



# Shepherd's Staff

Confircamp 2024  
June 2-7



THE MONTHLY NEWSLETTER OF GOOD SHEPHERD

JUNE 2024

## Confircamp 2024

We ask God's blessing over 17 middle school students heading to Confirmation Camp on June 2<sup>nd</sup>, for a week of joy, fellowship, and faith formation at Camp Tomah Shinga. May they experience the fullness of God's love in the wonder and beauty of creation as they explore discipleship together!



**Josh Brecht**  
Lead Pastor

In May, Gail and I were blessed to participate in a 4-day conference in San Juan, Puerto Rico with other pastors of larger ELCA churches from all over the country, and leaders of many of the partner organizations with whom we are connected. It was an invaluable opportunity to talk with some of the best pastoral leaders in the ELCA and hear stories about what God is doing in the wider church. We heard about some of the most joyful successes and some of the biggest challenges. While every church is unique, there were definitely common themes that emerged. Common challenges were:

- **Being Church in an increasingly post-religious culture.** There is increasing competition for people's time and energy. Sunday mornings and Wednesday evenings are no longer reserved by the surrounding culture for religious life, so all of us are experiencing less consistency in participation. The percentage of the population who are non-religious, or have dechurched has been rapidly growing for decades and is continuing.
- **Being united as the Body of Christ in a divisive era.** When the world around us is constantly dividing, the challenge of articulating the Gospel in such a way that rises beyond cultural language and reveals our common values as Christians is essential.

Common themes to fruitful ministry were:

- **Outward missional focus.** Congregations that live out their mission beyond the

walls of the church, both in terms of service and personal discipleship, are thriving. Without the crutch of the supposedly “Christian” culture of the past, churches are rediscovering the joy and passion of carrying the love of God out into the world and caring for those in need.

- **Authentic hospitality.** Congregations that consistently, relentlessly create a culture of radical hospitality are seeing fruit. When people come to a church for the first time and they are seen, authentically welcomed, and experience the boundless welcome of Jesus practiced, ministry grows.

One of the most energizing aspects of this conference is the personal, face-to-face time we get with leaders. Leaders from all the various partner organizations shared about their ministry and stories of how churches were engaged.

**Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton** spoke with us, along with other leaders from the Churchwide office of the ELCA about challenges and opportunities in the ELCA.

**Bishop Idalia Negrón Caamaño of the Caribbean Synod** spoke to us along with local pastors doing amazing ministry in Puerto Rico. Pastor Varinia has close ties to several pastors in Puerto Rico from her coaching ministry, and we were even able to borrow a keyboard from Pastor Edwin Cruz at Iglesia Evangelica Luterana Cristo Rey, a congregation Varinia had visited and Good Shepherd had helped with cost of repairs after the hurricane. What a blessing to make this connection!



ELCA World Hunger (ELCA Good Gifts) was there, and I was able to connect with the director, Pastor Dan Rift who visited Good Shepherd last year!

Lutheran World Relief was also present, and I enjoy talking with Pastor Tim Krick, who also visited GSLC last year. (GSLC has provided \$10,000 to LWR over the past few years through grants from our Endowment).

Tree 4 Hope. Pastor Jennifer Hope-Tringali and Deacon David Hope-Tringali are the founders of this mission in Guatemala. I was able to talk with them about their ministry and the impact it is making in the lives of the people in their community.

Global Refuge (formerly known as Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services) shared about their ministry and the impact it has had on lives for over 80 years.



Global Health Ministries talked about their work connecting churches in the United States with the health care needs of our siblings all around the world, including the direct impact of congregations making Newborn Kits to be sent for new mothers.

Thank you, Good Shepherd, for allowing your staff time for continuing education. These experiences are so important to enable us to grow spiritually, develop our skills, and build relationships across the entire church in all its various expressions. It was truly a holy experience, and I am so encouraged to see all the ways the Holy Spirit is alive and moving throughout the ELCA!

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**Varinia Espinosa**  
**Pastor of Congregational Care**

### **Thriving Congregations, Thriving Church**

In 2020 I was invited to be one of the coaches for the First Cohort of the ELCA Congregations Lead Initiative, to coach alongside with another Latino Coach, Rev Damaris Porsch-Ortega. We were assigned to coach five congregations and their pastors from the Caribbean Synod. This Initiative was a 2-year program that gathered a cohort of forty-eight congregations from across the ELCA to unleash and harness their collective genius and discover new and useful ministry innovations. These congregations were excited about more new, young, diverse people knowing a life in Christ.

With this initiative the ELCA has sought to activate each of us so that more people might know the way of Jesus and discover community, justice and love as written in the Scriptures on the Gospel of John 10:10, "I came so they can have real and eternal life, more and better life than they ever dreamed of."

This first cohort finished at the end of November 2023. It was a joy to accompany the five Puerto Rican pastors working together to reach out new people around two different communities of faith, plus planning their own experiments in their congregations. We met once a month with all of them in for team coaching, plus once a month with each of them in an individual coaching session.



In between cohorts, I took coaching classes to enhance the experience I was gaining. I entered a 1-year Coaching program where I graduated in April this year.



At the beginning of 2024 I was invited to be part of the second cohort. This time the program is only six months long with less congregations participating. I was assigned this time to Coach by myself to an Anglo congregation from Dallas, TX (Central Lutheran). In February the second cohort had their first Zoom meeting, and I had my first Coaching session with Central Lutheran in March. In April, I met the leaders of four

congregations from NTNL Synod and their pastors, for a long day of training and to have my first, in person, coaching session with the leaders of Central Lutheran. The

next day, I presided over the worship service together with Pr. Veronika at Central Lutheran.

At this point you may be asking yourself: What do these congregations learn through this program?



Here are some of the things they learned:

- How to innovate for the future through learning events
- Conduct a ministry experiment.
- Train with world-renowned innovation and ministry thought leaders.
- Receive personalized group coaching for support and guidance.
- Network with a cohort of other congregations doing similar innovation work.
- And as a special gift they are eligible to receive a Spark Grant for the purpose of conducting a ministry experiment.

The Congregations Lead Initiative uses the design thinking framework to guide participants in their innovation process. Congregational teams will use interviews and feedback from community members to empathize with joy and pain points, generate ideas, create prototypes of ministry experiments, and launch their innovations. This work is done with the support and guidance of their ELCA coach, their synod staff, and the Innovation home area at the ELCA churchwide organization.

Besides fulfilling my role as your pastor of congregational care, I am an ELCA Coach, who is in constant training. Constant upskilling as a coaching professional is the key to gaining the master coach designation. I am committed to the process of learning and dedicate sufficient time to the practice. With God's help and the support of my colleagues I will continue to serve in this regard anytime when an opportunity is presented.

The pictures in this article reflect the large meeting we had last year in Chicago with the first cohort, the meeting I had with the second cohort at the end of April in Fort Worth, Texas, (besides the full day of training on Saturday April 27), and the last picture is me presiding over the worship service at Central Lutheran, Dallas.

It is a joy to be able to serve our triune God, and it makes a double joy when I am doing this service around the areas of where my passion is, Pastoral Care & Coaching.

In Christ Jesus  
Pr. Varinia

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**Good Shepherd Connect Mobile App Login**

**Weekly Services Saturday 5pm (casual) and  
Sunday 9am (traditional) and 11am (contemporary)  
[goodshepherdlutheran.com](http://goodshepherdlutheran.com) | 636-391-6685 | [Calendar](#)**