

Research Report

December 2024



THE USE OF SYNOD-AUTHORIZED MINISTERS IN THE EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH IN AMERICA



Evangelical
Lutheran Church
in America

Research and Evaluation
Office of the Secretary

Executive Summary

Between August and September 2024, the Research and Evaluation team conducted a survey of all 65 synods of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) to better understand their use of synod-authorized ministers (SAMs). The survey was in the field for a total of eight weeks and had a response rate of 95%, with 62 synods reporting.

The survey found that synods increasingly rely on synod-authorized ministers to provide pastoral leadership for congregations in cases where affordability and geography prove challenging. At least 756 congregations – about 9% of all ELCA congregations – are currently served by SAMs. While there are a range of views among bishops concerning this practice, nearly 68% advocate or support using synod-authorized ministers in many cases. Most synod-authorized ministers preach, preside, offer pastoral care, teach and lead in ways that ministers of Word and Sacrament would otherwise. Patterns of formation for synod-authorized ministers differ widely, though most of these ministers complete a series of retreats, intensive courses and/or online course offerings, combined with significant mentoring. The increased use of synod-authorized ministers in the ELCA is one of the key indicators that a new, nonprofessionalized model of ministry is emerging alongside the more conventional model of rostered ministry.

This survey is part of the “Future Need for Pastoral Leadership” study in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, a research project designed to better understand the ELCA’s system of mobility and call, and to anticipate the church’s need for pastoral leaders for congregations over the next five years.

About the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) is one of the largest Christian denominations in the United States, with nearly 3 million members in 8,500 worshipping communities across the 50 states and in the Caribbean region.

Based in Chicago, the ELCA churchwide organization is guided by the Churchwide Assembly, the Church Council and the organization’s four elected officers. Its staff serve as advisers, conveners, partners and resource people for the ELCA and its ministries. The Research and Evaluation team is based in the Office of the Secretary and serves the churchwide organization, synods and related ministries by providing professional research services to empower informed decision-making around policy and practice.

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Introduction

In 2024, the Research and Evaluation team of the churchwide organization launched a new study, “The Future Need for Pastoral Leaders in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.” This study drew on previous research on the supply and demand of rostered ministers but also extended the inquiry in important ways. Between August and September 2024, ELCA researchers surveyed synod bishops or their representatives to better understand their use of synod-authorized ministers. This research report shares our findings from that survey.

Since its formation in 1988, the ELCA has emphasized its most local expression: *congregations*. Congregations are led by a collaboration between ministers of Word and Sacrament (pastors), who lead through preaching, teaching, conducting worship, offering and empowering community care, and equipping members for lives of discipleship and service. Laypeople also lead by organizing congregational ministries, serving on councils, committees and ministry teams and living out their discipleship in their daily lives.

Today, ELCA congregations are facing a changing religious landscape in the United States. Between 2007 and 2014, the share of adults belonging to mainline Protestant churches dropped from about 18% to 14%.¹ A similar decline was found among U.S. Catholics. When it comes to worship attendance, the picture is even more clear. In 2007, the Pew Research Center found that 54% of U.S. adults reported attending religious services monthly or more.² By 2021, only 31% said they attended worship that often.³

In 2000, the ELCA had 10,816 congregations. By 2023, however, the ELCA had just 8,464 – a net decline of 28%. Alongside this slow decline of congregations, an increasing number of congregations cannot afford a pastor or recruit a pastor to their community.

Fortunately, the ELCA Constitution anticipated such scenarios:

When need exists to render Word and Sacrament ministry for a congregation or ministry of this church where it is not feasible to provide rostered ministers of Word and Sacrament, the synod bishop – acting with the consent of the congregation or ministry, in consultation with the Synod Council, and in accord with standards and qualifications developed by the appropriate churchwide unit, reviewed by the Conference of Bishops, and approved by the Church Council – may authorize a person who is a member of a congregation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to offer this ministry (ELCA Constitution, 7.31.10).

Less anticipated, however, was that over the past five years, 56% of synods would report that their use of synod-authorized ministers had increased or increased significantly. The following research report shares findings from our 2024 survey “The Use of Synod-authorized Ministers in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.” It begins by exploring the number of congregations served by these ministers and the geographic distribution of these congregations across the ELCA. The report then turns to a basic demographic profile of these ministers before exploring additional topics such as why synods turn to synod-authorized ministers and how bishops view them. Finally, the report concludes with some key findings on the emerging patterns of leadership formation for synod-authorized ministers.

While this research report focuses exclusively on synod-authorized ministers, these findings are best understood in the broader context of pastoral leadership in the ELCA today. To better understand that context, please consider exploring additional findings from “The Future Need for Pastoral Leadership in the ELCA,” forthcoming in early 2025.

Tim Snyder, Ph.D.

October 7, 2024

Commemoration of Henry Muhlenberg

Congregations Served by Synod-authorized Ministers

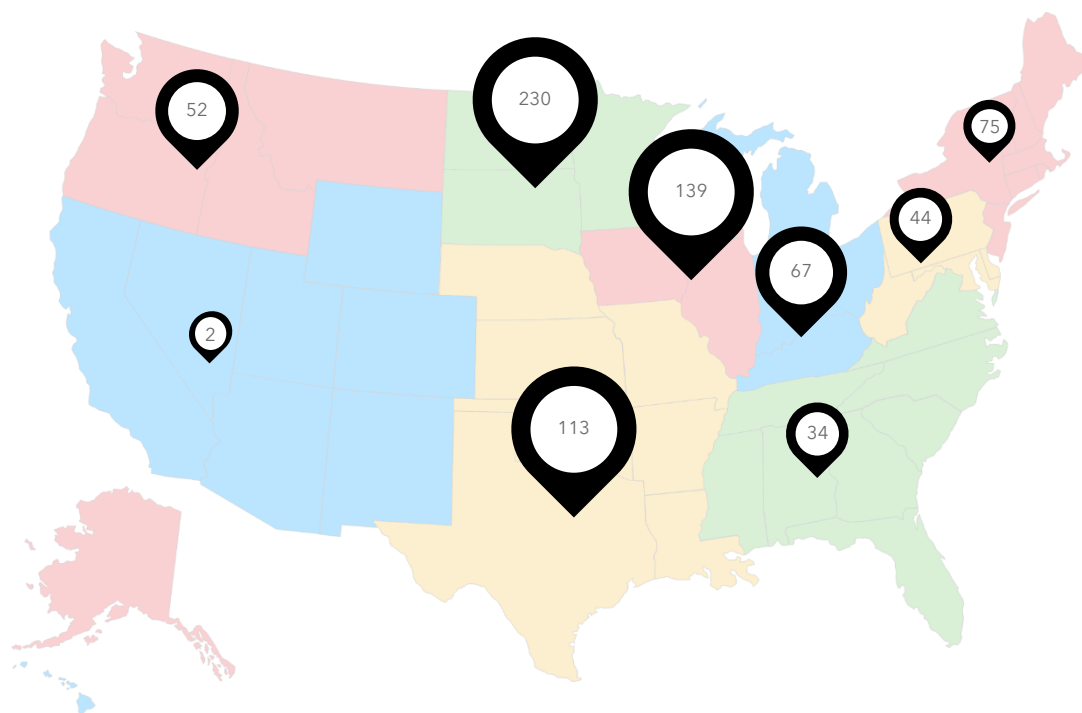
A primary aim of this survey was to establish a baseline dataset on the use of synod-authorized ministers (SAMs). To do this, synod bishops or their representatives were asked to complete a survey sharing information about the use of SAMs in their synods. As of 2023, there were 8,464 organized congregations in the ELCA. We know that, at the time the survey was conducted, at least 756 congregations (about 9% of all congregations) were served by a SAM. Table 1 (Appendix A) shows how some synods report a relatively small number of SAMs whereas others report quite a large number. For example, just seven synods have more than 30 congregations served by SAMs, but collectively they account for 40% of all ELCA congregations served by a SAM. Another 17 synods have between 11 and 30 congregations served by a SAM; collectively, these synods also account for 40% of all congregations served by SAMs. Most synods, however, have fewer than 10 congregations served by SAMs, and 14 synods report no congregations served by SAMs. This leads us to our first major finding from this survey:

Finding #1: Use of SAMs in the ELCA is unevenly distributed; one-third of all ELCA synods account for 80% of all congregations served by a SAM.

The map below (Figure 1) shows the geographic distribution of congregations served by synod-authorized ministers for each region of the ELCA. As the map reveals, the highest concentration of congregations served by SAMs can be found in the middle part of the United States – in ELCA regions 3, 4 and 5. These regions include the Midwest, historically a region with a strong Lutheran presence, as well as Texas (three synods), which alone has 47 congregations served by SAMs. The northeastern part of the U.S. – ELCA region 7 – also has a high concentration of SAMs, with the majority of those (71) located in the Metropolitan New York Synod. From this illustration, we see that the highest concentrations of SAMs are in locations where Lutherans have been historically strong and where rural communities are common.

That said, given historical patterns, we expect the use of synod-authorized ministers in the ELCA to increase in coming years. Indeed, as Table 2 shows, the majority of synods report that their use of SAMs has either increased or increased significantly over the past five years (31% and 25% respectively). Some synods report that their use of SAMs has stayed the same, but only four synods report that their use decreased over the last five years. Finally, despite the total number of congregations served by SAMs, the geographic distribution of those SAMs and the increased use of SAMs, the deployment of SAMs in the ELCA today remains limited, and the norm in pastoral leadership continues to be rostered ministers.

Figure 1 – Geographic Distribution of Congregations Served by a Synod-authorized Minister, 2024



Demographic Profile of Synod-authorized Ministers

A second aim of this survey was to learn more about the demographic profile of those serving as synod-authorized ministers. Because this survey relied on the working knowledge of synod bishops or their representatives, there were limits to the amount of detailed information that could be accurately collected (for more, see Appendix B). Still, the following gives us an important window into the demographic profile of current SAMs.

A small number of synods (5) report that more than 50% of their SAMs are BIPOC (Black, Indigenous or people of color). In fact, about 40% of synods report that none of their SAMs are BIPOC, with the rest reporting modest degrees of racial or ethnic diversity among SAMs. Alternative pathways to pastoral leadership, such as the Theological Education for Emerging Ministries (TEEM) program, have been important avenues for increasing the racial and ethnic diversity of our congregational leaders, but this does not appear to be the case with SAMs.

When it comes to gender, about 30% of synods report that they have more SAMs that are men; a similar number (34%) say they have more SAMs that are female. The rest report more or less even numbers of men and women serving as SAMs.

Overall, the demographic profile of our current SAMs matches what we would expect, given the geographic locations of these congregations and the fact that the vast majority of SAMs serving congregations are identified from within the congregations they serve. Put differently:

Finding #2: The demographic profile of current synod-authorized ministers closely reflects the demographic profile of ELCA rostered ministers, though there are somewhat more women serving as SAMs.

The Pastoral Leadership of Synod-authorized Ministers

A third aim of this survey was to better understand how bishops currently view the use of synod-authorized ministers, what kinds of ministries SAMs lead and why synods turn to this form of pastoral leadership. When it comes to the views of bishops regarding SAMs, overall, we find strong support for their use. In fact, 68% of all synod bishops either advocate using SAMs or support their use in many cases. A minority (17%) of bishops support using SAMs only in rare cases, and even fewer (6%) do not support the use of SAMs (Table 3). It is important to note that the survey asked bishops about the use of SAMs in *their* synods. Just because bishops do not support the use of SAMs in their synod does not necessarily mean they do not support their use in other settings.

In this survey, we asked “Which of the following ministries are SAMs in your synod authorized to lead?,” using language that appears in the ELCA Constitution. ELCA researchers realize that, theologically speaking, only sacramental ministry requires the extension of a bishop’s authority. In many settings, lay leaders may preach, offer pastoral care and so on. Though that is the case, there may be a difference between engaging in these ministries as a lay leader versus engaging in these ministries under the appointment of the synod bishop, even if such authorization is not theologically or constitutionally required.

By far, the most common ministries for which synod-authorized ministers are authorized are preaching, presiding and offering pastoral care (Table 4). Over 90% of synods with SAMs serving congregations report that their SAMs lead in these ways. Many synods also report that their SAMs regularly preside at funerals and weddings (84% and 59% respectively). Whether a SAM is authorized to preside at weddings is largely a legal matter, dependent on state law. In 2006, the ELCA Church Council gave permission to

synods to authorize SAMs to preside at weddings only if state law permitted them and the services were for members of the congregations they served. When invited to list other ministries that SAMs are authorized to lead, synods regularly named Christian education and congregational leadership (e.g., council leadership) as important. From this, we can now say with some confidence:

Finding #3: Most synod-authorized ministers serve as pastoral leaders in most of the same ways ministers of Word and Sacrament do.

When asked why they used synod-authorized ministers, respondents overwhelmingly report three reasons: (1) a congregation's inability to afford a full-time or part-time pastor, (2) challenging geography or community context, and/or (3) the congregation had spent two years in a call process but had been unsuccessful. Indeed, in each case, 84% of synods with congregations served by SAMs said these reasons were key factors. Sometimes a combination of these three factors drive the turn to a SAM. Though it may be tempting to think that affordability is always at least one of the factors, the data is clear that sometimes geography or community context alone drives the turn to a SAM. In these cases, recruiting a rostered minister to a particular place proves simply impossible. Sometimes the location is too remote or isolated. At other times, it may be a place where both the congregation and the community are so conservative that rostered ministers are unwilling to serve there.⁴

Finding #4: Affordability, challenging community contexts and unsuccessful call processes all contribute to the increased use of synod-authorized ministers.

The Leadership Formation of Synod-authorized Ministers

Because the ELCA Constitution stipulates that the appointment of synod-authorized ministers ought to take place "in accord with standards and qualifications developed by the appropriate churchwide unit" (ELCA Constitution 7.31.10), the final aim of this survey was to provide additional insight on this church's current practice regarding the leadership formation of SAMs. The survey asked respondents to share information on the length of such formation, the curriculum of their formation, the format of that formation and the party responsible for the oversight of their formation.

Synods responding to this survey report that currently there are 313 synod-authorized ministers in formation. About two-thirds of those are in synods with large SAM programs,

with 20 or more congregations served by SAMs. The remaining one-third of those in formation are in synods with small SAM programs, with 10 or fewer congregations served by SAMs.

Synods responding also report that in the past five years, 469 synod-authorized ministers have completed a pattern of formation. The majority of those were in synods with large SAM programs. About a quarter of those who have completed formation in the last five years were in synods with medium-sized SAM programs, and another quarter were in synods with small programs (Table 5).

When it comes to the length of formation for synod-authorized ministers, about 40% of synods with SAMs report that their formation pattern is under two years; three synods report that their formation pattern is less than a year. Most synods with SAMs (60%), however, report that their pattern of formation is over two years (Table 6). Because the vast majority of SAMs are serving in ministry concurrent to their formation, their deployment is not contingent upon the completion of formation. That said, findings from this survey suggest that though the need for SAMs has increased rapidly, their formation still takes a relatively significant amount of time.

The curriculum of synod patterns of formation appears quite similar to that of masters-level theological education and TEEM. Eighty percent or more of these formation patterns include Lutheran church history and theology, preaching and worship, Bible, and pastoral care. Almost 70% also include congregational leadership, whereas only 37% include evangelism (Table 7).

Given the similarity between synod patterns of formation and curricula developed by our seminaries, it is surprising that few synods rely on courses or resources provided by ELCA seminaries. In fact, only 40% of synod patterns include online courses provided by an ELCA seminary. The most common format of formation includes retreats (62%) and online courses not provided by seminaries (60%). Almost half of such patterns include some other kind of intensive in-person experience, and a similar number include one-on-one tutorials (Table 8).

There is little consensus on who ought to be responsible for forming synod-authorized ministers at the synod level. About one-third of synods with SAMs rely on their lay schools of ministry. Some (19%) rely on the synod candidacy to provide oversight for SAM formation, whereas others (15%) rely on a seminary to provide such oversight. The rest (29%) use a combination of the above or place oversight in the portfolio of synod staff (Table 9).

Finding #5: Patterns of SAM formation are largely based on traditional models of theological education; however, the varying formats and oversight structures reflect a local, less standardized approach to leadership formation.

Finally, this survey asked synods about the kinds of prescreening processes they use with synod-authorized ministers. Almost all synods with SAMs (96%) require a background check prior to appointment. About 40% also require a psychological evaluation like the one required at the beginning of candidacy for rostered ministry.

Commentary

This survey represents the best, most comprehensive data to date on the use of synod-authorized ministers. Taken together, the six key findings of this survey paint a picture of an emerging model of pastoral leadership that, while always part of our constitutional structure, has become a more significant part of the ELCA's leadership ecology. Given that, today, a small percentage of congregations are served by SAMs, it seems difficult to conclude that their use is now normative or on par with the use of ministers of Word and Sacrament. Still, the use of SAMs plays a key role – one that would be particularly challenging to replace given the structural challenges that are driving their use, such as affordability and challenging community contexts.

Because of the role that SAMs now play in providing pastoral leadership, their use, significance and efficacy warrant additional study and reflection. Building on the insights developed from this survey, we find at least five areas that deserve further research.

How do synod-authorized ministers experience and understand the ministries they provide?

Because this survey relied on insights from key informants, we know nothing about the experiences and self-understandings of synod-authorized ministers themselves. We do not know about their sense of call, nor do we know how they understand the service they provide. Similarly, we know little about the paths or stories that have led these leaders to accept the call to serve as SAMs. Pursuing this line of inquiry, we might also learn more about the demographic profile of those serving as SAMs, their educational backgrounds and the important leadership experiences or perspectives they bring to their ministries.

How do those served by synod-authorized ministers experience and understand their leadership?

While we know little about the experiences and understandings of synod-authorized ministers, we know even less about the experiences and understandings of those they serve. For example, do members of these congregations view the SAM as their “pastor”? Many synods provide clear guidelines that prevent SAMs from using titles, etc. that would blur the lines between their service and that of ordained pastors – and for good reasons. However, such restrictions may or may not shape how members see the significance of their ministry. Better understanding of how those served by SAMs see their leadership may provide important insights for future policy and practice.

How do varying models of SAM formation serve varying contexts?

Our survey data clearly shows that the context of a synod plays a vital role in the use of synod-authorized ministers and the particular way a synod's SAM program is implemented. Further research might trace and document various models of SAM formation to better discern how certain models are a good fit for some contexts whereas other models are better suited for other contexts. This line of inquiry is vital for developing regional and churchwide resources to support the use of SAMs.

How might congregations, synods and the churchwide organization collaborate to provide ongoing support and accountability for synod-authorized ministers?

The survey data reported above provides an important baseline for understanding synod-authorized ministers. Missing, however, was any effort to identify needs or opportunities to further support the ministries of SAMs. What kinds of policies and practices are synod leaders looking for to better support their SAMs? And what kinds of resources and opportunities are SAMs themselves seeking after they complete their synod's pattern of formation? These are among the topics that we know little about but would like to understand better.

Are there pathways from synod-authorized ministry to rostered ministry that might be developed and encouraged?

Depending on what we learn about the self-understandings of synod-authorized ministers and about the needs and opportunities that synod leaders have identified, it is worth exploring whether there are untapped opportunities to create unique pathways from synod-authorized ministry to rostered ministry. It seems unlikely that all SAMs will feel called to make such a transition. For those who may feel called, however, are there models that might facilitate this?

To pursue the above, ELCA Research and Evaluation is in the early stages of designing a follow-up study. One part research and one part evaluation, this new study will help us to better understand and learn from the on-the-ground experiences of SAMs and those who work with them most closely. If you are interested in learning more about this follow-up study or if you would like to partner with ELCA researchers, please contact us at research@elca.org.

Appendix A: Data Tables

Note: Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

Table 1 – Number of Congregations Served by a SAM, 2024

Range	Number of Synods	Number of Total SAMs
0	14	0
1-10	24	117
11-20	12	167
21-30	5	130
31-40	5	184
41+	2	118

Table 2 – Changes to the Use of SAMs, 2024

Use of SAMs ...	Number of Synods	Percentage of Synods
Decreased significantly	1	2%
Decreased	3	5%
Increased	20	31%
Increased significantly	16	25%
Stayed about the same	9	14%
N/A or unknown	16	25%

Table 3 – Bishops' Views of SAMs in Their Synods, 2024

	Number of Synods	Percentage of Synods
The bishop does not support the use of synod-authorized ministers.	4	6%
The bishop supports the use of synod-authorized ministers only in rare cases.	11	17%

The bishop supports the use of synod-authorized ministers in many cases.	14	22%
The bishop advocates for the use of synod-authorized ministers.	30	46%
Did Not Answer/Unknown	6	9%

Table 4 – Areas of Ministry SAMs Are Authorized to Lead, 2024

Ministries	Number of Synods	Percentage of Synods*
Preaching	48	94%
Presiding	47	92%
Funerals	43	84%
Pastoral Care	42	92%
Weddings	30	59%

* Percentage of reporting synods with SAMs (N = 51).

Table 5 – Number of SAMs in Leadership Formation by Size of Program, 2019-2024

SAMs in Formation (2024)			
Size of SAM Program	Number of Synods	Percentage of Synods	Number of SAMs
0	28	43%	0
1-10	25	38%	118
11-20	6	9%	86
21+	3	5%	109
Unknown	3	5%	NA
Total			313

SAMs in Formation (2019-2023)			
Size of SAM Program	Number of Synods	Percentage of Synods	Number of SAMs
0	27	42%	0
1-10	20	31%	93
11-20	6	9%	80
21+	9	14%	296
Unknown	3	5%	NA
Total			469

Table 6 – Length of SAM Leadership Formation, 2024

Length of Formation Pattern	Number of Synods	Percentage of Synods*
Under one year	3	6%
More than one year, less than two years	15	31%
Two years or more	30	63%

* Percentage of reporting synods with SAMs (N = 48).

Table 7 – Curricular Areas Included in SAM Leadership Formation, 2024

Curricular Area	Number of Synods	Percentage of Synods*
Lutheran History and Theology	44	86%
Preaching	43	84%
Worship	43	84%
New Testament	42	82%
Old Testament	42	82%
Pastoral Care	42	82%

Congregational Leadership	35	69%
Evangelism	19	37%

* Percentage of reporting synods with SAMs (N = 51).

Table 8 – Formats of SAM Leadership Formation, 2024

Format	Number of Synods	Percentage of Synods*
Retreats	32	62%
Online Courses (not provided by seminary)	31	60%
In-Person Intensive	25	48%
One-on-One Tutorials	25	48%
Online Courses (provided by seminary)	21	40%
Self-Paced Learning	9	17%

* Percentage of reporting synods with SAMs (N = 52).

Table 9 – Designated Party Responsible for SAM Leadership Formation, 2024

Designated Party	Number of Synods	Percentage of Synods*
Lay School	20	38%
Candidacy Committee	10	19%
Seminary	8	15%
Other	15	28%

* Percentage of reporting synods with SAMs (N = 52).

Appendix B: Methodology

The “Use of Synod-authorized Ministers in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America” survey was administered by ELCA Research and Evaluation in partnership with ELCA Synod Relations and with input from ELCA Christian Community and Leadership.

The survey opened on July 29, 2024, and closed on Sept. 30, 2024. The survey was sent to bishops via the official LISTSERV maintained by ELCA Synod Relations and was posted to the Microsoft Teams channel of the Conference of Bishops. The survey was to be completed by either the synod bishop or their representative. In all, 62 of the 65 synods completed the survey. The survey was composed of 18 questions, most of them closed-ended, and took an average of 8 minutes to complete.

The survey asked three demographic questions, including:

Q4. Approximately what percentage of your SAMs serving congregations identify as BIPOC?

Q5. Approximately what percentage of your SAMs serving congregations are male?

Q6. Approximately what percentage of your SAMs serving congregations are female?

Responding to input from key stakeholders, these demographic questions were meant to gather a basic level of data about individuals serving as SAMs. ELCA researchers recognize the limits of using key informants to gather such information. For example, religious researchers are often interested in the demographics of those who attend worship services, and in such cases, pastors are often asked to serve as key informants responding to questions about the congregation’s age, race, educational attainment, household income and household composition. Researchers seeking to assess the accuracy of using key informants in this way found that the data on select characteristics (including gender and race) was indeed very accurate. These researchers report that what makes the difference is whether the characteristic in question is reasonably observable. For this reason, ELCA researchers included demographic questions that would fit this criterion while omitting those that did not, such as questions about sexual orientation or marital status. For more on the validity of using key informants to identify social characteristics, see Steven M. Frenk, Shawna L. Anderson, Mark Chaves and Nancy Martin’s “Assessing the Validity of Key Informant Reports About Congregations’ Social Composition” in *Sociology of Religion* 72:1, pages 78-90.

Preliminary and incomplete findings from this survey were first presented to the Synod-authorized Minister Summit, hosted by ELCA Christian Community and Leadership on Aug. 30, 2024. Early and selected findings from this survey were presented to the Conference of Bishops at its fall meeting, Sept. 25, 2024.

Notes

¹ Pew Research Center, “America’s Changing Religious Landscape,” May 12, 2015, 4, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>.

² Pew Research Center, “U.S. Public Becoming Less Religious,” November 3, 2015, 17, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2015/11/03/u-s-public-becoming-less-religious/>.

³ Pew Research Center, “About Three-in-Ten U.S. Adults Are Now Religiously Unaffiliated,” December 14, 2021, 11, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/12/14/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-are-now-religiously-unaffiliated/>.

⁴ The further explanations for why a particular geographic location or community context might prove difficult for placing a rostered minister come from data collected in focus groups with 22 assistants to the bishop who had responsibilities for mobility and call. For more information and more themes from this data source, see the research report “The Future Need for Pastoral Leaders in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America” (forthcoming in 2025).



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