

Report of the Director for Evangelical Mission (DEM)

I want to highlight three grant opportunities that have had significant impact on mission and ministry across the Upper Susquehanna Synod this past year.

CaSTLE Grant

The Upper Susquehanna Synod was the recipient of a \$20,000 subgrant through Wartburg Seminary's CaSTLE grant (through the Lilly Foundation). It is a one year grant available to us from July 2025-June 2026.

This grant was designed to equip current ALWLs/SAMs to use their role as liturgists and preachers to inspire the people in congregations to envision and live into mission beyond weekly worship time; to equip rostered leader mentors to guide and support them in this endeavor; and to develop lay leaders for alternative communities of faith.

Three congregations/parishes were identified as pilot groups to receive training and coaching. The kickoff event was a retreat at which Deacon Marsha Roscoe led in exploring how worship can be shaped intentionally to provide formation for mission. Coaching and online learning sessions provided additional support for this exploration. We will use the learnings from this exploration to consider what type of training will best equip people to plan and lead worship that shapes us for discipleship and mission. With fewer congregations served by a called pastor, this role of worship leader is a keystone for congregational vitality.

The CaSTLE grant also provided an opportunity to consider ways to reach people who are not found in traditional church settings, but nevertheless may be searching for communities of belonging, where they can experience acceptance and grace. The Catalyst community has brought together young adults, in person and virtually, for worship, fellowship, and service. It has sponsored monthly dinner church open to anyone, regardless of age. We are also exploring what a creation focused community might look like. Chad Hershberger, Pr. Jim Vitale, and Ali Wyland attended the Fresh Expressions Gathering in February to learn more about forming and developing leaders for alternative communities.

The grant expires at the end of June, but the learnings will continue to shape how we prepare for mission that is lay lead, clergy supported, and focused on drawing people together to experience and share the love of Christ.

Bold Ideas Grants

The Bold Ideas Grant was announced at synod assembly 2025. Congregations have the opportunity to apply for funds to support a bold idea for outreach. A grant review team of Sarah Bowers, Pr. Justin Lingenfelter, Karen Sigler, and the Director for Evangelical Mission review applications and award grants based on established criteria. To date, grants have been awarded to St. Michael, Cogan Station (to establish a food pantry); Susquehanna University Office of Spirituality and Meaning (community meals for summer residential students); Trinity, McClure (music outreach program); and Messiah, New Berlin (community women's outreach programs).

Future 2026 grant review tables will be in summer and fall. The grant application is on the synod website. Questions can be directed to sueellen.spotts@elca.org. The Bold Ideas fund is replenished solely by additional gifts from congregations or individuals. Giving to the Bold Ideas fund will make it possible for these grants to continue to be awarded.

Daily Bread Grants

Last fall, the ELCA World Hunger program invited congregations to apply for grants to support their feeding programs. In the previous year, 67 of these Daily Bread grants (\$500 each) were distributed. Knowing that needs had increased, the staff hoped to award three times that amount this year. They received 1000 requests! This was way beyond what had been budgeted. So, the staff set to work looking for ways to meet the need. They committed any underspent categories in program and operations to Daily Bread grants, curtailing travel and adjusting a video project. They made their annual planning retreat virtual so the funds for that could also be given for Daily Bread grants. Through these efforts, they were able to offer 670 grants. Twenty of those grants were received by feeding ministries in the Upper Susquehanna Synod.

Church budgets are mission statements. How we allocate the funds in our budget should amplify the words that form our mission statement. The way we spend our money should reflect the way we say we live out our faith. When we send some of our congregational offering for the work of the synod as mission support, it supports mission beyond what the congregation can do on its own. The synod, in turn, sends a portion of the mission support to the ELCA. Last year, the Upper Susquehanna Synod shared \$276,475 in Mission Support for ELCA churchwide ministries. This mission support comes back in part to support the mission of individuals and congregations in the Upper Susquehanna Synod.

In addition to the world hunger grants, our mission support makes it possible for the ELCA to

- Build Christian communities in the United States
- Grow the global Lutheran Church
- Strengthen and sustain the ministry of the whole church.

What does this look like? Among other things, it looks like discernment and educational opportunities for leaders (clergy and lay). It looks like a Youth Gathering open to all youth across the church. It looks like opportunities for students at Lutheran seminaries, colleges, and universities. It looks like our companion relationships with Ansbach/Würzburg Kirchenkreis and the Lutheran Church in Liberia. It looks like resources for faith development, discipleship, prayer, stewardship, and worship. It fosters our ecumenical partnerships through which we share pastors among denominations. And it looks like me—because DEMs are funded through the ELCA. It continues to be my joy to join the people of the Upper Susquehanna in its mission of supporting one another and serving God in the world.

In Christ,

Deacon Sue Ellen Spotts

Director for Evangelical Mission

Allegheny & Upper Susquehanna Synods