



# Thresholds

By Bishop Wayne N. Miller

*Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it (Matthew 7:13-14).*

I recently paid a visit to one of our congregations that has just finished a building program. They have opened up a beautiful, lofty, glass-ceilinged gathering space. But to move into this worship space you still have to walk through a low, narrow threshold before that small space opens again into an even more expansive and uplifting sanctuary.

This architectural feature of narrow thresholds is an ancient convention in church architecture. It is both a symbol and an actual experience of the deep truth that many times life calls us from places that are open and bright and free into places that feel too tight for comfort—perhaps even a bit claustrophobic—before we once again feel the exhilaration of a more exalted vision and more expansive possibility. It's a narrowing sometimes caused by grief, loss, fear, change. And because of this we might be inclined to stay right where we are, in our familiar surroundings, rather than take the risk of reaching for greater freedom and fulfillment on the far side of the narrow gate.

On the other hand, sometimes we might actually crave time in a smaller world. Our fear or anxiety about the unknown and unfamiliar might make it feel quite cozy to enter the friendly confines of the narrow space and hunker down into a favorite tight-cornered existence where there are no surprises, no challenges, no threats—but also a limited oxygen supply.

Our culture has been called, in these days, into a narrow place. The relative brightness of a world that used to be is slipping further and further behind us in many ways, with no honest way to return. But the opening of a new and larger space



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is still invisible. And we seem to be struggling as a nation and as a civilization with whether to resist the call into the uncomfortable narrowness and try to cling to what has been ... or to enter and make our world as small and as narrow as possible—free from threat, or strangeness, or surprises, or languages we don't speak, or religions we don't subscribe to ... but perhaps also short on oxygen.

So once again God has given us Lent and Easter—that annual time of narrowing. It's a season for walking courageously into places that feel a bit too tight and way too challenging. It's a season to rediscover the truth that sometimes in the spiritual life you have to be swallowed by the big fish for a while before you can be released into your next adventure. It's a journey upon which we remember that Jesus always leads us into a very narrow place called the tomb, which a few of us refuse to enter and a few more nestle in and never want to leave.

But the journey doesn't stop there. That tomb is really just a gate. And, oh my goodness, the space that is waiting for you right there, across that threshold. ٧

## Area congregations team with RefugeeOne to welcome a Syrian family to Chicago



Photo: Ela Pop Photography; elapopphotography.com

Synod congregations held a baby shower for the refugee family from Syria they are sponsoring.

After months of watching news of the refugee crisis last summer, Jennifer Stutheit decided it was time to act. At an interfaith workshop hosted by RefugeeOne, the Illinois affiliate of Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, she and two fellow members from Grace Lutheran Church in Mount Prospect learned about the opportunity to co-sponsor a refugee family and walk alongside them from the moment they land at O'Hare.

The trio returned to their congregation ready to work. Through months of conversation and networking, a collaboration emerged with partners from St. Mark's Lutheran Church and Lutheran Church of Martha and Mary, both in Mount Prospect; Ascension Lutheran Church of Riverside; and the Turkish American Society. They pooled their resources and prepared to welcome a refugee family.

Stutheit became the point person of the co-sponsorship group, in charge of coordinating fundraising, gathering supplies, and managing communication between the congregations, the family and RefugeeOne.

"It's our responsibility to really live out our faith, and our faith tells us that we need to be welcoming to people," she said, reflecting on Matthew 25:34-40.

When RefugeeOne called to say a Syrian family of four was arriving soon and that one daughter had cerebral palsy, the group responded unanimously to co-sponsor them. Within days team members met Mahmoud, Wafaa and their two girls at the airport and brought them to their new home that had been carefully prepared.

But a new home in a new country wasn't the only change in store for this refugee family.

"I thought it was possible that Wafaa was expecting, but I wasn't sure," Stutheit said. Unbeknownst to RefugeeOne or the co-sponsorship team, the family was getting ready to welcome a fifth member within two months of their arrival.

The team quickly put together a baby shower for Wafaa and Mahmoud. The congregations celebrated at Stutheit's home with cake and brought diapers, toys, clothes, a crib and even a swing. Stutheit recalls getting the call from Mahmoud a few weeks later: "Jennifer!" he said in broken English. "Wafaa had baby!"

Since the family's arrival in Chicago, Stutheit has reflected on changes that she has observed in herself and her congregation. "I felt like I was open-minded before, but I have learned so much about the Syrian culture," she said. "Even though we come from two very different places in the world, we are so much alike."

The faith community of Mount Prospect has grown closer thanks to the co-sponsorship team. "It has been such a wonderful experience to get to know the other congregations," Stutheit said. "I have new friends that I wouldn't have otherwise." Additionally, the resettlement work has helped the congregations become more aware of world events.

On her second visit to the refugee family, Wafaa gave Stutheit a note that read: "From the bottom of my heart, I thank you." Stutheit said she responded: "I knew if I was in her place she would do the same for me." **L**

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## Program helps children with emotional/behavioral needs

Children in foster care who have experienced severe trauma or have the most emotional and behavioral needs face many challenges. It's often hard to find a foster home placement that can meet their needs and sometimes they are placed in an institutional setting. Therapeutic Foster Care provides more intensive support for these children so they can thrive in a family home.

Lutheran Social Services of Illinois (LSSI), one of the largest providers of foster care in the state, recently was selected by the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) as a pilot organization to provide Therapeutic Foster Care services. The pilot is part of a DCFS initiative to place children with histories of severe trauma and emotional/behavioral needs in family homes while avoiding institutional settings.

LSSI's Therapeutic Foster Care program involves teams of dedicated, innovative and highly trained clinicians, caseworkers and specially trained foster parents. These teams work with individual children, ages 6 to 14, during a six- to nine-month period using intensive treatment to help them develop the skills needed to thrive at home, in school and in the community. While the children are in the therapeutic foster home, intensive family therapy is provided for their parents, relatives or pre-adoptive parents, who then will be ready to care for the children once they have completed the program. The program is being coordinated at LSSI offices in each of the state's identified areas of highest need—Chicago, Rockford and Aurora.



Photos: iStock



LSSI is using an evidence-based treatment model called Treatment Foster Care of Oregon (TFCO), which has been highly effective at reducing problem behavior, increasing school success, strengthening attachment to caregivers and improving foster parent satisfaction.

“With our Therapeutic Foster Care program, LSSI hopes to intervene earlier and help families develop the tools and skills needed for the child in the home,” said Ruth Jajko, LSSI vice president of children's community services. “TFCO is a strong, evidence-based model that focuses on a team approach.”

LSSI's Therapeutic Foster Care includes behavioral parent training and support for foster parents, family therapy for biological parents and relatives, skills training and supportive therapy for youth, and school-based behavioral interventions and academic support.

“The TFCO model chosen for LSSI's Therapeutic Foster Care program provides a more holistic method of providing the resources needed to serve this population of children,” said Pauline Barlow, team leader of the LSSI Chicago office. “The collaborative approach allows youth in care to confront problematic behavior in a home-based setting with highly trained supportive individuals.”

To learn more about the program or to apply to become a professional TFCO foster parent, visit [LSSI.org](http://LSSI.org). [L](#)

## Meet the Metropolitan Chicago Synod Antiracism Team

You may know the synod's Antiracism Team from the workshops its members have led at the synod assembly. Maybe you've attended one of its 2.5-day analysis workshops held throughout the year. Or maybe you have paid no attention to the team because you say, "I'm not racist." If you only know this group from one of these perspectives, you don't really know the team.

The Metropolitan Chicago Synod Antiracism Team was created to engage in an intentional, ongoing effort to shape awareness of how racism manifests itself in our church and society, and to provide tools that will assist the church to fulfill its vision of becoming an antiracist organization.

"But wait! We're the Lutheran church; we're not a bunch of racists!" You're right; we're not. But saying, "We're not racist" doesn't solve the problems with racism that permeate our society. Systems that grew out of historic racism continue to perpetuate, support and enable the racial construct in our country and have a tremendous impact on our churches and ministry today. The Antiracism Team doesn't focus on individual racism. Its primary focus is on shaping an awareness of how racism manifests itself in our church and society. The team endeavors to assist individuals as they begin to understand and accept a common analysis of institutional racism and its destructive effects on our lives.

One of the ways the team does this is through the 2.5-day workshop "Understanding and Analyzing Systemic Racism." This workshop is presented by Chicago Regional Organizing for AntiRacism and is sponsored by our team (which means synod members get a big discount). It's an in-depth look designed to reveal how systemic racism creates barriers to true multicultural diversity and racial



Photo: Adobe Stock

justice in the United States. It's also a very intense time—those who go through it emerge changed.

Since many people can't attend a 2.5-day event (or maybe just aren't ready for the intensity), the team offers a one-day "Introduction to Antiracism" workshop. This

six-hour workshop is led by two Antiracism Team facilitators and can be scheduled by any synod congregation. For a small fee, the congregation picks the date and location, decides who they want to attend and provides lunch. The two Antiracism Team facilitators take care of everything else. This includes meeting with the pastor(s) or group that requested the workshop to customize it to meet the congregation's needs.

For those who aren't sure where to begin with the antiracism process, the team will consult with leaders of a congregation or synodically affiliated group to figure out where to begin. For some organizations, a one-day workshop may be too much too soon. In those cases, the Antiracism Team will meet with the congregation to begin a process of discernment on how to best approach this work within their setting and current reality.

The team can also help with temple talks, Bible or book studies, small group discussions and even Lenten or Advent services that have an antiracism focus.

Antiracism work isn't one-size-fits-all, but it is important work that needs to be done. That's why the synod's Antiracism Team is ready to help congregations determine what size fits best.

For more information about the Antiracism Team visit its website at [anotherpebble.org](http://anotherpebble.org) or email the group at [info@anotherpebble.org](mailto:info@anotherpebble.org). ♣