

Thanksgiving Eve 2007, I was standing in front of an ecumenical gathering asking people to put more than loose change and a few dollars in an offering plate. “I need you to get out your checkbooks,” I had told them, because we had a lot of people sleeping outside in very cold weather that needed us to buy them a tent and sleeping bag. At the time, it was one of the most profound ways I knew to call upon our community to love thy neighbor.

I wish I could report, after all these years, that we no longer need tents and sleeping bags because people no longer have to sleep outside. Pandemic relief resources have brought us close, allowing most of our unhoused neighbors to shelter safely in hotels for the better part of the last two years. We are doing everything we can to keep that going. But as life in our community settles around a new normal, there are plenty of evolving needs and fresh challenges keeping people in displaced situations. What I can share, however, are the many ways we now realize that God spoke into those early ministries of tents, sleeping bags, food and hospitality, and showed our churches that there was always a vision to do immeasurably more than we could ask or imagine.

Those original acts of justice, kindness and humility were conduits for relationship. Those relationships continue to teach us what our neighbors need and how we can call upon the community to love them better. Looking back, God has been leading the churches of Fredericksburg to build a “house” of sorts, where all are truly welcome, for a very long time. While the pieces of that “house”—apartments, respite care, basic needs assistance, income development, street church—are currently scattered throughout the community, the reimagining of our ministries during the pandemic has called us to consider how Micah might be more than a place where neighbors find a home elsewhere in our community. Perhaps, it’s time to BE a home for our neighbors.

While the prophet Micah is known for warning about the destruction of Israel that would come if the community did not recenter on “doing justice, loving kindness and walking humbly with God,” another prophet named Jeremiah actually lived through a conquering and destruction of the city. He joined the people in their exile, however, with a message of hope. In spite of the trials and tribulations that led to their homelessness, God desires a hope and a future for them. They may not be able to go back where they came from; neither could they reclaim the people and purpose of their past. They could, however, live the best possible life and even find joy in the new place God had planted them.

It is with this hope in the hearts of the Micah churches that we now call our community to consider not just the necessary—the tents the sleeping bags and so forth—but the extraordinary needs of the very least among us. We plan, with God’s help, to build a community, a Jeremiah Community, of 500-square foot homes with on-site supports intended to care for those living there in the ways God intended for all of creation, even those in exile. Amenities, such as a community center, a garden and an art workshop, will allow our neighbors to explore their gifts and find purpose and meaning in their lives. And welcoming our neighbors home to a place they can finally settle, also includes welcoming you to be a meaningful part of their lives.

We will share more about this vision God has given us in the coming month. In the meantime, we hope you will pray with us about this vision, ask God to reveal the right land and the right people to come alongside.

One way you can help, right now, is giving generously to the many scattered parts of the “house” our churches have been building for our neighbors these last 15 years. Please consider “getting out your checkbook” and loving your neighbor with the resources God has blessed you.

You can send a check or online contribution through Christ Lutheran with Love your neighbor in the memo. You can also give online at tinyurl.com/loveyourneighbor21. If you are looking for a special Valentine’s gift, consider making a donation in your sweetheart’s honor. Cards will be available at the church if you would like to give that as a gift this Valentine’s day. There are also many ways to volunteer with Micah. If God is stirring in you to get more involved, please contact Jill Clare at jill@dolovewalk.net.

The churches of Fredericksburg need your help to continue being a house where love can dwell, and all can safely live. When we seek the welfare of the city together, all of us are better for it!