

## Why be part of the ELCA?

First and foremost, the ELCA is a collection of people who have been redeemed by the grace of God in Christ Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. It is by Jesus' faithfulness that we are saved, not by our own actions or beliefs. The faith that trusts this Gospel message is given by the Holy Spirit in baptism as Martin Luther's Small Catechism reminds us in the explanation of the Third Article of the Apostle's Creed:

I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Ghost has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith; even as He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith; in which Christian Church He forgives daily and richly all sins to me and all believers, and at the last day will raise up me and all the dead, and will give to me and to all believers in Christ everlasting life. This is most certainly true.

*(<https://bookofconcord.org/small-catechism/>)*

The ELCA strives to be a witness to the world that our unity in Christ is a gift of God through the Holy Spirit even when we disagree with one another. We come together in worship, fellowship, and ministry despite sometimes significant differences in Biblical interpretation, political ideology, cultural backgrounds, economic status, and more. In baptism we are made by God into the varied Body of Christ that St. Paul refers to in 1 Corinthians 12. We don't require that everyone believe exactly the same, or be limited to one style of worship, but see that there are a variety of gifts that, when used in love for the other, work together to the glory of God.

The ELCA is unique as it is neither a top-down, nor bottom-up organization. We have three distinct expressions: Congregations, Synods, and Churchwide. Each expression can shape and adapt itself to provide ministry in its own context and community. We do this within a framework that values the input of all the baptized, both lay members and clergy. Synod and Churchwide Assemblies require that 60% of voting members are non-clergy. Decisions that come from Churchwide are made by the people that fill the pews and the pulpits of our congregations, not some out of touch elites secluded away from the real world.

The ELCA works a bit like a farm co-op. When you belong to the co-op you reap the benefits that come from pooling resources. With over 8000 congregations in the ELCA and over 200 years of ministry in North America (170 in our Synod) through predecessor Lutheran denominations, participating in the ELCA brings valuable resources to congregations that maintain, enhance, and grow local ministries. What are some benefits of being part of the ELCA?

- **A high standard of training and accountability for our clergy:** The ELCA has seven accredited seminaries across the United States. Most clergy have four years of college followed by four years of graduate level courses in seminary, including an onsite internship. Before being approved for ordination, potential clergy undergo a psychological evaluation, a background check and several interviews with a Synod

Candidacy Committee (comprised of both lay and clergy from the Synod). Synod offices work together to make sure that clergy who have been removed from our approved roster for misconduct don't sneak into a congregation in another Synod. After becoming ordained we require regular boundary and ethics training. These strict standards are not shared by every denomination.

Well trained and educated clergy help ensure that the Gospel (Good News) of Jesus is proclaimed and that the sacraments (Baptism and Holy Communion) are rightly administered. Strong standards and expectations reduce the incidence of clergy abuse and misconduct (ethical, financial, sexual) for the safety and wellbeing of everyone in our congregations and communities.

The Northeastern Iowa Synod's Fund for Leaders pays tuition and fees for ELCA seminary students from our Synod. Reducing the student debt load of new clergy benefits smaller congregations who can't pay top dollar for their pastors.

- **Assistance in times of transition, conflict, or tragedy:** Synod offices provide assistance to congregations seeking a pastor. This assistance varies from congregation to congregation depending on what is needed and what is available. While the Synod can't always provide what a congregation wants or needs, it does work as a partner in finding a well qualified pastor. Ultimately, it is the congregation's decision who is called as their pastor. The Synod *cannot* dictate to the congregation who they call as their pastor. (We want both the congregation and the pastor to be comfortable with each other in their relationship.) We also try to connect congregations to resources they may not be aware of during significant conflict or when tragedy strikes.
- **Expanded the Scope of Ministry:** Jesus sends us out in service to the world (Matthew 28:16-20). The ELCA supports missionaries who share Christ's love around the world. Dozens of Young Adults in Global Mission (YAGM) are trained and placed yearly in Christian ministries across the globe. The ELCA provides logistics to get thousands of locally created quilts, school kits, and health kits from congregations to those in need domestically and in foreign lands. Congregation feed our hungry neighbors locally but getting food and other health resources to countries in famine or war requires coordinated efforts with partners that the ELCA has in place. Lutheran Disaster Relief is a respected NGO known to stay and provide care and relief following a natural disaster long after other organizations have left. What's even better, mission support to the ELCA covers administrative costs so that when a gift is given to provide relief, administrative expenses are not diverted from the relief effort.

Working together we also support Lutheran Services in Iowa (LSI) and Lutheran Services in America (LSA) which is the largest social service organization in America. LSI provides a variety of services (mental health, in home care, child welfare) to the most underserved people in our state. Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS) works with federal, state, and local communities to find homes, employment, and education to refugees from places like Afghanistan and Ukraine being welcomed into our country.

- **Helping Families Raise Faithful Children:** Children and youth ministries have been a stronghold of Lutheran congregations for generations. Sunday School, Confirmation classes, and youth groups are faithful ways to pass on the faith at the congregational

level. Experiences of faith in places outside the home and the congregation reinforce Christian identity in young people and help teach them what it means to live their faith in daily life.

**Bible Camps:** A week of fun away from home where faith is shared in Bible study, worship around the campfire, skits, and crafts is different than a week of sports camp, or science camp. Spending a week with a college aged, young adult counselor who is excited about Jesus, demonstrates faith in the next phase of life. ELCA congregations support four Bible camps in Iowa alone: Riverside, Ewalu, Ingham Okoboji, and Lutheran Lakeside. Those who work on summer staffs at our Bible camps frequently go on to serve in leadership positions in congregations (council & committee volunteers and clergy). ELCA camps raise up leaders for the Church.

**Youth Gatherings:** The triennial National Youth Gatherings gather 25,000-30,000 youth from across the ELCA for worship, service, and learning. I will admit that there have been some poor decisions carried out at Gatherings. Unfortunately, those mistakes frequently overshadow the great ministry that also happens. People notice when tens of thousands of teenagers go out to do service projects in a community over three days, following the example and command of Jesus to serve. Jesus is proclaimed in small group Bible studies led by Synod youth directors and clergy both at the Gathering and in the months leading up to it. Our youth are inspired to know they are not alone in their beliefs but that other teens walk with them.

**Church Colleges & Campus Ministries:** There are 26 ELCA colleges across the country. Two (Wartburg and Luther) are in Northeastern Iowa, the other (Grand View) is in Southeastern Iowa. These institutions teach young adults about living faith in daily life no matter what career path they follow. This Lutheran notion of vocation is also taught to the 80% of students that are not ELCA too. The ELCA also provides campus ministries at the three state universities in Iowa (U of I, ISU, and UNI). Campus ministries provide safe places to explore faith at this critical time in a person's life.

Why be a part of the ELCA? Because these ministries are in line with the values and ministries that have been and remain important to Nazareth Lutheran: Proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen for the forgiveness of sins, and serving the world in response to God's grace and love.

In a church as large as the ELCA, we are bound to find differences, and even be offended at times by things done in the church. In those cases, we need to remember that we are one in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit, and not divide the body, but repent (allow our hearts to be changed to align with God's heart), give and receive forgiveness, and work to reunite and heal the best we can. As disciples of Jesus, we believe in God's ability to raise us to new life here and now, and in the age to come.

I, along with brothers and sisters in Christ across the Synod and beyond, are praying for you in your discernment. May you be blessed by the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

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