



Bridges of Hope: Reflections on the Power of Partnership

2024 LENTEN DEVOTIONS

Week 3
(February 26 – March 1)



Monday, February 26
REFORMATION LUTHERAN, MILWAUKEE
& OUR SAVIOR'S LUTHERAN, OCONOMOWOC

John Corning: Hi, I'm John Corning! I'm with Our Savior's Lutheran Church in Oconomowoc. And we've been very, very fortunate to have a long-term partnership with Reformation Church. And with me today is...

Thaurra Stallings: Thaurra Stallings from Reformation, Youth and Family Minister. And yes, we have been in a relationship for decades. It's... it means a very lot to me to be in relationship. As part of this, we get the opportunity to walk with our brothers and sister together. Not just in ministry, but in personal life. Also, you get a chance to pray and sit at the table for Bible study. The pantry we have and also, they do a great ministry. Also, we go out into the community together and do things together.

John: Yeah, what I just love is... I've retired a couple of years ago, and I have more time on my hands. And this was such a great opportunity to get more involved with other churches. One thing, you know, that I've learned so much is that we're able to do things with Reformation, and not necessarily for Reformation. I just learned so much more about the community, about the people. It just brings me joy when I'm able to either come here or have people from Reformation come out to our church and spend time with us. It's just been so rewarding!

Thaurra: Amen, amen! And we get the chance to sit at the table. Do Bible study, or just laugh. You know, you get a chance to show yourself to your partners. And you know, you get to know them and what they love to do. Like one is - the greatest thing for us is to do the fishing for the children that we do in April. Or just coming together, just to have a meal together. Or just a prayer. I could call and say, "I need you to pray for us," you know?! [laughs]

John: [Laughs] And I can do the same!

Thaurra: So, we really thank you for the opportunity to be in our life here at Reformation on 3806 West Lisbon Avenue! We can have fun... we really appreciate the Lord putting this together.

PRAYER: Disturb us, O Lord, when we are too well pleased with ourselves; when our dreams have come true because we have dreamed too little; when we arrive safely because we have sailed too close to shore. Disturb us when with the abundance of the things we possess, we have lost our thirst for the water of life. Stir us to dare more boldly, to venture on wider seas, where storms will show your mastery; where losing sight of land, we shall find the stars. We ask you to push back the horizons of our hopes and to push us into the future in strength, courage, hope and love. In your name we pray, Amen.

Using the daily devotional practice of St Ignatius in his Examen, take a moment to reflect on today's devotion...

- 1. What thoughts, questions, and feelings come up for you?*
- 2. Invite God's Spirit to speak to you about your reflections and also what is happening in your life today.*
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Tuesday, February 27
HEPHATHA LUTHERAN, MILWAUKEE
STRONG BABY SANCTUARY

Nurse Chris Keim: Hi, I'm Chris Keim. I'm the parish nurse at Hephatha Lutheran Church. I have the joy of overseeing the Strong Baby Sanctuary ministry that helps to decrease the high infant mortality rate in Milwaukee. And...we couldn't have Strong Baby Sanctuary without our partners. We need our partners. Our partner churches are just amazing! They are our fiscal agent for Strong Baby Sanctuary. They help us to organize all of our resources that we have in our gym, like diapers and wipes and clothing. They help us to bring furniture like beds to people's houses. This last year, we had 70 beds we brought to people's houses-- And what's better than a good night's sleep for your health? Without our partners, we wouldn't have Strong Baby Sanctuary. Strong Baby Sanctuary is not just Hephatha, not just even Ascension Healthcare... But Strong Baby Sanctuary is every partner who helps us. One of the wonderful things about Strong Baby Sanctuary is the number of partners that we have. And one of the things that I have noticed is the relationships that have been built between our partners, and our Strong Baby Sanctuary advocates, and our Strong Baby Sanctuary leaders. And you can see that when they come in, they're interacting with our leaders there. They're figuring out ways to serve together. And when they have a party, they invite us to a party. (laughs) We all go, you know, the Strong Baby Sanctuary families. And they know them. They are not just inviting them to come. They know them on a first name basis. And there's a lot of comfort in those relationships. Our partners are amazing. Like I said before, we cannot do this without them. And you can see that in the relationships, especially those relationships with our Strong Baby Sanctuary leaders -- who are our families, who are then leading. So they really are interactive, this interactive relationship.

Natalie: My name is Natalie. I'm from Hephatha, I've been here for 20 years.

There's a member from one of our partner churches who has taken a liking to my child and to me myself personally. And they have made it their mission to always reach out to my son and myself on a monthly basis. They've offered to give financial assistance on a monthly basis for me and my family. And I had my son when I was about 15 years old -- so for me, in the beginning of that, that was a big deal. And it was like a big huge weight off my shoulders. This person has continued to be a part of my life through letters, and just you know... My son is 17 years old, and she met him when he was about four years old. So that is a special relationship I have with this person. And I wouldn't have met this person without our partner churches. And I... that kind of commitment makes them family to me. And it's a deeper connection we have, deeper bond.

People who my son has reached out to and have... they just take a liking to my son, and we used to bring my child over to they house. And they would bake cookies with my son, my nephew, stuff like that. You can't get those memories, you know... and those people, some have since passed. And those

memories forever be in my heart, forever be with my son's heart. And to us, they took the partnership role, and they went way above and beyond. And I would forever be grateful for them, and to they church and to that partnership, because they have greatly impacted my life. (laughs)

Nurse Chris: And so, Hephatha and all of our ministries are strengthened in so many ways. We're strengthened by the faith of our partners. We're strengthened by the serving alongside our partners. We're strengthened by their prayers. We're strengthened by their donations, by their gifts that they offer, regardless of what they look like. And we are... it's not just like a, one plus one equals two. It's definitely exponential, how we can serve God's people with our partners. We're so thankful for them! We bless them, and we're just very grateful!

PRAYER: Nurturing God: You remind us that giving is about more than just money. Help us to give of our very selves to meet the needs of children in our communities. As we give, you remind us of how we are blessed in return. May you continue to encourage us in hope, that your goodness and love may grow around us each and every day. In your name we pray, Amen.

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Wednesday, February 28
GRACE WELCOME CENTER, KENOSHA
HARBORSIDE ACADEMY PARTNERSHIP

Pastor Jonathan Barker: Hello! It's Rev. Jonathan Barker and David Underwood, down here at Grace Welcome Center. And we are so grateful to be down here to share about the power of partnership. So, brother David, would you like to share a little bit about how Harborside [Academy] and Grace Welcome Center have been partners now for many years?

David Underwood: Yeah! It's been an absolute joy. I mean, we just-- today we just celebrated our first semester of learning, where we've been introduced to the Grace Welcome Center. Harborside is about, maybe, four blocks from here. So, Grace Welcome Center is in our school neighborhood. And about seven years ago, I was teaching my students about world history. And we just really wanted to look into this whole idea of the under-resourced in our community. And that's how I was introduced to Pastor Barker. A dear sister, Karen Kempinen, said "I need to introduce you to my friend." Because she came in to talk to the kids because she was from [Congregations United to Serve Humanity]. And he comes in and - him and [then Executive Director] Leif [Peterson] - and they cast the vision to the students about what they really wanted to do in response to just, not enough low-barrier emergency places for people to go. And so, we got on board with them. And we strategized and we planned, and we researched. And we created high-quality posters that we had in the gymnasium, and we invited a local band to come in and to play a concert, and we raised money. And ever since then, we just really were able to continue to stay connected throughout those years in different ways. And it has been an amazing journey. And it really is what we try to do at Harborside, in the EL Education Network... And that's to teach kids important concepts, but then to connect them to their community. And this is such a great connection and great relationship for us to have!

Pr. Jonathan: That same year, one of his students, upon graduating, she felt a call to do the first-ever canned food drive in Grace Welcome Center. And that was one of the big moments that pushed us towards our pantry, which now serves 16,000 non-duplicative individuals a year. And when I think about this relationship, I think about Philippians 127- 28: "Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you're standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith in the Gospel, and in no way intimidated by your opponents." And it's been such a privilege to stand side by side with my dear brother. When Paul talks about this, he's imagining a Roman legion where each soldier would hold this shield, and half protect half of themselves and half of the person next to one another. And so they had to stand incredibly close, incredibly firm with one another for their own protection and continued existence. And brother Dave and his students have stood with us through many things. As he mentioned, they ran the very first fundraiser at Grace Welcome Center, the first big fundraiser, and that allowed

us to go from serving breakfast on Friday, to serving breakfast on Thursday and Friday. Doubled our capacity.

And then when the pandemic came, and the uprising happened after Jacob Blake was shot, Harborside was there again. And brother Dave and his students were going literally porch the porch early in the pandemic, to help us meet the need. And they have stood firm with us. They have stood together in one spirit and one mind for now, seven years. It's been a great joy.

And not only has this partnership, you know, been great for Grace Welcome Center and Harborside... but personally, brother Dave has just transformed my life. This relationship, this friendship. Brother Dave and his family have since joined our church. Sister Karen also joined our church. It's amazing how this all kind of came together! And brother Dave's daughter, who was also in the class that first year - sister Gracie - is now our worship director! And sister Gracie introduced me to The Porter's Gate. And that's what we've been hearing at Grace, praising God with the grace being formed by a Grace. And, you know, literally last night, that's the last thing that my one-year-old son was listening to. It calms him down; we listen to music before bed. And you know, we're moved and touched, and we're being formed by this music that our dear brother and dear sister brought into our life. So, it's really an amazing partnership. And I know it's formed your life as well.

David: Yeah, I mean, like I always go back to the... it was in September 2020. And I was up in my classroom. So, my classroom is in a building that was right at the epicenter of all of the protesting, and the racial reckoning that was going on, in response to all those things that we've seen nationally. And our first-floor windows were all shattered. And so, we couldn't have school. Not because of the pandemic, but because it wasn't safe to come to school. And it was just really irritating and frustrating for me. I was really, you know, I guess disheartened by the response of the Church (Big C church) to everything that was going on. And was just really... I didn't... nothing resonated with me. I was going to a great church, a lot of good things, but just really didn't feel like I could truly, truly seek the Lord within what's happening in our world, and raise my family, and to have a good understanding of caring about social justice. So, I asked Pastor, who was just a friend of mine through the Grace Welcome Center, if he would Zoom with me. And we were Zooming and there were, you know, people marching down Sheridan Road as we're Zooming and everything. And I had one question for him. I said, "How can you be a Christian and deeply care about social justice?" And I'll never forget his reply. His reply was: "love your neighbor, we believe in loving your neighbor." And that just resonated with me.

And since then, we started watching [Grace's worship service] at home on Facebook, and then we started coming [in-person]. And it's just been an awesome journey. I'm raising my family here. And I've got my youngest son, Gus, who has autism, and it's a comforting place for him to come because he knows he's understood. I have my oldest son, Samuel, who is finding a passion. He's seen that he could take his guitar playing - he's in our worship band. My daughter's leading us, and I'm doing my best playing along with

them. And my wife conducted the very first big craft fair that was done here. And we've all just been very passionately involved now. And it's just been something that's become a part of our family. And we're very grateful for that!

Pr. Jonathan: Brother Dave, it's just a joy to have you be part of our church family. Love you so much, dear brother.

David: Love you, man.

Pr. Jonathan: And love to all of our Synod! We are so grateful for the ways that you stand firm with Grace Welcome Center every day. Whether it be food drives, coat drives, or funding Outreach for Hope so we are supported. There are so many ways that so many of you have stood firm with us over the years, and over this past year. God bless each one of you during this Lenten season!

PRAYER: Good and Gracious God: You call us to experience the fruits of the Spirit - love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Bless us as we work together in your kingdom, that the fruits of your Spirit may grow and flourish in our partnerships and in our lives. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

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Thursday, February 29
BREAKING THE CHAINS CHURCH
& ST. MARY'S LUTHERAN, KENOSHA

Steve Hartfield, St. Mary's social ministry team: For the past several Christmas seasons, the Greater Milwaukee Synod Lutheran churches in Kenosha (St. Mary's, St. Paul's, Lord of Life, Trinity, Lakeside, Grace, and Spirit of Life) have partnered with Breaking the Chains Church and Pastor David Ruby in creating gift bags for the inmates at the Kenosha Correctional Center. These gift bags are given to the men, many of them who would never receive any Christmas gifts at all. In addition, the churches in Kenosha obtain Thrivent Action [Team] grant money to purchase postage stamps and blank Christmas cards, so the men can send Christmas messages out to their loved ones. They might not be able to do this, if it weren't for the work of Breaking the Chains Church. Also, the St. Mary's Lutheran Endowment Foundation provides yearly grant money to Breaking the Chains Church, to continue their work in Milwaukee and in Kenosha.

As the Bible says in 1 Corinthians 3:9, "For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building." Thank you, and peace be with you!

PRAYER: Dear Great and Gracious God: Thank you for your plans of hope for our futures. Help returning citizens to never give up hope for a return to their families and their communities. Let us be a sign of your hope, to share the hope and love that Jesus has shared with us with men who are trying to transform their lives and are prepared to successfully re-enter our communities. All this we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

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Friday, March 1
INCARNATION LUTHERAN, MILWAUKEE

Janet Mays: Hello! My name is Janet Mays. I'm a member of Incarnation Lutheran Church at 1510 West Keefe Avenue. And my statement is about who or what happened in my life that assured me that God was with me, and that I could move forward.

I would like to start as a child. After baptism, Incarnation's pastors, Sunday School teachers and members taught me about God and Jesus, and always showed me unconditional love and acceptance. Also, pastors and members literally saved me from a very violent situation, saving my life and providing me with any support that I needed to get out of that situation, and to move forward. As well, in my later years, the pastors and members showed unwavering, consistent love and support to me as I care for my sick mom and stepdad - during their lives, once they die, and after their death.

PRAYER: God of Unfailing Love: May we be filled with love for each other that reflects your love for us - patient and kind, not envious nor boastful nor rude, seeking to lift others up in how we honor them, reflecting the love we have received from you - so that your love may grow in this world through us. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

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