

## **Report of the Synod Structure Taskforce**

### **Summary:**

The Upper Susquehanna Synod Structure Taskforce was established following a 2025 Synod Assembly resolution directing the Office of the Bishop and Synod Council to explore restructuring or merging with neighboring Pennsylvania synods. Meeting five times between February and May 2026, the Taskforce examined the Synod's finances, roster trends, and organizational strengths, finding that declining congregations and reduced giving are projected to deplete financial reserves by 2030. The Taskforce identified strengths in rostered leader collegiality, the Lay Ministry Institute, and Camp Mount Luther, while noting that nearly half of rostered leaders serve multiple congregations. The Taskforce has initiated contact with neighboring synods and plans to gather input from rostered leaders, congregational presidents, and lay leaders. A formal recommendation will be brought to the 2027 Synod Assembly.

### **2025 Synod Assembly Resolution:**

At the Upper Susquehanna Synod's 2025 Synod Assembly the Assembly adopted a memorial with the following calls to action;

*“RESOLVED that the Office of the Bishop and synod council members begin exploring the possibility of restructuring or combining existing synods in Pennsylvania, in consultation with affected leaders and congregations, to create a new synod structure to carry on the mission of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America [...]”.*

*RESOLVED that updates regarding this resolution should be reported to the congregations in September and any actions regarding this resolution should be reported during future Synod Assemblies of the Upper Susquehanna Synod.”*

In so doing, the Assembly made the following observations:

*“Whereas the number of congregations of the Upper Susquehanna Synod continues to decline; and,*

*Whereas the remaining congregations of the Upper Susquehanna Synod struggle to financially support the mission of the synod; and,*

*Whereas we are called to be responsible for the resources God gives us and to be good stewards of all those gifts, financial and otherwise; and*

*Whereas we are called to share the abundant gifts of God to follow Jesus into the world to share the Good News and care for those most in need; and*

*Whereas we can accomplish this mission more effectively together; [...]”*

The Assembly also reminded us of the following procedural matters:

*“Whereas the boundaries and names of synods are determined by the constitution of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA Bylaws and Continuing Resolutions 10.01.01). and,*

*Whereas, “Any synod contemplating amending articles of incorporation or undertaking other fundamental changes such as dissolution, merger, partition into multiple synods, creating a new synod corporation, incorporating in another jurisdiction, or any similar or related action, especially those that may affect relationships with other expressions of this church, must first consult with the Office of the Presiding Bishop, the Office of the Secretary, and with the bishops of any synods affected before seeking ratification by the Church Council. “(ELCA BCR 10.11.01); [...]”*

### **Call to Action:**

*“RESOLVED that the Office of the Bishop and synod council members begin exploring the possibility of restructuring or combining existing synods in Pennsylvania, in consultation with affected leaders and congregations, to create a new synod structure to carry on the mission of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America[...].”*

The Synod Council appointed members to the Synod Structure Taskforce (the “Taskforce”) following discussion by the whole Synod Council regarding the makeup of the group. The Council appointed the following individuals to the Taskforce: Bp. Craig Miller, Robin Callahan, The Table, Bloomsburg; John Yingling, St. James, Rauchtown; Noah Roux, Zion, Turbotville; Cindy Bilger, Trinity, Cowan; Jeffrey Mensch, First, Mifflinburg; Chris Minnich, Zion, Sunbury; and Rev. Kenneth Longfield, Holy Communion, Yeagertown.

### **Summary of Activities:**

The Taskforce has met five (5) times beginning in February 2026. It has collaborated to identify and understand the Taskforce’s purpose, the Synod’s financials, Roster Trends, sense of place in the region, staffing needs, our Synod’s strengths, and weaknesses.

On February 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2026, we gathered for the first time, we made introductions, discussed our current Synod governing documents, the purpose of the Taskforce, and how the Taskforce would take on the issue presented to us by the Synod Assembly. We also discussed what information the taskforce believed was necessary for us to fully evaluate the Synods' present situation.

On February 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2026, we discussed the purpose of our existing synod structure.

The Taskforce members concurred that the purpose of the Church is the administration of the sacraments, the sharing of the Gospel, and ministry to the people of this Church and all people throughout the world in the name of Jesus Christ. In our synodical context, the Taskforce concluded that our purpose is to 1. Develop lay and rostered leadership to serve in the geographic region of the Upper Susquehanna Synod, 2. Develop relationships inside and outside of our synod, and 3. Participate in outreach and accompaniment with all of God’s people in the Upper Susquehanna Synod.

On March 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2026, we discussed the central role of the synod, the synod’s strengths and weaknesses, and considered a letter to be sent to our neighboring synodical leadership. We identified many strengths, including Camp Mount Luther, the Lay Ministry Institute, Administrative capabilities, and collegiality among rostered leaders.

A recurring theme has been the Synod's sense of place. While the Synod is defined by territorial boundaries, its ministry is not limited by them as its work extends through relationships, collaboration, and shared mission beyond geographic lines. There is a shared conviction that the Lutheran faith tradition offers meaningful gifts to the wider world and that these gifts are best expressed through active relationship building with others. The Church is more than Sunday morning worship; it is a network of relationships and ministries. The Synod functions as a unifying structure that enables the wider Church to be seen at work on and enables ministry in its congregations.

The Taskforce identified existing, strong collaborations, in a letter to share with our neighboring synodical leadership, which expressed our interest in expanding these collaborations and included:

“We currently participate in several collaborative ministries with our neighbors. We have a strong relationship with Camp Mount Luther located in western Union County, PA. We participate in the Go

Tell It IN the Mountains initiative to help promote our mission and strengthen and develop our Lay Ministry and congregational leaders with a broad spectrum of resources. We have several Reconciling In Christ communities. Finally, we are also beginning to participate in NE PA Synod's 6-2-6-1 initiative on the boundaries of our Synod. We would like to explore other collaborative opportunities to aid and foster the ministry of this Church.”

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*A Synod is something that brings us together, to see the Church at work at a larger scale and see God's love and grace at work in new contexts so that they may inspire our own lives and ministry.*

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The Letter was subsequently sent to our neighboring Synods on April 11<sup>th</sup>, 2026, the text of which can be found at the back of this report.

On April 27<sup>th</sup>, 2026, the Taskforce discussed how to effectively gather input from the Synod's constituents and agreed to reach out to all rostered leaders, congregational presidents, and leaders of other separately incorporated ministries to ensure all voices are heard. We also discussed how we propose communicating the challenges our Synod faces to our constituents. The Taskforce intends to create a Fact Sheet about the Synod to distribute to all congregations.

On May 26<sup>th</sup>, 2026, The Taskforce approved this Report and Survey Questions for the Assembly.

As the Taskforce has gathered, there has been a strong focus on our sense of place. We as a Synod are defined by territorial boundaries, but we are not limited to them in the actions we take. We believe that the Lutheran faith tradition has something to offer to others. We believe that we must foster relationships with others, and that the Church is more than Sunday mornings. A Synod is something that brings us together, to see the Church at work at a larger scale and see God's love and grace at work in new contexts so that they may inspire our own lives and ministry. We have great rostered leaders and good collegiality. Our Lay Ministry Institute is doing well and can be offered to more. Camp Mount Luther is a boon to the Synod and to raising up young leaders. Together, these strengths, our territory, our relationships, our leaders, and our ministries form the

foundation upon which the Synod and its congregations can grow, serve, and share the Gospel together.

**Observations:**

*“Whereas the number of congregations of the Upper Susquehanna Synod continues to decline; and, [...]*

The Taskforce reviewed our roster and can approximate the following numbers:

Total Congregations	112
Rostered leaders (Pastors/Deacons) 47 rostered leaders serve 97 congregations	93
	<b>Number of Rostered Leaders</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Serving one congregation -----</li> <li>• Serving two congregations-----</li> <li>• Serving three congregations -----</li> <li>• Serving four congregations -----</li> <li>• Serving five congregations-----</li> </ul>	20 11 3 4 1 (Deacon)
Congregations served by a called pastor (includes interim)	47
Rostered leaders Retired/Disabled/On leave Congregations served by retired rostered leaders	55 23
Synod Authorized Ministers (SAMs)	31
Congregations served by SAMs †	10
Congregations served by Full-Communion* ministers	8

† *Synod Authorized Ministers (also known as Lay Worship Leaders) serve at the direction of the bishop and have limited responsibilities according to context and abilities. Those indicated above include only SAMs who have responsibilities beyond worship leadership.*

\* *Full-Communion partners are those judicatories with which the ELCA has formal agreement to allow exchange of ministers: Episcopal Church USA, Presbyterian Church USA, Reformed Church in America, United Church of Christ, United Methodist Church, Moravian Church.*

The Synod is blessed with hardworking leaders. One of the key duties of the Synod is to focus on raising up and sending forth leaders to serve in its territory. Today, the Synod faces unprecedented challenges in pastoral coverage.

Many pastors serve multiple congregations, with approximately 48% of rostered leaders covering more than one congregation. Retired pastors continue to play a significant role, serving 23 congregations, or about 20% of the synod’s congregations. The synod also relies on Synodically

Authorized Ministers and Full Communion partner ministers, who together serve approximately 10% of congregations. This reflects increased use of cooperative and multi-point parish ministry.

*Whereas the remaining congregations of the Upper Susquehanna Synod struggle to financially support the mission of the synod; and,*

*Whereas we are called to be responsible for the resources God gives us and to be good stewards of all those gifts, financial and otherwise; and*

*Whereas we are called to share the abundant gifts of God to follow Jesus into the world to share the Good News and care for those most in need; and*

*Whereas we can accomplish this mission more effectively together; [...]"*

The Taskforce observes that, at current deficit spending levels, the Upper Susquehanna Synod can sustain these deficits only through 2029. By the beginning of fiscal year 2030, reserve balances are projected to be nearly depleted.

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*The Synod Council has presented this Assembly with deficit budgets for over ten years, balancing them on withdrawals from reserve funds.*

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The Synod contributes forty-one percent (41%) of its annual income in benevolence to the ELCA and provides discretionary benevolence to ministry partners throughout the synod. The remainder of the Synod's budget supports staff salaries and benefits, office operations, Synod Assembly, and other programmatic and administrative expenses. The Taskforce looked at our neighboring synods, and a list can be found at the back of this report. Synod staff in our region range from three (3) to nine (9) staff members, with the Upper Susquehanna Synod in the middle with six (6) to seven (7) staff members in recent years.

The Taskforce further observes that the Synod faces ongoing financial pressures resulting from declining church attendance and reduced congregational giving, which in turn affects mission support. These trends are being experienced across all three expressions of the ELCA. In light of these realities, the Synod will need to consider budget reductions, structural changes, or potential merger opportunities with neighboring synods in order to remain fiscally sustainable.

At the same time, the Church is called to faithful and generous stewardship. Throughout its history, the Synod has supported ministry within congregations, across the region, and throughout the wider church. As we plan for the future, the Synod must balance responsible financial stewardship without ceasing our continued support for the ministries and mission to which we are called.

(Please refer to the Treasurer and Finance Committee Report for financial specifics).

### **Procedural Matters:**

*"Whereas the boundaries and names of synods are determined by the constitution of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA Bylaws and Continuing Resolutions 10.01.01). and,*

*Whereas, “Any synod contemplating amending articles of incorporation or undertaking other fundamental changes such as dissolution, merger, partition into multiple synods, creating a new synod corporation, incorporating in another jurisdiction, or any similar or related action, especially those that may affect relationships with other expressions of this church, must first consult with the Office of the Presiding Bishop, the Office of the Secretary, and with the bishops of any synods affected before seeking ratification by the Church Council. “(ELCA BCR 10.11.01); [...]”*

The Taskforce is actively considering if the optimal course of action is for the USS to merge with another synod or multiple other synods in Pennsylvania. The boundaries and names of synods are governed by the ELCA constitution. The ELCA constitution can be amended in two ways:

[The ELCA] constitution may be amended only through either of the following procedures:

a. The Church Council may propose an amendment, with an official notice to be sent to the synods at least six months prior to the next meeting of the Churchwide Assembly. The adoption of such an amendment shall require a two-thirds vote of the members of the next meeting of the Churchwide Assembly present and voting.

b. An amendment may be proposed by 25 or more members of the Churchwide Assembly. The proposed amendment shall be referred to the Committee of Reference and Counsel for its recommendation, following which it shall come before the assembly. If such an amendment is approved by a two-thirds vote of members present and voting, such an amendment shall become effective only if adopted by a two-thirds vote of the members present and voting at the next regular Churchwide Assembly.

The next ELCA Churchwide Assembly is triennial and will take place in the Summer of 2028, and again in the Summer of 2031. Therefore, if the Synod wishes to effectuate any change in corporate form by 2028 the Synod would need to follow the procedures above in (a) which would need to be voted on at the Fall 2027 Church Council meeting (the Church Council meets bi-annually).

The Synod can forward the Amendment request to the Office of the Secretary for Church Council consideration. Prior to making such a request the Synod must first consult with the Office of the Presiding Bishop, the Office of the Secretary, and with the bishops of any synods affected before seeking ratification by the Church Council *ELCA BCR 10.11.01*. This gives the Synod approximately one year and three months from this Assembly to have a vetted Amendment.

Option (b) would require the USS to wait until 2031 for the Amendment to take effect, giving rise to concerns about budgetary constraints. In this scenario, the Synod would need to have prepared a proposed Amendment by the Spring of 2028.

### **Next Steps:**

The Taskforce intends to engage in the following information gathering and dialogue with our ministry partners, rostered leaders, lay leaders, and neighbors.

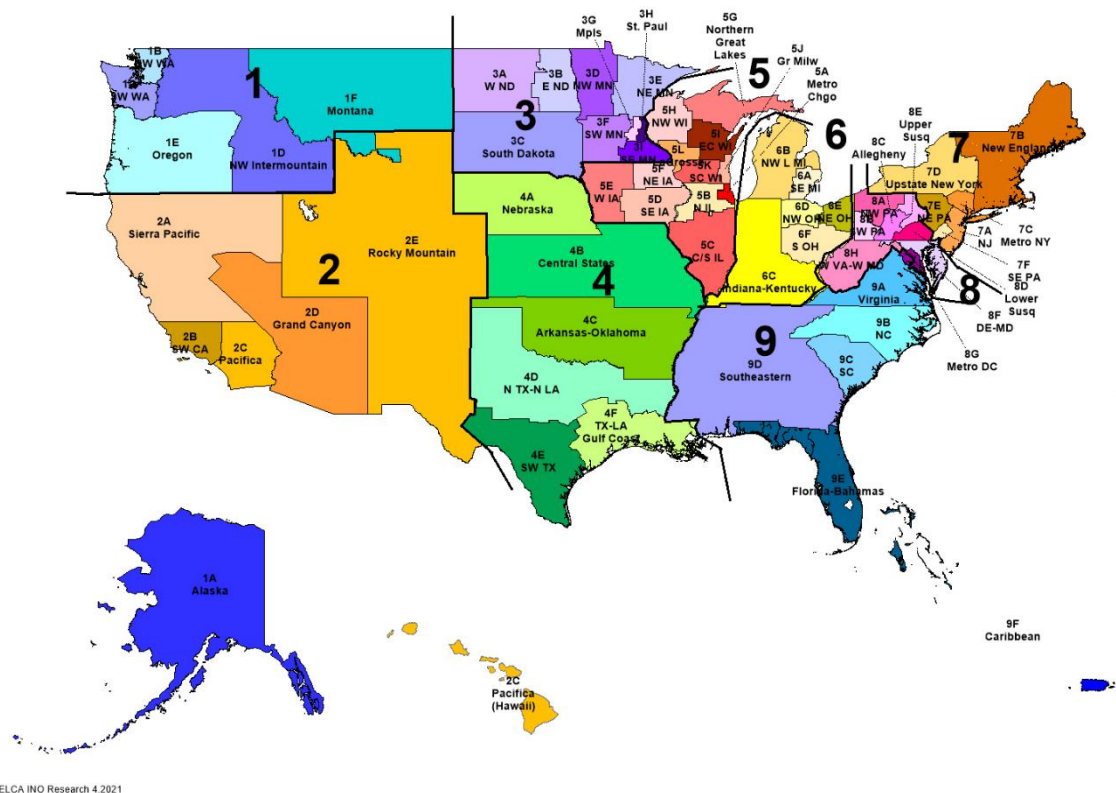
1. Complete a brief generative survey at the 2026 Synod Assembly

2. Provide Information to congregations about the Challenges facing the Synod and the Taskforce's work.
3. Contact Rostered Leaders and Lay Congregational Leadership
4. Continue dialogue with our regional neighbors
5. Begin a dialogue with the ELCA Churchwide Leadership
6. Report to the 2027 USS Assembly a recommendation

### **Conclusion:**

The Upper Susquehanna Synod is made up of faithful and dedicated pastors, worship leaders, congregants, and volunteers who remain deeply committed to the ministry to which they are called. Amid ongoing financial constraints and challenges related to pastoral coverage, collaboration across congregations and ministries has become increasingly essential. The Synod is called to be a Gospel people, living together in trust and hope, confident that Christ our Good Shepherd accompanies the Church in every step of its life and ministry. As the Gospel reminds us, Christ leaves the ninety-nine to seek the one lost sheep, and in the same way the Synod is called both to steward its resources faithfully and to actively seek those who are disconnected or absent from the life of the Church. This moment calls not for inward focus or institutional preservation, but for outward engagement strengthening relationships with neighboring synods, between neighboring congregations in our own synod, and within the wider community of friends and neighbors. The shared goal is the continued vitality and faithfulness of ministry throughout the region, rooted in collaboration, mission, and God's grace.

## ELCA Regions and Synods



### List of Neighboring Synod Staff Positions:

LSS - Bishop, Assistant to the Bishop x3, Director of Faith Formation and Youth Ministry, Executive Assistant, Administrative Assistant, Communications Assistant

Allegheny - Bishop, Assistant to the Bishop, Assistant to the Bishop for Transition, Assistant to the Bishop for Communication, Assistant to the Bishop for Life Together, Office Manager

NE PA Synod - Bishop, DEM, Director for New Ministries (Part time), Director of Operations, Director for leaders (full time), Director of Communications (full time), Leadership Support Coordinator (full time), Mission Support Coordinator (Full time), Lay ministry coordinator (part time).

NW PA Synod: Bishop, Accountant, Office Manager.

Upstate NY Synod: Bishop, Associate Bishop x2, Admin Support Specialist, Mobility Specialist, Finance Specialist, Communications Specialist, DEM

SW PA Synod: Bishop, Assistant to the Bishop, DEM/Assistant, Financial Assistant, Office Administrator, Communications Director,

SE PA Synod: Bishop, Director of Operations and Executive Assistant to the Bishop, Senior Accountant, Assistant to the Bishop for Congregations, Assistant to the Bishop for Formation,

USS: Bishop, Assistant to the Bishop for Leadership Formation, Director of Evangelical Mission, Administrative Assistant to the Bishop, Director of Communications, Bookkeeper

## Letter to Neighboring Synods:

April 11, 2026

To:

Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod, ELCA  
NE PA Synod Council  
c/o Bishop Christopher deForest  
Northwestern Pennsylvania Synod, ELCA  
NW PA Synod Council  
c/o Bishop Kristen Papson

Allegheny Synod, ELCA  
Allegheny Synod Council  
c/o Bishop Kevin Shock  
Lower Susquehanna Synod, ELCA  
LSS Synod Council  
c/o Bishop Stephen Herr

*“Again, truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them.”* Matthew 18:19-20

Siblings in Christ, Jesus invites us to gather in worship, fellowship, prayer, and community and promises to be there with us when we do so. Christ promised this to his Church of Twelve Disciples and the others gathered near to him. It is a message of his unyielding presence among us. It is no secret that mainline Protestant denominations across the United States have faced great difficulties in recent years. Many of our congregations thrive and grow but more have waned in size, faced financial difficulties, or closed their doors. Our synods and national organizations are not immune to these challenges. We believe in the Upper Susquehanna Synod (USS) that these challenges must be named, identified, and approached head on with an eye towards the future.

The 2025 Upper Susquehanna Synod Assembly adopted a resolution with the following call to action; “RESOLVED that the Office of the Bishop and synod council members begin exploring the possibility of restructuring or combining existing synods in Pennsylvania, in consultation with affected leaders and congregations, to create a new synod structure to carry on the mission of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America[...].” In response, the USS has established a task force to review our purpose and look for opportunities to grow so that we will have a continued presence as a welcoming church in the region. We know that we cannot do this alone. We are looking for new and innovative ways to collaborate in Christ’s ministry.

We currently participate in several collaborative ministries with our neighbors. We have a strong relationship with Camp Mount Luther located in western Union County, PA. We participate in the Go Tell It IN the Mountains initiative to help promote our mission and strengthen and develop our Lay Ministry and congregational leaders with a broad spectrum of resources. We have several Reconciling In Christ communities. Finally, we are also beginning to participate in NE PA Synod’s 6-2-6-1 initiative on the boundaries of our Synod. We would like to explore other collaborative opportunities to aid and foster the ministry of this Church.

Please accept this letter as an invitation to meet as neighboring Synods to openly discuss how we can bolster the sharing of services, including but not limited to the administrative, ministerial, and congregational support with which our synods are charged. We respectfully request that this letter be shared with your synod councils for their review and consideration. We appreciate the

mutual ministry and relationships between our synods in the past. We recognize our shared history and contexts in Pennsylvania and look forward to future collaboration.

We welcome and look forward to your response, please contact either Noah Roux, USS VP at [vproux@uss-elca.org](mailto:vproux@uss-elca.org) or Bishop Craig Miller at [bpmiller@uss-elca.org](mailto:bpmiller@uss-elca.org) with any questions or suggestions for our mutual ministry together. We hope that you will join the conversation and would appreciate hearing from you before May 31<sup>st</sup>, 2026.

God's Peace,

Noah Roux, USS Vice President