**6261 – the WHAT**

**6261 Ministry Communities** are groups of **6** congregations served by **2** full-time pastors, **6** synod-licensed lay ministers, and **1** full-time deacon for shared ministry within their community.

**6** congregations

**2** full-time pastors

**6** lay ministers

**1** full-time deacon

The goal is that each 6261 Ministry Community will be bound together in common life, ministry, and mission. For many, this is a cultural, paradigm shift. Leaders work in co-partnership with one another and across the 6 congregations for the purpose of deeply rooted, shared, vital, and sustainable ministry within the community.

Each 6261 Ministry Community will be formed around at least one **primary ministry project**. This core, ministry focus will be embedded in its community and that community’s context to address specific areas of human suffering by building relationships and encountering mutual transformation. This might look like healing the hurts by undertaking issues of poverty, mental health, food insecurity, affordable housing, or racial inequities. It might mean engaging the stranger by focusing on truly welcoming young people, people of color, and LGBTQIA+ communities. It might involve loving the land by working on green initiatives, reducing our waste as congregational institutions and as individuals, or by connecting our rural communities with more creation-friendly methods of farming. Whatever the passion and contextual need, a 6261 Ministry Community can commit to this profound work for the sake of the Gospel and one another.

**6261 – the WHERE**

**6261 Ministry Communities can happen anywhere!** Ideally, 6261 Ministry Communities will be comprised of 6 congregations who are within 15-25 minutes of one another. This geographic versatility gives the 6261 Ministry Community the opportunity to be deeply interconnected and to engage in ministry within the same surrounding community, demographically.

We hope to see 6261 Ministry Communities formed throughout the expanse of the Northeastern PA Synod, not just in our larger cities. 6261s can happen in rural areas as well as urban or suburban contexts.

6261s can be large or small congregations, those currently with full-time staff as well as those in a pastoral vacancy or who typically have only part-time staff. 6261s can also happen with our ecumenical “full communion” partners\* as well as ELCA and “full communion” partners across Synods. 6261s do not need to consist of only 6 ELCA congregations.

The benefit of a 6261 is that its interwoven nature allows for a variety of congregations to partner together for shared ministry. This ministry may have a singular focus that unites the 6 congregations. Or the 6261 may have several different yet complementary ministry foci across the 6 congregations that are mutually supported by the 6261 Ministry Community.

*\*Our ELCA “full communion” partners include the Presbyterian Church (USA); the Reformed Church in America; the United Church of Christ; the Episcopal Church; the Moravian Church; and the United Methodist Church. For more details, see the ELCA website* [*here*](https://www.elca.org/Faith/Ecumenical-and-Inter-Religious-Relations/Full-Communion)*.*

**6261 – the WHY**

6261 Ministry Communities align with the NEPA Synod **mission of** **“Gaining Strength.”** 6261 Ministry Communities gain strength through collaboration and sharing in ministry with one another for the sake of the Gospel.

Our **NEPA Synod Constitution** lays out its role and responsibility in supporting congregations for the sake of the Gospel and participating in God’s mission:

* “Serve in response to God's love to meet human needs, caring for the sick and the aged, advocating dignity and justice for all people, working for peace and reconciliation among the nations, and standing with the poor and powerless, and committing itself to their needs.” (S6.02)
* “Nurture its members in the Word of God so as to grow in faith and hope and love, to see daily life as the primary setting for the exercise of their Christian calling, and to use the gifts of the Spirit for their life together and for their calling in the world.” (S6.02)
* “Manifest the unity given to the people of God by living together in the love of Christ and by joining with other Christians in prayer and action to express and preserve the unity which the Spirit gives.” (S6.02)
* “Strengthen interdependent relationships among congregations, synods, and the churchwide organization, and foster relationships with agencies and institutions affiliated with or related to this church as well as ecumenical partners.” (S6.03)

**6261 Ministry Communities** promote vitality for all 6 of its congregations by providing:

* A collective pool of resources to support full-time pastors and deacons, in a time of clergy shortage and in a way that supports clergy health, as well as additional ministry staff such as musicians, Christian education, administration, and more.
* A training structure for lay ministers and interns, allowing for a natural flow of trained leadership – some of whom may discern a call to public, rostered ministry.
* A means for staff and members to practice teamwork in a familiar network as they will have to rely on one another to fully support and sustain ministry.
* Built-in support for re-identifying values, mission, and community in the wake of Covid-19 and an ever-changing social and cultural landscape.
* A deeper and broader training and accountability structure for councils, officers, committees, staff, rostered ministers, and lay ministers.
* Greater oversight to guard against financial malfeasance.
* Insight into the Church universal as congregations partner together for the sake of the Gospel, reaching beyond their individual doors into the broader community.
* Increased opportunities for worship, Bible study, small groups, service, fellowship, and other faith practices.

**6261 – the WHO**

**Licensed lay ministers, deacons, and pastors** will be the pastoral staff of 6261 Ministry Communities, supported by **coaching**. All 3 types of leaders are essential.

Licensed lay ministers will vary in their theological backgrounds and training, gifts and passions for ministry, and their availability for service. These lay ministers will become licensed for serving in the 6261 Ministry Community after completing the synod-authorized discernment, training, and certification for licensing process.

Deacons and pastors are “rostered” ministers, called by the whole church and serving in our synod in a 6261 Ministry Community. Both deacons and pastors have completed a seminary-level theological degree with equivalent training and candidacy rostering requirements.

**Lay Ministers** are licensed by the Bishop to perform certain duties within specific congregations of 6261 Ministry Communities. These duties may include:

* Praying for the 6261 Ministry Community, its congregations, its surrounding community, and its ministries
* Leading Worship services, including preaching
* Leading Bible studies
* Leading and coordinating small groups
* Visiting those in the hospital, the homebound, and others who request a visit
* Potential for licensed Sacramental authorization in special circumstances

**Deacons** are ordained to the roster of “Word and Service.” As such, deacons share the Word through preaching and teaching. Deacons are uniquely called to the ministry of service, connecting the Church to the world and reminding all believers of our call to loving service of our neighbors.

Deacons of 6261 Ministry Communities will be specifically responsible for:

* Praying for the 6261 Ministry Community, its congregations, its surrounding community, and its ministries
* Building relationships across the 6261 Ministry Community
* Equipping the 6261 Ministry Community for service embedded within the community
* Using their distinct and diverse ministry gifts and experiences, as well as their prophetic voice, for encouraging and integrating the primary ministry project of the 6261 Ministry Community
* With their two pastor colleagues, mentoring and supervising the 6 Licensed Lay Ministers in their contexts
* Leading worship, preaching, and setting the table for Holy Communion
* Coordinating with ministry teams and raising up leaders for faith in action
* Other ministries as determined by the 6261 Ministry Community such as leading Bible studies, small groups, visitation, teaching Confirmation, administration, etc.

**Pastors** are ordained to the roster of “Word and Sacrament.” As such, pastors are best known for preaching and teaching of the Word, along with presiding at the table for the sharing of the Sacrament of the Altar (Holy Communion). Pastors also perform the Sacrament of Baptism as well as other worship rites such as Confirmation/Affirmation of Baptism, Weddings, and Funerals.

Pastors of 6261 Ministry Communities will be specifically responsible for:

* Praying for the 6261 Ministry Community, its congregations, its surrounding community, and its ministries
* Building relationships across the 6261 Ministry Community
* Leading worship, preaching, and providing Holy Communion
* Performing baptisms, weddings, and funerals
* Coordinating ministry teams and staff to plan worship services – including music, prayers, service setting, liturgical elements, creative opportunities, etc.
* Visiting those in the hospital, the homebound, and others who request pastoral care
* With their deacon colleague, mentoring and supervising the 6 Licensed Lay Ministers in their contexts

**6261 – the HOW**

There is a detailed process that outlines how congregations, rostered ministers (pastors and deacons), and lay ministers can be involved with a 6261 Ministry Community. This process will be readily available and outlined on the **NEPA Synod website:** godslove.org/6261mc.

For congregations interested in exploring the possibility of joining a 6261 Ministry Community, the place to begin is with the **Narrative Inventory Form**, which can be found on the NEPA Synod website or through the direct link: bit.ly/NIF. The Narrative Inventory Form can be completed by the congregation’s Council, Vision Team, or another authorized group. This Form helps the congregation think through its gifts, hopes, expectations, current partnerships, and potential for shared ministries that it could not do alone.

Congregations are also encouraged to consider the following **characteristics** that each congregation of a 6261 Ministry Community should embody:

* Willingness to share pastors, deacons, lay ministers, and administrative staff
* Call and capacity to lift up local leaders to serve as lay ministers
* Focus on our common synodical goals of: Growing Young, Gaining Strength, and Going Beyond Death to Life
* Openness to sharing a common life of ministry and mission - inside and outside their walls - to be transformed by the neighbor and each other
* Geographic proximity, ideally within 15-25 minutes of the other 5 congregations in its 6261 Ministry Community
* Approval by its congregational council and written commitment to participate in the 6261 Ministry Community as well as appointing 2 members to serve on the 6261 Joint Council
* Willingness to actively participate in Congregational Learning Opportunities

**Deacons and pastors** serving and interested in serving a 6261 Ministry Community will participate in a **Gaining Strength Cohort**, facilitated by Rev. Doug Hill. This 18-month process provides rostered ministers with collegial support and tools for organizational transformation. The cohort also provides resources for guiding the 6261 Ministry Community in articulating its core values, mission, and ministry focus.

**Lay ministers** will receive training through the **Licensed Lay Ministry (LLM) formation path**. This process will give lay leaders the theological and practical training to provide lay leadership and preaching within the 6261 Ministry Community as licensed lay ministers. As a part of the 2-year LLM formation path, lay ministers take 4 theological classes, attend 4 formation retreats, and complete hands-on learning with their assigned LLM mentor. Lay ministers will simultaneously complete the requirements to become officially licensed by the NEPA Synod Bishop for service within the 6261 Ministry Community.

**Coaches** are trained professionals of the ELCA who are experienced in the art of deep listening, powerful questions, and intentional exploration to produce awareness, change, and transformation for the members/congregation. Coaches approach the members/congregation as **creative, resourceful, and whole** – and from this perspective will accompany both congregations and the 6261 Ministry Community as they discern their primary ministry project and design action plans to meet their goals.

**Coaches** for 6261 Ministry Communities will help:

* Provide a trustworthy, experienced partner from a faith-based perspective
* Listen reflectively to enable 6261 Ministry Communities, staff, and congregations to design action plans for ministry and primary ministry project(s)
* Remind 6261 Ministry Communities, staff, and congregations that they are creative, resourceful, and beloved of God
* Process grief, anxiety, and the sense of uncertainty that can come with trying something new and working with new partners
* Encourage and provide guidance to create goals and structures for mutual accountability and shared responsibility
* Discover the gifts each member, congregation, staff, and 6261 Ministry Community offers and how God is inviting them to use these gifts in God’s work of loving and healing the world.

**Coaching** will come alongside to support 6261 Ministry Community staff, Joint councils, and the congregational councils of congregations forming the 6261 Ministry Community. Coaching will happen at different intervals for each group receiving coaching:

**6261 Ministry Community Joint Council:** monthly for the first 6 months; then every other month for the next 12 months

**6261 Ministry Community Staff:** monthly for the first 18 months

**Individual congregational Councils of 6261 Ministry Communities:** quarterly for the first 18 months

The **NEPA Synod** will accompany and support each 6261 Ministry Community in a variety of ways, especially during their formation and early stages:

* Inviting interested congregations into conversation with one another for the purpose of discerning partnering in a 6261 Ministry Community and primary ministry project
* Providing resources like demographic studies for the 6261 Ministry Community’s surrounding context(s); community needs assessments; congregational identity studies; and congregational vitality assessments
* Providing and coordinating coaching (see above)
* Supporting congregational leaders to communicate the 6261 Ministry Community vision which will allow their relationships to bring people of the 6 congregations together for shared ministry
* Distributing surveys and evaluations to gather feedback throughout the process
* Assisting with any necessary paperwork or administrative pieces
* Building financial resources to help support 6261 Ministry Communities with lay leader scholarships, new ministry, and technology
* Utilizing the Director for Evangelical Mission (DEM) as the point person for 6261 Ministry Communities and allocating adequate time for her to fully accompany them
* Continuing to support the LLM Coordinator and his team in launching and building the LLM path

Additionally, the NEPA Synod will coordinate the biannual **Congregational Learning Opportunities** for 6261 Ministry Communities. These consist of:

(1) a yearly Lenten Joint Council Retreat for all members of the Joint Councils to gather for worship, reflection, and sharing; and

(2) a yearly service ministry day on “God’s Work Our Hands” Sunday for all members of 6261 Ministry Communities to participate. This day will highlight their and others’ 6261 ministries across the Synod as well as provide an opportunity for members to connect with one another.

**6261 – the WHEN**

The NEPA Synod has laid out a **goal of forming 4 new 6261 Ministry Communities per year for the next 5 years.** This would bring 120 congregations together for shared ministry!

The first 4 pilot 6261 Ministry Communities will likely be finished forming Spring-Summer 2024 – but they will start the process as early as Fall 2023. Additional 6261 Ministry Communities will be formed on an ongoing basis, as interest and feasibility align.

Please note that Gaining Strength Cohorts have 2 retreats per calendar year, with 2 Zoom meetings per calendar year (happening in between the retreats). Cohorts meet for a total of 18 months. The timeline below only lists their retreats. The Licensed Lay Ministry (LLM) formation path also has 2 retreats per calendar year and which will begin in 2024.

Here is a brief timeline of the next 12 months:

**July 2023** ‣ Narrative Inventory Form available to interested congregations

‣ 6261 Information available on NEPA Synod website

**Aug 2023** ‣ Gaining Strength Cohort 2 invitations/registration

‣ Discernment and conversations for forming 4 pilot 6261 congregations

**Sept 2023** ‣ Bishop deForest, Nancy Reichelt, and Kat Tigerman begin NEPA Synod Tour

‣ 6261 Budget proposed to Synod Council

**Oct 2023** ‣ Retreat - Gaining Strength Cohort 1 (finishes)

‣ Retreat - Gaining Strength Cohort 2 (starts)

‣ Narrative Inventory Forms due October 31 for pilot 6261 congregations

**Nov 2023** ‣ Congregations submit names of lay leaders for LLM formation path

**Dec 2023** ‣ LLM (Licensed Lay Ministry) formation path launches

**Jan 2024** ‣ Gaining Strength Cohort 3 invitations/registration

‣ Ready pilot 6261 Ministry Communities complete commitment forms

**April 2024** ‣ Retreat - Gaining Strength Cohort 2

‣ Retreat - Gaining Strength Cohort 3 (starts)

**June 2024** ‣ Synod Assembly with 6261 Ministry Communities update and sharing