



PHOTO BY MARK WASHINGTON/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Out of northeast Portland's Augustana Lutheran Church, Pastor Mark Knutson follows in Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. footpath in building coalitions to promote social change. "One person, one church can't do it," he says.

Promoting Justice

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Leslie said that Knutson brings a high level of empathy to his work, and stands out as someone who remains forward-looking and optimistic, even when things are bleak.

"Mark's not afraid to be on the frontline, and he's pulling you along," said Leslie.

Rev. Allen Bethel of the Albina Ministerial Alliance said that he's been able to count on Knutson's support whenever the alliance has taken on issues of police accountability or human services.

"What really stands out is Mark's presence," said Bethel.

In his office at Augustana Lutheran, Knutson explained that from reading King's works he understands that intentional action needs to be taken to initiate social change, which requires coalitions.

"One person, one church can't do it; one politician, one business person can't do it," he said.

He also stressed that it's important to reach out to people who may be on the opposite side of an issue. Knutson has been know to travel to remote places

of Oregon to help facilitate dialogue on issues ranging from the plight of immigrants to water rights battles, often with people almost at each others' throats.

"He [King] had a way of really addressing the issues in this country that were so wrong, and at the same time still loving the people who were instigating it, which is incredible if you think about it," said Knutson.

When Knutson came to Augustana Lutheran in the 1990s, the national church had recently issued an apology to its gay and lesbian members.

But Knutson wanted it to go further, and grant greater rights to gays and lesbians. He began facilitating dialogue with church members and even got 80-year-old members to see his point of view.

In order to foster better collaboration with other organizations, he rents out office space in the basement of the church to seven non-profits, most of which are focused on the rights of immigrants and low-income people.

"It's been enormously important for us because we're a very small organization with very little

funding, and just to have a space to designate for Oregon Farm Worker Ministries is really important," said John Munson of the help Knutson has done for his non-profit.

Ari Rapkin, a co-director with the Community Alliance of Tenants, said that having space next door to other like-minded non-profits has been a good way to swap ideas.

Knutson, 57, was born in Portland and attended Franklin High School and the University of Oregon. After graduating he did a stint training people for jobs in Astoria before heading to semi-

nary school.

After finishing seminary, he worked as the director for youth ministries for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Knutson said that part of the job required frequent travel, which gave him the opportunity to see how other churches operate, which would benefit him when he returned to Portland.

Since taking the reigns at Augustana Lutheran Church in 1995, he's watched the congregation swell to over 700 people, many of them young, which is a difficult feat as churches have seen their membership decline

over the years.

Knutson said that part of the reason he has been able to grow the church is through an inclusive approach that involves "flinging the doors open," as he proudly displays a picture of his diverse congregation.

He also mentioned that he also tries to make connections between the scripture and modern life, so that when his congregants leave Sunday service they will go out and try to positively impact their community.

"When we give of ourselves- when we watch people give of themselves- that's just amazing what that can do," he said.

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