

FAQ Regarding Mission Support in the Northern Texas-Northern Louisiana Synod
Of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

What is Mission Support?

All of our offerings to our congregation are called Mission Support. They support the mission of making disciples which Christ has called us to undertake. We understand that we have been given abilities from God to do ministry. In addition to talents and time, we believe that God has given us the ability to work, earn a living. In thanksgiving to God for our time, talents and income, we share a portion of them to spread the Good News of God's love in Jesus Christ. Everything we do for our church, everything we put in the offering plate is support of the mission of our church.

How much should my personal mission support be?

Old Testament scripture teaches that in thanksgiving to God people are to return the first fruits of their harvest or their livestock to the work of God's mission. As a sacrificial sign the required amount was 10 %. Because the Levites, the priests, were not given a portion of the Promised Land, but were called upon to do God's work full time, this 10 % was given to them for their support and, later, for the support of the widows, the orphaned, and the immigrant who had no land. Later Old Testament scripture allowed that first fruits could be turned into money for ease of giving and, thus, 10 % of financial income was required (tithe).

In the New Testament there is little mention of tithing. Rather, Jesus commended giving all, as in the story of the widow's mite and many of his teachings and parables commended the great generosity of believers who gave in thanksgiving and love. The tithe was assumed, generous giving was on top of the tithe. This moved offerings from the realm of law to the realm of gospel.

Today we are blessed to give a tithe and beyond to the support of God's mission. This way we empower the ministry of our congregation and the wider mission of Jesus Christ.

What happens to the Mission Support offerings I give to my congregation?

Congregations prepare a budget, sometimes called a Mission Strategy, for carrying out their ministry. Much of that budget pays for staff, including your pastor, administrative personnel, and other program ministers of your congregation. Your offerings also pay for the maintenance of your facilities, the work of your committees, and various benevolence outreaches of your congregation.

What are those benevolence outreaches of our congregation?

Your congregation may support a few or many local organizations doing great ministry. Those might include a food pantry, Habitat for Humanity, or other community activities designed to assist the poor, homeless, and needy close to home.

However, the primary connection your congregation has is with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). In fact, the ELCA is not just one of many benevolences of your congregation; the ELCA is the principal means by which we, as an interdependent community of congregations, work together nationally and internationally to expand the reach of God's kingdom. Your financial support of the ELCA and your involvement in the work of the wider church are a richer expression of your local ministry. Thus, practically and constitutionally, you are part of a church that is 4.6 million members strong in over 10,000 congregations.

Your Mission Support for the ELCA is sent to the Northern Texas-Northern Louisiana Synod (NT-NL), our local geographical expression of the ELCA. We have 120 local ministries like yours, with about 34,000 baptized Lutherans participating in those congregations. The NT-NL Synod, in turn, sends a portion of your offerings to the ELCA Churchwide offices for dissemination into all our global ministries.

How much money do we send to the ELCA?

This varies by congregational decision. The average amount passed on from congregations to the NT-NL Synod was about 7 % of their total offerings in 2008. We are encouraged to use the example of the tithe as a minimum starting place for our congregational response to the ELCA. That would be 10 %. Some congregations in our synod send 12 % or more. Some congregations in the ELCA send more than 20 % of their offerings to support the ministry of the wider church. You can see in your local budget how much your congregation sends for synodical benevolence.

What does the synod do with our Mission Support?

The NT-NL Synod keeps 53 % of what is sent to us and forwards 47 % for ELCA Churchwide ministries. By Synod Assembly mandate, we are moving toward a 50-50 split of your offerings, raising our commitment by ½ % per year.

We support a variety of ministries of the church on the local level including

- The Lutheran Seminary Program in the Southwest in Austin (plus the Lutheran Seminaries in Chicago and Iowa)
- Our very successful Parish Lay Ministry Academy

- Briarwood Camp and Retreat Center
- Lutheran Campus Ministry on various college campuses in our synod
- The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Sierra Leone (our Companion Synod)
- New mission starts and grants for congregations with emergency or special needs.
Among those new mission starts in the past few years are a Chinese mission, an Oromo (Ethiopian) mission, a Finnish congregation, a half dozen Hispanic/Latino missions, plus several new traditional mission starts.
- Youth ministry events like the Jr. High and Sr. High Gatherings and Youth Convo
- Scholarship support for NT-NL students attending seminary
- Texas Lutheran University
- Ecumenical activities like Louisiana Interchurch Conference, Texas Conference of Churches and Texas IMPACT
- Various learning opportunities such as the Stewardship Academy and Spread the Spirit's Fire held annually for congregational growth and enrichment
- Staff to help carry out these various ministries and many others

What synod staff do our offerings support?

Just as a significant portion of your local offerings are used to support your staff, so too, with the synod. It is the nature of a "middle judicatory" such as a synod, to provide staff for the coordination of ministries. Thus, the NT-NL Synod provides full-time:

- Bishop Kevin Kanouse (who is the synod's pastor), overseeing all of the synod's ministries, administration, mobility, pastoral care, ecumenical and interfaith representative, and is the visionary for the synod's mission
- Bishop Assistant for Mobility and Congregational Care, Pr. Jane Mar, overseeing call process, mobility of pastors, and assistance to congregations in transition
- Bishop Assistant for Leadership and DiscipleLife, Pr. Stan Meyer, providing direction to many of our ministries focused on DiscipleLife, our six foci for growth and renewal of our synod's life. He also works with the candidacy process, providing future leaders for congregations in our synod, and oversees our print and electronic communications.
- Hispanic/Latino Ministry Coordinator, Ms. Irma Bañales, overseeing the development of new Hispanic/Latino ministries and the growth and renewal of long-standing ones. This is the area of most growth for new mission starts on our synod territory
- A part time Youth and Family Ministry Coordinator, Pr. Jamie Bruning, who works with and connects youth and family leaders from congregations throughout our synod and assists with programming for youth within our synod and Churchwide (as with the National Lutheran Youth Gathering)

In addition there is a Synod Administrator (Ms. Tyna Oslie), a bookkeeper/database manager (Ms. Judy Rommel), and an office receptionist/assistant (Ms. Debi Gebhardt).

What happens to the 47 % of our offerings forwarded for Churchwide ministry?

You support a global web of ministry that touches the farthest reaches of the earth. Here is just a taste of the mission your offerings support:

- Lutheran Services in America, the largest social outreach network in the world, helping needy people in all countries. In one recent year we directly assisted over 6 million people. Lutheran Social Services is one example, providing leadership for generations in our area for adoptions and foster care. Mosaic is another, providing support and advocacy for people with severe intellectual and physical disabilities
- Lutheran Disaster Response, one of the most highly respected emergency relief agencies in the world. We are among the first responders in a crisis, and we are there long after many have concluded their work. For example, we still have ongoing ministry in New Orleans post-Katrina. The same is true in many other places. Your Sunday morning offerings provide the infra-structure for disaster readiness, so special offerings when a disaster occurs are directed fully toward disaster relief.
- Eight seminaries for quality theological education and practical preparation of ordained ministers and lay church workers to serve the church.
- Twenty-eight colleges for quality undergraduate preparation of young people for vocations that serve the world
- Hundreds of missionaries serving in distant lands, including young adults who spend a year learning about and experiencing missionary opportunities
- Companion Synod relationships, like ours with the ELCSL (Sierra Leone, West Africa), that connect us in a hands-on manner for church growth around the world
- Ecumenical Full Communion agreements with the United Methodist Church, the Episcopal Church USA, the United Church of Christ, the Moravian Church, the Reformed Church in America, and the Presbyterian Church USA plus formal dialogues with many other church bodies including the Roman Catholic Church. We also hold conversations with leaders of the Jewish and Muslim faith.

Do the offerings we send to the ELCA support our own synod's ministries directly?

Yes, we receive back, in the form of grants and subsidies, a significant portion of the offerings we send to the Churchwide expression of the ELCA.

- We are provided a full-time Director for Evangelical Mission (Pr. Steve Kanouse) within our synod. He is responsible for convening conversations about mission growth and stewardship. He is coordinating stewardship education, including the Stewardship Academy and consulting directly with many congregations seeking to set new ministry directions and goals. He supports the DiscipleLife Goal of Renewing Congregations and oversees new mission starts of all kinds in our synod.
 - The ELCA covers much of the salary of our Hispanic/Latino Ministry Coordinator plus training and support for her position.
 - The ELCA provides significant grants to cover the salaries of our new mission developers. This year that includes 7 pastors' salaries.
 - We receive other leadership from the ELCA through educational ministries, pastoral care and support, social outreach, educational institutions, and so on.
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We are upset by the decisions made at our Churchwide Assembly in August concerning homosexuality and we want to withhold or re-direct some of our offerings away from the synod and/or the ELCA. Can we do that?

We are the synod and the ELCA together both by constitutional definition and practical expression. However when a part of our body makes decisions that offend us or effect us in adverse ways, it is perhaps natural for some to want to express displeasure and anger in a way that can be heard or felt. Some see withholding or re-directing offerings as a means of that expression. While using our offerings to express anger is a natural response for some, it is not the nature of the church to dismantle important ministries that touch and change human lives or the spread of the gospel to achieve our ends.

In the end, individuals and congregations will designate their offerings as they choose. Some may choose to re-direct their mission support to wholly local causes and send nothing to the synod or ELCA. While this is a less than desirable action for the ministry of the whole church, we recognize that this is being done.

Some wish to continue to support synodical outreach or even ELCA outreach without supporting the salaries of those they believe brought about this change within the church. (It should be noted that the recent policy changes were not made in Chicago by the administrators and pastoral leaders there, but rather in Minneapolis by the ELCA Assembly, made up of 1/3 pastors and 2/3 laity (generally), who voted to make these changes after an 8 year study process.) The bishop will gladly consult with congregations who desire to withhold or re-direct their offerings. The bishop will encourage that congregations continue to meet their full benevolence commitment to the synod, but that designated portions may be given to specific ministries of the church that will be suffering because of the overall decline in mission support.

What does this mean?

For 2010, it appears that there will be dramatic cut-backs in overall mission support for both synodical and Churchwide ministries. The economic recession has already led to severe cutbacks with more expected as a result of the actions of the assembly in August. We are finding out that our synod and Churchwide ministries will lose the following in support from the ELCA Churchwide budget:

- Up to, or perhaps even more than, \$ 200,000 in support for the salaries of our new mission developers
- \$ 25,000 in financial support for administrative staff in our office
- An unknown amount of support for our campus ministry program
- Support for ELCA missionaries overseas, many of whom are expected to be called back home due to lack of support for their salary
- Significant cut-back in support for colleges and seminaries
- Many staff in the Churchwide office have been laid off in the past year with the expectation that many more will be laid off this year
- It may be necessary to lay off one or more of our own synod staff due to congregational cut-backs in mission support

How should we think about re-directing our offerings?

For a defined period of time (through the end of 2012), until the ramifications of the Churchwide Assembly decisions are understood, the NT-NL Synod will establish a holding fund for congregations who wish to re-direct mission support. Congregations may ask that 47 % of their mission support to the synod be placed in this fund.

This fund will provide support for some of the ministries directly affected by cut-backs in overall mission support such as support for new mission starts, campus ministry, our Companion Synod in Sierra Leone, Briarwood Lutheran Ministries, synod staff support, and so on. Congregations may ask that their 47 % portion be specifically directed to one of these needs or that the synod use them where they are most needed. This decision should be made by Congregation Councils in consultation with the bishop or the bishop's representative.

What does all this mean?

Certainly the Lutheran witness in the United States is changing. This is not new. It changes from generation to generation. Ten years from now the Lutheran Church in the US will look significantly different than it does today. Some see this as a blessing; others are greatly disappointed by this. The decisions we make about our ministry today will have a direct impact on the future ability of our church to carry out Christ's Great Commission to make disciples.

We are in a time of discernment about how we will be faithful to our calling; this is a time for deliberation, prayer, conversation, and renewal. God uses times such as this to cleanse the Church and prepare her for the future. Together we ask God what our mission truly is in the world today, how we can best accomplish our mission, and how we will use God's good gifts to fulfill our calling. May the Holy Spirit guide you in your personal discernment and renewal of faith in these days.

This FAQ was prepared by Bishop Kevin Kanouse on October 29, 2009, and reflect the questions he has been hearing and the answers he has been giving to frequently asked questions about the actions of the Churchwide Assembly, especially in relation to Mission Support. They are his answers only and may not reflect the opinion of other leaders in the NT-NL Synod or the ELCA. He is fully responsible for the accuracy of any representations given in this document. For answers to additional questions, please contact Bishop Kanouse at BpKevinKanouse@ntnl.org or check out our Toolkit for Sexuality Conversations on our synod website at: www.ntnl.org / Downloads.