WATERLIFE JOURNAL

The News Magazine of the Western Iowa Synod ELCA

NOVEMBER 2026



WAITING FOR LIGHT

ADVENT HOPE IN ANXIOUS TIMES

RURAL ISOLATION AND HOLIDAY DEPRESSION

BLUE CHRISTMAS: HOLDING SPACE FOR GRIEF

CHRISTMAS EVE CREATIVITY FOR SMALL CONGREGATIONS

WISYNOD.ORG

from Bishop Scott Dalen

The day I sat down to write this, my exercise routine involved "24 minutes of cardio." On these days, I get to choose my own adventure...which is almost always going for a walk around the neighborhood, and often my wife joins me. Today, I rolled out somewhat early and emerged in my exercise clothes about 6:30am. "Time for a walk."

My wife looked at me for a second and replied, "Its still dark outside." She wasn't wrong. As we set out on our walk, it was still really dark, with only the faintest trace of dawn showing in the east.

My friends, the days are getting shorter...and I don't like it.

Let me shift gears. In my last 2 homes, even when its dark, it isn't THAT dark. There are a fair number of lights on the street where we live now. And when I still lived in Underwood, there were lights EVERYWHERE. It was practically day light all night long. But there is a place that I get to once a year where it... gets...DARK! Rainbow Trail Lutheran Bible camp in the mountains of southern Colorado.

Now, I've been in dark places before, but I recall a moment that happened overnight a handful of years ago. I woke up in our cabin, and I couldn't see. It wasn't just dim...I was blind. And something happened to me that I had never experienced before and I have never experienced since. I got claustrophobic. It was terrifying. Even though I knew exactly where I was, that terror griped me and threw me for a loop.

UNTIL...I reached down beside my bunk, feeling around on the floor until I found my phone. I quickly clicked the button to turn on the screen...and instantly the presence of that small amount of light was enough to make me feel normal again.

I felt utterly lost and scared in the dark, until the light showed up.

"What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."
(John 1:3b-5)



BISHOP SCOTT

Our theme for this month, “Waiting for light,” points in this direction. The days are getting shorter and the nights longer. Early in November we’ll hit daylight savings again (don’t ask me if we go into it our come out of it because I can never remember), and we’ll find its dark by 5pm.

This time of year, this season that we’re entering into is a difficult one. I’m sure there’s scientific reasons behind it, but I think its safe to say that the vast majority of us are solar powered. And all this darkness, which is going to get worse before its gets better, it wears on us. If you’re anything like me, you’re already looking forward a few months to the realization that, even though its still winter, the days are getting longer. We’re ALREADY waiting for it.

Hand in hand with all this, we’re also moving towards Advent, the season in which we’re literally WAITING with anticipation for the celebration of Christ’s birth, the Light shining in the Darkness. It can be hard to wait, especially when things seem to be getting darker all the time (pun intended?). I think the world itself was waiting for the light to show up the first time around, roughly 2000 years ago. Likewise, the world and everything (and everyone?) in it, is perhaps waiting for a sign of that light as well.

This is where we come in Western Iowa.

Because we ARE the body of Christ…and we are a reflection of the light of Christ which has never gone out, even in the times when it might not feel like it. We reflect the light when we show up for one another, when we show grace and mercy for our neighbors, when we feed the hungry, when we are people of love and compassion. THAT is the light that this world is so desperate for. And you know what…

That kind of light…its disruptive. It flips the whole world on its ear. That’s the type of thing that looks at a world defined by “might makes right” and says “I don’t think so. Let me show you what God has made possible.”

What do you think Western Iowa? Can we be light in darkness? Can we reflect the perfect light out into a dark world that might not understand it? I think we can.

And here’s the thing, sometimes that very action, that intentional choice to be different in the world, sometimes that begins to brighten up the world around us, even if we don’t notice it. While I was out on that walk this morning, it started dark. But gradually it got brighter and brighter outside…because when light enters into the picture, darkness loses. It is inevitable.

May we all work towards that, because the world is waiting for light. Let’s reflect it.

In Christ
Bishop Scott

CHRISTMAS EVE CREATIVITY FOR SMALLER CONGREGATIONS

New Christmas traditions don't have to be bigger. Small churches are full of big love.



DIRECTOR FOR EVANGELICAL MISSION
REVEREND MELISSA PICKERING

Every church has that one perfect Christmas tradition. I bet you are thinking about your own childhood days on Christmas Eve, and the images are forming in your head of candles, or the nativity costumes, or the full pews singing Silent Night. (Sidenote: That's my favorite Christmas tradition that I grew up with, the lighting of the candles throughout the congregation and the acapella singing of the last verse of Silent Night together.) Or maybe it was the children standing in the front of the church on Christmas Eve presenting the Christmas story for all to hear.

For years these traditions have been what grounds us in our celebrations in our congregations. They were what we did, year after year. We could always count on that one special thing happening as we gathered together on December 24. It reminded us that we were a part of this special place, this special night in this great big world.

But something has changed. Fewer children are coming to church, we have fewer people packing our pews, our budgets have gotten tighter. Or maybe the person who has always organized the live nativity has said that she just can't do it any more. Suddenly we are asking what do we do about Christmas?

As churches learn how to serve with fewer resources, the sustainability of these big Christmas productions or week-long celebrations are being scaled back, or are even fading away. And that leaves many of us asking how we keep Christmas the way it has always been. But maybe the more appropriate question in this time and place is this: what new, meaningful traditions can we create in this season of change?

A good rule of thumb when discovering new traditions is to keep them simple. Congregations need something meaningful that can also be repeated year after year, something that will be remembered, and something that is easy to invite others to be a part of. Naming a past tradition that no longer fits might be a great place to start. What made this tradition meaningful? What attracts people to this moment in our church? Who was a part of this tradition? Brainstorm other events that could still capture the Christmas spirit in the same way. Families are busy and we need to think about ways that we can tailor events for our members. Little prep work or rehearsal time is a necessity for our volunteers and our people.

Here are some ideas that can be adapted for congregations that are looking for new Christmas traditions.

- Keep Christmas Eve simple. Sing familiar carols, share scripture and short message, and light candles together. Include children in the service, allowing them to help in fitting ways. Offer cookies and cocoa after worship, inviting guests to share their Christmas memories and traditions with one another.
- Invite congregation members to bring in a paper ornament to decorate the sanctuary Christmas tree. Families can write prayers, or blessings to share on their ornament before placing it on the tree.
- Pick a community non-profit organization to give a donation to. Rather than using the Christmas season as a time to fundraise for the church, use this time to give to another ministry.
- We all want Christmas goodies to share during the holidays. On a specific Sunday, invite everyone to bring in their favorite Christmas treat to share with others (homemade or store bought). Create goodie boxes to bring to homebound friends, first responders and neighbors.
- During the weeks leading up to Christmas, host a soup and sandwich Christmas around the table event. Members of the congregation and community gather around the table, share a meal and stories with one another. Specifically, invite children to be a part of this event.
- Host a free Christmas movie night, either at the church or partner with a movie theater if there is one nearby.
- People love to sing Christmas carols and share in the joy that music brings during the holidays. Plan a hymn sing outside of worship times.
- Go Christmas caroling! Walk through the town, or plan a sleigh ride through town, singing the old favorites.
- Decorate Christmas cookies together after worship. All ages will enjoy reminiscing about their frosting experiences, and sharing in a tasty treat.
- Christmas programs are deeply loved by congregations, but when the numbers are dwindling, changes need to be made. There are many programs that are available that are no practice programs, small church designed and are shared for no cost.

New Christmas traditions don’t have to be bigger. Small churches are full of big love. Find ways to share that love and connect with those both inside and outside of your church building. As seasons change, so do we as People of God, and so does our ministry. Celebrate how things used to be, and embrace where God is leading your congregation this Christmas season.



RURAL ISOLATION AND HOLIDAY DEPRESSION

Long Roads, Short Days: Holiday Loneliness in the Country

The holidays are often seen as a time for full tables and busy gatherings. But for many people in rural Iowa, the season can mean an empty chair, a long gravel road, and darkness before dinner. While loneliness during the holidays is not just a rural issue, living in the country can make it feel even stronger. It helps to talk about this now, in October, so there is time to get ready.

What the holidays stir up

A November 2025 poll from the American Psychiatric Association found that 41% of adults expected more holiday stress than the year before, up from 28% in 2024. The biggest worries were missing someone (48%) and the cost of gifts (46%), followed by family tensions (32%) and loneliness (31%). For many, the holidays are a time to remember those who are no longer there.

The U.S. Surgeon General's 2023 advisory explains the difference between isolation, which means having few people around or few chances to see them, and loneliness, which is the painful gap between the connection we want and what we have. Someone can feel one without the other. The advisory lists rural residents as being at higher risk.

Why the country makes it harder

A 2019 article in the Rural Health Information Hub's Rural Monitor shared how geography and weather can cause isolation: friends and activities are far away, there is no public transportation, and icy winter roads keep people at home. Even a senior center just a few blocks away can feel too far if the sidewalk is slippery. The article also pointed out that rural culture can make things harder. Many people value privacy, try to stay strong, and may not want to ask for help. Still, there is hope. Communities do not have to start from nothing. They can build on the networks of neighbors, churches, and schools that are already there.

Farm families face extra challenges. The Western Region Agricultural Stress Assistance Program (WRASAP), which is supported by the USDA, says that farmers deal with more ongoing stress, money worries, long hours, and isolation. Shorter days can make depression more likely. Seasonal affective disorder (SAD) is a type of depression that starts in late fall or winter. It is not a sign of weakness. The National Institute of Mental Health says SAD is a real illness, not just the usual 'winter blues.' Iowa's I-CASH program explained this spring that suicide rates among farmers are still higher than in many other jobs, and rural areas often have less access to mental health care.

What helps

The advice from these sources is practical and easy to follow.

- Say what you feel. Mayo Clinic staff suggest that it is better to admit sadness and grief than to pretend to be cheerful. It is okay to cry, and it is okay if this year's holiday is not the same as last year's.

- Get some morning light. WRASAP recommends spending 15 to 30 minutes outside within the first hour after waking up, even if it is cloudy. Another option is to use a 10,000-lux light box for 20 to 30 minutes. Farmers, who are usually up early, can add this to their morning chores.
- Make plans with others. WRASAP suggests setting up small, enjoyable activities during the slow winter days, like having coffee with a neighbor or picking a 'winter check-in buddy.' Mayo Clinic also recommends joining community or religious events and volunteering, which can help you make new friends and feel better.
- Be kind to yourself and set realistic expectations. Plan ahead, keep to a budget, learn to say no, and accept that the holidays do not have to be perfect. I-CASH's stress postcard shares simple tips: treat yourself gently, take deep breaths, stretch, write in a journal, stay active, and talk to someone you care about.
- Know when to ask for extra help. If you feel down for more than two weeks, WRASAP recommends getting a mental health check. Telehealth now makes it easier for people who cannot leave the farm to talk to a counselor.

A word for congregations

The Surgeon General's advisory says faith communities can help people reconnect. In a rural church, this might mean giving someone a ride to Advent or Christmas Eve services, calling someone who lost a spouse this year, dropping off a meal and staying to visit, or inviting a farmer to join your table. One clinician in the Rural Monitor article said that this work is not just for professionals. It relies on neighbors who pay attention.

If you or someone you know needs help

- 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline: call, text or chat 988, any hour. Veterans: dial 988, then press 1.
- Crisis Text Line: text HOME to 741741.
- Iowa Concern (Iowa State University Extension and Outreach): 1-800-447-1985, with chat. Free, confidential help with stress, legal and financial questions.
- Farm families, personal assistance: 1-833-999-FARM (3276), 24 hours a day.
- AgriStress Helpline: 833-897-2474, 24/7, 365 days a year.
- Your Life Iowa: (855) 581-8111 or text (855) 895-8398. Free, confidential support for mental health, alcohol, drugs and gambling.
- SAMHSA National Helpline: 1-800-662-4357. Free, confidential treatment referral.
- 211: statewide referral line for local services.

Sources: American Psychiatric Association, "Americans Are More Anxious About the Holidays" (Nov. 18, 2025) · Office of the U.S. Surgeon General, Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation (2023) · Kay Miller Temple, MD, "Social Isolation and Loneliness: Insights from Rural Clinical Providers and Other Experts," Rural Monitor, Rural Health Information Hub (July 10, 2019) · Allen Bush, "Seasonal Affective Disorder – Getting Through the Darker Winter Months," Western Region Agricultural Stress Assistance Program (Nov. 18, 2025) · National Institute of Mental Health, Seasonal Affective Disorder fact sheet · Iowa Center for Agricultural Safety and Health (I-CASH), "Spring 2026: Coping with Stress" · Mayo Clinic Staff, "Stress, Depression and the Holidays: Tips for Coping."

Blue Christmas Resources

The season of lights and carols comes around every year, whether we feel ready or not. For some of us, Advent brings an empty chair at the table, a tough diagnosis, a relationship that feels stretched thin, or a future that suddenly seems unclear. When you are grieving, all the cheer can feel like too much.

Many churches have found ways to care for those who carry heavy hearts during this season. Some call these gatherings Blue Christmas, Longest Night, or Service of Remembering. They often happen near the winter solstice, the longest night of the year.

These services are gentle and quiet. The lights are low, and there is space for silence, a few readings, and maybe a hymn or two. You might light a candle for someone you miss, write a name on a slip of paper, or hold a smooth stone and set it down as a prayer. Simple, hands-on acts like these help us give shape to our grief when words are not enough.

At their heart, these services remind us of the promise: the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. We do not have to rush from sorrow to joy. God stays with us in the dark, and so do the people around us.

Below, you will find liturgies, prayers, and planning guides to help you and your congregation offer this kind of service, whether it is your first time or you have done it many times before.

A Blue Christmas Service by Ray Beaver
A complete worship service for those who find Christmas a difficult season. Downloadable as RTF or PDF. Licensed under Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 3.0, so it is the most freely reusable full document.
http://www.feautor.org/uploads/contributions/12033647342/longest_night-1.pdf

The Longest Night Service Or Blue Christmas By Jim Taylor
Complete service with instructions for presiders and organizers, a three-part structure with different levels of participation, and sample announcement language. Copyright 2003, Northwest Synod of Wisconsin Resource Center.
http://www.feautor.org/uploads/contributions/12033642499/longest_night.pdf

An Advent Brunch Program
Liturgy to use with a meal, created by a congregation in Wisconsin.
http://www.feautor.org/uploads/contributions/12033642499/longest_night.pdf

Service of the Longest Night
Complete service with instructions for presiders and organizers, a three-part structure with different levels of participation, and sample announcement language. Copyright 2003, Northwest Synod of Wisconsin Resource Center.
https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5bc35f5d7980b31e1c91ba1c/t/5fe0f7be0c0dc46ab33f34bc/1608579007143/2020-longest-night-service.pdf

"Liturgy for Blue Christmas," Rev. Josh Evans
Full worship folder available from the page, including a thanksgiving at the table and invitation to communion written for the liturgy. Also draws on a prayer of the day from Augustana Lutheran Church in Omaha. Reuse is welcome with attribution, and copyrighted pieces need proper permission. Note: It does include a hymn by David Haas. Replacement recommended. https://pastorjoshevans.com/2019/12/09/liturgy-for-blue-christmas/

The Longest Night: A Blue Christmas Service
A service template for a “Longest Night” or “Blue Christmas” gathering—a gentle, contemplative service that honors grief, welcomes lament, and makes room for hope.
https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ucLN9sBKRs5nSfnw7Bjv7GKzGby6hCgR/view

Blue Christmas Worship Resource Index
A list of the resources on re:Worship suitable for use at a “Blue Christmas” or “Longest Night” worship service.
https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2012/11/blue-christmas-worship-resource-index.html

Blue Christmas Resources
From the United Methodist Church in the United Kingdom. A resource roundup page that points to a complete liturgy, the hymn "This is the longest night" by Mary Louise Bringle, and other links.
https://media.methodist.org.uk/media/documents/Blue_Christmas_liturgy_Hush_the_Noise_resources.pdf

"Blue Christmas with ACNA prayers" (Anglican Church in North America)
A PDF order of worship opening with John 1:1-5.https://networks.anglicanchurch.net/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Blue-Christmas-with-ACNA-prayers.pdf

“A Service of Worship for the Longest Night" 2025
Useful for seeing how a finished bulletin looks, including the call to worship and role assignments.
https://fbcmartinsville.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/Longest-Night-Bulletin-December-21-2025.pdf



mage by starline on Magnific

Getting to Know Dominique Fritz-Rapsch The Western Iowa Synod Staff

Blessed to be a blessing...

While we serve together as a unified staff, this month we continue to share the gifts of dedicated people who have joined the staff since September 2025.

Every staff team has someone whose work keeps everything else running, and at the Western Iowa Synod that person is Dominique, our Bookkeeper. Ask how Dominique came to the role and the answer comes with a grin: peer pressure. Pastor Fritz-Rapsch, Rebekah, and an honorable mention to Bishop Dalen all nudged, and then nudged again, until Dominique could see the good that could be done for the staff and for the synod as a whole. “Sometimes a calling can materialize as a push,” Dominique says.

The work behind the work

Most of what Dominique does never shows up in a Sunday bulletin or a synod assembly report, and that doesn’t make it any less important. Accurate financial reporting keeps the synod in good standing with the churchwide organization of the ELCA, and it lets the synod give the best possible support to the congregations in its care. The work is steady, detailed, and largely unseen. It is also a quiet form of faithfulness.

Dominique didn’t arrive at accounting through a degree. The path ran through Linda, a first accounting manager who spotted potential in someone working in a completely different environment. She taught the basics and, more importantly, instilled a mindset of accuracy. “I’m thankful to this day for her patience and direction,” Dominique says, “as she created the solid foundation I build on to this day.”

Recharging

Off the clock, Dominique’s interests lean happily nerdy: video and card gaming, plus collecting. Dominique and a husband share a century-old house they enjoy renovating, along with travel, biking, and catching up on culturally significant TV they missed the first time around. These hobbies, Dominique says, provide the strength to open Excel for another week. Whether spreadsheets belong in ministry, the reader can decide.

A work in progress

Asked for a story from a congregation visit or synod event, Dominique is honest: it’s too early. As the only staff member without regular contact with congregations, Dominique hasn’t collected enough experiences yet and would like to revisit the question down the road. Consider this an open invitation to congregations to change that.

What the pews should know

If someone in the pews knew synod staff only by title, what would Dominique want them to understand? “I always say that accounting is mostly convincing Excel to behave, and I think that continues to be true.” Dominique admits that “Excel babysitter” doesn’t have quite the same ring as “Accountant.”

Reasons for hope

Dominique is clear-eyed about the road ahead. Iowa is experiencing population shifts, changing policies, and economic headwinds. Still, Dominique sees “only potential” in what the synod, and especially its congregations, can do for their communities. That potential is realized by returning to what the church does best: connecting people, reaching out to neighbors with welcome, and working together to build something better for everyone.

Dominique closes with words from the late Senator Paul Wellstone: “We all do better when we all do better.” Then comes the invitation: “Let’s come together and build each other up into a wide, supportive community that can overcome anything the world throws against us.”



SYNOD BOOKKEEPER DOMINIQUE FRITZ-RAPSCH

WESTERN IOWA SYNOD STAFF

Reverend Scott Dalen, *Bishop*

Reverend Cara LQ Knutson, *Assistant to the Bishop for Mobility, Call Process, and Congregational Care*

Reverend Chip Borgstadt, *Assistant to the Bishop for Candidacy*

Reverend Melissa Pickering, *Director for Evangelical Mission*

Julie Cook, *Office Administrator*

Rebekah Elder, *Synod Events Coordinator*

Dominique Fritz-Rapsch, *Synod Bookkeeper*

Whisper Hope ...

In my past columns for the WaterLife Journal I spent time reviewing why the church should be concerned about health, our scriptural call to healing, and how that was modeled by Christ. So, how do we live out the call to care for our own health and encourage others when we are not in a state of wellbeing? As a reminder, the World Health Organization defines health as “a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity”. Who among us is not in need of improving our state of well-being, as least some days and in some ways?

Let’s begin, this month, talking about the obvious gifts individuals and/or a church family can offer another. Many are things you may already be doing: writing a card, text or email with words of concern or support; sitting and listening to the challenges and heartaches of another; taking a meal to someone in need; offering to pick up groceries or run other errands; bringing a prayer shawl when you visit; praying with and for others; driving someone to an appointment; simply sitting beside another --- no words spoken --- simply being present; or others. What do you offer that could be added to this list?

We each have a role to play in nurturing health and healing in others. Whatever we do, it’s a way of being Christ to others. Each offers a way of expressing your heartfelt concern and support. Does it require something of us to do these things? Absolutely, but probably very little compared to the emotional, physical, and/or spiritual distress being carried by the one you serve.

I share this quote that speaks to our role in supporting one another on life’s journey: “Here's to the bridge-builders, the hand-holders, the light-bringers, those extraordinary souls wrapped in ordinary lives who quietly weave threads of humanity into an inhumane world. They are the unsung heroes in a world at war with itself. They are the whisperers of hope that peace is possible. Look for them in this present darkness. Light your candle with their flame. And then go. Build bridges. Hold hands. Bring light to a dark and desperate world. Be the hero you are looking for. Peace is possible. It begins with us.” L.R. Knost

Sometimes the darkness in the world is within our own bodies and spirits. Peace within and without is possible and often a quiet presence, generous love, and a heart reaching out to give hope is part of someone finding healing. Today and every day, whisper hope, hold hands, and bring light.

Carol DeSchepper, RN, Faith Community Nurse and Spiritual Director
First Lutheran Church, Milford, IA



Carol DeSchepper, RN,
Faith Community Nurse and
Spiritual Director
First Lutheran Church,
Milford, IA



ELCA World Hunger – Daily Bread Grant Announcement

Daily Bread Grant funding is available in the form of a one-time $500 grant and is meant to supplement existing public serving food-based programs at ELCA congregations and ministries.

Who is eligible to apply?

- ELCA Congregations
- New Starts
- SAWCs
- Strategic Ministries
- Congregations in Development
- SAOMs
- ELCA Campus Ministries

What is the timeline to apply?

- Request form open: Thursday, October 1st – Wednesday, October 21st, 2026
- Award notifications shared with applicants: November 2026
- Banking & payment disbursement: December 2026

Is the application available before October 1st?

No, but you can find some of the questions to prepare on our website at https://elca.org/dailybreadgrants as well as links to the application in English in Spanish, which will be live beginning October 1st.

*You can also assist a ministry with their application and we are grateful for the many volunteers as well as DEMs and other Synod staff who do!

For more details, please contact us at hunger@elca.org.

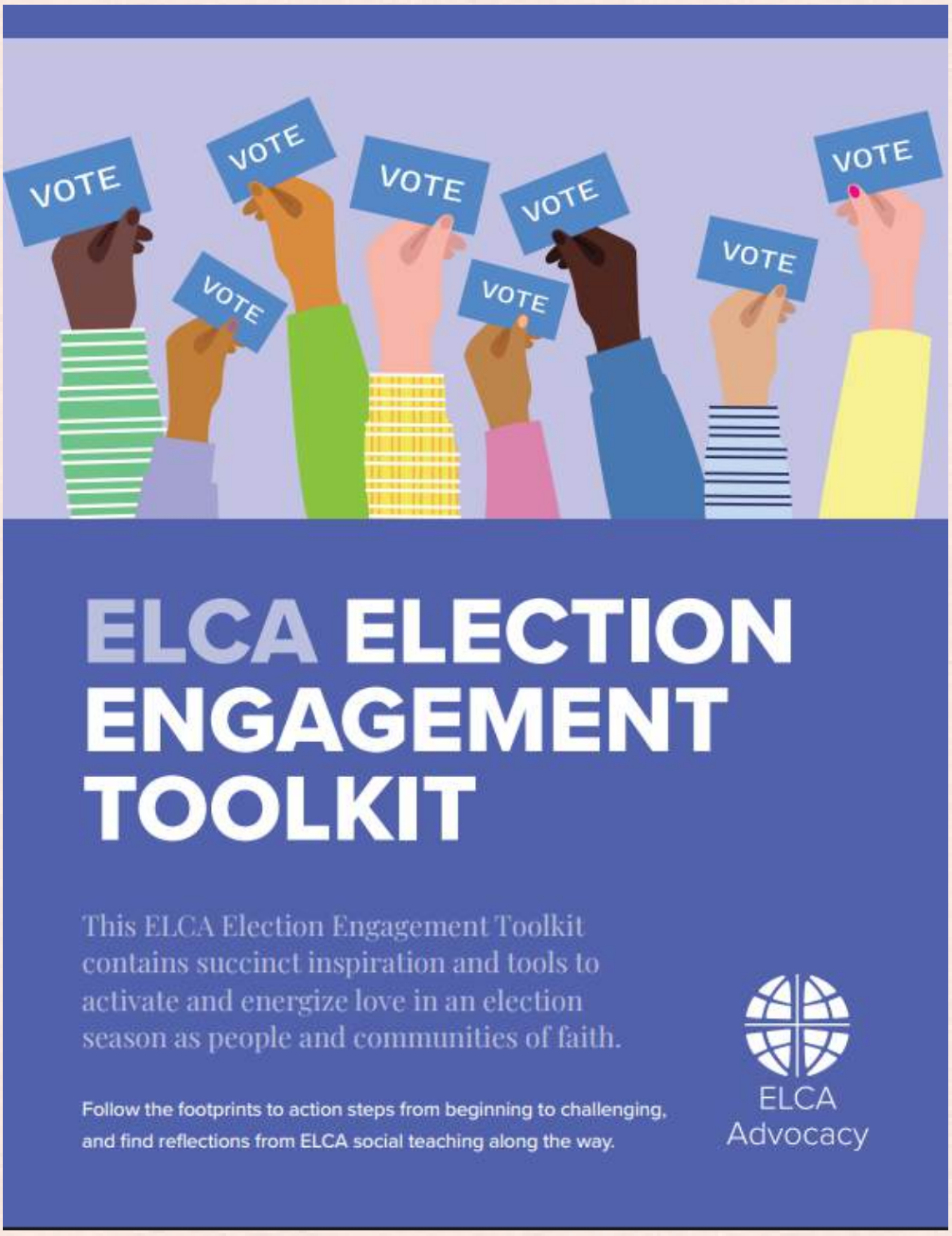
With gratitude,

ELCA World Hunger Team

ELCA World Hunger
Service & Justice unit
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
8765 W Higgins Rd., Chicago, IL 60631-4101
Phone: 800-638-3522 ext. 2616 or 773-380-2616
hunger@elca.org
ELCA.org
Follow ELCA World Hunger on Social Media:






VOTE
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ELCA ELECTION ENGAGEMENT TOOLKIT
This ELCA Election Engagement Toolkit contains succinct inspiration and tools to activate and energize love in an election season as people and communities of faith.
Follow the footprints to action steps from beginning to challenging, and find reflections from ELCA social teaching along the way.
ELCA Advocacy

LEARN MORE

NEW ROSTERED MINISTERS PROFILE AND PORTAL COMING SOON

Greetings in Christ,

We have exciting news. Based on feedback from synod staff and rostered ministers across our church, we've made much-needed updates to key parts of the call process portal: the Rostered Ministers Profile (RMP), Office of the Bishop form, Bishop Confidential Recommendation (BCR) and synod portal.

- The new RMP is easier to navigate, offering enhanced features such as autosave, the ability to view forms within the platform, and a cleaner, more user-friendly layout for both calling organizations and rostered ministers.
- To enhance protection of sensitive information, we're shifting from a short- and long-form RMP to an RMP and Office of the Bishop form. The Office of the Bishop form will contain the needed disclosures and other pastoral information from rostered ministers to synod staff. This change better protects rostered ministers' privacy.
- The content of the BCR has been updated.
- The refreshed synod portal has a streamlined look and feel, improved notifications and a simplified RMP review and approval process.

The new RMP, Office of the Bishop form, BCR and synod portal will launch Jan. 11. Current RMPs will no longer be accessible to rostered ministers after Jan. 10.

Resources for navigating the new RMP and portal, including training webinars, video recordings and FAQs, are coming soon and will be shared once they're available.

Actions needed before Jan. 11

- **Rostered ministers:** All rostered ministers who need or want a PDF of their current RMP must log in to ELCA Community and download the file before Jan. 11.
- **Synod call process staff:** Synod staff needing to access active and archived RMPs must log in to ELCA Community and download the files before Jan. 11.
- **Rostered ministers and first call candidates entering a call process**:
  - Before Jan. 11: Complete the current RMP. Otherwise, wait until after launch to use the new RMP.
  - After Jan. 11: Use the new RMP.

Evangelical Lutheran Church In America

MISSION SUPPORT:
WHAT DOES MY OFFERING DO?

Western Iowa Synod

As Lutherans, we experience the difference God's grace and love in Christ make for all people and creation. This is why, when we gather each week for worship, many of us give generously, knowing this provides for more people to know the way of Jesus. When you share your offering, most of it stays in your congregation to support vital ministry. ELCA members give about $1.6 billion annually in regular offerings to ELCA congregations and worshiping communities. Because we are a connected church, a portion – about 5% on average – becomes Mission Support, shared by your congregation with your synod. In FY2025, the Western Iowa Synod shared $96,005 in Mission Support for ELCA churchwide ministries. Through Mission Support, we share in ministry around the country and across the globe, doing more together than any one person or congregation could do alone. Connected in this way, we experience Christ, seeking community, justice and love.


Northwest Intermountain Synod, ELCA

Your **MISSION SUPPORT** funds a variety of churchwide ministries.



36% ESTABLISHES AND GROWS CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES that disciple individuals and form leaders. Together we:

Thank you for $34,562 from the Western Iowa Synod for these ministries!


ELCA Youth Gathering-Able

- Plant and support hundreds of worshiping communities.
- Revitalize congregational ministries and reach out to their surrounding communities.
- Promote leadership opportunities, discernment and education through leadership initiatives.
- Support the work of seven ELCA seminaries and 28 ELCA colleges and universities.
- Host events and leadership opportunities for youth and young adults.
- Support regional work through directors for evangelical mission as well as candidacy and leadership managers.
- Prepare and implement a system for recruiting and assigning rostered ministers.

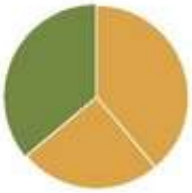


25% ACCOMPANIES LUTHERANS AROUND THE WORLD and promotes efforts to call and act for justice. Together we:

Thank you for $24,001 from the Western Iowa Synod for these ministries!



- Accompany new Lutheran churches, expand ministries and train leaders and evangelists.
- Send missionaries to accompany communities around the world.
- Address social inequities and work for justice.
- Cultivate and maintain relationships with 153 other churches through the Lutheran World Federation to strengthen the church and its global work.
- Foster relationships between ELCA synods and 65 companion churches for a total of more than 120 companion synod relationships.
- Work with leaders and members of our African-descent, American Indian, Alaska Native, Arab, Middle Eastern, Asian, Pacific Islander and Latiné communities.



39% STRENGTHENS AND SUSTAINS THE MINISTRY and MISSION of the whole church. Together we:

Thank you for $37,442 from the Western Iowa Synod for these ministries!



- Offer ministry resources and opportunities to lay leaders for networking.
- Coordinate and support churchwide ministries.
- Develop social messages of the ELCA as topical documents – called for by ELCA churchwide assemblies and adopted by the ELCA Church Council – to focus attention and action on timely, pressing matters of concern to the church and society.
- Provide governance, including maintenance of rostered leadership records and support for the ELCA Church Council and triennial ELCA churchwide assemblies.
- Sustain ecumenical and interfaith relations.
- Partner with congregations and ministries across the church as they explore new, innovative ways of being church in a constantly changing world.
- Invest in technology and communications.
- Grow and sustain financial resources.
- Engage in research and strategic planning.
- Create and share resources for faith, discipleship, prayer, stewardship and worship.

Thank you for your ongoing support and faithful partnership! For stories of your impact, visit **LivingLutheran.org/SOFIA**. To find additional Mission Support resources, visit **ELCA.org/SOFIA**. Scan the QR code to view the Mission Support video "What Does My Offering Do?"



2 pigs were processed Oct. 10th. Approximately 320 pounds of ground pork were given to:

Pastor Sue Sinclair for feeding ministries in Inwood & Larchwook
Carolyn Salberg for Hawarden Food Pantry
Keith Moe for food pantry in Albert City

Thanks to all in Western Iowa for their support of the Pig Project. We could not do this without you!



Oct. 3 St. John/Sioux City 150th Celebration
Oct. 16 Candidacy Committee
Oct. 18-19 Fall Convo
Oct. 24 Synod Council, St. Mark, Storm Lake 9:30 a.m.
SAMs - Intro to Mark, St. Mark, Storm Lake, 9:30 a.m.
Oct. 26 SAMs Text Study, 7 p.m. via Zoom
Oct. 29 First Call-Topic Politics & Lutheranism, via Zoom 11:30 a.m.

Nov. 5 Boundary Education, 4 sites
Nov. 12 Rural Affinity Group, 11:15 a.m. via Zoom
Nov. 17 SAM Mentor Retreat
Nov. 21 SAMs - Preaching, St. Mark, Storm Lake, 9:30 a.m.
Nov. 26-27 Thanksgiving, Synod office closed
Nov. 30 SAMs Text Study

Dec. 10 Rural Affinity Group, 11:15 a.m., via Zoom
Dec. 12 SAMs - Preparing for Lent, St. Mark, Storm Lake, 9:30 a.m.
Dec. 18 Candidacy Committee

2027

Jan 16 Synod Council, via Zoom, 7:00 p.m.
Jan 25 SAM text study, 7 pm, via Zoom
Jan 28 First Call-Topic Planning, via Zoom, 11:30 a.m.

Feb. 4 & 5 Peer Ministry Workshop, St. John, Council Bluffs

APRIL 16-17 SYNOD ASSEMBLY

Synod staff meets Wednesday mornings & are not available for calls. Please leave a message.



Congregations in Transition

Congregations/Parishes being served by SAMS:
Albert City, Our Saviors
Albert City, St. John
Alta, Immanuel
Boxholm, Trinity
Coon Rapids, Ascension
Harcourt, Faith
Hawarden, American
Linn Grove, Our Saviors
Manson, Augustana
Marathon, Grace
Merrill, St. John
Moorland, Fulton
Newell, Nain
Pocahontas, St. Peter
Pomeroy, St. John
Primghar, Grace
Rembrandt, Our Saviors
Sioux Rapids, First

Congregations/Parishes being served by a student:
Armstrong, Nazareth
Brunsville, St. Peter
Ringsted, United
Rural LeMars, Christ
Dayton, Emanuel
Holstein, St. Paul
Kiron, Bethel
Mineola, St. John
Moorhead, Bethesda
Odebolt, Faith
Onawa, Faith
Soldier, Soldier
Vincent, South Enes

Congregations/Parishes being served by an interim:
Stanton, Mamrelund



Bethesda, Moorhead

Congregations in conversation with neighbors:
Exira, Exira
Northboro, St. Paul

Congregations in Transition:
Emmetsburg, Bethany
Forest City, Immanuel
Lakota, St. Paul
Lost Island, Ruthven
Marcus, Faith
Remsen, St. Paul

Congregations in Call Process:
Akron, Immanuel
Akron, St. John Country Roads
Gowrie, Zion
Rock Valley, Our Savior's
Underwood, Underwood





Western Iowa Synod Prayers for September

For Those Who Hunger

God of the loaves and fishes, you feed us with abundance and call us to do the same. Open our hands and our pantries to neighbors who go without. Where tables are empty, make us bread for one another, and where we have plenty, make us generous. Give us no rest until all are fed. Amen.

Thanksgiving for God's Provision

Gracious God, giver of every good gift, we thank you for harvest and table, for rain and soil, for work and rest, and for the hands that bring food to our tables. You provide for all your creatures, and we receive it with grateful hearts. Teach us to share what you have so freely given. Amen.





Preparing for Winter

Lord of every season, as the days grow short and the cold draws near, we ask for your protection. Keep safe those who travel icy roads, those who work in the cold, and those whose homes are drafty or whose heat is uncertain. Make us watchful neighbors, ready to check in, shovel a walk, and share a coat. Warm us with your presence and with one another's care. Amen.

For Those Without Housing

God of shelter and welcome, you were born in borrowed space and know what it is to have no place to lay your head. Be near those who sleep outside tonight. Lead them to safe rooms and warm beds. Stir your church and our communities to build, to open doors, and to work until everyone has a home. Amen.



<u>The Supply Worship Leader List has been updated.</u>

<u>Congregations should use this list to identify a pastor or SAM who is authorized to lead worship.</u>

The bishop and synod staff will NEVER request money or gift cards through email. Do not respond to these phishing emails.



Enrollment Open for Lutheran Summer Music 2027

Youth musicians in grades 8-12 are invited to Lutheran Summer Music (LSM) 2027 at St. Olaf College in Northfield, MN! LSM is the nation's premier faith-based music academy for high school students. Churches from around the country send students to LSM for an unforgettable summer of musical growth and connections in faith and community. Students work with nationally recognized faculty and gather daily to share musical gifts in worship. Academy offerings include large ensembles (band, choir, orchestra), chamber music, private lessons, and electives like handbells, intro to the pipe organ, jazz, musical theatre, composition, conducting, church music, and more. Churches are encouraged to nominate students, and students can apply now through December 1 for a Priority Enrollment $100 discount.

LSM Program Overview: LSMacademy.org/program

Nominate Students: LSMacademy.org/nominate



First Call RETREATS

In partnership with the Nebraska Synod, three retreats will be offered in 2027. These are optional, but beneficial.

January 10-12, Stewardship, Carol Joy Holling Retreat Center
April 18-20, TBA, Carol Joy Holling Retreat Center
August 1-3, TBA, Benedict Retreat Center, Schuyler

Waiting for Light: Hope Across the Miles

From the Western Iowa Synod Companion Synod Network

“The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” — John 1:5
As we enter the season of Advent, we are reminded that waiting is not always easy. We wait for answers, for opportunities, for healing, and for hope. Yet, as people of faith, we trust that even in the waiting, God is at work, bringing light into places where darkness may seem overwhelming.

Through our Western Iowa Synod Companion Synod relationships with the Southern Diocese of Tanzania and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Chile, we are blessed to witness that light shining in beautiful and meaningful ways.

In Tanzania, one such light shines through the lives of young women who have attended Igumbilo Lutheran Girls' Secondary School. For many girls, education offers more than knowledge. It opens doors to opportunities, independence, and a future filled with possibilities.

One young woman whose story is especially inspiring is Ester Kitunda, a former student at Igumbilo who comes from the Maasai community in Tanzania. Her journey toward education was anything but easy. Facing opposition from her family and significant financial challenges, the opportunity to attend secondary school was far from certain. Yet, through scholarships provided by the Western Iowa Synod, Ester was given the opportunity to continue her education and pursue dreams that might otherwise have remained out of reach.

Recently, we received wonderful news about Ester, who is now married and they have welcomed a beautiful baby boy into their family! Even more encouraging is that her husband supports her desire to continue her education. While she celebrates the joy of motherhood and family, Ester continues to look toward the future with hope. She dreams of one day becoming a doctor or perhaps opening a pharmacy, where she could use her education to care for others in her community.

For Ester, the light she once waited for is beginning to shine in ways she may never have imagined. And her story is still being written.

What a beautiful reminder that when we support education, we are doing more than helping a young person attend school. We are planting seeds of hope that can grow for generations. Through the generosity of people here in Western Iowa, Ester was given an opportunity. Through her own determination and faith, she continues to move forward, dreaming of a future where she can make a difference in the lives of others.

Meanwhile, in Chile, our Lutheran brothers and sisters are shining God's light in another meaningful way. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Chile recently entered into an agreement to preserve historical records documenting the church's courageous defense of human rights during the country's military dictatorship. By preserving these stories of faith, courage, and justice, they are helping future generations remember the past while working toward a future grounded in dignity, compassion, and hope.

What a beautiful reminder that God's light shines in many ways! In Tanzania, we see it through education, perseverance, and new opportunities. In Chile, we see it through faithful witness, remembrance, and the pursuit of justice.

These stories remind us why our Companion Synod relationships matter. We are not simply churches separated by oceans and continents. We are brothers and sisters in Christ, called to walk together, learn from one another, pray for one another, and share in the work God is doing throughout the world.

Accompaniment is not about one church having all the answers or bringing light to another. It is about recognizing that Christ's light is already shining among our companions, and together we can help that light grow brighter.

As we wait for the coming of Christ this Advent season, may we be encouraged by these glimpses of hope. May we continue to nurture relationships that cross borders, support ministries that change lives, and celebrate the ways God is working through our companions.

Ester's journey reminds us that sometimes we are called to be part of God's answer to someone else's waiting. Through our prayers, our generosity, and our willingness to walk alongside one another, we become instruments of God's love and hope in the world.
For even in a world that sometimes seems filled with darkness, the promise remains:
The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness will not overcome it.

Come, Lord Jesus. May your light continue to shine through us and through our brothers and sisters around the world.

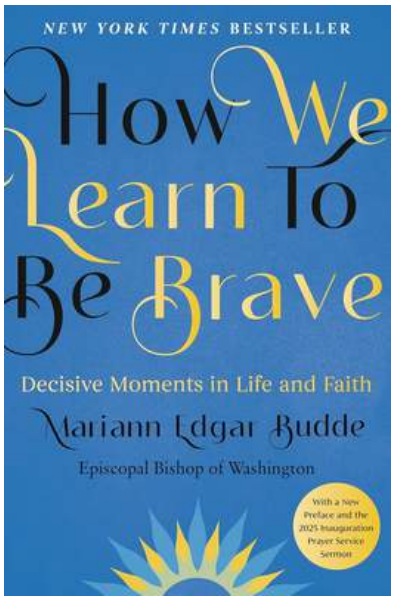
Submitted by the Western Iowa Synod Companion Synod Network





Book Review

Book Review: How We Learn to Be Brave by The Reverend Mariann Edgar Budde Reviewed by Reverend Cara LQ Knutson



What does it mean to be brave? And where does courage come from when life asks more of us than we feel prepared to give?

In How We Learn to Be Brave: Decisive Moments in Life and Faith, Bishop Mariann Edgar Budde explores these questions through Scripture, history, personal experience, and stories from her ministry. Her central argument is both simple and profound: bravery is not something we either have or lack. Courage is something we learn and practice.

Budde focuses on what she calls “decisive moments”—those times when we are faced with an important choice or a new direction. Sometimes courage means going somewhere new. Sometimes it means staying when everything in us wants to leave. Sometimes it means beginning again, accepting something we did not choose, or simply stepping forward when we don't know what will happen next.

This makes the book particularly meaningful for people of faith. Scripture is filled with people who had to act without knowing how the story would end. Abraham and Sarah left what was familiar. Moses confronted Pharaoh despite his fears. Mary said yes to an unexpected calling. The disciples left their nets and followed Jesus. None of them had a detailed roadmap for what came next.

Budde reminds us that **faithfulness does not require certainty.**

That is an especially important message for congregations and church leaders. Churches today are experiencing plenty of decisive moments: changes in membership, finances, leadership, mission, and the world around us. It is tempting to believe that courage means having a bold plan or knowing exactly what to do. Budde offers another possibility. Perhaps courage sometimes means simply taking the next faithful step.

One of the strengths of the book is Budde's honesty about failure. Courage does not guarantee that things will work out the way we hope. We can make a courageous decision and still experience disappointment, uncertainty, or even failure. Being brave is not the same as being successful.

Instead, courage is about **faithfulness in the midst of uncertainty**.

That insight resonates deeply with Christian discipleship. We are not promised that following Jesus will make everything easy or predictable. We are promised that we do not walk alone.

There are moments when each of us is called to go, stay, begin, accept, speak, listen, or simply keep going. We may not recognize those moments as significant when they happen. Often, we only understand their importance in retrospect.

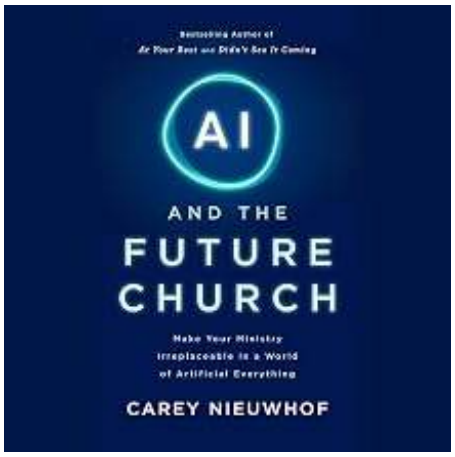
How We Learn to Be Brave invites us to pay attention.

Perhaps the greatest gift of this book is its reminder that courage is formed long before the decisive moment arrives. We practice courage in the small choices of everyday life: telling the truth, asking forgiveness, welcoming the stranger, standing beside someone who is hurting, trying something new, or trusting God when the path ahead is unclear.

We do not suddenly become brave when the crisis arrives. We have been practicing for it all along



Mariann Edgar Budde is the bishop and spiritual leader of the Episcopal Diocese of Washington, D.C., and the Washington National Cathedral. Prior to her election in 2011, she was a parish priest in Minneapolis for eighteen years. She has appeared on PBS NewsHour, Meet the Press, Good Morning America, and the Today show, among others. Bishop Budde earned her master's in divinity and doctor of ministry from Virginia Theological Seminary. To access her work, go to www.mariannbudde.com



AI and the Future Church: Make Your Ministry Irreplaceable in a World of Artificial Everything

by Reverend Carey Nieuwhof

The AI era may be the greatest disruption the church has ever faced, and its greatest opportunity to reach more people. Carey Nieuwhof shows you how to build a ministry ready for today's culture and whatever comes next.

The AI era may be the greatest disruption the church has ever faced, and its greatest opportunity to reach more people. The disruption isn't coming. It's here. The question is whether your church is ready.

Work is changing fast. Mental health is declining. Truth itself feels up for grabs. And people are searching desperately for something real. That something is Jesus — and your church is where they'll find him.

Here's the hope: a world growing more artificial by the day will produce people desperately hungry for what's real. For genuine community. For unchanging truth. For human connection that actually means something.

But the church that thrives in this moment isn't just any church. It's the church that rethinks Sundays to build deeper community. That shores up its finances before giving drops as unemployment rises. Whose leaders fortify their integrity before deception becomes so widespread that it seems unstoppable.

The church's future direction is human connection. And while the rest of the world scrambles to figure out what that means in an age of artificial intelligence, the church has been answering that question for two thousand years. You may be more prepared for this moment than you think.

In AI and the Future Church, Carey Nieuwhof gives you the three shifts every church leader needs to make now:

Make Sundays Non-Downloadable — build the authentic community AI will never replicate

Build the Shock Absorbers Now — create real capacity for the financial and mental health crises already heading toward your congregation

Fortify Your Integrity — lead from character so that when people search for what's true in a sea of deception, your church holds the answer

As the world becomes more artificial, the church's calling is to become more human.

You don't need certainty to lead through this. You need clarity.

Carey Nieuwhof shows you how to build a ministry ready for today's culture and whatever comes next..

ELCA



Make an impact next summer.

The 2027 ELCA Youth Gathering doesn't happen without people such as you.

Two of our three volunteer opportunities are now open — and this is your invitation to step into something meaningful. To serve. To lead. To help create a space where thousands of young people will encounter God, community and a faith that lasts.

Whether you're welcoming participants, assisting behind the scenes or helping bring large-scale moments to life, every volunteer plays a vital role in shaping the Gathering experience.

Apply today and take the first step toward serving at the 2027 Gathering. To learn more or apply, visit the Gathering's website.