



# Rev. Craig Rennebohm and Mental Health Chaplaincy

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PHOTO: CRAIG, 2016



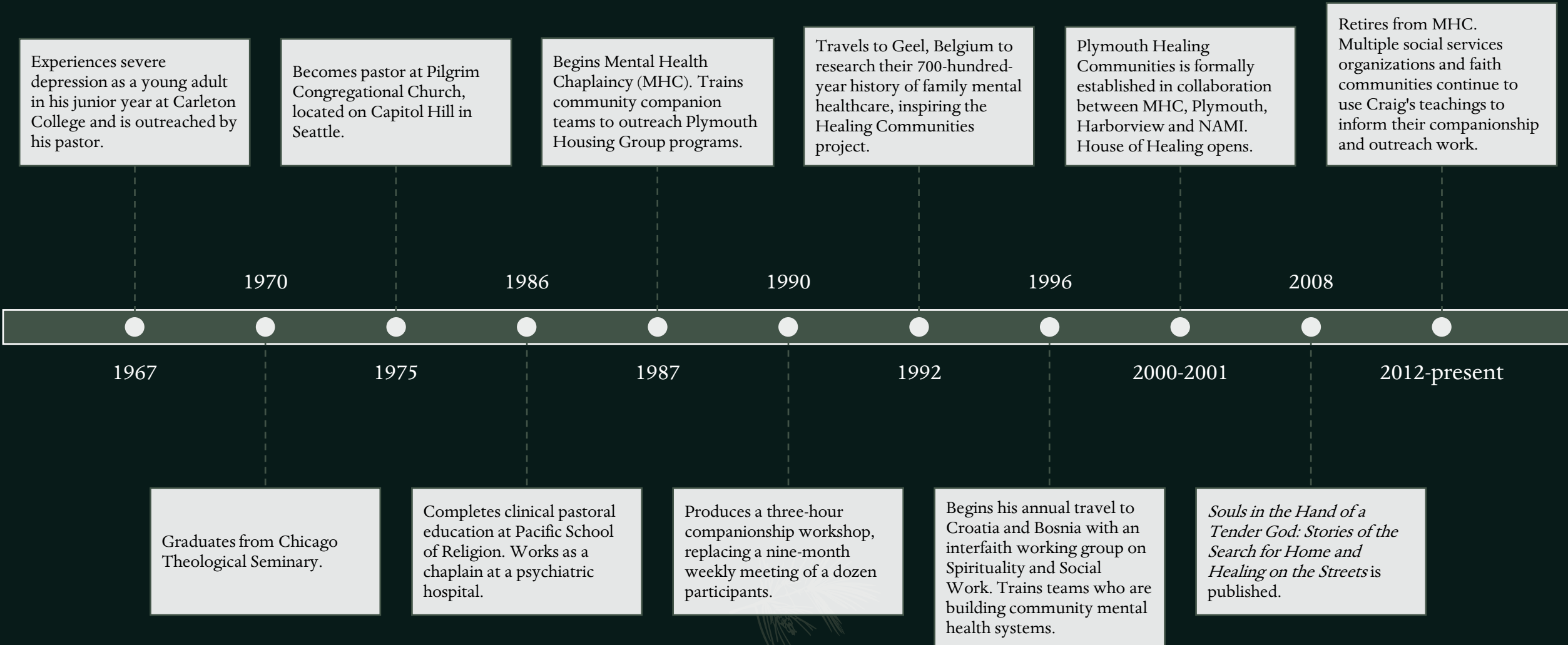
PHOTO: CRAIG, 1995



## Introduction

Craig Rennebohm initiated outreach-based companionship work at a historical juncture when the social services landscape primarily revolved around immediate crisis interventions and long-term care models. He is a leader in the field of mental health outreach in Seattle and has contributed significantly to changing the way our city views and responds to the intersection of homelessness and mental health.

# Craig's Timeline and Legacy



Sources: Mental Health Chaplaincy History (n.d), Rennebohm (2008, 2016, 2023), Stamp (2010, 2011).



# Before the Chaplaincy began

"As the neighborhood gentrified, drawing higher-income families, the church drew them. [Craig] challenged members to welcome everyone." (Stamp, 2010)

"Out front, our reader board proclaimed, 'All are welcome, come as you are,' but our ability to put that bold and basic principle into practice had a serious limitation when it came to the nearly 10 percent among us who are afflicted with major depression, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, or other severe mental illnesses."  
(Rennebohm, 2008, pg. 6)

Wheelchair  
accessible space

ASL interpretation

Printing hymnal and  
weekly service  
bulletin in braille

Community meals,  
food pantry, showers,  
laundry, clothing

Emergency shelter  
program



PHOTO: ALL PILGRIMS CHURCH, 2009

Beyond religious services, Pilgrim Congregational Church provided survival and accessibility services to community members who were disabled, low-income and/or experiencing homelessness. Craig recognized that a new approach was required to serve all people: "We haven't realized our potential for care, and we have created far too few possibilities for healing and growth." (pg. 22)

# The original mission of Mental Health Chaplaincy

"The program trains lay people from area congregations to be companions to people who are formerly homeless and who have mental illness. It also brings together representatives of area congregations and mental health programs to raise awareness about mental illness and to advocate for public policy reform. In addition to supporting the chaplaincy program, Pilgrim offers a support group for people to pray and share concerns and resources for people with mental illness." (Shifrin, 1998)



1) Street outreach with people experiencing homelessness



2) Craig serves as a chaplain on the inpatient psychiatric unit at Harborview. "Towards the end of the day, I go up to Harborview."



3) "[We] work with the churches to help them develop their capacity for companionship, systems for providing housing, and ongoing support."



4) Advocate for an accessible, effective mental health system and low-barrier housing/resources to the legislature and wider community.

# Mental Health Chaplaincy challenged traditional systems

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## F R E E D O M   T O O U T R E A C H

- MHC outreached beyond the traditional territory of faith leaders who made house calls.

"[Pastors] all too rarely visit the psychiatric unit or call on a church member living in a group home run by a community mental health program." (Rennebohm, 2008, pg. 59)

## N O   M E A N S T E S T I N G

- Funding for MHC came from the Church Council of Greater Seattle and individuals.

"They didn't have to qualify in terms of diagnosis, they didn't have to qualify in terms of being eligible for certain benefits or compensation."  
(Rennebohm, 2016)

## M A N Y P E R S P E C T I V E S

"I had the opportunity to see the whole system, both in terms of what worked and what did not. The decision to share the journey holistically, from the street to stability enabled us to help make strategic changes in both new service modalities and smoother, more effective connections of care"  
(Rennebohm, 2023)



"All that we embody or reflect of the Spirit in our actions, words, and decisions has an impact on those with whom we are sharing the human journey. When that journey brings us into companionship with someone suffering from mental illness, our role requires the utmost respect and sensitivity for the other person, and an intense consciousness of the internal confusions, blockages, and barriers presented by neurobiological disorder and psychological struggle."  
(Rennebohm, 2008, pg. 99)



"We did an annual training at Seattle University, and one year, the Chief of Police from Seattle came. It was just after he and his officers had been involved in an hours-long confrontation with a mentally ill man, who was threatening people with a Samurai sword. They put buses around, and they were shooting water cannons at him. We were talking with the Chief, and he said he and his officer staff were just astonished at how this man persisted in standing up to whatever was going on. It was almost supernatural.

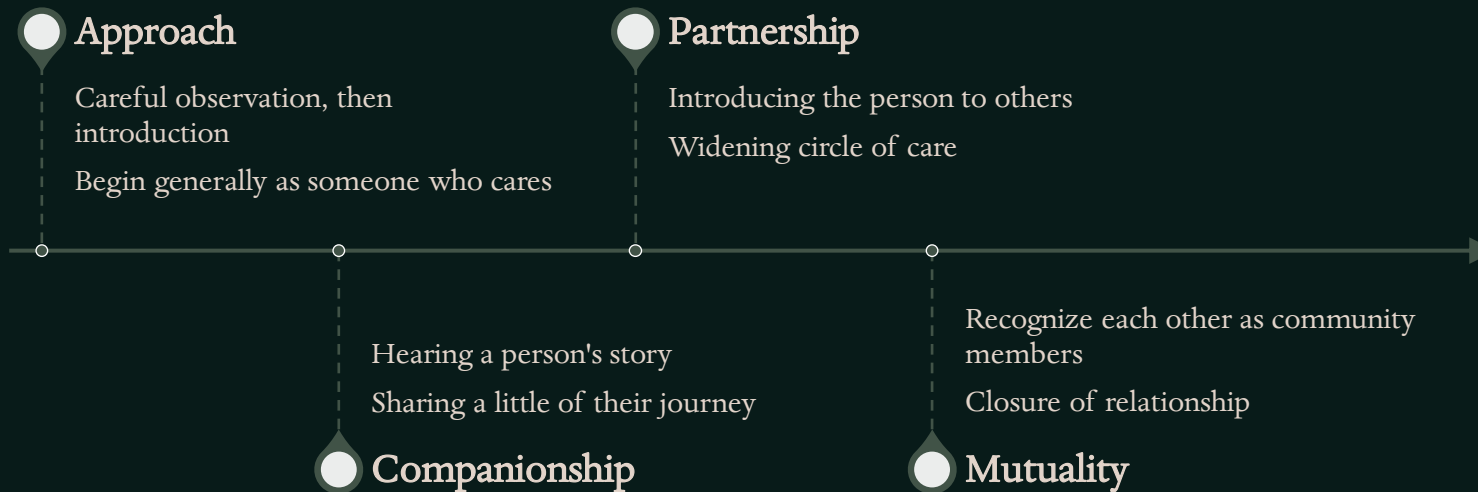
We had a nurse educator who was talking about what's going on in the brain when somebody's experiencing schizophrenia or depression or bipolar disorder, and a light went off for him. He said, 'Oh, I now understand. This guy's brain was not working the way brains usually work, so a lot of what we were doing just wasn't being processed by him. Is that right?'"

( R E N N E B O H M , 2 0 1 6 )

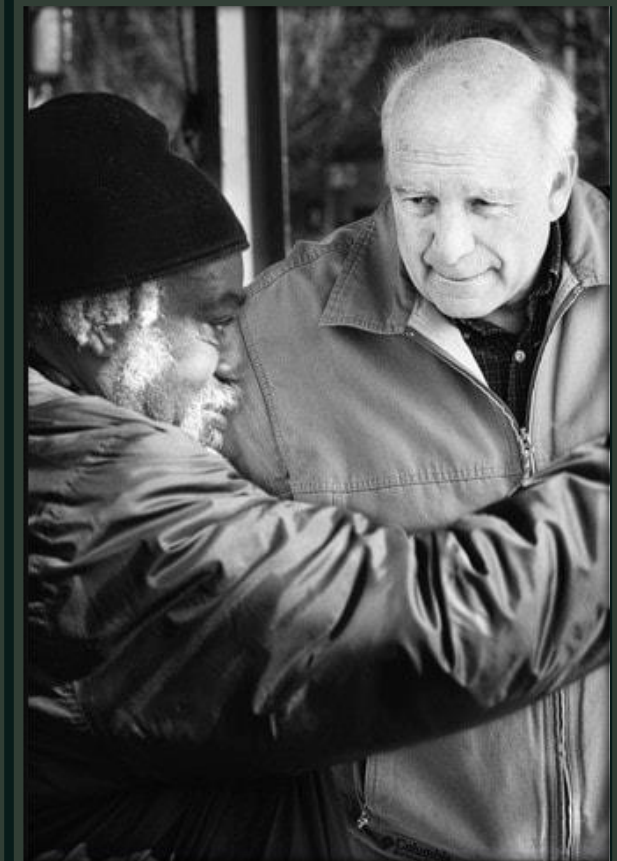



# Relational Stages of Outreach and Engagement

BY CRAIG RENNEBOHM IN PARTNERSHIP  
WITH DESC, HEALTHCARE FOR THE HOMELESS  
AND THE FIRST AVENUE SERVICE CENTER




"We avoid the confrontational and the directive approaches. We do not blame, and we do not give orders. We are not an accuser, interrogator, or judge; we are not there to march ahead and expect the other person to follow us, nor do we stand behind and push. Each of us has our own viewpoint, our own experience and interpretation of what is real and important." (Rennebohm, 2008, pg. 75)





"Homelessness ends when we have a home... Home is a place where we can both be who we are, and grow. Home is a place where we have basic connections to at least a few of our neighbors, to the folks next door, and down the street."



( R E N N E B O H M , 1 9 9 6 )



# Craig modeled Healing Communities from family mental healthcare in Geel, Belgium

- "Since the year 600, so the story goes, and certainly since the 13th century, Geel has been a haven for those with mental illness. The first written patient records from Geel are dated 1693." (Van Bilsen, 2016)
- Families host people with mental health disorders, providing care and support.
- Emphasizes deinstitutionalization, benefits of social inclusion, fosters empathy.
- Continuity fosters trust and stability.
- Involves entire community, normalizes the presence of people with mental health disorders.

# Plymouth House of Healing

- Three community volunteers called companions live in the house with five people exiting psychiatric hospitalization into homelessness.
- Accepts residents with co-occurring mental health and substance use disorders. Residents are asked to continue substance use disorder treatment and abstain from substance use while living in the program.
- Plymouth Healing Communities operates 44 units of permanent supportive housing today.
- "Walking with the homeless in Rennebohm's case required settling down and constructing home. In turn, that home created a site for theological reflection; designing, building, and dwelling in the house became the spatial condition for a decent theology of place." (Jenkins, 2009)







"Over the last decade, Seattle has promised new homes for the Mariners, the Seahawks, the Seattle Art Museum, the Symphony, the Children's Theater, the Ballet, and the Repertory... But all of this 'progress' has been at a profound cost. What has replaced the 25,000 units of low-cost housing that were once available to workers, elderly, and disabled folks downtown? When the government no longer has the capacity to borrow building a 'world class' metropolis, what is left to invest in creating sustainable, caring community among ordinary human beings?"

( R E N N E B O H M , 2 0 0 0 )



# Conclusion

Craig Rennebohm's innovative and compassionate approach to addressing mental health disorders among people experiencing homelessness has served as a model for companionship and outreach programs in communities across the United States and beyond. Rennebohm taught thousands of people to build relationships with their neighbors with love, respect, and sensitivity.



PHOTO: TIM HARRIS, FOUNDER OF REAL CHANGE, AND CRAIG, 2009

"'With malice toward none' we must find how our personal contribution, suited to our capacity and strength and circumstances, may gear in with that of others."

(Reynolds, 1935, pg. 8)

"Too much of our culture is based on the notion that you have to be out there by yourself... And the reality is that we're not created to be out there all alone." (To Rest and Be Well, 1995)

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NOTE: SOME PHOTOS ARE NOT INCLUDED IN CITATIONS.

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