



What is the “Go Tell It IN the Mountains Initiative”?

Allegheny, Northwest Pennsylvania, and Upper Susquehanna Synods of the ELCA were blessed to receive a \$1.25 million grant from the Lilly Endowment. This generous gift launched our tri-synod initiative, Go Tell It IN the Mountains (GTIITM). These funds will support our work through December 31, 2029, helping us strengthen preaching and proclamation across our region.

There are 3 primary goals of the Go Tell It Initiative. We are committed to helping both clergy and lay preachers become even more compelling proclaimers of the Gospel. Through regularly scheduled in-person and Zoom-based training events, preachers have access to high-quality learning right here in our region. Second, we’re also focused on the future—actively recruiting and training new preachers. If you (or someone you know) is feeling a call to preach, we would love to walk with you! Simply contact the Synod Office, and we’ll share clear next steps and resources. Third, preaching doesn’t end on Sunday morning. We want every worshipper to hear, reflect on, and respond to the Gospel in daily life. Two excellent study resources we recommend are: *I Will* by Thom Rainer and *Listeners Dare* by Will Willimon. Perfect for personal reflection or group study!

The Go Tell It IN the Mountains Initiative thrives because of dedicated volunteers who generously share their time and talents. The initiative is guided by a Steering Committee, chaired by Bishop Emeritus Greg Pile, along with representatives from each synod and several active task forces. Together, we are working toward a bold goal: making compelling preaching our shared standard of excellence.

Go Tell It IN the Mountains has fully funded the curriculum for our three synods’ Summer Camps for 2026. In addition: A Bible for Every Child: Each camper will receive a Bible—what a gift!

Sponsored opportunities and events by the Go Tell It IN the Mountains Initiative include:

- Small Group Preachers Training Cohorts
- Authorized Lay Worship Leaders Fellowship Meetings:
- Preachers Training Event (August 9–13, 2026)
 - *Kindling Faith – Preaching the Paradox*
 - Receive \$100 off registration
- The Pastors Workshop
 - 100 Clergy/Lay Leaders received free access
- **Zeteo Lutheran Edition Search Engine**—our Bishops and Steering Committee thoughtfully curated Lutheran-specific resource content designed to support you in the daily work of ministry
 - Zeteo Lutheran Edition brings trusted, topic-specific Lutheran resources together in one easy place, saving you time and frustration. Whether you’re refreshing a passage, finding a verse, adapting content for your congregation, or juggling a packed week, Zeteo offers reliable, accessible support. Our hope is that it

strengthens worship planning, lightens sermon prep, and supports your ongoing learning and leadership.

- FREE to all via the GTIITM website

For full details, questions, or to stay up to date with GTIITM news and events, reach out to:

Rev. John Kratz
Director, Go Tell It IN the Mountains Initiative
Director@alleghenysynod.com

We'd love to connect with you—come be part of what God is doing **IN the Mountains!**

This report was provided to the Lilly Endowment in March 2026 as an annual requirement of reporting relating to the Go Tell It IN The Mountains Initiative. Attached to this report was the full GTIITM financial report. This narrative summary is shared with Synod Assembly to enhance our open communications between the Initiative and our synods.

Goal 1: Ordained and lay preachers will be equipped to utilize traditional and non-traditional techniques including different modes of delivery to develop skills and practices that will communicate the Gospel message in more compelling ways.

ACTIVITIES

- 1) A large group format preaching cohort was established. Through zoom, Rev. Dilip Abayasekara has moved through the basics of compelling preaching and actively is working on using “brain mapping” as a tool to enhance preaching. This group meets one time per month for 10 sessions in one year. They have homework assignments each month to prepare for the next session. Slides of Rev. Abayasekara’s presentation are shared with the group following each session.
- 2) Seven small group format cohorts (8 people or less) are meeting on a monthly basis. Each cohort coach was specifically selected by their respective bishop and trained by Dilip Abayasekara. Each group has autonomy as to their studies. Each group meets once per month, reviews educational resources and has sermon evaluation built into their time together.
- 3) All three synods now have active Authorized Lay Ministry preaching options, a unified curriculum for training, an active synod supportive structure, and recurring meetings

for training throughout the year. We are working on creating a common language model to use when referencing our ALWL ministries throughout our tri-synod area.

- 4) Our three bishops began newly recurring meetings to discuss common challenges among the rostered leaders in our region. In order for our rostered leaders to be open to adaptation, change, and growth, their emotional stressors, work and family life issues, and isolationism need to be addressed. We have approximately 89 active (non-retired) rostered leaders in our tri-synod area which gives a larger pool to work with as a group.
- 5) The Festival of Homiletics for 2025 was a major resource for clergy and lay training in the art of preaching. We organized groups of lay and clergy preachers to meet together for fellowship and the Festival of Homiletics training. In one setting this was so well received that they continued meeting from that point forward. This in turn led that group to do a “pulpit swap” in order to understand and support each other’s context for preaching.
- 6) With the cancellation of the 2026 Festival of Homiletics, the Go Tell It IN the Mountains Initiative encouraged the support of an alternative preaching festival. The Go Tell It Initiative is now a sponsor of the Kindling Faith Ministry of United Lutheran Seminary August 2026 Preaching Festival. All lay and clergy of the tri-synod area receive a \$100 discount on their registration for this event.
- 7) Kindling Faith of United Lutheran Seminary has also been contracted to host three preaching specific training options in our region based on our preachers’ stated needs. These preaching focused events occur within an appropriate structure of our synods so as to not overlap with holy days, convocation days or synod assembly dates.
- 8) In coordination with Zeteo, we reviewed all search options and created a “Zeteo: Lutheran Edition”. This online search engine helps our lay and clergy know that their search generates trusted sources for their sermon preparation. The link for this search engine has been placed onto our Go Tell It IN The Mountains website.
- 9) The Curriculum Task Force has been analyzing existing podcast and online tools to aid in sermon preparation.
- 10) The Pastors Workshop has been identified as an existing excellent resource to aid in sermon and worship preparation. We are negotiating a contract to make this available to all of our rostered leaders and many lay preachers free of charge.
- 11) Sundays and Seasons has been identified as a worship preparation tool. A few micro-grants were provided to new lay preachers to aid in their start up. Some congregations have now purchased this product in support of their local lay preacher.

12) An Upper Susquehanna Synod based zoom weekly pericope study has been affirmed and shared among all three synods for clergy and laity to have access to this locally managed, thoroughly Lutheran, reliable pericope study.

13) A contract was arranged with Rev. Dr. Allison DeForest of United Lutheran Seminary. She provides on site (Hollidaysburg area) quarterly pericope studies for all clergy and lay preachers.

LEADERS:

Rev. Dilip Abayasekara moderates our large group preaching cohort.

Seven trained coaches care for our small group preaching cohorts. They are Rev. David Bowman, Rev. Shawn Clerkin, Rev. Regina Holliday, Rev. Julianna Holm, Rev. David Pencek, Rev. Gary Schaeffer, and Rev. Jim Vitale.

Bishops Shock, Papsen, and Miller are all active in our Steering Committee and the link between the Initiative and their respective Synod Councils.

Bishop Emeritus Greg Pile chairs the Steering Committee.

Rev. John Kratz is the Director of the Initiative and the one generating this report.

COMMUNICATIONS:

Written and verbal program reports are provided by the initiative Director to the Steering Committee each time that they meet (about 10 times per year).

Financial reports suitable for distribution to all three synods are generated quarterly and upon request.

In preparation for the Steering Committee meetings, Bishop Pile and Director Kratz meet to review each of the Initiative goals and progress/ideas for those goals.

An Administrative Assistant position has been created and approved by the Steering Committee. This person's responsibilities will focus heavily on communications.

A contract with Braden Social has been engaged. They handle all our social media campaigns and all our promotional work.

IMPACT:

We have seen significant relationships formed among clergy and lay preachers who attended our joint gatherings for the Festival of Homiletics. This mixed group continued to meet under its own initiative and proceeded to have a "pulpit exchange" event in their area.

Over 60 lay and clergy preachers are actively engaged in cohorts generated through this Initiative.

We have seen Laity from all three synods actively engaging in all of the resources we have produced. There is a great desire for time-saving, reliable, common language resources. Each synod lay preachers have overwhelmingly engaged in this journey.

Rostered Leaders (clergy) have had mixed reactions. We have multiple reports of appreciation for all the resources generated. Our challenge is to overcome the stigma of "I

am not good enough” or “they are trying to fix me” thoughts among some clergy. So, there are clergy who have not participated in this journey. We are aware of this challenge and actively working to address it.

Goal 2: Aspiring preachers will be recruited and engaged in a variety of compelling preaching strategies that educate, empower, and support competency in their ministry.

- 1) Since the formation of an agreed upon 10 course training for Authorized Lay Worship Leaders, we entered into a contract with Faith+Lead of Luther Seminary. The 10 courses, and many others, have been made available to all of our Lay Worship Leaders for enter into the program and to meet their continuing education requirements. To date we have had over 24 laity utilize this free resource. We added in 2025 15 new laity into the Authorized Lay Worship Leader training program. In 2025 two laity completed their training and were added to the Authorized Lay Worship Leader list. In a surprise addition, two non-Lutheran clergy who are serving Lutheran congregations were added into that resource. This will allow them to take courses to help understand our Lutheran heritage, terminology, and theology.
- 2) Since the establishment of the unified Authorized Lay Worship Leader training, the Northwest PA and Allegheny synods have entered into a memorandum of understanding which allows lay preachers to cross synod borders in utilization of their preaching gifts.
- 3) We entered a contract with United Lutheran Seminary to organize 3 times per year training events specifically focused on preaching and specifically focused on time frames that suit lay schedules (weekends and weeknights are our preferences).
- 4) An evening-based pericope study was made available to all laity within all three synods. The quarterly pericope training with Dr. Allison DeForest is held during weekday hours and works for our retired laity, but we needed an option for our working laity.
- 5) An online tool to connect authorized lay worship leaders and retired preachers to congregations has been developed. This “Preachers to Pulpits” online tool will become an app once the beta test is done. This tool will have training in January 2026 with a launch date of March 1 2026. A lay person was recruited to oversee this app management.
- 6) All three synods reinvigorated or restarted their Lay Worship Leader fellowship and training programs. Allegheny Synod formed a Lay Ministry Task Force and created an operations manual for Authorized Lay Worship Leaders. They also transitioned to Lay leadership of their quarterly fellowship and training events. Northwest PA identified a

person within the synod office to reinvigorate their lay preacher fellowship and training. The Upper Susquehanna Synod offered its Lay Ministry Institute program guide as a model for the other synods to mirror.

LEADERS

Rev. Karla Leiby of Upper Susquehanna Synod, Rev. Sandra Jones of Northwest PA synod, and Gary Mickle and Spence Garvin of Allegheny Synod are leaders of the Authorized Lay Worship Leader ministries.

Faithnetwork is the contracted agent for developing the Preachers to Pulpits online scheduling tool.

Rev. Dr. Allison DeForest is the quarterly Pericope Study leader.

COMMUNICATIONS

Each synod has updated their Authorized Lay Worship Leader contact information and email distribution platforms. The Initiative uses those platforms through the respective synod staff to promote all training, cohort, and fellowship options.

An email distribution list has been created for the Go Tell It IN The Mountains Initiative covering all three synods. Many of their lay preachers and laity within congregations have engaged in this tool.

A wide-ranging social media platform and social media publicity has begun through our contract with Braden Social. All our preacher training options are highlighted through these social media tools.

IMPACT

Seventeen lay people are newly enrolled into the ALWL training program and have begun the process toward lay preaching authorization.

Each synod office now has an active lay preaching component and emphasis throughout their region. The Go Tell It IN the Mountains Initiative Director has regularly attended (most are held monthly) synod staff meetings relating to lay preachers and clergy needs. There is direct communication from the Initiative direct to lay and clergy preachers due to this relationship.

Goal 3: Existing members of congregations and new community audiences within our 3 Lutheran partner synods will respond to compelling preaching opportunities and content by integrating the gospel message into their attitudes, actions and ministries in daily life.

- 1) Provided free to every congregation in our tri-synod region is the “Mission Insite” online demographic analysis tool. In 2025, we hired a person to run a 3-mile demographic

analysis of every congregation. Each congregation received through USPS mail their specific analysis. They also received information on how to access the Mission Insite online database for more intensive or refined searches. Each synod Director of Evangelism and Mission received a digital copy of these analyses for their entire synod.

- 2) Each congregation received direct mail from their respective synod and the Go Tell It IN The Mountains Initiative. This included posters for display within congregations, flyers relating to the Authorized Lay Worship Leader free online training, and synod specific communications information.
- 3) Each congregation received a printed newsletter highlighting the Go Tell It IN The Mountains Initiative goals, resources, and connection opportunities.
- 4) Three Pilot Sites have been identified, and engagement has begun directly working on the “Listening” component of the Initiative. Each of the Pilot Sites’ leadership has been provided the “I Will” by Thom Rainer book for mutual review. Each congregation provides quarterly reports and findings related to that study.
- 5) “Ready for Worship” one-minute videos have been created by clergy within our three synods. These daily 90 second videos are reflections on the upcoming Sunday texts. These provide an opportunity for all lay people to reflect on the upcoming texts and come ready to hear the gospel. Since its inception, the number of full watch and likes has steadily increased.
- 6) Plans for a Go Tell It IN The Mountains Sunday have been drafted. The proposed Sunday is the first Sunday of February each year. A draft script will be given to all pulpit supply, Synod Authorized ministers, Authorized Lay Worship Leaders and clergy to connect each congregation into the resources of the Initiative.
- 7) Two book resources have been encouraged to all congregations for review. “I Will” by Thom Rainer and “Listeners Dare” by Will Willimon have been identified as helping congregants come ready to hear the gospel. The Steering Committee has been reviewing the “Listeners Dare” book at their meetings.
- 8) Go Tell IT IN The Mountains was provided time during each Synod Assembly to share and table display space at each assembly site.
- 9) Surveys were conducted relating to preacher needs throughout the tri-synod area. Over 70% of rostered leaders completed their survey, over 50% of Lay Worship Leaders completed their survey. Survey results were shared with each Task Force and the Steering Committee to aid in planning and implementation of our goals.

LEADERS

The three Pilot Sites are Faith Lutheran in Erie PA, 1st Lutheran in Warren PA, and Zion Lutheran in Williamsburg PA.

Faithnetwork is our website designer.

Braden Social is our Social Media coordinator.

COMMUNICATIONS

An all-congregation USPS mailing was completed in 2025. We discovered some congregations location mailing addresses were no longer used. Records were updated to get current USPS information for all congregations to their synod offices. (Our goal is to do this USPS mailing twice in 2026.)

All three synods have identified and engaged their synod communications worker into the Go Tell It IN The Mountains Communication Team.

IMPACT

Ready for Sunday videos views and likes have steadily increased.

Our primary video about the Initiative has had over 13,000 full views since its release.

Multiple smaller congregations have expressed appreciation for the direct mail.

Multiple congregations have engaged in reviewing the I Will or Listeners Dare books.

2024 Discoveries that impacted 2025 projects:

In 2024, we discovered that there is a wide variety and too numerous to count digital resources related to preaching content. Our 2025 response was to spend significant time on the creation of “Zeteo: Lutheran Edition” to help reduce that challenge for our preachers. This tool allows them time saving, trusted resources at their fingertips.

In 2024, we discovered there is an air of scarcity which flows through our congregations and synods. In 2025, we worked diligently to use our group purchasing power to provide free or significantly reduced cost resources to our preachers and congregations. This ranged from buying 10 “I Will” books for a smaller congregation to review to seeking a contract with The Pastors Workshop to provide this resource free of charge to all our clergy.

OTHER:

Discussions are underway about having an in-person meeting of all the Steering Committee and Task Forces in 2026 to review our mid-point effectiveness and vision work.

New Task Forces specifically on Listening and Sustainability are being created and should begin in 2026.

The hiring process for an Administrative Assistant has begun. This person should be hired early 2026.

We celebrate that the co-payment goal of \$121,000.00 has been achieved for the Initiative. All future revenue has been dedicated by the Steering Committee and tri-synod bishops to be used for the perpetuation of the Initiative beyond our grant end date of 12/31/29.

Though 2 of our 3 synods experienced bishop turnover in 2025, we continue to have strong cooperation and communication among all three synods.

Conversations have begun with the West Virginia/Western Maryland Synod ELCA for inclusion into the Go Tell It IN The Mountains Initiative. Their demographics, ethos, and connections to the tri-synod are all affirmations that this would be a helpful addition

All 89 Goal Specific steps are reviewed annually by the Steering Committee to maintain course and intentional focus on the Initiative direction.