



Molly Doreza

The Rev. Molly Doreza is Interim and Bridge Pastor of Bethlehem and Bethel Lutheran Churches, Muskego, WI. She also is co-chair of the Greater Milwaukee Synod Task Force on the Opioid and Substance Abuse Crisis, Lived Experience Partner with the Office of Children's Mental Health, and co-chair of the Office of Children's Mental Health Resiliency workgroup.

Nearly three years ago, my family was hit by a brutal tsunami. My son, a brilliant, talented and loving man – six years sober – lost his life to an opioid overdose. In abject grief, I and my family struggled to cope, especially as we cared for his two young children. We tried to make sense of a senseless loss and searched for an elusive peace.

I am a clergy woman with 27 years of parish experience, and yet after his death I felt isolated and alone, distanced by the stigma of his death – which was rooted as much in my own heart as in my church.

I began to learn more about opioid addiction and substance abuse, attending conferences and forums, becoming aware of the dearth of resources and the lack of participation of the church. I, like other clergy, had been only referring our members to outside professional counseling – a default habit which furthered stigmatized and unwittingly removed them from the church's otherwise caring community. Now, as a mother with a broken heart, I knew the loneliness that others were experiencing.

Last June, at its annual assembly, the Greater Milwaukee Synod (a regional gathering of Evangelical Lutheran Church, ELCA, congregations) passed a resolution creating an official "Task Force on the Opioid Epidemic" which is to address the crisis – creating programs of awareness, response, and prevention within its 120 congregations and to develop ministries for support of addicts and their families within their own churches.

The Task Force is just beginning its efforts with "Faith Partners," an interfaith organization which joins faith leaders, prevention specialists, and recovery support professionals, to develop tailored readiness and recruitment strategies for congregational teams. Our first training will be in September 2020.

COVID-19 reminds us of the gravity of communal pandemic and its devastating impact on all of us. While we experience this crisis, we cannot ignore the crisis of addiction which rages even more with the isolation and fear we are experiencing in our communities. In each of these crises the statistics of suffering and death testify to the urgency of a response.

I became a Lived Experience Partner with the Office of Children's Mental Health shortly after I began my work with the Task Force. My participation as a Lived Experience Partner is a constant reminder of why I am doing all of this. Three years ago my two little grandchildren experienced unspeakable trauma in the loss of their father. I hope that our collective efforts will help them and others to develop a resilience which is grounded in the support of the church and community and help them find joy in life, even after the tsunami.



Molly Doreza's son and grandchildren.



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