



LUTHERAN CHURCH IN SINGAPORE

GIVE PRAY FAST



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Bishop's Message

Lent is the most solemn and beneficial season of the church year for contemplation on our faith. This year, the 40-day period begins on Ash Wednesday, February 14, and concludes on March 30, the day preceding Easter Sunday. It's important to note that this duration excludes the six Sundays in between. During this period, let us draw closer to the Lord through fasting and prayer. Through meditation, we can gain a deeper understanding of and better appreciation for Christ's redemptive work for us.

In 2024, the Lutheran Church in Singapore (LCS) aims to foster a church-wide engagement with the Weekly Devotional content authored by our pastors. We intend for the seven concise anecdotal narratives from the Lutheran Community Care Services (LCCS), along with the pastors' reflections on these stories with scriptural references, to deepen our congregation's appreciation of the LCCS ministry. This initiative also seeks to direct our focus towards Christ, His sufferings and death. It is Christ's deep care for humanity that led to His sacrifice, delivering us from the bondage of sin.

During this Lenten period, we are called to emulate Christ's compassion and concern for the less fortunate in our community. The Lutheran Community Care Service (LCCS), an integral part of the Lutheran Church in Singapore, works tirelessly to assist individuals and families facing life's challenges. With a particular emphasis on restoring relationships, LCCS aims to be a conduit of God's grace, drawing people closer to Him through its dedicated service.

I hope that this year, in addition to developing our own spirituality in our daily walk with Christ, we will continue to give LCCS our prayers, time and monetary support, actively.

May God bless you with an unique and exceptional experience of Lent this year.

Bishop Lu Guan Hoe

Foreword

“...When you give to the needy...” (Matt 6:2, 3)

“...When you pray...” (Matt 6:5, 6, 7)

“...When you fast...” (Matt 6:16, 17)

These words were spoken by our Lord Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. He was teaching His disciples how to give, pray and fast, commonly known as the three pillars of Lent, which are the three practices indispensable to Christian living then and now. Note that our Lord says “when you give/pray/fast”. He did not say “if you give/pray/fast”, thus suggesting that disciples *did* fast and Jesus expected us to fast, besides praying and giving.

In this 2024 Lenten season, we encourage all members of the Lutheran Church of Singapore to continue the tradition of giving generously, praying fervently, and fasting diligently. We are featuring weekly anecdotal narratives shared by the Lutheran Community Care Services (LCCS), together with the accompanying reflections of Lutheran pastors, over the seven-week Lenten period. The names of individuals in these case studies have been altered to protect their identities. Together, they will provide readers with the opportunity to practise the three pillars of Lent meaningfully. You are encouraged to allocate one day each week to engage in dedicated prayer, fasting, and giving to LCCS.

Our Lord Jesus taught us to provide for the needy, to embrace the needs of others as our own (Matthew 25:34-36). The needy encompass those in close proximity to us – the ailing and the elderly, the orphaned and the widowed, the impoverished and the foreigners residing on our shores. As a ministry within the Lutheran Church in Singapore (LCS), LCCS actively extends its outreach to the community, fulfilling the Lord's command to provide assistance and support.

While fasting itself does not improve our standing with God, it remains an invaluable spiritual discipline. The true significance of fasting is exemplified in the Book of Isaiah, where God summoned His people to fast as an expression of sorrow for their sins. It is also an opportunity to extend mercy to the hungry and homeless. Likewise, we can opt to show solidarity with those in need by fasting, such as abstaining from a meal on Wednesdays, while we engage in the contemplation of each LCCS story. The money saved from skipping a meal can be donated to LCCS, enabling us to experience the essence of fasting as a means of self-reflection, compassion, and exercising social responsibility.

Prayer too, a gift from God, facilitates the deepening of our walk with Jesus. Taking time to intentionally pause for prayer, even once a week with this Lent guide, helps us to reflect on our doings and shortcomings, to recognise the deep sorrow within for not readily giving to those in need. You may then give, as the Lord prompts, via the QR code at the end of each story and reflection, to LCCS.

May this Lenten Project bring about a more meaningful observance of Lent for you, as we, together as one LCS church, give, pray and fast.

Suggested Fasting Activity

- 1) Wednesday, 12noon. Lunchtime fast.
- 2) Read the assigned story and the reflection.
- 3) Utilise the prayer prompts at the end of each reflection to deepen your prayer experience.
- 4) Scan the QR code to give (e.g. the money saved from not having lunch, or any other amount as the Lord would have you give). The QR links you to the giving.sg webpage where you can donate to LCCS.

Guidelines on Fasting

For readers interested in going beyond our recommended one-day-per-week fasting, here are some important information for your consideration:

Traditionally, fasting, or the practice of abstaining from food, is observed daily throughout the Lenten season, with exceptions made for Sundays and significant church feast days, such as The Annunciation on 25 March, unless it coincides with Holy Week. A customary fasting day entails partaking in one complete meal and two smaller $\frac{1}{4}$ meals. These guidelines however serve as recommendations rather than strict mandates, allowing individuals the flexibility to tailor their fast according to their own preferences and needs. For instance, one may opt for two full meals while omitting a meal of their choice, or they may choose to have one full meal, one $\frac{1}{2}$ meal, and forgo one additional meal. Regardless of the specific approach, these are all considered valid forms of fasting, as long as the decision to fast is made prayerfully and is observed throughout the entire 40-day Lenten period.

Before embarking on a full fast, consider the following:

- 1) Fasting is not suitable for
 - a. children below 10,
 - b. pregnant or nursing mothers,
 - c. persons under restricted dietary requirements,
 - d. persons with existing health conditions,
 - e. and the elderly.
- 2) Begin slowly. Do not try full fast immediately. Prepare yourself by slowly limiting your food intake as you approach the Lent season.
- 3) Fast together with others! Christian faith is not individual-based. We draw strength from and encourage one another within the God-given church community.
- 4) If your fasting is disrupted, do not feel guilty nor troubled. Rather, give thanks to God for the food he has given you and then resume your fast the next day!
- 5) For further queries on fasting, seek guidance from your pastors for their insights and recommendations.

The Lutheran View on Fasting

Martin Luther has this to say on fasting, “It is right to fast frequently in order to subdue and control the body. For when the stomach is full, the body does not serve for preaching, for praying, for studying, or for doing anything else that is good. Under such circumstances, God’s Word cannot remain. But one should not fast with a view to meriting something by it as by a good work” (*What Luther Says*, 506).

The Church does not prescribe fasting as a means to accumulate merits or earn favour with God. This stance aligns with the teaching that salvation cannot be achieved through our works, but rather it is obtained solely by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. Fasting should instead be regarded as a beneficial exercise to discipline our mind and body spiritually. It is also an act that pleases God, as articulated in the Lutheran Confessions, which state, “... repentance ought to bring forth good fruits for the sake of God’s glory and command, and good fruits, true fasting, true prayers, true alms, etc., have the commands of God...” (*Apology of the Augsburg Confession* XII.139)

Indeed, Martin Luther wrote in his Small Catechism that while “fasting and other outward preparations may serve a good purpose” as preparatory practices prior to receiving the Lord’s Supper, faith, or belief in Jesus’ words, remained the key prerequisite for partaking in the Holy Communion. Fasting before the Holy Communion, during Lent or at any other times, though a good practice, is never a substitute for faith.

(Foreword, Guidelines on Fasting, and The Lutheran View on Fasting are all prepared by Pr Ray Soh)

14 February: “ Connect – An Innate Desire”

Thomas sought help after his wife summoned the police upon his act of slapping her during a heated altercation. This is the pivotal moment of awakening for Thomas, compelling him to acknowledge the harm he had inflicted upon his wife, motivating him to undertake the necessary changes to save his marriage.

Thomas recounted his childhood years, detailing his involvement with groups often labelled as 'gangs'. He reflected on how he once believed that aggression was a mark of strength. Acknowledging his struggle with anger, Thomas, now a father to a one-year-old, expressed the desire to provide a nurturing home for his child. He does not wish to be labelled as a "violent person" before his family.

The LCCS social worker counselled the couple, focusing on the consequences of violence and the necessary steps for resolution. Thomas admitted the hurt he has inflicted on his wife. Together, they understood each other's needs, expressing a mutual desire for restoring and deepening the connection between them. Motivated by a shared goal to rebuild their marriage, they embarked on a journey to mend and strengthen their relationship.

Violence has ceased for over a year. The couple now communicates with the intent to understand rather than to respond impulsively. Each partner is working on their own personal challenges, enhancing their ability to relate better with one another.

Reflection by Rev Andrew Thinagaran (QLC)

"You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire. So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift." (Matt 5:21-24)

The greatest commandment is to love God and our neighbour which is contrary to our natural tendency is to cherish self above others. God is love. We are created to love and to be loved. The Ten Commandments are often understood as a legalistic standard to meet rather than a set of loving commandments that will guide, guard and groom us in godly relationships. It is natural to read *"Do not murder"* as a commandment against the violent act of taking away life. If we avoid the physical act of murder, we are innocent of guilt, or so we think.

Our Lord Jesus opens us up to a new dimension of approaching God's Law. Do not merely keep the letter of the law, but obey the spirit of the law. Murder is not merely an act of violence. It is rooted in anger and hatred. We should nip the problem in the bud else *"sin when it is fully grown brings forth death."* (James 1:15). Let us instead deal with our inner life.

As we are called to die to self and live the life of Christ (Gal 2:20), strive therefore to control anger, lest it controls us. *"No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it."* (1Cor 10:13) Often, the heart of our struggles isn't anger itself, but rather the unwise choices we make. Consider why it's easier to become irritable with our spouses, children, the needy, or even the elderly. Contrast this with our ability to keep our cool in front of our superior, like a boss, a police officer, or an intimidating figure. Our failure to manage our temper with those we perceive as less significant, juxtaposed with our restraint before those whom we view as being more powerful, points to the deeper issue of making poor life choices.

Value every person as we are all created in God's image. Love our spouse and children, care for the needy and the aged. Love is the fulfilment of the Law.

Commit not just to outward expression of love and care, strive also to be a loving person, imitating our Lord Jesus. Meditate on Christ and the Cross till His love overflows from within and touches the people around us.

"We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother." (1 John 4:19-21).

Personal application

- 1) In what ways have you considered others better than yourself? (Phil 2:3)
Write a note or message to inform and thank three persons for their positive influence in your life.

- 2) Would you humble yourself and offer forgiveness to others, just as Christ has forgiven you? Reach out through a call or message to someone you need to forgive or to someone from whom you need forgiveness.
(Matthew 5:23-24)

Prayer

Father,

We praise you for being holy and loving. Thank you for accepting repentant sinners. Help us to imitate Christ's life of love and grace with others.

In Jesus' name. Amen.



21 February: “Restoring Trust in Relationships”

Carine and Caleb, 10 and 8 years old respectively, spent two years in foster care following the discovery of severe abuse by their mother. They were later reunited with their grandmother, Mdm Tan.

For years, Mdm Tan has been burdened with guilt and shame for not preventing the abuse of the children by their mother. This feeling has hindered her from forming a closer bond with her grandchildren. Additionally, she harbours a fear that discussing past events might further traumatize the children.

At LCCS, we hold the conviction that healing and restoration commence with meaningful dialogues about issues that matter. The LCCS team devoted time to interacting with the children, subsequently orchestrating a family circle that included them, Mdm Tan, and other related adults like their father, aunt, and uncle. This gathering proved to be a deeply emotional encounter for everyone involved, as they openly discussed feelings of anger and powerlessness in face of the abuse. The children witnessed the adults confronting the embarrassment of failing to shield them. Most significantly, the family collectively acknowledged and voiced the anguish experienced due to the separation and the losses borne from this detachment. The circle served as a pivotal platform for the family to mend trust and develop mutual support.

Children's voices are often overlooked as we assume they lack understanding, in addition to our intent to shield them from experiencing more pain. However, this silence can perpetuate a cycle of hurt, potentially leading to intense, unspeakable anguish. LCCS strives to break this cycle by fostering meaningful conversations, aiming to rebuild connections among individuals, including children, for self-healing and improved familial relationships.

Reflection by Rev Andreas Latz (ILSM)

During my visits to container ships and car carriers as a seafaring pastor in Pasir Panjang, my mind often wanders to past encounters – recalling when I last stepped aboard and anticipating familiar faces I might see today. The essence of my daily work lies in rebuilding, renewing, and restoring trust, which forms the cornerstone of International Lutheran Seafarers' Mission's (ILSM) approach. Trust and confidence, especially from the watchman, are crucial; without their cooperation, gaining access to a ship becomes an insurmountable challenge, as the watchman may deny entry for any number of reasons.

Establishing and continually renewing a sustainable, trust-based relationship with seafarers requires considerable patience and perseverance. Same goes with the family of Carine and Caleb. Because, at ILSM, we too believe that healing and restoration begins with having conversations on what matters.

Restoring the fractured trust between crew members of Russian and Ukrainian nationality has become increasingly challenging. Two years into the conflict, nearly every one of them has friends or family who have been killed or injured in the war. With tears in their eyes, they often share their stories of loss with me. Occasionally, tensions escalate between the Russian and Ukrainian crew, necessitating my intervention to defuse the situation. By soothing them and then allowing each side to voice their perspective, I facilitate an environment where mutual understanding can begin to take root. This approach is particularly vital in situations where one group tends to overpower the other, thereby silencing the latter's voice.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God” (Matthew 5:9). We give thanks to God for Jesus, the ultimate peacemaker! Through His selfless sacrifice, He mends the fractured relationships between God and humanity, and among people. Similarly, at ILSM, we are dedicated to our mission of rebuilding and reinforcing trust among seafarers, who are often far from their homes. A biblical verse wonderfully captures our role at ILSM, serving as Christians to rebuild and fortify trust between people. *“For those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.” (1 Timothy 3:13)*

Personal application

- 1) Why do you find it so challenging to discuss your feelings of fear and shame?
- 2) Do you agree that the act of sharing, listening, and opening up possesses the power to soothe and heal? Why so?

Prayer

Lord,

We commit to Your care the weary, the disillusioned, the lonely, the overlooked, and the voiceless. Be their constant companion and provide them with kindred spirits to journey alongside and give them a voice. We place them in Your eternal love and mercy.

In Jesus' name. Amen.



28 February: “Change through Relationships”

“It has always been hard talking to my father, his personality is very different from mine, and I do not know how to communicate with him.” The relationship Adam had with his father, while growing up, was challenging and difficult. He felt that his father had never truly understood him.

Adam was 18 years old when he was convicted for drug trafficking and sentenced to over 10 years in prison. During his years of imprisonment, Adam never had the chance to share his story, including the motives behind his behaviour against his parents.

Adam took part in the LCCS' Project Rekindle, a program designed to help reconnect inmates with their families. Through this project, Adam opened up to an LCCS caseworker about his upbringing as the eldest son, and the struggles he witnessed his parents endured to support him and his brother. Desiring to live a respectable life, to be self-reliant, and to be able to provide for his family, Adam was drawn to the quick financial gains offered by drug trafficking.

Adam felt remorse for his actions, believing he had let down his parents and younger brother. He remembered his mother's love towards him and felt he had grieved her deeply.

The LCCS caseworker engaged with the family to address the repercussions of Adam's imprisonment and its effects on them. Adam's mother has been carrying a burden of self-blame, feeling responsible for not disciplining him adequately, which she believes led to his incarceration.

In the meeting organised by the LCCS caseworker, Adam's family listened to his story for the first time. Adam, in turn, learned about the impact of his actions on them. Following the session, there were heartfelt embraces shared between them. Adam felt thankful that the meeting resolved misunderstandings, deepening his appreciation for his family.

Adam is currently continuing his education in Prison School and looks forward to the times he spends with his family during visits.

Reflection by Rev Sarah Ang (QLC)

A child first receives and experiences love and acceptance from their parents or guardians with whom they have a relationship. Even if a child grows up and goes wayward, we would often hear parents say that ultimately, this person is still their child and they would love him or her no matter what they have done. This is what most would call unconditional love.

The parable of The Prodigal Son in Luke 15:11-32 is a prime example of a parent's unconditional love.

A man had two sons and one of them decided to ask his father for his share of the inheritance and left home with it. The parable goes that he squandered away all he had in wild living. He worked as a hired hand feeding pigs but was starving and not given any food. Finally, he came to his senses, and realised how foolish it was for him to stay away from his father who could provide him with all He needs. He rehearsed in mind how he would admit his wrong to His father and beg him to make him one of his servants.

As he was going back to his father's house, His father saw from a long way off, was filled with compassion, ran toward him, threw his arms around him and kissed him. He then asked the servants to dress him up in the finest robes and prepare a feast for him.

For most parents, they would probably give their children a dressing down before doing anything else for them. However, this father was filled with love and care. The fact that he saw his son from a long way off meant that he had been looking and waiting for him to return. The prodigal son was received by his father with unconditional love and acceptance even after all that He had done.

The father in this parable mirrors who God is. A father who is looking and waiting for his child to return. A father who loves His sons and daughters even though they have chosen to go their own way, seeking and investing in things of this world. A father who accepts them when they return to him, recognising their broken and sinful state.

The Lenten season serves as a poignant reminder of our inherent sinfulness and mortality. It prompts us to acknowledge our human frailty and our propensity to stray from the path of righteousness, often succumbing to our ungodly

desires. It underscores the fact that self-redemption is beyond our reach; we stand as deeply flawed individuals, in dire need of a saviour.

Praise be to God that the acknowledgment of our sinful condition also readies us to welcome the Saviour that God Himself has bestowed in His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ! He is the individual who descended to Earth, suffered and died for our sins, that we may be reconciled with God. He is the one who, on Easter, emerged victorious over sin, death, and the devil, rising from the dead!

Those who believe in Christ and have a relationship with Him are changed! We no longer need to pursue or cling on to the things of the world to feel loved and accepted. There is no need to live in worry and fear because we have a Father who will provide for us and has promised never to leave or forsake us.

*"Yet even now," declares the Lord,
"return to me with all your heart,
with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;
and rend your hearts and not your garments."*

*Return to the Lord your God,
for he is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love;
and he relents over disaster." (Joel 2:12-13)*

Return to the Lord who loved you first.

Personal application

- 1) To whom or to what have you been clinging and pursuing besides God?
- 2) Have these things or relationships/friendships led you away from or closer to God?"

Prayer

Gracious Lord,

You are almighty and nothing is hidden from Your sight. Forgive me for setting my heart and mind on the things of the world, putting them else before You. Remind me Lord of my identity as a child of God, loved, accepted and forgiven in our Lord Jesus Christ. By Your Spirit, help me to live for you and draw me closer to you each day.

In Jesus' name. Amen.



6 March: “A Dream Comes Through”

Mr. and Mrs. Raihan are the parents of seven school-going children. Residing in a two-room rented flat, the couple desired to have a place they can truly call home. Consequently, they became participants in Project Lift, a program that accompanies lower-income families on a three-year journey to pursue their aspirations and hopes.

The LCCS team accompanied Mr. Raihan on his journey as he enhanced his skills by enrolling in the 'Cleaning Supervisor' course. This decision came after his former employer, with whom he had been employed for many years, declined to grant him a salary increase. As a result, he secured a position as a cleaning supervisor, which not only came with higher pay but also involved supervisory responsibilities, marking a significant improvement from his previous role as a cleaner.

The LCCS team also established a connection with their children to ensure their well-being. Through mentorship, their two elder daughters began attending school consistently, improved their academic performance, and forged meaningful friendships with their classmates. Both successfully completed their PSLE examinations and advanced to secondary education.

The family took part in LCCS' savings-matching scheme, which enabled them to incrementally build their savings. Through persistent efforts, the family managed to accumulate some savings. Subsequently, the LCCS team facilitated the family's connection with another agency to secure grants for the purchase of their new flat and for carrying out essential renovations.

Presently, the family resides in their newly acquired residence, situated in close proximity to Mr. Raihan's extended family. This proximity fosters stronger connections and mutual support between the family and their relatives. At the same time, Mr. and Mrs. Raihan continue to work towards their goal of providing a stable home environment for their children.

Reflection by Rev Mark Lai (BLC)

Dreams keep us alive, and even more so, dreams make us grow.

But many a time, dreams are beyond our grasp, they are not achievable just by our own hard work or our own efforts alone. As I read this story, I am reminded of another one we find in the Bible.

During those many days the king of Egypt died, and the people of Israel groaned because of their slavery and cried out for help. Their cry for rescue from slavery came up to God. And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. ²⁵ God saw the people of Israel—and God knew. (Exo 2:23-25)

The Israelites, under the oppression of Egypt were crying out, they were in a helpless situation – a situation that they were unable to get themselves out of. If they were to revolt, the mighty hand of Pharaoh would surely come down on them, there was absolutely no other political recourse. There was no way they were going to “pull themselves up with their bootstraps”. They needed someone outside, someone beyond themselves, and someone greater than themselves to help them. And it is very difficult for us to ask for help and to receive help. We are prone to think that we are self-sufficient, we are capable; our pride stops us from asking, from receiving help from outside of us.

As this story tells, and as we read on in Exodus 3, we are reminded that God is always willing and ready to help.

Then the Lord said, “I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey...”

In our helplessness, in our dire and dark situations, God calls us to put aside our pride, and invites us to call out to him for help, for deliverance, for salvation.

He reminds us that there is no shame and nothing to be guilty about when we ask and receive help. He even encourages us to do so, to receive the grace that he is willing and ready to give.

God does not want to leave us in our helplessness, but wants us to trust him, to trust in his help and his grace for us.

And many a time, we may not directly see God's hands delivering us. Instead, we see Him working through various means: for Mr. and Mrs. Raihan's family, that was through LCCS; for the Israelites, God used Moses; for our souls and salvation, He sent Jesus.

It may not be an overnight transformation, an immediate change in the situation, in fact, it would be a slow process, a process that calls us to trust God more and more each day, as we rely more on Him in our helplessness, and as we encounter His grace each day.

In trusting him more each day, we see His hands moving in our lives, and we become more and more like Christ daily.

Personal application

- 1) What are the areas of your life that you are struggling with, that seem to have no change and you are feeling helpless over?
- 2) What is hindering you from asking for help?

Prayer

Father,

I thank You for helping me, even when I am unaware. I thank You for reminding me that You are for me, and it is not Your desire to leave me in my helplessness. You are willing and always ready to help. Therefore, help me put aside all that hinders me from coming to You to ask and receive that which I need. Open my eyes so that I can see how You are working through various means. Help me to respond with thanksgiving. And though the process may be slow, help me to trust You more and more each day, as Your Spirit strengthens and builds my faith in You.

We pray this, trusting in your love and grace for us, through Your Son Jesus Christ. Amen.



13 March: “Turning Life Around with Relationships”

Anson, aged 20, had just entered the final three months of his stay at the Reformatory Training Centre (RTC) when he took part in LCCS' program, "My Journey." This initiative is designed to promote the reintegration of young individuals in detention back into the community through a network of support.

In 'My Journey,' Anson confided in the social worker about his involvement in gang violence, which led to his placement in RTC. He also recounted the estrangement that developed between him and his parents during his adolescence, brought about by their frequent disputes concerning his choice of friends, failed academic pursuits, and undesirable way of life. Anson felt that his parents did not understand his need for belonging, which he found in his association with a gang.

Through dialogues with the social worker, Anson reflected on the consequences of his actions. He regretted wasting his life away confined in an institution. He saw his peers progress in life as they graduated from school, employed with income, engaged in committed relationships. Anson was determined to turn his life around.

Before his release, the social worker formed a discussion circle for Anson and his loved ones to generate a care plan for his reintegration into the community. The participants included Anson's mother, sister and a counsellor from a faith-based agency. Another community leader, also a former offender, was invited as well to offer Anson the opportunity to be involved in community activities.

The circle drew everyone in alignment with Anson's goals and gave them the opportunity to raise concerns and co-create solutions. It allowed Anson to decide on what he would like to do after release and to articulate the support he needs. Anson's mother believed that the circle had prepared her mentally for Anson's release.

With the support from his community, Anson was able to stay on track with the goals that he had set out to achieve upon his release under supervision.

Reflection by Rev Dr William Chang (YCCL)

Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. (Galatian 6:2)

A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother. (Proverbs 18:24)

True friends are supportive and reliable. It's the opposite of fair-weather friends who stick around only in good times. You cannot depend on them in times of trouble.

Anson, like any typical youth in our society, longs for peer friendship to have fun and do the "normal" things a young person would do. Unfortunately, the friends he had chosen changed his life around, but in the wrong direction. Ultimately, led to his incarceration.

The Bible tells us that our Lord Jesus sticks closer than a brother. He even laid down His life for His friend (Jn 15:13). The New Testament records many examples of how our Lord Jesus turned people's life around for the better. One such example is how he turned the life of the chief tax collector, Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10), around. Being a chief tax collector, he has perfected the art of exacting money from the poor with force and threats. He was everyone's nightmare. People stayed away and shunned him while our Lord Jesus befriended and journeyed with him, guided him and eventually transformed his life. A prime example of changing lives through relationship.

Relationship or friendship is a powerful conduit through which lives could be touched and turned around. Relationship or friendship allows accompaniment. Close accompaniment fosters open dialogue and the sharing of personal struggles and challenges. The complexities of troubled lives are disentangled, leading to positive transformation and healing.

The circle of friends or community of support established for Anson comprised people from different walks of life and connections. Such relationships provided Anson with healthy and holistic input for healthy reflections on his messed-up life, prompting him to explore the way forward for a new beginning.

Church is a faith community as well as a community of support. *Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ (Galatian 6:2)* highlights the relational commitment Christians ought to have toward each other during bad

times. Helping one another carry their burden, makes our journey in life easier when the going gets tough.

There is a giving and receiving dynamic here! As much as we need to surround ourselves with good and supportive friends who would shelter us from heavy downfall and the scorching sun, surround ourselves with those who truly care and love us, people who are committed to do us good.

It is equally important for us to extend the same level of support and dedication to the well-being of others, both within and outside the church community. Our own experiences of success and failure can serve as invaluable resources, offering collective wisdom and a strong foundation of support for those who are navigating challenges in their lives.

Prayer

Dear Heavenly Father,

We thank You for friends and loved ones, especially those in the church family. Teach us to carry one another's burden as people whose lives have been touched and turned around because of our relationship with our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Grant us wisdom and opportunities to develop healthy relationships with each other that at the right time we may bless or be a blessing to others.

In Jesus' name. Amen.

Personal application

- 1) Consider thoughtfully who you would involve in your support network during times of crisis. Reflect in prayer on ways to deepen your connections with these individuals and how to meaningfully include them in your life.
- 2) Reflect prayerfully on whose support circle God might be guiding you to join, and contemplate the steps you should take to initiate this involvement.



20 March: “Breaking the Cycle of Bullying”

The transition to secondary school can present challenges for youth as they adjust to a new school environment while undergoing puberty. As they struggle to cope with their intrapersonal developmental issues and environmental stressors, their relationship with others can become strained. Such was the case for the class of Sec 1A where name-calling and disruptive behaviours have been ongoing since the beginning of the year. The bullying went beyond the classroom and was taken to cyberspace, where hurtful words were used behind the mask of anonymity.

In one incident, Jerome tackled Stephen roughly during a football match, intending to exact revenge for a previous altercation. He had someone record the incident and post the footage on social media to brag. These occurrences made the students perceive their school as an insecure environment, leaving those who were bullied feeling powerless. Worried parents reported this to the school, urging it to intervene and prevent the situation from worsening.

The school contacted LCCS through our "Missing Conversation" initiative. This initiative aims to provide assistance to children and young individuals who are facing mental distress due to issues related to bullying. It does so by organizing restorative conversations that are facilitated, with the goal of helping the affected parties not only recover their mental well-being but also rebuild their relationship with others.

LCCS social workers convened a gathering of the affected students, including those responsible for the harm, in a circle to discuss the incident. They also expanded the circle of support for these students by involving their teachers, who played a crucial role in supporting their healing through active listening and empathy. During the circle session, the students shared their fears and disappointments openly, particularly on the recurring instances of hurt within the classroom. Recognizing the necessity to break this cycle of harm collectively, the class took ownership and proposed various methods to create a safe and respectful environment for all. Subsequently, another circle was organized among the affected students, allowing them to act as peer supporters for each other.

The school expressed its gratitude for the support provided by LCCS and agreed that the circle has conveyed a powerful message over the seriousness with which bullying is addressed.

Reflection by Rev Terry Kee (JCC)

And Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." And they cast lots to divide his garments. (Luke 23:34)

Retaliate when threatened, seek revenge when hurt, such is the natural human instinct. As Martin Luther King Jr. also stated in one of his speeches, "Hate begets hate; violence begets violence; toughness begets a greater toughness. We must meet the forces of hate with the power of love."

"You have heard that it was said, An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' 39 But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. (Matthew 5:38-39) This is what Jesus meant when He told Peter, "Put your sword back in its place for all who draw the sword will die by the sword." (Matthew 26:52)

And beyond advocating non-retaliation, Jesus demonstrated love and grace towards those who hurt Him when He called upon the Heavenly Father to forgive those who crucified Him.

He said *"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do"* (Luke 23:34) after they ridiculed and crucified Him even though He can call upon more than twelve legions of angels. - *"Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?"* (Matthew 26:53)

Lewis Smedes once said, "To forgive is to liberate a prisoner and realize that the prisoner was yourself." Every individual bears responsibility before God for their actions and reactions. They are answerable to God for their conduct towards me, just as I am accountable to God for my own actions and reactions towards them. I discover it more manageable to extend forgiveness when I recognize that it not only aligns with God's will but also disrupts the cycle of pain and aggression, ultimately setting me free.

What are your thoughts?

Personal application

- 1) It is not easy to forgive. How does the forgiveness of Christ help you to forgive others?
- 2) How does the understanding that forgiveness liberates oneself rather than the other aid in the process of forgiving?

Prayer

Dear God our Heavenly Father,

You know and understand how much I have been hurt. I need Your grace and power to forgive those who have hurt me. Transform my heart, renew my mind and lead me on a path of healing and reconciliation. Break the cycle of hurt, beginning with myself.

In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.



27 March: "Regaining Voice and Dignity"

Luke, a Secondary 3 student, faced allegations from other students for molesting girls in school. Investigations conducted by the Discipline Master revealed no substantive evidence to these claims. It became apparent that the allegations stemmed from an inadvertent hand contact with a female student, resulting in him being unjustly labelled as a "pervert" by a witness. Regrettably, these baseless rumours spread, leading to his ridicule by others. Consequently, he began experiencing increasing isolation and alienation within the school community. He began to distance himself from his friends, refraining from participating in social activities such as after-class hangouts and online gaming sessions.

Wanting to make things clear, he wished for a chance to tell his classmates about his problems, clear up any confusion, and stop the false accusations. But he also worried if others would trust his words and had some doubts about speaking up.

This prompted the Discipline Master to reach out to a LCCS social worker to help Luke with his problem using a restorative approach. During the talk with the social worker, Luke received empathy and validation for the hurts that he experienced. The social worker also helped Luke tell his side of the story and talk about how it has affected him.

Luke chose to speak up in person and prepared a simple speech to share with his classmates. With the help of the school and the social worker, Luke found the courage to state emphatically that there had been a big misunderstanding. His friends realized they had accused him wrongly and that their actions had hurt him. As a result, they stopped making fun of him and welcomed him back into the school community.

By providing Luke a platform to voice his concerns and to be heard, the social worker helped Luke regain his voice and his dignity.

Reflection by Rev Nick Singh (LCOR)

Sexual dangers are always around in our society, like molestations and committing adultery. This serious wrongdoing affects not just regular folks but even people in high positions, as we've seen in our country recently. Martin Luther, in the Small Catechism, when talking about the commandment "we are not to commit adultery," says that when it comes to matters of sex, our words and actions should be clean and respectable. We require the Holy Spirit's strength to stay pure and respectable in a society filled with sexual temptations.

Luke was accused of molesting girls in his school. As a result, he suffered social isolation and ostracism even though the accusations have been untrue.

In the Bible, there's a tale from Genesis 39, about a man who was wrongly accused of sexual wrongdoing. His name was Joseph; he was good-looking. The wife of his master was attracted to Joseph and tried to get him to be intimate with her. However, Joseph said no. He wanted to stay loyal to his master and, most importantly, to God. Joseph said, "I can't do this terrible thing and go against God." Out of frustration, his master's wife grabbed Joseph's clothes one day and said to him, "Lie with me." Joseph quickly left the house, but his clothes remained behind were used to falsely accuse him of attempted rape. The master was furious and threw Joseph in prison. (Genesis 39)

While Joseph did not have a chance to prove his innocence, Luke with the help of LCCS had the opportunity to clear his name and regain his dignity. Joseph on the other hand, was eventually vindicated by God, who continued to shower him with steadfast love and favour in prison. Joseph's dignity was restored when the prison officer made him the de facto head of the cells.

Have faith in God. Even though we may be falsely accused by others, we can trust that God will restore us like He rehabilitated Luke.

Our Lord Jesus, insulted and falsely accused, took on our shame. In this season of Lent, we reflect on His sufferings in exchange for our salvation. By His grace we too can endure insults when we are humiliated for Christ's sake.

Prayer

Dear Lord,

You were also falsely accused during Your life, even though You were without sin. God raised You from the dead, proving Your innocence. When we face accusations, please give us the strength to place our trust in You. Help us maintain purity and honour in matters related to sexuality. We are grateful for LCCS' restorative approach, which helps those who have been falsely accused regain their voice and dignity. Please bless the ministry of LCCS.

In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.



Acknowledgements

Contributors:

Bishop Lu Guan Hoe

Rev Andreas Latz

Rev Andrew Thinagaran

Rev Mark Lai

Rev Nick Singh

Pr Ray Soh

Rev Sarah Ang

Rev Terry Kee

Rev Dr Willian Chang

Lutheran Community Care Services (LCCS)

LCS Prayer and Worship Committee (Design, Editorial and Translation)

Allan Ng

Amy Tso

Lim Jie

Lim Joshua

Michelle Lu

Peter Lee

Sophia Lu

We trust that the Lenten Prayer Project of 2024 has made Lent a prayerful and meaningful season for you.

We would appreciate your sharing on the encouraging aspects of this project and where there might be room for improvement.

Please provide your comments and suggestions using the QR code below. Thank you for your invaluable feedback!



GIVE PRAY FAST

