

# Florence Iversen Kraft

## 2006 PSMIN Award

### Celebration of Life Presbyterian Church

*Presented by Presbyterian Serious Mental Illness Network (PSMIN)*

Since 1999 the Presbyterian Serious Mental Illness Network (PSMIN) has given a series of awards that would give recognition to congregations in inclusive ministries with individuals and families affected by serious mental illness. The award is named for a founding member of the Network. This year the Florence Iversen Kraft Award is being given to honor the life and ministries of Celebration of Life Presbyterian Church, Mesa, Arizona. They are the sixth congregation to receive this award.



Judy Begun, Gayle Park and Shelly Moe.  
Photo by Joseph Williams.

Social justice, peacemaking and mission have been defining elements of the ministry of Celebration of Life Presbyterian Church (CoL) since its organization in 1974. This tradition became cemented under the co-pastorate of the Revs. Rebecca Strader and Mike Brown in the 1980s. Individual members of CoL joined anti-nuclear demonstrations, and the church supported a member's participation in the synod's peacemaking trip to Russia. During this decade the church began working toward becoming more inclusive, advocating for the ordination of gays and lesbians and learning to use inclusive language in worship.

When the Strader-Browns received another call, CoL decided that by using part-time pastorships they could allocate more money to missions. This continuing pattern fit the needs of the small, proactive congregation and defined the focus of CoL. During this transition, with the immigrant population soaring, Celebration of Life joined in a ministry with Guadalupe Presbyterian Church, a neighboring Hispanic congregation. Several CoL families took turns cooking food on Sundays to be distributed in local groves where large groups of migrants regularly stopped to rest on their journeys from Mexico and Central America to find work in this country. Teams provided foot care, water and basic medical assistance, in addition to hot meals. Since the groves were shut down, CoL has continued to supply food and clothing banks through the Guadalupe church. Also during this time, the CoL Presbyterian Women expanded their support for the local shelter for abused women, inviting the congregation to help provide items necessary to keep the shelter operational.

In 1993, the Rev. Larimore Wickett was called as pastor of Celebration of Life. Under his leadership CoL became aware of PHEWA and its resources, incorporated its material into its missions, and formally organized a Social Justice, Peacemaking and Mission Committee to coordinate service programs of the church. CoL began collecting food, clothing and blankets for the homeless. In the winter, Elder Rose Marie Wallace, an active advocate of PHEWA, kept several blankets in her car to give to persons who were homeless and suffering from the cold.

When the Rev. Wickett retired, Pastor Dale Strong encouraged the CoL congregation to expand their mission further and become more ecumenically involved. Church youth began weekly offerings for the Heifer Project, and the church developed awareness of international Christian concerns. With the passing of

## *Models of Ministry*

Rose Marie Wallace and the sudden death of the Rev. Strong in 2004, CoL went through a period of grieving. At this time, Judy Begun, Chair of the Arizona Mental Health Guild's SMI [Serious Mental Illness] Homeless Outreach Program, approached the Social Justice, Peacemaking and Mission Committee for vital assistance with the ongoing Mental Health Guild program of collecting personal hygiene supplies and helping to assemble hygiene kits to be distributed to adults who were homeless and mentally ill. The Committee accepted the challenge of this new mission but realized that taking on a project of this magnitude would require an enormous commitment from the entire CoL congregation. Presented with the opportunity, the church willingly embraced this new calling and became fully engaged in the new ministry. Their grief was assuaged as they turned again to ministry with others.

The arrival of the Rev. Shelly Moe in the spring of 2005 brightened spirits and renewed CoL's commitment to missions. Fully supportive of the local, national and ecumenical ministries of Celebration of Life, Shelly even ran a half-marathon to raise funds for the Lost Boys of Sudan. Adult Sunday School classes have studied the situation in Africa and examined differences between Islam and Christianity. CoL youth decided in January of 2006 to use proceeds from their fundraising Souper Bowl project to buy emergency food certificates for Homeless SMI.

Some members of the church believe the energy of social justice is an extension of their worship. In addition to PHEWA, Celebration of Life supports More Light Presbyterians, BorderLinks, Presbyterians for Restoring Creation and Presbyterian Peace Fellowship. Other causes members support include C.R.O.P. Walk and No Longer Silent. CoL has a long association with PHEWA, currently as a congregational member of all of the PHEWA networks. Representatives of the church

have served on the PHEWA Board and in leadership in several of its networks.

Started through the presbytery, specifically to be an alternative congregation with a different style of worship, Celebration of Life has always been small (55 current members), mission-oriented and inclusive. The church's web site (<http://www.celebration-of-life.org/lists>) numerous links for "Inclusivity, Peacemaking, and Social and Environmental Justice." Worship at CoL, the focal point of life together as Christians, is participatory, blending traditional and contemporary styles of music and liturgy. Each Sunday the worship service begins with congregational singing, followed by a welcome and "Passing of the Peace." A unique element is the prayer circle at the end of the service where all attending are invited to request prayers for personal joys and concerns. Everyone is warmly encouraged to linger after the service for conversation and refreshments.

CoL has welcomed, openly embraced and fully included persons affected by SMI in its life and ministries without stigma or bias. Children and adults with SMI, and their families and caregivers experience a climate of acceptance so authentic that this nurturing family of faith is an integral part of their ongoing journey toward wholeness of mind, body and spirit. It is for its service to and special concerns for those affected by serious mental illness that the Presbyterian Serious Mental Illness Network (PSMIN) of PHEWA is awarding the Celebration of Life Presbyterian Church of Mesa, Ariz., with this year's Florence Iversen Kraft Award. We stand in awe of their commitment to social justice, peacemaking and ministries with those in need, and PSMIN celebrates their inclusive love for one another and the world about them.

According to Judy Begun, An estimated 5,000 to 6,000 adults whose lives, hopes and dreams have been shattered by serious mental illness live in Maricopa

### ***Models of Ministry***

County and outlying communities. For these people, home is wherever they can find a place to stay that is safe from other people and the elements. Their only belongings are on their backs or in shopping carts. Their only assistance has come through eight to ten trained workers of a PATH (Program for Assistance in Transition from Homelessness) Homeless Outreach Team working out of a Phoenix office.

For the PATH Team members, the hygiene kits [containing 15-20 personal hygiene items, plus socks and a t-shirt] have become essential tools to establish rapport and build trust in homeless mentally ill adults, so they can be persuaded to accept available assistance and treatment. Workers then provide screening, information and referrals, in order to connect those assessed as SMI with appropriate social and behavioral services and help them apply for benefits. Giving them a hygiene kit helps to show these marginalized people someone does care. And knowing they are not forgotten can give them hope, and enable them to feel good about themselves and encourage them to take care of personal issues.

After Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast in August of 2005, the refugees from the devastation swelled the numbers of destitute homeless in the greater Phoenix area. The number of homeless persons with SMI, particularly displaced evacuees and returning Iraq war veterans, with severe PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder), has increased dramatically. An additional factor impacting the PATH Outreach program was that charitable giving and funding by local governments was being diverted to hurricane relief efforts, leaving existing programs serving the homeless mentally ill scrambling for resources. CoL responded, increasing their contributions of funds, blankets, clothing, and items to be included in the hygiene kits.

In 2005, the church assembled 856 hygiene kits. In December, in addition to the hygiene kits, the church

contributed hundreds of Christmas gifts and filled large food boxes for persons with SMI who are also homeless, including gifts especially for their children who lived with them on the streets and in shelters. On the Saturdays they have gathered at the church to assemble the hygiene kits, more than half of the church members and their friends have participated. This is now a continuing joint effort between Celebration of Life Presbyterian Church and the Arizona Mental Health Guild has become a major mission of the church.

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