Here we are at the dawn of another year, and the start of a new decade. In this newsletter, we at LEFSA would like to tell you about some of our recent accomplishments, as well as our plans for the future.

All of this is possible thanks to the kind and generous support of people like you, who realize—as we do—that homelessness is a vicious cycle that is very hard to escape unless the spirit is given support as well as the body. That is what you enable us to do here at LEFSA.

New Providence, Lenox Hill, Paradise, Holy Rosary, The Boulevard Men’s, Franklin Women’s Assessment, and Mainchance Drop-In Center are the New York City shelters that the LEFSA team visits each week. Each shelter has its own unique community. LEFSA has become a lifeline for many people in the shelter system, as we help them find empowerment and tools of transformation. God expects us to move forward no matter what issues we are going through in life. Of course we struggle—but are we struggling well?

Interview with our new team member: Pastor Carl Petrus

How long have you been on the team and how did you meet LEFSA?

I have been volunteering with LEFSA for seven years. I started coming to Leadership Study Day because of my wife. She went to one and was in awe of the things that people were grateful for which we took for granted. She came home and told me about it, so I visited and never left. I was asked to speak for certain occasions and I just kept coming. That evolved into going on retreats and to meetings and other events. I felt like I had to be there. I have recently become an official team member.

Did you have any prior work or volunteer experience before LEFSA you want to mention?

I was the youth pastor at my local church before I became the senior pastor of Center of Hope Church. However, my church volunteer experience does not compare to what I have experienced with LEFSA.

What do you do on the team?

I go into the shelters and assist with spiritual gatherings that LEFSA facilitates. I participate in the Wednesday meetings and monthly men’s meetings and Leadership Study Days.

What does LEFSA mean to you?

LEFSA is extremely important to me because it is the definition of what ministry really is. The love they show for those whom most consider unlovable is one of the most powerful transformative things I have seen. It is beautiful to watch and to be a part of.

I have seen people come not knowing what their next move will be, and find a new lease on life and an expectancy of God to do the miraculous for them. It’s an experience everyone should see.

I’ve been a team member for 16 years now. I enjoy my ministry and the people in our community. I have seen our organization grow and get better. We have some of the most loving team members in the world. I don’t look at this position as a job. To me, it’s my ministry because of the love and care that is given so freely. We would also like to thank all of our donors for all of the gifts that we receive to help our homeless community. Your kindness could never be erased from our hearts, souls and minds. —Team member Georgia
Imagine 150 men and women, homeless and formerly homeless, gathered at the LEFSA monthly Leadership Study Day, sharing about Thanksgiving and Ending Racism on the personal, communal and societal level. As each participant shared their name and what they were grateful for, the room resounded with variations of “I give thanks for life… for my apartment… for God, for Jesus, for the grace that has brought me from despair to hope.” Each person’s words of thanks added to and strengthened the palpable spirit of openness, vulnerability, courage and love in the room. The Spirit of the Living God was present.

Before the movie, Emanuel, was shown, Pastor Addison asked, “what effects has racism had on us, personally, communally, as a society?” I heard comments such as: need to be aware; need a changing heart; learn to be inclusive; forgiveness; need to step up and speak out in love, not judgment; ask God for opportunities to meet others who think differently; need to change our methodology and ways we think and act, since we have internalized ideas that have been with us since the first black slaves were brought from Africa to the Americas.

After the viewing of Emanuel, people were asked to share a thought or feeling. I heard: mourning; heartbroken again; how do you go on; how many times do we have to forgive? Jesus’ words, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” were mentioned by several people as they expressed how they have done things that have hurt people.

Mentioned throughout was the need for forgiveness and the belief in God, whose grace will lead us on this journey toward forgiveness. There was recognition that prayer is needed to soften hearts—our own and others—and that often we need to forgive ourselves before we can forgive others. Accompanying forgiveness is the need for accountability.

We spoke of how the police apprehended the killer of the Emanuel 9—the black people murdered by a white supremacist in their church in South Carolina. If the 21-year-old killer were a black man, would he have been brought in alive? Stories of black men calling the police for help and becoming the victim were raised, as was the need to bring the power of God, of Jesus, of grace into our lives and every situation...for this will bring about the end of racism. Love overcoming hatred. Learning to act and think differently in love and forgiveness will end racism.

The day was powerful. It was a retreat day, with people of God making LOVE visible and alive. It was Charity Rising! Thank you for your leadership on this journey to end racism, and for the gift of journeying together.

(Submitted by Carol De Angelo, Director, Sisters of Charity of New York Office of Peace, Justice and Integrity of Creation, November 11, 2019)
Our Second Annual Talent Show:

In February, LEFSA held its second annual talent show at our Leadership Study Day monthly meeting.

The theme for the day was “Extending the Reign of God through Freedom and Equality: Black History Month Celebration.” We had 18 performers from our community who displayed their talents with songs, works of art, monologue performances, poetry and jokes. It was wonderful to have a forum where members of the community were able to see this side of friends who possess phenomenal hidden talents.

There were about 100 people in attendance. A great time was had by all, and it made others inquire about how they can engage in upcoming events. We are hopeful the next show will be even bigger.

Women’s Empowerment Group Thanksgiving Dinner:

We had a feast! The menu was: turkey wings, stuffing, collard greens, potato salad, peas and rice, macaroni and cheese. The dessert was lemon coconut cake and banana pudding. The theme of the day was “Emotions.” The women shared openly about dealing with emotions during the holiday season: joy, peace, shame, humility, and others. We prayed, sang songs and had a great fellowship. Then we began our holiday feasting and thanked God for all his blessings past, present, and future.

Men’s Spiritual Development Group:

We average 12-18 men per meeting. We had an array of themes in 2019 that sparked new and challenging topics to address in our journey of life. For example: Healthy Vs. Unhealthy Relationships, Being Focused: The Race for Consistency, Fatherhood, Forgiveness and many more. Our enrollment of new members has increased too. We look forward to continuing to explore different themes that will empower us to be better individuals, to address our personal needs and those of our families, and be assets to our community as a whole.

Street Ministry:

Each week, we work to meet the needs of those who are still street homeless and depend on ministries like ours to help give hope and build community and relationships. We would like to thank our Franciscan brothers for assisting us in two street ministry locations: Mid-town and Harlem. Every Monday we serve 200 sandwiches, cakes, water and juice. During the winter months we try to also provide socks, hats, gloves and scarves. We are reminded every week of the gratitude of our community for addressing the needs of those who are sometimes forgotten.

Creativity Ministry:

Once upon a team meeting, we had an idea to start a creativity space for arts and crafts, poetry, writing, photography, and a host of other talents. It would be open to everyone to share these talents with the community. From the first meeting we hit the ground running—we had eight talented artists who showed up eager to get started. Since that meeting, we’ve had 10 sessions for painting, poetry, and tie-dying, which was a favorite and had to be extended to three sessions. We also went on a field trip to Central Park and took pictures to create a collage.

Shower Ministry:

The shower ministry is still open for those who are in need. We have a few community participants who come weekly for this opportunity.
Women’s Retreat 2019:
In May, 22 women attended LEFSA’s annual Women’s Retreat at Mariandale Retreat Center. It was a three-day opportunity for them to get in touch with their spirituality, gather their thoughts and take in the serene surroundings. The women bonded and got to know each other on a more personal level. The LEFSA team facilitated groups on Fruits of the Spirit, Accomplishments, and Love and Relationships. We also had a meditation session and toured the grounds of the Retreat Center. It was amazing to see how uplifted and peaceful everyone was at the end of our stay.

Men’s Retreat 2019:
It is always a blessing when men can sit down and put their egos away in a locked box. That’s what happened this year at our men’s retreat. One theme that stood out for some of the men was “Courage is a habit: practice it daily until it becomes the norm.” It was a wonderful experience to have four new participants who all spoke about the one-on-one time that they spent with other men, and some of the things that we learned about each other.

Co-Ed Retreat 2019:
44 women and men assembled at the LEFSA office for this retreat, full of anticipation of what the Lord had in store for us. There was plenty of chatter, singing, and laughter—and, of course, prayer—going on as we rode the bus to Mariandale Retreat Center for our three-day retreat. Some were there for the very first time. The scenery was breathtaking. Participants took many pictures of geese, wild turkeys, deer, eagles and hawks, and other wonderful things. The food was excellent and there was plenty of it.

I felt blessed to be in attendance at the retreat. It is an experience I will never forget. When the bus first pulled up on the grounds I was fascinated and excited to be at a beautiful place. Once I got to my room I began to cry, because it reminded me of being alone at home. I then went and told someone that I was ready to leave, but I thank God that I stayed. The best part was when we got together for the word of God and Pastor Carl’s segment. Every time he spoke, I felt it deep in my soul. All of the community members displayed so much love and concern. I want to thank them from the bottom of my heart and soul. –Carolyn, retreat participant

Housing Ministry:

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