



July 28 – August 2
PHOENIX, ARIZONA



Fortifying Urban Ministries Task Force Report

Fortifying Urban Ministries

Churchwide Assembly Action [CA22.01.08]

To receive with gratitude the memorial on “Fortifying Ministries in Underserved Urban Areas” from the Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod;

To affirm the strategic direction of the ELCA Fund for Leaders ministry to enhance the capacity of people of color through its disbursement of scholarships to Theological Education for Emerging Ministries candidates;

To refer this memorial to the Congregational Vitality Training and Development Team in the Christian Community and Leadership unit to create a churchwide Urban Ministry group, in partnership with the appropriate leaders in the Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod, to accompany ELCA synods in their urban strategies that lead to the enhancement of congregational vitality and ministry sustainability in the urban context. The group will 1) collaborate with other studies already underway, 2) resource synods by gathering best practices in urban ministry and emerging ideas in the care and creative use of church facilities, 3) identify supportive networks within this church and among ecumenical partners, and 4) encourage piloting innovative ways to address the realities and complexities of urban ministry, including enhancing urban internship opportunities. The group may consider additional topics as needed;

To request that the churchwide Urban Ministry group consult with and provide regular reports to the Church Council to ensure that the purposes and objectives of this memorial are being fulfilled; and

To provide a final report to the 2025 Churchwide Assembly on the results of its study, new urban initiatives, and ways for this church to fortify the witness and service among people and communities in underserved urban areas.

Final report from the Christian Community and Leadership Unit (April 2025)

The Fortifying Urban Ministries Task Force addressing this memorial would like to respectfully note concerns regarding the ELCA’s previous approach to this issue, which has focused primarily on studies and discussions with limited actionable outcomes. Additionally, our preliminary work has revealed that the allocated timeframe is impossible given the complexity of the matter. The scope extends beyond simply “supporting urban ministries,” as it necessarily involves addressing underlying systemic factors including racism, classism, and other structural barriers that impact our ability to effectively comprehend and respond to the needs of urban congregations.

Following its report to the April 2024 meeting of the Church Council, the task force convened three times. The task force began by reviewing the original intent of the memorial through interviews with former staff members who assisted in drafting the memorial for the 2022 Churchwide Assembly. Next, the task force examined previous urban ministry initiatives by surveying the experiences of each task force member in their respective urban contexts. The most notable initiative was In the City for Good, which was launched at the 1998 Churchwide Assembly and operated for approximately a decade. Finally, the task force consulted with the Innovation unit regarding the unit’s 2023 project with the Southeastern Pennsylvania synod. That report on urban ministry visits within the synod revealed four significant findings:

1. **Serving Neighbors:** Every congregation, regardless of size, engages with its immediate community in meaningful ways. This is particularly evident in the prevalence of food ministries across nearly all congregations. In most congregations, community service forms a central element of their organizational identity.
2. **Building Challenges:** Facility size and/or maintenance presents significant challenges for all congregations surveyed.
3. **Attendance Trends:** The majority of congregations reported experiencing declining attendance, with common themes including challenges in returning to in-person worship following the pandemic and overall membership reduction.
4. **Collaboration Opportunities:** Congregations are developing innovative solutions to challenges and envisioning new ministry possibilities. However, these efforts often remain isolated within individual

communities. Neighboring congregations may be addressing identical challenges without awareness of potential synergies or shared learning opportunities within the broader community.

Based on these findings, the task force has developed several initial recommendations, while recognizing that additional time would be beneficial to comprehensively address the complex issues at hand. The recommendations are:

1. **Regular Network Establishment:** The churchwide organization should establish a consistent networking forum (Network for Urban Ministries) where congregation and judicatory leaders can access support and exchange ideas to strengthen urban ministries. This could also serve as a platform for documenting and sharing effective evangelism, stewardship, and discipleship practices occurring within urban congregations.
2. **Resource Coordination:** The churchwide organization would benefit from considering a staffed resource center where urban ministries could access information and assistance regarding funding opportunities such as grants. The designated staff member would be responsible for gathering and distributing relevant information to directors for evangelical mission (DEMs), assistants to the bishops, and ministry leaders.
3. **Inclusive Definition:** The ELCA would benefit from expanding its definition of urban ministries to better reflect the diverse populations encompassed by the memorial. Urban ministries frequently extend beyond communities of African descent to include varied ethnicities and socioeconomic backgrounds.
4. **Messaging Strategy:** The Christian Community and Leadership unit should collaborate with DEMs to develop a communication approach that reinforces the core identity of urban ministries as Jesus-centered communities serving the world. Through this messaging, DEMs could inspire urban congregations as they engage with communities across the synod.
5. **Property Resource Utilization:** The ELCA should leverage the recently launched Church Property Resource Hub to facilitate discussions with urban ministries regarding property utilization and maintenance challenges.

Respectfully and prayerfully offered for consideration,

The Fortifying Urban Ministries Task Force

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The Rev. Linda Manson, *co-director for evangelical mission and diversity, equity, and inclusion, Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod*

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