



Evangelical
Lutheran Church
in America

Leadership
CIRCLE
FOR CONGREGATIONS

25 Years of Young Adults in Global Mission (YAGM) — Sent Out and Called Back Home

We're celebrating more than a thousand transformative journeys in international service (made possible by your gifts to ELCA Where Needed Most) by highlighting two program alums whose experiences called them down very different paths of service to Christ's church.

The Rev. Henry Martinez — United Kingdom (2004-2005), country coordinator for Australia (2016-2020)

When I applied for YAGM, I needed something new to me in a place that was just as foreign. That's how it started, but it ended up changing everything for me.

I spent my year at a residential facility for men battling chemical dependencies, befriending the men who lived there. I joined them in chores, devotion and Bible study. I made myself available to them, and I listened more than I spoke. Amid those conversations, one thing became clear: **I was called to ministry, and YAGM was shaping me into the pastor I would become.**

Today I pastor Servant of the Valley Lutheran Church in Beaverton, Ore., where my commitment to listening to and serving my neighbor informs every aspect of my leadership. I thank God for YAGM and for that change of scenery more than 20 years ago!

Pastor Henry leads a retreat with one of his YAGM cohorts.



Cetera's community (including her best friend's family, pictured here) made her feel at home during her year of YAGM service.

Cetera Jacobs — Jerusalem and the West Bank (2022-2023)

YAGM is about walking alongside others. I love that we have a word for that because **accompaniment is everything**. That's what made my YAGM year beautiful — once I learned to let go of assumptions, embrace discomfort and allow myself to be changed by generous, gracious friends. When we show up with open hearts, we find God everywhere.

I found common ground that allowed us to see each other and find healing together. **It lit a fire in me to dedicate myself to the work of justice.** I didn't go to give — I went and received more than I ever could have imagined. I was received into families, traditions, sacred spaces and complicated truths where I was loved, challenged and forever changed.

YAGM didn't just send me out; it called me back home more whole and more awake.

This year's ELCA World Hunger Advent resources are now available for your small groups and Bible studies. You can access them here at [ELCA.org/WHAdvent](https://www.elca.org/WHAdvent).

We also invite your members to sign up for our Advent devotion series — learn more about these in the full Leadership Circle Newsletter and register at [ELCA.org/LeadershipCircle](https://www.elca.org/LeadershipCircle). Together, these resources can be a wonderful addition to your spiritual journeys this Advent — as a community and in your own quiet moments.



St. Matthew's former pastor, the Rev. Lesley Radius, presides over communion during worship at "St. Matthew's on Tour."

CHURCH ON TOUR

After the COVID-19 pandemic, five Lutheran churches in Fort Worth, Texas, faced shrinking congregations and growing questions about their futures. Members of St. Matthew's Lutheran Church had an idea that they brought to the ELCA Innovation team, which is sustained by your gifts to ELCA Where Needed Most. Innovation partners empower congregations such as St. Matthew's to engage their communities more proactively to help them love their actual neighbors and meet their real needs. Innovation partner Rebecca Payne highlights the team's core belief in empowerment: "Congregations know this work best. Communities know themselves best. What we do is help them talk to each other. We're here to help our churches do good work better."

The idea began as one church visiting its four neighbors. What members called "St. Matthew's on Tour" quickly became all five churches visiting each other and eating potluck lunches together afterward. Neighbors became friends, and five communities started to feel like one. Together, the churches decided

to go on a different kind of tour – to nearby Burleson, Texas, where they would all worship together at a park. The Innovation team awarded "St. Matthew's on Tour" a grant through its Congregations Lead Initiative (CLI) that covered the full cost of the event, from equipment rental to food and drinks for fellowship after the service.

Churches taking part in the CLI report back to the Innovation team that they are communicating more effectively, making confident decisions, fostering trust among themselves and openly sharing what they have learned with other congregations. The work that began with just a few churches is now rippling across cities and even entire synods. Your partnership with the churchwide organization helps ELCA congregations a lot like yours embrace new approaches to ministry and to the neighbors they seek to serve and love.



Five small ELCA congregations in the Fort Worth area come together to worship and pray at a park in nearby Burleson, Texas.

Want to have these conversations in your congregation? The ELCA Innovation team has a resource to help you get started! Scan this QR code to download the interview guide. You can also follow the Innovation team's work on Instagram at @ELCAInnovation.

