

So, even though technically today is the conclusion of our stewardship season and this Thursday is designated as our National Day of Thanksgiving, we are hopefully more than well aware that such ways of being are meant to last a lifetime: doing our best to be ever thankful for the blessings we experience in our respective life journeys, as well as consistently envisioning how best to share some of those blessings with those who would be impacted for the better. And yet, the church is also more than well aware that we are not the only place and people who need such sharing of resources in order to thrive. We know there are countless other service organizations and charities, not to mention the schools and first responders who need financial support, not to mention there are those pesky utilities and groceries that require our adulting attention, too. The church is more than fully aware of all that needs tended to for each child of God in this world. And so not only are we as the church thankful for all of you who go above and beyond in shaping this place and people to provide an essential glimpse of God's love; we are also incredibly grateful for the siblings in Christ we often do not get to meet, but when our gifts are combined with theirs, an impact is even further released that we may never fully realize the overall holy effect.

Such combined efforts of our collective church are often pushed to the side in junk emails and postal mail flyers and dusty brochures on narthex tables. And as much as we as faith communities are focused on our past and what we do now and our future, we cannot overlook the impact being unleashed around the world with our little bit of this and little bit of that, that we steward to our wider church. We cannot overlook names like Lutheran Metropolitan Ministries in assisting those who would have to live on the streets of Cleveland otherwise or our 26 ELCA colleges and universities for those late teens and early twenty-somethings trying to navigate where exactly they are going to fit in with this world or ELCA World Hunger empowering churches cultivating community gardens or sustainable farming overseas, and then there is Lutheran Disaster Response. It is one we typically hear about the weekend after a hurricane or an earthquake. We make our usual plea during the announcements to help those affected by whatever natural disaster, and we might just forget about it altogether come the following Saturday or Sunday. But part of that usual plea is the reminder that all the donations collected in the aftermath will go entirely to short and long-term relief efforts; not to some executive's salary. Not for paid advertising or miscellaneous administrative expenses that we typically do not appreciate, but to help the lives of those who may never ever be the same, the stories of which fade from national headlines, but not from the most compassionate concern of our wider church.

A few years ago, wildfires took over one of the most sought-after tourist destinations in this country, in Maui. Over one hundred people died, not to mention the thousands of homes and businesses destroyed. Then, there was Nettie, one of the numerous many in Hawaii who shapes her life around accommodating the millions of visitors who come to enjoy her homeland. When it all started, she was leading one of her usual bus groups, and so she dropped them off at the south end of the island, and immediately went back north, where the flames ensued. She didn't know what she was going to do, but she knew she had to do something. She came upon a make-shift shelter with several other like-minded brave, selfless children of God.

They immediately went to work setting up nearly 3,000 cots, making it into the largest shelter in Maui at the time. But they refused to stop there. Nettie and other volunteers launched a resource and recovery center, providing survivors the needed furniture, food, and clothing to not only rebuild a

home, but rebuild a way of life that was ripped away from them. One of the organizations that has insisted being part in supporting Nettie and the recovery center is none other than our Lutheran Disaster Response, all possible because a bunch of ELCA members and visitors heard the plea on a random weekend in August of 2023, and couldn't help but respond in kind. And through that combined holy effort from those of us here all the way to an incredibly brave woman named Nettie: through that resource center, 6,000 families have been given some form of hope since fires took over not a tourist destination for them, but their most precious home.

Stewardship is not always the easiest topic for the church to navigate when so much of the world is asking for us to contribute our time to this and donate our dollars to that. And yet, children of God keep on responding as if they cannot help themselves, as if they're just divinely hard-wired to insist on being the disciples of Christ in this world not because that's the right thing for us to say, but because we truly believe it, and we wish to be a part of God's breath-taking response to what are sometimes the most desperate prayers for survival. And it continues not just in Maui, but with those trying to make ends meet buying their groceries and those struggling finding a place to call home, even in our own communities. Children of God are faced with dismal news and bleakest outlooks, but they keep on responding with hope, as if they believe Christ is still risen indeed to empower us to do exactly that. So, for all of you, in all the ways you respond with hope, even with the death-defying love of Jesus Christ himself, thanks be to God, indeed! Amen!