

Witness boldly

ELCA presiding bishop visits the New Jersey Synod

“Your congregation,” Presiding Bishop Elizabeth A. Eaton shared, “doesn’t just exist for yourselves.”

On Nov. 20, 2017, Eaton, presiding bishop of the ELCA, joined more than 100 pastors, deacons and synod staff for a conversation about the future of the ELCA. The daylong event was rooted in the ELCA Future Directions 2025 initiative. This collaborative initiative brought together Eaton, the ELCA Conference of Bishops, the ELCA Church Council, pastors and lay members from all over the denomination to collectively imagine what 2025 will be like.

“Who wants to be part of a church holding shiva for the 1950s?” Eaton asked. As she articulated the five goals laid out by the initiative, she returned over and over again to our Lutheran identity. She also invited congregations to read the Small Catechism and encouraged members to put the app on their phones (available for android and iPhone; search for “Luther’s Small Catechism” at augsborgfortress.org).



Eaton presents the goals for ELCA Future Directions 2025.



The Rev. Elizabeth Eaton, ELCA presiding bishop, and the Rev. Tracie Bartholomew, bishop of the New Jersey Synod.

Pastors and leaders were called to share who we are, what we do and why we do it. Our shared commitment to ELCA World Hunger (\$20 million a year), \$8 million for hurricane relief and a social services agency larger than the Salvation Army and Catholic Charities is something to celebrate and share. But the church is more than a social service ministry. “The only reason to invite someone to church is so they can have a life-giving and intimate relationship with Jesus Christ,” Eaton said.

After the presentation, Eaton participated in a 90-minute Q&A. Questions ranged from what keeps her awake at night to the future of professional ministry in congregational settings.

Over and over again, Eaton articulated a need to be realistic about what is possible, to stay rooted in our local communities and to cling to Jesus. She advocated seeing ourselves as part of something larger than just our congregations, as part of a network full of communities being led by the Spirit to take care of their corner of the body of Christ on our behalf. As a church, she said, we are not doing ministry alone because “this isn’t your church; it’s Jesus’.” ☞

Excellence is unleashed in congregations and among the people our pastors serve



Meet Lily, the mascot for EMU (Excellence in Ministry, Unleashed).

Excellence in Ministry, Unleashed (EMU/NJ) is the name of our work in the New Jersey Synod to cultivate a Christ-centered culture where pastors and congregations live, love and lead generously for the sake of the world. The scope of our targeted work addresses financial stresses related to a pastor's financial literacy, readiness for retirement, growing medical costs and educational indebtedness.

We are pleased to share with you the results of our continuing conversations and surveys among our pastors and congregations. Here are a few significant factors and trends that impact our pastoral leadership:

1. The viability of the congregation remains the most significant stressor in the lives of our pastors. With more than 36 percent of our congregations worshipping with fewer than 50 people, many pastors struggle under significant financial challenges.
2. Compensation for clergy has appropriately and historically been modest. However, aggregate clergy compensation across the church has diminished in recent decades compared to other identifiable occupations.
3. The most pervasive issue among our pastors is adequate retirement savings/planning.
4. The most drastically changed factor in the past 15 years is the rapid rise in educational debt.
5. While financial literacy needs to be increased for pastoral leaders, it is also imperative that the lay leadership join with the clergy in understanding and addressing the issues.

The EMU partnership forged with the New Jersey Synod and the Lilly Endowment is already beginning to reduce, alleviate and avoid key financial impediments that limit thorough and effective pastoral leadership in our congregations. Financial literacy among parish pastors creates confidence and stimulates healthy private and public behaviors related to faith and money. Financial incentives provided by our EMU initiative are encouraging retirement investment contributions, structured savings for medical costs, and educational debt relief among participating pastors.

EMU/NJ programs, labs and financial literacy events have inspired and challenged many pastors and lay leaders. One pastor reported: "I received the EMU Grant Check in the mail yesterday and want to thank you for this generous gift! It will truly help me get unburied from my educational debt! Since the EMU workshop I have really had a new perspective on my finances and have been doing a better job than ever before of managing my finances and eating away at my consumer debt, creating emergency savings, and paying my taxes in full and on time. I feel like I'm on a good trajectory."

The Ministerial Excellence Fund (MEF) is the part of our EMU work that provides financial incentives and grants to pastors. In the first two years of this initiative, 84 of our pastors attended one of our financial literacy events. Twenty-four pastors have accessed over \$212,000 in educational debt relief and 26 pastors have taken advantage of

almost \$20,000 in retirement contribution and flexible spending plan incentives. Three pastors benefiting from an MEF grant celebrated the repayment of their student debt, while another shared improvement in her credit score as a direct result of the EMU initiative. “I expect to feel and act more confident with my congregation around financial decisions and management,” observed a pastor following an EMU retreat. That is the goal of EMU—to cultivate pastors and congregations that live, love and lead generously.

The most encouraging discovery from this work, is identifying the amazing group of pastors serving in our synod who are in healthy relationships with personal and congregational finances. They exhibit some of these strong characteristics:

1. They understand their family *money biography*, and they view *money as a tool* and not something that defines their value.
2. They are *asset-oriented* and understand that a “can’t do because we don’t have” attitude never inspires generosity.
3. They exhibit control over household finances and reflect a *balanced perspective* on personal and congregational finance that is neither overly intense nor trivial.



Participants attend an EMU event.

4. They claim “*appropriate worth*” in their pastoral role and do not exhibit unhealthy attitudes in relation to money (i.e. resentment, jealousy, entitlement, martyrdom, fear, shame, embarrassment or insecurity).
5. They have been *intentional in learning* about personal and church stewardship and financial management beyond their basic seminary education.
6. They exhibit engagement and leadership in congregational stewardship, budget preparation and management.
7. They live, love and lead generously. ✚

New Jersey is going to Houston

ELCA Youth Gathering June 27-July 1

Are you ready for the ELCA Youth Gathering in just a few short months? We’re expecting more than 400 youth and adults to make up the 30,000 participants at this year’s gathering. As you prepare for this amazing event, keep a few things in mind:

1. Are you an adult leader? Join the NJ Houston 2018 ELCA Youth Gathering Facebook Group at [facebook.com/groups/1471723126416147](https://www.facebook.com/groups/1471723126416147). Connect with other leaders and get answers to your questions from peers and colleagues!

2. Make sure you are signed up for the New Jersey Synod’s



Houston Gathering e-newsletter. Information about the synod T-shirt, meal, and the day we spent together at the Gathering will be shared there. Visit njsynod.org/youthgathering and click on the link.

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Grace abounds for us and the whole creation

Dear Friends,

This year, Lent begins on Feb. 14 with Ash Wednesday. It seems rather fitting that on the day when the world would have us celebrate a hearts-and-candy kind of love, our church will be celebrating a death-and-life kind of love. Could there be anything more



Bishop Tracie
Bartholomew

real than inviting your loved ones to worship with you on Ash Wednesday in order to confess the ways you have failed to be truly loving to those you hold most dear, as well as to those with whom you are connected merely by being part of the same human family? Could there be a better time to remember the love of God in Christ Jesus that sustains us all through the joys and sorrows of life? Could there be a better way to celebrate Valentine's Day than by hearing again the reminder that when our earthly life has ended, God still holds us close? I don't think so.

Marked with the cross of Christ, we walk throughout the days of Lent reminded of our own sinfulness. But it's much more—we also remember the abundant grace of God which takes away that sin. This is the gift we celebrate as resurrection people. This will be the focus of our synod assembly in 2018—grace abounds for us and the whole creation.

I want to encourage you to join us for the assembly in downtown New Brunswick, May 11-12, as we gather as church for worship, learning and fellowship. We will be approving a spending plan for 2019—one of our most important mission documents—and electing people to serve as voting members to the ELCA Churchwide Assembly (to be held in Milwaukee in August 2019), to serve on Synod Council, and to serve on the discipline and consultation committees.

As of this writing, we don't yet know what important issues will be brought as resolutions to the floor for prayerful discussion and vote, but as a church that cares deeply about social and theological issues, I'm sure we will have some!

Ash Wednesday, Lent and Easter, and the synod assembly—through all of our life together as disciples of Jesus Christ, grace abounds! We are made new every day and sent into the world to share the love, grace and mercy of God with everyone we meet. We do so only because we have received the same gifts before we deserve or earn them and can't help but let them flow through us into the world.

May your life be renewed by the gift of God's abundant grace today and every day.

Your sister in Christ,
Bishop Tracie L. Bartholomew

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3. Get your kids ready by using the ELCA Youth Gathering's "Prepare" material. Download it at elca.org/YouthGathering/details/get-ready. While the material is broken into monthly sections, it can also help those congregations that meet only a few times.
4. Get to know Debra Porowski. As the NJ Synod's Gathering coordinator, she administers

the Facebook group, works with other synod leaders and is connected to the Youth Gathering's leadership. If you have a question or are looking for a particular resource, email her at deporowski@gmail.com.

We are excited to see so many youth growing their faith story by participating in the 2018 ELCA Youth Gathering. ☞