

Removing Barriers, Building Belonging

Report of the Barriers to Diversity Task Force
Northeastern Iowa Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

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Executive Summary

The Barriers to Diversity Task Force was authorized by the 2023 Northeastern Iowa Synod Assembly to identify barriers that prevent people from minoritized communities from serving as leaders in our synod and to expand the pool of pastoral candidates available to serve our congregations. Coached by the Rev. Dr. Jia Starr Brown, the task force conducted interviews with clergy and leaders of color serving in Iowa and elsewhere, reviewed ELCA and national research, consulted with synod staff and seminary and college leaders, and examined Iowa's demographic landscape.

What we found:

This work is rooted in the gospel of Jesus Christ and in the baptismal covenant that calls us to proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed, to serve all people following the example of Jesus, and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth. The ELCA Strategy for Authentic Diversity reminds us that we seek authentic diversity not as an option but in obedience to the Great Commandment and in proclamation of the gospel. The Lutheran tradition's commitment to reforming institutions that perpetuate harm is not new or borrowed from secular culture; it flows from the Reformation itself. Justification and justice go hand in hand. Gifts and grace go together.

Approximately 18% of Iowa's population are people of color, yet under 2% of ELCA members in Iowa are people of color—and in the NE Iowa Synod, just 1.7% (roughly 460 active participants out of 27,300). There is only one person of color serving as a congregational pastor in our synod. Many of the barriers we document are ELCA-wide, not unique to our synod; the seminary and candidacy experiences described occurred across multiple institutions. We name them because our synod must understand and address them, both locally and through cooperation with other synods and the churchwide organization.

The barriers are systemic: our congregation, synod, and churchwide procedures for candidacy, theological education, and call were designed for white, middle-class candidates. Financial structures penalize part-time students and exclude TEEM and certificate candidates from key scholarships. The call process channels clergy of color into limited roles. Our congregations have not kept up evangelism and community engagement with communities of color. Iowa's social climate presents additional challenges for all people of color.

Clergy of color who have navigated these systems report bias, gatekeeping, isolation, lack of institutional support after harm, and little follow-up care. Some have experienced lasting harm. At the same time, those we spoke with demonstrate

remarkable resilience, sustained by peer relationships, mentors, and deep spiritual commitment.

What we recommend: Our recommendations are organized by who is responsible for action. For the synod, we recommend providing antiracism training for lay leaders, establishing a joint accountability meeting across committees, contracting with a leader of color to advise synod staff and committees, mandating mentors of color for every candidate, and inviting a cohort of congregations to prepare for diverse leadership.

For congregations, we recommend intentional community engagement, worship that reflects the community's diversity, and cross-congregational partnerships. For the ELCA and regional partners, we recommend advocating for renewed STAD grants, churchwide monitoring of call process equity, Portico reforms, and ensuring racial equity is central to the new churchwide candidacy process. We also encourage seminary, college, and camp partners to continue and deepen their work—including cross-seminary opportunities for students of color.

Throughout, we center the perspectives and experiences of candidates of color as subjects of their own vocations, not as objects in the systems of the church. We are planting seeds for a church that will be more diverse, more vital, and more faithful to the gospel in 2046 and beyond.

I. Introduction: Our Calling and Our Mandate

The Task Force's Charge

At its June 10, 2023, meeting, the Northeastern Iowa Synod Assembly adopted the following resolutions, submitted by the Jubilee Conference:

Resolved: That the Northeastern Iowa Synod make a deliberate effort to include candidates of color in their call processes, especially if the call would be available to a recent seminary graduate.

Resolved: That the Northeastern Iowa Synod create a taskforce to identify and address barriers within the call process that limit candidates of minoritized groups.

These resolutions gave rise to the Barriers to Diversity Task Force, funded by a \$2,300 ELCA Strategy for Authentic Diversity (STAD) seed grant. Justification and justice go hand in hand. Gifts and grace go together.

Our Process

Guided by the Rev. Dr. Jia Starr Brown, the task force undertook a process grounded in Richard Osmer's four tasks of practical theology: *priestly listening* (What is going on?), *sagely wisdom* (Why is it going on?), *prophetic discernment* (What ought to be going on?), and *servant leadership* (How might we respond?).

The Rev. Dr. Starr Brown is an African American pastor, educator, author, and activist with more than three decades of experience advocating for underrepresented communities. She holds a Doctor of Ministry in Social Transformation from United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities and a Master of Divinity from Luther Seminary. She is ordained in The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), is the founding pastor of The Stable online anti-racism study church, a certified interfaith spiritual director, and a qualified administrator of the Intercultural Development Inventory.

We intentionally examined both the churchwide ELCA landscape and our specific Northeastern Iowa Synod context, because many barriers operate at multiple levels and our synod's response must be informed by the broader picture. We conducted interviews with ELCA clergy of color and leaders of color serving in Iowa and elsewhere, including one person who is leaving the ELCA because of the harm she endured. We also interviewed synod staff responsible for candidacy and calls, the outgoing synod candidacy committee chairperson, leaders from Wartburg Theological Seminary, and the campus pastor at Luther College. We reviewed the ELCA Strategy for Authentic

Diversity, the NECU “So That All May Belong” statement, research on ELCA women clergy and LGBTQ+ clergy, Iowa census data, and national occupational equity data. We consulted with ELCA ethnic association officers.

Theological Grounding

The Lutheran Church has so much good news to share: the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit. This report is rooted in that gospel and in our calling to proclaim it. In holy baptism, God makes a covenant with us and we are called to live among God’s faithful people, to hear the word of God and share in the Lord’s supper, to proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed, to serve all people following the example of Jesus, and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth. Every dimension of this report flows from this baptismal calling to share the gifts God has given us with all people.

The ELCA Strategy for Authentic Diversity declares that we seek authentic diversity “not as an option but in obedience to the Great Commandment, in affirmation of our baptismal promise, in proclamation of the gospel, and toward the restoration of God’s beloved community from the brokenness we have created.”¹

The Network of ELCA Colleges and Universities (NECU)—including Wartburg College and Luther College—has affirmed in its statement “So That All May Belong: Lutheran Roots for Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice” that these commitments are grounded in Lutheran theology: in the goodness of creation, the dignity of all persons, the doctrine of vocation, and the call to reform institutions that perpetuate harm.² This commitment flows from the Reformation’s radical claim that all people are called to use their unique gifts for the common good and that institutions must always be reforming.

As Martin Luther counseled, it is the Holy Spirit who empowers us to speak, listen, and act. Article 20 of the Augsburg Confession reminds us that our doctrine “is not to be charged with prohibiting good works, but rather the more to be commended, because it shows how we are enabled to do good works.”³ This work of sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ, reforming the church with the Holy Spirit’s guidance, and seeking justice, peace, and reconciliation with all God’s children is not only our call; we are equipped to perform it.

II. What Is Going On? (Priestly Listening)

A. The Demographic and Social Landscape

The ELCA remains the whitest denomination in the United States: 95% white, 1% Black, 1% Hispanic, less than 1% Asian, 3% other or multiracial.⁴ Intentional outreach has increased nonwhite membership from 2% to approximately 7.3%, but this coincides with declining white membership.⁵ The ELCA Strategy for Authentic Diversity states: “Only structural and systemic reinforcement can account for the glaring whiteness of our church.”

The Northeastern Iowa Synod reflects this pattern. According to ELCA congregational statistics as of December 31, 2024, the NE Iowa Synod has 138 congregations and one synod authorized worshipping community with 55,121 baptized members. Of the approximately 27,300 active participants for whom ethnic data was reported, 98.3% are white and approximately 1.7% (roughly 460 people) are people of color. As of May 2026, there are 20 candidates in the synod’s candidacy process; only one is a person of color. There is only one person of color serving as a congregational pastor in the synod. He came to the ELCA from another denomination and to our synod from another midwestern synod.

The other two Iowa synods show similar patterns. The Southeastern Iowa Synod reports 97.7% white and 2.3% people of color among active participants. The Western Iowa Synod reports 96.9% white and 3.1% people of color. Across all three Iowa ELCA synods combined, approximately 97.8% of active participants are white and only about 2.2%—roughly 1,500 people—are people of color.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau’s 2020–2024 American Community Survey, approximately 18% of Iowa’s population are people of color, including 7.3% Hispanic, 3.8% Black, 3.5% multiracial, 2.5% Asian, and 0.6% other.⁶ The gap between the state and the church is stark: 18% of Iowa is non-white, but under 2% of Iowa’s ELCA membership is. Iowa’s population of color continues to grow.

Between 2010 and 2020, Iowa’s population grew by 4.7%, driven entirely by gains in communities of color. The state’s white population actually declined. Without growth in minority residents, Iowa’s population would have fallen by approximately 2%. In rural Iowa, without communities of color, population would have shrunk by roughly 6%.⁷

Communities in our synod reflect this change:

- **Postville:** majority-minority, approximately 54% non-white or Hispanic.

- **Waterloo:** 34% non-white, including 18% African American.
- **Dubuque:** population ~59,667; growing minority population with 4–6% Black, 3–4% Hispanic.
- **Mason City:** population ~27,000; approximately 85% white, with a growing Hispanic population (7%), 3% Black, 3% multiracial.
- **Cedar Falls:** population ~40,000; approximately 90% white, 2–3% Asian, 2–3% multiracial, 2% Hispanic.

Iowa State University concludes: “Without minorities, Iowa will become a less prosperous and less thriving state.”⁸ The leaders we raise up in 2026–2028 will lead congregations in 2046 and beyond. We are planting seeds for the church’s future.

Iowa’s social climate creates additional challenges. Racial disparities in criminal justice are severe: a Black person in Iowa is 7.3 times more likely to be arrested for drug offenses than a white person; Black adults are imprisoned at nearly 11 times the rate of white adults. Legislative trends—restrictions on immigration, cuts to social service agencies, school voucher programs, and proposed anti-DEI legislation affecting Iowa Tuition Grants—disproportionately impact communities of color. Iowa will be a better place for clergy of color to serve when Iowa is a better place for all people of color to live, work, and thrive.

The Lutheran Church in Iowa will continue to change. We can envision joint Spanish-language ministries with Episcopal and Methodist partners, and new forms of cooperation across denominational lines. Many current Lutheran clergy of color already grew up in other denominations. Sharing the gospel with more people may mean going beyond our own denominational barriers.

B. What We Heard: Interviews with Clergy, Leaders, and Partners

Note on scope: Many barriers documented below are ELCA-wide, not unique to our synod. The seminary and candidacy experiences described occurred across multiple institutions—not the colleges and seminary in our territory, which have strong leaders doing this work. We name these patterns because our synod must understand and address them, both locally and through cooperation with other synods and the churchwide organization.

Harm and Barriers

The following findings center the perspectives of candidates and clergy of color on their own experiences:

- **Bias and racism** can come from all sides: faculty, staff, peers, candidacy committees, call committees, and congregants.
- **Gatekeeping and opacity:** “Trust the process” used while the process lacked transparency. Side conversations between seminary staff and synod personnel often felt manipulative. Candidacy experienced as “just another hoop.”
- **Channeling:** Interviewees were not invited to consider the wide variety of calls available. The call process offered only positions designated for “diversity”—not the full range of pastoral calls. One non-ELCA pastor of color was not allowed to bring his cultural gifts into worship at the predominantly white congregation that called him. This experience was shared by some ELCA pastors serving in predominantly white congregations as well.
- **Lack of institutional care:** Little to no follow-up after traumatic ministry experiences. Portico coverage abruptly terminated; no severance; no disability benefits for PTSD. Portico’s health contractors do not maintain lists of women of color or LGBTQIA+-affirming mental health professionals. Health coverage is still based on the needs of a typical single, white, male candidate.
- **Financial barriers:** While the synod has eliminated tuition debt through the H.G. Anderson Fund, financial barriers beyond tuition remain significant—including living expenses, family responsibilities, travel costs, and the income lost when candidates leave employment to study. The ELCA Fund for Theological Education requires full-time enrollment for full scholarships (the task force is confirming whether this fund is the same as the Fund for Leaders). TEEM and certificate students often lack access to loans and scholarships available to degree students—including, in many cases, synod tuition funds. Small congregations cannot fund internships alone. The Horizon Internship Program was defunded.
- **Safety:** One interviewee from another denomination reported sexual assault during the call process. It took years for the church to act; no direct apology was offered. One person we interviewed is leaving the ELCA because of the harm she endured.
- **Access:** Little to no financial support for seminarians to travel to candidacy interviews or the call process.

System Patterns

- **White default** in resource allocation. As the denomination constricts, white institutional needs pull resources from communities of color. The needs and goals of institutions often take precedence over the needs and experiences of candidates.

- **Power imbalance:** Candidacy is a process that both forms and evaluates candidates, and all candidates experience the vulnerability of being judged by people they hardly know. But for candidates of color — who are often the only person of color in the process, who may lack advocates or mentors who share their experience, and who navigate a committee and system that is entirely white — this vulnerability is compounded by racial isolation and by the opacity of a process not designed with them in mind.
- **Lack of advocates:** White clergy facing difficulty often have advocates; clergy of color frequently do not. The ELCA candidacy manual recommends advocates for minoritized candidates, but this is inconsistently implemented.
- **Systemic inattention:** As one task force member observed, the system is “negligent in awareness of any needs outside of what has been a standard quo, white-dominant system.”
- **Evangelism gap:** ELCA congregations and synods have not kept up evangelism and community engagement with communities of color who have lived in Iowa for generations—including African Americans—nor with newcomers to the state. This gap is explored further in Section III.

Strength and Resilience

- **Peer relationships:** Named in every interview as the most critical source of strength.
- **Mentorship:** Skilled mentors of color made the difference between persevering and leaving.
- **Spiritual resilience:** Despite harm, interviewees expressed hope for the church’s transformation.
- **Community support:** Ethnic associations and ecumenical networks provided sustaining community.

What Is Already Working in Our Synod

- All rostered leaders participate in Barriers Training with Region 5 clergy, with antiracism focus every third year.
- The candidacy committee uses an accompaniment model, with relators assigned to each candidate.
- The synod presents minoritized candidates to call committees individually—not alongside other candidates—to prevent unconscious bias toward traditional candidates.

- For eight consecutive years, the synod has provided full tuition coverage for all seminarians through the H.G. Anderson Fund for Leaders (\$34,700 distributed to 4 students this year) and the Immediate Use Fund, eliminating student loan debt as a barrier.
- The TEEM program has produced 7 graduates in the current tenure of the assistant to the bishop, all successfully placed. Wartburg Seminary's Journey Together competency-based TEEM program—the only ELCA ordination pathway offered entirely in Spanish—serves 6 Spanish-speaking students with fully bilingual delivery and 100% distance learning.
- Wartburg Seminary's Collaborative Learning program offers an M.Div. pathway with the same embedded, contextual model as TEEM but with a degree credential that provides greater flexibility.
- Luther College's Called Outward program provides discernment conversations and ministry internships for students exploring vocation.
- Wartburg Seminary, Luther College, and Wartburg College have strong faculty and staff supporting vocational discernment and theological education.
- The synod partners with Rural Shrink Smart (Iowa State University) to understand local demographic change.
- The ELCA is currently undertaking a churchwide review of the entire candidacy process, which will include external “accompaniers” for candidates—an important opportunity to ensure racial equity is built in from the start.

C. Intersecting Barriers

Research on ELCA women clergy reveals parallel patterns: 92% report gender-related challenges; 56% experienced gender-based discrimination; 32% experienced sexual harassment.⁹ Female clergy earn 86% of male salaries.¹⁰ LGBTQ+ clergy face similar channeling and isolation. For women of color, these barriers compound.

Gender/LGBTQ+ progress is connected to—not a substitute for—racial justice work. Our recommendations account for this intersectionality.

III. Why Is It Going On? (Sagely Wisdom)

The barriers are systemic, not isolated. Our congregation, synod, and churchwide procedures for candidacy, theological education, and call were designed for white, middle-class candidates. They assume financial resources, geographic mobility, and cultural familiarity that many candidates of color do not have.

When the ELCA could not meet its constitutional 10% goal for people of color, the goal was removed in 2016 rather than recommitted to—weakening accountability rather than strengthening it.

ELCA congregations and synods have not kept up evangelism and community engagement with communities of color who have lived in Iowa for a long time—including African Americans—nor with newcomers to the state. The stark gap between the state’s demographics and the church’s demographics, documented in Section II, reflects not only barriers to leadership but a failure to share the gospel with all our neighbors.

Pathways into ministry exist in our synod but need more resources, sustained investment, and intentional engagement with people of color to help craft, use, and publicize them. Campus ministries, TEEM, Wartburg Seminary’s CaSTLE project, lay leadership training, and outdoor ministry camps are all active—but few people of color have been invited to help shape these networks. As Wartburg Seminary’s admissions director emphasized, congregations and synods must build relationships and name leadership gifts before seminary recruitment can be effective; admissions offices cannot authentically recruit without those existing relationships. More broadly, our congregations have lost a whole couple of generations of encouraging ministry candidates of any background—and the challenge is even greater for candidates of color.

With over 460 people of color scattered across our synod’s congregations—and no Spanish-language ministry, no ethnic-dominant congregation—we need creative models for connecting and supporting these members. The Technicolor Ministries model from the Southwestern Texas Synod offers one approach: bringing together scattered members of color across multiple congregations for community, support, and leadership development.

Iowa’s social climate—criminal justice disparities, legislative trends, economic pressures—compounds the barriers clergy of color face within ELCA systems.

Trust has been broken. Clergy of color have been harmed by ELCA systems and have not received healing or repair. Rebuilding trust requires transparency, accountability, and follow-through. As the Rev. Dr. Jia Starr Brown’s framework emphasizes, we must move at the speed of trust.

IV. What Ought to Be Going On? (Prophetic Discernment)

The ELCA constitution calls its communities to exhibit authentic diversity—“demographically matching the ethnic and racial composition of their respective contexts” (5.01.A16.). The ELCA Strategy for Authentic Diversity calls for a *metanoia* movement—a change of heart and mind.¹¹

In our synod, this means:

- **Congregations that reflect their communities** and share the gospel with all people in them.
- **Predominantly white congregations prepared to consider and call clergy of color**, using resources like Augsburg Fortress’s *Call to Allyship* and *See Me, Believe Me*.
- **A candidacy process that supports candidates of color** with transparency, financial support, skilled mentoring, intentional relationships, and deep attention to the particularity of each candidate's own discernment of call. Raising up and recognizing leaders means centering people of color as subjects of their own vocations, not as objects in the systems of the church.
- **A call process offering the full range of ministry opportunities** to all qualified candidates.
- **Vital congregations**—vibrant, multi-ethnic communities of faith that intentionally invite and celebrate their community’s diversity and gifts.
- **Partnerships with seminaries, colleges, camps, and ecumenical partners** that recognize and build on the strong work already underway.
- **Cooperation beyond our synod**—with Region 5, nearby synods, and the churchwide organization.
- **Belonging, not just inclusion**—where all people know they are valued for their unique contributions.
- **Accountability structures** that outlast this task force, with evaluation of these systems in the hands of the people we seek to serve and call.

V. How Might We Respond? (Servant Leadership)

Our recommendations are organized by who is responsible for action, beginning with what our synod can do directly, then what we recommend to congregations, to our churchwide and regional partners, and to our seminary and college partners. Each recommendation is intended to be specific, strategic, accountable, and achievable. Evaluation of these systems should be in the hands of the people we seek to serve and call.

Part 1: Actions for the Northeastern Iowa Synod

These recommendations are within the direct authority of the Synod Council, bishop's office, synod staff, and synod committees.

Governance and Accountability

1. **Provide similar, but tailored, antiracism training for lay leaders.** All rostered leaders already participate in Barriers Training with Region 5 clergy—a strength we celebrate. We recommend providing similar, but tailored, training for lay members of the Synod Council, candidacy and call committee members, and other synod committees. The synod should also explore providing antiracism training resources for lay leaders in congregations.
2. **Establish an annual joint accountability meeting** of the Candidacy Committee, Racial Justice Network, the synod team responsible for congregational evangelism and vitality, and the Synod Council Executive Committee to review progress, share learning, and coordinate action on these recommendations. We recommend that the bishop initiate the first meeting. The next Synod Assembly is in June 2027, at which a progress report and assembly resolution affirming these recommendations can be delivered.
3. **Contract with a leader of color to advise synod staff and committees.** Since our synod does not currently have people of color on staff or on the Candidacy Committee, the synod should contract with a leader of color—whether from another synod, the churchwide organization, or an independent consultant—to provide ongoing consultation, advise staff and committees, and support candidates of color in the process.
4. **Create a centralized information hub on the synod website** for all discernment opportunities, seminary pathways, candidacy resources, and

events—making it easy for anyone exploring a call to ministry to find what they need in one place.

Candidacy

5. **Trained mentors—including mentors of color—will be made available to every candidate.** Continue to make the candidacy process transparent and supportive. Publish clear, step-by-step guides.
6. **Address financial barriers.** The synod’s H.G. Anderson Fund for Leaders and Immediate Use Fund have provided full tuition coverage for all seminarians for eight consecutive years—a remarkable achievement. We recommend clarifying and publicizing how these funds work, including eligibility for part-time students and TEEM/certificate candidates. TEEM and certificate students often lack access to scholarships available to degree students; this gap should be addressed.
7. **Intentionally identify and invite leaders of color into discernment.** Work with congregations, campus ministries at Wartburg College and Luther College, outdoor ministry camps, TEEM, Wartburg Seminary’s CaSTLE project, and community partners. Congregations and synods must build relationships and name leadership gifts before seminary recruitment can be effective—the seminary cannot authentically recruit without those existing relationships. The synod should not wait for candidates of color to self-select into a system they may not know or trust.
8. **Develop post-college discernment programming** for young adults ages 22–27 who may not pursue seminary immediately after graduation but are exploring a call to ministry.

Call Process

9. **Invite a cohort of 10–13 congregations to prepare for diverse leadership** by studying Augsburg Fortress’s *Call to Allyship* and *See Me, Believe Me* together, sharing learning and building mutual support.
10. **Arrange for seminary students of color and clergy of color from neighboring synods** to preach and lead worship in NE Iowa congregations as supply preachers, guest preachers, and retreat leaders—expanding congregational imagination about who can be their pastor.
11. **Present candidates of color for the full range of pastoral calls**, not only positions designated for diversity or ethnic-specific ministry.
12. **Enhance the Ministry Site Profile process** by adding a reflective prompt such as: “Looking at the racial and ethnic composition of your congregation and

your surrounding community, how might your next pastor help you engage and serve the full diversity of people in your area?”

13. **Include in compensation and benefits for minoritized clergy** extra time and financial support to participate in communities of color for mentorship, collegiality, and refreshment. For example, congregations should fund their minoritized clergy’s attendance at ELCA ethnic association gatherings, multicultural events, and theological conferences in addition to their basic continuing education time.

Lay Leadership Development

14. **Engage with Wartburg Seminary’s CaSTLE project** (thecastleproject.org) to raise up lay leaders, with intentional support for cross-cultural rural and small-town ministries.
15. **Encourage every congregation to learn about the demographics of its surrounding community.** The synod’s partnership with Rural Shrink Smart (Iowa State University) provides tools to help congregations understand local demographic changes and make wise, creative, and faithful decisions.
16. **Create pathways for lay leaders of color** to serve on synod committees, call committees, and council boards. Actively recruit and nominate leaders of color for these roles.

Care and Repair

17. **Establish a synod-level process for reporting and resolving experiences of racial harm,** with a designated contact outside the affected person’s immediate system.
18. **Create and fund peer support networks for clergy and candidates of color** serving in the synod. Every interview identified these relationships as the most important source of resilience.
19. **Develop community welcome and integration support** for clergy of color and their families relocating to Iowa, including connections to local organizations, schools, housing, and community leaders.

Funding

20. **Publicize and promote the synod’s Outreach Fund** with intentional encouragement of grant applications that reach people of color, prepare congregations to welcome diversity, and raise up leaders of color.

21. **Pursue ELCA seminary admissions cohort microgrants** now available for organizations creating discernment cohorts or support structures for people of color.

Part 2: Recommendations for Congregations

These recommendations are for congregations across the synod. We recognize that many of our congregations are small and carry heavy loads; these recommendations can be pursued incrementally, in partnership with neighboring congregations and with synod support. The Synod Council, bishop's office, and synod staff can encourage, resource, and support these efforts.

22. **Reflect the actual demographics of your community.** Community members should be able to see themselves in the congregation's proclamation, worship, and leadership. They should see that the congregation is expecting them.
23. **Engage in intentional evangelism and community building with people of color** in your neighborhood—including those who have lived in your community for generations and those who are newcomers. The 18% vs. under-2% gap reflects an evangelism challenge as much as a leadership pipeline challenge.
24. **Work across congregational lines** to support community engagement and evangelism efforts with people of color and people who do not worship in English.
25. **Study the Augsburg Fortress resources** *Call to Allyship* and *See Me, Believe Me* to prepare your congregation for calling and welcoming a rostered leader of color.
26. **When calling a rostered leader of color,** include in the compensation package time and funding for the pastor to participate in communities of color for mentorship, collegiality, and refreshment.
27. **Lift up leaders.** Raising up leaders for the wider church is part of the ordination vows. Pastors and congregations should intentionally name gifts for ministry in members of all backgrounds and encourage them to explore theological education and rostered service.

Part 3: Recommendations to ELCA Churchwide and Regional Partners

We offer these as partners committed to shared work.

28. **Advocate for renewal of ELCA STAD seed grants.** The program that funded this task force appears to be closed. We urge the churchwide organization to renew it.
29. **Advocate for churchwide or Region 5 monitoring of call process equity.** With so few clergy of color in any single synod, meaningful monitoring requires a wider lens.
30. **Develop a regional call committee resource guide** in cooperation with Region 5 synods, modeled on ELM's *Enrich and Transform* guide, with guidance on implicit bias, interview questions, and how to invite and welcome a rostered leader of color to interview and consider a call to congregational ministry.
31. **Advocate with Portico Benefit Services** to develop culturally appropriate mental health provider lists through its health contractors, ensure continuity of coverage during transitions, and review severance and disability policies for equity. We recommend that Portico meet annually with ELCA ethnic association officers to evaluate and improve services to clergy of color and the mostly small congregations they serve.
32. **Advocate for Fund for Leaders eligibility for part-time students** and for restoration of the Horizon Internship Program.
33. **Support the ELCA's current churchwide review of the candidacy process** and ensure that racial equity is central to any reforms, including the new external accompanier roles.

Part 4: Encouragement to Seminary, College, and Camp Partners

We celebrate the strong work already underway and encourage its continuation and deepening.

34. **Support and encourage Wartburg Seminary** and other ELCA seminaries in their continuing work to address racial barriers to theological education, including the Journey Together Spanish-language TEEM pathway and the Collaborative Learning program.
35. **Provide students of color with opportunities to connect with students of color at other ELCA seminaries.** For example, Asian and Pacific Islander seminarians should be able to attend the Asian International Lutheran

Conference; Black seminarians should be able to gather across seminary lines for mutual support and theological exchange.

36. **Address the scholarship gap for TEEM and certificate students**, who often lack access to the financial support available to degree students.
37. **Celebrate the NECU commitment to belonging.** Wartburg College and Luther College have affirmed through NECU that diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice are grounded in Lutheran theology. We encourage them to continue this work and to connect it to vocational discernment for ministry.
38. **Explore the Technicolor Ministries model** (Southwestern Texas Synod) as a possible approach for connecting and supporting scattered members of color across multiple congregations.
39. **Engage outdoor ministry camps as partners** in identifying and encouraging young adults of color who may be discerning a call to ministry.
40. **Invite people of color in NE Iowa** to help craft, use, and publicize the networks and programs that already exist—TEEM, CaSTLE, campus ministry, lay leadership training.

VI. Accountability and Next Steps

The ELCA Strategy for Authentic Diversity warns that the church has repeatedly made commitments to racial diversity that have not been implemented. We are determined that this report will be different. We recommend:

The Synod Council receive this report and formally respond with a timeline for action on each recommendation, identifying responsible parties and resources.

The bishop initiate an annual joint meeting of the Candidacy Committee, Racial Justice Network, Congregational Vitality team, and Synod Council Executive Committee to review progress, beginning in fall 2026.

The Synod Council provide a progress report to the 2027 Synod Assembly and biennially thereafter.

Task force members continue this work individually through service on synod committees and in their congregations.

Task Force Next Steps

In addition to supporting the Synod Council's implementation of these recommendations, the task force intends to share its findings with the ELCA seminary admissions cohort, with churchwide staff working on the new candidacy process, and with Portico so that our synod's experience can inform broader ELCA reforms. The task force also plans to continue conversations with campus ministry leaders and community partners as this work deepens.

A Living Document

This report is a living document. The conversations we have begun should continue and deepen. We move at the speed of trust.

Keep alert, stand firm in your faith, be courageous, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love. — 1 Corinthians 16:13–14

Endnotes

1. ELCA, “How Strategic and Authentic Is Our Diversity” (2019), p. 5.
2. NECU, “So That All May Belong,” *Intersections*, Vol. 2025, No. 61.
3. Augsburg Confession, Article 20; cited in ELCA Strategy for Authentic Diversity, p. 6.
4. Pew Research Center, Religious Landscape Study (2023–24).
5. ELCA, “Statistical Review of the Ethnic Specific Ministry Participation” (2016); ELCA, “Summary of Congregation Statistics as of 12/31/2024.”
6. U.S. Census Bureau, 2020–2024 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, Iowa.
7. Peters, D.J., “Population Trends by Race and Ethnicity,” *ISU Extension* (2021), pp. 4–8.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
9. Phelps, D., “Insights into Leadership among Female Clergy in the ELCA,” *JASS* 17(2): 209–219 (2023).
10. ELCA, “45th Anniversary Ordination Research” (2016).
11. ELCA Strategy for Authentic Diversity, p. 7.