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Where all May Dwell

Christian community

Emily Norris had been serving at Augsburg Lutheran Church's winter-overflow homeless shelter in Winston-Salem, N.C., for a few years when she heard the rumblings. Many of the guests opened up to her, told her stories. One need kept arising.

"I heard very loudly that there was a deep hunger for a faith community that looked like them," Norris said. They craved space where they could worship God and not feel judged for their housing status, their past or their appearance. Heeding their calls led Norris to Wartburg Theological Seminary, Dubuque, Iowa, to become a pastor.

By 2020, Norris was ordained and serving as the mission developer for the Dwelling, an ELCA faith community designed for, but not exclusive to, people in Winston-Salem who are or have been homeless. *Funding comes from partnerships with Augsburg, the North Carolina Synod, the Moravian Church in America and the ELCA churchwide organization, which draws on Mission Support for the Dwelling's grant.*

Starting a church during a pandemic wasn't ideal. Safety restrictions made worship impossible, and the population Norris had hoped to reach became especially vulnerable. So she did what many ELCA leaders and congregations were forced to do: she pivoted.

After assessing community needs, Norris determined that free mobile showers would be the Dwelling's anchor ministry. Visitors could take showers and receive clean underwear, socks and T-shirts donated by nearby members of the Dwelling's synod.

"It was really a profound way to start," Norris said. "Showers provide a sense of dignity and are therapeutic. I don't know a better way to remind people of their baptism."

Eventually the showers became permanent, with participants volunteering to help the program. By Christmas Eve, area restrictions for gatherings had been relaxed, and Norris held the Dwelling's first service. In January 2021, it began offering regular Sunday worship.

With a living room for its sanctuary, couches and chairs for its pews, and free-flowing food, the Dwelling takes seriously its mission of hospitality. "It has a feather touch, where you can come in and get comfy," said member Cheryl Morrison. "It's OK to talk to the person next to you, get up to get a cup of coffee, doughnut or muffin."

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"This is a church for God's people — the homeless — and they are the foundation of what makes this church work, which in my eyes is extremely special," added Ryan Sprinkle, a council member. "You have people right off the street with their backpacks."