



Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Office of the Bishop

Dear Lilly Endowment, Inc.,

On behalf of the people of the Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, we are enthusiastically submitting a grant proposal to be considered as part of the Thriving Congregations Initiative of the Lilly Endowment.

Over the last few years, the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the rate of change in our congregations and our congregations have risen to meet the demands of a rapidly changing and ever-evolving ministry context. With resilience and determination when so much of people's lives were taken away, the church persisted as many of our communities continued to gather online, in socially distant ways, or outside to continue to share the revolutionary love of Jesus that sees us through even the most stressful of times. As we emerge from this pandemic, we are ready to turn to the next chapter and wonder collectively what God has in store for us.

We call the city of Philadelphia home. We proudly embrace being the city of love and the city that started the revolution that led to our nation. Being agents of love and change is fundamental to being Philadelphian. We also are Lutheran and not afraid of reform. We are ready to help our congregations manage one of the largest paradigm shifts Christianity has seen in decades. What we propose is so much bigger than a program; it's a process and it's a revolution. *Love Revolution: Love God and Love Neighbor* seeks to create a process to help lay and ordained congregational leaders focus on going back to the basics of faith. We envision using the baptismal covenant to help congregations focus on building vibrant communities of faith. With baptismal theology connecting us to God and to our neighbors, we will help people discover their unique gifts to help build the Kingdom of God. With the support of the Lilly Endowment, we believe we can significantly increase the impact and effectiveness of our work to build up strong and thriving congregations through a two-year process walking congregations through baptismal renewal. The *Love Revolution* will help congregational leadership draw on spiritual resources to navigate and thrive amid the rapidly changing landscape of ministry in the 21st century.

Therefore, we are requesting \$1,070,392 from the Lilly Endowment to support this grant proposal for the next five years to help congregations in the Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod become love revolutionaries who create thriving congregations and vital community ministries.

In Christ,

The Rev. Patricia A. Davenport
Bishop, Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod

Ms. Tracey A. Beasley
Synod Vice-President

Executive Summary

We are the Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod (SEPA) of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). As one of our national denomination's 65 regional judicatories, we represent one of the most diverse Lutheran regional bodies in our country. We exhibit the true depth and breadth of God's beautiful creation in all that we are. In last year's statistical reports, 60% of our congregations reported participation of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, Persons of Color) and collectively as a synod, 10.96% of our active participants identify as people of various ethnic specific groups. This starkly contrasts our national church that reports to be 99.6% white. Beyond our ethnic diversity, we also have active LGBTQIA+ leaders and many congregations creating inclusive communities where all might know the wideness of God's love for all people. The 140+ congregations of our synod range in location from rural, to suburban, to campus, to urban ministry, enabling us to beta test ideas across a variety of contexts. As we journey with congregations emerging from the pandemic, we envision a process that would equip our congregations with tools for the shifting landscape of ministry, clarifying their purpose, and boldly claiming their faith in ways that lead to the flourishing of their communities.

The world feels overwhelming right now so we aspire to keep the program simple. Love God. Love Neighbor. When pressed about the greatest commandment, Jesus said, "love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul. And the second is like it, love your neighbor as yourself. On these two – all the law and the prophets hang."¹ What would it look like if we designed a process to help people explore and renew their sense of God's love working in their lives? How could we help people see that loving our neighbors is a way to renew their sense of purpose and belonging in community?

Love Revolution: Love God and Love Neighbor is a multi-year learning community that gathers both lay and rostered leaders to renew their sense of purpose and vocation by exploring the Baptismal Covenant as they discover ways God's love revolutionizes the way we live in the world. After the pandemic, many congregations are struggling to find meaning and purpose as they attempt to replicate the institutional church. But the institutional church is broken and the only way forward is to help people understand the crucial role relationships play in helping form vibrant and vital communities of faith. Through this culture shift, participating congregations will be accompanied in relationships with coaches and mentors. *Love Revolution* will also offer learning opportunities for the whole synod in the fall and spring as we invite others outside the formal learning process to learn about cultivating vibrant communities of faith. Affirming the work of the Holy Spirit across our whole synod, we will discover how God has equipped and called us with unique gifts to serve and build the Beloved Kingdom.

While the Baptismal Covenant is nothing new, our revolutionary approach is to teach them from a posture of cultural humility. Breaking from past colonialist influences, we will instead seek to evolve congregations into the church we are becoming – a servant church with growing and thriving congregations.

After all, Philadelphia is all about Love and Revolution. Love is in our name and the American Revolution had its start right in Independence Hall. *Love Revolution* will help congregations in the Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod chart the course towards this new missional future.

¹ Matthew 22:37-40

Proposal Narrative

Purpose

While many churches around the country want to go back to the way it was before the pandemic, we are leaning into this time as a moment of Holy Revolution and an opportunity to help congregations navigate one of the largest paradigm shifts the Christian church has seen since the Reformation. We are the Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod (SEPA) of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). As we help congregations continue to adapt to their surroundings we are poised to launch a Spirit-led revolution that will help congregations evolve into the new age of church and equip them with the skills to navigate the rapidly changing religious landscape in our country.

As we help our congregations discover their purpose, we imagine taking it back to the basics to make it plain for people. Christ said that above all, we should love God and love neighbor as the greatest commandments. We envision creating a revolution on this principle of love. As the City of Philadelphia we are the perfect place to start this *Love Revolution*, love (*phili* in Greek) is in our name! A recent census poll also ranked Philadelphia as one of the most helpful cities in the country – ranking our formal and informal volunteering among the top 3 cities in our country. Philadelphia was also at the center of revolutionizing our country when the founding fathers gathered at Independence Hall to dream of a more perfect union.

Of course as Lutherans, we are also no stranger to the work of reform and revolutions. Martin Luther ignited a movement that changed the course of Christian history with the Protestant Reformation. From his example we are drafting a process that takes us back to the source of our loving relationship with God – our baptism. We will take the Lutheran tradition of “always reforming” and apply this to our spiritual lives. Lutherans believe that when we are baptized, we are grafted into God’s unfolding love story with all of creation. In baptism, we receive the gift of faith and the promise of salvation. Everyday water reveals this extraordinary love of God that tells us that no one is excluded.

Love Revolution: Love God and Love Neighbor revitalizes the spiritual lives of participants by reflecting on the baptismal covenant in our tradition. As baptized people, we are called to “...**live** among God’s faithful people; **hear** the word of God and share in the Lord’s Supper; **proclaim** the good news of God in Christ through word and deed; **serve** all people following the example of Jesus; and **strive** for justice and peace in all the earth.” ¹*Love Revolution* will center on these five promises to live, hear, proclaim, serve, and strive as a framework to understand how we love God and love neighbor.

In reconnecting people to these promises, *Love Revolution* cultivates a discernment process where participants discover how deeply God has called them in love into the church, but also how God has equipped us with gifts to be sent out into the world to share God’s love with our neighbors. We will help participants discover their unique gifts for helping to bring about God’s love revolution.

We recognize this will not look the same for everyone. In fact, living into one’s baptism calling yields myriad manifestations. Our program will engage disciples to find how their baptismal calling fits into their own context, both on an individual and congregational level. Participants will reflect on their distinct communities, its particular needs and chasms, and how they might be a vessel for God’s love in those settings. As they engage in the *Love Revolution*, participants will also begin the process of generating new ministries that reach their contexts and spreading the refreshing waters of our baptismal promises in their communities.

¹ baptismal covenant Evangelical Lutheran Worship, pg. 236

While the baptismal covenant is long-established in the Christian faith, what is new for us is approaching the covenantal promises through the lens of cultural humility. *Love Revolution* seeks to cultivate love of all neighbors through recognition of our own particular position within culture. More specifically, anti-racism and post-colonialism will be an explicit component of *Love Revolution*. We will accompany our neighbors by asking them what they need as a pillar to forging new ministries and centering voices that are too often quieted. That is, we will turn down the volume on white Eurocentric voices to amplify the voices of those of immigrants and People of Color in our communities who are too often unheard.

Living through the compounding pandemics of white supremacy, COVID-19, loneliness, and patriarchy, we in SEPA Synod have become acutely aware of the growing chasms within our tremendously diverse area that spanning from urban to suburban to town and country congregations. SEPA Synod congregations also show diversity in culture, from historic Black-church congregations to recent immigrant start-ups. Regardless of setting, *Love Revolution* will ask the question: what does it mean to live in community and simultaneously wrestle with biases that influence the way we live and engage our neighbors? Cultivating renewed baptismal promises and outreach ministries cannot be done without the necessary work of anti-racism and post-colonialism training.

Overall, *Love Revolution: Love God and Love Neighbor* works to infuse participants with the re-energization of baptism to adapt to the dynamism of our changing region by utilizing the practices and traditions already given to us to deepen the faith of those involved. Our initiative will help participants go from seeing church as a building, to understanding themselves being the church among the people they meet every day.

Rationale

According to our SEPA Synod Vitality Team, having a framework to understand what is going on in the wider world is a critical component of helping congregations thrive. So much of our world has shifted and the church has neglected to shift along with it. While these cultural shifts were at play long before the pandemic, the pandemic magnified the issues to the degree that churches could no longer avoid them. Now is the time to help the church evolve beyond institutionalism and rediscover its role in spreading the gospel of God's love to all people.

Our pastors and our lay leaders identify a wide range of topics as their most pressing challenges, but we hope to address several key issues in our *Love Revolution* process. The first is to help people seek clarity amid what is an ever increasingly complex world. Harvard Business School has often used the term VUCA (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous) to describe not only the financial markets, but also the state of the world.¹ The answers are not always clear for us and the way forward can seem a bit murky at times. The only way forward for congregations in a VUCA world is gaining clarity on their mission and seeking a clear vision of how to carry the mission out. When disagreement or confusion arises, we want *Love Revolution* to give congregations the relational skills of understanding and clarifying their expectations and ideas. And we want them to practice agility in shaping what comes next. Helping our *Love Revolution* and their congregations concentrate on the work of sharing God's love will help them focus on the work of building vital and vibrant relationships.

¹ <https://hbr.org/2014/09/a-framework-for-understanding-vuca>

Living in such a complex world has overwhelmed many people into a sense of apathy and futility. In spite of such arduous issues like gun violence, racial unrest, increasing poverty, homelessness, and a democracy that seems to be coming apart at its seams, we remain hopeful. By taking a deep dive into our baptismal promises, we rediscover our sense of purpose and our place in the kingdom as beloved children of God. During the *Love Revolution* process, we will help people discover their unique gifts and empower them with a sense of purpose and agency to use those gifts to make a difference in their communities.

Another shifting reality for churches is the continued decline in congregational resources, dwindling worship attendance and decreased offerings. These numbers are largely a byproduct of inadequate vision and mission. Without a clear sense of purpose and agency, people struggle to see the impact of their participation. The denomination's historical reliance on professional clergy disempowered the vital ministry of all baptized people to help share God's love and build the beloved kingdom. Our process seeks to bolster congregational participation by equipping leadership among laity so they use their giftedness to help further the mission of the church.

Religious expression in our world today continues its downward trend. Statistics of people with no religious affiliation continue to make headlines in church circles. Yet, an intriguing post-pandemic trend provides a trickle of living water and hope: growing numbers of the spiritually curious. People are longing for a sense of community and connection after years of isolation and division. The church can cultivate life-giving relationships that propel people into the broader community as a force for good and hope.

Surgeon General Vivek Murthy posted a report saying our nation is facing an epidemic of loneliness.² Technology presents the great irony of our time: we are more connected than we have ever been, yet a pervasive sentiment of loneliness remains. In baptism we are taught that we are not alone. In the waters of baptism, we are connected to God's deep and abiding love, and we are also called to each other as siblings in Christ. *Love Revolution* helps people rediscover vital relationships as a key component of ministry is critical both for countering loneliness and for re-imagining what church can be.

Lilly Endowment funds would allow us to engage congregations in discernment of the world around them and to then adapt their ministries to better focus on connecting to God, each other, and their communities in rapidly-changing contexts. We will illustrate in a modern world Jesus's commission to go make disciples. By focusing congregations on forming disciples who love God and love neighbor, the *Love Revolution* sharpens our clarity on this vital work. Learning in community deepens the cohort groups in spiritual practice and understanding faith working in their daily lives so that being a disciple extends past Sunday. Following Jesus transforms our entire lives.

As the ELCA looks ahead to the future, we aspire to have congregations whose faith shines in their relationships with God, each other, and their community. Vital congregations experience heightened and more vibrant worship, prayer, study of scripture, and sharing of testimony as they discern the presence

² U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2023. Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community. [<https://www.hhs.gov/about/news/2023/05/03/new-surgeon-general-advisory-raises-alarm-about-devastating-impact-epidemic-loneliness-isolation-united-states.html>]

and will of God in their midst. We know that thriving congregations focus their vitality work on these three core components.

Congregations strengthen their relationship with God. Congregational leaders (both lay and ordained) articulate how God shows up in their everyday lives. The congregation clearly understands God's larger mission, and members know how that call relates to their local context. In addition to that sense of vision, vital congregations embody God's mission in their actions.

They develop strong relationships with each other. Relationships among leaders, staff, and laypeople create a loving community with clear and purposeful communication. People work together respectfully through successes and challenges. There is a sense of belonging that drives the commitment and engagement in the mission of the church.

Congregations maintain a strong presence in the community. The congregation is a porous community where people flow in and out of the congregation. Not only are the congregation's doors open to welcome all, the people also go out into the community to share the love of Jesus with their neighbors. Vital congregations develop key relationships to community groups and create partnerships to make a positive impact on the community and to strengthen the whole community, not just the congregation.

Through this *Love Revolution*, we hope to start an infusion of baptismal water flowing into our veins to help revive the sense of what it means to be a vital congregation. Investment from the Lilly Endowment in our program will make that a reality in our synod, helping congregations find new life in this post-pandemic climate, empowering them to take risks to become vital and thriving once again, embodying God's presence in their local contexts. Refreshed with the water of baptism, these congregations will promote the healing of our communities. They will share faith and tell stories of how God's love has changed them. They will grow and connect leaders across the broader community. Reformed by ancient tradition and modern practice, these congregations will invite and welcome all to experience God's love, worship in spirit and truth, and create the change needed for dynamic adaptability and vitality. Revolutionized by the promise of God's love, these congregations will practice radical generosity, become more rooted in their neighborhoods and communities, and above all - be grounded in a renewed sense of hope that God has called them to this holy work that is never done in vain.

Program Design and Activities

We envision creating a learning community where faith is caught more than it is taught. The goal of the *Love Revolution* activates each of us to proclaim the way of Jesus and embody the love of God and our neighbors. Our congregations need a shift in culture and mindset. Gone are the days of institutional programming; instead we seek to graft people into daily practices of discipleship that help them discover how God has uniquely gifted them to serve in this increasingly complex world.

Joining the *Love Revolution* means that participants from congregations are willing to take a deep dive into exploring how they are called to love God and love neighbors. By intentionally crafting learning experiences that explore a variety of spiritual practices, we will help participants affirm their vocation as disciples sent to be God's loving presence in the world.

For us as Lutherans, becoming part of God's beloved kingdom starts in baptism. In the waters of Baptism, we first experience the lavish love of God embracing us and calling us beloved. We are also

equipped to serve others through the gifts of the Holy Spirit. As such, we affirm our baptismal covenant to **live** among God's faithful people, **hear** God's word and share in the Lord's supper, **proclaim** the Good News of God in both word and deed, **serve** all people following the example of Jesus, and **strive** for justice and peace in all the earth. The *Love Revolution* will use these five baptismal promises as the framework for helping people connect more deeply with God's loving purpose and discover their giftedness for kingdom building.

Participants will spend two years learning together as they gather with their cohort as well as work in their individual congregations and communities. Using the five promises of the baptismal covenant, we will design key experiences that help participants love God and love their neighbor. As the process unfolds, participants will discover spiritual practices and discernment methods to help them explore new ministry opportunities in their contexts. As we journey together, we expect congregations to identify ways that God is calling them to evolve into a serving church - one that is called out into the community to serve their neighbors. As we explore these foundational elements of our baptism together, we will deepen our connection to God, to each other, and to our communities.

In the first year of the *Love Revolution*, participants will rediscover ways to love God. We will explore the first two baptismal covenants, to **live** and **hear**. Living together in community these days requires us to acknowledge the larger cultural realities swirling around us. We live in increasingly complex societies where the speed of change is exponentially expanding. This evolution existed before the pandemic, but the realities of Covid-19 heightened it and forced many congregations to become aware of its effects. The culture in many of our congregations has shifted - no longer do people regularly volunteer to serve on committees and in leadership roles. The Great Resignation had an effect on our congregations as well and we are seeing that congregations are struggling to give vision and purpose to leadership. By helping participants claim their baptismal purpose, leaders are equipped to serve the emerging missional church. Living together in community also means that we need to acknowledge our implicit and explicit biases that affect the way we live together. During the *Love Revolution* we will help participants become aware of the church's history and role in shaping communities in both harmful and helpful ways. By wrestling with this history, we will continue cultivating cultural competencies so we avoid replicating elements of our colonial past as we engage our neighbors. Finally, we will invite participants to imagine church in a new way - beyond buildings and programs to instead see church as a community of people knit together in the waters of baptism, equipped to serve and live their faith out as public theologians sharing God's love with the world.

In the second half of the first year, participants will explore how they hear God's word and share in the supper. This period will focus on exploring spiritual practices and help them discover ways they deeply and personally connect to God and to each other. We also will help them explore the voices that they hear as religious authority, drawing on theologians and spiritual leaders beyond traditional European descent voices. We hope that as they explore scripture during this time that they are discovering ways that THE story (scripture) is becoming part of THEIR story as a baptized believer. During this period, we will also equip participants with a deeper set of listening skills to hear what is really going on in our communities and conduct one-on-one interviews based on community organizing principles. As we help them explore their unique gifts for ministry, participants will begin to think about what our congregations will share with others. Holy Communion gives us a model to explore how we are called

as disciples to break bread with those in our community, while at the same time instilling a sense of cultural humility that seeks invitations to be in authentic relationships with community members.

In the middle of the *Love Revolution*, participants will go on retreat, spending multiple days together learning, exploring, and equipping leaders to be love revolutionaries who **proclaim** God's love in both word and deed. During the retreat, we will help participants discover their unique path of discipleship - how they have been gifted with a particular proclamation of the gospel that is needed for their community and their context. We will help them discover their own unique faith story and particular spiritual strengths and gifts through the discipline of Dependable Strengths activities³ and sharing stories with one another. Participants will learn new tools for evangelism in the 21st century, exploring social media platforms and video recording skills, to become better digital storytellers as a congregation.

In the second year of the process, we will help participants learn to love neighbors and dive into the last two promises of the baptismal covenant: **serve** all people and **strive** for justice and peace. We will explore what it means to serve like Jesus, grounding our approach in accompaniment.⁴ Grappling explicitly with the colonial and oppressive history of Christianity, we seek to equip our revolutionaries to serve rooted in tenets of mutuality, inclusivity, vulnerability, empowerment and sustainability. As participants learn to listen deeply to their neighbors, we will set up intentional experiments for them to explore and evaluate as we model a process of one-on-one interviews. This process includes discovering and identifying their community needs found in their unique contexts, then making connections that utilize their unique gifts. We will ask folks to explore ways that they might serve in all of their contexts - at home, in their communities, at work, and within the church. In the second half of the year, we will devote learning to the promise to strive for justice and peace. Participants will reclaim the biblical rather than the political roots of advocacy work. They will identify particular causes in their communities to address: racism, anti-semitism, transphobia, environment, poverty, homelessness, etc. We will equip them with the adaptive leadership practices to move complex projects forward while accompanying communities that wrestle with being a community of believers in a post-institutional-church world. This process is characterized by innovation - in listening, designing, experimenting and evaluating various ministry efforts. Equipping *Love Revolution* participants with practical tools empowers congregations to take agency in building the beloved kingdom in the face of what seems like impossible justice work.

Congregations would participate in waves over the five-year period. We will start with five congregations in the first wave. If we determine there is capacity to add additional congregations in successive waves, we will grow the learning cohort groups to eight and then twelve congregations participating. As participants complete the process, we hope that they will continue to be part of the learning community serving as mentors and volunteers with the successive waves of cohort learning groups.

In summary, each congregation will participate in the following components of *Love Revolution*:

- **Launch worship service** – We will create a revival-style worship service to surround program participants with prayer, praise and preaching as we begin to journey with them.

³ Examples of Dependable Strengths activities can be found here: [Dependable-Strengths-2017-2018-1.pdf \(uw.edu\)](#)

⁴ [https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Accompaniment_\(full\).pdf](https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Accompaniment_(full).pdf)

- ***PROCLAIM retreat*** – Between Year A and B, we will gather the congregational leadership for a multi-day retreat to explore the baptismal promise of PROCLAIM. During this retreat, we will help participants discern and explore their unique giftedness to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ in word and deed.
- ***Four cohort gatherings*** – Based around the themes LIVE, HEAR, SERVE, and STRIVE, these gatherings will allow for idea sharing among congregations, with topical speakers to bring lay leaders and pastors together in shared learning and collaboration. At the end of each gathering, congregational leadership teams will design curriculum to teach their congregations the key theme and experiments to try in their own communities.
- ***Monthly coaching sessions*** – A spiritual coach will meet with the congregation in the first year to resource their exploration of spiritual practices, finding what is authentic and life-giving for each context. In the second year, a different coach from the ELCA Coaching Network will be engaged to help develop the congregation’s connections to the community in the program areas they discern (children’s ministry, feeding ministry, education, anti-racism, environmental advocacy, etc.)
- ***Two synod-wide learning days*** – The Vitality team will help the synod explore how to cultivate thriving congregations who play a vital role in their community. Open to all SEPA congregations (including those who are not part of *Love Revolution*), these events will occur in the Fall as a stand-alone Synod Vitality Day and in the Spring as part our Synod Assembly in workshops offered for assembly participants (who are both pastors and lay voting members from all our congregations).
- ***Microgrants*** – We will also allow participating congregations to apply for a microgrant of up to \$5,000 during their two-year process. Often, our clergy attend continuing education events and are unable to implement their learning due to lack of funds. Microgrants will remove that financial barrier to change.
- ***Closing worship service*** – At the end of the two-year learning journey, we will gather for a revival-style worship service of prayer, praise and preaching to affirm the work program participants have been doing over the last two years. This will also mark their transition into their new mentorship roles to journey with the congregations in successive waves.
- ***Mentoring*** – After completing *Love Revolution* learning, Wave One congregations will mentor Wave Two congregations, further strengthening their personal learning, and relationship building and resource sharing synod-wide.

We will select congregations to participate in each program wave using the following criteria:

- At least one congregation will be selected from each of the five counties of SEPA Synod.
- Congregations must have a strong leadership commitment to the *Love Revolution*. This typically would be at least one pastor and four to five lay people per congregation who will help shape and implement the program at a congregational level. However, congregations in pastoral transition will be considered if they meet all other criteria.
- All lay members must be able to commit to the full two-year process.
- At least two people per team must commit to the additional two mentoring years. This should include the pastor if the congregation is not in pastoral transition.
- Consistent to the realities of our synod’s diverse ministry, at least 20% of congregations selected will have the majority of the congregation’s membership identifying as BIPOC (black,

indigenous, people of color) or whose primary language is not English or whose leadership represents historically underrepresented communities.

- We will select participating congregations with a preference for communities with a changed or changing demographic.

Collaborations and Partnerships

Synod by definition means people on the way together. We as the Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod do not exist without our vital partnerships. We are a network of over 140 congregations, social service organizations, camps, advocacy groups, and ministry teams that help propel the synod's mission forward. The diversity present in these communities reflects the wide diversity that is also present in our Philadelphia metro area. Our partnerships span the scope of racial and ethnic diversity, and also the diversity of landscape as we have congregations from dense urban areas all the way out to more rural farming areas. Connecting these congregations creates a strong Lutheran witness in the Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod.

In addition to partnerships with our local congregations, the Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod is part of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Directors of Evangelical Mission are a key role in connecting the synod and churchwide. The ELCA funds this position in each synod to help advance congregational vitality and mission. Our synod is blessed to have two Directors of Evangelical Mission, The Rev. Dr. Moses Suah-Dennis and The Rev. Bryan Penman, who share the responsibilities of this position. They are part of a network of over 80 other ELCA Directors of Evangelical Mission who regularly collaborate to strengthen congregations, vision new ministries, and inspire disciples to step into leadership roles. The ELCA is a church that exists as one church in three expressions: congregation, synod, and national church body. Partnership and collaboration are our constitutional DNA.

As part of our synod's ministries, we have an established Vitality Team. In existence for the last five years, they have been working to help congregations deepen their sense of mission and vision. Teaching about what makes for vital and vibrant congregations, they focus their work on framing the three key relationships in vitality: connecting to God, connecting with others, and connecting to their communities. Helping to instill the markers of vitality in congregations, they offer training, consulting, and accompaniment in development of new congregations.

Other key synod teams to engage the *Love Revolution* process are the Inclusive Communities team and the synod's Anti-Racism team. The Inclusive Communities team is working to assist congregations with being more open and welcoming to our LGBTQIA+ siblings (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual and more), while the Anti-Racism team is working to educate and dismantle white privilege in the church. Members of these two teams will be critical in helping to implement the grant as we learn ways to love our neighbors without the colonialist notions of the past. In addition to these formal synod teams, we also have a local chapter of the African Descent Lutheran Association (ADLA) who will serve as a resource for helping *Love Revolution* source instructors and content for our program.

Our synod office is also blessed to be located on the eastern campus of United Lutheran Seminary in Philadelphia. The mission of the Seminary is "Unifying, Learning, Serving: United Lutheran Seminary is a welcoming and diverse learning community equipping people to proclaim the living

Gospel for a changing church and world.”⁵ The campus is alive with both students and faculty who are deeply focused on public theology and doing ministry in the context of our everyday living. *Love Revolution* will depend heavily on helping participants also understand their call to live out their faith in the public square of their everyday life. We hope to draw on the experience of ULS faculty and students as they assist us with designing and implementing our *Love Revolution*.

Finally, we will partner with our Lutheran Advocacy in Pennsylvania (LAMPa) office located in Harrisburg, PA. Part of *Love Revolution* will walk participants through tangible ways they can get connected to justice work in their local communities and on the state and national level. Relationships with our LAMPa office will help connect our people into the wider work of advocacy as we strive for justice and peace in all the earth and especially in our own communities.

Evaluation

Love Revolution seeks to realize three primary outcomes:

1. Key markers of congregational vitality are present and evident in congregational systems.
2. Self-identified renewed understanding of baptism, its articulation according to the Lutheran tradition, and a re-energized baptismal call to serve God and neighbor emerge among participants.
3. Congregational leaders (ordained and lay) identify the needs of their community, utilize their own giftedness and story to address these needs, and sense God’s presence within the ministry- and relationship-building

Data will be sought through quantitative and qualitative methods. Each participating congregation will complete the ELCA’s Congregational Vitality Survey (CVS). This instrument brings high reliability and validity through its replicated use over time. It will serve as a pre- and post-test instrument to measure macro change. However, we realize the narrative components of this work that surveys cannot capture. As such, the Grant Evaluator and Program Director will develop a brief interview for use pre, mid, and post *Love Revolution* process. Besides detailing a congregation’s journey through the program, this will yield a critical mass of responses for the Grant Evaluator to code and analyze the data through qualitative methodology, extracting themes and essential experiences.

The midpoint interviews will lend themselves to serve as key performance indicators and will help shape the program’s trajectory and any needed adaptations to accomplish the outcomes. Furthermore, because the program itself will be replicated in waves, each wave’s collected data will serve as a performance indicator for the subsequent waves. Demographic data will be collected in addition to these scripted assessments. Quantitative indicators will include but not be limited to an increase in participating congregations, increase in active ministry participants, and an increase in new congregational ministries. Qualitative indicators will include but not be limited to deepening relationships with community partners, a sense of participants living out their baptismal call, and a revived energy to embark on new ministry within each community.

⁵ <https://www.unitedlutheranseminary.edu/about>

All data will be collected and compiled by the Grant Evaluator with the help of the Program Director as needed.

Communications

The viability of *Love Revolution* hinges upon effective communication. Revolutions throughout history have all functioned this way: they needed communication to get their message out and to gain momentum. This initiative is certainly no different. The purpose of our communications within this project will be accountability and momentum.

Serving the purpose of accountability, our communications will maintain transparency about our goals of this project. *Love Revolution* communications are a way to make our mission and baptismal call known while being explicitly clear about our values of anti-racism and post-colonialism. These values and goals will be communicated through various channels, including regular synodical emails and social media posts so synod stakeholders know what is transpiring. Longer reports will be released semi-annually for anyone interested in reviewing the progress and adaptations of *Love Revolution*. These reports will also be sent to all collaborating partners, including those who have written letters of support, our ELCA Churchwide offices, congregations currently and formerly involved in *Love Revolution*, and the Lilly Endowment. Reports will be advertised in synod communications and posted to the website for download. In providing this level of transparency, we hope these communications not only serve the purpose of accountability, but that they also foster momentum within our congregations.

Revolutions throughout history have depended on effective communication to ignite the energy behind them. *Love Revolution* will set out to do that through the modern channels of social media. The creation of independent social media accounts for this project will be explored to ensure this project is more effectively kept in the spotlight. Regular communications, updates, photos, and videos will be posted on these accounts to inspire others as we tell these revolution stories. Grant staff will upkeep the social media accounts to model and empower present congregations involved to do similar communications in their congregation. We envision congregations utilizing social media as a tool for our modern lives to inspire ongoing ministry.

Lastly, networking will be a significant part of our communications. We will network with our national cohort of Directors of Evangelical Mission, sharing what we have learned and trying out new ideas. Networking will also take place through a platform of online learning for participants currently engaged in *Love Revolution* to interact with each other.

Sustainability

We are starting a revolution, a movement, a paradigm shift - not running a program. We are seeking to change cultures, not invite people into another program. The process of creating a learning community and inviting people to focus on their unique ministry and call to follow Jesus is so much bigger than any program - this is inviting people into the way of love. This process will live on long after the grant funding has ended, mainly because this is what the church has been doing since the time of Jesus. We live out the Great Commission, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the

name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”⁶ Grant funds now will help us get a jump start on the revolution and help our congregations and their leaders adapt to their changing contexts, gain a clearer understanding of what God is calling them to do, and deepen their relationship with God.

Over the life of the grant, we expect to be building the capacity of our synod. With the support of the Lilly Endowment, we will strengthen the leadership of our ordained and lay leaders. As we invite congregations into the *Love Revolution*, we anticipate them connecting with a deeper sense of how to do ministry together. As we raise up leaders, we will raise their sense of generosity and understanding of the interconnected work of the wider church. By developing a network of disciples who care deeply about loving God and loving neighbors, we build the strength of our synod for the future. A synod full of disciples embodying the love of God and neighbors will invite new people into a relationship with Jesus Christ, growing our congregations. Congregations with a clarified vision and sense of purpose will lead to more engagement and thus higher levels of generosity and mission support towards the synod. Our synod staff includes an Assistant to the Bishop for Mission Advancement who will also be consulted for mission support and other fundraising initiatives.

In addition to increasing the ability for congregations to give more to our mission support, we can also utilize the synod’s Fund for Mission. This fund is largely designated for the work of growing new ministry efforts in our synod. Made up primarily of the net proceeds from now-closed congregations, we view this as our resurrection fund helping us to bring new life to ministries across our synod. We anticipate that the Fund for Mission will grow enough over the next five years to provide sufficient income to replace Lilly endowment funds with our own yearly disbursement of \$200,000 worth of investment earnings.

Organizational Capacity

We are the Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod (SEPA) of the ELCA. SEPA Synod is comprised of over 140 congregations and service organizations, representing approximately 70,000 baptized believers in the Philadelphia Metro area. We are Lutherans together, loving God, reflecting Jesus and serving our neighbors. At the heart of our synod’s focus is equipping the saints for the work of ministry. Our synod is led by The Rev. Dr. Patricia Davenport, the first African American woman elected bishop in the ELCA. She is supported by the synod staff of 9 ordained and lay leaders as well as our synod council. The synod council represents the diversity of our synod by specifying election criteria for equitable representation of ordained and lay leadership, gender diversity, and geographic diversity. Our synod works actively to increase the diversity represented in our largely white denomination by implementing a strategy for authentic diversity, allowing for extra representation from BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, Persons of Color), LGBTQIA+, and young adult communities. Throughout the ELCA’s sixty-five synods, Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod is known as one of the most diverse synods in terms of ethnic and economic diversity.

In addition to our formal governing structure, we also have several key synod committees that will help oversee *Love Revolution*. Our Synod’s Vitality Team will work closely to help shape and implement this grant process. Our synod also has members of our Inclusive Communities Committee and our Anti-

⁶ Matthew 28:19

Racism Team that will help with the bias training and help equip participants with a working knowledge of how to develop authentic diversity.

Our annual operating budget is \$2 million dollars. Our operational income primarily comes from funds we receive directly from congregations for Mission Support. We also receive funds from investments like our Fund for Mission that helps to defray the cost of missional activities in the synod. These investment funds are sourced from the sale of real estate and property from disbanded congregations. We also are supported by individual donors who give to special appeals and towards our annual fund drive, the All Saints Appeal. We also have several financial partnerships with the ELCA, including their funding of our Directors for Evangelical Mission and some of our strategic congregations and mission starts.

As an organization, the Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod is clear about who we are. We know we have networks of leaders ready to implement the *Love Revolution* process. Our congregations are looking to us as the regional judicatory to help them navigate these uncharted waters of being church after the changes wrought by recent pandemics. Receiving funds from the Lilly Endowment will help us continue the work of supporting congregations as they clarify and deepen their purpose and engagement with their communities.