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(page 14)

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Study guide

A “mission” to the future

ELCA new-start congregations offer innovative ministry models

By Robert C. Blezard

Across North America, church attendance has declined in the 35 years since the ELCA was formed by the merger of several Lutheran denominations. Churches of all stripes have suffered and closed. But a number of ELCA congregations and leaders are finding church growth and vitality by reaching out to new people in creative and entrepreneurial ways. They have much to teach us.

EXERCISE 1: CHURCH DECLINE

Churches in America crossed a milestone in 2021 when, for the first time, less than half of Americans identified as Christians, according to the Pew Research Center. Just 50 years ago, the figure was 90%. Denominations across North America have suffered, including the ELCA. Since forming in 1988 from the merger of several Lutheran denominations, the ELCA has declined in membership from 5.2 million to about 3 million today. Most ELCA churches are smaller than they were in 1988. Discuss:

- How is your church doing compared to 10 years ago? 20 years ago? 35 years ago when the ELCA was formed?
- If the congregation is smaller, what was congregational life like back in the day? What ministries have gone by the wayside?
- As your congregation shrunk, what efforts did you make to maintain or grow membership?
- In your view, what are the chief reasons for the decline?
- How would you describe your congregation’s openness to new approaches? Is it less open or more open than in the past? Why?
- As you read the article in *Living Lutheran*, what ideas for growth stand out? How might your congregation give them a try? As a study group, formulate some ideas and present them to your congregation council or pastor for consideration.

EXERCISE 2: CHANGE IS HARD

There’s an old joke about a pastor who put up a sign in the narthex that said “Prayer Changes Things!” When it disappeared a week later, the pastor put up another sign that said “Prayer Changes Things!” But it, too, disappeared. The pattern repeated for several more weeks until the pastor caught the culprit: Surprise! It was the president of the congregation council! The astonished pastor asked, “Don’t you believe in prayer?” The president humbly replied, “I believe in prayer. But I don’t believe in change!” Discuss:

- Is reluctance to change only a church thing, or is it across all human institutions? Where else do you see it? Why is change so hard?



Study guide: A “mission” to the future

continued

- How would you describe your congregation’s openness to change? Has it always been so or has it varied over time?
- As our national culture has changed over the last 35 years, how has your community changed? In turn, how has your congregation changed? Has it kept up or have changes in the wider culture passed your congregation by?
- In an effort to change, what new outreach efforts, programs, ideas, ministries has your congregation proposed or tried in the last 35 years? How successful were they? Why?
- What changes would be helpful for your congregation to greet the future with more vitality and health?
- What insights and ideas can you glean from the article in *Living Lutheran*?
- How can your congregation’s leadership work to foster more openness to change? How can your study group help?

EXERCISE 3: “NEW PEOPLE”

“The future of the Lutheran church is new people,” said Ruben Duran, ELCA senior adviser for new ministry development. “New people” especially includes those who are outside of the Lutheran church’s traditional Northern European demographic. Our nation is becoming more racially and ethnically diverse, and that presents a challenge and opportunity. “The look of Lutherans is changing,” Duran said. “They don’t all look European; they are more mixed. That’s the present of the Lutheran church, and that’s the future.” Explore:

- In the last 35 years, how has your community changed in its mix of races and ethnicities? (An online search tool may inform your answer.)
- Do you have “new people” living in your community? Who are they? Where do they live? Where did they come from? What gifts in culture, perspective and talents do they bring to your community?
- How has your congregation tried to reach out to them? What else could it do?
- If your congregation has not reached out, what strategies can you glean from the *Living Lutheran* article?
- As a study group, put together some ideas and present them to your pastor or congregation council.

EXERCISE 4: BELONGING

Describing his congregation’s success in growth, mission developer Charbel Zgheib said, “Belonging is the No. 1 thing. People want to belong to a community that cares for them, helps them and equips them.” Discuss:

- How would you describe your congregation’s environment when it comes to fostering a sense of belonging? Why?

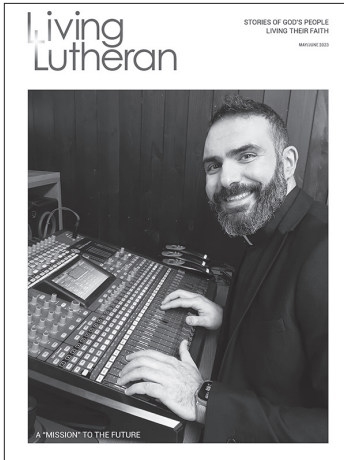
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Living
Lutheran

8765 W. Higgins Rd.
Chicago, IL 60631
(800) 638-3522, ext. 2540
livinglutheran@elca.org
livinglutheran.org

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Study guide: A “mission” to the future

continued

- What programs, ministries, practices and other factors help people to “belong” to your congregation? How well are they working? Are they enough? What more could/should be done?
- In many congregations, longtime members enjoy a sense of belonging, but it’s hard for newcomers to fit in and belong. Why do you think this is so? Is this phenomenon present in your congregation? What can be done about it?
- Does your congregation have any strategy to encourage newer members to fit in and belong? If so, what are they? Are they enough? What more could be done? If not, why not? How might this help your congregation to grow?
- Are your congregation’s efforts enough? What more could be done?

EXERCISE 5: THE “ART” OF DEVELOPMENT

Explaining the work of developing a congregation, Duran described it as more art than science, involving these tasks:

- Listening to the people.
- Finding God in the people.
- Humbling ourselves.
- Walking with the people.

For each of these tasks, discuss:

- What does this entail?
- How are they easy to say but hard to do well?
- How does each task build on one another to achieve a desired outcome of growth?
- Does your congregation employ these tasks in its outreach? If so, how and how well? What could be done better? If not, why not? How could it start?
- If so, what could be done better?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- The traditional congregation model—a church with sufficient middle- and upper-middle class members to support the staff and building—is in decline. Moreover, the model may exclude potential new people who may live in urban areas, have less money and are younger. What model brought your congregation into existence? How has it served you over the years? Does it work as well now? What can be done?
- Acknowledging the human tendency to resist change, a 1960s advertising slogan for a cigarette brand said, “Us Tarryton smokers would rather fight than switch!” How is that attitude evidenced in our world today? How is it apparent in church life? In your congregation? What fights have taken place over proposed changes in your congregation? What were they about? How were they resolved (if at all)?

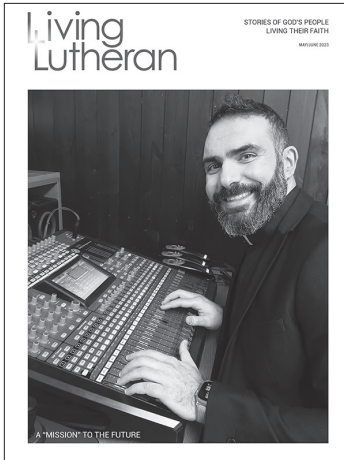
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About the study guide author:

Rob Blezard

is pastor of St. Paul Lutheran Church in Aberdeen, Md. He earned a Master of Divinity degree from Boston University School of Theology and has done further study at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg (Pa.), now called United Lutheran Seminary.



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Study guide: A “mission” to the future

continued

How can resistance to change limit a congregation’s possibilities and future?
How has it or is it limiting your congregation’s future?

- To grow into the future, congregations and leaders have to be creative, entrepreneurial, and willing to change and try new things. Do you agree with this premise? Why or why not? How do these characteristics apply to your congregation and its leaders? What can be done to spark the will to change, as well as the creative spirit that it will require?
- With Christianity in decline in North America, thousands of churches close every year. Will your congregation be one of them? How would you characterize the vitality and strength of your congregation? What would it take for your congregation to grow?



A “MISSION” TO THE FUTURE

ELCA new-start congregations offer innovative ministry models

By Jennifer Bringle

Charbel Zgheib serves as mission developer of an emerging Arabic-speaking congregation in Sacramento, Calif., one of 322 ELCA new-start or mission congregations. As part of his ministry approach to meet the needs of his community members, Zgheib launched Salam Radio Station, an Arabic Christian media organization.

After moving from Lebanon to the United States to complete his theological studies, Charbel Zgheib was presented with a life-changing opportunity: to serve as mission developer for a new congregation serving Afghan, Arab and Middle Eastern people in Sacramento, Calif. Members of the community had shown interest in establishing the congregation, and Khader Khalilia, program director for ELCA Arab and Middle Eastern Ministries, thought Zgheib would be the perfect person to lead the effort.

“I met with Charbel and learned about his background and what he was doing in Lebanon—walking with people, especially with the refugees, and providing psychosocial support,” Khalilia said. “We know the church is not only the place where people can hear the word of God and receive the sacrament, but it’s also the place where they find comfort and belonging. And I knew Charbel was the one who could bring the Arab community together under this umbrella.”

Zgheib realized that establishing a new congregation such as this one would require some outside-the-box thinking. Working alongside Dawn Roginski, interim director for evangelical mission with the Sierra Pacific Synod, and supported by Khalilia, Zgheib came up with a multichannel approach that includes not only in-person services but also an Arabic-language radio show and an idea for a mobile app.

“It’s bringing the church to people where they are, meeting them where they are,” Zgheib said. “Some people will always want to come to the church, and that will always be an option. But it’s not the only option for the church to operate.”

Innovative models

Zgheib’s emerging Arabic-speaking congregation is the Sierra Pacific Synod’s newest synod-authorized worshipping community (SAWC) and just one of 322 new or mission congregations being developed by the ELCA across the United States and the Caribbean. These new congregations employ innovative models to reach new people in changing communities and areas experiencing rapid population growth.

New mission congregations aim to include diverse socioeconomic groups, ethnic and multicultural communities, and emerging younger populations as part of the ELCA’s goal to engage a million new, young and diverse people by the end of the decade.

“The future of the Lutheran church is in new people,” said Ruben Duran, ELCA senior adviser for new ministry development. “The current people, we need to serve them, love them and respect them. But we’re not reaching new people. So therefore, hundreds of ELCA congregations are going to die

and close, because they’re not reaching out to their diverse community.”

Church attendance in the United States has been declining over the last decade, particularly since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to a 2021 Gallup poll, church membership slipped below 50% in 2020 for the first time in the polling group’s eight decades of tracking. Even prior to the pandemic, closings were on the rise; a 2021 Lifeway Research study found that 4,500 churches shut their doors in 2019.

“It’s bringing the church to people where they are, meeting them where they are.”

The traditional church model of a large congregation with enough middle- to upper-class members to afford maintenance of a building can exclude people living in urban areas, as well as low-income and younger people.

“If you don’t have enough people and enough money—which used to be the criteria to have a ‘nice’ church—what are we going to do?” Duran asked.

That’s where the new-start congregation program comes in. The initiative includes several mission and ministry models that serve as entry points for establishing new congregations. SAWCs, which are approved by their synod and affirmed by ELCA Christian Community and Leadership (CCL), explore particular ministry fields and can operate independently or within an existing congregation.

Through these entry points, leaders develop models using the key tenets of mission development: theological grounding, leadership development, discipleship, and ministry that is contextual, organic, healthy and oriented toward justice.



“There is a place where they can come to feel freedom and know that God loves them.”

Regardless of the entry point, new-start congregations require a mission developer. Sometimes this person emerges from the community forming the congregation, though they can be recruited from outside as well. Potential mission developers go through a screening and interview process overseen by the area synod and CCL before they are installed in a new start.

“The No. 1 expectation of a mission developer is to read the context, listen to the people, learn from the people, accompany the people and serve the people, and invite their participation in forming a new community of faith,” Duran said.

Duran points to several examples of this mindset in action and how it helps new congregations grow organically. In Berwyn, Ill., Maria Rojas-Banda serves as mission developer of Misión Luterana Unidad, a Latino ministry housed at Unity Lutheran Church of Berwyn. Rojas-Banda received several requests from LGBTQIA+ couples to officiate at their marriage ceremonies. After Rojas-Banda performed several of these weddings, word spread, and many of the couples and their friends in the area began attending services at Unidad.

“In the Latinx community, coming from a Roman Catholic background, many times LGBTQIA people feel that there is no place for them, that there is no place where they can come and worship and be their



Maria Rojas-Banda is mission developer of Misión Luterana Unidad, a Latino ministry housed at Unity Lutheran Church in Berwyn, Ill. “In the Latinx community, many times LGBTQIA people feel that there is no place where they can come and worship and be their authentic selves,” she said. “We are the place, and we want to provide that for them.”

authentic selves,” Rojas-Banda said. “We are the place, and we want to provide that for them. Even if they don’t become a member, I want them to know that there is a place where they can come to feel freedom and know that God loves them.”

New kinds of outreach

No matter how these mission congregations start or develop, their goal is to create a safe space for worship that fits the needs of varied communities, from immigrants to those experiencing homelessness to young urban dwellers. Duran said that goal can be achieved by actively engaging with the community that a new congregation will serve.

“It’s not a science or methodology but rather an art,” he said. “New-start is basically the art of listening to the people, of finding God in the people, and then humbling ourselves and walking with the people. In the mix of community, a hunger for the divine always pops up, and we were created to be part of that.”

That has been Zgheib’s experience as a mission developer. Prior to taking on the role, Zgheib assumed he would find an already-assembled community simply in need of a leader. But once he arrived, he realized he would be the conduit to the Afghan refugee and Middle Eastern communities, identifying Christians who were in search of a church home.

“I realized [that] I need to begin some outreach in the church, organizing in the community and meeting people to build this community,” he said.

Zgheib also knew traditional avenues of reaching people and creating space for worship likely wouldn’t work. “Church is not only a physical place for people,” he said. “We need to have new ways of [doing outreach to] people and new ways of communicating with our communities. In the United States, especially in these communities, people seek new opportunities, for they are not connected to a land, to one physical space. They travel, they seek opportunities, they seek work, especially the youth.”

At the same time, Zgheib met longtime residents who were more likely to attend regular services in a traditional church building. He aimed to create a ministry that could serve both groups.

With Roginski, Zgheib is developing an approach that will allow him to meet the members of his community where they are and to minister to them in the way that best fits their needs. The first piece of this plan, the newly launched Salam Radio Station, will share the gospel over the airwaves, alongside a website (salamgroup.co/radio), mobile app and social media.

“We thought that an Arab-speaking radio station would be a way to outreach to people and go straight to the community,” Zgheib said. “Wherever you go, you have this application and the website on your mobile



Photo: Courtesy of St. John Lutheran

Zgheib serves food as part of his new-start congregation's community Thanksgiving meal alongside St. John Lutheran Church in Sacramento.

“It’s not a science or methodology but rather an art.”

phone, and you can interact with us. You can find whatever you need, an online community, and you’re always connected to the church.”

Zgheib said the radio station will reach not only the Arab community but also marginalized people within that population who are less likely to worship in a traditional church setting due to age, disability, lack of transportation or distrust of the institution.

“It’s outside the building—it’s a live connection,” he said. “It’s wherever you need someone, and wherever you want to, you can chat with us. You can send your messages. If you need any kind of support—someone to listen to you, financial support, whatever—it’s a virtual community that supports its members.”

The present and the future

Duran believes that the model of a leader assembling the community—rather than the usual route of a congregation seeking its leader—allows mission congregations such as Zgheib’s to demonstrate God’s love to people in a new way. Instead of “preaching to” their communities, he said, mission developers offer a sense of welcoming and belonging, which is particularly valuable to members of marginalized groups.

“The belief will come later—the belonging is the No. 1 thing,” he said. “People want to belong to a community that cares for them, helps them and equips them. So belonging is first, and then we can begin to learn to behave as a people of God. And then the belief will come as we act, as we reflect on our action. So belonging, behaving and then believing.”

No matter where a new-start congregation sets up—an existing church building, a community center, a bar, a homeless shelter or even online—the guiding principle is to engage communities in the church through God’s calling to love and serve others.

“There are all kinds of entry points, but the idea is to connect to those new audiences and then learn from them and invite them to create a community,” Duran

said. “And then the social ministry, of course, with food and shelter and [other resources]. When you have that, the people will be interested in creating a spiritual community as well.”

A holistic ministry model such as this is centered on evangelism, equity and justice.

New mission congregations also sometimes team up with struggling congregations to pool their resources and find ways for both communities to continue their worship.

Duran is currently working with a congregation considering a parallel development agreement. While the existing congregation no longer has the membership and funds to support a pastor full time, they have an opportunity to work with a developing mission to share their pastor and facility. Under such an agreement the congregation pays a percentage of the pastor’s salary and ELCA new-start mission development pays the remaining share.

“It’s a win-win,” Duran said. “That’s one of the models we’re utilizing in different places. And then who knows if, two years from now, because they have one pastor serving the two communities, if they intentionally build a relationship, maybe we don’t need [them to be separate]. It could be just one church that has two expressions.”

Duran said new-start missions teach the church how critical it is to connect with their surrounding communities. Rather than see themselves as only for Lutherans, these new congregations challenge the larger church to see itself as a place for everyone. Even thriving congregations with many members can see in new-start communities new ways to be stewards of God’s love in their neighborhoods.

“We’ve got to mingle in the community, we have to build partnerships,” Duran said. “The YMCA is a partner, the library is a partner, the restaurants are our partners. I train a lot of churches that still have the capacity ... to go into their community. So I tell them, ‘Do it now. Don’t wait until the last minute. We [as a denomination] are 35 years old—it’s time to get out of the house.’”

As traditional church models change and wane, the future of the ELCA is reflected in the myriad faces of new mission congregations’ diverse membership. Duran believes this intermingling of different people will ensure not only that the church stays strong but also that it reflects the full breadth of God’s love.

“The look of Lutherans is changing,” he said. “They don’t all look European; they are more mixed. That’s the present of the Lutheran church, and that’s the future.” †

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