

ekklesia

The New England Synod - ELCA

Fall 2013

Also Inside:

- Helping refugees take the next step
- A look back at Churchwide Assembly 2013



WHAT THEY CAN DO

HOW THE ALL RIGHT MINISTRY CELEBRATES THE ABILITIES OF PEOPLE TOO OFTEN DEFINED BY THEIR DISABILITIES ... PAGE 3

Where all are welcome



The All Right Ministry hosts several inclusive worship services, including Rejoicing Spirits at Peace in Wayland, Mass. All are invited to participate in the services, regardless of ability or age. Below, Leah Jonczyk delivers a message. (Photos by Andy Merritt)

Ministry's mission: make worship inclusive to all

By Andrew Merritt

WAYLAND, Mass. – Andrew Cummings strode confidently to the altar at Peace Lutheran Church, up to the lectern, turned and faced his audience.

He read the scripture passage quickly and evenly, stumbling only briefly before continuing on to the end. He walked back to his seat as a few people in the congregation congratulated him on a job well done.

In a typical worship setting, Andrew might not have had the opportunity to walk up to that lectern, to read those words, or to receive those congratulations. But Rejoicing Spirits isn't a typical worship setting. It's a part of the All Right Ministry, which is dedicated to reaching out to people with disabilities, especially developmental disabilities or mental illness, and recognizing them "as full and active members of the body of Christ."

The ministry's mission is made manifest in several ways. It helps congregations become more inclusive toward those with disabilities and encourages them to share resources and ideas, as well as helping the ELCA at large with furthering its ministry to people with disabilities. One of its objectives is to establish a New England network for inclusive ministry, and has begun working toward that through its consultation services made available to any congregation in the region that asks. It also hosts Living Well, a mental health spirituality group that meets twice a month at the Lutheran Church of Framingham.

But the most obvious and powerful fulfillment of the ministry's mission is the inclusive worship services hosted by churches throughout the region. In addition to Peace in Wayland, there are monthly services at two other Massachusetts churches

(Zion – Worcester and Immanuel – Attleboro), two in Maine (Grace – Auburn and Trinity – Westbrook) as well as the weekly "Lifting the Flock" service each Sunday at St. Mark in Norwich, Conn.

What those services have in common is a dedication not just to bringing the word of God to those with disabilities, but to have those people participate in every facet of the service, from reading and praying to

lighting candles and helping with communion.

Andrew Cummings, a member at the Lutheran Church of Framingham, has experienced the kinds of services where that wasn't possible.

"Never," he said when he was asked if he ever got to read during a service before moving to Massachusetts four years ago. "Back when I was growing up, there was no such **ALL RIGHT, Page 7**



can't find one anywhere else.

"I think it's because it's close to the earth," Hall said when asked why the greenhouse work is so satisfying to the community's clients. "It's very hands-on, a very sensory-oriented opportunity to work, where they can get their hands dirty, they can be on their feet, they can move. Nothing's ever stagnant in the greenhouse, you go from one job to the next, and some can be very therapeutic."

Like the plants growing in the greenhouse, the community is very young, and yet its biggest goal is a lofty one: The organizers want to purchase land and create a farmstead village, where those with disabilities can work and live with whatever supervision they require. Some, Hall said, are so high-functioning they don't need constant supervision. Others, like her son, would require 24-hour care.



"An intentional community; live, work and play together," Hall said. "The most important thing is to create housing, and to make it more of an intentional community with the correct supports for what people need. ... That's why we don't want to say we're just going to build a group home that will be staffed 24/7, because different people have differ-

ent needs.

"After 21, there are really no entitlements or services" for those with disabilities, Hall said. "Curtis has been really fortunate and blessed to have a day program where he is busy all during the week, but I do know of adults who are exiting the school system at 21, one friend in particular who is much more involved than

Curtis, and has very limited support during the day. That puts such a huge burden on families financially, especially if they're both working."

Buus said the organization is currently applying for its final piece of grant money, and is set to mail out a fundraising request this month. It also hosts an annual farm fair, which is a fundraiser and "community public relations event," Buus said, to bring people from the surrounding towns in to see what the community is up to.

"It's a full day, and a really good time," Buus said.

Until the dream of the farmstead village comes to fruition, the Creative Living Community will continue to grow – both itself, and the delicious vegetables that are the product of its unique and inspired mission.

For more information, go to creativelivingcommunityofct.org.

ALL RIGHT, From 3

thing at all. I grew up in a very small town in Texas, and all I had was Sunday services."

Yet there he was, feeling "enlightened, elated, tongue-tied," as he read in front of about 30 people at Peace.

"But I kept hearing my boss's voice in my head, saying, 'rock the house and roll with it!'"

The services, and the ministry from which they have sprung, are the brainchild of Susan Lindberg Haley, a diaconal minister from Holliston, Mass., who has worked with people with disabilities for more than 20 years "in a variety of situations – residential, vocational, kids and adult," she said.

"I always knew that that was the work that God had called me to do, because it's what I love to do," said Lindberg Haley, who leads the service at Peace. "It's always been a part of who I am as a person. ... In 2000, I started discerning what would be next in my life, and what I'd do with my life once (my children) were gone. Over time, it became kind of clear to me that God was calling me to go into diaconal ministry, which is that leadership role within our church that kind of serves on the edges and boundaries between the church and

the world.

"Through that discernment process, it seemed to me that diaconal ministry was a good way for me to work with my own faith, and to encourage and support people with disabilities."

As part of her seminary education, Lindberg Haley came to Peace for her field experience after seeing the church had hosted a forum on making itself more accessible to people with disabilities. She came back a year later to do her independent study, and spoke with Pastor Jeff Johnson about how those with disabilities might find a greater role at Peace.

"When you start talking about getting involved in the church, the first thing we think of, usually, is worship," Lindberg Haley said. "Because everything we do comes from that adoration and praise of God. So we started the worship service at Peace, and now we've developed things beyond that original base."

So was born the All Right Ministry, and its outreach to those who are often marginalized even in their place of worship.

"A lot of the people that come to the worship services may not have the opportunity to worship else-

where," Lindberg Haley said. "Many do, many go to other churches, but when they come to our services, they get to be involved in a whole different way."

Though the Rejoicing Spirits service at Peace is geared toward bringing those with disabilities up onto the altar to participate, the inclusiveness isn't limited only to them. At a recent service, teenager Leah Jonczyk stood before the congregation and gave a message centered on finding one's true self, and finding joy in God's love.

"The way we look at ourselves is kind of like looking in a mirror," she said. "You see each crease. Each pimple, each wrinkle, and say, 'is this really me?' We see what really makes us ourselves. Sometimes the mirror gets foggy."

The service is non-traditional in many ways, including volume. Although there is a structure laid out in an easy-to-read bulletin, those present are encouraged to speak whenever they have questions or comments, whether it be about a part of the service or simply a part of life in general. Everyone is encouraged to participate in worship in their own unique – and not necessarily quiet – way.

"The funny thing now is that I can't just go to any worship service and be quiet," Lindberg Haley said. "We're always moving. It's so un-Lutheran, but you've got to have some joy!"

And that goes double when it's their turn to read.

"What I find amazing is that somebody can go up and read, and they'll do a good job – not every word is correct, but they walk back down those steps just saying to themselves, 'yup, I did that, I did my best,'" Lindberg Haley said.

That's how Blythe Brown felt after she handled another one of the service's readings.

"I've been in the church for a long time," she said. "I've been acolyte before, I've been a reader before – a little bit, though, I'm learning."

The mission of the All Right Ministry can be described in hundreds of words, but Andrew Cummings summed it up with just 10.

"We're all God's children," he said, "and we should never be forgotten."

For more information on the All Right ministry, contact Susan Lindberg Haley at haleysl@verizon.net or any of the churches mentioned in this story.