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## Study guide

# Unlocking a new ministry model

*The role of lay leadership in the ELCA's future*

By Robert C. Blezard

News flash (that is no real news): Our church is changing. Congregations are getting smaller, finances are stretched, and there are fewer traditional rostered ministers available. What's a denomination to do? The ELCA is discovering anew the rich pool of talents and spiritual gifts among our faithful lay members. It is leading the ELCA into the future.

### EXERCISE 1: MANY GIFTS, ONE BODY

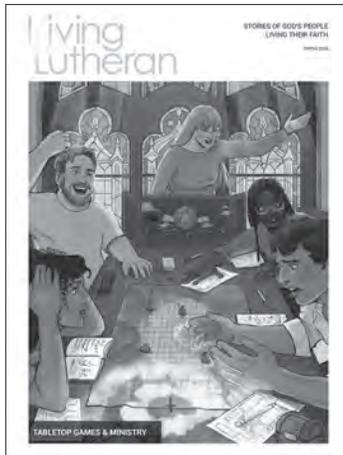
Giving instruction to the early church, the apostle Paul emphasizes the diversity of gifts that God has poured upon people of the church. God has bestowed different people with distinct gifts—all for the good of the church.

Read 1 Corinthians 12:12-31 and discuss:

- To whom is Paul speaking in verse 27? How does that refer to Christianity as a whole? To Lutherans? To your congregation? To you?
- Paul likens the body of Christ to a human body that consists of many different parts that each fulfill a distinct role, yet they all together work for a common goal. How is this analogy helpful to understanding gifts in our denomination? In your congregation? To your role in the faith?
- Taking the analogy a little further, what happens to your overall health if one part of your body is sick or does not fulfill its role? What happens in a congregation if a part of the body is not functioning? When and how have you seen this happen?
- What does Paul mean when he says we are “one body”? How does that description apply to churches in general? Does that fit how your congregation sees itself and its membership?
- Although we are “one body,” Paul says we are also “individually members of it.” What does that imply about the responsibility we have as individual members of the body?
- At the end of the passage, Paul enumerates a number of different gifts. What other gifts would you add? Look at each one of the gifts and explore how they are present and contributing to the life of your congregation.

### EXERCISE 2: ROSTERED MINISTERS

In the ELCA, “rostered ministers” refers to ministers of Word and Sacrament (pastors) and ministers of Word and Service (deacons). They serve congregational ministries in many ways. Thinking of your congregation, list the duties or tasks your rostered minister performs in each of the following categories (feel free to add others):



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- Staffing
- Building management
- Event planning
- Finance
- Evangelism
- Volunteer coordination
- Education
- Preaching
- Pastoral visitation
- Worship leadership

When you have completed your list, discuss:

- Which duties could be completed by lay leadership?
- To what degree do lay leaders in your congregation work to accomplish those tasks? Could the lay leaders do more? What's preventing them?
- Which duties are exclusively or primarily the responsibility of a rostered minister?
- How would your congregation's efficiency and effectiveness change if lay leaders stepped up and took on more responsibilities?
- What would be the benefit to your congregation if your rostered minister was able to focus more on their primary responsibilities?

### **EXERCISE 3: CLERGY SHORTAGE**

From 2015 to 2023, about 3,700 pastors retired from active ministry, yet only 2,000 were ordained in that period, according to a 2025 report titled "The Future Need for Pastoral Leaders in the ELCA." With retirements outpacing ordinations nearly 2-to-1, the question for some congregations is whether there will be a rostered minister available to serve them.

But for many more congregations, the larger question is whether they have the resources to compensate a full-time pastor, according to the report. The ELCA calculated that congregations typically need at least \$160,000 in income to afford a full-time pastor. Given that figure, about 45% of congregations in 2022 could not afford a full-time pastor, up from 38% in 2015. The report said the figure is likely to increase.

To cope, many congregations have adopted cost-saving strategies, including arranging for a part-time pastor, calling a bivocational pastor, sharing a pastor with another congregation (or more than one), or combining or merging with other congregations.

Synod bishops have also responded to the need for pastoral leadership by training and commissioning laypeople to serve in congregations. Synod-authorized ministers

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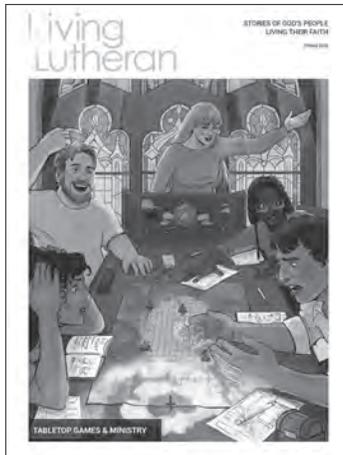
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(SAMs) now serve in about 9% of ELCA congregations, performing the same duties as pastors or deacons.

Because of these cost-saving strategies and deployment of SAMs, the shortage of pastoral leadership is not as dire as the imbalance between retirements and ordinations might suggest.

Discuss:

- As you consider these trends in clergy availability, what are the first thoughts and emotions that arise?
- Has your congregation ever worried that there might not be a pastor available to serve you when your current pastor moves on? Explain.
- Has your congregation worried that it might not be able to afford a pastor now or in the future? Can you say more about that?
- How has clergy availability or affordability been an issue in your area or synod?
- What do you think of the coping strategies congregations and synods are turning to?

### **EXERCISE 4: SYNOD-AUTHORIZED MINISTERS**

As noted, synod-authorized ministers serve in at least 756 congregations, or 9% of ELCA congregations, and their numbers are expected to increase. SAMs tend to serve in congregations facing issues of affordability and community challenges. Moreover, SAMs are not serving uniformly across the ELCA. Some 80% of SAMs serve in just one-third of the ELCA's 65 synods, mostly in the middle part of the country, according to a 2024 report titled "The Use of Synod-authorized Ministers in the ELCA."

Whereas rostered ministers tend to be formed by traditional education at seminaries or through the ELCA's Theological Education for Emerging Ministries program, SAMs typically receive training through programs established by their synods. Varying by synod, these programs may run one or two years and generally cover Lutheran history and theology, preaching, worship, Bible, pastoral care and congregational leadership, the SAMs report said.

SAMs generally cover the same duties as pastors—preaching, presiding at worship, pastoral care, and presiding at funerals and (where permitted by state law) weddings.

Synod bishops report that SAMs have been a lifeline for congregations that can't afford to compensate a pastor or attract a pastor because of issues related to their community context, such as extreme isolation.

Discuss:

- What do you think of the commissioning of SAMs to serve congregations that can't afford or attract a pastor?
- From your experience as a congregation member, can you hypothetically imagine a fellow parishioner who—with some training and guidance—serving

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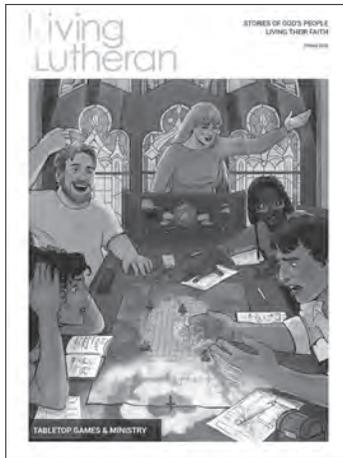
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satisfactorily in a pastoral role? Can you think of a specific person who would be a good candidate?

- SAMs serve 9% of ELCA congregations now, and that number is expected to rise in the future. What do you see as the benefits? The drawbacks?
- Hypothetically, what would you think of a SAM serving a congregation that you belonged to? How about your current congregation?
- How do you see the rise of SAMs and the issues that necessitate them changing the church? Is it for the good, the not so good or the in-between?

### **EXERCISE 5: SMALLER CONGREGATIONS**

“The Future Need” report showed a significant shrinking in the membership size of congregations. By 2022 nearly 60% of ELCA congregations had fewer than 50 in average worship attendance (AWA), compared to 32% just seven years earlier. Other size categories also had shrunk from 2015 to 2022:

- 51-150 AWA—47% in 2015 and 35% in 2022.
- 151-250 AWA—12% in 2015 and 4% in 2022
- Over 250 AWA—9% in 2015 and 2% in 2022.

Discuss:

What are the implications of shrinking worship attendance on:

- Congregational morale
- Congregational vitality
- Finances
- Christian education
- Building upkeep
- Volunteerism
- Other aspects of church life?

Thinking of your church, discuss:

- What is the trend of your congregation’s average worship attendance?
- How has your congregation changed as a result?
- How is it coping?
- What strategies have leaders employed to boost or maintain AWA?

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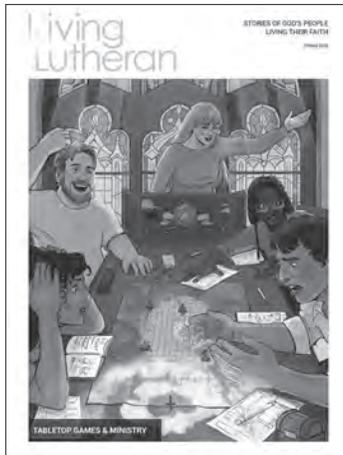
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### EXERCISE 5: DECLINING FINANCES

“The Future Need” report cited that, adjusted for inflation, the average income for ELCA congregations had declined by 19% between 2015 and 2023. Discuss:

- How do decreasing finances affect a congregation?
- When income dips, how do priorities shift?
- What areas of the budget tend to get cut? What tends to remain better funded?
- How has your congregation’s budget changed in the last 10 years?
- How has your congregation coped?
- What remained as your congregation’s priorities?

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- “Necessity is the mother of invention,” the old saying goes. How does that fit the emerging models of education and training for church leaders? What does that mean for your congregation? For your synod? For our denomination?
- How have recent changes in church attendance and finances brought about the necessity for greater lay leadership and a closer partnership between lay leaders and rostered ministers? In doing so, how are lay leaders and rostered ministers challenged to learn new ways of cooperation and coordination?
- Reflecting on the early Christian church, as well as the North American experience of ministry from pre-Colonial days, how were leaders recognized, trained and elevated into their positions? (Exploring this question may be aided by research.) How are emerging models of leadership education reclaiming some of that “homegrown” flavor? What are the pros and cons of this approach?
- Looking at the trends in church attendance, finance and leadership, what thoughts emerge about the current “season” in the 2,000-year story of the Christian church? What are causes for anxiety? What signs of hope are there?
- In her book *The Great Emergence*, theologian Phyllis Tickle asserts that the current changes in the Christian church worldwide just reflect the latest realignment of Christendom that happens every 500 years. The last big realignment came with the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century. As old models and presuppositions fade away, new ones will emerge. What do you think of Tickle’s theory? What about her hypothesis seems to fit the current trends? How does her theory provide hope for you? For your congregation? For Christianity in general?

# UNLOCKING A NEW MINISTRY MODEL

*The role of lay leadership  
in the ELCA's future*

*By Jennifer Bringle*

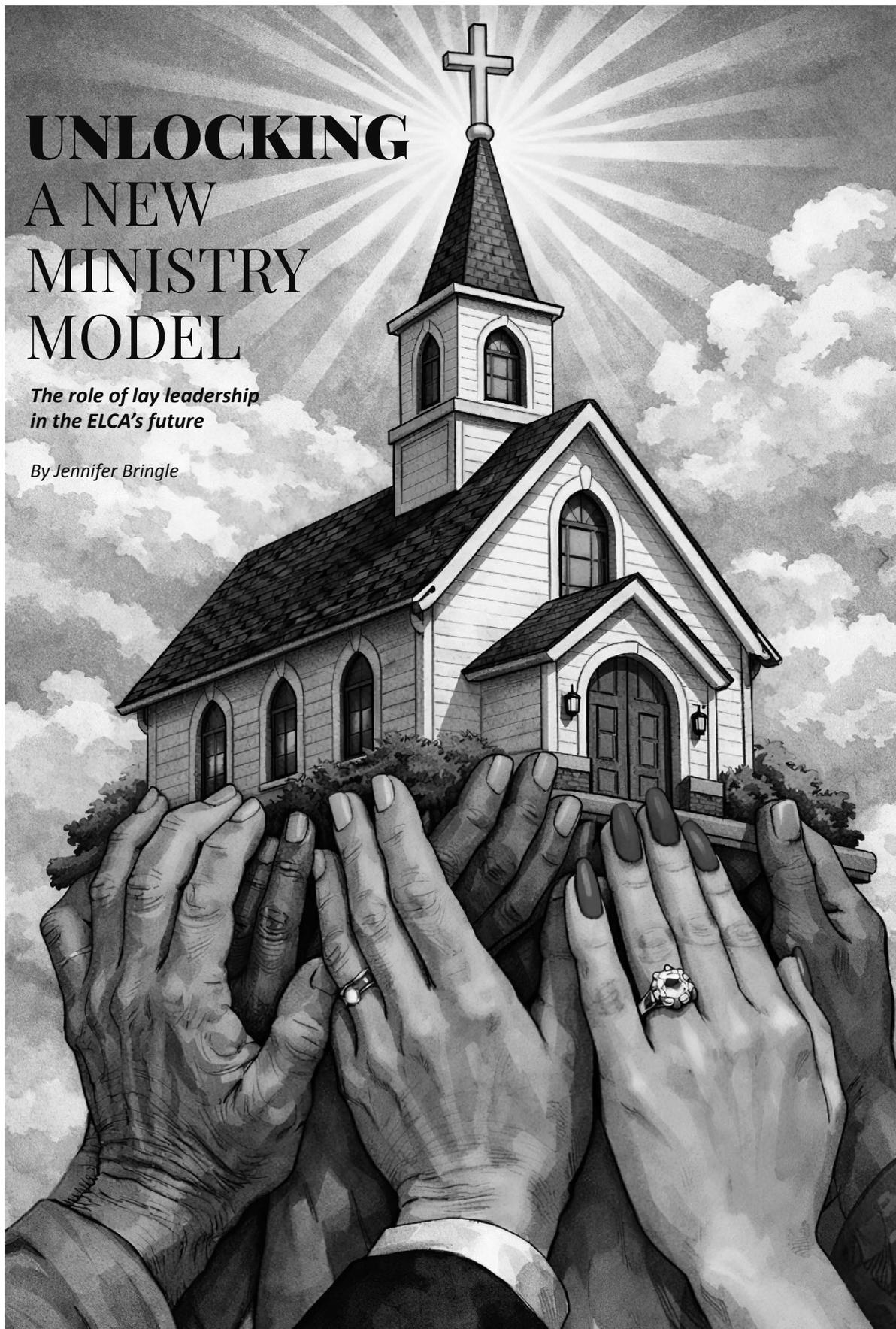


Illustration: Todd Grasty

Growing up at Prince of Peace Lutheran Church in Greensboro, N.C., Lucille “CeCee” Mills, ELCA secretary, saw lay leadership as an opportunity for everyone to have their voice heard in the church.

Prince of Peace began in 1970 as a neighborhood service center in the city’s historically Black Warnersville community, and Mills said that foundation guided the church’s approach to ministry.

“We started out as a children’s center, and because of that, children were never a future part of the church—they were the church,” she said. “So anything you wanted to experience leadership-wise in the church, you were allowed to do. I preached my first sermon at age 9. I served on council for the first time at age 12. There was always a holy invitation to come in.”

That faith upbringing stayed with Mills, and as she entered adulthood, she continued to serve in lay roles in the church, assisting fundraising efforts, serving on boards and giving her time to different outreach programs. “Doing those things was really critical to my understanding of who we were as the ELCA and what that meant for my call as a child of God, even before I felt called to public ministry,” she said.

Eventually, Mills did feel that call, and she looked to the example of her godfather, who at the time was a lay associate at Prince of Peace. Instead of attending seminary, he completed the Theological Education for Emerging Ministries (TEEM) certificate



Photo: Courtesy of Kathy Jo McLean

Since becoming a certified lay preacher in 2024, Kathy Jo McLean has served as a fill-in minister at more than a dozen congregations in the North Carolina Synod.

*“Empowering lay leaders is a way to unlock ministry and giftedness that is often overlooked.”*

program, which prepares people for ordained ministry in the ELCA. Mills followed that same route, and then served in the Virginia Synod, where she participated in the Ambassadors Community for Theological Study, which offers training to equip laity for service as ambassadors of Christ in homes, churches and their communities.

Mills’ story is just one of many across the ELCA of parishioners answering God’s call to serve in lay leadership roles. And while that call sometimes leads to ordination, as it did for Mills, ELCA members often serve as lay leaders in their churches and synods.

### *Opportunities to serve*

Lay ministry plays an important role in how ELCA congregations serve both their members and their communities. These roles can include everything from youth leaders, council members and community outreach coordinators to non-ordained positions such as a synod-authorized minister (SAM) and lay preacher.

Lay leader roles fulfill two purposes: Assisting ordained ministers in effectively running the church and performing outreach, while also giving congregants the opportunity to serve and answer their own calling to contribute directly to ministry.

“Often our word and sacrament ministers become so stretched and pulled, especially regarding administrative issues,” said Wendy Roberts, a deacon and assistant to the bishop for the candidacy and call process in the North Carolina Synod. “Being able to empower their lay leaders is really a way to unlock so much ministry and giftedness that I think is often overlooked in the church.”

While assisting rostered ministers accounts for the work of a large portion of lay leadership in the ELCA, a growing number of laypeople have stepped into minister roles through the SAM (see page 30) and TEEM programs. According to a 2024 report from the ELCA Research and Evaluation team that surveyed all 65 synods, at least 756 congregations—or around 9% of all ELCA churches—are currently served by SAMs. But the use of these lay ministers is



Photo: Courtesy of Brenda Magers

Brenda Magers, who manages the food pantry at Shepherd of the Sea Lutheran Church in Murrells Inlet, S.C., came to lay ministry in retirement.

unevenly distributed, with one-third of all synods accounting for 80% of all congregations served by a SAM. Those SAM-led congregations are mostly located in the Midwest and Texas.

“The increased use of synod-authorized ministers in the ELCA is one of the key indicators that a new, nonprofessionalized model of ministry is emerging alongside the more conventional model of rostered ministry,” the report says.

And acceptance of this type of ministry is growing within the ELCA, according to the report, which found that 68% of bishops approve of the use of SAMs and other non-ordained lay leaders in ministry positions.

“There are leaders who will do great ministry without ever having been ordained or rostered,” Mills said. “We just have to figure out how to celebrate and unleash that gift, and not look upon it with a hierarchical-based idea of their theological understanding and the effectiveness of their ministry.”

### *Welcoming different voices*

As the ELCA works toward becoming a more diverse and inclusive church, the growth of lay leadership creates a pathway to ministry for people who might

not otherwise be able to answer the call. Alternative pathways to pastoral leadership, such as the SAM and TEEM programs, appeal to those for whom the traditional avenue of seminary isn’t as feasible due to financial, time or proximity constraints.

“When I went to seminary, people were surprised that I had to pay for it—‘Oh, the church doesn’t just pay for you to go to seminary?’” said Jacqui Pagel, bishop’s associate for candidacy and faith formation in the Grand Canyon Synod. “It may have once been that way, but it’s not now. There’s the Fund for Leaders, but that can’t cover everyone.”

Programs like SAM and TEEM afford potential church leaders who face obstacles to seminary, such as a lack of funding, the chance to answer the call to ministry, Pagel said. And that can open the door to a wider range of potential leaders from underserved communities, rural areas and different socioeconomic backgrounds.

“These are opportunities for folks who are underrepresented,” said Imran Siddiqui, ELCA vice president. “They’re minority groups, they’re people who have disabilities, they’re people who speak another language other than English as their primary language—they have opportunities to serve in leadership.”

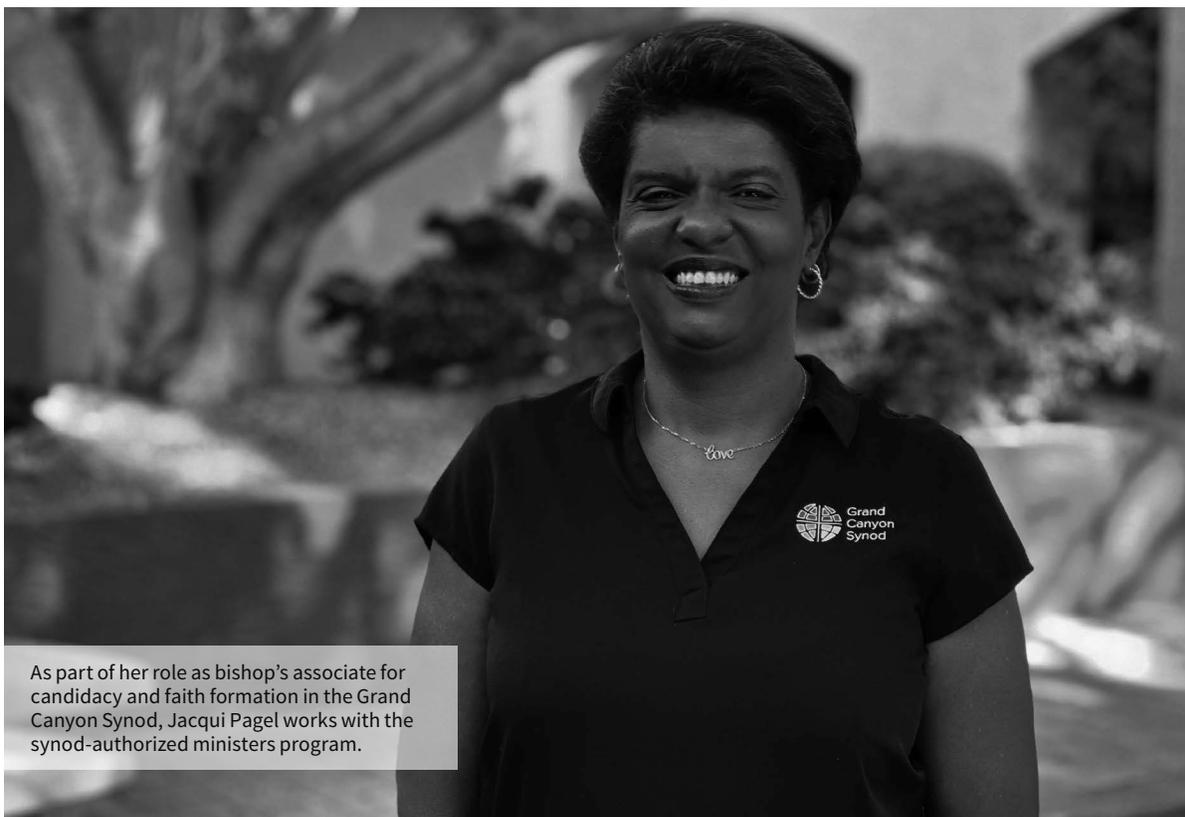
Siddiqui said leadership begets leadership for more diverse communities, as seeing people who look and sound like them in positions of power can inspire others to get more involved in the church and its ministries. He believes this can help make that ministry and outreach more successful because churches can better understand the needs of people.

“It’s not just about optics,” he said. “It’s about different experiences that lead to different outcomes. There have been certain things that I’ve been part of where folks are saying, ‘We need to do this for this group,’ but there’s no one involved from the group that they want to help.”

When churches and their leadership don’t have voices different from their own as part of the process, he said, programs and outreach efforts can miss the mark because they offer disparate groups what they think they need, rather than what they actually need.

“Having more laity included in leadership roles allows for more conversations, but also it allows

*Around 9% of all  
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are currently served  
by SAMs.*



As part of her role as bishop's associate for candidacy and faith formation in the Grand Canyon Synod, Jacqui Pagel works with the synod-authorized ministers program.

for clergy to be more diverse,” he said. “And it also allows for clergy and bishops to be more cognizant of different cultures and traditions, so that when they make decisions, they’re not unwittingly making a terrible choice based on racism or sexism or ableism.”

### *Spiritual second acts*

Lay leadership also creates a pathway to service for Lutherans who answer the call later in life. Kathy Jo McLean, a commissioned lay preacher in the North Carolina Synod, never thought she’d go into ministry. While she was always involved in her church—teaching Sunday school and Bible school, serving in kids’ programs—McLean never really considered that work lay ministry, though it technically qualified as such.

In 2022, McLean heard about the synod’s advanced lay ministry and realized she wanted to pursue that path. “It was like, ‘That’s it—that’s what I’m supposed to do,’” she said. “It took me a week before I could even talk to my husband about it, because it was not something I ever thought I would do.”

Since becoming a certified lay preacher in 2024, McLean has served as a fill-in minister at more than a dozen congregations in her region. She said this opportunity to pursue ministry has not only grown her faith but has also pushed her to step outside of her comfort zone and grow as a person.

“My faith, my trust, knowing that God and the Holy Spirit are going to show up in those moments, it’s a different feeling when you’ve been in the pulpit talking than when you’re sitting in the congregation,” she said. “I feel the confidence that no matter what happens, the Holy Spirit’s going to jump in, and everything’s going to be the way it’s supposed to be at that moment.”

Brenda Magers, who manages the food pantry at Shepherd of the Sea Lutheran Church in Murrells Inlet, S.C., came to ministry later in life as well. Magers’ partner, Angie Howell, who serves as a lay evangelist for the congregation, encouraged her to get involved in lay leadership as the church’s finance secretary. Recently retired from a career in park management, Magers said she initially saw the work as a way to stay busy in retirement, but she found true purpose when the opportunity arose to manage the church’s food pantry.

“We offer a choice pantry, which means people can come through and shop like they would in a grocery store and pick the food they like,” Magers said. “That reduces waste and increases dignity.”

Shepherd of the Sea recently partnered with Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church in nearby Georgetown for a satellite pantry. The Georgetown area has been hit hard recently by the closure of two major employers, and Magers says the pantry fills a need for many in that community who are struggling.



Photo: Courtesy of Wendy Roberts

Wendy Roberts is a deacon and assistant to the bishop for candidacy and call process in the North Carolina Synod.

“We set up a choice pantry in Trinity’s fellowship hall, and it’s not just dry goods. We have fresh meat, produce, salads, pasta and a table of sweets they can grab on their way out,” Magers said. “People like to have a little treat even if they’re struggling—it’s part of dignity, saying that you’re still a regular person.”

Last year the food pantry served 40,435 people and distributed 464,735 pounds of food.

Magers never planned to get into lay ministry, but her experience at Shepherd of the Sea has transformed her retirement and affirmed her faith.

“After 30-plus years of professional experience, I can apply my skills in a rewarding way,” she said. “There’s a different comfort level, and I can kind of relax into the ministry.”

### *Focusing on the future*

The power of lay ministry goes far beyond the individuals filling those lay leadership roles. These leaders play an important part in the vitality and growth of ELCA churches, particularly in smaller or rural communities, and for new pastors serving those congregations.

“So many of our congregations are on the smaller side, and many of our first-call opportunities for pastors are often smaller congregations with solo ministry positions,” Roberts said. “To survive in that setting, you are going to have to connect with your lay leaders and lift up your lay leaders to be able to do

*Lay leadership helps create a pathway to ministry for people who might not otherwise be able to answer the call. It also creates a pathway to service for Lutherans who answer the call later in life.*

all the things that you dream of bringing to fruition in the ministry.”

And that’s if those small congregations are able to call an ordained pastor at all. With fewer people entering seminary, Siddiqui said, there are fewer ELCA rostered ministers, which means greater competition for placing first-call pastors.

“In some parts of the country, people have had a really difficult time finding a pastor even if their congregations have enough money to pay above pastor guidelines, because they’re in a remote area or they’re in an area that some people don’t necessarily like,” he said.

In those situations, he said, having the freedom to tap lay leaders from within the congregation empowers smaller churches to continue to pursue mission and ministry.

“We’re probably going to see more of these situations,” he said. “And I think we can embrace these situations where laypeople are leading these congregations, and you don’t necessarily have to pick someone to be a pastor—you can have the

*“After 30-plus years of professional experience, I can apply my skills in a rewarding way.”*

*“We’re reformers, so we should always be questioning whether what we’re doing is still what it should be.”*

congregation council doing mission work and maybe you have someone who travels to be a pastor.”

That’s where SAM and TEEM ministers can really make a difference, whether they’re serving in a temporary or traveling role, or if they take on full-time pastoral duties. Pagel said the key is ensuring wide access to these lay ministry training programs and operating them in a way that best fits the needs of the faith communities they will serve.

Pagel works with the SAM program in the Grand Canyon Synod, which rolled out two years ago using the work of the Montana Synod as a model. During the first year, the synod brought on 10 candidates as SAMs, and as the program has evolved over the past two years, Pagel said they realized they needed to customize the training for their synod’s specific needs.

“I very quickly realized we couldn’t just do what Montana does,” she said. “[We] had to figure out, were we creating SAMs to be mini-pastors, or were we creating SAMs to be placeholders? I realized we were doing both, and once I figured that out, I felt like I had a



Lucille “CeCee” Mills, secretary of the ELCA, began her ministry as a lay leader, receiving certification through the Theological Education for Emerging Ministries program.



Imran Siddiqui, vice president of the ELCA, believes lay leaders can help make congregations’ ministries and outreach more successful by understanding the needs of their people.

really good grasp of where I’m pushing our SAMs and how I help them develop their leadership skills.”

As the need for lay leadership continues to grow in the ELCA, Mills said she hopes the church will continue to take an open-minded approach to support the growth of this important facet of ministry. And as someone who has seen the power of lay ministry not only in her personal faith journey but also in congregations across the country, she believes that supporting and cultivating those who feel this call will play a critical role in the future evolution of the ELCA.

“One of the things I’ve learned in this church is that we get in our own way—we can be theological snobs and say that, ‘It’s not right, and we should never do it that way,’” she said. “But we’re reformers, so we should always be questioning whether what we’re doing is still what it should be. Give [lay leaders] opportunities in all the spaces so that people can see the gifts and blessings they bring to the church.” †

### To learn more

- For more information about lay schools, search for “Lay Schools for Ministry” at [elca.org](http://elca.org) or contact your synod office.
- Check out Faith+Lead of Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minn., for its School for Lay Ministry at [faithlead.org](http://faithlead.org).
- Find your path to leadership at [journi.faiht](http://journi.faiht).
- Download a free study guide for this article by searching for “Study guide for ‘Unlocking a new ministry model’” at [livinglutheran.org](http://livinglutheran.org).