

People of promise

By Bishop Wayne N. Miller

Editor's note: *This month's article by Bishop Wayne Miller consists of his remarks made at Holy Name Cathedral, Chicago, on Oct. 31, 2017, at the Covenant Renewal Service that also commemorated the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. The original covenant was signed in 1989 by Cardinal Joseph Bernardin and Bishop Sherman G. Hicks. It was the first such covenant between a Catholic diocese and a Lutheran synod in the United States. These remarks are based on Jeremiah 31.*

I want to begin by offering my deep personal thanks to Cardinal Blase Cupich and the people of the Archdiocese of Chicago for the opportunity to be with you this evening. Thanks also to my colleagues from the Council of Religious Leaders of Metropolitan Chicago who are with us tonight ... to all my Lutheran sisters and brothers ... and, of course, to my friend and esteemed former bishop, Sherman Hicks, for the visionary leadership that led to the original signing of the covenant we consider this evening.

I might add that it is a somewhat surprising honor for me to be here tonight. I think it is safe to say that if, two years ago, you had asked me where I



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was likely to be on the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, Holy Name Cathedral would not have been the most obvious reply. Thanks be to God for opening us again and again to the surprising gift of grace.

We have come together here, of course, to affirm and recommit ourselves to a covenant, a set of promises. It is a simple enough thing to do. But the simplicity of the act should not diminish its profound significance.

It was, after all, a promise that first called Abraham and Sarah to leave home and follow, and a promise that called the people out of slavery toward freedom. It was a promise that held God's people in hope during exile, and a promise that allowed the first disciples to see Jesus as the son of the living God.

It is our capacity to make, to keep and to honor promises, both to God and to one another, that makes community, in all its forms, possible.



Cardinal Blase Cupich and Miller sign the renewed covenant.

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Because promises honored create reliability, and reliability brings trust, and without trust, community is broken, consigning us to estrangement and isolation ... as we know too well from our experience with pie-crust promises

That is to say, promises that are easily made and easily broken: “I promise your check is in the mail ... I promise I will make it to your game tonight ... I promise that I will never take another drink ... that I won’t get angry ... that I will love you and only you forever.”

Promises, you see, are not to be taken lightly. Because our faithfulness to promises is our witness to a world that is much more interested, I’m afraid, in what we do and how we live, than it is interested in what we say about what we think. We may not be saved by our works, but we are certainly known by them.

Five hundred years ago a brilliant but belligerent German monk, named Martin Luther, came to believe that the church of his time had betrayed its most basic promise to preach, teach and live the good news of Jesus Christ in all its power and purity. But whether or not one agrees with Luther’s assessment, we cannot deny that his challenge to the church led to a cascade of intended and unintended consequences that has had the effect of splintering the body of Christ into a fragmented array of groups that say different things about what they think. [These are] groups that, for generations, have responded to difference among Christians as a threat either to eradicate by any means necessary, or to flee from, rather than seeing difference as a surprising gift of grace to engage with and learn from. ... The result of which has been a fracturing of Jesus’ own profound hope for a community that is one, even as he and the Father are one.

But the God who is faithful to promises even when we are not comes to us again here on this night with a new covenant—a promise produced by 50 years of honest, respectful conversation and

relationship between Christians who think differently about some things. It is a covenant grounded in our shared baptismal identity in the God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit ... and because of this, a covenant built upon the certainty that the one who binds us together will always be more powerful than that which pulls us apart. It is a covenant that calls us into respect and patience, honesty and humility in our dealings with one another. ... And which calls us toward a commitment to engage and learn from our differences rather than trying to eradicate or flee from them.

And because of this it is, implicitly, a covenant that, in our own time, challenges us to stand side by side and to work tirelessly together for peace, to stand against violence in all its forms, and to witness boldly to the sanctity of life.

It is a covenant that challenges us to create a place of welcome for the stranger and to stand against all forms of bigotry, racism, oppression and exclusion. It is a covenant that challenges us to care for the poor among us and to work for a society that will provide a sufficient, sustainable livelihood for all. It is a covenant that

challenges us to cherish and protect the splendor of God’s creation and to resist the temptation to exploit and abuse that creation for the garnering of personal extravagance. It is a covenant that challenges us all to live with our hands open—opening once to freely and joyfully receive the abundance of God’s grace, and then opening a second time to release our abundance back into the world with equal joy and equal freedom.

In a moment, the cardinal and I will write our names on a page affirming and renewing the covenant—the promises—that we have made. But the power and promise of this night will only be realized when every single one of us allows Jesus to write these words on our hearts. Because it is then that our lives as well as our words will become our witness, and I have a strong hunch that we may even be surprised by Christ’s capacity to use us to do even greater things than these. ✠

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LSSI's Recovery Home provides healthy start toward sobriety

It's a sunny morning as the women residents at the Healthy Start Recovery Home gather for a peer-led self-help group, and their animated camaraderie fills the room. This type of bond, and the support it brings, is crucial for individuals who are determined to maintain a sober lifestyle.

A program of Lutheran Social Services of Illinois (LSSI) located within the Kenmore Center on Chicago's North Side, the Healthy Start Recovery Home assists men and women who are actively seeking to obtain or maintain a drug- and alcohol-free lifestyle. The women's housing opened in April 2017; the men's in July that same year.

The program provides a structured environment through congregate living. Peer-led, self-help groups are offered regularly at least five days a week, and residents can access intensive outpatient treatment on-site. They can stay up to a year and typically come from a 28-day treatment program, a detox program, or have relapsed in their sobriety.

"Our Healthy Start Recovery Home is important to our clients' sobriety because they need a safe living environment where they can integrate back into society," said program director Frank Harris, who noted the great need for these services. "They



Peer-led self-help groups are requirements of LSSI's Healthy Start Recovery Home, which provide crucial support for people in recovery.



Roommates at Lutheran Social Services of Illinois' Healthy Start Recovery Home.

can 'practice' living sober at the recovery home, and it helps them stay engaged in treatment." The program also helps participants move toward next steps in independence and sobriety.

Residents live in dormitory-style rooms and are required to attend the peer-led group sessions. Meals are served family-style, with residents responsible for different aspects of the meal service. Much like the camaraderie they share in group sessions, these meals help them draw support from each other in their common goals. Computers with internet access assist in job searches. Many residents work while living at the Healthy Start Recovery Home.

Jessica Dekreon was the first to move in last April. "It's changed my whole world around," said Dekreon, who lived at the Recovery Home while working as a certified nursing assistant. She was a peer leader for the daily self-help group and attended intensive outpatient classes on-site. A bulletin board in her room displayed photos of her daughter, sister and father. The photos show insight into a joyful consequence of her path to sobriety: "My family has come back into my life," she said.

In addition to the Recovery Home, LSSI's Kenmore Center also offers a medically assisted detox program and intensive outpatient treatment. These synergistic resources provide many options for clients in various stages of recovery.

For more information on LSSI's Healthy Start Recovery Home, call 773-275-7962. [L](http://www.lssi.org)

LSTC takes steps to become an anti-racist institution

During his student days at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago (LSTC), Michael Russell was among those advocating for anti-racism training. That was back in the late 1990s. Today, he's a leader in Chicago ROAR (Regional Organizing for Antiracism) and bringing to LSTC what he had dreamed of some 20 years ago.

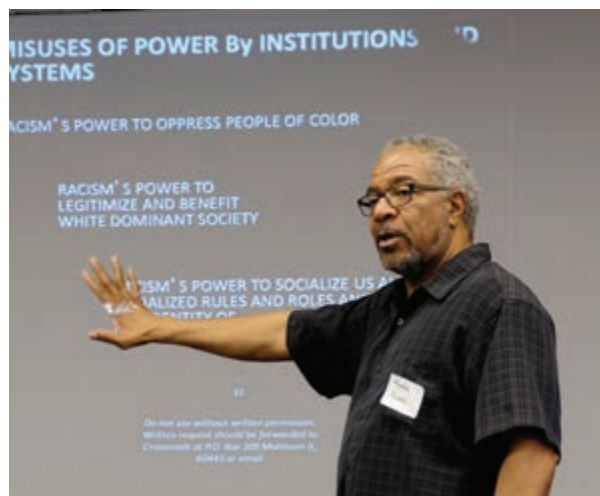
Russell remembers that during his LSTC time there were often “triggers and crisis moments”—friction between cultures as well as outright institutional racism. “Things would flare up as the result of something a professor would say to stereotype a group of people or to discount or discredit a student’s life experiences, statements like, ‘Black people do ...’ or ‘Latinos will ...’ or ‘Arabs are ...,’” he said.

Often, LSTC took a crisis management approach to deal with such incidents or institutional decisions, he said. “Corrective actions were taken, people would be reprimanded. And students would wait for the next incident to flare up,” he added. “What we didn’t do was look at the institutional culture that allowed this behavior to happen cyclically and systemically.”

Racism permeates every institution, and institutions operate out of a culture of whiteness (white supremacy) until taking deliberate steps to change, Russell said.

James Nieman said institutional racism at LSTC became increasingly apparent to him after he became seminary president in 2012. In 2015 a small group of students, faculty and staff met with him to share instances of racism they had experienced there. “Their comments were gripping and disturbing,” he said. “I agreed to make a statement and to follow through on various plans to address racism. It was a catalyst to get us started.”

Nieman began talking with Russell, and said he wasn’t interested in a one-time effort but an ongoing cycle of training. A partnership formed



The Rev. Michael Russell.

between LSTC and Chicago ROAR, an organization that serves as a resource throughout the synod and beyond.

LSTC developed a four-year plan that has put the seminary on a path to becoming an anti-racist institution. It engages students, faculty, staff, administration and board members in annual anti-racism and critical cultural competency workshops.

The workshops are meant to create a critical mass of institutional stakeholders who hold the school accountable for changing its culture. They are the bearers of the new institutional identity. Building up this new constituency, this new institutional identity, at LSTC is the first step. From there, it spreads and can be far-reaching: “LSTC contributes to shaping the identity of the ELCA and that contributes to shaping Christendom,” Russell said.

Unlike more confrontational trainings of the past, Russell is after more “revelatory learning, the ‘aha’ moments that compel people to want to act so we gain partners in this work.” Those passionate people often become supporters and leaders in this work.

Nieman is eager to see how this training helps LSTC and its constituents engage the larger social conflicts of our time. “We’re addressing white privilege and racism,” he said. “But how do we incorporate this cultural shift into what students will do [when they graduate]? That’s why I’m passionate about this topic.” ☒