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Study guide

So more people may know the way of Jesus

ELCA implements Future Church design

By Robert C. Blezard

Based on the speed and thoroughness of the culture change we have seen in the last 20 years or so, we can conclude one thing for sure: The church of the future will look much different from the church we have known. The ELCA's question is: "Can we anticipate these shifts and adapt our church to meet them so we can faithfully continue our mission to bring the gospel of Jesus to God's people?"

EXERCISE 1: YOUR CHURCH FUTURE

The Future Church design aims to help our church adapt to meet the needs of God's people. Is that something your congregation needs? Discuss:

- How has your congregation fared in the last 20 or so years?
- Which term best describes your congregation's experience since 2000: growing, maintaining or declining? Explain.
- What key factors define your congregation's experience since 2000?
- The metrics of attendance, membership and finance are the traditional key factors in evaluating church health. What do your congregation's metrics since 2000 reveal?
- What aspects of church health are not represented by the key metrics? How is your congregation doing in these areas?
- How might Future Church assist your congregation?

EXERCISE 2: WHY ARE WE HERE?

In determining a ministry's path forward, a useful question to ask is "Why, in God's name, are we here?" Sometimes an honest assessment can provide course corrections that can reinvigorate an organization. Discuss among your study group:

- How would you describe the purpose of your church? What factors would you consider in formulating a response?
- How is that purpose evidenced in your congregation's ministries?
- How is it lived out among its membership?
- How does the purpose align with "the way of Jesus" and biblical principles?



Contact us:

Living
Lutheran

8765 W. Higgins Rd.
Chicago, IL 60631
(800) 638-3522, ext. 2540
livinglutheran@elca.org
livinglutheran.org

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- Is the purpose worthy of the gospel?
- How might Future Church assist?

EXERCISE 3: "THE WAY OF JESUS"

Jesus declared in John 14:6 that he is "the way, and the truth, and the light." Then Acts records that the earliest church was known simply as "The Way" (Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22).

To help direct God's people, the Future Church design will emphasize "the way of Jesus" across our church. Discuss:

- What does "the way of Jesus" mean to you? To your congregation?
- What Scripture passages would support an understanding of "the way of Jesus"?
- As a study group, come up with a consensus definition of "the way of Jesus."
- What would it mean to live in accordance with "the way of Jesus"?
- Are you living "the way of Jesus" faithfully? Is your congregation? Explain.
- What attitudes and actions would have to change for you and your congregation to live "the way of Jesus"?
- Do you think those changes would help revitalize your faith and your congregation's life? Explain.

EXERCISE 4: ONE CHURCH

The ELCA has traditionally understood itself as a single church with three interrelated "expressions": congregations, synods and the churchwide organization. Future Church seeks to encourage an identity of "One Church" to bring greater collaboration.

- Which phrase or phrases best describe your congregation's ongoing relationship with your synod ministries: close and collaborative, cordial and collegial, functional and formal, indifferent and distant, hostile and contentious? Explain.
- Which phrase or phrases best describe your congregation's ongoing relationship with our churchwide ministries: close and collaborative, cordial and collegial, functional and formal, indifferent and distant, hostile and contentious? Explain.
- How did your congregation's relationships with your synod and the churchwide organization get where they are today?
- Would you welcome a better relationship?
- What might our denomination accomplish together if we worked more closely together?
- How might the "One Church" model assist your congregation?

EXERCISE 5: THREE GOALS

The Future Church design stresses three goals:

- A welcoming church that engages new, young and diverse people.



About the study guide author:

Rob Blezard

is pastor of St. Paul Lutheran Church in Aberdeen, Md. He earned a Master of Divinity degree from Boston University School of Theology and has done further study at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg (Pa.), now called United Lutheran Seminary.



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8765 W. Higgins Rd.
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Study guide: **Future Church** *continued*

- A thriving church rooted in tradition but radically relevant.
- A connected, sustainable church that shares a common purpose and direction.

Discuss:

- Right now, on its own, how is your congregation faring on meeting each of these goals?
- How would additional emphasis on each of the goals assist your congregation?
- Which goal would enhance the life of your congregation the most?
- How would Future Church assist your congregation?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Some faith communities resist change even to their own detriment, choosing stagnation or decline rather than adopt new ideas that could invigorate their church. Have you seen that happen in other faith communities? Is your church one of them? Why do you think this is so? How might your congregation prepare itself to readily receive new ideas from Future Church?
- “We are on a mission from God,” said Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton. “That’s exciting! Our lives have meaning, deep meaning. They’ve been given meaning because we’re beloved of God.” Do you agree? Explain. What “mission from God” is your congregation involved in? Are you involved in? How does God’s mission give our lives “deep meaning?”
- The article identifies a number of disruptions that have affected church life in our nation. How have they impacted your congregation? What help does your congregation need to meet them?
- Our denomination is predominantly white in a culture that is increasingly diversifying to the point where 48% of Gen Z do not identify as white. What are the implications of this juxtaposition for our church? For your congregation? What does that say about the need to diversify? How can our churches accomplish that?
- Future Church aims to invite people to the ELCA so they can experience community, justice and love. What do each of those elements mean? Why are they important in the life of our church? To what degree are those elements present in your congregation? How can your congregation do a better job in encouraging those elements?
- “I would encourage people to be grounded in their Christian life through prayer and reading Scripture,” said Phil Hirsch, executive director of ELCA Christian Community and Leadership. “You can’t give what you don’t have, and the more our own people have the sense that they are so completely loved by God and unconditionally, the better they are going to be able to share that with others. If they don’t have that, it will be a program, but if they have that, everything else will become clear.” Do you agree? Explain. To what degree is prayer and Scripture reading a part of your personal life and the life of the congregation?

SO MORE PEOPLE MAY KNOW THE WAY OF JESUS

ELCA IMPLEMENTS FUTURE CHURCH DESIGN

By Megan Brandsrud

On Feb. 1, the ELCA churchwide organization implemented Future Church, a new working structure focused on motivating the entire church to actively share the way of Jesus with more people so that they might experience community, justice and love. The design emphasizes the belief that members, congregations, synods, the churchwide organization and its partner organizations all have important roles in the church's mission.

The church's three expressions (congregations, synods and the churchwide organization) will remain, but the Future Church design is centered on a "One Church" identity that will bring greater collaboration to the mission of sharing the gospel and God's grace in the world.

This new design stresses three goals:

- **A welcoming church that engages new, young and diverse people.**
- **A thriving church rooted in tradition but radically relevant.**
- **A connected, sustainable church that shares a common purpose and direction.**

To implement the Future Church design, structural changes were made that resulted in a 5% reduction in staff and the creation of new departments, called home areas (see page 23).

Living Lutheran talked about Future Church and what it means for the life of the ELCA with Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton; Phil Hirsch, executive director of ELCA Christian Community and Leadership; Mikka McCracken, executive director of ELCA Innovation; and Bill Horne, ELCA vice president. The interview has been edited for clarity and length.

***Living Lutheran:* What is the purpose of Future Church, and what is most important for people to know about it?**

Eaton: We've tried to emphasize that this isn't something that just sprang up because of or during the pandemic, but this is building on work that we've done for years. We're not doing this to combat or counteract the trend lines that we see in the church, though that is something we're concerned about.

We're trying to find a way to activate each of us to invite more people into the way of Jesus and find community, justice and love. That's it. The way of Jesus.

When you talk about church out in the world, especially when you have an "evangelical" in it, it's a church that is anti-science, anti-intellectual, anti-gay, anti-having any kind of dialogue, and we have a theology that is the opposite of that. How can we now be the ones to grab hold of that doctrine of grace and justification that brings freedom, and invite more people into that and have that be heard as an authentic voice of Christianity?

Hirsch: This is something that's authentically Lutheran. Martin Luther, at a time when the church of his day was facing a crisis of its own, what did he have them do but drill down to the core of the gospel message and hold true to a few core principles and then innovate on everything else. That's what he taught us, and that's what we're doing here. So, we talk about becoming an innovation denomination, but that's who we've been since the start.

McCracken: Innovation is a means—not an end. Part of this purpose statement of activating each of us is, for me, about connecting to that sense of vocation. For Luther you could be a bread maker, a shoe fixer ... as long as you were doing that in service to the neighbor and with the heart of the gospel, you were connecting and living your life of faith. How do we return to that as we think about innovation?

Each person has a vocation that's a gift from God. When we become the body of Christ and live more fully into that collective, all things are possible.

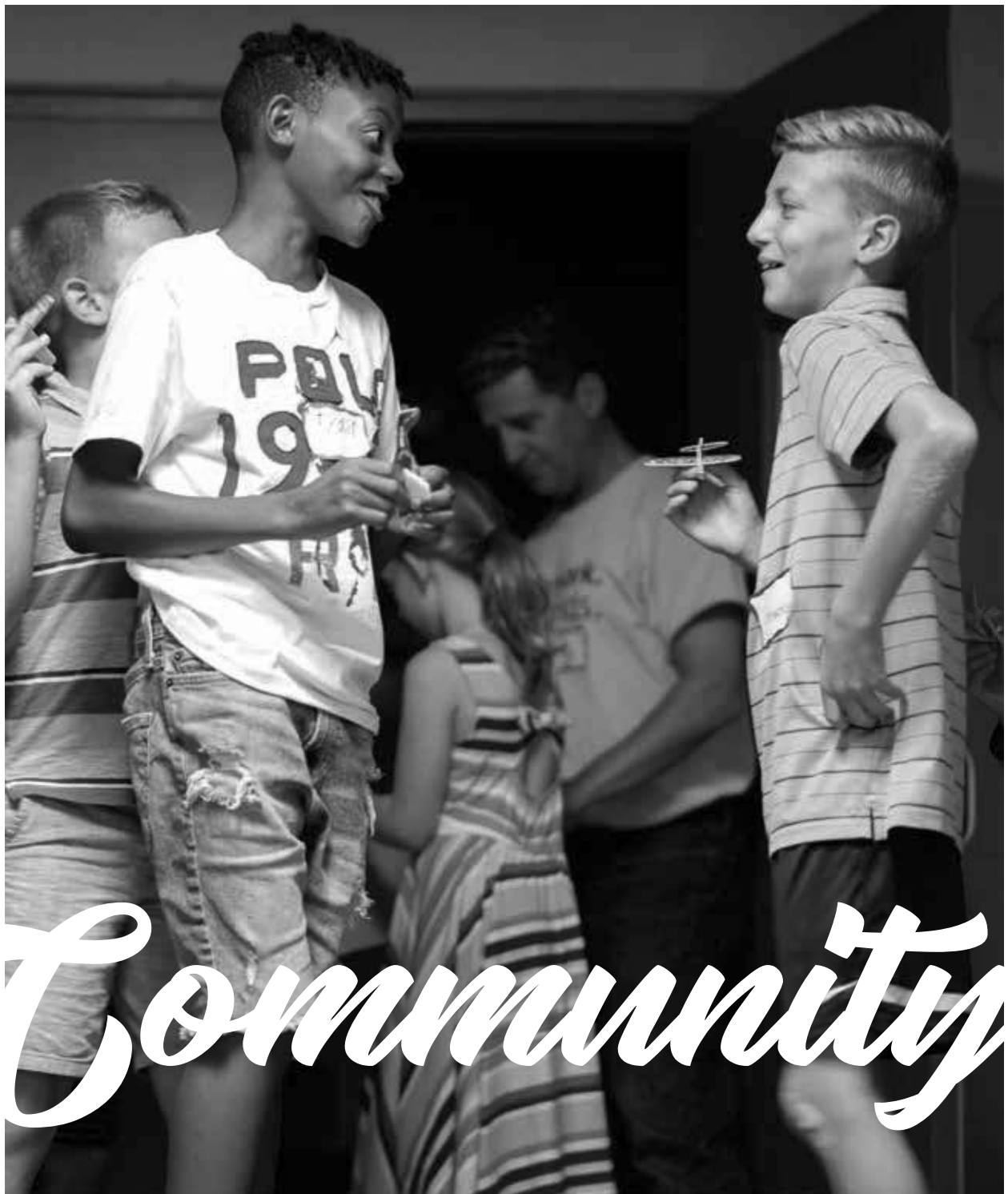
What are some of the disruptions that have affected the church's ability to reach people, and how does Future Church address them?

Hirsch: One is that people don't just come to church as a matter of course anymore. Instead of expecting that people are going to come to us, maybe we need to think about going to them, particularly for young adults.

Secondly, we are a very monocultural church in a very multicultural world. The issue there is, what witness does it bear to the kingdom of God—the way we understand God to be and the kingdom of heaven to be—to be that very white church in an increasingly



Photo: Chris Schaefer



Community

diverse world? The way to get at it is to begin by naming it and then take some steps. Instead of expecting people to come to us, we go to them and listen to what their needs are and then craft ministries to begin to meet those needs. When it comes to becoming a more multicultural church, more diverse people, there's a lot to be said about that, but we have to learn about and respect our neighbor's culture in ways that we haven't before.

Eaton: And certainly being forced to shelter in place. We were disrupted that we couldn't do business in the same ways, and we found out we could be a lot more creative and efficient in this new way. That would've never happened if we weren't forced out of the office or out of our congregations. And we've adapted. We're reaching more people now than we have reached before with the good news of the gospel of Jesus.

So when we can worship in person, which I think is an extremely important component of the Christian life, how do we make sure we still stay in contact with those people who will not come into our church buildings? And what have we learned or can we learn about online community?

Hirsch: I think one of the disruptions is also that the way human community is forming is changing at an increasingly rapid rate. People form human communities now online, and it's not just a virtual experience to supplement the in-person. It is its own experience. That is new to human community. The world nor the church have seen this before, and the church has now taken a huge step to adapt to this.

We need to be able to make adaptations like that as a regular course of what we do because it's changing so quickly.

McCracken: To build on that piece, about human community, it's not only the forming but the finding and belonging that changes with that. When you consider that 48% of Gen Z (born in the late 1990s and early 2000s) is going to be people who don't identify as white in terms of racial identity, what does that mean for us? How do we have to grow and adapt so that we can be this place for all, that vision that we have?

Hirsch: And it is not just our vision for the church; this is our understanding of the kingdom of God, and it was the way of the early church. So in a way, it's a callback to the roots of who the church was from the start, which was not only more ethnically diverse but more economically diverse than what we are today.

The Future Church design focuses on working as “One Church.” How will the expressions of the church be working together in this new design?

Eaton: It's our intent to contact a million new people and introduce them to the ELCA as this community of Jesus. This has to be our great mission and our great purpose. It can't be done by those of us in the churchwide organization developing programs or issuing directives. It can't be done just by congregations. We have so many other beautiful resources that can be brought into play to give people entry points to come into this community. I mean, 1 in 50 Americans is touched by a Lutheran service organization. Right there, we are in contact with people.

Hirsch: This is something we hope everyone will see their place in—that they will be able to find a way to reach out to somebody new around them. We know that belonging usually precedes believing. So we're hoping that people will have a sense of belonging to each other, and then we need to do better at helping people understand the way of Christ.

New home areas

The Future Church design has created four new home areas that encompass the work of the churchwide organization.

Christian Community and Leadership

Led by Phil Hirsch, this home area recruits, trains and deploys leaders, and establishes and grows Christian communities. Programs include congregational vitality, campus ministry, the ELCA Youth Gathering, children's ministry, young adult ministry, worship, federal chaplaincy, Young Adults in Global Mission, and ELCA colleges and universities.

Innovation

Led by Mikka McCracken, this home area champions and drives innovation culture (the development of new and useful things) and leaders. Programs include Resourceful Servants and Innovation Services.

Service and Justice

Led by Rafael Malpica Padilla, this home area fosters and facilitates the church's engagement in service and promotes efforts to call and act for justice. Programs include global service, ethnic ministries and associations, ELCA World Hunger, Lutheran Disaster Response, advocacy, and the Accompanying Migrant Minors with Protection, Advocacy, Representation and Opportunities (AMMPARO) strategy.

Operations

Operations comprises the work of the Office of the Presiding Bishop, Office of the Secretary and Office of the Treasurer. This home area includes the work of development, ecumenical and interreligious relations, theological discernment, communications, the archives, synod relations, rosters and records, finance and information technology.

We've been very good at that for people who would come and baptize their babies and bring them up in Sunday school and confirm them, but when that is no longer the primary way people are engaging with religion, we need to make some shifts and begin to ask how else we can bring along adults and help them discover this way of living and of loving in the world. And to be changed by the grace of God.

Eaton: I think here is where the innovation lab is going to be a very important incubator for us, because we need new ideas and new ways to do this that we haven't even thought of.

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McCracken: If this year of working with the lab has taught us anything—the best ideas, no offense to us, don’t necessarily come from churchwide. Synods and congregations are encountering this more and have more aptitude for innovation because they’re closer to the members, they’re closer to the community.

“One Church,” I think, means, “How might we learn from one another in new and different ways so we don’t have to re-create the wheel and are able to share good ideas and offer encouragement?” One person with a good idea really only needs a little bit of encouragement.

How can members get involved in this shared mission—the purpose of Future Church?

McCracken: Check out what’s already happening by you. I have been in so many conversations with places like Augsburg University or Luther and a handful of synods that are far out ahead of us in this innovation work and have been doing it for many years. There are a lot of resources that exist already, and that’s something that we would hope to build on.

Also, the ELCA is just so excited about the opportunity to work on the “Congregations Lead” initiative with support from Lilly [Endowment Inc.] and their Thriving Congregations work. That will be a fairly small group in terms of a pilot group for that work, but we know we’re going to learn so much from those congregational partners and synods. And hopefully those will be some inspiration points and ideas that we’re able to share back with the church.

Hirsch: This is maybe going to sound very basic, but I would also encourage people—if they’re really going to be active in this—to be grounded in their Christian life through prayer and reading Scripture. You can’t give what you don’t have, and the more our own people have the sense that they are so completely loved by God and unconditionally, the better they’re going to be able to share that with others. If they don’t have that, it will be a program, but if they have that, everything else will become clear.

Horne: Our focus on innovation gives our members an opportunity to show that love for Jesus to others. Working in a much more collaborative environment, that is where the person in the congregation can see a connection to others who may work in other parts of the church and, because of what they do, can help give life and meaning to some ideas that they have, where they are located. We can become better connected because we share that experience with Christ.

Eaton: Phil is absolutely right. This is not just a technique or a program, but it’s a way of being. And as Bill just mentioned, we’re not used to being one

church, working all together. We don’t see ourselves as connected, but in baptism we are connected already.

What are you most excited about with the Future Church design, and what do you want members to feel hopeful about for what’s to come?

Horne: I hope when they read this article, they come to the conclusion that there are so many possibilities of how we can be church. For years I’ve heard people complain and criticize the church for not being able to do this or do that, and often the criticism was directed at how our three expressions function. When they begin to experience what it means to be one church, these barriers melt away because there are things that you can do, and we’re committed to being church in a way that embraces good ideas, embraces innovative ways of serving God.

Eaton: We are on a mission from God. That’s exciting! Our lives have meaning, deep meaning. They’ve been given meaning because we’re beloved of God. And then we’re free to share that.

I think we live pretty isolated lives in the United States in a lot of ways, but we’re not alone. We don’t do this alone; we’re invited into this great cloud of witnesses. That, to me, is exciting. That we have this mission that’s been given to us—and doing it all together!

Hirsch: I know that some people are concerned that focusing on new people, on others, will take away something from their experience of church. My experience is that when people see others come to faith, experience the love and the belonging that is in community, the longing for justice and peace, the people who were there all along are energized in a way that’s hard to describe. My hope for the church is that we will have that experience again. Because I think once people get a taste of it, there’s just nothing like it.

McCracken: To speak very personally, as someone who is as old as the ELCA and has only ever known this denomination, I would love to be part of a future church movement that isn’t only defined by decline and failure to reflect the diversity in which God gifts and creates. I want to be part of telling the old, old story of Jesus and God’s love so more people have a chance to think about church and community in new ways. I want to be part of a church—the people of God—that trusts so deeply in the transformative power of life in Christ that we insist on change.

I believe the abundance of God is going to be so incredible, we’re not even going to know what to do with it. That’s my hope. †

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Love

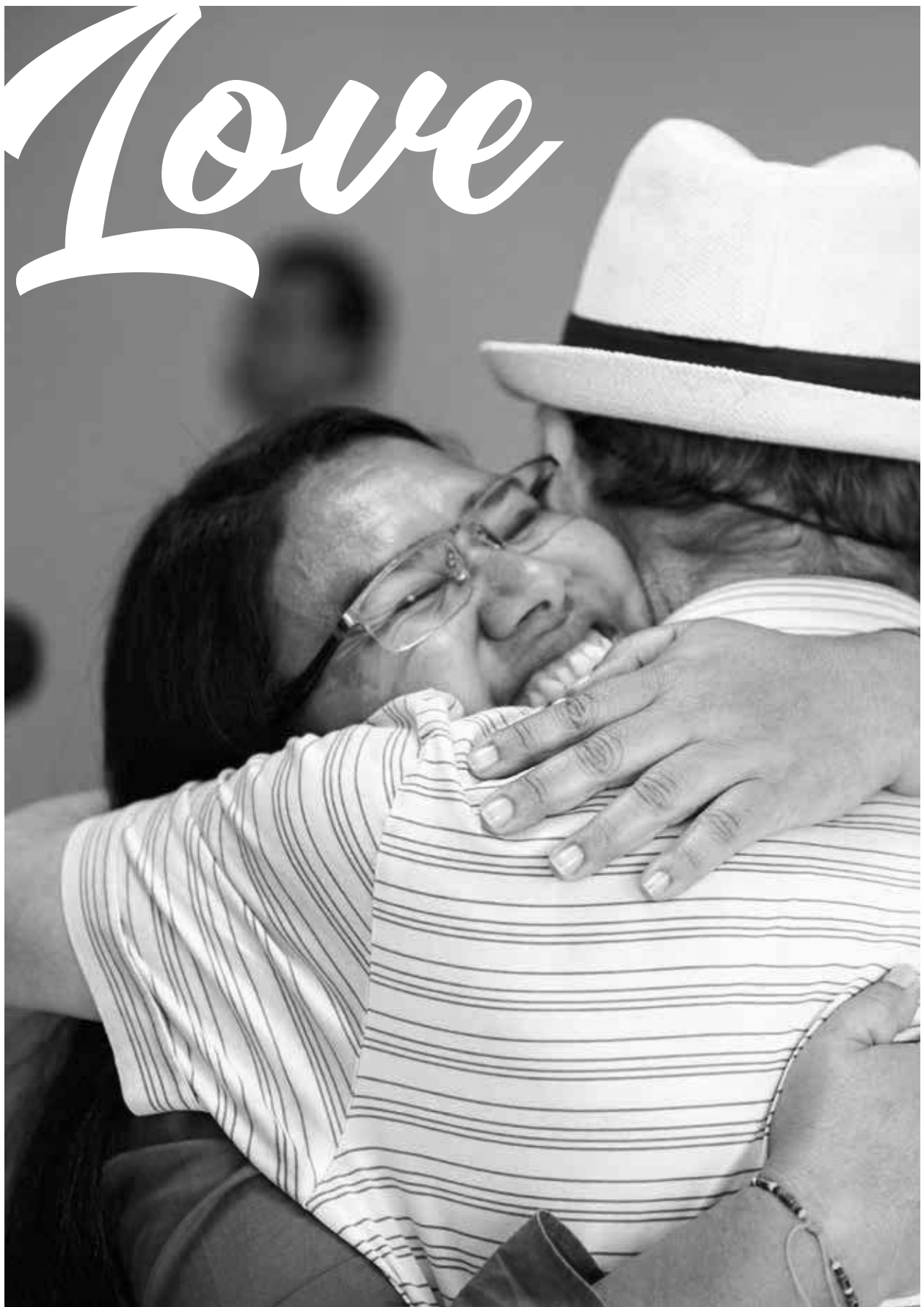


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