

LEADERSHIP

# A dynamic, welcoming duo



children were students. Active members of Bethlehem Lutheran Church in New Orleans, Victoria and William felt God's call but were unsure of the feasibility of attending seminary at that point in their lives.

Then they found out about the Theological Education for Emerging Ministries (TEEM) program at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary (PLTS). *PLTS is one of the ELCA's seven seminaries, each of which receives annual Mission Support grants to maintain their work of training leaders like the Williamses for service in the church.*

Through the seminary's TEEM program, the couple could take classes remotely; they also attended three on-campus sessions for each year of seminary. The format not only facilitated their seminary studies but also allowed them to apply what they were learning to situations outside the classroom. This theological training laid the groundwork for the community outreach that's been a hallmark of their tenure at St. John's.

"That experience really helped to shape how we see ourselves as pastors to the community," William said. "We have so many people in [Jacksonville]

at every path to the ministry follows the same trajectory. But for Victoria L. and William C. Hamilton Jr., the married co-pastors of St. John's Lutheran Church in Jacksonville, Fla., the journey has been unique.

The duo came to ministry later in life, after William had retired from the Navy and Victoria had wrapped up years of working in the school system while their

who call us their pastors who've never set foot inside the physical building of the church." After seminary, the couple was called from New Orleans to lead St. John's, a long-established congregation whose membership was declining. While building relationships with their congregants, the pastors began reaching out to the surrounding neighborhood, which was largely made up of black and LGBTQIA+ residents. Their passion for inclusion and evangelism has fueled the congregation's steady growth over 19 years, and in 2016, it became a "Reconciling in Christ" congregation. For the pastors, guiding St. John's to commit to welcome, include and celebrate lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex and asexual (LGBTQIA+) people was just a natural extension of their faith.

In the Hamiltons' eyes, practicing Lutheran welcome is simple: "We love everybody; God loves everybody," William said.

*To find a video story about St. John's becoming a "Reconciling in Christ" congregation, visit [ELCA.org/SOFIA](http://ELCA.org/SOFIA).*



Top photo: Members of St. John's hand out food to community members.

Bottom photo: A young St. John's member sings a hymn during worship.

