

WE ARE CHURCH TOGETHER

2024



JUNE 2024 Mission Support Memo

STORYTELLING ENGAGEMENT

Congregation With Birch Trees and Squawking Geese

A story from the Northern Great Lakes Synod

As you read this story, what inspires you?

Where in nature do you feel the presence of God?

Do you feel a deeper connection to God when you're outdoors? People in the town of Marquette, in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, have been inspired by the stunning nature that surrounds them to create [U.P. Wild Church](#), an exciting movement of "wild" outdoor worship communities. The church holds its worship and prayer services outdoors and hosts nature walks, wilderness reflections and field trips to explore God's creation amid the scenic beauty of the peninsula. Started in 2019, U.P. Wild Church is an ecumenical ministry of the [Northern Great Lakes Synod](#) (NGLS) and the Episcopal Diocese of Northern Michigan. Initially created to gather younger people and those not engaged in traditional church, it has grown into a ministry that fosters deep spiritual connection within God's great outdoors.*

The NGLS recently held its synod assembly and, through mission stories, shared how U.P. Wild Church has staked its claim on the peninsula as a "church outside the box." The mission story for U.P. Church on the [Episcopal Asset Map](#) describes it as "a means of encountering the actively Living God, based on shared values of faith, connection, and nature. Deep within the Christian tradition there hides a wealth of wisdom on how to cultivate a culture of compassion." The [U.P. Wild Church site](#) calls it a community for everyone: "You are welcome whether you are a part of a Christian faith community already, questioning your faith, in recovery from wounds inflicted by religious trauma, simultaneously receiving nourishment from other faith traditions, or simply seeking to go deeper."

The movement is growing, and through dedicated efforts U.P. Wild Church has a new branch in the Keweenaw Peninsula. Rob Bishop, an assistant dean at Michigan Tech University, shares his experience with the ministry:



"In October of 2022, I saw an announcement for a nature hike and prayer service that was being put on by a group called U.P. Wild in the Keweenaw. It piqued my interest because I have always found a closer connection to God when I am in the outdoors. I saw that the group was connected to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. I immediately reached out to the Rev. Bucky Beach, a retired pastor in the synod, and asked him about the group. He was familiar with Lanni Lantto, who was leading the U.P. Wild Church in Marquette. He said it looked like it would be a perfect opportunity for me to get reconnected to my faith.

“In January of 2023, I was invited to a Zoom meeting for those interested in starting the branch in the Keweenaw. A launching team was formed, and I volunteered to be in charge of communications. We agreed [that] our first official U.P. Wild in the Keweenaw would be Wednesday, June 28, 2023, at the [Nara Nature Park, in Houghton, Mich.]. Fast-forward to the last day of February 2024. We have held eight services in eight different locations across the Keweenaw, with eight different service leaders. I have been fortunate to have attended seven out of eight services. Each one has connected me closer to my faith in God and my love of the outdoors. I have found a new calling and look forward to continuing my journey.”

[U.P. Wild Church proclaims itself](#) “a spiritual home for the seekers of beauty, wonder, & awe; where the ‘church goers’ supplement their journey and the ‘misfits’ finally feel connected within the congregation of paper birch trees & squawking geese via the Mystery which creates all things.” The church wants to share this space with others, so feel free to explore virtual walks and a cemetery stroll, to pray by the beach, to follow deer tracks, to find Christ in the compost, and so much more at www.upwild.org/media/.

* Paraphrased from Wendy Healy’s “UP Wild Brings Worship Outdoors” in “Stories of Faith,” www.livinglutheran.org/sofia/up-wild-brings-worship-outdoors.php.

ENGAGE WITH US

Did you know that ELCA Congregational Stewardship not only offers webinars open to anyone in our congregations and synods, it also posts video recordings of them in case you miss one or want to refresh your memory? Check out the [Congregational Stewardship Vimeo page!](#)

Interested in “The Spirituality of Capital Campaigns,” “Creating a Year-Round Stewardship Calendar,” “Narrative Budget Construction,” “Donor Motivations” or “Four Mindset Shifts”? They’re perfect for stewardship teams wanting to do some continuing education or for councils curious about what’s happening in the realm of stewardship.

GRATEFUL

As the school year concludes, we are grateful for all the leaders who have worked diligently and faithfully in school-year-based activities, from Sunday school to confirmation to youth events to Lutheran schools and universities, including campus ministry. This work provides the foundation and next steps in growing faith among our children, youth and young adults, and fosters the faith stories we seek to share. We pray for a blessed and peaceful summer that renews your commitment to God’s call and inspires you for the next school year. If you are bringing a group to the ELCA Youth Gathering, make sure to find us in the Interactive Learning Center!

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

