

This directions paper shares the key messages harvested through conversations across the ELCA. We invite you to comment on the directions and priorities that have emerged.

## Called Forward Together in Christ for the sake of the world

A Consultation Paper on Future  
Directions of the ELCA

**July 25, 2016**



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

# Preface

In 2017, together with Lutherans around the world, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America will commemorate the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. Across this church we will be observing this event in worship, study, proclamation and witness and deeply reflecting on the precious gift of God's liberating grace. The Reformation anniversary provides a powerful focal point for reaffirming who we are as a Lutheran church and understanding what God is calling this church to be in its ongoing reformation. And for a brief time a spotlight will be turned on Lutherans in this country and around the world. How will we use this moment to explain ourselves and renew our commitment to sharing the good news of Jesus in a world suffering through growing conflict, fear and inequality, at home and abroad?

Through Called Forward Together in Christ, we have been asking what it means to be Lutheran and how we express this in today's world. We have learned we aren't as good as we could be in giving a clear answer to that question. We speak about grace, about our work in advocacy, about the relief and development work we do, about our inclusiveness and diversity – though I believe these last two are more aspirational than actual – about our ecumenical and interreligious dialogues and relationships. These are true and important, yet they are not exclusively Lutheran. Thanks be to God, many religious and secular organizations are deeply committed to serving the vulnerable and working for justice and peace. So what is distinctive about being a Lutheran church, and how do we agree on and unite around priorities that are important for the whole of the ELCA?

When the ELCA Church Council and Conference of Bishops endorsed this broadly based conversational and consultative process, I was nervous about whether we would reach conclusions that had wide resonance across this church – that we would be able to **say together** what is most important. This directions paper shares what we heard from church leaders and members about who we are as Lutheran and our distinctiveness as a Lutheran church together for the sake of the world. It also shares what people across this church see to be our most pressing challenges and priorities. I am heartened by the congruence we see in your responses and the passion for this church that has been expressed.

The conversations and feedback tell us two things: There is broad consensus about the church we want to become, but in some of the areas that are highly important we do not have a clear or effective strategy. Becoming an inclusive, multicultural and more youthful church is on everyone's lips, but we are so far failing as a church to achieve our aspirations. Growing discipleship and membership of this church is also an aspiration, but congregations, synods and the churchwide organization have struggled to find ways to reverse the decline in membership and participation in this church. This is weighing heavily on the hearts and minds of a majority of lay, lay rostered and ordained leaders. So how do we collectively respond to this? There are also areas identified to be important where we are enthusiastically and effectively living out God's mission – for example in our global and domestic mission work and in our ecumenical partnerships and interfaith relationships.

We invite you into this next stage of discerning the ELCA's future directions and priorities. Let us know what you think about the themes and directions reflected in this paper. Your input will help the ELCA's leadership tables be courageous in interpreting God's call and together developing an intentional strategic focus in taking that call forward.

**Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton**

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Elizabeth A. Eaton". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

# 1 INTRODUCTION

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## 1.1 ABOUT CALLED FORWARD TOGETHER IN CHRIST

Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton, together with the ELCA Conference of Bishops and Church Council, has embarked on an ambitious process to invite people, ministries and institutions of the ELCA into a conversation about future directions of this church. Building on processes that have come before it, especially Living into the Future Together (LIFT), Called Forward Together in Christ seeks to discern future directions and priorities of the ELCA. The process started in November 2015 when the Conference of Bishops and Church Council affirmed its importance and discussed how to best engage people across the ELCA. It involves three stages in 2016.

**Conversations** across this church about the future (January to June).

**Consultation on directions and priorities** that emerged through these conversations (July to September).

**Reaching decisions** about where the ELCA is heading and to what it will give importance. In this paper we refer to that as a Future Directions Statement (October to November).

The 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation in 2017 offers an exciting moment in the ELCA's journey – a time to rejoice in the life-giving, liberating power of the gospel and deepen our faith and love of Jesus. As a church always being made new, what better time to launch a shared vision and direction for the ELCA around which leaders and members can unite. What is decided by the Church Council in November will be launched as part of marking the Reformation anniversary.

### Where are we in the process?

On advice of the presiding bishop, the ELCA Church Council appointed a Future Directions Table to guide the process. One of their primary tasks is to make sense of the messages and themes resonating through Called Forward Together in Christ. They met in March and June and will meet again in September to help shape a Future Directions Statement ahead of the Conference of Bishops and Church Council meetings. You can see who serves on this table on the last page of this paper.

**Stage one is completed** and we have heard from many people across this church:

- through conversations held in congregations and at synod assemblies;
- through a survey of rostered leaders, lay and ordained and a survey of youth and young adults;
- via the website and social media;
- through discussions and information gathered from church networks and specialized ministries (young adults, ethnic and multicultural ministries, social ministries, campus ministries, seminaries and separately incorporated ministries); and
- through meetings involving the Conference of Bishops, the Church Council and the churchwide organization.

While the specific wording of questions and input mechanisms varied for different groups, we used six BIG questions to focus conversations.

- ◆ What is distinctive about who we are as a Lutheran church?
- ◆ What kind of church do we believe God is calling us to become?
- ◆ How do we become an inclusive, diverse church that is inspiring and relevant in different communities?

- ◆ What is God calling us to do in a world that is facing unprecedented levels of poverty, conflict and violence, interreligious tension and displacement of people?
- ◆ What do we expect from our church leaders? And how do we recruit, invest in and support them to lead this church into the future?
- ◆ Will our current structures serve this church well into the future? How can the ELCA maintain strong congregational participation and ownership and become more connected as one church?

We are grateful to the many individuals who participated in the process and those who led conversations. Of course we did not reach everyone. But we believe the many voices heard show there is a high degree of shared thinking on hopes about the future of this church and what is important.

This directions paper takes us into **stage two**. The Future Directions Table advised on and shaped the content of this paper, with writing undertaken by our consultant supporting Called Forward Together in Christ, Lyla Rogan, and input from Kenneth Inskeep. It is also informed by available ELCA research and other important discussions on the future of this church.<sup>1</sup>

The directions paper provides the platform for the next stage of consultation and engagement in the process. It summarizes the main themes coming through conversations and meetings held, survey findings and other research. And it begins to identify what these messages point to in terms of future directions and priorities. This paper is being distributed widely to get feedback on what has emerged.

**Stage three** moves to decision making. In November 2016, the ELCA Church Council will affirm a Future Directions Statement. The Future Directions Table, Conference of Bishops, Church Council members and leaders in the churchwide organization will contribute to shaping the statement in the lead-up to the Church Council meeting. The goal is to achieve joint ownership of the statement by the ELCA's leadership tables and invite others to join in leading the church forward based on a shared view about what is important.

**2017 and beyond** – The Future Directions Statement will be launched in 2017 as part of marking the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation. The process will extend well beyond 2017 as the directions are interpreted and implemented across the ELCA's complex church ecology.

If this is the first time you are hearing about this process, you can find more information at [ELCA.org/future](http://ELCA.org/future). And it is not too late to be heard!

## 1.2 HOW TO RESPOND TO THE DIRECTIONS PAPER

We welcome feedback on the directions paper via written comments online or email. We encourage you to **use the questions throughout the paper** as a basis for discussion with others and send us responses that arise. You may wish to give general comments, respond to a specific section of the paper or give a longer response to several of the questions. There will also be opportunities for input at the ELCA Churchwide Assembly and the Grace Gathering in August.

Send your feedback by **Friday, Sept. 9**, via the remark form, <https://surveys.elca.org/scripts/rws5.pl?FORM=CTFFFeedback>, or by sending an email to [future@elca.org](mailto:future@elca.org).

<sup>1</sup> Blue Ribbon Committee (2006-2007), the Living into the Future Task Force (LIFT I, 2009-2011 and Lift II, 2011-2014), the Group of Nine (2011-2012), the Mission Funding Task Force (2102), the Three Leadership Tables, Church Council Retreat and the Bishop's Think Tank on Mission Support (2014-15).

## 2 DOES THE ELCA NEED TO ESTABLISH PRIORITIES?

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This is not the first time the ELCA has sought to discern priorities that help this church be more effective in serving God’s mission and respond to contemporary challenges facing mainstream Christian denominations. However, deciding future directions and priorities for the ELCA is far from a regular strategic planning exercise. While God’s mission is clear, as people of God, we must constantly discern how to express and carry out that mission in a faithful, relevant and compelling way in today’s world.

The ELCA is a complex part of the body of Christ, with many expressions, ministries, leaders, members and participants. There are multiple centers of ministry, leadership and places of decision-making and this makes it hard to test and affirm what this church together holds to be important. We know God is calling and guiding us and that the plans we put in place are meant to help us steward the gifts, resources and opportunities God places in our hands.

There are great examples of what this church can achieve together when shared purpose, collaboration and good ideas come into play. Recent examples are the Malaria Campaign, *Always Being Made New: The Campaign for the ELCA*, AMMPARO (Accompanying Migrant Minors with Protection, Advocacy, Representation and Opportunities), the Word and Service Task Force, and the work of the Theological Education Advisory Committee.

As Bishop Eaton said in her invitation to participate, “We know our mission – we are a people of God together preaching Christ and Christ crucified because the world deserves to hear the gospel.” The question she and many others pose is, “How can we be clearer, better focused and more effective in the way we tell the good news and embody God’s love for the world?” This is the aim of Called Forward Together in Christ.

### Why now?

Many people who joined the conversations feel there is a pressing need to find better responses to the big challenges facing the ELCA and to build shared leadership commitment to strategies that put this church on a positive, confident and unashamedly Christian path for the years ahead. This process matters now because the cultural and religious landscape in America and around the world has changed. It matters now because there are some very real challenges facing the church for which the ELCA does not yet have answers. And it matters now because we cannot do and be everything. This church needs to make some strategic choices so we can concentrate our efforts and steward our human and financial resources in the right direction. This is what setting directions and priorities for this church is about.

## 3 THE CONTEXT

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This section touches on some of the contextual factors and challenges that have had and will continue to have an impact on the ELCA. When the church discerns priorities for the future, it is in part considering how to respond to today’s context and the challenges and opportunities that presents.

### 3.1 THE LIFT LEGACY

The Taskforce on Living into the Future Together: Renewing the Ecology of the ELCA (LIFT) was set up in 2009 and presented its first report to the ELCA Church Council in 2011. Resolutions were taken to the Churchwide Assembly and were passed, reflecting their broad support. In brief, the resolutions dealt with:

- making support for the work of congregations one of the highest priorities of this church;
- strengthening synods as catalysts for mission planning and reassessing synod roles, boundaries and structures;
- undertaking work through the Conference of Bishops to develop strategies to support the vitality of congregations, mission growth and outreach and consider how resources are increased and distributed in support of congregations; and
- affirming the importance of regions as centers for cooperative mission and ministry and the role of the churchwide organization in accompaniment of congregations and synods, building capacity for evangelical witness and service and supporting effective church relationships and ministries.

Following the 2011 Churchwide Assembly an advisory committee (LIFT II) was set up to continue providing advice in the implementation of the resolutions. This committee reported to Church Council in 2014, observing there was at the time both significant accomplishments and unfinished business.

The issues and priorities emerging from the Called Forward Together in Christ process echo many of the LIFT conclusions. Interestingly, the unfinished business highlighted in the final LIFT report includes some of the major areas that continue to be seen as important:

- facilitating grassroots input and collaboration – connecting, solving problems and sharing information;
- growing as a multicultural church;
- leadership development;
- vitality and boundaries of synods; and
- Mission Support – how to increase and distribute resources in line with church priorities.

The final LIFT report concluded:

*The ELCA has made significant progress in the past decade. Congregations must be ready not only to respond and adapt to changes in our context, but also to serve as catalysts and lead the way in shaping communities that are transformed by the vision of God’s mission. In order to do so, we must have an intentional way of asking provocative questions and seeking and responding to feedback. The churchwide organization also has the opportunity to serve as a catalyst, not a barrier, for innovation at the grassroots level as we constantly ask, learn, grow and live into God’s future for us together.<sup>2</sup>*

Called Forward Together in Christ is a further opportunity to ask the questions, explore common aspirations and address challenges.

## 3.2 TRENDS – THE ELCA AND THE U.S. RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE

### Patterns of growth and decline in membership

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the membership of congregations, now part of the ELCA, represented 2.5 percent of the U.S. population. Up to World War II, the church benefited from newly arriving immigrants from predominately Lutheran countries in Europe who were looking for new church homes. After WWII, there was a new growth spurt due to a significant increase in the birth rate among Lutherans in the U.S., and by the mid-1970s, membership of the ELCA was 5.6 million or about 2.7 percent of the U.S. population.

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<sup>2</sup> LIFT II Final report to the ELCA Church Council, April 4-6, 2014.

Over the last 40 years, baptized membership in the ELCA has declined, with the rate of decline increasing substantially after 2000. By 2015, the baptized membership was 3.7 million or about 1.2 percent of the U.S. population. The decline in membership has made it increasingly difficult to support the ministries the predecessor generation of Lutherans had built. When congregations have less, the impact is felt most directly by camps, campus ministries, seminaries, synods and the churchwide organization, and nearly all of these ministries are now assessing their futures.

### **Is there a real commitment to growing membership?**

Membership growth is one of the greatest challenges facing the ELCA, in part because it is not viewed as a priority across the church. In a 2015 survey of ELCA pastors, 17 percent indicated that steady growth in membership or attendance was “very important” (5 on a five-point scale from 5-very important to 1-not at all important). Forty-four percent of pastors ranked the importance of steady growth in membership or attendance at 3 or below on the scale.

In the survey conducted as part of Called Forward Together in Christ, pastors and lay leaders were asked about the importance of “spreading the good news of the gospel.” The item was ranked as “very important” by 51 percent of the clergy and by 68 percent of the lay leader respondents. At the same time, there was a clear indication among both pastors and lay leaders that, even as members want their congregations to grow, they tend to be “set in their ways” and find it difficult to change to attract new members (including young adults). When asked, for example, about the importance of trying new outreach or evangelism strategies, 48 percent of the clergy and 31 percent of the lay leaders ranked its importance at 3 or below on the five-point scale. On the 2015 Annual Report, the respondents were asked how their congregation is at “equipping members to share their faith with others.” Sixty-three percent of the respondents said their congregation was “mediocre” or worse in doing so.

A central premise of the LIFT Taskforce was that membership growth is key to the ELCA’s future. LIFT endorsed and supported the deployment of churchwide staff to synods from the churchwide Domestic Mission unit (then Congregational and Synodical Mission). These directors of evangelical mission were tasked with a variety of functions, but primary among them was synodical mission planning and strengthening the ability of congregations to engage in mission. One key question, however, is the relationship of these activities to membership growth. Overall, baptized membership and worship attendance have continued to decline. The congregations that subsequently developed mission plans were larger (about 150 in worship) than the congregations that did not (about 90 in worship), but those who did so continued to decline, albeit at a somewhat slower rate, which may simply have been a reflection of the larger size of these congregations.

### **The challenge of geography**

Lutherans live all over the U.S., but they are most heavily concentrated in 11 states. Forty percent of all ELCA Lutherans live in just three states: Minnesota (18.5%), Pennsylvania (11.7%), and Wisconsin (10.0%). Another 32 percent live in eight additional states: Iowa (5.7%), Illinois (5.3%), Ohio (5.2%), North Dakota (4.1%), New York (3.1%), South Dakota (2.9%), Nebraska (2.7%) and Michigan (2.7%). In 2015, these 11 states accounted for 26 percent of the U.S. population. While each of these states is projected to grow (with the exception of North Dakota), none is growing rapidly.

Between 2000 and 2015, the fastest growing states in the U.S. (based on projections from the U.S. Census) were California, Texas, Florida, Arizona, Georgia and North Carolina. Each of these fast-growing states grew by nearly 2 million or more from 2000 to 2015 and each is projected to continue to grow at a significant rate. While the population of these states increased by a combined 23.6 million, the baptized

membership of ELCA congregations in these states actually decreased by 238,000. In each of these states, ELCA members account for less than 1 percent of the population.

### The suburban bubble

After World War II, millions of U.S. veterans returned home. Some of those who served were able to access educational benefits under the G.I. Bill and housing benefits provided by the Veterans Administration and the Federal Housing Administration. College-educated veterans created a new professional class. Others found new, well-paid jobs in manufacturing and service professions. The U.S. economy was strong and had few competitors. Household incomes increased and people could afford to buy new homes and start families. Developers provided affordable solutions by choosing undeveloped plots of land on the edges of urban areas and the suburban movement was on.

These new suburbs and the favorable family values of the post-World War II United States created a demand for new congregations. Between 1950 and 1970, the predecessor bodies of the ELCA started a record number of 2,355 new congregations. However, for a host of reasons (i.e. re-emerging economic competition from Europe and Japan, the institutional disenchantment produced by Jim Crow segregation, the Vietnam War, the civil rights and women's movements), the phenomenal suburban growth proved to be impossible to sustain. Suburban development would continue, but the rate slowed. Between 1970 and 1990, the number of new congregations founded by the predecessor bodies of the ELCA fell to 1,105 and between 1990 and 2010, the number of new congregations begun by the ELCA was 790.

### The changing household

New ministries in the ELCA during the post-World War II period depended upon predominantly white, stable, two-parent households and the birth of children in the suburbs. These growing households bolstered the Sunday school and vacation Bible school attendance of Lutheran congregations. In 1970, there were 1.5 million Sunday school pupils and 650,000 vacation Bible school pupils in the predecessor congregations of the ELCA. But, by the time of the merger in 1988, Sunday school attendance had fallen to 1 million and vacation Bible school attendance to 380,000. In 2010, Sunday school attendance was at 400,000, and vacation Bible school attendance was 255,000. In 2015, the estimate of Sunday school attendance is just over 300,000.

Stable, mainly white, two-parent households, anchored in suburban communities and committed to raising children still exist, but there are far fewer of them. In 1955, the birth rate was 25 live births per 1,000 population. By 1970, it had dropped to 18, and in 2010, the birth rate was 13. The average size of a household in 2015 was 2.54 people, down from 3.67 in 1948.

### Young adults

The membership of the ELCA as a whole is considerably older than the general population. The median age of those 15 to 99 in the ELCA is 58.<sup>3</sup> For the U.S., the median age of those 15 to 99 is 39. About a third of the U.S. population is between the ages of 20 to 44 compared to about a fifth of the active members of the ELCA. Many congregations have struggled to attract younger people and to adapt their worship and mission planning to better accommodate their views and expectations.

Christian Smith's 2009 work on the religious and spiritual lives of young adults describes the religious views of emerging adults.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> This age estimate is based on surveys, and those under 15 typically do not complete these questionnaires.

<sup>4</sup> Christian Smith with Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults*, New York: Oxford, 2009. 286.

*Not all emerging adults think about religion in the same way, but there definitely is a dominant outlook when it comes to religion. Most emerging adults are okay with talking about religion as a topic, although they are largely indifferent to it—religion is just not that important to most of them. So for the most part, they do not end up talking much about religion in their lives. To whatever extent they do talk about it, most of them think that most religions share the same core principles, which they generally believe are good. But the particularities of any given religion are peripheral trappings that can be more or less ignored. The best thing about religion is that it helps people to be good, to make good choices, to behave well.*

### The diversity of U.S. society

Among the most significant challenges impacting the ELCA is the growing racial and ethnic diversity of the U.S. In 1950, 90 percent of the U.S. population was white. In 2010, 65 percent of the U.S. population was white. Between 1950 and 2010, the Latino population grew from about 2 percent of the population to 15 percent. Despite the commitment of those who founded the ELCA to increasing the racial and ethnic diversity of ELCA congregations, progress has been slow. As of 2015, the ELCA is 94 percent white. This surfaced as a major issue in *Called Forward Together in Christ*. Many would affirm the goal but note the need to revisit how the ELCA becomes a church that better reflects the diversity of U.S. society.

### The challenge of spiritual but not religious

Perhaps because the vast majority of Americans claim they believe in God, the U.S. is often considered a religious country.<sup>5</sup> However, the vast majority of people in the U.S. do not attend church regularly, and those who do are largely Roman Catholic or conservative evangelicals. Attempts to estimate the actual number who attend worship in a typical week conclude that it is about 20 percent of the population.<sup>6</sup> The number of people who do not identify with any religion or religious group is also growing at a rapid rate. One-fifth of the U.S. population and a third of adults under 30 are religiously unaffiliated.<sup>7</sup>

### Other factors

Other factors influencing following and practicing religion in the U.S. and globally are:

- the mobility of people and changing work patterns – the neighborhood congregation that worships at a fixed time on Sundays does not fit easily in to people’s lives;
- interreligious tensions and conflict in the world creating a culture of fear, which makes people suspicious of organized religion; and
- the growing disparities in economic well-being and the pressures families face to merely survive.

### How should the ELCA respond?

These changes in context present a significant challenge to congregations and other institutions of the ELCA. If this church is convinced it has something important and special to contribute to God’s mission, it is faced with encouraging others to actively participate as ELCA Lutherans. This means growing congregations and maintaining a commitment to growing congregations. To grow, ELCA congregations have to think and act more creatively. There are many in this country – young people, people of color, people with languages other than English, people who are poor and people of some means – who have never heard the distinctive message of ELCA Lutherans that God is a gracious God who loves them and can

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.gallup.com/poll/147887/americans-continue-believe-god.aspx>.

<sup>6</sup> C. Kirk Hadaway and Penny Long Marler, “How Many Americans Attend Worship Each Week? An Alternative Approach to Measurement”, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, September, 2005.

<sup>7</sup> “Nones” on the Rise: One-in-Five Adults Have No Religious Affiliation, Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 2012.

set them free from themselves to serve. And there are many who may have encountered Lutherans whom they perceive are more committed to maintaining the past than embracing and shaping the future.

There are evident tensions that sit around the theme of church growth. Some have said it shouldn't be about the numbers, it is about deepening our faith. A few say God may be calling us to be a smaller church and we should plan for this. While there are good examples of congregations and synods evangelizing in a creative and intentional way, many lay and ordained leaders are struggling with how to respond to the falling numbers in their congregations.

Called Forward Together in Christ has uncovered a sense of urgency that this church must face up to the challenges in a more strategic and intentional way. Many see that it is now critical that the ELCA's leaders work together to better understand how growth is achieved and take action to achieve this outcome.

#### Your feedback

- ◆ What does the above analysis mean for the future of the ELCA?
- ◆ What other important factors need to be considered?

## 4 WHAT IS GOD CALLING THE ELCA TO BE TODAY?

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The conversations and feedback shared through Called Forward Together in Christ demonstrate a powerful and mostly unified view about what God is calling this church to be. The messages reflect what is important in the ELCA's Lutheran theological traditions and the kind of church we want to be in the future. Here we capture the common themes and propose how they might be presented in the Future Directions Statement.

### 4.1 KEY MESSAGES FROM ACROSS THIS CHURCH

#### We are a distinctively Lutheran church

We are centered in Christ crucified, resurrected and in whose footsteps we follow. We are disciples of Jesus offering a living witness and testimony to the love of God in the world.

We are a Lutheran church, rich in theology, embracing and teaching Martin Luther's foundational catechetical framework that we are saved by God's unfailing grace through faith alone and that we can be in direct relationship with this trinitarian God.

We are scriptural and sacramental, grounded in God's word of law and gospel that continues to speak to us. We are chosen by God through Baptism and renewed through the presence of Christ in Holy Communion.

Our future is one of abundance and hope – with bread, wine, water and God's word, all things are possible. Worship, prayer and reading the Scriptures is at the center of our life together and nurtures our unity in Jesus. When we gather for worship, we connect with believers everywhere.

We are grounded in a long and proud theological tradition that is always looking to the future. And we are a church that is comfortable with mystery and uncertainty, grounded in our hope and faith in Christ.

We are committed to being in communion with Lutherans around the world through The Lutheran World Federation and our global companion churches.

## **We are church together living the way of Jesus for the sake of the world**

The ELCA is a church that confidently proclaims God's love and grace and the gospel of forgiveness in Christ.

We are a missional church – we embody the goodness of God, and we are set free to serve people and communities that are suffering because of hunger, poverty, disasters, conflict and racism.

We are a church whose people engage in ministry in daily life – we empower people in God's calling at work, at play, in families and households, and in communities.

We are a broad church with many places of worship and centers for mission – congregations, synods, social ministries, the churchwide organization, global ministries, young adult networks and ministries, colleges and seminaries, financial service ministries and more.

We are a church that is out in the world, engaged in the public space through our service, advocacy and social statements. We speak out for justice and peace, lifting up the voices and experience of people who live with poverty, marginalization, discrimination, violence and fear.

As church together, through formal and informal relationships and networks, we can achieve things on a scale that would otherwise not be possible.

## **We are a welcoming and inclusive church**

Liberated by grace, we hold the intention to surrender judgment, forgive, accept all and offer a radical welcome to all God's children.

We strive to be an inclusive church that reflects the diversity in our communities and U.S. society – including ethnic and cultural identity, age profile, sexual orientation, family and relationship status and socio-economic class. Our worship and faith practices evolve and deepen with the gifts given and received by a diverse church leadership and membership.

The ELCA's goal to be a diverse and inclusive church is longstanding, yet the ELCA remains a predominantly white and ageing church. If diversity and inclusion are a priority, the ELCA will need to come to grips with why the church profile is, for the most part, not changing.

## **We are a relational church**

We are a faith community, some would say a movement, together proclaiming and witnessing the good news of Jesus. Members of this church live out their faith through service and engagement in their communities and with other parts of the church.

Ecumenism is at the core of the ELCA's confessions and beliefs. We are committed to our full communion partners and to dialogue with ecumenical partners locally and globally.

We engage in dialogue and collaboration with other faiths for the sake of justice, reconciliation and peace in the world. We also engage with other parts of civil society, government and business.

### **Your feedback**

- ◆ Do the above statements describe who the ELCA is as a Lutheran church? What is missing?
- ◆ Can we explain who we are as a Lutheran church in a more engaging and consistent way?

## 4.2 PROPOSAL FOR HOW THIS IS EXPRESSED IN THE FUTURE DIRECTIONS STATEMENT

A recurrent theme in the Called Forward Together in Christ process was that the ELCA is clear about who it is as a Lutheran church but that it does not do a good job communicating this in a consistent, exciting and accessible way – inside the church and to others beyond the church. An ELCA Future Directions Statement provides an opportunity to find a short and compelling way to speak about:

- ◆ Who we are as Lutherans
- ◆ Who we are as church together
- ◆ Who we are as church for the sake of the sake of the world

**The Future Directions Table proposed that the final statement adopt this structure, and we will use the clear thinking from Called Forward Together in Christ to craft these statements in the next months.**

### Purpose and vision

Taking the heartfelt commitment to this church that was revealed in Called Forward Together in Christ, the Future Directions Table also discussed having a short, shared purpose and vision that gets to the “why” of the ELCA. Easier said than done. This group wanted statements that show “It is all about Jesus!” They desired a unifying narrative that reminds us of the “why” and affirms who this church is and what it stands for.

**God’s work. Our hands.** has become a recognizable and loved tagline that goes to the heart of what the ELCA is about. There was a strong call to retain this and to broaden its use. It is a good example of what we are looking for in vision and purpose.

The Conference of Bishops and Church Council will be asked to shape and endorse a succinct expression of the ELCA’s purpose and vision. We welcome your ideas for a vision and purpose that have the power to unite and help us communicate who we are as church together. Below are some initial ideas.

### Our shared purpose (why this church exists)

- ◆ *To love and serve God and the neighbor*
- ◆ *To love God, love and serve others, grow spiritually and share the good news of Jesus*
- ◆ *To live out God’s grace and love in a broken world*

### Our vision (the long-term aspirational end or change we want to see)

- ◆ *A church united in God’s mission joyfully living the realities of Jesus*
- ◆ *A church together, proclaiming Jesus Christ and sharing God’s love*
- ◆ *A world that knows Jesus and has found peace, reconciliation and justice*

### ELCA values

Some of the ELCA characteristics identified through Called Forward Together in Christ take the form of core values or commitments that derive from the Scriptures and Lutheran theology but also say something important about the ELCA’s character and conduct as a church. As a starting point, the values below were expressed often and widely.

- ◆ Inclusion and diversity
- ◆ Dignity and compassion
- ◆ Forgiveness and reconciliation
- ◆ Courage and adaptability
- ◆ Mutuality in relationships
- ◆ Careful stewardship of God’s gifts

### Your feedback

- ◆ Let us know your thoughts on a purpose and vision statement – flag those you like from the ideas above or propose others that will help us find the powerful words we are looking for.
- ◆ Are the values identified above right for the ELCA of the future? Are there other values that guide your congregation, synod or agency that could be embraced by the ELCA as a whole?

## 5 FUTURE DIRECTIONS AND PRIORITIES

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### 5.1 KEY MESSAGES FROM ACROSS THIS CHURCH

The Called Forward Together in Christ conversations produced consistent findings about what is important going forward. In reviewing the discussion themes, the Future Directions Table observed that the emerging priorities were not new. Rather, they reinforce areas that have been seen to be important and invite the question whether the ELCA should be more determined to improve or strengthen its efforts in these areas and what this would require of different parts of this church. Below we reflect the messages heard. They are not intended to present a hierarchy of priorities.

#### A Christ-centered thriving church

Everyone wants a growing, thriving ELCA, and congregations are a key to this. However, it was also apparent from available ELCA data, discussions and surveys that the tide is not turning on declining membership. And there are likely to be myriad views about why this is. LIFT rightly focused on congregational renewal and mission planning, but, as pointed out earlier, this has not had a significant impact.

Participants in this process called for renewed emphasis and new approaches to evangelizing that share the good news of Jesus in ways that are meaningful in the context of people’s daily lives. They highlighted the importance of equipping people – members and leaders – to speak about faith in daily life with non-Lutherans. And there were calls for honest reflection on the success or otherwise of strategies directed at congregational renewal and new starts.

The conversations remind us that evangelism starts with reaching out and inviting people to Jesus in neighborhoods, workplaces and community settings. It is about taking risks and leaving the comfort zone of being with “people like us.” And it may require different approaches depending whom you are inviting. Consistently, we heard younger adults are likely to connect with the ELCA’s service and witness in the world and the gift and power of Lutheran grace theology. Pastors and clergy generally want to raise the visibility of this church in their communities, and they look to the churchwide organization to do the marketing and branding for the whole church, like the Methodists and Roman Catholics.

The world needs the gospel rightly proclaimed. Lutherans are not solely or exclusively responsible, but they have a special and significant role to play alongside other Christians. Lutherans speak for the “overwhelming goodness of God.” Some say that Lutherans have been quiet stewards of this gift – that Lutherans in the U.S. have been largely on the sidelines and they have kept to themselves.<sup>8</sup> This was reflected in the conversations as a call for the ELCA to be a more public church, out there in communities and the world spreading the gospel, proclaiming the good news and bringing people to Jesus.

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<sup>8</sup> One important exception is the network of social service agencies built by Lutherans. Lutheran Social Services in America represents more than 300 health and human services organizations that reach 6 million people annually, touching the lives of 1 in 50 people in the U.S. each year.

## Word and sacraments

This church is “committed to worship God in the proclamation of the Word and administration of the sacraments and through lives of prayer, praise, thanksgiving, witness and service.” (The Use of the Means of Grace, p. 8) Called Forward Together in Christ findings reaffirm this commitment. We want our congregations to be places of welcome to all people to encounter God’s word and the sacraments. These gifts from God are how God’s grace is present with communities of faith in tangible ways. This church is diverse in how congregations worship and receive these gifts. As we reach out to the world around us, we have a strong foundation on which to build new relationships and share God’s love.

## An inclusive and diverse church

Inclusion and diversity are considered to be of utmost importance – because of the ELCA’s theology and beliefs and for future sustainability of this church. In the context of Called Forward Together in Christ, two areas received more attention than others – becoming a multicultural church and generational diversity.

The Future Directions Table, Conference of Bishops and Church Council see the need for a broad definition of diversity that includes ethnicity and culture, age, socio-economic class, sexual orientation and household/family structures. Differentiated strategies will be needed to live into inclusion and diversity across these very different dimensions.

In this process we heard that being inclusive means the ELCA offering a radical welcome to all God’s children and unconditionally accepting and including them in the life of this church. It is about ELCA congregations and worship communities understanding and reaching out to people in their neighborhoods, inviting them in and listening to what they are seeking in their faith journey and from this church. Many spoke of a shift from welcome to genuine inclusion, meaning congregations show an openness to adjusting the way they have traditionally done things so people feel they too can be part of the worship community.

Like society and other churches, the ELCA reflects a range of values and views, from conservative to more progressive. Many would like to see the ELCA be more public about the beliefs it holds on racism, violence and the causes and costs of social and economic exclusion, believing that if it were more public it would have the effect of drawing a more diverse following. For some, calling out racism and discrimination in all forms is an integral part of becoming a multicultural church.

One big question raised through Called Forward Together in Christ is why the profile of the ELCA is not changing despite it having been a goal for some time. The response must examine who owns this goal, and who does not. Research undertaken by the churchwide organization’s research and evaluation section finds many congregations are content with the way things are and fearful of how change might impact their members. Others are concerned and committed but not sure how to achieve the change or feel they do not have the resources to make things happen. And there are a growing number of leaders and members who are frustrated and fear the ELCA will remain a white church for the few.

Many suggested the ELCA needs to promote what’s working in a more strategic and concerted way, develop and try new strategies and accept that some congregations may not come on board. An important foundation for becoming a more diverse church is a leadership profile that mirrors the diversity of communities and having leaders who are competent to serve in an inclusive church.

## Leaders and leadership development

Leaders and leadership development was rated one of the highest priorities in Called Forward Together forums and discussions. There was concern about low morale among clergy and a gap in aspiration between lay leaders and pastors. Having a church leadership that is fit for the future is foundational to

other emerging priorities: growth through evangelism, inclusion and diversity, faith formation and discipleship, and being a church that engages and serves people who are suffering in the U.S. and around the world. There is strong agreement about what is needed but less clarity about how to get there.

*Leaders equipped to lead the church of tomorrow* – This church needs leaders who are passionate about Christ, spiritually grounded, theologically fluent, ecumenically committed and growing in their capacities to lead in a complex world. At the same time, the ELCA needs leaders who are ready for different ministries and better matched to areas of ministry needed by this church. To achieve this, bishops may need greater freedom to empower lay leaders, create bi-vocational pathways and develop other forms of leadership to fit their contexts.

Leaders for tomorrow will need a more mixed education – with a strong theological and vocational orientation and knowledge and skills relevant to different contexts. The rapidly changing world requires church leaders who are compassionate, adaptable, courageous, committed evangelists with strong relationship and communication skills and cross-cultural competence. Future leaders must be able to explain theologically and practically who we are as a Lutheran church and why we do what we do.

*Education and formation of leaders* – The ELCA needs to invest more in recruiting, educating, supporting and retaining ordained and lay leaders to serve across the church. Conversations and meetings identified the Theological Education Advisory Committee as important work that is in the right direction. The following messages were persistent:

- theological education is bigger than seminary education;
- strengthen programs of vocational discernment and formation especially in colleges and provide different vocational pathways;
- increase our commitment to welcoming and forming lay leaders;
- actively encourage and support young adult lay leaders;
- provide better financial support for students and address the debt load of first-call pastors;
- help leaders understand and adopt new leadership models and cultures; and
- support lifelong learning and make continuing education a requirement of roster status.

*A diverse leader profile* – The ELCA should be more intentional in recruiting leaders that reflect the context and demography of different communities and the church the ELCA wants to become. Concerns were raised about pigeon holing “ethnic” leaders and setting pastors up to fail through placement in congregations they are not well-equipped to serve.

*Collaborative and accountable leaders* – The ELCA needs a collaborative and relational model of leadership through which leaders exercise shared responsibility. We need leaders equipped to work and serve together, who understand their accountability is to the gospel, which means, in turn, accountability to those we serve, to our ecclesial structures and our partnerships in ministry.

### **A church serving people affected by hunger, poverty, disasters, conflict and violence**

Discussions, without exception, gave very high importance to the ELCA’s service and advocacy to alleviate poverty and work for justice, peace and reconciliation in local communities and nationally and globally.

This covers a very broad sweep of ministries and activities, and it is one area that connects the ELCA as church together in God’s mission. Mentioned as past achievements and important for the ELCA’s unfolding future were: ministry as part of daily life, service in local communities, social service ministries

in the U.S., the ELCA's hunger and malaria campaigns, responding to disasters and humanitarian crises, calling out racism and violence, and building bridges for peace and reconciliation with our ecumenical and interfaith partners.

In the current national and global context, there were calls for the ELCA to be a source of light and hope in a fearful, hostile world and play a more visible advocacy role on behalf of vulnerable and marginalized people, including immigrants and other people experiencing discrimination.

### **Faith formation and discipleship**

Faith formation from birth and over the life cycle was emphasized, as was a focus on discipleship training and support. A "back to basics" call was expressed in relation to faith formation, discipleship and developing Christian communities. A focus on faith formation and discipleship means always considering why we do what we do as a church. As people of faith, we want to be able to share our witness with others as well as deepen our own understanding of what it means to follow Jesus today. This church should continue to focus on deepening individual faith, spiritual practices, prayer, worship and service. Faith formation and discipleship are also core to who we are as church together. Biblical and theological literacy are seen to be extremely important, as is becoming conversant with the gospel and its meaning in daily life.

### **Youth and young adults**

Youth and young adults were identified as important in all of the priority areas identified so far – in current and future leadership, for revitalization of congregations – because there is no future without young people joining the ELCA and because young adult ministries are currently highly valued and have a positive impact in U.S. communities and in other countries. This includes the ELCA Youth Gathering, Young Adults in Global Mission, Youth Mentors, colleges and universities, and outdoor and campus ministries, to name but a few.

Younger people contributing to Called Forward Together in Christ pointed to a gap between intentions and progress being made. The ELCA wants to be a church that younger people are drawn to – as disciples and leaders – but congregations and ministries may not be experienced as welcoming or relevant in their daily lives. There is some evidence that young people of today are less likely to come to this church through family as they may have in the past. They will connect via multiple pathways as they search for meaning, spirituality and ways to make a difference in their world. College is a critical time both for young adults born into this denomination and for young people who have not been part of a church. It offers space for reflection, making choices about churches that fit their values and otherwise seeking spiritual meaning in their lives.

The ELCA's previous research and Called Forward Together in Christ suggest young adults want the ELCA to be a publicly engaged church that is concerned about justice in the world. A further message was that the ELCA needs to tell its story and the story of Lutheran theology better to reach a broader and more diverse audience.

Young adults are generally more mobile than their parents and have high demands on their time and finances. As they juggle the demands of work, education or (for some) unemployment, they will look for and value flexibility in the ways they can connect to church and participate in worship and ministry.

There were also calls for a renewed emphasis on children and young families in the way the ELCA spreads the gospel, provides biblical foundations and builds awareness of God's presence in their daily lives.

## Church structures and relationships

Called Forward Together in Christ invited reflection on whether the current structures of the ELCA are right for the future, as did the LIFT Taskforce. This question was discussed in a direct way by the Conference of Bishops and the Church Council and was explored in a range of other conversations and through the survey of lay and rostered leaders. The messages here were mixed, but some important themes did surface.

Connectivity across expressions of the ELCA has been a persistent theme in discussions. Congregations, synods and the churchwide organization all feel cut off from each other.

Many see the current structure as cumbersome and not geared to achieving a growing, courageous and agile church. The church polity is also seen to be challenging, and some would say the current mix of autonomy and interdependence is not serving this church well. Decision making is slow, communication and information sharing can be challenging, and the lack of formal lines of authority means reform of the ELCA is difficult to mobilize.

Recognizing that it is hard to conceive of this church without congregations, synods and some form of churchwide or national office, some see value in revisiting where roles and responsibilities sit and how resources might be better aligned to these roles. Revisiting the roles, number, boundaries and resourcing of synods was one area specifically identified, including at the Conference of Bishops meeting. However, there is no strategic framework at present to guide such a review. And the autonomy of synods means if individual reforms proceed they may not serve the interests of this church as a whole as well as they could if the reform were coordinated.

The survey of lay and rostered leaders confirms other research that shows the churchwide organization is not well understood by congregations. Its role in relation to campaigns for hunger, disasters and malaria is known, as is its role in some ministries (e.g. Global Mission and young adults) and supporting churchwide governance. However, other roles are less visible or known, and it appears the churchwide organization is perceived by congregations to have more authority than it actually has.

Many congregations are asking for more support and resources to make the changes expected by the wider church (diversity, growth, responding to needs in their communities). There continues to be an expectation from congregations that the churchwide organization should provide the resources and materials needed to support evangelism, faith formation and worship. In the current structure, this is the responsibility of the publishing house of the ELCA, Augsburg Fortress, (now known as 1517 Media). But perceptions are everything, and this leaves congregations feeling the churchwide organization is not serving them as well as it should.

Other messages were:

- The traditional “geographic” structure of congregations may not be right for the future (church and worship need to take new forms).
- Networks are critical to the ongoing life and work of the church (some would say as important as the formal expressions and institutions).
- Defining three expressions ignores the importance of the household and the significant role and contribution of other parts of the ELCA, which have been thought of as the “wider ecology.”
- The Church Council, the Conference of Bishops and leaders in the churchwide organization need processes that support joint leadership and common direction on important matters.

Structure, of course, is not the whole story. Most conversations emphasized the importance of relationships, connectivity, collaborative leadership, effective communication and clear vision as drivers

for the ELCA becoming the church it seeks to be and overcoming the challenges detailed earlier in this paper.

### Stewardship of resources

Declining Mission Support and the implications of this for congregations, synods, the churchwide organization and ELCA ministries has been a concern and the subject of strategic work over many years. In 2012, a Mission Funding Taskforce prepared a report and proposal for the Conference of Bishops that was not endorsed. The task force decided not to forward the proposal to the Church Council. It reported to the November 2012 Church Council meeting that the current Mission Support system remained in effect. In 2014, a Bishop's Think Tank on Mission Funding was appointed. The think tank reported to the ELCA Church at its April 2015 meeting. Key items approved by the Church Council include:

- affirming the presiding bishop's intent to convene a team to generate recommendations to sharpen this church's priorities (Called Forward Together in Christ and the Future Directions Table are the implementation of this item.);
- replacing the present reporting form of synodical Mission Support;
- developing a contextually sensitive Mission Support consultation process;
- assessing staffing needs for the Mission Support function in the churchwide organization;
- endorsing multiple streams of income as sources for Mission Support;
- assessing current and prospective resources to assist congregations and synods in the Mission Support consultation process; and
- affirming a three-year Mission Support experiment for five synods beginning in 2016.

Called Forward Together in Christ again highlighted concerns about a declining funding base and the proportion of resources tied up in property and other assets. Sustainability of the ELCA is a far broader concept than financial resources and capital assets. However, the fact that there is no long-term whole-church strategy to manage how Mission Support is increased and distributed in line with the roles and expectations of congregations, synods and the churchwide organization and church priorities is of concern. Many feel a new approach is needed – that it may be time to reassess the longstanding nexus between membership and the Mission Support funding model that has operated. Coming up with a new strategy in this area may be one of the greatest challenges for church leaders who, as is to be expected, see they have a duty to protect and look after their constituencies.

## 5.2 LIVING IN THE TENSIONS

Lutherans are comfortable living with ambiguity and uncertainty. This is a strength when it comes to being church in an increasingly complex world. The Called Forward Together in Christ conversations highlighted some specific tensions about “how” this church achieves change and moves forward together.

- ◆ We want to thrive and grow, and congregations are central in this. Yet we do not know how to achieve this, and it is not clear where the leadership and resources will come from to make it happen.
- ◆ Many people fear that too much evangelizing or evangelizing in new ways will compromise who we are by engaging the wrong folk – the spiritual-but-not-religious. In general, there is both fear of change and fear of the consequences of NOT changing.
- ◆ We are a church with rich traditions and a church being made new every day. We seek to be a broad church, and some would like to see the ELCA become a progressive religious alternative to evangelical conservative Christianity. Yet this view is not shared by a significant number of our congregations.
- ◆ We have a precious gift in the eyes of younger people who are part of the ELCA, yet we struggle to attract young people. How can we be seen as more relevant and responsive to their hopes and needs?

- ◆ Are we “one church” or a church with many separated parts? How we do get the right balance between autonomy, interdependence and being church together? Is it clear what authority and decisions rest with our leadership tables and governing structures, and are they willing to come together around some whole-church priorities?
- ◆ Finally, there are important choices to make: Church leaders must come together to forge the future path God is calling us to, knowing there will be supporters, detractors and others who choose to stay on the sidelines. Is this what being a bold or courageous church means? The Future Directions Table was keen to see that living with tension does not become an excuse for not making hard decisions.

### 5.3 TESTING THE WATER ON EMERGING PRIORITIES

In this section we propose priorities that appear to have broad support across this church as a basis for further work on a Future Directions Statement. These are very much based on the feedback from conversations and the structured discussions at recent meetings of the ELCA Church Council and the Conference of Bishops, which were well aligned on the issues explored and conclusions reached. The priorities are identified under three headings: *The church the ELCA is becoming, our most important ministries, and church leadership and sustainability.*

Without strategies these priorities will be hollow – on the other hand you can’t develop strategies until you decide what you want to achieve and what is most important. In reviewing these priorities, trust that a body of work will follow on HOW we move them forward.

#### Proposed priorities for the ELCA to 2021

##### The church ELCA is becoming

- ◆ The ELCA is growing, thriving and more connected across the U.S. and the Caribbean.
- ◆ We are an inclusive church that reflects the diversity in U.S. society today.
- ◆ We are a visible church deeply engaged in public witness and service for the sake of justice, peace and reconciliation in the U.S. and the world.

##### Our most important ministries

- ◆ Worship, word and sacraments
- ◆ Faith formation and discipleship
- ◆ Formation, education and development of lay, lay rostered and ordained leaders
- ◆ Youth and young adults
- ◆ Domestic and global ministries addressing poverty, inequality, disasters, violence and peace building

##### Church leadership and sustainability

- ◆ Relationships among leaders of this church are deepened, and the ELCA’s governing bodies provide visionary and collaborative leadership in the interests of the whole church.
- ◆ Resources for mission are growing and distributed in line with future roles and expectations of congregations, synods and churchwide ministries and within a framework of priorities for the whole church.

## 5.4 IMPLEMENTING PRIORITIES ACROSS THIS CHURCH — WHAT WILL IT TAKE?

As stated earlier, these priorities may not look new. What is new is that we are going to ask the Church Council and Conference of Bishops to affirm some priorities for the whole church and take responsibility, with others, for working on the broad strategy in these areas.

The big challenges and priorities articulated in this paper cannot be led or managed in a piecemeal way. Decision-making at different levels and in different institutions should be aligned in some way to the broader aspirations and goals of this church – to what God is calling the ELCA to be. In its second year, Called Forward Together in Christ can and should be a “call” to get behind the ELCA’s future directions as a Christ-centered, growing, joyful and sustainable church. And potentially, when the call to participate in problem solving and evolution of this church falls on deaf ears, should there be some accountability or consequence for those standing on the sidelines or those who block change.

When asked what it will take, the Church Council and Conference of Bishops identified these elements:

- ◆ commitment and ownership of the directions and priorities among the ELCA’s main leadership tables;
- ◆ building relationships and trust between ELCA leadership groups and structures, including those beyond the three expressions where they carry major responsibilities for the priorities identified (e.g. ELCA’s colleges and seminaries);
- ◆ a collaborative model of national, regional and local leadership with clearer delineation of roles in decision-making and strategy on behalf of this church;
- ◆ more gatherings and networks that bring people together for spiritual discernment, future planning, problem solving and learning exchange;
- ◆ a more diverse leadership fulfilling this church’s mission within the tension of legacy, evolution and innovation;
- ◆ making hard decisions, reducing practices directed at self-preservation and letting some things die – and putting resources where regeneration and renewal are likely or possible; and
- ◆ finding ways to recognize, celebrate and communicate where positive change happens.

### Your feedback

We welcome your feedback on the priorities proposed above and how the ELCA can effectively carry those priorities forward.

If we have got this right, they will be priorities that can inform and be reflected in congregational mission plans, synod strategic plans, churchwide organization plans and strategic plans of other institutions and ministries.

We want a Future Directions Statement that invites leaders across this church to join the effort that will be needed to achieve our shared goals.

If endorsed by the Church Council in November, serious consideration will be given to the implications of these priorities and to having implementation plans that clarify what needs to happen, who is responsible, what we will do less of and how we will measure progress.

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