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Study guide

A source of light

COVID-19 disrupts, evolves ELCA global engagement

By Robert C. Blezard

Not since the flu pandemic of a hundred years ago has the world seen a crisis like COVID-19. It has disrupted lives, families, nations and economies across the globe. As with every crisis, our church has learned to adapt and find ways to help our neighbors in need.

Exercise 1: COVID-19 in your community

The coronavirus pandemic has infected millions of people across the globe and killed hundreds of thousands. And still, there is no end in sight.

- How has COVID-19 affected you, personally? Your family? Your community?
- How have you coped? What changes did it require you to make? How hard was it?
- Have you sheltered in place? Have you seen a change in your income?
- What have been the most harmful effects of COVID-19 in your community? County? State?
- How have government, medical and community authorities responded?
- How effective has the authorities' response been in keeping people safe?
- What might have been the outcome if your community and state did not have the governmental or medical infrastructure to respond?
- What might be the likely consequences of COVID-19 if you lived in an area that lacked effective, proactive government? If your area lacked modern, quality medical care? If your area lacked both effective government and quality health care?
- The scenario above is precisely what many of our brothers and sisters around the world are coping with right now. Why is it important that our church do something to help?

Exercise 2: A helping hand

Five themes have emerged in the global companions' response to the COVID-19 crisis:

- Supply equipment, supplies and gear.
- Feed those whom the virus has harmed economically.
- Provide educational materials about the virus.
- Provide mental health support.



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- Give financial assistance to those who have lost income. (The ELCA, through Lutheran Disaster Response, has provided funding for this work.)

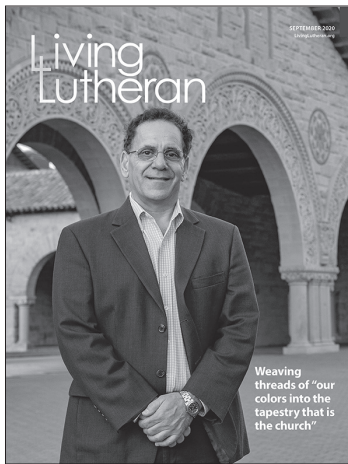
Discuss:

- In our country, does it fall to churches to provide this kind of assistance? Explain.
- In North America, what institutions mostly take care of these functions? How do they do it? How well do they accomplish their mission?
- What does it say about the economies of other nations that churches step in to provide this kind of relief? What does it say about their governments?
- What are your thoughts as you contemplate that you are part of a church that cares enough to assist pandemic victims across the globe?

Exercise 3: Help the sick

“Am I a sheep or a goat?” The question haunts many a Christian who read Jesus’ parable in Matthew 25. It’s especially vexing for Christians who possess plenty in a world where there is so much poverty and suffering. The parable of the sheep and the goats has much to tell us about our response to the global COVID-19 crisis. Read Matthew 25:31-46 and discuss:

- Who is the judge? Who is being judged and why?
- What’s the difference between the sheep and goats?
- Identify the five criteria for judging sheep and goats. What do you make of them?
- What is our responsibility to care for the sick? What are the stakes?
- Who are “the least of these”? (And, what does it mean that “the king” identifies with them?)
- Our church is helping different types of people in the pandemic. In what ways does each of these qualify as “the least of these”?
 - Those who cannot shelter in place.
 - Women who are responsible for providing for their families.
 - Refugees and migrants.
 - LGBTQIA+ individuals and families.
 - Women experiencing domestic abuse.
 - People facing religious discrimination.
 - Unemployed people.
- In accompanying our global neighbors suffering from the pandemic, is our church acting more like a sheep or a goat?
- How could you help the ELCA’s efforts? How about your congregation?



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Exercise 4: Church mission

The word “mission” has a lot of meanings in our culture, many of them linked to a description of a military operation (“mission accomplished”) or popular TV shows and films (*Mission: Impossible*). But what does “mission” mean for the followers of Christ—individually, as a congregation, as a denomination, as the members of the Lutheran World Federation? Discuss:

- What are the first things that come to mind when you think of mission? How is the word most often used?
- What comes to mind when you think of “church mission”? How are those thoughts distinct from just thinking of mission in general?
- What could or should be the basis for any mission the church may have?
- Some congregations have both a “mission statement” and a “vision statement.” What is the distinction between them? How do they overlap one another? How do they complement? Why is it good to have both?
- Look at your church’s or your synod’s mission statement. What does it say? Is it helpful? What would be the “grade” (from A=excellent to F=failing) if you were to evaluate your congregation on how well it lives into its mission statement? Explain. What’s going well? What needs improving?

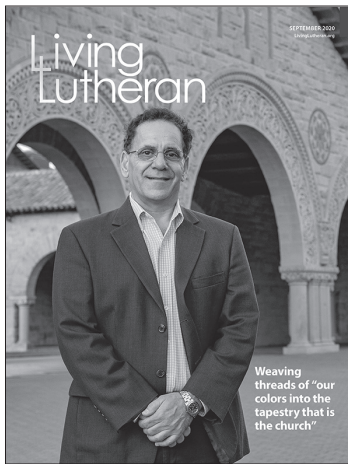
Exercise 5: Church “fire”

In the article, Rafael Malpica Padilla, executive director of ELCA Global Mission, quotes theologian Emil Brunner: “The Church exists by mission, just as a fire exists by burning. Where there is no mission, there is no church; and where there is neither Church nor mission, there is no faith.”

- In the first phrase, examine the words “mission” and “burning.” The word “burning” is a form of a verb—to burn. Burning is active, not passive. “A fire exists by burning.” How would it enrich an understanding of “mission” to think of “mission” as an action word too? What nuances are implied when the phrase reads, “The church exists by *missioning*”?
- Why is it true that “where there is no mission there is no church”? When have you experienced or observed a church without a mission? What were its characteristics? How did it get to that state? What could be done to remedy the situation?
- Why is it true that “where there is neither Church nor mission, there is no faith”?
- How would you describe the church’s mission when it comes to partnering with global companions respond to the COVID-19 pandemic?

Exercise 6: Who is my neighbor?

God’s command for us to love our neighbor is woven throughout the Bible, but where does that responsibility end? That’s what the religious leader in Luke 10 wanted to know. In response, Jesus gave us the parable of the Good Samaritan.



Study guide: **A source of light** *continued*

What does this mean for the Christian church as we see neighbors across the globe suffering from COVID-19? Read Luke 10:25-37 and discuss.

- Why does the leader ask the second question in Luke 10:29? What caused him to want to “justify himself”? In what ways do we, as North American Christians, ask that question? Why do we want to justify ourselves?
- Why weren’t the first two passersby a neighbor to the beaten man?
- Why was the Samaritan a neighbor?
- What answers does the parable give to the question “Who is my neighbor?”
- Is “our neighbor” only someone with whom we have a personal relationship? Another Christian? Someone from our country or race?
- Looking at this teaching, what are the reasons for our church’s assistance to neighbors suffering from COVID-19?

Questions for thought and discussion:

- As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, how has your church learned to cope? Whether it’s virtual worship or Bible studies via Zoom, what adaptations has the church had to make to continue its mission? How has it turned out? How are these adaptations similar to the changes ELCA Global Mission and other units needed to adopt while serving our neighbors?
- Which of the article’s “stories of hope” did you find most inspiring? Most moving? Why? How could you help?
- We have 7.8 billion siblings in the world, many millions of whom have very severe problems, indeed. Can the church possibly solve them all? If our church liquidated all its assets and used the money to solve problems, what difference would it make? Finally, even though the church can’t solve all the problems of our siblings, why is it important that we partner with our global companions to serve those in need? Is something better than nothing?
- We often think that what is good and works for us as North Americans should also be good and work for everyone. Why is that a mistake? Regarding help for COVID-19 sufferers around the world, what factors are critical in determining the proper context for help?
- Responding to the crisis in the United States, the federal government authorized trillions of dollars in economic relief, including generous unemployment benefits. How did these help stabilize your family? Your community? Our nation? What hardships do you imagine confront people who live in countries where there is no such government assistance? Why is it a good thing the ELCA and other Christians step in?
- “The church gives light. It gives direction to life,” said Simon Kyengo, commenting on Christian generosity that is reflected in an increase in offerings and engagement to help coronavirus sufferers. What does “the church gives light” mean? What does “it gives direction to life” mean? How does this fulfill the church’s mission? The commands of Christ?

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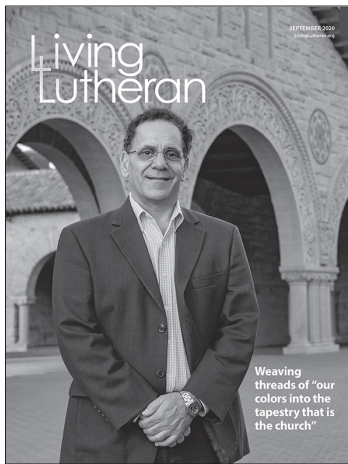
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About the study guide author:

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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- Like people and other institutions around the world, the ELCA has had to learn to do new things in new ways. While challenges are often difficult, they often lead to new discoveries. The ELCA's Phil LaDeur reflected on this, saying, "This has been a time of letting go and letting God lead us to new types of engagement ... we have never attempted in the past." How has the coronavirus helped you, your family and your congregation to "let go" and "let God lead you" to new types of engagement?



A source of *Light*

COVID-19 disrupts,
evolves ELCA global engagement

By Erin Strybis

Photo: LWF/ P. Omagwa

At February's end, Rebecca Duerst, ELCA director for diakonia, had just returned from Lutheran World Federation (LWF) meetings in Geneva when it dawned on her: COVID-19 was spreading like wildfire.

Duerst had been compiling situation reports on the virus for Global Mission colleagues since the start of February. A month prior, she'd overseen the release of Lutheran Disaster Response (LDR) grants to Chinese companions combating the coronavirus. Duerst, who has a doctorate in immunology, soon realized that COVID-19 could become a pandemic.

In March, Global Mission staff sprang into action, allocating up to \$1.5 million for relief requests they anticipated from ELCA companions. Those funds would come from general donations to LDR, Duerst said, and this was a strategic choice.

"Usually when we face a disaster, we put out an appeal," said Rafael Malpica Padilla, executive director of Global Mission. "We knew that financially our congregations would find themselves in a challenging position."

At the same time, leadership faced another issue: ensuring the well-being of staff in the field.

Chicago-based staff who were traveling were immediately recalled. The Young Adults in Global Mission (YAGM) program concluded early, and volunteers were flown home.

As for missionaries, "we had to make quick decisions about bringing [deployed staff] home and supporting them while in [the] home, and also working with those who chose to stay in their countries of service," Malpica Padilla said.

Some missionaries wanted to return home but were unable to leave as travel restrictions were put in place. International students who have ELCA scholarships faced similar travel issues and worked with Global Mission staff to resolve them.

Mission formation events, at-home missionary visits and other events scheduled throughout 2020 were canceled. By April, the ELCA's global

A child demonstrates handwashing at the Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya. The Lutheran World Federation, which receives funding from the ELCA, reinforced hygiene education to prevent the spread of COVID-19 at the camp.

engagement had shifted dramatically, and leaders such as Duerst and Malpica Padilla believe the pandemic will have a lasting impact on it.

Collective relief

At press time, over 16 million people worldwide have tested positive for COVID-19, and more than 655,000 have died, according to the World Health Organization. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported in July that nearly 4.2 million Americans had contracted the virus and over 147,000 had died.

Since the outbreak began, the ELCA, through LDR, has financially supported 49 responses led by companion churches and organizations in 35 countries. In the United States, LDR has supported 28 synods and three social ministry organizations that developed feeding ministries to meet needs brought about by COVID-19. In addition, the church has funded five international pandemic responses carried out by the LWF, ACT Alliance and Church World Service.

Given the numbers, some might argue that the ELCA ought to prioritize

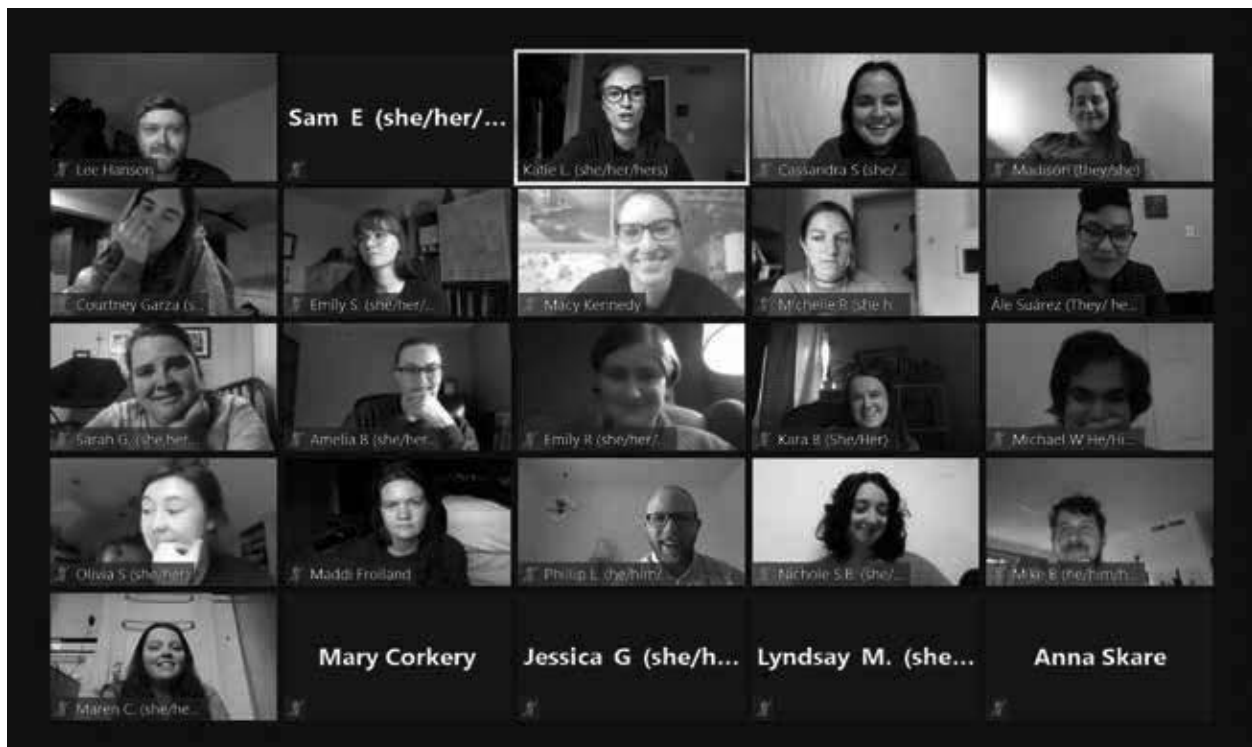
funding for the U.S. response. But Malpica Padilla points to theologian Emil Brunner, who wrote: "The Church exists by mission, just as a fire exists by burning. Where there is no mission, there is no Church; and where there is neither Church nor mission, there is no faith."

"We sing in our hymns, 'In Christ there is no east, no south, no north.' Even though we are having a rough time here, we have a larger vision," Malpica Padilla said, stressing that support is needed at home and abroad. "As a member of the Lutheran World Federation, it is important that we walk with our global companions."

For the ELCA, walking alongside companions during the pandemic can be characterized as relational, contextual and constantly evolving, Duerst said. "We have been in communication since the very beginning of this," she added. "They know who is in need; they know how to reach them."

The virus has disrupted societal rhythms around the world, but companion needs differ by country

**"AS A MEMBER OF
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Members of the 2019-20 Young Adults in Global Mission cohort gathered for a virtual retreat via Zoom to close out their service commitment; this spring they were recalled early from their countries of placement due to COVID-19.

context. “We assume what we do here should be normative. That’s not the case,” Malpica Padilla said. “It is a decision based on economics. There are people who can’t afford to shelter in place. We need to contextualize those decisions.”

Five themes emerged among their responses:

- Supplying hospitals and communities with preventive materials such as medical equipment, medical supplies, protective gear and hygiene kits.
- Giving food to those unable to leave their community or whose incomes were negatively affected by the pandemic.
- Disseminating media on proper hygiene practices to prevent the spread of infection.
- Offering psychosocial support and counseling to manage pandemic-induced anxieties and isolation.
- Providing financial assistance to those who have lost livelihoods.

These efforts targeted the most vulnerable, Malpica Padilla said, naming women, migrants, refugees, LGBTQIA+ individuals, and families experiencing poverty as those facing compounded challenges because of COVID-19.

Julinda Sipayung, a Lutheran pastor and the coordinator of a women’s crisis center in Indonesia, has seen firsthand that “women are at the forefront of the pandemic—looking for ways to meet [their]

family’s daily needs and put food on the table. They have a heavier burden.”

And Stephen Deal, ELCA regional representative for Central America, has observed in his work that, although “everybody is exposed and vulnerable to this virus ... the population of migrants and refugees are even more vulnerable. They’ve got no place to shelter in place.”

Migration and gender justice were already key emphases for Global Mission, Duerst said, and as societal inequities have grown due to the pandemic, Global Mission has deepened its commitment to accompanying companions in the pursuit of justice.

Stories of hope

Though the challenges are great, success stories from initial LDR-funded responses give Duerst hope for the future.

In the Egyptian context, for example, COVID-19 has increased the discrimination faced daily by refugees and migrants, Duerst said, making it difficult for them to find work. A cash-grant program for migrants and refugees, offered by St. Andrew’s Refugee Services (StARS) in Cairo, is providing relief.

In April, less than a week after giving birth, Aisha (last name withheld) experienced domestic abuse. StARS helped Aisha and her baby relocate to a safe and stable home, paired her with a caseworker and

provided a grant to cover living costs. Staff report that she is rebuilding her life.

Staff of Lutheran Health Care Bangladesh have reported that an LDR grant for personal protective equipment and other medical supplies helped the center stay open and treat patients, adding that they didn't stop service for a single day, even during the lockdown.

When the Indian government announced a lockdown in March, Rekha (last name withheld), a factory worker in Kolkata, lost wages and couldn't buy food. With LDR funds, Lutheran World Service India Trust gave Rekha and 79 other residents at a homeless shelter daily meals and hygiene kits during the shutdown. "[They] met all my needs. Staff are helpful and stand beside me and all of us at the shelter," she said.

In Jerusalem, Augusta Victoria Hospital used LDR funding to purchase medical equipment and build up its capacity to test and treat COVID-19 patients. Within three weeks of receiving its first case in April, the hospital had been declared free of the virus, staff reported (read more in "A doctor's logbook" at livinglutheran.org).

The Evangelical Lutheran Church of The Gambia collaborated with the national government to distribute handwashing materials, sanitizer, face masks and gloves to select communities and sustenance to 300 families experiencing income loss due to COVID-19. Neneh Jallow, a villager from Gambia's west coast, had just returned from the market, worried how she'd feed her children and grandchildren, when she encountered a surprise. "What I could see is a bag of rice and oil," she recalled. "I said, 'Oh my God, what a mighty God you are. Thank you, God!' I am a Muslim, but I am grateful to God through the church."

Duerst thinks ELCA congregations have much to learn from their Lutheran and ecumenical partners' response to the pandemic. She highlights the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Sierra Leone, which built on its knowledge from fighting the Ebola crisis and quickly implemented a coordinated hygiene campaign to prevent COVID-19, aided by LDR funding. (See "In Sierra Leone and beyond, Lutherans work together to stop COVID-19" in the August issue.)

"I hope [congregations] here can follow the lead of churches in Africa and be promoters of what we really need to do now to counter behaviors we're seeing arise in the U.S.," she said. "We know the church has had a key role [there], so maybe the church can have a key role here."

Adapted evangelism, new connections

While Global Mission diakonia staff partnered with companions to address health, hunger and poverty issues brought on by the pandemic, ministry



St. Andrew's Refugee Services, an ELCA companion organization in Egypt, created a cash-grant program for migrants and refugees facing income insecurity due to the pandemic. Here staff hand out emergency assistance while maintaining physical distancing.

and education leaders supported adaptations in spiritual care.

Two days after Kenya detected its first case of COVID-19, Ngatu Lutheran Church was ordered to stop services. Church leaders pivoted, working with volunteer preachers to deliver in-person worship for *bomas* (family homesteads) on a rotating basis while following and communicating physical-distancing guidelines. The congregation created a WhatsApp group where members could access the weekly sermon and readings and engage in discussion, and offered a new online-giving opportunity. Simon Kyengo, Ngatu's head elder, noticed that offerings and engagement have grown as a result.

"The church gives light. It gives direction to life," he said. "Especially in the context of the coronavirus, they see that there is hope."

Like many ELCA congregations and institutions, the Protestant Christian Batak Church (HKBP) in Indonesia started offering pastoral care to its members via Zoom. HKBP staff also produced web content with uplifting Christian messages and music while in-person meetings were suspended. Although people are experiencing great pain due to the virus, Debora Sinaga, an HKBP pastor, said such resources allowed them to "freely express their situation."

Munther Isaac, pastor of Christmas Lutheran in Bethlehem, reported that his congregation had shifted to offering prayers and worship via social media as well. Although fear and loss of livelihood have devastated many and the occupation continues



Family members receive the gospel from leaders of Ngatu Lutheran Church in Kenya. When the government ordered the congregation to stop services to quell the spread of COVID-19, leaders and volunteers took worship on the road to its community while practicing physical distancing.



Leaders from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in The Gambia report that hunger issues are on the rise due to the coronavirus. Aided by funds from Lutheran Disaster Response, the church distributed provisions to 300 families facing food shortages, including that of Neneh Jallow (center, with her children and grandchildren).

to expand, devotional practices have galvanized hope. “In the midst of all of these difficult situations, I’ve seen the best of our community coming together and helping one another, and, of course, the church is part of [that],” Isaac said during a Peace Not Walls webinar connecting engaged ELCA members with companions in the Holy Land.

In May, Chicago-based mission formation staff hosted “For the Healing of the Nations,” a virtual prayer service that recognized global anxiety and reminded participants of the peace to be found in God. More than 400 people participated, including companions from the Asia-Pacific region, Latin America and the Caribbean.

“We as a team are normally traveling around the country with the Glocal musician educators during the summer months as we partner with synods and congregations to lead assemblies, retreats and consultations, but those events have all either been postponed or canceled,” said Phil LaDeur, program director for education and curriculum development. “This has been a time of letting go and letting God lead us to new types of engagement ... we have never attempted in the past.”

Likewise, ELCA missionaries continue their work in adapted formats, leaning on technology for remote communication with companions and following prevention measures while in the field. Malpica Padilla said he hopes that missionaries who have returned to the United States can be deployed back to

their countries of service by late summer or early fall. Duerst is tracking each country so Global Mission leaders can determine when it is safe to travel there.

The YAGM program has been suspended for the 2020-21 program year, but volunteers who had planned on serving this year will receive priority placement for 2021-22, said Michael Busbey, interim director for global service. During this sabbath, YAGM staff are facilitating a program-wide evaluation.

As for those companions with ELCA-funded scholarships, Kaleb Sutherland, director of the International Leaders program, said that, in partnership with companion churches and ELCA educational institutions, his team has focused on providing ongoing support. “This is an especially challenging time to be far from home, to attempt international travel and to reimagine summer plans,” he said, noting that some students had returned home while others remained on campuses.

“For new, incoming students, we continue to be optimistic and flexible about how the fall semester will unfold. For some, this will mean adjusting to online learning or finding other hybrid solutions until U.S. embassies again start to issue visas and travel becomes more stable.”

Looking to the future

At press time, Global Mission staff were making plans with companions to embed long-term recovery work in their responses to the pandemic, such as growing



Photo: Rajen Ruth

In Kolkata, Lutheran World Service India Trust, bolstered by funds from Lutheran Disaster Response, provided sustenance to people and distributed hygiene kits including soap, sanitizer and antiseptic. One of those people was Rekha (last name withheld), who was out of work due to coronavirus lockdowns.



Photo: Courtesy of LHCB

Personal protective equipment has been a critical need for health care workers around the world, and Lutheran Disaster Response funding helped the staff of Lutheran Health Care Bangladesh procure such supplies for its COVID-19 response.

community gardens in rural Guatemala, which was hit hard by the virus.

But with \$1.5 million of LDR funds allocated for a global response to COVID-19 nearly depleted, Duerst anticipates a need for more funding before 2020's end.

"We are hearing that the effects [of the pandemic] are going to be widespread, impacting every aspect of life," she said. "Health is obvious. Livelihood is becoming one of the key things. When men are not providing, there is more opportunity for depression leading to gender-based violence in the household—all of those other things lead to instability. We are thinking about peace and reconciliation, as well as how it's going to impact migration. The good side of that is that we already do work in these areas."

ELCA World Hunger partners with global companions to implement myriad programs that address the root causes of hunger and poverty. Some have already shifted response to the pandemic. For instance, a skills development program for Ghanaian women changed its focus, and participants began sewing face masks for their community.

In addition, Malpica Padilla is working on a pilot program to equip leaders of companion churches and institutions to apply for government grants to continue serving their communities. "Whatever we do should lead not only to the liberation of the self but of communities," he said.

With staff leaders, Malpica Padilla is reviewing at

a high level the intersectionality of existing programs, and he anticipates creating connections to address evolving needs brought about by this virus.

Amid great changes, Tammy Jackson, senior director for mission formation, remains optimistic: "The interruption caused by COVID-19 has allowed [Global Mission] opportunities to pause and to think [of] new directions, resources and ways to engage with our companions and ELCA members. Through the generous support of ELCA members, we are able to be a source of light in this time of great uncertainty and, through our actions, to serve as reminders that God sees us, regards us and loves us." †

What you can do

To help with COVID-19 relief, donate to Lutheran Disaster Response at elca.org/ldr.

Find resources and information about the ELCA's response to the coronavirus at elca.org/publichealth.

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



Erin Strybis is a content editor of *Living Lutheran*.