

Courageous, resilient, faithful

Synod program equips ministry leaders

By Steve Lundeberg

Aiming to help its congregations evolve and thrive through enhanced emotional intelligence and self-awareness, the Rocky Mountain Synod in September 2019 launched a program for rostered ministers and laypeople alike called Excellence in Leadership (EiL).

The premise is simple and powerful: Not everything that used to make sense for congregations still does, so leaders need a fresh and honest reexamination of and thoughtful instruction on how to do ministry in an ever-changing church landscape. The goal is to form courageous, resilient and faithful leaders.

“We’d like our congregations to have those traits, but congregations can’t have what their leaders don’t possess,” said Kim Gonia, program co-founder.

Gonia said EiL dovetails well with Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton’s Leadership Initiative, which encourages ELCA members to seek out and inspire gifted people in their congregations and communities. The initiative’s goal is for pastors, deacons and laypeople to work together to bring the word of God to the world.

“[The synod’s] focus has been driven by wanting to help our pastors and deacons, some of whom attended seminary a long time ago and were trained for a different church than what most of us are experiencing right now,” said Gonia, pastor of Risen Lord Lutheran Church in Conifer, Colo. “Also, a lot of laypeople are looking for ways to strengthen their leadership skills.”

A planning team met for more than a year as EiL took shape. The team included Gonia; Sarah Moening, the synod’s assistant to the bishop for congregational life; and Lou Blanchard, canon missionary for the Episcopal Diocese of Colorado.



Sarah Moening, a program lead trainer for the Rocky Mountain Synod’s Excellence in Leadership (EiL) initiative, leads the project’s session in Parker, Colo.

“Sarah and I were familiar with some of the material through our involvement with a similar program of the Episcopal Church,” Gonia said. “The defining moment for us as we developed our vision was pointing our focus toward a framework of emotional intelligence—building capacity for self-awareness and other awareness so that our life together in community might be enriched.”

Sixty-two people from 20 congregations and ministry settings are enrolled in the first two-year course, in which groups of participants will gather four times a year for daylong sessions at three locations. The entire group will also have three training presentations per year via videoconferences.

Gonia, Moening and Blanchard serve as program lead trainers, and six other trainers cover the quarterly sessions in Denver; Cheyenne, Wyo.; and Las Cruces, N.M.

Emotional intelligence

“I think the piece that’s most exciting is the integration between the personal and interpersonal, and among systems, working in a community,” Moening said. “Emotional intelligence is the foundation—knowing yourself, being able to moderate yourself, paying attention to the community around you.”

From that bedrock, EiL builds toward an exploration of adaptive leadership, spiritual practices, systems theory and vulnerability.

“Our intent is to change the culture of the ELCA,” she said. “We’re all trying to tend to the future that’s coming at us, and we can’t just hang on to what we’ve always done.”

Take Sunday school, for example. “We’ve always done spiritual formation in an academic framework,”



EiL participants in small-group discussion at a daylong program session in Parker. Sixty-two people from 20 congregations and ministry settings are enrolled in the first two-year course.

Moening said. “We have grade levels for kids, and we teach them this and that. What we really need to be doing is listening deeply enough to learn what people are hungry for, and then addressing those questions.”

EiL’s curriculum draws from multiple sources, including the writings of author and researcher Brené Brown on vulnerability and courage, and the work of Theory U founder Otto Scharmer on awareness-based systems change.

“I love that our program is not isolating,” Moening said. “This is for people who want to be effective leaders, regardless of title—people who want to roll up their sleeves and do hard work together without arbitrary separations.”

Gonia’s list of goals for EiL participants, and ultimately for their congregations, includes:

- Moving from a “club mentality” to a spirit of true community.
- Seeing a path where the focus shifts from programming to a deepening spiritual life.
- Working from abundance rather than scarcity as a route to more authentic connections with communities beyond church walls.
- Embracing change and transformation without fear, seeing them as a means of sharing God’s kingdom.

“I once served a congregation that was shrinking in numbers and connections to the community,” Gonia said. “They had room to share and a partnership opportunity that could have made a real difference in their community, but they could not see another way of being except to continue to gather in a huge building one day a week for worship with 25 people.”

A more self-aware group, she added, might have been able to unleash resources for the sake of increased ministry.

“This is the kind of thing I hope to open people to in Excellence in Leadership,” she said. “We need leaders who are realistic and committed, willing to try things knowing not everything will work, but knowing that there is something to be learned from trying.”

To learn more about the Excellence in Leadership program, visit rmselca.org/leaders/excellence-in-leadership. Visit elca.org/leaders for more information about the Leadership Initiative.



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