



Report of the Presiding Bishop

In the book of Acts, we find the story of the emerging church. The Spirit rushes in upon the disciples like a mighty wind — blowing open closed doors and propelling them out to proclaim the gospel. Each chapter brings news of the widening scope of the Jesus movement. More and more people receive the gospel word that transforms lives. Even the Gentiles are brought into new life in Christ. There were hardships and deep disagreements, but the trajectory of the good news comes from strength. This is the story of the church.

The actual title of this book is “The Acts of the Apostles.” Certainly, the apostles demonstrated deep faith and great courage. They preached, healed, baptized, cast out demons, founded churches and even raised the dead. This is a remarkable story, but it is not their story. A better title might be “The Acts of the Holy Spirit.” It is the Spirit who calls, gathers, enlightens and sanctifies the new church. Peter, Paul, Lydia and a host of others participate in the work of the Spirit. In the same way all reports and presentations about the work of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America are not our story but the story of God at work in the world, reconciling and redeeming through Jesus Christ and empowering through the Spirit. This report is a brief account of God’s work, using our hands.

The ELCA is a complex organization with many moving parts. The Spirit appears in congregations, synods and the churchwide expression; in seminaries, colleges and universities, in social ministry organizations, and in camps and campus ministries; on military bases, in federal prisons and at the Department of Veterans Affairs through our federal chaplains; in missionary personnel around the world, in ecumenical and interreligious relations, and in the ELCA’s social teachings; in separately incorporated ministries including the ELCA Foundation, the Mission Investment Fund and the ELCA Credit Union, 1517 Media, the Women of the ELCA, and Portico Benefit Services; in advocacy work, ELCA World Hunger and Lutheran Disaster Response; in the campaign for the ELCA, strategic communications and many more areas. It would be easy to get lost in all of these moving parts. It would be easy to lose sight that this is not our busy-ness. This is God’s work in the church for the sake of the world. When I work with churchwide staff, the Church Council and the Conference of Bishops, I use the following framework for who we of the ELCA are: We are church, we are Lutheran, we are church together, and we are church for the sake of the world. This framework is displayed in the five goals and supporting priorities of [Future Directions 2025](#) and is implemented through the lenses of leadership and congregational vitality.

The ELCA is 31 years old. We have been around long enough to become established, yet the ELCA is young enough to take risks and try new ideas. We know the world has changed. The church is changing. The privileged position the church once had in our culture — one of respect, relevance and even power — does not hold anymore. The church is a missionary movement once again. We need to find ways, in good Lutheran fashion, to communicate the gospel in the cultural vernacular. This calls for experimentation. Experiments can be risky. Some of them are likely to fail. Are we ready and willing to step out in faith, learn from what didn’t work, dust ourselves off and try again? I believe we are.

I also believe that we need to get back to basics:

- Luther’s reclamation of the gospel.
- God’s saving work accomplished through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.
- The conviction that Jesus is not just a moral teacher or an example of how we ought to behave but the incarnation of who God chooses to be for us.
- The reality of human brokenness, captivity to sin and the inability to save ourselves.
- Our complete dependence upon God, our liberation by God’s grace and our freedom through Christ to serve the neighbor.

These are the gifts God has given us. Gifts we have to offer to the world. It might be a paradox to call for a season of experimentation and risk while, at the same time, reclaiming the basics, but that is the Lutheran way.

The churchwide staff — your staff — are a remarkable group of people. They are dedicated to this church’s mission and feel called to support the ministries of all expressions of this church. They love what they do and want to work with you to make a difference in the world in Jesus’ name. I am grateful for them and am blessed by them. Take time at the churchwide assembly to meet them.

There is a lot of work before us at this assembly, including:

- The proposed social statement “Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Lutheran Call to Action.”
- The proposed policy statement “A Declaration of Inter-religious Commitment.”
- The entrance rite for ministers of Word and Service.

- An apology to people of African descent.
- Elections for presiding bishop and secretary.
- Elections of Church Council members.
- The adoption of the 2020–2022 budget.
- And more.

Please take time to prepare carefully and come ready to be a part of the holy deliberation to which you have been called. Be prepared to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the decision to ordain women as well as the successful completion of *Always Being Made New: The Campaign for the ELCA*. God is at work in this church and has given us the great honor of serving God and neighbor.

I thank God for your partnership in the gospel.

The Rev. Elizabeth A. Eaton, *presiding bishop*