



ELCA COVID-19 Response Fund Spring 2021 Update

Since the COVID-19 crisis hit last year, we have been living in a reality steeped in grief, fear and uncertainty. But all this time, the church has never closed. Thanks to donors such as you, we have proved that God's abundance has no limits.



Launched in response to the unprecedented need caused by the pandemic, the ELCA's COVID-19 Response Fund supports the ministries of this church that are most in need and best positioned to make an impact.

Thank you for sharing your gifts with our church and the world.

The situation

In the United States, unemployment continues to climb, demands on our food pantries and social services are rising, and congregations are feeling the financial strain. Around the world, millions of people living in poverty are facing this pandemic and its long-term impacts without reliable access to sanitation or health care. There are many people in poverty who are hurting, and COVID-19 has exacerbated the cruelty in our society.



Volunteers prepare bags of food and supplies at Holy Trinity Lutheran Church.

However, donors such as you have committed to addressing this crisis and joined hands with people who are struggling throughout our community in Christ.

By the numbers

- Since the fund's inception, **63 synods** have applied for and received grants, with a total **165 grants** distributed to synods through seven granting rounds.
- ELCA members, including you, have contributed nearly **\$1.8 million** to date.
- The ELCA has distributed nearly **\$1.5 million** to the synods.
- Additional funds from the COVID-19 Response Fund were distributed through ELCA World Hunger Daily Bread Grants, which address hunger in local communities through existing ministries.
 - \$180,000 was distributed as matching grant funds, a portion of which came from the COVID-19 Response Fund. 360 congregations across 60 synods and 43 states (including Puerto Rico and Washington, D.C.) used those matching grants to raise \$355,000+ for their ministries. Together, we've raised a total of **\$535,000** to address hunger in local communities.

Your impact

These grants are supporting our siblings in Christ in a variety of ways, providing resources to:

- feed people in poverty – particularly through congregations and local ministries serving communities that are disproportionately at risk from the pandemic.
- install new technology in our buildings for innovative faith formation.
- pay salaries for those who are critical to carrying out the mission of this church, such as leaders of outdoor ministries and small, under-resourced congregations.
- ministries 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. In the following report, you will see how your gifts are reaching our church and the world. Thank you.

Prince of Peace Lutheran Church, Greensboro, N.C.

One congregation supported by your generous gifts to the COVID-19 Response Fund is Prince of Peace Lutheran Church in Greensboro, N.C. Prince of Peace has been an institution in the historically Black neighborhood of Warnersville for decades. The church has been home to programs for daycare, youth, elder care, job training, food assistance and more. Prince of Peace is truly in the heart of the neighborhood, and church membership is blurry – almost everyone in the community has been touched by the church’s ministries even if they haven’t attended worship.



Pastor Matt hosts a group in an outdoor gathering.

When the pandemic hit in the spring of 2020, it was a major disruption, just as it was for everyone across the country.

“I would say the biggest challenge,” said Rev. Matt Canniff-Kesecker, the pastor of Prince of Peace, “is that a large mission of our congregation is being a community center, being a sign of kin-dom and abundant life in our neighborhood, and really fostering relationships with people who live near us, and that all became a whole lot harder.”

Two years ago, Prince of Peace started its newest community venture, an urban teaching farm on three acres of land on which the church sits. The farm was at a turning point and was really taking off – the congregation was growing and selling food, and the farm was becoming an educational site for youth and school groups to visit. The urban farm was growing into a gathering place where community members had impromptu meetups and potlucks.

Then, COVID-19 halted that momentum.

“This has always been ... a congregation that has been mission-oriented and has been more worried about living out its mission than where the money is going to come from,” said Pastor Matt, “In normal times, we’re trying to do a lot with a little bit, and COVID did disrupt our giving, and so there was some worry in that.”

When the opportunity arose, Prince of Peace tried applying for a Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) loan. However, like so many other small congregations, they kept hitting roadblocks with their status in the banking system. They were struggling hard and doubting their ability to access a loan. So, the synod stepped in and decided to provide their own version of a PPP loan to the congregation – a grant, supplied by the ELCA’s COVID-19 Response Fund, which they matched with the synod fund.

But the story doesn’t end there. At the same time the church was giving up on the prospect of getting a PPP loan, the ELCA Foundation, which was helping the ELCA Credit Union field loan requests, contacted Pastor Matt. If they opened an account with the credit union, they could receive a loan in 24 hours.



Community youth gather at the urban teaching farm.

“We really just went from being stymied in every way and feeling like we were buried in bureaucracy and it wasn’t going to happen, to it becoming such a church partnership, where you have somebody from the ELCA Foundation, the Credit Union, the synod, all bending over backward to help us get this quickly,” said Pastor Matt. “And then, what that allowed us to do was take a breath and not worry in the same way, and just stay focused on how we were going to live out our mission in the new reality.”

This joint funding allowed the urban farm ministry to adapt – they were able to give away weekly boxes of produce from the farm to about 20 families in need, addressing hunger in the neighborhood directly. This is what is made possible by your generous gifts to the ELCA COVID-19 Response Fund.

“If you want a story of loaves and fishes, it started with feeling stuck at the bank – [now] we have an ELCA grant, a synod grant and a PPP loan,” said Pastor Danielle DeNise, Director for Evangelical Mission at the North Carolina Synod. “But then also, as Pastor Matt said, we could breathe. As a white church, part of what I want is for my siblings of color to be able to breathe so they can live into their God-given gifts, which can be abundant life through a farm, abundant life as they worship outside, abundant life through a bonfire for young adults. All of those things are made possible when you are not counting nickels.”



Community youth engage and learn at the urban teaching farm.

South Sudan Lutheran Church Fargo, N.D.



A delegation from South Sudan Lutheran Church at the 2019 South Sudanese ELCA Network gathering.

One of the ministries supported by your gifts to the COVID-19 Response Fund is South Sudan Lutheran Church in Fargo, N.D.

The congregation is led by lay leader Mr. Matuor Alier, who is also a social worker with the Cass County Economic Assistance Division, chair of the Fargo Human Relations Commission, a Bush Foundation fellow and a member of the Eastern North Dakota Synod Council.

“After I moved to Fargo, I joined First Sudanese Lutheran Church. We came together with other Sudanese community members and the synod to start South Sudan Lutheran Church,” said Alier. “Our church is a place where people who have experienced emptiness, war zones, confusion and misery can know healing, fulfillment, joy, love and faith.”

Like many churches across the country, South Sudan Lutheran struggled when the pandemic hit. Church members were trying to apply for unemployment benefits offered

by the government, but they were unable to easily navigate the process since many didn't speak English as a first language. After receiving a grant from the COVID-19 Response Fund, the church was able to support its members.

"We were able to provide foods for some families from our congregation, rental assistances for those who have lost their jobs and distance learning activities for students who are unable to get help at home," said Alier. "We were able to mobilize some volunteers to help with the unemployment applications while applicants wait for their unemployment benefit to come through, [and] we provide them with foods during that time."

Funds from the COVID-19 Response Fund, including your generous gifts, supported a ministry of the congregation that they have developed from the ground up – they help people file for and keep up with reporting on unemployment benefits with English translation for their many members who do not sufficiently read or write English in order to complete these on their own.

"My grandfather used to say, 'I cannot be whole unless everyone is whole,'" says Alier. "I use this saying a lot to help me stay in a close relationship with others. It means that we need each other's support to survive and thrive. I don't want to be the only one doing well if others aren't doing well. It's not just about me – it's about us."

Marion Correctional Institution ELCA ministry in Marion, Ohio

Your gifts to the ELCA COVID-19 Response Fund have allowed ministries to be innovative and responsive in addressing local needs during the pandemic.

"These grants have been excellent. It has been incredibly helpful that you [the ELCA] have allowed synods to retain decision-making responsibility," said Rev. Sarah Schaaf, the director for Community Engagement for the Northwestern Ohio Synod. "That has allowed us ... to respond to the needs we are seeing and allow enough flexibility that people can dream up new ways to use the funding to meet the needs of their people."

One ministry in Northwestern Ohio supported by your generous gifts is behind prison walls. Prisons and jails around the country have been some of the hardest hit communities during the pandemic, with little of the resources needed in order to

combat the spread. Many people who are incarcerated are required to spend most of their time in extreme isolation due to lockdowns, which takes a serious toll on mental and physical health.

At Marion Correctional Institution in Marion, Ohio, 95% of the prison system has been positively diagnosed with COVID-19, and the institution had to go into lockdown. The prison used grant funding from the ELCA COVID-19 Response Fund to get the equipment needed to broadcast services, educational videos and concerts within the prison walls.

“Religious programming runs 24 hours a day, seven days a week there now and will well into the future,” said Rev. Schaaf. “Months later, we are still getting thank you notes from men incarcerated at MCI.”

Immanuel Lutheran Church Boise, Idaho

Recent data is only beginning to show how food insecurity has increased in the United States during the last year. But long before the numbers appeared in research reports, leaders and volunteers at Immanuel Lutheran Church in Boise, Idaho, saw the alarming numbers of people showing up in line for food. Immanuel’s Food Fellowship Ministry was serving about 65 people per week before March 2020. After the shutdowns, more than twice as many people were showing up every week for fresh fruit and vegetables, hot meals and other food Immanuel could provide.

The Food Fellowship Ministry, like so many feeding ministries around the U.S., faced an unprecedented increase in costs. Not only were more people showing up, but restrictions on meals meant finding a way to afford takeout containers, disposable tableware and cups.



Volunteers at Immanuel's Food Fellowship Ministry pictured before COVID-19.

Donations to the COVID-19 Response Fund, including your generous gifts, supported an additional round of ELCA World Hunger's Daily Bread Matching Grants, which provided a way for Immanuel to reach out to their network of generous supporters to meet the increased needs. Daily Bread Matching Grants are an innovative way to connect donors from across the ELCA with local ministries. Through their matching grant, Immanuel used ELCA World Hunger's online platform to raise funds from local supporters. These funds were then matched by \$500 grants made possible by gifts to the COVID-19 Response Fund and ELCA World Hunger, multiplying the support partners receive.

As the people at Immanuel's ministry know, though, hunger is not just a matter of numbers. Each of the guests at the Food Fellowship Ministry is a valued neighbor. That's why it was important for Immanuel to find new ways to help each person in need. With members worshipping remotely, the Food Fellowship Ministry asked the congregation to provide donations for gift cards at Christmas instead of the gifts they usually provide. They also held a special Christmas feast with ham, chicken and other traditional holiday fixings.

This approach to ministry makes a difference, both to the people at Immanuel and the guests in the ministry. "I don't think you can know the depth and breadth that your gifts and kindness penetrate into needy souls," wrote one guest in a letter to Immanuel. "No one else is doing a hot meal, let alone a good one. They try...but when it doesn't matter to the entire congregation, it's paltry. It's not just the gift, but that you are happy to give."

Research on hunger can provide information on numbers and trends, but the on-the-ground ministry of Immanuel's Food Fellowship Program creates a space to meet neighbors in need – to hear their stories and to be part of the larger story of God working through supporters, volunteers, leaders, guests and congregations in Boise and across the ELCA to end hunger. During the pandemic, the numbers have gone up, but Immanuel's ministry has adapted, with support from your gifts to the COVID-19 Response Fund, to make sure that every guest continues to be welcomed and fed.

**Our work is not yet done. The ELCA continues to minister to its members, to those hurting and searching for peace, and to those in need. This pandemic is not over. Your continuing gifts ensure that we can respond quickly and effectively through ministries that serve those most impacted.
Thank you, again, for your generous gifts and vital support.**