



North/West Lower MI Synod Council Meets in Retreat from Sept. 26-27, 2025

The N/W Lower MI Synod Council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) gathered in retreat at the Living Water Ministries Retreat Stony Lake Camp in New Era MI, September 26-27, 2025. This council serves as the synod's board of directors and interim legislative authority between meetings of a synod assembly.

This meeting, the first with Synod Bishop Julie Schneider-Thomas who was elected at the May 2025 synod assembly, included the following activities and actions:

- Welcomed Bishop Julie Schneider-Thomas and her new [synod staff](#):
 - Assistant to the Bishop - Pr. Scott Torkko
 - Assistant to the Bishop & Director of Evangelical Mission - Pr. Kate Van Valkenburg
 - Director of Communication and Administration - Ms. Shannan Boerema
 - Director of Finance - Ms. Rebecca Bossenbroek
 - Director of Technology - Pr. Alex Aivars
- [Celebration of the installation of Pr. Julie Schneider-Thomas](#) as the 5th Bishop of the NWLM Synod on Sept. 13 at Trinity Lutheran Church in Grand Rapids, MI.
- Welcomed newly elected or re-elected [Synod Council](#) members:
 - Ms. Karla Chamberlain – Grace, Lansing (second term)
 - Ms. Diane Madej – First, Muskegon (first term)
 - Pr. Sherry McGuffin – Cross of Christ, Petoskey (first term)
 - Pr. Kevin O'Bryan – Zion, Freeland (first term)
 - Bp. Julie Schneider-Thomas – St. Thomas, Cheboygan (first term)
 - Pr. Dennis Smith, Synod Secretary – St. John's, Three Rivers (second term)
 - Ms. Linda Wicander – Immanuel, Mt. Pleasant (second term)
- Completed annual NWLM Synod Council on-boarding activities (review of constitutional responsibilities, key policies and procedures, meeting schedule, etc.)
- Bp. Julie led Evening Prayer (Friday) and Morning Prayer (Saturday) – both live on Facebook with other synod members!
- Participated in various listening sessions and team building activities.
- Approved the June 30, 2025 Synod Council meeting minutes. Received the June 10 and August 17, 2025 Executive Committee meeting minutes.
- Received updated congregation constitutions from Grace, Alpena and New Life, Spruce.
- Acted on multiple roster changes at the request of Bp. Schneider-Thomas.

- Issued a synod term call to Pr. Alex Aivars as he transitions to “Priest in Charge” of the Canterbury MSU Campus Ministry program (aligned to the Episcopal Diocese of MI).
- Received the Report of the Treasurer including review of financial statements for the first 6 months (through July 2025) of the 2025-26 fiscal year (ending 1/31/26). Income and spending continue to be in line with expectations based on the approved budget and planned activities.
- Expressed thanks to Lynn Kriser (University – East Lansing) as she transitioned from the NWLM Synod Attorney position at the end of September 2025.
- Appointed Dr. Timothy Lundgren (Trinity – Grand Rapids) as the N/W Lower MI Synod Attorney, effective October 1, 2025.
- Reviewed the [2025 Synod Assembly survey input](#) and approved the [May 2025 Synod Assembly minutes](#).
- Discussed initial plans for the 2026 Synod Assembly which will take place May 15-16, 2026 at Prince of Peace Lutheran Church in Portage, MI.
 - The first “pre-assembly” day on Friday (starting at ~1 PM) will focus on worship, fellowship, celebrations and education. Dinner will be provided for those who register.
 - The second “business” day on Saturday (ending by 4 PM) will serve as the official “Synod Assembly” business meeting to address required business, elections, consideration of memorials and/or resolutions, etc. Lunch will be provided for those who register.
- Reviewed [changes in Portico Health Plan options](#) for 2026 along with corresponding updates to the [2026 NWLM Synod Compensation Guidelines](#) approved and sent rostered ministers (to forward on to their congregational leaders) in August 2025.
- Agreed to move forward with filling two open unexpired terms on Synod Council (action planned for the December 2025 meeting):
 - Rostered Minister – Male (term expires August 31, 2026). This term is open due to Pr. Jake Lehman moving to a ministry position in Scotland as of Sept. 1, 2025.
 - Young Adult – Female (Lay or Rostered; term expires August 31, 2027). This term is open due to Pr. Kate Van Valkenburg transitioning to the NWLM synod staff as of Oct. 1, 2025.
- Received greetings from [Nicole McCarthy, Executive Director of Living Water Ministries](#) along with an [overview of the recent summer camp season](#) and on-going plans and future strategies.
- Next Meetings:
 - Executive Committee: Tuesday, Dec. 2, 2025 at noon via Zoom
 - Synod Council: Saturday, Dec. 6, 2025 at 10 AM via Zoom