

For the Life of the World

Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne

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Life Together—Gift

By Rev. J. Bart Day

Experiencing Life Together in Christ

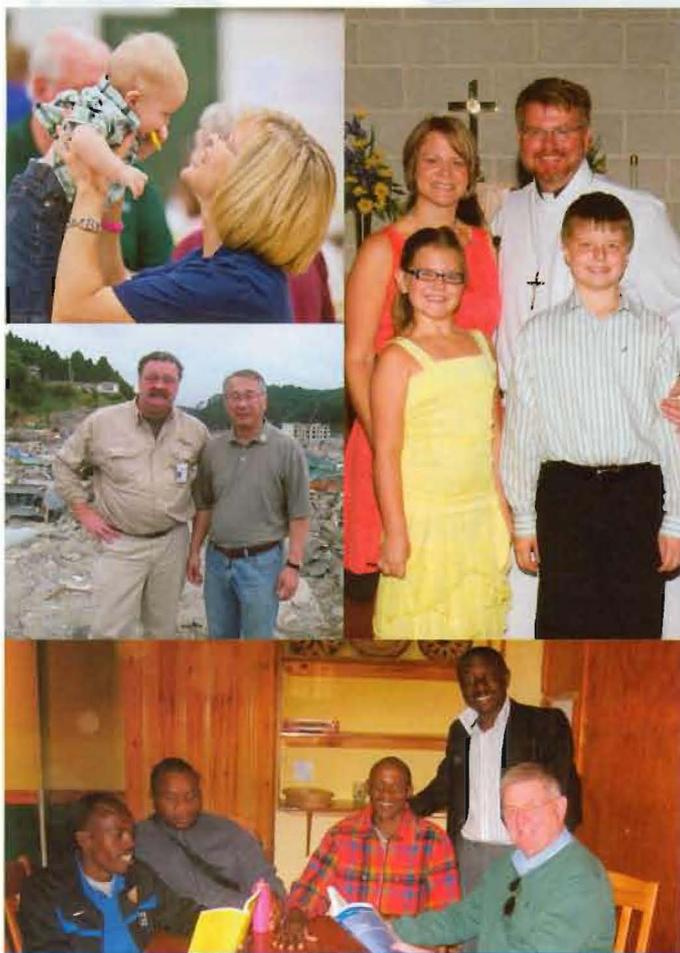
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Philadelphia Lutheran Ministries: Witness, Mercy and Life Together in the City

By Rev. Joshua R. Gale

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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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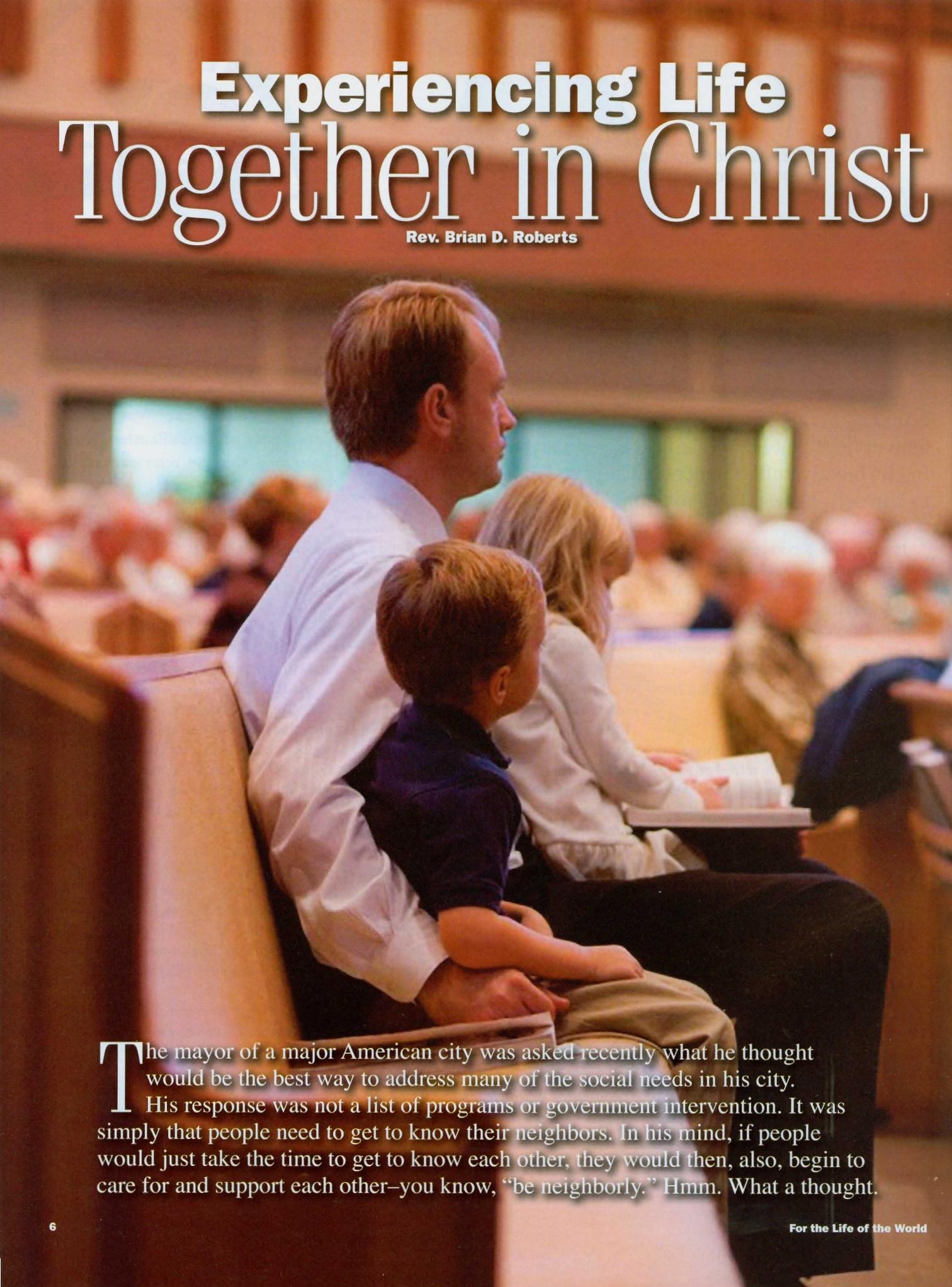
Philadelphia Lutheran Ministries (PLM), the organization that has recently called me as their mission developer, is a Recognized Service Organization (RSO) of the LCMS, daring to pursue Witness, Mercy and Life Together in the name of Christ into the Philadelphia metropolitan area. The project at my direction, 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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Experiencing Life Together in Christ

Rev. Brian D. Roberts



The mayor of a major American city was asked recently what he thought would be the best way to address many of the social needs in his city. His response was not a list of programs or government intervention. It was simply that people need to get to know their neighbors. In his mind, if people would just take the time to get to know each other, they would then, also, begin to care for and support each other—you know, “be neighborly.” Hmm. What a thought.

Is it a truism of American life that many, if not most of us, have lost the concept of being neighborly? Okay, reality check: What are the names of the people living two doors down from you? What are the names of the people who live across the street and two doors down?

It is, too often, the case that we live our lives with our schedules so jam-packed that we have little time to get to know the people around us. As a result, we are missing out on many meaningful relationships and friendships. We also are missing out on opportunities to care for our fellow human beings, to help each other and to place ourselves in positions of support and encouragement for our neighbor.

Yet, 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).

Initially, the Christian Church got a lot of traction from living their life-together in a manner that was a decided shift from cultural expectations. Their community was marked by a radical kind of love for one another with an attitude of free-wheeling selflessness. The last verse of Acts 2 describes how Christians received the favor of "all the people," because of their genuine love, charity and care for one another.

No doubt, like every congregation in our Synod, St. Luke's Lutheran Church in Oviedo, Florida, wrestles with how we model a life together in Christ, in a world of misplaced priorities and self-centeredness.

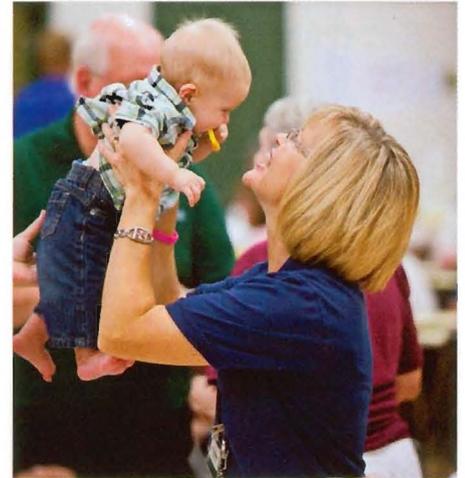
St. Luke's, which celebrates its 100th anniversary next year, has seen tremendous blessings since its humble beginnings in 1912. Slovak settlers from Ohio depended upon God and each other in order to carve out a life in the sand and swamps of Central Florida. As the population swelled in Florida, so did the membership at St. Luke's until we reached our current size of over 4,000 members. However, this is not merely a factor of population growth. A sense of community and connectedness has been an ongoing and active part of St. Luke's ministry.

The early members of St. Luke's demonstrated their strong sense of community by establishing the Lutheran Haven retirement community next door to the church in 1948. The Lutheran Haven was initially created as a retirement village for Lutheran pastors and teachers. It also included an orphanage, which revealed the heart of the founders to care for people at both ends of the age spectrum.

In 1949, St. Luke's Lutheran School was launched. Since then, it has expanded both in buildings and enrollment to its current size of over 730 students from preschool through eighth grade. The spiritual formation of children in the academic setting has become a focus of ministry at St. Luke's.

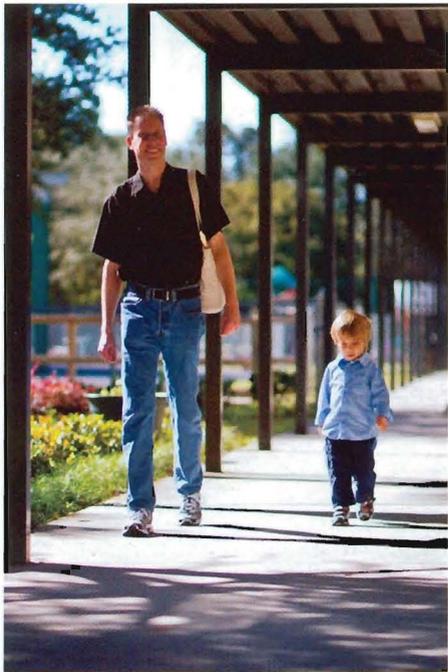
When children grow physically, they reach milestones along the way. They learn to walk and speak. They celebrate birthdays. They begin school; they graduate from school. The same is true when they grow spiritually! Of course, two very important milestones are Baptism and confirmation.

However, there are other milestones that children reach that deserve to be celebrated. These *Faith Milestones* include learning to worship, discovering how they serve the Lord and beginning to read the Bible. St. Luke's offers three-week, parent-child classes for any family in the church, which conclude with a special blessing event during worship.



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“Life Together” is a fundamental need for us all. It should be no surprise God designed humanity to live in community (Genesis 2:18). Christians are at their best when they experience, share and celebrate Life Together in Christ.



The “Age 4 Milestone” coaches parents and prepares children to be involved in the worship event. The “Kindergarten Milestone” opens the concept of service to the Lord in all that the children do. The “Second Grade Milestone” provides basic instruction in how to use and read the Bible, and culminates with parents presenting their child with their very own Bible during a special worship service. Expanding the concept of recognizing, achieving and celebrating *Faith Milestones* throughout childhood and even through adulthood is an exciting work-in-progress at St. Luke’s.

Youth groups beginning at fifth grade seek to provide a sense of belonging and community for children who are pulled in many different directions in our culture these days. While *being* together is important for youth groups, we have found that *servicing* together takes it to the next level. A common purpose is very effective in uniting the youth. Local servant events, such as stocking food at a food pantry or doing yard work for a family in need, have been very effective in bringing kids closer together.

At St. Luke’s, members who are experiencing some form of personal or family crisis can expect to receive a visit from *Loaves and Dishes*. Volunteers are dispatched to deliver a meal to members coming out of the hospital, or who are grieving, or have lost a job or are having a hard time. It’s a way of saying, “we love you and care about you,” with more than words. For victims of cancer there are *Chemo Care Caddies*, which are bags filled with gifts and useful items for anyone enduring chemotherapy.

Every Wednesday is *Community Night* at St. Luke’s. Families are invited to come and relax and enjoy a meal together. Then following dinner, they are encouraged to partake of a variety of classes which are offered for children through adults. These classes range from Bible studies to practical issues, such as parenting. We even had a cooking class once.

With a desire to “be neighborly,” St. Luke’s invites our surrounding community to “our house” for a variety of events and activities, such as free concerts and an interactive Christmas pageant. However, in this day and age, we have to be thinking about ministry off of the church property, as well. We have to cross the street and get to know the neighbors two doors down, as it were.

One of the ways that St. Luke’s is accomplishing this is by partnering with the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) in a neighboring town. Utilizing the VFW property and hall, we have been able to sponsor Ice Cream Socials, Vacation Bible School, Chili Cook-Offs and other activities that introduce us to the community and encourage new relationships.

The Lutheran Haven retirement community, which is now open to all Lutherans from any vocation of life, is a unique facet of ministry for members of St. Luke’s. We are still learning how to accomplish Senior Ministry overall. Nevertheless, we have learned that the experience of “Life Together” as it pertains to senior ministry is particularly important. So many seniors are experiencing some sort of loss almost daily. Therefore, simply being with others is profoundly important. Whether it is being together, visiting together, enjoying experiences together: the key is “together.”

“Life Together” is a fundamental need for us all. It should be no surprise God designed humanity to live in community (Genesis 2:18). Christians are at their best when they experience, share and celebrate Life Together in Christ. 🏡

Rev. Brian D. Roberts (CTS 1988) lives in Orlando, Florida, with his wife, Ruth, and four children, Becky, Eric, Matthew and Elizabeth. He is one of four pastors at St. Luke’s Lutheran Church and serves as the Director of Outreach. Learn more about ministry at St. Luke’s by going to stlukes-oviedo.org.

