

**LUTHERAN VOLUNTEER CORPS (LVC) UPDATE  
FOR MAY 2020  
TO: METROPOLITAN WASHINGTON, DC SYNOD**

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### **Introduction**

In LVC's 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary year of 2019, the organization has created a blueprint for further movement building at a time when a growing economy and personal debt steers prospective volunteers away from volunteering and toward employment; the national discourse is rife with discord and alienation of groups; and social justice is even more at the heart of debates and national/world challenges than ever before. LVC is excited about plans to offer broader community access to social justice leadership development that seeks to build community, and communication, across differences.

For the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Lutheran Volunteer Corps (LVC), and with the hiring of a new president, board and staff considered what value LVC might bring to the next 40 years. In economic recession, service year programs thrive due to lack of employment opportunities; and in our growing economy service programs suffer due to the abundance of paying jobs combined with higher education debt. The 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary continues the trend of downward service participation, while LVC is simultaneously enhancing the program experience. Because of COVID-19, service programs were disrupted even further, many closing or calling back international volunteers. LVC's enrollment decline has reversed slightly in response, as our program remains open and is welcoming some applicants from closed program.

Volunteering on a modest stipend could be seen as a luxury for those unable to leave home to go to a new city for a year. This model of volunteering may be seen a luxury, but is also invaluable as a way to develop employable skills with positions where the competition for the position is reduced significantly; and a way to build leaders able to communicate across differences, required of leading and living in the world. Volunteering with LVC continues to offer entre into the social justice world, and for a generation raised on conversations around privilege, whiteness, and anti-oppression, social justice is forefront.

For the challenges our nation, and world, are facing today, our ability to communicate across differences will be key to our survival. LVC is pleased to continue serving as a platform for social justice service, and springboard for lifelong justice work.

Over the last year, LVC has focused on the following.

- **Making the program more accessible.** For the first time, LVC is offering alternatives for participating in the program. A new FLEX Semester will allow participants to 1) serve for a semester (instead of a year) starting in August, January, or June; 2) serve where they live, in one of LVC's program cities (instead of being sent to a new city to live); 3) have a no-housing option (so participants can commute).

- **Making the program more relevant (and hopefully appealing).** For the first time, LVC is supplementing the service volunteering experience with a year-long learning series, offered as Program Days (first Friday of each month). We'll feature social justice topics and contemporary issues facilitated by subject matter experts, practitioners, researchers; as well as staff and Volunteers; as a way to bridge academic learning around social justice with real life practice, in a broad context (the nation/world).
- **Recruiting Volunteers more broadly.** While maintaining relationships with key feeder colleges (mostly Lutheran), LVC recruited and/or began reaching out to 1) Lutheran churches in its program cities, inviting them to nominate applicants from their congregations and communities; 2) select HBCUs and other organizations of underrepresented groups; 3) events hosted by groups compatible in focus (such as Lutheran Outdoor Ministry); and 4) online platforms (such as Handshake and Service Year) to reach more diverse applicants. LVC also created new marketing materials to emphasize that service is available to others outside of new graduates, including those on sabbatical, retired, in-between jobs, job changers, etc.

For 2019, LVC geared up for a new season of admissions, which shifted from fall, to spring, running from January - July 2020. From this year's efforts, LVC aims to achieve the following outcomes:

1. **Increase the number of applicants.** Service years and service breaks are common in the volunteer service universe, designed to fit mostly into the college lifestyle of gaps and breaks. By adding options for participation that are more flexible around program duration, time of year, location, and living arrangement, similar to higher education commuter programs, LVC hopes to encourage participation by more people with economic, tradition, and life stage requirements that call for different expectations around participation.
2. **Increase the diversity of applicants.** Volunteers have been mostly white, college-degreed, middle class women from the mid-west, throughout LVC's history. By directly recruiting from Lutheran churches, HBCUs, and underrepresented group organizations, as well as instituting new FLEX Semester options and a social justice learning series, LVC hopes to build relationships with potential long-term partners that can help increase the diversity of applicants beyond LVC's usual demographic.

We believe these expectations are ambitious for a first year in a time of declining enrollment, but from this past year's efforts, here's what we hope to see:

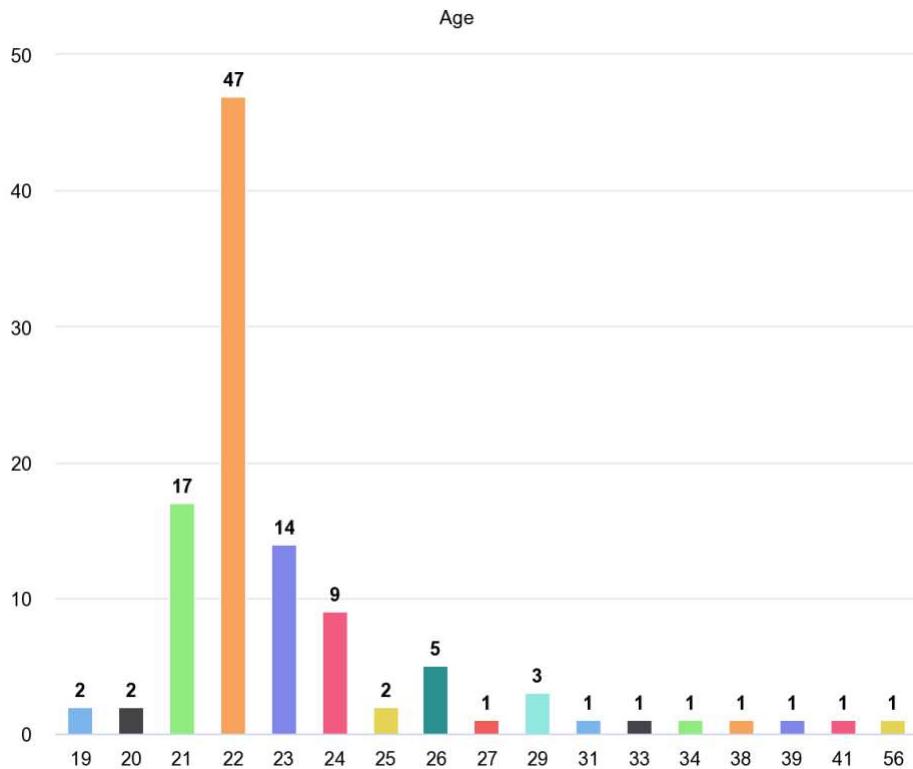
1. Instead of enrollment continuing the trend of decline 30-40%, **enrollment increases at least 10%.** Since decline is expected, it will take considerable effort to even maintain enrollment.
2. **Underrepresented applicants increase to 15-20% of the LVC cohort** (racial/ethnic, regional, age/stage, socioeconomic...).

#### **Results (as of 6/1/20, full results will be available in August)**

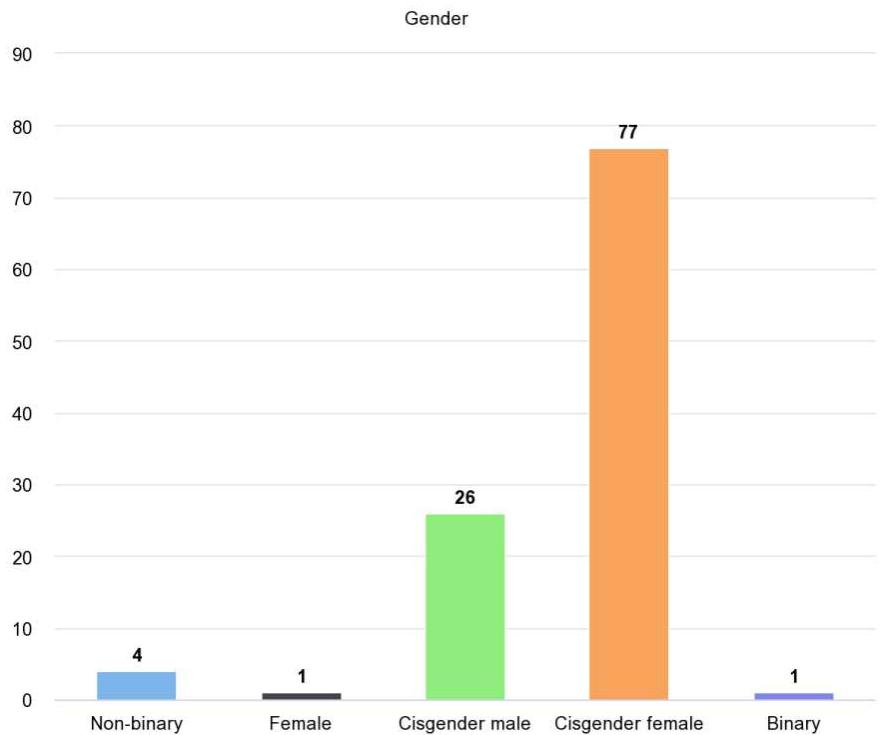
**Enrollment Goal: 10% increase, which would be from 42 in 2019, to 46 enrolled in 2020:** LVC received 100 total applications in 2019, and to date for 2020 has received 147. Our focus is on the number of *completed* applications out of that total number, which is currently 54. Last year we had 42 Volunteers, so this year's number (54) seems to be a good start for a recruitment season that has two months to go. Note that 54 completed applications does not mean all will confirm their participation. LVC shifted our intensive recruitment period from fall, to spring (January - June) when applicants are more likely to be serious about their next steps with service.

**Increase Underrepresented Goal: 15-20% of the cohort, which would be 9 out of 46 enrollees for 2020. Of the 147 total applicants, here is how our new marketing and program efforts have succeeded so far (below). Note that we will not know the final result until August when the new service year begins.**

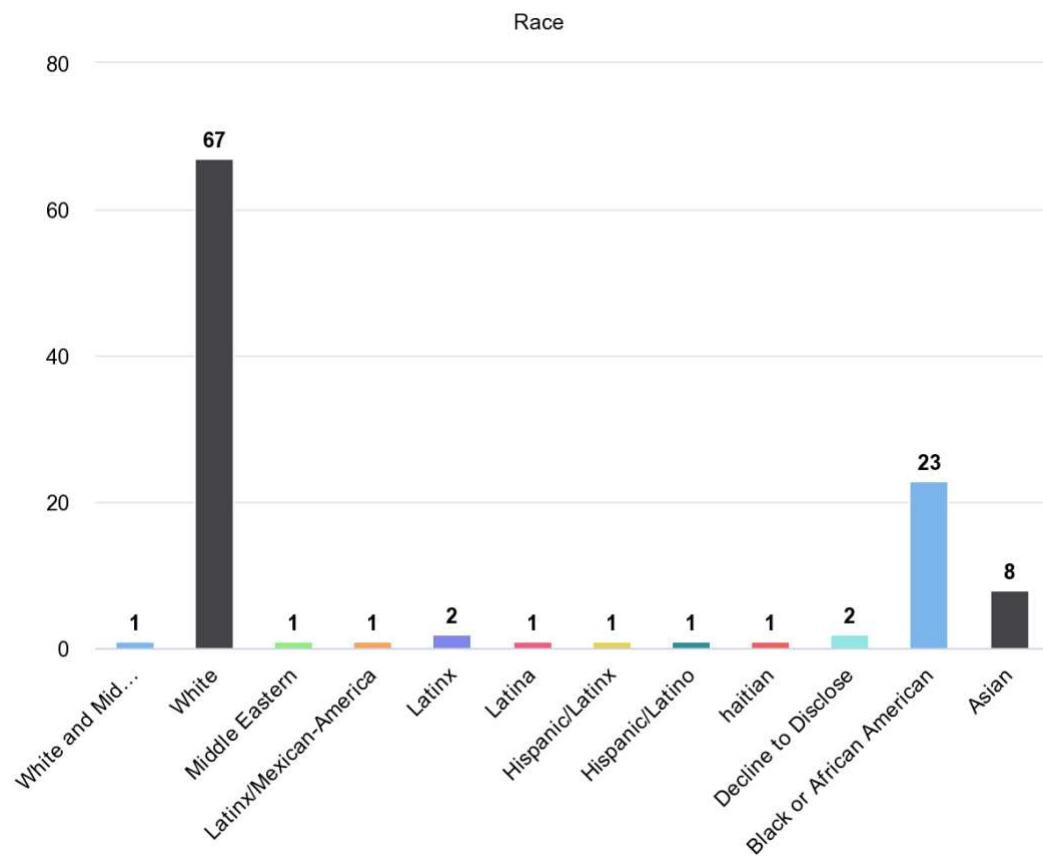
Age -- For 2019 there were 0% of applicants or enrollees over 25 years old. So far for 2020, 15% of applicants are over 25.



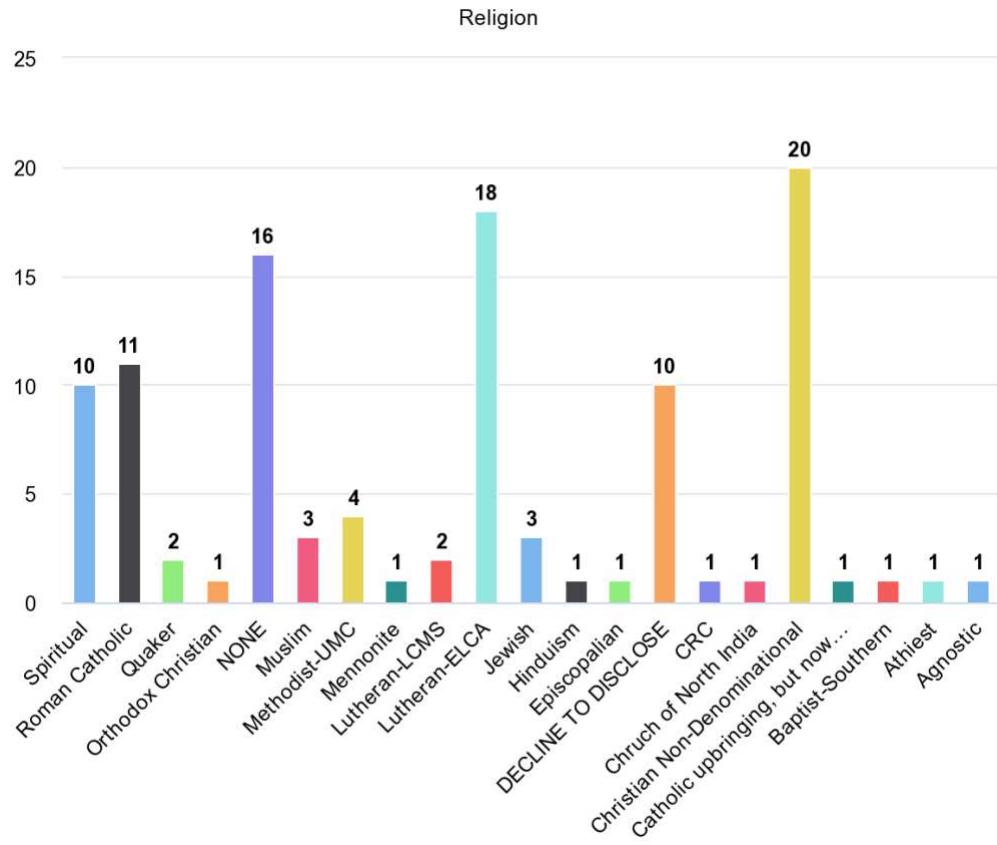
Gender: For 2019, 17% of enrollees were male; so far in 2020, 26% of applicants are male. (The program is historically mostly female, so increasing male participation is considered important.)



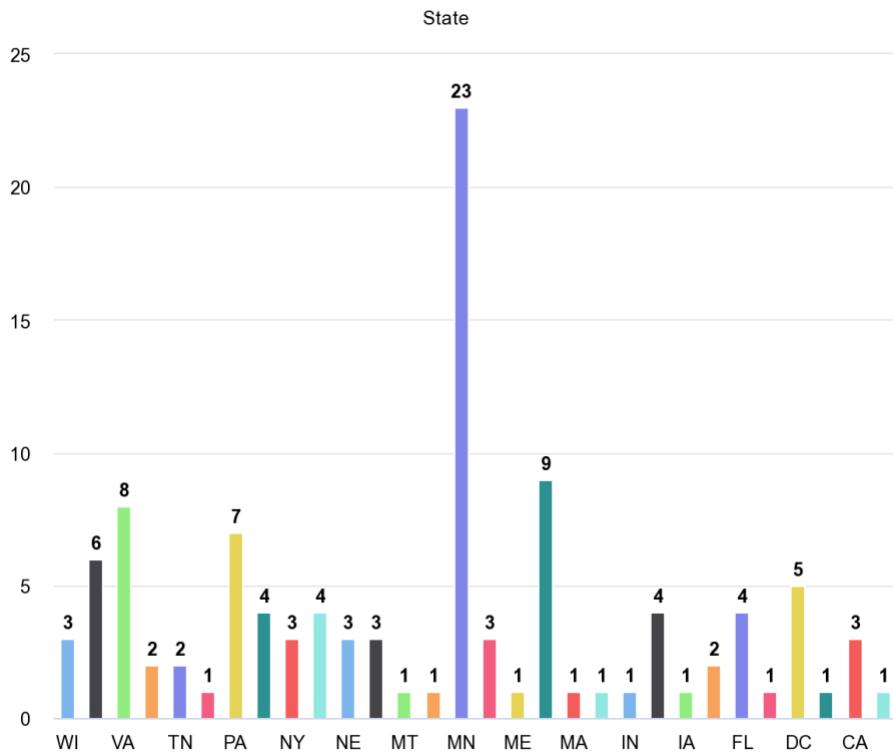
Race: For 2019, 18% of enrollees are non-white; and so far in 2020 38% of applicants identify as non-white.



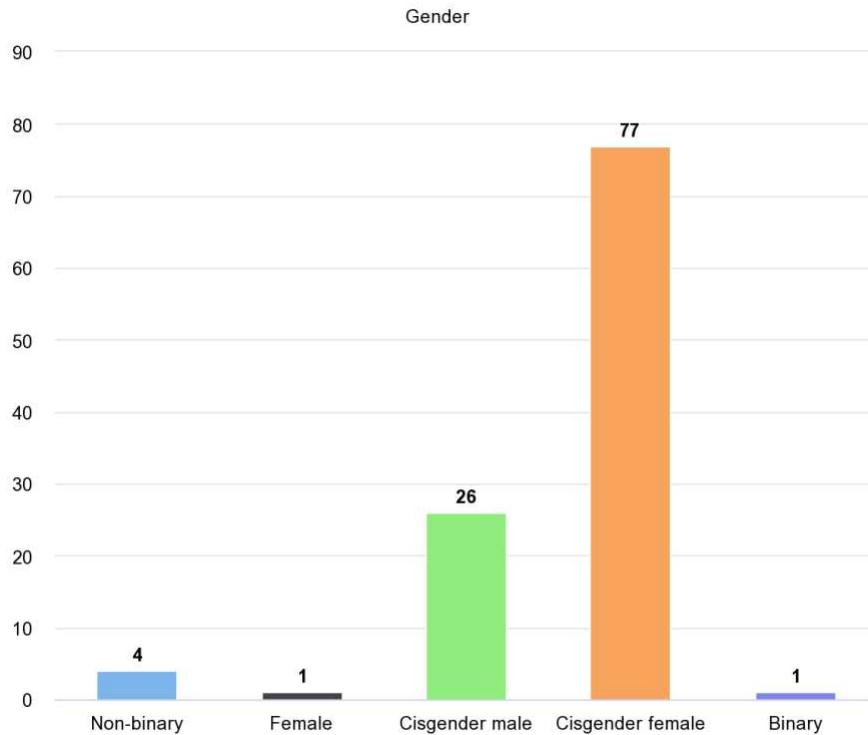
Religion: For 2019, 65% self-identify as non-Lutheran; so far for 2020 82% identify as non-Lutheran.



Region: For 2019 enrollees come from 23 states and regions; so far for 2020, applicants come from 30 states and regions.



Sexual Orientation: For 2019, 49% identify as not heterosexual; so far for 2020, 20% self-identify as not heterosexual.



LVC does not see broadening and diversifying participation in social justice service just for diversity sake, but because social justice conversations are incomplete without diverse voices; because volunteering must move away from assuming a privileged white audience to assuming and inviting a more complex demographic that can better teach and learn from each other; because diverse perspectives should increase creative tension and creative solutions to LVC as a growing organization and to the volunteer experience. We also know recruitment is not just tabling at college events, but broader relationship building and value-building.

LVC has taken the following new actions to broaden recruitment, followed by response and retention:

- While continuing to engage our mid-west, Lutheran college roots and continuing relationships in Twin Cities, initiate communications with non-Lutheran, east and southern, HBCUs and higher education institutions with high representation of People of Color (POC). We hand-picked a few colleges in the DC region, our second largest program area, including Trinity University DC, which drew significant interest and has a high POC population.
- Change the visual pictures on recruitment flyers to reflect openness to applicants that are not new college grads but have gray hair (!), include males, and include minorities. (Note: We had one disabled woman drop out of the application process because LVC is unable to accommodate. We are working on that issue, with an eventual goal of having no barriers to participation.)
- Eliminate the January application deadline in alignment with higher education trends, to allow people to apply year-round. Last year, we had 16 interested applicants in June that were not

considered, but may have bumped up enrollment in a year when enrollment challenges threatened financial stability.

- Refocus recruitment staffing from one LVC employee to the whole team having a role with recruitment and admissions.
- Initiate a People of Color mentoring program matching Volunteers of Color with alumni to reduce isolation.
- Initiate “in-person” engagement before Volunteers show up for service. Previously, communications were mostly email, there was no early orientation to help applicants discern their participation, and we never met applicants face-to-face. Now we have Zoom orientations weekly for applicants, monthly for Placements, and will have a second round in July; and we have Zoom interview prep training. These are all efforts to “see” each other on multiple occasions to help all applicants feel more connected; and to help underrepresented applicants feel connected and supported.
- Initiate conversations with ELCA leaders around LVC inclusion in engagement efforts. This has been a much slower effort, but initial conversations and meetings have been had with Rev. Dr. Phil Hirsch, Bishop Leila Ortiz, Bishop Yehiel Curry, Lamont Wells, Joe Young, Savannah Sullivan, Yvonne Lembo. Bishop Ortiz foresees value connecting LVC’s semester or year of service with her “year of discernment” program drawing seminary applicants and retired pastors.

LVC does not assume we can do this on our own, but with the help of partnerships representing sources for recruitment, funding, and education/learning. Thank you for supporting the ambitious plans of LVC, and for reading about our early efforts for increased inclusion.

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