



Service and Justice home area report for
The Becoming Conference

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Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
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Table of Contents

Introduction	3
General Information and Statistics	4
Additional Feedback From Attendees	4
Theological and Scriptural Framework	5
MERGE: The Five Core Justice Foci and Roundtables	5
Service and Justice Staff Gathering Day	6
Interactive Stations and Roundtables	7
Plenary Sessions and Worship Services	9
Service-learning Opportunities	10
Network Gatherings	10
Accompanying People, Communities and Networks	11
Building Resilient Communities	21
Witness in Society	24
AMMPARO: Accompanying Migrants with Protection, Advocacy, Representation and Opportunities	25
Companion Synod Networks	26
Most Generous Congregations	31
The Summer Missionary Conference	32
The Children's Program	33
The Gala	34
Conclusion	35



Introduction

The Becoming Conference, held Aug. 21-28 at the Hyatt Regency O'Hare, Rosemont, Ill., brought together more than 550 participants from across Service and Justice ministries of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Participants gathered in person with some virtual components, physically together for the first time since the COVID-19 pandemic and the restructuring of the churchwide organization that created new teams and new ways of working together. The conference represented an important moment for the Service and Justice home area and its networks.

Guided by the vision statement “Connecting communities through service and justice for transformation in the way of Jesus,” and grounded in Scripture (see below), the conference presented an opportunity for the newly reorganized Service and Justice home area of the ELCA to work together in an embodied way, lifted by music, worship and prayer. Following on the heels of the Churchwide Assembly, the gathering enabled Service and Justice staff to reflect on what Service and Justice, and its ministries of love to our neighbors, might contribute to the process of renewing the church.

Evaluations collected from attendees after the conference included the following observations:

- “The work for justice has always been intersectional, and the conference fully incorporates this new way of thinking.”
- “I felt a great connection, as well as felt challenged to rethink my constructs.”
- “We can work on our area of focus, recognizing that [there] are others waiting in other areas.”
- “I did feel like I was able to connect to many people on justice issues.”
- “During this week we were very connected ... listening [to] each other, and in some way we could feel what is the point of our work. To support people who need to be supported and to support each other in this way.”
- “Mission – lifting up both the local and global. Together and connected is imperative (not about being balanced) but seen as more TOGETHER AND HOLISTIC. Build upon this vision with mindfulness of building in embodying the vision of relationships.”

- “Very grateful for this opportunity, just to be at such an important conference.”

At the Becoming Conference, leaders in ELCA global and domestic mission and their relationship partners; hunger, advocacy and disaster response ministries; ethnic-specific and migrant ministries; and Corporate Social Responsibility staff met face-to-face for the first time in almost three years. Resting in and savoring the gathered community, delighting in friendships old and new, attendees were able to praise, listen, lament, feast, pray and plan together after many, many months apart.

General Information and Statistics

During the Becoming Conference:

- 550-plus participants gathered.
- 38 networks met.
- 35 international guests from companion churches attended.
- 13 service-learning opportunities helped attendees experience local ministries around the five justice foci of the home area.
- Three plenary sessions highlighted mission as accompaniment, the theological framework, and prophetic diakonia and empowering those living at the margins. Plenaries brought together both global and domestic perspectives.
- Attendees gathered around worship services and daily devotions/prayers and were guided by the Chicago-area land acknowledgement.
- Service and Justice collaborated with the Northern Illinois Synod, the Greater Milwaukee Synod and other home areas of the ELCA churchwide organization.

Additional Feedback From Attendees

Participant evaluations of the conference stressed the importance of gathering as a community as the church moves forward together:

- “I was learning about Service and Justice and all it includes.”
- “I experienced the transition about the ELCA.”
- “I was able to work with others who shared experiences and learn from each other.”
- “I learned so much more about global mission and domestic ministries.”

- “I gained the ability to broaden perspectives, meet old connections, while making more friends.”
- “I am seeing everything that is happening around the world.”
- “Thank you for being brave enough to host the conference despite the changes and challenges.”
- “I needed this!”

Theological and Scriptural Statement

The theological and scriptural framework “Going Ahead to Galilee: A Theological Statement for the Becoming Conference” was embodied by study and worship throughout the conference. Guided by Mark 16:6 -7, Matthew 15:25-28 and 1 John 3:2, attendees renewed our call to service and justice, affirmed the gifts and blessings of each other and our companion churches, learned from one another, and listened deeply to each other’s joys, pains and challenges in doing God’s work in each of their ministries.

The Five Justice Foci (MERGE)

Service and Justice strategies are organized around five justice foci, represented by the acronym MERGE:

- **M**igration justice.
- **E**conomic justice.
- **R**acial justice.
- **G**ender justice.
- **E**nvironmental justice.

During the conference, Service and Justice ministries began to recognize the intersectionality of these five forms of justice. Through plenary sessions and roundtables, the conference allowed staff the time and space to consider how these intersections might inform their work – both internally, within and among their teams, and externally, within their networks.

Service and Justice Staff Gathering Day

On Monday, Aug. 22, the first day of the conference, the Rev. Barb Lund facilitated the “Service and Justice Administration” plenary. She reminded participants of the inherent vulnerability of accompaniment: “Accompaniment requires us to talk honestly; to share with one another; to get to know one another; to name, recognize and undo the boundary of strangeness or suspicion that can come between us. It takes time, thought, commitment.”

She invited participants to reflect on an artist’s image of a bridge over running water, imagining the sounds and aromas that might fill the air, and to consider: Where do you want to go now?

In small groups, participants discussed thought-provoking questions: How in their work were they being called out, pushed out of their comfort zones, and challenged to work differently? What did they need to let go of? What did they need to redirect? What held them back? How did their ministries and encounters with companions, partners and one another welcome them and teach them to walk together?

So, what held them back? Answers included:

- Fear of change.
- Taking things for granted.
- Pride.
- Assumption that the churchwide organization will always have value.
- Power.
- Funds.
- Personnel.
- Mindset.
- Terminology.
- Systemic racism.
- Unwillingness to let go of power.
- Lack of clarity.
- Lack of trust.

Following Rev. Lund’s presentations, the Rev. Rafael Malpica Padilla, in his plenary address, challenged these answers by charging the church with complacency. “It is not fear that holds us back,” he said. “It is complacency. We like it the way it has been ... we have domesticated Jesus.” He likened God’s mission in the world, enacted through us, to

movement and dance – a dance that is under grave threat from the growing Christian nationalist movement in the United States and around the world.

He challenged the church to “rediscover its heretical roots” and to move toward the margins. “Jesus comes to us today with the same invitation he shared with the disciples: Let’s go across to the other side. This is not an invitation to relaxation, but to missional engagement. ... We must journey toward the margins not as pragmatists to find objects for our charitable work but as bridge builders, displacing the church from its position of privilege and helping to change the landscape around us. It is there, in those margins, we will find the new, younger, diverse people who will transform and renew the way we are being church in the 21st century.”

Interactive Stations and Roundtables

From Monday through Saturday, participants were invited to post sticky notes to the walls of one of the conference rooms in response to a series of questions: “Who is present at the conference?” “What connections are you making with others and between issues?” “What challenges do you face, and what opportunities do you see?” The answers accumulated throughout the week as people came back to the walls with more reflections:

- “We need to do racial justice work internally before we can be effective in it externally.”
- “New sense of mission; better understanding of accompaniment.”
- “Hope. Forgiveness. Mercy. Grace.”
- “The church has people who are committed to disruption.”
- “People speaking their experiences loudly, bravely and unapologetically.”
- “Sparked fire: God’s movement and dance transforming the church.”
- “Go ye therefore and disturb the world.”
- “How do we continue toward the margins?”
- “Our job is to challenge the church.”
- “The desire to participate in God’s justice for the world.”

On Saturday, Aug. 27, two roundtable sessions embraced the week’s presentations, the questions asked, the responses posted and the connections and work surrounding the five core justices. The roundtable discussions of these questions brought participants closer to and helped them map the intersectionality of justice issues, which inspired them to design action steps in their contexts after the conference.

Highlights from the **MERGE** Roundtables included:

- **Migration:** Strong intersectional connections made with climate, racism in displacement and transition, and similarities/differences between the U.S. border wall and Israel/Palestine.
- **Environment:** Recognition for advocacy and policy, and strong connections made between climate change and its differential impact on low-income and Brown/Black communities.
- **Race:** Calls for truth and reconciliation, awareness-building, activism, and recognition of Roma rights (ethnicity and race).
- **Gender:** Focus on safety and its connection to financial inclusion.
- **Economic:** Strong intersection with the four other justice areas, especially regarding consumer choices, food security and care of the whole person.

Highlights and Intersections from the regional roundtables included:

- **Europe:** “Nothing about us, without us, is for us.” The roundtable focused on the importance of uplifting marginalized communities through leadership opportunities. Participants noted that storytelling is helpful in creating global partnership and sought to use activism as a common experience across contexts and cultures.
- **Latiné:** There is a need for communities to recognize the multiculturalism within the Latiné community. Participants uplifted youth projects and expressed a desire for more robust language resources in Spanish and for providing appropriate interpretation and translation services.
- **Middle East and North Africa/Arab and Middle Eastern Ministries:** Action steps were twofold: participants talked about Palestinian liberation theology in seminary and about expanding trips to include more youth and companion synods.
- **Latin America and the Caribbean:** Roundtable discussion centered on the need for better communication strategies and for a redesign of the “mission trip” that might follow the Palestine “come and learn” model.
- **Economic justice:** An intersection between gender justice and housing emerged. Action steps focused on advocacy, education, transparency and retooling affirmative action.
- **Environmental justice:** Participants noted that partners all over the world are doing amazing hands-on work that should continue to be cultivated, and called on the ELCA to do resilience planning, education, and protection work.
- **Migration justice:** The roundtable highlighted the intersection of migration and race. Participants also called on the ELCA to embrace migrants in church/worship and to think of ways to support the long-term integration of communities.

Plenary Sessions and Worship Services



Worship at the Becoming Conference

There were three plenary sessions and three community worship services during the Becoming Conference. The goal for these sessions was to bring the theme, vision statement, theological and scriptural reflections, and fivefold justice foci into the life of the conference. Panelists, moderators, speakers, preachers and worship leaders engaged attendees with stories of living out God’s mission through ministries; worship focused on accompaniment. Through the plenary sessions and worship services, participants shared stories of accompaniment; of living with and among those at the margins; and of personal transformation, commitment and sacrifice in service of what God was calling them to do in the world. During the plenary sessions participants reconnected in small group while engaged in deep and vulnerable conversations, and made plans for the future.

- The first plenary was “Mission As Accompaniment: Diakonia As a Theological Basis Toward the Practice for Liberation.” This plenary focused on experiences

and learnings of “accompaniment” as a hermeneutical key and on “diakonia” as a mark of church identity. “Accompaniment” and “diakonia” are key to interpreting the ELCA’s mission in the contexts of churches and partner organizations around the world and in aligning it with the ELCA’s goal of reaching one million new, young and diverse people. They coincide with the meaning and purpose of the Becoming Conference, with the ELCA becoming the Future Church and with the Service and Justice home area becoming a source of future leadership.

- The second plenary was “We Are Always Becoming.” Through the experiences of three panelists, participants dove deeper into the theological framework developed for the conference. Meeting and dwelling in the in-between, they celebrated what brings and holds us together, named and transformed what must pass and opened themselves to see where God is already taking them.
- The third plenary was “Prophetic Diakonia: Listening To, Working With, and Empowering Those Living at the Margins.” The two speakers guided participants into God’s call to serve those at the margins of our society. The plenary session addressed how we become whole as children of God, as a church and as a global family. What forces divide us and push people to the margins? What does liberation look like? How can we liberate people in accompaniment with, and from within, marginalized communities?

Service Learning Opportunities

Thirteen service-learning opportunities gave participants a chance to learn about and experience the work happening around the five core justices of Service and Justice as they aspire to be more involved in their communities. After their practical experiences, participants had time to reflect on a personal level and engage in deeper conversation in groups.

Network Gatherings

Though the Becoming Conference offered opportunities for communal connection, conversation, reflection and worship, it also invited networks to gather in small groups throughout the week. Thirty-eight different networks with connections and roots back to the Service and Justice home area gathered throughout the week, each with individual objectives and outcomes.

Accompanying People, Communities and Networks

Africa



Attending the Becoming Conference from the Africa desk were regional representatives, mission personnel, representatives of ELCA synods and seminaries, and staff of the churchwide organization. The invited guests were a highlight:

- The Rev. Lilana Kasper is executive director of the Lutheran Communion in Southern Africa.
- The Rev. Helena M-Hooper is a seminary leader in Ghana and coordinates vital diakonia ministry.
- Bishop Moses K. Momoh leads the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Sierra Leone.
- Rev. Mimii Kwerakwiza Brown is principal of a Bible college of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania.

Together they spoke powerfully in sessions on gender justice and online theological education, which were led by the Africa desk. These two sessions represent opportunities the ELCA is taking to grow with companions in new and potentially transformative ways.

Some team members could not attend in person due to visa issues, though many of these were able to join sessions virtually.

Companion networks also gathered, strengthening partnerships between parts of the ELCA and their Lutheran siblings in Christ from Cameroon, Central African Republic, Liberia, Namibia, South Africa, South Sudan, Tanzania (Mwangaza) and beyond. ELCA mission personnel working in Zambia, Tanzania, South Sudan, Nigeria, Liberia, Cameroon and Senegal joined with colleagues from the United States and other regions of the world. Participants had time for fellowship with youth, namely International Women Leaders scholarship recipients and international camp counselors hailing from Senegal, Tanzania, Namibia and Madagascar.

The photo shows just some of the Becoming Conference attendees who are connected to ELCA ministry in Africa. Those pictured speak dozens of languages and work in vastly different settings – all connecting communities across barriers for transformation in the way of Jesus.

African Descent Ministries (ADM)

African-descent synod staff gathered at the Becoming Conference to share with each other the work they are doing. A handful of African-descent young adult leaders and seminarians participated in greater networking opportunities with global mission teams. The Conference of International Black Lutherans (CIBL) was invited to join the ADM network in preparation for the upcoming reinvestment work surrounding “Declaration of the ELCA to People of African Descent.” The ADM network utilized the expertise of the AMMPARO team (Accompanying Migrant Minors with Protection, Advocacy, Representation and Opportunities) to discuss the Black Migrant Memorial and AMMPARO 3.0, which focuses more widely on Black migration. ADM also partnered with Lutheran Disaster Response’s network to participate in a power workshop led by Southsiders Organized for Unity and Liberation, and ADM leadership led a Monday workshop for Service and Justice staff and missionaries, “MONadvocacy,” that explored racial inequities in urban policy.

African Nationals Ministry



All six ELCA Service and Justice African-national ministries were represented:

- West Africa Caucus: Justina Sergeon and Mydea Reeves-Karpeh, from Baltimore.
- South Sudanese Caucus: John Gok Badeng and Nyanhial J. Dat, from Omaha.
- Oromo/Amharic Caucus: Wondimu Legesse, from Minneapolis.
- Eritrea Caucus: Nyayoka Deng Lonsdale, from Minnesota, and Gideon Paul, from Iowa.
- Southern Africa Caucus: Xastor Varney Yarkpazuo, from Columbus, Ohio.
- Swahili-speaking Caucus: Jean Paul Makano Kisuku, from Baltimore.

Also attending were Joseph Bocko, director of the ELCA African National Ministries program, and Wal Reat, ELCA missionary in South Sudan.

Participants had time to share their personal life journeys based on the ELCA's teaching that "hospitality for the uprooted is a way to live out the biblical call to love the neighbor in response to God's love in Jesus Christ" (ELCA social message "Immigration," p. 3).

As new immigrants, participants discovered and discussed the value of including all generations in church leadership teams. Children and youth provide fresh insights, with little “baggage” from previous experiences, hurts or struggles. Young and middle-aged adults deliver stability in leadership.

Arab and Middle Eastern Ministries



The Arab and Middle Eastern community partnered with Peace Not Walls (PNW) at the Becoming Conference to deepen and strengthen their relationship and to envision ways in which they can continue to cooperate to advance the wheel of justice. Arab and Middle Eastern Ministries partners with ELCA World Hunger to support Arab and Middle Eastern congregations through work related to food insecurity and advocacy.

Arab and Middle Eastern Ministries continues to look for partnerships that will help it empower communities and bring programs and services to local congregations. It partnered with Project Amal to bring congregations its program to help children deal

with the psychological impacts of the refugee and migrant experience. It initiated a primary negotiation with Lutheran Disaster Response (LDR) and Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS) to support refugees in its area of intervention.

Through the Rev. Dr. Munther Isaac and the Bethlehem Bible College, Arab and Middle Eastern Ministries will create a program to train congregation members as synodically authorized ministers. It will also cooperate with Peace Not Walls to create the Advent Pilgrimage in Palestine and to plan trips to the Holy Land and support advocacy.

Asian and Pacific Islander Ministries

The Association of Asians and Pacific Islanders (AAPI) gathering consisted of key leaders from diverse backgrounds (in gender, age, lay or rostered status, and type of ministry). The Rev. Gigie Sijera-Grant, president of the AAPI, shaped the group's network time together. It was grounded on Scripture and prayers, assessing and reviewing who Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders are, and incorporated what was asked of participants, such as prioritizing MERGE and sharing hopes and dreams. Participants also met new people, and a few attended the network meeting. All this connected to the vision statement.

Some outcomes from the gathering included:

- Many new connections.
- Greater understanding of the new Ethnic-specific Communities unit within Service and Justice.

Asia and the Pacific



Three specific networks gathered under the umbrella of the Asia and the Pacific team:

- India companion synods (see “Companion Synod” section).
- Papua New Guinea companion synods (see “Companion Synod” section).
- Asia Pacific mission personnel, who reflected on their time together, each tending to their own callings, jobs and assignments but also representing the ELCA’s vision of service and mission. Mission personnel from the region also discussed the possibility of holding weekly meetings for/with all Asia mission personnel to help foster a sense of togetherness.

Europe

The two-day Europe network meeting focused on anti-racism (particularly anti-gypsyism, which impacts Roma communities) and migration justice. International guests who specialize in these two topics led discussions that were attended by ELCA missionaries serving in Europe.

Europe missionaries had a chance to connect with other colleagues from around the region, many for the first time. Personal connection enhances ELCA ministry in the region as missionaries invite transformation within themselves and their communities.

The Europe desk connected European partners whose work and ministry focus on migration justice, staff of the ELCA churchwide organization, and global partners focusing on migration justice in their ministries. It also strengthened relationships with regional partners who advocate for intersectional justice in their contexts and work. In particular, it learned about Roma communities in Europe and how to advocate for and with them.

Other outcomes included:

- Developing strategies to incorporate intentional anti-racist and migration justice programming into the Central Europe Teachers program.
- Developing strategies to empower Roma communities through ELCA World Hunger and Lutheran Disaster Response grants in the region.
- Learning about migration issues in various countries, particularly Serbia, and how the ELCA supports and intersects with both refugees and organizations that work with them.
- Connecting specific ELCA staff with international guests to strengthen their relationship with the church.
- Creating opportunities for international guests to learn about the ELCA and the work of its Chicago partners (e.g., Vedrana and the service-learning opportunity).
- Integrating international guests and ELCA personnel into the larger roundtable discussions and action planning.

Three outcomes emerged from the Becoming Conference:

- Commencement of leadership development and network building for Native youth and young adults in the ELCA.
- Analysis of the concepts of mission, accompaniment and Christian education from an Indigenous perspective.
- Laughter and prayer together.

Latino Ministries: Young Adult Network



The program director for Latino Ministries worked with the Young Adult Latino network in the United States, including Puerto Rico. This included conversations with Daniel Kirschbaum, ELCA director of Young Adult Ministry, and the Rev. Wilma Rommel, president of the United Evangelical Lutheran Church, Argentina and Uruguay. Latino Ministries honored the vision of the conference by connecting with the Latin American network of churches represented. A major outcome was development of a proposal to expand its work of reaching young adults in synods where many Latino congregations are located.

Middle East and North Africa Team



The Middle East/North Africa desk facilitated the Peace Not Walls (PNW) network gathering and Middle East/North Africa roundtable, and helped coordinate the participation of international guests from the MENA region: the Rev. Munther Isaac of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land, staff members from Digitales–Project Amal in Jordan, and staff from St. Andrew’s Refugee Services (StARS) in Egypt.

These networks achieve the vision of “connecting communities through service and justice for transformation in the way of Jesus” by accomplishing three main goals:

- Gathering already-connected communities such as PNW to receive crucial updates from partners on the ground and to consider new approaches and strategies.
- Introducing new conference participants to the work of partner churches and organizations in the MENA region.
- Connecting international partners to other ELCA networks doing similar or relevant ministry; for example, helping guests from Project Amal and StARS participate in the AMMPARO network gathering.

The following outcomes emerged from these network gatherings:

- The PNW network gathering decided to assemble a task force of ELCA staff and PNW network members to continue working on action steps for more effective ELCA engagement.

- StARS and the AMMPARO network are working on planned follow-up actions, such as StARS staff updating already-existing materials to serve as “Bridging Youth to Youth” materials for ELCA youth ministries.
- ELCA networks such as the MENA desk, AMMPARO and the Association of Lutherans of Arab and Middle Eastern Heritage (ALAMEH) are exploring the possibility of using the Project Amal curriculum in other settings.

Peace Not Walls



Core staff for the Peace Not Walls (PNW) campaign (Karin Brown, Gabi Aelabouni, Khader Khalilia and Dennis Frado) convened the PNW gathering at the Becoming Conference, which included PNW network leaders from 25 synods (including young adults and seminarians), seven members of the Association of Lutherans of Arab and Middle Eastern Heritage (ALAMEH), and international guests from Palestine and Jordan. They were joined by the Rev. Munther Isaac of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land (ELCJHL) and three members of the Digitales team working with Project Amal.

The PNW gathering gave PNW network leaders a chance to build community and facilitate networking; to hear from each other about accompaniment, awareness-raising and advocacy “best practices” across the synods; to identify fresh strategies for connecting more ELCA members with the work of ELCJHL, the Lutheran World Federation and PNW (and strengthening existing outreach); to review the current conflict in Palestine/Israel and identify pressing issues (including human rights violations and threats to institutions); and to collect and prioritize action items for the coming 12 months. The PNW gathering was an opportunity for participants to connect directly with ELCJHL companions through Rev. Munther and to dream together about next steps for peace with justice in Palestine and Israel.

After reflecting on current realities in Palestine and Israel, the PNW gathering participants named action items under awareness-raising, accompaniment and advocacy. The group then committed to have a smaller group (the PNW core staff team and four PNW network leaders) further prioritize the action items and develop issue-based small working groups for the PNW network to participate in.

Building Resilient Communities (BRC)

ELCA World Hunger Leadership Gathering

Approximately 150 leaders from the ELCA World Hunger network came together for the 2022 World Hunger leadership gathering, held every 18 months and hosted this year as part of the Becoming Conference. The network leaders present included synod leaders (staff and volunteer, lay and rostered), ministry partners (including representatives from 12 Big Dream Grant partners); colleagues from Service and Justice; and the Development team.

At the Becoming Conference, the World Hunger network was able to engage formally and informally with the rich and varied networks of the ELCA that are carrying out its ministry of service and justice. Through sessions on advocacy, community organizing, global service, anti-racist leadership, education, generosity and more, World Hunger leaders were able identify how their work intersects with work being carried out by many others. By worshipping, dining, learning and serving with members of so many other networks at the Becoming Conference, World Hunger leaders were inspired to expand their own ideas and approaches to working toward a just world where all are fed.

Whether new to the event or longtime network members, World Hunger leaders left the conference energized, excited and hopeful about the scope and breadth of the ELCA’s service and justice work. They witnessed a diverse church actively at work in the world and recognized the importance of their ministry and leadership to that work. They

made meaningful connections with one another to inform, strengthen and deepen their ministry in their local contexts.



The Rev. Emily Norris, co-pastor of the North Carolina worship community the Dwelling, and Dr. Bijaya Bajracharya, director of the Lutheran World Federation Nepal Program, share perspectives from their respective communities at the margins.

Naomi Sonni (left), social ministry engagement manager for ELCA World Hunger, and the Rev. Jenny Kim, director of Dasom Bi-Cultural School, share a service-learning day with ministry partners at Bethel Lutheran Church in Chicago.



Lutheran Disaster Response Network Gathering

The Lutheran Disaster Response network – LDR staff and 25 guests from local and global partner organizations – gathered at the Becoming Conference, delved into the network’s understanding of disaster and unpacked the values it holds in responding to crisis. Participants attended a session on power with the African Descent network, led by Chicago-based grassroots community organizers.

Together the LDR team and network engaged with the broader conference through plenaries, meals and networking time. Participants intentionally shared space with the African Descent network to pilot further collaboration with other Service and Justice programs. The simple act of crossing cultural lines to learn in community helped participants understand themselves as part of the body of Christ.

The meeting revealed a desire for more trans-boundary experience sharing around disaster response. The network was excited and energized by greater opportunities to learn and grow together as an LDR network that eliminates the barrier between domestic and international efforts.



The LDR network celebrates its innovative trans-boundary work creating a flood-warning system in tandem with partners in Nepal, India and Bangladesh.

Witness in Society (WiS)



Hunger Advocacy Fellows at the Becoming Conference

At the Becoming Conference, the Witness in Society (WiS) team convened the ELCA State Public Policy Office network. Current and former Hunger Advocacy fellows attended as a new network with ELCA World Hunger leaders.

During the conference, WiS staff conducted team building and planning to identify and connect individual and team strengths toward the ELCA Future Church goals. WiS staff led two listening sessions on the 2023 Farm Bill, with participants providing input and exploring opportunities to shape legislation that has a major impact on domestic hunger, rural development and international agricultural programs. A panel with Hunger Advocacy fellows provided a platform for young adults passionate about faith-based advocacy in the world they are called to lead and alerted others to opportunities for young adults in justice ministry. Advocacy staff also supported Becoming roundtables and theological framing that brought a public-church awareness to Service and Justice discussions.

Two listening sessions for the Farm Bill not only engaged World Hunger leaders, global companions and domestic networks in this legislative opportunity to impact policy but also connected them with the advocacy experience of their companions and communities. The sessions will magnify the impact of WiS in using the experiences and voices of the ELCA to influence policymakers.

AMMPARO



The AMMPARO U.S. network had its first hybrid gathering at the Becoming Conference, with great success. The gathering was staffed by the AMMPARO core team: Mary Campbell, Giovana Oaxaca, Stephen Deal and Corinne Hughes. Presenters – in-person and virtual – included Silvia Raquec, Pop No’j, Guatemala; Ana Mendivelso, Evangelical Lutheran Church of Colombia; Dr. Luis Rivera-Pagán, Puerto Rico; and Margaret Brown Vega, Lutheran Family Services Rocky Mountains. More than 30 network participants from all over the country gathered at the Becoming Conference, with another small group of participants who attended virtually, to discuss congregational asylum-seeker sponsorship, immigration detention advocacy, and international accompaniment of migrants and refugees in Latin America in addition to domestic accompaniment in the U.S. Attendees shared best practices and made new connections to strengthen migrant accompaniment.

Companion Synod Networks



Throughout the week, eight companion synod networks and one independent Lutheran organization gathered to reconnect, revisit their respective relationships and develop strategic goals for the future while focusing on the values of accompaniment and the core justice foci. Following the network gatherings, one leader from the Sudan Mission Centennial wrote, “What a great meeting we had at the Hyatt in Chicago, working at ‘BECOMING’ all that God wants for us to be and do – individually and together – in Christ’s name. ... Minutes were kept during our meeting times, as we began to dream and plan together concerning the Cameroon and Central African Republic Sudan Mission Celebration, and ways each of the companion synods and other players could support and capitalize on the unique opportunity this celebration presents. Exciting discussions, and exciting decisions!” All six networks had similar responses, evaluations and plans for a way forward.

Friends of Mwangaza Board

The Friends of Mwangaza board held its annual in-person gathering during the conference, joined by its consultants and development assistant. The board was able to move forward with strengthening its relationship to the Mwangaza Partnership for Education program and staff in Tanzania while discussing its priorities: promoting Mwangaza, raising funds and recruiting teachers for short exchanges. Board members worked together on their transformational strategy with Mwangaza, shared their work

with others at the conference and learned about other ELCA organizations and individuals doing similar work that promotes service and justice throughout the world.

India Network

During the India companion synods gathering, participants:

- Discussed the meaning of accompaniment, what “good” relationships look like and the challenges of working with congregations and members within synods to understand not just accompaniment but also what the church in India is about.
- Looked at the need for truth-telling in relationships even as partners encounter caste, racism and other structural issues in ELCA churches and in society.
- Reflected on the status and challenges of the current relationships among four ELCA synods and four churches in India.
- Established a planning committee for a network visit to India in early 2024.
- Held a Zoom call with India church companion leaders.

Latin America and Caribbean Network



The Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) desk and the Companion Synod Program invited leaders from synods and companion churches to discuss the importance of the international consultations within the Companion Synod Program and to consider program-content proposals for the Sixth International Consultation with synods and companion churches. Using a consultative approach and including the ELCA Future Church priorities, 35 people participated, including missionaries who serve in the region, and engaged in five sessions during the conference. To follow up on this work, the convened group will offer recommendations for the Sixth International Consultation

to synods and companion churches in the region for 2023. Participants also reaffirmed the importance of the Companion Synod Program in the region, which encompasses 32 companion relationships, and the need to keep strengthening a program that gives life to the ministries of companions.

Liberia Network

Two members of the Liberia Companion Synod Committee of the Upper Susquehanna Synod attended the conference. From Friday through Sunday they held meetings with the Africa team, the ELCA's regional representative to Liberia, Liberian mission personnel and others that were interested. A highlight for the network was the chance to talk with the regional representative via Zoom on Saturday morning; this was most helpful in the Upper Susquehanna Synod's relationship with the Lutheran Church of Liberia. Synod representatives were disappointed that they didn't have a chance to connect with other companion synod programs, as they had envisioned. The Service and Justice home area's new MERGE model will evolve as team members accompany their brothers and sisters in Christ with the Lutheran Church in Liberia and Ansbach-Wurzburg Kirchenkreis.

Namibia Network

The Namibia Network planned the following action items during the conference:

- Asking the Rev. Philip Knutsen to lead backgrounders for the group in two quarterly phone meetings. Conference participants learned a great deal thanks to his knowledge, insight and historical perspective, especially the many newcomers in the network. Topics could include the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Namibia (ELCIN) and the bishop selection; the Lutheran Communion in Southern Africa's role in infohuts; the role of the German church in Namibia; theological education; and the children's hostels in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Republic of Namibia. COVID has taken its toll on the group, whose members now need basic instruction on what a companion relationship is as well as the group's history and players.
- Shifting the paradigm in the church's relationship with Namibian Lutherans to suspend the notion that the ELCA has resources and they don't. Instead, as Rev. Knutsen suggests, staff plan to ask the Namibians how they have such vibrant and growing congregations when those of the ELCA are slowing down.
- Folding the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Angola into the Namibia companion relationship, with the New Jersey Synod taking the lead. This synod has a long history in the northern reaches of Namibia and has in fact planted a large, thriving church there. There have been many visits over the years, and personal relationships have been sustained. With people crossing back and forth over the soft border between Namibia and Angola, it is reasonable for the New Jersey Synod to do this.

- Rescheduling the Southern Africa consultation, perhaps for 2024. New bishops are being identified in the ELCIN, and Rev. Knutsen can provide further education before then.
- Continuing the quarterly phone meetings led by Kevin Jacobson.

Papua New Guinea Network

During the Papua New Guinea companion synod network gathering, participants:

- Heard a report from Rev. Kinim Siloi of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Papua New Guinea (ELCPNG) on recent developments in that country.
- Reflected on the 2019 companion synod consultation in Papua New Guinea, particularly as this resulted in more and better communication and various kinds of engagement.
- Discussed the possibility of a companion synod consultation to be held in Papua New Guinea in summer 2024.

South Africa Network

Representatives from the ELCA South Africa Companion Synod Network gathered and consulted with the Namibia Network from Friday, Aug. 26, through Sunday, Aug. 28. Four ELCA synods relate to three churches in Namibia and one in Angola, whereas six synods relate to six of seven dioceses in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (ELCSA). All synods were represented at the conference. International guests that attended and participated in the network meetings included: Rev. Lilana Kasper (a former dean, a pastor in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa, and executive director of the Lutheran Communion in Southern Africa) and the Rev. Nahuma Ambole and Rev. Marta Nekwaya of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Namibia (ELCIN), who were in the U.S. during the past summer as camp counselors.

The Rev. Philip Knutsen, who recently retired from his position as the ELCA regional representative in southern Africa, shared a PowerPoint presentation giving an overview of the interlinked historical contexts of the region, the accompaniment model and examples of the current bilateral and multilateral relationships of the ELCA and companion synods with companion churches/dioceses and the Lutheran Communion in Southern Africa.

There was a good discussion touching on such issues as how to improve communication, current protocols for transferring financial gifts, requests for scholarships, recognizing different kinds of relationships among various partners (including individuals, congregations/parishes, conferences/circuits, dioceses/synods and the churchwide organization / Service and Justice team), what participants could learn from each other's approaches to gender issues, the complexity of addressing theological education and Christian formation, how to improve access to the internet

for online studies and resources, and how to revitalize congregational life and financial giving/stewardship after the pandemic.

The global COVID-19 pandemic in early 2021 forced cancellation of the regional consultation planned for May 2021 in Johannesburg. Questions were raised about if and when such a conference could or should be held, possibly in 2024.

The consensus was to keep in close and regular contact with companions in the coming months, also using quarterly Zoom meetings. The past two years have been challenging to all. In a number of cases there is new leadership, and it would be good to establish or reestablish communication and build or rebuild relationships before planning larger group visits or projects. The network could explore the possibility/feasibility of individuals or small groups making bilateral visits after identifying a clear focus or purpose.

It is important for ELCA representatives to listen long and deeply and ask what their companions' priorities are at this time. What does the ELCA need to know or understand, and how can its companions help it to deal with its own challenges in the U.S.? Is it open to critique, and do companions feel free to challenge and critique the ELCA? Both parties need to accompany each other better in transparent and accountable ways that include "mutual support and admonition."

Sudan Mission Centennial Planning — Cameroon and Central Africa Republic Networks

From Friday, Aug. 26, through Sunday, Aug. 28, the Sudan Mission Centennial planning team was able to hold conversations with the companion synod leadership of the Cameroon and Central African Republic networks. The purpose for the joint meeting was to discuss, discern and see a way forward in preparing for a centennial celebration July 7-9, 2023, in Minneapolis.

Most Generous Congregations Network



Fourteen leaders from nine congregations and seven different synods met with members of the ELCA Mission Funding and Congregational Stewardship and Generosity teams for the first-ever gathering of leaders from ELCA congregations that are among the most generous in supporting such churchwide ministries as ELCA World Hunger, Lutheran Disaster Response and Global Mission. At various sessions of the three-day network gathering, participants were joined by numerous leaders of other congregations and synods attending other network gatherings, including the ELCA World Hunger leaders gathering.

Participants in the network gathering were able to build meaningful connections with one another as an affinity group as they shared creative ideas and successful strategies for encouraging their communities' support of churchwide ministries. They were inspired by and experienced new learning through meaningful interactions with Global Mission personnel, International Women Leaders students, and Service and Justice program leaders.

Network gathering participants were enthusiastic in wanting to meet again next year, in an online forum, to further the work begun at *Becoming*. Such a gathering will enable leaders from even more generous congregations to participate, and to feel more deeply connected to one another and to the Service and Justice ministries to which they are passionately committed

Summer Missionary Conference



The conference welcomed our ELCA international mission personnel together by convening the Summer Missionary Conference (SMC), the first since 2019. Invited personnel included: volunteers, global mission associates, companion synod personnel, and Global Mission two-year, long-term and global coworkers. The SMC was one of many network gatherings in which mission personnel were involved throughout the eight days of the conference. Missionaries engaged in conversation with regional global desks and global ELCA companions, members of Most Generous congregations, and former missionaries. They also learned about the missionary sponsorship program, finance and insurance

ELCA missionaries expressed a desire to engage more fully with each other and to create better connections and opportunities in the missionary community across Service and Justice. Also heard from were people not typically invited (volunteers, Global Mission associates, companion synod personnel, global coworkers), who expressed their hope to be included in future conferences. Participants expressed their appreciation and gratitude toward the Becoming conference organizers for gathering all missionaries at the conference.

Children's Program



The Children's Program consisted of children whose parents/guardians were attending the Summer Missionary Conference or World Hunger leadership gathering, plus a few children of Service and Justice staff. This year's program used ELCA World Hunger's 2022 Vacation Bible School curriculum "Tree of Healing," whose personal stories, drawn from projects supported by ELCA World Hunger, highlight the many ways God works through ELCA congregations, companion churches and partners. The Children's Program participants also engaged with other aspects of the conference, making a presentation to the World Hunger leadership gathering on the VBS curriculum, engaging in music and dance with worship leaders and enjoying story time with Service and Justice staff. "Tree of Healing" stresses environmental health, mental health, healthy grieving, different abilities and health justice, exploring these topics through arts and crafts, outdoor games and storytelling. Children also bonded as fellow missionary kids, ELCA members and young conference participants.



The gala provided participants an opportunity to celebrate and acknowledge one another for the service and justice work God entrusts us to do around the world. It brought together Service and Justice’s various partners to see the church’s shared mission in action. The event sponsors – Portico Benefit Services, the Mission Investment Fund, the ELCA Credit Union and the ELCA Foundation – demonstrated the importance of people pooling their gifts and reminded attendees that an accompaniment model starts at home.

Seeing the big picture through the day-to-day operations of our church can be difficult; the gala was where everyone and everything connected and all networks could see how their puzzle piece fit into the big picture. From the Deaconess Community, Young Adults in Global Mission Women of the ELCA and International Women Leaders to the

missionaries, congregations, sponsors and donors, connections were made and sustained through a willingness to work with one another. We are in this together!

Colleagues and ministry partners were able to connect, learn from and appreciate one another's work. Missionaries were able to connect with individuals and congregations in mutual support. Service and Justice personnel were able to celebrate and acknowledge one another for the wonderful work that they do. "Well done, good and faithful servant!" (Matthew 2:21 NIV).

Conclusion

The Service and Justice home area holding a conference for 500-plus people would have been unthinkable three years ago. The Holy Spirit guided us along the way in a year and a half of planning to arrive at a week-long conference called "Becoming" in August 2022. Many colleagues contributed their gifts and expertise to shape this conference. We anxiously prepared to receive participants and leaders full of hopes and objectives for their allotted time. "Becoming" became a unique networking opportunity that connected participants and aligned them with the ELCA's "Future Church" strategy. Participants came from companion churches around the globe and from different regions across the United States. Each participant represented a different thread in the fabric of our church, communities and global communion. As the conference programming progressed, these threads intertwined, connecting and reflecting on our work in new ways. The Becoming Conference made many connections possible. It transformed into a hermeneutical space that allowed participants to see their work with joy, imagination and the strength that comes from unity.

"Becoming" is a movement, teaching us that our faith and vocation thrive in human relationships. Staff, mission personnel and networks with a variety of agendas left "Becoming" transformed by its energy, affirming their commitment to continue advancing their work together. The church is all of us: our convictions, our beliefs, our practices and even our doubts. Despite the disruptions caused by the pandemic, which seemed to limit our horizons, "Becoming" showed that the Spirit keeps calling us to be together and to strengthen the mission and ministries of the Service and Justice home area of the ELCA.