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STORIES OF CHRIST'S
ABOUNDING LOVE AND GRACE

Summer 2025
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Boundless

Albin Hillert/LWF

For the last 25 years, the Young Adults in Global Mission program has enabled participants such as Sophie Warnberg (2022-'23) to go on life-changing journeys of global fellowship and service. Read more on p. 10



Evangelical
Lutheran Church
in America

"I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you" (Jeremiah 31:3).

Dear friends in Christ,

As Christians and as Lutherans, we are used to endings that lead to new beginnings. We live our whole lives as resurrection people. As we watch one season end — in our lives, our communities or our world — we have the joy of watching a new one begin. We know that all things are made new through Christ.

As I enter my final weeks of service as presiding bishop of the ELCA, I approach the end of one season in my life and ministry. But there will be beginnings after that, for me and for our church. Even though I am moving out of my current role, I know that our work together as a community of faith will continue, and continue to be made new. That's a future I look toward with hope — because I have witnessed your faith and your generosity and seen the incredible things we have accomplished together as church. I know that God's amazing grace will keep transforming the world through you.

This issue of "Boundless" contains just a few examples of ways you share new life and new hope around the world. In Radford, Va., you helped a closing congregation to build a new ministry, welcoming people in their community who yearn for a safe and healing space. In Bangladesh, you are turning destructive floodwaters into a life-giving force for farmers. In North Dakota, you are powering a grassroots movement that lifts up lay leaders within rural communities.

Over the last 25 years, you have sent more than a thousand young adults on life-changing journeys of global fellowship through Young Adults in Global Mission (YAGM). And now, your generosity is making it possible for YAGM to reopen previous country programs and explore new ones. Because of you, more young adults are finding their way into the world.

You have made an incredible impact on our church and our planet. Thank you. I am honored to have journeyed with you this far, and I look forward to watching this work unfold in new ways. God's love — and your capacity to share that love with your neighbors — has no end. It is truly boundless.

With abundant gratitude,



Elizabeth L. Eaton

THE REV. ELIZABETH EATON
Presiding Bishop
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

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A New Way of Welcome



"The ELCA's investment in our mission project in a small city in Appalachia sends the message that we are, indeed, seen."

—The Rev. Libby Pfaff

The Rev. Libby Pfaff didn't have to think for very long about what to call the new ministry she was developing with support from donors such as you. The name "Nineveh" came to her quickly. In the Bible, the people of Nineveh are looked down upon by their neighbors. Pastor Libby imagined that they felt expendable and invisible. The same was true of the community she wanted to minister to in her Appalachian city of Radford, Va. Like the people of Nineveh, the people on Radford's margins are part of God's good creation. Pastor Libby asks, "Why should God not care about them?"

Pastor Libby first arrived at the church building that would eventually house Nineveh Lutheran Justice Ministry in 2021. Back then, it was known as Christ Lutheran Church, and Pastor Libby was called to serve as the congregation's pastor. However, the congregation had been reduced to just a handful of members. Attendance and involvement had oscillated for years and then plummeted in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. The church had a large endowment that could have kept its doors open for several more years. But the members agreed that they didn't want to use up their remaining resources that way, especially when they saw so much need in the community around them.

After struggling through many difficult conversations and listening to the Spirit, the members of Christ Lutheran Church decided to close the church. But in that ending, there was also a beginning. The congregation voted to reallocate the building and the church's remaining assets to start a new ministry that would serve their neighbors in a meaningful way. They also decided to reinstall Pastor Libby as the mission developer who would guide this new ministry into existence.

Pastor Libby met with city leaders, officials, teachers and business owners, asking: Who is falling through the cracks of the community? How could a ministry respond? Through those

conversations, Pastor Libby learned about resources missing from the community and groups of people who felt forgotten.

One of the poorest cities in Virginia, Radford is home to a growing unhoused community. The opioid crisis has hit the city hard; substance use disorder is rampant, and recovery aid is limited. Because there were no programs that visibly affirmed LGBTQIA+ youth in the area, those youth slipped further out to the margins, where they were at greater risk of isolation and addiction.

In response, Pastor Libby joined other faith leaders, from the ELCA and other protestant denominations in the area, to begin a justice-oriented ministry. Drawing on the resources of Christ Lutheran and additional support from donors such as you, Nineveh Lutheran Justice Ministry was born. It is a new, unconventional church that serves as a safe haven and place of healing for the people of Radford, especially

those dealing with homelessness, substance use disorder, mental illness, religious trauma, and harassment due to their LGBTQIA+ identity.

As with any new ministry, some experiments failed and relationships had to be built from the ground up, but Pastor Libby knew it would be worth the struggle. "Every nonsuccess was a learning experience. Slowly but surely, we are building a foundation of trust with the marginalized people of this city."

Through your gifts to ELCA Where Needed Most, you show your neighbors — in Virginia and beyond — that they are neither invisible nor expendable. "The ELCA's investment in our mission project in a small city in Appalachia sends the message that we are, indeed, seen," Pastor Libby says. "For that, I and my leadership, and all who have benefited from Nineveh's kindling of relationships, are deeply grateful."



Your gifts to ELCA Where Needed Most provide new-start communities across the church with the resources they need to thrive. Your support enables Nineveh Lutheran Justice Ministry in Radford, Va. — and hundreds of other ministries across the wider church — to grow, experiment and explore fresh models for being church together.

Hope that rises with the Floodwaters



Farmers in Bangladesh are growing flood-resilient crops with your support.



Kids in a flood-prone area participate in swim training.



Farmers in rural Bangladesh were losing their crops and their livelihoods to flooding every year, until your gifts to Lutheran Disaster Response enabled them to build floating seedbeds. You helped buoy their income and their hope for the future.

Before your generosity reached Abdur Razzak, his hard work as a farmer in a rural community of Bangladesh was washed away over and over again. From 2018 to 2022, floods caused extensive damage to homes and destroyed croplands. Every year, Abdur would plant a bed of rice to provide income and food for his family — and every year, his crop would be ruined.

Then Abdur connected with the Rangpur Dinajpur Rural Service (RDRS) Bangladesh, whose flood resilience project is supported by your gifts to Lutheran Disaster Response. Project leaders work with rural communities to repair flood damage and rebuild in ways that will make them more resilient when the waters rise again. Across 20 communities and three countries, the program has provided supplies and training to help farmers grow flood-resilient crops, to teach flood safety in schools, to set up community flood preparedness centers, and more.

Through the project, Abdur received supplies to build a floating bamboo seedbed in a pond near his home and mastered the skills he needed to tend it. Now, when waters rise during small floods, Abdur's crop rises with it. His rice plants are lush and thriving this year.

Through your gifts to Lutheran Disaster Response, you walk alongside our neighbors who have been affected by disasters around the world. You stay with them in the immediate aftermath

of events that shake their lives and during the long months and years it takes them to rebuild.

Responding directly to disaster is only one part of our church's mission to care for our neighbors. Your gifts to other ELCA ministries pick up where Lutheran Disaster Response leaves off, helping communities find long-term solutions to other challenges. RDRS Bangladesh also received support from ELCA World Hunger to provide health and vision care to families experiencing poverty, especially women and children. Your gifts are going to work in Bangladesh in many different ways, building stronger futures for all.

The impact of Abdur's seedbed is expanding. Other farmers noticed his new growing method and were inspired to try it themselves the following year. Your support is enabling them to build more floating seedbeds and try other flood-resilient growing techniques such as hydroponic farming (growing crops in nutrient solutions), sack farming (growing them in polypropylene bags) and plinth farming (growing them on raised platforms). With your help, the entire community is planting a stronger future together.

For the first time in many years, Abdur is looking toward the next growing season with not fear but hope. Your generosity helped the ELCA to share that hope with him and many others who have been affected by disaster. Until the clouds break, you will be with them.

Your Gifts in Action:

2024 IN REVIEW

Thank you!

Through the International Leaders Program (ILP), your gifts help provide scholarships for emerging leaders from our partner churches around the world. A yearly gathering gives ILP scholars studying in the United States the chance to learn, worship and connect.

Gabriel WoundedHead

The International Leaders Program provided scholarships for **164 students** from **41 global companion churches** to study at **15 colleges and universities**.

Gather communities connected **700 young adults** through **25 ELCA small groups** across the ELCA, and **400 young adults** attended the first-ever Young Adult Gathering.

Last year, ELCA World Hunger was at work in **62 countries** and **56 ELCA synods**.

Your gifts to ELCA World Hunger are making space for differently abled people, especially members of the deaf community, at La Vid Verdadera Colombia. Program participants learn to mend discarded items, which they can then reuse or sell to increase their income.



Daudi Msseemmaa, ELCA regional representative for East Africa, welcomes a delegation from the Lutheran Church of Rwanda to the ELCA office in Arusha, Tanzania. Through your gifts to ELCA missionaries, you support him and other ELCA representatives rooted in communities around the world.

101 long-term missionaries were at work in **35 countries** around the world, and **24 YAGM volunteers** served in six country programs.

ELCA New Ministry Development and Evangelism grants empowered **340 rural and urban ministries** to explore new, innovative ways of serving their communities, and **25 new-start congregations and ministries** began serving their communities.

The Rev. Hieraal Osorto leads the Spanish-speaking congregation of St. Paul's-San Pablo in Minneapolis, Minn. Your gifts to ELCA Where Needed Most support him and other leaders serving unique, vibrant communities across the ELCA.



Bruce Silcox

Lutheran Disaster Response was at work in **53 countries** around the world and **36 states and territories** in the United States and the Caribbean, responding to hurricanes, tornadoes, conflict and migration.

In Puerto Rico, your gifts to Lutheran Disaster Response are helping people rebuild their homes and lives after devastating storms.



Techos Pa' Mi Gente

Trusting the Momentum of the Spirit



YAGM Cambodia participants

When Carolina Bowen applied to the Young Adults in Global Mission (YAGM) program, she was ready for an international journey. During a spring break from college, she had traveled to the Holy Land and met YAGM participants and alums who inspired her to apply for the program. Through YAGM, Carolina says, she wanted to pursue the kind of deep learning and service “that could only come from an extended amount

of time in a different country.” Still, the prospect of serving in Cambodia intimidated her.

YAGM’s Cambodia program – one of six country programs around the world – has a long history, rooted in deep relationships with partners in the region. The COVID-19 pandemic shut down the program for four years, but thanks to donors such as you, YAGM participants returned to the region in 2024 – and Carolina is one of them.

She still remembers the YAGM discernment and placement event where she learned of her assignment. “I felt like I was about to go over the first drop of a roller coaster,” she says. But she trusted in the momentum of the Spirit and the testimony of the YAGM alums at the event who had served in Cambodia. A short time later, she was on her way to Phnom Penh.

Carolina lives in a dorm for high school and university students that is a ministry of the Lutheran Church in Cambodia. She teaches piano lessons to staff and English enrichment classes for students aged 8 to 13. She also joins Cambodian students in her dorm for meetings, classes and Bible study. When she isn’t working, Carolina enjoys cooking for herself alongside the other residents in the dorms and sometimes plays piano with praise bands at Sunday worship.

Carolina acknowledges the difficulty of immersing herself in a new culture and learning a new language, yet she believes this will make her a



Your gifts to Young Adults in Global Mission (YAGM) support young adults such as Carolina Bowen, who has embarked on a yearlong journey of service, fellowship and spiritual discovery in Cambodia.

better leader when she returns to the United States. Carolina plans to attend Luther Seminary this fall and hopes to become a parish pastor eventually. Her time in YAGM has helped her understand the power of true welcome, which she will carry into her future ministry: “I don’t think you realize how important your cultural understanding is until you have none of it.” When it’s her turn to invite someone into her community, she “will be more willing to be in uncomfortable situations for the sake of my neighbor.”

As Carolina navigates cultural differences, she has shared some powerful experiences with her Cambodian neighbors. One day, she and some of her dormitory mates took a service trip to Kampot, a province bordering the Gulf of Thailand, where they helped paint a new Lutheran church building bright blue, picked up trash along a roadside and delivered a few meals. Carolina also watched her peers lead visits with older members of the church; after introducing themselves, the students surrounded the older members in prayer. She was moved by their courage as they acted on their faith in an unfamiliar setting. The experience reminded her of home visits she had participated in when she interned for a pastor in the United States. This simple act of caring for a neighbor, she explains, is shared by the church all over the world.

You made it possible for Carolina to have this life-changing experience, and she is grateful for your support – both as an individual and as a member of our church’s global fellowship. “In your support, I feel the interconnection of the church,” she says. “In my day-to-day, I bring not just my own love and service but the love and service that has been modeled for me, growing up in Christian faith and community. Thank you for coming along with me this year.” Thank you for helping Carolina – and other YAGM participants like her – to take a leap of faith into the world.

“In my day-to-day, I bring not just my own love and service but the love and service that has been modeled for me, growing up in Christian faith and community. Thank you for coming along with me this year.”

—Carolina Bowen

25 years

of Young Adults in Global Mission

Over the last 25 years, donors such as you have enabled more than a thousand young adults to strengthen our global fellowship through Young Adults in Global Mission (YAGM). YAGM participants provide critical support for our companion ministries and form deep relationships around the world. Reflecting on their own faith and identity, they are transformed even as they transform our community of faith.



"One of the recurring themes of my YAGM year is that many of the things I have been conditioned to see as impossible are really possible and that the world is filled with never-ending layers of beauty and intelligence."

—Justin Sikkema,
Mexico (2023-'24)

"I can say wholeheartedly that doing YAGM is a direct line and link to me doing this work today. Understanding and learning about accompaniment and what it means to walk alongside our brothers and sisters in Christ, it changed my whole brain and faith and who I am as a person and how I do work."

—Mae Helen Jackson,
current YAGM director and YAGM alum, South Africa (2014-'15)

Want to get to know a Young Adult in Global Mission? **Contact us at globalchurch@ELCA.org to learn about supporting a new YAGM.**



"For me, love feels connected to community – my host congregation cares about and for me so much, and my friends love me so deeply, and it's, honestly, hard to put into words in any language (but I can try): *Mi experiencia acá me llena mi corazón muchísima y por eso estoy demasiada agradecida.* My experience here fills my heart so much, and for that, I am so overwhelmingly grateful."

—Brooke Nelson,
Argentina (2024-'25)

"That's the spirit of accompaniment, that we are seeking to do life together and, through simply doing life together, being present with one another, sharing meals, all the things that Jesus lifted up as the important aspects of his ministry. Through all these things, we are the church better together, and we are able to more fully share God's love with all those around us."

—Rev. Bekah Boatwright,
Central Europe (2016-'17)



New videos! Scan or visit ELCA.org/YAGM25 to hear more reflections from YAGM alums.



A Rural Revival



In rural North Dakota, your gifts to ELCA Where Needed Most enabled 12 laypeople to become the leaders their community needs.

A few years ago, members of Nazareth Lutheran Church in rural Cogswell, N.D., faced a leadership crisis. After leaving a parish agreement with another church, they found themselves without a pastor. Council President Steve Ringdahl remembers the many ways they tried to figure out a way forward. They formed a discernment committee and bought a big, revolving whiteboard that they filled with ideas in the form of pictures, diagrams and scribbled notes. They got in touch with the synod office and attended meetings with other rural congregations that were struggling to fill their leadership vacuums.

They had no luck finding an ordained minister who would come to Cogswell, a town with fewer than 200 residents and no paved roads. So they turned their focus inward and began to rethink what a minister could look like.

As Nazareth members worked with staff from their geographical conference and the synod, they learned about different kinds of lay leadership such as synod-authorized ministers (SAMs). SAMs are trained to preach and administer sacraments such as Holy Communion to their communities

when an ordained minister isn't available. SAM training sounded interesting to some, but the classes took place hours away, in Alexandria, Minn. Many community members, including Steve, are full-time farmers or ranchers and can't be away for that long. They wondered if the training could come to them.

With your support, that's exactly what happened. Community members worked with Deacon Erin Power, director for evangelical mission in the Eastern North Dakota Synod, to apply for a synod vitality grant, supported by your gifts to ELCA Where Needed Most. The grant allowed SAM instructors to travel to North Dakota at no cost to the students. Pastor Julie Johnson, who leads a three-point parish near Nazareth, organized the program. The classes were open to all, and 27 people attended the first session. Twelve people, including Steve, stepped forward to complete the full SAM training.

Brenda Schreiner, a member of Pastor Julie's parish, attended the class on visitation outside of a traditional church setting because she wanted to learn new ways to use her nursing skills. After that, she just kept coming. While training as an SAM, Brenda embraced Pastor Julie's vision for

the parish: no one has to carry the burden of leadership alone, and the whole community helps sustain the church's ministry.

Together the SAM students learned about theology, Scripture, spiritual practices and preaching. The preaching class, which they took from Luther Seminary online, was especially eye-opening for Brenda. As she learned how to choose Scripture and build a sermon, she thought, "Oh, my gosh. We can really do this."

The 12 SAMs were commissioned in their home congregations in June but want to keep learning together. They plan to take a few more classes and to check in with each other regularly.

These days, Steve likes to say that Nazareth is "pastor-poor but mission-rich." Its revolving whiteboard is now filled with the names of people who will supply the pulpit throughout the year. Without a regular pastor, they invite different preachers every week, including SAM students, representatives from local organizations and some visiting pastors. New energy flows through the congregation and into the surrounding community. In Brenda's parish, SAMs are supporting Pastor Julie by preaching at one of three services every week.

Your gifts will continue to multiply through these 12 new lay ministers. The original cohort wants to form a SAM "strike team" that can travel around the area, providing respite for pastors who need it. They want to keep offering classes and fostering more leaders, showing similar communities how they can train SAMs locally too. "We really believe this is the future," says Brenda. "These classes and the work that we're starting to do have been truly life-changing." This grassroots movement — powered by your generosity — has revived a community of faith.

"These classes and the work that we're starting to do have been truly life-changing."

—Brenda Schreiner



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Summer 2025

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
8765 West Higgins Road
Chicago, IL 60631-4101
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