



July 28 – August 2
PHOENIX, ARIZONA



Christian Community and Leadership

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age. Matthew 25:18-20

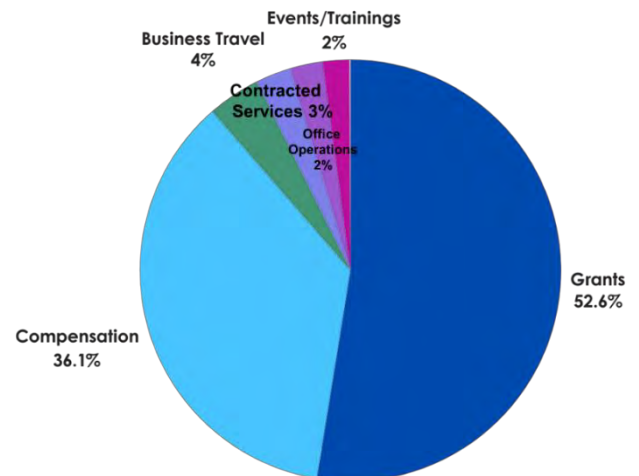
Christ's call to the church is the first priority of the Christian Community and Leadership unit (CCL): Love one another and tell others about the good news of God we have in Jesus Christ, our Lord. This is the guiding principle for all we do. We seek to speak a good word into the lives of those who are living in troubling times. Jesus is our hope and the salvation of the whole world. People who follow Jesus become a part of the care and redemption of all that God has made. Our work is to preach the gospel and, when people come to faith, to guide them into community and a life of serving their neighbor and seeking justice.

For these reasons, CCL has a close relationship with the Service and Justice unit of this church. The Christian life is one of faithfully living out God's calling in our lives to serve our neighbors. Faith and service are inextricably linked together and represent the good news and better way that God offers the world. This way includes forgiveness, reconciliation, and the promise of salvation.

CCL is guided by our purpose to recruit, train, and send leaders who establish and grow Christian communities. To achieve this purpose, CCL pursues three goals:

1. Help the ELCA engage people who are new, younger, and more diverse.
2. Develop new leaders to support the engagement of people who are new, younger, and more diverse.
3. Make measurement, assessment, feedback, and innovation standard practice in CCL.

Throughout the last three years, CCL staff have built and adjusted systems to live into our purpose and achieve our goals. This work is funded through the generous gifts of Mission Support, donors, grants, and bequests. CCL extends its gratitude for the opportunity to steward these faithful gifts and has discerned that the gifts should be allocated as shown to the right. Note that nearly 90% of CCL's budget consists of grants to the wider community and personnel costs, highlighting that networking, "best practice" sharing, and financial support of the work of faith communities are top priorities.



Goal #1: Engagement

To help the ELCA engage more people, CCL executed the largest gathering of the denomination since before the pandemic with the return of the Youth Gathering in New Orleans in the summer of 2024. Sixteen thousand participants



poured into the city, reigniting the passion of this church to strengthen the faith lives of young people. CCL contracted with Spiro, a consulting firm, to better learn how to deeply engage with this population and will use this research to craft pop-up events between now and the next Youth Gathering in 2027, to develop ways to be "always on" to support our youth and their leaders, and to attract elementary and middle school aged youth to high school ministries. Young adults joined the gathering with their own initial gathering, with more than 400 participants.

Through the generosity of the Lilly Foundation, CCL is stewarding grants to support the ELCA Youth Ministry Network, compelling preaching, and children in worship. These three grants have increased the capacity of this church to serve in these ways by more than \$3,000,000 over the course of several years. Additionally, CCL has been the recipient of a grant to enhance the ability of Lutheran Outdoor Ministry sites to be more inclusive in a variety of ways from being compliant with ADA regulations to welcoming those who are neurodiverse.



To support our youngest members, CCL engaged the Barna-Fuller team to research our congregations that have early learning centers, day cares, and schools. That research prompted seminars and resources to help congregations better understand, support, and minister to the families benefiting from these ministries. More information is available at: <https://elcaschools.org/nurturing-faith-communities/>.

Last year, ELCA Campus Ministry served over 11,000 students through 176 ministries across the country. Last year, 25% of campus ministries reported at least one student baptism, and each week during the academic year, around 200 small group studies are offered. Young Adult Ministries blossomed during the pandemic with the ELCA's Abide online Bible study groups. As we have returned to in-person gatherings, these online forums have evolved into the Gather Network. Currently, 26 Gather Communities are active with 30 more in process. This work is supported by a generous \$100,000 gift from the ELCA Vision Team and has engaged more than 1,000 young adults. When the Gather Network is fully built, we anticipate 2,000



young adults will be a part of these new Christian communities in the ELCA!

For the first time in many years, the churchwide organization has a working team with the word "evangelism" in its name. This team, New Ministry Development and Evangelism, is responsible for blessing the wider church with nearly \$5,000,000 in grants to support new ministries and enhance existing ones. It is actively experimenting with smaller-dollar grants to increase the capacity for current congregations to reach their neighbors. These experiments lean into the strengths and gifts of our current membership and the growing reality of the strength of lay leadership. CCL continues to support new worshipping communities, with 151 currently in development and 23 new outreach ministries established. This team also financially and ministerially supports 192 congregations in spaces where this church is especially needed. Primarily, this work is executed by synod-deployed Directors for Evangelical Mission.

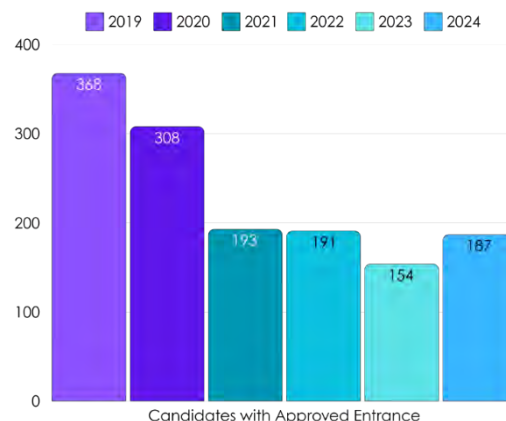
Many congregations and synods are learning how to create new ministries for new people alongside their existing traditional ministries. The idea for this initiative, called "Fresh Expressions," came from the Church of England. The initiative prompts members and leaders to find new ways to reach out to and connect with people around them to form communities of friendship, love, support, and service. Forms of outreach might involve meeting at a dog park, or an invitation to dinner and conversation, or a community garden project, but they seek to find new ways to build relationships and share the good news and love with the people around them. This initiative is now in a dozen synods and scores of congregations.

Goal #2: Leadership

Rumors and lived experience of a pastoral shortage continue to burden the wider church. CCL has worked with the churchwide organization's Research and Evaluation team to better understand leadership needs and respond to the needs that are discovered. This work has led to the first Synod-Authorized Ministers (SAM) Summit, as CCL leans into the lay leadership of the ELCA. CCL is also working to identify best practices for training SAMs through the lay schools throughout the denomination. A SAM is a member of a congregation who receives special training, mentoring, and authorization to lead worship, care for the members of a congregation, reach new people, and steward the sacraments. Currently 8% of ELCA congregations are led by a SAM and this number is increasing rapidly. SAMs are one way the Holy Spirit is lifting up leaders for the work of ministry.

To support leadership growth, CCL welcomed the Fund for Leaders (FFL) team into the unit in 2023, and the ELCA has responded to the financial burdens a seminary education produces by fully funding FFL. This has allowed CCL to put the generosity of this church to work by piloting ministries to increase leadership development in this church. In 2024, FFL sponsored discernment groups, positively impacting entrance into candidacy and stopping the decline experienced since 2019.

CCL continues to lead the work of reforming the candidacy process with the Candidacy Leadership Development Working Group. This group engages with the Conference of Bishops, ELCA seminaries, and the Church Council to discern potential process updates. The work is entering an initial launch phase, moving to a model based on core competencies to make the candidacy process more flexible, increase equity for persons previously marginalized, and form competent leaders.



The final process will recommend competencies for rostered ministers and SAMs. Additionally, updates to the candidacy process will reshape the Theological Education for Emerging Ministries (TEEM) program by standardizing preparation of non-degreed rostered leaders.

The Lutheran Theological Center in Atlanta (LTCA) completed its ministry in 2023. In 2025, with the support of African Descent leaders of the ELCA, the Sankofa Theological Institute for African Studies is intended to launch, offering a Black pedagogy of Lutheran higher education. FFL is financially supporting Spanish-language seminary education in Puerto Rico and offering a cohort for persons of color. The Spanish language resource: www.vidaluterana.org is now available to support Latino ministry.

CCL, in partnership with the Network of ELCA Colleges and Universities (NECU) and ELCA seminaries, is responding to transitions impacting higher education. Many NECU institutions and ELCA seminaries are facing leadership transitions and other significant changes. Even so, CCL is building bridges to connect students with next steps in engagement with the ELCA. We are developing networks to facilitate camp counselors, campus ministry students, and other young people finding each other and discovering ways to follow their vocations in and outside of this church. A redeveloped Journi app is being prepared to launch later this year.

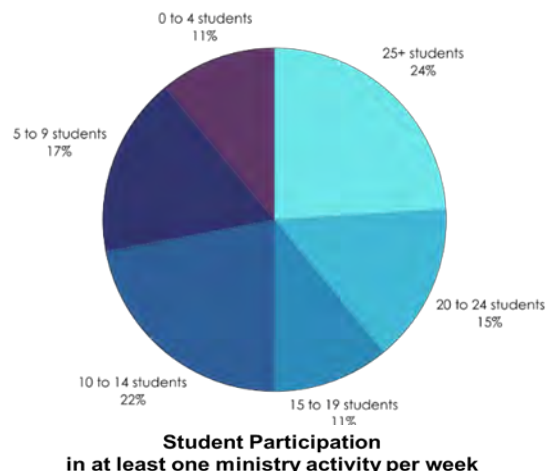
Additionally, in 2024, CCL supported 164 international scholars from global companion churches across 41 countries for study in NECU schools, ELCA seminaries, and their home countries. CCL recruited and trained 46 international camp counselors to serve ELCA outdoor ministries. Overall, we impacted 49 unique partner ministries in the ELCA.

The Young Adults in Global Mission (YAGM) ministry continues to recover following the pandemic. Twenty-four volunteers were sent into six country programs in 2024, and applications for 2025 have already surpassed those of previous years. YAGM alums continue to lead this church in a variety of ways.

ELCA rostered leaders are in high demand with the U.S. military as federal chaplains. The military has sought increased ELCA involvement in military chaplaincy because our ministers are willing to serve all people of all faith traditions based on the core belief that all people are God's children.

Goal #3: Measurement

As this church rises from the pandemic, CCL is returning to and adjusting previous standard practices. During the pandemic, grants to congregations and new start congregations generally went unchanged and only seven new starts organized into congregations. In 2024, however, eight congregations were organized through the work of CCL. Grants were properly adjusted to promote growth and build capacity for new ministries to develop. In partnership with the Innovation unit, CCL has studied the impact of grants to new-start communities and is actively shifting to find points of greater impact. ELCA Lutheran Campus Ministries (LuMin) also remained relatively unchanged during the pandemic. In 2024, a survey produced insights into the effectiveness of these organizations. This research revealed that 25 percent of responding chapters (134 of 176 campus ministry sites) reported at least one baptism in the previous year. This research also enabled CCL to shift granting practices to work directly with campus ministries and build capacity to add new LuMin sites. The chart to the right shows engagement reported by campus ministry sites. CCL is excited that Jacob's Porch, the LuMin site at The Ohio State University, is a part of an ELCA Vision Project to expand to other universities and hopes to continue to capitalize on other such successes.



ELCA Coaching ministry supports and equips the leadership of the ELCA and leaders of other denominations. To utilize best practices, coaches contracted through CCL require active status, including proper training and insurance. Nearly 70 of 922 ELCA coaches are registered with active status. Forty-seven of 65 ELCA synods utilize ELCA Coaching ministry as the ministry continues to grow and expand its offerings to meet community needs, including grief coaching, support for leaders in transition, discipleship coaching, and abbreviated training for basic coaching. Coaches are matched with all mission developers and CCL is experimenting with coaching Fund for Leaders scholars, as well.

CCL has also utilized research to enhance and prioritize the work of several ministries, including Disability Ministries in conjunction with the God's Love Made Real initiative and Multi-ethnic Ministries. Disabilities Ministries will engage the completed research in 2025 and beyond. Multi-ethnic Ministries has articulated a vision and through

2026 will build on a project involving nearly 20 healthy, multi-ethnic congregations in the ELCA to share their best practices related to engaging, attracting, and equipping the populations in their neighborhoods.

From Lutheran Men in Mission

Lutheran Men in Mission (LMM) continues to live into its mission: “By God’s grace, we intentionally disciple men by modeling the character of Jesus and lead a transformative ministry of loving and serving our neighbors.” In 2024, LMM successfully completed its first three-year strategic plan, Reach Beyond, and in so doing revitalized LMM ministry and set the stage for the next three-year strategic plan titled. LMM iS... By December 2027, bathed in Spirit-led prayer, LMM will disciple men across Lutheranism and the larger church. Hungry for God’s word and in intentional relationship with Jesus, members of LMM represent a rich and redemptive body of Christ, diverse in age, ethnicity, theology, and spiritual maturity. Over the next three years, LMM will strengthen its discipleship approach to equip men to be bold and daring followers of Jesus Christ. Funding from diverse sources will sustain the ministry and enable it to flourish into the future and wherever God leads.

Ministry impact as of March 14, 2025: More than 70,000 men have been reached for Christ, 800 individuals have participated in a live Bold Gathering (with an additional 1,200 viewing Bold Gathering videos online), 2,100 men have been transformed by a One Year to Live retreat, over 68,000 copies of the Master Builders Bible for Men have been distributed, and there are now 120 free LifeLines (small-group studies) available for free on projecttwelve.net.

With gratitude to God for all those with whom we have partnered in this work of the gospel and with the hope that comes from our faith in Christ,

Rev. Philip C. Hirsch, *executive director, Christian Community and Leadership*