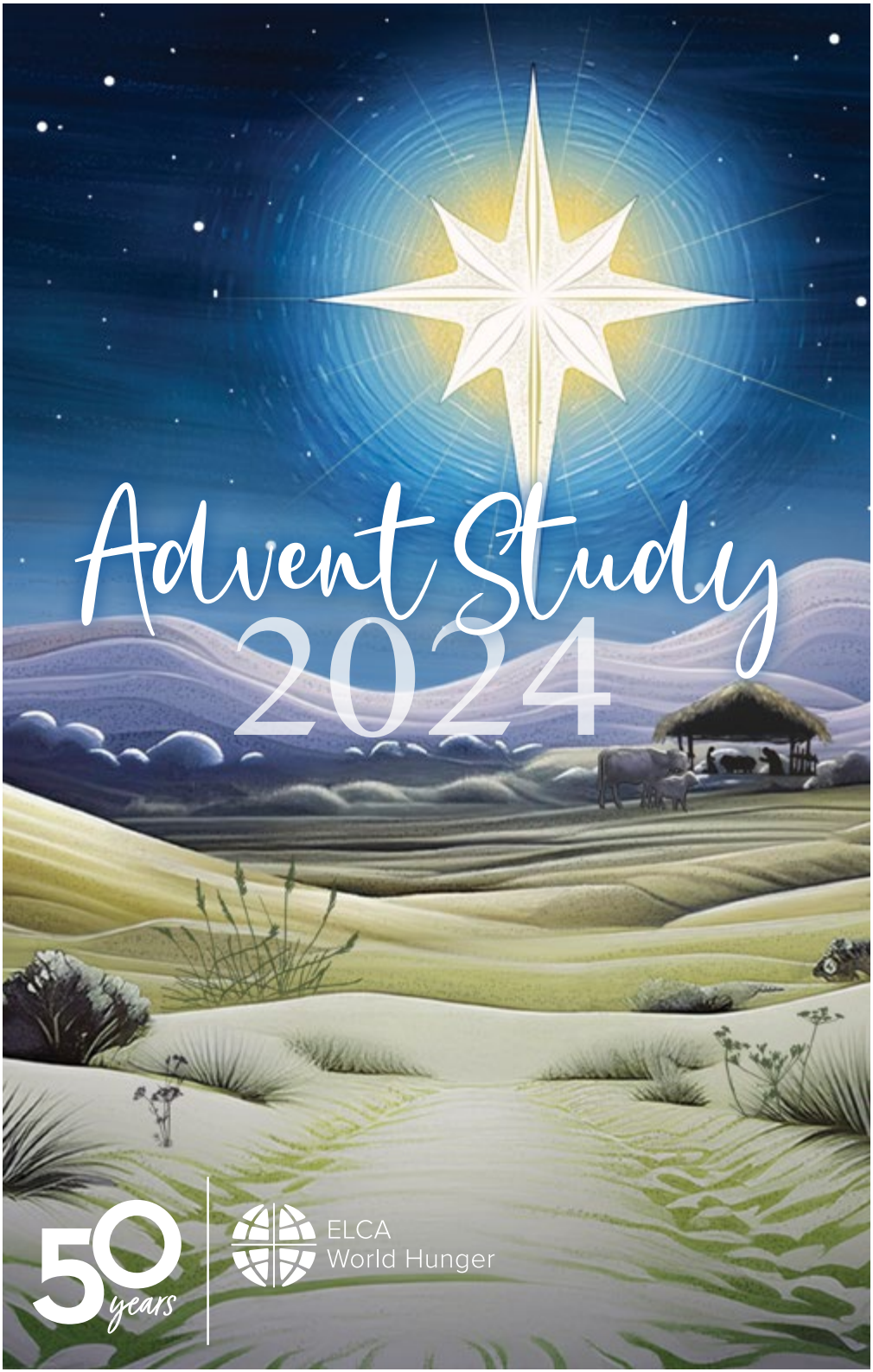

Advent Study
2024
50 years
ELCA
World Hunger

Dear siblings in Christ,

I often feel anxious before opening up to tell neighbors my story. Storytelling is an act of vulnerability, because telling our story — authentically, truly — means sharing something of our being that can be rejected, mocked or hurt, just as much as it could be accepted and loved.

The Advent season is a similar moment: We invite God to share Godself in Christ, awaiting a revelation of God's authentic story in human form.

As we prepare for the openness of God's vulnerability on Christmas Day, this Advent study invites you to hear the vulnerability in your neighbors' stories and open yourself to the challenge of sharing your own story. When you are confronted with another person's vulnerability, we ask that you respond as the crowds following John did: "What, then, should we do?" (Luke 3:10).

This question communicates that we see the vulnerability of our neighbors and are ready to share our vulnerability with them.

In this study you will read passages from the Gospel of Luke alongside stories from ELCA World Hunger partners who have demonstrated what community action can look like when people tell their stories with openness to an unknown, uncertain future.

If you find yourself challenged or inspired by the study, visit **ELCA.org/hunger/resources** to explore the many resources available to support local action in your neighborhood. If you want to get in touch with local hunger teams or ELCA World Hunger partners, please email **hunger@elca.org**. In this ministry of vulnerability, please know that you are not alone.

Advent blessings,

Peter N. McLellan, Ph.D.

Program Director, Hunger Education
Building Resilient Communities

FIRST
Sunday in Advent

Luke 21:25-36

"Roaring of the sea and the waves," people fainting from "fear and foreboding," the "powers of the heavens" shaken in anticipation of the Son of Man's arrival (Luke 21:25-28). No doubt, most North American Christians have experienced and made note of these prophetic images in their own lives, especially over the past 25 years. And for many within this number — perhaps many reading this reflection — our concern for those facing poverty can leave us sensitive to "fear and foreboding" in anticipation of Christ's coming. Anxiety can be productive in our struggles for a just creation where all are fed, but it can also paralyze us in our work and obscure the true causes of hunger. Anxiety does not offer a specific, productive vision for the future. But our neighbors can offer that vision if we choose to hear their stories. Over the course of the Advent season this study will invite you to the sacred act of walking with your community as a first step toward imagining what God's Christmas justice can look like for the most marginalized people in our world.

On this first Sunday in Advent, Luke's Gospel calls us to listen to the stories of nonhuman members of our community: "the fig tree and all the trees" (verse 29). Understanding the root causes of injustice requires us to understand the connections between ourselves and the created world, because the exploitation of nonhuman creatures harms all creation. That is, treating creation as something that exists just for humans to use ignores the necessary relationships between all things, puts them out of our view and hides the ways human pursuit of comfort and convenience can harm creation.

In short, Luke's Gospel calls us to seek knowledge about God's justice from those around us.

This week's passage is a string of prophetic statements, interrupted by a parable. Before the parable, Jesus tells his audience of the earth's "distress" (verse 23), that the anxiety of all people will become unbearable in anticipation of "the Son of Man coming in a cloud" (verse 27). At this point Jesus says, "Your redemption is drawing near" (verse 28). Following the fig tree parable, Jesus returns to his prophetic language with a warning: "Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life and that day does not catch you unexpectedly" (verse 34). Jesus certainly acknowledges a worrisome moment and calls for vigilance. But he delivers this prophecy with an appeal to listen to the created world first, to hear the story of the fig tree, to learn from it. Without attention to creation around us, his prophetic admonition traffics only in worry; hearing creation's story helps us see exactly what's at stake and whose stories must be foregrounded in our work.

Luke calls readers into an embodied practice: before we can learn the lesson of the trees, we must first hear their story. We are called to hear the stories of those who do not speak. Jesus' parable makes clear that trees, nonhuman creatures, have experiences to share. Their knowledge is not just the "book learning" humans often prioritize; this is prophecy about when "heaven and earth will pass away" (verse 33) — cosmic knowledge.

Creation has stories to share. We often lift up spoken and written words, and thus the ability to speak and write, over the knowledge contained within those creatures of root, leaf, fur, molecule, exoskeleton or spore. Doing so means we can treat creation and those who depend on it as something less-than. Fatmata Komba of Sierra Leone has seen her community's struggle to find clean drinking and cooking water impeded by the dumping of construction and human waste into the local Combay stream. For Fatmata and her community, acknowledging their connection — in this case, to the stream — highlights our dependence on water for a full life.

Komba's community determined together the need for and location of a well that would mean safe drinking water for nearly 150 households. In partnership with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Sierra Leone (ELCSL), generosity to ELCA World Hunger made it possible to build a well for Komba's community. The well has allowed the community to focus on life and work, even in the dry season.

In short, as ELCA World Hunger's partnership with the ELCSL demonstrates, pausing to consider "the fig tree and all the trees" means acknowledging human fragility. We depend on creation. In fact, even considering our own lives first can lead us to degrade streams, such as Combay, on which entire ecosystems depend.

REFLECT

Take a walk outside along a normal route — e.g., where you walk your dog, where you walk your child to school, maybe even the path from your front door to your car — and take note of the nonhuman beings you often overlook. Reflect, in writing or in conversation with others, on the wide array of plants and animals that depend on those beings.

Ask people in your life about their most memorable experiences with water. Try finding people from different generations. Are those memories similar or different?

Check out these resources for water-based advocacy, from Lutherans Restoring Creation: lutheransrestoringcreation.org/advocacy/issue-based-advocacy/water/.

SECOND
Sunday in Advent

Luke 3:1-16

Christians commonly read John's prophecy with an eye toward Christmas morning, especially in Advent: "Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight" (Luke 3:4). This makes sense! We read this passage as we deck our Christmas treetops with a star, as we sing hymns about the birth of Jesus in a manger, lighting Advent candles in anticipation of the final Christ candle. But John's quotation of the prophet Isaiah makes one thing very clear: we know none of this without first hearing from "**a voice of one crying out** in the wilderness" (verse 4). That is, to even know of Christ's coming at Christmas, of his radical justice that levels mountains and fills valleys, means hearing the stories of those in "the wilderness." In fact those with knowledge of this justice are the ones crying out. What does it look like to center our Advent devotional reflections?

Listening to voices that cry out in familiar places — like this passage! — can be meaningful to folks fighting hunger, in at least two ways: (1) such voices offer concrete reminders of people whose own stories bear news of Christ's coming, and (2) they show that the "wilderness" can be in our own neighborhoods. The challenge, in either case, is

identifying the witness to Christ's radical, gospel justice and opening ourselves to the wildernesses in our midst.

West Oakland, a neighborhood in Oakland, Calif., is one such contemporary wilderness. Its story will be familiar to Black folks living in urban spaces: during the 1960s and '70s this historically Black community was bisected by an interstate highway even as real estate redlining depressed home values. Then West Oakland began to gentrify. Between 2012 and 2022 home prices rose 300%, which drove up rents and made the cost of living unsustainable for longtime residents.

When the only local grocery store closed, West Oakland became a *food desert*, a literal wilderness because of the systemic injustice built into housing markets. "Food desert" is a term that accounts for communities in the United States with both low-income households and no supermarket.[1]

So the community cried out; it organized. With a Domestic Hunger Grant made possible by donor support of ELCA World Hunger, the Rev. Todd Benson, pastor of Bethlehem Lutheran Church, and organizing partners hired canvassers to knock on two thousand doors and survey 276 residents about issues affecting their community. Housing was a top concern, driving Bethlehem and its partners to host tenants' rights workshops. The church is now creating a rental database of property owners in West Oakland and organizing people who live in public housing near the church.

The voices of those organizing in West Oakland are crying from the wilderness and beginning a change-making process. They are also calling attention to the fact that wildernesses exist in gentrifying communities across the United States. In fact, according to the Harvard Joint Center for Housing Studies , U.S. rents rose 27%

[1] The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) defines a food desert as a place where: "1. poverty rate is greater than or equal to 20 percent OR median family income does not exceed 80 percent statewide (rural/urban) or metro-area (urban) median family income; 2. at least 500 people or 33 percent of the population located more than 1 mile (urban) or 10 miles (rural) from the nearest supermarket or large grocery store" (Paul Dutko, Michele Ver Ploeg and Tracey Farrigan, "Characteristics and Influential Factors of Food Deserts," *Economic Research Report* 140 [2012], 6).

between 2001 and 2022, whereas incomes have increased only 2%.[2] Injustice, baked into the cost of living, has created mountains and valleys to be leveled across the U.S.

In short, Luke's Gospel challenges us to do the work of truly hearing the stories of those in our communities who cry out, to identify the wildernesses. What does this listening look like? Often listening can be as simple as conversing with a neighbor about your community or attending a city council meeting. Maybe your congregation has a feeding ministry or food hub where you can build deeper relationships with community members. Or maybe you are the voice, with a knowledge of injustice and a desire to organize. As Lutherans, we start with stories and listening and then always move to action, leveling mountains and raising valleys alongside our neighbors.

[2] *2024 America's Rental Housing,* Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University, *www.jchs.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/reports/files/Harvard_JCHS_Americas_Rental_Housing_2024.pdf.*

REFLECT

Take time to reflect on a moment when someone in your town, neighborhood or congregation shared something challenging about life in your community — even if it seems small. What was it?

What barriers discourage you and your congregation from knocking on doors in your community and asking people what they need most? What must happen for you to overcome those barriers?

Imagine your neighbors' testimony about the challenges of living in your community as "voices crying out in the wilderness." Does this make it easier or more difficult for you to advocate for them? Why?

THIRD
Sunday in Advent

Luke 3:7-18

In the first two weeks of Advent we've explored some ways to think about stories *within* Bible stories, to see our communities' stories as integral to the sacred hope of Advent. We are also part of these communities, with gifts and stories to share! Indeed, John's wilderness audience seems to have the same response to his prophecies, asking three times, "What should we do?" (verses 10, 12, 14).

What should we do? When faced with neighbors' stories that call for justice, what should we do? John's response is always specific and assumes that people are empowered to do good. Those with resources must make sure that no one else goes without; tax collectors have a duty to maintain the trust of the public; soldiers should never use force to harm their neighbors (verses 11, 13-14). Baptism comes with strings attached, binding the baptized to share their specific gifts as beloved children of God in service of God's creation. Most importantly, these gifts and responsibilities are already within us.

Asking "What should we do?" requires us to tell **our own story** in a way that celebrates **our own gifts**, because we are called to share those gifts with our communities. How can we share our gifts

with others if we can't tell the story of those gifts? Similarly, when systemic injustices prevent other children of God from sharing their gifts with their communities, we are called to change the system. Indeed, as John intimates in his prophecy, those trees that do not "bear good fruit" impede God's intention for creation to live fully (verses 8-9, 17).

LuMin, the Lutheran campus ministry of Colorado State University (CSU) in Fort Collins, Colo., has recognized the diverse gifts of its student body and listened to students who have said that lack of housing is a significant barrier to their completing a degree. LuMin's Student Housing Security Initiative offers reduced and subsidized rent to students facing housing insecurity, especially those without access to generational wealth. Thanks in part to generous ELCA World Hunger donors and through a partnership with CSU, LuMin acquired fully furnished apartments along a transportation route and near the university.

Though housing was a clear need expressed by the students LuMin served, their stories revealed something deeper: they needed more space for listening, storytelling and community. Being a student is hard. These young folks simply wanted an opportunity to be together in intentional community, to share meals and life together. They were living in the stressful, demanding world of college; they needed a space to celebrate and share their gifts.

For students within these LuMin apartments, the question "What should we do?" was a matter of taking time to appreciate one another's gifts and of living in intentional community together. Now, once a week, these students gather for a meal they prepare and share. Breaking bread together has led to real change in their lives: LuMin students report that they are able to focus on their coursework and extracurriculars, work toward graduation and find a sense of belonging.

Sharing our own stories may feel self-absorbed at first. But story-sharing is a vulnerable act that can signal to our neighbors that we value them enough to open up to them, to share worries and hopes and to prepare one another for our ministry in a chaotic world. Telling our own stories is the key to doing justice, to answering our own question, "What should we do?"

REFLECT

Write your story, using the following prompts:

When did you first become aware of injustice in the world? What was the injustice, why did you care, and how did you respond?

How have you responded to injustice since then?

What personal skills have you deployed in addressing a perceived injustice? Where did you acquire those gifts?

FOURTH
Sunday in Advent

Luke 1:46-55

Mary's story, as she tells it, contains generations:

- "Surely from now on all generations will call me blessed" (Luke 1:48).
- "His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation" (verse 50).
- "... according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever" (verse 55).

God's faithfulness lives on across time and place, appearing in acts of justice. God has ...

- Shown mercy (verse 50).
- "Scattered the proud" (verse 51).
- "Brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly" (verse 52).
- "Filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty" (verse 53).

Where God shows up, justice follows.

As we know all too well, if God's justice reigns throughout the generations, it only follows that injustice has been there too. Those of us who have been energized by ELCA World Hunger's mission to end the root causes of hunger are familiar with the frustration, even despair, when we realize that systemic causes of poverty are so entrenched. We see how new movements toward change are snuffed out by familiar power plays, how money speaks louder than compassion, how dictators and warlords seize power in places where sustainable development might be taking root. Indeed, Mary's song, often called the Magnificat, calls to mind some familiar stories when it implores God to bring the "powerful from their thrones" and (one can almost hear her say, "*for once*") to "[lift] up the lowly" (verse 52).

The historical pattern of powerful people finding new ways to crush the marginalized is not new. Biblical scholar and theologian Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza calls this phenomenon *kyriarchy* (in Greek, the rule of a lord): systems of oppression that have existed throughout time but look different at different historical moments.[3] In the ancient Mediterranean world, property-owning males were the tip of the kyriarchal pyramid. Throughout time, ownership of land and slaves have been the mark of social dominance. Today, Schüssler Fiorenza writes, generations of oppression are maintained through "class, race, gender, ethnicity, empire, and other structures of discrimination."

Though hunger is a generational problem, ELCA World Hunger's 50-year ministry is an intergenerational response of God's justice alongside and through marginalized communities. To that end we work to cure the root causes of injustice as illuminated by those who, like Mary, tell their stories out of generations of oppression. The faces of the oppressors change, but Mary's song calls for the sort of work that always topples the "powerful from their thrones," no matter what those thrones look like.

As ELCA World Hunger tells its 50-year story of global partnerships, Educación Popular en Salud (EPES) in Chile, one of the earliest

[3] Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "Introduction: Exploring the Intersections of Race, Gender, Status, and Ethnicity in Early Christian Studies," in *Prejudice and Christian Beginnings: Investigating Race, Gender, and Ethnicity in Early Christian Studies*, ed. Laura Nasrallah and Schüssler Fiorenza (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 9.

organizations the ELCA was able to partner with thanks to the generosity of donors, stands as an example of what a persistent, faithful gospel response to kyriarchal domination looks like. A program of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Chile, EPES began its work in 1982, organizing and mobilizing Chileans under the military dictatorship. As the social fabric of health and education services deteriorated, EPES rallied communities, led mainly by women, to provide services that would lead to systemic social change. EPES leaders advocated for human rights for people living with HIV/AIDS, women experiencing violence, and migrants. They taught healthy eating and environmental conservation. This ministry continues to build the leadership capacity of Chilean communities to make lasting, systemic change, to make good on Mary's Magnificat call.

Even today EPES combats the legacy of kyriarchy in Chilean communities, through courses discouraging violence against women. In much the same way that our Advent texts this season champion the telling and hearing of stories, these courses center the stories of women who have experienced domestic violence. Patricia, one of the participants, found the historical connections of violence against women so powerful that she gathered 12 more women in her own workplace into a group that "can discuss and grow together." Moreover, she says, "I ... discussed it with my family, with my children, my granddaughter." Through her experience in an intentional storytelling space, Patricia decided to confront generational injustice with intergenerational justice. Mary's justice. God's justice.

Stories cut across generations. They show us how we belong and have an obligation to one another. They show us places where kyriarchy reigns, the same as ever, and where God breaks in, demanding that things be different. We are the key: when we hear Mary's story, when we hear Patricia's story, when we hear the stories of our neighbors, we begin to see new avenues for God's Magnificat justice to take hold. Most challenging, perhaps, gospel justice enters into our communities when we make ourselves vulnerable enough to tell our stories, revealing where we have been hurt and where we have hurt others.

These are the places where the thrones of the powerful crumble.

REFLECT

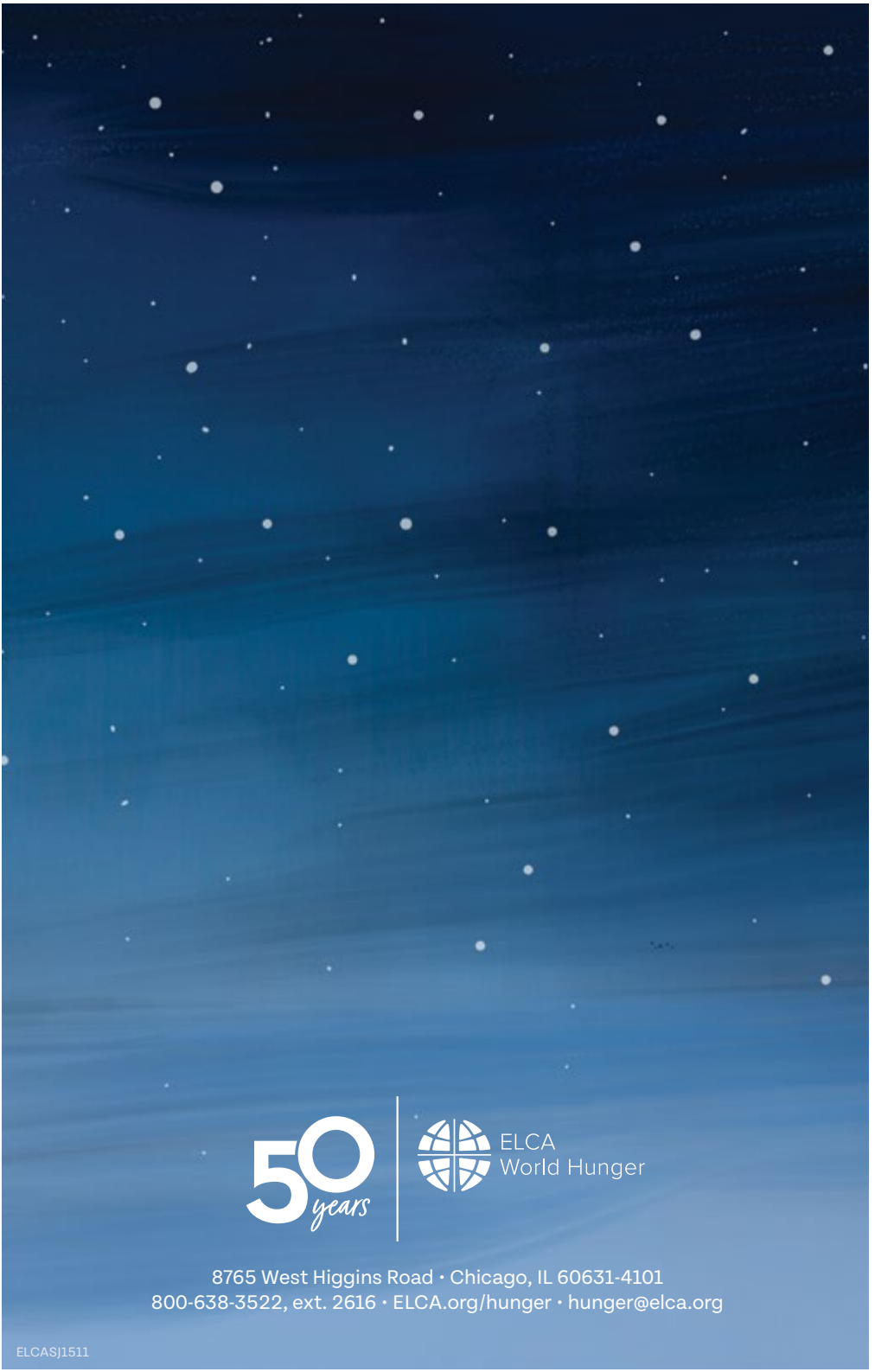
Write more of your own story:

What people from generations past do you consider to be your ancestors? Are they family members?

In one or two sentences describe what you admire most about your ancestors.

Which ancestors from generations past inspire you to work on behalf of others?

NOTES



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