



ELEEA



2026

ANNUAL REPORT

Prepared By:

Cory Newman
Executive Director

A MESSAGE FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

As I reflect on 2025, I am filled with gratitude – for the work accomplished, the relationships deepened, and the unwavering commitment of the people who make the ELEA what it is. Special thanks to Melanie Bicket, our dedicated Membership Director, Gabby Frohrip, our energetic Communications Manager, and Tom McGinnes, our devoted accountant. Without their support and devotion to ELEA's work, we would not be where we are. I also want to thank our passionate board of directors for engaging with the association's mission in ways that advance our vision and create opportunities to better support all the ELCA schools and learning centers across the country.

This was a year that reminded me, again and again, why our ELCA schools and centers matter and why this work is worth every ounce of energy we pour into it.

Some of my most treasured moments this year were the ones that took me out of the office and into the schools and centers where our mission comes to life. Our Lunch & Learn events in St. Louis and Houston were simply extraordinary. Sitting across from school and church leaders, listening to them tell their stories with such passion and conviction – that is the greatest blessing of this work. It is in those moments that I am reminded that the ELEA is a vital part of what makes these ministries thrive.

That spirit of connection was on full display throughout 2025. OH25, our National Conference in Cleveland, brought together leaders from Churchwide, Synods, congregations, schools, centers, and related organizations in a way that was energizing and deeply inspiring. It was also the birthplace of an exciting emerging relationship with the Network of ELCA Colleges and Universities (NECU), opening new pathways for connection between higher education and the schools and centers within their greater communities across the ELCA.

Our partnership with the ELCA continued to bear fruit through the Nurturing Faith Study Series, and our communications reach grew significantly – evidence that our message is resonating far beyond our immediate community. People are paying attention, and they are hungry for what ELEA offers. I'm honored to have been invited to serve on the board of the Curious Christian Children Initiative, a Lilly Grant-funded effort whose board first convened in Chicago in September 2025. Looking ahead, our continued partnership with the National Association of Episcopal Schools (NAES) promises to strengthen and enrich our future national events in exciting ways.

Everything we do flows from three simple but powerful words – Connect, Develop, Inspire. In 2025, we connected educators across the country, developed resources to strengthen our schools and centers, and inspired a community of leaders passionate about faith-filled education. To our incredible members – thank you for living those words every single day. It is an honor to serve alongside you.



ELEA Executive Director

IT STARTS WITH CONNECTION

Prepared by Melanie Bicket

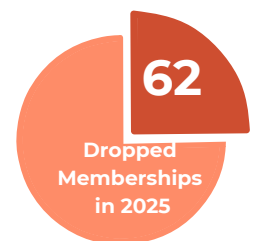
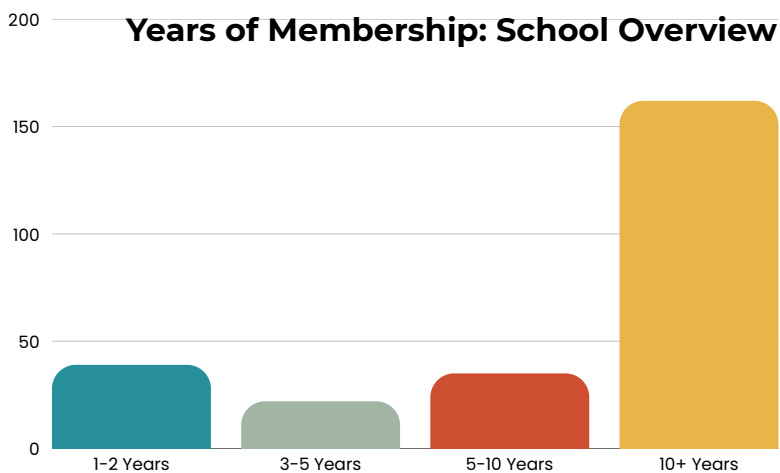
Highlights

- ELEA travel visits included Child Life Ministries (Wausau, WI) and Grace Lutheran Preschool (Rockford, IL). Janelle Hooper, ELEA Board Liaison to the ELCA, and Gabby Frohrip, ELEA Communications Manager, visited several schools in the Minneapolis area. Cory Newman, ELEA Executive Director, also visited schools in the Seattle/Tacoma area. Janelle Hooper and past board member, Paul Waterman, were onsite in Valparaiso, IN, and Waverly, IA to award our Rostered Leaders and Educational Leader of 2025.
- Represented ELEA at the Central/Southern Illinois Synod Assembly, participated in an ELEA Lunch & Learn in St. Louis, MO, and celebrated ELEA Leaders at the 2025 National Conference in Cleveland, Ohio.
- Cory, Gabby, and I launched Community, ELEA's new one-stop hub for benefits, resources, and connection.
- Completed the 2025 ELCA Schools & Centers Survey (results available upon request).
- Approved a Tiered Membership Fee Structure in 2025 for implementation in 2026.

Challenges

School and center closures continue to impact membership numbers. Maintaining current leadership information for accurate data and communication remains an ongoing need.

ELEA remains committed to strengthening connections, improving communication, and enhancing member value in the year ahead.



Membership by the Numbers

ELEA's network shows strong loyalty: nearly two-thirds of our 265 organizational member schools have been with us for more than a decade, and 39 schools joined in the last two years. This past year also brought loss – 62 member organizations left the network due to circumstances beyond their control, including permanent closures, financial hardship, and the lasting effects of natural disasters. ELEA remains committed to strengthening connections with current members and re-engaging those who have stepped away, ensuring no school feels alone in facing these challenges.

In 2025, our communications efforts continued to gain momentum across both Facebook and Instagram, showing steady growth in engagement and overall visibility. On Facebook, our most influential page, we recorded 112.3K views, along with 4.1K content interactions, 353 link clicks, and 4K page visits. We are more than pleased to see the clear signs of increased interest in ELEA resources and updates. We also welcomed 123 new followers, expanding our ability to share stories, resources, and ministry highlights with a broader audience!

Instagram remained an important space for connecting with both educators and ministry leaders. The platform generated 6.6K views and reached 1.5K people. Engagement stayed strong with 479 content interactions, 290 profile visits, and 42 new followers, reinforcing Instagram's role in extending ELEA's visibility and strengthening our storytelling reach.

Strategic timing and meaningful storytelling helped drive engagement spikes throughout the year, particularly during Lutheran Schools Week and National Conferences.

Email communications remained an important outlet in 2025, maintaining an above-average open rate of 45% while delivering timely updates, professional resources, and ministry news. We strive to continue to use these communications intentionally to build deeper connections, strengthen engagement, and pursue an increasing desire for collaboration across our network.

As ELEA continues its focus on connecting, developing, and inspiring leaders and staff of schools and centers, clear and timely communication remains essential. Keeping leadership updates current and sharing information ministry-wide strengthens our collective impact. The stats we've seen this past year affirm that our mission-centered communications approach is resonating and provides a strong foundation for continued growth and engagement.

COMMUNICATING WITH PURPOSE

Prepared by Gabrielle Frohrip

Growth

Over 114K views across Facebook and Instagram — ELEA's story is being seen far and wide!

Engagement

A 45% email open rate — well above the nonprofit industry average of 28% — proves our community wants to hear from us!

NEW YEAR STYLES



FROM OUR PRESIDENT

Greetings ELEA members and friends.

All of us at ELEA, both board members and staff, hope that 2025 was a year of joy for you. Our hope is that your schools and learning centers were blessed with continued growth, supportive communities, and happy children. Your dedication to your ministries and your commitment to nurturing a strong ELCA-based faith formation education are gifts to those you serve.

2025 was a busy year for the ELEA as we continued to lean into our role of encouraging professional growth and fostering community among our ELCA education leaders. OH25!, our national conference in Cleveland, OH, in November, was an exciting opportunity for our school leaders to gather and connect with one another. Thank you to everyone who was able to attend.

Not only did we gather nationally, but we are also creating more opportunities to gather regionally. We have begun hosting Lunch & Learn luncheons in our various regions. If you have not had an opportunity to attend one close to you yet, please know we have big plans on the horizon. Keep an eye on our newsletter and social media for ways to gather locally in 2026. Upcoming locations include western Washington and southern California.

In 2024, we first partnered with the National Association of Episcopal Schools (NAES), and we are thrilled to say that partnership is continuing. In November 2026, we will gather with NAES during their Biennial Conference in Los Angeles, CA. Episcopal and Lutheran leaders will once again share several days of learning, fellowship, and fun! There will be many enriching activities and workshops available to participants, along with ample opportunities to network with other faith-based educators. Please mark your calendars now for November 18-20. Registration information will be available soon.

There are over 17,000 dedicated educators serving over 140,000 children in ELCA schools and learning centers. ELEA is honored to support and advocate for each and every one! We understand the important and sometimes challenging work that is done each day. We pray daily that you feel loved and supported in your work and feel the grace of God in all moments.

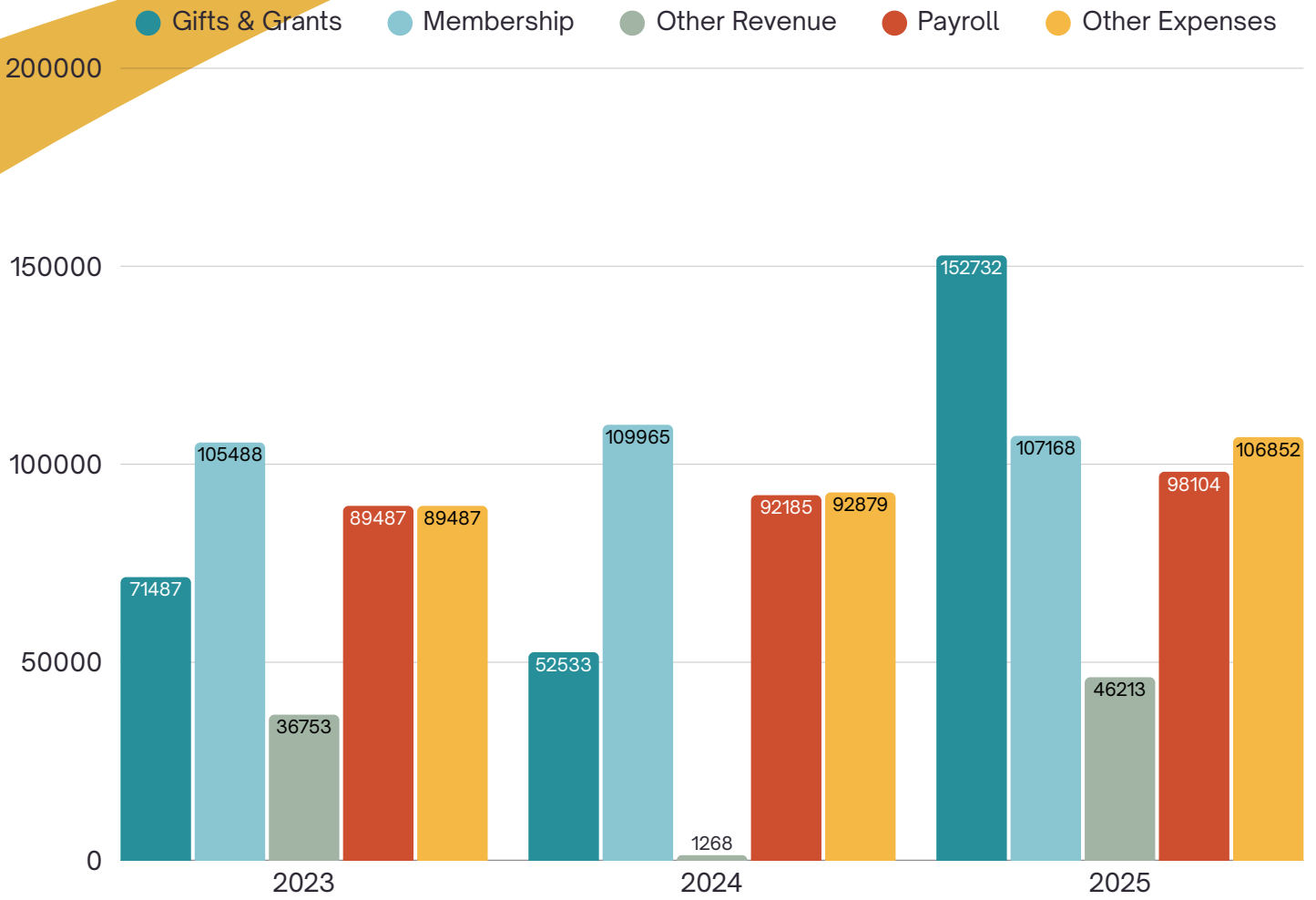
Blessings to you and your ministries in 2026.

With gratitude,

Katie Jones
ELEA Board President



St. Mark's Lutheran Church by
the Narrows, Tacoma, WA



Financial Growth and Stewardship

We are pleased to report a year of significant financial progress and strategic investment. Highlighting our fiscal successes was the receipt of a \$100,000 grant, which is designated to enhance future programming that will have a long-term impact on our members. In total, our revenue for the year included \$9,000 in corporate support, \$9,220 in individual donations, and \$134,511 in total grant funding.

Endowment and Community Impact

The ELEA Endowment Fund continues its upward trajectory, reaching a year-end market value of \$57,486.44. We remain committed to reinvesting in our community, having awarded nine grants totaling \$3,600.00 throughout 2025. This growth was helped by \$1,333.00 in new contributions to the fund.

Fiscal Responsibility and 2026 Outlook

Our commitment to disciplined financial management resulted in a strong year-end position. Excluding the one-time \$100,000 grant – which has been set aside for its dedicated purpose – revenue exceeded budget by \$19,826, while expenditures were \$19,317 under budget. After reserving the grant funds, this left us with a realized operational surplus of \$1,157. As we move into the 2026 fiscal year, the Board is actively exploring our revenue streams to align with 2025 performance levels while maintaining efficient expenditures.

EXPANDING IMPACT

Prepared by ELEA Board Treasurer Michael Rottmann

ANNUAL GIVING

Every gift given to the ELEA is an investment in the future of Lutheran education. We are deeply grateful for the generosity of those who believe in our mission to Connect, Develop, and Inspire.

Champions

- Adventure Place
- Calvary Lutheran Church, Solana Beach, CA
- Gayle Denny
- Katie Jones*
- Michael Rottmann
- Melanie Bicket
- Cory Newman*

Advocates

- Shirley Becker
- Lynn Hockenberger*
- David Behling
- Sara Kantorik*
- Jonathan Vehar
- St. James Lutheran Church, Verona, WI

Friends

- Janelle Hooper
- Kate Elkins
- Andrew Larsen
- Diana Smith
- Chris Comella
- April Mosier
- Sandra Nelson
- Carlos Ham
- Karen Beasley
- April Blahut
- Marguerite Jeffers
- Geniene Hankey
- Gabrielle Frohrip
- Christ Lutheran
Preschool, Avon Lake, OH
- Daniel Flucke
- Robert & Ellie Federwitz

We are grateful for every gift, big and small. Additionally, we wish to honor those who gave anonymously – your generosity is known to God and deeply felt by all.

(- denotes a portion given was in-kind)*



 info@elcaschools.org

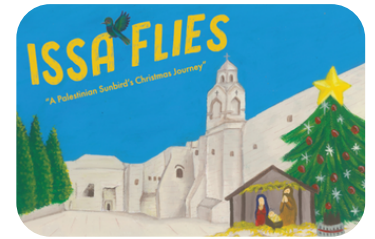
 elcaschools.org

ENTRUSTED TO SERVE

The ELCA values our partnership with the ELEA. Let me tell you why! This past year has been a testament to what we can accomplish together. From resource development to advocacy, research to relationship-building, our collaboration continues to strengthen Lutheran education and ministry across the country.

Expanding Lutheran Identity Resources Our joint support of congregations, schools, and early learning centers remains central to our shared ministry. This year, we expanded our [Lutheran Identity resource series](#) – building on the foundational brochure to add three new titles: Children's Spirituality, Language for God and People, and DEIJ. These resources equip communities to live out their Lutheran identity throughout the week.

SUMUD: Justice in Israel and Palestine. Together, we supported [SUMUD](#), the ELCA's work for Justice in Israel and Palestine. We hosted an informational webinar and read-aloud of the flipbook [Issa Flies](#), which follows a Palestinian Sunbird through Palestine on the eve of Christmas. The resource was warmly received for use in chapel services, classrooms, and Christmas Eve services.



Federal Chaplaincy Conference & Congressional Advocacy Cory Newman and I attended the ELCA Federal Chaplaincy Conference in Virginia, where we shared ministry resources for children and connected with chaplains serving every branch of the armed forces – including National Guard members active in congregations and schools. While in the D.C. area, ELCA Senior Director Ed Kay and I joined our [ELCA Advocacy](#) colleagues to visit senators, engaging in conversation around public and private education, support for those on the margins, and the proposed defunding of the Department of Education. We were honored to bring student artwork from [St. Mark's by the Narrows Preschool](#), which was gratefully received in every office we visited.

Nurturing Faith Research Project: Cory Newman, Ed Kay, and I continued advancing our joint research initiative, [Nurturing Faith](#). This year, we authored a companion study series and piloted the resources with four congregations through intensive educational sessions and ongoing coaching. We also hosted an ELEA webinar on the topic, drawing more than 35 attendees – a meaningful sign of the interest and energy surrounding this work.

Bridging Lutheran Education-Lower Ed to Higher Ed: Cory and I met with Lamont Wells, Executive Director of the [Network of ELCA Colleges and Universities \(NECU\)](#), to explore ways to intentionally grow mutual support for Lutheran education across all ages. We have identified five potential synods with strong college relationships and dense ELCA schools in the area to begin a pilot for connection and communication

Partnering with the "Future Church" Initiative, Cory and I met with Churchwide's "Future Church" team, which is working to implement research using the ["God's Love Made Real"](#) framework. We presented numerous ways the ELEA is currently – and could further – provide ministry in neighborhoods that deepen the ELCA's commitment to welcome and belonging. These conversations affirm the vital role ELEA schools and early learning centers play in the future of the Church.



Together in Christ, Rev. Janelle Rozek Hooper, Program Manager for Ministry with Children, ELCA & ELEA Board Member

REIMAGINED, RENEWED, ENGAGED

Prepared by Sara Kantorik

In 2025, the ELEA made a thoughtful, strategic decision to reimagine its approach to member engagement – and with that evolution came an exciting shift in my role and focus. Having previously served as National Ambassador, I was instrumental in asking hard questions about sustainability, impact, and how board service could be deployed most strategically. Rather than simply stepping away from the Ambassador role, I helped shape what would replace it—a process that ultimately led to the creation of the Member Engagement Director role, designed to build the internal systems and relationships that fuel long-term growth.

This was not a year of waiting – it was a year of doing. One of the most visible expressions of that was the ELEA National Conference, OH25. From the energy in the room to the carefully curated swag to the cultivation of a meaningful relationship with our keynote speaker, Elec Simon, the conference reflected intentional care and connection at every level. When people feel genuinely welcomed and celebrated, engagement follows naturally.

Synod relationship-building was equally central to my work in 2025. Through consistent, careful cultivation of relationships with the Northeast Ohio Synod – including synod staff and Bishop Barbins – we have laid a solid foundation for greater visibility and connection. These are genuine partnerships rooted in shared ministry, not transactional interactions.

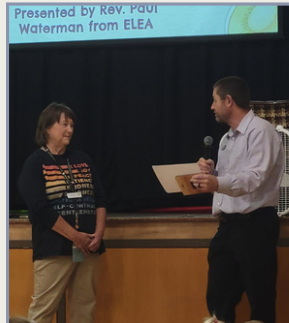
Throughout the year, I also initiated conversations with school leaders and synod partners about what they valued most in ELEA, where they saw gaps, and what would make membership more meaningful in their local context. Those conversations reinforced what I have come to believe most deeply – that engagement is strongest when it feels personal, supported, and mission-aligned. Ultimately, 2025 allowed me to move from representing the organization externally to strengthening it from within, strengthening partnerships, and relationships that ensure ELEA's mission continues to thrive through an engaged and growing membership community.

Being part of shaping the new Member Engagement role was exciting! It involved reflecting on what the Ambassador role had been and imagining what ELEA would need in the next five to ten years. I took part in discussions on setting goals, defining responsibilities, and ensuring the role was strategic. For me, it was about building trust, helping the organization evolve, respecting its history, and preparing for future growth.

In the end, this transition allowed me to focus on strengthening ELEA from the inside by building systems, partnerships, and relationships that ensure the organization's mission continues through a dedicated and growing membership, and I am really looking forward to seeing this position evolve.



Photo from the 2025
ELEA National
Conference: Bishop
Laura Barbins, Sara
Kantorik, Geniece
Hankey, Rev. Duane
Jesse



ELEA SPACES AND FACES