



Who Is Our Neighbor?

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For the past couple of years, my team and I have been doing street-based harm reduction outreach in Washington Square Park across from our office in Judson Memorial Church. At least twice a week, we pack up carts with homemade sandwiches and baked goods, safer drug use, safer sex, and overdose prevention supplies, hygiene and wound care kits, and walk the neighborhood making connections and engaging in conversation with our neighbors who live in and near the park. Often, a number of our neighbors follow us back to the office to shower, obtain clean clothing, pick up mail they have had delivered to the church, and have the opportunity to dream aloud, receive prayer, or just make small talk.

This past Wednesday, as outreach began we were alerted that one of our unhoused neighbors was being detained, that Parks Department officers were kneeling on his neck while working to zip-tie his hands behind his back. This person, like many of our neighbors, struggles with mental health issues and substance use disorder. All have become targets for violent removal by local homeowners and businesses in partnership with the New York Police Department.

As long as the park has been in existence, there have been organized efforts to eliminate, remove, and ban particular people from the public square, a conflict rooted in who is perceived to be legitimate humans and neighbors, whose human rights are respected, and who deserves compassionate care.

With Washington Square Park as a front yard, Judson has long used the public square as an organizing space, advocating for the rights of all New Yorkers, as well as providing health and community care in partnership with our most marginalized neighbors in the Greenwich Village neighborhood.

In the 1950s, Judson and its leader [Reverend Howard Moody](#) were instrumental in advocating for healthcare and expanded evidence-based treatment access for people using heroin. They rejected the dominant punitive approach in drug policy and advocated for whole person health care instead. Politicians and the public at large overwhelmingly supported laws that removed and incarcerated people who used heroin. Moody mobilized citizens to demand change and formed a grassroots coalition.

During the 1960s, when abortion was still illegal in the United States, Judson began an initiative that offered abortion referrals to people with unwanted pregnancies. The initiative, called the Clergy Consultation Service, quickly grew from a small group of [21 Protestant and Jewish religious leaders](#) to a movement of thousands of clergy members around the country.

In the 1970s, while vice teams were criminalizing and rounding up people who do sex work throughout New York City, [Judson Memorial Church's](#) Rev. Howard Moody [responded](#) by running a mobile ministry using a van, nicknamed the "hospitality wagon," to provide medical, legal, and emotional support to these same sex workers.

Judson was also a site in the 1960s and 1970s for LGBTQIA+ political gatherings. In 1966, a Greenwich Village protest arose against the Lindsay administration's "Operation New Broom," which attempted to "clean up" the Washington Square area by raiding gay bars, restaurants, and bookstores, and by entrapping gay men.

With the emergence of HIV/AIDS in the 1980s, Judson became one of New York's first compassionate churches, hosting an AIDS support group and conducting many memorial services. Church

members launched harm reduction kit making parties, where church members make safer sex and safer injecting kits for a local harm reduction organization, Lower East Side Needle Exchange Program (Alliance for Positive Change)—a ministry that is still running to this day.

For nearly two centuries, Washington Square Park has been a place to linger, to play, to celebrate or demonstrate. It functions not only as a public park beloved by locals, but also as a campus green, a crossroads, a performance space, a magnet attracting visitors from around the world, as well as a home and community building space for an increasing number of our most marginalized neighbors and New Yorkers.

The videos that my team recorded of our neighbor being restrained and detained, and ultimately transported to Bellevue Hospital against his will this past Wednesday, was shared with the New York City and New York State Health Departments and the Office of Drug User Health at the AIDS Institute, who is coordinating an investigation. One of a stream of videos showing detentions by police, Immigration and Custom Enforcement Agents, and National Guard deployed to our cities blinding us to the humanity of the people who are being detained, blinding us to the humanity of our neighbors.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The Rev. Erica Poellot serves as the Minister for Minister of Harm Reduction and Overdose Prevention Ministries in the national setting of the United Church of Christ.

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