

# STORIES OF FAITH

IN ACTION  
2019 • 2020

## YOUR MISSION SUPPORT GIFTS AT WORK

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Item #: ELCAMA1392



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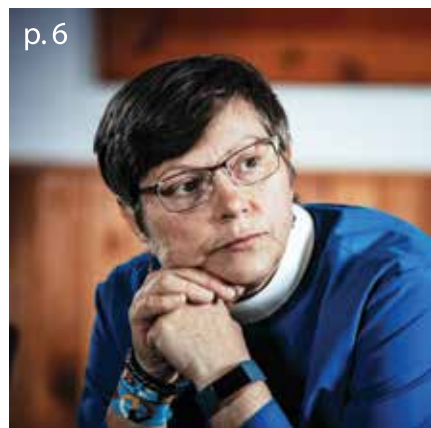
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YOUR MISSION SUPPORT GIFTS AT WORK

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## A message from ELCA Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton

### Share a story, pass the faith

*“And the Word became flesh and lived among us”  
(John 1:14).*

How do we communicate our faith? In this increasingly secular culture, we often struggle for the right words to share what it means to be Lutheran.

When we turn to the Bible for answers, we encounter ancient stories of drama and miracles. Some seem dated or outlandish; others sound impeccably familiar. We dive deeper into God’s word and are reminded that Jesus himself was a masterful storyteller. He told parable upon parable — of a lost sheep, a lost coin and even a lost (prodigal) son — to illustrate God’s relentless love for us.

Yet there is no greater story than Jesus’ own crucifixion and resurrection, the foundation of our faith. It is the story that inspires Lutheran ministry across the country and around the world.

In this edition of Stories of Faith in Action, you’ll meet ELCA leaders, congregations and global companions addressing today’s challenges with

gospel hope. Whether they’re breaking bread with our Muslim neighbors (p. 13), building international relationships (p. 16) or cultivating hospitality in their congregation (p. 10), their faith shines brightly.

You make these stories possible through your congregation’s gifts of Mission Support. Mission Support is the portion of your offering your congregation elects to send to your synod and the portion of your synod’s income your synod chooses to send to the ELCA churchwide organization (turn the page to learn more). Through our pooled resources, we can do more as a church together than we could do alone.

I’m grateful for your witness to the gospel through your generous giving. And I pray in the year ahead that you’ll continue to give generously of your time, treasures and talents as you seek to pass the faith.

Maybe what we need to make Jesus known aren’t the “perfect” words. Instead, when we’re called to share our beliefs, let us fix our eyes on God’s “Word became flesh.” Freed by the love of God in Jesus, let us boldly proclaim our faith stories to all who wish to listen.

Grace and peace,



# How your offering becomes Mission Support

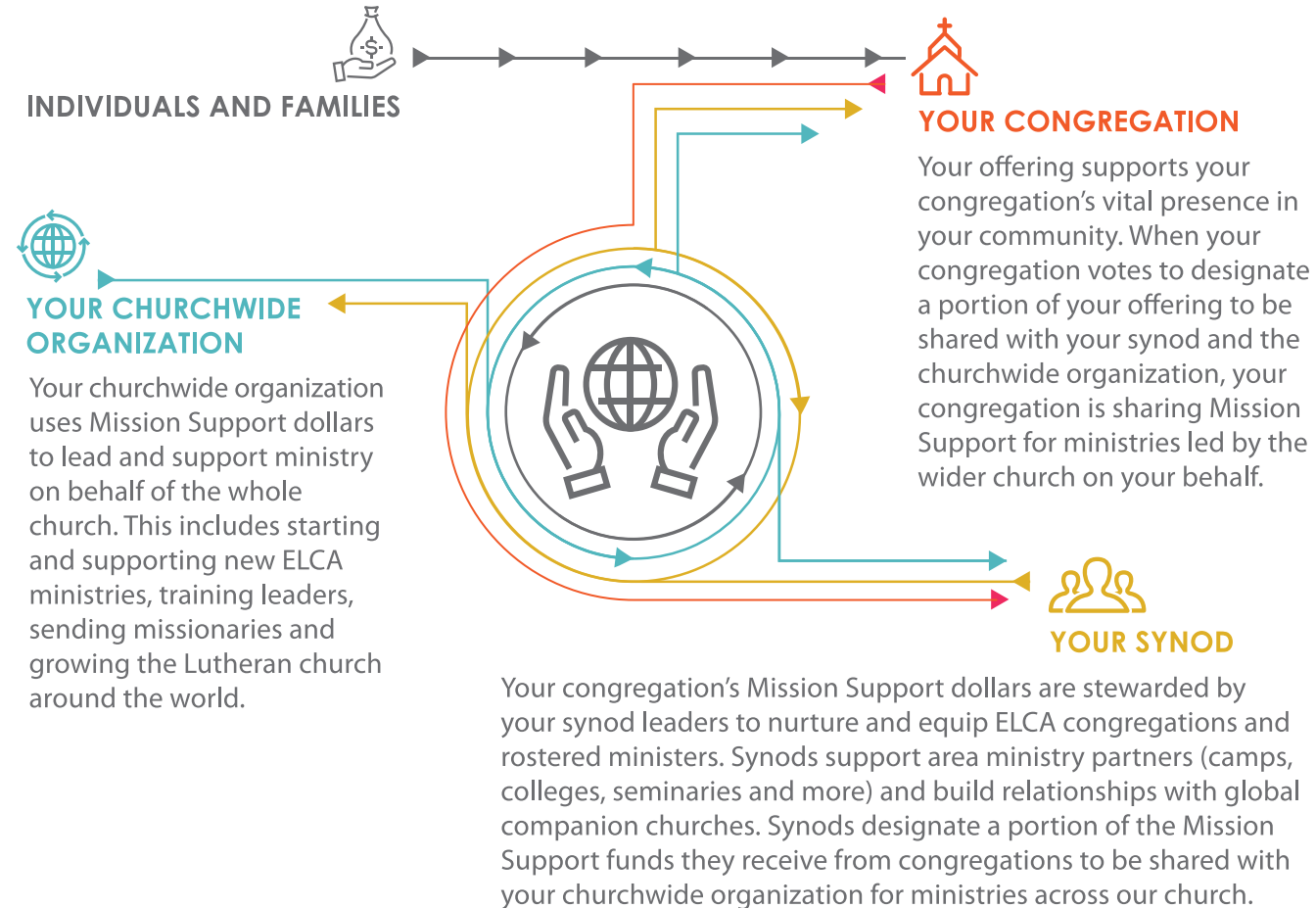
As Lutherans, we believe that Christ has freed us from sin and death, and even from ourselves, so we can love and serve our neighbors. One way we put our faith in action is by making a financial gift — an offering — to our congregation.

Each year, ELCA congregations pledge to send a portion of the offerings they receive to fund ELCA ministries in their synods and beyond. In the ELCA, we call these funds Mission Support.

Mission Support enables the ELCA's 65 synods and more than 9,100 congregations to pool resources to love and serve our neighbors in ways no individual or congregation can do alone. Mission Support is one way we are church together — it's essential to who we are as the ELCA.

Through Mission Support, we participate in God's life-changing work in our communities and around the world.

# How Mission Support funds ministry across our church



# 2018 financial picture

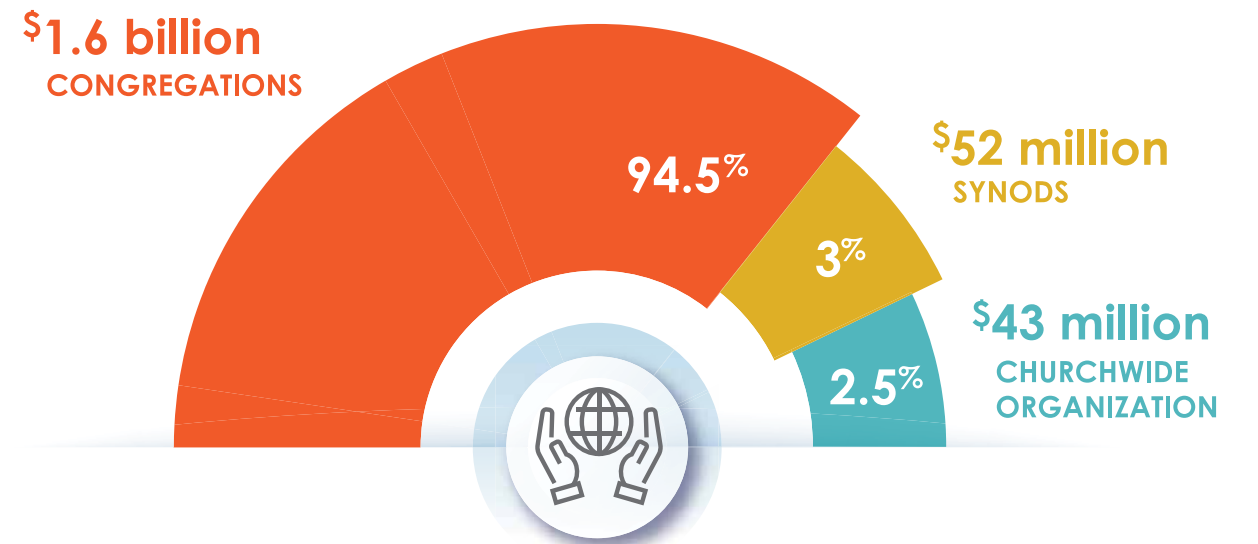
In 2018, ELCA members gave \$1.7 billion in unrestricted offerings\* to support God's mission and ministry through the three expressions of the ELCA. Thank you for your generosity!

**94.5% — CONGREGATIONS**  
\$1.6 billion was stewarded by the ELCA's 9,100-plus congregations

**3% — SYNODS**  
\$52 million was stewarded by the ELCA's 65 synods

**2.5% — CHURCHWIDE ORGANIZATION**  
\$43 million was stewarded by the ELCA churchwide organization

\*Unrestricted offerings do not include special offerings (e.g., congregational capital improvements or gifts to ministries such as Lutheran Disaster Response).



Read on for stories of faith in action — made possible by Mission Support!





## “A life-changing experience”



Kay Ressel, an ELCA pastor and director of Lutheran Lakota Shared Ministries, stresses that a pillar of her work in Jesus’ name is to challenge people’s beliefs about Native Americans and to “hold people accountable for how they engage in ministry.”

“My job is to push you out of your comfort zone so you come to a different way of knowing the Lakota people,” said Ressel, who is not Native American.

in numerous roles. Staffers work with visitors who have come to the reservation to lend a hand and, more importantly, to gain a new perspective. This cultural-immersion ministry receives a variety of groups annually.

Tammy Jacobi did a 10-day immersion in January 2018 as part of her studies at Wartburg Theological Seminary. The experience brought her face-to-face with her own privilege, which she found humbling.

“Given what we take for granted as daughters, mothers, wives living in western Christianity, the immersion was eye-opening,” Jacobi said. “[It] was a life-changing experience. Everyone had a lesson to teach, a story to tell.”

To find a video story about Lutheran Lakota Shared Ministries, visit [ELCA.org/SOFIA](http://ELCA.org/SOFIA).

*Headquartered on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation and funded in part by Mission Support from the South Dakota Synod and the churchwide organization, Lutheran Lakota Shared Ministries serves a geographic area that, at 3,500 square miles, is larger than Rhode Island and Delaware combined.*

In 2000, Lutheran Lakota Shared Ministries opened a retreat center to house visiting teens who came to do missionary projects on the reservation.

“It was very appropriate in that time, but we knew we could do better,” Ressel said. “Our focus now is on learning and listening to people’s stories, getting to know one another, sharing time together, sharing meals. ... After we develop relationships, we find ways to work together.”

The ministry still offers what Ressel refers to as “threshold ministries,” with household items — diapers, sandwiches, hygiene kits, blankets — passed out the door to those in need.

In addition, there’s the Lutheran/Lakota Job Corps, which employs about a dozen community members



“My job is to push you out of your comfort zone so you come to a different way of knowing the Lakota people,” said Kay Ressel, an ELCA pastor and the director of Lutheran Lakota Shared Ministries.



# Satisfying spiritual hunger

The soothing strains of live music create a relaxed, meditative environment at the Open Space program, hosted by Church of the Apostles, a Seattle-based worshipping community of the ELCA and the Episcopal Church.

The monthly gathering is open to the public and regularly attracts 10 to 40 people. Attendees enter quietly, silencing their phones. They set up yoga mats, pillows or cushions to relax on as they take time to enjoy the present in a comfortable, candlelit space.

“A lot of people who go to [Open Space] have nothing to do with [our congregation],” said Ivar Hillesland, pastor of Church of the Apostles. “It answers a longing they have for safe spiritual experiences within community.”

The Seattle area has many who aren’t affiliated with a church, and who may be wary or distrustful of religion, he noted.

“We’re hosting a communal, spiritual place without the programming involved,” Hillesland said. “It is evangelism, but we’re not trying to get [visitors] to join the church.”



Once a month, Church of the Apostles, an ELCA and Episcopal Church worshipping community in Seattle, hosts a time of music and meditation for the city’s residents. Your Mission Support dollars fund this congregation’s outreach.

Alex Mrakovich, a regular attendee, enjoys the serenity of Open Space.

“It’s a space where my questions and judgments and fears can slowly be suspended as I practice being present to both myself and the vibrations and sound around me,” Mrakovich said.

*Mission Support funding from the churchwide organization enables Church of the Apostles to provide this community program as well as other ministries.*

“It is because of the freedom granted to us through this funding that we are able to serve God and our neighbors most fully,” Hillesland said.

He believes Open Space is satisfying Seattleites’ deepest cravings. “Some churches offer food pantries that respond to the physical need for food. We offer a spiritual, musical experience for people who are hungry for that. ... It is spiritual food for people.”

To find a video story about Open Space, visit [ELCA.org/SOFIA](http://ELCA.org/SOFIA).

# Witness at the border

Energy flows to a congregation when it’s involved in an invaluable ministry among God’s people. That’s the case for *Iglesia Luterana Cristo Rey*, El Paso, Texas. Situated near the border with Juárez, Mexico, the congregation has found purpose in accompanying Latin American migrants and offering visitors border immersion experiences, said Rose Mary Sánchez-Guzmán, its pastor.

Their Lutheran faith inspires their work. “[The migration crisis] is what I believe Christ is putting in front of us,” she said. “This is urgent.”

**“Spiritually, it has changed our congregation.”**

For two Tuesdays each month, *Cristo Rey* opens its doors to receive migrants. The congregation feeds them and provides them with overnight shelter and an opportunity to call their families so they can buy a bus or plane ticket to get to their court date on time. By Friday, most visitors are gone. In the interim period, the congregation works to educate its community about immigration issues and migrant rights. “Asylum seekers are legal in [this] country ... they have the right to ask for asylum,” Sánchez-Guzmán said. “They are legal until the court decides [otherwise] for them.”

Immersion program participants meet undocumented migrants, U.S. Border Patrol officers, immigration lawyers and others involved in border culture. Through the chain-link fence on the border, they listen as their Mexican neighbors share their joys and challenges.

“Spiritually, it has changed our congregation,” she said, adding that although *Cristo Rey* is small and its members aren’t wealthy, they’ve generously opened their hearts to their migrant neighbors. *The congregation receives an annual grant, funded by Mission Support from the Rocky Mountain Synod and the churchwide organization, to bolster outreach.*

*Cristo Rey* also finds support as a member of the ELCA Welcoming Congregations Network, an initiative of the ELCA’s AMMPARO strategy (Accompanying Migrant Minors with Protection, Advocacy, Representation and Opportunities). There are 112 ELCA congregations involved.

“Jesus told us to help,” said Sánchez-Guzmán of *Cristo Rey*. “He didn’t say just help people with documents. He just says feed the hungry and clothe the naked.”

To find a video story about *Cristo Rey*, visit [ELCA.org/SOFIA](http://ELCA.org/SOFIA).



*Iglesia Luterana Cristo Rey*, El Paso, Texas, is a member of the ELCA Welcoming Congregations Network. Your Mission Support gifts fund this congregation’s ministry.





Pastors William C. and Victoria L. Hamilton of St. John's Lutheran Church, Jacksonville, Fla., studied at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary as part of the ELCA's Theological Education for Emerging Ministries program. Your Mission Support dollars fund grants for each of the seven ELCA seminaries.

## A dynamic, welcoming duo



ot every path to the ministry follows the same trajectory. But for Victoria L. and William C. Hamilton Jr., the married co-pastors of St. John's Lutheran Church in Jacksonville, Fla., the journey has been unique.

The duo came to ministry later in life, after William had retired from the Navy and Victoria had wrapped up years of working in the school system while their

children were students. Active members of Bethlehem Lutheran Church in New Orleans, Victoria and William felt God's call but were unsure of the feasibility of attending seminary at that point in their lives.

Then they found out about the Theological Education for Emerging Ministries (TEEM) program at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary (PLTS). *PLTS is one of the ELCA's seven seminaries, each of which receives annual Mission Support grants to maintain their work of training leaders like the Williamses for service in the church.*

Through the seminary's TEEM program, the couple could take classes remotely; they also attended three on-campus sessions for each year of seminary. The format not only facilitated their seminary studies but also allowed them to apply what they were learning to situations outside the classroom. This theological training laid the groundwork for the community outreach that's been a hallmark of their tenure at St. John's.

"That experience really helped to shape how we see ourselves as pastors to the community," William said. "We have so many people in [Jacksonville]

who call us their pastors who've never set foot inside the physical building of the church." After seminary, the couple was called from New Orleans to lead St. John's, a long-established congregation whose membership was declining. While building relationships with their congregants, the pastors began reaching out to the surrounding neighborhood, which was largely made up of black and LGBTQIA+ residents. Their passion for inclusion and evangelism has fueled the congregation's steady growth over 19 years, and in 2016, it became a "Reconciling in Christ" congregation. For the pastors, guiding St. John's to commit to welcome, include and celebrate lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex and asexual (LGBTQIA+) people was just a natural extension of their faith.

In the Hamiltons' eyes, practicing Lutheran welcome is simple: "We love everybody; God loves everybody," William said.

To find a video story about St. John's becoming a "Reconciling in Christ" congregation, visit [ELCA.org/SOFIA](http://ELCA.org/SOFIA).



Top photo: Members of St. John's hand out food to community members.

Bottom photo: A young St. John's member sings a hymn during worship.



# Mentors in faith

Lutheran campus ministries provide students with a haven from the pressures of academia while helping them realize their callings in Christ.

At Clemson University in South Carolina, Lutheran Campus Ministry helps students understand that their studies intersect with their Christian identity. The ministry's mentoring program, called 2x2, connects students with faculty and members of University Lutheran Church who are in similar fields. These small groups meet regularly to discuss how one's vocation can be discovered through one's studies.

*"I felt strongly that whatever I ended up doing as a profession had to be in service in some capacity."*

Tom Birdsong, a Clemson senior majoring in computer engineering, said that being part of 2x2 has helped him understand that his vocational discernment is an ongoing process and that there are many paths he could pursue.

"I felt strongly that whatever I ended up doing as a profession had to be in service in some capacity," he said. "I knew I wasn't going into a pastor role, but I was trying to find out how I could apply my engineering skills to projects that would create community and foster faith. Having the perspective of my mentors as people in academia and in my industry helped me realize there are a lot of ways that we can apply our vocation and do God's work at a community level."

Chris Heavner, campus pastor at Lutheran Campus Ministry–Clemson, thinks the 2x2 program gives students a community of support. "Our mentors are able to take students on field trips and immerse them in experiences they wouldn't always be able to have," he said. *Mission Support from the South Carolina Synod and the churchwide organization enhances the work of Lutheran Campus Ministry–Clemson.*

"In campus ministry, we never have members like you do in congregations," Heavner said. "Students come and go. It's important for students to know when they graduate that they can find a community of faith and continue to be surrounded by that cloud of witnesses. I couldn't be concrete with students about that if I didn't have the confidence that this was a ministry the whole church was supporting."



Lutheran Campus Ministry at Clemson University in South Carolina ministers to students through its 2x2 program. Your Mission Support gifts fund grants for this and other ELCA Campus Ministries.

# Breaking bread, eradicating hate



uch can happen when we gather for a meal — new understandings, new commitments, new friendships.

In May 2018, several ELCA congregations and worshiping communities discovered this when they joined their Muslim neighbors for interfaith iftars.

An iftar is the meal for which Muslims break their daily fast during the holy month of Ramadan.

Augustana Lutheran, Sioux Falls, S.D., and the mission congregation it shares building space with, *Pueblo de Dios*, hosted their first iftar. Almost 60 people attended, including members of Augustana Lutheran and *Pueblo de Dios* and Muslims from three mosques in town.

"There was a bit of discomfort on both sides — Christian and Muslim," said Amy Martinell, Augustana's pastor. But "when the food came out and we sat and ate together, the discomfort melted away and we became one community."

For two years the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago (LSTC) hosted regular iftars with a nearby Turkish community. Sara Trumm, interim director of A Center of Christian-Muslim Engagement for Peace and Justice at LSTC, reported that 60 to 100 people attended. Trumm said they've found that sharing a meal helps people feel comfortable meeting others from different backgrounds.

"Right now, with Islamophobia as strong as it is, it's important for people to be informed about what

Islam is so they don't fall prey to some of the negative stereotyping and falsities being shared, especially with one of the Ten Commandments telling us to not bear false witness against our neighbors," she said.

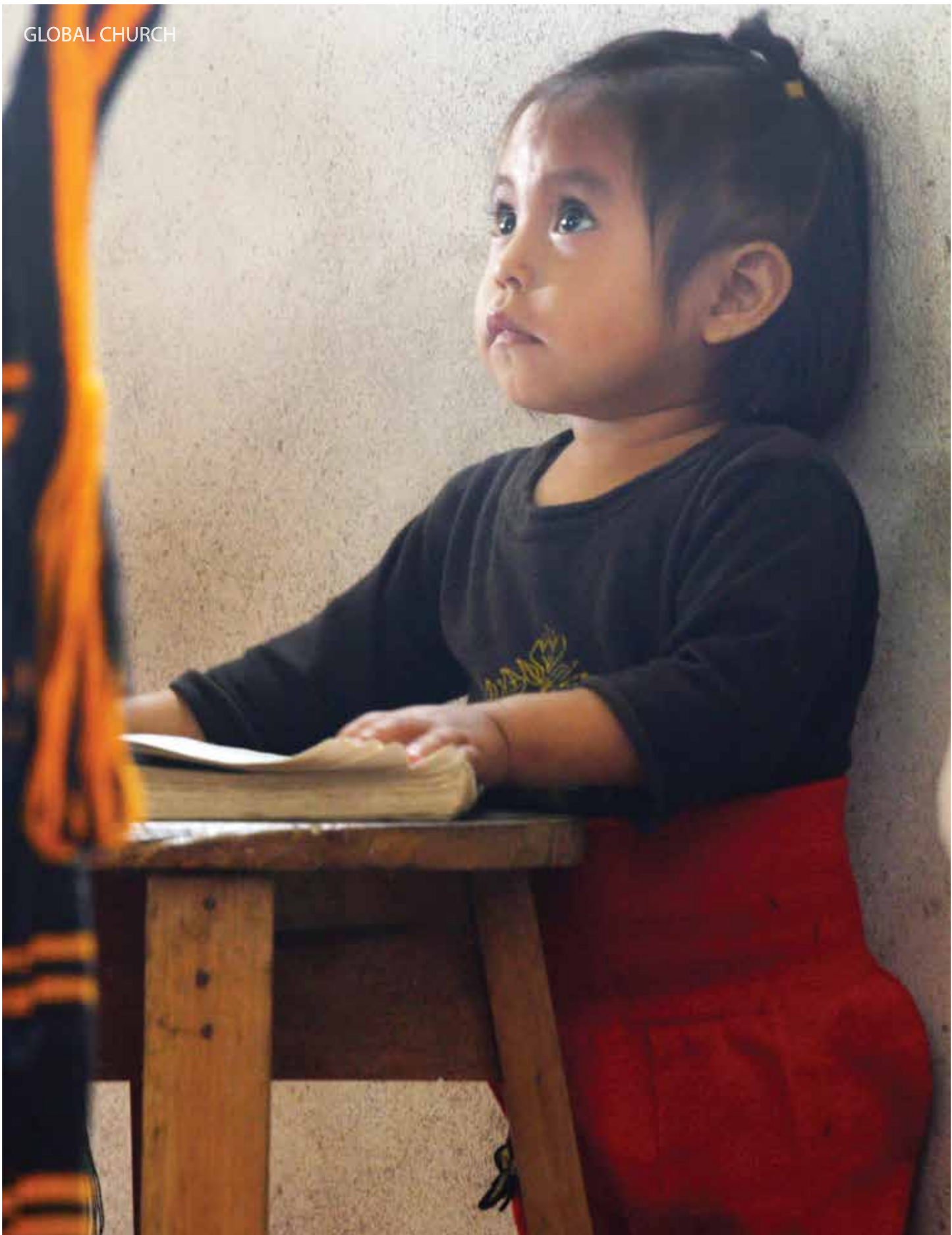
To promote the interfaith iftars, Neighbors in Faith, a joint ministry of the Northwest Washington Synod of the ELCA, the Episcopal Diocese of Olympia and Washington's Muslim community, worked with Shoulder-to-Shoulder, an interreligious campaign dedicated to ending anti-Muslim sentiment. *The ELCA is a founding member of Shoulder-to-Shoulder, which receives Mission Support funding.*

"What actually changes for people who are rooted in fear is to meet a Muslim and realize they're just human too," said Terry Kylo, an ELCA pastor and the director of Neighbors in Faith. "The iftars are a beautiful way to begin to understand the basics of Islam and how many similarities we have. And they help our Muslim neighbors to see that they aren't alone, that we want to learn from them and are willing to stand in solidarity with them."



Lutherans and Muslims broke bread together at interfaith iftars in May 2018. Your Mission Support dollars boost the ministry of Shoulder-to-Shoulder, an interreligious campaign to end anti-Muslim sentiment founded by the ELCA and other ministry partners.





# Church on a rock



irst [they] said we were crazy for building a Lutheran church,” recalled Fabian Gaspar Cardenas, pastor of St. Augustine Lutheran Church in La Esmeralda, Guatemala. “Then they said we were crazy for building it on top of a hill.”

But the St. Augustine community believed this audacious space — high on a rock overlooking La Esmeralda — was exactly where God had called them to be. Cardenas said they were inspired by other churches and holy places they’d seen that were built on hilltops.

“It is better to build on a rock than in the sand, so that is why we built here,” he added, referencing the Gospel of Matthew.

Though St. Augustine’s building is new, the congregation has worshipped in La Esmeralda for more than 20 years since their return from Mexico, where they spent the worst years of Guatemala’s civil war in refugee camps. Today the congregation

strives to support sustainable livelihoods, health care and education for its community, said Stephen Deal, ELCA regional representative for Central America.

The ELCA has invested in the ministry of St. Augustine by accompanying leaders within the Augustinian Lutheran Church of Guatemala (ILAG in Spanish). *Cardenas and other ILAG pastors receive theological and evangelism training at retreats funded by Mission Support.* For him, the opportunity to connect and grow together has been a great gift.

“[Hope] has been the thing that has supported us the most,” Cardenas said. “And that is what I have been able to share with my fellow pastors, especially in the retreats.” In his own ministry journey, a serious health condition nearly left Cardenas blind and delayed his pastoral training by over eight years.

Despite challenges to his health and the community, Cardenas has kept his vision fixed on God. For all who visit or pass by St. Augustine, he hopes that “when you look at the church, you remember that God is with you always, and you can do anything with God at your side.”

To find a video story about the ILAG, visit [ELCA.org/SOFIA](http://ELCA.org/SOFIA).



St. Augustine serves its community through ministries that connect members with sustainable livelihoods, health care and education. Your Mission Support gifts assist Cardenas and other leaders in the Augustinian Lutheran Church of Guatemala in their evangelism.

“It is better to build on a rock than in the sand, so that is why we built here,” said Fabian Gaspar Cardenas, pastor of St. Augustine Lutheran Church in La Esmeralda, Guatemala, referencing the Gospel of Matthew.



# Rooted in relationships

ELCA missionaries and pastors Rachel Eskesen and Zachary Courter are partners in work, life and ministry. The married couple has served in Central Europe since 2015, accompanying the Lutheran Church of Hungary (LCH) and Slovak Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Augsburg Confession in Serbia and coordinating the ELCA Young Adults in Global Mission (YAGM) program in Central Europe.

**“We’re filled with gratitude to walk alongside the YAGM volunteers and their host communities here in Central Europe.”**

Eskesen and Courter oversee a small group of YAGM volunteers, who serve schools, soup kitchens, homes for those with disabilities, nonprofits, refugee organizations, Roma communities and other ministries.

“One of the things I love about our program is matching the gifts of the YAGM volunteers to the needs of the communities with which they’ll serve,” Eskesen said.

“We’re filled with gratitude to walk alongside the YAGM volunteers and their host communities here in Central Europe,” Courter added.

In addition, the couple preaches and presides at City Park Lutheran Church in Budapest and partners with its ministries.

*Mission Support funding enables their work mentoring young adults and walking alongside companions in Hungary and Serbia.*

Though the political environment there can be tough, Eskesen said she and Courter are inspired by the commitment of their colleagues to proclaim the gospel. The relationships they are forming — as they preach, teach, learn and receive the gifts of the global church — keep them grounded.

Eskesen appreciates how ministry abroad allows her and Courter to use their gifts and grow in faith. “We live in a global context right now that’s increasingly polarized and isolationist,” she said. “Every day, when we work with young adults, I can see how God is calling us to relationships that are bigger than any relationship we have. A big part of my daily faith experience is seeing not only how we can welcome volunteers into the communities that we love but also how we’ve been welcomed here.”

*To follow this missionary couple, visit their blog ([zachandrachel.wordpress.com](http://zachandrachel.wordpress.com)) and [Facebook.com/YAGMCentralEurope](https://www.facebook.com/YAGMCentralEurope).*



ELCA missionaries Rachel Eskesen and Zachary Courter coordinate the ELCA Young Adults in Global Mission program in Central Europe. Your Mission Support dollars sustain their ministry.

# Companions in Christ



The global church is a reality, not just an abstract concept, for the thousands of Lutherans engaged in ELCA companion-synod relationships.

“Companion synods nurture a church that is global, not only the parochial enclave of being together,” said Rafael Malpica Padilla, executive director of ELCA Global Mission.

Sixty-four ELCA synods have at least one

global-church companion. Because many synods relate to multiple companion churches, more than 120 companion-synod relationships exist. Most participating churches, including the ELCA, are members of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF). *Mission Support funding enhances the ministry of the LWF and the companion-synod program.*

For Martin Malley of Ralston, Neb., participating in the Nebraska Synod’s relationship with the Northern Diocese of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania “enlarges my worldview and lets me see outside my box.”

Visiting Tanzania during a synod trip was Malley’s first peek beyond his “box.” “By the end of the weekend, I was so taken with the people and the beauty of the place that I was on fire!” he said.

Now Malley serves as the synod’s volunteer coordinator of Tanzania ministries, weaving myriad Nebraska-Tanzania connections into the fabric of the synod and diocese. Scores, if not hundreds, of Lutherans have traveled between Nebraska and

Tanzania and built long-standing personal relationships over time, said Brian Maas, bishop of the Nebraska Synod.

Nebraskans and Tanzanians swap pulpits, visit each other’s schools and congregations, and keep in touch via Facebook. Nebraskans have donated generously to the Northern Diocese, funding scholarships, purchasing textbooks, equipping evangelists with motorcycles and more. But “this is not about us doing projects,” Malley said. “It’s about us having Christian friends on the other side of the world.”

In companion-synod relationships, care and support flow both ways. Visitors from the Nkuu Kati Lutheran parish took note when Malley and other members of Messiah Lutheran in Ralston showed how they were retrofitting the church’s bathrooms to accommodate people of all abilities. “Three months later [Nkuu Kati] sent a check for \$300 to support our project,” Malley said. “We knew then that this was a partnership.”



“This is not about us doing projects,” said ELCA member Martin Malley of the ELCA Nebraska Synod’s relationship with the Northern Diocese of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania. “It’s about us having Christian friends on the other side of the world.” Your Mission Support gifts enhance the ELCA companion-synod program.



# A message from the Mission Support team

Dear partner in ministry,

We firmly believe that Mission Support is all about relationships. We are a church of three expressions: congregations, synods and the churchwide organization. Mission Support is one of the ways that we, as members of the ELCA, express our relationship as church together.

God calls us into relationship with one another; by responding to that call, we can better serve our neighbors around the block and around the globe. Serving together strengthens our relationships with each other, our neighbors and God.

The stories in this booklet — those ministries born out of our relationships with each other and with God — are possible only because of Mission Support. We invite you to read and share these stories, which make visible the collective ministry of the ELCA. We hope you find inspiration in them and use them to inspire others.

We are deeply grateful for your generous offerings and for the generosity of our congregations and synods as they share Mission Support funds. In the year ahead, may we continue to strengthen our relationships with each other and with God as we proclaim the saving grace of Jesus Christ with the world.

In peace and partnership,



Victoria Flood  
Director, ELCA Mission Support



Nick Kiger  
Associate Director, ELCA Mission Support



The stories in this booklet — those ministries born out of our relationships with each other and with God — are possible only because of Mission Support.

## Devotional

Interested in using a story from this publication as a devotion for a group gathering? Here's an outline you could use — or feel free to create your own!

### Opening

Leader: As in one body we have many members,  
**Response: So we, who are many, are one body in Christ.**

### Reading

Select and read a biblical passage from the following list:

Mark 12:41-44

Luke 10:25-27

Acts 2:43-47

1 Corinthians 12:12-31

2 Corinthians 7:16 - 8:7

Galatians 5:22-26

Next, choose and read one story from this publication. See pages 6-17.

### Discussion

Choose and discuss one or more of the following questions:

- In what way(s) does this story exemplify the biblical passage you read?
- Identify the passion that motivated the people in the story. What passions motivate people in your ministry setting?
- What is one thing you learned about ministry across the ELCA from this story?
- How might you share this with others in your ministry setting?
- What new idea for ministry in your setting does this story inspire?

### Closing

L: Let us pray.

**R: Gracious God, we cannot begin to know all the ways we, as your church, respond to the needs of the world. We thank you for the generosity shared from across our church. Give us strength to respond to your call to live out our faith in service to our neighbors, near and far. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.**

