

# Living on the fringe

By Bishop Wayne N. Miller

*An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt ..."* (Matthew 2:13).

In September, I decided to attend my 50th high school reunion as a 1968 graduate of Maine Township High School South. It was a very enjoyable event, and it was nice to have some time to catch up with friends whom I had not seen in a very long time. Lives change in unexpected ways. But there are also some things that don't change that much ....

During several conversations, I alluded to my childhood home in the village of Niles. This, in and of itself, is not a very remarkable fact. But almost all my friends in high school lived in Park Ridge, which, at the time, was mostly a very wealthy community, in contrast to the more "working-class" neighborhood that I lived in. It certainly was not a difference that kept me from having friends or succeeding in school, but it was a difference that made me aware almost every day that I was living "on the fringe" of respectability. And even now, after 50 years, I experienced surprise from some of my old friends when they learned where I had come from.

Living on the fringe, of course, is a common experience. It might be what you feel when you visit a new church where you don't know anyone, and you stand there with a cup of coffee in your hand, overhearing bits and pieces of animated conversations all around you. And you wonder if you should try to worm your way into the center of one of those conversations or, instead, stay quiet and invisible out there on the fringe.

You can be sent to the fringe by your age, by the color of your skin or by the language you speak. You can be exiled by a divorce or an illness that everyone knows about but no one wants to talk about. You can be sent to the fringe by parenting a special-needs child whom no one understands,



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or brought to the edge by the shame of being the child of an alcoholic.

And it is for all these reasons that there is value in remembering—at Christmas and throughout the year—that the one we call "Lord" not only entered the world through the stockyards of a coarse, backwater suburb on the far western fringe of Jerusalem ... not only did he grow up commonly regarded as the illegitimate urchin of a peasant woman ... he had also barely drawn his first breath before he was forced to flee for his life into exile as an undocumented stranger in Egypt.

It's a story that may serve to remind us that if it is Jesus whom we choose to follow, our discipleship must also begin by learning to listen to those who have no voice, to see those who are invisible, and to celebrate the rich and full humanity of those who are presumably of little interest to others. Because it is in doing just this that we may rediscover that, in Christ, those who have been relegated to the fringe see that the center has, quite miraculously, chosen to move right into their neighborhood in order to fulfill the promise of "Emmanuel"—God with us! ƚ

## LSTC begins the year with service

When leaders planned orientation activities for incoming (and returning) seminary students this year at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago (LSTC), they decided a hands-on experience of service and learning would help everyone experience “public church,” which is at the center of its curriculum.

“We wanted to find a way to have the community have access to one immediate experience of public church,” said Scott Chalmers, dean of students. “While students are immersed in public church during the time they spend in the classroom, we wanted new students in particular to begin their LSTC experience walking from Hyde Park to nearby Washington Park, crossing boundaries and already starting to think about context.”

And they did. More than 50 students, staff and faculty engaged in an afternoon of service during “Welcome (Back) Week” on a rainy day in late August. Chicago CARES was on-site to lead the learning and service in the nearby neighborhoods of Washington Park and Bronzeville.

Chicago CARES is an organization that envisions “a city where we’re all active participants, fully invested in the city we call home and the success of all our neighbors.” More than 200 volunteer projects are available through Chicago CARES every month to the public. It’s an easy and organized way for individuals and groups, especially congregations, to serve in the city.

LSTC’s effort was the first time Chicago CARES worked with volunteers who were able to walk to their work sites. Part of that strategy, Chalmers said, was to lift the veil of “don’t cross Cottage Grove Avenue,” commonly (and stereotypically) referred to as a South Side dividing line beyond the seminary and the University



Master gardener Lewis Lee introduces student volunteers from the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago to the Urban Juncture Foundation rooftop garden during a day of service led by Chicago CARES.

of Chicago. Chalmers said the leaders wanted to communicate security and common sense, but also make students aware there is more to Hyde Park than what they see every day.

Observed student Troy Medlin: “As I walked through Washington Park to Bronzeville to serve at a community garden for the afternoon, I was struck by the beauty, power and resiliency of these neighborhoods on the South Side. They have been denied resources and services for many years and yet still find ways to care for one another, serve one another and create innovative ways to love one another.

“We didn’t go to these neighborhoods to fix them or save them, but only to witness and to be equipped to challenge the dominant narratives about the South Side and proclaim the good news that it is there ... the Spirit is making things new in all sorts of unexpected and unsettling ways.”

Jessica Houston, assistant vice president for advancement, led one of the teams and said the experience provided an opportunity for LSTC to “be community in community.”

“At the end of the day, hearing folks share their experience and the impact that was made warmed our hearts and encouraged us to keep our connections to the new



Student Jeffrey Roberts (left) helps paint at Chicago Youth Programs in the Washington Park neighborhood. CYP offers more than 40 programs for at-risk youth.

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opportunities just blocks away. Seeing our staff embrace the young people as we shared goodbyes was a powerful testimony,” she said.

LSTC is already looking for more opportunities to serve and frequent the places its community visited. They have worked with organizations focused on:

- **Restorative justice:** At Church of the Good Shepherd in Bronzeville, volunteers learned about Nehemiah Trinity Rising by participating in

a peace circle and tracing and painting symbols that now serve as traveling peace murals.

- **Youth engagement:** at Chicago Youth Program’s community center, volunteers painted signs with students, cleaned offices and played games.
- **Beautification:** Urban Juncture builds economic opportunities through its Boxville market, Chicago’s first street food market and container mall. One of the things volunteers did was work on its rooftop garden. ㄿ

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## Hallberg honored with GO Champion Award

The Rev. Donald M. Hallberg has committed his entire career to the ministry and service of others. He began as a pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church, Des Plaines, and then expanded his work statewide, serving as the president/CEO of Lutheran Social Services of Illinois. For his exceptional service, he was named president emeritus of the organization.



Hallberg didn’t stop there—he continued building his ministry both nationally and globally by serving as president and executive director of the ELCA Foundation. In his work, he oversaw the ELCA’s fundraising and development services, which allowed him to foster strong relationships with donors and church leaders across the U.S. and in countries such as Israel, Kenya, Uganda, Hong Kong and Taiwan.

Though he formally retired in 2007, Hallberg carries his dedication and passion into multiple volunteer roles, including service on the Board of Directors at Concordia Place in Chicago. Founded in 1981, the nonprofit serves low-income and working families by focusing on growth and opportunity through early childhood, teen leadership and senior wellness programs.

On Sept. 20, the organization honored Hallberg with its Growth and Opportunity (GO) Champion Award, given at Concordia Place’s annual GO Gala

fundraising event. The award honors individuals committed to providing growth and opportunity to children and families in Chicago.

“Receiving the award is a real honor,” Hallberg said. “If I can in any little way raise the profile of Concordia Place so that people understand this

great human service here in the city, I am thrilled and humbled to have the chance to do so. When we raise the profile of nonprofits and their staff, who work so hard every day to provide care, continually giving of themselves, it inspires others to be more giving as well.”

“Don truly embodies the idea of ‘faith in action,’” said Brenda Swartz, CEO of Concordia Place. “He inspires us all to live out the principle of loving your neighbor. His leadership on the board and in many roles over the years has truly shaped the spirit and the character of the work we do.”

The Concordia Place GO Gala recognizes the organization’s success in providing meaningful, high-impact programs across all generations on Chicago’s North Side. This year the event celebrated the 10th anniversary of its Teen Leadership program and the continued blossoming growth and expansion of Concordia Place.

For more information, see [concordiaplace.org](http://concordiaplace.org). ㄿ

## Mental illness: LSSI treats the whole person

Marty Senica has a passion for his work as a certified recovery support specialist with Lutheran Social Services of Illinois (LSSI) because he has been in his clients' shoes. As a young adult, Senica was diagnosed with paranoia and schizophrenia.

"Marty is admired and respected by all of his colleagues," said Meredith Lee, LSS director for adult outpatient case management services. "He can relate to the clients in ways many of us cannot."

To combat his illness when first diagnosed, Senica started group therapy sessions and began to get out of the house more. Encouraged by his mother, he returned to college and earned degrees in math and physics. Unsure of his career path, he enrolled in graduate school. The book *What Color Is Your Parachute?* made him realize he wanted to help those with mental health issues like his own.

In his role, Senica works on one of LSSI's community support teams that provides ongoing support to adults with mental illness, helping them live and thrive in their community in an independent manner. The notion of helping clients with issues beyond their mental illness is a key component of LSSI's whole person care approach. The organization knows that helping clients goes beyond treating their mental illness. It realizes people live a more fulfilling life if they have connections to their communities, such as making friends with a neighbor, taking public transportation to cultural events or visiting the library.

Taking this whole person approach, Senica helps clients work through their specific issues as well as supports them as they establish themselves in the community and work toward personal goals. It always varies. Some days he might meet clients at a medical appointment and offer tips on how to speak with their physician and advocate for themselves. Other times, his support might be



Marty Senica, a certified recovery support specialist with Lutheran Social Services of Illinois, helps adults with mental illness live and thrive in their community.

something as simple as going to the gym together to attending career fairs and working on job skills. He notes that the unemployment rate for individuals with mental illness is 85 percent.

"I use self-disclosure with my clients," Senica said. "I tell them I had mental illness and am working on recovery. I use my knowledge from my own recovery to connect with them." ♣

### Access LSSI's behavioral health services

LSSI has established a toll-free number —833-610-LSSI (5774)—for people to access a full continuum of services for people with mental health and drug/alcohol treatment services. LSSI's intake specialists will link and schedule individuals with the services they need, including community support teams, community case management, counseling for adults and children, psychiatric treatment and alcohol/drug treatment, to name a few.

All services are supervised by caring and licensed professionals who guide and encourage each individual in attaining personal goals.