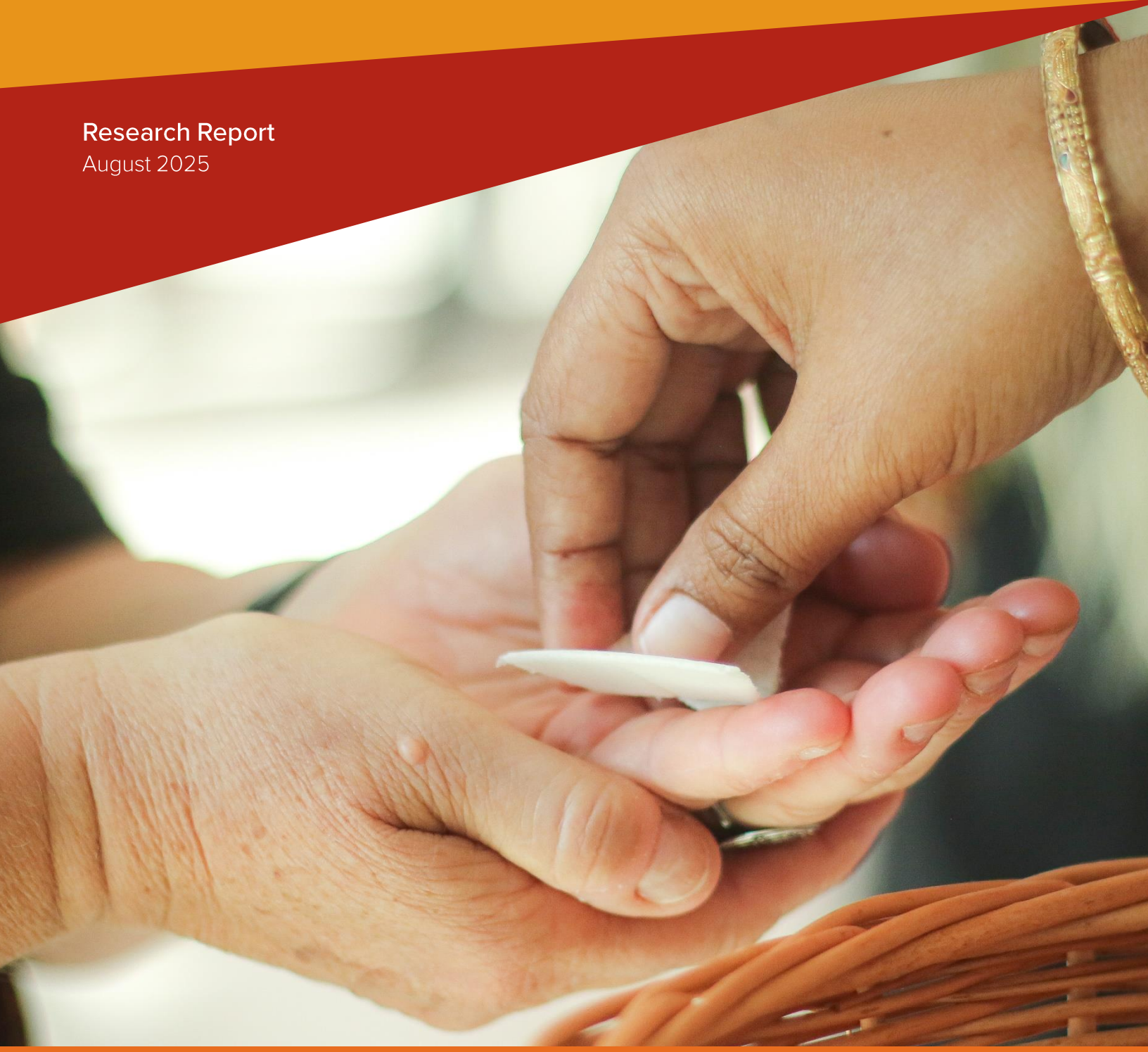
Research Report
August 2025



Research Commentaries

THE FUTURE NEED FOR PASTORAL LEADERS IN THE ELCA: PART ONE

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Office of the Secretary
Research and Evaluation

Executive Summary

Beginning in the summer of 2024, the Research and Evaluation team launched a major study of pastoral leadership in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). The purpose of this study is to better understand the ELCA's system of mobility and call, and to anticipate the church's need for pastoral leaders for congregations over the next five years. This study draws on past research from the team on the "supply and demand" of ministers of Word and Sacrament, but it also extends the inquiry in new ways.

The first publication from this study, *The Future Need for Pastoral Leaders in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Part One: Trends in Pastoral Transitions and Affordability*, reported on key findings from the quantitative analysis. In response to the insights presented in that February 2025 report, this report offers a series of commentaries intended to initiate a meaningful dialog across the church for how it might meet the challenges identified through this research.

What follows are the views and perspectives of the contributors which may or may not reflect official positions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

This report is the second in a series of resources developed to explore the findings of this study. Following this report will be additional qualitative analysis, commentaries, video resources and opportunities to engage with ELCA researchers on this and related topics.

About the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) is one of the largest Christian denominations in the United States, with nearly 3 million members in 8,500 worshiping communities across the 50 states and in the Caribbean region.

Based in Chicago, the ELCA churchwide organization is guided by the Churchwide Assembly, the Church Council and the organization's four elected officers. Its staff serve as advisers, conveners, partners and resource people for the ELCA and its ministries. The Research and Evaluation team is based in the Office of the Secretary and serves the churchwide organization, synods and related ministries by providing professional research services to empower informed decision-making around policy and practice.

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Contributors

R. Guy Erwin is president of United Lutheran Seminary and the Ministerium of Pennsylvania Chair and Professor of Reformation Studies. He is bishop emeritus of the Southwest California Synod, ELCA.

Laurie Jungling is bishop of the Montana Synod, ELCA.

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Tim Snyder is researcher/evaluator at the ELCA churchwide organization.

Beverly Wallace is director of lifelong learning at Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary at Lenoir-Rhyne University and creator of the ELCA Womanist Initiative.

Editor's Introduction

Tim Snyder

In February, ELCA Research and Evaluation published *The Future Need for Pastoral Leaders in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America*, offering a new window into the state of our congregations and their pastoral leaders. The first of a two-part report, Future Need covers important, emerging trends related to pastoral transitions and the affordability of pastors. Throughout, it paints a picture of a church navigating significant change.

The researchers who compiled the report realized at the time that many of its findings begged for discussion and debate. They also knew that they were not the ones to answer the practical theological questions posed by the report. These are the kinds of questions best answered not by a single voice but by a chorus. To begin a conversation that we hope will spread throughout this church, we have invited five seasoned leaders to offer commentaries on the research presented in the report. We asked these contributors to write out of their particularity. What follows is not the deliberation of a task force charged with deciding what the church should do. Instead, it is a multivocal presentation from passionate, invested leaders who have points of view shaped by who they are, where they dwell and the communities to which they are accountable.

In the opening reflection, Christian Scharen delivers a sobering interpretation of the report and offers what he sees as "theological themes hidden in plain view" that point his readers to what God might be up to amid so much change. In doing so, Scharen points toward even deeper existential challenges implied by the report's findings, but he also points to exciting exemplars across the ELCA who might be pointing us all toward new horizons. Scharen currently teaches worship at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, but his recent call to serve as pastor of St. Lydia's, a creative dinner church in New York City, has clearly shaped his imagination in important ways.

Laurie Jungling also responds to the report's findings by asking difficult yet important questions such as what ministry is and who gets left out when the formation of leaders privileges some local contexts over others. She presses us to wonder whether standardization is always the answer or whether some kinds of formation might be better shaped by local contexts. Jungling's expertise as a teaching theologian is evident in her commentary, and her experience as bishop in the predominantly rural Montana Synod is what gives her response such clarity and precision.

A key finding of the initial report is that the denomination has shifted significantly toward very small congregations (those with average worship attendance under 50). Francisco Javier Goitía Padilla wisely points out that if this church is curious about what vital ministry can look like on this scale, it might turn to its leaders from the Latiné community who have long worked in such contexts. By inviting us to seek out voices from the margins, he reminds us that our idealized vision of a congregation is often influenced by White privilege. He also encourages us to lift up our own gifted prophets and missionaries rather than seek new visions outside our church.

As a former bishop and current seminary president, R. Guy Erwin brings a unique perspective to the report, explaining just how difficult and contextual change can be for congregations and synods. Like Jungling, he wonders how standardization reflects our understanding of ministry today and confronts the reality that past standards may not be possible in the future. Erwin proposes greater collaboration and partnership between the ELCA and its seminaries as the church navigates the new challenge of forming leaders regardless of their pathway to ministry.

Beverly Wallace offers a prophetic commentary on the report's findings. She welcomes many of its insights but reminds us that however we respond, we must recognize that the church's system of preparing leaders for ministry has both inspired hope and caused harm. The harm, whether intended or not, springs from the "gaps, silences and blind spots" of theological education. As a womanist theologian, she is keenly aware of and attuned to the intersectional realities that threaten pastoral leadership in the ELCA. This is most clear in her final question: "Who gets to imagine the future?"

These commentaries are not meant to provide a final, collective answer to the questions posed by *The Future Need for Pastoral Leaders* in the ELCA. Instead, we hope they will spark more conversation and that the questions they pose and directives they issue will be a starting point for the more difficult work of discernment that awaits this church. We pray that, in the conversation provoked by this research, the church will hear God's voice calling us into the future. May we remember the wisdom of the Hebrew Bible:

Do not say, "Why were the former days better than these?"
For it is not from wisdom that you ask this.

—Ecclesiastes 7:10

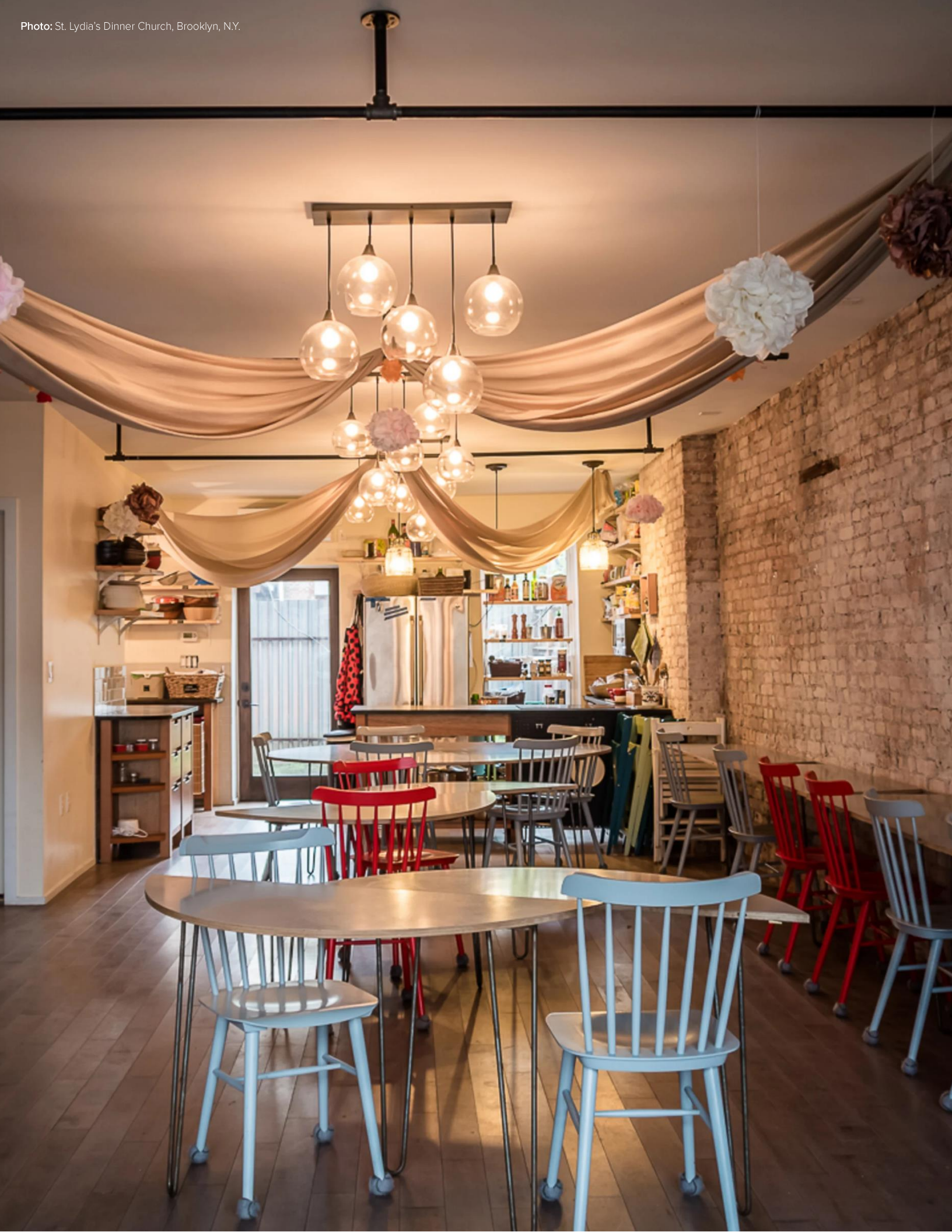

Photo: St. Lydia's Dinner Church, Brooklyn, N.Y.

The Future is in the Present

Christian Scharen

This sobering report describes the end of the ELCA as we've known it. Of course, it focuses on the implications of this ending for pastoral leaders, but it rightly acknowledges that a focus on pastoral leaders cannot be understood without sketching the larger context, the features of which constitute a genuine crisis for religious organizations like the ELCA. Among some concrete takeaways, the authors suggest that "we" (let's define that as denominational leadership) can no longer assume:

- That people value what we offer.
- That traditional pipelines will produce enough candidates for ministry.
- That past levels of giving, support and resources will continue.
- That older patterns of evangelism and hospitality will save the church.

The context of ministry has shifted so dramatically that the report suggests, "We may need to learn new patterns of evangelism and hospitality; indeed, we may need entirely new ways of being church."

The report presents various evidence of the ELCA's decline over the last decade—decline that mirrors the patterns of previous decades. In his recent book *The End of Theological Education* (Eerdmans, 2023), Ted A. Smith, a professor of divinity at Emory University, notes how generalized these trends are: "Congregations across the political and theological spectrums are seeing declines in members, money, and vitality." Sure, he notes, there are exceptional congregations that continue to operate as if these changes do not impact them, but this does not change the overall picture: "the larger pie is shrinking" (95).

Rather than bemoan the noisy sociological facts of decline this report delivers, I want to point out some theological themes hidden in plain view—of judgment, abiding, and stirring—and to ask what God might be doing amid these changes.

Judgment. In the spirit of the ancient prophets and of Jesus too, God might be saying: "Woe to you," passing judgment on the ELCA. In describing the geographic distribution of Lutheran congregations, the report notes that "the significant number of congregations in rural communities reflects Lutheranism's prominent place as an immigrant church before the 21st century. Many congregations were formed as the nation's European-descent immigrants expanded westward." My family followed this pattern too, claiming lands whose Indigenous owners had just been displaced by deception and violence, often genocidal in nature. One can trace this colonial violence back to the Battle of the Milvian Bridge in 312 C.E., when the church embraced the Roman Empire. Smith writes that "in our time, there is no work more urgent than the renunciation of the white settler colonial project" intertwined with the building of our churches, colleges and seminaries. "For those of us who identify as white,"

he continues, “renunciation involves long processes of telling the truth, relinquishing power, and making reparations” (130). We have resources for this work, not least of which is Luther’s admonition that we be theologians of the cross, letting go of mythologies of pioneer glory and calling a thing what it really is.

Abiding. Judgment does not entail abandonment, however. British theologian James Butler critiques life-cycle theories of church growth and decline, rejecting the idea of decline as a death march to be reversed by revitalization techniques. Responding to the phenomenon of small, older congregations, a reality of ELCA churches in rural areas, Butler calls out the fetishizing of youth as saviors of the church and wonders about the gifts of elders. He writes of congregations as a quiet, durable presence, witnessing to God’s vitality in their midst, and calls them a beautiful gift to the wider community. The rise of synod-authorized ministers (SAMs) serving in these communities should be viewed in this light, as a witness to God’s abiding presence in this moment. Butler quotes the Rev. Rowan Williams, formerly the archbishop of Canterbury in the Anglican Communion: “Perhaps the hardest thing of all for the Christian is precisely this bearing with the present moment, not pretending that it is good or happy, but simply acknowledging that it is here where God is to be met” (213). Some of the most impressive work to face the ELCA’s settler past takes place in rural areas where the decline in membership is most dramatic. Bishop Amy Odgren and the Northeastern Minnesota Synod have been deeply involved in a process of truth-telling and reparation with the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe.

Stirrings. At the heart of Christian faith, we hold to the conviction that God brings new life. Even on Holy Saturday, when only death seems present, the spirit is stirring. José Esteban Muñoz is not a theologian, yet queer theology owes a great debt to his 2009 book, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. Drawing on Ernst Bloch’s treatise *The Principle of Hope*, Muñoz argues that we “must strive, in the face of the here and now’s totalizing rendering of reality, to think and feel a then and there” (1). He offers “hope as a hermeneutic,” but rather than pin that hope on some imagined future, he shows how “the future is in the present” (49). The report shows that, over the past decade, 796 congregations folded whereas only 73 new congregations were developed. But, the report notes, this is not counting “several hundred mission sites where the ELCA is exploring new possibilities for developing worshipping communities.”

At the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, I’m leading a project that gathered a cohort of such mission sites across the ELCA (for more information, visit futurechurchpilots.org). We on the project team assume that, as Muñoz writes, the future is in the present. Isaiah phrases it this way: “I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth; do you not perceive it?” (43:19). These missions can be found in every region of the United States but mostly where the ELCA is least present: major urban areas. They are experimenting with everything except the radical welcome of God we know in Christ. They are claiming the reforming spirit of the Lutheran tradition, letting the Spirit set them free from aspects of church—including a professionalized model for pastoral leadership—that would hold them back. In this regard, we should be troubled that the ELCA continues to view non-stipendiary pastoral leaders as possible but exceptional. In these

experimental communities, full-time, salaried and credentialed pastoral leaders are the exception, not the rule. One way forward, we on the project believe, is to support and strengthen these experiments, then learn how they structure pastoral leadership. They already know much of what the rest of us will need to know as we find a faithful way forward.

References

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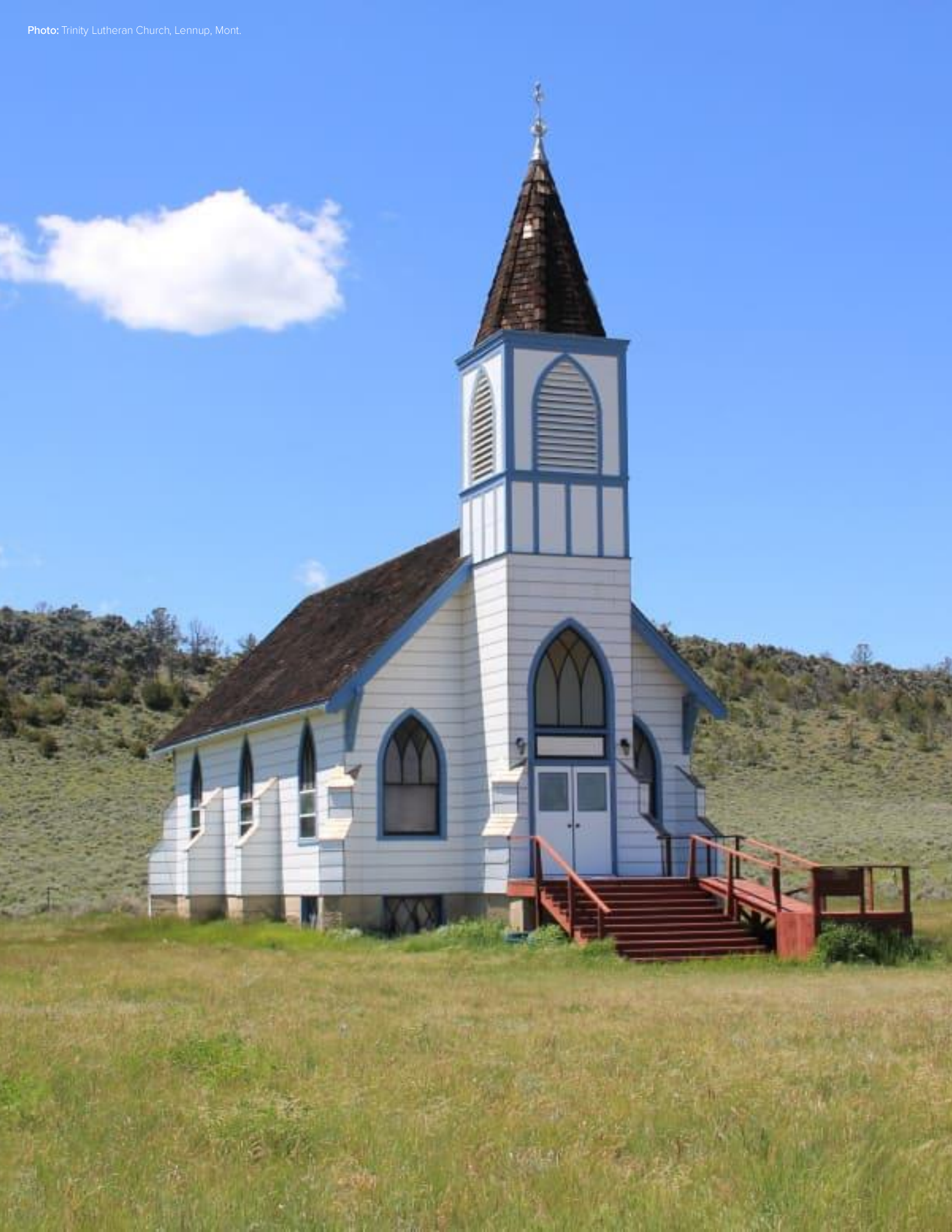


Photo: Trinity Lutheran Church, Lennup, Mont.

Quality Over Quantity?

Laurie Jungling

We have much to learn from this report as we consider the realities facing the ministry and mission of the ELCA and try to imagine its need for pastoral leaders. Nudged by the Holy Spirit, The Future Need for Pastoral Leaders in the ELCA has the potential to help this church focus its mission in better ways and to spark our imaginations toward more life-giving forms of ministry.

However, for everything the report does say, new questions arise and more considerations emerge about what its data might mean, not only for the ELCA's purpose and function but also for its leaders, its members, its governance and structure, its ecumenical relationships, and the nation and world it influences. This report represents just one piece of the puzzle, reminding us that Christ's church in the world is undergoing significant changes. Some members have not yet experienced the effects of these changes (positive, negative or neutral); others are floundering in the mire or dancing in the freshness of this uncertainty. These changes aren't necessarily right or wrong, but they do lead us to ask whether we are transitioning through them in the healthiest and most life-serving way for all.

One primary question this report requires us to ask during this transition is: *What must we do to fulfill our mission?* This church can't do everything that everybody wants it to do. It can't save the world from all its ills. To discern what we must do, we require a clearer and more precise vision of the ELCA's true mission and purpose, not according to us, but according to God. This report lifts up at least two aspects of addressing our mission: 1) rostered ministers as a workforce and 2) forming and equipping pastoral leaders.

Rostered Ministers as a Workforce

First, we face the reality that there are fewer rostered ministers to serve congregations and that those congregations are less likely to be able to afford those ministers. We must ask what ministry is and who should do it, both in our congregations and across the church. Which types of pastoral positions will be available in the future? Which types won't or shouldn't be? And which types might we need to create?

The current model for pastoral ministry is a professionalized and ordained clergy. Is that a necessary model to accomplish this church's mission today, and if so, is it sustainable? Should rostered ministry be a "career" in which someone makes a living, or do we need to move to a more multivocational understanding of ministry and leadership?

We also need to explore how much we are willing to do to accommodate this demand for pastors. Considering the changing context of ministry, we must not tend to the needs and desires of rostered ministers so much that the needs and desires of congregations and the wider church are ignored or dismissed.

For example, the report states that the "prototypical opening for a rostered pastor in the ELCA is a solo call in a small or mid-sized congregation" and that "rostered ministers are not able to be deployed because they can't be afforded by congregations" (p. 17, 20). However, the problem is more complex than size or money. There are rural and small-town congregations that are bigger and can afford full-time and experienced rostered ministers, but many of those rostered ministers aren't willing to consider these congregations because they see the town, the people, and the culture as unacceptable places to serve (e.g. too conservative, too rural, too remote or without the perceived amenities of the metro lifestyle). At what point do we form and call upon our rostered ministers (and their families) to accept ministry that is outside their preference and to love all God's people where they are?

In light of this question, our church must address an important cultural reality: an attitude that prioritizes "being served" over "serving." Though this culture of self-centeredness has invaded all parts of the ELCA, it is particularly noticeable in some rostered ministers' sense of call having devolved into something personal and private where the church is perceived as what makes "my" call happen for "me." To a small but growing number of rostered ministers, the external sense of a call from God and the wider church doesn't seem to matter much.

Therefore, when we consider recruiting current and future pastoral leaders to become rostered ministers, perhaps the quality of this "workforce" should matter more than the quantity, especially as we more fully equip the laity to serve in various pastoral capacities.

Formation of Leaders and Equipping of the Members of the Body of Christ

This report also raises questions about the formation of pastoral leaders. Specifically, *are we preparing these leaders for the ministry they want to do rather than the ministry this church needs them to do?*

For example, given the size and geographic location of our congregations, is this church too focused on training leaders to serve the 39% of the church based in metro areas (p. 7) and the 42% of the church found in the largest congregations (p. 8)? Has it forgotten about the rest of the church: the 61% of congregations located in rural areas or the 58% of congregations with fewer than 50 people worshiping?

At this point, this church's resources, education and formation parameters seem to be geared toward city congregations that aspire to larger worship attendance numbers. Church growth seems to be the central criteria, and large congregations are often portrayed as the ideal size. Our small and rural congregations, unable to measure up, feel ashamed and disconnected.

This reality also affects the training of lay ministers. Some may desire to have more common standards in training lay leaders, perhaps through our seminaries, but is it possible that smaller congregations and those in rural places will better accept synod-authorized ministers (SAMs) if they are trained by the synod and in local contexts? In this polarized society, many rural folks mistrust education from a seminary or metropolitan context. Perhaps the local context is more

important in preparing lay leaders than standards that are common to all and decided by metropolitan institutions.

To conclude, this report exposes several things that need to change if we are to be Christ's church today and in the future:

- Both congregations and the wider church must revise their expectations for pastoral leaders.
- Pastoral leaders must revise their expectations for congregations, ministries, the wider church, and their own role in all of these.
- As a church, we must renew our understanding of vocation, both religious and secular.
- We must explore a mixed-ecology church, including the boundaries of this ecology. The church can't be everything, and everything isn't the church.
- Leaders and congregations must reject the culture of being served for the culture of serving.
- The mission of the ELCA must become clear, more focused, and mutually agreed-upon.

To make these changes, we must listen to each other across the many divides paralyzing us and, if possible, find the common ground upon which we become one body of Christ (Ephesians 4).

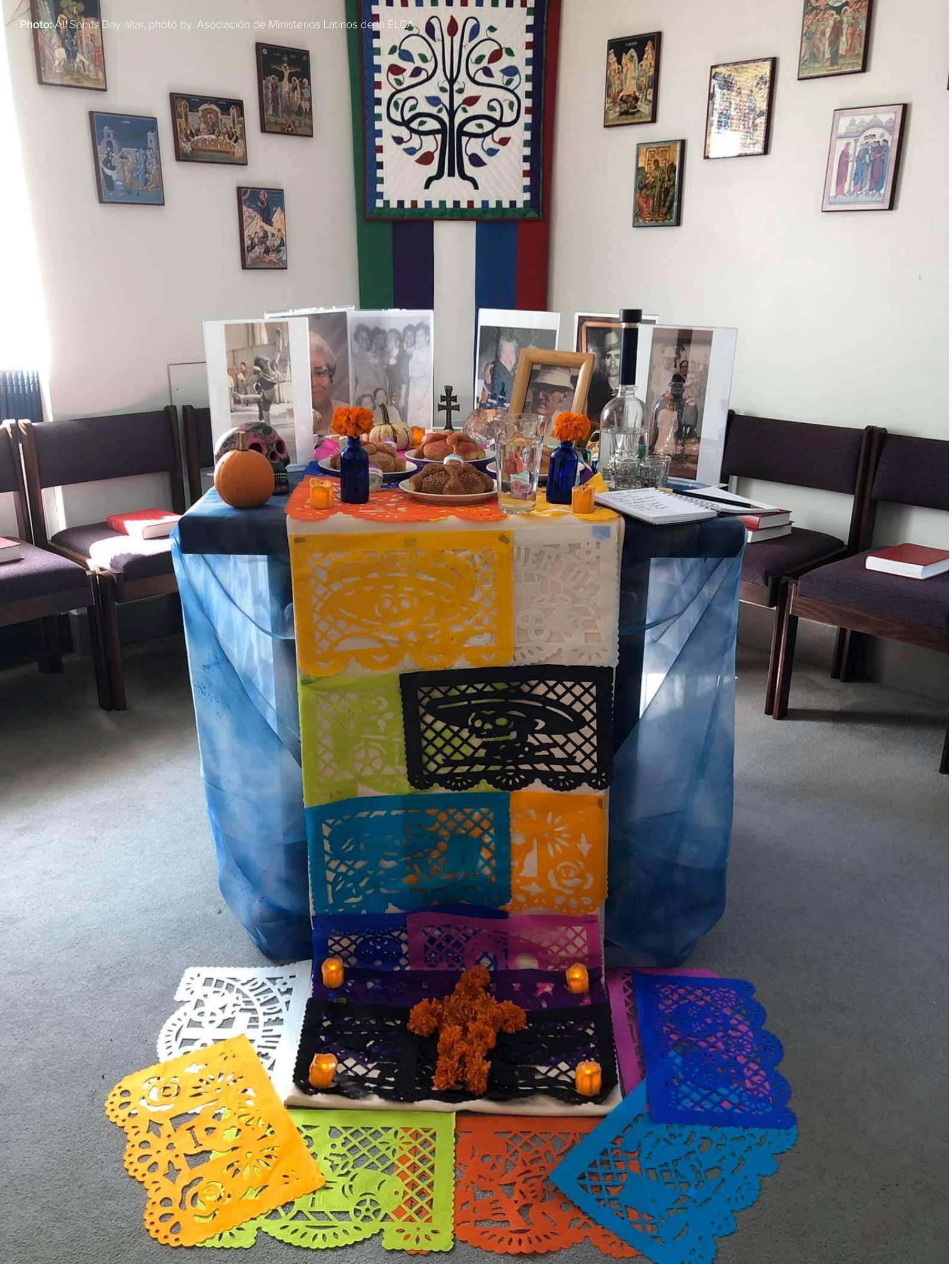


Photo: All Saints Day altar, photo by Asociación de Ministerios Latinos de la ELCA

Gathering Our Wisdom

Francisco Javier Goitía Padilla

This report calms our worst nightmares about the future of the ELCA by providing foundations for a serious but manageable, and even hopeful, reality. We have the data and documentation to create meaningful, sustainable strategies and programs that will address the situation described in this report and surmount the challenges affecting rostered ministry and ecclesial vocations. To succeed in this endeavor is to equip the baptized and our rostered ministers with a precise contextual lens germane to their ministerial *topos*, paired with a robust confessional Lutheran ecclesiology. It is to do ministry in the vernacular.

The Wisdom of Our Latiné Communities

Our religious landscape is a *missionary context* with few resources for recruiting, yet some Lutheran Latiné congregations and leaders survive. Ethnic-specific ELCA congregations almost always operate in a missionary setting because, in our communities, life is a struggle, identities are questioned, and the particularities of our Lutheran denomination are not known. We need to explain ourselves constantly, both in our communities and in our denomination. There are few resources to support ministries in this context. Nevertheless, their pastors and parishioners serve, worship and sing vigorously, and share the gospel, constantly revisiting their identities, which are rooted in the theology of the cross. The wider church may learn something by accompanying these communities.

I know some Latiné pastors and leaders who can tell you how to survive and even thrive while doing ministry as a solo pastor in a very small congregation with decreasing income and increasing costs. I have done ministry in five Latiné congregations in Puerto Rico and Chicago, always as a solo pastor. This is the norm. In this setting, congregations have a deep sense of gratitude, belonging, and vocation that forms the fiber of the community. It is not a professional approach to ministry but a communal and personal one where in-kind resources make the difference: food, music, time and effort, adornments, and even competencies such as bookkeeping are contributed in kind for ministries to survive. Frequently people in the community pitch in on special occasions. It is a *fiesta* ethos that pairs wonderfully with an ethic of gratitude, the freedom of a Christian, and the joy of justification by grace through faith.

If you seek ministerial models for serving amid past and present affordability crises, I know some Latiné communities that can share with you their vocational grit. People are not poor. People are impoverished by dramatic life experiences that affect their everyday lives and by structural forces that exploit their labor while keeping them in poverty. Nevertheless, they find time to do church. Few Latiné congregations enjoy the annual budget of $160,000 needed to afford a pastor and do ministry, as this report suggests. There are ELCA synods with budgets under $160,000. A ministry's success can be measured by more than its financial stability. Our church may learn something as we accompany these communities.

Our Theological Education Network

In the last decade, seminaries have done an excellent job of making theological education accessible and affordable. Our network has more than 20 relatively new programs, in a variety of modalities, that guarantee anyone in any location access to theological schooling. At great expense, the ELCA Fund for Leaders provides prospective clergy with almost 100% full tuition because of our vocational understanding of theological education. Fund for Leaders also provides economic resources to Theological Education for Emerging Ministries (TEEM) candidates, seminarians, mission-oriented candidates and chaplains. Access and affordability are not issues anymore. The theological education network needs support, and we need to create a collaborative theological culture in the ELCA.

According to the report, Theological Education for Emerging Ministries (TEEM), developed a couple decades ago by Gregory Villalón for Latiné candidates, has mitigated both seminaries' enrollment problems and the challenge of providing ministerial leadership to congregations. As we envision a new, TEEM-like ministerial path, we can be both rigorous and flexible in equipping our new candidates. Formation and flexibility are not mutually exclusive. I believe we need a visionary Lutheran ecclesiology and vernacular pedagogies that can create gospel-like learning and worshiping hubs where we can do *fiestas* and become *familias*.

Two Invitations

Finally, I have two invitations. The first is to follow this excellent report with (1) more focused studies addressing the situation of ethnic-specific communities and (2) attention to the pipeline of marginal communities' candidates and their calling processes. There are power and discrimination issues that cannot be avoided when addressing the way we do church.

My second invitation is that, instead of hiring consultants and forming committees with tight agendas, we tap into the wisdom and know-how of leaders in our ethnic communities, urban neighborhoods, and small-town churches where ministry happens. Let us learn from their stories, pair them with our theological and ecclesial Lutheran gems, and create a cross-shaped, hope-filled praxis that catapults us into the future.

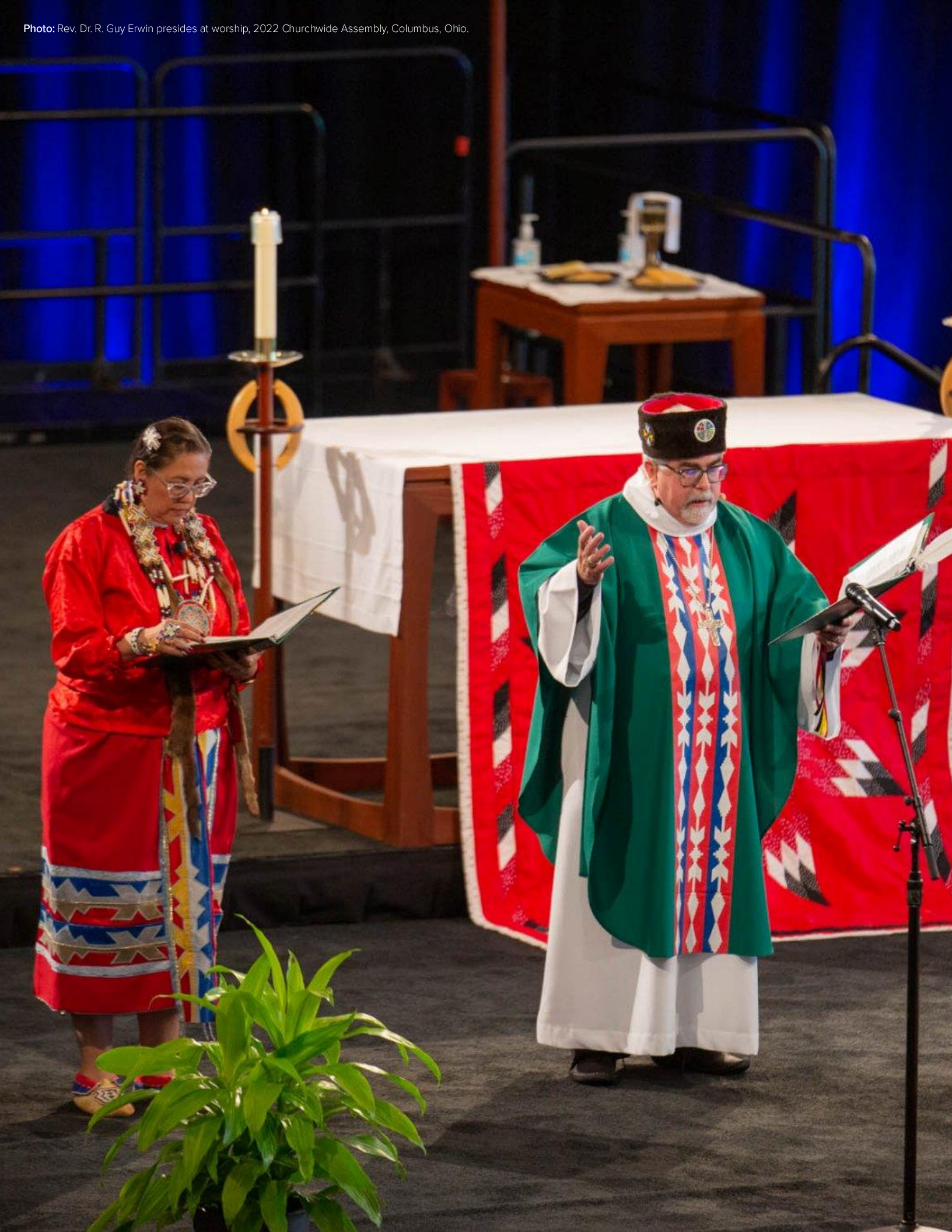


Photo: Rev. Dr. R. Guy Erwin presides at worship, 2022 Churchwide Assembly, Columbus, Ohio.

Raising Up New Leaders

R. Guy Erwin

My response to this very helpful document comes from two perspectives: that of an ELCA seminary president, charged by the church with forming and educating its pastoral leaders, and that of a former synod bishop, much of whose work involved raising up new leaders and finding leaders for vacant positions in existing congregations.

The State of ELCA Congregations

As former bishop of the Southwest California synod, whose slightly more than 100 congregations reflect relatively well the demographic shifts and patterns outlined in the study, I want to underscore the challenges faced by urban congregations.

My synod included Los Angeles, a metropolitan area that has grown rapidly at various times in its history but at an accelerated rate since the mid-20th century. Almost all the congregations inside my synod were solidly suburban. Only one mission congregation was composed mostly of agricultural workers; several were dominated by service workers from minority communities. Most of these congregations were largely white and middle- to upper-middle-class, and the largest number were founded in the two decades after World War II, as Lutherans left the Midwest for economic opportunity and a Southern California lifestyle.

In talking with small congregations about cooperating, sharing resources, or merging with other congregations nearby, one of the greatest emotional challenges was the members' sense that what they possessed as a congregation resulted directly from their parents' or grandparents' efforts, and that significant change would represent a betrayal of the previous generation's hopes. In parts of the United States where Lutherans have historically been well-represented, the challenges are different, but in the western United States, where Lutherans are both thin on the ground and, in many cases, relative newcomers, there are still strong emotional impediments to change.

The study's conclusion that "ELCA congregations display surprising organizational resilience but major declines in participation" holds true for the synod where I served. But that resilience has grown weaker and more brittle, and I expect to see half of those congregations fall to an unsustainable level over the next decade, especially given the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. One significant factor in their survival so far has been pastoral leadership, addressed in the next section as a question of "workforce."

The "Supply" of Rostered Ministers

My Southwest California Synod, like those in Region 2 generally, benefits greatly from its geography: the Southwest is a region where Americans want to live, and in general, its population is growing. But apart from Lutheran snowbirds creating a seasonal boom in states

such as Arizona, population growth in the Southwest doesn't bring the same concentration of churchgoing Lutherans it once did.

In one narrower sense, though, migration to the sunny Southwest has skewed our numbers in a positive way: a significant number of highly qualified Lutheran clergy retire to the Southwest, and many are willing to buttress their retirement through part-time or interim work in congregations. Around 2016, the number of formally "retired" ELCA clergy in my synod exceeded that of "active" clergy, and the trend has continued apace. It meant, essentially, that our definition of "retired" had to change, and the term was applied only to those who were unwilling to keep working. "Retired but active" is now an essential category, and depending on the energy and gifts of the leader in question, that service can be a great blessing to both the leader and the congregation. The question is how long this situation can continue.

What role can the ELCA's seminaries play in raising up new leaders for the ELCA?
Traditionally, the seminaries have played a somewhat passive role: they educate candidates for ministry according to the church's expectations. Apart from the synodical candidacy process, the seminaries do not recruit ELCA members, though they are always looking for new ways to plant the idea of pastoral ministry.

Changes in the ways seminaries teach, especially the distance-learning programs each has augmented in response to the market and the pandemic, have greatly reduced the cost and inconvenience of study. Generous scholarship support from the seminaries, together with the ELCA's strong Fund for Leaders, has nearly removed the cost of tuition from a student's calculations. The ELCA's seven seminaries all provide an excellent education, and its quality can be seen in their alums. The pandemic has shown how adaptable the seminaries are.

Still, synods seek quicker, simpler ways to prepare leaders. If the ELCA is to remain committed to a consistent standard of theological education for those who lead its congregations, it will need to define better what that standard is and how it may be provided and attained. Given the shrinking interest in ministry as a profession and the church's urgent need for more pastoral leaders as soon as possible, one can hardly see how the church might sustain the historic standards of Lutheran theological education across the profession. This is not just a procedural question; it goes to the heart of what ministry is and how it should be carried out.

The seminaries legitimately worry about being abandoned as quicker, cheaper, less intensive forms of education are lifted up as more practical and more responsive to the church's needs. Ultimately the church, and not the seminaries, has the constitutional authority to set standards for its leaders and determine how those standards are met. The seminaries are relatively free-standing institutions; the church supports them but does not take complete responsibility for them. Nonetheless, ELCA seminaries are the church's sole repository for and provider of a high-quality, distinctively Lutheran theological education. No other church entity has this unique charism, and no non-ELCA seminary can offer exactly what our seven seminaries do.

The seminaries are painfully aware that fewer ELCA Lutherans are enrolling in their M.Div. programs. The seminaries all have the capacity to teach more students, and without students from the ELCA, they will naturally reach out to a wider student ecumenical population. These institutions aren't betraying their mission of forming Lutheran leaders; if they are to survive, they must find students to teach.

Where do we go from here? Greater coordination between the ELCA and its seminaries seems an obvious place to begin in this digital age, when the geographical and logistical limitations that forced candidates to study at non-Lutheran seminaries have largely evaporated. Our seminaries must educate all candidates for pastoral ministry—traditional students, TEEM students and synod-authorized ministers—in the methods best suited to each of them. Not every seminary can offer everything, but among us, we have the capacity to offer anything the ELCA needs.

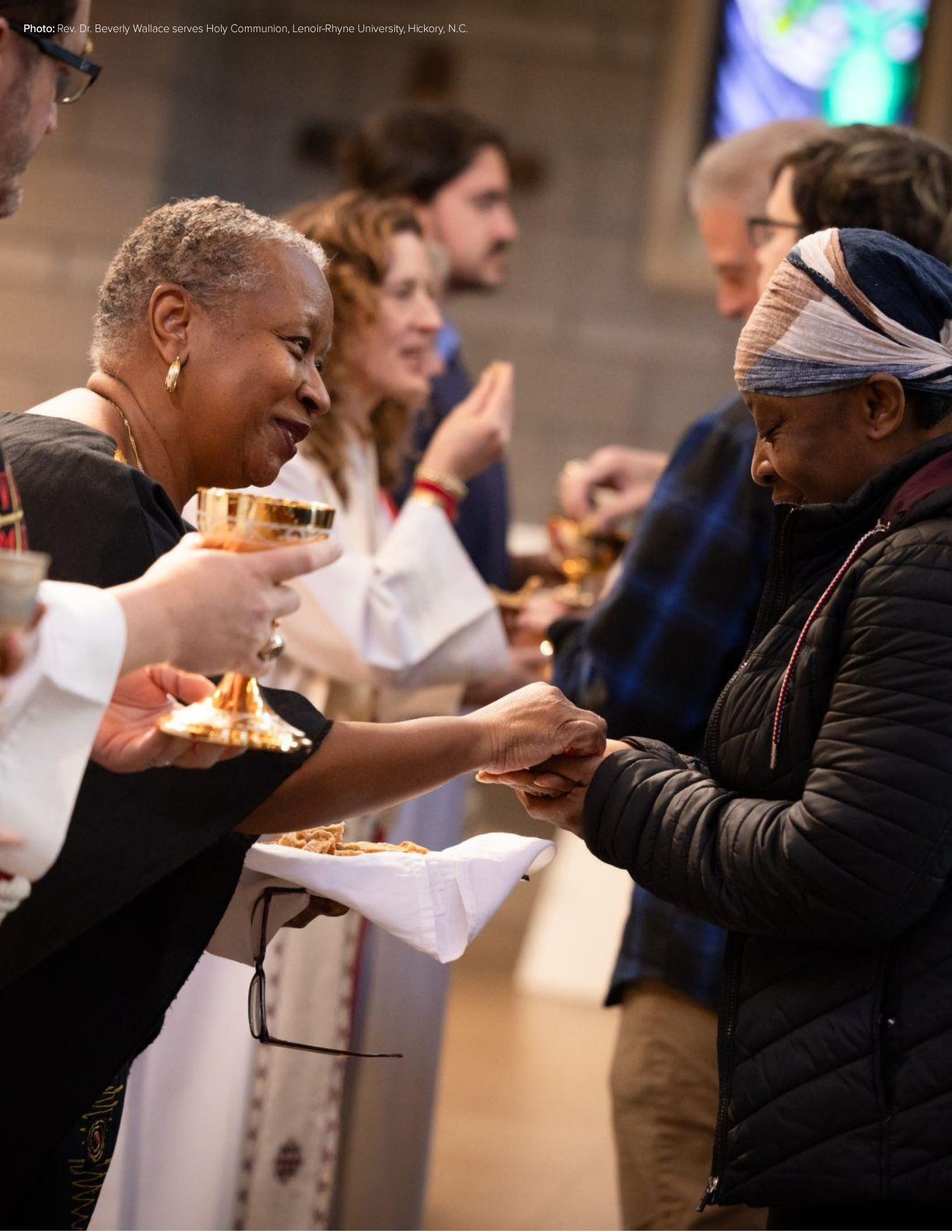


Photo: Rev. Dr. Beverly Wallace serves Holy Communion, Lenoir-Rhyne University, Hickory, N.C.

Who Gets to Imagine the Future?

Beverly Wallace

The world we want is one where many worlds fit.
—Slogan of the Zapatista movement

Context — and Language About Context — Matters
The Future Need for Pastors in the ELCA uses urban, rural and suburban indicators to describe the location and landscape of ELCA realities. The report indicates that most of the U.S. population lives in urban settings but that many Lutheran students attend seminary in the Midwest. To me, this suggests a possible disconnect between those two settings. But this data also asks us to consider investing in urban theological education. In *Urban Ministry: An Introduction*, Ronald E. Peters reminds us that Christianity in its initial stage was basically an urban phenomenon. Peters also writes that, unfortunately, Christians have ignored the fundamental unity of urban and rural ministry. Though many people use the term "urban" as a code word for communities of color, fewer know it as a theological symbol of hope. As our theological institutions create courses and degree tracks in "rural ministry," students and congregation members need to understand "urban" as one way of addressing the relational and spiritual gaps that Peters identifies.

This rethinking of language and context may help us to recruit more leaders for urban settings with the bonus of educating all about Peters' understanding of the unity between the two contexts. Our embrace of this unity might also help us to address issues of diversity in the ELCA, because many African American communities are in rural contexts. As noted in the report, future research might also distinguish between urban centers. Is ministry in Chicago, Philadelphia, and Washington, D.C., different from ministry in the Twin Cities and Milwaukee? This could help us to develop a fuller picture of what is occurring in those contexts and what opportunities may arise.

Addressing the Crisis with Creativity
Another key finding noted in this report is that the needs of this church have spurred growth in alternative forms of pastoral leadership, with programs such as TEEM and the education of synod-authorized ministers (SAMs). Demographic information would better inform this finding. The report would be strengthened by descriptive statistics relevant to race and ethnicity and by information about the students enrolled in the TEEM program.

When promoting alternative education for leaders, we must consider many factors.
For example, formal education has historically been vitally important to African Americans. In most Black denominations, the trend has been not to reduce educational requirements for leaders but to require more formal and master's level education. In the past, "alternative routes" to ministry within the ELCA meant a planned educational offering seemingly created primarily for people of color. Intentionally or not, this creative alternative has resulted in a two-tiered system that undercuts the legitimacy of the new leader educated in the "alternative" route.

Because of this, we need more qualitative research to get to the meaning of this finding about the growing trend in alternative methods of educating leaders. Some questions to be explored include: What is the quality of that education? Who are the professors/instructors? Are they

able to teach to the realities and context in which the leader will serve? How might the quality and length of instruction impact the decline in congregational membership? For example: One cannot learn much in two days about the art of congregational and spiritual care. How might alternative forms of education help or hinder effective ministry? Are there more or fewer students going the TEEM route now than in the past, and why? We may need additional research using qualitative research methodology, and even a longitudinal study.

A Womanist Suggestion

Womanist theologian Keri Day writes about her personal experience as a professor in theological education in what she calls a system of both hope and harm. Day's perspective might be something to consider as we think about educating leaders for the future needs of the church. Day suggests that theological education can move forward into a more diverse future only if it has been formed by the people and the Spirit moving within. She suggests employing what she calls an" economic of desire." In her book, *Notes of a Native Daughter: Testifying in Theological Education*, Day suggests that by embracing this economic of desire, we might answer such questions as: What do we desire? How might it be if we educate students in faith activism and advocacy, creating a new vision of formation? Would it fit the existing paradigm, or would removing the colonizing impulses of theological education free people to do and be what God desires God's followers to do and be? This embrace of an economic of desire could mean that some "traditional" courses would be eliminated in favor of an expansive theological education that extends beyond the walls of the seminary and a curriculum that goes beyond Greek, Hebrew and required courses in church history. We need to discern what we desire and what kind of compass can point us toward the knowledge and practices of a diversity of communities.

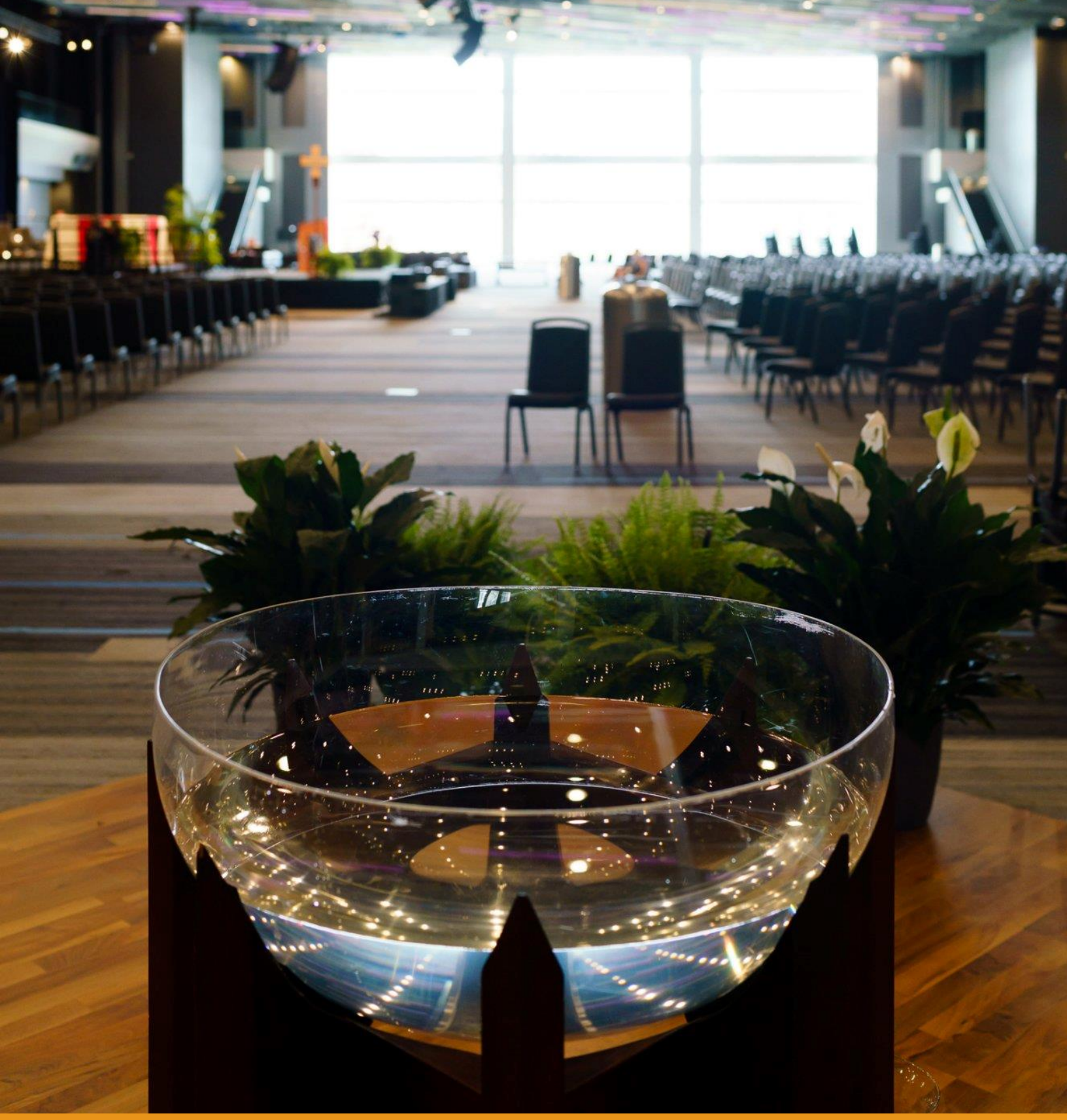
Quoting womanist theologian Katie Cannon, Day says we need "metalogue," to attune ourselves to the gaps, silences and blind spots of our current discourse. According to Cannon, this attunement comes only with the matrix of interacting with others. This interaction might compel us to ask what might be missing from current pedagogies and how the search for that something reshapes our understanding of theological education. The commentary from diverse voices is one of the gems of this report.

As a womanist theologian of this church, I concur with Cannon and Day's recommendation that we reenvision theological education. As womanist theologian Monica Coleman suggests, that process would include using a womanist creative *Ase*, a Yoruba concept that means using one's imagination and creative power to develop something different. However, one cautionary question cannot be overlooked: *Who gets to imagine the future?*

References

Day, Keri. *Notes of a Native Daughter: Testifying in Theological Education.* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2021.

Peters, Ronald E. *Urban Ministry: An Introduction.* Nashville: Abingdon, 2007.



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