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Study guide

Where all may dwell

By Robert C. Blezard

Following the example of Jesus, Christians have always responded to the physical and spiritual needs of people they encounter. Addressing the need of the vulnerable in Winston-Salem, N.C., the Dwelling takes an immersive and particularly integrative approach. What can the rest of the ELCA learn from them?

EXERCISE 1: CARE FOR THE HOMELESS

The Bible is clear that God not only holds special concern for vulnerable people—including widows, orphans, the poor, foreigners, people experiencing homelessness—but also expects God's people to help them as a priority matter. God's care for the poor is familiar to Christians through such well-known passages as Jesus' parable of the sheep and goats (Matthew 25:31-46), but the idea is also woven throughout the Old Testament. Turn to Isaiah 58:1-12 and discuss:

- Isaiah wrote the words, but whose voice is speaking in this passage? And to whom?
- How would you characterize the tone of God's message?
- Why are God's people perplexed?
- What are God's people doing in an effort to please God?
- Why isn't God pleased with their actions?
- What corrective action does God prescribe?
- How does God, through Isaiah, describe true worship and devotion?
- If God's people follow the Almighty's directives, how does God promise to respond?
- How would the community of God's people be transformed if they obey God's instructions?
- How does this passage speak to the Christian churches of the 21st century? To the ELCA? To your congregation? To you?
- Given the promises God makes, how would your congregation be transformed if members took Isaiah 58 seriously?
- As a study group, devise an "Isaiah 58" action plan for your congregation and submit it to your congregation council or pastor for consideration.

EXERCISE 2: "ALL ARE WELCOME." REALLY?

Most congregations say and believe that they welcome everybody. While a noble goal and worthy intention, the reality of welcoming everyone is often much harder to achieve. Why is that? What are the complications?



Study guide: **Where all may dwell** *continued*

Residents of the Dwelling had expressed a need for a worship community that “looked like them”—where they wouldn’t feel judged by their housing status, their past or experiences. Discuss:

- Why do people who are poor or experiencing homelessness sometimes feel judged or otherwise unwelcome in a typical congregation?
- How or why is “fitting in” important for a person of faith in order to feel comfortable in a worshiping community?
- Offering a “welcome to all” at worship may begin with a friendly greeting to visitors in the narthex, but why is that just the start? What else is required? What might be helpful?
- If two people experiencing homelessness participated in your congregation’s Sunday service, would they feel welcome? Would they fit in? Would their clothing and appearance fit in with the rest of the congregation’s?
- What are obstacles to your congregation fully welcoming and accepting people experiencing poverty or homelessness? What obstacles can be overcome, and how?

EXERCISE 3: RELATIONAL OR TRANSACTIONAL?

Ministries can often be characterized as either relational or transactional. Relational ministries involve ongoing engagement, development and care for those being served. A congregation’s ministry to its homebound members is a good example of a relational ministry. A transactional ministry is one where there may be worthwhile service or aid rendered, but there is no ongoing engagement. Collecting food for the local food pantry is a good example of a transactional ministry. Discuss:

- People are being served under either model of ministry, but which serves them more fully, relational or transactional? Explain.
- Which model offers a church the better chance of meeting the spiritual needs of those being served?
- Looking at the Dwelling’s ministry, is it more relational or more transactional? Explain.
- How does the Dwelling’s ministry not only meet people’s physical needs but also gather them together as a spiritual community?
- Does your congregation participate in a food or housing ministry for people and families in need? Does it address their spiritual needs? Would you characterize it as mostly relational or mostly transactional?
- How might a relational ministry to people experiencing homelessness transform not only those helped but also those who are helping?
- How might your congregation’s food or housing ministry be improved to become more relational, meeting spiritual needs as well as physical needs?

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Study guide: **Where all may dwell** *continued*

- If your church doesn't participate in a food or housing ministry, how might your congregation go about starting one or finding an existing ministry with which to partner?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What does it mean to describe people as "vulnerable"? Vulnerable to what? And why? In what ways are people experiencing extreme poverty and homelessness vulnerable? Why does the Bible make clear that God has a special heart for the vulnerable? Why does God command God's people to help?
- Are there people experiencing homelessness and extreme poverty in your community? How do you know? What signs indicate the extent of the problem? How is your congregation responding to the physical and spiritual needs of your community's most needy?
- How would you characterize the availability of affordable housing in your area? What are the major factors driving the housing market? How has the North American housing crunch that began in 2020 affected your community, particularly in the availability of affordable housing? How does the volatility of the housing market relate to homelessness? What are you seeing in your community? How is your church responding?
- Through food pantries and homeless shelters, many churches provide assistance for the physical needs of people experiencing extreme poverty or homelessness. What is your congregation doing? What more could it do? How can your congregation also address the spiritual needs of people experiencing extreme poverty or homelessness? Devise an action plan and give it to the congregation council or pastor for consideration.
- Jesus was quoting Deuteronomy 8:3 when he told the tempter that "one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4). What does this say about the spiritual needs of God's people? What does it mean to be not only physically well-nourished but also spiritually well-nourished? Which need, physical or spiritual, is easier to fulfill, and why? For what reasons must a wise church that seeks to meet people's physical needs also pay attention to the spiritual needs?
- Jesus did say, "You always have the poor with you" (Matthew 26:11), but the snippet is sometimes quoted out of context to imply that it is ultimately fruitless to assist the poor. Looking at the whole story of Matthew 26:6-13, do you think Jesus intended to dismiss charitable ministries? Explain.

Where All May Dwell

FAITH COMMUNITY PROVIDES SPACE FOR SACRED VULNERABILITY

By Erin Strybis



Members of the Dwelling lead worship on Easter Sunday 2021. The Dwelling is an ELCA worshipping community in Winston-Salem, N.C., that “proclaims boldly that there is holiness in the identity [of] someone experiencing homelessness, that they share a kinship with God who reminds us all that we are all wanderers in search of belonging.”

Photos: Courtesy of Emily Norris

Emily Norris had been serving at Augsburg Lutheran Church’s winter-overflow homeless shelter in Winston-Salem, N.C., for a few years when she heard the rumblings. Many of the guests opened up to her, told her stories. She wasn’t ordained, but they saw her as their pastor. One need kept arising.

“I heard very loudly that there was a deep hunger for a faith community that looked like them,” Norris said. They craved space where they could worship God and not feel judged for their housing status, their past or their appearance. Heeding their calls led Norris to Wartburg

Theological Seminary, Dubuque, Iowa, to become a pastor.

By 2020, Norris was ordained and serving as the mission developer for the Dwelling, an ELCA faith community designed for, but not exclusive to, people in Winston-Salem who are or have been homeless. Partnerships with Augsburg, the North Carolina Synod, the Moravian Church in America and the ELCA churchwide organization provide funding. “I was so certain I was being called [by God] to start the Dwelling that even though the synod had [only] part-time funding for the position, I [took it],” Norris recalled.

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The Dwelling rents space from a local nonprofit that focuses on addiction, mental health and homelessness. Unfortunately, Norris received the certificate of occupancy for the space a day before the pandemic necessitated a statewide shutdown. There was one silver lining. “Before I knew it, there was extra funding from the [ELCA COVID-19 Response Fund], and it got me to full-time ministry,” she said.

Starting a church during a pandemic wasn’t ideal. Safety restrictions made worship impossible, and the population she’d hoped to reach became especially vulnerable. So Norris did what many ELCA leaders and congregations were forced to do last year: she pivoted.

Cleansed, housed, held

After assessing community needs, Norris determined that free mobile showers would be the Dwelling’s anchor ministry. Visitors could take showers and receive clean underwear, socks and T-shirts donated by members of the Dwelling’s synod conference.

“It was really a profound way to start,” Norris said. “Showers provide a sense of dignity and are therapeutic. I don’t know a better way to remind people of their baptism.”

Eventually the showers became a permanent fixture and new funding allowed the faith community to hire another pastor, Tobi Fleck, to manage the ministry.

Many who use the showers now also volunteer there. “One of the things the Dwelling takes seriously is that it is a community for folks who have experienced or are experiencing homelessness, where they can be leaders instead of guests to the ministry that God is working through the community,” Fleck said.

And then in July, city officials invited Norris to provide pastoral care and community activities at a local hotel where they had arranged to shelter 60 of the most fragile people who were homeless. That experience inspired her to develop the Dwelling Place housing initiative.

“What we realized then was that people can get housing vouchers and have a housing plan, but if there’s not affordable housing, it’s not happening,” she said. An outreach arm of the Dwelling, the Dwelling Place renovates affordable housing units for those in need.

In November, Norris recruited leaders to form the Dwelling’s advisory council. By Christmas Eve, area restrictions for gatherings had been relaxed, and Norris held the Dwelling’s first worship service. In January, it began offering regular Sunday worship.



In spring 2020, Emily Norris, pastor of the Dwelling, launched a free shower ministry for those in need in Winston-Salem.

Looking back on the Dwelling’s first year, Norris said that “the shutting down of the world actually opened up our impact.”

Open doors, open hearts

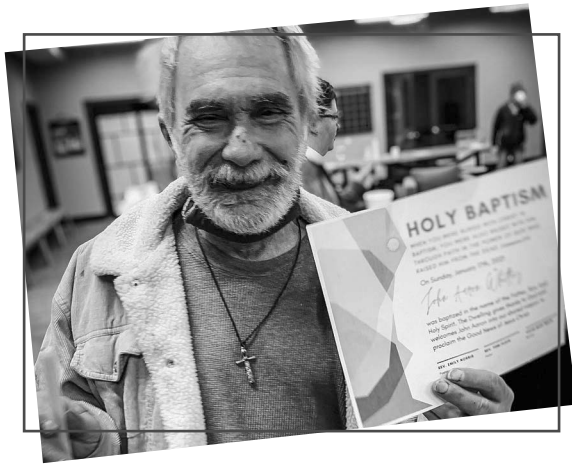
Worship at the Dwelling is “like coming home,” said member Cheryl Morrison.

With a living room for its sanctuary, couches and chairs for its pews, and food that flows freely, the Dwelling takes seriously its mission of hospitality. “It has a feather touch, where you can come in and get comfy,” Morrison said. “It’s OK to talk to the person next to you, get up to get a cup of coffee, doughnut or muffin.” She calls it one of her “God spots.”

“This is a church for God’s people—the homeless—and they are the foundation of what makes this church work, which in my eyes is extremely special,” added Ryan Sprinkle, a council member. “You have people right off the street with their backpacks.”

A maintenance worker, Sprinkle first met Norris at the shelter, where he slept years ago. He has since found housing through connections forged at Augsburg, but he credits the Dwelling with getting him back to church after a yearslong absence. “Everybody needs love and compassion and a safe spot for a few hours—to come and hear music and hear the word and get open about their feelings and have nobody judge them,” he said. “People feel comfortable sharing their stories [here] because they know people beside them have experienced the same thing.”

One of those people is John Whitely, who knew Norris through Augsburg’s shelter. In fact, it was Norris who came to Whitely’s rescue when he accidentally overdosed in the shelter’s restroom after a Christmas party. When he woke up in the hospital, his first thought was, “Oh, you’ve done it now, Johnny. You’ll never be able to go back there.”



John Whitely was one of the first members of the Dwelling to be baptized, and is a member of its council.

When Whitely saw Norris the following winter, she came up to him, smiling, and asked if he would be returning to the shelter. “I’m like, ‘Oh, God. I didn’t think you’d ever want me there,’” he remembered. “Ever since then, I would do anything she asked.”

Today, Whitely belongs to and volunteers at the Dwelling. “I didn’t go to church,” he said.

“I didn’t like the way people treated you there, until I met Emily. When we started to meet at [the Dwelling] I asked her, ‘Can you baptize me?’ I knew I needed to be baptized—it says that in the Bible.”

Norris was delighted to baptize him, saying, “To have seen [John] at so many stages of life, to literally have been with him near death and in life—what a gift for a pastor.”

Whitely’s story is one of many shared at the Dwelling, often as part of discussion during worship. Such openness, Norris said, is the heart of the church: “We’re creating a community that welcomes the messiness of being human. Vulnerability is powerful. We are our strongest as a community of faith when we are honest with each other.”

Added Madi White, student intern and a candidate for ordination in the Moravian Church, “We don’t tell people they need to have it together—they can bring all the pieces of themselves to us and the love of our community will fill in the cracks.” †

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