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Study guide

The power of connection

By Robert C. Blezard

We are not meant to be Christians alone, whether individuals or congregations, synods or denominations. Interdependence is hardwired into the Christian witness. For example, in teaching disciples the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:9-13), Jesus instructs them to address "Our Father," not "My Father." The fact is, Christians are meant to be in community. We are stronger and more effective when we work with one another. The ELCA models and celebrates our interconnectedness. How do you experience such connections?

EXERCISE 1: A CHURCH OF THREE EXPRESSIONS

"A threefold cord is not quickly broken," declares Ecclesiastes 4:12. Why? Simply because each cord is supported and strengthened by the others. The ELCA is structured much like a threefold cord. Our three expressions—congregations, synods and the churchwide organization—work together to witness the gospel through word and service. Each expression has its own mission field and work to do. Together, the ELCA reaches our neighbors both around the corner and around the world. Discuss.

- Looking at your congregation's structure, leadership and ministries, who are the neighbors your church loves and serves? Specifically, how is your congregation serving them in word? In service? (You might want to refer to your congregation's annual report.)
- Could your synod serve your neighbors as effectively? Could the churchwide organization? Why or why not?
- In what ways do your synod and the churchwide organization support your congregation in its ministries?
- What local churches or organizations does your congregation partner with in carrying out their ministries? How do they enrich your congregation's work?
- Looking at your synod's structure, leadership and ministries, who are the neighbors your synod serves? (You might refer to the most recent synod assembly bulletin or reports.) Specifically, how is it serving them in word? In service?
- What ministries and outreach does your synod undertake that your congregation does not?
- Could your congregation or the churchwide organization serve those neighbors or run those ministries as effectively as your synod does? Why or why not?
- How does your synod support your congregation?
- How does your congregation support the synod? How does your congregation support the churchwide organization?



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- What regional judicatories or organizations does your synod partner with to facilitate its ministries? How do they enrich your synod's work?
- Looking at the churchwide organization's structure, leadership and ministries, who are the neighbors our denomination serves? (You might refer to reports of churchwide assemblies and other resources available at elca.org.)
- What ministries and outreach does the churchwide organization undertake that synods and congregations do not? Explain.
- Could your synod or your congregation serve those neighbors and run those ministries as effectively? Why or why not?
- How does the churchwide organization support your congregation? Your synod?
- How do your congregation and synod support the churchwide organization?
- What other denominations or partners does our churchwide organization partner with to facilitate its work? How does it enrich our work?

EXERCISE 2: FOUNDATIONAL IMPERATIVES

In clarifying their mission, Christians have found primary inspiration in Jesus' Great Commission (Matthew 28:16-20) and Great Commandment (Matthew 22:34-40, Mark 12:28-34 and Luke 10:25-28). In the Great Commission, Jesus instructs disciples to make disciples of all nations through baptizing and teaching, while the Great Commandment directs us to love God with all we have and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Look at the Scripture references and discuss:

- List all the different ministries that you can think of, not only in your congregation and synod but across denominations. For each, discuss its connection to either the Great Commission or Great Commandment.
- Can you think of any ministries that are *not* related to either the Great Commission or Great Commandment?
- In what ways are these foundational imperatives important in discerning the value of a ministry or outreach?
- How do the Great Commission and Great Commandment inform our walk as individual disciples of Jesus? How can we better appropriate them?
- Is it in the power of any one church body or denomination to accomplish the directives of the Great Commission and the Great Commandment? Why or why not?
- How do Christians across the globe, as diverse as we are, together accomplish God's work?



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EXERCISE 3: ONE BODY IN CHRIST

Paul uses the analogy of the human body, with its distinct parts that each play an essential role, to describe how Christians are simultaneously both individual and interconnected. Read 1 Corinthians 12:12-27 and discuss:

- One at a time, consider each of the parts of the body Paul mentions in this passage. Describe what function they have in a person's life. How does each contribute to the "mission" of human vitality and well-being? What would someone's life be like if that part were missing or not functioning due to illness?
- Despite their many differences and distinctions, the parts of the body are united. Continuing Paul's analogy, what are the elements that keep the parts of the body connected and working toward a common purpose?
- How does Paul's analogy apply to the people of your congregation? What are the distinct gifts that can be identified from your membership? How does each gift contribute to the overall vitality and well-being of the church? Would your congregational life be impaired if the gifts were not present?
- Now widen your focus. Consider how Paul's analogy applies to Christian communities in your area and region, across the nation and across the world. Lutherans, Catholics, Methodists, Presbyterians, Baptists, Moravians, Episcopalians ... and so many more. We all are distinct, but how do we together form one body, as Paul writes: "In the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit" (1 Corinthians 12:13)?
- Does Paul's bold claim of unity among Christians hold up despite differences of theology and practice? In other words, can we have disagreements with our Catholic or Baptist colleagues and still be considered "one" Christian body? Why or why not?

EXERCISE 4: CHURCH PARTNERSHIPS

An outward-looking denomination, the ELCA is in "full communion" partnerships with six other Protestant denominations, an arrangement that allows for clergy exchange and easier cooperation in ministry. Those partners are the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Reformed Church in America, United Church of Christ, Episcopal Church, Moravian Church, and United Methodist Church. Learn more about the ELCA's full communion partnerships at elca.org.

Moreover, the ELCA belongs to the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), a communion of 153 bodies in 99 countries, representing more than 78 million believers. See lutheranworld.org to learn more.

Discuss:

- How do the ELCA's full communion partnerships assist the ELCA in fulfilling its mission? In what ways does it broaden our understanding of mission and ministry beyond our Lutheran institutions? How do (or how could)



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full communion partnerships assist your congregation in its mission and self-understanding?

- How would you describe the LWF? How are Lutherans stronger when we stand together? How does the LWF assist the ELCA in its mission and self-understanding?
- What do the ELCA's full communion partnerships and participation in the LWF say about the connectedness of our church? Of Christians in general?

EXERCISE 5: CHURCH FAMILY

The New Testament characterizes the church as a collection of siblings. We are a family brought together not by blood but by common faith in Jesus. But like all families, the church—whether a congregation, a synod, a denomination or the global church—is not perfect. We have tensions and squabbles, differences of opinion and even fights. And like all families, the love we have for one another helps us work through our differences or just accept them and carry on. Discuss:

- Around what areas and concerns are there differences of opinion or conflicts in your congregation? Are such differences or conflicts normal, or are they aberrations? How does your congregation manage to resolve differences or, if unresolvable, to just live with them? Does your congregation manage to fulfill its mission and manage its ministries despite occasional conflicts and differences? How or why not?
- Tensions sometimes arise among the ELCA's three expressions. Has your congregation ever disagreed with an official position taken by a churchwide assembly or the Church Council? Explain the circumstances. Or has your congregation ever decided not to support or participate in a churchwide or synod initiative? When? How? Does that mean your congregation isn't part of the ELCA? How does our denomination's "big tent" outlook allow for us to participate together in ministry despite differences?
- Similarly, the ELCA is one of thousands of Christian denominations across the globe, each with its own geographical history, theological ancestry and culture. You will find a wide variety of worship practices and beliefs, yet we are all united in our belief in the saving work of Jesus of Nazareth, our messiah and the son of God.
- How does our common connection through Jesus help us dialogue respectfully in our differences, resolve conflicts and work together? Like families bound by blood, do we do this perfectly? Despite differences, how are we stronger when we work together, emphasizing the things we have in common?

EXERCISE 6: BISHOP CURRY'S VISION

In his messaging to synod assemblies this year, Presiding Bishop Yehiel Curry expressed his vision for what it means for the ELCA to be a connected church. Reflect on his words below. How are they true for the ELCA? For your congregation? For you personally? How and why are we stronger as a connected church?



About the study guide author:

Robert C. Blezard is a retired ELCA pastor. Previously he served as pastor of St. Paul Lutheran Church in Aberdeen, Md., and as an assistant to the bishop of the Lower Susquehanna Synod. 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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“This is who we are, and this is what we are called to be: a connected church that walks together, shows up for one another and trusts that God is always at work within us. God is constantly weaving us together for the sake of the world. We are a blessing so that we might be a blessing to others.”

“Connectedness is not a program or a slogan; it is a way of being church that recognizes our shared calling and our shared responsibility. This is not my church. It is yours. It is ours, together.”

EXERCISE 7: MINISTRY PARTNERS

Review the *Living Lutheran* article featuring the successful feeding program at Shepherd of the Sea Lutheran Church in Murrells Inlet, S.C. Note how the congregation did not grow the ministry on its own.

- Who were/are the partners that help make Shepherd of the Sea’s food pantry a success?
- How and what does each partner contribute?
- How does the connectedness of the partners amplify the reach and strength of the others?
- What ministries does your congregation support? What partners assist in its running? How might additional partners help the ministry grow and succeed more?

Reflect on this comment from Brad Bellah, pastor of Shepherd of the Sea, on the connectedness of the congregation’s feeding program: “God wants us to depend on one another. It’s God’s church being God’s church in the community. And isn’t that what we’re called to be?”

- Why does God want us to depend on one another?
- How are we better and stronger together?
- How does your own congregation live out this ideal in its own ministries? How can it do better?

The power of connection

Photo: iStock.com/Brandon Laufenberg

By Jennifer Bringle

In a world that feels increasingly divided, the power of connection has become more important than ever. That was the message Presiding Bishop Yehiel Curry brought to this year's ELCA synod assemblies, emphasizing how connection—between people, churches and communities—allows us to bridge divides and overcome challenges to do God's work with our hands.

"We are a connected church," Curry says in his 2026 synod assembly video. "What does it mean to be a connected church? For me, it means understanding that the ELCA boldly lives out its mission in God's world through our three expressions: congregations, synods and the churchwide organization."

"This is who we are, and this is what we are called to be: a connected church that walks together, shows up for one another and trusts that God is always at work within us. God is constantly weaving us together for the sake of the world. We are a blessing so that we might be a blessing to others."

The idea of connectedness has shaped Curry's approach to leadership and his vision for the church,



Photo: Courtesy of Willie Langdji

Willie Langdji, ELCA regional representative for West and Central Africa, works with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Central African Republic (ELCA-CAR) on projects, including milk production, with the help of its companion synod, the Western North Dakota Synod.

Photo: Courtesy of Alex Aivars

Alex Aivars, director of technology for the North/West Lower Michigan Synod, forged a connection with Trinity Lutheran Church in Kalamazoo, Mich., that continued into his adulthood. When Trinity helped him discern a call to ministry, grants from his synod and the churchwide organization helped him offset the costs of seminary.



creating a shared sense of purpose and commitment that spans its expressions and their ministry.

“Connectedness is not a program or a slogan; it is a way of being church that recognizes our shared calling and our shared responsibility,” he wrote in a letter to synod assemblies. “This is not my church. It is yours. It is ours, together.”

That spirit of connectedness is already at work across the ELCA in myriad ways. From partnerships between congregations and community organizations to global exchanges that bring the good news and helping hand of God to communities in other nations, Lutherans are living this ethos of a connected church. And that connectedness has allowed them to amplify the work of God in everything they do.

Feeding connection

At Shepherd of the Sea Lutheran Church in Murrells Inlet, S.C., dozens of people line up three days a week to shop for groceries. A choice-model operation, the congregation’s Carol Hummel Food Pantry doesn’t provide a prepackaged box but allows those it helps to select their own items. It’s a small difference that makes a huge impact on the people it feeds.

“You have the dignity of choosing your own food, based on your family and household size,” said Brad

Bellah, a pastor of Shepherd of the Sea. “And we were committed to expanding that model.”

The food pantry started as a partnership during the early 1980s with Mobile Meals of the Grand Strand, a meal delivery nonprofit similar to Meals on Wheels. Shepherd of the Sea served as host congregation for the operation, assisting with food distribution in the area. That program expanded during the 1990s to include providing prepackaged food bags to unhoused people in the area.

As the operation grew, Bellah said, Shepherd of the Sea began looking for ways to maximize its resources to have a greater impact on the communities it served. At the time, donations from the congregation funded food purchases at traditional grocery stores, which offered no discount to nonprofits.

“We could feed so many more people so much more food,” he said. “With that comes accountability and facility inspections, which some people pushed back on. But I said, ‘Why would that matter? We want to do this the right way.’”

A solution arrived in the form of Lowcountry Food Bank, a nonprofit in eastern South Carolina. Through that partnership, Shepherd of the Sea’s food pantry expanded from a few shelves of canned goods

in the fellowship hall to a massive operation that last year served more than 45,000 people and distributed more than 460,000 pounds of food.

Along with the resources already provided by the congregation's pantry and kitchen, Shepherd of the Sea obtained grant funding to purchase a refrigerated truck that allows it to transport large quantities of fresh food.

"We received two different grants from the ELCA along the way to be able to expand these ministries to serve," Bellah said.

A new opportunity for expansion came through a partnership with Trinity Lutheran Church in nearby Georgetown, S.C. Recently impacted by several large business closings, Georgetown saw an uptick in those struggling to put food on the table due to unexpected job loss and rising grocery prices. Shepherd of the Sea operates a quarterly food pantry at Trinity using the same choice model.

Bellah said that Shepherd of the Sea's partnerships, not only with Trinity but also with the ELCA and community groups such as the Lowcountry Food Bank, testify to the power of connection and what it can make possible.

"God wants us to depend on one another."

"God wants us to depend on one another," he said. "It's God's church being God's church in the community. And isn't that what we're called to be?"

Facilitating connection

Growing up, Alex Aivars forged a strong faith foundation at another Trinity Lutheran Church, this one in Kalamazoo, Mich. "My family was very involved," he said. "We attended church every Sunday. I fondly remember attending Sunday school classes and middle and high school youth group. I was also confirmed there."



Photo: ELCA/Brett Nelson

Along with the resources already provided by the congregation's pantry and kitchen, Shepherd of the Sea Lutheran in Murrells Inlet, S.C., obtained ELCA grant funding to purchase a refrigerated truck that allows it to transport large quantities of fresh food.



Clockwise from top: Through Shepherd of the Sea, residents are able to receive fresh produce and other goods; Aivars presents a workshop at his synod assembly; a partnership with the ELCA, U.S. companion synods and ELCA-CAR congregations helped established a new high school in the Central African Republic.

Photo: Courtesy of Matthew Nygard

Floribert Ngare (right), a church leader in the ELCA-CAR, presents Matthew Nygard, financial specialist for the Western North Dakota Synod, with a gift in recognition of their companion-synod relationship.



That connection stayed with him into adulthood as he pursued a career in web development. “I looked around for other churches to attend but eventually came back to Trinity,” he said. “A little while after I returned, I was a part of the founding of a young-adult group that grew to have a monthly potluck and Bible study.”

While he was working as a web developer at Western Michigan University, Aivars said, his faith deepened and evolved in a way he didn’t expect.

“I went to a Gay Christian Network conference, where I got my concrete call to ministry,” he said. “I hadn’t really thought about ministry before, but the last night of the conference, it really hit me.”

Aivars said he sat with that feeling for a few days before consulting with his pastors. “As I was discerning a call to ministry, Trinity helped guide me through the candidacy process.” The community continued to walk with him through the lasting

connection they’d made. Eighteen months later, Aivars attended a discernment retreat with his synod and made the decision to go to seminary.

Aivars enrolled at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, partly because of its committed affirmation of LGBTQIA+ students, and quit his job to pursue seminary studies full time. Though he had a part-time job, Aivars needed help to pay his tuition and new living expenses. Grants from his synod and the churchwide organization helped offset some of his costs, and the rest were covered by student loans.

Upon graduation, Aivars began his first call, as a part-time pastor of St. Stephen Lutheran in Lansing, Mich. His synod and the churchwide organization continued to support him with grants that eventually paid off his loans.

“Getting those grants every year to pay down my debt really helped,” he said. “I’m now seven years into ordained ministry, and my student loans are all paid off. That opens up my financial future, so I can do things like start saving for a house.”

Today Aivars has paired his calling to ministry with his technological expertise, serving as director of technology for the North/West Lower Michigan Synod. He finds that his experience as a pastor gives him insight into what churches need from

technology, which an outside provider might not fully understand.

“I have the perspective of being in the parish and working to update the website, setting up the livestream,” he said. “I’ve been in it, and I know what pastors go through, especially if you’re in a small parish.”

Aivars is setting up a technology team within the synod to offer greater support for congregations, and he believes its work will help create connection both online and offline. “It’s all about open communication,” he said.

Global connection

More than a century ago, Lutheran missionaries traveled from the United States to the Central African Republic. Since its inception, the ELCA has maintained a relationship with the country and others in Africa, and today the Western North Dakota Synod maintains a companion-synod relationship with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Central African Republic (ELC-CAR).

Over the years, that relationship has deepened through boots-on-the-ground mission work. Willie Langdji, ELCA regional representative for West and Central Africa, has played a major role in that effort. Based in Cameroon, Langdji works closely with ELC-CAR congregations in the region as well as their counterparts in the United States, and he said that many threads connect those U.S. Lutherans to their African siblings.

“That connection is done in many different ways, and one of them is just being there,” he said. “Relationships are very important in this region, [especially] person-to-person relationships. Your being there puts a real face to that relationship.”

Matthew Nygard, financial specialist for the synod, knows that well. Nygard has traveled to Cameroon and the Central African Republic for mission work, and in 2023, he joined a group that included his father—ELCA missionary Mark Nygard—and Craig Schweitzer, now executive director for the Christian Community and Leadership unit, on a visit to the Central African Republic to celebrate the centennial of the global partnership. Nygard said spending time in Africa further solidified his connection to Lutherans there and the communities they serve.

“To see the vibrancy of the church there and the amazing leadership they have, and to visit the congregations—it was amazing, it was extremely joyous,” he said. “People who don’t seem to have anywhere near the means that we have, they have so much thankfulness and praise. They are just filled with life through their faith and the gospel.”

The companion-synod relationship between the Western North Dakota Synod and the ELC-CAR

has served as a catalyst for positive change across the Central African Republic. In recent years, the church has supported a variety of projects in the region, ranging from clean-water packaging to the opening of a high school in a remote area not served by government-funded educational resources.

“The church has been running primary schools

“It’s all about open communication.”

in very remote communities,” Langdji said. “It is very difficult to access, and nobody goes there—the government doesn’t go there, the other big [nongovernmental organizations] cannot go there. But the church goes there because that’s where the need is.”

Langdji said that once those students finished sixth grade, there was no school where they could continue their education. So in partnership with the ELCA, companion synods in the United States and congregations in the region, the first private Protestant high school in the nation opened to serve students who would not otherwise receive secondary education.

When Langdji was growing up in Africa, he said, his community modeled the meaning of connection every day, and he gets that same feeling from his role with the ELCA. “I grew up in a community where communal life is so important, where everything is done together,” he said. “Parents take care of the kids—one kid is everybody’s kid. And I feel such an important connection to my faith journey when I’m part of a community.

“I learn from the community, and people come to me and learn things from me. That sharing has been a very enriching experience for me over these years.”

Nygard echoed that sentiment. He found that the partnerships in Africa embodied the spirit of a connected church and illustrated how the ELCA’s three expressions can work together to do God’s work, no matter where it needs to be done.

“When we live into our baptism, we realize that we don’t have a choice whether we reach out and help our neighbor, even if our neighbor is across the world—we have to respond to that need,” Nygard said. “If we’re going to live out of faith, getting outside the doors of our church is essential to that, [in order] for us to remain vital and committed.” †

To download a study guide for this article, search for “A study guide for ‘The power of connection’” at livinglutheran.org.