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To serve and love the neighbor
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**Evangelical Lutheran
Church in America**
God's work. Our hands.

Study guide

To serve and love the neighbor

By Robert C. Blezard

In five years “God’s work. Our hands.” Sunday has grown from an innovative idea to an emerging valued tradition. You see the trademark bright yellow shirts as Lutherans organize to serve their neighbor, embody the love of Christ and witness to the gospel. The Sunday also provides visibility for our churches and helps everyday Lutherans deepen their discipleship.

Exercise 1: Sights and symbols

Those popular bright yellow shirts have become a highly visible uniform for the participants in “God’s work. Our hands.” Sunday projects.

- What do you think of when you see folks wearing those yellow T-shirts?
- What do you think the shirts have meant to people in the ELCA?
- What message do the shirts send to the world?

Exercise 2: “God’s work. Our hands.”

A catchy slogan goes a long way in helping an effort get off the ground.

- What does “God’s work. Our hands.” mean to you? What images come to mind?
- What makes “God’s work. Our hands.” such a good slogan?
- What exactly is the “God’s work” that we do? List as many kinds of work as you can.
- Looking at the list, what makes the items God’s work? Why do we do it?
- What Bible references inform us about God’s work that we are asked to do?
- Why does God use “our hands” to accomplish God’s work?
- How do we grow as we use our hands for God’s work? How does our church grow? How do we help accomplish God’s mission for the world?

Exercise 3: Sainly advice

Teresa of Avila, the 16th-century Spanish nun and mystic, left us a treasury of wisdom and insight, including her renowned book *The Interior Castle*.

A passage attributed to her echoes the ideas of “God’s work. Our hands.”



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Read it and discuss what moves you, what inspires you, what is true. How do you feel?

Christ has no body now but yours.

No hands, no feet on earth but yours.

Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world.

Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good.

Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world.

Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body.

Christ has no body now on earth but yours.

Exercise 4: “God’s work. *Your hands.*”

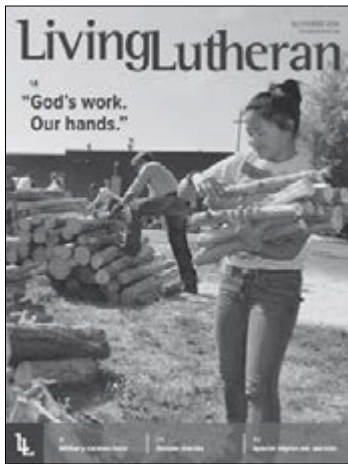
If your congregation has participated in “Gods work. Our hands.” Sunday, discuss (if not, skip to the next section below):

- How many of the last five years has your congregation participated?
- What led you to join “God’s work. Our hands”? What keeps you doing it?
- Has participation increased over the years? Has the excitement?
- How do participants respond and feel about it?
- What kind of activities have you done? Have you joined with other churches?
- How has your community responded?
- What messages does this day of service give your neighbors about you? Your congregation? God’s people?
- In what ways does this day help grow you (and other participants) in faith? Grow your church? Grow your community?

If your congregation **has not** participated in “God’s work. Our hands.” Sunday:

- What obstacles or factors have kept your congregation from joining? How can they be overcome?
- What would it take to put a program in place?
- What ELCA ministry partners might collaborate with you for “God’s work. Our hands.” Sunday?
- In what ministries or outreach efforts does your congregation currently engage? Could a special project in one of those ministries serve as a basis for your day of service?
- How might “God’s work. Our hands.” Sunday energize your congregation, your outreach efforts or your social ministry?

For action: Develop a plan for getting involved in next year’s “God’s work.



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Our hands." Sunday. Include several ideas and planning steps to make it happen. Give it to your pastor or congregation council for consideration.

Exercise 5: "Our hands" mural project

Here is an artwork activity that your congregation can have a hand in. Perhaps it can be used to publicize next year's "God's work. Our hands." activities. On a highly visible wall (maybe in the narthex or fellowship hall), post a big sheet of paper from a newsprint or craft paper roll. In big bright letters write "God's work. Our hands." Alongside the display put an assortment of water-based, washable markers.

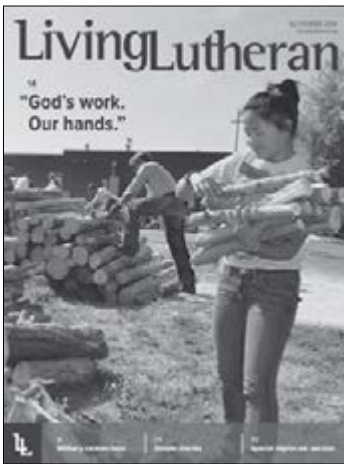
Invite people to place their hand on the paper, trace it with a marker and sign it with their name. They can color or decorate their hand tracing as they wish.

You might also use this mural as a "sign up" sheet for "God's work. Our hands." Sunday activities.

Exercise 6: Love your neighbor (Luke 10:25-37)

Drawing from Jewish teaching in Leviticus 19:18 (and elsewhere), Jesus lifts up "Love your neighbor as yourself" as a central tenet of Christianity. The parable of the good Samaritan serves as a definitive explanation of what this principle means. Read Luke 10:25-37 and discuss:

- What is the question asked by the expert in the Jewish law that initiates the whole discussion?
- What is the question for which "love your neighbor as yourself" is half of the answer?
- Jesus affirms the lawyer's correct response and gives him what directive?
- What's the second question that the expert in the Jewish law asks? Why do you think he asks it? Why wasn't Jesus' answer in verse 28 sufficient?
- So the whole parable of the good Samaritan is the answer to what question?
- Why weren't the first two passers-by neighbors to the beaten man?
- Why was the Samaritan a neighbor?
- What answers does the parable give to the question, "Who is my neighbor?"
- What does this whole passage teach us about what it means to love our neighbor as ourselves?
- Can we love our neighbors if we don't have a relationship with them?
- What directive does Jesus conclude with in verse 37? How does it relate to Jesus' directive in verse 28?



About the study guide author:

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- What are some takeaway lessons from this passage for you and your congregation?
- How does this teaching relate to “God’s work. Our hands.”?
- How could you use this teaching as a way to explain the meaning of “God’s work. Our hands.”?

Exercise 7: The least of these (Matthew 25:31-46)

Jesus’ parable of the sheep and goats has informed Christians about their duty to needy neighbors. Read Matthew 25:31-46 and discuss:

- What’s going on in this passage? Who is being judged and why?
- What’s the difference between the sheep and goats?
- For both sheep and goats the criteria for judgment is the same. What is it?
- Who are “the least of these”? What does it mean that “the king” identifies with them?
- Who are “the least of these” in your community? Our culture? The world?
- What is our responsibility?
- How does this teaching relate to “God’s work. Our hands.”?
- How could you use this parable as a way to explain to others the meaning of “God’s work. Our hands.”?

Exercise 8: Inspirational stories

The article in *Living Lutheran* lifts up stories of congregations that have found innovative and creative ways to celebrate “God’s work. Our hands.” Sunday.

- Which stories do you find most inspiring? Why?
- Which congregation best resembles your own in size, context and other factors?
- Which outreach ministry aligns with your congregation’s interests and context?
- Given your community’s needs and opportunities, what potential projects could your congregation take on for next year’s observance of “God’s work. Our hands.”? For action, make a list and give it to your pastor and congregation council for consideration.

To serve and love the neighbor



By Megan Brandsrud

You know them if you've seen them—the bright yellow shirts emblazoned with the message

“God’s work. Our hands.”

They first appeared in 2013 when “God’s work. Our hands.” Sunday, a national day of service for ELCA congregations, was introduced. While the T-shirts aren’t necessary for participation, they’ve become a sort of visual symbol for the unity experienced across the church on that Sunday in September when congregations gather for service.

This year, ELCA congregations around the country celebrated the fifth anniversary of “God’s work. Our hands” Sunday by once again going out into their neighborhoods to meet needs in their communities and form relationships with people who might not typically come to their church.

In her video invitation to congregations, Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton said the service day is “an opportunity to celebrate who we are as the ELCA—one church, freed in Christ to serve and love our neighbor.” And how that’s lived out is just as varied in creativity and mission as the number of congregations that participate.

Hard work fulfills a need

Faith Lutheran Church in Lander, Wyo., started participating in “God’s work. Our hands.” Sunday in 2013 with a variety of service projects around town. Three years ago, they added an activity to their service day when members Hart and Josey Jacobsen had to cut down a lot of trees on their property that had been killed by the pine bark beetle.

“We had a lot of wood that had

been cut, and I thought this would be a real opportunity to make use of it and distribute it to those who would need it,” said Hart Jacobsen, referring to many in the area who use wood-burning stoves to heat their homes during winter.

About a month before their service day, members of Faith go to the Jacobsens’ property with pickups and trailers to spend a day cutting and sizing the wood to haul it to the vacant lot next

to the church. Then on “God’s work. Our hands.” Sunday, people come with chainsaws and wood splitters to cut the logs into fireplace-sized lengths.

“This year we had about two dozen people—all ages, men and women, and even some people who aren’t members of the church who just live in the neighborhood and showed up to help,” said Mark Moxley from Faith. For the past couple of years, a pastor from a nearby reservation also has come with others to help with the project.

“It’s hard work but I think you get more satisfaction out of it when you work hard,” Moxley said. “It benefits not only the people we give the firewood to, but it also helps clean the forest and reduce the risk of forest fires.”

“It’s not just members of a congregation getting together and helping each other, but we’re really reaching out into the community, and I do feel like God is working through our congregation to help folks out.”

Moxley estimates the congregation has at least five cords of wood (one cord is a well-stacked woodpile about 128 cubic feet in volume) by the time they’re done stacking it. Some of it gets distributed to older parishioners who might have trouble acquiring wood, some goes to families who

Photo on page 14: Dave Steidley tosses a freshly sawn log on the pile for splitting on “God’s work. Our hands.” Sunday at Faith Lutheran Church in Lander, Wyo. Below: Mark Moxley, a member of Faith, uses his splitter to get logs to a manageable size for burning.



Photos: Kris Trahnstrom

live on the reservation, and the rest is distributed or picked up as members hear of people who need wood for the winter.

“It really is an outreach activity,” he said. “It’s not just members of a congregation getting together and helping each other, but we’re really reaching out into the community, and I do feel like God is working through our congregation to help folks out.”

Josey Jacobsen agrees: “Sometimes you can’t always think of what to do in your community, but this is something concrete—something we know will help people.”

Community connections

On its service day, Grace Lutheran Church in Lancaster, Pa., hosts a community cookout. A few weeks leading up to the event, members canvass the neighborhood with news of the cookout, hanging door hangers written in English and Spanish, and extending personal invitations to people they meet.

Steve Verkouw, pastor of Grace, said a variety of people attend—some live in the neighborhood, some are homeless and know about Grace from a weekly meal it hosts, and others are from groups with whom Grace shares its building. This year 150 people attended.

On the day of the cookout, members set up stations, grilling hot dogs in the parking lot and welcoming people. Parishioners and people from the neighborhood bring side dishes and desserts to share. Favors are handed out—this year it was handmade dishcloths wrapped with a label that said “Handmade with love,” along with information about worship times at Grace.

There are also often music and games for the children, but the main point of the cookout is about



Photos: Nick Gould Photography

Above: Patti and Carl Hartman take a break from serving ice cream to eat lunch at the community cookout on “God’s work. Our hands.” Sunday at Grace Lutheran Church, Lancaster, Pa. Below: Barbara Andersen carries the favors that are given to each guest. This year’s favors were hand-knit dishcloths wrapped with messages of welcome.



spending time with neighbors and being in conversation. “Sometimes we’re talking with someone and find out that they might be in a situation where we could be able to provide them some help, and if we hadn’t met them we wouldn’t have known,” said Barbara Andersen from Grace. “I can’t emphasize enough how important it is to just be with people.”

Along with human needs, “we want to let them know we’re here for spiritual needs too,” Verkouw said, adding that members often make deliberate efforts to connect with the community. “The cookout isn’t so much a special event but more a celebration of what we’re always trying to do,” he said.

“I can’t emphasize enough how important it is to just be with people.”

Andersen said it’s inspirational to see what other ELCA congregations do on “God’s work. Our hands.” Sunday, and she hopes that Grace’s story can be an inspiration to those who might be able to host something similar.

“What’s so wonderful is that during this meal, everyone is so equally a child of God,” she said. “No one knows who is who or what their station in life is. Everyone is just having a great time together.”

The more, the merrier

Several congregations gather with other faith communities in their area for “God’s work. Our hands.” Sunday. For five years, five ELCA congregations in Colorado Springs, Colo. (Grace, Ascension, Christ the King, First and Prince of Peace), have joined together for the day of service.

Cathy Irwin, a member of Grace who helps coordinate the projects, said representatives from each congregation meet in the summer to find and recommend

activities for the day of service and choose activities that represent a citywide need.

This year, 138 people from the five congregations participated in 13 service projects around the city, including assisting at a food

pantry, helping at local nonprofits and a community center, and making sack lunches for people who are hungry. Each activity had a leader and members from all congregations represented.

“I look forward to working together to do God’s work with *many* hands,” Irwin said. “I’ve met so many wonderful people that share the same love of community and want to serve the organizations that look forward to our working together to help them accomplish their mission. When we all work together, we laugh a lot, work hard and share interesting things that are unique to our congregations. It’s truly a sharing Sunday.”

Engaging stories and expanding service

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church in Somerville, N.J., has participated in “God’s work. Our hands.” Sunday for several years, and this September one of its service projects helped connect members to neighbors they’ve never met.

Stamp Out Despair is a program of First Friends of New Jersey and New York, an ecumenical nonprofit organization. For the project, congregation members filled 230 folders with correspondence materials to be given to people being held in a New Jersey detention center. The folders all contained lined paper, colored paper, greeting cards, some stamped and unstamped envelopes, a pen and a handwritten note from a member of Good Shepherd.

“I think it might be easier for a congregation to hear that someone needs something and write a check, but it can be hard to engage the stories of people who just need pen and paper to let their family know they’re alive,” said Chelsea Miller, pastor

Robert Durand (right), a member of Grace, talks with a neighbor during the community meal. About 150 people attended this year’s cookout at Grace.



Photo: Nick Gould Photography

of Good Shepherd. “I think that’s become an important part of ‘God’s work. Our hands.’ for us—engaging stories and people we don’t hear or meet every day.”

Good Shepherd had several service projects in addition to Stamp Out Despair organized for its Sunday, and more than 100 people from the congregation participated.

“We have little kids working alongside our oldest members, serving together,” Miller said. “More than one person commented on how we’re just one small part on this day, and when we looked at how much we accomplished, it’s amazing to think about how much the church as a whole accomplished on that day. It’s a neat reminder, year after year, that we’re part of something so much bigger than ourselves.”

Good Shepherd has expanded its efforts by dedicating one Sunday every month to intentional service. “The participants in this faith community hear the words of Jesus to go out and serve your neighbor, and they live into that like nothing else I’ve ever seen,” Miller said. “They identify what they’re called to do as people of

God and as a congregation that is called by Christ to do God’s work in the world.”

Stepping out in service

For some congregations, “God’s work. Our hands.” Sunday serves as an introduction to outreach ministry.

When Grace Gravelle was called as pastor of West Union Lutheran in Cologne, Minn., in January 2018, she found that the congregation had never really engaged in service or activities with their neighbors. “I started having conversations with them about how we can reach out and be a blessing to the community and welcome people,” she said.

When she suggested participating in the ELCA service day, Gravelle said the congregation was a little nervous because they had never heard of it before, let alone participated in it. But they were eager to try something new.

They ordered the yellow T-shirts and Gravelle made flyers

that listed information about West Union and invited people to some upcoming events. On their service day, West Union’s members filled goody bags with candy and homemade cookies and delivered them with the flyers to different places in town—the nursing home, the police station and to people from church they hadn’t seen in a while.

“The point is to be God’s people in the world for the blessing of the world.”

Member Jason Johnson made deliveries with his family around their neighborhood. He knew his daughters would love the activity but was a little hesitant himself. “My family and I love to participate in church activities with our church family and friends, but to be honest, I’m not very good at talking with strangers,” he said.

While Johnson expected to finish the deliveries quickly, his family ended up spending time talking with people who were interested in learning more about

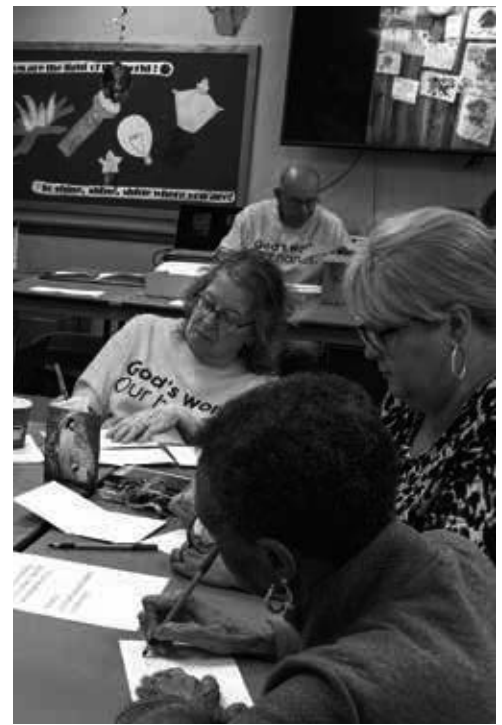
Worshippers at Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Somerville, N.J., take communion before participating in several “God’s work. Our hands.” Sunday activities. More than 100 people participated in the service projects.



Photos: Brett Nelson



Sabrina Eilers (10th grade) and Victoria Diaz (ninth grade) count sheets of paper to meet the specifications for the Stamp Out Despair project at Good Shepherd.



Members write a card of greeting and prayer for each Stamp Out Despair packet.

what they were doing and why. “It was fun to see how people reacted to getting a treat for no other reason than to spread happiness,” he said. “We ended up having a lot of fun and talked to a lot of people who I had lived near for years but never officially met.”

Gravelle said the congregation is now looking at other ideas of how they can engage their community, such as delivering lunches to farmers in the fields and making sure people know about their Sunday school programming.

“I think the potential to be a voice for God in the world in Cologne is something they didn’t feel they had the ability to do before,” she said. “It was a step to help bring the congregation to a more evangelical outlook of where God is calling us and to show that they can go out and tell people that we’re here and God loves them.”

When congregations participate in “God’s work. Our hands.” Sunday, they’re contributing to something bigger than themselves that helps create relationships in the world, said

Ruben Duran, ELCA director for congregational vitality.

“Being part of the church is not about us; it’s about the world,” he added. “We’re an institution that lives for others. Some of those neighbors might come to church or they might not. The point is to be God’s people in the world for the blessing of the world.”

Duran said the ELCA’s service day is also a way to discover what God is doing in the world through others—to become “detectives of divinity” and see how people are always doing God’s work in the world, even if they don’t call it that.

Anna-Kari Johnson, ELCA assistant director for congregational vitality, said, “There are

many exciting ways people are doing God’s work, whether they think of themselves as religious or not. Go out and find it. Affirm it, bless it and join in it.”

“God’s work. Our hands.” Sunday is a day of service that’s made special because it’s an intentional effort to unite ELCA congregations around the country, but Duran said it’s also an extension of what Lutherans are already doing and are called by God to do—to care for the well-being of the world.

His co-worker, Johnson, agrees: “It doesn’t have to be once a year. You haven’t missed it. Your opportunity to do God’s work with your hands is today, again, always.”

For more information on “God’s work. Our hands.” Sunday, go to elca.org/dayofservice. Watch a video of the service day held at Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Somerville, N.J., at youtube.com/elca.

Download a study guide at livinglutheran.org by clicking on the “Spiritual practices & resources” tab.



Megan Brandsrud is a content editor of *Living Lutheran*.