



October 14, 2025

Dear Companion in Ministry,

Greetings from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America on behalf of the ELCA's International Leaders Program team.

I am contacting you today to invite your church body to participate in the ELCA's International Camp Counselor Program. For over three decades, this program has been inviting young people from around the world to work as camp counselors at the ELCA's summer camps for youth and families, here in the United States. This program gives campers and staff at ELCA summer camps the opportunity to experience the gifts of partner churches around the world, and it provides transformative leadership development experiences to youth / young adults from churches like yours. Participating in this program is an excellent opportunity for you to uplift the leadership expertise among youth and young adult members of your church, especially in the area of camping ministry and youth programming.

Your church is invited to nominate up to three young people between the ages of 18 and 30 to apply to participate in this program in 2026. By living and working in the United States for three months, your participants can gain critical intercultural skills and ministry experiences that will serve them well as leaders in your church. ELCA summer camps vary widely in their location and programming, but all of them offer great experiences in youth and family ministry in a Lutheran setting. We encourage you to nominate youth / young adults who have a track record of service to your church and who are committed to growing that service in the future.

We are now accepting applications for Summer 2026. Accepted participants will travel to the U.S. from mid-May through mid-August 2026 (exact dates to be shared later in the process). We are inviting your church to nominate up to three applicants in total. Applications are due by December 15, 2025.

What does it mean to be a camp counselor in the United States? There are [about 90 camp organizations throughout the United States that are affiliated with the ELCA](#), and each camp is unique. Generally speaking, summer camps provide educational and faith formation programming to children, youth, and adults in a variety of outdoor environments. Camp counselors are employees of the camp whose job is to lead programming and create a safe and fun environment for learning. Camp counselors lead a wide variety of activities, including games, arts and crafts, nature activities, Bible study, devotions, worship, hiking, swimming, music, and more. Typically, camp counselors are responsible for supervising a group of children/youth, and this often includes staying with them overnight in cabin groups. Normally, counselors work with a group of participants for one week at a time. Camp counselors sometimes have opportunities to visit nearby ELCA congregations to lead day camp or vacation Bible school activities.

The camp counselor schedule can be very intense and demanding, but also very rewarding. This job can be very physically and mentally challenging at times, but it also provides transformative learning and leadership experiences rooted in communities of faith and cross-cultural exchange. Being a camp counselor is a job that requires a high level of responsibility and provides excellent leadership development opportunities. The role can be a great match for those who have interest in youth/young adult ministry, teaching, diaconal ministry, pastoral ministry and more.

The required characteristics we look for in a successful applicant to this program include:

- Youth or young adult between the ages of 18 and 30
- Available to travel to the United States from mid-May to mid-August 2026 (U.S. summer months)
- Experienced as a youth worker, student or teacher, or specially skilled at working with children and youth
- Interested in working with children and youth in an outdoor ministry setting
- Highly responsible, dependable, and trustworthy—especially in settings with children and youth
- Flexible, resilient, and open to new experiences
- Proficient in reading, writing, and speaking the English language
- Vetted, interviewed, and endorsed by your church
- Excited about growing the relationship between the ELCA and your church
- Able and willing to work in an outdoor environment that may be rural and/or far from city areas. Camp counselors spend most of their days working in outdoor environments. Indoor lodging is provided but is usually in shared quarters with other staff and campers of the same gender identity, and lodging at camp can be quite rustic. Internet and phone access will usually be limited.
- Able and willing to experience the challenges of summer camp work. Counselors will be asked to share their gifts in Bible study, worship, music, recreation, and any specific skills they might bring. They will be asked to share their faith and their culture with those who attend the summer camps. They will spend the majority of their time working with children and youth and must have a track record of responsible engagement with children. They may also be asked to share with the rest of the staff in occasionally doing food service or maintenance work. *Participants should understand that this work is physically, emotionally, and spiritually demanding and that personal time and privacy is very limited.* Most camps give time off only one or two days per week. **Please ensure that your nominees are well-prepared to do ministry with children and youth and are willing to undertake the challenging job of camp counselor.**
- Committed to abiding by all program policies and relevant U.S. visa regulations

The application for this program has **seven components**, which are explained below. Please give a copy of this letter to your applicants so they are aware of these requirements:

1. **Participant application:** This form is to be completed by the individual who is applying to participate. The form is online and can be completed on a computer or mobile device. *The applicant must fill out this form in English.* Please share this link with your applicant(s): <https://forms.microsoft.com/r/kxnfEeciyx>
2. **Proof of English language proficiency:** The U.S. J-1 Exchange Visitor Program requires us to evaluate the English language proficiency of applicants. Strong proficiency in the English language is important for a positive experience in the camp counselor role. Applicants can show English language proficiency in one of the following ways:

- a. Signed documentation (transcript or other grade report) from an academic institution or English language school that shows that the applicant has taken at least four English language courses (or other subjects taught in English), and received a passing grade or higher in each course
- b. [Duolingo English Test](#) (DET) score of 80 or higher
- c. [Test of English as a Foreign Language](#) (TOEFL) score of 55 or higher (internet-based test)
- d. [International English Language Testing Service](#) (IELTS) band score of 5.0 or higher

The ELCA may pay for the test fee for one Duolingo English Test attempt, with pre-approval. Please email our team if you are unable to pay this fee and need to request support.

- 3. **Copy of passport ID page:** A valid passport will be required to apply for a U.S. visa and travel internationally. The passport must not expire earlier than March 2027. Individuals without a valid passport can apply to this program, but they must obtain a valid passport no later than February 2026.
- 4. **Reference form:** The reference form must be completed by a current or former employer or teacher of the applicant. The fillable PDF form is attached to this email. *The reference may be completed in any language.*
- 5. **Church endorsement form:** The church endorsement form must be completed by an authorized official of your church body. This is normally the bishop, general secretary, council member, or other high-level official. The fillable PDF form is attached to this email. *The endorsement may be completed in any language.*
- 6. **Third party agreement form:** The third party agreement form must be signed by an authorized official of your church body. This form outlines the agreement made by your church by participating in this program. The fillable PDF form is attached to this email.
- 7. **Interview form:** Your church must interview your applicants to the program in person. Please see the interview form for details about the interview requirements. The fillable PDF form is attached to this email. *The interview form may be completed in any language.*

**We recommend that you save all PDF application documents on your device before filling them out.*

Item 1 will be submitted online by the applicant. Items 2-7 should be compiled and returned to us via email to intcampcounselors@elca.org. If at all possible, please return items 2-7 together in one email with the applicant's name in the subject line. **The due date for fully completed applications is December 15, 2025.** *(We have made the due date earlier to help accommodate current delays in U.S. visa application processing.)* We cannot accept late applications due to the timing limitations of U.S. visa application processes. The ELCA will vet all applications carefully and will conduct phone interviews for eligible applicants. While we will do our best to place as many qualified applicants as possible, we may not be able to accept everyone who applies. Successful applicants will be offered a summer job at one specific ELCA summer camp, whose name and information will be provided in the acceptance materials. We work directly with participating summer camps to make these matches between counselors and camps. Those who are offered positions will have the opportunity to accept or decline the offer.

Information about U.S. visa application process: In order to enter the United States and participate in the camp counselor program, applicants will need to apply for and be approved for a *J-1 exchange visitor visa*, which allows presence and employment in the U.S. in alignment with the camp counselor program. Accepted applicants will receive extensive support from the ELCA team in navigating the visa application process. However, the U.S. visa application process is quite complex, and sadly not everyone who applies for a visa is approved by the embassy. The realities of the U.S. visa application process have been changing quickly over the past year, creating a variety of challenges for those seeking U.S. visas. Specifically, our

program has seen a sharp increase in the number of prospective participants whose visa applications are declined. While we do everything we can to increase the chances of an approved visa, the power to grant or deny a visa is solely held by the relevant U.S. embassy. Applicants who meet the eligibility requirements listed on page 2 are more likely to be approved, but unfortunately visa approval rates vary widely by country of origin.

We acknowledge that it can be very frustrating for applicants and their sending churches when they go through the extensive application process but then are not able to obtain the needed visa. For the sake of transparency, we are providing data about visa approval rates among applicants to the ELCA program over the course of recent years, *which is one of the documents attached to this email*. I encourage you to review this visa data so that you can have a clearer understanding of recent visa approval rates for applicants from your country. If your country is not listed, that means we have not worked with accepted participants from your country in the last few years. If you have any questions about this information or about the U.S. visa process generally, you are welcome to contact us at intcampcounselors@elca.org.

Accepted participants will receive the following as part of the program:

- Sponsorship to apply for a U.S. J-1 visa in the camp counselor category (if approved, this visa only allows presence in the U.S. during the summer program plus an optional grace period)
- Airfare to and from the United States (May to August)
- In-person orientation in Chicago in May
- Domestic transportation from Chicago to the summer camp
- In-person staff training at the summer camp
- Lodging and meals throughout the summer
- Basic bedding and towels for use at camp
- Stipend of \$1,600 USD to cover minor living and travel expenses during the program
- U.S. health insurance for the full summer that meets J-1 visa requirements

Please give a copy of this letter and all email attachments to your endorsed applicants.

As you and your applicants navigate the application process, you are welcome to contact our team with any questions you may have. Emails about the application process can be sent to intcampcounselors@elca.org. We continue to wish you all the best in your leading and serving.

Sincerely,



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