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Committed to the mission

A closed congregation finds a new way to serve

By Diane Stafford

"Jesus was very clear: Whatever you do for the least of these you do it for me. This transition lives out that reality."



Ann Rundquist, pastor of the Gathering Table in Kansas City, Mo., stands with community members as they share a meal. Gathering Table is a synod-authorized worshipping community that provides meals, showers, worship opportunities and more to the community. Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, meals and worship have moved outdoors.

Once part of a thriving middle-class community located near an area of heavy industry and commerce, Children's Memorial Lutheran Church in Kansas City, Mo., began to see a gradual loss of membership in the 1970s.

"The downsizing really began with problems in the Kansas City school system," said lifelong member Deborah Taylor. "So many families moved out. We used to have hundreds of members, two services every Sunday, and were very involved in the community and synod. Ultimately, it got to where we just had maybe 20 or 25 at services. By about 2011 to 2013, the handwriting was on the wall."

After years of soul-searching and meetings, the Central States Synod closed Children's Memorial

in Dec. 31, 2017. The synod "accepted the reality of what had been the case for several years," said Bishop Susan Candea. "It became the synod's responsibility, as the property owner, to manage the property and decide what to do going forward."

The death of Children's Memorial led to the birth of Gathering Table, a synod-authorized worshipping community, which opened Jan. 1, 2018 (gatheringtablekc.com). The new ministry has continued the congregation's mission in the community, allowing for the preservation and extension of services to people in need and those experiencing homelessness.

With grants from the ELCA, the synod and others, Gathering Table opens the doors of the old

church's red brick building three days a week to provide people with meals, showers, clothing and worship opportunities. The building also houses a nonprofit that teaches sewing and job training skills to refugees, a small tamale business operating out of the kitchen and worship space for a Congolese congregation.

"This is a very important ministry of the church," Candea said. "Jesus was very clear: Whatever you do for the least of these you do it for me. This transition lives out that reality."

Gathering Table is on a busy commercial thoroughfare in an area of Kansas City with significant poverty, crime and homelessness. "It breaks my heart because I know a lot of these people sleep outside at night,"



said Ann Rundquist, part-time pastor of Gathering Table. "This is a unique opportunity to help without a congregation that directly supports us."

A new church home

Seventy-five percent of Gathering Table's annual budget is dedicated to program expenses. Rundquist, who entered the ministry after a career in social services, is Gathering Table's janitor, secretary, cook, house musician and fundraiser. She also works part-time at Immanuel Lutheran Church on the city's west side.

As people file in the back door of Gathering Table for the regular Saturday noon meal, Rundquist is a whirlwind of hugs and conversations with the many diners she has come to know.

One person who has become part of Gathering Table's community is Bruce Huffman, who also volunteers to mow the grass on the ministry's property. "I quit church after high school and now, in my middle age, I found a perfect church home," he said. "This gives me purpose to have responsibilities and help out. Plus, I have new friends and help out when things get a little crazy. I never thought of my pastor as a friend, but she is, and my faith continues to grow because I understand what she preaches."

In what some might consider a dangerous environment, Rundquist focuses on the positive. When a man she knew stole her cellphone, other men from the Gathering Table community asked her for several weeks if it had been recovered or if there had been an arrest. When she answered "no" to both, an impromptu discussion unfolded between a hymn sing and communion, with individuals sharing stories of bad things that had happened to them and how they'd chosen good responses.

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, Gathering Table couldn't turn to technology to continue its ministry because many of its patrons are experiencing homelessness and have no communication device. While it closed for one weekend, it quickly became "obvious our ministry was important for the well-being of the neighborhood: food, clothing, water and some kind of fellowship," Rundquist said.

Partner congregations and agencies provided hundreds of sack lunches and other food. Rundquist said Candea agreed to let Gathering Table start worshipping outside, and the ministry shifted to serve five nutritious meals outdoors weekly, often sending sack lunches and protein drinks to go.

In recent months, most of the Saturday lunches at Gathering Table, which draw about 70 people, have been donated and served by volunteers. Many are provided by other ELCA congregations in the Kansas City area.

Candea and Rundquist agree that the biggest challenge is increasing awareness of Gathering Table to help improve fundraising and volunteer support.

For Dan Glamann, whose family joined Children's Memorial in 1957, the resurrection of the building is a long-hoped-for success. "Over the years, I've seen overwhelming change in the northeast area and the church," said Glamann, who now belongs to Gathering Table's leadership team. "But a constant has been the mission to the neighborhood. I continue to see the corner of Independence Avenue and Brighton as a beacon of hope." †

This article was written by **Diane Stafford**, a member of First Lutheran Church in Mission Hills, Kan., with contributions from ELCA pastor **Ann Rundquist**.

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