



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

The Formation Lab

A proposal to the Lilly Endowment
Strengthening Congregational Ministries with Youth Initiative



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

September 1, 2022

Dr. Chanon Ross
Program Director, Religion, Lilly Endowment Inc.
2801 N. Meridian St. P.O. Box 88068
Indianapolis, IN 46208-0068

Dear Dr. Ross,

Thank you for the invitation to apply for the Strengthening Congregational Ministries with Youth Initiative. We are deeply grateful for your past support and the incredible work of the endowment in supporting community development, education and religion.

For more than 30 years, ELCA congregations have been centers for evangelical mission, where people of faith celebrate, learn and connect with one another and others around the world through service and worship. We are a church that belongs to Christ. And yet, younger generations are struggling to belong to the church. As prescriptive youth models fail to feel relevant in today's world, youth are asking tough questions about the church, the world and why faith should matter to them.

The ELCA Youth Ministry Network ("The Network")—the grassroots, forward-thinking expression of the ELCA that focuses on faith-formation with young people—has a history of being on the leading edge of faith formation for children, youth, young adults and families. They know firsthand the challenge of connecting with younger generations and want to help congregations move past prescriptive, outdated models of youth ministry that often separate youth from the vital faith practices they need to embrace God as the center of their lives in today's world. The Formation Lab, a partnership between the ELCA and the Network, will create and nurture adaptive youth ministry models that allow congregations to discern and implement what innovation looks like in their own context while uniting them around a shared understanding of future ministry.

To this end, we respectfully request \$1 million through the Strengthening Congregational Ministries with Youth Initiative of the Lilly Endowment, Inc. During this four-year project, we will discover diverse models and practices by accompanying 50 key congregations in different cohorts, equip 3,000 leaders for leading ministry with younger generations, and provide ELCA congregations with accessible and affordable resources. Our aim is to reach every congregation in the ELCA with a desire to nurture the faith formation of youth, engaging them more fully with the stories and practices of our faith.

Thank you for your prayerful consideration of this request.

Yours in Christ,

The Rev. Elizabeth A. Eaton
Presiding Bishop

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The ELCA is a church that shares a living, daring confidence in God’s grace. With our hands, we do God’s work of restoring and reconciling communities in Jesus Christ’s name. There is a place for all among our 8,900 congregations across the United States, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. As the world continues to change, it is important for the church to remain true to the Gospel and relevant in our time. In 2020, global pandemic, the urgent struggle for racial justice and a divisive political climate only renewed this church’s purpose to “activate each of us so more people know the way of Jesus and discover community, justice and love” (ELCA Purpose Statement).

To do this important work, the ELCA Church Council affirmed a new Future Church design that began in February 2021. Future Church is based in the strong belief that members, congregations, synods and the churchwide organization must work together to share a powerful witness of the Gospel in the world, engaging our current members in new, innovative ways and inviting more young and diverse people to experience God’s grace in action. It envisions a world experiencing the difference God’s grace and love in Christ make for all people and creation (ELCA Vision Statement).

In alignment with the Future Church design, the primary objective of this proposal is to: help congregations move past prescriptive, outdated models of youth ministry that often separate youth from the vital faith practices they need to embrace God as the center of their lives in today’s world. **Through the Formation Lab, the ELCA and the Network will create and nurture adaptive youth ministry models that allow congregations to discern and implement what innovation looks like in their own context while uniting them around a shared understanding of future ministry.**

The gospel tells us we can change the world through God’s radical grace and boundless love. As the everyday realities of climate change, political division, socioeconomic inequality, racial disparities and mental health struggles (to name a few) press in on us, the church has struggled to share our faith in new ways, especially with our youth. We separate youth from the rest of the faith community, a model of ministry that assumes they are too young to need the same faith practices that sustain us in the face of seemingly insurmountable challenges.

But our experience of the world informs our experience of faith, regardless of age. In order to nurture the lives of youth in the church, we must change our relationships to one another and to the world. We must claim the good news of our sacred stories while recognizing that God is still writing new stories—stories of change, of healing, of belonging, of inclusion, of justice, of righteousness, of love.

Key activities to accomplish this objective will be:

- Identifying a new vision of youth ministry through design thinking and relevant research.
- Designing adaptive experiments and resources that will guide congregations forward.
- Hosting in-person and online gatherings and training for 50 congregations in four different cohorts and providing ongoing support as they test new prototypes of youth ministry.
- Resourcing congregations with key practices and tools via various digital platforms.

1. PROJECT NARRATIVE

Central Purpose

The primary purpose of this project is to help congregations move past prescriptive, outdated models of youth ministry that often separate youth from the vital faith practices they need to embrace God as the center of their lives in today's world. Through the Formation Lab, the ELCA and the Youth Ministry Network will create and nurture adaptive youth ministry models that allow congregations to discern and implement what innovation looks like in their own context while uniting them around a shared understanding of future ministry.

About the ELCA Youth Ministry Network

Since 1997, the ELCA Youth Ministry Network (the Network) has provided training and preparation for adults who work with children, youth and families in ELCA congregations on behalf of the ELCA. The Network exists to strengthen and empower youth ministry leaders in service to Christ. It envisions a future where children, youth and family ministry in the ELCA flourish and become ever stronger through spiritual renewal, continuing education and networking for congregational leaders in faith formation.

The Network's Core Values

Striving to be faithful witnesses of the Christian gospel, the Network values:

- Its partnership with the ELCA.
- Faith formation for children, youth and adults as the key to growth in relationship with Jesus Christ.
- Adult, children, youth and family ministry leaders; equally valuing lay, rostered, volunteer and paid.
- Healthy, supported and networked ministries.
- A spirit of hospitality and inclusivity.
- Professional relationships among adult children, youth and family ministry leaders.
- Practices that are informed by biblical and theological wisdom.

Grant Roles

This grant will be administered as a partnership between the ELCA and the Network. While the Network is a stand-alone 501(c)(3) organization, it works in close partnership with the churchwide organization. The Network will take the lead on the Formation Lab by identifying adaptive challenges in youth ministry, design collaborative experiments, host in-person gatherings and trainings, create resources translated into multiple languages, and produce a vibrant digital community and resource hub. They will utilize their platform of developing leadership, communication, distribution and congregational relations to connect with the churches to effectively administer this project.

The ELCA will assist with the hiring and oversight of the program director, monitor progress toward project objectives, remain in excellent communication throughout and help publicize the project within our own communication channels. In addition, the ELCA's program director for youth ministry will serve on the advisory team.

The Network's Key Objectives

By the end of this project, the Network will have:

1. Piloted new ministry prototypes with a cohort group of congregations (50) to listen to what is emerging in the church and to discover methods and models that will be transferable to the broader church, together discovering practices for long-term, sustainable ministry that transforms lives.
2. Produced comprehensive, adaptive prototypes for youth ministry practices, communicated in print and digital formats for distribution to all faith communities in the denomination with a desire to innovate the way they engage youth and their needs.
3. Engaged an additional 2,000 ELCA congregations in the resources produced during the four-year period. At least 60 percent of faith communities will have tested new ministry practices based on the adaptive prototypes provided within their faith community, even if on a temporary basis.
4. Engaged an additional 3,000 faith leaders in resources/methods produced during the four-year period, using them to strengthen their own understanding of youth ministry needs today.

Congregational Key Objectives

By the end of this project, congregations will have:

1. Tested ministry experiments that nurture the faith of younger generations, with a particular emphasis on middle and high school youth.
2. Discovered ministry approaches that integrate younger generations into the life and faith practices of their congregation.
3. Formed relationships with other congregations in their cohorts to foster long-term mutual learning and support.

Our Mission

For more than 30 years the ELCA has experienced a rich history of ministry, but the church has also witnessed a pattern of significant decline, with aging members and a membership profile that does not reflect the diversity of God's creation. The Future Church design embraced a goal to share the story of Jesus and the ELCA by engaging with 1 million new people as we grow the church together. Priorities of this goal include:

1. A Welcoming Church: Engaging new, young and diverse people.
2. A Thriving Church: Rooted in tradition and radically relevant.
3. A Connected, Sustainable Church: Raising the bar together.

The Formation Lab directly supports these goals and priorities by helping churches embrace new, adaptive models of youth ministry that will support the tenets of this churchwide vision. While the focus of the project is to nurture the faith lives of middle and high school youth in a congregational context, we believe the results of these experiments will reach youth both in and outside the faith communities we serve. If we are sharing God's radical grace and unconditional love in new and innovative ways—ways that address change, healing, belonging, inclusion, and justice—we believe the results of these new youth prototypes will not just change the lives of youth in a particular congregation but will change how these congregations relate to the world, engaging new, young and diverse people in authentic ways.

2. RATIONALE

According to the Pew Research Center, younger generations, namely those identified as millennials and Generation Z, are less religious and spiritual than their Generation X and baby boomer counterparts. Data between 2020 and 2021 reveals that nearly half of millennials surveyed (49%) described themselves as Christians (the most of all religions), another 10% identify with non-Christian faiths and four in 10 now identify as religious “nones.” These individuals are not religiously observant, and include atheists, agnostics, those who are spiritual but not religious, and people who are “nothing in particular.”

A quick Google search reveals a bank of articles and research pointing to youth and young adults struggling with faith communities—perceiving the church as inauthentic at best and upholding oppressive systems at worst.

The Network and the ELCA believe that youth, just like adults, are yearning for a faith that makes sense in the world, one that feels radically relevant to the issues they grapple with every day—issues of mental health, isolation, justice, equality and more. While the gospel is inherently political, the church has long been comfortable separating the story of God from the story of our contemporary lives.

We recognize that the answer to nurturing the spiritual and religious lives of youth may not be separate from the answer of how we nurture the spiritual and religious lives of the entire church. We are all struggling to live out God’s call to love and justice in a world that feels overwhelmingly determined to divide and destroy.

In order to innovate, we must open ourselves up to new possibilities of how we live and form our faith. God is at work with the church and in spite of the church—and so are youth. We cannot assume that we know what comes next or how the youth in our church (and outside our church) are being called to live out their faith.

Led by the Network and supported by the ELCA, the Formation Lab proposes that, in order to help congregations move forward in youth ministry, we start with deep listening. Listening to experts in ministry, but mostly, to youth. Youth who love the church and youth who distrust the church. Youth leaders already changing faith formation in their congregations and youth who have been marginalized by the church and no longer feel welcome. With their experiences guiding our innovation, we will then use the resources of the Network and the ELCA to envision the future of youth ministry, design adaptive and experimental prototypes for congregations to implement in their own context, and then continually evaluate those results to inform and redesign additional adaptive prototypes.

By using design thinking and an annual cycle to empathize, define, ideate, prototype and test, congregations will be able to use what is applicable to their own contexts and continually improve upon the results year after year. Through this grant, the Network and the ELCA will provide a hub of resources and support that strengthens youth ministry across the ecosystem of the church. Innovation is individual—what works for one congregation may not work for another—but we believe the process will result in churches nurturing the faith lives of youth and their congregations in ways that connect to anything, from mental health to community needs to justice and equity work. We also believe this process will foster mutual learning; the success of one congregation will translate to future success for another.

3. PROJECT ACTIVITIES

Through a four-year program, the Network will focus on developing three years of innovative youth ministry prototypes while walking alongside 50 key congregations in four different cohorts to design, test and implement those prototypes to nurture the faith lives of diverse middle and high school youth. Each year builds off the previous year. Listening sessions will lead to the development of prototypes. Implementation of those prototypes will lead to evaluative listening, which will lead to further prototypes, and so on.

ACTIVITIES CYCLE:

- | | |
|--------|--|
| Year 1 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establishment of the program • Development of first-year (Year A) materials |
| Year 2 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implement Year A • Develop Year B |
| Year 3 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluate Year A • Implement Year B • Develop Year C |
| Year 4 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluate Year B • Implement Year C • Redevelop and adapt Year A |

YEAR 1 ACTIVITIES:

Establish the leadership team:

The Network, in consultation with the ELCA, will hire a full-time program director whose primary responsibility will be to tend and nurture this program. They will take leadership in setting and communicating a vision, creating and maintaining the structures, marketing the program, relating to congregations, to The Network and the ELCA, and working with the advisory team, regional leaders, a researcher and content creators to ensure that the material and training that comes out of this program is of maximum help to the congregations involved.

In addition, we will establish a six-person advisory team. This team will represent the diversity of the church. Two members of this team will rotate off the team each year, making room for two new people. At least half of this team will always be congregationally based and the other half from academia, synod staff or other church-serving agencies. In addition, both the program director for youth ministries in the ELCA churchwide organization and the executive director of the Network will sit on the advisory team. We will ensure that at least two members of this advisory team are also from BIPOC communities. Advisory team responsibilities will include: working with the program director to tend to the vision of the program; setting goals, making evaluations, and where appropriate, assisting operationally in program implementation.

The leadership team will be a collaboration between the Network and the ELCA, combining the institutional resources of the churchwide organization with the on-the-ground youth ministry leadership that should inform this work, bringing diverse perspectives to the table that might have previously been excluded.

Additional roles will include a research assistant and nine regional team leads who will help facilitate listening sessions.

Start listening:

In order to equip congregations with new, innovative and adaptive prototypes for youth ministry, this project will begin with a process of deep listening and prayerful discernment. Led by the program director, advisory team and a research assistant, learnings from the deep listening will guide an ongoing process to assess current best practices, harmful strategies, youth needs, congregational resources, sustainability and feasibility issues, digital relevancy, and barriers to inclusion and diversity, etc.

Utilizing Design Thinking methodologies, deep listening will begin with youth in and outside current faith communities, including those who live at the margins of our church and society. Their experiences will center our research and prototype development, using empathy to learn their core values and future vision for the church.

- **Regional Listening Sessions:**

For the purposes of our work, the 65 synods of the ELCA will be clustered in nine geographical regions. Within each region we will conduct three in-person group sessions of 10-15 youth and 10-15 caregivers for a total of 54 group sessions and approximately 400 youth participants and 400 caregivers. In addition, we will hold additional one-on-one sessions with a minimum of five additional ministry partners.

- **Online Listening Sessions:**

We will also host a minimum of two online sessions per synod which include open conversations with youth and leadership, focusing on specific lived experiences of faith communities (rural, urban, socio-economic, racial, etc.). Participation may vary, but a total of 130 sessions will be conducted with a minimum of 10 participants for a minimum of 1,300 participants.

Primary Listening Partners:

- **Youth in and outside current faith communities:**

If we want to discern what youth need from the church, we must center their voices in the conversation. We recognize that we cannot move forward without first learning from the very population we are trying to reach and transform.

- **Caregivers in and outside current faith communities:**

Caregivers are an extension of the youth we are trying to reach and have valuable perspectives on barriers they face when participating in current youth programming and how it enriches (or fails to enrich) their lives.

- **Directors for Evangelical Missions (DEMs)**

As full-time churchwide staff, DEMs work on the bishop's staff in each of our 65 synods as a trusted resource for congregations and leaders in need of tools and counsel for starting new ministries, revitalizing existing ministries, and how to identify, develop and equip leaders for mission and ministry. They are tapped into the needs of our faith communities and a wealth of information on youth ministry needs. In particular, we will lean on them to help us connect with marginalized folks both in and outside faith communities.

Additional listening partners with unique perspectives and insights on youth ministry may also include: LuMin (Campus Ministry) Network, multi-cultural ministry leads, academics, ELCA ethnic-specific associations, Symbol (regional youth ministry networks), Lutheran Outdoor Ministry Network, and ecumenical partners.

This research will inform the strategies of the leadership team in year one, resulting in training modules needed to resource and equip ministry leaders with common practices that address theology, theory and practical skills needed for ministry and how to contextualize for their faith communities. The listening process and methodology will continue throughout the entire grant, allowing us to avoid prescriptive models of ministry and center the voices of young people, especially those historically ignored by the church.

Design the prototype:

Our vision is to let the voices of youth inform the next iteration of youth ministry for all faith communities in the ELCA so that ultimately, we answer God's call to equip young people with a life giving, transformative, missional faith in Jesus Christ. Informed by available research and the results of our own deep listening, the program director and advisory team will design experimental, adaptive prototypes for youth ministry grounded in the goals and priorities of the ELCA Future Church and the values of youth today.

The intent is to pilot new ways of engaging youth in the life of the church which, depending on the individual faith community, could result in eco-justice activities, interfaith relationships, social justice initiatives, biblical study, service and learning, shared leadership and resources, mental health activities, etc. Our prototypes will help faith communities determine what they need in their own context to engage youth in and outside the church walls.

Once the prototypes are developed, they will be disseminated via print and digital form through the Network and ELCA communication channels, inviting all faith communities interested in learning about the suggested prototypes to test them in their own context.

YEAR 2 ACTIVITIES:

Training for Year A curriculum:

The Network will identify 50 congregations to pilot the training and implementation of Year A prototypes, forming four different cohorts representing the following congregational contexts:

- Congregations with under 100 in worship
- Congregations led by professional youth ministry leadership
- Congregations forming faith *online*
- Congregations strategically collaborating with others (i.e. ecumenical partners, community partners, schools)

These congregations will be trained, supported and surveyed throughout the granting period to help us evaluate and test prototypes. Their experiences will inform ongoing research and development, ensuring that our work is applicable in a variety of ministry contexts.

However, we believe the interest of ELCA congregations in this work will be widespread, even as prototypes and materials are developed and improved. Year A prototypes and training will be promoted across the communication channels of the ELCA and The Youth Ministry Network. Training will be open to any faith community interested in participating, welcoming and growing engagement over the course of the grant period from our 50 cohort congregations to faith communities across the ecosystem of the ELCA..

Training for the 50 cohort congregations will be held in conjunction with the ELCA Youth Ministry Network's Extravaganza, an annual gathering of children, youth and family ministry leaders that averages 600 participants. The program director, regional team leads, and the ELCA Youth Ministry Director will lead the "Year A" training, communicating the results of the deep listening and walking participants through the "Year A" prototypes for youth ministry and helping envision how it might be applied to their individual contexts. In addition, leaders will offer workshops on needs reflected in the listening sessions such as relational ministry, faith practices, theology, administration, event planning, budget and fundraising, safety practices, etc. Additional faith communities attending the Extravaganza will also be able to participate.

Quarterly Check Ins:

Check-in meetings for the 50 cohort congregations will be held for support, accountability and learning. They will discuss what is going well, what challenges they are facing, what resources they might need, and guided feedback about the execution of Year A prototypes.

Cohort Leaders identified:

From the congregations identified, four cohort leaders will be selected for a one-year volunteer position and will be trained by the project director to serve as "on the ground" resources and liaisons.

Responsibilities will include:

- Providing consistent, ongoing contact/check-ins
- Troubleshooting issues that arise
- Helping generate ideas when a congregation is feeling frustrated or stuck
- Communicating congregational needs and successes to the program director

Additional activities will include:

- In-person training and support
- Zoom check-ins (frequency will be decided by the cohort leaders and the program director after initial training based on need)

Implementation:

Cohort congregations—equipped with both training and adaptive prototypes developed by the program director and advisory team—will test a new way of engaging youth in their own context.

These congregations will communicate with the program director and advisory team regularly throughout Year 2 to ensure they are receiving adequate support while also serving as part of the evaluation/metrics as Year B prototypes are developed.

Ongoing listening:

Continuing the deep-listening practices and Design Thinking from Year 1, the program director and advisory team will develop Year B materials/prototypes, learning from cohort experiences (both youth and leadership) to inform revisions and additional prototypes.

YEAR 3 ACTIVITIES:

Training both in-person and online for Year B prototypes:

The Network will continue its partnership with the 50 congregations from four different cohorts. Congregations will be invited to share stories from Year 2, receive Year B prototypes and gain additional training on how to effectively implement the new materials.

Activities will include:

- One in-person annual training event, held in conjunction with the Extravaganza
- Quarterly check-ins via Zoom
- Four new cohort leaders being identified and trained

Implementation:

Congregations will build on the prior year with Year B materials. They will have the flexibility to change what is not working, improve on successes, or experiment with new prototypes. This process is meant to be nimble, adapting to the needs of the individual congregation. These congregations will communicate with the program director and

advisory team regularly throughout Year 3 to ensure they are receiving adequate support and will also serve as part of the evaluation/metrics as Year C prototypes are developed.

Ongoing listening:

Continuing the deep-listening practices from Year 1 and 2, the program director and advisory team will develop Year C materials/prototypes, learning from cohort experiences to inform revisions.

YEAR 4 ACTIVITIES:

Training both in-person and online for Year C prototypes:

The Network will continue its partnership with the 50 congregations from four different cohorts. Congregations will be invited to share stories from Year 3, receive Year C prototypes and gain additional training.

Activities will include:

- One in-person annual training event, held in conjunction with the Extravaganza
- Quarterly check-ins via Zoom
- Four new cohort leaders will be identified and trained

Implementation:

Congregations will be able to build on the prior year with the Year C prototypes. As in the previous years, they will have the flexibility to change what isn't working, improve on successes or experiment with new prototypes. These congregations will communicate with the program director and advisory team regularly throughout Year 4 to ensure they are receiving adequate support and will also serve as part of the evaluation/metrics as the grant period concludes.

4. EVALUATION

Throughout the grant cycle, evaluations will be achieved through cohort quarterly check-ins and additional broad surveys sent to all faith communities engaged with the materials produced during the grant period.

At the end of the grant period, The Network and the ELCA will have:

- Piloted new ministry prototypes with a cohort group of congregations (50) to listen to what is emerging in the church and to discover methods and models that will be transferable to the broader church, together discovering practices for long-term, sustainable ministry that transforms lives.
- Produced comprehensive, adaptive prototypes for youth ministry practices, communicated in print and digital formats for distribution to all faith communities in the denomination with a desire to innovate the way they engage youth and their needs.
- Strengthened regional and synodical connections with congregations to build effective support systems for sustainability.
- Engaged an additional 2,000 ELCA congregations in the resources produced during the four-year period. At least 60 percent of faith communities will have tested new ministry practices based on the adaptive prototypes provided within their faith community, even if on a temporary basis.

- Engaged an additional 3,000 faith leaders in resources/methods produced during the four-year period, using them to strengthen their own understanding of youth ministry needs today.
- Through the in-person training at the Extravaganza, engaged and equipped 1,000 leaders (volunteers and professionals) over the course of four years who have not participated in any training beyond their congregation before.

At the end of the grant period, the 50 cohort congregations will have:

- Successfully tested and improved new prototypes for youth ministry in their individual context, engaging youth and their needs in new ways.
- Formed relationships with other ministry leaders in their cohorts that foster long-term learning and support.
- Contributed to the final materials developed out of this program, lifting up their successes with the intention of supporting youth ministry innovation across the ecosystem of the ELCA.

Progress goals:

Our four-year system is intrinsically linked to the evaluation of our goals. In addition to the relationship between the project director and cohort leaders (which will provide ongoing insight), every six months, the advisory team will meet to evaluate current progress in the project. They will examine and learn from our “progress goals” or steps toward cultivating a new vision with practices that address the adaptive challenges of today.

- Identifying themes from listening in Year 1, testing and refining practices through experimenting in Year 2, distilling the prototype from learnings in Year 3 and pulling it all together in Year 4.
- Measuring the creating and sharing of resources that come from the project. At every check-in, the number of resources will have increased since the last evaluation.
- Tracking number of leaders equipped in each year, increasing each year toward the goal of 3,000.

5. COMMUNICATION

The Network will target its established audience of youth and adult leaders within ELCA congregations to promote the project and resulting resources. The Network currently has 1,090 subscribed members and a total of 7,568 contacts (included subscribed members). Other highlights include:

- A Facebook group totaling 6,687 engaged members
- 2926 Twitter followers
- 1,502 Instagram followers
- 3,064 followers on The Network blog
- 11,538 downloads of their 3TC podcast
- 4,891 subscribed to their weekly e-newsletter with resources and event announcements
- 2,500 monthly individual website views
- 600 average participants at the Extravaganza, an annual conference for children, youth and family ministry leaders (the Extravaganza has seen participation as high as 1700).

The Network also works in close collaboration with Synod Youth Ministry Band of Leaders (SYMBOL), a network of synod children, youth and family ministry leaders. While not a formal part of the Network, Symbol meets annually in conjunction with the Extravaganza and their communications networks would be available to promote the Formation Lab and resulting materials.

In addition, the ELCA will utilize churchwide communications to reach a wider audience of leaders, including the 64 regional synods and their bishops and councils. Our extensive communication channels include the ELCA website, social media, 65 synods and bishops, DEMs, ELCA national gatherings and events, various network partners (Youth Ministry Network, Campus Ministries, Outdoor Ministries, etc), prominent Lutheran publications, the ELCA Worship Team and a variety of other potential avenues. Highlights include:

- 148k followers on Facebook
- 19.6k followers on Instagram
- 28k followers on Twitter
- 7,823 followers on ELCA Youth Twitter
- 9,620 Youth Gathering e-news subscribers

The Youth Gathering is a national gathering for high-school-age youth. It is held every 3 years in a different American city. The gathering lasts around 5 days and each day is focused on a form of service. Youth Gathering leadership has already committed to promoting the results of the Formation Lab at their next gathering if needed.

Strategies will include extensive personal invitations, web-based promotions, social media pushes, and print communications in order to advertise the Formation Lab, the available training, and all resulting materials from each grant year. Having participated in the initial listening sessions, our DEMs will also be a vital resource to reaching our 65 synods and encouraging faith communities to engage. The goal will be to use the trusted reputation of both the ELCA and the Network to encourage innovation in as many faith communities as possible, changing the way our denomination approaches youth ministry.

While we're confident these innovative and adaptive prototypes for youth ministry will have widespread appeal, we do anticipate some churches remaining resistant to change – especially if they feel what they've done for years is still working for them. Our hope is that the year-after-year cycle will encourage those initially hesitant, hearing and seeing the successes of other communities (through some of the same communication channels above) and being called by the Spirit to try something new.

6. SUSTAINABILITY

In the first two years, the project will be fully sustained by grant funds. As the project continues into Years 3 and 4, cohort congregations will be asked to pay participation fees to help support the remaining grant period. In addition, funds will be marked by the churchwide ELCA to support this project through staffing.

Beyond this, The Network and the ELCA are both committed to the ongoing needs of the Formation Lab as they are revealed through the practical results and ongoing evaluations. Ideally, as the grant progresses, the number of faith communities utilizing the new prototypes would continue to grow but the success of each program would be sustained financially on a community level. While we don't know exactly what this will look like at the individual faith community level, we do know the prototypes provided will center the voices of youth and what they need from their faith communities. In doing so, we are building practices that will live much longer than the initial grant period.

In 2021, the ELCA churchwide organization set an ambitious goal: share the story of Jesus and the ELCA by engaging with one million new people as we grow the church. Key to accomplishing this is an openness and commitment to disrupting old systems and moving away from areas of focus that are no longer effective. In addition to housing an innovation lab staffed by churchwide employees, the ELCA has committed 30 percent of its budget in the coming years to further the work of innovation in the church in order to support:

- Work that is focused on maintaining and/or improving existing ministries and initiatives that are important for the future of the church.
- Adjacent work that is focused on reimagining existing ministries specifically to reach new, young, or diverse people directly or through work with synods, congregations and partner organizations.
- Transformational and innovative work that is focused on developing new ministries that specifically reach new, young, or diverse people directly or through the work with synods, congregations and partner organizations..

The Network views this grant opportunity as a way to further their own innovation practices. Together, the ELCA and the Network will be able to work towards innovation values across the DNA of the denomination, ensuring that innovation is not an initiative championed by the ELCA churchwide organization and resisted by synods and individual faith communities, but rather a fundamental part of who we are as God's people in order to activate each of us so more people know the way of Jesus and discover community, justice and love.

The Formation Lab is designed to innovate youth ministry and directly aligns with Future Church goals. The success of this program envisions a future where leaders, congregations and faith communities are fully resourced and equipped to move in the same direction, sharing a common vocabulary and a set of practices that can be placed into their context in order to equip young people with a life giving, transformative, missional faith in Jesus Christ. Whatever financial or practical needs arise to further this work, the Network and the ELCA will ensure their resources support the ongoing needs and momentum of this work..

7. TIMETABLE

2023 | Year 1

- Onboarding leadership
- Listen and learn from current ministry leaders
- Capture learnings to share with the church (Create Year A materials)
- Incorporate learnings into leadership training
- Identify and invite a diverse set of 50 congregations to be a learning cohort
- Invite other congregations to participate and learn alongside the core congregations
- Design congregational cohort experience
- Create strategies for sustainability
- Design assessment and evaluation systems

2024 | Year 2

- Begin leadership training
- Implement evaluation and assessment measures
- Learn from and experiment within congregational cohorts
- Incorporate learnings from congregational cohort into leadership training
- Create mechanisms for sharing learning from the congregational cohort with the wider church
- Begin development strategy

2025 | Year 3

- Expand leadership training—both in content and access
- Continue evaluation and assessment
- Reflect on congregational cohort's learning from experiments and cultivate themes and shared practices
- Share learnings from congregational cohort with other leaders and congregations
- Ongoing development work

2026 | Year 4

- Continue to expand leadership training—both in content and access
- Reflect on learnings from evaluation and assessment
- Wrap up congregational cohort experience
- Share learnings from congregational cohort with other leaders and congregations
- Ongoing development work

8. KEY PEOPLE

FROM THE NETWORK

Rev. Todd Buegler, Executive Director of the ELCA Youth Ministry Network and Senior Pastor at Trinity Lutheran Church in Owatonna, Minn.

Todd brings over 30 years of experience in ministry with young people, as well as long-time leadership of the Network. Todd's role would be to work closely with project leadership to ensure that they have the organizational and personal support they need to be successful.

Dr. Terri Elton, Academic Dean and Professor of Leadership at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minn.

Terri brings a unique blend of congregational and academic experience to this project. She approaches the work of ministry as a practical theologian, always asking the question "How is God at work in this time and place?" As a member of the advisory team, she will help to keep the project grounded theologically.

Catherine Anderson, Synod Minister for Discipleship and Christian Community, Northeastern Minnesota Synod. A longtime veteran of both congregational and synodical ministries, Catherine has both the vision to see possibilities and the organizational and logistical skills to carry out large programs. She understands the importance of both discipleship and leadership development and will offer this expertise to the program director and advisory team as needed.

FROM THE ELCA

Dr. Kris Bjorke, Interim Program Manager for Youth Ministry at the ELCA Churchwide Organization.

As a Doctor of Ministry in congregational mission and leadership, Kris has spent the last 30 years not only serving in congregations in youth ministry positions but also mentoring pastors and lay leaders within the Minneapolis Synod and Luther Seminary. She started and ran her own nonprofit in interim children, youth and family ministry for 15 years assisting congregational leaders in discerning a path forward in their ministry in times of transition. In addition to her expertise, Kris will work to make sure the project outcomes are in alignment with ELCA vision and strategies.

Rev. Kimberly Vaughn, Senior Director, Christian Community and Leadership, ELCA Churchwide Organization. With 30-plus years in youth/family ministry, urban and multicultural ministry as a lay professional, parish pastor and bishop's assistant, she leads the ELCA team that is committed to congregational faith formation. She advocates for the full welcome of youth and young adults in the church and will strive to ensure that the ELCA's Future Church goal of engaging new, young and diverse people is represented in the project.

Rev. Dr. Phil Hirsch, Executive for Christian Community and Leadership, ELCA Churchwide Organization. Phil is the executive director for Christian Community and Leadership, the largest unit of the churchwide organization. He brings a passion for connecting new, younger and more diverse people with the gospel, honed by 30 years' experience in the parish and synod staff. Phil understands the importance of developing congregations as communities that serve God's mission through empowering young people and the adults who care for them and their faith. Phil is accountable for integrating learnings from this project into the wider ELCA system.

9. ANTICIPATED CHALLENGES

1) Shrinking denominational systems

The ELCA, like many mainline denominations, is declining in both membership and in the number of congregations. These factors have stretched congregations, synods and churchwide systems to carry out their mission with diminished resources. These realities have also limited people's imagination and caused many leaders to become risk-averse.

2) Societal impact on ministry leaders

Society is experiencing an extended period of uncertainty. The COVID pandemic, disruptions related to social injustice, and politically divided communities have dramatically shifted the landscape in which congregations do ministry. Several studies, including within the ELCA, have noted how these societal realities are increasing apathy within everyday disciples and overtaxing church leaders. Exhaustion, the need to retool, and reevaluating life's priorities are challenging ministry in ways not witnessed in decades.

Our approach:

This program is designed to acknowledge where we are in this current snapshot of ministry. Even if we could put all the elements back in place that made the "youth group" of the 1980s and '90s flourish, our society has changed so significantly that the end result would not be the same. The Formation Lab is designed for deep listening and bringing congregations together to address these challenges through innovation, allowing faith formation and practices to evolve with society and across generations.

Acknowledging the diminishing of resources for staffing, specifically for youth ministry, will invite us to imagine a different way to engage young people as agents in their formation with the support of structures and systems that may or may not be already in place. These systems may include pastoral leadership, parental equipping, peer leadership and connecting with outside service agencies to invite youth in their endeavors. The Formation Lab will encourage congregations to utilize and adapt the resources that already exist in their current communities or, if the resource does not exist, how they might rely on the greater church to help build something new. We will use both in-person gatherings and technology to support and encourage each other as we listen, learn, discover and develop cutting-edge resources for ministry.

10. BUDGET

EXPENSES

	2023	2024	2025	2026	
Staffing					
Director (<i>salary/benefits</i>)	\$80,000	\$82,400	\$84,872	\$87,418	\$334,690
Assistant (.5 time at \$25/hr)	\$26,000	\$26,780	\$27,583	\$28,410	\$108,773
Continuing Education	\$1,000	\$1,030	\$1,060	\$1,092	\$4,182
Administration					
Computer, Phone, Supplies	\$8,000	\$8,240	\$8,487	\$8,741	\$33,468
Development					
Curriculum Materials	\$8,000	\$8,240	\$8,487	\$8,741	\$33,468
Video Production	\$10,000	\$10,300	\$10,609	\$10,927	\$41,836
Online Teaching Platform	\$4,000	\$4,120	\$4,243	\$4,370	\$16,733
Translation Services	\$9,000	\$9,270	\$9,548	\$9,834	\$37,652
Volunteer Teams					
Online Training Expenses	\$5,000	\$5,150	\$5,304	\$5,463	\$20,917
Travel					
Listening/Training Visits (eight trips per year)	\$18,000	\$18,540	\$19,096	\$19,669	\$75,305
Marketing					
Promotions	\$8,000	\$8,000	\$8,000	\$8,000	\$32,000
Postage	\$4,625	\$4,763	\$4,906	\$5,061	\$19,355
Printing	\$7,500	\$7,725	\$7,956	\$8,195	\$31,376
Training Expenses					
Seminar Expenses	\$18,000	\$18,540	\$19,096	\$19,669	\$75,305
Zoom Events Expenses	\$490	\$505	\$520	\$535	\$2,050
Extravaganza	\$10,000	\$10,300	\$10,609	\$10,927	\$41,836
Sub Total	\$217,615	\$223,903	\$230,377	\$237,054	\$908,949
Contingency	\$21,761	\$22,390	\$23,037	\$23,705	\$90,893
Yearly Total	\$239,376	\$246,293	\$253,414	\$260,759	
				GRAND TOTAL	\$999,892

BUDGET SUMMARY

Staffing

We are requesting \$107,000 for project staffing in the first year (plus 3% additional each of the following three years). These funds will provide for a full-time project director and a half-time assistant. These two project leads will take responsibility for developing the project, building relationships with the core congregations and the wider church, and giving direction to the listening, resource development, training and distribution of findings.

Administration

We are requesting \$8,000 for administrative costs in the first year (plus 3% additional each of the following three years). These funds will provide the basic supplies necessary to begin an initiative of this scale. They will fund everything from computers to phone service to office supplies.

Materials Development

We are requesting \$31,000 in the first year (plus 3% additional each of the following three years) for the development of resources based on what is heard in the listening portion of the project. This would include (but not be limited to) curriculum, video production, online teaching and translation services into languages other than English, to reach as broad an audience as possible.

Volunteer Teams

We are requesting \$5,000 in the first year (plus 3% additional each of the following three years) to prepare and train regional or synodical volunteers to serve as primary contacts for congregations, and to assist with training and preparation on a local level.

Travel

We are requesting \$18,000 in the first year (plus 3% additional each of the following three years) for travel for the project director to visit and hold listening sessions and provide training for the core congregations and the broader church.

Marketing

We are requesting \$20,125 in the first year (plus 3% additional each of the following three years) to market this project, inviting congregations to participate and create a sense of community among the core congregations and other congregations that choose to participate.

Training Expenses

Our intention is to freely and broadly share what is learned within congregations of the ELCA and with our ecumenical partners. We are requesting \$28,489 in the first year (plus 3% additional each of the following three years) to help pay for training expenses. These include in-person seminars, online events and training taking place at the Network's existing annual conference.

BUDGET NARRATIVE

Staffing:

- Project Director (full-time)—Salary (includes benefits): \$80,000 (Year 1), \$82,400 (Year 2), \$84,872 (Year 3), \$87,418 (Year 4)
- Assistant Director (half-time)—Salary: \$26,000 (Year 1), \$26,780 (Year 2), \$27,583 (Year 3), \$28,410 (Year 4)
- Continuing Education costs for the two staff people, totaling \$1,000 (Year 1), \$1,030 (Year 2), \$1,060.90 (Year 3) and \$1,092.73 (Year 4)

Administration:

- Administrative expenses of \$8,000 (Year 1), \$8,240 (Year 2), \$8,487.20 (Year 3), \$8,741.82 (Year 4) to cover basic equipment and office supplies

Project Development:

- Development expenses of curriculum and training materials. Includes printing for in-person events. \$8,000 (Year 1), \$8,240 (Year 2), \$8,487 (Year 3), \$8,741 (Year 4)
- Working with a video producer to create materials that can be used for online training and archived for congregations to use at later times: \$10,000 (Year 1), \$10,300 (Year 2), \$10,609 (Year 3), \$10,927 (Year 4)
- Selection and use of an online teaching platform that allows for engaged and dynamic communication of new ideas and concepts: \$4,000 (Year 1), \$4,120 (Year 2), \$4,243 (Year 3), \$4,370 (Year 4)
- Translation services to make all resources and materials available to congregations and individuals whose primary language is other than English. Languages TBD. \$9,000 (Year 1), \$9,270 (Year 2), \$9,548 (Year 3), \$9,834 (Year 4)

Volunteer Teams

- Recruitment, selection and training of regional leaders who assist with mentoring of the core congregations and providing training on what is heard and learned throughout the project. \$5,000 (Year 1), \$5,150 (Year 2), \$5,304 (Year 3), \$5,463 (Year 4)

Travel

- Travel for the project director to host gatherings of core congregations and to lead training sessions. \$18,000 (Year 1), \$18,540 (Year 2), \$19,096 (Year 3), \$19,669 (Year 4)

Marketing:

- Materials to distribute to promote and communicate the value of the project, and to build a sense of community among participants. Ideas could include shirts, notebooks, etc. \$8,000 each year for four years.
- Postage for promotional mailings and other communications: \$4,625 (Year 1), \$4,763 (Year 2), \$4,906 (Year 3), \$5,060 (Year 4)
- Printing of materials to distribute to promote the program: \$7,500 (Year 1), \$7,772.5 (Year 2), \$7,856 (Year 3), \$8,195 (Year 4)

Training Expenses:

- Expenses for trainings and workshops for the core congregations and for the broader church. Includes fees for teachers, speakers, writers, etc. \$18,000 (Year 1), \$18,540 (Year 2), \$19,096 (Year 3), \$19,669 (Year 4)
- Expenses to cover online event platform (Zoom) to host the trainings, webinars and workshops. The project would cover half of the expense. The other half would be paid for by the ELCA Youth Ministry Network. \$490 (Year 1), \$504 (Year 2), \$519 (Year 3), \$535 (Year 4)
- The Extravaganza is the annual training event that draws 700-800 children's, youth and young adult ministry leaders together for renewal, learning and networking. The project would harness the energy at the Extravaganza both as a place for promotion and for core congregations (and others) to gather and learn together. This expense covers the cost of leaders and resource people that may be brought in to participate: \$10,000 (Year 1), \$10,300 (Year 2), \$10,609 (Year 3), \$10,927 (Year 4)

CONCLUSION

Thank you for your leadership in launching *Strengthening Congregational Ministries with Youth Initiative*. We are honored to be included in the invitation. Through the Formation Lab, the ELCA and the Youth Ministry Network are ready to innovate the ways we nurture the lives of middle and high school youth. A \$1 million dollar grant would empower churches across the ecosystem of the ELCA to share the good news of God's radical grace and unconditional love with new generations.

Thank you for your prayerful consideration of this request.