

# PATHWAYS for Advocacy

**Partnering with faith-based organizations and networks forges relationships that expand ministerial impact.**

By Val Walker, *Ecumenical and Interfaith Ministries Team co-chair*

For Zac Harmon-McLaughlin, one phone call to a pastor in his area built a lasting ecumenical relationship that led to advocacy on a large scale. At the time, Zac was responding to an immediate need. “I wanted to make sure no child went hungry in Orange, California—that there were safe places for the community,” said Zac, co-chair of Community of Christ’s Ecumenical and Interfaith Ministries Team.

Building upon this connection, Zac became involved with Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice (CLUE) and California Power and Light, a climate-change organization. Engaging with local ecumenical and interfaith networks prompted him to advocate for policy change to a city government panel.

“The reality is, in the United States about 80 percent of food pantries, homeless shelters, and nonprofits are faith-based,” said Zac, now director of the Community of Christ Seminary at Graceland University. “We were able to say to government leaders, ‘Hey, we are the community’s caretakers. We need you to implement policy changes that reflect that. We are doing this together out of a sense of aligned mission, caring for our neighbor, and as our theological mandate. We’re the people that vote in this community.’”

Zac’s network in California continued to grow and led him to relationships with pastors, priests, and clergy from all over the country. Since then, he has participated on government councils, lobbied the US Congress, and been to United Nations gatherings.

“All of this began because of just one little story, ‘Hey, this family can’t eat. What are we going to do about that?’ Powerful religious networking can happen anywhere. Look at what’s happening in your neighborhood. Expand your relationships and possibilities,” Zac said.

“Participating in ecumenical and interfaith work in the Pacific Northwest has brought new, deeper,

mind-expanding meaning to what it means to love my neighbor,” said Kathy Sharp of Bothell, Washington, USA, a member of the Ecumenical and Interfaith Ministries Team. “My neighbors are now Buddhist, Muslim, Jewish, Zoroastrian, Baha’i, Unitarian, and from many different Christian denominations. They are also Spanish-speaking immigrants and asylum seekers from Central and South America.”

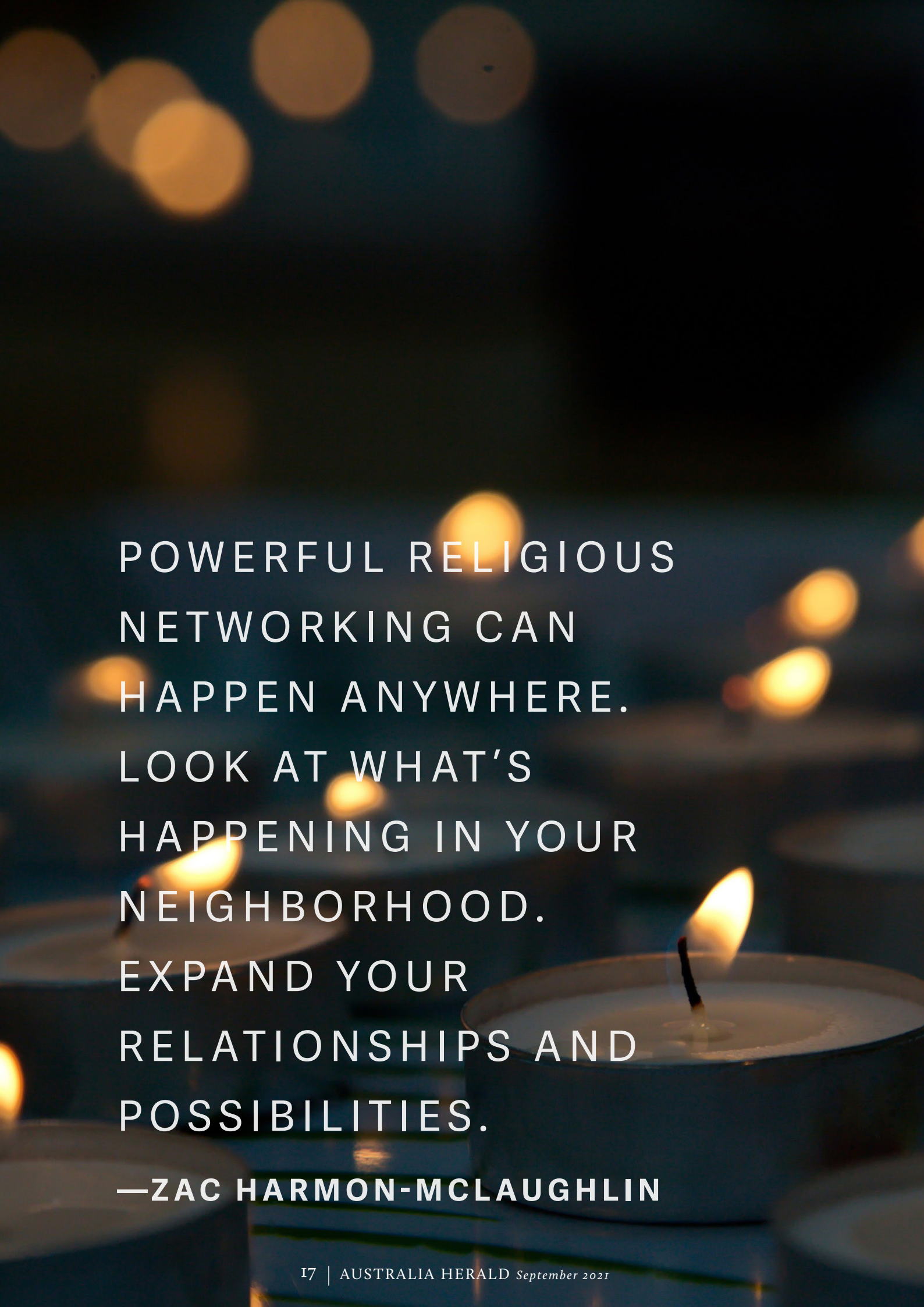
A few years ago, local immigrant advocacy organizations asked The Church Council of Greater Seattle to help them accompany immigrants facing the often confusing, nerve-racking, and expensive immigration and criminal court systems in the USA. The Council amplified the call to their interfaith connections and about 100 people responded.

“We are not social workers or legal advisors. We are helpful neighbors,” Kathy said. As escorts, their role is to focus on their immigrant neighbors’ well-being and logistics related to their cases. They are trained in the steps of the immigration process, which can lead to permanent residency, deportation, or many years of uncertain limbo.

Bilingual companions bridge language barriers and reduce anxiety in documentation appointments. Sometimes the escorts offer transportation to courtrooms. Simply having a companion can diffuse some fear.

“We sit in court as a supportive presence while they appear before the judge and prosecuting attorney, represented by their attorney,” Kathy explained. “We are silent witnesses, observers, and note-takers. Immigrant advocates believe clients are treated with greater respect when white citizens are present on their behalf, though we never speak.”

“I am so grateful for the trust and vulnerability of all my new neighbors who let strangers like me become their friends, witnesses, and supportive companions as we walk together ‘in the midst of the difficult questions and struggles of life,’” Kathy said (Doctrine & Covenants 163:2a). ■



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