

## HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS

# Housing justice in the Hilltop

members of the congregation as they discerned how to do faithful ministry in this context. What emerged was spirit-led and reaffirmed their commitment to the church's existing housing ministry, which they decided to expand.

At the same time, an idea emerged to plan a youth immersion week in the Hilltop, dubbed "Love to the Local," instead of embarking on their usual service-learning summer trip. Youth contributed ideas for activities and issues to explore in order to shape the weeklong program. They became passionate about justice issues in the neighborhood, particularly housing. Reflecting on the impact of the program, Director of Community Outreach and Engagement Brendan Nelson shared, "It wasn't just about opening up the Bible and doing service programs. [We were] seeing the impact right here in our community. Some of the people in the congregation in need were being served through the program, too."

**"THIS IS NOT JUST A NICE STORY. THIS IS PART OF OUR MINISTRY — PART OF US."**

Walk through the doors of Peace Lutheran Church in the Hilltop neighborhood of Tacoma, Wash., on a Sunday morning and you'll soon learn why this congregation calls itself "a church that welcomes and serves." Worshipers greet each other warmly by name from across the aisle, sway and sing in passionate praise with the music director and provide a hospitable welcome to longtime members and first-time visitors alike.

"The Hilltop" began as a working-class neighborhood in the early 1900s, when Peace Lutheran was founded, and developed into a primarily Black community in the 1970s. Now, it is gentrifying at a tremendous rate, and longtime residents of the neighborhood are being driven out. The people who attend Peace Lutheran are a reflection of the changing neighborhood — multiethnic and socioeconomically diverse.

"How do we show our love for the neighborhood?" asked the Rev. John Stroeh, pastor of Peace Lutheran. "How do we share the love of Jesus? What are the ways that we need to teach and learn and train one other so that we can be followers of Jesus in this place, making a difference?" These were all questions from

That energy turned the youth into leaders, inspiring the congregation to embrace their call to dive deeper into housing justice in their neighborhood. Reflecting on this passion, Pastor John said the youth were catalysts for the congregation to come alongside others in pursuit of justice in the Hilltop.

Peace Lutheran owns three houses adjacent to its property and rents them out at affordable rates despite skyrocketing home prices in the area. "The three families who are in the three houses right now all have ties to the Hilltop prior," Pastor Stroeh explained. "With the high cost of renting here, you can't be back in the Hilltop unless you have some way in. That was true for these three families who are now able to be back in this area that they called home for a while and couldn't afford to be in anymore. So that's part of that ministry, too, if at all possible, to allow for families to stay in the neighborhood."

Peace Lutheran was invited to apply for and received one of ELCA World Hunger's Big Dream Grants. The invitation encouraged the congregation to develop an even broader vision in pursuit of housing justice in their neighborhood. For another affordable housing rental, they plan to build a 750-square-foot "detached accessory dwelling unit" on the same lot occupied by



one of their current homes and hope to build more when construction costs fall and supply chain issues recede.

Rebecca, a mother of three, lost her apartment to a fire a few years ago. "We were in a motel — well, two or three motels," she remembered. "But having to stay there for a month, we had to pay quite a bit. And so, I talked to Pastor [Stroeh] and said, 'I'm out of funding. What am I going to do? I don't want to be homeless with my kids.'"

Peace Lutheran had just finished renovating one of its units and was looking for tenants, so Rebecca and her kids moved in. At church, Rebecca leads the nursery and Godly Play activities and makes sure that anyone who walks through the doors at Peace Lutheran — either for the church on Sunday or for the community meal on Friday — feels welcome.

Your incredible generosity made it possible for ELCA World Hunger to award 12 Big Dream Grants this year, including the one to Peace Lutheran Church. Rebecca and her family have already found a better future because of Peace Lutheran's ministry and community of welcome and service. Your gifts bring congregations' big dreams to life as they find ways to address root causes of hunger in their communities.

Elyse, a high schooler who urged the congregation to expand its housing ministry, is especially proud of Peace Lutheran's work. "We're actually going and helping people," she said, "and we're actually making change instead of saying, 'This is what we should do,' and not doing anything. So that's why I actually enjoy this church a lot: because we actually go out and make change."

## BIG DREAM GRANTS

ELCA World Hunger launched the Big Dream Grants program in 2019 with \$250,000 across five grants to support ministries that are building and designing innovative and lasting solutions to hunger, poverty and economic inequality.

Record giving levels to support the ministry of ELCA World Hunger made it possible to say yes to the big dreams of 12 partner ministries with support totaling nearly \$1.5 million.

As pandemic protections expire and emergency resources are depleted, low-income renters around the country are struggling more than ever. Rising inflation, skyrocketing rents and increasing homelessness have drawn the attention of ELCA World Hunger partners' work to meet the needs of their community members — more than half of Big Dream Grant recipients in 2022 are ministries working at the intersection of hunger and homelessness.



1. Peace Lutheran Church\* Tacoma, Washington
2. Faith Food Bank\* Everett, Washington
3. Zion Lutheran Church\* La Grande, Oregon
4. Churches United\* Moorhead, Minnesota
5. St. Johns Lutheran Church\* Dubuque, Iowa
6. Lighthouse Foundation of Chicagoland Chicago, Illinois
7. Tikken Farm Cincinnati, Ohio
8. The Dwelling Winston-Salem, North Carolina
9. Allegheny Valley Association of Churches\* Natrona Heights, Pennsylvania
10. Lutheran Camping Corporation Arendtsville, Pennsylvania
11. Amazing Grace Lutheran Church\* Baltimore, Maryland
12. The Welcome Church\* Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

\*Indicates ministries with a focus on housing

Homelessness and housing insecurity are tied to higher rates of food insecurity and health issues. Youth and young adults experiencing homelessness or housing insecurity often face greater challenges in school. Due to the high rate of criminalization of homelessness, people experiencing homelessness are much more likely to get caught in a hard-to-break cycle of fines and jail time that prevents them from building sustainable livelihoods. Your gifts to ELCA World Hunger support programs that address root causes of hunger, including housing and homelessness.