

Related articles:

A map of faith

Church in the geographic margins
(page 20)

Living Lutheran,
May 2022

Reprints:

Permission is granted for individuals, small groups and congregations to reproduce this study guide for local use.

Tell us:

Do you find this guide helpful? Send comments and suggestions to rcblezard@embarqmail.com

Study guide

A map of faith

By Robert C. Blezard

It's been said that God calls us to plow the fields where we live. And, so, every congregation adapts to serve its local mission field, each with its own needs, opportunities, peculiarities, challenges. For congregations on the geographical margins of the ELCA, ministry has developed in distinctive ways.

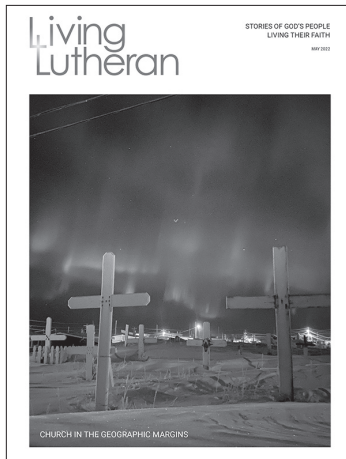
EXERCISE 1: YOUR CONGREGATION

- After reading about the congregations on the geographical edges of the ELCA, which one resonates most with your church's context or history? Why?
- How mainstream or fringe is your congregation, geographically or culturally? Rate your congregation on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being "in the mainstream" of Lutheranism and American culture (for example, Minneapolis), and 10 being "on the fringe" of Lutheranism (Shishmaref). Explain your rating. Describe your ministry context in this framework. How has the context changed over the years since your congregation was formed?
- How has your congregation adapted or responded to your unique context?
- How has your community's or region's local culture integrated with your Lutheran identity?
- What opportunities has your context provided for ministry? What challenges?
- What ministry partners have assisted your congregation in fulfilling its mission?
- How has your ministry context shaped your congregation's ministry in distinct ways? What signs or indications would be readily apparent to an out-of-state visitor that your Lutheran church has integrated with your local context?

EXERCISE 2: ISOLATED CHURCHES

Shishmaref Lutheran Church in Alaska and House of Prayer Lutheran Church in Arizona have developed and operated far away from major population centers.

- What opportunities could you imagine might arise from a congregation's isolated location?
- What liabilities or challenges might geographical isolation present to a congregation?
- For Shishmaref and House of Prayer, how has isolation affected the congregations' growth and development?
- How has isolation affected the churches' need to serve as conduits for community service? Their ability to serve as conduits for community service?



Study guide: **A map of faith** *continued*

- How might isolation and a unique culture assist the churches in bringing people together to form a faith community?
- What challenges of geographical isolation does your congregation contend with, or has contended with in the past? How does/did your congregation cope?

EXERCISE 3: LOCAL CONTEXT

While retaining a core identity as Lutherans, ELCA churches naturally adapt to the customs, languages, histories, experiences and worldviews of the communities and regions they serve. So, for example, while they are both ELCA congregations, a church in Manhattan will naturally have a different way of being than a congregation in a Nebraska farming community. And both will be different from an ELCA congregation serving a Spanish-speaking community.

- How might local customs, beliefs and worldview provide unique cultural opportunities for a Lutheran church? How might they present challenges?
- Can you think of a cultural context where Lutheranism just would not fit? Explain.
- How has each of the congregations profiled in the article adapted to their local contexts? How is their context reflected in the congregations' unique ways of being and outlook?
- Shishmaref and House of Prayer both serve communities of people rooted in Indigenous North America. How has Alaska Native and Native American ancestry, respectively, shaped those congregations? What opportunities and challenges have the congregations experienced?
- Lutheran Church of Honolulu serves a diverse multicultural population on a geographically remote tourist paradise, where extreme wealth and poverty coexist. What opportunities and challenges would arise from their mission context? How has their context shaped their congregational identity?
- In establishing or maintaining ministry, how has your congregation adapted to local customs, beliefs, languages or lifestyle?

Contact us:

Living
Lutheran

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

Living Lutheran is the magazine of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

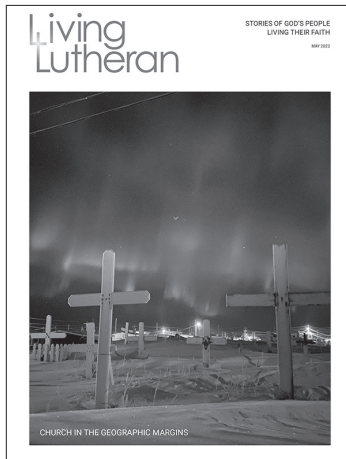


**Evangelical Lutheran
Church in America**
God's work. Our hands.

EXERCISE 4: LUTHERAN IDENTITY

Grace Lutheran Church in Mississippi faces isolation of another kind. It is like a cork of Lutheranism bobbing in a sea of Roman Catholic, Methodist, Episcopal and Southern Baptist churches. As a result, Grace works hard to proclaim its distinctive identity.

- In Grace's context, what difficulties could you envision it would face in evangelism and membership recruitment as one of the few Lutheran congregations in its heavily churched area?
- On the other hand, what advantages could you imagine Grace would realize as one of the few Lutheran congregation in its area?
- Because of its location, Grace partners with churches of other denominations. In what ways could this be healthy? What opportunities could arise? What challenges might have to be overcome?



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.



Contact us:

Living
Lutheran

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

Living Lutheran is the magazine of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

Study guide: **A map of faith** *continued*

- Describe your congregation's context. How does your congregation assert and proclaim its Lutheran identity in your context? Is it relatively easy or difficult? Explain. How do the challenges and opportunities compare to those of Grace?

EXERCISE 5: SERVING NEIGHBORS

Jesus commands us to love one another in tangible ways, such as feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, tending to the sick and visiting the imprisoned. All of the congregations profiled have worked to assist neighbors in need.

- Reviewing the article, how has each congregation responded to the needs of their community?
- What in their contexts has given them unique challenges? Unique opportunities?
- How has your congregation reached out to the needy of your community or region?
- What factors would make your congregation's outreach unique from others in the ELCA?

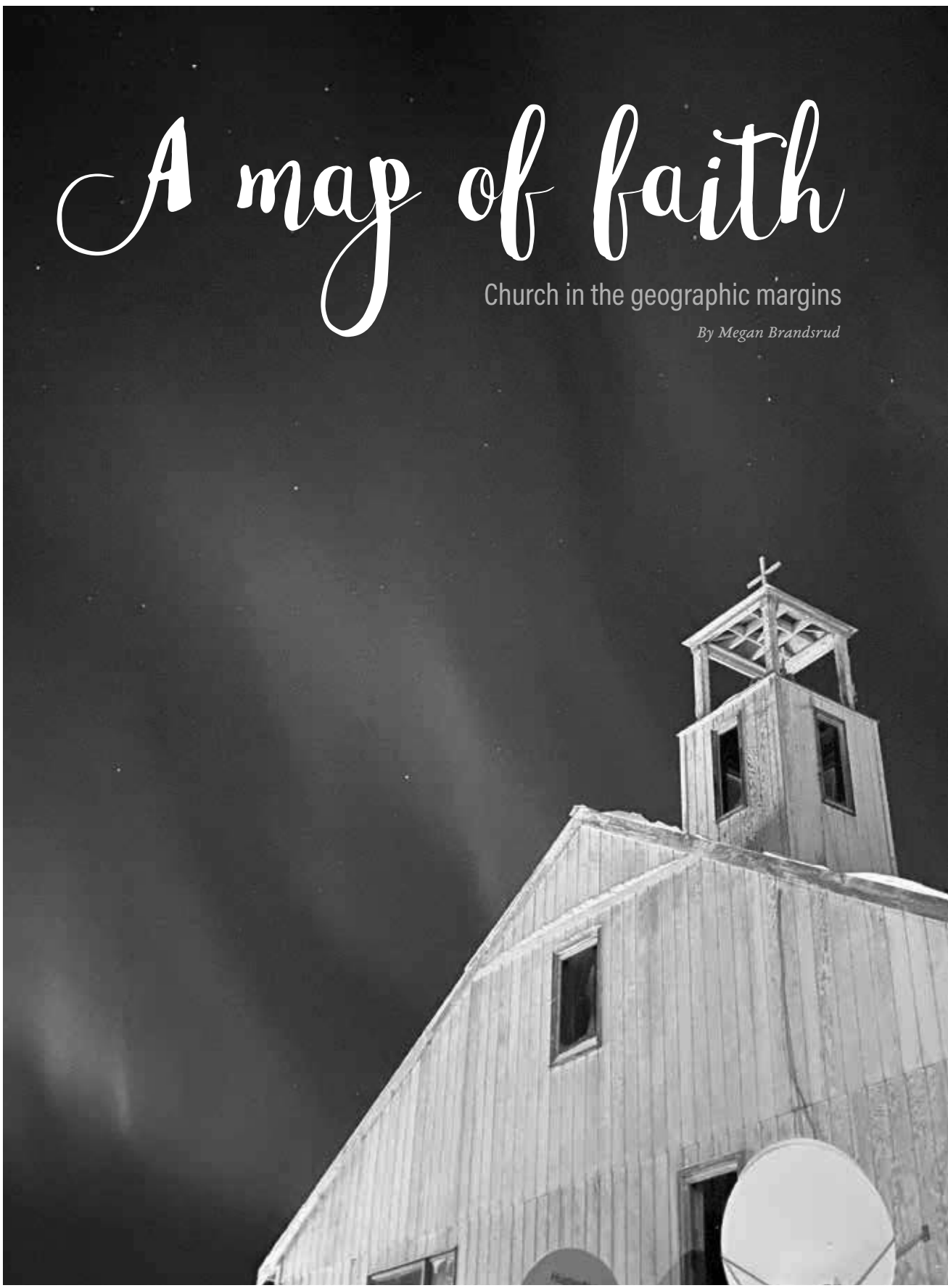
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- The article profiles congregations on the fringe of mainstream ELCA Lutheranism. What do they all have in common? What is distinct for each? How do their stories and ministries differ from that of your congregation? How are they similar? In what ways are they all/we all distinctly Lutheran?
- How has your ministry context shaped your congregational identity? What opportunities and challenges are unique to your congregation, compared to others elsewhere in our denomination?
- Though each of the profiled congregations is unique in its own way, would you agree that no two ELCA congregations are alike? Why or why not?
- What are the contextual factors that go into formulating a congregation's identity? List them, and then explain how each has shaped the identity of your own congregation.
- Many congregations in areas where Lutherans are strong (such as Illinois and Pennsylvania) nonetheless can point to struggles with identity and cultural expression in their context. For example, churches founded to serve immigrants from Germany or Sweden who didn't speak English and clung to the customs, foods and attributes of their native lands. Describe your congregation's history. What vestiges of its founding culture are present in congregational life today?

A map of faith

Church in the geographic margins

By Megan Brandsrud



The northern lights glow in the sky above Shishmaref (Alaska) Lutheran Church, the ELCA's northernmost congregation.

With nearly 9,000 congregations across the United States and in the Caribbean, the ELCA's ministry encompasses the geographic diversity of the country. For some congregations, their distinct location plays a part in shaping their ministries. Whether they're in physically remote locations or an area where simply being Lutheran might feel singular, they exemplify the expansive work of the church.

Deeply in tune with their mission and faithfully committed to their communities, these ministries reveal that God's love knows no boundaries, even if maps do.

SHARING IS THE CULTURE

Five miles off the coast of mainland Alaska, near the Bering Strait, is a small island barely more than 2 square miles. This island is home to the nearly 600 people who live in Shishmaref, Alaska, and to the ELCA's northernmost congregation—Shishmaref Lutheran Church. In fact, it's the only church on the island.

"Basically everyone knows each other because it is such a small island, and many are related," Anna Silco said. "It's also unique because about 40% of the island is under the age of 18." Anna and her husband, Aaron Silco, became part of this community in September 2021 when they began their first calls as pastors of Shishmaref Lutheran.

There is a deep significance to the meaning of community in Shishmaref, one that is rooted in tradition and imparted knowledge. Most of the people who live in Shishmaref are Iñupiat, a group of Alaska Natives. Many practice subsistence living—hunting, fishing and gathering for food.

"A lot of people share this wisdom across generations," Anna said. "And there is the sharing of the food that follows. If you get a moose, you will share that with elders in the community."

The church, along with the school, is one of the main gathering places on the island. It's where the whole village meets to share a Thanksgiving feast and to celebrate Christmas. Yet, with the interconnectedness of the community, a lot of ministry takes place outside of the church—often in people's homes.

"People request house blessings, and that's always a nice chance to go visit people," Anna said. "And people will call the parsonage and ask for prayer for a very specific thing—even people we have never seen on Sunday mornings."

The church is also one place where the community helps pass down the Inupiaq language to younger generations, as it is used to sing the doxology and some hymns.

"I think the church and song is a way for people to get more engaged in the language, as having

"IT'S AN EXCITING WAY THE CHURCH IS HELPING KEEP THE LANGUAGE ALIVE AND WORKING TOWARD HONORING AND PRESERVING THE CULTURE."

song helps learn a new language," Anna said. "The culture teacher at the school uses songs from church to help teach some of the Inupiaq words, so it's an exciting way the church is helping keep the language alive and working toward honoring and preserving the culture."

The interconnectedness of the community also creates a spirit that exudes forgiveness and grace, Aaron said. "Since there are 600 people here, if they held onto grudges, the community would have died out a long time ago," he said. "There is a lot of coming to the table to make sure things work out for the benefit of all. There is a lot of working through things together."

In 2016, the village voted to relocate Shishmaref to mainland Alaska due to the impacts of permafrost thaw and erosion, but the move hasn't happened due to lack of financing. Still, climate change continues to affect the way of life, with some in the village even citing it as a cause of death. It was blamed, for example, when a family lost a member who fell through sea ice on a snow machine.

"Those deaths can really hit home for people on the fact that the landscape is changing so much all the time," Anna said.

While the impacts of climate change might be felt more acutely in Shishmaref than in the middle of the United States, Anna said it's important to remember there is still "so much regular life happening" and many ways faith shows up amid it all.



House of Prayer, an ELCA congregation on the Navajo Lutheran Mission in Rock Point, Ariz., gathers for an Easter sunrise service. The mission is located in a remote area with food and medical services more than 50 miles away.



Photo: Courtesy of Lutheran Church of Honolulu

Members of Lutheran Church of Honolulu participate in a beach cleanup. The congregation is one of 10 ELCA churches in the state, spread across four of the Hawaiian islands.

“God is still at work in the everyday aspects of life and the culture here,” she said, “in the traditions of singing together, caring for each other and celebrating.”

ISLAND CONNECTIONS

Travel 3,000 miles to the south and you’ll land on a different island—a more tropical one—in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. There the Lutheran Church of Honolulu (LCH) has been serving its inner-city neighbors and welcoming tourists on Hawaii’s Oahu island for more than 100 years.

LCH is well-known for its music programs, which are heard in worship services and through a regular concert series. “People often find us because they hear about the music, and they come for that,” said Jeff Lilley, who has served the congregation for nearly 15 years. “We’ve featured everything from Bach to Cat Stevens.”

During the pandemic, the congregation started an online jazz concert series. “Live performances came to an end, and we wanted to support the musicians who were unemployed and had been a big part of our ministry for so many years,” Lilley said. “We also wanted to help provide meaningful experiences for people who were stuck in their homes.”

As it did for so many congregations, the pandemic affected LCH’s ministry, but members are now resuming their outreach programs to the LGBTQIA+ community, people who are experiencing homelessness and those who are food insecure.

And with their location near the Waikiki neighborhood, a hub for tourism in Honolulu, the congregation always extends a warm welcome to

“WE’RE WORKING WITH THE PEOPLE WHO LIVE AND WORK HERE IN HAWAII, WHO LOVE GOD AND ARE DOING GOD’S WORK HERE.”

visitors and shares information with hotels about worship services. But Lilley said their attention remains focused on outreach to the community.

“As tourists start to return, we do want to provide for them while they’re on the island, but for the most part, they have a church home—and there is so much work we need to do in our community,” he said.

“Homelessness here in Hawaii is at absolutely terrible rates. Our cost of living is remarkable. The median home price just topped \$1.1 million. And we



Photo: Courtesy of Grace Lutheran Church

Grace Lutheran in Long Beach, Miss., builds relationships with its community through its vacation Bible school, which includes many participants who aren't members of the congregation.

“A LOT OF PEOPLE STILL DON'T KNOW WHO LUTHERANS ARE, AND WE'VE BEEN WORKING HARD TO CHANGE THAT.”

have a high incidence of poverty that has only grown as a large percentage of people here are employed by the tourism industry and were thrown out of work over the last two years. We've recommitted ourselves to working more deeply in the community for those folks.”

The congregation supports a local nonprofit, Family Promise of Hawaii, that helps prevent homelessness, and they have shopped for and prepared meals with the Institute for Human Services to feed those who are experiencing homelessness.

LCH has also partnered with other ELCA congregations on Oahu for a long-running outreach ministry called One Pot One Hope, hosted by Maluhia Lutheran Church. Volunteers from the congregations gather once a month to prepare lunches of chili and rice and deliver them to homeless encampments.

Such outreach programs exemplify the reality that contrasts the misconceptions Lilley said many people have of ministry in Hawaii—that it's only a paradise all the time.

“We are one of the most multicultural places in the U.S., and that is tremendous fun,” he said. “But we also have people here who say they haven't been to the beach in 20 years because they are having to work multiple jobs just to live here.”

Lilley said he hopes other congregations across the ELCA see the similarities in their mission and ministry—that they're all church together.

“We're working with the people who live and work here in Hawaii, who love God and are doing God's work here just like they're doing it in Wisconsin,” he said. “We just face a different set of challenges and opportunities.”

A WELCOME MESSAGE

Grace Lutheran in Long Beach, Miss., is located in the heart of the U.S. Bible Belt. It's one of just 10 ELCA congregations in a state of nearly 3 million people.

“Here on the Mississippi coast, the largest traditional denomination is Roman Catholic, followed by Methodist, Episcopal and Southern Baptist,” said Dave Parr, pastor of Grace. “A lot of people still don't know who Lutherans are, and we've been working hard to change that.”

At times, these efforts have led to some interesting conversations. “We've been asked if the Lutheran church is a cult because it's named after a person,” he said. “We are trying to raise awareness through community outreach so people know the ELCA is a viable, legitimate community of faith and that [Lutheranism] is a major denomination within the world. That message is slowly but surely getting out.”

Grace is active in many outreach ministries to help serve its community of about 15,000. One such ministry is its food pantry, which opens once a month and serves about 25 families each time. “In 2021 we spent about \$5,700 buying groceries for the pantry,” Parr said. “This is a very important service for this community.”

The congregation also does community outreach as part of an ecumenical organization with four other area churches (United Methodist, Baptist, Catholic and Presbyterian). “We formed to make Long Beach Outreach, and we pool our resources to help people who need assistance with dental bills and vision bills,” Parr said.

Grace also has its own Good Samaritan fund that helps people with needs that Long Beach Outreach can't address, such as rent or utilities.

Vacation Bible school is another way the congregation connects with its neighbors. Parr said

it is a well-attended program with many participants from the wider community, not necessarily members of Grace.

Though the number of ELCA congregations in the area may be few, Grace's parishioners are deeply faithful. Some members travel a significant distance—one couple drives 40 miles one way—to get to church. “We have folks who are making an effort to get here,” Parr said.

Up until the pandemic, and even during its first year, the congregation was adding new members, especially people who were relocating from other parts of the country. Parr, who has served Grace for more than eight years, said this was an amazing thing to see in a congregation of this size, which has 206 baptized members.

The congregation always has a sit-down fellowship hour after worship, which Parr said makes an impression on visitors. “I am told by people who do come by that they've felt a very warm welcome by the congregation—to the extent that they comment on just how warmly they have been greeted and feel included,” he said.

SPIRITUAL IDENTITY

House of Prayer Lutheran Church is located on the 5-acre campus of Navajo Lutheran Mission in Rock Point, Ariz., a remote area that is near the “Four Corners”—where Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado and Utah meet.

“Rock Point itself is 50 miles from anywhere—banks, hospitals, groceries, anything like that,” said Kate Adelman, a deacon who serves House of Prayer and is executive director of Navajo Lutheran Mission. “I would describe the mission as the essential service provider of the Rock Point community as a whole, and House of Prayer, specifically, is the Lutheran church on the mission campus.

“Everything on the mission campus starts at House of Prayer. Everything we do is around what is good for us to do as people of God.”

For the approximately 2,500 people who live within a 10-mile radius of Rock Point, one gas station is the only local option to purchase food. Feeding the hungry has become a targeted ministry. Mission staff and House of Prayer members coordinate a program called Hózhó Cafe, where they daily provide a warm meal to anyone who needs it. The mission also operates a food bank, which distributed 3,000 pounds of food last year to nearly 2,000 families in a 50-mile radius.

About 40% of households in Rock Point have no running water or electricity, Adelman said, so the mission campus has a nonpotable water well where people can access fresh water for cooking and cleaning. They also have a solar program through which they help install a small solar electrical system

that can work for charging phones, running lights or powering a small refrigerator.

The mission also runs a private Christian school, which currently has 39 students in kindergarten through second grade.

In addition to these vital services and programs, the mission, through House of Prayer, is focused on fostering the faith and spiritual life of the community. Worship is done in a combination of Navajo and English. A dialogue sermon allows for conversation about the differences in meanings that are taken on between English and the more descriptive language of Navajo.

“When Christian people first came onto the reservation, they told the Native people that if they didn't choose Jesus they were going to hell,” Adelman said. “To this day they live with that deep pain of believing some ancestors might be in hell. It is very difficult and has been detrimental, and so one of our goals is to raise up Wisdom Keepers.”

The Wisdom Keeper training program is designed by and for Navajo Lutheran Mission and Rock Point in which Navajo people are trained to provide pastoral and spiritual care to the community.

“Any organized religion has its hierarchies and very strict rules about training for pastors,” said Patterson Yazzie, who is training to be a Wisdom Keeper and is the mission director of Navajo Lutheran Mission. “But that comes from a white perspective. Many churches fail to understand the American Indians and their relationship with the creator and with God. But what we are doing here is a big change.

“Since Christianity was introduced to Native people in general, there has never been a good relationship between American Indians and the church. It was introduced to us as a way to humanize us, to get rid of our identity as American Indians. But with this program, we would reinforce our relationships and identity as Navajo people in Rock Point. We have our own creation stories that can be used to make connections and comparisons to further explain Lutheran theology.”

At the end of the training, Wisdom Keepers will serve in whatever ways the Rock Point community needs and wants, Yazzie said. This could range from giving sermons to leading Sunday services and Bible studies to helping with funerals.

Yazzie said the “program will help not just our community but the church outside of Rock Point—to understand that we have something to contribute to our faith and spiritual growth.” †

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