

**Mental Health Ministry
Plymouth Congregational Church
Seattle, Washington**

The Mental Health Ministry was launched at Plymouth Congregational Church, Seattle, in 1998. Plymouth Church is located in the heart of downtown Seattle. For several years Plymouth had served as the base for the Mental Health Chaplaincy, a program directed by Rev. Craig Rennebohm that serves those with mental illness who live in the margins of downtown. At the same time, many members of Plymouth had experienced mental illness themselves or within their families and felt called to advocacy and action as a faith community.

The Mental Health Ministry's first step was to educate the congregation about mental illness and mental health, and to learn about its impact on our surrounding community. This was done through Sunday morning educational forums and discussions. In the process many additional members came forward to speak of their experiences with mental illness and to express a desire to take action. Seven years later the ministry has grown into one of on-going education and support, Sunday morning companionship - and Plymouth Healing Communities, a program that provides much needed housing for the mentally ill.

Plymouth Healing Communities began with one house in 2001, called the House of Healing. Purchased and lovingly renovated by Plymouth Church members, it provides a home for four formerly homeless mentally ill men and women. The residents all continue to receive treatment and case management from our partner, Harborview Hospital. The House is a place to experience healing and community through shared meals, warm surroundings, the privacy of one's own room, and companionship. Living at the house are four resident companions, lay people who make a commitment to live in the house for one year and to 'companion' the residents as they reach stability. The 15 companions since 2001 have ranged in age and life circumstances, from recent college graduates to retirees. Their ministry of presence makes the House a unique place and for all of them the year at the House has been one of learning and deep spiritual growth. During this time 36 residents have lived at the house, before they have transitioned to more stable housing. If not for their residence in the House of Healing many of them would have returned to the streets after their acute hospitalization.

The House of Healing has given rise to two other houses, and a small apartment home with a resident companion that provide much needed long-term housing. Agape House, houses five women, and our newest home, Hoffman House, will house six residents. A local family, who had experienced mental illness, read about our program in the newspaper and has provided seed money to purchase Hoffman House. The house is currently being renovated by Plymouth members and future residents and will open in July. The culture of Hudson House will be the expectation that residents are recovering from their mental illness. There will be encouragement and support for volunteering, working, and participating in the larger community. The active participation of future residents in the design of the changes to Hoffman House, and their participation in the

renovation work are the first steps in creating this culture – and making the house their home.

From the beginning, Plymouth Healing Communities has received significant financial support from Plymouth Church, including \$45,000 each year toward its operating budget and \$347,500 toward the purchase and renovation of the House of Healing. At the same time Plymouth Healing Communities has actively sought and received financial support from the broader community, from individuals, resident fees, rental assistance, corporate contributions, and local foundations. During the past three years this broader support has been over \$700,000 for the purchase and renovation of our houses and over \$100,000 in operating support.

As Plymouth Healing Communities has grown from one home to three, hundreds of Plymouth members have given countless hours as board members and volunteer Companions, helped with painting and gardening, shared meals with residents, taught knitting and guided art and craft activities. Members have also lent their expertise in fundraising, provided pro bono architecture and legal assistance, donated furniture and household items, and worked on renovating each of the homes. Their work has sent church members out to practice discipleship and learn from those who live with mental illness. Each of their lives has been transformed. Plymouth Healing Communities continues to look for ways to acquire other homes to provide additional long-term housing.

Another important part of the ministry is Plymouth's Sunday Companions program. Each Sunday during our worship hours a volunteer Companion who is a member of the congregation is present for those who come to the church, often off the street, seeking sanctuary. The Companions are there for conversation, to offer coffee or a sandwich, to accompany people to worship, or to help them find a quiet place to rest. Their work is based on the Ministry of Presence model of Rev. Rennebohm.

Plymouth Church also offers important support for our members and the community through a monthly Family Mental Health Support Group. Using the NAMI Family to Family model, the group led by a minister and parish nurse, provides support to spouses, parents, siblings, and friends whose family members are experiencing mental illness. Often this is the only place the group members can share their concerns and receive help solving problems. Once a year Plymouth also sponsors the 12-week NAMI Family to Family class, for family members of individuals with mental illness. The class, attended by members and those in the community, provides education about mental illnesses and treatment and helps teach coping skills. We also continue to devote Sunday adult education time to topics related to mental illness and advocacy and reducing the stigma of mental illness.

Plymouth's Mental Health Ministry is now woven into the fabric of who we are as a community of faith, bearing witness to God's love for all and the radical inclusion of Jesus. It is an honor to have our ministry recognized by the broader United Church of Christ.

