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(page 8)

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Study guide

Mission support: The lifeblood of the ELCA

By Robert C. Blezard

Maybe we should say, “God’s work. Our hands ... *and* our money!”

Church is *not* and *should not* be all about money, and yet financial resources are necessary to accomplish the important work God calls us to do in our communities, our nation and the world.

Mission Support that flows from congregations to synods and to our churchwide organization funds the ministries we all value so highly.

Exercise 1: Mission Support—*huh?*

Give your study group a pop quiz: What *is* Mission Support anyway?

Let everyone share their ideas before considering this explanation from elca.org/missionsupport: “As members of the ELCA, our faith in a loving God frees us to be generous and to boldly participate in God’s work in the world. Stewardship is no longer simply about paying the church’s bills. It is about how congregations can together live out God’s call to love our neighbor. We are open to the Holy Spirit’s invitation to participate in and contribute to God’s work in the world using all of the gifts that God has entrusted to our care. Mission Support—the portion of offerings that ELCA congregations share with synods and the churchwide organization—unites us in this vital, life-giving work.”

- As you read this passage, what phrases and concepts stand out? Why?
- How does your congregation understand itself to be part of a regional church through your synod? What are you accomplishing together that your congregation could not do on its own?
- How does your congregation understand itself to be part of a national and international church through our churchwide organization? What are we accomplishing together that your congregation and synod could not do on their own?
- For what reasons is it important that your congregation fits into an organization that reaches well beyond your local community?
- Why is Mission Support important for our ministry together?

Exercise 2: Mission ministries

Do you know all of the various ministries, partnerships and outreach that your Mission Support makes possible in your synod and through



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Study guide: **Mission Support** *continued*

our churchwide organization? How well? As a study group, peruse your synod's website to explore the ministries it operates or partners with. Make a list of the ministries. For each, briefly note:

- What is the mission of the ministry?
- How is it "God's work. Our hands."?
- Where does it operate?
- Whom do they reach, and how?

Now do the same thing with the churchwide website. Start with the key Mission Support categories listed at elca.org/missionsupport (new ministries, new leaders, global work, fighting poverty and promoting justice). While looking at the page for each category, browse some of the links, especially on the menu bar at the left, to get a deeper view of the breadth of ministries.

- What is the mission of the ministry?
- How is it "God's work. Our hands."?
- Where does it operate?
- Whom do they reach, and how?

When done, discuss:

- Were you surprised at how much your synod and churchwide organization accomplish with your help? Why or why not?
- Which ministries did you find most interesting? Most touching? Most creative? Most in line with your understanding of what God is calling us to do in the world?
- What do these ministries together say about the witness of Lutherans in your area and our world?
- Why are they worth maintaining through your congregation's Mission Support?

Exercise 3: Mission Support, aka ...

Some Lutherans may be confused about Mission Support because it's sometimes called by different names, such as apportionment, benevolence—or even head tax. Those terms might have been used by the ELCA's predecessor Lutheran bodies, but since its founding in 1988 our denomination has used "Mission Support" to describe the undesignated funds that congregations provide for the ministries of the synod and churchwide organizations.

- What term does your congregation use for the undesignated money it passes on to your synod? If it's not Mission Support, how did that term come into use? Why do you keep it?



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Study guide: **Mission Support** *continued*

- Discuss what the different names say about the funds congregations give to the wider church.
- What does “apportionment” mean in a non-church context? How is it most commonly used? What is apportionment usually based on? If congregations use apportionment to describe the money they provide for the synodical and churchwide organizations, what does it mean then? What would be the basis for apportionment in a church? Is that how the ELCA tells congregations to calculate Mission Support?
- What is the ordinary, non-congregational definition of “benevolence”? What ministries or contributions does your congregation fund out of true “benevolence”? Is the money you send for the wider church truly motivated by a sense of benevolence? Explain. What might be a truer motivation?
- Mission Support is the term the ELCA uses for the undesignated contributions that congregations give to the wider church. What does the term mean?
- Explore: What mission does God give to our church as congregations serve their communities, synods serve their region, and the churchwide organization serves our nation and world? How do a congregation’s undesignated financial contributions support that mission? Why is Mission Support a more accurate term than either apportionment or benevolence?

Exercise 4: How much?

Mission Support is usually measured in dollars contributed as a percentage of the congregational budget. So if your congregation’s budget is \$200,000, then a \$10,000 contribution in Mission Support would be 5 percent.

Unlike many other mainline denominations, the ELCA does not have a set amount it expects from every congregation. It’s up to the congregations to decide how much to provide. Today the average congregational contribution is 5.6 percent, which is down from about 10 percent when the ELCA was formed in 1988.

- Some congregations *strongly suggest* their members tithe—give 10 percent of their income. Does your congregation suggest that members tithe (or give specific percentage of their income to the church)? Why or why not? What would be the pros and cons?
- Should congregations *require* their members to tithe? What might be some likely reactions and consequences if congregations issued such a mandate? Is it better for congregations to simply *suggest* but not *require* a tithe? Explain.



**About the study
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Study guide: **Mission Support** *continued*

- Should the ELCA *strongly suggest* that congregations tithe their budget to the wider church through Mission Support? Why or why not? What would be the pros and cons?
- Should the ELCA *require* congregations to tithe their budget to the wider church? What might be some likely reactions and consequences if such a mandate were made? Is it better for the ELCA to simply *suggest* a tithe, but not *require* it? Explain.
- In discerning an amount to contribute in Mission Support, what factors should congregational leaders weigh?
- As a percentage of its budget, how much does your congregation give to the wider church in Mission Support? How does it compare to the ELCA average of 5.6 percent? Is it sufficient? Why or why not?

Mission Support:

The **lifeblood** of the ELCA

Funds connect Lutherans to ministries around the block and around the world

By Robert C. Blezard

After a string of financially challenging years, Mission Support giving at Elvira Zion Lutheran Church in Clinton, Iowa, dropped to 10 percent of its budget. That's higher than the ELCA average of 5.6 percent, but less than half of what the congregation once gave.

Jealaine Marple, pastor, had always spoken enthusiastically about Mission Support, the undesignated funds congregations share with their synods, which synods then share with churchwide ministries. Though Marple encouraged leaders to increase their giving, she was astonished at the congregation's annual meeting in 2016 when

financial secretary Linda Duesing moved to restore Mission Support to the historical level—22 percent.

Marple recalls supporting the idea, listing various ministries funded by these offerings. "I said the money that we send does so much good and does so much ministry in the world that it would be hard not to give," she said.

Believing 22 percent to be too high an increase, the congregation voted to raise Mission Support giving to 15 percent.

"It's been fantastic," Marple said, noting that she serves a farm-country congregation with a \$160,000 budget. "We're not full of millionaires, but gosh,



they're just beyond generous of spirit."

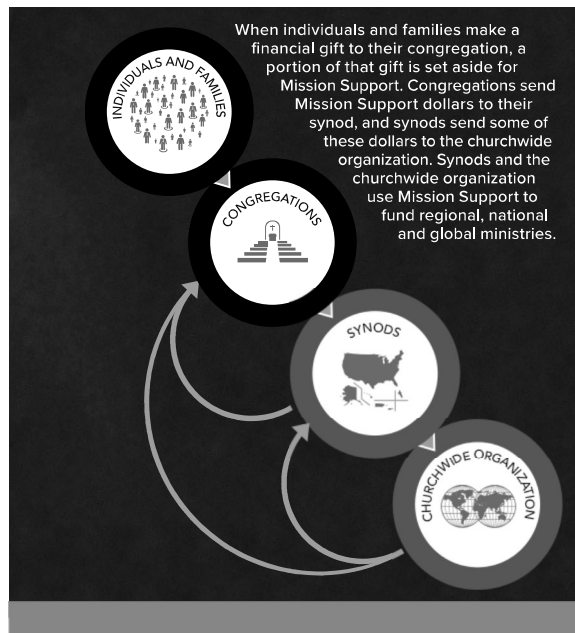
Elvira Zion's experience isn't unusual. Many congregations with tight budgets struggle to provide the level of support that ELCA ministries need to accomplish God's work. Yet, the more that congregations understand the vital role of Mission Support, the more they want to give, said Nick Kiger, associate director of Mission Support.

When he visits congregations, Kiger explains how Mission Support funds the ministries they rely on, such as recruiting and training new rostered ministers or how synods accompany congregations in times of crisis or pastoral transition. "I'm always surprised when people say back to me, 'I didn't know we did all that! I didn't know that was what Mission Support does!'" he said.

Synodical ministries are especially dependent on Mission Support, which typically accounts for between 85 and 98 percent of a synod's budget, he said. For the churchwide organization, Mission Support funds about 65 percent of operating costs, which includes funding for various ministries.

How it works

If there is still confusion in some circles about Mission Support, it may be partly because of its



name. Though the term has been used for 30 years, some congregations still use older names, such as "benevolence" or "apportionment."

The Mission Support team, led by director Victoria Flood and Kiger, has been working hard with the 65 synods to communicate that Mission Support is the lifeblood of our interdependent denomination: Congregations share Mission Support dollars with their synods, and the synods then share it with the churchwide organization. These funds flow back to ELCA members, congregations, institutions and global companions through churchwide and synodical ministries.

Today congregational Mission Support averages 5.6 percent, which is down from over 10 percent when the ELCA was first formed, Flood said.

Many Lutherans embrace 10 percent—a tithe—as a benchmark for faithful giving. For congregations that set a goal of tithing their offerings in Mission Support, Flood suggests building up to 10 percent through small percentage increases over time.

The South Carolina Synod encourages congregations to tithe in Mission Support, said Rick Carter, its director for evangelical mission. "If a church is able to show that it is tithing—that

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is, giving firstfruits—then it's much easier to ask others to participate," he said. "We can't ask if we're not doing it ourselves."

For many congregations that give 10 percent or more, it's a matter of pride and dedication to supporting the wider church.

Messiah Lutheran Church, Red Lodge, Mont., confronted a one-year drop in giving when six generous families moved away. But even with a tight budget, they agreed to maintain Mission Support at 11 percent, said Kim Wilker, pastor.

Messiah has a long legacy of generously giving its time, talents and treasures to the church and community, Wilker said. Members are active in synodical affairs and aware of where their Mission Support dollars go. "There is trust of the [churchwide organization] and our synod that the offerings will be used well," he added. "I think there's an appreciation of what the ELCA accomplishes in ministry and bringing the kingdom of God near to people."

Serving a congregation that is experiencing financial challenges, Wilker understands the temptation some may have to cut this support to balance the budget, but he advises leaders to think carefully and prayerfully. "Our congregation could have done that this year, easily, but they chose not to because they value the relationship and see the importance of the institution," he said.

Why it matters

In explaining the significance of Mission Support, Flood finds a valuable teaching tool in Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton's four emphases for the ELCA: *We are church. We are Lutheran. We are church together. We are church for the sake of the world.*

"Mission Support really touches all of those," Flood said. "[It] is foundational to us being church


together, and it is what allows us as individuals within the ELCA to make a difference beyond just our local congregations and to really be church for the sake of the world, in all parts of the world, and in ways that we couldn't do just in our own congregational settings."

"I try to define Mission Support as a verb, that this is what we do. It's just a continuation of the work we do locally, but in sharing these firstfruits we are able to expand beyond our local communities and to other places to follow the gospel."

In his conversations with people in the South Carolina Synod, Carter also points to Eaton's four emphases. "I try to define Mission Support as a verb, that this is what we do," he said. "It's just a continuation of the work we do locally, but in sharing these firstfruits we are able to expand beyond our local communities and to other places to follow the gospel."

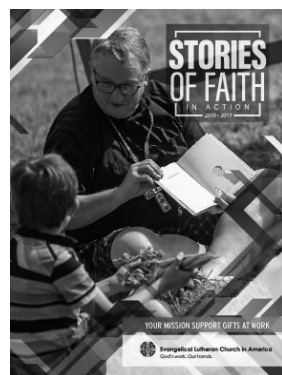
For Marple, Mission Support is an extension of Christ's "Great Commission" to go and make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:19-20). It's true that evangelism and discipleship happen when Jesus' followers are guided by the Spirit, but financial resources help. "At the end of the day, it's going to take money," she said.

Elvira Zion's members believe in Mission Support in part because they are always learning how they are actively living out this church's mission to serve God's people. For instance, youth share their experiences at ELCA Youth Gatherings, voting members share what they learn at synod assemblies, and Marple shares ELCA happenings.

Duesing, who has been a member for more than 30 years, was pleased her congregation voted to raise Mission Support because she understands how much good it does. "Every dollar is important," she said. 

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

To learn more



Stories of Faith in Action highlights how Mission Support dollars advance ELCA ministries that are transforming lives with the gospel of Jesus Christ. To download a free PDF and associated videos or order free copies (you cover shipping), go to elca.org/SOFIA.



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