

Partnering with Faith Communities: Pillars of support during the COVID-19 response

Providing hope

The Southeastern Minnesota Synod Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (SE MN Synod of the ELCA) is a faith community of 168 congregations. It is one of the 65 synods that make up the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). Throughout the pandemic, they have worked to support their congregation in a variety of ways.

The SE MN Synod of the ELCA responded to the communities' physical, emotional, social, and spiritual needs by creating safe spaces for conversations with congregation leadership, guidance to keep everyone safe, and resources to cope with the realities of the COVID-19 pandemic. Several congregations in rural and urban Minnesota provided weekly food packages and hot meals, such as the congregation in Albert Lea that provided drive-throughs for people to pick up free hot meals for their families.

The Connections Shelter Ministry (CSM), a faith-based homeless shelter organization, worked with Salvation Army, local pharmacies, and low-cost clinics to provide shelter space for quarantine and isolation, testing, and vaccination services. This was welcomed by communities who were "facing many barriers to health care access" and it was a "safe space to quarantine," said Bishop Regina, SE MN Synod of the ELCA. Initially, there was significant resistance among many people experiencing homelessness to get vaccinated, which the staff addressed through continued conversations to address their fears. A resounding success was the number of people experiencing homelessness being vaccinated increasing from 25% in the spring of 2021 to 70% in the fall of 2021, said Pastor Collette Broady Grund.

Local collaborations

Partnering with the county public health department and the City of Mankato helped to "coordinate our efforts in creating safe spaces during meal taking and sleeping," said Pastor Erica Koser. They also worked tirelessly with these partners to refer those to the shelter who tested positive and needed isolation. With the help of a local low-income provider, they supplied COVID-19 screening for those admitted into the program. Open Door Health Clinic brought rapid test kits each time there was a COVID-19 outbreak in the shelter so that all shelter residents could be tested as often as needed. When it was necessary to quarantine COVID-positive guests in the shelter, both Open Door and the City of Mankato provided valuable personal protective equipment and logistical support.

Throughout the pandemic, pastors and chaplains continued to visit nursing homes, supporting many isolated residents with care and love. Since most church buildings are large open spaces, people continued to congregate for "worship and fellowship while observing the guidelines on social distancing and wearing masks," stated Bishop Regina. These spaces were also provided to community schools for tutoring and child care. Bringing people together to worship and for other educational activities while offering a safe gathering space helped keep people connected during these challenging times.

Working with MDH

Early in the COVID-19 response, MDH formed a faith-based engagement team whose purpose was to collaborate with and provide guidance to diverse faith communities in Minnesota, while bringing an equity perspective to engaging faith communities experiencing the disproportionate burden of COVID-19 in rural and under-resourced areas. This team hosted regular virtual check-ins to provide COVID-19 updates, answer questions from faith leaders, help develop faith-specific guidance and materials, and elevate issues the faith communities faced.

Thanks to this dedicated staffing model, the periodic updates and direct communication from MDH guided the synods' leadership across different congregations to make informed decisions on how to congregate and provide pastoral care in their communities. "Having someone from MDH [dedicated to

working with faith communities] helped us to understand the implications of what the case positivity numbers, state guidelines, and restrictions meant for faith-based communities," said Bishop Regina Hassanally. In the beginning, masking was a challenge in small worship spaces as congregations had mixed feelings toward this practice. However, the "communication material and quick turn-around from MDH to provide clarifications helped pastors and congregation leaders appreciate the importance of masking," said Bishop Regina.

Reflecting

Community partnerships grew much stronger as "we helped each other and shared best practices" to better serve the communities during COVID-19 pandemic, said Pastor Erica. The collaborations cultivated across our congregations with MDH, local public health departments, health clinics, community leadership, and other partners will continue to "help communities grow and remain healthy and connected," concluded Bishop Regina.