

Research Report  
February 2025



# THE FUTURE NEED FOR PASTORAL LEADERS IN THE EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH IN AMERICA

PART ONE: TRENDS IN PASTORAL TRANSITIONS AND AFFORDABILITY



Evangelical  
Lutheran Church  
in America

Office of the Secretary  
Research and Evaluation

## Executive Summary

Beginning in the summer of 2024, the Research and Evaluation team launched a major study of pastoral leadership in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). The purpose of this study is 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. This study draws on past research from the team on the "supply and demand" of ministers of Word and Sacrament, but it also extends the inquiry in new ways.

This report includes major findings from the study's quantitative analysis. Set within a changing American religious landscape, we find that ELCA congregations today are organizationally resilient yet challenged by major declines in participation. A key finding of this study is that changes in participation have exacerbated a pre-existing decline in the number of congregations that can afford a full-time pastor. This trend is driving many of the changes present within pastoral openings in recent years, and it is also driving the increased use of alternative forms of pastoral leadership such as synod-authorized ministers. Analysis included in this report shows that while enrollment in the degree-based pathway to pastoral ministry is down, the certificate-based pathway (Theological Education for Emerging Ministries) has increased in recent years. While this report predicts a shortage of first call candidates through 2028, it also invites further reflection on the complex intersection between our congregations' needs for pastoral leadership, the needs of our rostered ministers and current models of leadership formation.

This report is the first in a series of resources developed to explore the findings of this study. Following this report will be additional qualitative analysis, commentaries, video resources and opportunities to engage with ELCA researchers on this and related topics.

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### 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

Since the formation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), this church has reaffirmed a central Lutheran understanding of pastoral ministry: that particular forms of pastoral leadership flow from the missional needs of the church.

In its rationale for pastors and bishops, the ELCA's "Together for Ministry: Final Report and Actions on the Study of Ministry, 1988-1993" makes this point clear when it states, "For all the changes, in society and world, that face the Church today, the task of proclaiming God's Word of reconciliation ... remains a constant and a necessity."<sup>1</sup> Drawing on another statement from a predecessor church, the study goes on to say, "The shape of a pastoral ministry may and must adapt to the many situations which cry out for the Word of grace through the Gospel."<sup>2</sup>

This research report begins with such an outcry.

"The Future Need for Pastoral Leaders in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America" is the first in a series of research reports from the ELCA Research and Evaluation team that are based on a significant study of the church's need for pastoral leaders serving in congregations over the next five years. The purpose of the study is to better understand the ELCA's mobility and call process and to anticipate this church's need for pastoral leadership. The study explores questions such as:

- Given the current number of congregations and the pastors they currently call, how many total pastoral leaders might the ELCA need between 2025 and 2030?
- Given the range of leadership needs across ELCA congregations, what types of pastoral positions might congregations be seeking to fill? How many senior pastorates, associate pastorates, solo pastorates and shared pastorates? Likewise, how many of those positions might be part-time or full-time?
- Given financial and geographic restraints, what pathways to pastoral ministry might best address these needs? Will future needs be better served by candidates trained in the traditional manner, TEEM candidates and/or synod-authorized ministers?

This study explores these and further questions, using a combination of internal data and new data collected specifically for this project. Sources for this data include the Annual Congregation Reports, "Survey on the Use of Synod-Authorized Ministers in the ELCA" (August 2024), ministry site profiles, seminary reports and focus groups. Additionally, a wide range of external research was used to provide the broader context for our study. For detailed information on the data and methods used during this study, please refer to the appendix.

The report that follows begins with a description of today's religious landscape in the United States. This context is critical for understanding a situation that currently cries out for new forms of pastoral leadership. The report then turns to findings that illustrate the present "state of congregations" in the ELCA, an in-depth analysis of rostered ministry as a "workforce," and a discussion on leadership formation. The report concludes with a series of key findings related to the future need for pastoral leaders in the ELCA.

A final word on use of the term “pastoral leaders” in this report. For the purposes of this study, we have chosen to use “pastoral leaders” in the title of this report instead of “pastors” or “ministers of Word and Sacrament” or even “rostered ministers” because we have focused on the needs of congregations and, increasingly, those needs are being met by a range of leadership that extends beyond ordained ministry.

Whether you are a bishop, a rostered minister or an engaged member of this church, you are invited to read this report as a kind of prayer — a prayer that seeks to discern the possibility that God may be doing a new thing in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

Tim Snyder, Ph.D.

October 31, 2024

*Reformation Day*



## The Religious Landscape Today

One way to imagine the shape of religious life in the United States — and, more broadly, throughout North America and the Caribbean — is through the range of features that make up a landscape. Mountains, valleys, forests, rivers and lakes all shape the land in significant ways. However, standing immediately in front of any of these, it can be difficult to perceive changes that have been underway for decades or more. To really see the full picture, we need to zoom out and see things from above.

In this section, we describe today's religious landscape in relation to two significant trends reshaping the contours of contemporary religious life in profound ways: *the decline of religious participation* and *the rise of the "nones."*

### THE DECLINE OF RELIGIOUS PARTICIPATION

When the ELCA was formed in 1988, it was exceptionally common for Americans to identify as Christians. In fact, in that year, about 8 out of 10 adults in the United States self-identified that way, and half of them attended worship at least monthly. The most recent data from the Pew Research Center suggests that, today, about 6 out of 10 adults identify as Christian and only 4 out of 10 attend worship that often.<sup>3</sup>

Even this simple snapshot makes clear that, today, participation in organized religion is on the decline. The truth is it has been declining for decades. One of the implications for leaders and members of the ELCA is that we can no longer assume that Christian faith is a regular part of most of our neighbors' lives. That reality has been washed away by a variety of social forces, including a growing distrust of institutions, well-publicized accounts of clergy scandal and sexual abuse, and the increasing conflation of religious identity with a conservative political affiliation. Even if these have not been key features of the ELCA's history over recent decades, these social forces profoundly shape the broader religious landscape.

*What does this mean for pastoral leadership in the ELCA?* It means at least three things and likely much more. First, it means that pastoral leaders today face a much more difficult context for their ministries.



*We can no longer assume that Christian faith is a regular part of most of our neighbors' lives.*



Today's religious landscape is a missionary context where we can no longer assume that others will value what we have to offer. Second, fewer people participating in religious life in the U.S. ultimately means a much more challenging context for recruiting individuals to prepare for pastoral ministry. Seminaries and other training programs mostly come into the picture after lives have been transformed by the gospel in congregations or other local ministries of the church, such as camps or campus ministries. All of these are experiencing the decline in participation. Finally, fewer participants means fewer resources. Congregations are supported by those who attend and who give generously what God has first given to them. In the past, it may have often been possible to counter challenging financial trends with more robust stewardship practices. However, many congregations today simply can no longer sustain much of what we have assumed every church needs: a building, a ministry budget and a full-time pastor. Something must give.

## THE RISE OF THE “NONES”

While participation has declined, another trend has reshaped today's religious landscape: the rise of the religiously unaffiliated, also known as the “nones.” (The term refers to those who indicate to survey researchers that their religious preference is “none of the above.”) It is a group that includes those who describe themselves as “agnostic,” “atheist” or “nothing in particular.” Today, more than 1 in 4 U.S. adults are religiously unaffiliated. That makes them the largest religious demographic and the only group that is growing.

It is important to note that the nones are not a monolithic group; rather, they are quite diverse. For example, according to the Pew Research Center, the religiously unaffiliated do not consider the role of religion in their lives similarly, do not share the same beliefs and do not follow similar practices. More than two-thirds of religiously unaffiliated Americans are under age 50, which makes the cohort significantly younger than their neighbors who are religiously affiliated. Overall, this group is evenly split by gender, though agnostics and atheists are more likely to be men than women. Similarly, the nones mirror the racial diversity present across the United States, though agnostics and atheists are far more likely to be white than to be any other racial, ethnic or Indigenous identity.<sup>4</sup>

When asked why they identify in this way, the top five reasons they gave were:

- “Question a lot of religious teachings” (60%).
- “Don't like religious organizations” (47%).
- “Don't see a need for religion in my life” (41%).
- “Don't believe in God or higher power” (32%).
- “Bad experiences with religious people” (30%).<sup>5</sup>

In short, many U.S. adults who identify as religiously unaffiliated do not do so on a whim. Nor do many of them seem eager to affiliate. In fact, another study directly asked unaffiliated Americans if they were looking for a religion that would be a good fit. Only 1 in 10 responded that they were.<sup>6</sup>

*What does this mean for pastoral leadership in the ELCA?* This trend suggests that, increasingly, many of our neighbors find themselves disconnected from religion and

Christian faith. It is unlikely that many of the older patterns of evangelism and hospitality will produce the same results that they may have in previous generations. Furthermore, as the research indicates, many of those who are today unaffiliated have personal stories of rejecting the religious teachings they grew up with and have had negative experiences with religious institutions such as congregations and with Christians themselves. In other words, one faithful response for pastoral leaders and the congregations they lead is to turn toward humility and confession. It is important to see that we Christians have been part of the problem. To put a number on it, over one-third of those who are currently religiously unaffiliated were previously part of a mainline Protestant tradition, the broader religious family to which ELCA Lutherans belong.

Does this mean that all is lost when it comes to the religiously unaffiliated? Perhaps not, but the research-based evidence here suggests that reconnecting with those who have been disenfranchised by organized religion may require us to learn new patterns of evangelism and hospitality; indeed, we may need entirely new ways of being church.

## CONCLUSION

Whether our pastoral leaders know the research or not, most of them are already familiar with the effects of today's changing religious landscape. They may or may not know just how much religious participation has declined or how many Americans identify as unaffiliated, but they feel the winds of change blowing. They know that, for many congregations, these changes present profound challenges.

The good news is that, as Lutherans, we believe that our models and forms of pastoral ministry can adapt to the changing conditions of our religious landscape. The following report traces a wide range of data and trends more specific to the realities facing ELCA pastoral leaders and the congregations they lead. The through line, however, is a story about new possibilities for pastoral leadership emerging in response to these challenges. Let's turn now to that story.

## The State of ELCA Congregations

Assessing the overall state of ELCA congregations is a difficult task.

One reason is that congregations find themselves in different seasons of ministry. Some are struggling with decades of decline driven not by their lack of faithfulness but by demographic changes in their surrounding communities. Some are seeking new ways of reaching out and connecting with their neighbors against the backdrop of a challenging religious landscape. Still others are thriving.

Another reason is that identifying a comprehensive set of metrics that tells us everything we want to know about how ELCA congregations are doing is simply not possible. Instead, researchers rely on a useful but admittedly limited set of metrics to serve as proxies for whether congregations are struggling or thriving. In the following section, we discuss the state of congregations by drawing on four key indicators: changes to the overall number of ELCA congregations, the location of congregations, congregational size, and income.



What is most important throughout is to understand trends and changes occurring across the entire church.

**Table 1 — Changes to the Number of ELCA Congregations, 2015–2023**

Status Change	Number
Closed	520
Withdrew	142
Merged and Consolidated	131
Removed	41
Total Congregational Decline	834
New Congregations Developed	73
Total Net Change	–761

Source: Congregational Records, Office of the Secretary, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

## BY THE NUMBERS: ELCA CONGREGATIONS TODAY

In 2023, there were 8,464 organized congregations in the ELCA. Because this study draws on previous research reported in 2016, we pick up where we previously left off, examining trends and changes to ELCA congregations since 2015.<sup>7</sup> As detailed in Table 1, between 2015 and 2023, there was a net loss of 761 congregations. More than half of that loss came from the closure of congregations, whereas a few hundred more came from congregations that have withdrawn, merged, consolidated or been removed. During this same period, 73 congregations were officially organized. Not included in this analysis are several hundred mission sites where the ELCA is exploring possibilities for developing worshiping communities and outreach posts.

Though every congregational closure marks a significant loss, the rate of congregational decline in the ELCA overall is relatively modest at just 8% between 2015 and 2023, or about 1% each year. As we will see below, there are other metrics regarding the state of congregations that are more concerning, but when it comes to the number of congregations, we see relative organizational resilience in the face of significant social and religious change.

## THE LOCATION OF ELCA CONGREGATIONS: AN URBAN-RURAL DIVIDE

ELCA congregations are located in every geographic setting in the U.S. and the Caribbean. They are in small farming communities, former industrial towns and ports, growing suburbs, retirement communities and major metropolitan areas. The location of a congregation may offer some insight as to the kind of ministry needed by a congregation's surrounding community. Ministry looks different in urban centers than it does in the nation's breadbasket. The location may also

offer a window into the kind of challenges and opportunities that are present, since congregations are embedded in a broader ecology or world beyond the congregation.

Overall, the geographic distribution of ELCA congregations today is nearly identical to what it was in 2015. About 60% of congregations are in rural or small-town communities with populations of less than 50,000, and about 40% are in urban communities with populations over 50,000. Additionally, about 1 out of 5 congregations is in a suburb. Less than 10% of all ELCA congregations are in the largest U.S. cities — those with populations over 250,000.

**Table 2 — ELCA Congregations by Community Type, 2015–2022**

Community Type	2015 % of cong.	2022 % of cong.
Rural	29%	29%
Town or city <50,000	33%	32%
City of 50,000-250,000	11%	12%
Suburb	18%	18%
City of 250,000+	9%	9%

Source: Annual Congregation Reports, Office of the Secretary, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

The significant number of congregations in rural communities reflects Lutheranism’s prominent place as an immigrant church before the 21st century. Many congregations were formed as the nation’s European-descent immigrants expanded westward. Though some of those communities grew into urban centers, most did not.

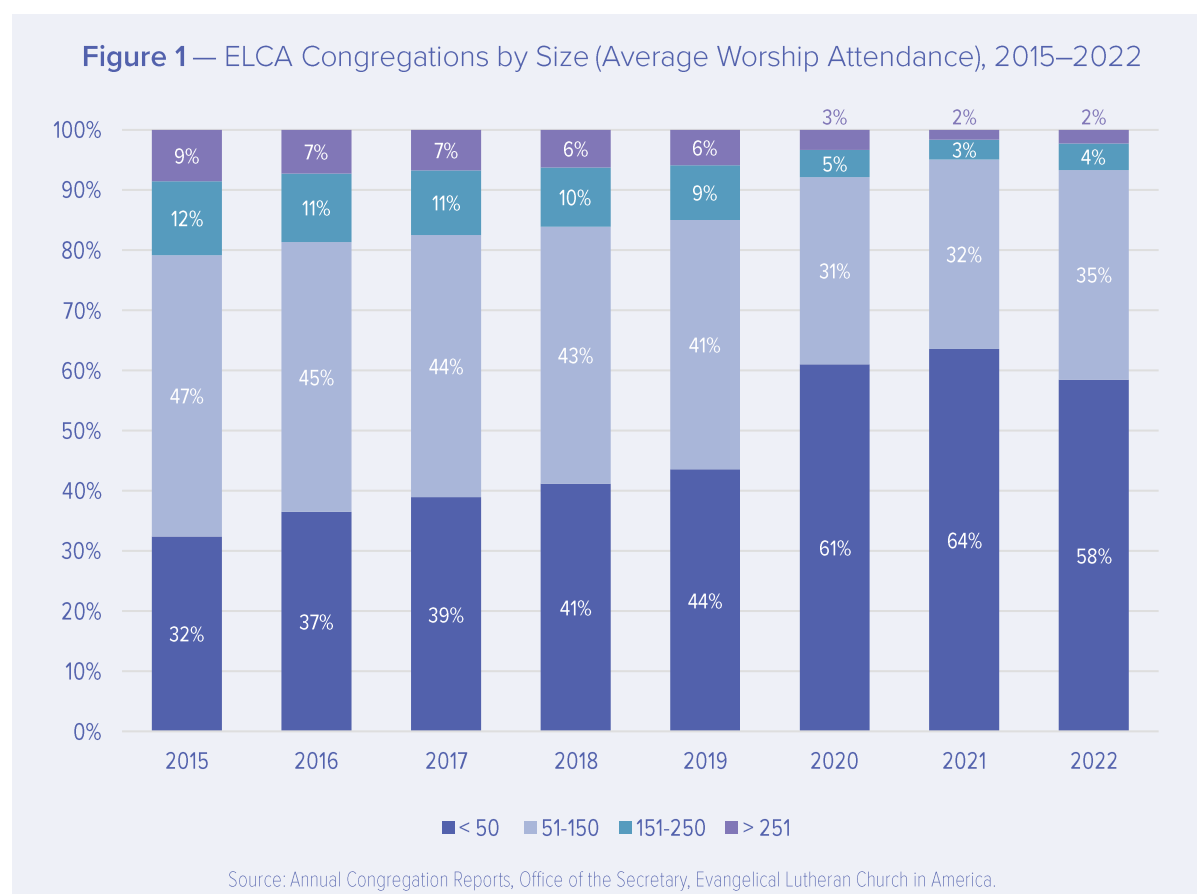
Today’s geographic distribution of congregations is incongruous with overall population shifts in the U.S. Increasingly, Americans live in urban centers and suburbs. According to the 2020 U.S. Census, about 80% of the U.S. population now live in urban communities whereas just 20% live in rural communities.<sup>8</sup> Given the reality that most ELCA congregations are in rural areas, this creates a structural challenge. Adapting to these geographic trends will not be easy, nor will strategies to address these trends develop overnight. Importantly, a strong majority of the ELCA’s current mission developments are in urban communities — a sign that this church is trying to adapt accordingly.<sup>9</sup>

## CONGREGATIONAL SIZE

Denominational researchers and social scientists alike have observed the imprecision that often exists when determining the size of a congregation. The Annual Congregation Report collects data on three metrics related to congregational size: membership (both baptized membership and confirmed membership), average worship attendance (in-person and online), and active participants — a somewhat recent addition meant to account for those connected to a congregation beyond its worship life or those who have not yet become members.

Historically, membership has been a key metric for thinking about congregational size. However, researchers know that congregations are slow to clean their membership rolls, and

to the extent that the membership count is accurate, it is often a lagging indicator of those connected to a congregation. For this reason, in this study, we rely on average worship attendance (in-person only) as our key metric for determining congregational size.



Between 2015 and 2022, congregations experienced significant shifts in their size (Figure 1). Most notably, the percentage of our smallest congregations — those with average worship attendance under 50 — almost doubled. In 2015, 3 out of 10 congregations reported such attendance. By 2022, that ratio was nearly 6 out of 10.

Considerable change was also evident among congregations reporting average worship attendance between 51 and 150. In 2015, these congregations made up almost half of all congregations. By 2022, this cohort made up little more than one-third of all congregations.

During this same time, the number of medium and large congregations also significantly decreased. In 2015, medium-sized congregations (with average worship attendance between 151 and 250) constituted 12% of all congregations. By 2022, they constituted 4%. Similarly, large congregations with average worship attendance over 250 made up 9% of all congregations. By 2022, these congregations made up just 2% of all congregations. To be exact, in 2022, only 167 congregations reported average worship attendance over 250.

In summary, the decline in worship attendance in congregations has profoundly reshaped the makeup of the ELCA. Only a few years ago, the ELCA was composed mostly of small to medium-sized congregations. Today, it is mostly very small congregations.

Of course, to understand changes to worship attendance during this time, one must account for the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. There is no doubt that part of what we see in the graph above is the enduring impact of two years of social-distancing precautions; many who stopped participating in worship during the pandemic have not returned. Beginning in 2020, the Annual Congregation Report began asking congregations to report both their on-site worship attendance and their online worship attendance.

In the analysis above, we have excluded online worship attendance. We have done so for a few reasons. First, there is no commonly agreed-upon metric for online worship attendance, and different platforms count viewers in different ways. Furthermore, during the pandemic, some congregations multiplied their viewer counts by two, three or more to account for families viewing worship together on a single device. Though this made sense at the time, that particular social phenomenon may not prevail. Yet another reason to exclude online worship attendance figures is that we know relatively little about these viewers or their relationship to the congregation. Finally, for the purposes of this study, tracking changes to worship attendance before and after the pandemic required a like-to-like comparison, and online participation in worship was not included in years prior to 2020. Despite these caveats, there is no doubt that online worship presents congregations with new ways to extend their ministries even if we do not yet fully understand the impact of this development.

Emerging research from the Hartford Institute for Religion Research indicates that what we are seeing in ELCA congregations largely matches what researchers are seeing elsewhere.



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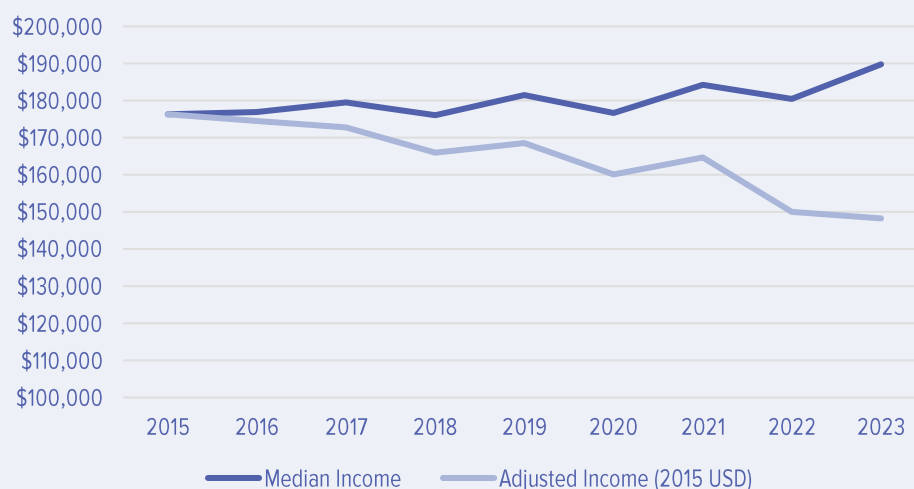
In 2020, at the peak of pandemic restrictions, congregations experienced a dramatic decline in average worship attendance. Since then, there has been slow growth, though most congregations have not yet rebounded to pre-pandemic levels of attendance. Even when accounting for online worship, researchers at the Hartford Institute found in 2023 that “in over 50% of churches, combined worship attendance ... is down considerably, but 33% of churches are now above where they were pre-pandemic.”<sup>10</sup> In conclusion, though the pandemic seems to have accelerated the decline in congregational size, that decline points toward a future when many congregations will find themselves smaller than before and will struggle with the implications of that change.

## CONGREGATIONAL INCOME

One implication of fewer participants is fewer resources. There is some evidence that as many congregations get smaller, individuals step up in their giving to close the gap created by fewer overall givers. A similar trend was also discernible during the pandemic, when several studies documented record-setting levels of giving to charitable causes.<sup>11</sup> Since 2014, the overall trajectory is that income across congregations has been relatively stable. This may seem promising at first glance, yet due to inflation, it actually represents a significant decline in the purchasing power of congregations.

When adjusted for inflation, average congregational income between 2015 and 2023 declined by 19%. In 2015, the average income of an ELCA congregation was about \$175,000. By 2023, the average income was about \$190,000 (or \$148,000 in 2015 dollars). To put this another way, incomes remain the same in congregations year after year, but the costs of ministry go up and up, which makes it increasingly difficult to meet expenses.

**Figure 2 — Median Congregational Income, 2015–2023**



Source: Annual Congregation Reports, Office of the Secretary, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

Recent research from the Lake Institute on Faith & Giving provides some important context for understanding the impact of these financial trends. According to their nationally representative study, mainline Protestant congregations (ELCA Lutherans included) spend on average 54% of their budgets on personnel, 24% on facilities and the remaining 22% on mission and ministry.<sup>12</sup> Using data from the 2022 reporting year, those spending benchmarks would mean that a typical ELCA congregation might spend its modest income in the following way (see Table 3).

From this simple illustration, we can see that most congregations are working with relatively modest incomes. Assuming that ELCA congregations spend their incomes as do other mainline Protestant congregations, paying the staff and covering the costs of their buildings leave not a lot of funds for ministry, and the margins are tight.

**Table 3** — Sample ELCA Spending, Using Research-Based Projections, 2022  
*Based on average income of \$180k*

Personnel	Facilities	Mission and Ministry
\$97,200	\$43,200	\$39,600

Source: National Study of Congregation Economic Practices, Lake Institute.

## CONCLUSION

The state of ELCA congregations can be summed up in this way: *ELCA congregations display surprising organizational resilience but major declines in participation*. There is some positive evidence that congregations are slowly rebounding to pre-pandemic levels of participation, though the broader trajectory suggests that the pattern of decline impacting many congregations predates the pandemic and will continue to have significant impact on the state of congregations in years to come.

As mentioned above, these four metrics alone cannot tell us all that we want to know about ELCA congregations. For example, we know little about congregational efforts to respond to these changes. We also lack comprehensive knowledge of the impact congregations have on the ordinary lives of those they serve, even if we know anecdotally that congregations can and do change lives and communities. The snapshot above, then, should not be seen as the final word on whether ELCA congregations are living out their missions. Rather, it should orient the direction of our further listening and understanding. To that end, we will now consider this study's findings related to rostered ministry as a “workforce.”

## Rostered Ministry as a “Workforce”

For Lutherans, the dominant frame for understanding pastoral ministry is a *theological* one. Rostered ministry is a call to public ministry — one that includes discernment, an internal and external sense of call, and formation. Within this understanding, several models of pastoral ministry have been present throughout the history of Lutheranism in the United States. Since the mid-20th century, the primary model has been a *professionalized* one where those who lead the church's public ministries are trained through graduate theological education, receive salaries and retirement benefits, and can expect for their ministries to progress in much the same way as other careers might.

One implication of this professionalized model is that the state of rostered ministry can be evaluated as itself a kind of “workforce.” In doing so, we can ask questions such as:

- What does the “supply” of leaders look like, and what is the “demand” for them coming from congregations?



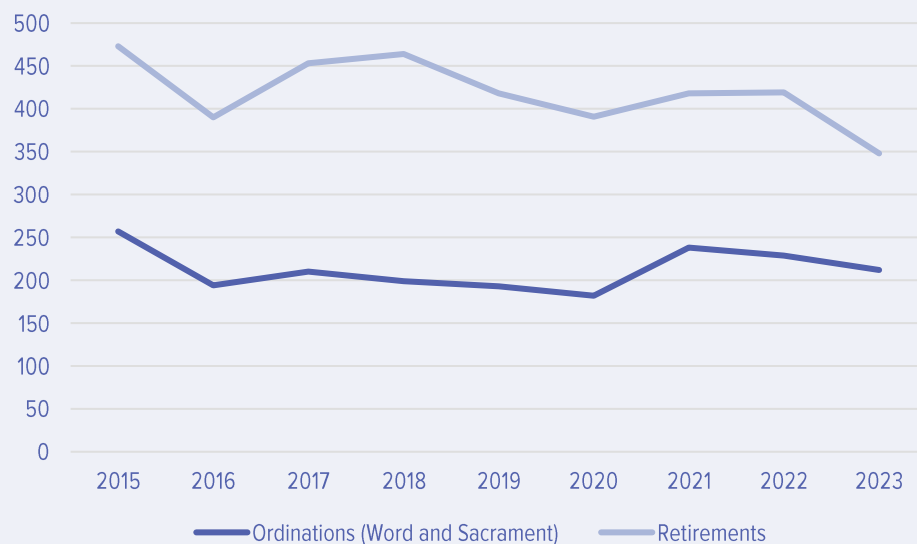
- Is there a shortage of rostered ministers?
- How are rostered ministry positions changing? Are these good-paying jobs or not?
- What kinds of positions might exist in the coming years? Or, what's the prospect for the future of rostered ministry?

In this section, we take up these questions to explore further the future need for pastoral leadership in the ELCA. We begin with the most pressing challenge facing congregations and their pastoral leaders: *the decreasing affordability of rostered ministers*. We then turn to an in-depth analysis of pastoral openings between 2015 and 2023.

## THE “SUPPLY” OF ROSTERED MINISTERS

One way to think about meeting the church’s need for pastoral leaders is to consider the “supply” and “demand” of rostered ministers. On the supply side of the equation, there are several relevant data points. We could, for example, consider the number of individuals entering candidacy and those who have been approved for call. We could also consider seminary enrollment trends, focusing particularly on ELCA students in Master of Divinity programs. An even simpler approach would be to examine the number of ordinations each year, since the vast majority of individuals are added to the roster through ordination. Similarly, the most common way an individual leaves the active roster is via retirement. Comparing ordinations and retirements offers a useful window into the supply of rostered ministers.

**Figure 3 — Ordinations v. Number of Retirements by Year, 2015–2023**



Source: Official Roster Records, Office of the Secretary, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

As Figure 3 shows, between 2015 and 2023, there were almost 2,000 ordinations in the ELCA whereas there were about 3,700 retirements — a net difference of about 1,700 rostered ministers. Put another way, on average, there are about 200 ordinations per year whereas there are about 400 retirements.

The average retirement age for a rostered minister was 66 in each year between 2015 and 2023. In our 2016 research report on the supply and demand of rostered ministers, we projected retirements for years 2015 through 2019. Table 4 shows that, on the whole, our projections were within a 15% differential. Table 5 shows what percentage of retirements happen across age ranges.

In an effort to anticipate future retirements, we repeated the methodology we adopted in 2016 to project the number of retirements between 2024 and 2029. While some have understandably feared a “cliff” of retirements where the church might suddenly experience a rapidly growing number of retirements, we project that the number of retirements will steadily decrease as the number of total rostered ministers also decreases (Table 6). If this historical trend continues and if the number of ordinations holds steady going forward, it is possible that the ELCA could close the gap between ordinations and retirements.

**Table 4 — Retirement Projections (2016) v. Actual Retirements**

	Projected	Actual	Difference
2015	449	473	5%
2016	436	390	–11%
2017	422	453	7%
2018	404	464	15%
2019	382	418	9%

Source: Official Roster Records, Office of the Secretary, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

**Table 5 – Historical Retirements of Active Pastors 55+ Years, 2015–2023**

	55-59	60-64	65-69	70-74	75+
% who retired	0.6%	5.9%	21.7%	19.4%	14.3%

Source: Official Roster Records, Office of the Secretary, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

**Table 6 – Retirement Projections, 2024–2029**  
*Based on Percentages of Active Pastors Retiring at Various Ages*

	55-59	60-64	65-69	70-74	75+	Total
2024	5	75	205	79	26	391
2025	5	67	192	76	29	368
2026	5	61	178	66	31	342
2027	5	56	160	65	35	321
2028	5	52	148	57	38	300
2029	5	48	137	54	37	280

Source: Official Roster Records, Office of the Secretary, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

In 2023, there were 7,156 active ministers of Word and Sacrament in the ELCA; of those, 6,013 were serving congregations. As we reported above, in 2023, there were 8,464 congregations. This means that even if every active pastor in the ELCA were serving a congregation, there still would not be enough for each congregation to have its own pastor. In this sense, there are not enough rostered ministers to go around.

However, this is not a full picture, because our research has identified a significant decrease in the number of congregations that can afford a full-time rostered minister. These congregations still have a need for pastoral leaders, but the question of affordability disrupts the supply-and-demand formula altogether. It is to this question that we now turn.

## THE AFFORDABILITY OF ROSTERED MINISTERS

Affordability is a surprisingly deceptive concept to research. On the one hand, it is tempting to think about affordability in terms of whether a congregation has the funds to cover the costs of a rostered minister. On the other hand, in practice, the available income is only one part of the equation because affordability is also a reflection of the implicit or explicit values and priorities that shape congregational spending. For many congregations, having their “own” pastor is an existential matter, part of their very self-understanding as the church. For others, imagining any other arrangement to meet their pastoral needs proves difficult.

To begin, we started with a question: How many congregations can comfortably afford a full-time rostered minister? We then turned to that same research from the Lake Institute on Faith & Giving described above. Table 7 describes projected spending for a sample ELCA congregation, using the average total income in 2022. To better understand affordability, we charted projected personnel spending for congregations reporting total income between \$60,000 and \$300,000. To develop a projection for the personnel costs specific to rostered ministers, we allocated a conservative estimate of \$10,000 within total personnel costs to account for the typical part-time roles many congregations employ such as organists, church administrators, and custodians.

**Table 7** — Affordability Zones Based on Projected Spending and Estimated Rostered Minister Costs, 2022

Income	Personnel	Rostered Minister
\$300,000	\$162,000	\$152,000
\$280,000	\$151,200	\$141,200
\$260,000	\$140,400	\$130,400
\$240,000	\$129,600	\$119,600
\$220,000	\$118,800	\$108,800
\$200,000	\$108,000	\$98,000
\$180,000	\$97,200	\$87,200
\$160,000	\$86,400	\$76,400
\$140,000	\$75,600	\$65,600
\$120,000	\$64,800	\$54,800
\$100,000	\$54,000	\$44,000
\$80,000	\$43,200	\$33,200
\$60,000	\$32,400	\$22,400

Challenging
  Creative
  Comfortable

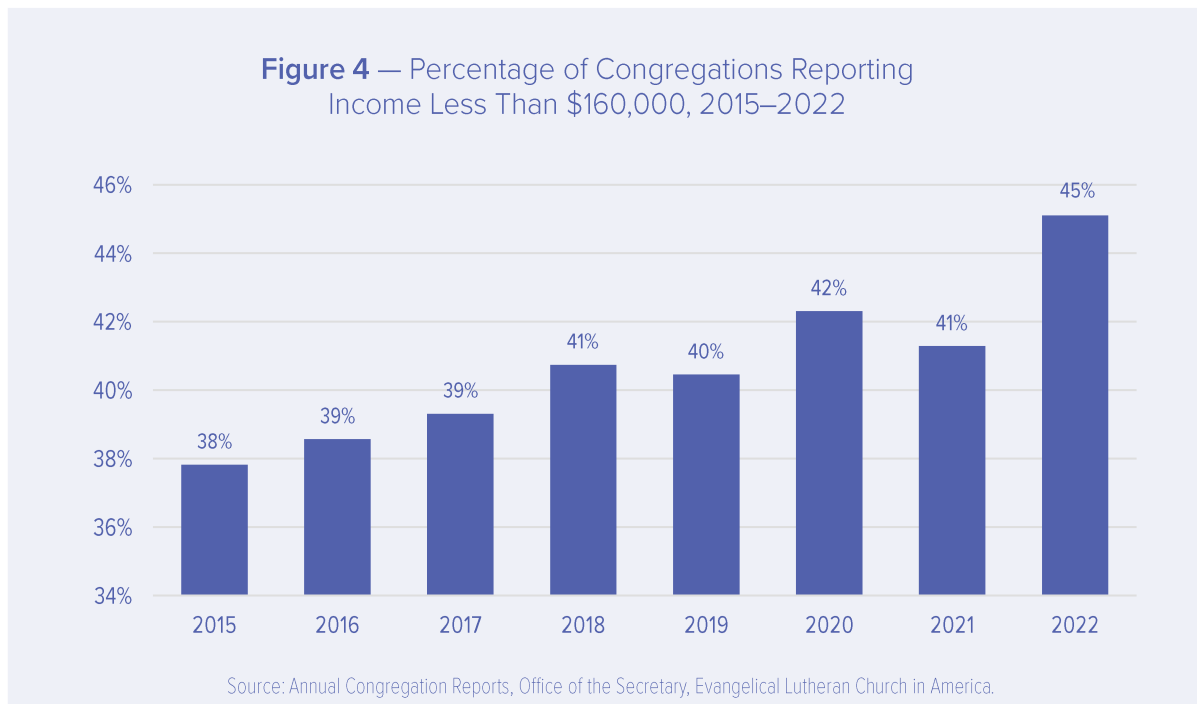
Source: Select Synod Compensation Guidelines/National Study of Congregation Economic Practices, Lake Institute.

To estimate the costs of a rostered minister, we calculated a “high-end” figure to account for urban and other high-cost communities, using an average of salaries for first call, five to 10 years of experience and 10-plus years of experience, and drawing on guidelines from three mostly urban synods. We then calculated a “low-end” figure to account for rural and other low-cost communities, using an average of salaries for first call, five to 10 years of experience and 10-plus years of experience, and drawing on guidelines from three mostly rural synods. The figures included in the table above are from synod guidelines that included base salaries plus Social Security allowances. Because exact costs of retirement and health care benefits can vary depending on the situation, we used a conservative estimate of \$30,000 across all rostered minister cost projections.

Combining our spending projections with our estimated rostered minister cost projections allowed us to identify three zones of affordability: comfortable, creative, and challenging. Table 7 shows the breakdown for each of these zones, using a scale of congregational income that ranges from \$300,000 to \$60,000.

From this analysis, we conclude that \$160,000 represents an important benchmark for thinking about the affordability of rostered ministers. It is a figure that focuses, however, on low-end costs. In some communities, the cost of a rostered minister would exceed \$110,000, requiring total income above \$240,000. It is important to note that there are a wide range of factors that shape affordability and that, at times, congregations with relatively low total income can still afford a rostered minister. Other congregations choose to spend much more than 54% of their income on a rostered minister. There may be instances when spending considerably more than half the budget on personnel makes sense, but that decision will have a negative impact on the congregation's capacity to engage in ministry and mission. These affordability ranges are not absolute; rather, they represent what is typically the case, and we hope they will provide leaders with new ways of thinking about and talking about the question of affordability.

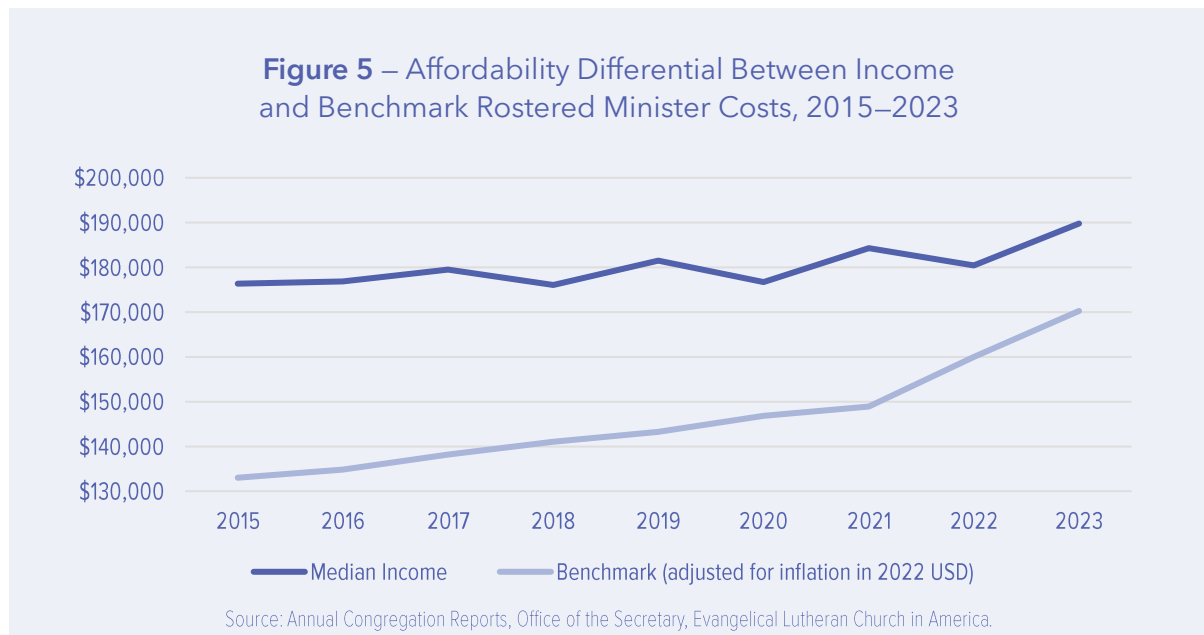
Given our \$160,000 benchmark, we conclude, based on data from annual congregation reports, that about 45% of all ELCA congregations cannot comfortably afford a full-time rostered minister. Figure 4 shows that the percentage of congregations reporting total income under this benchmark — when controlling for inflation — has grown from 38% in 2015 to 45% in 2022.



*About 45% of all ELCA congregations cannot comfortably afford a full-time rostered minister.*



Even more troubling, however, is that the gap between the income congregations report and the income needed to afford a pastor has significantly closed since 2015. In 2015, the median income of an ELCA congregation was more than \$40,000 above what would have been needed to afford a pastor that year. By 2023, the median income of an ELCA congregation was about \$20,000 above that amount (Figure 5). This declining affordability differential illustrates that congregational income has not kept pace with growing inflation and that this has created additional challenges for the affordability of rostered ministers.



After taking affordability into account, we see no evidence of a system-wide shortage of rostered ministers. This analysis implies, however, that affordability will continue to be a major challenge for the future of pastoral leadership in the ELCA. It is a dynamic that negatively impacts congregations because those that cannot afford a rostered minister have fewer options for pastoral leadership. It is a dynamic that also has a negative impact on rostered ministers because they now have fewer opportunities to serve in full-time ministry. But perhaps the most significant impact of this decline in affordability is the disruptive effect it will have on the denomination’s system of recruiting, forming and placing pastoral leaders. Our current system is designed to produce rostered ministers, yet rostered ministers are increasingly not able to be deployed because they cannot be afforded.

Beyond affordability, this study has also identified new insights into the kind of pastoral positions that remain available to rostered ministers. It is to these insights that we now turn in the next section. But first, a brief intermission to clarify some important terms related to these positions.

## DEFINING SOME KEY TERMS

As we have sought to better understand pastoral leadership in the ELCA today, it has come to our attention that we do not always share common language when describing key aspects of congregational life. Two terms that can become especially confusing are “vacancies” and “openings.” Some use the term “vacancy” to describe a congregation at any point of a



pastoral transition. Others use the two terms interchangeably. The challenge with this imprecise use of terms is that it can lead to unintended misrepresentations of current needs. In this report, we define these two key terms in this way:

A *vacancy* is a congregation in transition that:

- Has no regularly called pastor (it may have an interim).
- Has no approved Ministry Site Profile.
- Has no alternative plan for pastoral leadership such as a contract pastor or a synod-authorized minister.

An *opening* is a congregation in transition that:

- May be calling additional rostered ministers but most often does not have a regularly called pastor.
- Has an approved Ministry Site Profile.
- Is actively in a call process.

This distinction is important for a few reasons. First, defining these terms this way allows us to distinguish between congregations engaged or not engaged in an active call process. Some congregations are not yet in an active process but will be in the coming months. Others may not ever enter our standard call process.



Photo: The Rev. Dr. Phil Ruge-Jones, pastor, Grace Lutheran Church, Eau Claire, Wis., presides at Holy Communion. *Used with permission.*





Second, the only positions for which rostered ministers can interview are openings. Often the number of vacancies in the ELCA is larger than the number of openings. In this way, “vacancies” more fully describes the need for pastoral leaders in the ELCA, whereas “openings” best describes the opportunities available to rostered ministers.

In what follows, whenever we use “openings,” we are relying on analysis of nearly 5,000 Ministry Site Profiles submitted between 2015 and 2023. We realize that not all pastoral positions in the ELCA are filled using a call process facilitated by a Ministry Site Profile. Synod and churchwide roles, for example, rarely utilize them. And there are a variety of reasons why a congregation, in collaboration with synod staff, may deviate from this standard process. Collectively, however, the information provided below represents the best and most comprehensive data on pastoral openings in the ELCA.

HISTORICAL TRENDS IN PASTORAL OPENINGS

The transition from a pastoral vacancy to an opening represents an important milestone in a congregation’s discernment. By this point, a call committee has been formed, and considerable time and energy have been spent listening to members of the congregation, assessing the needs of the community and identifying priorities for the congregation’s next leader. The result is that Ministry Site Profiles contain a wellspring of insightful information about the future need for pastoral leaders in the ELCA. In our analysis of this data, we identified the following key findings:

- Overall, the percentage of ELCA congregations with pastoral openings is relatively stable; however, as the number of congregations declines, so do opportunities for rostered ministers.
- Pastoral openings are geographically concentrated in the Midwest and parts of the Mid-Atlantic region.
- The prototypical pastoral opening in the ELCA is a solo pastorate in a small or medium-sized congregation.

Let us now explore each of these findings in greater detail.

Between 2015 and 2023, the overall percentage of ELCA congregations with a pastoral opening was relatively small — 6% or 7% each year. This stability within the system is encouraging. However, the total number of pastoral openings, and therefore the number of opportunities available to rostered ministers, dropped considerably over this period (29%), as Table 7 shows. In 2023, there were just 471 openings, compared to 660 openings in 2015.

Table 7 – Pastoral Openings as Percentage of All Congregations, 2015–2023

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Number of MSPs	660	563	498	534	532	384	549	578	471
Number of Congregations	9195	9122	9039	8974	8892	8823	8724	8594	8464
Percentage of Congregations	7%	6%	6%	6%	6%	4%	6%	7%	6%

Source: Ministry Site Profile Data, Christian Community and Leadership, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

During this same period, 6 out of 10 pastoral openings were in regions 3, 5 and 8. Region 3 — which alone accounted for one-third of all openings — includes the six Minnesota synods along with the three synods in North Dakota and South Dakota. Region 5 includes 12 synods

in Illinois, Iowa and Wisconsin. Finally, Region 8 includes eight synods in Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Maryland, Delaware and the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area.

Though the distribution of pastoral calls concentrates in these three geographic regions, it should be noted that these are hardly monolithic. They include urban centers such as Chicago, Milwaukee, Minneapolis–St. Paul, Philadelphia and Washington, D.C. They also include some of the most rural communities in the Dakotas, northeastern Iowa and Pennsylvania. And, as one might expect, they include everything in between.

Since 2015, the remaining regions each had less than 10% of pastoral openings, with the fewest number of openings occurring in the western part of the country along with states in the middle part of the country and Texas (regions 1, 2 and 4).

**Table 8 – Distribution of Pastoral Openings by Region, 2015–2023**

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Region 1	32	39	28	27	47	28	45	34	32
Region 2	42	34	40	36	46	27	32	40	32
Region 3	157	136	118	111	105	87	142	170	116
Region 4	64	34	35	43	39	24	36	44	37
Region 5	124	93	77	95	109	60	96	104	92
Region 6	66	53	47	62	36	43	49	39	33
Region 7	62	70	47	54	47	40	58	36	35
Region 8	65	58	50	64	45	32	50	53	36
Region 9	47	46	56	42	58	43	41	58	58
Total	659	563	498	534	532	384	549	578	471

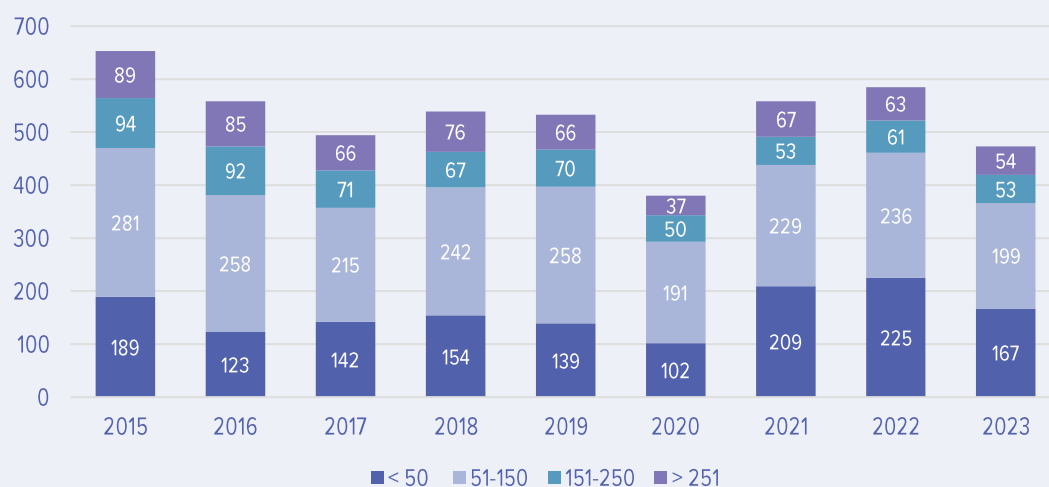
Source: Ministry Site Profile Data, Christian Community and Leadership, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

Increasingly, the church's process of candidacy and first-call placement are regional processes. How the regional distribution of pastoral openings will serve or complicate that process is yet to be seen. One possible application of this finding, however, might be to better inform candidates about the historic trends of pastoral openings in the regions where those candidates desire to be placed.

Not only are pastoral openings concentrated geographically, they also concentrate by the type of position and congregational size. Fully three-quarters of all pastoral openings were in very small congregations (average worship attendance less than 50) or small-to-medium congregations (average worship attendance 51-150). Likewise, two-thirds of all pastoral openings were for solo pastor positions. Neither of these proportions has changed markedly since 2015. Given these realities, it should come as no surprise that just 2 out of 10 openings are for senior pastors and just 1 out of 10 openings is for an associate pastor.

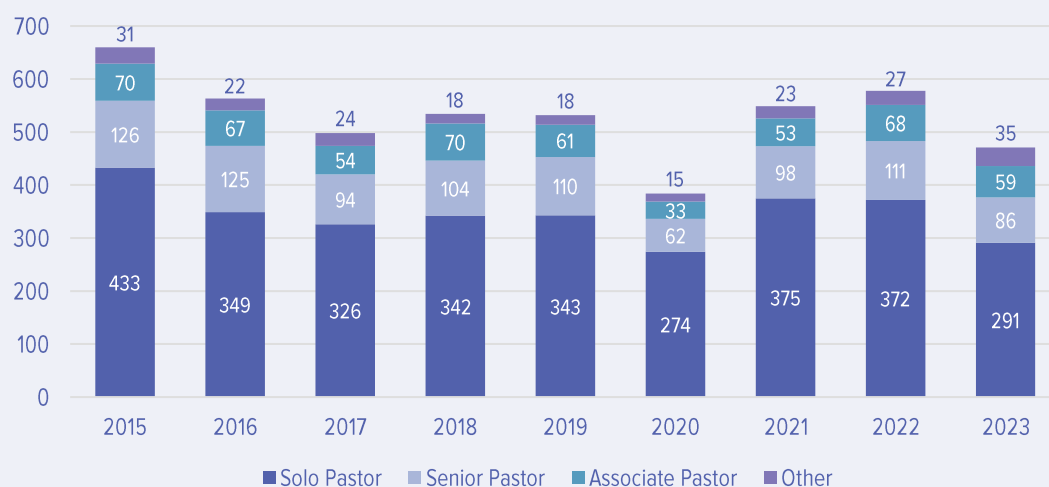
One important implication of this finding is that the very small number of associate pastor positions presents a structural problem for ELCA rostered ministers who are seeking an opportunity to serve on a pastoral team. Some rostered ministers at the beginning of their service would particularly benefit from the opportunity to grow while serving alongside a more experienced senior pastor. The reality is, however, that very few of those opportunities currently exist in the ELCA.

**Figure 6 – Distribution of Pastoral Openings by Congregational Size, 2015–2023**



Source: Ministry Site Profile Data, Christian Community and Leadership, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

**Figure 7 – Distribution of Pastoral Openings by Position Type, 2015–2023**



Source: Ministry Site Profile Data, Christian Community and Leadership, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

When congregations are preparing to call a new pastor, they are invited to think about their priorities in two ways: critical ministry tasks and the particular gifts for ministry. For the former, call committees must select five tasks from a list of 40 options. For the latter, call committees are invited to identify five priority gifts. Tables 9 and 10 list the top 10 tasks and gifts identified by congregations between 2015 and 2023. While few will find these results surprising, it is notable how few of these items were chosen by a majority of congregations. This indicates that beyond a few core items, congregations identify a diverse set of needs particular to them and their next season of ministry.

**Table 9 — Top Ministry Tasks for Pastoral Openings, 2015–2023**

Ministry Task	Frequency	% of MSPs
Preaching/Worship	5713	87%
Pastoral Care and Visitation	4635	71%
Youth and Family Ministry	4000	61%
Building a Sense of Community	2205	34%
Evangelism/Mission	2036	31%
Christian Education	1846	28%
Spiritual Formation/Direction	1352	21%
Administration	1073	16%
Innovation/Creativity	979	15%

**Table 10 — Top Priority Ministry Gifts for Pastoral Openings, 2015–2023**

Ministry Gifts	Frequency	% of MSPs
Help people develop their spiritual life	4686	72%
Be an effective communicator	4673	71%
Be active in visitation of members and non-members	3034	46%
Be effective in working with youth	3006	46%
Be able to share leadership and work in a team	2562	39%
Build a sense of community among the people with whom he/she works	2405	37%
Being joy and humor to relationships	1486	23%
Be effective in working with children	1313	20%
Be an effective teacher	1296	20%
Provide care and nurture	1175	18%

Source: Ministry Site Profile Data, Christian Community and Leadership, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.



## CONCLUSION

The analysis included in this section has provided a first-of-its-kind glimpse into key dynamics present in today's rostered minister "workforce." Decreasing affordability has left rostered ministers with fewer opportunities than ever before. Those pastoral openings that do remain are geographically concentrated and largely solo pastorates in smaller congregations. There is no doubt that God regularly calls individuals who fit that exact typology of a pastor. For those who do not fit that type or for those who are more geographically restricted themselves, however, opportunities for full-time career ministry are becoming somewhat more limited. Perhaps this is why synod staff regularly report a shortage of candidates for call. Where there are limitations for our professionalized model of pastoral leaders (rostered ministers), there are also opportunities for new models of pastoral ministry emerging across the ELCA.

## Leadership Formation

Thus far, this report has explored the state of ELCA congregations and rostered ministry as a workforce. This final section considers the formation of pastoral leaders through recent data on seminary enrollment and through newly available data on the use of synod-authorized ministers.

### LEADERSHIP FORMATION FOR ROSTERED MINISTRY

The most common pattern of leadership formation for pastoral leaders in the ELCA is through graduate theological education in seminaries. Because of this, one way to anticipate the pipeline of pastoral leaders that will be available in the future is to consider current trends in ELCA seminary enrollment. When it comes to the future need for pastoral leaders, however, choosing which data points to focus on is not as straightforward as one may imagine.

Trends related to total enrollment may serve as a window into the relative health of our seminaries (Figure 8). However, this may not tell us as much as we might hope about the pipeline of pastoral leaders. Most ELCA seminaries offer a range of programs, including certificate programs and advanced degrees. In some cases, these additional offerings account for as much as half of their total enrollment.

Many of the leaders who graduate from these programs will not pursue congregational ministry in the ELCA. Moreover, many ELCA seminaries serve ecumenical student bodies. As of 2022, ELCA students as a percentage of total enrollment at ELCA seminaries ranged from 48% (Trinity Lutheran Seminary) to 94% (Wartburg Theological Seminary). Most often, ecumenical students make up 30-40% of an ELCA seminary's total enrollment.

Focusing on ELCA students in Master of Divinity (M.Div.) programs provides a better metric for the pipeline of future pastors — though it too presents challenges. While most M.Div. programs require four years of study, seminaries increasingly provide more flexible pathways to graduation through part-time study and distance learning. This complicates any exact projection of how many leaders may be available in the future. Knowing just how many of those M.Div. students will complete the candidacy process is even more difficult. For example, previously, ELCA Research and Evaluation found that among candidates who applied between 2010 and 2012, only 41% were serving an ELCA congregation in 2017.<sup>13</sup>



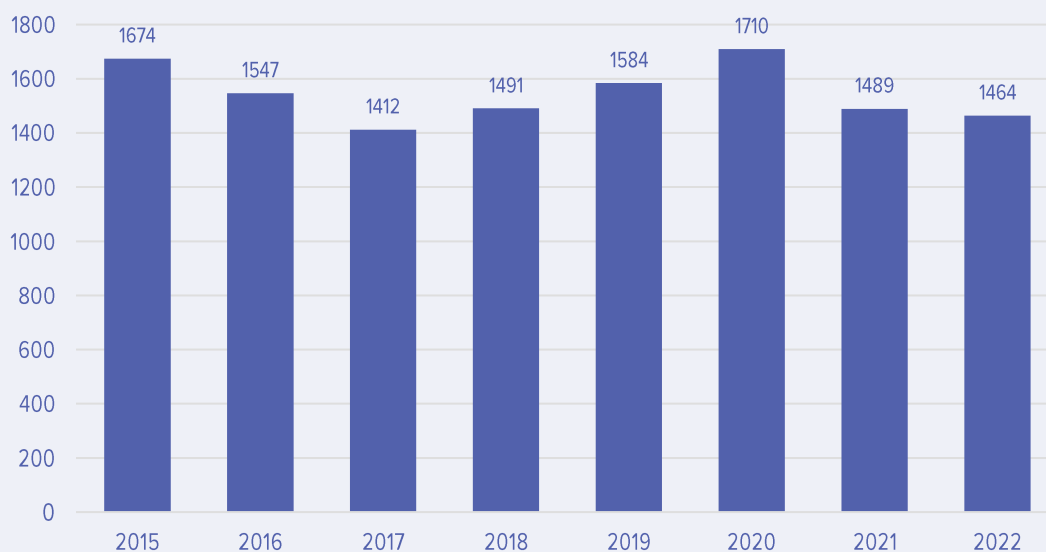
*While ELCA M.Div. enrollment has declined by almost 20% since 2015, that decline has been mitigated by the increase in TEEM students over the same period.*



Finally, students in M.Div. programs are not the only candidates in formation to become ministers of Word and Sacrament in the ELCA. Each year, about 50 students from non-ELCA seminaries affiliate to complete their Lutheran formation as a requirement of the candidacy process. Additionally, students in the Theological Education for Emerging Ministries (TEEM) program are also engaged in a pattern of formation for pastoral leadership.

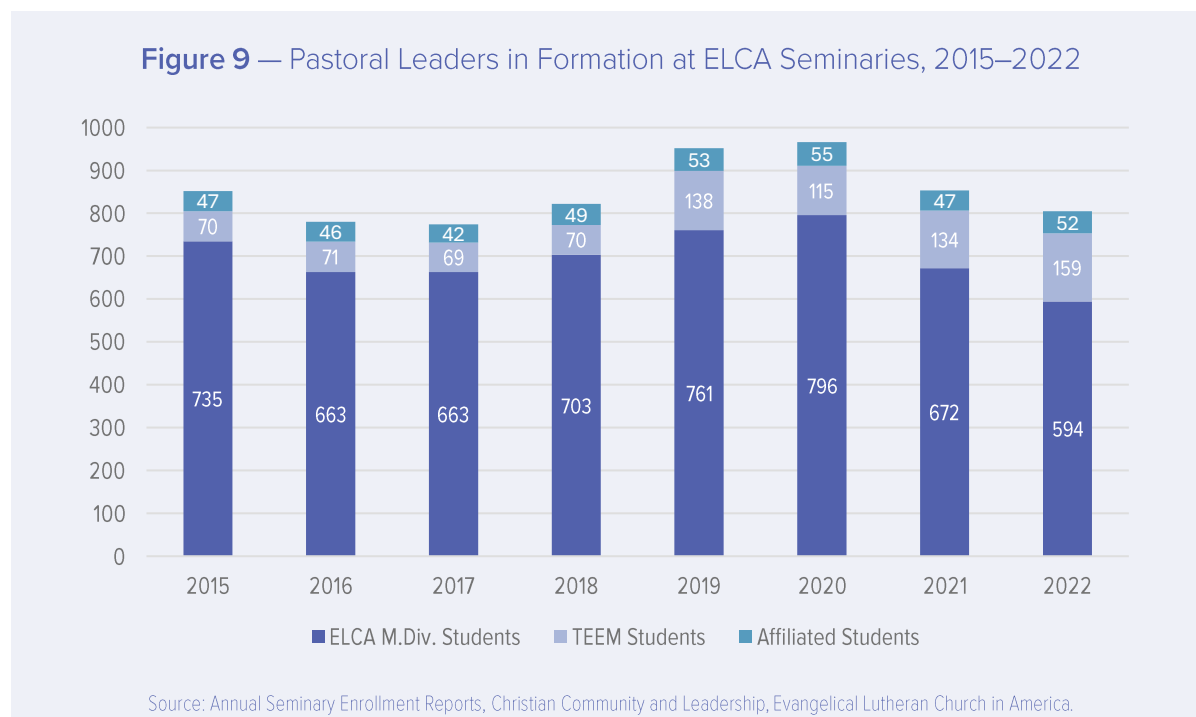
For the purposes of this analysis, “pastoral leaders in formation” is a combined metric that includes ELCA students in M.Div. programs, affiliated students and TEEM students. Figure 9 shows this combined metric and illustrates that, while ELCA M.Div. enrollment has declined by almost 20% since 2015, that decline has been mitigated by the increase in TEEM students over the same period.

**Figure 8 – Total Enrollment at ELCA Seminaries by Head Count, 2015–2022**



Source: Annual Seminary Enrollment Reports, Christian Community and Leadership, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

Comparing ELCA seminary enrollment to data publicly available from the Association of Theological Schools provides some important context for this analysis. Between 2015 and 2022, ATS schools in the United States saw total enrollment increase slightly (9%) while enrollments in M.Div. programs at ATS schools in the U.S. declined slightly (7%).



Given these trends among pastoral leaders in formation at ELCA seminaries, will we have enough pastoral leaders to meet the future demand in congregations? It is a critical question and one that deserves a nuanced answer. To start, consider some basic facts of this equation, given what we now know about the state of ELCA congregations and rostered ministry as a workforce:

*The total unmet need for pastoral leaders in the ELCA each year is reflected in the number of vacancies and openings — those congregations without a regularly called pastor.*

Those congregations that need and can afford a pastor will be reflected in the number of openings represented by Ministry Site Profiles. Given historical trends, the ELCA can anticipate approximately 500 openings in each of the next five years. If historical trends hold steady, about 200 congregations each year will be open to a first-call pastor. Some of those will be able to afford only a first call candidate. There are several additional factors:

- The total number of congregations will likely continue to decline at a rate of 1% per year, so by 2029 there will be about 7,900 ELCA congregations. Though this decrease is not dramatic, it will mean less overall demand for pastoral leaders five years from now.
- Retirements among ELCA pastors will continue to outpace the number of ordinations, so the overall pool of active pastors in congregational calls will decrease slightly.

- The percentage of ELCA congregations that cannot afford a full-time rostered minister is not likely to decrease. If current trends continue, in 2029 there may be only 4,300 or so congregations that can comfortably afford a full-time pastor. If inflation rises again, the ELCA could see another significant increase in the percentage of congregations that cannot afford their pastors, which will increase the pressure on those congregations with called pastors and on those entering the call process.

*In the short term, declining ELCA M.Div. enrollment will result in a shortage of first call candidates, beginning in 2025 and lasting at least through 2028.*

This reality may or may not impact congregations that are open to first-call candidates but can afford a more experienced pastor. Congregations that can afford only a first call candidate will likely wait longer for an appropriate candidate or be driven to consider alternatives to rostered ministers.

Congregations that remain vacancies without becoming openings are difficult to account for in this analysis because the ELCA lacks comprehensive data on how these congregations fill their pastoral needs. Where available, some use pulpit supply pastors. Others engage part-time contract services from rostered ministers (retired or active). Increasingly, congregations turn to synod-authorized ministers (SAMs).

Photo: The Rev. Manuel Retamoza, pastor, St. Andrew's Lutheran Church, San Diego, Calif., at 2022 Churchwide Assembly. *Used with permission.*



As part of this study on pastoral leaders, ELCA Research and Evaluation conducted a survey of all 65 synods to better understand how and to what extent they use SAMs to meet the needs of their congregations.<sup>14</sup> This survey found that at least 756 ELCA congregations (about 9% of all congregations) are served by SAMs. Their use, however, is unevenly distributed, with 80% of all congregations served by SAMs located in just one-third of synods. This survey also found that SAMs lead their congregations in much the same way as rostered ministers. They preach, preside at the sacraments, lead worship (including funerals and — where state law permits — marriages) and offer pastoral care. Finally, this survey found that affordability and challenging community contexts are driving an increased use of SAMs in the ELCA.

For more detailed reporting on this survey, see our research report “The Use of Synod-Authorized Ministers in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America” (2024). Given the broader trends noted in this report, synod-authorized ministers have become an important part of how the ELCA meets the pastoral leadership needs of its congregations. For this reason, we now turn to the leadership formation of SAMs.

## LEADERSHIP FORMATION FOR SYNOD-AUTHORIZED MINISTRY

In 2024, synods reported that 313 synod-authorized ministers were currently in formation. Unlike most rostered ministers, SAMs undergo formation concurrently with their ministry leadership.<sup>15</sup> This means that the 313 SAMs now in formation are not formally part of the pipeline of future pastoral leaders; rather, they are already meeting the pastoral needs of congregations that the pipeline would otherwise need to serve. In addition to those currently in formation, synods reported that over the past five years, an additional 469 SAMs had completed formation. This means that, since 2019, SAMs have begun serving 782 congregations that would have otherwise needed rostered ministers. It is important to note that this number is similar to the total ELCA M.Div. enrollment during those years and that there are twice as many SAMs currently in formation as there are TEEM candidates in formation.

## CONCLUSION

This report began by citing changes in today’s religious landscape. It then turned to changes within ELCA congregations and rostered ministry. This final section has sketched just some of the ways in which this church’s patterns of leadership formation have changed too. In summary, since 2015, seminary enrollment (especially among ELCA M.Div. students) has declined — a predictable trend, given the declining number of congregations and deeper decline in participation. At the same time, nontraditional forms of leadership formation such as the TEEM and SAM programs have experienced extraordinary growth. Gains in these alternative models have significantly offset what would otherwise be devastating net losses in the number of pastoral leaders in the ELCA; however, the processes that place these leaders are distinct from the conventional call-and-mobility processes that serve rostered ministry. As a result, leadership formation in the ELCA today is a patchwork of processes, programs and patterns, facilitated by a combination of seminaries, lay schools and other synod-led training initiatives.

## Summary of Key Findings

To summarize this report, we have identified the following 12 key findings. Though these findings are among the most important insights available from this research, we encourage all stakeholders to read the full report and discern for themselves the relevance of these insights to their local contexts.

1. The decades since the ELCA's formation in 1988 have been marked by profound religious decline. In 1988, 80% of U.S. adults identified as Christian, and half attended worship regularly. Today only 60% identify as Christian, and less than 40% attend worship regularly.
2. More recently, the only religious demographic growing in the U.S. is the religiously unaffiliated. About 25% of U.S. adults identify as unaffiliated, and it is unlikely that they will be joining our congregations anytime soon — 90% say they are not looking to join a religion.
3. Since 2015, the number of ELCA congregations has slowly declined, at a rate of about 1% each year. This relative organizational stability is notable, given changes in the broader religious landscape and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Whether this rate can be sustained is less clear.
4. The geography of ELCA congregations has remained constant in recent years: about half are in rural/small-town settings, and half are urban/suburban. Migration patterns within the U.S. population continue to shift toward urban living, and ELCA mission-development efforts are attempting to keep pace with this shift.
5. Today the ELCA is composed mostly of very small congregations with average worship attendance under 50. This is a significant change from only a few years ago, when most ELCA congregations had average worship attendance between 50 and 250.
6. In 2022, the median income of an ELCA congregation was about \$180,000 — about the same as it was in 2015. Because of economic inflation in recent years, ELCA congregations have experienced a decline in their purchasing power. This decreased financial capacity may present real challenges in the near future.
7. This study has identified \$160,000 as an important benchmark for affording a full-time pastor. The benchmark is based on a congregation that spends about 50% of its budget on personnel. A congregation may spend much more, but there are significant consequences for mission and ministry.
8. Based on our benchmark, we estimate that 45% of ELCA congregations cannot afford a full-time pastor. This represents an increase of 7 percentage points since 2015.
9. Each year, about 6% of all ELCA congregations have a pastoral transition that results in an opening for a rostered minister. About 40% of those congregations in transition indicate openness to a first-call candidate.



10. The total number of pastoral openings has declined by almost 30% since 2015. Because of congregational decline and decreasing affordability, the number of opportunities for rostered ministers has declined. Of those openings available, 75% are in congregations with under 150 in average worship attendance, and about 60% are solo pastorates.
11. Given the drop in ELCA M.Div. student enrollment, we predict a shortage of first call candidates, beginning in 2025 and extending to 2028. The impact of this shortage is unclear. Some congregations will turn to more experienced rostered ministers, but others may turn to alternative leadership.
12. The challenge of affordability will continue to drive an increased use of synod-authorized ministers (SAM) in parts of the ELCA. Today 9% of ELCA congregations are served by a SAM. We expect that figure to increase and have identified additional areas for further guidance and support of this emerging model of pastoral leadership.

Photo: Graduates at Luther Seminary are received by the faculty after commencement. *Used with permission.*



## Appendix: Data and Methods

“The Future Need for Pastoral Leaders in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America” is a mixed-methods research study drawing on diverse data sets that include large, comprehensive data on congregations, rostered ministers, relevant external data, and qualitative data collected through focus groups. “Part One: Trends in Pastoral Transitions and Affordability” contains the quantitative finding of this research or, in other words, those insights that draw on historical trends and statistical analysis of data representing the ELCA as a whole.

In conducting our research and analysis, several distinct data sources were used.

### **Official Records of Congregations and Rostered Ministers**

The Secretary of the ELCA is charged with maintaining official records of congregations and maintaining the roster of Ministers of Word and Sacrament and the roster of Ministers of Word and Service. Annual reports on these and other relevant records can be found at:

[www.elca.org/directory/statistics-reports](http://www.elca.org/directory/statistics-reports)

These records are well documented through constitutional and legal processes, and therefore, the data contained in these reports are highly accurate and reliable. Because these records depend on updates from synods, there can be lags in the arrival of the most up-to-date data.

### **Annual Congregation Reports**

Each year, every congregation, synod-authorized worshiping community (SAWC) and new start is invited to provide information about its people, finances, and resources through the Annual Congregation Report. This provides the churchwide organization and synods with a record of the congregations and worshiping communities that make up the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). Throughout this report, we have used the most recently available data from these reports — either 2022 or 2023. Following standard practices among denominational researchers, data from previous reporting years is pulled forward when a congregation does not submit a current annual report. Sample forms and additional resources related to the collection of Annual Congregation Report data can be found at:

[www.elca.org/about/congregations/annual-congregation-report](http://www.elca.org/about/congregations/annual-congregation-report)

The quality of data provided through the Annual Congregation Reports is dependent on the recordkeeping of congregations. In many cases, this process yields very accurate and reliable data. In other cases, a congregation may rely on estimates or observations from a limited number of individuals. Each year, the churchwide organization receives annual reports from more than 70% of all congregations. Overall, this strong response rate ensures that our Annual Congregation Report data provides a useful window into congregational life.

## Ministry Site Profile Database

When a congregation seeks to call a new rostered minister, its call committee completes a Ministry Site Profile outlining demographics in the community, challenges the congregation may be facing, and their priorities in selecting a new rostered minister. While primarily used to assist synod staff in the mobility and call process, these forms provide a wide range of important data on the pastoral needs of congregations. This study is the first time ELCA researchers have analyzed this data. Sample Ministry Site Profile forms can be found at:

[www.elca.org/call-process/ministry-sites](http://www.elca.org/call-process/ministry-sites)

Similar to Annual Congregation Reports, the quality of data provided through the Ministry Site Profile process is dependent on the recordkeeping of congregations. However, because this process facilitates the call of a new rostered minister, there are additional incentives for congregations to provide the most accurate data possible.

## Seminary Enrollment Reports

Each year, ELCA seminaries receive grants from the churchwide organization. Administered by the Christian Community and Leadership home area, these grants are determined by a formula that depends on annual reporting provided by seminary registrars. These reports provide a wide range of data on enrollment in degree programs and demographic information on the seminary's student body.

## Additional External Data

During this study, ELCA researchers also consulted publicly available data from the Association of Theological Schools. Access to this data can be found at: [www.ats.edu/Research-and-Data](http://www.ats.edu/Research-and-Data)

Additionally, ELCA researchers consulted external research on congregations and religious participation in the United States from the following sources:

"National Study of Congregations' Economic Practices," Lake Institute on Faith & Giving at the Lilly Family School of Philanthropy, Indiana University: [lakeinstitute.org/research/lake-institute-projects/nscep/](http://lakeinstitute.org/research/lake-institute-projects/nscep/)

"Religious Landscape Study," Pew Research Center: [www.pewresearch.org/religious-landscape-study/database/](http://www.pewresearch.org/religious-landscape-study/database/)

"National Congregations Study," Duke University: [www.nationalcongregationsstudy.org/](http://www.nationalcongregationsstudy.org/)

"Religious Change in America," Public Religion Research Institute: [www.prrri.org/research/religious-change-in-america/](http://www.prrri.org/research/religious-change-in-america/)

## Methods

To analyze the data above, ELCA researchers used descriptive statistics to calculate changes across a wide range of variables. In some instances, when reporting percentages, totals may not add up to 100 due to rounding. All analyses were performed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software. For additional information, contact us at [research@elca.org](mailto:research@elca.org).

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, “Together for Ministry: Final Report and Actions on the Study of Ministry, 1988-1993” (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America), 16, [elcamediaresources.blob.core.windows.net/cdn/wp-content/uploads/Together\\_for\\_Ministry.pdf](https://elcamediaresources.blob.core.windows.net/cdn/wp-content/uploads/Together_for_Ministry.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Gallop, “Religion,” Gallop, Inc., 2024, [news.gallup.com/poll/1690/religion.aspx](https://news.gallup.com/poll/1690/religion.aspx). Religious affiliation has been tracked since 1948, whereas frequency of worship attendance has been tracked since 1992.

<sup>4</sup> Pew Research Center, “Religious ‘Nones’ in America: Who They Are and What They Believe,” Pew Research Center, January 2024, 16-21, [www.pewresearch.org/religion/2024/01/24/religious-nones-in-america-who-they-are-and-what-they-believe/](https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2024/01/24/religious-nones-in-america-who-they-are-and-what-they-believe/).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Public Religion Research Institute, “Religious Change in America,” Public Religion Research Institute, March 27, 2024, [www.prrri.org/research/religious-change-in-america/](https://www.prrri.org/research/religious-change-in-america/).

<sup>7</sup> Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, “The Supply and Demand of Clergy in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America” (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2016).

<sup>8</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, “Nation’s Urban and Rural Populations Shift Following 2020 Census,” U.S. Census Bureau, December 29, 2022, [www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2022/urban-rural-populations.html](https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2022/urban-rural-populations.html).

<sup>9</sup> Unpublished analysis provided by ELCA Research and Evaluation, using data provided by ELCA Christian Community and Leadership unit, September 2024.

<sup>10</sup> Hartford Institute for Religion Research, “Back to Normal? The Mixed Messages of Congregational Recovery Coming Out of the Pandemic,” Hartford Institute for Religion Research, August 2023, 2, [www.covidreligionresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Epic-4-2.pdf](https://www.covidreligionresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Epic-4-2.pdf).

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>12</sup> Lake Institute on Faith & Giving, “National Study of Congregations’ Economic Practices,” Lake Institute on Faith & Giving, 2022, 27, [lakeinstitute.org/research/lake-institute-projects/nscep/](https://lakeinstitute.org/research/lake-institute-projects/nscep/).

<sup>13</sup> Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, “A Review of Candidacy Applications Submitted January 1, 2010, Through May 23, 2017” (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America), 7.

<sup>14</sup> Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, “Research Report: The Use of Synod-Authorized Ministers in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America” (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2024), 3.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.







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