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Good things can come in small packages.

Or, in the case of St. James Lutheran Church of New Wehdem, Texas, in small congregations.

St. James, a congregation in rural Texas, sees 50 to 60 worshipers each Sunday — an impressive roster considering New Wehdem has a population hovering around 100.

Despite its size, the 154-year-old ELCA congregation has taken steps to create opportunities for impactful financial giving within its synod, such as aiding Lutheran camps and helping community members.

In September 2018, during the Rev. Evan Cameron’s first week at St. James, he received a call from Lizbeth Johnson, a gift planner for the Lutheran Foundation of the Southwest, which partners with the ELCA Foundation.

Johnson suggested that the congregation explore the ELCA Foundation’s Ministry Growth Fund, a growth-oriented fund invested in equities that provide a stable, quarterly distribution to participants.

“I’m not a business major,” Cameron laughed. “I just thought, ‘This sounds like it’s too good to be true.’ It’s the easiest way to invest money ... and do something with it without it being locked away and inaccessible.”

Cameron shared the news with his congregants, and before long, member Gary Weiss and others decided they wanted to establish an endowment fund.

The congregation not only approved of the new committee, Weiss said; it also approved utilizing the funds from one of the church’s existing certificates of deposit to start the endowment fund.

Both Cameron and Johnson said they were struck by how willing the congregation—most of whom are fourth- and fifth-generation members of St. James—was to try a new way of investing.

“When it comes to their finances, very often they will have left their money the same way their parents did: under a mattress or in a CD,” Johnson said. “For [this congregation] to think about investing for the purpose of earning more to do more is actually a new concept. … [They] took that in stride to understand the market goes up and goes down, you have good years and bad years, [but] ultimately [an endowment is] a good way to prepare to make more than you would if you kept your money in the bank or non-interest-bearing account.”

St. James now has three separate endowment funds, and it has chosen several ways to award the distributions, or investment earnings.

Its first distribution — plus its Wednesday Lent offerings that year — went to Lutherhill Ministries, a summer camp and year-round retreat center of the Texas-Louisiana Gulf Coast Synod, with locations in both Galveston and La Grange, Texas.

Most recently, St. James chose to award its 2021 distribution to Unbound Now Bryan College Station, which supports survivors and helps fight human trafficking in the Brazos Valley. Its 2022 distribution went to a local family with significant, long-term pediatric medical care costs.

“We don’t have massive endowments,” Cameron said. “I think sometimes people think you need $100,000 to have an endowment. We created three endowments that each started with $20,000 or $30,000, and the outward mission benefit has still been significant.”
**Who’s Participating?**

**Dollars Invested**

$878,993,484

**5-Year Growth of Assets**

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**Makeup of Invested Assets**

*As of 12/31/2022*

- 49% ELCA-related ministries
- 32% Endowment investments from congregations
- 10% 56 investments from other Lutheran organizations
- 9% 1,057 investments from synods

Includes funds invested by outdoor ministries, colleges and universities, seminaries, campus ministries, social ministry organizations and others.

**Who Benefits?**

$36.1 Million distributed to the ELCA Churchwide Organization supported.

- 131 Missionary Households
- 45 Countries
- 6 Disaster Response in 42 Countries and 26 U.S. States and Territories
- 436 Projects that help fight hunger in 67 Countries, including the United States

**In 2022, Distributions Made to the ELCA Churchwide Organization Supported:**

- 1057 Endowment investments
- 175 Investments from other Lutheran organizations
- 56 Investments from synods
- 1,057 Investments from ELCA-related ministries

**Small But Mighty**

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