green projects and support accessibility remodeling for community spaces. Each project strengthens ELCA ministries, ensuring that they stay vibrant, inclusive and fully prepared to support the communities they serve.

### By the numbers:

- **Total Loans Outstanding:** \$614,967,000
- **Total Investment Obligations:** \$551,452,000
- **Total Assets:** \$779,189,000
- **Net Assets & Capital Ratio:** 27.4%

### What makes MIF unique?

- **Proven stability:** With more than a century and a half of experience, MIF has weathered changing economic and political landscapes, maintaining financial strength for ELCA ministries.
- **Deep expertise in church and ministry financing:** We understand the unique needs of faith communities and have longstanding experience in congregation and ministry building projects.
- **Competitive rates and terms:** Our financial offerings are structured to support ministries of all sizes.
- **A full suite of financial services:** In partnership with the ELCA Federal Credit Union, we provide a range of financial solutions for congregations, ministries and individuals.
- **Faithful stewardship:** Investments in MIF directly support loans that fund hundreds of capital projects across the church.

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MIF continues to enhance our tools and financial services to better support ELCA ministries. And even as we look ahead with fresh vision and innovation, our foundation remains the same: enduring trust, time-tested stability and commitment woven through generations. In every chapter, we journey with ELCA members and ministries, united in faith — a steadfast partner supporting God’s work in the world.

### MIF at work in the Central States Synod (as of December 31, 2025):

- 11 Mission Investment Fund loan, with a balance of \$19,041,874
- \$9,752,967 in Mission Investment Fund investment obligations.

For more information about MIF capabilities, please visit our website, [mif.elca.org](http://mif.elca.org) or contact Deacon Jerry Johnson, Regional Manager: 773-682-5954 [jerry.johnson@elca.org](mailto:jerry.johnson@elca.org)

Updates from the ELCA Foundation

# Synod Assemblies 2026



We are the ELCA Foundation, a financial ministry of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. We walk alongside faithful people and organizations – helping them turn generosity into legacy, and legacy into ministry.

We believe generosity is more than a financial act; it is a testimony of faith, gratitude and hope. With \$1.5 billion in donor-designated gifts and invested assets entrusted to our care, we partner with individuals and organizations to thoughtfully steward these resources and maximize their impact.

We serve as a bridge between individual generosity and the shared mission of the ELCA – from congregations and synods to seminaries, outdoor ministries, and churchwide ministries such as ELCA World Hunger and Lutheran Disaster Response. Every planned gift we steward is an investment in the church's life – now and into the future.

## What we do

We offer guidance that is both spiritually grounded and financially sound, ensuring every gift reflects the heart of the giver and the needs of the church.

- **Gift Planning Services:** Our regional gift planners accompany individuals and families through faithful, personalized planning – helping them create charitable legacies through bequests, trusts, charitable gift annuities, real estate, retirement assets and more.
- **Ministry Growth Fund:** A socially responsible investment option that supports endowments and ministries across the ELCA, balancing fiduciary excellence with faithful stewardship.
- **Resources and Tools:** From our online Planning Library and free Personal Estate Planning Kit to our partnership with Giving Docs, we provide easy, trustworthy ways to start planning today.
- **Ministry Partnership:** We help ELCA ministry leaders grow a culture of generosity without adding more to their workload, offering training, templates and direct support to strengthen local ministry.



### Our vision

is to support and sustain ELCA ministries by enhancing gifting capacity and stewarding resources.

### Our mission

is to be a thriving ministry that develops a culture of intentional generosity and financial stewardship to expand the work of the ELCA.

Updates from the ELCA Foundation

# Synod Assemblies 2026



## 2025 At a Glance \*

In 2025, the ELCA Foundation's gift planning network walked alongside **190 donors/families** in developing faith-focused gift plans that reflect their passion and purpose.

**\$79.9M**

in future planned-gift commitments

**\$6.9M**

in currently funded gifts

**\$34.4M**

in direct support to individual congregations

**\$105.4M**

in existing gifts to ministry stewarded

In total, the network generated **\$205.4 million** in gifts and investment assets, which includes **\$118.5 million** in new assets invested in the Ministry Growth Fund.

## Let's continue the conversation

The ELCA Foundation has gift planning tools for every situation and professional staff throughout the U.S. ready to walk with you every step of the way. All of our gift planning services are made available to individuals and congregations without obligation. Contact your gift planner to get started:

**Stephen E. Phelps, MA, CFRE**

Stephen.Phelps@elca.org

314-703-6949

8765 W. Higgins Road, Chicago, IL 60631 • 800-638-3522 • Foundation.ELCA.org



## **ELCA Federal Credit Union**

Faithful financial services for ELCA members and ministries



The ELCA Federal Credit Union (ELCA FCU) provides a full range of financial products and services to members, congregations and ministries of the ELCA. **As the first of the ELCA's financial ministries to offer loans to individuals**, the Credit Union offers savings and checking accounts, CDs, loans and lines of credit, credit cards, home mortgage loans for purchases or refinances, as well as home equity loans and lines of credit.

**The ELCA FCU serves ministries** through federally insured deposit accounts, a flexible corporate credit card program, auto loans and unsecured ministry loans up to \$100,000 to support smaller projects such as building repairs and purchases. In addition, the Workplace Banking program allows ministry organizations and congregations to offer ELCA FCU Credit Union products and services, along with other exclusive perks, to their employees.

A new cohort joined the ELCA's Resourceful Servants program, **designed to improve financial wellness and assist rostered leaders in building emergency savings funds**. Through this matching program, ELCA rostered leaders make ongoing deposits to their Credit Union emergency savings accounts. The Mission Investment Fund of the ELCA matches those deposits up to an established amount. Together, more **than 700 rostered ministers** have been served, collectively depositing more than \$1 million in emergency savings.

A **strong online presence** means members have access to funds with an ELCA Federal Credit Union Mastercard Debit Card at more than 30,000 surcharge-free ATMs. The ELCA FCU also offers account-to-account (A2A) transfers, person-to-person (P2P) payments (similar to Venmo and Zelle), remote deposit, bill pay and more.

### **Why choose the ELCA Federal Credit Union?**

- **The ELCA Federal Credit Union supports the ELCA's mission of good stewardship.** We provide full services to all ELCA members, congregations and related ministries.
- **As a not-for-profit financial cooperative chartered to serve our church, we offer socially responsible banking solutions often priced more competitively** than traditional banks. We have demonstrated success in providing savings to our members.
- **With the church as our sponsor, we operate in ways that are consistent with the church's values.**

**Membership is open to every ELCA member, synod, congregation and ministry—and their employees.**

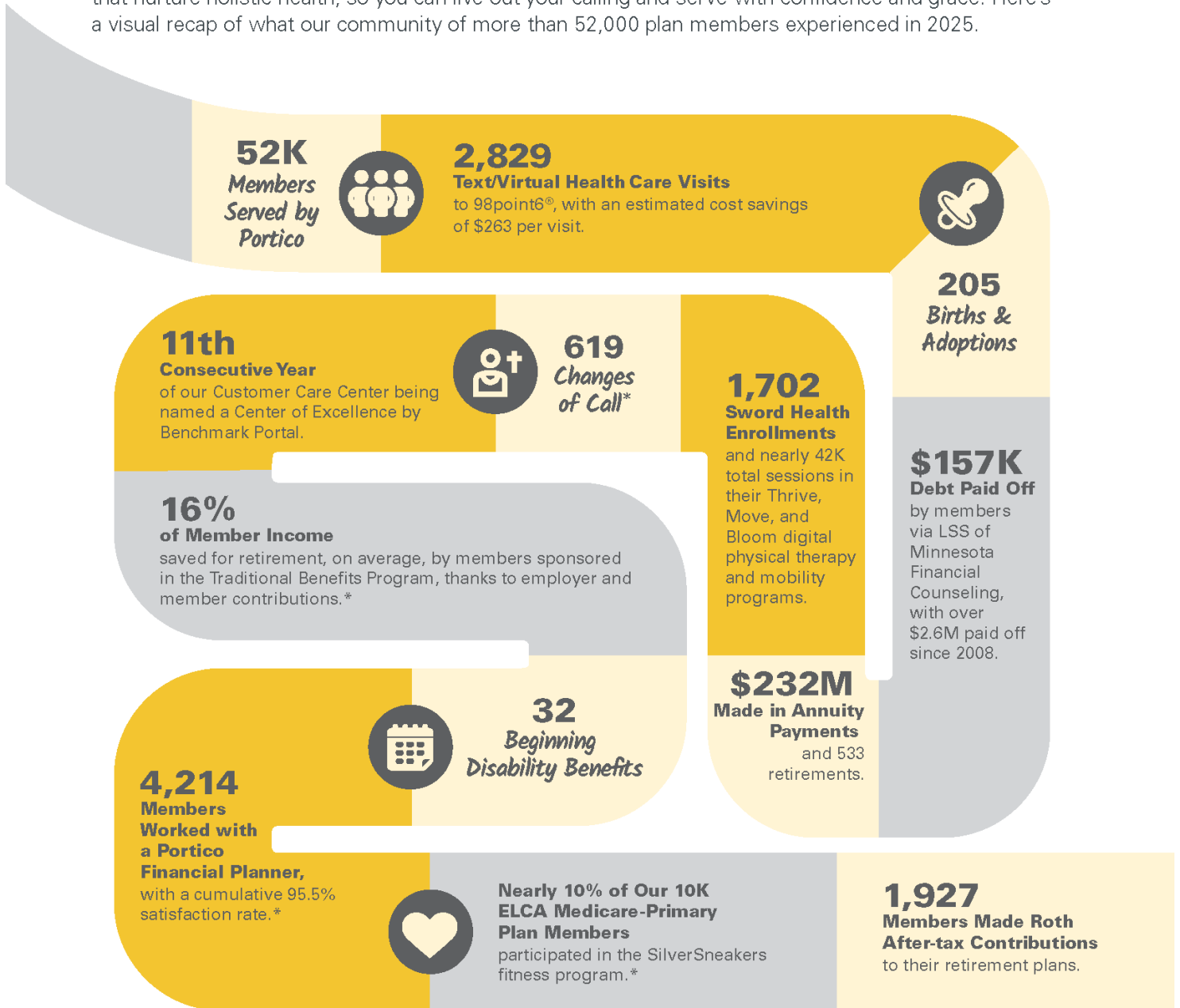
**For more information about the products and services of the ELCA Federal Credit Union, please visit our website, [elcafcu.org](http://elcafcu.org) or call us toll-free at 877-715-1111.**

**Walking Together - Central States Synod, ELCA 2026**

## Your Calling + Our Benefits

### Portico Benefit Services' Report to 2026 Synod Assemblies

Your calling is to serve. Ours is to support you. As the ELCA's benefit ministry, Portico provides benefits that nurture holistic health, so you can live out your calling and serve with confidence and grace. Here's a visual recap of what our community of more than 52,000 plan members experienced in 2025.



We design our benefits to align with the needs of the church, pooling resources through a community benefits plan to deliver stable, sustainable support that enhances everyday life and brings value to those who serve. Follow us on social media @PorticoBenefits.

\*Source: Traditional Benefits Program. All other numbers and percentages are drawn from across Portico's benefit programs.





# CHURCH PROPERTY RESOURCE HUB

Resourcing Faith-driven Church Property Stewardship

A project of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), the **Church Property Resource Hub** was built in response to requests from synod and local church leaders, to support them in navigating the challenges and opportunities that buildings and land represent for both congregational vitality and the wider mission of the church.



### COURSES & RESOURCES

Find **resources** and expand your knowledge of church property management through templates, guides, explainers and **courses**.



### SUPPORT FORUM

Share advice and get support from colleagues with experience answering property management questions, all on our digital **forum** (forthcoming).



### SUCCESS STORIES

Be inspired by **success stories** of faith communities using underutilized space in exciting new ways to fulfill their mission.

## Why Is the Church Property Resource Hub Being Developed?

The Church Property Resource Hub (CPRH) was created **in response to questions and needs voiced by synods and congregations** regarding the use, management and support of church-held property. Our congregations find themselves with buildings and land that no longer fit their need for programming or their capacity to manage them. This has spurred urgent conversations at local and synod levels about the future of church property. There was no centralized hub collecting the information and wisdom congregations need to **faithfully steward buildings and land** for both congregational vitality and mission impact. The ELCA churchwide organization is addressing this need by equipping congregation and synod leaders with the expertise that will empower congregations to continue to steward their buildings and land as a witness to the gospel through the Church Property Resource Hub.



Sign up for “**Church Property Resource Hub Newsletter**” for the latest news and resources.

### The Church Property Resource Hub is ...

... an online platform that connects congregations and synod leaders to information, organizations and guidance on effective, faith-driven management of church property. It includes how-to lessons for the many aspects of property stewardship, stories of congregations that have found creative solutions to property challenges, and a network of professionals who can answer questions and partner with congregations and synods.

The resource hub is **built for synod and local church leaders, to help them navigate the challenges and opportunities that buildings and land represent**. The hub offers advice and experience for churches in a variety of contexts across the United States, from urban centers to suburban areas to rural and small-town communities. The Church Property Resource Hub is a growing initiative that will be completed by 2028, though the first, most basic version was launched in August 2025.

### The Church Property Resource Hub is NOT ...

... an attempt by the churchwide organization to take control of congregations' property. Local churches hold the title and deed to their property; their right to make independent decisions about the use, management and future of their property is codified in the ELCA constitution and churches' individual constitutions.

... an attempt by the churchwide organization to bypass synods' relationships with their congregations. The resource hub is being built **in collaboration with synod leaders** and equips them to **assist and guide congregations** that approach the synod with ideas, questions or concerns about property stewardship.

### Who leads the Church Property Resource Hub?

The Church Property Resource Hub is led by the **Rev. Sarah Jones** (program director), **Deacon Sarah Kretschmann** (digital communications manager) and the **Rev. Tim Brown** (director of congregational stewardship). This team is reaching out across the ELCA, our sibling denominations and the many organizations and businesses that focus on church property, to collect, curate and disseminate information that synods and congregations need. Please reach out with your questions!