

Recovering-Restoring-Reconnecting in Middletown *The Story of a New Live Journey*

By Rev. Phil Bjornberg, Missional Priest-in-Charge, Trinity, Portland

In Portland, Connecticut there is a charismatic pastor named Donald of the Grace and Mercy Family Ministry who is also the local administrator for a federal transition program, Access To Recovery (ATR), as it is called. One afternoon at about three o'clock he had a vision in which he clearly saw an angel of God coming in and saying to him, "Donald" He stared at him in terror and said, "What is it, Lord?" He answered, "Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. Now send people to Middletown for a certain street minister who is called Pastor James and his wife Pastor Karla. When the angel who spoke to him had left, he called a number of his devout friends and pastors who served in the neighborhoods of Middletown, Portland and Meriden with him, and after telling them everything, he sent them to the north end of Middletown where Pastor James preaches Streetfire.

About noon the next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Philip went up to Trinity Episcopal Church, Portland to be ordained missional priest. He became hungry to meet others in the neighborhood and went into the local cafe for something to eat; and while it was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw the heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming out of the church basements, being raised to the ground by its four corners. In it were all kinds of pastors and believers, housed and unhoused, churched and unchurched. Then he heard a voice saying, "Get up, Philip; make communion with all of these. But Philip said, "By no means, Lord; for I have a parish and a big steepled pile of rocks with Tiffany windows and an endowment to manage." The voice said to him again, a second time, "What God is doing in your neighborhood, you must not call inane." This happened several times, and suddenly a Eucharistic Community with twelve men and women from seven various denominations drinking from a common cup on Friday evenings in an Episcopal parish office, with two Episcopalians, became an official ministry network.

In the Fall of 2017 a group of lay and ordained Christian ministers began to meet on Friday evenings at Trinity Episcopal Church in Portland. Most of those in the group were in recovery themselves and all of them worked in the helping professions. In their normal day-to-day lives they were in the position of helping and being a model to others. Typically they found themselves in the public eye and they were constantly aware that they were listened to carefully and that their actions were being observed. It was important to these Christian leaders that they manifested strength and optimism for the people that looked to them for guidance and support. While they loved what they did it could be draining and exhausting.

What they found in that room at Trinity on Friday evenings was a group of people that loved Jesus and people that carried heavy professional burdens. They also discovered they didn't have to be strong for anyone in that room. When they met together they received what they needed

to go back out and serve the lord by serving his people. The group fed and supported each other in their daily work and in their love of Jesus.

This diverse **Recovery Ministry Network** which began communing in early September launched a Friday night fellowship called [New Life Journey](#) on January 19, 2018. **New Life Journey Recovery Ministry Network** is a Christian faith-based support community rooted in fellowship, compassion, and a desire to “abide” together. The group has rented space at the First Church, 90 Court Street Middletown so that meetings are accessible to many local folks who are un-housed and on foot. We are able to shuttle people from the Eddy Shelter in Middletown and Rushford's Stonehaven residence in Portland with a van provided to us by Cross Street AME Zion Church. On January 26th, almost half the twenty six co-ed residents at Stonehaven opted to be collected to attend.

On January 19, the attendance at the launch of New Life Journey was remarkable. Clergy from more than a dozen churches throughout Connecticut were present, and four of six ECCT Region Missionaries participated. Our missionary, Erin Flinn, offered a Holy Spirit impassioned affirmation for the Christ witness this ministry. Erin's Spirited words evoked a sustained ovation with numerous exuberant alleluia's and AMENS:

This group, I have come to believe through observations, truly embodies the Kingdom in that they are not only willing but able to work together across differences, not melding into uniformity, but rather acknowledging their differences and more importantly their various and diverse gifts as an asset to their mission... I believe [New Life Journey] is a testimony to the fact that the Kingdom is not just something that is far off, but it is something that is right here among us, in Middletown, Connecticut.

In the Episcopal Church in Connecticut [...] we have as a whole renewed our baptismal promise to love our neighbor. And we have acknowledged that to truly love our neighbor we must be willing to get to know our neighbors, respect our neighbors, and support our neighbors. We also acknowledged that the Episcopal Church is not the sole proprietor of God's mission; rather, all people regardless of faith or creed have a role to play in healing and restoring creation. There is not "us" and "them" but rather "all of us" in it together. We must therefore be willing to, and actively seeking to, reach out and work with all of our brothers and sisters in Christ. For it is only in community that we will make this world a better, more loving, most Christ like place.

In parallel to the Friday community fellowship ministry of New Life Journey, Pastors James and Karla Woods, Pastor Watson, and Rev. Phil Bjornberg plan to create a networked web of faith-based recovery community homes in Meriden, Middletown and Portland to be joined with the **Connecticut Coalition of Recovery Residences (CCOR)**. The Woods now operate a four bed women's residence in Middletown and on December 29, 2017, Rev. Bjornberg purchased a four bedroom house on Main Street in Portland which will become a faith-structured home for six to eight residents.

New Life Journey aims to establish a pattern for flourishing life - in community - embodied primarily in the Christian fundamentals of loving self and others - in community! We will achieve this by creating a safe environment that honors each as an integral part of a collective whole. We are people from all walks of life who recognize that our experiences influence and mold us and

we are not limited to or confined by our individual stories. Every person has infinite value and every voice needs hearing.

Recovery is not a term exclusive to substance use disorders – it is a process applicable to the vast diversity of humanity in our various stages of life. **New Life Journey Recovery Ministry Network** joins God's mission of restoration and reconciliation by: Recovering - Restoring - Reconnecting our right relationship with God, with Creation, and with one another.

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved' (Acts 2:42-47).

Some of who we are?

Our Website: <https://newlifejourneyct.com/>

Streetfire Ministries - **Pastors James and Karla Woods** have been counseling and mentoring individuals in faith-based recovery for many years and have a service oriented ministry in the streets of Middletown.

Trinity Episcopal Church - **Rev. Phil Bjornberg** is a graduate of Fuller Seminary Institute for Recovery Ministry. He has served as Chaplain for active duty military and veterans with post-traumatic stress (PTSD) and substance use disorders (SUD) at a local intermediate residential recovery residence.

Grace and Mercy Family Ministries - **Pastor Donald Watson** - Federal Access to Recovery (ATR) provider including Faith Recovery Support Services, Mentoring, Pastoral and Spiritual Counseling, Social Support and Community Engagement and Recovery Values to Support Recovery and Relapse Prevention.

Cross Street AME Zion Church - **Rev. Gregory B. Winborne:** Co-Pastor of Cross Street, A.M.E. Zion Church Recovery/12-Step Ministry, Biblical/Spiritual Counselor. Twenty + years serving veterans at the Dept. of Veterans Affairs: NA Forensic Certified CCDC. CCJS. Specialize: Chemical dependency/Substance Abuse Disorder, Motivational/Brief Intervention Counseling: Relapse Prevention, Anger Awareness/Management and the Enhancement of Individual and Family Relationships.

Faith Christian Assembly -**Deacon Wallace Collins** manages the daily function of two (2) residential units containing up to eighteen (18) adjudicated juveniles and nine (9) staff each at the Connecticut Juvenile Training School. Wallace also is owner/operator of Collins Parent Coaching, LLC, professionally assisting parents in raising responsible and resourceful adults and he is a Board Member of Streetfire Ministries

The Episcopal Church in Connecticut- **Fred Faulkner** - Director of Operations for The Open Hearth, a 110 bed residential facility for men in recovery located in Hartford, CT.

City Church Middletown - **Ed Davis** is a long-term recovery (>11,000,000 minutes) practitioner and sponsor: "Having walked the path I've walked, it is my purpose and privilege to help others suffering from addiction." **Joanie Sylvia** - soulful servant heart, creative encourager, lover of God and companion and true neighbor to all - the light of Christ.