



A CONNECTION TO CHRIST



Sometimes the Christian life can be complicated. We may wrestle with our consciences before God, full of turmoil and anxiety. Or like the apostles, we may enjoy favor with some people in our lives but suffer persecution from others, enduring violence and rejection as we try to carry out God's mission.

It isn't so much the "what to do" part that is difficult; the Law clearly instructs us to love God above all things and to love our neighbor as ourselves, and Christ commands us to spread the Gospel. Motivated by the forgiveness of sins and

reconciliation won by Christ on the cross, and given new life in the Spirit in our baptism, we faithfully proclaim God's love and mercy. It's the "how to do it" that can be complicated. Discerning God's will requires prayer, reading of Scripture, advice from fellow believers, and ultimately, the leading of the Holy Spirit. All of these things work together to inform our conscience of what God would have us do.

How They Got Started

"There was about a 10-year period where I could look back now and see God nudging me in a different

direction," says Sue Olson, teacher at St. John's Lutheran School in Lansing, Illinois. Sue had been the owner and coach of a successful gymnastics and tumbling program for years, but felt led to do something else. "They say that when you're called, you know you're called—you really do! So I closed the gym... and cut my salary to 10% of what it was... and became a Lutheran school teacher!"

For years, Sue taught Kindergarten, more recently moving to the third and fourth grade level. Three years ago, she noticed her students were having



quite a hard time as they learned how to write. “We were in the unit of writing friendly letters, and there was just no motivation to do a good job. Teaching writing is a really difficult thing, and getting kids to be motivated to write is really difficult. So I got this crazy idea to write to someone.” But who would the “someone” be? The answer came easily.

Sue had been convinced of the Lutheran Church Charities (LCC) K-9 Comfort Dog Ministry’s ability to inspire and nurture years before. Tim Hetzner, president of LCC, had brought Comfort Dog Howie to a chapel service at St. John’s. “In his lesson, he’s standing on the chancel, and Howie is sitting next to him. He has a tennis ball in his hand and he’s bouncing it. While he’s talking, he whips it to the back of the church. Howie just sits there. Still talking, Tim goes and retrieves the ball. Then he takes the vest off the dog, whips the ball down the center aisle—Howie shot off those stairs like a rocket!” That moment made a huge impression on Sue, and ever since, she has followed the dogs on social media and met as many of them and their handlers as possible.

What It Looks Like

For Sue, the dogs’ work is inspiring and energizing because the world needs the comfort they bring so badly. The dogs are well-known for the ministry they provide in times of trouble, such as natural disasters or tragedies like the Orlando and Newtown shootings. But their work extends beyond this. Handlers manage

social media accounts for the dogs where “the dogs” make jokes and have fun, exuding positivity. This levity invites the dogs’ followers to engage in a fun, imaginative way, instead of the contentious and argumentative modes all too common online.

Visiting Sue’s classroom, it is evident that her students love the dogs as much as she does. Each desk has a “stuffie” on it, a stuffed animal version of the comfort dogs. The students also love to collect the dogs’ contact cards. “My kids all had stacks of cards in their desk. If you’ve ever seen a third and fourth grader’s desk, you know it looks like a cannonball blew up inside—but their cards were stacked in a special place inside their desks!”

The students found it much more interesting writing friendly letters to these dogs they had come to know from afar, and the motivation problem was solved. But soon, Sue and her students’ shared love for the dogs created even more learning opportunities. “My kids know all the states without ever really studying, and they know pretty much which states have comfort dogs in them,” because they like to look up where the comfort dogs live. The dogs are also helpful for religious instruction. Each dog has a Bible verse associated with it, and the students come to know verses this way, recognizing when they hear them in church. Most of the dogs’ names come from the Bible, and Sue used this as motivation to get her students engaged with Scripture. “It started when Margot brought Darius Comfort Dog. I couldn’t remember where [the name] came from, so we looked it up. We use online resources, as a teaching tool, to look up where that name comes from in the Bible, and then they would have to read and write about that.”

Sue sees possibilities to expand the “comfort curriculum” to students both younger and older than her third and fourth graders.

One application she has for social studies is for students to plan a “virtual road trip” to see the dogs. “They could chart where the dogs are and plot it on the map, determine differences in routes, analyzing the cost of gas and different sites in the area, budgeting. I think that would be a really fun thing to do.”

How They Are In This Together

Last school year, the students’ relationship with the comfort dogs showed its depth and impact. Two of the dogs, Prince Comfort Dog and Jackson Comfort Dog, passed away, and another, Sasha Comfort Dog, became sick. “As these things would happen, my kids’ reaction was a lesson to me. First thing they said when they found out that Prince died: ‘Can we pray?’ ... okay! And then they wrote letters to Prince Comfort Dog’s team.” When asked how she came up with the idea, Sue said, “You can talk about a word and tell the kids a story and tell the kids what your expectations are, and you can tell them that a hundred thousand times, but you need something that can make a connection. And it clicked to me that the kids being connected to the dogs made some of those connections in their life. And so I just built on that concept. When did I come up with this concept? I didn’t. It came to me.... There’s a connection, and with that connection, it leads to a connection to Christ.”

Due to the low enrollment, the St. John’s Voters’ Assembly decided to suspend school operations for the 2019-2020 school year. They thank all of the families and staff who have partnered in their Mission of Christian Education in the Lansing area for the last 125 years.

LCC Disaster Response LERT Volunteers have a Heart and Hands for Service

Lutheran Church Charities (LCC) Disaster Response assists those in need through LCC LERT (Lutheran Early Response Team) volunteers who are prepared to deploy in our district and across the country to bring the Mercy, Compassion, Presence, and Proclamation of Jesus Christ to those who are suffering and in need.

“LCC Disaster Response is recognized nationally for our expertise and available heavy equipment. We never charge those we serve, helping individuals and families following devastating loss,” says Deaconess Kathy O’Day, LCC Director of Disaster Response.

Invited in May, LCC Disaster Response LERT teams quickly

responded to storm and tornado damage in Northern Illinois District and Indiana. After a microburst, heavy rain, and hail struck Oswego and Yorkville causing extensive damage, the Cross Yorkville/Helmar LERT chainsaw teams assisted their community. They were also present and serving the following recent disasters: tornadoes, storms, and high winds in Watseka, Illinois; flooding in Fremont, Nebraska; and tornadoes and storms in Missouri and Kansas.

LCC conducts multiple LERT trainings each year on how to safely and effectively respond to different disaster situations. This year, 101 volunteers attended the



LCC Disaster Response LERT teams help residents after tornadoes, storms, and high winds hit Watseka, Illinois

Annual Basic LERT Chainsaw Training and Service Event Workday at Walcamp Outdoor Ministries and Retreat Center in Kingston, Illinois.

For more information on ways you can donate to help LCC continue to make a difference, visit LutheranChurchCharities.org, text @LCCGIVE to 52014 and follow the prompts, or call 866-455-6466

LCC K-9 Comfort Dogs Make Learning Fun for Students

For the 2018-2019 school year, Sue Olson went the extra mile to motivate her 3rd and 4th grade students desire to learn at St. John Lutheran School in Lansing, Illinois. What better way than to share her love for the LCC K-9 Comfort Dog Ministry with her class.

When Sue found students struggling with a writing lesson, she came up with the idea of having them write letters to some of the LCC K-9 Comfort Dogs. Sue initially met Tim Hetzner, LCC President / CEO, when he brought Howie Comfort Dog to St. John’s for a chapel talk. She witnessed how Comfort Dogs connected with students in a powerful way by showing compassion and presence through Christ.



Students in Sue Olson’s 3rd & 4th Grade class at St. John Lutheran School, Lansing, Illinois, met some of the LCC K-9 Comfort Dogs that received their letters

For one assignment, students had to welcome a new puppy, write their Bible verse, research their Biblical name, and write a prayer. Here is an excerpt from a letter to one of the newest LCC puppies, Jemimah:

“Dear Jemimah, welcome to the LCC Comfort Dogs! Your name in the Bible is Job’s first daughter and that’s really cool because your name had to live with six thousand camels. My prayer is: Dear God, I want Jemimah to grow up to be a very good comfort dog helping everyone around the world. Bless



LCC K-9 Comfort Dog in Training Jemimah loved the letter of encouragement from 3rd & 4th Grade students at St. John Lutheran School, Lansing, Illinois

Jemimah in her training and bless her trainers. Dear God, please don’t let her get stepped on by a camel. In Jesus Name, Amen.”

Jemimah loved getting the letter of encouragement and the students love her special card with her picture and Bible verse of Psalm 139:14, “I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well.”

LCC thanks Sue Olson’s class for your encouraging letters to our 130 K-9s in 27 states.