



## Engaging across traditions



An interfaith service at Wagner College

“We Methodists take our coffee hours very seriously!” said the pastor during announcements after the service, and the congregation laughed. I was just visiting, but I wanted to say: “No, that’s us. It’s *Lutherans* who make jokes about their coffee consumption and their love of potlucks.” Then I wondered how many other faith communities make the same jokes each week when *they* gather to worship.

Fortunately, we Lutherans are able to define ourselves beyond jokes about Jell-O and sitting in the back pew. We *are* part of a rich

faith tradition, but we do ourselves a disservice if we focus so much on what it means to be Lutheran that we fail to interact with other sisters and brothers in faith. This interfaith issue takes a look at how Lutherans across the synod are involved with people of different religious faiths. From worship to social ministry, from politics to prayer, Lutherans are learning, leading, and loving with their neighbors in respectful ways. ✦ **SARAH GIOE** is Director of Communication and Interpretation.

### Love, giving, and welcome in Westchester County

One snowy, pre-Christmas morning in 2004, my pastor approached my church office desk, lightly tapped my shoulder, and dropped a letter atop my fingers as I clacked away on my keyboard. “Take a look at this,” he said with a grin. “I know you have a heart for this kind of work.” The letter was an appeal to area congregations to get involved in a project to provide winter shelter for local homeless people. My pastor knew I’d been championing the Midnight Run program, traveling down to New York City to feed and clothe the homeless as often as I could.

In January 2005, Lutheran Church of the Resurrection joined four other congregations to form the beginnings of the Emergency Shelter Partnership (ESP). Now we are a

coalition of nearly 30 religious congregations and community-based groups from Northern Westchester providing shelter and funding for homeless individuals during the coldest months of the year. Happily, that winter marked the first of many in which someone in our area had not died of exposure to the elements.

ESP offers homeless persons hot meals and safe shelter from November through March. The program provides bedding, toiletries, and other essentials via donations from host congregations which rotate weekly. Three bi-lingual staffers, along with congregational volunteers, supervise the shelter each night. Guests depart each morning with a breakfast bag and a good night’s sleep. As many as 30

individuals per evening have found shelter with the program, which costs about \$32,000 annually to operate. Funding, provided primarily by tax-deductible contributions from the community, directly supports the program—from staff salaries to sleeping bags to maintenance of the van used to transport guests.

Since its inception, the program has received incredible support. The willingness of each congregation to open its doors and extend hospitality puts into practice the best of our religious traditions: those of love, giving, and welcome. I look forward to our hosting weeks and I always remember to smile and greet each person as an individual as our guests enter our house of worship. We've even provided live dinner music during the holidays and watched the appreciation on the faces of people who don't often get to feel special.

Sometimes, in the heat of summer, I'll spot one of our regular ESP guests as I drive through town. In a bittersweet moment, I both cherish seeing them in the warmth of a summer's day, yet lament that they turn up in the program every winter because their situation has not improved. Still, my heart says, "There's one of our guys. God bless him." I think about how lucky I am to be able to do God's good work and how blessed I am that God has made me strong and able to do it. *Yes, dear Lord, I do have a heart for this!*

✦ **ROO STREICH** is a member of Resurrection, Mount Kisco.

### Opening windows at Wagner

The chapel at Wagner College, Staten Island, is sacred space shared by Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and the Hindu faiths. The work of Hillel (Jewish campus ministry) and chaplaincy to the Jewish students is cared for by Rabbi Dr. Abraham Unger. He leads services for Shabbat and the High Holy Days. Roman Catholicism is the largest faith group on campus. Sister Elaine Schenk coordinates Sunday's Mass at 9:00 p.m. Prayer Offices mark the worship opportunities for Christian students during the week, and the Eucharist is offered on Sunday at noon by Father Anthony DeLuca, a Syrian Orthodox priest. Prayer rugs and copies of the Qu'ran, donated by one of our many local mosques, rest in the front of the chapel along with the cross and a Star of David. The Stations of the Cross hang around the walls. This fall, Dhira Chaintanya, a priest from our Staten Island Hindu Temple, installed Sri Ganesha, the elephant-headed deity—and "remover of all obstacles"—alongside these other symbols of our world's major faiths. Celebrations of each faith are opened to campus through "holy days" during the year, offering windows into their views.

We seek to provide a place where our students can walk beside each other on their spiritual journeys. We hope to encourage dialogue that challenges prejudices and the historical chauvinisms. We want to provide opportunity for questions and differences to be shared openly and honestly so that misconceptions, fears, and the dangers of non-critical thinking can be addressed.



*The chapel at Wagner College*

At Baccalaureate on graduation day, you will find Roman Catholic and Hindu priests, a rabbi, a pastor, an imam, and a Buddhist monk on the dais. The vestments and colors, white, black, and saffron, set the tone for the blessings to come. This is the paradigm for our work in campus ministry at Wagner. Each faith brings its blessing and prayers to the students for their ongoing journey. ✦ **THE REV. RICHARD MICHAEL** is pastor of Trinity, Staten Island and chaplain at Wagner College.

### Joyful sharing through Word and song

"Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together...but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near." —Hebrews 10:24-25 (RSV)

This passage illustrates how Christ Lutheran Church of New Hyde Park views the world both inside and outside our doors. The diverse neighborhood we share has brought many religions to our area. Like many churches, we have been feeling the decline of attendance in our congregation, which has led us to be creative for survival. But it has also brought about great changes in sharing the Good News about our Lord and Savior.

Christ currently shares its worship space with two wonderful congregations. The first one is a Korean Presbyterian congregation, the Wonderful Covenant Church, and the second is the Brazilian Baptist Church. We have shared our space and along the way decided to share our worship time for Thanksgiving Eve and Christmas Eve. Our previous pastor, the Rev. Norman White, started our interfaith service 10 years ago.

As a congregation we have enjoyed these services, and experienced the way our mutual ministries express faith and thanks to God. The young Koreans used their expressive hands in sign language to a song during one Christmas service. Then they joined us for a rousing "Hallelujah Chorus." Without their tenors, we would have been sorely uneven. At the Thanksgiving service, the Brazilian pastor preached in his native Portuguese, which was simultaneously translated to English. The Baptists also have an amazing musical group

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