

For the Life of the World

Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne

November 2011, Volume Fifteen, Number Three



Life Together—Gift

By Rev. J. Bart Day

Experiencing Life Together in Christ

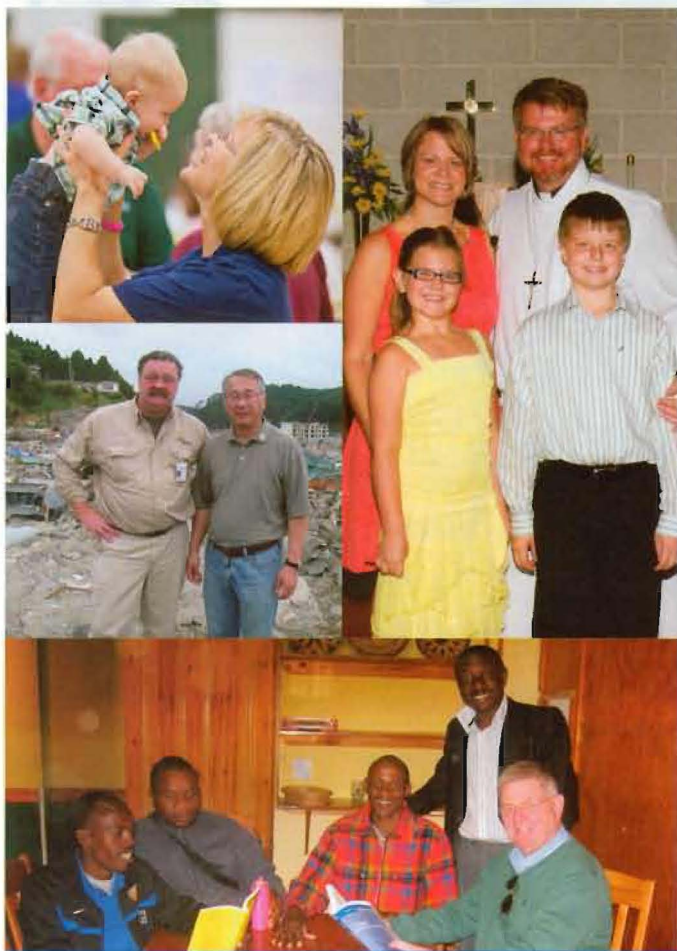
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The Office of National Mission is doing the work of “Home Mission.” The world is at our door. The challenges facing the church in our post-Christian culture can appear overwhelming. In the face of such challenges, the church must stand ready to proclaim the Gospel boldly. Being a faithful Lutheran has never been more critical.

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God’s people are uniquely empowered to model life together in Christ. Not only is the church where we abide in community with Christ (Matthew 18:20), but we also abide in community with one another (Ephesians 2:19). And then, we take that power of life together in Christ into a world around us (Matthew 22:39)—a world parched for meaningful relationships (Isaiah 32:2).

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By Rev. Joshua R. Gale

Philadelphia Lutheran Ministries (PLM), the organization that has recently called me as their mission developer, is a Recognized Service Organization (RSO) of the LCMS, daring to pursue Witness, Mercy and Life Together in the name of Christ into the Philadelphia metropolitan area. The project at my direction, known as the “Northeast Philly Project,” seeks to realize this purpose through reaching out to the homeless in and around the city of Philadelphia.

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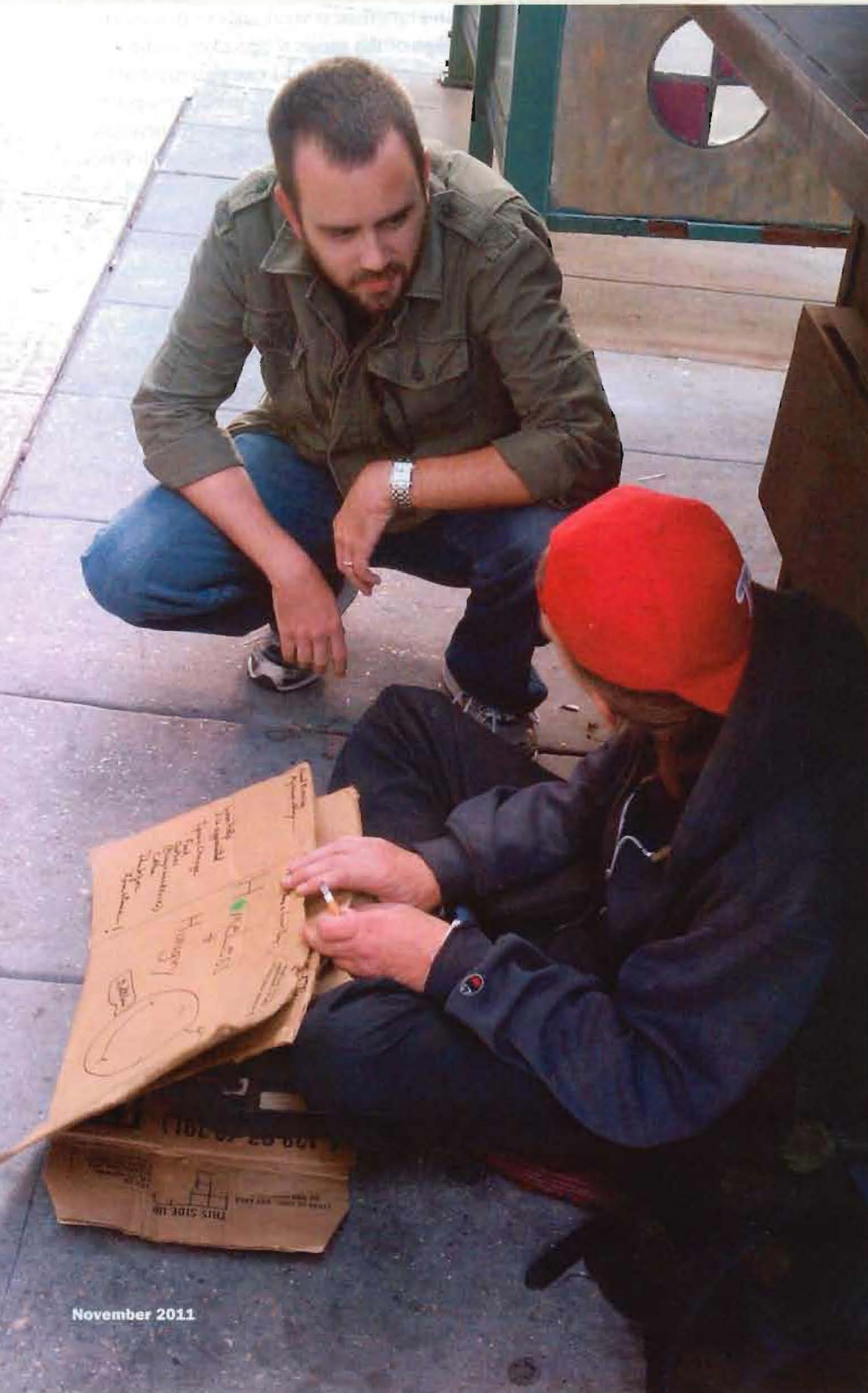
Philadelphia Lutheran Ministries: Witness, Mercy and Life Together in the City

By Rev. Joshua R. Gale

In his book, *Christ, Have Mercy: How to Put Your Faith in Action*, Rev. Dr. Matthew Harrison, President of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, gave this imperative to the Lutheran Church of the 21st century: “It is time to ‘dare something’ in the name of Christ” (p. 254). The work of Philadelphia Lutheran Ministries’ pastors and laypeople is a realization of this imperative. President Harrison has interpreted the time we live in as one of amazing mercy mission potential, along with the realization that we have the tools already in place to bring Lutheranism into every corner of our cities and towns.

As I look at the need of my city and the resources of the Lutheran community, I find myself agreeing that it’s time to reengage our communities with focused mercy work. It is possible that there was a time when we didn’t have the ability to engage our communities with ambition and zeal. I don’t believe that time ever existed. But if it did, that time certainly isn’t now.

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Philadelphia Lutheran Ministries (PLM), the organization that has recently called me as their mission developer, is a Recognized Service Organization (RSO) of the LCMS, daring to pursue Witness, Mercy and Life Together in the name of Christ into the Philadelphia metropolitan area. The project at my direction, known as the "Northeast Philly Project," seeks to realize this purpose through reaching out to the homeless in and around the city of Philadelphia; bringing about urban renewal in one targeted, impoverished area of the Northeast Philly corridor; to utilize the current structure of LCMS churches in the city; all while drawing together individuals to form active Lutheran congregations within and near the vicinity of targeted urban renewal.

The first phase of the project, evangelization work with Philadelphia's homeless, is already in process and showing significant gains. Without a permanent site, I am actively walking the streets of Philadelphia each day, in both Center City and some North and Northeast Philadelphia neighborhoods (especially Fairhill, Kensington and Frankford). I usually carry a cooler of sandwiches and water, along with a bag of clothes, while keeping an eye out for the many men, women and children who live on Philadelphia's streets. Along with food and clothing, I also provide regular devotions. Even though this project has

just begun, and after only two months on the ground, a small group of homeless men is gathering to study the Small Catechism, with an ultimate goal of Confirmation and membership in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. Thanks to the power of the preached Word, many members of the homeless community refer to me as "The Pastor" and consider me a trusted person within their highly reclusive society.

The greatest weakness of this early stage of the project, however, is the limitations of what I can prepare and carry. We are currently seeking support for the development of a permanent site that would highly increase the efficiency of both meeting the intense material needs and reaching out to the people. Our current diaper, clothing and food drives can accomplish much, but far more could be done with a permanent mission center and mobile facilities.

In this way, the second phase of the plan is the most crucial: planting a mission center in one of the poorest, most depressed, most intimidating neighborhoods North/Northeast Philadelphia offers—the impoverished neighborhood of Fairhill and within a few blocks of a strip known as "The Badlands."

The Badlands is an open-air drug market populated by



drug dealers, prostitutes, addicts and many law-abiding but impoverished citizens, all in desperate need. The level of crime in this area is excruciatingly high. I see the future of Lutheranism in Philadelphia flourishing here.

This "mission center" building will be, first and foremost, a newly planted church. There will be the daily preaching of the Gospel and administration of the Sacraments, while we provide instruction in the faith. The building will also ideally have ample space dedicated to a homeless shelter of 35-40 beds, a community kitchen to feed the poor, a food bank and free clothing store, and other mercy facilities. This location is of utmost importance to establishing a long-term launching point for engendering true urban renewal and evangelization of Philadelphia. Our supporters' donations are specifically targeted to the purchase and renovation costs of such a facility.

The shelter housed here will be dedicated to the long-term rehabilitation of a portion of Philadelphia's homeless. The residential program in which the men will be enrolled will extend from a year to 18 months. It will be centered on daily prayer offices and instruction in the Catechism; mental, vocational and substance abuse counseling; along with encouraging many volunteer hours in the community. In this way, the major players in the urban renewal of The Badlands will be their own people who have either lived in the area or have experienced incredible poverty in their own lives. We have many volunteers eager to help and we will provide ways for them to participate, but the most active hand in the community will be the community itself.


Many in The Badlands have places to live, though these homes are mostly slum housing. My project with PLM seeks to improve their living conditions and provide food for them on a regular basis from the mission center. For example, many of the children enrolled in school receive free lunches, but their homes don't have food to feed them when school is not in session. The community kitchen will be able to ensure that the children and their families receive adequate nutrition any time of day, and the center's residents and volunteers will

be proactive in seeking out these needs and opportunities.

We are also pursuing the purchase of a mobile kitchen trailer which would be housed at the mission center, but also taken further into the streets, seeking the various homeless communities who often live in camps under bridges, parks or other semi-private areas. Since staying mobile in the community is important, this mobile kitchen will serve as a gathering point for those living on the streets, a place where they will receive food and clothes and hear the preaching of the Gospel.

The third phase of the project focuses on the LCMS congregation of St. Luke's Lutheran Church, located near Castor Gardens. Centered in a quiet and predominantly blue collar neighborhood with many families and a great deal of foot traffic, the congregation's property has a church, two large homes and a large double lot. One of the homes was once used to house a dedicated pre-school. PLM is currently in the process of refitting the current school building that has not been in operation for several years. It is hoped that through our congregations working together, PLM can oversee the continuing renovation of this building and the re-opening of a new, quality Christian childcare center, operated by my wife Amanda. This part of the third phase will be completed no later than the fall of 2012.

The daycare will serve as an important tool in reintroducing St. Luke's Lutheran Church to the community, while being one of the ways we intend to help revitalize the congregation. In addition to using the buildings for childcare and community programs, we intend to use the vacant lot as a community garden for those living in the immediate area. On this lot we will hold farmers' markets in the summer and other community events.

As I look at the dramatic need that is right out my front door in the city of Philadelphia, and compare it to the eagerness of LCMS Lutherans to support us, I can't help but conclude that now is the time to dare something in the name of Christ and here is a place it will be done. 



Rev. Joshua R. Gale is a 2011 graduate of Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana. He has been called as Mission Developer for Philadelphia Lutheran Ministries in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. You can learn more about his work at www.phillyministries.org.