

RECOVERY

*The official newsletter of the
Fletcher Group Rural Center Of Excellence*



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WHATEVER YOUR FAITH



The Fletcher Group Rural
Center of Excellence

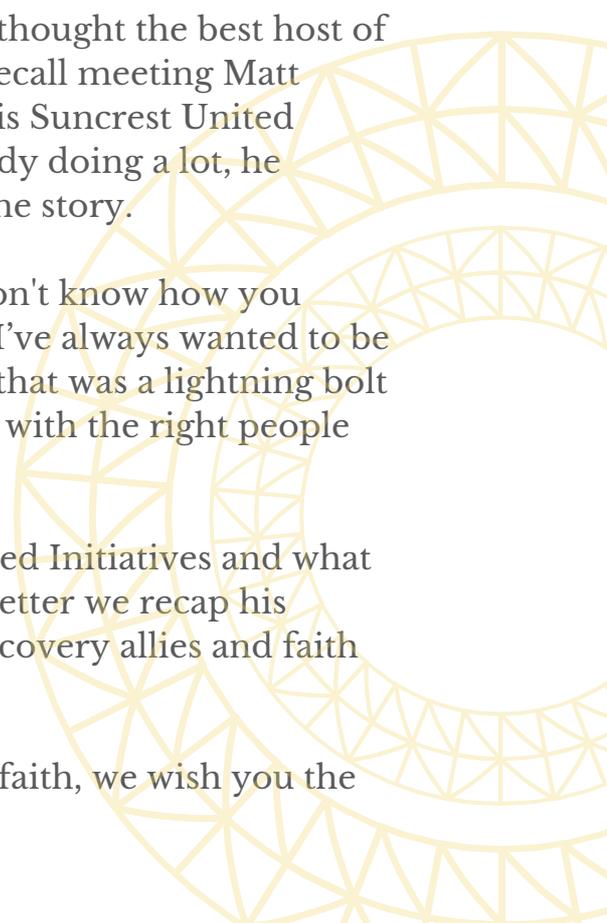
by Founder and Chief Medical Officer Dr. Ernie Fletcher

Because December is a month of religious holidays, we thought the best host of our monthly webinar would be pastor Matt Johnson. I recall meeting Matt when he was running a sober recovery program from his Suncrest United Methodist Church in Morgantown, West Virginia. Already doing a lot, he wanted to do more. But I should probably let Matt tell the story.

"You said 'Matt, your dream is too small. Think big.' I don't know how you knew, but for me that's been a driving force all my life. I've always wanted to be able to take a bigger risk and dream a bigger dream. So that was a lightning bolt moment for me. I knew instinctively that I was working with the right people and doing the right thing."

Matt is today the Fletcher Group's Director of Faith-Based Initiatives and what a wonderful addition he has been. In this month's newsletter we recap his December webinar and highlight the many ways that recovery allies and faith leaders can collaborate for mutual benefit.

As we enter the holidays may I add that, whatever your faith, we wish you the very best and thank you for all the good work you do.



HOW TO PARTNER WITH FAITH-BASED ORGANIZATIONS

Dr. Matt Johnson, the Fletcher Group's Director of Faith-Based Initiatives, believes we're at a unique moment in history as faith-based organizations reassess their role in society and look for more meaningful ways to contribute.

"When we think about recovery, we tend to think about therapists, healthcare workers, criminal justice, potential employers, and services," says Johnson. "But your local faith-based organization could be just as important to partner with."

The value of faith-based organizations was highlighted at the Fletcher Group's most recent monthly webinar. Johnson began by pointing out that churches and other faith-based organizations are often the center of conversation, education, and community life, particularly in rural areas. They also have a solid track record of doing good work on the part of local communities. (Recent data shows a total U.S. economic contribution by such organizations of over \$316 billion.)

Johnson noted that 82 percent of those who have a spiritual awakening during treatment are abstinent one year later, compared to 55 percent for those who did not report a similar awakening.* Another study indicates that forgiveness and purpose in life serve as effective spiritual mechanisms for those recovering from substance use disorders.**

As might be expected, faith-based organizations are already very active in America. Indeed, 73% of all substance use recovery programs include a spirituality-based component. But Johnson sees even greater potential ahead.

"Faith compels these organizations towards work," he says, "and many are looking for new ways to contribute."

Johnson admits there are barriers (see page 3), but once they're overcome, the steps involved in creating effective partnerships are simple, logical and powerful (see page 4).



Driven by a strong belief in the power of faith-based communities to help heal those in recovery, Dr. Matt Johnson came to the Fletcher Group after 15 years serving as a United Methodist Pastor and advocate for people who are marginalized. An innovator and entrepreneur by nature, he delights in launching new initiatives and finding creative ways to connect faith-based entities with their communities. To enlist his unique talents and technical assistance, contact Matt at mjohnson@fletchergroup.org

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“We suffer to get well. We surrender to win. We die to live. We give it away to keep it.”
— Father Richard Rohr

*Geoffrey C. B. Lyons, Frank P. Deane & Peter J. Kelly (2010)

** Addiction Research & Theory, 18:5, 528-543, DOI: 10.3109/16066351003660619

HOW TO OVERCOME BARRIERS

Faith-based organizations are a natural fit for recovery work, says Dr. Matt Johnson, the Fletcher Group's Director of Faith-Based Initiatives. And that's true regardless of religion or denomination.

"The five pillars of Islam, for example, include offering dignity and care for the poor, particularly in terms of food, shelter, clothing, and education," says Johnson. "To me, that sounds a lot like the kind of recovery ecosystem people in recovery need."

Johnson also makes the point that recovery allies and faith-based organizations have much in common. Both require gathering together and, for that reason, were equally challenged when Covid prevented personal contact. Both have also been frequently misunderstood and stigmatized.

"Many faith-based communities have unfortunately equated substance use with moral failing," says Johnson. "But that's wrong. It's a disorder that deserves understanding and treatment, not rejection and punishment."

Faith-based organizations can also misunderstand how recovery works and the crucial role safe housing plays. That lack of understanding can be hard to overcome when faith-based organizations remain inside their 'silos,' refusing to acknowledge or address new and emerging community needs.

But that's changing, says Johnson, who has extensive experience in both recovery- and faith-based work. "Many faith leaders are realizing that community engagement must be more focused and purposeful. You can't just wait for it to happen. Good work requires intentional engagement. Thankfully, I'm seeing more and more of that. There's a real movement now among faith-based organizations to seek partners and explore opportunities that can make a real difference in their communities."

The substance use and opioid use epidemics that have decimated rural America are a natural focus, says Johnson. "We don't always get it right," he says. "I myself have had to apologize for the hurt and harm that's been perpetuated in churches I've served. On the other hand, the idea that people of faith are hypocritical, judgmental, and unwilling to accept



others is also a harmful stereotype. Neither side benefits by clinging to assumptions, staying within their silos, or thinking only they know best."

According to Johnson, those who work in faith-based organizations and those who work in recovery have much to gain from each other. The greatest barrier separating them are the stereotypes of each other. Thankfully, says Johnson, it's an easier barrier to cross than you might think.

"All stereotypes are overcome the same way," says Johnson. "Because it's harder to hate people up close, the key is to simply get in the same room and talk. That's my calling: bringing good people on both sides together to help the people who need it."

CLICK HERE



to watch Dr. Johnson's
December Webinar

SIMPLE BUT EFFECTIVE STEPS YOU CAN TAKE NOW

So what can faith-based organizations do to help? A lot, says Johnson. Here are a few of the simple yet powerful steps he recommends.

Johnson begins with what he calls "space to grow." Many faith-based organizations are property-rich, says Johnson, and may have unused buildings, houses, or land that people in recovery can use in a variety of ways, including holding meetings and safe housing.

"Ask yourself what it would be like to take a space that's used only once a week and re-purpose it for other activities the other days of the week," says Johnson. "How powerful would that be?"

Johnson did exactly that when serving as a local pastor in West Virginia. "It instantly created a meaningful, bonding relationship between the local faith community and local recovery house residents. Church members became immediately invested in the lives of the residents. And the residents found new meaning in life by assuming responsibility and taking care of the property. It all happened so quickly and was so deeply beneficial for everyone," says Johnson.

Another important way of contributing is by providing transportation. Recovery treatments and services are useless if housing residents can't get to them.

Sponsorships, mentorships and the funding of move-in costs are three other critical ways that faith-based organizations can have a positive impact.

Affecting public opinion is equally important. Faith-based organizations can sponsor educational activities around harm reduction and train themselves, with the help of local recovery workers, to fight stigma and NIMBY-ism. (NIMBY stands for "Not In My Back Yard" and refers to the opposition to recovery housing on the grounds that it may bring drugs into the community or lower property values.)

All such educational efforts, says Johnson, should reframe the conversation around dignity and the sacred worth of human life. He cites, as an example, the work of a West Virginia colleague who launched the Ezekiel Project which works to get Naloxone and



Narcan into the hands of faith organizations across the the state.

What about recovery houses?

What can they do to nurture effective partnerships with faith-based organizations? Johnson says it's as simple as inviting them to an open house and showing them the good work you're doing. Some have ministerial staff that welcome new ideas. In either case, try to be as open-minded and collaborative as possible.

"For people of faith, life is always worth the effort," says Johnson. "As long as what you're doing is based on a belief in the dignity and worth of each individual, faith leaders will see the merit of what you're doing and will find a way to help."

But be flexible, says Johnson. "When you get a faith-based organization on board, it can go a lot of directions and encompass a lot."