



Shaping theFuture

Summer 2011

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K-9 Comfort Dogs

by Jill Zempel

Bring a dog into any room and you're likely to get some attention. Bring an adorable Golden Retriever "Comfort Dog" into any situation, and you will make some new friends and might even open the doors to ministry.

The dog is the most faithful of animals and would be much esteemed were it not so common. Our Lord God has made his greatest gift the commonest.

—Martin Luther

The idea began after the tragic shooting of students at Northern Illinois University in 2009. LCC brought in Extra Mile Ministries to assist Immanuel Lutheran Church in DeKalb to bring comfort dogs to the campus. The NIU community had such a positive response to the dogs, LCC thought, 'why wait for another disaster to provide this outreach ministry?'

Here's how the ministry works

LCC works only with trained Golden Retriever service dogs. Golden Retrievers have a great temperament, are very trainable, and are approachable. Starting when they are six weeks old, the dogs complete eight months of training – much of which is socialization. The dogs are taught to put their heads in people's laps to encourage interaction, they bow their heads when they sense someone is in need, and some are even trained to pray. These are service dogs, not therapy dogs, so they are allowed to go anywhere that people go.

A congregation or school develops a ministry plan outlining how they will use this new canine staff member. Congregations can use K-9 Comfort Dogs as greeters, at hospitals and nursing homes, with shut-ins, in schools, at funerals, and in the community library, airport, or coffee shop. K-9 Comfort Dogs are also great with special needs children, as reading buddies, and in disaster relief. Wherever the congregation is doing ministry, the dog can participate.

The Parish dogs are trained to have multiple handlers. In a congregation, no less than six handlers are required. In a school setting, there can be two to three handlers. The handlers also go through training on how to work the dog, how to share their faith, and how best to listen to the needs of others. The handlers do the ministry, the dogs help open the door.

"These dogs can Pete Imlah, LCC
Director of Mission

Yes, ministry. The only program of its kind, [Lutheran Church Charities \(LCC\)](#) has 26 certified-service Golden Retriever "K-9 Comfort Parish Dogs." There are currently 15 dogs working at Lutheran churches and schools across the country. "The purpose of the K-9 Comfort Dog Ministry is to bring the mercy and compassion of Christ to people who are hurting," says Tim Hetzner, President of LCC. "The dogs become the bridge to do the ministry."

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Review, Reflect, Resolve

What incidents in the past year would have been prime time for K-9 at your school or congregation?

What opportunities and obstacles would you face in establishing a K-9 ministry? From whom would you need to seek approvals and support?

Links & Resources

For more information on the K-9 Parish Comfort Dog Ministry go to www.lutheranchurchcharities.org or call 866-455-6466. To schedule a Comfort Dog Chapel visit, contact Pete@Lutheranchurchcharities.org. You can also request a Chapel Packet, posters, and a DVD.

LCC operates what is called "dollarin/dollar out" giving, 100 percent of each donation goes to what it is donated for. To donate to the K-9 Comfort Ministry, visit their [website](#).

All Parish Dogs have their own business



get people who are hurting to open up in a way they aren't able to with others."

and Outreach, has overseen the ministry for the last 18 months. Much of his time is spent visiting churches, schools, hospitals, prisons, and disaster relief sites with Tillie, a K-9 Comfort Dog. "When I have Tillie or another comfort dog with me, people approach me," says Pete. "People always want to know why

the dog is wearing a service vest. "This dog is here for you. This is a comfort dog." Once they begin petting the dog, they start talking and sharing with me what they have been through or what worries them. That's how the door to ministry is opened. I can invite them to church, pray with them, or give them the name of a pastor or counselor. These dogs can get people who are hurting to open up in a way they aren't able to with others."

Pete and four K-9 Comfort Dogs recently spent a few weeks in tornado-ravaged Joplin, Missouri, as part of the LCC Disaster Relief team. "The stories that we heard were amazing. As she was crying and holding on to a Comfort Dog, one young girl recalled seeing the tornado coming, hiding in a freezer at work, surviving only to learn that one of her best friends died minutes away. She was able to share that grief with us through the dog and that's a huge step towards healing." Within the next few weeks Immanuel Lutheran Church and Martin Luther School, Joplin, Missouri, are getting a Comfort Dog to help their community heal and rebuild.

Because the dogs exert so much energy comforting others, they can only be worked for about 2 1/2 hours a day – especially if they are in a high stress environment. The handlers are trained to watch for elevated stress levels in the service dogs. When the dog is wearing his vest, he knows he has a purpose. When the vest is removed, he's just a great dog.

'That dog was the first person who has ever loved me.'

If this ministry wasn't amazing enough, there's more. Most of LCC's K-9 Parish Dogs are trained by inmates at an Illinois prison through a professional service-dog school. It's a strict program rewarding only those inmates who are dedicated and can manage the challenge. One inmate recently said, "That dog was the first person who has ever loved me." For many of these inmates having access to the comfort and love the service dogs provide has completely changed their attitudes and their lives. As part of the relationship, which now exists between LCC and the prison, the warden will often call Pete to bring comfort dogs to help with an inmate who is grieving or needs care.

Gunnar

In November 2010, Walther Lutheran High School, Melrose Park, Illinois, welcomed K-9 Comfort Dog, Gunnar, to their staff. How Gunnar even came to be part of their ministry is a story of mercy and healing.

Last summer Eli, a sophomore at Walther, died in a drowning accident. LCC Comfort Dogs were brought to the high school to help students and teachers with their grief. This was the first time Gail Grebasch, guidance counselor at Walther, and her husband, Doug, Principal at St. Paul Lutheran School in Melrose Park, had seen the Parish Dogs in action.

"There was one boy who had been a good friend of Eli's who was really struggling with his grief," says Gail. "The dog walked over, put his head on the boy's lap and the boy held on to the dog and just cried. Later he was able to start talking about Eli's death."



After seeing first-hand what the dogs were able to do in a school setting, Doug and Gail began working with LCC to develop a plan to get a K-9 comfort dog for Walther and St. Paul to share.

Tragically, on Labor Day, 2010, Doug died of a heart attack. He left behind Gail, their son, and his ministry at St. Paul. Knowing

cards and Facebook pages. Friend them or "like" them on [Facebook.com](#).



Other articles you might be interested in in this issue of **Shaping the Future:**

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[Crossing Over from Fear to Hope](#) by [Rev. Dean Nadasdy \(Feature\)](#)

that the Comfort Dog program was so important to Doug, Gail requested that donations be made to the Parish Dog Ministry in Doug's memory.

I know the student who has had discipline issues or academic struggles. But to Gunnar, every kid comes in with a clean slate. He loves everyone unconditionally – like Jesus loves us.

In October, Gail received a call from Pete at LCC that the Comfort Dog was being delivered earlier than expected. With that call, Gail along with Linda Abbe, the registrar at Walther, became Gunnar's handlers. Gunnar is a beautiful European Cream Retriever, and his job is to go to work at the high school every day. He sits in Gail's Guidance and Counseling office, and students and teachers stop in all day to pet him and "get their Gunnar fix."

He is usually at the school entrance greeting students at the beginning and the end of the day. He loves playing ball, so after the halls have cleared, students will often throw balls down the corridors for him to fetch. Gunnar attends chapel services at Walther, Walther Academy, and other Lutheran schools in the area. This Spring he even attended the memorial service for a Walther alumni who was killed in the war in Afghanistan. The young man was a "Gunnar."

"I believe Gunnar is another arm that the Lord is using to help people," says Gail. Gunnar accepts everybody. I know the student who has had discipline issues or academic struggles. But to Gunnar, every kid comes in with a clean slate. He loves everyone unconditionally – like Jesus loves us. Having Gunnar at Walther is more than having a pet at the high school. He relates to people in a way that our human nature doesn't allow. I've seen kids lie down on the floor in my office and just talk to him. Or they will come in and once they start petting his head, they just open up and talk about whatever is bothering them. Gunnar helps take their minds off the stress of whatever the situation is."

"Kids have suicidal thoughts, they might be having a hard time at home, or they might be struggling at school. Gunnar is trained to love them and care about them. Once those doors are opened, the conversation with me is often more effective. Gunnar believes there's no kid who is not lovable. As a counselor, just having Gunnar around me is a constant reminder that people need to know someone loves them."

"Having Gunnar at Walther has changed the whole demeanor of the school. Walther is a family, and somehow having Gunnar here has made a difference for all of us."

In addition to being there for the Walther students, Gunnar also loves being with the faculty. He attends faculty devotions and tends to sit next to a faculty member who needs some extra love. A few months ago, after making his rounds before devotions, Gunnar settled next to a young teacher whose grandmother had passed away earlier in the week. "He just seems to know who is hurting and goes straight to that person and puts his head in their lap," says Gail. "If I didn't see it all of the time, I wouldn't believe it. Having Gunnar at Walther has changed the whole demeanor of the school. Walther is a family, and somehow having Gunnar here has made a difference for all of us."

When Gunnar isn't working, he divides his time at Gail and Linda's homes living a normal "dog's life."

K-9 Comfort Dogs cost between \$8,000 to \$10,000 per dog. They are full-bred Golden Retrievers

and the service training is extensive. LCC asks that the money for the Parish dogs does not come from the congregational or association budget so that the dog is not a fixed expenditure possibly taking dollars from another ministry. Groups who handle the Comfort Dogs often find veterinarians and groomers to donate services in order to keep costs down.

All Parish Dogs have their own business cards and Facebook pages. Friend them or "like" them on [Facebook.com](https://www.facebook.com).

As Tim Hetzner says, "Lutherans have theology right. Bring a dog into the picture and people start petting him, asking questions, and start talking." That's the bridge to outreach. That's the bridge to healing and mercy from God.



*Jill Zempel is Editor of **ShapingtheFuture** and has a German Shepherd named Segen (German for "Blessing").*

Photos provided by Lutheran Church Charities, Addison, Illinois, and Walther Lutheran High School, Melrose Park, Illinois.



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