



ELCA Coaching aims for growth in life and ministry

Coaching resources can help leaders and congregations use their gifts to accomplish goals

by Marcia Hahn

An untapped resource in the Northeastern Iowa Synod is ready to help ministers, lay leaders and congregations unlock their potential for growth and transformation.

ELCA Coaching was introduced at the Northeastern Iowa Synod in June as a ministry that helps people discover their strengths and where God is leading them. The Northeastern Iowa Synod encourages coaching as a ministry resource and is offering synodical funding to help make it an affordable option for leaders and congregations across the synod.

“We feel like coaching is really valuable support in this time when congregations and ministry leaders

are dealing with declining attendance and challenges that they never faced before,” says Pastor Kristen Rod, Director for Evangelical Mission. “There aren’t any easy answers or quick fixes, but coaching can help congregations and leaders identify the gifts and resources they have, as well as what energizes them. These things can then give guidance to discern how they might best use their gifts,



Kristen Rod

resources, and energy to address challenges.”

COACHING THROUGH TRANSITION

Pastor Kristi Grieder is one of six coaches from the Northeastern Iowa Synod. Grieder became familiar with coaching in 2020 when she connected with an ELCA coach as a source of community for her own self-care during the Covid pandemic. She loved having a coach so much that she started training as a coach in 2021.

Grieder points out that coaching is not therapy or mentoring; instead, coaches ask questions designed to help clients work out their next step

>> Continued on page 2



IN THIS ISSUE

- 1 ELCA Coaching aims for growth in life and ministry
- 3 From the Bishop
- 7 Racial Justice Advocacy
- 9 Generosity
- 11 Congregations
- 12 Prayer Calendar

or figure out what they are missing. This confidential process can help pastors with problem solving to manage their stress and prevent getting burned out. Coaching sessions can focus on the personal part of a pastor's life or issues within their congregations, and help the pastor develop a plan to take care of themselves.

"Coaching is a safe space for a pastor to receive the support that they give to everyone else and to know that everything is held in confidence," Grieder says.

As a certified coach, Grieder specializes in grief coaching. She does formal one-on-one sessions with people who are dealing with grief due to the death of a loved one or a myriad of reasons not death-related, such as a change of call, loss of identity or relationship, loss of health, or a congregational closure. She also applies coaching skills in her work as a minister, previously as a hospice chaplain and currently as visitation pastor for Bethlehem Lutheran, Cedar Falls.



Kristi Grieder

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"The grief group is a powerful ministry and is a good example of how to be community through practiced skills to relate to one another," Grieder says.

A topic that often comes up with pastors is discernment of a call, leaving a congregation or other transition. When it comes to big life decisions, Grieder says coaching helps her clients develop greater confidence in what they know and the decisions they are making.

"Clients have space to process through the details and gain clarity to take their next step forward," Grieder says. "I see people make a shift in their demeanor and how they talk about themselves. They find the potential God has given them and come away with a greater awareness of how God wants them to be."

A NEW CULTURE OF COACHING

Pastor Sarah Nye recalls being at an event where the Rev. Dr. Mark Hanson, who was the ELCA presiding bishop at that time, talked about something that his coach had said to him.

"I remember thinking that if even the presiding bishop of the ELCA would find it helpful to have someone to bounce ideas off of and to prompt their thinking, then certainly it could be helpful to me as well," Nye says.

Nye connected with a coach who she says helped her accomplish changes in key areas of her life and ministry. "It has been a lifeline in times of difficulty and continues to be an encouragement in times of new opportunity."

WHAT IS COACHING?

"... partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential."

— from the International Coach Federation

Nye went on to receive training to become an ELCA coach while serving the Southwestern Texas Synod as the synod and congregational vitality coordinator. She and two of her colleagues helped start a coaching ministry for the entire synod.

"ELCA coach training turned out to be the single most helpful piece of continuing education that I have ever experienced," Nye says. "Coaching became an absolutely vital gift to my ministry and to the synod as a whole."

Nye and her husband, Pastor Joel Nye, moved to Iowa in 2021 to serve the Cross Roads Lutheran Parish at Osage, Nora Springs and Mitchell. Nye also serves as the Northeastern Iowa Synod's coach coordinator and says that one of her goals is to help encourage a culture of coaching to form throughout this synod.

"I love that coaching affirms that each of us has the gifts, wisdom and resources to accomplish that to which God has called us," Nye says.

>> Continued on page 6

“Coaches affirm and come alongside us with really great questions to prompt our thinking, get us to see past whatever it is that might be blocking our imagination, and help us identify the next step forward.”

Nye says that coaching can be especially powerful when a person or congregation senses that a change is needed, but they are not sure how to make that change. A coach can serve as a sounding board to help rostered ministers clarify their thinking as they prepare to work with a congregation. Lay leaders may want to connect with a coach when beginning the call process, forming a new outreach program, discerning closing a congregation or entering a shared ministry partnership.

“Coaching is most successful when an individual or group wants to focus on a particular topic and has a sense of what they would like for an outcome,” Nye says.

TEAM COACHING TO ACHIEVE MINISTRY GOALS

Congregational councils, committees and leadership teams seeking to form a new vision or accomplish a change together can benefit from a formal relationship with a team coach.

“It is incredibly powerful for a team to work together with a coach—usually from outside their immediate context—to gain clarity, direction and consensus on the next steps to take as they live into the future into which God is calling them,” Nye says.

Team coaches can help congrega-

tions and synod networks move forward in mission development, congregational vitality, race relations and more. The synod has a pilot program for coaches to help congregations in the closing process.

The Northeastern Iowa Synod’s Care for Creation Network recently worked with an ELCA team coach to set an action plan for the network’s goal to help 15 congregations over the next two years achieve net zero emissions. Network members met with the coach over four detailed sessions to fine tune a document outlining their objectives, actions, milestones, timeline, resources and accountability.

“The coach brought a more objective look to the process, and we got a good product out of it,” says network member Leslie Sand. “It took some time, but we have something that is measurable and includes accountability. I don’t think we would have gotten there without her help. Now it is up to us to follow through.”

Congregations and teams can also benefit from informal coaching when a congregation member or ordained minister is trained as a coach and uses those skills in their own congregations.

“Congregations that have leaders trained as coaches benefit from



Sarah Nye

those types of informal coaching interactions on a daily basis,” Nye says.

HOW TO GET STARTED

One of the best ways to find out how coaching works and how it might be beneficial is to sign up for a free online mini coaching session. People can bring a specific question or decision they are wrestling with to discuss in a half-hour conversation.

“It is a great way to see the benefits of coaching quickly and meaningfully,” Nye says.

Coaching is client-led, with the client deciding how many sessions and how often they want them—usually four to six hour-long sessions weekly or monthly. Coaching sessions take place over Zoom with coaches from throughout the ELCA. In-person sessions can be arranged when working with a local coach.

Fees can range from free for coaches in training to \$25 to \$100 per session; however, the synod may be able to cover most or all the cost for first-time coaching clients and those wanting to be trained as coaches.

Rostered ministers, lay members and congregations interested in coaching and supplemental funding should contact Pastor Kristen Rod, rodk@neiasynod.org. People can also connect with a coach and learn about coach training through the ELCA Coaching website, www.elcacoaching.org.