

firmly in mind. (Need to brush up on the red flags? Here's a resource: <https://bit.ly/2Uv0MZe>.) Ask questions privately when you are concerned and make referrals to services. Stay in touch.

Victims of abuse also need material support. You can mail gift cards for groceries, gas, or pharmacies to the office address of your local domestic and sexual assault service agency. The

advocates there will make sure those gift cards are put in the hands of people experiencing abuse.

Now more than ever, United Methodist faith leaders and congregations have a critical role to play in helping to keep those who are experiencing abuse safer. We can and should be the sign in the window: "call me if you need help."

## In Brief

### Pre-existing Disparities Revealed seminar program launches virtual series on COVID-19

Church and Society takes its signature seminar program virtual in a series of webinars on COVID-19 and social justice issues. The weekly series, called Pre-existing Disparities Revealed, explores how the pandemic intersects with topics such as systemic racism, the cartel system, and access to food.

"COVID-19 revealed societal injustices that already existed. This pandemic has magnified familiar societal, political, and economic disparities—now with the added urgency of a public health crisis," said Aimee Hong, Senior Executive Director of Education and Engagement.

"We will hear from experts and learn how to take action for a long-lasting change towards a more just post-COVID-19 world," says Hong.

Webinars will occur every Thursday, starting May 21 at 2 PM ET. Topics include:

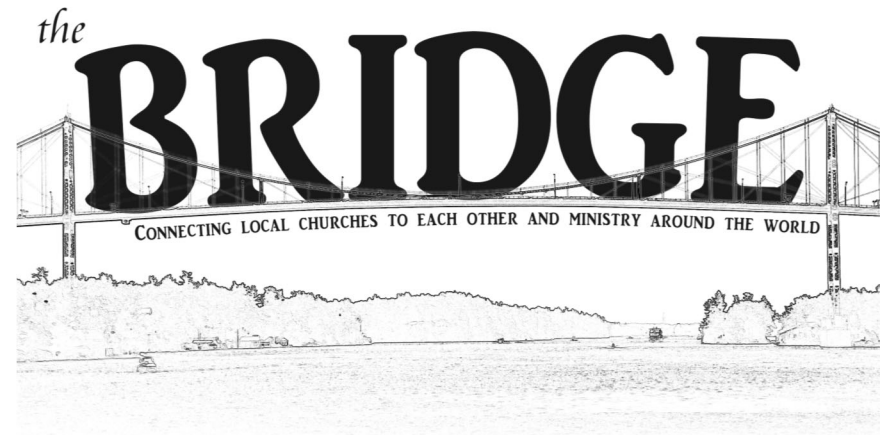
- **May 21:** Systemic Racism and Discrimination during COVID-19
- **May 28:** Confined and Vulnerable: Detained and Incarcerated during COVID-19
- **June 4:** From the Ground to the Table: Food Insecurity during COVID-19
- **June 11:** A Just and Peaceable Global Relief from COVID-19
- **June 18:** Imagining a Just Economy post COVID-19

All webinars are free and open to all. Visit <https://bit.ly/COVID19disparities> to register for any of these webinars.

*The Bridge is a Conference Communications Ministry tool that delivers to local churches news and stories of ministry from around the Upper New York Conference and the world. For more news and stories visit:*

**[www.unyumc.org](http://www.unyumc.org)**

Following this issue, the *Bridge* will start its summer publishing schedule. The *Bridge* will be published once a month in June, July, and August and will be sent to local churches the week before the third Sunday of the month.



The Upper New York Conference's vision is to live the gospel of Jesus Christ and to be God's love with our neighbors in all places.

## A look inside!

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# Faith community support for those experiencing abuse

**By the Rev. Dr. Anne Marie Hunter, Elder New England Annual Conference Safe Havens Interfaith Partnership Against Domestic Violence and Elder Abuse**

Last month, in downtown Boston, a sign appeared in an apartment window that is visible from the adjoining apartment where older adults live. The sign says, "Call me if you need help," and provides a name and phone number.

As COVID-19 spreads in our families, congregations, and communities, we are all reaching out to those we know and love - even to complete strangers. During this difficult time, I invite your prayers for them and for us all.

On that prayer list, please include those facing domestic and sexual violence and elder abuse. While social distancing will slow the virus, isolation is both a risk factor and a weapon of abuse. "Sheltering in place" with someone who is abusive is at best dangerous and at worst a death sentence.

Katie Ray-Jones, CEO of the National Domestic Violence Hotline (800-799-7233/800-787-3224 TTY), described how social isolation impacts abuse survivors: "their ability to seek help or guidance is significantly limited . . . many of the tools in a survivor's toolbox feel like they're disappearing rapidly" (PBS NewsHour, March 27, 2020).

Adding to this concern is the fact that, since the beginning of the pandemic, gun sales around the U.S. have soared. We know that the presence of a gun in a home where there is domestic violence makes it five times more likely that

someone will be killed. This is a nightmare scenario.

People experiencing abuse turn first for help to people they trust: friends, family, and, often, faith leaders or someone in their faith community. The 2009 Georgia Domestic Violence Fatality Review stated, "during a trauma, victims are five times more likely to seek the aid of clergy than any other professional. Clergy are people they know and trust."

While survivors of abuse are at greater risk and have fewer opportunities to reach out for help, we need extraordinary, community-based efforts to provide access to safety and services. For example, in France and Spain, a code word has been established that survivors can use to ask a pharmacist to call the police.

As many countries that are experiencing "lockdown" have realized: this is the time for extraordinary measures to reach out to and provide support for victims of abuse.

During this emergency, Safe Havens is calling on all United Methodist and all United Methodist congregations because we need your help! There are several important, concrete steps you can take to support survivors. Learn more about Safe Havens by visiting [www.interfaithpartners.org/](http://www.interfaithpartners.org/).

Many UMCs have posters in restrooms with state hotline numbers and local domestic and sexual violence services. Now that congregations have gone virtual, make sure this information (which you can get by calling the national hotline: 800-799-7233/800-787-3224 TTY) is



Photo courtesy of the New England Conference

*The Rev. Dr. Anne Marie Hunter was guest speaker at the 2017 Pre-Lenten Gatherings in the New England Conference.*

readily available on your congregation's website. Put it in the footer of every newsletter, under your email signature, and on your congregation's Facebook page. Get the word out that sexual and domestic violence services are still open to provide free and confidential support and safety planning.

Most faithful people aren't experts on domestic and sexual violence and elder abuse, but we don't have to be. We just need to know how to call the experts on the hotline for help. The hotline is free, anonymous, and anyone can call. They have language translation capability.

For a victim who can't reach out for themselves, your ability to call the hotline and get information that you can

share with the victim could make a life-changing difference. In this time of crisis, it's important that we leverage the hotline to help connect survivors to services and safety.

Also, use your prophetic voice to speak out against abuse in newsletters, in corporate prayers, and in other communications. Include survivors of abuse in homilies and sermons. Break the taboo and make this something people of faith can talk about.

Reach out to family members, friends, and fellow congregants. Ask how they are doing, and listen carefully to their answer, keeping the "red flags" of abuse

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