



**North/West Lower  
Michigan Synod**

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## **Sab·bat·i·cal: A Rest or Break from Work**

*"Moreover I gave them my Sabbaths, as a sign between me and them, so that they might know that I the Lord sanctify them" (Ezekiel 20:12)*

This message comes to you as Bishop Satterlee is enjoying the first month of a well-deserved 3-month sabbatical planned with the full encouragement and support of Synod Council in accordance with the *synod's sabbatical guidelines* for all rostered ministers. A link to the [2024 Compensation Guidelines](#) is provided on the synod website for reference (see Appendix C for the sabbatical guidelines).

**What is a sabbatical?** A sabbatical (from the Hebrew *šabat* or *sabbath*; Latin *sabbaticus*; and Greek *sabbatikos*) is an extended period of time intentionally spent on things like study, travel, rest, renewal, personal development, reinforcement and rejuvenation of relationships with God and others – activities outside of the routine job that take place without the demands and stress of daily responsibilities.

**Why are sabbaticals a blessing for our rostered ministers?** Many parishioners believe the call of a rostered minister is relatively stress-free, with the primary focus centered on weekend worship and related activities. In reality, pastors and deacons across our synod work tirelessly throughout each week to meet the strategic needs of their congregation(s) – including worship leadership, education and Bible studies, service projects, community support and the like. In addition, we rely on our pastors to serve as our "shepherds" during congregational conflict, during our more personal events such as baptisms, weddings, funerals, and as they provide 24/7 pastoral care and counseling in times of need. At the synod level, the bishop also serves as "shepherd" to rostered ministers (pastors and deacons) across the synod. Since the pandemic, there has been an enhanced need to help these leaders manage conflict within their congregations along with the feelings of sadness, hurt, anger and frustration that have resulted within their ministries. Our rostered ministers are honored to serve in their calls and they are committed to the important work they lead. Each do their best to manage the inherent stress that builds up as they deal with the mentally challenging and emotionally exhausting deep, "inner soul" issues we put before them week after week, month after month, and year after year. A periodic sabbatical provides a blessed opportunity for our rostered ministers to step away and renew, refresh and recharge for the work to come.

**How frequently are sabbaticals recommended?** It is up to the Congregation Council (or equivalent leadership body) to set the schedule for sabbatical leaves for their rostered ministers to meet the needs of the organization. According to our synod's Compensation Guidelines, a sabbatical of up to three months in duration is encouraged for full-time rostered ministers who have been in their present call five years or more, with continued eligibility for additional sabbaticals within the same call every five years after that. From a financial standpoint, salary, housing and other benefits are expected to continue throughout the sabbatical period with the congregation taking full responsibility for alternative staffing to cover needs during the absence.

With all of this in mind, I encourage you to think about the stressors being managed, both outwardly and inwardly, by your pastor(s) and/or deacon(s). Are there ways you can provide additional support within their on-going ministry to help alleviate known stressors? Is your congregation supportive of sabbaticals for rostered ministers and is a schedule in place for long-range planning? Your encouragement and support of and advocacy for this meaningful break from ministry will mean the world to your rostered minister and to your congregation in the long run!

Sandy Schlesinger, Synod Vice President

## Sharing Jesus in Lent and Easter

As many have already discovered, Lent starts very early this year with Ash Wednesday being February 14. The earliest Ash Wednesday can occur is February 4, but that will not happen again until 2085 and I will not be around to see it. As we prepare for Lent and Easter, here are some ideas and resources I have been collecting to help us share Jesus during this time:

- Have an Easter Giveaway. At the local food pantry or your church, have Easter Baskets to give with Easter coloring books, Easter candy, devotional books, and other Easter items to give away along with the regular food distribution.
- For the Good Friday service, or a community Good Friday service, have a cross processional through parts of town. Have one or more people carry a cross along with music, ending at the Good Friday service.
- Use the free Easter Communications Tools available from the ELCA: <https://bit.ly/48Sm3j3>
- Create Lenten and Easter social media posts. These posts could explain the meaning of Ash Wednesday, Maundy Thursday, and the Easter Vigil, and promote the congregation's Lenten, Holy Week, and Easter services. These posts can be shared by congregation members and friends.
- Focus on Jesus throughout Lent and Easter. Find ways to tell the story. Display pictures or figures around the church that depict Jesus's journey to the cross.
- Have a Easter Egg Hunt with easter eggs filled with candy and bible verses about Jesus's love.
- Consider how Lenten Services can be places where people can make their testimonies about Jesus. Use *You Are Witnesses of These Things* as a guide to preparing testimonies (contact me if your congregation has not already received your free copies of the book).
- Have an Easter Sunrise Service in a park or a cemetery and invite the community.
- Take Easter Services to nursing homes, assisted living, and senior living apartments.
- Invite the community. Give each congregation member an Easter Egg with a prize inside and an invitation to all the Holy Week and Easter services that they can give away to friends, neighbors, and people they meet.
- Have a Holy Week/Easter walk around the building or outside. Have stops, like Stations of the Cross, where people can walk and hear/see Jesus' journey to the cross. End with a sign of the resurrection.
- Create a Children's Easter Drama, like the Christmas Pageant.
- Focus Preaching on Jesus. Tell the story of Jesus setting his face toward Jerusalem and the events there. Connect the Gospel texts each week as one continuous story.
- Other Lent and Easter Resources:
  - <https://godventure.co.uk/36-of-the-best-faith-at-home-ideas-for-lent-and-easter/>
  - <https://www.resourceumc.org/en/content/5-out-of-the-box-easter-outreach-ideas>
  - <https://www.resourceumc.org/en/content/15-outreach-ideas-for-easter>
  - <https://blog.childrensbulletins.com/lent-and-easter-activity-ideas-for-families/>

## Living Stones

2023 -2025

The Living Stones initiative, endorsed by Synod Council, provides a “compass” for our synod and the ministry of the staff. The Living Stone initiative 2023-2025 includes:

- Becoming more confident and competent sharing the story of Jesus
- Supporting campus ministry
- Raising up candidates for public ministry, attracting pastors to our synod, and helping congregations recalibrate their expectations to attract a pastor.
- Accompanying and assisting congregations to realistically assess their sustainability
- Providing adult theological education.
- Addressing rostered minister indebtedness
- Discussing ways to expand our welcome to all God's people
- Supporting Living Water Ministries and the ELCA Youth Gathering

As we begin 2024, you can support these initiatives and the ministry of the synod in two concrete ways. First, encourage members of your congregation to sign up to receive our synod's monthly Bishop's Newsletter and Weekly Update emails so they can learn about and participate in all that our synod is doing. As we communicate with other synods and ELCA Churchwide, we have learned that the focus of these initiatives is relevant and important and in many cases, our synod is ahead of the curve on developing programs to address these concerns. For example, Synod Council recently established a scholarship fund to assist congregations in sending youth to the ELCA Youth Gathering, ELCA Churchwide is looking to our synod as they develop a program to address rostered minister indebtedness, and our Adult Theological Education program has drawn hundreds of rostered ministers and lay participants from across the ELCA. We would appreciate you sharing our synod's work with those in your congregations and communities. All are welcome to sign up to our mailing list on our website: <https://mittensynod.org>. From the home page, scroll down and enter your email address in the “Sign up for the Weekly Update” box.

Second, we are genuinely grateful to individuals and groups who make a one time or ongoing gift to Living Stones. As a growing number of our congregations struggle with sustainability, and therefore mission support, and grants from ELCA Churchwide are reduced and reimagined, gifts from individuals and groups directly to our synod provide a gracious, cherished resource. When we developed Living Stones in 2019, we invited individuals and groups to make an annual gift of \$500 directly to the North/West lower Michigan Synod. We are deeply grateful to all who made and continue to make such a gift. We invite you to support the work of our synod and these initiatives by contributing to Living Stones. You can learn more about the initiatives and how to give on our website: <https://www.mittensynod.org/living-stones/>

## Lutheran Summer Music

Each year, the primary way that music students find their way to Lutheran Summer Music (LSM) is through the encouragement of their church musician! LSM offers opportunities for musicians of all kinds: brass, winds, strings, percussion, piano, organ, voice, harp, guitar, handbells, and more! Students receive advanced musical instruction through large ensembles (Festival Choir, Band and Orchestra), chamber music, private lessons with collegiate-level faculty, and elective classes (such as conducting, composition, church music, intro to the pipe organ, jazz band, musical theatre, music therapy). In the evenings, students attend recitals and Evening Prayer services, and social events with their friends. LSM 2024 takes place at Valparaiso University in Indiana from June 30-July 28 (Full Session) or June 30-July 14 (Half Session) and is open to students who have completed grades 8-12. Know a musical young person who would thrive at LSM? Nominate them today at [LSMacademy.org/nominate](https://LSMacademy.org/nominate).

## Seminary Debt Reduction Assistance Program

In 2019, as part of the first Living Stones initiatives, the North/West Lower Michigan Synod established the Seminary Debt Reduction Assistance Program. This program addresses the burden of seminary education debt born by many of our rostered ministers (pastors and deacons) and annually awards grants of \$2,000 - \$4,000 directly to lending institutions for educational debt to be applied to the principal of a rostered minister's seminary student loans.

Unlike other professions, it is more challenging for rostered ministers to repay their student loans because of the compensation pastors and deacons receive. Since its establishment, the Seminary Debt Reduction Assistance Program has provided numerous grants to rostered ministers in our synod, including \$16,000 in grants in 2023.

We are incredibly grateful to individuals and groups who support the Seminary Debt Reduction Assistance Program through gifts to our synod. We invite you to read notes of thanks from those who received grants in 2023:

*The news that I would be receiving a \$4,000 scholarship to be paid directly to my student debt came as a wonderful early Christmas gift for both my family and me. This gift was only possible because of the loving and faithful giving of so many of you and your congregations. Thank you all very much. There are so many wonderful things you could give to and I know I, and all those who receive these scholarships, are deeply appreciative that you chose this fund.*

- Pastor Nicole Smith, Hope Lutheran Church, Plainwell

*I would like to take a few words of gratitude to share my appreciation in covering some of my Seminary Debt. It reminds me that I am loved and cared for by the people and places that I serve. Education is not cheap and sadly economics have made it difficult for others to go into ministry. It is acts of kindness like this that remind of the hope and joy I find in the proclamation of Christ. Thank you again and continue to lift me in prayer.*

- Pastor Max Miller, St. Paul Lutheran Church, Au Gres & Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church, East Tawas, Christ Episcopal of East Tawas

*I would like to say a big thank you to all of the donors who contributed to the Seminary Debt Reduction Fund. Thanks to your generosity, my wife and I were able to pay off a significant portion of our seminary debt. This assistance helps not only us individually, but the three congregations we serve and our young children. Thank you, Mitten Synod!*

- Pastor James Smith, St. John Lutheran Church, Three Rivers

*Thank you so much for the scholarship! It means a lot to receive it and shows the importance this synod puts on helping clergy with seminary debt.*

- Pastor Alex Aivars, Christ United Lutheran Church, Dewitt

We invite you to learn more about the program and our other Living Stones initiatives on our website:  
<https://www.mittensynod.org/living-stones/>

If you are rostered minister who would like to apply for a grant from the Seminary Debt Reduction Assistance Program, you can learn more on our website: <https://bit.ly/3jJNWBu>

## God's Wounded Creation - Our Vote, Our Voice

*Pastor John Burow, Environmental Stewardship Task Force*

*"Speak out on behalf of the voiceless, and for the rights of all who are vulnerable" (Proverbs 31:8)*

In 2023 it became even clearer that the destructive impacts of climate change are not just future threats but present reality. It is also evident that election results in 2024 and the public policies that result will impact on how well we can reduce further warming and effectively adapt to those changes that are already baked into the environment.

I commit to use my vote and my voice on behalf of my neighbors who lack the resources to cope or even survive what is on the horizon; on behalf of my non-human neighbors who also worship the Creator, and on behalf of my two grandsons who will live in a wounded creation.

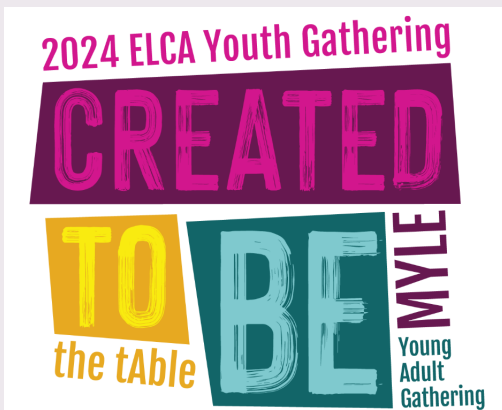
Possible actions are:

- Writing letters to public servants, attend civic meetings advocating for moving swiftly towards renewable energy and adapting infrastructure to withstand more extreme weather events
- Encouraging, supporting and voting for those candidates of any party who seem responsive to the climate emergency
- Learning more about the issues and policy proposals
- Using your voice in both church and public settings
- Working with others in the public square in addressing the climate emergency from a faith perspective

*Lutherans Restoring Creation* is one of many excellent resources for materials on worship, preaching, teaching and advocacy. I and others on the Synod's Environment Stewardship Task Force would be pleased to enter into conversation about other resources and how best to speak out on behalf of the voiceless. You can reach out to me at [pastorjburow@yahoo.com](mailto:pastorjburow@yahoo.com).

*"Instead of each person watching out for their own good, watch out for what is better for others" (Philippians 2:3-4)*

## 2024 ELCA Youth Gathering



The 2024 ELCA Youth Gathering will be held July 16-20, 2024 in New Orleans under the theme, "Created to Be." Registration is now open! Learn more: <https://elca.org/gathering>

Congregational Leaders can apply for funds from The North/West Lower Michigan Synod ELCA Youth Gathering Fund, which seeks to make the ELCA Youth Gathering more accessible for families and congregations in our synod, by completing this application: <https://bit.ly/3QYRQsz>

As you plan for the 2024 Gathering, Pastor Dan Schewe, our synod's ELCA Youth Gathering Champion, is available to answer questions. Email Pastor Schewe at [mittensynodgathering2024@gmail.com](mailto:mittensynodgathering2024@gmail.com).

## Salt, Light, and Leaven: 2024 Synod Assembly

The North/West Lower Michigan Synod is excited to announce "Salt, Light, and Leaven" as the theme for the 2024 Synod Assembly!



Jesus names us "the salt of the earth" and "the light of the world," and compares the kingdom of heaven or reign of God to "leaven" (Matthew 5:13–16; 13:33). At the 2024 Synod Assembly, we will celebrate ways our congregations are "salt of the earth," "light of the world," and "leaven" of the kingdom in ways large and small as we prayerfully participate in Jesus's own work of reconciling the world to God's very self.

In order to celebrate and share the ways our congregations are "salt of the earth," "light of the world," and "leaven" of the kingdom, congregations or groups of congregations will have the opportunity to produce and submit a video showcasing one way they are salt, light, and leaven. We will select four videos to be shown during the 2024 Synod Assembly. Congregations who submit a video will receive a \$100 donation to their ministry and congregations whose videos are selected to be shown at the 2024 Synod Assembly will receive a \$500 donation to their ministry.

All congregations in our synod are invited to submit a video for consideration. There is a limit of one video per congregation. The goal of the video is to provide an experience of the congregation's ministry rather than a report about it. Think of the video as a "virtual tour" of an aspect of the congregation and ministry. This might be an annual event, such as providing backpacks to school kids, or an on-going ministry such as a food pantry. Preference will be given to ministries that in some way include sharing the story of Jesus. Videos must be 8-10 minutes in length.

Congregations interested in submitting a video must complete the interest form by January 15, 2024. This form confirms a congregation's intent to submit a video. All videos must be submitted by April 3, 2024 for review.

Selected congregations will be notified on April 17, 2024. Videos from congregations who are not selected will be shared on the Synod's social media after the conclusion of the 2024 Synod Assembly. As this opportunity is for congregations, Synod task forces, tables, and ministries are not eligible. Congregations should review the submission guidelines carefully and contact [assembly@mittensynod.org](mailto:assembly@mittensynod.org) with any questions.

### Video Submission Guidelines

- Congregations must be located in the North/West Lower Michigan Synod. Synod task forces/tables/ministries are not eligible for this opportunity.
- There is a limit of one video per congregation.
- Videos must focus on one area or ministry that shows how the congregation or group of congregations is salt, light, and leaven. Preference will be given to ministries that include sharing the story of Jesus.
- Congregations must produce and submit their own videos. The Synod Staff is not available to assist with video production.
- Videos must be 8-10 minutes in length.
- Congregations interested in submitting a video must complete the interest form by January 15, 2024. Interest Form: <https://forms.gle/xVqyZF1GXytR9occ8>
- All videos must be submitted by April 3, 2024. Video Submission: <https://bit.ly/3tdgLPG>

## Synod Finances

	December	Year to Date (Feb-Dec)
<b>Unrestricted-Undesignated Fund</b>		
Mission Support Revenue	94,612	1,106,118
Synod Assembly Revenue	0	40,550
Other Revenue	18,111	78,957
<b>Total Revenue</b>	<b>112,722</b>	<b>1,225,625</b>
Churchwide Proportionate Share (50%)	49,306	503,753
Synod Assembly Expense	0	54,655
Other Expenses	54,171	664,750
<b>Total Expenses</b>	<b>103,477</b>	<b>1,223,157</b>
Net Change to Fund Balance (Revenue - Expenses)	9,246	2,468
Beginning Fund Balance	147,365	509,326
Transfers directed by Synod Council		(355,183)
Ending Fund Balance	156,610	156,610
<b>Other Fund Balances</b>		
Unrestricted-Designated		976,857
Temporarily-Restricted Endowment-Related*		789,257
Temporarily-Restricted		315,019
Permanently-Restricted		1,035,547
<b>Total - All Funds (as of 12/31/23)</b>		<b>3,273,291</b>

\*December 31 ELCA Ministry Growth Fund Account Statements were not available at the time of publishing this summary. The amounts shown here reflect balances as of 11/30/23.

### Year End Giving

As we head toward the end of the synod's fiscal year, we remind congregations that gifts received in the synod office, or processed online, on or before Wednesday, January 31, 2024, will be recorded as January transactions and reflected on 4<sup>th</sup> Quarter and year-end giving statements.

We remain ever grateful for your steadfast partnership and faithful generosity!

### Stories of Faith in Action

The December 2023 Mission Support Memo is now available! In this edition, learn about the "Cultivating Generous Congregations" training available in partnership with our Stewardship ministry and the *Lake Institute on Faith and Giving*.

The December 2023 Mission Support Memo and previous Mission Support Memos are located on the ELCA website: <https://bit.ly/3Qf7waL>

## Congregational Financial Wellness

Have you wondered if your congregational financial systems and policies were up to date and meeting the standards for excellence?

Join Pastor David Sprang, Assistant to the Bishop and Director for Evangelical Mission, and Steve Oelschlager, ELCA Congregational Assessment Research Coordinator, for a one-hour introduction to the ELCA's free Congregational Financial Assessment and corresponding resources.

This seminar will be held via Zoom on January 18, 2024 at 7:00pm ET.

Register Now: <https://bit.ly/3uVcK3b>

## Annual Rostered Minister Reports

2022 Annual Rostered Minister Report forms are now available! All rostered ministers are expected to complete and return a report to Bishop Satterlee.

To complete the annual report form, please download the form and save it to your computer before completing it. Once completed, please email it to Bishop Satterlee at [bishopcraigsatterlee@mittensynod.org](mailto:bishopcraigsatterlee@mittensynod.org).

Bishop Satterlee will respond to all rostered minister reports when he returns from sabbatical in April 2024.

Download Forms: <https://bit.ly/38HxIEU>.

## Annual Congregation Reports

As in previous years, all ELCA congregations, synod-authorized worshipping communities (SAWCs), and new starts will need to complete the annual congregation report. The ELCA has updated the process to submit this report and there is now only one form to complete, Form A, which asks for congregation statistics and financial data. The kinds of questions previously asked on Form C will instead be gathered through surveys throughout the year.

The Annual Congregation Report packet will be mailed in mid-January. The packet will contain a paper copy of Form A, instructional documents, and the password that congregations or communities will use to file their report online. Due to some technical issues, it is anticipated that the online system will open on January 23. It will be accessible at [elca.org/congregationreport](https://elca.org/congregationreport).

A blank, generic version of Form A is available at [elca.org/reportinstructions](https://elca.org/reportinstructions) so congregations that wish to begin compiling their data can do so.

## Upcoming Events

January 15	Martin Luther King Jr. Day	
January 16	Adult Theological Education: Six Women	Learn more: <a href="https://bit.ly/3rnwR8l">https://bit.ly/3rnwR8l</a>
January 16	ELCA Study Curriculum on Civic Life and Faith	Learn more: <a href="https://bit.ly/4aZyVpA">https://bit.ly/4aZyVpA</a>
January 18	Congregational Financial Wellness Seminar	Learn more: <a href="https://bit.ly/3uVcK3b">https://bit.ly/3uVcK3b</a>
January 31	Addiction & Practical Solutions for Faith Communities Webinar	Learn more: <a href="https://bit.ly/42eLPfr">https://bit.ly/42eLPfr</a>



Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that.  
Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.

MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR

Today we remember the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and others who have gone before us in proclaiming all people to be children of God, deserving of freedom, equality, opportunity and respect.

## Congregations in Transition

Note: We include congregations on the public list when the called pastor or rostered leader completes her or his ministry in the congregation. Thus, congregations in which the pastor has resigned but is still serving are not listed here. We also do not post calls that are accepted until Bishop Satterlee signs the Letter of Call.

<b>Bay Conference</b>	<b>Pastor Emily Olsen-Brandt, Dean</b>	<b>Kalamazoo Conference</b>	<b>Pastor Joan Oleson, Dean</b>
Messiah/Bay City	CALL ACCEPTED: Pastor Tim Jahn. Installation January 28	<b>Stony Lake Conference</b>	<b>Pastor Sarah Samuelson, Dean</b>
Prince of Peace/Rose City	Pastor David Sprang, Administrative Future / Supply Pastors / Discerning Future	Harbor of Grace/Muskegon	CALL ACCEPTED: Pastor Jack Ferra; Installation TBD
<b>Capital Area Conference</b>	<b>Pastor Neil Brady, Dean</b>	<b>Sunrise Conference</b>	<b>Pastor Megan Crouch, Dean</b>
University/East Lansing	Pastor Bryan Schneider-Thomas, Interim / CALLS ACCEPTED: Pastors Emily and Zachariah Shipman (Western North Dakota). Installation February 11	New Life/Alcona County	Supply Pastors / Seeking candidates
		St. Paul/Alpena	Seeking a part-time assistant pastor
<b>Greater Grand Rapids Conference</b>	<b>Pastor Julie Schneider-Thomas, Pastor Kate Van Valkenburg, Co-Deans</b>	<b>Traverse Conference</b>	<b>Pastor Jonathan Reid, Dean</b>
Trinity/Grand Rapids	Pastor Dennis Smith, Interim Senior Pastor / Preparing MSP	Advent/Lake Ann	Pastor Rosanne Anderson, Administrative Pastor / Supply Pastors
St. Paul/Greenville and Settlement/Gowen	CALL ACCEPTED: Pastor Nan Dehnke (one year). Installation January 17	St. Paul/Reed City	Supply Pastors / Seeking candidates
Bread of Life/Hudsonville	Pastor David Beese, Stated Supply / Discerning future		
Peace/Sparta	Supply Pastors / Preparing MSP		
Zion/Woodland (Part-Time)	Supply Pastors / Seeking candidates		