

2025 ELCA/ELEA
RESEARCH SURVEY WITH BARNAB GROUP



NURTURING FAITH STUDY SERIES



Evangelical
Lutheran Church
in America



ELEA

ELCA Schools & Learning Centers

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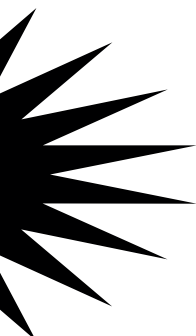
Compiled by the Rev. Dr. Ed Kay,
the Rev. Janelle Hooper
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INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the “Nurturing Faith” study series, which contextualizes the research the ELCA and ELEA have done in partnership with the Barna Group.

This series will explore how our churches and schools can nurture faith throughout our communities.

This first session will introduce the purpose and breadth of the whole study, which is founded on the importance of asking good questions.



Jesus was an expert question-asker! He knew how to get to the heart of the matter and what was most important for that particular context. Sometimes the roles were reversed and Jesus was the one folks were wondering about. One such time was when he was returning home to Nazareth.



• Read Mark 6:1-6

The neighbors thought they knew who Jesus was from their past experiences. Yet, Jesus changed so the people asked questions.

To talk more about this passage together, consider the following questions for discussion:

- Have you ever experienced someone “coming back home” after a prolonged time to find that life had changed them a bit? What was that like for you and them?
- How do you imagine Jesus answering their questions?
- What can the community’s response tell us about what they believed about Jesus?

INTRO CONT.



Watch the 5-minute introduction video
“Supporting Families Well:
An ELEA and ELCA Collaborative Approach”

*All videos can be found under “Study Resources”
at <https://elcaschools.org/nurturing-faith-communities/>

There’s a substantial amount here to learn and process. Let’s start with a few discussion questions:

- What finding or statistic surprised you the most?
- How do you think these findings would resonate within your own community?

Throughout the remainder of this study series, we’ll consider the research’s key findings. You can continue with “Further Study” options or close in prayer.

As we keep thinking about these questions from the community about what God was up to in Jesus’ ministry, let’s turn to the introduction of the research by watching the overview video together.

You may want to jot down some notes along the way, paying attention to insights or phrases that strike you.



God of all creation,
thank you for bringing us together. As we listen to one another and our neighbors, help us to be curious and open to the ways you are moving. Bless us in this season of discovery and possibility as we consider this research for our own context and move us ahead in faithful action. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

FURTHER STUDY

Introduction

We just heard the three **common themes** that surfaced during this research:

1. Creating Space for Caregivers to Connect
2. Growing More Welcoming and Inclusive of All
3. Balancing Quality Education and Faith Formation

REFLECTIONS:

- How can we design spaces where parents and caregivers feel truly seen, heard, and supported?
- How can we better reflect the diversity of our community in the leadership programs, and activities of the school?
- What challenges do families face in maintaining academic and spiritual growth at home and how can we help support that balance?

POTENTIAL IDEAS:

- Survey your community, using the “Understanding Young Families” assessment available in [Gloo's assessment library](#).
 - Watch this [5-minute video](#) to learn how to utilize the library.
 - [Step One: Setting Up a Gloo Account](#)
 - [Step Two: Access and Deployment](#)
- Establish small groups focused on shared parenting experiences. Consider:
 - *Faithful Families: Creating Sacred Moments at Home* by Traci Smith
 - *Growing With: Every Parent's Guide to Helping Teenagers and Young Adults Thrive in Their Faith, Family and Future* by Kara E. Powell and Steve Argue
- Develop online spaces for continuous connection and conversation between meetings.

SESSION A: REACHING COMMUNITIES AND FAMILIES

As we dig deeper into the research that the ELCA and ELEA have done in partnership with the Barna Group, one of the key findings was how unchurched people see the church, specifically ELCA congregations.

Those who have been Lutherans for some time may lose the perspective of a newcomer. This research gives us a particular challenge and hope for how we can share the love of Christ with people currently outside the church.

Called together early in Jesus' public ministry, the disciples accompanied Jesus from town to town, observing and participating in his work of healing, proclamation, forgiveness and even miracles. Yet repeatedly we hear these same disciples struggle to articulate what they are experiencing or who Jesus is to them.



• **Read Mark 8:27-38**

“Who do you say that I am?” is one of the core questions that we observe the disciples struggle to answer as they experience Jesus' ministry. Even when they seem to have the “right” answer, such as Peter in this passage, that confidence is short-lived. Even to the disciples, Jesus was often misunderstood.

- By redirecting the disciples and the crowd, Jesus shares the expectations of discipleship. What does “carrying your cross” look like for you / your community?
- What understanding of Jesus has changed for you over the years?
- How would someone unfamiliar with your church or school understand what your community believes about Jesus?

SESSION A CONT.



As we keep thinking about the ways various people experienced Jesus and articulated that understanding, let's turn to the video for this session which gets into more of the data for this key finding.

You may want to jot down notes along the way, paying attention to insights or phrases that strike you.



[Watch the 3-minute video "Reaching Communities and Families"](#)

There's a substantial amount here to learn and process. Let's start with a few discussion questions:

- How could your church introduce/reintroduce itself to unchurched neighbors?
- In your ministry context, how well do you think you are serving and meeting the needs of young parents?

You can continue with some of the "Further Study options" or close in prayer.

Steadfast God, thank you for the grace and space that accompany our own curiosities and wonderings about who you are and how we experience you in the world around us. May we gently reflect upon ourselves and how we might become more open and ready to welcome new people in our midst. Set upon us a spirit of hospitality and empathy. In Jesus' name, Amen.



FURTHER STUDY

Session A

“ELCA congregations want to be the neighborhood church ... but how do you get there? One of the ways is by providing relevant services that affect the daily lives of your neighbors. ...It might be a school. ...For us, it has been the key to being reflective of our neighborhood, relevant to our community and providing a service that meets these families at the point of their felt needs — and it’s so much fun.” —ELCA pastor, California

REFLECTIONS:

- How can we create environments where parents and caregivers can connect authentically and feel valued?
- What specific challenges related to school safety and mental health are families in our community experiencing, and how can we address them together?
- How can we introduce or reintroduce our church and school to the diverse families in our community in a way that feels authentic and inclusive?

POTENTIAL IDEAS:

- Host listening sessions with local families and community members to understand their perceptions of the church, what inclusivity means, and how they would like to engage with it. Consider [Interfaith America](#) or the [Kaleidoscope Institute](#).
- Include diverse voices in program leadership and ensure that events, sermons and educational materials reflect the experiences and identities of people from varied backgrounds.
- Create community playgrounds or parent-child events that intentionally welcome all families, including unchurched or underrepresented groups.
- Engage unchurched young parents by offering events that meet their expressed needs (e.g., quality education, positive role models for children) in a way that authentically reflects the church’s commitment to inclusion.

SESSION B: MODERN-DAY PARENTING

One theme of the ELCA/ELEA research project is the challenges of parenting today.

Many families prioritize providing a safe, loving and nurturing household environment and extending that to time spent away from home in schools and learning centers.

As ever-learning communities, we can choose to empathize with one another's struggles and stresses and rise to the opportunity to support what each needs to be present and successful.

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- **Read Acts 2:37-47**
(begin at 2:1 for more context)

Following Jesus' resurrection and ascension, the book of Acts details the experiences of the early followers who are learning from the disciples how to live into "the Way." Following the Pentecost experience and an impassioned sermon from Peter, the response of the gathered crowd gives us a peek into this Christian community.

- What do you think it was like to live in a community where resources from the whole were shared to meet the needs of individuals?
- How does this compare to our society?
- Can you remember/share a time when there was a need and the community provided it?

SESSION B CONT.



[Watch the 3-minute video
“Modern-day Parenting”](#)

There’s a substantial amount here to learn and process. Let’s start with a few discussion questions:

- How have you seen young parents struggling to receive the caregiving help they need?
- Are we fostering friendly, open-minded and creative learning environments for children?
- Are you optimistic that life for this generation of children will be better than your own?

You can continue with the “Further Study” options, or close in prayer.

As we keep thinking about the life of the early Christian community and how they cared for one another, let’s turn to the video for this session that gets into more of the data for this key finding.

You may want to jot down some notes along the way, paying attention to insights or phrases that strike you.



God in community, thank you for gathering us into relationship. We recognize the ways we have fallen short of meeting the needs of our neighbor and pray that you open our eyes to more clearly see those in need and to act with empathy and compassion. As in the early days of those who followed Jesus, may your Spirit continue to work in and through us in our own community. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

FURTHER STUDY

Session B

“I see parents struggling with trying to be the best parents they can be. We want parents to know that we can help them, not because we have the answers but because we're on this journey together.”

—ELCA pastor, Texas

REFLECTIONS:

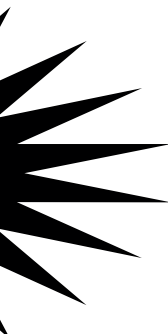
- What are the key struggles parents face today, and how can we as a church/school offer assistance to address those challenges?
- How might we foster deeper connections among parents, particularly those who may feel isolated or unsupported, such as unchurched parents?
- In what ways can we involve early childhood learning centers in building stronger parent networks within our community?

POTENTIAL IDEAS:

- Establish peer-led support groups where parents can share their experiences and challenges, providing a space for encouragement and practical advice.
- Facilitate a childcare exchange program where parents assist each other with caregiving responsibilities, easing the burden for those who may feel overwhelmed.
- Host regular workshops on parenting topics such as child safety, mental health and managing challenges such as social media.
- Organize events such as picnics or game nights that bring parents, caregivers and children together to build stronger community bonds and create lasting friendships.

SESSION C: THE PRIORITY OF EDUCATION

Among the many early childhood centers and schools connected with ELCA congregations, there are many ways that children grow and develop as children of God.



Teachers and leaders play a unique role in creating and supporting a community where these values are prioritized and centered, including the ways parents and caregivers can partner in their child's growth in life and faith.

A central aspect of Jesus' ministry was his role as a teacher. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus spends time with his disciples, who are eager to learn. Jesus' care for them tells of the gentle and clear way that Jesus would encourage and instruct them in the way of God.



• Read Luke 11:1-13

Jesus often taught through metaphor to extend the inclusive way of God into many situations. Teaching his disciples the Lord's Prayer was one of many educational moments"?

- If you had been with the disciples, what would you have asked Jesus about?
- Remember a time when you were eager to learn? Whom did you seek out?
- What important things have you passed along to others?

SESSION C CONT.



[Watch the 4-minute video
"The Priority of Education"](#)

There's a substantial amount here to learn and process. Let's start with a few discussion questions:

- What are the "connection points" for your church/school? Chapel, drop-off/pickup, doughnuts/coffee, Bible study?
- Do you prioritize valuable education or spiritual development? How can you work toward a healthier balance of the two?

You can continue with the "Further Study" options or close in prayer.

As we keep thinking about the way of Jesus that also prioritizes teaching and growth, let's turn to the video for this session, which gets into more of the data for this key finding.

You may want to jot down notes along the way, paying attention to insights or phrases that strike you.

God of all times and places, we thank you for the gift of knowledge and for those who encourage and support us in our growth. Bless educators that they might be faithful in their purpose and steadfast in their commitment to those entrusted to their care. We are grateful for those who have taught us, and may we pass along that gift to others. In Jesus' name, Amen.



FURTHER STUDY

Session C

“Through our preschool education program, my hope is that more school families would discover the value and the gift that being part of a faith community can bring.”

—ELCA pastor, California

REFLECTIONS:

- How can we ensure that our emphasis on academic excellence is balanced with strong, impactful faith formation?
- What does it look like to integrate faith into everyday education in a way that feels authentic and relevant to students?
- How can we better engage parents and caregivers in their child's academic and spiritual development?

POTENTIAL IDEAS:

- Develop interdisciplinary approaches in which faith principles are seamlessly integrated into academic subjects.
- Offer family faith-formation activities, such as devotions or community service projects, that complement the academic learning at school.
- Create spaces for students to reflect on their learning and faith journey together, promoting both intellectual and spiritual growth.
- Partner with parents to provide resources that foster faith-based conversations and activities at home.

SESSION D: PERCEPTIONS OF THE ELCA

Nearly *half* of churchgoers are familiar with the ELCA and generally view it positively, especially among young families and the LGBTQIA+ community.

Among nonchurchgoers, that recognition drops to 4%. Clearly, we need to understand how our church denomination is perceived in the wider culture.

This portion of research demonstrates Barna's survey of a broad segment of American society to provide our congregations, faith communities and early childhood centers with a better sense of how to share our Lutheran faith in the future.

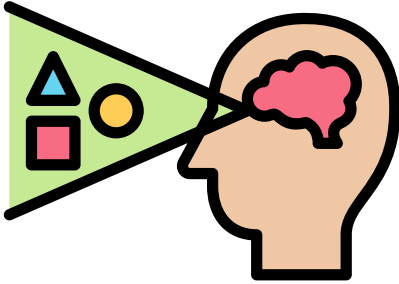


• Read John 3:1-21

Jesus was approached by Nicodemus, a member of the established religious order called the Pharisees. There were disagreements and misunderstandings about who Jesus was and what he was about. Puzzled by what he was hearing, Nicodemus approached Jesus on his own to learn more.

- Do you think Nicodemus learned what he was looking for? Why or why not?
- What questions might you have asked Jesus if you were in Nicodemus' place?
- When you need answers to big questions, to whom do you look?

SESSION D CONT.



As we keep thinking about how people understand the nature of Jesus and reconcile it to their own perceptions, let's turn to the video for this session, which gets into more of the data for this key finding.

You may want to jot down notes along the way, paying attention to insights or phrases that strike you.



[Watch the 4-minute video "Perceptions of the ELCA"](#)

Let's discuss a few questions:

- How can you improve overall awareness of the ELCA in your community?
- Do you think your ministry is perceived as "a positive influence on the community"?
- How can you strengthen The LGBTQIA+ community's awareness and favorable opinion of the ELCA"?

You can continue with the "Further Study" options or close in prayer.



God of Relationships, thank you for the ways you abide among us, helping us to be neighbors to each another. When we are unsure, lead us to be curious about one's actions and motivations. May we be true to our faith and our values, rooted in the way of your unconditional love and grace. In Jesus' name, amen.

FURTHER STUDY

Session D:

Perceptions of the ELCA

“The Lutheran Church is the oldest Protestant denomination. But if there's any kind of a legacy between then and now, I would say it is serving young families and providing a space that is nurturing for them, where they will learn the faith, character, and courage. ...Growing up to be the kind of faithful adults that the planet so desperately needs.” —ELCA pastor, Washington

REFLECTIONS:

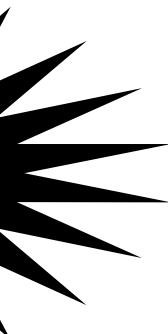
- What are three words you would use to describe your Lutheran faith?
- What might be unique to Lutheranism, compared to other faith traditions?
- What types of events demonstrate ELCA values to you? (World Hunger work, ELCA Youth Gathering)

POTENTIAL IDEAS:

- Learn more about our denomination at www.elca.org/about
- Search the internet to learn how other faith traditions describe themselves.
- Review your mission statement. How does it reflect Lutheran core values, and how could you promote that message?
- Claim what sets you apart in your community. As a school, lean into your role as a Lutheran school. As a congregation, communicate the gifts of Lutheranism that speak within your context.
- Consider using some of the ELCA's “Lutheran Identity” series, found at:

www.ministrylinks.online/lutheran-identity

SESSION E: KNOWING OUR NEIGHBORS



Historically, members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America have worked to be daring servants of Christ in their communities, deeply convicted by the desire to serve and love their neighbors. In this work, the ELCA strives to do God's work of restoring and reconciling communities in Jesus' name throughout the world, including the communities in which their churches and schools are located.

Judaism stresses hospitality to strangers and kin so that everyone is a “neighbor.” Whether we live next to them, we work for them or they work for us, the story from 2 Kings teaches us to pay closer attention to who our neighbors are and how we can meet their needs.

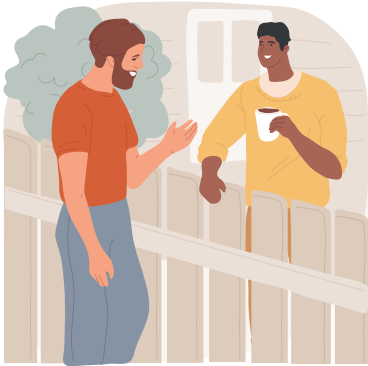


• Read 2 Kings 5

The slave girl from Israel is able to see Naaman's family as neighbors; Naaman's family, not so much. He expects that if he were to be healed, it would be by his own gods, not his neighbor's. It is the nameless girl who bravely speaks up and gives testimony to God's healing powers for the sake of loving one's neighbor.

- How might the girl have learned from her family / her faith how to recognize a neighbor and care for their needs?
- How might we overlook or make excuses for neighbors due to age, status, economics?
- What could it look like to bravely speak up and act on behalf of our neighbor's needs?

SESSION E CONT.



As we keep thinking about how people understand the nature of Jesus and reconcile it to their own perceptions, let's turn to the video for this session, which gets into more of the data for this key finding.

You may want to jot down notes along the way, paying attention to insights or phrases that strike you.



[Watch the 4-minute video "Knowing Our Neighbors"](#)

Let's discuss a few questions:

- How can you improve overall awareness of the ELCA in your community?
- Do you think your ministry is perceived as "a positive influence on the community"?
- How can you strengthen the LGBTQIA+ community's awareness and favorable opinion of the ELCA"?

You can continue with the "Further Study" options or close in prayer.

God of relationships, *thank you for the ways you abide among us, helping us to be neighbor to each another. When we are unsure, inspire our curiosity about others' actions and motivations. May we be true to our faith and our values, rooted in the way of your unconditional love and grace. In Jesus' name, amen.*



FURTHER STUDY

Session E

“Our pastor is doing something called Hope Talks. It's mental health tips and tools for twos, teens and beyond. She has a panel of educators, child psychologists and others coming to do a community event in the wake of the pandemic. How are we helping children and families with their social, emotional needs and their strong mental health? She's making a real effort to be a community resource.” —ELCA school director, Arizona

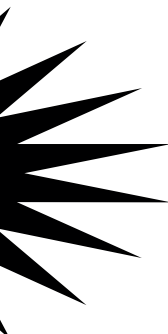
REFLECTIONS:

- What is your church/school known for? And how might you share that?
- What healing do you think would be made possible by knowing your neighbors better?
- It's hard for staff to care for those on their books much less extend energy to folks outside. What priorities might need shifting to allow for that to happen?

POTENTIAL IDEAS:

- Intentionally invest in getting to know parents and caregivers through one-on-one conversations, having both school directors and pastors routinely present at child drop-off/pickup.
- Create an internal log of families in the preschool that do not have active support networks locally; ensure that teachers and staff are aware of these families and that they go above and beyond to understand their needs to ensure that these families are served well.
- Using the “Understanding Young Families” assessment created by the ELEA, routinely survey the needs of parents. Address expressed desires. Schedule co-hosted focus groups of parents and volunteers to receive candid feedback.

SESSION F: SUPPORTING THE LGBTQIA+ COMMUNITY



Many parents and caregivers who choose ELCA schools for their children are not motivated to do so because of their religious beliefs or practices. Yet through this decision, their families are exposed to Christian leaders and teachers who share what being part of meaningful faith communities can look like. Implicitly, parents and caregivers are taking note of how their family is welcomed, accepted and celebrated in these spaces.

Since most folks do not find their way to church through worship and because Christian churches have intentionally disavowed the LGBTQIA+ community in the past, expressions of welcome need to go above and beyond saying, “All are welcome to worship at our church.”



• Read Galatians 3:27-28

The early church wrestled with how to be faithful after Jesus’ ascension. The people of Galatia were curious how to be a follower of Christ. Did they still have to follow previous laws? The apostle Paul writes that there is a new freedom in Christianity that does not segregate. The core commandments are still key, yet Jesus has expanded the circle of faith.

- Does your church/school have a mission statement or core values? What are they?
- The ELCA has had to apologize to Jews for Martin Luther’s disparaging remarks. Does your faith community have a history it needs to move forward from in a new direction?
- What does “Love Wins” or “Love is Love” or “Y’all means All” mean to you?

SESSION F CONT.



As we keep thinking about how our faith community can intentionally welcome families who are LGBTQIA+, let's turn to the video for this session, which gets into more of the data for this key finding.

You may want to jot down notes along the way, paying attention to insights or phrases that strike you.



[Watch the 4-minute video "Supporting LGBTQIA+"](#)

Let's discuss a few questions:

- The survey shows that the LGBTQIA+ community is open to ELCA ministry, especially as it relates to raising a family. What about our theology might be most welcoming?
- When have you felt like an outsider, and what did it take to convince you that the group was now worth joining?



God, our Mother and Father, thank you for the many ways you express your love. Guide us toward intentionally welcoming all families who are looking for a spiritual home. In Jesus' name, amen.

You can continue with the "Further Study" options or close in prayer.

FURTHER STUDY

Session F

“Many people move out here for good schooling. Now, we see far more gay and lesbian folks in our community because they're having children and wanting to have their kids in the good schools.

This community used to be referred to as the bubble of all white, conservative, rich people.

That's not the case anymore.” —ELCA pastor,
Texas

REFLECTIONS:

- What steps can we take to ensure that our school or congregation actively embraces and includes people from diverse backgrounds?
- How can we become more sensitive to the needs of LGBTQIA+ families as well as racially and culturally diverse communities?
- What barriers (intentional or unintentional) exist within our school or church that might hinder inclusivity?

POTENTIAL IDEAS:

- Engage with [ReconcilingWorks](#).
- Conduct listening sessions or surveys to better understand the needs of diverse families inside and outside the school or congregation.
- Provide diversity training for staff, teachers and congregational leaders to foster an environment of inclusion and understanding.
- Celebrate diverse cultures through events, music and food, ensuring that families feel their heritage is acknowledged and valued.
- Incorporate diverse voices in curriculum development and in church or school programming decisions.

CONCLUSION

Often, in ministry, we guess what people need, what times would work best and how to share God's love in this context.

We hope this data removes the guesswork from your ministry decisions and allows you to focus on the "how" of implementing what you now know.

Please know that our prayers are with you daily. You have the gifts needed to share the good news of God's love and grace.

We are in this together!



FIND MORE RESOURCES AT:

elca.faithformation.org

elcaschools.org

elca.org

*With gratitude for your ministry,
Ed, Janelle and Cory*