

CALLED FORWARD

Together in Christ

ELCA Future Directions 2025



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Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

FOREWORD

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

With pleasure, profound gratitude, and a deep sense of responsibility, we present Called Forward Together in Christ, ELCA Strategic Directions 2025. As leaders in this church, we also pledge our commitment to carrying it forward with determination and in a spirit of faithful collaboration with you, the people of God throughout the ELCA.

This strategy is the result of a yearlong process of conversation, listening and prayerful discernment concerning what God is calling this church to be and do today and into the future. We believe that the Called Forward Together in Christ, ELCA Strategic Directions 2025 provides a road map toward this church's participation in God's mission for the life of the world.

At the 2016 Churchwide Assembly, we shared a directions paper titled "Called Forward Together in Christ for the Sake of the World" that captured what church leaders and members said is important in discerning God's call for the future of this church. It discussed the ELCA in the global context and proposed priorities that appear to have broad support across this church. Assembly voting members and Grace Gathering participants embraced the draft document and provided their input as well.

In October 2016, the Conference of Bishops provided additional feedback at their meeting, and a draft statement went to the Church Council for approval in November 2016. The Church Council reviewed and unanimously approved the Called Forward Together in Christ, ELCA Strategic Directions 2025.

The Church Council approval of these directions represents agreement, ownership and solidarity regarding the future directions, goals and priorities of this church, beginning with the presiding bishop and Church Council, and the Conference of Bishops. In order for these directions, goals and priorities to come to life, it is crucial that the whole church explore and engage them in every expression of our life together.

In light of this good work, to which so many members and friends of this church have contributed, we encourage everyone across this church to embrace these directions, goals and priorities as a complement and guide for their local ministry and as partners in mission across the ELCA through 2025.

Of course, strategic directions must be followed up with plans for implementation at various ministry locations. The Church Council will begin its implementation work during its meeting in late March 2017.

As we observe the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, may Called Forward Together in Christ, ELCA Strategic Directions 2025 guide and foster ELCA church unity in the years ahead as, together, we continue to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ crucified and risen for the life of the world.

"Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord, and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." (1 Corinthians 12:4-7)

In Christ,



Elizabeth A. Eaton
The Rev. Elizabeth A. Eaton
ELCA, Presiding Bishop



William O. Gafkjen
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INTRODUCTION

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) is one of the largest Christian denominations in the United States, with more than 3.7 million members in more than 9,000 congregations across 65 synods. This church formed in 1988 through a merger of three Lutheran churches – The American Lutheran Church, the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches and the Lutheran Church in America. However, the ELCA proudly traces its roots back through the mid-17th century, when early Lutherans came to America from Europe, settling in the Virgin Islands and the area that is now known as New York. Well before that, Martin Luther, along with others, sought reform for the church in the 16th century, laying the framework for our beliefs.

As a church deeply rooted in the Scriptures, and in Christ, this church continues to be shaped by the changing face of our communities, by new migration patterns and national and global trends affecting religion and society.

In 2017 the ELCA, together with Lutherans around the world, will observe the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. This significant milestone provides an opportunity for this church to look back with joy to our deep theological roots and faith traditions, on our history of being a reformed and reforming church and to a future filled with abundant hope and possibilities.

Propelled by a commitment to Lutheran traditions and to being a community of faith that is always forming and being renewed, the ELCA's presiding bishop, Church Council and Conference of Bishops initiated Called Forward Together in Christ in late 2015. The process sought to engage the ELCA in conversation about future directions so that the Church Council might reach decisions that help this church journey faithfully and effectively together in the years ahead.

Strategic Directions 2025 is the outcome of that process. Participants in Called Forward Together in Christ – from congregations, synods, the churchwide organization and a wide range of ELCA ministries – resoundingly lifted up similar hopes, concerns and ideas about what should be given importance. The goals and priorities that emerged are not entirely new. They reflect what many in the ELCA already see to be important and draw from other discussions in recent years on the ELCA's strategic direction, especially Living into the Future Together (LIFT)¹.

Called Forward Together in Christ has delivered a strategic framework that will serve shared leadership across the ELCA to realize common aspirations and better face the challenges this church faces.

¹The Living into the Future Task Force (LIFT I, 2009-2011 and Lift II, 2011-2014).

OUR STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS

ELCA Strategic Directions 2025 tells the story of the church we are becoming – a church that is confident about who we are in Christ and what God is calling us to do. The directions are presented in three parts: The ELCA – who we are; What unites us as church; and, Our goals and priorities.

1. The ELCA – who we are

Called, gathered and sent into the world to embody the good news of Jesus' death and resurrection, we exist to be a reforming, renewing and reconciling expression of God's grace through life-giving relationships and communities of worship, mercy, justice and service.

We are church

We are what God has made us – people whom God has created by grace to live in union with Jesus Christ and has prepared to live faithful, fruitful lives by the power of the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 2:8-10). In Jesus Christ, God has reconciled us to God and to each other. As we gather around word and sacraments, this life in Christ is what defines, shapes and guides us as a community of faith, the church.

By God's grace we can and do live confidently and generously in this community of faith and in service of others, amid the mysteries and paradoxes of this life in Christ – including our human limitations and failings, and the ambiguities, uncertainties and suffering that we experience.

We are Lutheran

We are a church that walks by faith, trusting God's promise in the gospel and knowing that we exist by and for the proclamation of this gospel word. We proclaim Jesus Christ crucified and raised from the dead for the life of the world. As the apostle Paul wrote (Romans 1:16-17), and we echo in our Constitution (2.02), we are not ashamed of this gospel ministry because it is God's power for saving all people who trust the God who makes these promises. "We are to fear and love God, so, that we do not despise preaching or God's word, but instead keep that word holy and gladly hear it and learn it" (Small Catechism).

God's word, specifically God's promise in Jesus Christ, creates this liberated, confident and generous faith. God gives the Holy Spirit who uses gospel proclamation – in preaching and sacraments, in forgiveness and in healing conversations – to create and sustain this faith. As a Lutheran church, we give central place to this gospel message in our ministry.

We understand to be Lutheran is to be ecumenical – committed to the oneness to which God calls the world in the saving gift of Jesus Christ, recognizing the brokenness of the church in history and the call of God to heal this disunity.

We are church together

Just as God has joined us to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ in baptism, we are also joined to others, not only in the ELCA and The Lutheran World Federation (LWF), but in all communities of Christian faith around the world. In Christ none of us lives in isolation from others. Jesus is our peace and has broken down the walls that divide us – walls of judgment, hatred, condemnation and violence – and has made us into one, new human community (Ephesians 2:14-15). This spiritual communion depends only on God’s mercy that comes to us in the word and sacraments. That alone is enough for unity, and so we yearn for this communion with all Christians at the Lord’s table.

Because God gives us our unity in Christ, we are able to see and respect the diversity within Christ’s body. We receive it as a gift and embrace it, rather than treating it as a threat or a problem to be solved (1 Corinthians 12:12-13). We respect and honor the diversity of histories, traditions, cultures, languages and experiences among us in the ELCA and in the larger Christian community of faith. We seek full participation of all in the life and work of this church and will strenuously avoid the culture of any one group becoming the norm for all in the ELCA. And we strive to address the ways that racism, sexism, classism and other forms of injustice limit participation and harm people, communities and the whole body of Christ.

In all these relationships the ELCA serves reconciliation and healing with other Christians, while repentantly acknowledging its failings and wrongs, trusting in God’s forgiving mercy.

We are church for the sake of the world

Christ has freed us from sin and death, even from ourselves, so that we can live as ministers of reconciliation in loving and generous service of our neighbors (2 Corinthians 5:17-18). In Jesus Christ, all of life – every act of service, in every daily calling, in every corner of life – flows freely from a living, daring confidence in God’s grace.

Freed by the transformative life of Christ, we support ELCA members as they give themselves freely in transforming service with the neighbor. Through a wide range of daily vocations and ministries, we nurture faith, build alliances and gather resources for a healed, reconciled and just world. As church together, we faithfully strive to participate in God’s reconciling work, which prioritizes disenfranchised, vulnerable and displaced people in our communities and the world. We discover and explore our vocations in relation to God through education and moral deliberation. We bear witness to the love of God in Jesus Christ through dialogue and collaboration with ecumenical partners and with other faiths. In all these ministries, God’s generosity flows through us into the life of the world.

2. What unites us as a church

Our shared purpose

Together in Jesus Christ we are freed by grace to live faithfully, witness boldly and serve joyfully.

Our vision

A world experiencing the difference God's grace and love in Christ makes for all people and creation.

Our values

Our values are grounded in faith, in our biblical and Lutheran confessional sources and our love of God and neighbor. They speak to the way this church lives and practices our faith, and they will guide how we journey forward in Christ as church together.

Forgiveness and reconciliation

We are reconciled to God by God's forgiving mercy. Forgiveness and reconciliation flow from what God has made us to be in Jesus Christ and what God is doing with us in the world. As a people of God, we embody forgiveness in speech, action and relationships, and our ministry in reconciliation is foundational.

Dignity, compassion and justice

Each person is created in God's image. We respect this God-given right to dignity and, inspired by the life of Jesus, show love and compassion for all people. Through proclamation of the gospel, through worship and as servants of God working for healing and justice in the world, we uphold and seek to protect the dignity and human rights of all people.

Inclusion and diversity

As Christ's church, we value the richness of God's creation and offer a radical welcome to all people, appreciating our common humanity and our differences. We are a church that does not view diversity as a barrier to unity. We recognize and will challenge dynamics of power and privilege that create barriers to participation and equity in this church and society – for women, people of color, minority ethnic groups, people with disabilities, people who are marginalized or living in poverty, and the LGBTQ community.

Courage and openness to change

Because we trust in God's promise and understand faith to be a living, daring confidence in God's grace, we are emboldened to embrace learning and change in our spiritual and institutional journey as church. This means we are open to new ways and willing to take risks to discover God's plan for this church.

Faithful stewardship of God's creation and gifts

As church together, faithful stewardship is about holding to God's purpose and ensuring the responsibilities and resources that God has entrusted to us are used with great care and with accountability to God, to each other and those served by this church.

Our most important ministries

In today's competitive society that creates unrealistic expectations of finding worth through human accomplishments, the most important ministries of this church in the years ahead are:

Worship, word and sacraments

Rooted in evangelical proclamation and sacramental celebration, we are a church gathered around worship experiences that are meaningful, authentic and responsive to community contexts.

Faith formation and discipleship

Honoring our rich traditions, we are a church grounded in the Lutheran confessions inspiring biblical and theological literacy, gospel fluency and daily vocation and ministry through shared experience and life-long learning.

Leadership development

We are a church strongly committed to formation, education and continuing development and care of lay leaders and rostered ministers.

Children, youth and young adults

We are a church dedicated to ministries that engage and affirm children, youth and young adults as an integral part of this church, now and for the future.

Ministries addressing human suffering and injustice

In communities and around the world we are an informed church, actively utilizing our many gifts in witness and service in response to human need in our communities, countries and the world.

“Christians live not in themselves,
but in Christ and in their neighbor.
Otherwise they are not Christians.
They live in Christ through faith,
in their neighbor through love.”



– Martin Luther, “The Freedom of a Christian” (Luther’s Works, vol. 31, p. 371)

3. Our goals and priorities

Strategic Directions 2025 identifies goals and priority areas for the ELCA as a whole church. These are based in a shared trust and hope that the future is in God’s hands. And they express what this church has collectively said is important into the future.

Goals express the longer-term aspirations for the ELCA, and the priority areas indicate where coordinated and intentional action is needed to achieve our goals. The strategic directions provide a focus for shared leadership of this church in serving God’s mission and attending to institutional challenges that stem from being church today. The goals and action areas do not represent a hierarchy or order of priorities.

The “why” of our goals is in the gospel, in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and deeply embedded in our Lutheran theology and traditions.

In a radically individualistic society, we seek to create and sustain life-giving relationships and communities that connect us to God and to one another.

In a society that is changing and increasingly secular and a world facing continuing interreligious and national tensions, we seek to proclaim the gospel and share the story of Jesus as a source of hope, inclusion, peace and reconciliation.

In a world that misuses power and authority and struggles with conflict and growing inequality, we seek to follow Jesus who publicly spoke up for those who were oppressed and marginalized.

The church we are becoming

1. A thriving church spreading the gospel and deepening faith for all people
2. A church equipping people for their baptismal vocations in the world and this church
3. An inviting and welcoming church that reflects and embraces the diversity in our communities and the gifts and opportunities that diversity brings
4. A visible church deeply committed to working ecumenically and with other people of faith for justice, peace and reconciliation in our communities and around the world.
5. A well-governed, connected and sustainable church

GOAL ONE:

A thriving church spreading the gospel and deepening faith for all people

Acts 1:8, 1 Peter 2:9-10, Matthew 28:16-20, Romans 1:16

PRIORITY AREAS FOR ACTION

Church identity

Develop a deep and shared understanding of who we are as a Lutheran church and equip leaders and all the baptized to communicate our theology and beliefs in accessible and compelling ways.

Renew and strengthen evangelism

Through all expressions of this church, and in accompaniment with global companions, foster new approaches to evangelism that are compatible with being Lutheran and generationally, technologically, and contextually relevant and effective.

Church leaders

Adopt a strategic and coordinated approach to formation, education and continuing development of lay leaders and rostered ministers, with emphasis on theological fluency and equipping leaders for evangelism and vocations in a wide range of contexts and ministries.

Renewal and formation of congregations and worship communities

Support and empower congregations and communities of worship through mission planning and development, encouraging a culture of deepening faith, hope and openness to change.

Ecumenical dialogues and relationships

Maintain our commitment to being a church deeply engaged in ecumenical dialogue, relationships and partnerships for the sake of Christian unity.

GOAL TWO:

A church equipping people for their baptismal vocations in the world and this church

Philippians 2:4-11, 1 Corinthians 12:4-7, Romans 6:3-4, Mark 10:13-16

PRIORITY AREAS FOR ACTION

Baptismal vocation

Form and equip the baptized to express their faith through their life and witness as followers of Jesus.

Faith formation and practice

Support and provide resources for faith formation and practice with children and across the life span – within households, workplaces and communities – and share learnings across this church.

Youth and young adults in mission

Provide space, support and opportunities for youth and young adults to participate in ministries and pursue their calling.

GOAL THREE:

An inviting and welcoming church that reflects and embraces the diversity of our communities and the gifts and opportunities that diversity brings

1 Corinthians 12, Ephesians 2:14-20, Acts 10, Galatians 3:26-28

PRIORITY AREAS FOR ACTION

An outwardly focused church

Support congregations and worship communities in actively reaching out to people in their neighborhoods through relationships, in service and with an openness for mutual learning.

Theological and cultural competence of leaders

Build confidence and competence among lay leaders and rostered ministers to provide an authentic welcome to people from different cultures and circumstances and embrace the ideas and experience they bring.

Church leadership profile

Pursue a leadership profile that reflects the diversity to which the ELCA aspires and endeavor to match the gifts and experience of leaders to communities and ministries where those gifts are needed.

Addressing discrimination and oppression

Equip and support leaders at all levels of the church to understand, speak out and act against discrimination based on race, gender, disability, sexual orientation and social status.

GOAL FOUR:

A visible church deeply committed to working ecumenically and with other people of faith for justice, peace and reconciliation in communities and around the world

[2 Corinthians 5:14-21, John 13:12-15, Isaiah 58:1-11](#)

PRIORITY AREAS FOR ACTION

Poverty and hunger

Encourage and harness resources for local, national and global ministries to alleviate poverty and hunger and improve the way this church tells these stories of God's work in the world – internally and externally.

Response to disasters and humanitarian crises

Support and take action in local and international response to natural disasters, violence and conflict and assist the growing number of people affected by displacement and forced migration.

Lift up the work of ELCA-related social ministries

Build awareness across this church of the important work of ELCA-related social ministry organizations and understanding their work as central to the life of this church.

Advocacy and action on economic justice, racial justice, gender justice and climate justice

Be a visible witness and agent of change for justice and creation care.

GOAL FIVE:

A well-governed, connected and sustainable church

1 Corinthians 4:1-2, 2 Corinthians 4:1-2, Micah 6:8, 2 Corinthians 9

PRIORITY AREAS FOR ACTION

Leadership in governance

Re-evaluate and strengthen governance of the ELCA to provide for clarity in roles and authority, strong relationships and shared leadership and a culture of willing accountability.

Church structures

Review church structures to ensure their fit with future needs of the ELCA, with a focus on responsibilities, functions and resourcing of synods and the churchwide organization and how best to support and resource congregations.

Resources for mission

Develop and take forward a church strategy to grow resources for mission and ministry and ensure distribution and use of resources aligns with roles, expectations and priorities for the whole church.

Communication

Improve communication across this church in support of proclaiming the gospel, new forms of evangelism, connecting the church as one part of the body of Christ and sharing success stories, experience and learning.