

WE ARE CHURCH TOGETHER

2024



MAY 2024 Mission Support Memo

STORYTELLING ENGAGEMENT

Come Early, Stay Later

A story from the Upstate New York Synod and ELCA Christian Community and Leadership

As you read this story, what inspires you?

How is your congregation risking for the sake of the gospel?

The Holy Spirit was at work in 2017 when [Parkside Lutheran Church](#), in the heart of North Buffalo, N.Y., was seeking a new pastor. At that time the Rev. Jeremiah Smith had just completed his Master of Divinity degree and decided to leave sunny California to return to the town he was raised in, Buffalo. They chose each other and have experienced over six years full of discernment, connections, risks and newness. Parkside knows its niche is to be the “progressive Lutheran church in Buffalo.” It proclaims the mission of “rediscovering the radical love of Jesus” that calls it to be a community trying the best to live out authentic faith and love that will transform lives, communities and this world.

Parkside engagement in the neighborhood as a community center is well known. It hosts the North Buffalo Food Pantry, Tuesday Buffalo Burrito Project to just grab a warm burrito off the curb, ecumenical [WNY Church Unleashed](#) TV worship (now its own entity). It has active community outreach, is an advocate for neighbor and city needs, plus hosts yoga, Alcoholics Anonymous, scouts and other community groups, so the building is active all the time. It is well known for the Rainbow Doors, which began one year during Pride month but are now a fixture of inclusive welcome.



Through the challenges of the pandemic and the tragic terrorist shooting at Tops supermarket in 2022, Parkside has been a beacon of hope and welcome. In this time it has transitioned to a younger congregation, with 50% of folks new over the last five years. In fact it has only one retired person on its council — now, that is rare. One of the first things Parkside did after the Tops shooting was to host a breakfast to bring folks together to pray, grapple with the situation and seek ways to advocate actively. It lives out being the church, “risk-taking for the sake of the gospel.”

From this tragic breakfast sprang an idea. Parkside had recently been encouraged to participate in a new ELCA [Congregations Lead Initiative](#), meant to “unleash and harness ... collective genius and discover new and useful innovations” to build up thriving congregations. Joining with 47 other congregations across four partner synods of the ELCA, Parkside began a two-year process of learning, wondering and innovating with the shared support from the churchwide organization, the synod and within the cohort, all seeking a way for deeper connections within the congregation.



With so much going on and so many younger families all sharing, they could not take on one more thing. Could breakfast church maybe be a possibility? They tried it, they adapted it, and it worked! Once a month, instead of meeting in the sanctuary, members meet for Breakfast Church around tables. They follow a liturgy, sing songs, say prayers, engage in vulnerable faith conversations, and serve and share with each other. It's potluck, come as you are, and all about "come early, stay late." Parkside is deeply committed to engaging and experimenting within the congregation, in the neighborhood and across our church "to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8).

What a blessing to get funding for the [Congregations Lead Initiative from the Lilly Endowment](#) but also the generous Mission Support that allows ELCA churchwide organization staff, synod directors for evangelical mission and other leaders to walk alongside congregations, building thriving congregations through this and other vitality work.

ENGAGE WITH US

"Story Matters"

Online Webinar Monday, March 20, 6-7:15 p.m.

Storytelling is an ancient practice. People of faith told stories to pass God's story on to the next generation. God's story is what holds the people together, tethers us. It's important to know that your story matters in the midst of God's story, how to tell it and when to share it — inside and outside the walls of your church. Join the Rev. Heather Roth Johnson, a storyteller, a public speaker, a workshop leader, a writer and in general just a creative soul. She also is pastor of Family Ministry with [Bethlehem Lutheran Church—Twin Cities](#) in Minneapolis, Minn., and passionate about intergenerational ministry.

[Join the Zoom Meeting](#)

Explore Why Story Matters!

Meeting ID: 873 1581 1234

Passcode: 525042

GRATEFUL

This month we are grateful for all the staff and volunteers who work so hard to plan and execute synod assemblies. Synod assemblies are a time for us to come together and experience this church beyond our congregations. It is also the time we set aside to do the important business of the church. We are equally grateful to be able to be present at some of your assemblies as your churchwide representative or to offer workshops. Whether we are with you or not, we are holding you in prayer, that amazing connections and stories come out of your assembly. Please reach out to us if we can be helpful in any way.

In deep gratitude,
Victoria Flood, Senior Director for Congregation and Synod Support
Nick Kiger, Director for Mission Support
Karen Kretschmann, Coordinator for Storytelling Engagement

