Dear friends in Christ,

In many ways these last few months have been long and unrelenting. The COVID-19 pandemic has left our world in a state of uncertainty, yet as Lutherans, we like to roll up our sleeves and get to work. Our church and its people continue to minister to our neighbors across the street and around the world, to those hurting and searching for peace, while uplifting leaders in their callings. We are training health care professionals, supporting future federal chaplains, walking alongside migrants and refugees, and sending pastors to foster creative new ministries around the country. This is what faith looks like.

You are a vital part of these ministries. You have stepped up to give to the church and support your neighbors, and for that we thank you. Staying in community is more important now than ever, and the church community is resilient because of the dedication of people such as you.

As Paul points out in Romans 12:6-8, “We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us; prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.” This issue of Boundless brings stories of your gifts and faithfulness at work in the world. Together, we are serving, giving and leading this church.

Let these stories be glimmers of hope reminiscent of the words of James Weldon Johnson in that familiar tune “Lift Every Voice and Sing”:

Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us,
Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us;
Facing the rising sun of our new day begun,
Let us march on till victory is won (ELW 841).

Christ’s peace be with you,

KATHY SUMMERS
Executive Director, Mission Advancement
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

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Make checks payable to “ELCA” and mail to:
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ELCA WORLD HUNGER
Realized Dreams

ELCA FUND FOR LEADERS
Serving Those Who Serve

MAKING AN IMPACT
Your Generous Response to COVID-19

MISSIONARIES
Across Contexts

CONGREGATIONS
Sacred Space

On the cover: In New Orleans, La., local history professor Rachel Wallace noticed that Bethlehem Lutheran Church was preparing meals and asked how she could help. Your gifts to the COVID-19 Response Fund have supported Bethlehem Lutheran Church as the congregation has stepped up to serve hot meals three times a week during the pandemic.
Realized Dreams

Chhani Marandi, 24, lives in Nepal. She used to be a domestic worker, but she dreamed of furthering her studies and becoming a health care professional. Thanks in part to your gifts to ELCA World Hunger, Chhani’s dream is now a reality.

Chhani’s dream began when she was young. Her father had health problems, but her family could not afford to get him the best treatment. When Chhani was 5, he passed away, leaving her mother to shoulder the responsibility of supporting and raising the children. Two of Chhani’s older siblings were forced to leave school and go to work to help with the family’s livelihood. By the time Chhani was in third grade, she’d begun doing housekeeping work to cover the cost of her own education. Due to the acute poverty the family faced, her two older sisters were pressed into early marriages.

Chhani was always interested in school, working hard and getting good grades, and she eventually graduated from 10th grade. After that, she couldn’t afford to continue her studies. That changed when Chhani heard about a scholarship program from the Lutheran Community Welfare Society (LCWS), an implementing partner of Lutheran World Federation Nepal. The program provided scholarships to girls from ethnic minority groups, including the Santhal community, of which Chhani’s family is a part. This is one of many projects supported by your gifts to ELCA World Hunger (a partner of LWF Nepal) that create opportunity for women and girls. Gender justice is an important part of the work to which the ELCA is called.

After 18 months of study, Chhani completed her training as an auxiliary nurse midwife, and she now works at Anjali Hospital. Dr. Dipesh Pokhrel, the hospital’s medical superintendent, said the staff were very happy to have recruited Chhani, who is “very sincere and dedicated to her work and serving the people with honesty.”

In addition to her work at the hospital, Chhani plans to provide health services in her community via phone. She wants to continue her advanced training in reproductive health and obstetrics and to provide free care for other families in poverty.

Chhani’s mother, Solma Marandi, is proud of her daughter. “Now even my neighbors who had refused to provide a loan to me at that time for my daughter’s studies come to my house and ask for the checkup with my daughter,” she said. “I feel so proud at that moment.”

“It was my dream to be a health worker since the time my family could not afford proper treatments of my father,” Chhani said. “I got an opportunity to fulfill my dream due to support from LWF Nepal. I realized that it was ‘God’s grace to me and my dreams.’”

CHHANI MARANDI
A
fter 12 years of serving with the United States Marine Corps, Rebekah Nelson sensed the Holy Spirit calling her in a new direction. The idea of serving as a chaplain had long been in the back of her mind, and in high school she would pick up pamphlets about chaplaincy when she went to drilling competitions — but she hadn’t seriously considered it as a career. In that moment of discernment, she realized God was calling her to chaplaincy.

Rebekah texted her father, a pastor, to ask how she could start seminary as soon as possible. “Are there online programs I can start now?” she asked. Surprised, her dad asked what had sparked her sudden interest.

“I just had this wake-up call one day where I realized, why not federal chaplaincy ministry now?” Rebekah said.

She started visiting ELCA seminaries, where she learned she could apply to the ELCA Fund for Leaders scholarship program. The week Rebekah learned she’d been awarded support, she also found out that the United States Army had accepted her into its federal chaplaincy program. “Everything fell into place so beautifully,” Rebekah said. “It was really affirming for me.”

The ELCA Fund for Leaders provides seminary scholarships to support the future leaders of the church, and Rebekah was awarded both a full-tuition scholarship and a federal chaplaincy scholarship. At United Lutheran Seminary in Gettysburg, Pa., she took an intense course load of 42 credit hours her first academic year — an endeavor made possible by the scholarship funds she’d received. She’s transferring to Wartburg Theological Seminary in Dubuque, Iowa in the fall.

The Federal Chaplaincy Ministries scholarship endowment fund was established in 2014 to attract and support chaplain candidates, and since then donors have given generously to support future chaplains such as Rebekah. As a result, the fund has grown to almost $500,000 in value. The Rev. Christopher Otten, assistant to the presiding bishop and director of federal chaplaincies for the ELCA, described chaplaincy as an incarnational aspect of mission, to care for people who are away from home.

“It’s a ministry of accompanying people wherever they happen to be while away from home, whether it’s a veteran away from home in a veteran hospital or a person incarcerated in a federal prison or a soldier in the middle of a battlefield,” Otten said. “Every chaplain is a pastor, but not every pastor has been trained as a chaplain to go into a battlefield, prison or hospital.”

Rebekah serves as a chaplain candidate with a United States Army Reserve medical brigade. This past April, during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, she made 60 calls a day to offer pastoral care to soldiers. Some soldiers in her unit are health care workers on the front lines of the pandemic. “I’m calling out to literally the full unit, every single service member attached to us, the cadets in our program, and just seeing how they’re doing with everything,” Rebekah said. “It’s just something that people need, someone to say it’s OK to not be OK right now. It’s OK to reach out for help or to have someone listen to you.”

Because of her scholarships, Rebekah didn’t have to take on a job this year, which allowed her to focus on her seminary courses and chaplaincy care. On top of ELCA Fund for Leaders scholarships, Rebekah also received support from her seminary and home congregation. United Lutheran Seminary covered her housing expenses her first year, and Peace Lutheran Church in Lompoc, Calif., sent her a scholarship for books even after the church had been broken into twice. Rebekah said she’s experienced the faithful support of the whole ELCA along her journey.

“It always hits me almost to the point of tears how much people care about those doing rostered ministry,” Rebekah said. “My calling is to serve those who serve.”
“Every chaplain is a pastor, but not every pastor has been trained as a chaplain to go into a battlefield, prison or hospital.”

THE REV. CHRISTOPHER OTTEN
Assistant to the Presiding Bishop and Director of Federal Chaplaincies for the ELCA
Launched in response to the unprecedented need caused by the coronavirus pandemic, the ELCA’s COVID-19 Response Fund supports the ministries of this church most in need and best positioned to make an impact.

In the United States, unemployment has soared. We are seeing rising demands on our food pantries, homeless shelters and social services. Around the world, millions of people living in poverty are facing this pandemic without reliable access to sanitation or health care.

At the same time, congregations across the ELCA quickly employed creative thinking, innovation and new technology to continue ministering to members, those in need and those hurting and searching for peace.

With $1.5 million raised to date, this outpouring of generosity is already making an impact.

These gifts support:
- congregations and local ministries serving communities that are disproportionately at risk from the pandemic, especially as it relates to health concerns, exposure risk and/or economic status
- the health, safety and well-being of leaders and church employees who are critical to carrying out the mission of this church
- ministries around the world that provide people in poverty with health care, sanitation and hygiene supplies, clean water, food and shelter — resources critical to slowing the spread of this virus

When one member of the body of Christ suffers, all suffer together. The needs are great. So are the opportunities. Thank you for sharing your gifts with our church and the world.
Across CONtexts

In 28 years as a missionary and regional representative for the ELCA, the Rev. Stephen Deal has developed deep relationships with companion churches and partners in Central America while learning from their work and ministry experience.

“As a regional representative, I learn a lot from our companion churches as I move from one country to another,” Stephen said. “Most church leaders are immersed in their context, while I see lots of contexts. You play a bridge role, sometimes informal and sometimes formal, like a leadership exchange.”

Stephen has been serving as an ELCA missionary since 1992, when he began as a catechist and evangelist in Guatemala. There he became an ordained deacon and pastor of the Iglesia Luterana Agustina de Guatemala (ILAG), or the Augustinian Lutheran Church of Guatemala. In 2003, he was named regional representative for the ELCA, the Rev. Maria Elena Mora (Costa Rican Lutheran Church). The Rev. Stephen Deal (far right) with staff of the Pop No’j Association, part of the ELCA’s AMMPARO network in Guatemala.

In his role, Stephen builds relationships with companion churches, responds to crises and disasters, facilitates leadership development workshops for pastors and lay leaders, supports other missionaries serving in the region and works with the ELCA’s network of AMMPARO companions (Accompanying Migrant Minors with Protection, Advocacy, Representation and Opportunities). His missionary assignment requires frequent travel in Central America and Mexico, all in a spirit of mutual accompaniment.

At any time, regional representatives must be ready to respond to crises or disasters in the region. Over the years, Stephen has supported companions through the aftermath of coups d’état in their countries and provided pastoral care and support during internal church crises, such as the tragic loss of a pastor to an extended illness. “The only way to learn how to cope and function within a crisis situation is through experience,” Stephen said. However, the ability to remain calm in that situation is a key starting point. “You have to have a personality where you can stay calm in the middle of a storm, as opposed to making the storm worse.”

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented a new crisis, one that puts migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers in greater danger. Along the migration journey, finding shelter has become even more difficult. Meanwhile, migrants held in overcrowded detention centers in the United States are put at risk of exposure. “Everybody is exposed and vulnerable to this virus, but the population of migrants and refugees are even more vulnerable,” Stephen said. “They’ve got no place to shelter in place.”

The United States has deported migrants and refugees to the region by the plane-load while failing to take adequate health precautions. “Even though the public health imperative is to prevent the propagation of the virus, that seems to apply to everybody except migrants and refugees,” Stephen said.

Meanwhile, the virus has weakened the global economy, and the repercussions of this will be felt more in the Global South. Stephen explained that families who support themselves through informal employment can afford to eat only on days when they earn an income. They don’t have extra food on the shelf, and most will not qualify for economic stimulus measures. Hygiene is more difficult to maintain in areas with a chronic shortage of clean water, while items critical for preventing the spread of the virus, such as soap and alcohol gel, are in short supply.

Since the onset of the pandemic, Stephen has spent hours communicating with companions throughout the region to learn how they’re coping, how faith communities have been affected and what emergency needs have arisen. He has guided companions on preparing emergency requests to Lutheran Disaster Response. As a result, LDR has approved seven grants to provide emergency aid related to COVID-19 in Central America and Mexico: three administered by companion churches in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, and four more administered by AMMPARO companions working with migrants and refugees in Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras and Mexico. Your gifts to Lutheran Disaster Response have funded these grants, while your gifts to missionaries and the ELCA’s global mission work have supported Stephen’s ministry.

Reflecting on nearly three decades of service, Stephen realizes that churches in the United States and Central America face common challenges, from immigration to climate change to gender justice, that create opportunities for mutual learning. For example, as churches in Central America have grappled with a shortage of pastors, many have built collaborative leadership models that more fully employ the gifts and talents of lay leaders. Now, the global Lutheran church is learning how to respond to a pandemic as well.

“Change doesn’t happen in a vacuum but through global engagement,” Stephen said. “Global companions are dealing with the same challenges but with fewer resources, and they’ve survived and done it extremely effectively. They have a lot to teach us. But you have to be open to changing the model.”

The Rev. Stephen Deal (second from left) with the pastor presidents of companion churches from left to right: the Rev. Rolando Antonio Ortez (Christian Lutheran Church of Honduras), the Rev. Karen Castillo (Augustinian Lutheran Church of Guatemala), the Rev. Gilberto Quesada Mora (Costa Rican Lutheran Church), and the Rev. Gilberto Quandt (Augustinian Lutheran Church of Guatemala). The Rev. Gilberto Quandt (second from left) with staff of the Pop No’j Association, part of the ELCA’s AMMPARO network in Guatemala.

The Rev. Stephen Deal (far right) with staff of the Pop No’j Association, part of the ELCA’s AMMPARO network in Guatemala.
“A lot of the work of a mission developer is first about listening to a community,” said the Rev. Emily Scott, “and seeing what God is already doing.”

Emily is a mission developer at Dreams and Visions in Baltimore, Md., a ministry that centers the faith of LGBTQIA+ people.

Since beginning her journey toward being a faith leader, Emily has been seeking new ways to create intimate, sacred spaces for people on the margins of society. At first she went to school to study music, but she found herself drawn to classes in Christianity and explored the intersection of liturgy and the arts. While working for Riverside Church in New York City, she began to meet young people who were lonely and searching for connection. Responding to this need, she founded St. Lydia’s, where worship takes place over a meal. She helped the ministry grow and foster community amid disaster, a story she tells in her new book, For All Who Hunger: Searching for Communion in a Shattered World. Emily spent eight years ministering to these young adults, all with different experiences, incomes and social skills.

“I think the church kind of made me a pastor as we went along,” she said. “I didn’t know it was in me, but they sort of drew it out of me.”

Her new ministry in Baltimore, Dreams and Visions, is also geared toward people who don’t always feel at home in a traditional church setting. It’s about creating a new, sacred worship space that takes queer culture into account. She said the church should take a different approach to inviting queer people into worship spaces.

“The church has a lot to learn about the ways in which [queer people] created community in exile,” she said. Due to their own experiences of exclusion, Emily notes, LGBTQIA+ people know a great deal about creating community — showing hospitality, taking care of those on the margins or offering compassion to those who are excluded.

When Emily first arrived in Baltimore, she volunteered at the PRIDE Center of Maryland, something she had time and energy to pursue because she could support herself as a mission developer for the ELCA. Being a mission developer gave her the time to form strong, trustworthy relationships and the space to allow God to knit together a community. These opportunities wouldn’t have been possible without donors such as you who give budding faith communities a chance to be something special.

Emily welcomes the opportunity to be creative in worship planning; worship at Dreams and Visions is flexible, collaborative and interactive. One service was focused on immigration, and after the sermon, congregants wrote letters to transgender asylum-seekers at the border. At Christmas, they had a queer Christmas pageant with a role and a costume for each person who attended. “The message of the pageant is really that this story is for you, no matter what you’ve been told,” she said. “If someone has tried to tell you this isn’t your story, it is your story — and you have a role to play in it, which is why we’re giving you a costume!”

The COVID-19 health crisis brought the congregation’s high level of need to the surface, but it has also allowed for even more connection. Since LGBTQIA+ community centers and support systems have closed and members are more isolated, Emily has focused on pastoral care and creating structures of support within the congregation. Dreams and Visions has transitioned from meeting every two weeks to meeting twice a week and has created “church pods” so smaller groups can check in with each other more regularly.

To donors who have made her work possible, Emily wants to say a huge “thank you.” “It couldn’t happen without that kind of giving, and I’m blown away by it all the time,” she said. She hopes that Dreams and Visions will grow with even more opportunities to show up for the people in her community. “That’s how the church wants to show up, that’s who we want to be. We want to be there to walk alongside people, and that opportunity was given to me through the ability to be a mission developer.”

In December 2019, Dreams and Visions held “Exalted: A Queer Christmas Pageant.” Attendees were invited to dress up in costume and participate. Photo by Katie Anholt.
Brandon Blake, the vice president of Bethlehem Lutheran Church in New Orleans, La., prepares free-to-go meals during the COVID-19 pandemic. He has been involved at Bethlehem since he was born.