



Open with care

By Bishop Wayne N. Miller

Editor's note: *This month the bishop reflects on Mark 7:24-37.*

I had a headache the other day. No big deal, but it was irritating enough that I decided to take a couple of Tylenol, which I almost never take—and it worked like a charm. Because by the time I figured out how to get the Tylenol bottle *open*, the headache was gone!

It is a curious feature of modern life that we routinely and intentionally make so many things hard to open: pickle jars, canned goods, vacuum-sealed pouches—and don't even get me started on shrink wrap. I hate shrink wrap.

Of course, even though it can be incredibly frustrating and irritating, there are good reasons why some things are so hard to open. The world, after all, is a dangerous place and you have to be careful about what might slip in and pollute the contents of the package.

All of which helps explain why we human beings are sometimes hard to open as well. To be open is always to be just a little more vulnerable than we are comfortable being—vulnerable to a world that is uncertain and unpredictable ... a world that is too angry, aggressive, violent ... a world that is jealous or arrogant or rude ... a world that insists on its own way without much concern for the impact on others.

Mark has left us a little story about a man unable to hear or speak. And though we might be inclined to think only about how wonderful it must have been for him to have his lips and his ears opened, we shouldn't forget that there was considerable risk involved in allowing himself to be opened. There was the risk of opening his ears to hear for the first time what the people all around him were actually saying, and the even greater risk of opening his mouth to speak the truth with courage and clarity without knowing if anyone would have ears open to hear it.



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But for all the risks, he chose still to allow himself to be open—that is, to be open to the liberating word and the loving touch of Jesus. And the blessing, compassion and healing power of the living God flowed into that small, clear, opening, making a brand-new life possible for him and for those around him.

The same promise is there for us, sisters and brothers. But it's not without risk. It's hard in today's world to take the time and the chance to listen honestly to the anger, frustration and hurt of those we don't understand and who don't understand us. It's hard to face the responsibility to speak truth to those with the power to hurt us or to limit us or to toss us aside.

And yet, we who have been opened to the liberating word and the loving touch of Jesus have also been called to open our hearts, our lives and our communities in his likeness so the blessing, compassion and healing power of the living God might flow into that small, clear, opening and make new life possible. ✚

Group builds congregational leadership

In 1989, Partners for Sacred Places was founded by leaders from the religious, philanthropic and historic preservation communities. Since then, Partners has distinguished itself as the only nonsectarian, nonprofit organization dedicated to the sound stewardship and active community use of older sacred places across America. At the intersection of heritage, faith and community, its mission is to build a shared sense of responsibility for the future of sacred places.

Partners' research and its work in communities show that houses of worship face the effects of constrained budgets and deferred maintenance. But with the right support and stakeholders, buildings can be buttressed and congregations can continue and expand their role in neighborhoods. Partners' mission, as it approaches its 29th anniversary, is to continue its work with faith leaders, lay leaders, neighbors, governments and donors to maximize the impact of houses of worship.

The organization helps congregational leadership learn about building care, shared use and capital fundraising through training programs, fundraising assistance, and organizational and facility assessments. Some of its tools and resources are capital campaigns and feasibility studies, community engagement and asset mapping, discovery studies, economic valuation studies and shared space planning. Through this work, Partners seeks to find solutions and create hope for the future of historic, purpose-built sacred places.

One congregation that Partners has worked closely with is Unity Lutheran in the Andersonville neighborhood. In 2012, Unity participated in the Arts in Sacred Places (AiSP) program, an initiative to foster partnerships between arts groups seeking space and congregations with space to share. Within a year, more than six artists on Chicago's North Side called Unity home.

In the spring 2013 issue of Partners' *Sacred Places* magazine, the Rev. Fred Kinsey, pastor of Unity, described space-sharing this way: "When we



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started, we thought it was just about money. But it is about so much more. We see now how this work is integral to our mission, to our outreach to the community."

Both Kinsey and Amy Wood, space-sharing marketing manager at Unity, credit AiSP training and Partners as important steps to get to where they are. "Our building has new life. Our congregation has new life. And it's spreading out into the community, too, [reaching] all of these artists, new people and new projects," he said.

Over the past 30 years, Partners has served more than 100,000 congregations and other organizations in all 50 states—including consulting services in 22 states and counting. Each interaction fuels the capacity to help congregations, and Partners continues to expand its national reach by strategically growing projects and work.

To learn more, email Emily Sajdak, consulting services associate (esajdak@sacredplaces.org). ☒



Tour LSTC's rare book collection

One way to commemorate the 500th anniversary of the Reformation is to schedule a tour of the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago's rare book collection for a group from your congregation (Sunday or mid-week forum; confirmation class).

This collection features original copies of many of Martin Luther's most important writings (95 Theses, Diet of Worms, *Freedom of a Christian*, 1522 translation of the New Testament, etc.).

Tours take about 90 minutes and are free. To learn more or schedule a tour, contact Ralph Klein, curator of rare books (rklein@lstc.edu; 773-238-1856). ☒

Congregations can heal the effects of childhood adversity

In a 1997 study, researchers asked mostly white, middle-class adults 10 questions about incidences of abuse, neglect or other adversity they had experienced as children. These 10 items were called Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). The researchers found that ACEs are common: More than two-thirds of adults reported at least one experience of home-based trauma. When any one ACE is present, there is an 87 percent chance that a person will have experienced at least one other ACE. Numerous studies since 1997 have borne out these findings.

Health care, schools and other human service organizations are paying attention to the impact these experiences have on people as they become adults because the research also found that there is a “dose response” in health outcomes. This means that the more ACEs a child has, there is a greater chance he or she will have poor health outcomes as an adult. Adults who have experienced four or more ACEs have much higher rates of chronic disease, mental illnesses, physical pain and substance use disorders. Overall, someone with an ACE score of six or more dies 20 years earlier than someone with a score of zero.

Some of these health outcomes can be explained by unhealthy behaviors that people use to cope with stress. But trauma also affects how brain pathways develop and the way genes function. Trauma affects the kind and levels of hormones that bodies produce. Our bodies adapt to experiences of adversity by raising stress levels and easily triggering elevated fight, flight or freeze responses.

But the damage doesn't have to be permanent. We are extremely resilient! We can reverse the effects of trauma on our bodies, minds and spirits. The brain disruption that trauma causes can be soothed by caring relationships, spiritual practices, gaining a sense of meaning and purpose, and simple exercises to restore healthy brain function.



Participants greet (top photo) and listen (above) at a summit on trauma and resilience in January 2017.

Faith communities hold a special place in the work on ACEs and resilience. Many of us come to our congregations with these experiences and find healing and strength in the communities that we form and in the rituals and practices of our tradition. Healing doesn't have to be complicated. Evidence shows that the most effective thing we can do to protect children from the effects of adverse experiences is to provide a positive, caring relationship with an adult.

One trauma-informed approach teaches the Five Healing Gestures—Celebration, Comfort, Collaboration, Listening and Inspiration. Faith communities practice these gestures naturally and routinely. When we meet each other with these gestures, we are literally reprogramming our brain pathways and restoring healthy hormone functioning.

Advocate Health Care, along with other partners, has been convening summits, learning experiences and conversations to explore how it can develop a network of congregations that are “trauma-informed,” or intentionally integrating knowledge about ACEs and resilience into their congregational life.

Learn more about the Trauma Informed Congregations Network at faithhealthtransformation.org. 

LSTC's hub of hospitality

By Julie B. Sevig

Certainly the faculty and staff of the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago (LSTC) are vital to students and those who gather on campus for conferences or events. But there's also a cadre of folks whose work is particularly crucial: the Refectory staff.

Executive chef Jennifer Powell came on board in April 2016 to bring an already-respected Refectory to an even higher level. It's committed to using fresh, local ingredients for its made-from-scratch entrees, salads and soups, burgers and sandwiches, and breakfasts.

The Refectory consistently gets five-star Yelp reviews that call it Hyde Park's favorite lunch spot. A hub of hospitality, it attracts students and staff from the University of Chicago and McCormick Seminary, even local construction workers. It's the seminary's gathering place—not unlike your grandmother's kitchen table.

Such excellence starts with the staff. Chef Frank Perez and short order cook Pedro Rodriguez, both with considerable professional experience, have been here for five years. Rounding out the team are up-and-coming sous chef Akeem Haywood and student employees. Haywood is also an artist who has led the way in using the Refectory to display justice-related artwork created by the community.

Powell, who grew up in Texas and also worked in the wine and beer industry in New Orleans and Chicago, wants to grow the Refectory “in a way that makes sense for the seminary, and that we can sustain.”

She was a sous chef at McCormick Place before answering LSTC's ad. The convention center's expectations, logistics and pace taught her how to “take care of the food,” as she calls it. It's a reverence for how food comes to our tables: “An awareness that someone grew, cut, processed and had



Frank Perez (left), Jennifer Powell, Akeem Haywood and Pedro Rodriguez are all smiles at the end of a busy day in the Refectory at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago.

expectations for it. We're the keeper of something someone had a vision for but didn't know what it might be.”

Powell and Perez are kindred spirits when collaborating on meal preparation. They have fun with their creativity, and Powell does her “homework.” Preparing for the premiere of travel guru Rick Steve's Martin Luther film at LSTC, for instance, sent her researching historical food that reflected the film.

“We have good days and bad days like any restaurant or catering business, but in the end feeding the community is what counts,” Powell said. “We nourish faculty, staff and students so they can go and do their work.”

Her approach to cooking reflects the realization that food is important to every culture's rituals and ceremonies. She has a special appreciation for the seminary's global students. “It begins with the pot or pan. Every culture has its special cookery ware, be it the rice bowl, cast iron skillet or clay pot,” she said. “Our style of cooking is inspired by these ancient methods—timeless techniques with global spices and good ingredients.”

And through it all, Powell keeps this focus: “Faculty, staff, students, this is your home, the center, the heart, where we eat, our gathering space.” ♣

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