

LOVE Report - Extraordinary Lutheran Ministries

Compiled by RHW Consulting LLC

In March and April 2022, RHW Consulting was approached by leaders of Reconciling Works (RW) and Extraordinary Lutheran Ministries (ELM) to discuss how their individual work relates to each other and what options might be available if there was greater connection, alignment, or merged ministries. It was expressed that this has been an ongoing wondering over the years as each organization deepened in their work of supporting LGBTQIA+ inclusion throughout the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). After listening to leaders and engaging in conversation, it became clear that ELM was in a significant place of transition that required specific support and leadership. Conversations regarding the relationship between ELM and RW were paused and ELM explored the option of working with RHW Consulting to support the various transitions that have been present recently.

In June 2022, RHW Consulting was officially retained by ELM with the explicit goal of helping ELM's Board and staff discern their next phase of ministry. RHW Consulting led a series of conversations with key partners among the ELM ecosystem - Proclaim members, ministries and congregations, and donors.

RHW Consulting began our time by attending a staff meeting in July as we prioritize those who lead the day-to-day operations of an organization. After meeting with the staff, we engaged in a listening campaign in July and August that invited staff and Board members to one-to-one conversations that utilized a specific framework and the following questions:

1. What is your role with the organization and how long have you been in this role?
2. How would you describe the work (mission/vision/purpose) of the organization?
3. What has caused the organization to not fulfill its work (mission/vision/purpose)?
4. What would you change about how the organization engages its work (mission/vision/purpose)?
5. What's the relationship between staff, donors, board and volunteers?
6. How would you describe the relationship between the organization and those that it serves?
7. What have been significant issues/conflicts/events that have marked the organization's life cycle?
8. What would you articulate as the organization's commitment to racial justice?
9. How has this commitment been operationalized?
10. What is one hope for the future of this organization? What are obstacles that could get in the way of this hope?

In addition to the one-to-one conversations, RHW Consulting also:

- Met with the Board co-chairs (June - August);
- Attended a Board meeting (August);

- Invited leaders throughout the organization to participate in Affinity Group Listening Sessions (September);
- Crafted a survey that was shared throughout the organization (October - November);
- Reviewed organizational documents, statements and online presence (Ongoing);
- Provided recommendations and feedback for communication about this process with organizational constituents (Ongoing).

We held space for and listened to three staff members, eleven board members, and thirty five leaders who signed up for Affinity Group listening sessions. Leaders throughout ELM were invited to attend Affinity Group listening sessions throughout the month of September. Individuals were able to sign up for as many affinity groups as they wanted because we understand that people embody multiple realities and identities. These groups were invited to reflect on variations of the questions asked during our one-to-one listening sessions with staff and board members. In consultation with staff and board members, the following affinity groups were created and offered:

1. Transgender, Gender Non-Conforming, Gender Non-Binary
2. BIPOC
3. Donors
4. Volunteers
5. Polyamorous
6. Bishops and Assistants to the Bishops
7. Historically Rostered

The final part of our listening process was to craft an anonymous electronic survey that was shared with the entire ELM ecosystem. This survey was available during the month of November and collected 126 responses. Below are key summary demographics of survey participants:

- 38% of respondents were from the midwest, 21% were from the northeast and 15% were from the west coast;
- 28% of survey respondents were between the ages of 30-39, 20% were between the ages 50-59, 15% were between the ages of 40-49, and 15% were older than 70 years of age
- 81% of the respondents shared that they were not part of the Historic Roster
- 68% of the respondents are rostered, 13% of the respondents are lay, 11% of the respondents are seminarians
- 48% of the respondents identified as Lesbian, Gay or Queer, 22% of the respondents identified as Bisexual, 17% of the respondents identified as Gender non-conforming/non-binary, 12% of the respondents identified as Transgender, and 13% of the respondents identified as Polyamorous
- 12% of respondents identified as Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC)

Some key things to note about the process:

- Affinity Groups were identified alongside leadership of ELM;

- We held two BIPOC affinity group sessions and no one showed up even though a few people registered;
- We were surprised by the low turnout for Affinity Group listening sessions overall;
- The Board experienced transition during our engagement, with two new co-chairs being onboarded between July and November.

This report includes our **Learnings** as we engaged in a process of listening, observation, and discernment; **Opportunities** that were uplifted from respondents in this process; **Vulnerabilities** that have been identified as potential obstacles to future endeavors; and **Endorsements** that are our recommendations for next steps.

RHW Consulting LLC was founded by Rozella Haydée White and is a company dedicated to nurturing life-giving and justice-seeking love in this world. Utilizing a Love Ethic, RHW Consulting develops creative solutions alongside clients who are navigating change, transition, and conflict by:

- *Clarifying their purpose*
- *Deepening their impact*
- *Leading boldly*
- *Living with passion*
- *Aligning values and beliefs with behaviors.*

RHW Consulting LLC works with nonprofit organizations founded and led by women, Black, Indigenous People of Color, and LGBTQ+ leaders who address issues of injustice and are committed to embodying and operationalizing anti-racist ways of being, believing, and behaving. Our coaching is focused on bridging the gap between intent and impact by strengthening the identity and infrastructure in order to create healthy organizations.

LEARNINGS

What was revealed...

ELM has a significant history of moving justice forward for LGBTQIA+ leaders and being a prophetic voice to the ELCA and ELCIC in the fight for inclusion. As we listened to various leaders and stakeholders, and reviewed the survey results, it became clear that the work of ELM saved lives and shifted culture. ELM has made a significant impact in the lives of all who have engaged this organization and has shown - time and time again - what is possible when there is focused, coordinated efforts that lead to liberation.

As we engaged in this process, a key theme emerged. There is significant grief that is present throughout the organization at-large. This grief is due to multiple factors with the following being shared repeatedly by respondents:

1. 2009 - While this was a moment and time for celebration after many years of organizing and advocating, there was so much pain leading up to the decisions of the Churchwide Assembly, the reality of Bound Conscience, and a seeming end to the efforts once the 2009 decision was passed. Respondents spoke of feeling like ELM lost its way after this decision and that there hasn't been a clear focus or organized effort since 2009 in ways that capture the energy and commitment of the organization.
2. Amanda's Departure - The departure of your last Executive Director was a consistent point of reflection. As the Executive Director of an organization that served marginalized communities, Amanda also was a pastoral presence and support for leaders. Her departure and the subsequent absence of someone to provide care was a shock to the system - staff, board, and constituents alike.
3. The expulsion of Bishop Megan Roherer - This decision was referenced throughout this process with a few people sharing their disagreement with the decision while the majority lamented the way that things unfolded. The decision and subsequent actions led many within ELM to wonder what the standards and expectations for membership are and what the process for submitting and addressing grievances is. There was a consistent theme of a lack of clarity on the decision-making process that is also linked to a feeling of mistrust of organizational leadership that stems from a lack of communication and connection with constituents. One respondent shared, "That in a righteous effort to both lead and support, ELM gets too far ahead of the masses. Taking a principled stand is laudable and necessary and requires vast amounts of explanation and education so that you don't stand principled, alone."

In addition to grief, the trauma that many within ELM have experienced was also shared during this process. The multi-layered realities of peoples' identities, the cultures they come from, the society that we are a part of, and the church that has done great harm to the community led us to wonder what kind of support and attention is given to the community as they navigate trauma. As one respondent shared "I hope to see ELM break out of a place of trauma and resentment.

So much of ELM language/work/actions feels focused around past trauma from the ELCA (and predecessor bodies) instead of focusing on the queer joy that is before us.” This statement stood out to us as it both recognized the harm that has been caused and the possibility that is inherent in the claiming and embracing of the fullness of one’s identity. We believe that this embrace of “Queer Joy” has to happen in conjunction with opportunities for healing, connection, and communal support.

One of our key learnings was that there were differing thoughts about the vision, mission, and values of ELM. While there was some clarity among Board members, other respondents from staff to stakeholders to those surveyed were unclear about the focus of ELM. The role of a Board is to craft the vision of the organization while the staff executes the mission and develops programming in alignment with the values.

Our listening also revealed that there is confusion about what the work of the Board is and what is the responsibility of the staff. Examples were shared regarding how information is accessed and changed that is under the purview of staff. There also seems to be minimal trust between the staff and the Board writ large. This seems to have emerged after Amanda’s departure and has significantly impacted the morale of the current staff.

We noted that many respondents had positive things to say about Olivia’s leadership as the Program Director and that there was confusion about the programs that ELM officially provides. Proclaim seems to be the only program that has an infrastructure and some clarity about purpose. When respondents were asked to name the programs of ELM, most were unsure of what the work of ELM entailed beyond Proclaim.

Communication was a major theme that was revealed in our listening, with staff feeling the pressure and a lack of understanding for the work and leadership of Lewis and with those external to the staff having unmet expectations of Lewis. Some respondents shared a frustration with not knowing how and when things are communicated. There seems to be a lack of clarity about channels of communication. Many shared that while they appreciate the blog posts and sharing of stories, there is not enough communication about the work of ELM. We also heard the need for communications and donor relations to be handled separately.

In order for ELM to be a sustained organization, Donor cultivation, engagement, and retention has to be a priority. Given the small number of staff and there not being clarity about the future and needs of ELM, engaging donors will continue to be a difficult task.

One of our questions was specifically related to ELM’s commitment to anti-racism and operationalizing this value. While many respondents believe that this is important, there was not consensus in understanding what this means for the organization writ large. The Board and staff were able to share specific examples of conversations and/or training that addressed this commitment however members of ELM were not clear when this became a value and how it impacts the work of the organization. Some also shared that there is fear among cis-White gay and lesbian members of ELM that this focus could erase other aspects of the LGBTQIA+

struggle. This is not uncommon to hear when an organization shifts focus without intentional work to communicate a new direction and share what the value means in this season of the organization's life cycle.

Many spoke to the possibility of ELM and RW merging, with RW leading work with congregations and synods and ELM leading seminarian and rostered leader support, development, and care. There was a lot of energy around ELM reclaiming an advocacy identity and that this work could happen more effectively with infrastructure shifts and clarity of focus.

When it comes to the larger community, it is unclear if people are members or constituents and what constitutes either. Many wondered about expanding beyond seminarians and rostered leaders while others shared that there should be more support for those preparing to lead in faith communities. Some shared that they hoped for ELM to expand beyond Lutheran spaces and engage LGBTQIA+ lay and clergy leaders from diverse denominational traditions.

ELM has a rich and storied history that should be uplifted and shared even as the organization moves into the future. As one respondent shared and we wholeheartedly agree,

ELM needs to get back to the queering of things and operate with an ethos that says not A or B but always C; we need to leave room for change and breathe into it and live into it as opposed to being flabbergasted that these things are being asked of us. If we are looking at the data, we are only going to get queerer and less white as we move through the world. We need to be able to respond from a place of hope and possibility and not a place of fear

It is our belief that ELM is at a crossroad. This is a season to clearly define your purpose and the people you are called to serve. There is an invitation to do less and do it well while trusting in the prophetic vision that you have been given, to "organize queer seminarians and rostered ministers, confront barriers and systemic oppression, and activate queer ideas and movements within the Lutheran Church."

OPPORTUNITIES

What is possible...

Below is a list of respondents' thoughts about what might be possible, not just for this work but for the work, identity, and future of ELM. This list was compiled based on 1:1 conversations and the anonymous survey. Many responses were duplicated and this list seeks to compile the greatest diversity of hopes.

- ELM would be an effective communicator with a clearly articulated vision, mission, and values
- ELM would strengthen, celebrate, and support queer rostered leaders and seminarians from discernment through the call process through being placed in a call and beyond
- ELM would consolidate with Reconciling Works and focus on leadership support and advocacy
- ELM would be able to live into a Lutheran identity that is expansive, lean into our trauma, and foster a community that is brave, safe, and grounded and rooted in love
- ELM would seek the truth and say difficult things when they need to be said
- ELM would be less sentimental about what we do and be more political, challenging the church to be better.
- ELM would be able to witness to who's in front of us rather than witnessing to those from 20 years ago
- That ELM doesn't give up in the vision to become racially just and equitable
- ELM would be in spaces and in conversations with other historically marginalized groups
- ELM broadens beyond rostered ministers to include other lay leaders and other queer ministry sites
- That the main issues facing queer clergy are reflected in our agenda - getting calls and getting insurance
- That ELM would notice the queer clergy are called by lay people and unless we have relationships with call committees, we won't get anywhere
- ELM expands advocacy beyond its ELCA lens
- ELM would have Board retreats happen and Board orientation process
- ELM would either partner with organizations that are doing the work that we don't have the capacity or resources to do, or morph into a new organization whose values are relevant to current events (anti-racism, justice responses, community building)
- Develop into our own denomination, with a greater focus on liberation than the ELCA has
- ELM would gather queer leaders and those discerning leadership
- Clarify what Proclaim is - a community of people in need of support, not necessarily a community organizing body
- Creating a separate, intentional organizing arm of ELM would be great
- Advocate to the main church about the call process

- ELM would form a Queer Clergy Union
- ELM would grow into an organization that can help advocate for clergy within power-structures and who could offer data and advice when clergy are negotiating calls and navigating crises
- That it will continue to advocate for progressive sexuality policies and queer leadership in the ELCA, and that it will continue to keep Proclaim members informed
- More efforts on a local/synodical level. What would it look like for every synod to have someone who is specifically supporting queer candidates and rostered ministers that relates to ELM and Churchwide
- ELM would engage in intentional mentorship and outreach to young people
- Gathering queer clergy for retreat and renewal
- ELM would reclaim its historic identity as working for the Gospel no matter what may be happening denominationally
- ELM would find ways to actually tangibly support Rostered Ministers, especially those who are trans/gender expansive, polyamorous, BIPOC, and/or disabled
- ELM would provide a space for LGBTQIA+ folx who are not publicly out, but are looking for a space of people to be accepted by and in-community with as they wrestle with the struggles that come with the intersections of being LGBTQIA+ and in ministry, without the safety of fulling being out publicly
- Advocacy for clergy in non-monogamous partnerships and diverse relationship/family structures
- Deepening relationships with the wider church including meetings with bishops to encourage this church to publicly speak out against the hatred that queer leaders face

VULNERABILITIES

What could be an obstacle...

Below is a list of respondents' thoughts about what obstacles stand in the way of creating a hoped-for-future. As with the Opportunities, we have condensed the list and shared the overarching themes.

- Staffing - not having an Executive Director; having a small staff; staff being over capacity
- Leadership - lack of clarity about roles and purpose; people without capacity; not understanding governance structure; gaps in leadership; burnout; Board dysfunction
- Infrastructure - how decisions are made; lack of clarity of the organizational structure and goals
- Constituency - lack of clarity about who our constituencies are (lay, rostered, seminarians, etc...); disconnection from the larger community
- Merging - the bureaucratic decisions; merging organizations, finances; IRS designation
- White Supremacy - Comfort; proximity to whiteness as the default for the organization and decision-making
- Communication - Social Media as the main tool; lack of communication; overlap of communication with donor relations
- Institutional Connections - getting in the way; not enough resources; burnout;
- COVID - shift to online engagement or lack thereof
- everything is happening online at the moment, and it hinders deeper communication
- Fear - losing money; losing people; losing donors; beholden to what was
- Reality of historic population - Cis-white primarily gay and lesbian constituents who are concerned that a shift in focus to anti-racism is in conflict with their struggles and stories
- Old structures and organizing 400+ people around the country.
- Current political realities
- Social media and a culture of perfection.
- The past relationship between ELM and Reconciling Works that wasn't positive
- Differing opinions about if Proclaim Members should be publicly identified
- There are congregations that are still afraid of LGBTQIA+ candidates, and ELM has an opportunity to identify that fear and help fearful communities of faith overcome fear and open themselves to new ministry opportunities.
- Lack of donor support, loss of sense of common mission, poor communication.
- There's a sense that the Board has had struggles during the past couple years, though those of us on the outside don't really understand everything that has happened and where the organization is moving in terms of its future.
- Finding ways for new people to plug in, capacity to offer in person and online gatherings
- Need to establish something about what it means to be a Proclaim or ELM member.

- How to build and maintain the level of trust and community to do that work well when we are so geographically scattered. The sense that LGBT oppression has ended within the ELCA and therefore ELM's funding streams dry up.
- Fear of subversive denominational repercussions. Lack of commitments and too many cancellations. Weak fundraising efforts. Failure to connect and nurture relationships with well established advocacy organizations (at national and local levels) like Trevor Project.
- The polity of the ELCA and the structure of ELM
- Infighting
- Maintaining the status quo, listening primarily to cis white male voices, failing to do anything at all, seeking money over relationship
- Nostalgia gets in the way of a lot of ELM's progress
- A vision that doesn't include all
- Not enough supporters to properly underwrite the projects that need to be funded
- Limited time and bandwidth to volunteer to take charge of making any of them happen on my own
- ELM sometimes tries to be everything to everybody and ends up paralyzed
- Not paying adequate attention to our confessional roots
- Embracing "queerness" to the exclusion of those (whether sexual minority or not) who do not identify as "queer"
- Continuing homophobia in the population at large, as well as within the ELCA
- Resistant to change
- Burnout and a general distrust of ELCA ministry practices
- The organization sidelines the principle foundations of being an organization that supports queer clergy and seminarians
- Christian Nationalism getting more followers
- ELM has lost its connection to the historical definition of extraordinary. Exploring ways to be alternative to the acceptable definitions of Church and community, while demonstrating authenticity, should be the cornerstone of our identity
- Other people in leadership within the ELCA not seeing ELM as a central and essential expression of the work God calls us to do

ENDORSEMENTS

What is recommended...

Below are recommendations from your Coach. Please review this information and schedule time to connect with us to review these recommendations.

1. Clearly articulate the vision, mission and values of ELM and create a digital campaign to share who you are, why you exist, and what populations you serve
2. Plan an organizational retreat for the Board and Staff to connect, build trust, and engage in organizational planning that distinguishes the work of the Board and the work of the Staff
3. Select an interim Executive Director to guide work in this season as the organization discerns merger opportunities
4. Review staffing model and the programs of ELM with attention paid to the values and goals of the organization
5. Develop an Onboarding Process for Board members with clearly defined roles, responsibilities, and terms
6. Engage the larger ELM community in conversations that address grief and allow for public repentance and lament
7. Connect with Candidacy in the ELCA in order to better identity, support, and equip LGBTQIA+ rostered leaders
8. Develop a campaign that honors the past, provides space to let go of what was, and sets the stage for future possibilities
9. Define ELM's racial justice commitment and the way that this intersects with and impacts the work and values of the organization.
10. Consider creating a professional organization that includes dues to engage your member base and create steady streams of income