

**Mental Health Ministry
Plymouth Congregational Church
Seattle, Washington**

The Mental Health Ministry was launched at Plymouth Congregational Church, Seattle, in 1998. Plymouth Church is located in the heart of downtown Seattle. For several years Plymouth had served as the base for the Mental Health Chaplaincy, a program directed by Rev. Craig Rennebohm that serves those with mental illness who live in the margins of downtown. At the same time, many members of Plymouth had experienced mental illness themselves or within their families and felt called to advocacy and action as a faith community.

The Mental Health Ministry's first step was to educate the congregation about mental illness and mental health, and to learn about its impact on our surrounding community. This was done through Sunday morning educational forums and discussions. In the process many additional members came forward to speak of their experiences with mental illness and to express a desire to take action. Seven years later the ministry has grown into one of on-going education and support, Sunday morning companionship - and Plymouth Healing Communities, a program that provides much needed housing for the mentally ill.

Plymouth Healing Communities began with one house in 2001, called the House of Healing. Purchased and lovingly renovated by Plymouth Church members, it provides a home for four formerly homeless mentally ill men and women. The residents all continue to receive treatment and case management from our partner, Harborview Hospital. The House is a place to experience healing and community through shared meals, warm surroundings, the privacy of one's own room, and companionship. Living at the house are four resident companions, lay people who make a commitment to live in the house for one year and to 'companion' the residents as they reach stability. The 15 companions since 2001 have ranged in age and life circumstances, from recent college graduates to retirees. Their ministry of presence makes the House a unique place and for all of them the year at the House has been one of learning and deep spiritual growth. During this time 36 residents have lived at the house, before they have transitioned to more stable housing. If not for their residence in the House of Healing many of them would have returned to the streets after their acute hospitalization.

The House of Healing has given rise to two other houses, and a small apartment home with a resident companion that provide much needed long-term housing. Agape House, houses five women, and our newest home, Hoffman House, will house six residents. A local family, who had experienced mental illness, read about our program in the newspaper and has provided seed money to purchase Hoffman House. The house is currently being renovated by Plymouth members and future residents and will open in July. The culture of Hudson House will be the expectation that residents are recovering from their mental illness. There will be encouragement and support for volunteering, working, and participating in the larger community. The active participation of future residents in the design of the changes to Hoffman House, and their participation in the

renovation work are the first steps in creating this culture – and making the house their home.

From the beginning, Plymouth Healing Communities has received significant financial support from Plymouth Church, including \$45,000 each year toward its operating budget and \$347,500 toward the purchase and renovation of the House of Healing. At the same time Plymouth Healing Communities has actively sought and received financial support from the broader community, from individuals, resident fees, rental assistance, corporate contributions, and local foundations. During the past three years this broader support has been over \$700,000 for the purchase and renovation of our houses and over \$100,000 in operating support.

As Plymouth Healing Communities has grown from one home to three, hundreds of Plymouth members have given countless hours as board members and volunteer Companions, helped with painting and gardening, shared meals with residents, taught knitting and guided art and craft activities. Members have also lent their expertise in fundraising, provided pro bono architecture and legal assistance, donated furniture and household items, and worked on renovating each of the homes. Their work has sent church members out to practice discipleship and learn from those who live with mental illness. Each of their lives has been transformed. Plymouth Healing Communities continues to look for ways to acquire other homes to provide additional long-term housing.

Another important part of the ministry is Plymouth's Sunday Companions program. Each Sunday during our worship hours a volunteer Companion who is a member of the congregation is present for those who come to the church, often off the street, seeking sanctuary. The Companions are there for conversation, to offer coffee or a sandwich, to accompany people to worship, or to help them find a quiet place to rest. Their work is based on the Ministry of Presence model of Rev. Rennebohm.

Plymouth Church also offers important support for our members and the community through a monthly Family Mental Health Support Group. Using the NAMI Family to Family model, the group led by a minister and parish nurse, provides support to spouses, parents, siblings, and friends whose family members are experiencing mental illness. Often this is the only place the group members can share their concerns and receive help solving problems. Once a year Plymouth also sponsors the 12-week NAMI Family to Family class, for family members of individuals with mental illness. The class, attended by members and those in the community, provides education about mental illnesses and treatment and helps teach coping skills. We also continue to devote Sunday adult education time to topics related to mental illness and advocacy and reducing the stigma of mental illness.

Plymouth's Mental Health Ministry is now woven into the fabric of who we are as a community of faith, bearing witness to God's love for all and the radical inclusion of Jesus. It is an honor to have our ministry recognized by the broader United Church of Christ.

Mental Health Ministry

Plymouth Congregational Church

Seattle, Washington

Plymouth is located in the heart of downtown. The ministry was launched to meet the need of the many mentally ill who live in the margins of the city, and because members had experienced the pain and stigma of mental illness within their own lives and their families.

Support and Education

- Sunday morning educational forums have taught the congregation about forms of mental illness, treatment, impact on the community, and unmet need.
- The Family Mental Health Support Group meets monthly for spouses, parents, siblings, and friends of those experiencing mental illness and is led by Minister and Parish Nurse. It is a place to share concerns and solve problems.
- 12-week NAMI Family to Family Class is offered yearly at Plymouth for members and the community.
- Sunday morning Companions are available at church each Sunday for those who come to the church seeking sanctuary, conversation, or a cup of coffee. The Companion is there to accompany someone to worship, to talk, or help them find a quiet place to rest.

Plymouth Healing Communities

- Begun in 2001 to meet the housing needs of homeless mentally ill men and women, residents all get treatment through a local hospital we partner with.
- The House of Healing was our first house. It is home to four formerly homeless mentally ill men or women. They live there with four resident 'companions' who commit to live in the house for one year and to companion the residents as they reach stability.

- The House of Healing offers healing through shared meals, privacy of one's own room, and the chance to live in community. It has served 36 residents in four years who have transitioned to more stable housing.
- The 15 House of Healing Companions range in age from recent college graduates to retirees. For all of them their year has been one of spiritual growth and learning.
- Agape House was later acquired and houses five women who live in shared community, but all receive treatment for mental illness.
- Hoffman House, opening soon, will house six residents who are ready for more stable housing than the House of Healing. Residents will be encouraged to volunteer, work, and participate in the wider community. Future residents were involved in design the renovations to Hoffman House, and working on it.

Role of Plymouth Members

- Members have been involved in all aspects of Plymouth Healing Communities. Their work has sent members out to practice discipleship and learn from others. They have served as board members, provided pro bono legal, architectural work, and financial expertise.
- Each home has been extensively renovated and members have given thousands of hours - painting, plumbing, wiring, landscaping, and transforming each house into a warm and loving home.
- Members also serve as volunteer Companions or spend time at the houses sharing a meal, teaching knitting or sharing a craft activity.
- Plymouth Church provides \$45,000 each year to the operating budget of Plymouth Healing Communities - and \$347,500 toward the purchase and renovation of the House of Healing.

To learn more about Plymouth's Mental Health Ministry contact:

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Description of What It Is Like to Be a Companion At Plymouth House of Healing

By Quan Dau
Remarks at Plymouth Congregational Church
Seattle, Washington

I was asked to come before you today and discuss what I believe makes someone a strong candidate to be a companion at the Plymouth House of Healing. I wish I could stand up here and list off things that I want to see in a companion, but I can't. I don't think there is an essential blueprint for a person who lives at the house. Who I was when I left the House of Healing was not who I was when I entered.

I want to start by reading a quote that I heard in an anthropology class I took at the University of Washington. This quote summarizes how my view of the world has changed after living at the Plymouth House.

“We see the world the way we do, not because that is the way it is, but because we have these ways of seeing”. - Ludwig Wittgenstien

When I first told my parents that I would be spending a year of my life living with homeless people with mental illness, they thought it was a bad idea. At the time, I was in my last year at the UW and my dad thought I needed time to prepare myself for the medical school application process. My mom actually was scared for my safety. Like many, my mother's perception of people with mental illness was of dangerous and unpredictable individuals. Honestly, I did not know what to expect.

I saw the house as a good opportunity to do something different during my college years. I mean, I always talked about how I like to help people, now was my chance. For me, helping people was a very shallow 2-way street. By giving food to the homeless and helping delinquents pass remedial math, I thought I was making a difference in their lives while I received the self-satisfaction of doing something good for someone else. What I got from working at the house was the profoundly different from my past experiences of working with others.

At the house I received my first sense of belonging and significance during the whole 22 years I have spent on the earth. Here I was, with total strangers, building bonds of family and friendship that I knew played a crucial role in both our lives. I think **that is** the most important thing I learned at the house. I learned that what I did in this world meant nothing, unless it meant something to people other than me.

Living at the house we had one resident who suffered such severe mental and physical abuse, that he eventually developed depression and schizophrenia. During his worst bouts with the illness, I remember being woken up at 11pm by someone leaving the house. I would follow this person over to the neighboring soccer field and sit with him while the children he was seeing would play soccer in the field. I would sit there in my