



Frequently Asked Questions

Living into the Future Together: Renewing the Ecology of the ELCA (LIFT)

1. Where did the LIFT report come from?

The LIFT report is the result of a project whose entire name is: Living into the Future Together: Renewing the Ecology of the ELCA.

The task force was asked to study the “ecology” of the ELCA because this term signifies the interdependent relationships in this church, in other words, how the various expressions of the ELCA live and work together.

The ELCA Church Council authorized the appointment of a study design group in March 2009 and subsequently formed the LIFT task force in November 2009. The task force met for the first time in January 2010. Its assignment was far-reaching:

- a. **Study** the evolving societal and economic changes that have taken place since the ELCA was formed over 20 years ago.
- b. **Evaluate** everything—the structures and interrelationships among the expressions of this church in light of the internal and external changes this church is experiencing.
- c. **Prepare** a report and recommendations that will position this church for the future and explore new possibilities for participating in God’s mission.

Members of the ELCA responded to the task force’s research by:

- a. Engaging in 2010 synod assembly discussions and forums
- b. Completing questionnaires
- c. Participating in surveys, focus groups and interviews
- d. Submitting hundreds of suggestions for task force consideration

The task force extends thanks to all those who joined in the LIFT conversations from the beginning, and appreciates all of the ideas and responses members shared. These responses were instrumental in forming the recommendations that are part of the LIFT report.

2. What is the report about?

This report is about the identity and mission of this church. Its purpose is to answer two main questions:

- a. What is God calling this church to be and do in the future?
- b. What changes are in order to help us respond most faithfully?

The LIFT report deals with **seven major themes**: Identity, Opportunities, Interrelationships, Congregations, Partnerships, Finance, and Structure and Governance. In each area it responds to the following questions:

- a. **Identity**: What unique gifts does our theological, confessional and liturgical identity bring to this environment and to this time of change?

- b. **Opportunities:** What kinds of scenarios do futurists project? How is God surprising and leading us, in the midst of change and uncertainty, to new and distinctive opportunities?
- c. **Interrelationships:** What are the key changes, internal and external, that have had the most impact on the relationships and interdependence within and among the congregations, synods, the churchwide organization and related organizations, agencies, entities and partners, including, but not limited to, seminaries, campus ministries, outdoor ministries, colleges and universities, social ministry organizations, ecumenical partners, global companions and others?
- d. **Congregations:** Given the importance of congregations in the ELCA, how has the changing environment affected their mission and relationships? How might this church through its congregations, in partnership with synods and the churchwide organization, engage in ministry with an evangelical missional imagination for the sake of the world?
- e. **Partnerships:** How can the ELCA's relationships with its full communion and global mission partners strengthen and extend this church's mission and ministries? How can we learn from and partner with ministries and organizations to accomplish God's work beyond this church?
- f. **Financial Resources:** How can this church most effectively and efficiently steward and deploy the funds available for its mission? What are the current patterns and what are their implications for future funding patterns?
- g. **Structure and Governance:** How can the governing documents in the *Constitution, Bylaws, and Continuing Resolutions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America* provide structures and governance mechanisms that strengthen identity and faithfully and effectively facilitate mission and ministry?

3. How does the report affect me?

If the LIFT report's recommendations are adopted, you as an individual will be affected in two main areas:

- a. **Relationships:** The report emphasizes how we relate to one another on the basis of our mutual faith in our Lord Jesus. It provides recommendations for strengthening our relationships with one another, and recommendations to give vitality to the relationships across the church through greater collaboration in ministry.
- b. **Witness and Service:** The report is about change. While taking into consideration the rich traditions of the denominations that formed this church and the ELCA's own background, it calls for new ways to witness and serve. Why new ways?
 - The church no longer can presume the privileged position it once held in American society.
 - Church membership and worship attendance are declining everywhere.
 - People describe themselves as being more "spiritual" but less "religious."
 - Digital communication and social networking have changed forever the way people communicate with and relate to one another.

The church needs to take seriously these seismic changes that have altered the context and interrelationships within which this church seeks to carry out its mission.

4. How does the report affect my congregation?

The LIFT report asks that the priority of this church be to work together to nurture evangelical (proclaiming the good news) and missional (engaged in witness and service) congregations.

The report recommends that the priority of nurturing congregations be done primarily in two ways:

- a. Your congregation is invited to use the suggested characteristics to consider its own vitality. Prepare a plan for mission that considers the congregation's strengths:
 - how those strengths relate to the congregation's context;
 - how those strengths help the congregation look at itself in light of God's mission—in that particular context and in the particular season of the congregation's life.
- b. The congregation can look to its synod, region and the churchwide organization for support in carrying out its mission plan. Synods, regions and the churchwide organization's functions, structure and finances will be reviewed in the light of nurturing congregations as their priority.

5. What impact does the report have on the ELCA as a whole?

The LIFT report asks that all constituencies within this church take a fresh look at their functions: what they are about and how to achieve it. It looks for the ongoing preparation of a study that determines how every part of this church makes decisions with regard to discerning what is best for the entire church community. With regard to the various expressions of this church, the report states that the primary role for the churchwide organization is to support synods in working directly with congregations. It calls for regions to explore new ways to help this church's groups work cooperatively in mission and ministry. It asks for synods to review their work and their constituting documents to focus on being centers for mission planning and partnership.

The report celebrates the findings of the research of the task force that show a high regard for the global mission and ecumenical activities of the ELCA both within and beyond this church. It calls for an ongoing focus on accompaniment as this church's mode of operation with partners and a consistent use of the Global Mission program unit's country plans in working together with global companion churches.

The report is particularly interested in the rich resources this church has for effective leadership. It recommends how the schools, colleges, universities, social ministry organizations, outdoor and campus ministries, and seminaries can relate more closely in developing leaders well versed in theology and effective in using their skills to lead this church's various organizations in proclamation and service.

Sustainability played a role both in the motivation for the establishment of the LIFT project and the report's concern for the future of the witness and service it envisions. The report calls for collaborative work by the Conference of Bishops, synod vice presidents, synod leadership, the Church Council and the churchwide organization beginning in the fall of 2011 and culminating in a report to the 2013 Churchwide Assembly. The issue addressed by this report will be renewed and sustainable mission support for this church's ongoing ministry. The report will look at giving patterns in the past and how they might be improved for the future.

6. What is the future of the LIFT report?

At the 2011 Churchwide Assembly, the LIFT report will suggest constitutional structure and governance changes and processes for congregations and synods to engage in regarding this church's participation in God's mission.

For this church's future together, the LIFT report calls for the continuation of the functions originally assigned to the task force. The specific areas for which the report calls for immediate attention, further study and future action are:

- a. the constitutional responsibilities of synods
- b. a broad-based process to address legislative decision-making
- c. exploration of the use of social media and technology to allow for greater participation by members in meetings, gatherings, and assemblies
- d. facilitation of non-legislative forums and events for addressing mission-related issues, theological study, the fostering of leadership development and enhanced interdependence
- e. proposals from the units of the churchwide organization to the Church Council for generating and fostering broadly participatory conversations about and for communicating their work
- f. expansion of the consultative role of the Conference of Bishops

7. Will the LIFT report make a difference?

The LIFT report can make significant differences in the ELCA in several areas:

- a. The report brings attention to the ways the ELCA gathers together as congregations and leaders around **discernment** of where the footsteps of our God are leading in our time.
- b. By using its rich theological heritage to discover how our **identity** provides the gifts needed precisely for this time of change, this church's identity helps us relate more cohesively with one another and strengthen our relationships with Christian partners and the world beyond.
- c. The theological education institutions of this church working in closer collaboration with synods and congregations can produce effective rostered and lay **leaders for mission** in a specific territory.
- d. The report looks for increased opportunities for leader development and **accountability for multicultural ministry**.
- e. By calling for a look at synods as primarily supporters of evangelical missional congregations, the report emphasizes **the synod as a catalyst and an agent of mission**.
- f. The report calls for **congregations to be engaged in God's mission in their context**. This is not a new vision. What is new is an expectation that each congregation is encouraged and offered support to consider its mission by means of a plan. The hope is that these mission plans will benefit those who are already planning for mission as well as those who are ready for and see the value of a plan.
- g. The use of networking for building relationships is inherent in the use of the word "ecology." The **denomination as a network** presupposes working together to sustain the denomination and its work through its inner relationships.