

ekklesia



New England Synod - ELCA

Spring 2014

JOINED IN FAITH

Lutherans, Episcopalians gather
to renew vows in Connecticut
(p. 3)

Bishop James Hazelwood

Where I'm seeing hope

The long winter has many of us looking for signs of spring. We are wondering about our lives and our churches as well. Where is there hope? One of the great advantages I have is getting around the synod and visiting with people, pastors and parishes. I'm seeing hope in many places around our synod.



First Lutheran in Southington, Conn., is a congregation that until recently had a distant relationship with the New England Synod and other congregations in the area. That's all changing now. Pastor Josh Rinas became transition pastor last summer, and in April was called as its new pastor. Under a pattern of shared leadership with Pastor Rinas and a team of committed lay leaders, hope is springing up at this nearly 150-year-old congregation.

Pastor Rinas joined Pastor Jim Debner of nearby Zion Lutheran to distribute ashes on Main Street in Southington as Lent began. In addition, the congregation has partnered with four other churches to participate in the Forward Leadership Community as well as Transformational Ministry under the Leadership of Pr. Jane Shields, our Director for Evangelical Mission.

Emanuel Lutheran Church in Hartford, Conn., and First Lutheran in East Greenwich, R.I., have partnered to help make theological education a reality for two interns next year. While each is a unique internship site, the two congregations will engage in ways to learn from one another, provide support and prepare future pastors for the ELCA.

We are building more and more connections with our ecumenical partners. This spring, the leaders of Lutheran and Episcopal congregations gathered at one event in Hartford, Conn., on April 15 (Page 3), and another in Rhode Island on May 1. Next fall, there will be a gathering on Oct 14. These are signs of our new partnership, as we build coalitions in order to plan for new congrega-

tions and renewal in existing congregations.

Our Latino ministry is moving forward in a partnership with the School of Lay Ministry in Providence, R.I., and we are in the planning stages for starting several new Latino ministries in the New England Synod.

The Forward Leadership Community (Page 8) has brought together five congregations for monthly gatherings of mission planning. Each congregation participates in a survey called a Congregational Assessment Tool (CAT for short).

One of the great advantages I have is getting around the synod and visiting with people, pastors and parishes. I'm seeing hope in lots of places.

The results paint an accurate picture of the health and vitality as well as the areas that need work. After the completion of the CAT and interpretation led by one of our cracker jack New England Synod trained guides, the congregations develop a plan to begin the work of renewal.

St. Paul Lutheran Church in Gloucester, Mass., is evidence of what a strong and vital small congregation can look like. Pastor Anne Deneen has spent years partnering with lay leaders to bring strength and purpose to

this Cape Ann church. In recent years they have completed a building project and are now engaged in connecting with the community.

This issue of Ekklesia includes many stories of hope. Whether it is in Vermont or Rhode Island, spring is here. The gospel is rising in new and unexpected ways.

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Ekklesia is a production of the New England Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

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'Lutherpalians' in Connecticut



There were, quite simply, a whole lot of priests and pastors on the altar of Christ Church Cathedral in downtown Hartford on April 15.

The occasion was the joint renewal of ordination vows and a day of conversant faith as the Lutherans and Episcopalians of Connecticut gathered for their annual clergy day.

Lovingly referred to as a gathering of "Lutherpalians," the morning featured a series of spirited discussions in Christ Church's Cathedral House Auditorium among the state's Lutheran and Episcopalian clergy about the challenges and triumphs they're facing.

"I think that we had a constructive conversation about the challenges that we all face in ministry as well as the joys that we are each experiencing in our locations," said the Rev. Christopher McKinstry (Immanuel Lutheran Church, Meriden, Conn.). "I think they were very general, challenges to get people involved, have enough money to balance the budget, engage with the community, et cetera.

"I enjoyed the fact that we transitioned away from that and into what excites us about our settings because those responses were a lot more hopeful and unique to each person's context."

The morning discussions were broken up into multiple sessions, and

after each one the clergy were asked to rotate to different tables in order to hear new voices and see new faces. It wrapped up with each clergy member writing down his or her passion, then continuing on to another discussion centered on that passion.

For McKinstry, that led to talk of communications, and specifically the church's role in social media.

"We also spoke about the strengths and weaknesses of social media in ministry, admitting that though social media can be a great tool, it's not something that works as a replacement to real connections with people in the real world," he said. "We also spoke about the need to use social media intentionally and not feel the need to be everywhere, on every network but to choose one or two and do it well."

After those conversations, the gathering entered the cathedral for a joint service. Episcopal priests handled the scripture readings and New England Bishop Jim Hazelwood gave a sermon on the modern culture of commercialism and consumption, and where the church fits into that picture.

With clergy from the state's churches sitting side-by-side regardless of denomination, the bishop's sermon prompted one of the many overlapping virtues of the Lutheran and Episcopal churches: Laughter.



Photos: Andrew Merritt

A Closet thrown open to all

Clothing sale has become mission

By Andrew Merritt

SOUTHBIDGE, Mass. – It was time to get out of the fundraising business.

Kirsten Nelson Roenfeldt was called to be the pastor of Bethlehem Lutheran Church in Sturbridge in August, 2012, and she saw that the congregation was involved in a lot of different fundraising activities. One of them, a clothing sale, was particularly successful.

“So I said, well this is a really cool project, even though people presented it as a fundraiser, this is also a ministry and a mission to this area,” Roenfeldt said. “So how do we do this and make the proceeds we’re making – \$100/week, just open on Saturdays – we’re enjoying doing it, let’s keep doing it and see what we can do with it.”

With some dedicated volunteers, and an assist from a nearby Catholic church, that modest but successful fundraising project has become Bethlehem’s Closet, a thriving and vital source of affordable clothing for the residents of southern Worcester County.

The store itself, which is open Saturdays from 9 a.m.-1 p.m. and Mondays from 9:30-1 p.m., is in the basement of the Sacred Heart rectory in Southbridge, across the hall from Sacred Heart’s large flea market room. That room has the traditional appointments of a flea market or rummage sale – antique furniture and décor, books, kitchen items, dishware. Some 40 feet away sits the entrance to Bethlehem’s Closet, and once you’re inside it’s almost difficult to find open space, because the room is filled with rack after meticulously organized rack of clothing, shoes and accessories.

At the center of the semi-organized maelstrom stands Andrea Trifone, one of the volunteers who runs the show from the cash register by the door. Trifone isn’t just the woman pushing the buttons and making change, though. She accepts the donated clothing – which often arrives



Bethlehem’s Closet, a ministry of Bethlehem Lutheran in Sturbridge, Mass., is a room teeming with affordable clothing donated by the community. (Photos by Andrew Merritt)

in piles and huge garbage bags – and sorts through it. Just about every donation that comes in is kept. The clothes that are in good condition go onto the sale racks, with prices Trifone determines with a sharp eye (everything is under \$10, and most items are just a few dollars). Some clothes that may not be suitable for resale go into a basket just outside the entrance, where they can be picked up for free by anyone who wants or needs them.

“We’ve received enormous

amounts of donations,” Roenfeldt said. “As publicity came out, tons of people have wanted to offer clothing, so our inventory has just exploded – so much so that we are seeking ways to give away more of the clothes. We’re talking to Lutheran Family Services in Worcester, and we’re giving gift certificates to local churches to give to the public.”

Trifone sees where those clothes go when she’s running the register. And the clientele is varied, she said. Some of the people who come to

Bethlehem’s Closet are simply bargain hunters looking for a hidden treasure.

“There was one woman who came in and bought like 14 Christmas sweaters, those ugly Christmas sweaters,” Trifone said with a laugh. “She had bought a couple, she was a teacher, and they were all jealous at her work, I guess, so she came back and bought every one she could find. Then I had a man who came in and bought seven Hawaiian shirts last week.”

So just like any thrift shop, Bethlehem’s Closet sees its share of the bargain-minded but fashion-conscious. That’s not where the true ministry lies, though.

Southbridge is one of the poorest towns in Worcester County, and while Sturbridge, which Bethlehem Lutheran calls home, is on the wealthier end of that list, the two towns are neighbors. On one side of the town line sits the relatively affluent Sturbridge. On the other side is Southbridge, where more than half the population has a household income under \$50,000, and a whopping 24.1 percent of residents live below the poverty line – Nearly 11 percent



Volunteer Andrea Trifone helps a customer.

higher than the state average.

Making matters worse is a lack of thrift stores in the area. The nearest Goodwill facilities are in Springfield, some 35 miles away, and the nearest Salvation Army store is 13 miles to the north in Spencer.

Bethlehem's Closet, in other words, has filled a void for those who need its brand of assistance the most. And that is certainly appreciated.

"I have a very sweet boy, he's one of my favorites," Trifone said. "He comes in regularly and gets shirts for his work, and I say he's the best-dressed one working there. We have quite a few people who are in need."

The hope, Roenfeldt said, is for the thrift store to grow beyond simply being a place for the needy and the thrifty to find affordable clothing. There are plenty of ideas. Among them is creating an endowment that will create scholarships and grants for people in the community, us-

ing the revenue from Bethlehem's Closet.

There is also a scarcity of places for the homeless of Sturbridge and Southbridge, as Worcester shelters recently stopped offering their services to those towns.

"We don't have a shelter here," Roenfeldt said. "We had one that closed for a number of reasons. It may be that the money that is currently being made by Bethlehem's Closet can be funneled into a way to help homeless in our area. If it is indeed true that we can't just transport people to Worcester, we are going to have a dire need."

"The goal is to get all the money coming in to Bethlehem's Closet back to the community. Right now, Bethlehem's Closet funds are still going to Bethlehem's budget. But hopefully over the next few years, that can change."

On a chilly day in early spring, Trifone managed the store while

"We are right next to a lot of people who have a lot of physical needs. So how do we be in partnership instead of just charity?"

Pastor Kirsten Nelson Roenfeldt, Bethlehem Lutheran Church



Volunteer Andrea Trifone, left, and Pastor Kirsten Nelson Roenfeldt (Bethlehem, Sturbridge, MA) talk at Bethlehem's Closet, a ministry that Roenfeldt hopes will become more than a fundraiser.

customers and donors trickled in and out. Two women came in to look around, as did a veteran with patches on his jacket and the firmest handshake you'll ever feel.

"We have (a woman) that comes and buy 20 pairs of shoes, and (she's) sending it to Ghana," Trifone said. "She comes in regularly, she was here Saturday buying multiple pairs of shoes."

Another woman arrived with a gigantic bag of clothes. Inside was a pair of leather chaps to be worn while riding a motorcycle. It just so happened that another woman standing near the counter rode a bike. A few

minutes later, the rider had a nearly new pair of chaps to replace her ill-fitting pair, for pennies on the dollar.

One regular customer, Denise, was picking through the tightly spaced racks, looking for a deal.

"I've been in the community all my life. Born and raised," she said, then gestured to a nearby apartment building. "I moved in over here, and I'd heard about (Bethlehem's Closet). I thought it was great. They had posters up that said they were going to open up the new this, the new that, and I said 'that's the place for me.' I don't shop strictly for name brands, it's just what you like. It's variety. I can't even think of going into a regular store now."

"My housekeeper's coming for the first time today. She's in from Worcester, and they don't have anything like this out toward Worcester now."

The shop has also become a community resource during emergencies. When a recent house fire destroyed everything a local woman and her son owned, they came in and were given bags to fill with clothes for free.

"We are right next to a lot of people who have a lot of physical needs," Roenfeldt said. "So how do we be in partnership instead of just charity?"

The answer, it seems, might be found among the racks of clothes in a rectory basement, where the idea of a fundraising rummage sale has grown into something more.



A customer checks out a pair of shoes at Bethlehem's Closet, which offers clothing, footwear and accessories.



MISSION: *incredible*

At Good Shepherd (Rutland, Vt.), food security has gone from one-time challenge to year-round focus

By Andrew Merritt

It started with a challenge.

John Michael Longworth was just months on the job as pastor of Good Shepherd in Rutland, Vt., when he issued that challenge to his new church's council.

"I challenged the council to put together 10,000 meals through Kids Care, as sort of an outreach, mission-oriented thing to jumpstart their imagination," he said.

The challenge was not only accepted, it was met – and then some.

"In that first challenge, through community involvement, they were able to set a new state record," Longworth said. "They did over 13,000 meals on their first go. That was really exciting for the congregation. It gave them a whole new sense of who they were, what they were able to accomplish, whether they could go after big things."

Just over a year later, the congregation at Good Shepherd has taken that challenge and turned it into a mission. Good Shepherd has made the vexing, growing problem of food

insecurity its central ministerial focus, turning the KidsCare meal packaging from a one-off community service event into a year-round repertoire of programs designed to help one of Vermont's most poverty-stricken regions.

Only four counties in Vermont have a higher percentage of people below the poverty line than Rutland, which sits at 13 percent – 1.4 percent higher than the state average, according to the 2010 census. The median household income in the county is \$48,968, some \$5,000 less than the state average.

With that level of economic struggle, Longworth said, comes a crippling hunger problem. There are between 8,000 and 9,000 people in the county who are food-insecure, meaning they don't have enough food for their next meal, they don't have the financial resources to acquire enough food, and they don't have a realistic plan to take care of those two problems.

"You literally do not know where your next meal is coming from," Longworth said.

Good Shepherd is attacking that problem on multiple fronts. One method is being a school



Pastor John Michael Longworth and his wife, Sara, celebrate their first year at Good Shepherd in Rutland, Vt. Since his arrival, Longworth has challenged the congregation at Good Shepherd to become a mecca of meal packaging, and the response, judging from the overflow of meals waiting in the church's sanctuary shown in the photo above, has been staggering.

lunch site, meaning the congregation provides free breakfast, lunch and snack to some 70 children who attend an after-school program at the church.

But the school lunch program only takes care of those two meals on weekdays.

"The kids that are eligible for free school lunch, the weekends are a time of great anxiety for them," Longworth said. "When they come to school, they know their food insecurity goes away. But Saturday night, it might be Lord knows what."

That's where Good Shepherd's other food-related ministries come in, and chief among those is the Rutland Meals Challenge, which is what has blossomed out of the church's first meal-packaging event. The Challenge includes volunteers and donors from throughout Vermont, and its goals are both simple and ambitious.

In January, the church hosted its own meal-packaging weekend, and using \$5,000 in donations and numerous volunteers, the two-day effort produced 20,000 meals consisting of rice, beans, vegetables and soy protein. Those meals went to eight different Vermont food pantries.

The next step, Longworth said, is to once again double the Challenge's meal output. The record for meals packaged in a single event for the "North Country" states of Vermont, New Hampshire and Maine is 38,004, set by the New Hampshire Food Bank. Longworth said Good Shepherd thinks it can do even better.

"So we're shooting for 40,000,"

he said. "There are about 80,000 food-insecure people in Vermont, so this would be one meal for half of them. So that's one big effort."

And the effort is now going beyond setting up the assembly line-style packaging program that many churches have done throughout the synod in conjunction with Kids Care. Good Shepherd is in the process of building a garden that will serve both as a source of vegetables to augment the meals, and as an educational venue to help children better understand where their food comes from.

The hope, Longworth said, is that the church's effort will earn it a grant that is being offered to an area organization that wants to create a sustainable, large-scale community garden.

"A grant was made available, we have a master gardener's extension here, and they did a partnership with one of the TV stations in Burlington, essentially a competitive grant where you could describe where you work, and why the grant would be a real benefit," he said. "They want to know you're not just going to have two boxes of dirt on the lawn. We talked about how our teachers and parents and students could contribute to the garden."

"And for us, as an educational institution, children have the opportunity to learn where food comes from, that it's not just a can or a box."

The reason that food security has taken off as a ministry at Good Shepherd, rather than just being something the congregation dabbles in for an occasional service



Above and below, volunteers from Good Shepherd in Rutland and the surrounding community packaged 20,000 meals during a two-day drive in January. That alone is enough to feed a quarter of the food-insecure people of Vermont.

event, is that it has resonated as a way for the church to forge its own identity.

"We entered into this mission identity conversation, and had sort of adopted as our tagline that we are the church that is 'fed by God to feed our neighbor,'" Longworth said. "And that replaced this big long mission statement that nobody could remember, but they knew it was printed in a bulletin somewhere."

The new tagline has become the congregation's rallying cry. One member even had a bunch of T-shirts printed up with "Fed by God to feed our neighbor" on the front, and "Body, Mind, Soul" on the back.

"Just as we get fed by God in many different ways, we are called to feed others in different ways," Longworth said, reflecting on the success of that first meal packaging event. The volunteers ended up putting together so many meals, they ran out of storage space in the church's fellowship hall and used some spare room in front of the altar.

That image, of thousands of meals' worth of food waiting in a room where the church's members normally came to be fed both physically and spiritually, was a striking one, Longworth said.

"I think when we sort of said, 'wow, this is kind of a sense of who we are,' it meant that we really needed to look for ways to sort of make that our own."

The challenge may have come from Longworth when he first started, but he said the reason the

effort has become so successful is that the congregation has taken ownership of it.

"It was nice to see that it was something people were able to take and chew on themselves," he said. "They took way more ownership of it than if I had come in and said, 'here's our five-step plan, here's how we accomplish it,' because then it vanishes as soon as I leave the room. And I think that's why even though 40,000 (meals) sounds terrifying — you talk about raising \$10,000, and lots and lots of volunteers and quite a few hours of packing work — people aren't scared of it."

"They were scared of going up from (10,000 to 20,000), but now they're just more excited than anything else."

Good Shepherd sent in its application for the garden grant earlier this year. If it's selected, it will be able to take yet another step in its mission to help feed the hungry in Vermont. But even if the grant doesn't come through, Longworth said he's confident that the garden will happen.

"I get the sense that because people were so excited about it, whether we get the grant to have the specialist do the construction, we'll get something started on the property one way or the other," he said.

That's what happens when a single challenge becomes a singular mission.

To learn more about the Rutland Meals Challenge, you can visit the blog Longworth set up to track its progress: vtmealschallenge.wordpress.com



A new way to take a step Forward

Synod's Forward Leadership Community aims to give congregations a path to success

By Andrew Merritt

This year, five New England congregations are learning how to take the next step in discerning their mission and purpose, with a little help from a new Synod initiative.

The Forward Leadership Community is a new program from the New England Synod that began in January with the introduction of those five congregations: First (Lynn, Mass.), Christ the King (Holliston, Mass.), First (Southington, Conn.), First Evangelical (Waltham, Mass.), and Holy Trinity (North Easton, Mass.).

Over the course of the year, they will undergo a series of training seminars aimed at helping them identify and affect the changes they need to make to find their overall and individual purpose.

The Community formed as an evolution of the Doing What Matters project, which came to a close last year.

"From my perspective, when I was doing the Doing What Matters coaching, and taking people through discerning purpose statement and guiding principles, they would get through that process, figure out their strategic directions for mission, but then where does it go?" said Kim Bergstrand, who along with Rev. Sara J. Anderson and Bishop Jim Hazelwood is leading the program. "What do we do next? How do we change? How do we change the culture of the congregation? Are we going to innovate, are we going to experiment?"

"We're equipping those leaders – not just pastor – to help lead that change."

All of those questions may seem onerous if a congregation is trying to do it without help, but

Bergstrand, Anderson and Hazelwood are helping to guide the five "guinea pig" congregations through understanding and answering them.

"Everybody gets so far, and then has a problem taking those final steps putting their mission into action," Bergstrand said. "Part of our mantra for Forward Leadership is 'we're in this together.'" It's a collaborative program, with multiple congregations in different places – small, large, each unique, but all have something to contribute to one another."

The process begins with the congregation completing a 95-questions survey called the Congregational Assessment Tool, administered by HolyCow! Consulting. It measures a raft of attributes surrounding how successful a congregation is in its mission, from readiness for change to the resources needed to make that change happen.

That's the starting point. From there, the five congregations gathered in January for a retreat, and they spend time throughout the year working on the strengths and weaknesses the assessment identifies. On six Saturdays this year, they will spend the day in a seminar together with Bergstrand and Anderson, as well as different guest speakers.

"From each congregation, the goal would be concrete, but the larger goal is to give people the opportunity to collaborate, to come together and form the community bond," Bergstrand said. "Hopefully the skills and strategies they learn in cong will be useful at work, at home."

Each seminar has a focus. One of this year's featured Rev. Mark Huber (Sanctuary – Marshfield, Mass.) talking about identifying leadership styles, while another had the synod's Listening Team showing the ropes of conflict management, and Rev. Lisa Hazelwood (St. Andrew – Charlestown, R.I.) will speak about community

engagement.

"We're using synod resources that people sometimes don't realize we have," Bergstrand said.

And lest it sound like a rehabilitation program exclusively for troubled churches, Bergstrand said the current crop and the congregations that will be a part of it in the future run the gamut of success and health.

"We're looking at your average church with declining attendance to a healthy congregation," Bergstrand said. "The only thing we're not doing is we're not accepting congregations in transition, because that just takes a lot of prayer and discernment."

The five congregations involved this year were invited to be part of the inaugural class. Going forward, congregations are invited to apply via an application that will be made available at this year's Synod Assembly, during which Rev. Anderson will run a workshop promoting and explaining the process.

Once accepted, the congregation is asked to identify three or four lay leaders who will join the pastor for each seminar, as well as an "accountability team" that will lead in implementing the actions the first group identifies through its work with the Forward Leadership Community.

"That gets it a little further than just people coming to the seminar and the buck stops there; it brings it to a conversation within the congregation," Bergstrand said.

For more information, visit the Forward Leadership Community blog at forwardleadershipcommunity.blogspot.com.



Mission and Worship in the Age of the Spirit
New England Synod Assembly 2014
 Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
 God's work. Our hands.

June 5-7, 2014

MassMutual Center, Springfield, Mass.

The 2014 New England Synod Assembly will be held at the MassMutual Center in Springfield, Mass., June 5-7. The assembly will feature keynote speakers the Rev. Dr. Cláudio Carvalhaes and Dr. Scott Thumma, as well as opportunities for casual conversation, small group discussions, and educational experiences around our theme of mission and worship. For more information, including how to register, go to NESynod.org.

Writers wanted!

Ekklesia is looking for more voices from throughout the Synod, from opinion columns to news features. Are you interested in writing for Ekklesia? Got a great column or story idea? Email Andy Merritt at amerritt@nesynod.org to get started!