

**STORIES OF CHRIST'S  
ABOUNDING LOVE AND GRACE**

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Summer 2024

# Boundless



Miriam, who lives in Malawi, has a more energy-efficient home and a thriving business thanks in part to donors such as you. Learn more about her on p. 6.



Evangelical  
Lutheran Church  
in America

**"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you" (John 15:12).**

## Dear friends in Christ,

In John 15, Jesus *tells* us to love one another as he has loved us. But throughout the Gospels he *shows* us what that means. We watch him feed the hungry, heal the sick and honor the dignity of the ostracized. He crosses cultural and economic boundaries to walk with those at the margins of society. Through Christ we glimpse the boundlessness of God's love.

That love has been woven into the history of our faith, and it informs who we are as church today. As we aspire to follow Jesus, we show love through our words and our actions, as he did. We listen to the Gospel stories and proclaim the good news that we are deeply loved no matter who we are. Through your generosity you are showing the world how transformational that love can be. Your faithful gifts have empowered our church to make a real difference in the lives of our siblings in Christ around the world.

The power of God's boundless love is made real through you. But I know my words can go only so far. I hope the stories in this issue of "Boundless" will show you what that means. In them you will find examples of the many ways you are sharing the gospel with our neighbors — by supporting ministries that reach outward, addressing the root causes of hunger, lifting up the next generation of leaders for our church and showing up in communities impacted by disaster.

You are manifesting Christ's love in the world. Through you that love flows across physical, emotional and all human barriers. I am grateful to be part of this welcoming church with you, and to walk alongside you in this work. Thank you.



With abundant gratitude,

*Rachel Wind*

**RACHEL WIND**

Executive for Development  
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

## HOW TO GIVE

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# Boundless

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# Caring for the Dignity of All



*Mission developer Birgitte Simpson (center) with members of her community receiving donations of quilts.*

According to the “lore,” as the Rev. Birgitte Simpson calls it, People’s Church in Bemidji, Minn., began 26 years ago with an act of hospitality. At the end of a Bible study one evening, the founding pastor discovered there were a few people who didn’t have a place to stay that night. He said, “Well, why don’t you stay here?” Ever since, People’s Church has been a home for people in need of shelter.

Today People’s Church is an ELCA congregation and Indigenous ministry centered on three core values – food, shelter and dignity. “As a church we believe that God calls us to provide shelter for anyone in need, which is why we offer overnight emergency shelter services 365 days a year,” says Birgitte, part-time pastor of People’s Church and an ELCA mission developer. “We believe that the Holy Spirit has gifted each person in this world with inherent dignity, being made in the image and likeness of God, and so we strive to honor and care for the dignity of all those that we meet.”

Sundays are kicked off by a community meal, or “feast,” at noon, and the rest of worship follows. As an Indigenous ministry, People’s Church incorporates Native spiritual practices, led by Native leaders, into its expression of Christianity. About half the staff identify as Indigenous, and the congregation intentionally lifts up leaders who have experience living at the margins of society.



*People's Church, Bemidji, Minn.*

Having served People's Church and its ministries for a year now, Birgitte has gotten to know its close-knit, generation-spanning community. She calls it a "grandma's couch" ministry. "If you are having a rough time, you're going to go to your grandma's house and get some love," she says. "And that's what People's Church is for a lot of people – [it's] that place where you know that people are going to remember your name, and you're going to be cared for, and there will be laughter and good food and good fellowship and love and warmth."

Anna,\* a regular at People's Church for many years, has struggled with substance abuse for a long time. She recently told Birgitte she was on a list to get into subsidized housing. She was excited about the opportunity – but also terrified.

"I've been a failure forever," she said to Birgitte. "Every time something good happens, I end up messing it up, and I just don't want that to happen this time."

Anna talks about People's Church the way our church talks about God. "I know that every time, no matter what, I can always come back here.

Your gifts to ELCA ministries, especially Where Needed Most, support mission developers such as the Rev. Birgitte Simpson. She leads the People's Church in Bemidji, Minn., which honors the dignity of everyone in her community and welcomes them in – including those who have nowhere else to turn.

That no matter how many people have been mad at me or how many bridges I've burned, that I can come back to People's Church, and I'll be loved and cared for here."

When you give to ELCA ministries, you offer a warm welcome to people struggling through hard times. You provide a home for people who have nowhere else to turn. Your gifts support mission developers such as Birgitte, who lead innovative, radically welcoming ministries rooted in their communities.

Those gifts are still at work, in new ways. With funding from an ELCA World Hunger Domestic Hunger Grant, People's Church is starting up a new street and jail ministry to reach some of the most isolated members of its community.

"Any funds that come to us are put to deep, loving, good use," says Birgitte. "From my time at People's Church, I have seen the Spirit showing up and moving every single day, in ways that are funny, and wild, and messy, and beautiful, and truly incarnated."

*\*Name changed for privacy.*

**"We believe that the Holy Spirit has gifted each person in this world with inherent dignity, being made in the image and likeness of God, and so we strive to honor and care for the dignity of all those that we meet." —Rev. Birgitte Simpson**

# Fueling Sustainable Futures in Malawi



*With her fuel-efficient stove Miriam can cook for her family, using less than half the fuel she was using earlier. Your gifts to ELCA World Hunger greatly impact individuals such as Miriam and create a more sustainable world for all.*

**Y**our generosity to ELCA World Hunger has helped Miriam, a mother of four in Malawi, upgrade her kitchen. A fuel-efficient stove has been installed in her home, which allows Miriam to cook her food with less than half the wood she was burning earlier. The change may seem small to visitors, but for Miriam and her community it represents a great

shift – both in their present lives and in the future they are building.

Miriam and her neighbors didn't always have the time or resources to plan ahead, which made them especially vulnerable to disasters. In 2019, Cyclone Idai damaged homes and destroyed crops and other food sources in the region. Your gifts to Lutheran Disaster Response helped provide the food, shelter and other resources community members needed in the immediate aftermath. Through your generosity to Lutheran Disaster Response and ELCA World Hunger, you continued walking alongside them as they rebuilt, becoming more resilient.

With support from ELCA World Hunger and Lutheran Disaster Response, the Evangelical Lutheran Development Service (ELDS) has helped the community grow climate-resilient crops such as hybrid maize and sweet potato vines. ELDS also helped women in Miriam's village and two neighboring ones create a self-sustaining loan group. Participants pool their money and resources, then individuals take out loans to grow their enterprises. Group members celebrate successes together and rely on one another for support rather than the village bank. The funds have helped members purchase pigs and goats, rebuild homes, open shops and more.

Miriam's participation in the group gave her access to the funds she needed to start a business selling grains and seeds. Now she makes



*Your generosity to ELCA World Hunger has helped empower women in Malawi to build stronger futures for themselves, their families and their communities.*

enough of a profit that she doesn't need to spend all her money on her family's immediate needs. "Through savings," she says, "I am able to save a little something and then borrow some money and pay back with interest."

The ELDS program has also provided Miriam and many of her neighbors with high-efficiency stoves that allow them to spend less money on fuel and that help the whole community preserve the forests surrounding them.

In addition to using less wood for cooking, Miriam has also begun planting new trees. They are small now, but they will grow to provide shade and sustenance for generations to come.

This year marks the 50th anniversary of ELCA World Hunger. The occasion gives us a chance to reflect on the impact donors such as you have made through this ministry, and to dream about what we can do together in the future. Over the last half-century your gifts have grown ELCA

World Hunger and strengthened our church's presence alongside communities impacted by hunger and poverty around the world.

We believe that, in another 50 years, we can fulfill God's promise of a world without hunger and poverty. That's why the youth of our church attending the 2024 ELCA Youth Gathering have been invited to join ELCA World Hunger as part of Generation Zero-Hunger: the generation taking action to usher in a world without hunger and futures filled with hope.

Your generosity has already made you part of building the generation that can end hunger. You support global communities as they raise homes, plant crops, dig wells and start new businesses, creating a more resilient and sustainable world for all. You also support people such as Miriam, who is building a better future for herself and her children.

## GENERATION ZERO-HUNGER

Find resources and learn more about how you and your community can get involved in Generation Zero-Hunger at [ELCA.org/GenZeroHunger](https://ELCA.org/GenZeroHunger).



# Your Gifts in Action: 2023 IN REVIEW



Last year ELCA World Hunger awarded  
**198 grants** to partners in **66 countries**  
and **149 domestic grants**  
to partners in **56 ELCA synods.**

*With support from ELCA World Hunger, Christ the King Lutheran Church in Cary, N.C., works with the Farmers of Color Network to educate congregation and community members about systemic discrimination against Black farmers and to support them directly.*

The International Leaders Program provided  
scholarships for **185 students** from **66**  
**global companion churches;**  
**65%** of scholarship holders  
identify as women, and **77%** are  
**young adults.**



*International Leaders Program scholars from across the U.S. met for education, worship and fellowship at the 2023 program gathering.*

Fund for Leaders  
provided nearly  
**\$2.2 million**  
in scholarship  
assistance to **345**  
**ELCA seminary**  
**students**  
during the 2023-2024  
academic year.

# Thank you!





Missionary Karen Anderson (black blouse) plays an educational game with attendees of a training hosted by Popular Education in Health in Chile.

In 2023, **101** long-term missionaries were at work in **41** countries around the world, and **25** YAGM volunteers served in five country programs.

New ELCA congregations are taking shape throughout the United States and the Caribbean and in nearly every synod, with **292** "new starts" currently in development and **39** proposed during 2023. More than **70%** of total new starts are in nonwhite ethnic communities and reflect growing diversity in their LGBTQIA+ leadership as well as their younger leaders and participants.



The mural behind the Sunday school class at Christ's Beloved Community in Winston-Salem, N.C., was painted in response to a community request for "art that looks like us."

A severe hailstorm destroyed the crops and gardens of an Indigenous community in Bolivia. Your gifts to Lutheran Disaster Response helped the community members purchase food supplies and seeds to replant their crops.



Lutheran Disaster Response was at work in **51** countries around the world and **34** states and territories in the United States and the Caribbean, responding to hurricanes, tornadoes, conflict and migration.



# Bridges

## Across Barriers

*Your gifts to ELCA ministries (such as ELCA Where Needed Most) support global leaders such as the Rev. Sally Azar, the first woman pastor in the Holy Land. She is working to connect people across countries, denominations and cultures at the Lutheran Church of the Redeemer in Jerusalem.*

**T**he Rev. Sally Azar, a Palestinian Christian, has always been drawn to the work of building connections between people. This passion set her on the path to church leadership, and our global Lutheran community accompanied her along the way. Now she is shaping the church in her home and around the world. You are still walking alongside her through your

generosity, strengthening our fellowship of believers across continents.

Sally grew up in Jerusalem as a Lutheran pastor's daughter. Her Holy Land congregation welcomed many international groups and frequently hosted youth from other churches. This included an ELCA youth exchange program, established through the ELCA's long-standing partnership

with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land (ELCJHL).

These visitors helped Sally understand how to see the world from different perspectives, and they sparked her desire to share the story of her church with others. “Seeing how many people didn’t actually know much about us as Christian Palestinians inspired me,” she says, “and showed how important the church work is.”

As Sally got older, she says, “everything I experienced made me love theology and the church more.” At that time the ELCJHL did not ordain women pastors, but Sally followed her call to ministry, with global support. Thanks in part to donors such as you, Sally received an ELCA International Leaders Program scholarship to

pursue a Master of Arts degree at the Near East School of Theology.

On Jan. 22, 2023, Sally became the first woman ordained in the ELCJHL. Over 100 clergy from around the world, including ELCA Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton, attended the ordination service. Participants in the Young Adults in Global Mission program also had the opportunity to be part of the momentous event.

Since her ordination Sally has continued to build bridges across countries, denominations and cultures. She currently serves as a pastor for Arabic- and English-speaking congregations at the Church of the Redeemer in Jerusalem. Your generosity to ELCA Where Needed Most helps fund her work, part of our church’s commitment



ELCJHL

*The Rev. Sally Azar helps lead a youth retreat in Jordan.*

to fostering leadership among women and young adults in the region. On any given day Sally may spend time leading Bible studies, visiting families or leading workshops. “My only routine is coffee every morning,” she says.

For the last seven years Sally has also served as a council member in the Lutheran World Federation. “Despite the demanding schedule,” she says, “my favorite aspect remains connecting with people.”

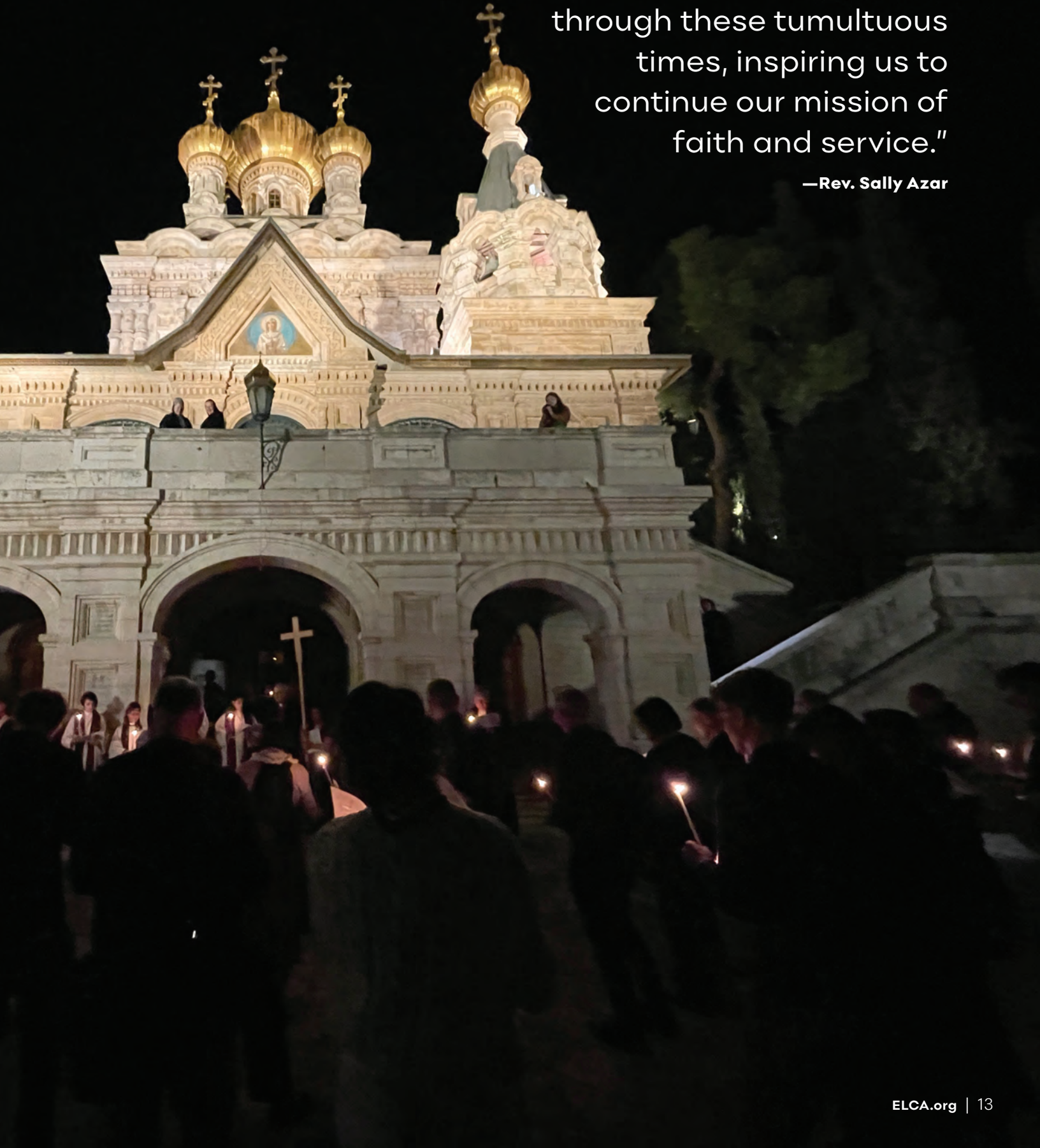
Her work has become even more important in recent months, during the humanitarian crisis that has arisen in the Holy Land. Tensions have mounted in Jerusalem, where Sally lives among Israelis and Palestinians. People are no longer able to pass into or out of the West Bank, and an increased military presence has created a sense of unease for Sally and her fellow Palestinians. Still, she knows that this is nothing compared to what her neighbors in Gaza are experiencing. When people in her congregation have lost family in Gaza, Sally explains, “we did the mourning here, where they were not able to physically say goodbye to their loved ones.” In all this turmoil Sally often sees her community of Palestinian Christians overlooked by the rest of the world.

Sally wants her ministries to thrive despite adversity and to endure in hope. She believes they can, with the support of members of the global community such as you. “It’s the resilience of our community and the support of allies worldwide that sustain us through these tumultuous times,” she says, “inspiring us to continue our mission of faith and service.”



"It's the resilience of our community and the support of allies that sustain us through these tumultuous times, inspiring us to continue our mission of faith and service."

—Rev. Sally Azar



# Walking Together

## After the Storm



*Tornado damage in Selma, Ala.*

**S**elma, Ala., has experienced tornadoes but nothing as devastating as the one that tore through the community on Jan. 12, 2023. With wind speeds of more than 100 miles per hour, the tornado caused widespread damage, affecting almost every resident in some way.

Over a year later, countless people still need assistance to rebuild their lives. Sheronda Armstrong, a community outreach worker through Lutheran Disaster Response, is ensuring that impacted people have the resources they need to do just that.

Sheronda's role is to connect residents to disaster recovery resources or organizations that can

address their needs. The needs of individuals vary – many need home repairs, but others need health care support, guidance with paperwork for federal assistance and insurance claims, or emotional and spiritual care.

Sheronda advocates for residents and empowers them throughout the recovery journey. “You become a counselor, you become a teacher, you become a servant,” she said.

Attending dedications for new homes – some of which were built with support from Lutheran Disaster Response – is a source of joy for Sheronda. After giving her a hug, one new homeowner remarked, “I didn't have a home; I didn't dream that I could have my own home.”



*Sheronda Armstrong hosts an event for people impacted by the January 2023 tornado in Selma, Ala.*



## *“I didn’t have a home; I didn’t dream that I could have my own home.”*

Through your gifts to ELCA ministries such as Lutheran Disaster Response, more people are being connected with the resources they need to recover after disasters.

One woman, a grandmother of nine, has no form of transportation, which made finding disaster assistance difficult. Sheronda dropped off the paperwork the woman needed and picked it up after she’d filled it out. That small act made a huge difference, and that woman is now getting her recovery needs addressed. Lack of transportation is just one of the barriers Selma residents face that prevent them from accessing recovery services. Others lack internet access or have limited forms of communication.

Sheronda has found creative ways to reach people. She attends weekly community bingo nights to connect with people she wouldn’t meet through other avenues. She sets up a table and hands out flyers about how people can find what they

need, whether it’s contractors, low-cost building materials or applications for federal aid.

Sheronda describes herself as “a human being who’s in the community helping people.” She builds trust and relationships with people who are weary of the automated messages greeting them when they need help. The work of Lutheran Disaster Response is built on relationships – with partners, with volunteers and with survivors themselves.

“I try to follow my heart, and what becomes of that I never know,” says Sheronda. “All I have is my brain and my heart.” Along with your gifts to the ELCA, Sheronda’s brain and heart are making a real difference in the Selma community. Through your generosity, you are sharing God’s hope, healing and renewal with countless people whose lives have been upended by disaster. Your support ensures that disaster survivors are never alone.

Your gifts to Lutheran Disaster Response help people in places such as Selma, Ala., access the resources they need after disasters. With your support they are rebuilding their homes, their community and their lives.

# Boundless

Summer 2024

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America  
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*The Rev. Sally Azar is the first woman pastor in the Holy Land. Learn more about her work on p. 10.*