

From Pastor Sarah Mayer-Flatt
Synod Story Teller
South East Michigan Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

In February of 2023, **Pastor Vicky Lovell** started on a new journey in Dexter, MI. Opening up Living RED, a mission development of the Southeast Michigan Synod, she hoped that those who had always identified as “spiritual but not religious,” those hurt by the church, or those with a robust church background who had grown disillusioned with the church, would try a new way of experiencing faith: by allowing a healing ministry to help them also follow in the red-letter words of Christ in scripture.

RED, which stands for Recharge your faith, Engage your Spirit, Discover the Divine within, began after Vicky had her own transformation of faith. Danielle Groth, a member of Vicky's church at the time, challenged Vicky on how she was caring for herself as she cared for the church. Danielle began to offer Reiki on a weekly basis to Vicky. Reiki is an energy healing technique that is used for stress reduction and promotes healing. It is comparable to the laying on of hands in prayer.

Vicky and Danielle joined forces during Covid and began to intentionally minister to individuals experiencing homelessness who were displaced and suffering this collective trauma. Together they held space for this population. Danielle tended to their physical needs and Vicky their spiritual and emotional ones. She also held space for her own healing and wellness. "In Christianity, it's honorable to put ourselves last. But, when we do that, we are trying to pour from an empty vessel. When we love ourselves, we feel worthy of receiving God's love, when we are full of God's love, we are able to give love more freely." This is one of the truths that Living RED teaches, especially since it's been couched with Angel Whispers.

Angel Whispers is a healing center located in Dexter. Co-run by Danielle Groth, Dan McConnell, and Pastor Vicky, Angel Whispers and Living RED offer a variety of services. Using massage chairs and tables, Reiki sessions, sound therapy, and EFT, as well as Spiritual Direction, Angel Whispers looks to heal the body of past trauma by helping to heal what is hurting in the body.

Living RED helps to heal the body of past trauma by helping to heal what is hurting in the heart and soul. “Living RED's one-of-a-kind healing ministry creates a safe environment supporting healing of the mind, body, and spirit through unique worship settings, meditations, mindful retreats, end-of-life care, and personalized one-on-one emotional and spiritual care.”

In essence, Living RED and Angel Whispers work in tandem to bring people to healing, and back to Christ. Their unofficial motto is: We come from Love, to love.

Living RED also offers two points of intentional spiritual and communal gathering.

Monday afternoon hosts a spiritual discussion where folks are safe to ask big questions, grieve together, offer comments and questions about a book the group is reading, and sometimes just having fellowship with one another. One member of Living RED states of this time: “Not only are Pastor Vicky’s studies biblically based, she leads and encourages our group discussions. Her teachings are always based in God's love through His son, Jesus. Teaching us, through scripture, how to live a Christ based lifestyle, and the importance of the Cross.”

The second communal gathering is Thursday evening for worship. The pattern is similar to an ELCA service: music, Word and Sacrament, and prayers. But the pattern is also different. Each week, the lessons are read, and Vicky gives a brief explanation of the Gospel reading -- context clues, etc. Then, instead of her preaching a sermon, she offers discussion questions about the Gospel reading, and folks are encouraged to respond openly. One gentleman, who went to a Lutheran church his whole life but became disengaged after Covid, says, “we get to delve into the lesson in our own lives. We do that work. Pastor Vicky just encourages it out of us. My faith has never been stronger.”

One woman had some compelling remarks: “I am a Christian, but have never felt very comfortable in a traditional worship setting. I think it’s the formality I don’t care for- sometimes it feels stuffy, and is an uncomfortable setting to ask questions. I [also] have special needs -- I have cerebral palsy, and never really felt welcome, which is ironic when you consider Jesus’s love for those who were different.” Beloved, these words convict

me, your writer. Being a person with a disability still seems more unwelcoming than not in our churches. Living RED is a safe space for this woman, physically and emotionally. She has found welcome here.

Another woman, who is 82 and a lifelong protestant, testified: “Living RED worship serves a small, but distinct group of participants who are deeply committed to growing in their faith.” Welcome is an essential part of joining any faith community, and it is then that our faith is able to grow and be strengthened. The welcome of Living RED is so strong that almost immediately, attendees begin growing in their faith.

Living RED also practices what they preach. Pastor Vicky serves Iroquois Lutheran Church in Detroit, MI, on Sunday mornings. As a recent outreach ministry, Living RED collected and filled 200 backpacks with supplies for students that Iroquois serves on Friday mornings. We know small congregations can accomplish mighty things in the name of Jesus.

Perhaps the most exciting thing about Living RED during this time of ministry is that they are growing! By the end of fall, they will be moved into a 5,000 square foot space (more than four times their current space size), shared with Angel Whispers. They will remain in Dexter, and hope to serve more individuals through body, mind and spirit healing. They will continue to have worship, and hope to expand the ways they minister to others. Everyone is excited for the move, and hopeful for the growth they will see.

It is my prayer that Living RED continues their ministry, not only for the sake of each of us, readers, but for those who gather there, for the sake of the world, in the name of Love, Jesus Christ our Savior.

In Peace,
Pastor Sarah
SEMI Synod Storyteller

P.S.: Have a story you'd like me to share about your own congregation? Send me an email (sarah.flatt@gmail.com) and I'll be sure to tell your story!