



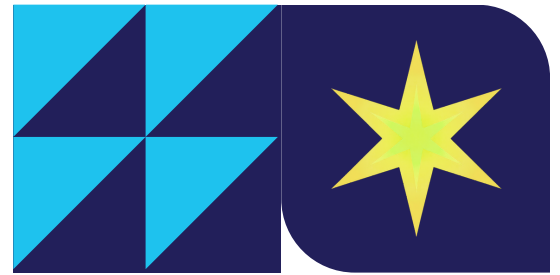
Imago Dei: Seeing as God Sees

Congregational Guidebook



**Southeastern
Pennsylvania
Synod, ELCA**

Lutherans Together: Loving God, Loving Neighbor



Introduction

May 31, 2026

Dear siblings in Christ,

At Synod Assembly, we reflected on a profound truth at the center of our faith: every human being bears the image of God — Imago Dei. This is not merely a theological concept. It is a way of seeing. A way of being church. A way of engaging our neighbors and communities.

This booklet is designed to help congregations continue that work beyond assembly. These activities are not intended to create guilt or overwhelm. Rather, they are invitations into deeper discipleship, courageous reflection, and joyful participation in God's work of healing and justice.

The goal is not to do everything.
The goal is to begin.

As you work through these sessions together, remember the invitation from the keynote address: "pick one. One of these justice ministries. One concrete step. Not a conversation — a plan. Not an aspiration — an action."

In Resurrection Hope

The Rev. Bryan Penman
Bishop, Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod, ELCA

POSSIBLE USES:

This guide can be used:

- By church councils
- Adult forums
- Justice ministry teams
- Youth groups
- Small groups
- Congregational retreats
- Confirmation programs
- Staff teams

Each session includes:

- Scripture grounding
- Reflection questions
- Congregational activities
- Action steps
- Prayer practices



How to Use This Guide

SUGGESTED FORMAT

Each session is designed for approximately 60-90 minutes.

A SIMPLE FLOW

1. Opening Prayer
2. Scripture Reading
3. Reading Excerpt from the Address
4. Discussion
5. Activity
6. Action Commitment
7. Closing Prayer

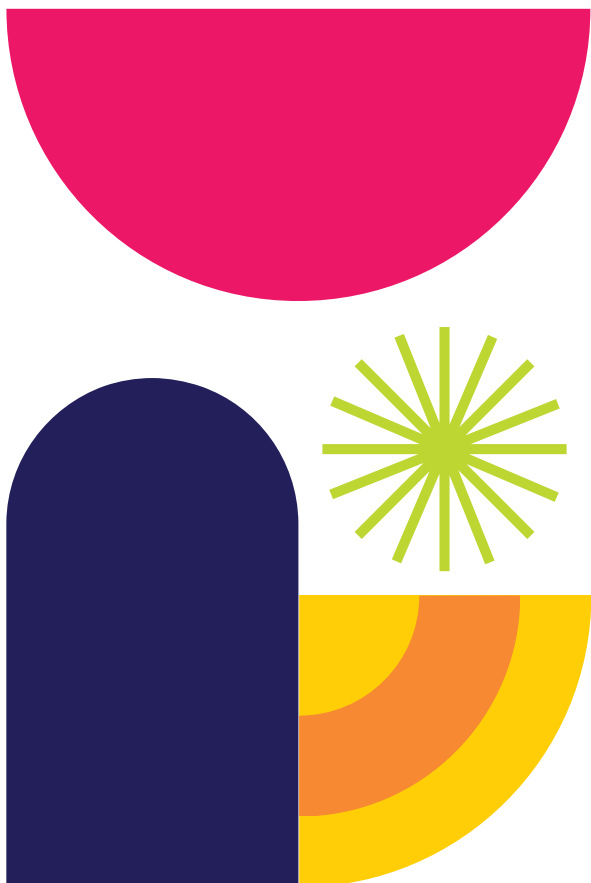
GROUP COVENANT

Because these conversations involve identity, justice, privilege, exclusion, and harm, establish a covenant together before beginning.

SUGGESTED COVENANT

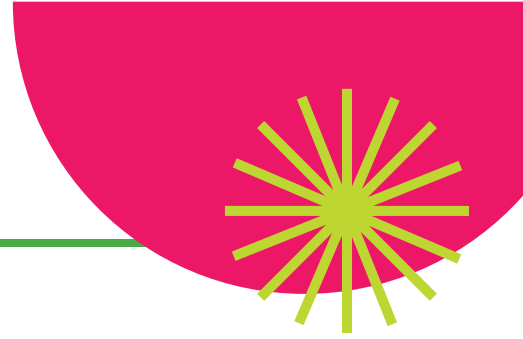
We commit to:

- Speak honestly and listen generously
- Assume good intentions while remaining accountable for impact
- Make space for every voice
- Stay curious rather than defensive
- Honor confidentiality
- Expect discomfort as part of growth
- Remember that we are all learners



Session One

Seeing the Image of God



GROUNDING SCRIPTURE

Genesis 1:26–31 | Psalm 139:13–14

“For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.”

Key Theme: The work of justice begins with learning to truly see one another as bearers of God’s image.

OPENING REFLECTION

Read aloud:

“What would change in our congregations — what would change in our synod — if we actually believed that? If we looked at every person who walked through our doors, or who walked past them without coming in, and saw the image of God?”

Spend two minutes in silence.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. When have you felt truly seen and valued in a faith community?
2. Who feels most visible in our congregation?
3. Who may feel invisible?
4. What assumptions do we make about who belongs here?
5. What barriers might keep people from feeling fully welcome?

Closing Prayer

God who created every person in love,
open our eyes to the fullness of your image
in every neighbor we meet.
Give us courage to see,
humility to listen,
and hearts ready to be transformed.
Amen.

CONGREGATIONAL ACTIVITY

The Circle of Visibility

Supplies: Large paper or whiteboard, sticky notes, markers

Instructions:

- Draw a large circle labeled: “People who easily feel seen and centered in our congregation.”
- Outside the circle, write: “People who may struggle to feel seen, heard, or valued.”
- Invite participants to anonymously write groups or identities on sticky notes.
- Discuss: What patterns emerge? What surprises us? What might God be inviting us to notice?

ACTION STEP

Identify one person or group your congregation may not be fully seeing. Commit to learning more about their experience.

Session Two

The Church Has an Image Problem



GROUNDING SCRIPTURE

Luke 19:1–10 (Zacchaeus)

Key Theme: Jesus consistently saw the people others overlooked.

OPENING REFLECTION

Read aloud:

“Jesus had an uncanny habit of seeing people that polite society had made invisible.”

Spend two minutes in silence.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Who are the people our community tends not to see?
2. What reputation does the church have in your neighborhood?
3. If non-members described your congregation in three words, what would they say?
4. How might Jesus challenge our assumptions about ministry success?
5. What fears keep congregations from change?

Closing Prayer

Jesus who sees every person,
help us notice who we have overlooked.
Interrupt our assumptions.
Lead us toward compassion,
curiosity,
and courageous love.
Amen.

CONGREGATIONAL ACTIVITY

Community Listening Walk

Preparation: Break into groups of 2–4.

Take a 20–30 minute walk through the neighborhood around your church.

While Walking, Notice:

- Who is present?
- Who is absent?
- What signs of struggle or beauty do you observe?
- What community assets already exist?
- What ministries or services are nearby?
- What stories are visible?

Return and Discuss

- What did we notice?
- What surprised us?
- What assumptions did we carry?
- How might our ministry shift if we centered what we observed?

ACTION STEP

Identify one community organization your congregation could begin listening to or partnering with.

Session Three

Baptism and Belonging

GROUNDING SCRIPTURE

Matthew 28:19–20 | Go Make Disciples

Galatians 3:26–29 | No longer Jew or Greek

Key Theme: Baptism is not about sameness. It is about belonging to Christ while honoring the diversity of God’s creation.

OPENING REFLECTION

Read aloud:

“What if we reclaimed the Great Commission not as a mandate to make everyone look like us — but as a call to go into all the world and recognize the divine image already present there?”

Spend two minutes in silence.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What cultural assumptions shape our congregation?
2. In what ways has the church historically demanded conformity?
3. How can diversity strengthen our understanding of God?
4. What does a “longer table instead of a higher wall” look like in practice?
5. Where do we struggle with difference?

CONGREGATIONAL ACTIVITY

Mapping Congregational Culture

Create Three Columns: “Explicitly Welcomed Here” | “Implicitly Expected Here” | “Potentially Excluded Here”

Discuss areas such as:

- Worship style
- Language
- Dress expectations
- Political assumptions
- Family structures
- Accessibility
- Economic realities
- Music
- Leadership
- Theology

Reflect honestly on how congregational culture may unintentionally exclude others.

ACTION STEP

Choose one congregational practice that could become more intentionally welcoming.

Examples:

- Inclusive language review
- Accessibility improvements
- Multilingual signage
- Child inclusion practices
- Diverse worship leadership
- Pronoun hospitality

Closing Prayer

God of every nation and people,
expand our understanding of your beloved
community.

Teach us to honor difference
as a reflection of your creative love.

Amen.

Session Four

Accessibility Is Holy Work

GROUNDING SCRIPTURE

1 Corinthians 12:12–27 | Not all the same body part

Key Theme: Accessibility is not charity. It is theology.

OPENING REFLECTION

Read aloud:

“Accessibility is Imago Dei in architecture.”

Spend two minutes in silence.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Who can fully participate in our congregation?
2. What barriers exist in our building, worship, or communication?
3. What assumptions do we make about bodies and abilities?
4. How might accessibility enrich the whole congregation?
5. What does inclusion communicate about God?

CONGREGATIONAL ACTIVITY

Accessibility Audit

Walk through your ministry site and discuss areas such as:

Physical Accessibility

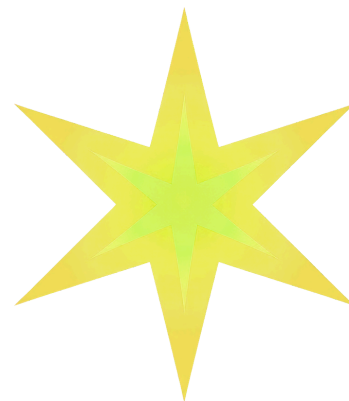
- Parking
- Entrances
- Bathrooms
- Seating
- Communion access
- Lighting
- Sound systems

Communication Accessibility

- Website readability
- Livestream captions
- Large print bulletins
- ASL interpretation
- Audio support
- Clear signage

Participation Accessibility

- Leadership opportunities
- Volunteer accommodations
- Sensory-friendly worship options
- Flexible participation for children



Closing Prayer

God of abundant welcome,
help us build communities
where every body and every mind
can fully belong.
Amen.

Discussion

- What barriers did we discover?
- Which changes are low-cost and immediately possible?
- Which changes require long-term planning?

ACTION STEP Choose one accessibility improvement to implement within the next six months.

Session Five

Children, Youth, and Neurodiversity

GROUNDING SCRIPTURE

Mark 10:13–16 | Let the children come

Key Theme: Children and neurodivergent people are not disruptions to ministry. They are essential to the body of Christ.

OPENING REFLECTION

Read aloud:

“Neurodiversity is not a disorder to be managed. It is another facet of the image of God.”

Spend two minutes in silence.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How are children included in worship and leadership?
2. What messages do families receive about belonging?
3. How do we respond to behaviors that disrupt our expectations?
4. What gifts do neurodivergent people bring to community?
5. How can worship become more flexible and participatory?

CONGREGATIONAL ACTIVITY

Worship Through Different Eyes

Invite participants to imagine worship from different perspectives:

- A child with ADHD
- A teenager questioning faith
- A nonverbal autistic child
- A parent with sensory-sensitive children
- A first-time visitor unfamiliar with liturgy

Discuss:

- What might feel welcoming?
- What might feel overwhelming?
- What changes could help?

Closing Prayer

Jesus who welcomed children,
teach us to honor every mind,
every voice,
and every way
of experiencing the world.
Amen.



ACTION STEP Identify one way children or youth can become more fully integrated into congregational leadership or worship.

Session Six

Healing Harm

GROUNDING SCRIPTURE

Psalm 51 | Create in me a clean heart

Luke 4:16–21 | The Spirit of the Lord is upon me

Key Theme: Justice work begins with honesty about harm.

OPENING REFLECTION

Read aloud:

“Healing begins not with programs but with honesty. With lamentation.”

Spend two minutes in silence.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In what ways has the church caused harm historically?
2. What harms may still exist in our congregation?
3. What is the difference between guilt and accountability?
4. How can lament become part of discipleship?
5. What healing is needed in our community?

CONGREGATIONAL ACTIVITY

Stories We Carry

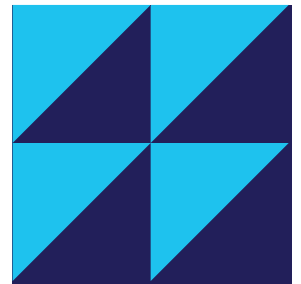
Invite participants to reflect silently:

- When have you been wounded by the church?
- When has the church brought healing?
- What stories shape your relationship with faith?

If appropriate, invite voluntary sharing in pairs or small groups.

Group Reflection

- What themes emerged?
- What do people long for from faith communities?
- What healing ministries might God be calling us toward?



Closing Prayer

God of mercy,
heal what has been broken.
Give us courage to tell the truth,
seek forgiveness,
and become agents of reconciliation.
Amen.

ACTION STEP

Discern one area where your congregation could intentionally practice healing ministry.

Examples:

- Grief support
- Addiction recovery partnerships
- Mental health ministries
- LGBTQIA+ reconciliation
- Anti-racism work
- Community listening sessions
- Trauma-informed ministry training

Session Seven

Justice Is Relationship

GROUNDING SCRIPTURE

Micah 6:8 | do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God

Matthew 25:31–46 – When did we see you hungry

Key Theme: Justice is not charity alone. It is the restoration of right relationship.

OPENING REFLECTION

Read aloud:

“Justice is the restoration of right relationship.”

Spend two minutes in silence.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What justice issues most affect your local community?
2. Which ministries already exist in your congregation?
3. What is the difference between service and solidarity?
4. What issue is your congregation uniquely positioned to address?
5. What relationships need to be built before action can happen?

Closing Prayer

God of justice,
move us beyond charity alone.
Help us build relationships,
share power, and participate in your
restoration of the world.
Amen.

CONGREGATIONAL ACTIVITY

Justice Discernment Matrix

Create a chart with four columns:

Community Need | Congregational Passion | Existing Relationships | Possible First Step

Brainstorm together.

Potential areas might include:

- Hunger
- Housing insecurity
- Gun violence
- Immigration support
- Environmental justice
- Racial justice
- LGBTQIA+ advocacy
- Public education
- Disability advocacy
- Mental health
- Prison ministry

After discussion, prayerfully identify ONE area for focused engagement.

ACTION STEP

Develop a concrete 6–12 month justice goal.

Examples:

- Form a partnership
- Begin advocacy work
- Start a community conversation
- Train leaders
- Launch a ministry
- Participate in synod initiatives

Session Eight

Joy as Resistance



GROUNDING SCRIPTURE

Isaiah 55:12 | out in joy back in peace

John 15:9–11 | Abide in my Love

Key Theme: Justice work is sustained by joy.

OPENING REFLECTION

Read aloud:

“Don’t let anyone tell you this work is joyless.”

Spend two minutes in silence.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Where have you experienced joy in diverse community?
2. Why do justice conversations sometimes feel heavy?
3. What practices sustain long-term ministry?
4. How can worship nourish justice work?
5. What signs of hope do we already see?

CONGREGATIONAL ACTIVITY

Celebrating Signs of Life

Invite participants to name moments when they have witnessed:

- Radical welcome
- Healing
- Courage
- Community transformation
- Intergenerational connection
- Unexpected friendship
- Hospitality across difference

Discuss:

- What gives us hope?
- What is God already doing?
- How do we celebrate progress without pretending the work is finished?

Record these stories visibly

ACTION STEP

Create a regular practice of storytelling and celebration around justice ministry.

Examples:

- Testimonies during worship
- Newsletter stories
- Justice ministry moments
- Shared meals
- Prayer partnerships

Closing Prayer
God of joy,
remind us that your Spirit
is alive among us.
Strengthen us for the work ahead,
and help us delight in the beauty of your
beloved community.
Amen.

Worship & Prayer Resources

SUGGESTED HYMNS

- All Are Welcome
- Let Streams of Living Justice
- We Are Called
- There Is a Balm in Gilead
- Christ, Be Our Light
- Draw the Circle Wide
- Borning Cry

PRAYER PRACTICES

- Neighborhood prayer walks
- Prayers of lament
- Story-sharing circles
- Baptismal remembrance
- Intercessions for marginalized communities
- Lectio Divina with justice-focused texts

SCRIPTURE TEXTS

- Genesis 1:26–31
- Psalm 139
- Isaiah 58
- Luke 4:16–21
- Matthew 22:37–39
- Matthew 25:31–46
- John 13:34–35
- Acts 2:42–47
- Galatians 3:28
- Revelation 7:9

Final Sending

Read together:

We believe every person bears the image of God.

We believe every community deserves dignity.

We believe the church is called to healing,

justice,

and joy.

We commit ourselves to seeing more clearly,

loving more courageously,

and building a wider table.

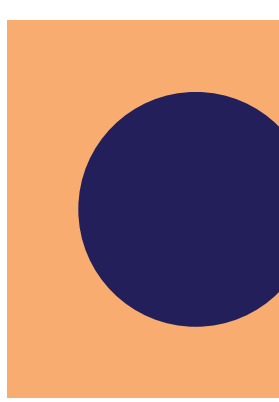
With God's help,

we will do this work together.

Amen.

Discernment Worksheet

Our Congregation's Next Faithful Step



What justice issue are we called toward?

Why does this matter in our community?

Who is most impacted?



Discernment Worksheet

Our Congregation's Next Faithful Step



What relationships do we already have?

What gifts does our congregation bring?

What is one concrete next step?



Discernment Worksheet

Our Congregation's Next Faithful Step



Who will lead this work?

What support do we need?

What timeline will we commit to?



Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod, ELCA + Synod Assembly



Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod, ELCA

Lutherans Together: Loving God, Loving Neighbor