Life Matters

This week was painful as I watched a video of police brutality ending the life of George Floyd in Minnesota; it brought me to tears. My tears were of unimaginable frustration, of sadness for the family, of helplessness for those calling out for human compassion, of concern for those I love and at risk daily of such acts, of anger and distrust for those enacting a civic role in society that is supposed to represent community safety and protection of life, every life. While I have no knowledge of Floyd having any direct experience of living with disability, I write in concern for the mental state of America. This death is not a deadly virus that we cannot control; this is what I have come to think of as our death-dealing ways as a society. It is a sin-sick soul sort of death that pains all of humanity because we all are part of the problem; each of us must be mindful of ways in which we contribute to the problem and the solution. Societal ills are disabling for communities, yet churches can participate in needed change. Such systemic change requires collective action whereby members of every race, age, ability and sexual expression allow God to move us into the plumb line of justice and mercy.

Can we truly be the body of Christ if we are not all in this together? It is our willingness to do God’s will in informed ways despite our imperfections that can remedy the state of our country; we pray, discern and act knowing God is in charge, yet God relies on us to act in life-giving ways. Is it not unfathomable how God’s mercy is great? While I am thankful that I can release this pain and concern and sorrow to God’s care, I cannot forget that God’s work is done through our hands, including my white, privileged, imperfect hands. Yet, no matter what my race, ability, social status and/or privilege is, God can use it for good; if I choose life, the honoring of my own life and the lives of every child of God, such mercy will bring about some goodness.

Lately, because of a global pandemic, I have reflected upon death quite a lot. In prayer today I recalled a 2016 gathering in Washington, D.C., entitled “Healing Through Peace, Purpose and Prevention.” The intent of this Minority Mental Health Summit (sponsored by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office of Minority Health, and American Psychological Association) was to reveal the important role faith and community leaders of minority communities have as trusted messengers. We all can benefit from their wisdom if included in platform discussions on policy, best practices, and engagement strategies on minority behavioral health.

As we approach Minority Mental Health Awareness Month this July, let us not judge persons of color for what may be perceived as a bias associated with mental health and substance abuse treatment; 83.6% of psychological professionals are white (https://www.apa.org/workforce/publications/13-demographics) and ethnic patients have historically encountered professionals with very different life experiences who lack sensitivity to cultural differences. I have come to understand a deep sense of informed distrust by many that may be healthy for us all.
I believe today’s current events, though not desired, can help us understand the realities of institutional racism that can shed light on the source of such lack of trust. COVID-19 is unveiling the stark reality of economic and racial inequities of health care, employment, environmental conditions and emergency services that should disturb our well-being. Significant and systemic change can occur if we listen, learn and act; public media and local legislators are preparing us for our own role and responsibilities. When a life is taken by ones who are called to civic acts of care for, and with, our brothers and sisters who are not white, is it any surprise that distrust exists? Since 2017 I have observed blatant acts of white supremacy that in prior years and decades were less obvious and more covert; while it is ugly, it is also exposing. We can learn from and stop our dysfunctional ways of being society; corporate confession can be a tool for collective wisdom that can make a difference. Lives lost are not only taken individually. We, ourselves, contribute to the disproportionate loss of life; at times the physical lives, yet even more frequently day-to-day in ways that impact the quality of life that leads to a multitude of deaths such as what is being revealed through this coronavirus pandemic. We have grace and are forgiven; the church, too, is forgiven as we confess as a whole body our complicitities and/or our lack of trust in one another.

Beloved, as a nation I am not so sure that we love ourselves any more than we love our neighbor; we must confess this individually and corporately in order to be capable of love. In confession we learn we can love God within ourselves and within our neighbor, forgive ourselves and our neighbor. We can be about life-giving, rather than death-dealing, ways of acknowledging and struggling in relationship with one another. It will not be easy, and we will have a lot of work to do in confronting ourselves, learning from the past and gaining trust with one another, but with God’s will and our willingness, we can be church together for the sake of the world. Maybe this time apart and the abundant time we have in reflecting upon death is God’s revealing gift to us, rather than a curse. Let us not delay our work together; it is too costly to us all as we seek wellness for self and one another.

— Carol A. Johnson, Coordinator for ELCA Disability Ministries

Three ELCA congregations find that Mental Health Ministry matters

Pathways to Promise and ELCA Disability Ministries partnered in resources for three mental health ministry programs for ELCA congregations in Arizona, Iowa and Texas. Gloria De Cristo, Mt. Olive and Trinity Lutheran churches launched their mental health ministry plans in 2019 and continue to serve. Grants for $10,000 each were provided from Always Being Made New: The Campaign for the ELCA.

Pathways to Promise, a nonprofit organization, was founded in 1988 by 15 faith groups and mental health organizations to facilitate the faith community’s work in reaching out to people with mental illness and their families; the ELCA was a founding denomination of Pathways to Promise and has provided support and leadership on the board of directors. In recent years, board member Carol Johnson, ELCA coordinator for Disability Ministries, Grants and Schools, has worked diligently to connect ELCA congregations with Pathways for programming and resources that assist in developing a welcoming atmosphere, promoting recovery and inviting members living with mental health symptoms and/or a diagnosis to actively share their gifts and interest within the congregation and the community.

As a result of funding from the “Where Needed Most” fund, more than 25 grants were awarded for mental health ministry plans in 2019. Pathways consulted with several ELCA congregations and assisted in the assessment, education and implementation required to develop new mental health outreach ministries. The Companionship Movement, a ministry practice founded by Craig Rennebohm that is spreading across the country, is one way that Pathways introduces a model of ministry suitable for almost any congregation. Pathways issues certificates for people seeking to be trained to lead introductory workshops in their own context. ELCA Disability Ministries affirms the companionship program to prepare congregational leaders to practice more equitable engagement of
Some examples of our recent work include Trinity Lutheran Church in Mason City, Iowa, which planned to develop a new mental health ministry, stating, “We realized that we need each other to form a community that is truly integrated and inclusive.” In January 2019, Trinity Lutheran Church reached out to Pathways to receive training in companionship and planned to host a three-hour interactive workshop to educate congregation members on the “5 Practices of Companionship — Hospitality, Neighboring, Listening, Journeying Side-by-Side, and Accompaniment” — and the power of relational engagement. However, schedules conflicted so much that both Trinity and Pathways were worried the training might not happen, until a “ram in the bush” solution to the dilemma appeared.

Karen Young, a local chaplain and volunteer of Trinity Lutheran Church, was trained as an instructor of the Companionship Movement in Chicago to bring the program back to the Mason City community. Not only was this a more financially viable solution, but it was also a way to make continued hosting of workshops throughout the community a possibility, therefore increasing the network of companions. Pathways is happy to report that, as a result, Trinity has embraced the Companionship Movement and incorporated it into a movement of its own, along with knowledge gained from several other trainings.

Trinity, since October 2019, has been able to engage the community in conversations about mental health, seemingly giving members of the congregation permission to talk about the mental health struggles they face personally or with loved ones, and reinforcing their ultimate goal of becoming more supportive of people living with mental illness. Trinity concluded its grant with the understanding that “inclusivity is a faith value” that must be actively sustained. On December 15, twenty one new hospitality ambassadors were commissioned in worship for this work.

Mt. Olive Lutheran Church in south Dallas, another congregation that included Pathways to Promise in its plans to develop a mental health outreach ministry, aimed to develop a network of trained volunteers and companions who could attend to the multitude of needs throughout their city. Their motto is “I am here with you; you don’t have to walk alone. We will walk with you for the next few steps.” The Companionship Movement was just the program to support Mt. Olive in this work!

Jermine Alberty, executive director, and Jessica Dexter, program development associate at Pathways to Promise, spent a week in south Dallas learning about the community’s challenges, needs and hopes for the future. This on-the-ground time allowed Pathways to tailor the companionship workshop to the congregation and community’s specific needs. At the end of the visit, Mt. Olive Lutheran Church hosted a three-hour companionship workshop and has since boomed with a companionship presence. The entire congregation and much of the larger community embraced the companionship model because it recognized its potential to save lives and benefit both the giver and the receiver of care. Pastor Todd Bruning of Mt. Olive has become an even more influential advocate for the most vulnerable in the community and continues to grow the network of companions throughout south Dallas. Pathways team members remain in regular communication with the Mt. Olive congregation and Pastor Bruning, supporting their overall ministry development, the advancement of which includes several members of the community being trained as instructors of companionship in order to enhance the passion and sustainability of the ministry. You can follow the journey of Mt. Olive by visiting: https://bruningt.wixsite.com/companionship.

In addition to work with Trinity and Mt. Olive, Pathways brought the Companionship Movement to Gloria de Cristo Lutheran Church in Yuma, Ariz., where we met Pastor Bill Timm and a congregation eager to decrease the stigma of mental illness in its community. The vision of Gloria de Cristo was to bridge its community with other congregations and increase its mental health literacy through the Model of Companionship and Mental Health First Aid. Gloria de Cristo has already begun conducting several mental health first aid trainings and companionship workshops. Gloria de Cristo remains excited about its new mental health ministry and
continues to inquire about how to expand the number of instructors and increase the impact on its community-at-large.

As a result of our partnership with the ELCA, Pathways has expanded the Companionship Movement, which has resulted in opportunities to continue serving in ways that extend beyond the initial commitment of assessment, education and implementation. At Pathways to Promise, we are proud of the work we’ve been able to do in collaboration with the ELCA. As we continue into 2020 and move out of quarantine, we look forward to bringing even more resources, training and support systems to ELCA congregations throughout the United States. “Grief and anxiety are a common life experience amidst the COVID-19 pandemic,” Johnson states, “yet we might consider this time an invitation and opportunity for meaningful change. The kinds of resource materials, consultative services and offerings of certified trainings provided by Pathways to Promise are a means of bringing about a more equitable way for congregations and schools to be the church and live life together.”

For more information about Pathways to Promise and the Companionship Movement, please visit our websites: pathways2promise.org and thecompanionshipmovement.org.

What are we learning from mental health ministry grantees?

COVID-19 has brought changes to everyone’s lives including how to maintain faith communities and their many ministries. Mt. Olive Lutheran Church, Dallas, Texas, was no exception. Mt. Olive is one of the ELCA Disability Ministries mental health ministry grant recipients. Mt. Olive’s ministry plan includes partnerships with United Methodist, Episcopal and other Lutheran congregations along with Pathways to Promise. Companionship training, led by Pathways to Promise, and the companionship methodology were a pivotal and life-changing experience for the individual participants of the training and ultimately the congregation.

The partnership and trust relationship between Pathways to Promise and Mt. Olive Lutheran Church has aided the congregation to stay connected during the coronavirus pandemic by its learning to use Zoom conference calls. Successful use of Zoom has allowed for worship, Bible study and companion leaders’ strategy meetings to continue during this time of social distancing. Companionship principles and practices were implemented to aid the congregation in learning how to use Zoom.

Companionship has become not just a program but the core of Mt. Olive’s identity in this current public health crisis and with anticipation of remaining so beyond the present. The five principles of Pathways to Promise are ways of understanding the congregation’s role with each other as members, with neighboring residents, other nearby congregations and local organizations. The companionship model has taught the congregation that folks with mental health issues are treated the same as everybody and anybody else, but this concept is just as effective with those who have never been diagnosed.

The mission of Mt. Olive Lutheran Church is to “serve as a vehicle through which the gospel is spread.” As in-person training is not an option at this time, Mt. Olive has proposed an alternative plan for Pathways to Promise to host an online (Zoom) companionship training with the thought of doing the “Train the Trainer” workshop online. Through a discovery process Mt. Olive looks for ways to grow disciples who will lead their ministries as an outreach to the community and collaborate with five congregations to propel the Companionship Movement.

We celebrate the ongoing work of Mt. Olive Lutheran Church and its openness to finding adaptive ways to continue to be the church and serve its community even amid the unanticipated challenges of a global pandemic. As an ELCA congregation, we are proud to
call you our sisters and brothers in Christ! God's work is in our hands, and we do this together for the sake of the world.

Written by Jean Sandberg (A-team convener for the Accessibility Task Force, Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod)

Dates to know about:

- **June 18** Zoom conference call, Grant Review expansion team, led by Chris (3 p.m. Central Time)
- **July 7** Zoom conference call, ELCA Grantee Enlightenings, led by Jean (3 p.m. Central Time)
- **July 13** Zoom conference call, Disability Ministries Connections, Carol (11:30 a.m. Central Time)
- **July 16** Zoom conference call, Grant Review expansion team, led by Chris (3 p.m. Central Time)

Find additional information on Disability Ministries or contact us.