

## LSSI foster care program a success

By Veronica Campbell

When he was 3, Brendan (name changed for privacy) had been in three foster homes within eight weeks. Placed into foster care when his parents were arrested with issues related to prescription drugs, he was nonverbal, wouldn't respond to his name and threw food on the floor, among other challenges. He overwhelmed his foster parents, who all said they weren't equipped to handle his needs. Creative treatment options were needed to help Brendan.

That's when Lutheran Social Services of Illinois (LSSI) stepped in with its Therapeutic Foster Care program. It was launched as a pilot program in 2017 to support children who had experienced severe trauma and had behavioral issues. These children are most at-risk of being placed in group homes or institutional settings because their needs overwhelm traditional foster parents. Based in Chicago, Aurora and Rockford, the LSSI program is proving successful in helping these children thrive.

With intensive support from highly trained foster parents and a team of clinicians and caseworkers, Brendan developed the life skills he needed to grow and flourish at home, in school and in the community. His birth parents invested in the program's family therapy and other required services. Ultimately, they were reunited with their son.

LSSI's program uses an evidence-based treatment model called Treatment Foster Care of Oregon, which has been successful at reducing problem behaviors, increasing school success, strengthening attachment to caregivers and improving foster parent satisfaction. "Kids are graduating from this program already," said Marnie Jamison, a therapeutic foster parent, who contrasted the LSSI program with her experience in traditional fostering. "I don't see the same results. I see *better* results."

Therapeutic Foster Care is a strong team effort: foster parents meet weekly with clinicians and caseworkers and can contact the team 24/7 in emergencies. Additionally, therapeutic foster parents receive daily check-in calls to update staff on the child's behavior. "[These] Parent Daily Reports are the most rewarding



Therapeutic foster parents Eve Rivera (left) and Gloria Cunningham prepare for their weekly team meeting with LSSI foster care licensing representative Norecia Williams.

part," said Norecia Williams, a Therapeutic Foster Care team member who regularly conducts the calls. "Even though I don't have a relationship with the kids, I get an idea of how they're doing, and I build relationships with the foster parents."

Children with psychiatric, substance use, medical and/or developmental concerns are assessed on a six-point scale. Six indicates the highest need of support, and the average score for children accepted into LSSI's program is 5.1. The average score for children leaving the program is 2.5. To date, 83% of children in the program have graduated successfully, which means they are reunited with their biological family, non-family members with whom they have a strong relationship or an adoptive family.

"The evidence-based program is important because it shows validity that this has worked," said team leader Maya Maclin. The children win points for good behavior. With this motivation, one child received the top score in his honors algebra class and another received the "Most Improved Student" award at his school.

Children also meet regularly with a skills coach who takes them on outings. To the kids, these are just fun activities, but the sessions help them develop essential life skills. They might be asked to order for themselves at a restaurant or play politely with the other kids at a playground. This may sound easy, but many of the

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## Kyle named LSTC director of contextual education

Clergy and congregations in the Metropolitan Chicago Synod who routinely host contextual education students and interns (vicars) from the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago (LSTC) will soon see a new face—if they haven't already. Eric J. Kyle joined LSTC as director of contextual education on July 1.

A year ago, Terry Baeder retired after serving part time in the role, then called "director of field education." Kyle's job is a new full-time position where he will administer and adapt a framework for contextual education that is integrated with the seminary's public church curriculum.

Kyle said he felt the call to shape future ministerial leaders for congregations and society in 2004, while pursuing his Master of Divinity degree, which he earned in 2006 from the Claremont (Calif.) School of Theology. "I have been yearning to be at a seminary," he said.

He most recently served as director of the Center for Research, Education, and Teaching Excellence at Nebraska Methodist College in Omaha, where he was an associate professor. Kyle, who also has a doctorate in practical theology in religious education and spiritual formation, was assistant professor of theology and director of service learning at the College of St. Mary in Omaha. He taught courses on spirituality, nonviolent peace-building and world religions. In the United Methodist Church, he served as a youth minister and as a local pastor at an urban church, and worked at a Japanese-American church.

Kyle also has experience as an instruction designer and technologist. His areas of interest include religious education, community engagement and excellence in education.

"We are delighted to welcome Eric to the LSTC faculty," said Esther Menn, dean of academic affairs. "His education and experience in spiritual formation and community engagement are especially well-suited to LSTC's public church curriculum. He combines practical, contemplative and prophetic



Eric J. Kyle

approaches that will both support and challenge our learning community."

Of his new role, Kyle said, "It's inspiring to be joining a group of students, staff and faculty who are deeply committed to working toward change in our churches and in theological education. I

hope that I will be able to contribute to this mission as much as I know that I will be benefiting from this work."

Kyle described his educational approach as "collaborative," adding that he puts relationships first as he begins work with both seminarians and contextual education site supervisors.

He also looks forward to working with students throughout their time at LSTC—in the classroom and as they spend time at Ministry in Context sites, on clinical pastoral care assignments and as interns.

His goal for formation is to shape clergy for the many contexts in which they will serve and make sure they have tools, theories and strategies in their toolbox. "We are equipping clergy to be effective," he said.

Kyle approaches the relationships of congregations to students, and students to congregations, as "welcoming and nurturing, with a foundation of grace. No one is perfect, and we enter into the struggle together to be in this together."

His first months are being spent checking in with established congregational sites and exploring new ones. Tapping into his technological skills honed at Texas A&M University (where he earned bachelor's and master's degrees in mechanical engineering), he hopes also to develop ministry modules that seminarians can access for support while away doing field education. He may also implement some short-term service-learning experiences that will connect LSTC with more congregations than those who know about the seminary through Ministry in Context students and vicars. **L**

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# Servants and messengers

By Jan Rizzo

The story of deaconesses is as old as the church itself. And, although the Deaconess Community of the ELCA has its main office in Chicago, its sisters live and work throughout the country and world.

“Deaconess” comes from the Greek word *diakonos*, first used by Paul in Romans 16:1-2 to describe a woman leader and worker in the early Christian community by the name of Phoebe.

Susan McArver, professor of church history and educational ministry at Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary, explained: “One of the things I find interesting about the word *diakonia* is that in the early church it had two meanings. Both ‘a servant,’ one who serves another, but it also meant ‘messenger,’ someone who carried the message on behalf of someone else. A deacon can be seen as someone who carries the gospel message to a needy and hungry world.”

That is what the deaconesses do: they carry the gospel message to the world through their work in the ministry of word and service. They are rostered as ministers of word and service in the ELCA and as diaconal ministers in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada. There is an intentional community of women who affirm, challenge, pray for and accompany one another daily, and they regularly attend community gatherings. They seek justice and the flourishing of all of God’s creation. They work in existing communities and help build new ones.

Members of the Deaconess Community share their individual gifts and talents in a wide range of services, including as hospital and hospice chaplaincy, community organizing, teaching, congregational ministry, youth ministry, pastoral care, health care and community nonprofit organizations. They are equipped with the theological education and spiritual preparation necessary to connect the church to their individual area of service.

For example, Sister Clare Joseph-Maier finds that a primary definition of her call is to “speak publicly to the world in solidarity with the poor and oppressed, calling for justice and proclaiming God’s love for the world.” She is minister to Christus House and the Young Adults Ministry in Eugene, Ore. Christus House, part of the Lutheran Campus Ministry Network, is a “unique student housing opportunity of the University of Oregon and Lane Community College that equips its residents to live, learn and practice community,” Joseph-Maier said.

Before becoming a sister, Sylvia Countess was a high school French teacher. She served with ELCA Global Mission as assistant to the director of education in the Lutheran schools of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land. She lived in Jerusalem and worked in the West Bank. “It’s my experience that deaconesses do not retire,” she said. “They just get recycled into new positions. That has happened to me many times. I first started out as a hospital chaplain.

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## Music that Makes Community comes to LSTC

The Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago (LSTC) is hosting a “Music that Makes Community” workshop Oct. 10-12. Conie Borhardt, Paul Vasile and Scott Weidler will lead worship, plenaries, small groups and reflection. Participants will learn practical skills and a diverse repertoire and explore how paperless music can strengthen and enrich worship and community life.

More information about the schedule, costs (\$350, \$650 for two individuals from the same congregation/community) and housing are available at [musicthatmakescommunity.org](http://musicthatmakescommunity.org) (click on “Calendar,” then “Workshops”). LSTC is supporting the event, and discounted rates are available for current students, faculty and alumni. Scholarships are also available for seniors and for individuals and faith communities with limited resources.

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I then worked four years in the West Bank, then I worked four years for the community. I then went into an interim ministry, and now I am teaching English as a second language to immigrants and international visitors in my hometown, and I also work in the surgical waiting rooms at the local hospital."



Sister Noreen Stevens (middle) and Sister Liz Colver (right) at one of the monthly distributions of fresh produce organized by Rescue, Release, and Restore Inc. and Shekinah Chapel in Riverdale, Ill., a Deaconess Community Mission Grant partner.

In living out their core values, deaconesses have the opportunity to use their financial resources to partner with Mission Grant recipients. One grant partner is Rescue, Release, and Restore of Chicago, which offers SIMBA (Safe in My Brothers' Arms) and SIMSA (Safe in My Sisters' Arms) camps for young African American men and women. Yehiel Curry, bishop of the Metropolitan Chicago Synod, chairs the RRR board.

By rescuing the gifts, releasing the potential and restoring the promise of our youth within their communities, RRR is building their self-worth and empowering them through leadership training, artistic expression and mentorship. Through the camps, youth are given a safe space in a rural environment to examine their lives, their choices and their futures.

In writing about the Deaconess Community's involvement, RRR administrator Heather Hayes said: "Not

only did the grant funds help us in reducing the cost for so many youths, but the community provided us a liaison who reached out to talk with us and let us know that we were being prayed for. Some may think that the money is most important, but we know that to have someone praying for you far outweighs any financial gift." ❧

For more information on the Deaconess Community visit, [deaconesscommunity.org](http://deaconesscommunity.org) or email [deaconess.community@elca.org](mailto:deaconess.community@elca.org).

**Jan Rizzo** is the administrator and public relations manager of the Deaconess Community.

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children haven't been exposed to normal social situations, and these activities help them learn and grow. "It's a mentorship role—I model good behaviors," said therapeutic skills coach Driana Cotto. This modeling has a positive impact: one child she worked with had trouble being patient and listening, but now she's demonstrating these skills without being prompted.

Such success stories inspire staff and foster parents to continue providing the time, effort and unconditional love these children require. Despite the many challenges, the foster parents are quick to proclaim their love for and commitment to the children in their care.

"These kids have the same wants and desires as other kids—they just need a little more love," said

therapeutic foster parent Eve Rivera. "Hopefully the child, after everything they've gone through, will come out of the program knowing that someone's there for them."

"They don't know where they're going, and that's traumatizing," said Gloria Cunningham, another foster parent. "Through this program, they know they're going to be reconnected." ❧

For more information, visit [LSSI.org](http://LSSI.org).

**Veronica Campbell**, a 2019 Calling and Purpose in Society Fellow at Valparaiso (Ind.) University majoring in creative writing, interned at Lutheran Social Services of Illinois.