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## Study guide

# Bread for today, hope for tomorrow

*What's behind domestic food insecurity?*

By Robert C. Blezard

With a median household income of more than \$63,000, the United States is one of the wealthiest nations in the world, and yet 11% of our households were at risk for hunger in 2018. Experts say it's not a lack of food that's causing the problem, but a complicated web of problems made worse by imbalances in income. Food ministries help, but are there better solutions?

### Exercise 1: Your experience with hunger

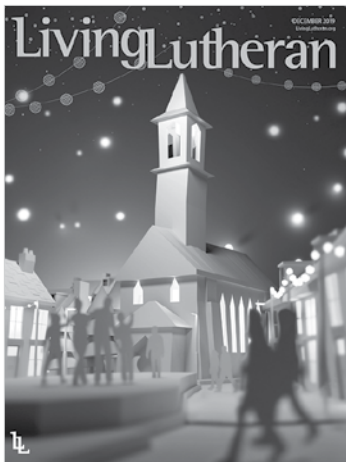
Many of us have experienced or witnessed hunger in our lifetimes. It leaves lasting impressions.

- Do you have any personal experiences that help you relate to the 11% of “food-insecure” households in our country?
- Can you share a time when you had trouble putting food on the table for yourself or your family? What were the circumstances? How did you cope? How did you feel?
- Have you ever skipped meals or gone without food in order to pay rent or other bills? Why? How did it make you feel?
- Do you have friends or family members who have experienced hunger? Can you share their experiences?
- What do you imagine it's like to be unable to feed yourself or your family properly? For a parent, what feelings would likely arise? How would it affect a family's emotional well-being in the short term? In the long term?

### Exercise 2: Your congregation's response

Many Lutheran congregations assist in local hunger relief, whether it's collecting food for a pantry, offering free community meals or filling weekend backpacks for schoolchildren. Feeding ministries take many forms.

- How would you describe or evaluate the need for feeding programs in your community?
- Does your congregation engage in feeding efforts within your community?
- Are you aware of any other hunger alleviation efforts within your community? What organizations sponsor them?
- Are there more feeding programs in your congregation or community than in years past? Think of the feeding programs in 2010, 2000, 1990. If there are more, what accounts for the increase?



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## Study guide: **Bread for today** *continued*

- What do you see as the primary causes of hunger in your community? What can be done about them?
- Do these programs meet all the hunger needs in your community? Why or why not? How do you know?
- Is the answer to hunger in your community exclusively in providing more charitable feeding programs? Why or why not?
- What else needs to be done? How can you and your congregation help?

### Exercise 3: "Food insecurity"

"Food insecurity" is a technical term for hunger in America. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) defines it this way: "**Food-insecure** households are uncertain of having, or unable to acquire, at some time during the year, enough food to meet the needs of all their members because they had insufficient money or other resources for food."

Within that group are families with "very low food security," which the USDA describes this way: "Households with **very low food security** are food insecure to the extent that normal eating patterns of some household members were disrupted at times during the year, with self-reported food intake below levels considered adequate." Discuss:

- What do you make of these definitions? How do these definitions help you understand issues of hunger more fully?
- How might you identify and understand the needs of "food insecure" people and families in your community, as well as households with "very low food security"?
- How might these definitions assist you or your congregation to respond and assist hungry people in our country, your state or your community?

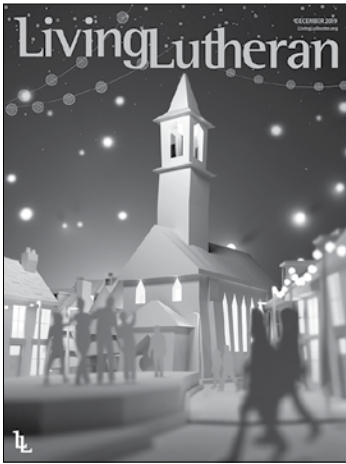
### Exercise 4: Local hunger

Food insecurity is everywhere, from innermost city neighborhoods to isolated rural villages, from middle-class suburbia to small town USA. What's the status of hunger in your county? What percentage of people are "food insecure" in your area?

First, as a study group, estimate what you think the food insecurity rate would be for your state and county.

Then check out your county's actual food insecurity rate by going to Feeding America's map of hunger at [map.feedingamerica.org](http://map.feedingamerica.org). Find your state and county's food insecurity rate. Discuss:

- How accurate was your study group's estimate? Were you surprised? Why or why not?
- How does your state's hunger rate compare with those of neighboring states? Your county with those of neighboring counties?



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- What do you conclude from this information?
- How can this inform your synod's or your congregation's work in hunger?

### Exercise 5: Local poverty

Poverty is readily apparent in many communities where you might see decaying infrastructure and shuttered businesses, but it also exists in many neighborhoods that outwardly seem prosperous. Obviously, if a problem is unknown and unseen, how can it be addressed? Explore poverty in your community.

First, as a study group, estimate what you *think* the percentage of folks living below the federal poverty level is for your community.

Next, check out your community's actual poverty rate at the Census Bureau's website. Go to [factfinder.census.gov](http://factfinder.census.gov) (click on "Community Facts") and type in your ZIP code, then hit enter. When the results are displayed, click on the "poverty" tab on the left.

- How accurate was your estimation? What did you learn from the results?
- "Drill down" into the poverty data and review the details, including ages, ethnicity and categories of people living below the poverty line. What information surprised you most? Which moved you the most? Explain.
- What does this data mean for your community? For your congregation?
- How can this information better inform your congregation's social service or outreach programs?

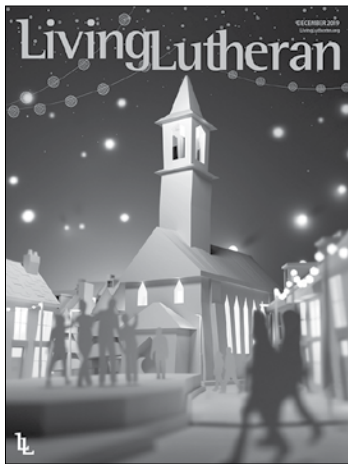
### Exercise 6: A "living wage"?

What income does it really take for a family to meet their basic, no-frills needs—food, clothing, housing, etc.? This is a "living wage," and advocates say it's much more than both the U.S. poverty level and what a family could earn from minimum wage. And, of course, it varies by region, state and municipality. What about your state and metro region?

Scientists at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) have developed a web tool that calculates the living wage by state and metropolitan area. And not only living wage, but also poverty wage (how much a family would have to earn to be at the federal poverty level) and minimum wage (which the U.S. government sets at \$7.25 an hour, but some states and areas have raised).

The calculator makes for an easy comparison of economic data of living wage, poverty wage and minimum wage. How are things in your state and area? Explore:

First, as a study group, decide together what you think your area's hourly "living wage" would be for a family similar to yours (number of adults, number of adults working, and up to three children). This is just for basics—no restaurant meals, vacations or entertainment.



## Study guide: **Bread for today** *continued*

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Then, decide what you think the income would be for that family to be at the federal poverty level.

Finally, consider what the minimum wage is for your state or area.

Next, go to the MIT calculator at [livingwage.mit.edu](http://livingwage.mit.edu). Find your state and area, and compare the results.

- What did you learn?
- How did your estimates compare to the data?
- What surprised you, and why? What didn't surprise you, and why not?
- What's the difference between your area's "living wage" and the "poverty wage" and "minimum wage"?
- What emotions come to mind as you look at the information?
- What conclusions can you draw?

Follow up with the next exercise.

### **Exercise 7: Economic justice**

Statistically speaking, as our economy has grown in recent decades, income for those at the top of the earning scale has advanced much faster than those at the bottom. Case in point, the federal minimum wage has not increased since July 2009, when it was set at \$7.25 an hour. For a 40-hour week, a worker making minimum wage would take home \$290 a week, or \$15,000 a year.

Moreover, even in our booming economy, 27.5 million people lacked health insurance in 2018, the U.S. Census Bureau reports. It was the first time the number had increased since 2010, when the Affordable Care Act began adding people to insurance rolls. For people without health insurance, an injury or serious illness may spell not only financial ruin, but also death. Millions more have inadequate health insurance that results in high out-of-pocket costs. The Census Bureau reports that in 2017 nearly 11 million Americans were pushed into poverty by medical costs.

Discuss the justice implications:

- Do people who work hard at a job for 40 hours or more a week deserve to have enough money to live? Why or why not? Should a "living wage" be an expectation? A right? Why or why not?
- When the economy grows, shouldn't the gains be shared across the income groups, raising everyone's standard of living proportionally? Why or why not?
- What does it say about our country's tolerance for wage inequality when the minimum wage has not increased since 2009?
- Do people who work at a job for 40 hours or more a week deserve to have health insurance coverage that will care for them in the event of serious

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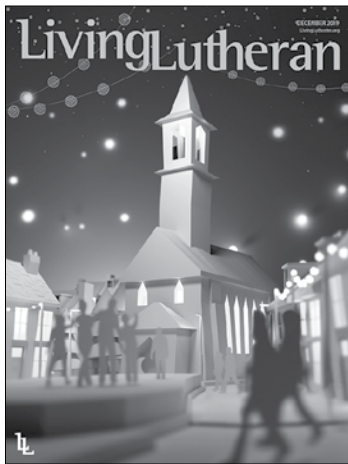
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illness or injury without jeopardizing their finances? Why or why not? Should health care be an expectation? A right? Why or why not?

- Politicians in Washington, D.C., have long promised to create a fair health insurance environment that would give everyone access to safe, affordable, reliable, adequate coverage. But severe problems remain both in access to coverage and adequacy, and the politics seems gridlocked. What does this reality say about our country's tolerance for injustice and suffering?
- The 2010 Affordable Care Act (ACA) significantly increased the number of Americans with health insurance coverage, but the number of uninsured people increased in 2018. Though the ACA is not a perfect law, our politicians have done nothing to fix or strengthen it. In fact, Congress has actually weakened it. What does it say about our country's tolerance for poverty when our politicians not only ignore a health insurance crisis, but actually work to weaken a program that was reducing the number of uninsured Americans?
- Why is adequate income and health insurance a matter of justice in our country, one of the wealthiest on the planet?
- As people of faith, what's our responsibility to speak up for the poor, the powerless and suffering? What Scripture passages support this view?
- As people of faith, what can we do to raise our voices and push our politicians to help our economy work for everyone?

### Exercise 8: Living on the edge

For millions of Americans living paycheck-to-paycheck, a simple unexpected expense can plunge them into hunger. In a landmark survey of 12,000 households, the Federal Reserve found that 40% of respondents said they would have a hard time coming up with money for a \$400 emergency bill. For them, an unexpected car repair or medical bill would create a crisis that might push them into food insecurity.

- Can you share a personal experience of living on the brink of financial disaster? Or, perhaps, a friend or family member who found himself or herself in that position? Can you explain the circumstances? What were the consequences?
- Do the Federal Reserve's survey findings surprise you? Why or why not?
- What do you think are the reasons people have so little in savings?
- To what degree do you think the following factors come into play: credit card debt, student loan debt, insufficient income, money mismanagement, living beyond one's means?
- What can the church do to help families in your community in this situation?
- As a study group, brainstorm five ways your congregation could help people who face temporary financial hardship. How would each idea work? What

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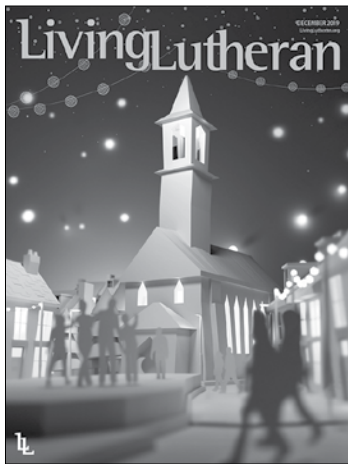
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### About the study guide author:

#### Rob Blezard

is an assistant to the bishop in the Lower Susquehanna Synod. He holds degrees from Boston University School of Theology and the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg (Pa).



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## Study guide: **Bread for today** *continued*

would it take to implement the idea? Flesh out the list and give it to your congregation council or pastor for consideration.

### Exercise 9: Feeding *plus*

In addition to providing groceries to needy families, some faith communities are teaching them how to manage their money better. Churches can sponsor, organize or support workshops, classes and one-on-one coaching in such topics as financial literacy, household budgeting, paying off consumer debt, saving for retirement and investing.

- What signs do you see in your community that there is a need for financial literacy training and coaching? Explain.
- From the perspective of your community, what kind of coaching or training would provide the most help, and why?
- Who could provide that kind of assistance in your community? Can you name individuals? Agencies or organizations? How might your congregation get things going?

# Bread for today, hope for tomorrow

What's behind domestic food insecurity?

By Ryan P. Cumming



Farming Hope is a San Francisco Bay Area nonprofit that provides transitional employment and job training to people who are experiencing poverty or were formerly incarcerated. In one program, participants work in a kitchen learning restaurant skills that can translate into a job in the culinary industry and in an urban garden learning about food production. Farming Hope received a grant from ELCA World Hunger in 2018.

Photos: Erik Unger

When Len first came to St. Matthew Trinity Lutheran Church's Lunchtime Ministry in Hoboken, N.J., it was as a last resort. Born in Jersey City in 1959, Len (last name withheld) had attended technical school in Texas before being deployed to California to work as a forklift driver for the Air Force. After his honorable discharge, he stayed in California. But when his father died, Len moved back to New Jersey to take care of his mother. When she died in 2011, he had nowhere to go.

Lunchtime Ministry provided a warm meal and a respite from the streets. Although it's not an overnight shelter, Len was able to get a few hours of sleep there on the benches or the floor when he wasn't helping out cleaning tables and taking out garbage or attending Bible study and Alcoholics Anonymous meetings. The ministry welcomed him, and the community was repaid by Len's time and good humor.



**More than 11% of U.S. households (about 37.2 million people) were food insecure in 2018.**

**This includes 12.65 million people facing "very low food security," meaning they skipped meals or reduced their food intake multiple times during the year.**

**In a country where the food system provides up to 4,000 calories per person per day:**

**More than 37 million people aren't sure where their next meal will come from.**

**And for more than 12 million people, that next meal won't come at all.**

Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture

Mutuality and hospitality are at the core of the ministry, said Stanley Enzweiler, Lunchtime Ministry program manager: "Whatever your story is, we will welcome you."

Ministries that accompany people facing hunger aren't unique—and neither is Len's story of hunger in a land of plenty.

The 2018 hunger rate in this country is actually a positive sign: Food insecurity in the U.S. is at its lowest level since before the Great Recession of 2007-09, when it peaked at nearly 15%. Still, community-based programs like Lunchtime Ministry are being called on to do even more in the fight against domestic hunger and poverty, particularly as proposed legislation continues to threaten the safety nets that support people.

### **A tangled web**

Behind the numbers is the reality that hunger, while pervasive, isn't evenly distributed across the U.S. As the Department of Agriculture has reported, certain groups are more vulnerable than others to food insecurity. These include households headed by single women and single men and both "Black households" and "Hispanic households."

Other research suggests that LGBTQ communities are particularly vulnerable to food insecurity. According to a 2014 study by the Williams Institute, LGBTQ people experienced food insecurity in 2013 at the following rates:

**25% of adults**

**34% of women**

**37% of African Americans**

**55% of Native Americans**

**78% of Native Hawaiians**

The web of root causes for hunger is complex, but the uneven distribution of food insecurity gives some clues for untangling it—and helps dispel some of the myths about people facing hunger.

One of the most popular myths is that the root of the problem is people's unwillingness to work. In 2019, this myth has fueled a proposed change to immigration and citizenship processes from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. With this change, a noncitizen resident of the U.S. who receives assistance from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP; formerly called food stamps) can be deemed a "public charge" and denied permanent residency or full citizenship.



The argument for the change stems from the notion that a person receiving public support for food is a burden to society. But the numbers don't seem to bear this out.

Data gathered during the Great Recession suggests that the federal safety net, including SNAP, worked as it should, keeping poverty levels relatively stable when public benefits were included in household income, protecting families struggling to find work.



**SNAP recipients work nearly as much as people who do not receive SNAP benefits:**

**In 2017, about 86% of households that did not receive SNAP benefits had at least one worker.**

**79% of households that did receive SNAP benefits at some point during 2017 had at least one worker.**

Source: U.S. Census Bureau 2018 American Community Survey

Poverty is one of the clearest causes of hunger: When earned income isn't enough to afford food, people can go hungry. In the U.S., this tends to happen at certain times of the year, such as when benefits run out at the end of the month or when seasonal work slows down for workers in agriculture or the service industry. Poverty alone, though, can't account for all causes of hunger.

Even for households with enough income to meet the needs of everyone in the household, sudden crises can leave families vulnerable to hunger. Health issues and medical expenses are among the most common such crises. In its 2018 Supplemental Poverty Measure, the U.S. Census Bureau (USCB) estimated that out-of-pocket medical costs drove nearly 11 million people into poverty in 2017. As wages for workers in the U.S. continue to decline, fewer can weather unexpected events, like a sudden illness or loss of a job.

But it would be a mistake to view these episodes as "natural," unavoidable events or cycles. As researchers Sandy Brown and Christy Getz argue

in *Cultivating Food Justice* (MIT Press, 2011): "In a world of agricultural surpluses, hunger is the result not of natural processes but rather of unequal power relations and resource access."

As the numbers show, the gender pay gap is one reason households headed by single women are disproportionately vulnerable. The USCB says that in nearly every industry in the U.S., women are paid less than men, even when accounting for differences between hours worked and their role in an organization or company. Declining wages also—though to a lesser extent—leave single male-headed households more vulnerable.

Social, legal and political structures can also leave certain communities more vulnerable to hunger and poverty. Researchers working among the Karuk American Indian community in the Klamath Mountains of northern California have found that laws restricting fishing, hunting and land access were written with recreation, rather than subsistence, in mind. In many cases, the laws and regulations have barred the Karuk from gathering food as their ancestors have done for centuries. This effectively prevents them from managing part of their own food system, a critical aspect of sustainable food security.

For LGBTQ communities, permitting employment and housing discrimination is often the source of the high percentages noted earlier. Twenty-six states allow companies to fire someone because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. (At press time, the issue was before the U.S. Supreme Court, with the Trump administration arguing that current laws prohibiting discrimination don't apply to LGBTQ communities.)

Food pantries and other feeding ministries often open the door for people to learn about the causes of hunger—and for uncovering the assets the communities have to address them. As neighbors engage one another and hear each other's stories, the realities behind the statistics become clear. Communities built around the sharing of food can help ensure solutions come from the lived experiences and perspectives of the community, drawing on the collective wisdom of neighbors working together.

In this way, ministries that address the immediate needs of hunger are the first step for addressing the injustice that leaves neighbors vulnerable to hunger; charity sets the table for justice.

### **Charity and justice—the church's calling**

Responding to hunger has been part of the church's work since its beginning. Acts 6 describes how the early church organized food distribution for the community. In 1 Corinthians, Paul chastises the



Iskashitaa Refugee Network is an intergenerational group of Tucson, Ariz., volunteers and refugees from Africa, Asia and the Middle East who harvest and redistribute locally grown fruits and vegetables that would otherwise go to waste. Gifts to ELCA World Hunger helped support this important work in 2016 and 2017.

# WHAT YOU CAN DO TO END HUNGER



## Pray

Worship on Sunday forms Lutherans for service on Monday. When your congregation gathers, include local and global hunger in your prayers, liturgy, hymns and sermons. Consider using ELCA World Hunger “40 Days of Giving” resources with your congregation during Lent. Download a weekly study, Lenten calendar and more at [elca.org/40days](http://elca.org/40days).



## Learn

World Hunger resources—including adult studies, vacation Bible school curricula, toolkits and more—can help you, your family and your congregation learn more about hunger around the world and in the U.S. Visit [elca.org/hunger/resources](http://elca.org/hunger/resources) to download or order. To learn more about hunger and poverty in your community, click on the “Hunger Ed” tab to find the “Know Your Neighborhood” guide.



## Help

World Hunger is a primary way the ELCA supports ministries working to end hunger—including sustainable agriculture, maternal health care, refugee resettlement, microloans for new businesses and more. Visit [elca.org/hunger](http://elca.org/hunger) to learn more and to support this vital ministry.



## Advocate

ELCA Advocacy helps congregation members connect with legislators at the federal, state and local levels to ensure fair and just laws and policies. Learn more at [elca.org/advocacy](http://elca.org/advocacy).



## Follow

Follow ELCA ministries on social media to get the latest information on grants, new resources and current events. Find World Hunger on Facebook at [facebook.com/elcaworldhunger](https://facebook.com/elcaworldhunger), Lutheran Disaster Response at [facebook.com/elcaldr](https://facebook.com/elcaldr) and ELCA Advocacy at [facebook.com/elcaadvocacy](https://facebook.com/elcaadvocacy). For faith reflections, stories and updates, visit World Hunger’s blog at [blogs.elca.org/worldhunger](https://blogs.elca.org/worldhunger).



## Lead

If you feel called to start or to grow a hunger ministry, check out World Hunger’s how-to guides on community gardens, backpack programs and food drives for tips from other leaders in ELCA ministries. Visit [elca.org/hunger/resources](http://elca.org/hunger/resources) and click the “Hunger Ed” tab.



church at Corinth for neglecting hungry people during the common meal. By the late second century, Christian author Tertullian called for the establishment of “trust funds” that could be used to provide for people in poverty, especially those facing hunger.

Hunger and poverty were similarly central concerns of Martin Luther. As historian Carter Lindberg noted in *The European Reformations* (Wiley-Blackwell, 1996), Luther “explicitly tied worship and welfare together.” For Luther and the other Reformers, good works may not merit salvation, but they are the proper expression of a vital church living the gospel.

**In its 2018 Supplemental Poverty Measure, the U.S. Census Bureau estimated that out-of-pocket medical costs drove nearly 11 million people into poverty in 2017.**

In 1528, Johannes Bugenhagen, who helped establish welfare programs within the early Reformation churches, described “the true worship of God” as “bear[ing] the burdens of our neighbor’s needs.” For Luther, Bugenhagen and others, to be church meant to be active in the world, responding to the spiritual and material needs of neighbors. To separate worship and service would be a denial of the gospel, which frees humans for service of the neighbor.

But for Luther, this meant more than meeting people’s immediate basic needs. In his treatise on *Trade and Usury*, for example, he chastised the court system that required peasants to travel to Rome to have their cases settled. This system, he argued, privileged the wealthy while placing undue burdens on people in poverty. The catechisms also are rife with references to injustice in the marketplace, including critiques of what today might be called price-gouging.

Luther found good works of charity to be important expressions of faith active in love. But so, too, was the critical work of establishing justice in the world. And in this, the church has a special calling.

### **The church today**

The “true worship of God,” in Bugenhagen’s terms, is lived out today in congregations throughout the ELCA and by companion synods and ecumenical partners around the world. This year, ELCA World Hunger, the ELCA’s collective response to hunger


and poverty, supported more than 70 ministries across the U.S. and the Caribbean. Some, like St. Matthew Trinity’s Lunchtime Ministry, provide a safe, welcoming place for neighbors to eat, rest and find support. Others provide vocational training, advocacy for fair and just laws, and community gardens full of fresh produce.

Each of these ministries is part of the transformative work God is doing in the world through the church to end hunger. Vocational training provides job skills while fostering self-confidence among trainees. Advocacy—particularly through the work of ELCA Advocacy, supported in part by ELCA World Hunger—lifts the church’s collective voice for justice while exercising the church’s vocation to hold governments accountable for reducing vulnerability and responding to the needs of all creation. Community gardens provide fresh food for neighbors while providing opportunities for communities to have agency within their own food systems.

This broad, comprehensive response addresses the reality that hunger is rarely about food alone. For Len, the Lunchtime Ministry is a source of food and shelter, certainly. But on a deeper level, it lays the foundation for relationships that can have far-reaching effects for Len and for the community. “A little respect goes a long way,” he said. “A lot of respect could be eternal.”

In a world where inequality divides us and public speech can shame us, relationships built on respect for human dignity and faith in God’s plan for reconciliation can make the difference in ending hunger.

As Amy Santoriello, a deacon and director of faith formation and outreach at Zion Lutheran, Penn Hills, Pa., said of her congregation’s food pantry, “It isn’t about food as much as it is about the whole person. Christ didn’t come so we can survive, Christ came so that we could have abundant life. How can we help others have abundant life?”

As she has found, abundant life goes beyond meeting needs to the long-term work of building community and working together for justice. It’s the work the church has been about since its start—and to which it is called in the future. 

Download a study guide at [livinglutheran.org](http://livinglutheran.org) by clicking on the “Spiritual practices & resources” tab.



**Ryan P. Cumming** is program director for hunger education with ELCA World Hunger.