



July 28 – August 2
PHOENIX, ARIZONA



Innovation

The Innovation unit creates a culture of collaboration and innovation within the churchwide organization and the broader church. Innovation tests new and useful ideas for ministry alongside partners, helping the ELCA become a more welcoming, thriving, and sustainable church.

Our work is rooted in the understanding that the best ideas and solutions are developed by those who will utilize and interact with them. Therefore, our work relies on promoting two key concepts in the work of the churchwide organization and the broader church:

1. **Design Thinking:** A methodology for creative problem solving that emphasizes that the best solutions are context-specific and developed in partnership with those who may eventually use them (see <https://blogs.elca.org/innovationlab/design-thinking-intro/>).
2. **User Research:** An approach that uses a mix of research methodologies to understand the perspectives, needs, and opportunities of product users in a way that builds empathy and informs decision-making.

To accomplish this work, the Innovation unit is divided into two teams that serve distinct audiences.

- **Innovation and Ideas:** This team works primarily with synods, congregations, and ministries of the ELCA.
- **Organizational Innovation:** This team works primarily with staff of the ELCA churchwide organization.

Innovation and Ideas

Congregations Lead Initiative

[The Congregations Lead Initiative](#) works directly with congregations, equipping and inspiring leaders with innovation and design-thinking tools to spark a renewal of ministry and community partnerships to create adaptable, relevant, and thriving faith communities. So far, 73 congregations from 32 synods have participated in a Congregations Lead Initiative cohort.

At the end of 2024, an outside evaluator conducted a comprehensive evaluation of the initiative to better understand its impact and potential areas of growth. The evaluation found that this initiative has helped congregations experiment with new practices, embrace community needs, and adopt inclusive decision-making. Eighty-six percent of participants would recommend participation to another ministry leader, and 66% of participants reported their congregation now had a greater willingness to experiment and view failure as an opportunity to learn.

Resources from this initiative can also be utilized by any congregation, regardless of their participation in a cohort. The latest example of these resources is a new resource, [the Congregations Lead Initiative User Interview Guide](#), designed to help congregation leaders conduct interviews with their community to learn more about members' experiences, needs, and ideas. This initiative was initially funded by a grant from the Lilly Endowment's Thriving Congregations Initiative. Since then, the ELCA has received an additional sustainability grant of \$477,000, supporting this work through the end of 2027.



Grants for Innovation

Each year, the Innovation unit sets aside a portion of its budget to support congregations, ministries, and leaders trying something innovative in their context. These grants help ministries and leaders seeking to try something new, reach a new audience, or create new partnerships. Over the past three years, these grants have supported everything from an ELCA camping ministry exploring a new business model to congregations seeking to listen to their neighbors. Emerging themes from these grants include a focus on creating spaces that are set apart from traditional church life to create a safe and welcoming environment to reach a particular community and an emphasis on artistic expression to engage new people.

Young Adult Parents Research

Part of the Innovation unit's responsibility is to prepare relevant research for the ELCA as it seeks to share the message of God's grace and love with the world. Partnering with Try Tank Research Institute (Episcopal) and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), a year-long study, the [Young Adult Parents Research Project](#), was conducted to

understand the attitudes of young adult parents and prospective parents toward faith, spirituality, the church, and parenting.

This national research study provided intriguing insights, with one notable finding being the shocking statistic that more than 70 percent of respondents reported that life, at this point, was harder than they expected it to be. Additionally, the study found that the church/faith communities are not seen as places young adult parents can turn to in times of need and challenge. We hope to continue this research with our partners and provide resources that help ministry leaders explore relational strategies and respond to some of the insights identified by this research.

Organizational Innovation

Within the churchwide organization, the Innovation unit works closely with colleagues to facilitate workshops, conduct user research, and provide staff training. Over the past three years, the unit has focused on building trust within the organization, cultivating collaboration across teams, and investing in tools and training that facilitate listening to the communities served by the organization.

Project Facilitation and User Research

The Innovation unit holds significant expertise in gathering diverse perspectives and collaborative decision-making through user research and facilitation. This expertise has been utilized throughout the churchwide organization to help identify new ways this church can collaborate more closely. In 2024, the Innovation unit led an in-person workshop with over 200 global staff members to help them discover connection points between the many people and communities they serve and act on the opportunities identified.

Additionally, new technologies and user research methods have been introduced, enabling the organization to learn from people who have never met the ELCA but are seeking spiritual or Christian community. We believe that new and useful things come from good listening, and these tools help this church to listen better.

In 2024, the Innovation unit supported more than 45 projects in the churchwide organization. These projects most often involved partnering with a team that was either trying something new or trying to learn more about those they serve. Examples of these projects include helping the Accompanying Migrants with Protection, Advocacy, Representation, and Opportunities (AMMPARO) team utilize user research to better understand the experiences of congregations and communities already making use of their resources, facilitating design workshops that led to new strategies for multi-ethnic ministry, and assisting the Service and Justice unit in an eco-system mapping exercise to help staff better understand their networks and impact.

Training and Equipping

In partnership with the People Solutions (renamed Human Resources in 2025) and Information Technology teams, the Innovation unit has worked to provide training to churchwide organization staff through a leadership development program called LEAD (Learn, Equip, Apply, Deliver). This program provides quarterly trainings focused on tools and techniques for building trust, improving communication, and navigating conflict. More than 200 staff have participated in the program, and 96 percent of participants reported that the training contributed to their development.

Staff were also encouraged to participate in trainings offered by the Innovation unit, including an interactive course focused on equipping staff as facilitators and a self-guided online course exploring the key concepts of equity design.

Mr. Iain Chester, *executive director*