

## WHAT IS A SYNOD?

“We are a church that believes God is calling us into the world – together.

“The ELCA's 65 synods vary greatly in size, geography, membership, staffing and program. Our smallest synod has 30 congregations — the largest nearly 300. The synods are grouped into nine regions, which are points of connection for them and the churchwide organization. **Synods unite the work of congregations within their areas, serve as regional support, and guide pastoral and other staff candidates.** In order to strengthen the relationship between synod leaders and the churchwide office, many churchwide teams relate to and support the work of the synods.”

ELCA Website

## WHICH SYNOD IS OUR SYNOD?

### 5G - Northern Great Lakes

**Area:** The Michigan Upper Peninsula and six counties in Northeast Wisconsin

**Office:** Marquette, MI

**Bishop:** The Reverend Katherine Finegan

**Congregations:** 80

**Clergy:** 125 (active and retired)

**Members:** ~31,000



## WHAT DOES OUR SYNOD DO?

The short answer is: **a lot**. Here is just some of what our synod does:

### LEADERSHIP

*Participating with congregations and the churchwide expression to maintain the unity of the church:*

**Facilitating the call process:** In calling pastors, congregations work with the wider church. Synod staff are responsible for the initial legwork, looking at every pastor's Rostered Minister Profile, every congregation's profile, and trying to find potential candidates for each. Synod staff also meet with congregation councils and call committees, putting in long hours on the road.

**Congregational crisis management:** Sometimes, tensions and crises break out in congregations. Synod staff meet with congregations and leaders to find resolutions to these situations.

**Discipline:** When no other resolution is available, it is the responsibility of the synod to enforce discipline.

**Committees:** To facilitate conversations and the work of our synod, these committees have been established:

*Synod Council, Candidacy Committee, Endowment Fund Board, Evangelism Committee, Leadership Support*

*Committee, Mission Outreach Committee, Stewardship Committee, Synod Campus Ministry Committee, Synod Consultation Committee, Task Force for an Inclusive and Welcoming Church, Transformational Ministry Team, World Hunger Committee, Worship Committee, Youth Ministries Support Team, Synodical Women's Organization Board*

The members of these boards and committees, clergy and lay, organize events, make decisions, and provide leadership in their areas.

### **SYNOD MINISTRIES**

*Organized in and by our synod:*

**Lay Schools for Mission:** Our synod's lay schools offer classes taught by local pastors for lay people who are interested in delving more deeply into the faith and practices of our church (and it's free of charge!). About 80 students at 6 campuses take advantage of this opportunity every year.

<https://www.nglsynod.org/lay-school-for-mission/>

**Prayfaithfully:** Every week, pastors and lay people in our synod publish brief devotions that are perfect for daily use. Pastor Ken has contributed devotions to this program in the past.

<https://www.nglsynod.org/prayfaithfully/>

**Evangelism Resources:** Our synod website has a list of resources that may be helpful to congregations looking to renew their devotion to evangelism, including book recommendations, grant applications, and articles.

<https://www.nglsynod.org/evangelism-resources/>

**Men in Mission:** Our synod sponsors mission and study opportunities for men to help them learn how to be good disciples and followers of Christ.

<https://www.nglsynod.org/men-in-mission/>

**Women of the ELCA / Synodical Women's Organization:** A chapter of this nationwide women's ministry is in our synod and is not only active, it's on fire! They organize retreats, conventions, and service projects such as pillowcase dresses and grocery bag sleeping mats.

<https://www.nglsynod.org/welca/>

**Stewardship:** Bishop-Emeritus Tom Skrenes is a strong advocate and voice for stewardship. Our synod provides a plethora of resources around stewardship, including newsletter articles, information and resources for treasurers and bookkeepers, programs, and events.

<https://www.nglsynod.org/stewardship/>

**Lutheran Campus Ministry:** Our synod actively supports Lutheran campus ministries at Michigan Tech University, Northern Michigan University, and Lake Superior State University.

**National Youth Gathering:** Every three years, the National Youth Gathering brings together 30,000+ high school students for worship, workshops, group-building, service projects, and yes, fun! Our synod provides resources, financial support, and coordination for congregations in our synod who are sending youth to this amazing event.

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/354157674979807/>

**Region Archives:** Along with the other synods of Region 5, our synod staff help to maintain the archive of records at Wartburg Seminary in Dubuque, Iowa. Every region maintains an archive of records, and they are a treasure trove of historical information about our congregations and synod that would be lost without the dedicated work of our synod staff to preserve them.

**Inclusive and Welcoming Task Force:** In recent years, congregations have been faced with tough decisions regarding welcoming and inclusion. This task force was established to facilitate conversations that congregations don't know how to have, all without pushing any specific agenda or outcome.

**Church is Good:** Who represents the Christian voice in media? Often, it's not Lutherans! Partnering with a local news station in the Upper Peninsula, our synod created a series of TV spots and a new website specifically for people in our synod area looking for a church (fun fact: the main contact person at the news station through this whole process was so impressed by what she saw as she worked with our congregations that she ended up joining one of them!)

<https://www.churchisgood.org/>

**Companion Synod:** Our synod is partnered with the Eastern Coastal Diocese of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania. Together, we support each other's life and work for the sake of the Gospel, mutually encouraging each other in the faith.

<https://www.nglsynod.org/companion-synod/>

**Dental Medical Mission:** For the last few years, members of our synod have traveled to Tanzania to provide free dental and medical services to people in need.

**T-12:** This year, our synod sent its first ever youth delegation to Tanzania to learn about our companion synod there, to immerse themselves in the culture, and to learn about God and the church from our siblings in Christ in Tanzania.

### **CONFERENCES AND RETREATS**

*An incomplete list of the conference, retreats, and events our synod is organizing and sponsoring in just the next few months, as well as events that have been held in the past:*

**Annual Professional Leaders Event:** A conference for rostered leaders to gather and further their formation and education (past keynote speakers were Bishop Craig Satterlee of the Northwest Lower Michigan Synod and a leading professor in preaching; Anna Madsen, director of the OMG Center for Theological Conversation; and our Presiding Bishop, the Reverend Elizabeth Eaton).

**Fortune Lake Lutheran Camp:** This camp is owned by all of the congregations in the Northern Great Lakes Synod and is our outdoor ministry. While summer camp is the main highlight, FLLC provides retreats and conferences year round. Here are just a few of the retreats they offer:

*Council retreat:* A time for congregation council members to get away and renew their leadership focus.

*Women's Fall Retreat:* This year's theme is "A Godly Touch", and is hosted by our synod's WELCA group.

*Upper Elementary, Junior High, Senior High Retreats:* As the name suggests, these are fun retreats for kids of all ages!

*Adoptive Family Retreat:* Families with adopted children face unique situations and challenges that other families do not. This retreat brings these families together for mutual sharing and to provide support for each other.

*Financial Peace:* Money is a source of stress for many people. Learn how to be at peace with money and finances, and some best practices.

*Unfinished Objects (UFO):* Got a craft you've been meaning to finish, but just haven't gotten to it? Gather with others in the same predicament, get to know new people, and have some fun while getting your "stuff" done!

*Winter Wonderland:* What could be more fun than getting out in the snow, skating, cross-country skiing, snow shoeing, getting in the sauna, and enjoying campfires? Experience the beauty of winter and have a lot of doing it at this retreat!

**The Festival of Congregational Renewal:** Plan on meaningful worship, workshops, and riveting discussions to bring back to the congregation. While not held every year, when it is held, this festival is an amazing opportunity to learn more about what's out there for congregations and ministries.

**Banner workshop:** For those who do or are interested in learning good practices for making banners for a congregation.

**Planning Ahead:** Tim Knutson, our regional endowment planner, frequently puts on workshops and meets with congregation councils to help them start and maintain their own endowment funds. He also helps congregation members with planned gifts, estates, and leaving behind a legacy.

**Altar Guild Workshop:** Where does the Paschal Candle go? What IS a Paschal Candle? How do we decide what paraments and banners are used when? Should the font be open and filled? What's the difference between wafers and bread? Altar Guild workshops answer these questions and more.

**Marked! Confirmation events:** A chance for confirmation students from all around our synod to meet, get to know each other, worship, and learn together.

**Pre-Retirement Seminars:** Portico Benefits, a ministry of the ELCA that provides health, retirement, disability, life insurance, and other benefits is holding a seminar near our synod for those who are approaching retirement and might need a little help navigating this life change.

**Reformation Road Trip:** When a traveling Reformation exhibit stopped in Minnesota, our synod organized a road trip to visit it.

**Transformational ministry conference:** Many congregations are in need of renewal and transformation. The Synod Transformational Ministry Team has organized a conference to help congregational leader tackle this reality. Transformational ministry is a long, dedicated process.

<https://www.nglsynod.org/tm/>

## **FINANCIAL SUPPORT**

*Using the money congregations send through mission support, as well as outside grants, our synod funds the following ministries and programs:*

***Always Being Made New Grants:*** As part of our churchwide fundraising campaign for new and existing ministries around our church, our synod provides grants for ministries each year based on the *Always Being Made New* theme. This year, we are providing grants for our companion congregations in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania. Last year, grants were given out for congregational hunger ministries. The year before that, grants were given for barrier-free projects in congregations, such as installing hands-free automatic doors for people in wheelchairs or who otherwise have trouble opening heavy church doors; installing chair lifts; and redesigning worship spaces and bathrooms to accommodate those with limited mobility.

<https://www.nglsynod.org/always-being-made-new/>

**Endowment Fund:** Our synod maintains an endowment fund that is the envy of other synods. Dispersals from the fund are about \$25,000 a year. Some of the things it supports are:

*Clergy debt relief:* New rostered leaders come out of seminary with an enormous debt burden, and our synod uses some of its endowment money to help pay down that debt.

*Seminarian support:* Our synod is a leader in the ELCA for providing financial support to students in seminary who have come from our synod.

*Tanzania Ministry-Mkuza Girls Secondary School:* A portion of the endowment fund went to building this school for our partners in the Lutheran Church in Tanzania.

*Lay schools for Mission:* The lay schools are free to students because our synod funds them itself through the endowment fund.

<https://www.nglsynod.org/synod-endowment-fund/>

**National Youth Gathering:** Grants were made available to congregations and kids who were planning to attend the National Youth Gathering in order to defray the costs associated with this amazing, life-changing event.

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/354157674979807/>

**Local Hunger:** Our congregation is part of the Three Lakes Christian Food Pantry, which is run by one of our members. Synod grants and resources are available for local hunger programs, like our food pantry.

**World Hunger:** Every year, our synod collects a substantial offering that goes directly to helping combat the epidemic that is hunger in our world. This year at our synod assembly, we broke our record for the most money raised for World Hunger!

**Bishop Thomas and Luane Skrenes Fund for Ministry:** As Bishop Skrenes retires, he and Luane have started a new fund through our synod's endowment fund to further support our clergy and work being done in our companion synod, the Eastern Coastal Diocese of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania.

**Other financial assistance:** Our synod takes requests for grants and financial support, and provides appropriate assistance whenever it can.

## **PARTNERSHIPS**

*Our synod partners with the following institutions to support and expand their ministries:*

**Finlandia Univeristy**, an ELCA university in Hancock, MI.

<http://www.finlandia.edu/>

**Lutheran Social Services**

<https://www.lsswis.org/LSS.htm>

**Northland Lutheran Retirement Community**

<https://northlandlutheran.org/>

***IN ADDITION, 45% OF ALL MONEY RECEIVED BY OUR SYNOD THROUGH MISSION SUPPORT IS PASSED ON TO SUPPORT THE WORK OF THE WIDER CHURCH.***

**That means our synod accomplishes all of this with only half of the money congregations make available for regional ministry and support, in addition to any grants it itself receives.**

### **WELL YES, BUT WHAT DOES OUR SYNOD DO “FOR US”?**

I get this question about once a year, and it’s always difficult to respond to. It’s difficult because yes, we do benefit from our connections with our synod. We benefit directly from the role our synod plays in the call process. We benefit from grants provided through our synod. We benefit from the theological and pastoral leadership of our Bishop, Assistant to the Bishop, and all synod staff. We benefit from the ways being in our synod facilitates connections with other congregations in our area.

But, this question about the relationship between “the synod” and us is based on a misinterpretation of what our synod is. Our synod is not an outside service we contract with to receive something in return. It’s not a business we hire to provide goods and services.

*We are our synod.* The word “synod” itself is a Greek word that means “walk together / on the same path”, which by definition implies a shared relationship. Our synod is network of congregations who have banded together to do more together than we can apart. These relationships are the heart of what it means to be *synod*, to be walking together.

Sometimes, maybe often, we don’t recognize the ways in which we walk together. Think about the many churches around us. The churches in our town know each other, but how many strong connections do we have with different churches in Eagle River? Conover? Hiles? Minocqua? There are many churches in these towns, but we don’t have relationships with the majority of them.

And yet we have a strong relationship with Prince of Peace Lutheran Church in Eagle River. We team up for service projects, Pastor Andrea Fluegel and I frequently cover for each other in emergencies, and we hold a number of joint worship services.

When I need to be out of town, ELCA pastors in our area come and lead worship for us; most often it’s Pastor Devon Barrix, a retired pastor who now attends Immanuel Lutheran Church in Rhinelander, but there are pastors all across our synod willing to fill in when other pastors need to be out of town.

When we raised money to feed an immigrant family for a year, we did so with the other ELCA churches in our Conference, raising 150% of our goal and providing more food than we thought possible.

We train lay people to better live into their faith through our Lay School for mission, hosted at Calvary Evangelical Lutheran Church in Minocqua and staffed by pastors from our conference, including myself, and Faith Lutheran has a few graduates of that Lay School.

Going further back, when Faith Lutheran Church was first getting started, help came from all across our synod. Trinity Lutheran Church in Ishpeming donated a trunk full of dishes so that Faith didn't have to buy their own. Our synod sent out a call to the other congregations of our synod, who collected money for this new congregation. Pastor Jerry Check, who served Trinity Lutheran Church in Rhinelander at the time, agreed to also serve as pastor at Faith Lutheran for no compensation until a regular pastor could be called. Though not part of our current synod, St. John's Lutheran Church in Ashwaubenon donated paraments to decorate our worship space.

We have these strong connections with these churches because we are all "walking together". We are *synod*. We walk together so that we can do more

together than we can on our own.

A better question than "What has the synod done for us?" is "What has our synod done in our name?" Few congregations could raise over \$25,000 for World Hungry; but together, we as a synod can. Few congregations are equipped to undergo radical transformation on their own; but together, we as a synod can help our congregations through that process. Few congregations are truly prepared to have tough conversations around being inclusive and welcoming, but we as a synod can train a team to facilitate those conversations with the rest of us. Not every congregation can afford to install hands-free handicap accessible doors in their building; but together, we as a synod can raise money and make it available to those congregations.

Christians have known since the founding of the church that we are stronger and better in community with others than we are on our own. In the ELCA, synods are one of the ways in which we express that. We are synod. We are walking together. We rely on each other, and we support each other, so that together, we can continue to live into our baptismal callings as disciples of Jesus Christ.

## HOW CAN WE FIND AND RECEIVE ASSISTANCE OR OTHER RESOURCES?

Most congregations don't know about the many resources available from our synod *because they do not ask*. It doesn't matter in how many places our synod posts information, or how many mailings they send, if people don't seek the information out. Resources and assistance are available to everyone, but unless we ask for it, our synod staff don't know we need it. At the end of this article, you'll find the mailing address, phone numbers, and email of all of our synod staff. The best way to find resources or assistance is to ask.

Our synod also sends out mailings to our congregations with information about upcoming events and opportunities. I post any material I receive from our synod and sister ministries either on the bulletin board near the door or on the table outside the sanctuary. *Please stop by these two locations and look at all of the material provided.*

If you're more comfortable receiving information in electronic format, our synod publishes an every-other month newsletter titled *Notes and Quotes*. You can sign up to receive an email with a link to that newsletter on our synod website.

There is also a twice-monthly email blast sent out by our synod staff with lots information in it. You can sign up to receive that directly in your email inbox on our synod website.

In addition, synod staff are always willing to come and offer resource and assistance in person.

## HOW CAN WE GET IN CONTACT WITH OUR SYNOD STAFF?

**Mailing Address:**

Northern Great Lakes Synod  
of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America  
1029 North 3rd Street  
Marquette, MI 49855

**Phone:** 906-228-2300

**Fax:** 906-228-2527

**Emails:**

General email: [ngls@nglsynod.org](mailto:ngls@nglsynod.org)

The Reverend Katherine Finegan, Bishop: [kfinegan@nglsynod.org](mailto:kfinegan@nglsynod.org)

Louise Ingalls, Office Secretary: [louise@nglsynod.org](mailto:louise@nglsynod.org)

Betsi Koski, Bookkeeper / Secretary: [bakoski@nglsynod.org](mailto:bakoski@nglsynod.org)

**Website:**

<https://www.nglsynod.org/>

*Go here to sign up for Notes and Quotes and for the twice-monthly e-notes (the signup form is on the front page).*

*This article first appeared in the September 2017 edition of Faith's Foundations, the monthly newsletter of Faith Lutheran Church in Three Lakes, WI. It is © Pastor Ken Ranos and licensed for use under CC BY-SA 4.0.*