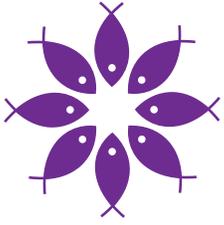


Stories of Mission

LIVING FAITH





The Spirit is With Us

Boarding Homes Ministry provides comfort and companionship to people living in low-rent, inner-city housing—many of whom live under a crushing combination of mental illness, addiction and poverty. The ministry also works to increase the inclusion of people living with mental illnesses and to reduce social isolation wrought by stigma.



A few years ago, I met George, wild-haired and wild-eyed, at the door of his Parkdale boarding house. It was a typical Parkdale moment: I was arriving for a pastoral visit just as the firefighters were on their way out. It had been a false alarm.

We proceeded to the startling turquoise and yellow sitting room where George trained a skeptical eye on me and said, “What are you? Some kind of worker?”

“I’m a chaplain,” I offered, prepared to explain.

Unexpectedly, George lit right up. “A *chaplain*? I LOVE chaplains! We had those in prison!”

And so, a great friendship was born.

Over the better part of a year, we got to know George at our weekly visits. He was devastatingly funny, tossing a deadpan comment into a conversation that would make the whole room crack up. He had limitless enthusiasm and childlike glee. He loved to read the Bible with our team member Jim and listen to him play the banjo. As George came to trust us, we learned how hard his past was and how deeply he’d been hurt by people who were, in his words, “NOT kind and gentle.” It is a miracle that George stayed so tender-hearted despite the cruelty he had faced.

Over the summer, George looked increasingly unwell and distraught. Before we knew it, he was back in prison.

It took us months to find him, but he was so

delighted when we showed up on the video screen one day (new high-tech prisons no longer let visitors see their loved ones through Plexiglas). He asked us about the banjo and proudly told us about his Bible class. Darker things emerged over time, too, like the fact that inmates in mental health crisis are placed in solitary confinement until they get better.

COVID-19 has made things hard for our ministry, as we’ve been forced to substitute letters and phone calls for those crucial in-person house visits. We really miss seeing the residents.

One great cause for celebration came from the unlikeliest place: those video screens. One thing we can say for them is that they are certainly germ-free. We get to see George again next week and we can hardly wait.

Working in this ministry is a lesson in finding small joys amid great pain. Sometimes problems are too big for a quick fix. The forces at work are too great, and systemic change takes time. Our little ministry is unlikely to end poverty or cure schizophrenia. But loneliness and isolation make both of those afflictions so much worse. And we can fight those by choosing to connect in the moment we’re given. We can feel the Spirit right there with us, delighting in us as we delight in each other.

— Kate McGee, Executive Director and Chaplain,
Boarding Homes Ministry



Read: Psalm 88

Reflect

If you read Psalm 88 and felt your heart hit the floor with a thud, you're not alone. This psalm doesn't get a lot of airtime. On the face of it, the psalmist is crying out to God for having abandoned them. It doesn't have a tidy resolution: it's the only psalm of lament that does not end in a vow to praise.

It's not rosy, but it's real. The psalmist refuses to give us hope—maybe because they don't feel any.

Even so, this psalm is a balm, a gem, and can be a source of healing for the many people who still experience the feelings expressed here.

One of the most insidious things about mental illness is that it can cut people off from one of the greatest gifts of human existence: the capacity to be in relationship. A person experiencing mental illness can feel like a barrier has descended around them until they can no longer feel the love of friends and family. Ironically, it descends when people need the love of friends and family the most.

There's a double effect at work, too. When the psalmist writes "all my companions are in darkness," it may not be just because they can't see their companions. The companions may well have turned their backs. We do that sometimes. We turn our backs on a person who is suffering with mental illness for a lot of reasons, but one is that it is terrifying to see someone swallowed up by "the pit" the psalmist so aptly describes. We can't help but fear being sucked down to the bottom ourselves.

On the surface, Psalm 88 is one of total despair. But did you notice that the psalmist is still talking to God the whole way through? This person feels totally and utterly alone, but voicing their cry gives them away: they are still in relationship. They may not be able to feel it, but the God who created their heart to love, relate and cry out has not abandoned them. The psalmist writes, "in the morning my prayer comes before you." Their prayer continues unabated even when they feel most alone.

If we want to be the friend or neighbour who doesn't shun the suffering person, if we want to love despite futility and fear, we have to look the darkness right in the face. We can't be looking for a quick fix.

For our model we need look no further than the silent partner in this psalm. Our God says: I will be here for you even when you can't feel my presence. I will love you even when you don't know I love you.

Our hearts were made for this: to love God and one another.

Discuss

- 1) Describe a time in your life when you felt cut off from the love of God and others. How did you reconnect?
- 2) Think of a time when you felt lonely or overwhelmed. How did you get through that time? Did you have help from someone?
- 3) Have you ever felt powerless to help someone who was suffering? What could you have done to help?
- 4) Is there a problem you care about that feels too big to manage on your own? Can you connect with a person or show your care in a way other than trying to "fix" the problem? Make a commitment to take a small step this week.

Sing

698 – Saviour, teach me day by day

730 – Oh for a world where everyone respects each other's ways

792 – Let us hope when hope seems hopeless

Prayer Focus

Pray for Boarding Homes Ministry as they find new ways to minister to people who are isolated and abandoned, especially during this time of higher isolation for many people. Pray for people living with mental illness who feel deeply alone. Pray for charities across Canada who are facing the effects of the economic downturn, that they may be able to continue their important work. Pray for the church and for our communities, that we learn from this crisis the importance of interconnection and mutual care.

Pray

Loving God, we praise you for your loving faithfulness, and we thank you because you will never leave us or forsake us. You said, "It is not good for humankind to be alone." We thank you for the shelter of your mercy in vulnerable times. In the times of our loneliness, give us the grace to sense your presence. In times when we are caring for someone who is ill and cannot feel our own love or care, grant us patience and forbearance. Give us the great expansiveness of love through your Holy Spirit, so that we may always welcome strangers. Light up our paths, so we can see that every loving connection is a way home to You.

In Jesus' name we pray,
Amen.

Read: A Brief History of Rooming Houses in Toronto (1972-1994):

presbyterian.ca/utoronto-rooming-houses-history



Mission in Canada

Through Presbyterians Sharing we support mission in Canada in many ways. Together we help congregations meet local needs in their communities and work to make the Gospel relatable and relevant to people of all ages. We support ministries that help meet the needs of people living in at-risk urban communities. We walk with staff and volunteers, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, as they work together to meet people's physical and spiritual needs through ministries that operate in and with Indigenous communities in Canada. Together we live out our faith, sharing God's love and igniting transformation.

