

Lake Institute Executive Certificate in Religious Fundraising
Final Project Proposal
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Vision

The judicatory which I lead—the Central States Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America—has a budget of over two million dollars, with income provided primarily by congregational “mission support” or donations. We lack a comprehensive plan for fundraising beyond mission support, which has shown a steady pattern of decline for many years. Several means for addressing this decline and diversifying means of income to the synod are needed. This project aims to provide a strengthening of one of those means: the direct appeal. We have made an appeal in December most years, and this annual appeal has yielded support of \$10,000 to \$35,000 in my years on staff. (I served nine years as Director for Evangelical Mission prior to being elected bishop in June of 2025.)

The appeals have always highlighted work done by the synod staff and synod teams, but I don’t believe we have had themes for these appeals. I will work with the Project Team to outline themes for our appeals over the next five years of my full term as bishop.

I propose to work with a team from my staff and our synod council to develop a plan for a twice yearly appeal which will increase in yield to \$40,000 in 2027 and \$100,000 in 2028, with commensurate increases in the following years. This increase will be the result of two strengthened approaches: inviting new givers among our congregations and individual members, and providing a comprehensive vision for them to support.

Anticipated Challenges

Strengthening our direct appeals will require a thoughtful plan and work with staff to create a process that ensures that our appeal reaches more people and thoroughly explains what those constituents are being called to support. We will need to begin earlier and to create a multilayered approach. I don’t anticipate negative reactions from our ministries, but that is certainly a possibility when making a direct ask.

Key Stakeholders

Identifying stakeholders and thinking through the process of inviting their generosity is probably the most important step in this process. At the outset, I believe these are our key stakeholders:

- All congregations of the synod
- Members of those congregations
- Institutional partners such as Lutheran Disaster Response and the ELCA Foundation
- Additional stakeholders suggested by synod council, staff, and congregation members

Project Team

This appeal will be led by a team which would include myself, two members from our synod council, one additional member of my staff, and 2-4 members of synod

congregations. The synod council and congregational members will connect with members of their congregations to gather potential new donors.

New Constituencies and Technologies

I hope to reach individuals in our congregations and across the ecology of our synod. We stretch across two states, yet our annual appeal went to about forty donors last year. The potential to reach many more givers with a compelling vision is vast. I believe we can move this appeal to hundreds of individuals and nearly two hundred organizations; the synod congregations and ministries account for over 150 of those, but there are other organizations adjacent to our congregations and ministries who have never been asked to support the work we do.

Our appeal has only gone out as a letter. I think we could make use of social media and video to move the vision beyond a static letter. I will work with my Communications Director to create a more appealing appeal.

Timeline

Late summer/early fall 2026: gather the team and develop a thematic map for the next five years. Develop the theme for the 2026 appeal. Identify a monetary goal for the appeal.

October 2026: Team members build the list of appeal recipients, contact information, and best method of contact for each. Team and Communications Director work on a plan for releasing the appeal from mid-November to mid-December.

November-December 2026: Appeal is released to targets through December 20. At least one release on social media weekly and at least one video released by the end of November. Letters go out November 15 and December 1.

January 2027: Thank you notes to all donors, hand written by team members.

Team gathers to evaluate the appeal. Evaluation Questions:

1. Did we reach our goal?
2. Which methods of contact seem to have led to the most response? Do different methods work with different constituencies? Are there additional methods to try in the coming year? Do any of the methods we used return too little for the effort they require?
3. How many new donors did we reach? How will we follow up with those donors?
4. How shall we cultivate relationships with all of the donors in this campaign?
5. Was the theme effective? Did we learn anything useful in explicating the theme for the coming year? Can we begin to share that theme now, and build toward the mid-year appeal?