



ELCA

# STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS

FOR THE



Strategic Commitments

Presented by



FEBRUARY 2025

*“I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth; do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.”*

— ISAIAH 43:19



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

While the ELCA is amid a multi-decade decline of baptized members, the next decade presents a rare opportunity for action backed by concrete support — a season the ELCA may not experience again. This report offers Barna and Fuller’s recommendations on strategic commitments that must be embodied in the future of the ELCA, which can inform how and where the ELCA focuses its time, energy and resources to make the most of this unique window and realize its vision to reflect God’s love in the world. Based on more than two years of journeying with the ELCA, we’re filled with hope and enthusiasm and truly believe the best days of the ELCA can be ahead.

We’re also sobered by the challenges, barriers and pain that keep ministries from functioning at their full potential. Further, we’re aware that the Church in the U.S. is currently in a season of decline and transformation, and the methods and structures that have gotten the ELCA to this point are not likely to move the ELCA into the future.

Our work began with many questions, including: What is the current state of the ELCA? Why is it facing some of its current challenges? Where does God seem to be leading? How might the ELCA respond and draft clear plans and strategies? Barna approaches these questions as one of the leading research organizations focused on faith and culture, with widespread trust among church leaders. Fuller is one of the largest and most influential multid denominational seminaries in the world, and our Leadership Formation Division has deep expertise related to young people (including the Fuller Youth Institute), as well as church leadership, adaptive change and intercultural competence.

We’ve found that one’s perspective on the ELCA largely depends on the role or seat that person is in, and what part of the ELCA they are focused on. Judging simply by baptized membership, number of congregations and total resources, the ELCA has significant reasons for concern following several years of downward trends. Meanwhile, for an 80-year-old who has been at the same relatively stable congregation for most of their life, the ELCA is a source of consistency, support and social connection that helps them draw closer to God. A seasoned rostered minister may see the fracturing of various social and political perspectives in their congregation and have serious concerns about the larger ELCA systems and structures — yet find themselves clear in their calling and relatively healthy in terms of their well-being and job satisfaction. A younger leader, particularly someone who is a person of color, may find it difficult to innovate in



and belong to an ELCA congregation that shares their values and convictions. A college student seeking a campus ministry experience may see the ELCA as one of the only Christian ministries that is fully inclusive and affirming of those who identify as LGBTQIA+. There is no simple picture of the beauty, diversity and complexity of the ELCA.

Given this complexity, we designed several activities and forms of data collection that have resulted in these strategic recommendations. These include review of a wide set of current and historical documents from the Churchwide Organization; ongoing discussions with core project team members and advisory teams; discovery calls with identified stakeholders; conversations with bishops and Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton; presentations to synodical leaders, Church Council and other bodies; in-person and virtual listening sessions with over 24 groups; three quantitative surveys led by Barna among rostered leaders, laity and the general population; review of training processes for synod-authorized ministers; interviews with leaders testing an approach to competency-based theological education; and 29 qualitative interviews with representatives of key themes from the survey data. The recommendations presented in this report are drawn from analysis across multiple methods and inputs. In some places, data points are provided to illuminate specific insights.



The pages that follow will begin with an overview of how this report fits into the ELCA overall, as part of the work of God’s Love Made Real<sup>1</sup>. Then we’ll offer an overview of national realities that shape the ELCA’s ministry today (which set our strategic recommendations within the wider context of themes and trends in the U.S. that shape churches, religion and faith). Key challenges, as well as assets and opportunities of the ELCA, are also provided to offer context for the strategic recommendations. The heart of the report is provided in the strategic recommendations, which identify five commitments that must be embodied for the ELCA to realize its vision and key priorities. While we are confident efforts in the five commitments will strengthen ministry efforts in the ELCA, there are wider situational and structural conditions of the ELCA that also must be addressed for the ELCA to move forward. We have provided additional details on these structural recommendations to relevant stakeholders in the Churchwide Organization. Finally, this report concludes with details on how the project was carried out, including specific sources informing the conclusions and a project timeline.

Based on the breadth of data we’ve collected from many different sources, we believe there are several paths and strategies for the ELCA that are relatively clear and actionable. Rather than wish that circumstances were different or wonder what else might be coming in the future, we urge ELCA leaders and stakeholders to act swiftly and decisively on the recommendations we have made. If you do, we believe there is great reason for hope that the ELCA’s best days can be ahead. That said, we also believe the ELCA faces a steep incline to accomplish these recommendations and will need to be diligent, courageous and willing to take risks and make some bold moves — all while staying closely attuned to the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

As you read, we invite you to keep an open mind and to test what you read alongside your experience and where you believe God is leading the next season of the ELCA. There will be time to reflect, dialogue and act. Take confidence in following Jesus, the greatest change leader who ever lived. As Christians, members of the ELCA do well to honor Jesus’ ongoing invitation to follow him, embrace change and live his way — toward the fulfillment of the ELCA’s vision: “a world experiencing the difference God’s grace and love in Christ make for all people and creation.”

Grateful to be part of the ELCA’s journey,



<sup>1</sup> God's Love Made Real was a phrase used as a shorthand reference to the ELCA's vision statement. The work produced under that initiative continues as part of an ELCA focus on building a connected and sustainable church.

# CONTEXT FOR THIS WORK

The ELCA is guided by the vision of “a world experiencing the difference God’s grace and love in Christ make for all people and creation.”

The strategic recommendations in this report are part of how the ELCA is working toward this vision and how the Churchwide Organization is doing its part in the world to make the gospel message of God’s love more widely known. It’s one of many other strategies that are in place across the wider ELCA.

The recommendations that follow are connected to the current purpose and priorities of the ELCA.

The purpose of the ELCA is to: “Activate each of us so more people know the way of Jesus and discover community, justice and love.”

## The priority areas of the ELCA are:

### 1. **A Welcoming Church:** Engaging new, young and diverse people

“Your young ... shall see visions, and your old ... shall dream dreams.” — Acts 2:17

### 2. **A Thriving Church:** Rooted in tradition and radically relevant

“You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? ... You are the light of the world.”  
— Matthew 5:13–14

### 3. **A Connected, Sustainable Church:** Raising the bar together

“I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.” — John 15:5

What might the future of the ELCA look like if it were more fully reflecting God’s love in the world? Several perspectives might give us a glimpse.



The book of Revelation paints a picture of people from every nation, tribe, people and language who stand before God in worship (Revelation 7:9), as well as the reality that God will dwell with the people, wiping every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death, mourning, crying or pain (Revelation 21:3-4). The ELCA has a unique role to play in carrying out the important ministry of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:11–21).

Structurally and organizationally, it might mean that the ELCA no longer experiences numeric decline of baptized members, but grows in the number of people who are disciples of Jesus and the number of congregations that are vibrant and vital.

When we asked nearly 1,000 ELCA rostered leaders what they think the future of the ELCA will look like, their most common responses were that the ELCA would be marked by the grace and love of Jesus Christ, centered on the cross and the gospel, welcoming and inclusive of all people, and defined by justice, advocacy and service.

Several future-oriented and hope-filled quotes about the future of the ELCA stood out across this project, including:

- “Our current church buildings would be functioning more like community centers. Our pastoral care and other offerings would be hyper-locally focused and relevant to people in each community.”
- “We would lean even more into the aspects of Lutheranism that make us unique, including our strong the-

ology of the cross and emphasis on the grace of Jesus Christ. People who engage with ELCA churches would know that they are valued and accepted, and there is nothing they can do to separate them from the love of God.”

- “Our world has too much hurt and hate. Lutheran churches must help those who experience them to know they are not freed because of the good work we do, but because of the good work Jesus has already done for us. We offer an incredible message of liberation.”
- “Our metrics will have changed — no longer just butts in seats, but toward things like injustices addressed and lives transformed. We would focus even more on engaging in community and love of neighbor.”
- “We would ... invite others into the joy of the love of Jesus. I believe that if we focused primarily on that, the rest would probably take care of itself.”

Presently, the ELCA is one of the largest Christian denominations in the U.S., with nearly 3 million members and about 8,500 congregations. The ELCA has a rich history, tracing its roots to the reformer Martin Luther. Much might be possible through the strengthened collective efforts of those across the ELCA to reflect God’s love in the world.

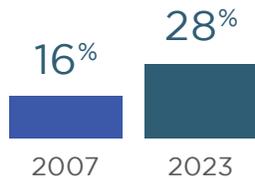
## NATIONAL REALITIES THAT SHAPE THE ELCA'S MINISTRY TODAY

As the ELCA seeks to realize its vision, any strategic recommendations must take into account the broader landscape of life and faith in the United States. Following are several key features of the current religious realities in which the ELCA operates, and some statistics that illustrate these factors.

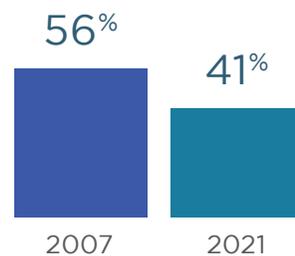
### U.S. Adults' Faith Affiliation Is Declining

The number of U.S. adults who are religiously unaffiliated has climbed steadily and currently stands at 28 percent of the U.S. population. Younger generations are more likely than older adults to fall into this group.

% of U.S. adults who are atheist, agnostic or "nothing in particular"<sup>1</sup>



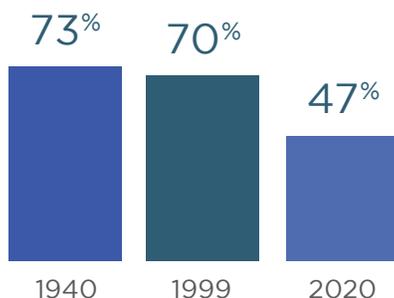
% of U.S. adults who say religion is "very important" in their lives<sup>2</sup>



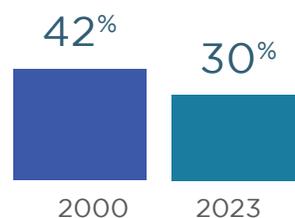
### Church Attendance Is Down & Congregations Are Shrinking

Beyond the ELCA, many other Mainline denominations' membership has declined by 20 percent or more between 2010 and 2020, including American Baptist Churches USA, the Episcopal Church, Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, Presbyterian Church USA, United Church of Christ and United Methodist Church.<sup>3</sup>

% of U.S. adults who are church members<sup>4</sup>



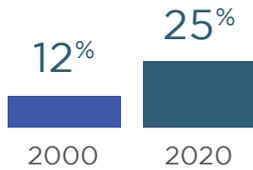
% of U.S. adults who attend religious services weekly<sup>5</sup>



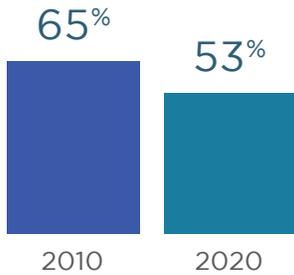
### Racial & Ethnic Diversity Is Increasing, Including in Churches

Based on projections around birth rates and immigration in the U.S., Pew Research estimates that by 2055, the U.S. will have no majority racial or ethnic group. Pew also estimates that Hispanic and Asian populations will grow much more rapidly than the white or Black population.<sup>6</sup>

% of faith communities identified as multiracial (20%+ of the congregation from a non-majority racial or ethnic group)<sup>7</sup>



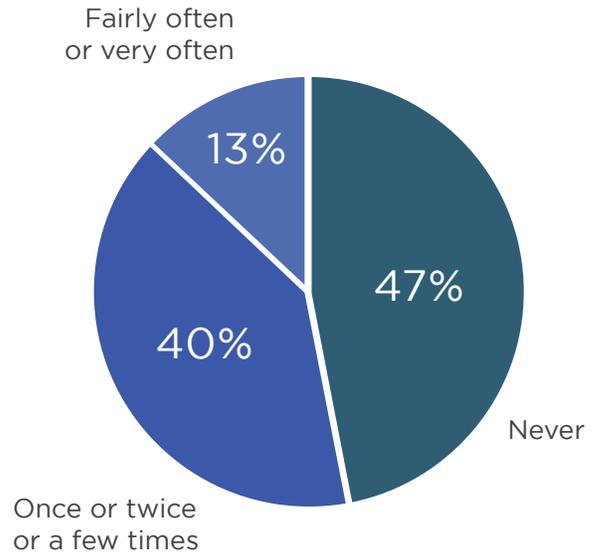
% of U.S. population under 18 years old categorized as "white alone"<sup>8</sup>



### Clergy Contentment Is Fluctuating

Religious leaders who are younger, female, part-time, bivocational or in more challenging congregations (e.g., financially challenged, less willing to change) are more likely to consider leaving pastoral ministry.<sup>9</sup> In Barna's research on pastoral burnout, pastors' top reasons for considering quitting ministry include immense stress, loneliness and political divisions.<sup>10</sup>

% of religious leaders who have seriously considered leaving pastoral ministry (2023)



### Generational Patterns & Preferences Are Drastically Changing

Millennials and Gen Z engage with life milestones, work, technology, family, religion and more in very different ways than Gen X, Baby Boomers and the Silent Generation.<sup>11</sup>

Median Age for Getting Married <sup>12</sup>			
1970		2022	
Women	Men	Women	Men
21	23	28	30

Median Age for Women Having First Child <sup>13</sup>		
1970	2000	2019
21	25	30

Taken together, the data points to significant challenges as well as significant opportunities for the ELCA. There are challenges because fewer people in the U.S. today identify as Christian or are likely to attend church, compared to recent decades. Clergy are expressing higher rates of burnout and lower contentment with their work. Younger people's major life decisions and engagement with institutions look very different than previous generations', leading to a need for new forms of ministry. Many of these realities can make the future of the ELCA seem bleak.

However, these realities also present many opportunities the ELCA can grasp. Some denominations and traditions, as well as many churches, are experiencing significant growth in the midst of these challenges. People still find Jesus compelling, and people are in need of both grace and truth, demonstrated by a loving Christian community.

One of the widest recent studies on U.S. churches over the last two decades<sup>14</sup> has found that congregations that are growing and spiritually vital are also more likely to:

- Have strong leadership that fits well with the participants.
- Have a clear and compelling mission.
- Be innovative and open to change.
- Be active in the local community.
- Have more vibrant worship that is thought-provoking and stimulating.
- Have a community of participants that represents a diversity of ages, genders, races and other differences.
- Be good at incorporating new people.
- Have significant lay involvement, including contributing financially and volunteering.
- Live out their faith commitments in everyday life and tell others about the congregation.

# KEY FEATURES OF THE ELCA TODAY: CHALLENGES

As we have engaged with the ELCA since 2022, we have gathered many insights on the ELCA's current features and realities. Following are several challenges that we believe warrant the greatest consideration as the ELCA seeks to move toward its vision, which specifically inform the recommendations to come in the report. These challenges are presented in no particular order.

- 1. Decline in Membership:** The ELCA has declined in terms of baptized membership from 4,272,688 members in 2010 to 2,904,686 members in 2022.
- 2. Decline in Resources:** Following a decline in baptized members, the ELCA is also facing a decline in the financial resources available to carry out ministry. This contributes to a sense of scarcity, as well as a lack of time and space to innovate.
- 3. Challenges Identifying Clear Priorities and Executing Strategies:** In our experience with ELCA leaders, we found that a desire to be respectful of and support all perspectives often led to a struggle to set a shorter list of actionable priorities. Further, our review of recent historical documents for the ELCA revealed no shortage of clear strategic plans. However, it was less clear that the ELCA has been able to stick with and see through those past strategic plans.
- 4. Complex Governance, Hierarchical Systems and Multiple Initiatives:** In our efforts to understand decision-making in the ELCA, there was often no one person who could say yes, but several people who had the ability to say no. In an open-ended question to hundreds of rostered leaders about what must be changed in the ELCA, one of the top responses was to reduce or eliminate ELCA bureaucracy and hierarchy. Respondents' descriptions of the ELCA revealed the complexity of the present ELCA.

# KEY FEATURES OF THE ELCA TODAY: ASSETS & OPPORTUNITIES

While the ELCA faces great challenges, we have also observed substantial assets and opportunities. These assets and opportunities also specifically inform the recommendations that follow in the report. In no particular order, they include:

- 1. Clear and Abundant Signs of Hope and Possibility:** Our work with the ELCA has revealed dozens, even hundreds, of leaders and ministries in the ELCA who are bright spots, illuminating the way forward. They give us hope that the best days of the ELCA can be ahead. While the number of baptized members in the ELCA is decreasing, we anticipate many other markers such as service efforts in the wider community, donations to worthy causes and other forms of engagement beyond membership actually paint the picture of a denomination in the midst of a renewal, not a decline.
- 2. Rich, Accessible, Conversational, Justice-Oriented, Grace-Filled Theology:** The ELCA has strong theological and historical foundations, tracing its beliefs to Martin Luther's efforts to reform the Church in the 16th century. The focus on being saved by God's grace and God's grace alone, as well as God's unconditional love in light of the cross, provide the ELCA with a relevant and much-needed gospel message for today's world. This has uniquely positioned the ELCA to engage in many forms of ministry, including ministry with the LGBTQIA+ community. Combined with the fact that the ELCA is deeply self-aware and recognizes its present challenges, a grace-filled posture could position the ELCA to respond very well in this moment.
- 3. Deep Resources, Significant Donors and Committed Leaders:** In light of its history and significant systems and structures, the ELCA has abundant resources that could be utilized in terms of real estate and property ownership. Many generous donors who value the Lutheran tradition and church have significant capacity to make transformational gifts (nationally and locally). Thousands of leaders (rostered and lay leaders) are committed to the ELCA and to seeing it succeed. The next one or two decades





# STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS:

## ELCA Commitments That Must Be Embodied

In our review of all of the data over recent years, Barna and Fuller came to the conclusion there are strategic commitments that must be embodied across the ELCA. These commitments need to be translated into strategic goals and plans for action, and we offer some of those initial directions here. We call them “commitments” because we believe the ELCA already has good *intentions* or *ideas* in these areas — but the intentions and ideas are not translating into a new culture for the ELCA.

While the commitments that must be embodied represent practical, tangible and actionable areas of work, those commitments will not ultimately be successful if there is no progress made on some wider structural and systemic conditions of the ELCA. We have provided additional detail on these structural recommendations for the Church-wide Organization to the relevant stakeholders. We offer all of the commitments in light of the national realities that shape the ministry of the ELCA today, as well as the ELCA’s challenges, assets, and opportunities.

In no particular order, the five commitments that must be embodied are:

- **Commitment #1:** Cultivate congregations that are warmer, more inviting and more invitational in nature.
- **Commitment #2:** Enhance ELCA-wide efforts to nurture and strengthen faith and spiritual formation.
- **Commitment #3:** Tangibly and significantly incorporate and empower young people in all levels of the Church’s life.
- **Commitment #4:** Provide greater empowerment, equipping and tools for lay leaders to carry out the work of ministry and be the Church in the world today.
- **Commitment #5:** Rethink, refocus and reorganize the ELCA’s educational systems and structures to serve the current (and rapidly changing) needs of the ELCA.

Each commitment will be explained further on the following pages.

# COMMITMENT #1:

## Cultivate congregations that are warmer, more inviting and more invitational in nature.

**What it means:** Once someone becomes connected with an ELCA church, data suggests that they have a very positive experience. But too few people are aware of the ELCA overall or the uniqueness and value of local ELCA churches specifically. One reason is that many ELCA members feel uncomfortable with evangelizing or inviting others to church. The outcome is that ELCA communities can become somewhat insular or private. Many people reiterated that while the ELCA has good intentions to be warm and inclusive, too many congregations have a disconnect between word and action. A warm congregation is one in which there is a sense of welcome, belonging and acceptance. Invitational means members of congregations intentionally encourage others they know to participate in worship or other activities of their congregation. Often the ability to be warm and inviting flows from a posture of listening, empathy and understanding. An example that was shared during our listening project was that, on a Sunday morning, many ELCA members have no problem saying hello to a new visitor or offering them a cup of coffee — but those same members don't often do a good job inviting someone to fellowship after the service or asking the person what brought them to worship in the first place.

**Why it is recommended:** We heard from many project participants that while some new people visit ELCA congregations, those congregations lack the warmth and invitational culture to compel visitors to return or continue to engage. The ELCA could have the healthiest, strongest churches in the world, but without more people knowing about them, no new people will attend or join. This is analogous to owning or eating at the best restaurant in town, but never advertising

### Commitment #1 | Key Data Points

*The recommendations presented in this report are drawn from analysis across multiple methods and inputs. Here, data points are provided to illuminate specific insights.*

 Laypeople who are younger or are people of color struggle to see their churches as warm communities. Meanwhile, they are less inclined than older or white laypeople to see their churches as effective at being a welcoming place for persons of color, the LGBTQIA+ community and marginalized people groups.

 While ELCA laypeople generally give their churches high marks when it comes to fueling a warm community, there is room for improvement. Less than half of laity feel their church integrates newcomers well (46% say this is “completely” or “very true”).



for it or inviting someone to it because you don't want to be too pushy. This lack of warmth and invitation, particularly to new people who are younger and more diverse, was mentioned throughout the project. On the flip side, many interview participants mentioned that congregations that develop an outward, missional focus of care for the surrounding community naturally become more warm and welcoming. Warm and inviting churches don't wait for people to come to church, but demonstrate hospitality by showing they care about people and their wider community, then move from care to understanding and inclusion. As the ELCA engages this commitment, it must ask, "Who are our congregations designed to welcome, include and integrate?" Specifically, congregations should ask (and potentially get outside perspective on) if they are warm and inviting to people of color, those who are disabled and other marginalized groups. As ELCA congregations ask these questions, many in the extensive listening sessions expressed a lack of training in how to create more inclusive and welcoming environments.



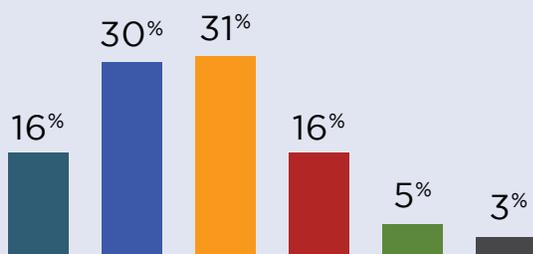
### Suggested strategies and activities:

- 1. Develop and provide widespread evangelism training for rostered leaders and ELCA members in a way that is natural for and fits ELCA theology and culture.** This could be done alongside Directors of Evangelical Mission (DEMs), churchwide staff who are embraced by each synod to serve local needs for tools and counsel. The training should likely have a strong focus on listening and developing greater empathy, as well as training people how to invite others in a way that is organic. We encountered some exemplary local congregations and campus ministries who said they were effective in training people to invite the people they meet to church and to be more welcoming to visitors when they do come. One interview participant explained their church does



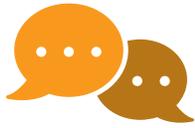
"Our church integrates newcomers well"

● Completely true ● Very true ● Moderately true  
● Slightly true ● Not true at all ● Not sure



n=10,282 ELCA laypeople

**IN LISTENING SESSIONS WITH A CROSS-SECTION OF HUNDREDS OF ELCA LEADERS, A TOP RECOMMENDATION THAT EMERGED WAS TO PRIORITIZE MOVING DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND INCLUSION (DEI) GOALS TOWARD ACTION AND IMPLEMENTATION.**



“Isn’t it great when you get to invite someone home?”

“Welcome brings peace. If you are welcome and you belong in a space, you tend to feel at peace there. And if you feel marginalized in a space, you’re not going to feel peace there. Really, at its core, hospitality is about peace.”

“‘All are welcome’ is lovely, but people won’t know they are welcome unless you have named them in the invitation.”



role-play activities to help their members become comfortable inviting new people. Another participant recommended, “We need to create a resource to equip people to talk about their faith in a way that doesn’t feel like it’s from 1982. Most ELCA pastors I know are bad at that. Instead of defining ourselves by what we’re not or what we’re against, we need to define ourselves by what we’re for.” Such training could be refined and offered as a national resource for the ELCA. **As will be a theme throughout our recommendations, we anticipate one of the most effective means for distributing high-quality, contextualized training will be through an online learning platform. This training can also be offered through national and synodical training events, as well as DEMs providing training in each local congregation.**

2. **Lean into existing strengths of inclusion and being welcoming to those who are LGBTQIA+ (following ELCA policies and social statements), and invest more effort and resources in supporting ministries that do this well to expand and replicate those ministries.** This is one significant characteristic of ELCA congregations and ministries in the wider landscape; many campus ministry leaders we interviewed expressed they were one of the only (and sometimes the only) LGBTQIA+ affirming Christian group on campus. One college student we spoke to expressed that they participate in the ministry and invite others because “there’s such a high level of safety here.” Gather several ELCA leaders who are strong in this work and develop a curriculum or



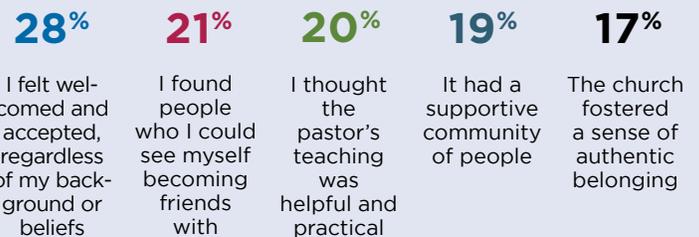
The data reveals that strong integration of newcomers is positively associated with church qualities like being a safe place for marginalized people, trusting and supporting younger and diverse leaders and being committed to racial equity and justice.



The top reason nonchurchgoers might be encouraged to continue attending a church is if they felt welcomed and accepted, regardless of their beliefs or backgrounds.

### What Encourages Church Visitors to Return? Nonchurchgoers’ Top 5 Responses

Please read the following statement and check all the answers that apply: “I would continue attending a church I visited if ...”



n=1,439 U.S. adults who have not attended church in the last six months; 35% selected “none of the above.”

set of ministry recommendations that any church can use. The curriculum would target lay leaders and could be disseminated as a small-group or Bible study, or as a 101-level course on a digital training platform. The ministry recommendations would be targeted to rostered leaders at national and synodical training events or also through the digital training platform. We recognize (and heard) there is uneven reception among ELCA congregations and members about their openness to LGBTQIA+ ministries, and recommend that the ELCA move toward greater alignment on this topic (while recognizing divergent positions of conscience).

3. **Provide training for churches and leaders to focus more on creating relationships and other spaces of trust outside of worship services.** These ministries are more likely to be an entry point for new, younger and more diverse attendees. We recommend the ELCA (perhaps in partnership with seminaries) create stronger continuing education and nondegree digital forms of training on this topic. Such training would focus on how ministries can better offer true hospitality — particularly to those who feel excluded or marginalized. This could include expansion of small-group ministries or other venues that allow personal relationships to be developed, including gathering around meals. It could also include training on how rostered leaders could begin to view and utilize their building as a resource for their community by partnering with local nonprofits and co-hosting community events. There are several exemplary congregations in the ELCA who demonstrate these values well and embody them through specific practices. Curate the lessons and best practices from these congregations and share them widely throughout the ELCA. Sharing them would go beyond broadcasting information or telling inspiring stories to developing competency-based training delivered in-person or on an accessible online platform.
4. **Develop a scalable model where ELCA congregations provide hospitality and create reciprocal partnership with immigrant communities and churches.** In our research, we spoke with a few congregations in the ELCA that already do this work well. Several advisors in interviews identified this as a natural strength that builds on



“We are not [being warm] just so more people will come and join us. We’re working to establish in our ministry the culture that we want to be curious about people because God is curious about people.”

“We need to accompany folks. We need to receive, as well as give. It’s reciprocal — and all about relationships. That’s what God does with us.”



## In your church:

### Implement an intentional welcome strategy

Don’t just rely on friendly greeters — establish structured follow-ups with church visitors, such as handwritten notes, phone calls or small welcome gifts. Consider ways to make your space more physically and culturally accessible to both guests and members (e.g., name tags with pronouns, inclusive liturgy or dietary accommodations).

the ELCA's orientation toward service and justice, and our experience with other networks and traditions outside the ELCA identifies this as an area of opportunity. One interview participant stated, "I view this as more about hospitality. Hospitality is being willing to hear and receive feedback and become more accommodating to other people." While the ELCA has not seen significant growth in ethnic diversity of its baptized membership through its established ministries and congregations, leaning on the ELCA's desire to love neighbors and support those in need might be naturally expressed by partnering with Christians who are entering this country and many communities with a robust faith.

- 5. Support congregations in conducting a "language audit" to ensure that their language is clear, understandable and welcoming to newcomers.** This might include making sure the language isn't overly dense, doesn't lean heavily on "insider terminology" and is aligned with ELCA social teachings and policy. Language shouldn't be off-putting to those who are of different abilities, identify as LGBTQIA+ or are from various generations, racial and ethnic backgrounds. This might include language in terms of choice of vocabulary, but also to be more multilingual. Several leaders we interviewed noted they became aware that their messaging was confusing or off-putting to newcomers, and made intentional shifts over a period of time through more understandable and hospitable vocabulary. These shifts included paying attention to what is communicated through physical signs and space, websites (if applicable), written materials and other language that offered "first impressions" to newcomers.



## COMMITMENT #2:

### Enhance ELCA-wide efforts to nurture and strengthen faith and spiritual formation.

**What it means:** The core of the Christian faith and Lutheran tradition is not simply about being a member of a church but experiencing God’s grace and love in Christ. While grace is a gift received by faith, Lutherans believe that, in response to God’s love, people are set free to live out of gratitude and love. Scripture encourages Christians to become mature in Christ (Ephesians 4:13), display the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23) and be formed into the image of Christ (2 Corinthians 3:18). While ELCA congregations can offer a number of helpful and important ministries, none is more important than the Church’s efforts to help people become stronger in their faith in Christ and deepen their discipleship.

**Why it is recommended:** National data outside of the ELCA is clear that healthy and growing congregations include congregants who are spiritually vital and have a strong faith. At present, however, many church members seem to possess a faith that might be described as half-hearted or going through the motions. While church membership nationally across traditions is on the decline, research continues to affirm strong interest in spirituality and a desire to find meaning and purpose. Within the ELCA, the research conducted for Barna’s surveys shows laity report low levels of engagement in spiritual practices, and many young people share their frustration with ELCA churches that do not seem to embody the example of Jesus. Simply put, the more ELCA congregations and congregants tangibly embody the grace and love of Jesus, the more vibrant and vital those congregations will be — and the more attractive they will be to new, young and diverse people.

### Commitment #2 | Key Data Points

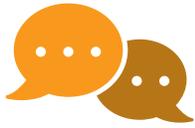
*The recommendations presented in this report are drawn from analysis across multiple methods and inputs. Here, data points are provided to illuminate specific insights.*



A little over 70 percent of ELCA laypeople say it’s completely or very true their churches have relevant preaching and encourage them to live out their faith every day. Programming like worship and Sunday school is often considered foundational ministry activity.



From our perspective, one area of weakness for ELCA churches is training people to regularly engage in spiritual practices, such as prayer and reading the Bible. Just 39 percent of laity say it is “completely” or “very true” that their church accomplishes this.



“You have to engage young people’s questions. They have deep interests that they’ll share — if we’ll listen. ... I don’t treat young people like they’re stupid, and I don’t short them on theology.”

“Prioritizing people’s mental and spiritual health needs must be way more important than churches just running a program.”



**Suggested strategies and activities:**

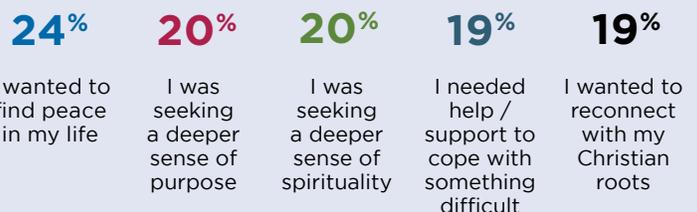
- 1. Provide national-level training for rostered leaders on encouraging spiritual practices and other forms for deepening spiritual formation of congregants.** Similar to our recommendation in the first commitment, we believe this could be best deployed through development of an online training platform that offers competency-based training for rostered and lay leaders, as well as developing synodical training for rostered leaders. While there are dozens of spiritual practices, some specific historical practices we heard mentioned include prayer, reading scripture, engaging in service and justice efforts, forgiveness and keeping Sabbath. Given the ELCA has already developed a *Strategy Toward Authentic Diversity*, several insights from that report might be implemented, including consideration for how trauma-informed practices and training might be incorporated. Incorporating trauma-informed approaches can help the ELCA better respond and offer grace and healing in light of the very real brokenness, division and hurt that exists in the world. We are not aware of a widely used Lutheran discipleship curriculum, and if it is not available, we recommend it be developed by the Churchwide Organization and made available to Sunday school classes, small groups and Bible studies in the ELCA.
- 2. Explore and elevate approaches to spiritual formation that extend outside of worship services or are less Sunday-focused.** Many exemplary leaders in the ELCA already offer creative approaches that reflect the needs and interests of their community. Some leaders we interviewed highlighted that new approaches emerged when they lis-

**Why Would a Nonchurchgoer Consider Attending Church? Top 5 Responses**

*Please read the following statement and check all the answers that apply: “I might consider going to a Christian church if ...”*

 **Small-group ministry and discipleship courses, according to laypeople, are impactful. Among rostered leaders, however, these areas are rarely noted as a primary focus for resource allocation.**

 **“Seeking a deeper sense of spirituality” is one of the top reasons nonchurchgoers might consider going to church.**



*n=1,439 U.S. adults who have not attended church in the last six months; 33% selected “none of the above.”*

tened carefully to people in their faith community, asked what they wanted to learn and created opportunities for people to try new things. One campus ministry leader explained she hasn't abandoned traditional Bible reading, but incorporates art to make it more creative and allow people to engage in new ways. We recommend the ELCA develop resources (and provide tangible ministry stories, ideas and examples) for rostered leaders to incorporate the arts into Bible reading. Another recommended approach is to develop several cohorts that include a few leaders and congregations that are already exemplary in this area (such as having effective small-group ministries) and including 10–15 congregations that need to grow in this area, creating the space and interactions for these congregations to learn and grow together.

- 3. Heighten approaches to faith formation that are action-oriented and lean into the ELCA's strengths of being focused on justice and love of neighbor.** Create a curriculum or set of resources that helps ELCA congregations tie social justice efforts more clearly to spiritual practices and spiritual growth. These resources would be provided to both rostered leaders and key lay leaders through an online training platform, synodical training for rostered leaders and material for small-group or Bible study groups. Many ELCA congregations naturally are externally focused, and that can be a catalyst for faith formation. An example of this might be that some people are naturally generous with their finances, but do not have firsthand experience with those who are unhoused, are in poverty or have other tangible needs. Designing church ministries that allow more participants to be active and hands-on in their local neighborhood or in another community or culture can be a catalyst toward spiritual growth.
- 4. Drawing from the qualitative interviews Fuller and Barna conducted for this work, identify a set of best practices and creative ideas on new forms of discipleship.** Many ELCA congregations already excel here, but the ideas need to be articulated practically and shared more broadly in a way that gains traction and drives action. For example, a few congregations mentioned they are experimenting with changes to confirmation by





“[The students] that end up going to [our campus] Bible study are mostly our Lutheran students. They mostly feel like they don’t know anything about the Bible at all, which is helpful feedback for the Church. We also teach them to articulate their faith. What do they believe? Why is that important to them?”

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“Many people have experienced the Bible being used in a harmful manner. While our preaching needs to be biblical, we need to dig deeper into the Bible and read specific passages from a different perspective.”



giving young people more agency and leadership opportunities, and they’re seeing positive results. While the Churchwide Organization shares a significant amount of information, we see this as an opportunity to move from an “information-based approach” (where people are made aware, but may not experience change) to a “formation-based approach” (where people are both aware and experience change). We recommend the ELCA develop stronger and clearer national standards for non-degreed training and competencies needed of rostered leaders and lay leaders, delivered in formats that support progress in those standards.



### In your church:

#### **Nurture environments for faith conversations**

Create opportunities for interactive faith discussions, which might involve small-group storytelling, journaling or time during liturgy for dialogue. Consider the spirit, soul *and* body — perhaps by hosting gatherings in environments beyond the sanctuary (particularly outdoors!) or engaging tactile spiritual practices like breath work or artistic expression.



## COMMITMENT #3:

**Tangibly and significantly incorporate and empower young people in all levels of the Church's life.**

**What it means:** Teenagers, young adults and families with young children in the ELCA need to be more highly prioritized. This includes the ELCA's ability to listen to and learn from them, as well as engage them in positions of leadership and authority. This shift is needed at every level: local church and ministry, synod and Churchwide Organization. Making young people a priority means that they are considered and elevated in terms of resource allocation, focus, attention, decision making, systems and structures. The ELCA does not need to take an "either / or" approach to choosing between a focus on younger generations or older generations. Instead, the ELCA can pursue an intergenerational approach to ministry that places younger people alongside older generations for relational support, mentoring and reciprocal learning.

**Why it is recommended:** Young people need not be one of the ELCA's biggest challenges; they can instead be one of its greatest opportunities and can fuel innovation and growth. Engagement of this age group, reinforced by ongoing intentionality, listening and support, was a glaring gap called out in nearly every form of data collection we employed. This is such a weakness — and such a significant opportunity — that we believe even small efforts here, executed consistently and across the whole ELCA, hold outsized potential to move the ELCA forward. As the ELCA seeks to be more vibrant and vital for the future, it must recognize that it will not have a future unless it better engages younger generations.

### Commitment #3 | Key Data Points

*The recommendations presented in this report are drawn from analysis across multiple methods and inputs. Here, data points are provided to illuminate specific insights.*



On a scale of 1 to 5 (5 being a positive score), both rostered leaders and laity rate the church's ability to empathize with young people at less than a 3.

Empathize with today's young people

Prioritize today's young people

Rostered Leaders

Laity

**2.59**

**2.86**

**2.53**

**2.86**

n=875 ELCA rostered leaders; n=10,282 ELCA laypeople. Average score per category, on a scale of 1 to 5. Each category includes 5 relevant questions.



“I want [the kids] to say, ‘At my church, I was the assistant minister on some Sundays. I also helped count money, I served communion and did numerous other things.’ I hope the church would allow them to get plugged in at whatever age or level.”



### Suggested strategies and activities:

- 1. There is currently a shortage of ministry and program offerings in ELCA congregations designed for or focused specifically on teenagers, young adults or families with young children.** More ministries for this age group need to be identified, launched and supported. This could take a variety of forms, either coordinated by the Churchwide Organization, synods or local congregations. One step in making this happen is redirecting some budget at all levels toward ministry with young people. For teenagers, the ELCA Youth Ministry Network provides a variety of resources and training opportunities. For young adults, low-hanging fruit would include expanding the Gather Network in more synods, as well as involving young adults in increased leadership of a congregation’s mission and service efforts.
- 2. Train rostered leaders (not just youth leaders), as well as lay leaders in the ELCA, in current best practices for how to engage and respond to this younger generation.** This will need to include national-level training on understanding and empowering young people, including how to step into their world, listen to them, and recruit and train other adults to invest in them relationally. Fuller and Barna have several industry-leading resources and trainings that may be helpful here. Our research reveals that a pastor’s willingness to make changes in this area is particularly important for local churches to make

**IN LISTENING SESSIONS WITH A CROSS-SECTION OF HUNDREDS OF ELCA LEADERS, A TOP RECOMMENDATION THAT EMERGED WAS TO INVEST IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF YOUTH, YOUNG ADULTS AND YOUNG FAMILIES, BOTH INSIDE AND OUTSIDE OF ELCA CONGREGATIONS.**

 Congregations in urban locations, diverse churches and larger churches tend to receive better assessments from laypeople when it comes to prioritizing young people and families.

 Younger leaders in the ELCA are significantly more likely than their older peers to be feeling emotionally and mentally exhausted, lonely, unequipped and inadequate. They are also more likely to report burnout, stress and feeling held back due to their identity.

progress. Pastors may also need supportive training in leading change. We recommend young people be part of and help lead the training.

3. **Utilize the Growing Young Assessment tool to conduct an audit across all levels of the ELCA, including local congregations and synods.** This could start with one pilot group of five to 10 congregations that engage the assessment and, through coaching, make tangible next steps over a 6- to 12-month period. Based on the results, make tangible shifts such that young people are one of the top five priorities of ELCA time, energy, focus and funding.
4. **Increase investments in camp and campus ministries.** We regularly heard that young people simply aren't centered within the ministries, practices, structures and funding of the ELCA. Yet much of the data we collected across this project identified that many of the camps and campus ministries are bright spots. In particular, when rostered leaders were asked, "If you were given \$1 million to help the ELCA more effectively engage new, young and diverse people and had one year to spend it, where would you invest it?" the top response category by far was camps and campus ministries. These efforts should be carried out with a specific focus on how to identify future leaders for the ELCA. We believe these efforts can and will have a disproportionate contribution to feeding a pipeline of seminary students and rostered leaders.



"We're still kind of stuck culturally in the place that's like, 'It's enough to just have young people in the room and then the real adults will make the decisions.' And there's not this idea that they have something truly indispensable and meaningful to offer."



"The young people in my church didn't care much about church until I showed up to their swim meet, play or other activities. Then I asked them to bring that area of passion into the church."



 **At least half of ELCA laypeople say it's "not at all true" or just "slightly true" that their church "makes young people a primary focus," "has enough volunteers or staff members who minister to young people" or "has a thoughtful approach to our ministry to people in their twenties."**

"Our church ..."  
% of ELCA laypeople who say this is "slightly true" or "not at all true"



n=10,282 ELCA laypeople



“Centering young people in the work we do isn’t a fringe priority — it’s a central priority ... You need to realize young adults may come with challenges or problems. They need a space where they won’t feel judged.”



“You need to go to the places where [people in their 20s and 30s] are: protests, calling out injustices. You can’t just have your doors open and ask them to come to you; [you] need to go out and engage.”



- 5. Every office and ministry of the Churchwide Organization, every synodical leadership team and every local congregation should identify a list of young people they are mentoring and investing in and with whom they are sharing the keys of leadership.** We regularly heard that many young people in the ELCA are capable but do not feel they have been given a shot or appropriately empowered. A larger culture shift is required within the denomination, and that culture shift will take place through thousands of leaders and hundreds of offices and ministries identifying young people to tangibly empower. We recognize this larger culture shift will be a long-term pursuit and may be a significant jump from where ELCA congregations and leaders are currently. While there are challenges to implementation, this could be launched through a smaller initial pilot of 10 Churchwide Organization staff, 10 synodical bishops and / or 10 senior pastors who commit to this value for one year. Pre- and post-testing can be done with the Growing Young Assessment to measure progress. We believe the more seasoned leaders will experience better innovation, ideation and fresh thinking, and the younger leaders will have greater satisfaction in their roles and desire to grow in their roles as a result of the mentoring and support. Another early attempt that is more easily actionable might be identifying five churches with thriving youth ministries or young adult ministries and pairing those congregations with congregations that seek to grow in this area so they can experience first steps toward mentoring and coaching.
  
- 6. Pursue greater effectiveness with people of color and those who identify as LGBTQIA+ through a stronger focus on listening to, learning from and tangibly empowering these young people with resources and decision-making ability.** Younger generations are more racially and ethnically diverse than older generations, and younger generations are more likely than older generations to identify as LGBTQIA+. A focus on young people will thus necessarily increase the focus on greater racial and ethnic diversity and those who identify as LGBTQIA+. In our interviews with young adults who are people of color and / or identify as LGBTQIA+, many told us that if ELCA leaders are willing to truly listen to what today’s young people need, the denomination will

likely develop natural capacities of empathy, mutuality and belonging, which will also make the Church more effective in ministry with people of color and those who identify as LGBTQIA+. We wonder if further investigation should be had regarding the needs of congregations and synods in regard to LGBTQIA+ ministries. Reconciling Works could be a partner for congregations in this effort.



## In your church:

### Give young people a place and purpose

For some of your youngest attendees, a “pray-ground” (where children can participate in worship and play together at the same time) might be a space where they can feel like they belong at your church. As children grow up, empower the emerging generation with meaningful responsibilities — which starts with asking them how they want to contribute and empowering them in their gifts and interests. There might also be existing opportunities, from reading scripture to having a voice on the church council.



## COMMITMENT #4:

**Provide greater empowerment, equipping and tools for lay leaders to carry out the work of ministry and be the Church in the world today.**

**What it means:** Too many ELCA lay people and churches seem to view rostered leaders as the “professionals” who carry out the work of ministry. Based on ELCA theology and polity, however, there is a *priesthood of believers* who are meant to carry out the life and work of the church. These leaders, most of whom do not view themselves as vocational ministers, need to be empowered and trained to lead ELCA churches into the future. This does not take away from the work of ordained and rostered leaders, but instead shifts their role to one of carrying out specialized tasks, then equipping and empowering other people for the work of ministry (Ephesians 4:12) to build up the body of Christ.

**Why it is recommended:** In light of challenges, including declining resources and fewer rostered leaders, the ELCA’s best resource that can fuel the future of the Church is its capable and faithful lay leaders. However, too often these leaders are sitting on the sidelines. They must be identified, rallied, motivated and trained to do the work of the Church. This will require a larger mindset and culture shift, as well as specific and tangible actions like those we recommend. The data we collected and conversations we had revealed the significant but underutilized potential of lay people. Even in the data we reviewed regarding synod-authorized ministers (SAMs), many bishops or other leaders seemed to view SAMs or other types of lay leaders as a last resort if a full-time rostered minister could not be identified. Given a decrease in available resources and rostered leaders, this expectation and model is not sustainable.

### Commitment #4 | Key Data Points

*The recommendations presented in this report are drawn from analysis across multiple methods and inputs. Here, data points are provided to illuminate specific insights.*



Openness to new ways of doing ministry is consistently correlated with other positive church attributes, like integrating newcomers well, taking Jesus’ message seriously or being good neighbors.



Responses from ELCA laity suggest churches are not often asking young people to participate in making important decisions or equipping young people with the skills they need to lead ministries. About two in five (41%) say it’s “not at all true” or only “slightly true” that their churches do this.

## Suggested strategies and activities:

- 1. Create national-level training for lay leaders that can be adopted and / or contextualized by synods and local congregations.** While we heard much more about training standards and offerings for seminary students and rostered leaders, we heard very little about lay-leader training standards, pathways or platforms. This might also include the Churchwide Organization identifying several ministries and congregations that are exemplary in their engagement of lay leaders and developing a set of best practices and other recommendations for congregations to boost lay leadership. How this is developed might depend on the seminaries’ appetite to engage in this work. Most seminaries have placed the greatest emphasis on providing degree-based training. Luther Seminary, as one positive example, seems to be engaging more nondegree and lifelong learning. If the ELCA seminaries can’t provide sufficient lay-leader training, we recommend the Churchwide Organization develop an online training platform that can provide this training. FULLER Equip ([fullerequip.com](http://fullerequip.com)) provides digital courses, certificates and other learning experiences to lay leaders, and could serve as a resource or example.
- 2. Develop a clear pathway of competency-based theological education that begins with lay leaders and ends with full-time rostered leaders.** Given the well-established congregational model in the ELCA, as well as standards and qualifications of rostered leaders, it makes sense that more ELCA effort has historically gone to structures and systems that support the training of rostered leaders. However, we believe the ELCA would benefit from a mapping exercise that takes the current competencies



“Without lay leaders, our church would have closed years ago — and now we’re thriving.”

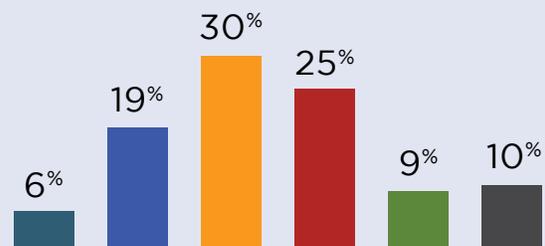
“Part of resourcing laity is ending this hierarchy between them and ordained people.”



 Only about one in four ELCA laity feel their church has many people who are willing to contribute to making changes (25% say this is “completely” or “very true”).

“Our church has many people who are willing to contribute to making changes”

● Completely true   
 ● Very true   
 ● Moderately true   
 ● Slightly true   
 ● Not at all true   
 ● Not sure



n=10,282 ELCA laypeople



“In the ELCA, there is an expectation that a trained, full-time pastor will carry out the work of ministry. This disincentivizes lay leadership.”



“We can’t just give other people their purpose. We need to journey with them and commit to grow together.”



being considered for rostered leaders and explores what competencies might be needed and possible for lay leaders who have less time to give to their role. This exercise is likely to illuminate various forms of training and leadership development that do not currently exist. While the ELCA’s current work with SAMs has explored competencies that may be helpful for SAMs, we recommend taking it one step further to other lay leaders in congregations who are not going through the full SAM training process. Fuller and Barna’s experience with lay leaders reveals low-hanging fruit for competencies that could be developed now (without further listening, research or mapping work), including how to lead a small group, how to be an effective elder or board member, how to listen and discern needs in a local community and additional topics we can recommend.

- 3. **Launch an incubator or accelerator program that helps congregations launch new ministries that are led by lay people.** Begin with a pilot of 15 congregations, which each identify two to three lay leaders, and walk through a 10-month process of assisting them with the needed training and launch. The current model of operating ELCA congregations and recruiting, training and placing full-time rostered leaders is expensive and likely not financially sustainable. Developing leaner, less expensive and lay-led ministries increases the ELCA’s ability to respond and adapt to a shifting landscape. Several ELCA ministries and leaders we interviewed were exemplary in this regard and often credited their strong volunteer training programs. We are not recommending starting new worshipping communities; rather, we recommend focusing on ministries like small-group gatherings and Bible studies that engage groups of 5–20 people. Another example might be deploying the abundance of older members who are part of the ELCA. Many in this group are increasingly entering retirement age and may have extra time, to launch community-based ministries such as adopting local schools to provide volunteer education and mentoring.

**IN LISTENING SESSIONS WITH A CROSS-SECTION OF HUNDREDS OF ELCA LEADERS, A TOP THEME THAT EMERGED WAS TO INCREASE TRUST BY EMPOWERING LAY LEADERS AND LOCAL CONGREGANTS.**

These older members could be appropriately trained and equipped to engage this work through the training methods we've identified throughout this report.

4. **Develop a digital training platform that can train and assist congregations in developing stronger volunteer training.** This could be done either through the Churchwide Organization or in partnership with one or more of the ELCA seminaries. We recommend these efforts be part of the required training provided to SAMs and rostered leaders during their seminary education, rather than something congregations opt into. Fuller already provides such a training platform and could partner or advise in the development of the ELCA's efforts. Additionally, we believe that, given the ELCA's large proportion of white and / or older members, tangible training will need to be provided on how to welcome new, younger and more diverse people.
5. **Commission the development of stronger theological foundations on the importance of lay leadership, perhaps through a few white papers.** The ELCA emphasizes doing things in good order and making decisions that flow from theological commitments. We suspect, however, that the current practices of the ELCA that prioritize rostered leaders stem from under-developed theology about leadership and the role of lay leaders (or at least the practical outworking of the ELCA's theology of leadership in action). A few of the ELCA's professors, colleges, universities or seminaries might be able to guide the development of such teachings and documents. This is likely to include theological and practical implications for developing a flatter organizational structure in ELCA congregations. The goal of such theological work is to drive the tangible result of more lay leaders engaged in and equipped for the work of ministry. While many rostered leaders express a sense of being overwhelmed or tired, and many younger lay people and other lay people express a desire for increased purpose and meaningful responsibility, the equipping of lay leaders is not yet at the level needed for the ELCA's future. Theological work is one step toward tangible action.



“There's an old paradigm that, as clergy, I am supposed to have all the answers. Or that I'm the Swiss Army knife who is the tool for everything.

But I need to be the keeper of the story and the tradition. One of the most important things I can do is to give permission to others.”



## In your church:

### Emphasize personal gifts within a team model

Focus on identifying and growing people's strengths rather than simply filling gaps in empty roles. Consider deploying ministry teams with term limits and clear expectations (within specific areas like finances, operations, vision and so on) to make leadership participation an approachable and evolving opportunity.

## COMMITMENT #5:

**Rethink, refocus and reorganize the ELCA's educational systems and structures to serve the current (and rapidly changing) needs of the ELCA.**

**What it means:** The former understanding of ELCA seminaries was that they provided extensive training to full-time rostered leaders who were ordained, called and served in a congregation. Often these leaders were equipped with the skills they needed during their years in seminary and received occasional continuing education along the way. A new understanding of ELCA seminaries and educational systems needs to focus on equipping all of the people of God in the ELCA to be more effective in building the Church and carrying out the work to which God has called them. This new understanding also needs to include a reskilling of many rostered leaders who completed seminary one or more decades ago and are finding they do not have the new, complex skills and competencies needed to navigate today's fast-changing world. Taking this approach will yield new forms of training that reflect the changing landscape of our world and how people today (especially new, younger and more diverse people) are engaging with faith and ministries.

**Why it is recommended:** The ELCA is in the midst of its most significant shifts since its founding, facing a decrease in church attendance, an increase in virtual or digital means of church engagement, and the declining importance of religion in people's lives. These shifts mirror those affecting other Christian denominations, theological education broadly and U.S. culture overall. The ELCA has a major opportunity to update the

### Commitment #5 | Key Data Points

*The recommendations presented in this report are drawn from analysis across multiple methods and inputs. Here, data points are provided to illuminate specific insights.*

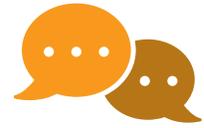


ELCA rostered leaders report healthy vocational well-being. More than nine in 10 say they frequently or sometimes feel “confident in my ministry calling,” “motivated to become a better leader,” “energized by ministry work” and “well-supported by those I work with.”



However, there are also signs of fatigue. Looking at those who select “frequently” or “sometimes,” three-quarters of rostered leaders feel “emotionally or mentally exhausted” (76%). About two-thirds feel “lonely or isolated from others” (65%) or “unequipped for the challenges I am facing” (62%). About half (49%) feel “inadequate for my ministry calling.”

skills of its key leaders, as well as equip lay leaders and others to carry out the work of ministry. The data we've reviewed and the feedback we've heard from leaders indicate the current approach to education in the ELCA is not sufficiently comprehensive, relevant or adaptive.



“The one-size-fits-all approach to candidacy, rostering, first call, even resources available is not cutting it anymore.”

“Twenty-six colleges and universities are a source of strength for our Church that is barely tapped. There's a lot of evidence that students who do engage with the various initiatives to explore their faith on campus are a source for seminarians. We need them as a pipeline for leaders.”



## Suggested strategies and activities:

1. **In addition to the current competencies being developed for rostered leaders and SAMs, consider developing additional training that is needed immediately for the continuing education of rostered leaders and training of lay leaders.** We recommend standards for this training be developed by the Churchwide Organization and synods and delivered through an online training platform, at in-person training gatherings of rostered leaders and / or through curriculum that can be utilized in congregations with small groups or Bible study groups. This should include growing intercultural competence, understanding and empowering young people, being more welcoming and invitational, understanding context, listening well, grant writing and raising money, managing change and engaging in productive conflict. Growing in these competencies would likely be strengthened through an apprenticeship or mentoring model, where leaders who are skilled in an area coach or walk with leaders who are less skilled.
2. **Launch or partner with an existing organization to provide digital courses, microcredentials and certificates for high-quality, accessible training.** Several areas in the ELCA have already begun efforts to develop relevant digital platforms (during our review of the SAMs documents, ELCA



Senior rostered leaders (ages 60+) tend to have more confidence, satisfaction and energy than younger leaders.



The top issues that rostered leaders say negatively impact their ability to lead are political divisions and the emotional impact of the stress of their role. Leaders in urban congregations emphasize a lack of professional support, while leaders in rural areas are more likely to be affected by isolation.

**IN LISTENING SESSIONS WITH A CROSS-SECTION OF HUNDREDS OF ELCA LEADERS, A TOP THEME THAT EMERGED WAS TO DEVELOP SYSTEMS TO EDUCATE AND RESOURCE ROSTERED LEADERS.**



“In the ELCA, being Brown is a challenge. If you look at our list of those being called to pastor congregations, those not being called are overwhelmingly people of color or LGBTQIA+. We train and educate them, but don’t call them.”

“[Our values go] back to Martin Luther’s confession: There is no place in which you are not called. ... Being truly called sometimes is really messy and not fun. It comes out of a deep understanding and a deep commitment to grace and vocation.”



groups identified included Northern Rockies Institute of Theology, SELECT courses, Luther Seminary’s Faith + Lead and others), and other ministries and organizations outside the ELCA can provide guidance (such as Candler Foundry, Duke Divinity+ and FULLER Equip). A first step in this area might be convening representatives from each of the ELCA seminaries to strategize what is currently available, what is planned in the next two to three years and where there are remaining gaps. One or two of the seminaries might be able to lead the way in developing this training, or the current resources of one of the seminaries that is currently focused on providing degrees could be repurposed to focus more on lay-leader and nondegreed training.

3. **We strongly recommend that the Churchwide Organization play more of a guiding and coordinating role in developing SAM training and standards.** Our interviews and audit revealed that too many synods are reinventing the SAMs process, leading to duplication of resources and inefficiency. Building on a convening of synod leaders to explore possibilities with SAMs, the ELCA should determine national standards and accompanying resources. This might include the Churchwide Organization identifying bright spots and early innovators whose approach can be scaled or replicated.
4. **Invest in more embodied and experiential forms of engagement and learning (such as apprenticeship-based models or service-learning and field education).** Several people in our interviews expressed that the ELCA tends to emphasize cognitive and intellectual forms of training. This disproportionate focus can produce leaders who are not well-rounded or as resilient as needed in the daily realities of ministry. Over-intellectualized lessons may also struggle to engage or be meaningful for younger people, those who are neurodivergent or other more praxis-oriented leaders.



## In your church:

### Invest in practical ministry training

Seek out (or provide) training for yourself and lay leaders in areas like change management, conflict resolution, active listening, understanding younger generations, trauma-informed principles and cultural competency. Take inventory of existing skills represented by your team which could be better shared or utilized, including helpful expertise that, on the surface, doesn’t seem explicitly about ministry.

## NEXT STEPS

Thank you for taking the time to read this document. We hope it has offered you helpful perspectives, generated fresh ideas, suggested paths forward and even raised new questions.

It has been a significant undertaking to listen, learn, brainstorm, discuss and plan over the recent years that led to these recommendations. Key leaders at various levels of the ELCA will be reviewing this report, including the strategic recommendations embodied in the commitments. While we are confident efforts in the five commitments will strengthen ministry efforts in the ELCA, there are wider situational and structural conditions of the ELCA that also must be addressed for the ELCA to move forward. We have provided additional details on these structural recommendations to relevant stakeholders in the Churchwide Organization. Much is already in motion, and many more activities are yet to be catalyzed and launched.

While there are significant challenges to overcome, as well as significant opportunities to pursue, we are incredibly hopeful about the ELCA and believe that its best days can truly be ahead. We will certainly put our best efforts into next steps, and are grateful we follow a God of new life who shines light that darkness cannot overcome and offers wholeness, restoration and reconciliation.

In response to this document, we certainly invite you to pray for wisdom on the next steps. If you would like to provide feedback, please send questions and comments to [info@ELCA.org](mailto:info@ELCA.org).





# STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS PROCESS & SOURCES OF INPUT

Barna and Fuller designed a project with multiple sources of input and data that would provide a well-rounded and accurate picture of the ELCA. Recommendations included in the strategic recommendations reflect consistent themes we heard from multiple sources, including group listening sessions, project planning meetings, one-on-one qualitative interviews, national quantitative surveys of both the ELCA and the general population, review of historical and project documents, and much more.

## **Project Timeline:**

Barna and Fuller's work on this project began in September 2022 with a goal of helping the ELCA gain greater clarity and develop strategies to assist in fulfilling the ELCA's vision and key priorities. Various dates and milestones of the project are outlined below, which have led to the strategic recommendations in this report.

### **Fall 2022**

**Initial Discovery:** The Barna and Fuller teams began hosting discovery interviews and several in-person sessions with a variety of leaders across the ELCA to better understand the denominational context and goals for this work. This led to the development of an ELCA Transformation Team, recruitment of a Multigenerational Advisory Group and a report of short-term recommendations, ideas and other insights to calibrate next steps.

### **Winter and Spring 2023**

**Research Design:** Several in-person and virtual project sessions were conducted to begin to test hypotheses, design the quantitative survey instruments and refine project goals.

### Summer and Fall 2023

Surveys and Listening Sessions: Quantitative surveys went live with rostered leaders, laity and the general population beginning in July 2023. In addition, group listening sessions were hosted in person and virtually to solicit qualitative feedback on the needs, ideas and experiences of diverse groups across the ELCA.

### Winter 2024

Data Interpretation: Barna began to report on the data collected from the quantitative surveys, and the findings were reviewed by dozens of leaders across the ELCA. Based on the questions identified during this review and interpretation process, the data was revisited and additional analyses were conducted.

### Spring and Summer 2024

Ongoing Research and Listening: Based on additional questions that emerged from the data collected to date, Fuller conducted additional individual and group qualitative interviews to gain greater insight on identified project themes. Additional data was gathered and analyzed related to the training of SAMs and competency-based theological education.

### Fall 2024

Synthesis and Reporting: All project data and insights gathered since September 2022 were analyzed, synthesized and translated into themes and actionable recommendations contained in this report. This process included internal review by the Barna and Fuller teams, as well as multiple rounds of review and iteration with an external research company and ELCA leaders.

## Sources Informing the Strategic Recommendations:

The information contained in this report is not the result of any one survey, meeting, interview or perspective. The project was designed to draw the best contributions and methods from several different sources and adapt these insights into a robust set of recommendations. Following are the wide range of sources of information that contributed to the recommendations in this report.

- Review of background documents and other project information provided by the ELCA at the start of the project. This included internal data gathered by the ELCA, as well as past strategic plans and recommendations provided by other agencies and advisors.

- Ongoing discussions with core project team members and selected advisors, as well as a Multigenerational Advisory Team and Transformation Team, who provided insight along the way. Approximately 27 people participated in these teams and provided feedback on documents and at in-person project meetings.
- Initial discovery calls with 13 ELCA stakeholders (including young people, lay leaders, staff from the churchwide office, pastors and scholars, many of whom represent diverse perspectives and backgrounds).
- A one-day meeting with the Bishop's Advisory Council and several conversations with the ELCA Presiding Bishop.
- Presentations and feedback from synod gatherings and Church Council.
- Listening sessions conducted with 24 different groups (representing 450 people total), lasting around 60 minutes each (with some groups having multiple sessions). These groups included: COB - Conference of Bishops; A2B - Assistants to Bishops; DEMs - Directors of Evangelical Mission; Indigenous Ministry Communities and Partners; Network of ELCA Colleges and Universities; Network of ELCA Colleges and Universities Chaplains; Lutheran Services in America; CWO - Churchwide Organization; CWO Home Areas (IT, Service and Justice, Christian Community and Leadership, Synod Communicators and Strategic Communications); four sessions with synod leaders and pastors; Lutheran Outdoor Ministries; Lutheran Campus Ministry Board Meeting; Young Adult Transitions Retreat; Youth Summit.
- Three quantitative surveys executed by Barna. The ELCA oversaw inviting survey participation. The laity survey had 10,891 survey participants and was conducted July 17, 2023–January 2, 2024. The rostered minister survey had 875 participants and was conducted July 17, 2023–January 2, 2024. The general population survey had 2,472 participants and was conducted October 16–25, 2023. Sample sizes sometimes vary throughout the report due to data cleaning. The results from these surveys were discussed and evaluated at several rounds of meetings with ELCA stakeholders to include a community of interpreters.
- Review of SAM training processes for all ELCA synods. This resulted in a 111-page report.
- Interviews with 10 leaders identified by the ELCA's Candidacy Working Group to test and improve the quality of an approach to competency-based education. These interviews lasted 30–60 minutes.

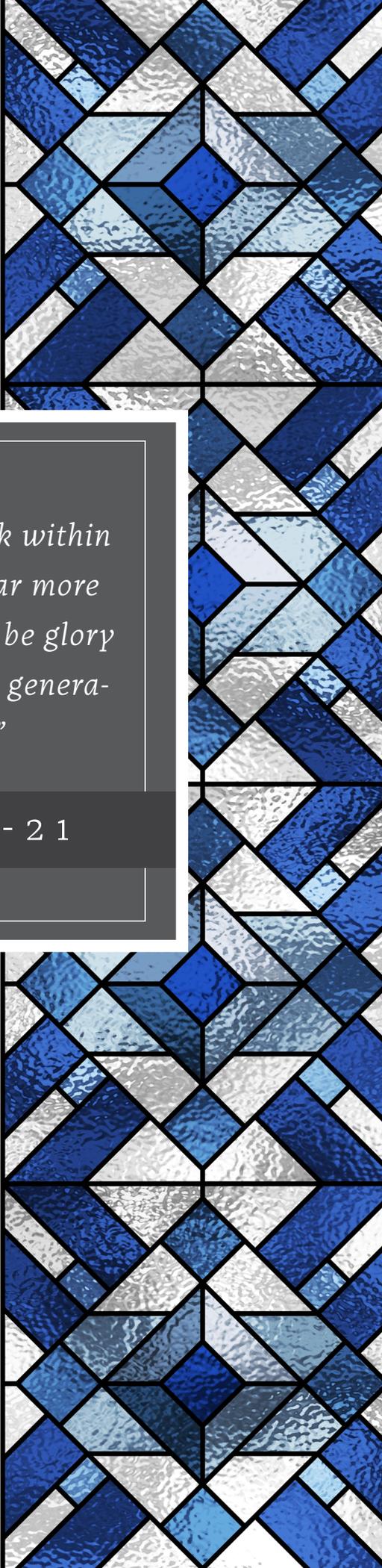
- Twenty-nine qualitative interviews, each lasting approximately 60–90 minutes, with individuals and groups who were identified by ELCA leadership as exemplary or informative around key areas of insight. Many of these conversations focused on leaders or ministries, referred to as “bright spots,” in the ELCA and can provide recommended paths forward for other leaders and churches.

A team of advisors across all levels of the Church were involved in the research and discussions that led to these recommendations. This diverse group of nominated leaders spanned the denomination, representing the depth and breadth of God’s people. They volunteered their time to share insights and stories, provide feedback and guidance and contribute their voice on behalf of those faithfully stewarding God’s vision on the ground.



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*“Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.”*

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