



What a friend

By Wayne N. Miller, bishop

Jesus was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray ..." (Luke 11:1).

I was recently asked to perform a wedding for the son of my oldest and best friend. It is a precious privilege of pastoral ministry to be invited into the ordinary wonder of life passages like this. But in this case it has also been an opportunity to reflect on a very precious friendship.

My friend Lee is a woman I met in high school in a French class or working on a school play or somewhere. However we met, it didn't take us long to become friends. It was one of those rare and sacred relationships that sometimes fall into the lap of an adolescent that didn't get all bogged down in images and expectations. We were friends. That's it—just friends.

So it isn't surprising that when we parted company and went away to separate colleges, we wrote to one another. And soon we were writing every day. Most days, in fact, Lee's letters were the only things in my mailbox. We must have spent hours reading and writing those letters—hours that could have been spent doing something much more practical. But it was through the time and energy spent on those silly and profound, clumsy but always honest letters that two friends became what we now call soul mates.

The opening verses of Luke 11 contain Jesus' teaching about prayer. Prayer is something we all know about and something whose importance we all understand. Yet for many there is a certain awkwardness about prayer, particularly in public. If you doubt this, just ask for volunteers to pray at the beginning of a committee meeting. It's an activity that most of us want to leave to the experts—those who have taken entire seminary courses on the subject and have studied dozens of books on how to do it correctly.

But when I consider the business of prayer, particularly in light of some of the things Jesus had to say on the subject, I am reminded of my good friend Lee and the truth that, for all of the styles and forms it may assume, at its heart prayer is most like the correspondence between friends.

Prayer, I admit, doesn't seem especially well suited to the pace and distraction of modern life. It requires time, focus, attention and passion. It rarely works well when it lives only in the realm of something we *should do*. The Spirit who transports our prayer lives on joy, longing, eagerness ... eager-



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ness to write our next letter, to wait patiently, and then to do our best to read the love between the lines of what is given back in return.

Prayer should not be undertaken lightly. Because the truth is that the diligent correspondence of prayer requires an inescapable vulnerability—the vulnerability of opening our hearts and souls to be utterly exposed to the one we love and by whom we are loved, the vulnerability of those days when the mailbox is vacant and the friend seems silent or sleeping behind closed doors or so overwhelmingly far away.

But for all this, I encourage you with my whole heart to keep praying, to ask boldly, to seek persistently, and to knock relentlessly through all the days and seasons of your life. It is a precious privilege of life in the Spirit. □

Goal of TSI is growing, thriving churches

Did your congregation get your free copy of *Pathway to Renewal* at the synod assembly? More than 100 congregations picked up this Alban Institute guide to congregational renewal. The rest were mailed, one per congregation, along with a Renewal Resource Guide and a brochure about the Turnaround Synod Initiative (TSI).

Why give everyone this particular book? The short answer is: to further the work of the Turnaround Synod Initiative.

We want folks in all our congregations to have a chance to read *Pathway to Renewal* as an encouragement to consider undertaking a renewal process. The book demystifies the whole “renewal” thing and lays it out in doable steps.

We chose *Pathway to Renewal* in particular because it gives a solid, realistic-yet-encouraging description of what renewal looks like and how it can happen in a congregation. It even includes helpful exercises to guide individuals and groups in listening together for the Spirit and for God’s call for their church. It’s proved a good guide for those churches that have signed on as Focus Congregations with the initiative (to read more about Focus Congregations, go to www.mcselca.org/what/mission/tsi/about and scroll down a bit).

You may also want to gather a few people from your congregation to attend one or more of these upcoming TSI workshops. For a description of each workshop, visit www.mcselca.org/what/mission/tsi.

[org/what/mission/tsi](http://www.mcselca.org/what/mission/tsi).

- **“Show Yourself ...”** (annual evangelism for congregations workshop) led by Brian Zehr and Bruce Hanson of Intentional Impact. *Saturday, Oct. 1, 9 a.m.-noon, Gloria Dei, Northbrook; and Saturday, Oct. 22, 9 a.m.-noon, Trinity, Oak Lawn* (same workshop, two times and locations).

- **Turnaround 101** led by Turnaround Synod Initiative staff. *Saturday, Nov. 5, 9 a.m.-4 p.m., location TBD.*

- **Your Building Is an Asset for Mission** with Bill Hutchison, pastor and intern architect. *Saturday, Nov. 5, 10 a.m.-noon, United in Faith, Chicago.*

- **Leadership Triangle** led by John Holm, TAG

Consulting. *Saturday, Nov. 12, 9 a.m.-noon, St. Mark, Worth.*

- **Getting Unstuck** led by Kathy Nolte, pastor of Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Oak Park. *Saturday, Jan. 28, 2012, location TBD.*

- **Transformative Ministry** led by Ed Kruse, consultant with Growing Congregations, Growing Ministries. *Saturday, March 3, 2012, location TBD.*

- **Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations** with Dennis Kelly, pastor of Ascension Lutheran Church, Northfield. *Saturday, April 21, 2012, 9 a.m.-noon, location TBD.*

For more information about the Turnaround Synod Initiative, how your congregation can get support as a TSI Focus Congregation, or for any questions, comments or great ideas, email or call Carol Breimeier (cbreimeier@mcselca.org; 773-248-0021, ext. 13).

Information is also online at www.mcselca.org/what/mission/tsi/about. □

refugeeONE

Welcome the stranger

To welcome the stranger is one of the great traditions of our faith. Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS) works with the State Department to help address the ever-expanding number of refugees worldwide. But LIRS can function only if it has local points of contact and people who provide a safe and welcoming new home for refugees.

RefugeeOne is the Illinois affiliate of LIRS. With 30 years of experience and a broad network of resources, RefugeeOne knows the most effective ways to help refugees integrate successfully into American society.

Congregations are a valuable part of the refugee resettlement process. Each resettled family receives a one-time payment from the federal government of \$1,800 per person. That falls short of providing all they need to meet rent, food, clothing, furnishing and, at the very least, 90 days of services necessary to become self-supporting.

While some congregations provide line-item financial support, the majority begin with smaller efforts that, when multiplied across the synod, have a significant impact on welcoming the stranger. Examples include paying one month’s rent (\$800) or helping stock a kitchen, bathroom or bedroom. (See refugee co-sponsorship information at www.refugeeone.org; click on “Get Involved”).

Please consider what you and your congregation can do to open some welcoming doors. For more information, contact Kim Snoddy at 773-423-9834 or kksnoddy@refugeeone.org. □



Erika Dornfeld lived at the Casa Oscar Romero house in Chicago's Logan Square neighborhood during her second year with Lutheran Volunteer Corps.

Lutheran Volunteer Corps Chicago

Two years of wild onion hunting

For the past two years, I have worked for Faith in Place, an inter-faith nonprofit organization dedicated to environmental stewardship. Daily, I was challenged to negotiate the twists and turns of sustainability, faith and justice.

I also learned far too much about “fracking” (a method of natural gas extraction) and the many ways to misspell the word diocese (c? s? both?).

When I began working with Lutheran Volunteer Corps (LVC), I wanted to be able to say at the end of two years that I had successfully engaged in all three of its core practices. Indeed, I have learned the many lessons around community, social justice and simplicity/sustainability. Some lessons were more radical than others. And Chicago proved to be a wild place to explore and discover them.

Working in an environmental orga-

nization, I would often explain to kids that Chicago was once an actual wilderness, and even the name “Chicago” stems from a French rendering of the Miami-Illinois word for wild onion: *shikaakwa*. To sniff this local wild onion, you’d find it familiar. But its flavor makes its association more difficult. It’s uncommon and unexpected for an onion—garlicky and pungent.

My two years with LVC were a lot like encountering this common-looking onion with a very unusual flavor when I expected something milder and more domesticated.

In some ways, my experiences were familiar. I found a job, friends, a church and host family. I had structures of support and security. But other times, LVC was beyond my control. It went wild. It tested my limits of comfort, challenged my faith and broadened my definition of risk. Those principles it foisted upon me—community, social justice,

sustainability—began to crack the parched soil of a domesticated faith.

What I consider a “bad neighborhood” has changed. I now look for community assets in terms of relationships and resilience. I discovered my racial and economic privilege. My understanding of community was tested. In those moments, I knew I had left the uniform rows of the back garden and was headed to the horizon, toward those wild onion patches.

In Scripture, we see this same type of journey into the wild when Jesus bolted toward that desert mountain-top and struggled with Satan. And, as people of faith, we’re called to follow. Neither the ELCA nor LVC is quite there yet, but the steps we take toward the wilderness matter. And just when we get lost in the woods and think we really were better off staying in the garden, we get that oh-so-pungent whiff of God’s kingdom coming forth. That is what LVC has done for me.

So whether you’re out in the thick of the forest or wandering the suburban sidewalk, keep your senses alert. Jesus promises to meet you in untrodden places where onions grow wild. □

Erika Dornfeld

Last year, Dornfeld lived in the Carter Heyward House in Albany Park. Christ Evangelical Lutheran is the host congregation for that house.

This year she lived at Casa Oscar Romero in Logan Square, with St. Luke’s in Logan Square as the host congregation for that house.

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For more information about Lutheran Volunteer Corps visit its website (www.lutheranvolunteercorps.org) or contact the local regional director, Kate Koval, at 773-832-9402 or kkoval@lutheranvolunteercorps.org.



Frederick Aigner

Aigner to receive LSSI award

On Nov. 12, Lutheran Social Services of Illinois (LSSI) will present the 30th Amicus Certus (“True Friend”) Award to the Rev. Frederick Aigner, president emeritus of LSSI, during a celebration at the Meadows Club in Rolling Meadows. LSSI presents the award to individuals or organizations that have made significant contributions to the human community.

Aigner is being recognized for his commitment to actively serve others, his distinguished leadership of LSSI, and his continuing benevolence, which exemplify the spirit of the award.

He served as president/CEO of LSSI from 1997 until his retirement in 2009. Prior to that, he served on the LSSI Board of Directors from 1990 to 1996. From 1983 to 1997, he served as a pastor of Our Saviour’s Lutheran Church in Arlington Heights. He also served at Christ the King Lutheran Church in Florissant, Mo., and Christ the Shepherd Lutheran Church in Altadena, Calif.

“Through very difficult times, Aigner always focused on providing continuity of care for the most vulnerable served by Lutheran Social Services of Illinois,” said Denver Bitner, LSSI president/CEO. “His commitment to provide excellence of care with fiscal responsibility has become a hallmark of the service provided by our agency. I am privileged to follow his leadership, which has provided a legacy of professional care reflecting the values of our Lutheran tradition.”

Aigner is a graduate of Wittenberg University, Springfield, Ohio. He

received a master of divinity from the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg, Pa., and a doctor of philosophy from the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, Calif.

He is the recipient of several awards and honorary degrees, including the Presidential Award for Distinguished Leadership from Gettysburg Seminary.

For more information on Amicus Certus or to make a reservation for the celebration, visit www.LSSI.org or contact Ed Newton at edward.newton@LSSI.org; 847-635-4656. □

LSSI offers LifeBalanceSM to congregations

Lutheran Social Services of Illinois (LSSI) has a new ministry to share with congregations: LifeBalanceSM, a wellness curriculum for faith communities. LifeBalance focuses on wellness through shared faith.

Shared faith. Let’s face it, “shared faith” is the original concept of a workout partner. Look up the benefits of a workout partner on the Internet and you’ll find qualities such as devotion (sure, they call it accountability); commitment (sticking to a schedule, even when you want to stay in bed!); and fellowship (that’s your workout buddy saying, “Are you ready to go?”).

Shared faith is at the heart of LSSI’s mission: “Responding to the gospel, bringing healing, justice and wholeness to people and communities” and LifeBalance.

Participants reflect upon the physical, emotional, social, intellectual, vocational and financial arenas of their lives through the perspective of their spiritual well-being. This course is intended to help people build on strengths and tackle behaviors and attitudes they would like to change.

Throughout the curriculum, we focus on John 5:1-6, where Jesus heals the sick man at the pool of Bethesda after asking him, “Do you want to be made well?”

This is an amazing question that Jesus asks. Before healing the man, Jesus asks him if he’s ready to change his life. Does the man realize how old patterns and habits will need to change — what will his new life mean?

Change, even positive change, can be hard. LifeBalance is designed for “buddying up” and working with accountability partners to share encouragement and nurture confidence in one’s ability to make these positive changes.

For eight weeks, participants of LifeBalance will seek to address Jesus’ question, set goals, and strive to make changes in their lives while encouraging others to do the same. It’s a great opportunity.

If you have questions or comments about LifeBalance, please contact Kelly Fitzgerald at 847-390-1432, kelly.fitzgerald@lssi.org, or visit www.LSSI.org. □