



LIBERATION. LOVE. HARM REDUCTION.

www.faithinharmreduction.org

Welcome Letter



Welcome to the Faith in Harm Reduction Summer Newsletter!

This summer we are featuring some of the incredible work of **Eli Poore**, **Hill Brown** and **SOOAR (Strategies to Overcome Obstacles and Avoid Recidivism)** in Michigan. In each issue we will feature a partner organization and spiritual leader and share their transformative work. If you know an organization or leader we should highlight please reach out to us at elizabeth@ncchurches.org.

Spiritual Leaders Spotlight



Our first Spiritual Leader for this summer newsletter is **Eli Poore**:

Hi there, Faith in Harm Reduction Family! It is such a privilege to be featured in this month's newsletter, and I'm looking forward to getting to better know this network of superstars and all of the incredible work that is being done in so many communities. I'm particularly excited to have recently begun connecting with this group, a collaborative from which I have drawn so much inspiration from the work, principles, and mission. I have to admit- I've definitely been a "Faith in Harm Reduction Stan" for the past few years since learning about the organization which seemed to align so deeply with the work that I am called to do in the world.

So, a little bit about me- I currently live in Corpus Christi, Texas with my partner Angela, my stepkids, and way too many cats, but I'll soon be relocating to Portland, Oregon to serve for the church year as the Intern Minister at First Unitarian Church. I recently graduated from Starr King School for the Ministry/Graduate Theological Union with an M.Div and an MA, a very big deal for me as I spent 2007-2010 in jail/prison for drug related charges, and I was the first person in my family to graduate with anything higher than a vocational degree. In addition to being a working class, formerly incarcerated Unitarian Universalist Minister in formation, like many of us, I hold a spectrum of other identities- I am proudly Queer, Trans, Non-binary, formerly homeless, and both a person in long term recovery from Opioid Use Disorder (for which I personally utilize and advocate for Medication-Assisted Treatment (MAT)) and as a Person Who Uses Drugs (PWUD), the latter a complexity that is often both difficult and joyful to navigate. I find that there is Spirit, Strength, and deep Holiness inherent within these complexities and "mixities" in all of us and within the exploration of these on our own spiritual journeys- and particularly, most particularly, in community with others. I find engaging with these complexities in myself, in the Divine, in others and in communities, especially those which have been traditionally oppressed or marginalized to be a way to engage powerfully with Spirit. And on my best days, I'm able to find joy and connection with the totality of all that I am and know that it is good and holy, and others, I still struggle. And I'm figuring out that this is okay too. To be right here, as I am.

My journey with Harm Reduction work began when I started training as a Peer Support Specialist just before seminary. My program was specific to those with Opioid Use Disorder, and was funded by the State to "combat the opioid overdose crisis". I distributed naloxone to everyone who identified as a heroin user at entry and explained how to recognize an overdose. I recognized the need for information and safer use supplies as well, but as an "abstinence only" program, I was denied my request to obtain and distribute these, even after I obtained funding myself. When the treatment center, locally owned and run, was bought out unexpectedly by a corporation that I thought to be engaging in immoral practices, I left my position and began a small operation while I attended seminary full-time, distributing safer use supplies, and providing training on recognizing and intervening in the case of an opioid overdose. I called it the Recovery Collective- intent on recognizing Harm Reduction - any positive change - as recovery. It was later in my development that I connected my recovery/Harm Reduction work and my spiritual calling together, but once I made the connection I knew immediately that the draw I felt towards Harm Reduction was a spiritual one - about the inherent worth and dignity of human beings who are so often denied it through shame, stigma, and oppressive criminal systems which I have experienced firsthand, where oppressive systems, racism and white supremacy, homophobia and transphobia, economic oppression- where all of these converge to offer up the most vulnerable among us into jails, prisons, abusive treatment centers, or into ashes or graves. Harm Reduction is not always the grit of the streets, but this is where I am called. To the margins of the margins.

For me, Harm Reduction is a celebration of life, of Spirit, and of hope, and I gain this from my friends on the streets as much as I find it from their friendship, from witnessing their resilience in the face of so much struggle and trauma and oppression, and from witnessing the ways that they care for one another that many times unhelped, non-drug using people simply don't. My spiritual paths, which include Buddhist, Sufi, Pagan, and Unitarian Universalist traditions teach of the inherent dignity of all people-our oneness. I dream of a world where no one is left outside the circle of dignity and kindness. I know you do too, and I look forward to making this real together.



Faith in Action

- Check out our Spirit of Harm Reduction Toolkit <https://harmreduction.org/issues/harm-reduction-basics/spirit-of-harm-reduction-a-toolkit-for-communities-of-faith-facing-overdose/>
- Register for the National Harm Reduction Conference <https://conference.harmreduction.org/registration/>
- Register, submit and abstract, and/or submit an scholarship application for the **Southern Harm Reduction Conference** in Atlanta, GA, August 25th to 27th.
- Register for the **Center for Addiction and Faith Conference**, to be held October 6th to 8th in Bloomington, MN and virtually.
- Take the Gilead COMPASS Faith Coordinating Center's survey https://wakeforest.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_45b3NcBygLC2TXM

Spiritual Leaders Spotlight



Our second Spiritual Leaders Spotlight for the summer newsletter is **Hill Brown**, Southern Director for Faith in Harm Reduction. I am looking forward to expanding the educational and bridge-building work that FIHR has already been engaged in to an area of the US I was raised in and feel committed to. The South is often discussed as a region unprepared for radical movements like Harm Reduction. I know that isn't true. While I was the executive director of Steady Collective I got to see the kind of impact an informed, justice oriented group of Southern faith leaders can have for Harm Reduction organizations and their participants. I am ready to help facilitate these invaluable partnerships while offering accompaniment and spiritual support to Harm Reductionists in this region.

How do you connect faith/spirit and harm reduction?

I am a Christian and put succinctly, I believe followers of Jesus are called to proclaim the reign of the God of Liberation and decry the anti-reign. We realize the first part of this calling by siding with the people God sides with- people who are oppressed and heartbroken by prevailing systems- offering them relief and material supports. And we decry the anti-reign when we see and address oppression, domination, and harm at their roots by holding those in power accountable and dismantling systems when necessary. Harm Reduction is a human rights movement where I can live out my spirituality by supporting people where they are through acts of services and presence and opposing, in word and deed, the corrupt systems that seek to annihilate those people.

How do you ground yourself/practice self-care/community care?

I read a lot of poetry (I am thumbing through works by Jericho Brown, Sam Sax, Lucille Clifton, Danez Smith, Ada Limon, Malcolm Watershed...who and what lives here. Humans are really struggling. The systems we have created are flatter in ways that terrify. Certainly our systems have also caused significant damage to the land. And yet my watershed feels much healthier than other communities/spaces where I spend my time. Taking a less anthropocentric approach to thinking about this moment and our collective future feels really vital. I know I am not unique in this reframing and I feel really grateful for writers and thinkers who are showing me new ways to interact with the world.

Why do you have faith in harm reduction?

There are so many reasons that I have faith in this movement despite the challenges presented by capitalism and gentrification (both within the movement and in the spaces where Harm Reductionists have historically operated). We are naming that gentrification both principles or practices we say the name of the work we engage in: "harm reduction". We are naming that harm is happening. Culturally we are struggling with so much denial. We are surrounded by people who are looking away from harm, making a choice not to see. So the very repeating of the name of our work is an invitation into an act that has become subversive.

I continue to be animated by Harm Reduction's history. We are part of a movement that held up anti-racism, prison abolition, popular education, self-determination, queer liberation, and disability justice (among other things) as essential values and forces decades before these ideas were discussed as openly as they are now. I have faith that if we study this past and appreciate and listen to our movement elders we can continue the work of bringing a new, more just world into being. And of course, more than anything else, I have faith in Harm Reduction because I have seen how lifesaving and transformative it is for individual syringe access program participants. Harm Reduction holds, values, and centers people who have been treated with so much discard. There isn't another framework that feels as kind as Harm Reduction. We are in desperate need of spaces where kindness is the order of the day.

Partner Highlight



Our partner highlight this month is the SOOAR is an acronym for **Strategies to Overcome Obstacles and Avoid Recidivism** in Michigan, led by Executive Director, **Valerie Kelley-Bonner**.

SOOAR is an acronym for Strategies to Overcome Obstacles and Avoid Recidivism. We are a 501c3 nonprofit corporation and a licensed Community Awareness Information and Training (CAIT) Provider by the State of Michigan Department of Community Health Substance Abuse Division that provides prevention, life skills, harm reduction, and community mobilization services. We are proud of the many ways we remove barriers and improve the quality of life for participants and the community at large. Our mission: By implementing leadership strategies we encourage, enlighten, and empower at-risk individuals by integrating life skills programming, harm reduction, and substance use prevention services stimulating positive personal change that leads to more productive lives.

How do you connect faith/spirit and harm reduction?

When applied correctly, faith and spirituality lays the foundation for positive mental health outcomes, including more optimism that contribute to the recovery process. Spirituality counteracts self-rejection and creates a positive sense of self, and provides an escape, when one is tempted beyond their ability.

How do you ground yourself/practice self-care/community care?

It can be incredibly easy to get caught up in the chaos of daily life, and forget that taking care of myself is not an option, but a priority. Taking care of yourself sounds like an easy and simple task, but the reality is that I struggle to find healthy ways to take care of myself. Mindfulness is my primary self care technique. Staying in the present moment can be difficult, and even uncomfortable at times. However, mindfulness gives me a chance to get in touch with what's really going on inside me, and allows the chance to explore emotions and thoughts that I avoided and find peace.

I set healthy boundaries by creating a healthy balance between work, family, social life, and harm reduction activities. All of these things can be fulfilling, but if you're focusing too much on one aspect of your life, you'll quickly find yourself feeling overwhelmed. **Setting boundaries** regarding who you spend time with, where you go, and what you do are essential to self-care.

Why do you have faith in harm reduction?

My team and I approached several different churches and religious identities before starting "Boots on the Ground" harm reduction program. The result of these conversations were appalling. What stood out the most is that a sick church can save a dying world.

After much thought, consideration, and prayer it was revealed that God called me to care because He knew that Trische Duckworth and I would go against the status quo and do what is right for the people. This birthed "Called 2 Care (C2C) Ministries, the spiritual arm of our harm reduction program. C2C is a "no judgement zone". We appeal to those who are hurting and have been traumatized in life and may not have found acceptance inside the church. We truly meet people where they are and embrace the fact that we are all God's children.

Wisdom Saying of the Month

You have always been, and always will be, worthy of love, care, and connection. No part of you is unlovable. The divine—sacred—God is yours if you want it. You don't have to do it alone. We are capable of holding the truth of your story. Complicated is allowed. Your life/the lives of people you love are valuable, even if the law indicates otherwise. You will not lose everyone. You will help more than you know. I will attend to my healing so I can better attend to yours.

—Blyth Barnow, *Feminary*

+ Share a prayer/spell/poem or spiritual practice with us. Let us know if we have permission to share your harm reduction on our website or newsletter. <https://faithinharmreduction.org/prayer-submission>

Want to tell us more, contact us here at Elizabeth@ncchurches.org or at <https://faithinharmreduction.org/>

