

Conveners Corner

By Raymond Dougherty, Convener of Illuman NorCal

Greetings, brothers.

I am honored to serve as the new Convener on the Convener Team of Illuman NorCal. My journey with Illuman NorCal started with my MROP in 2015 at Camp Tamarack in Northern California. This was such a transformative experience that, like many of you, I felt compelled to continue to foster this seed of transformation in my own life, while finding ways to encourage and support other men on the journey. To that end, I joined the Illuman NorCal leadership team in 2016 and was invited to speak at Soularize that year on the topic of Grief and Loss as a Gateway to Service (my [talk](#) is at 18:40 in Session 1). I subsequently served as a teaching elder at our 2017 MROP, drawing on my work as a healthcare chaplain for over twenty years. In getting to know and work with the men of Illuman NorCal, I continue to receive an incredible amount of encouragement, support, and food for the journey and have an opportunity to hopefully encourage others in the process.

This year, we have decided as a chapter to move from the individual convener model to the collaborative leadership approach of a Convener Team. Rich Gierak, who served as our convener for many years, agreed to stay on as the Convener Emeritus and Joe Gabaeff (whom many of you know from his exceptional facilitation of the virtual retreat [Elders at the Gate](#)), serves as our Convener Elect. At the end of our terms, Joe will move into the Convener role, I will move into the Emeritus role, and we will choose another man to serve in the Elect position.

This movement from individual to collective mirrors an essential part of my own growth and journey as a man. As a young man, I often idealized independence. I was a loner, didn't trust others, and was loath to join any organization or group in any meaningful way. In reality, of course, I was creating a protective shell against the world. Hiding and scared to be seen, I swallowed the myth of the self-made man and paid [the price of that individualism](#) in terms of depression, isolation, and a lack of commitment and community.

It is a tension I still live with. Primarily through men's work, I slowly began to experience that I am not alone, that I can be vulnerable with other men, that I can trust and be trusted, and that my true self is something much

bigger than the small self I work so hard to protect. It is truly a journey of liberation—a continual movement outside of my “comfort zone,” which Illuman helps to illuminate.

This movement out of our comfort zones showed up in our NorCal chapter through some uncomfortable conversations about inclusion and community. We asked ourselves, “What does it mean to be a man today?” (This reflection question was at the heart of our June 2021 [Elders at the Gate](#), an event that, by the way, was itself an example of a unique collaboration of many brothers from various Illuman chapters.) We asked ourselves what it would mean to include *all* men, all those who identify as male. The council process helped us grapple with this question, speak our truth, and listen deeply to one another, resulting in a decision to stretch outside of our comfort zones and adopt Illuman’s openhearted and challenging [Welcome Statement](#), which includes the welcome of “men on all parts of the continuum of gender identity and expression, without prejudice about sexual orientation, living status, whether sexually active or celibate, and everyone for whom labels don’t apply.” It’s just a first step, as we commit to continuing to educate and challenge ourselves in how we might live more fully into the inclusiveness of Illuman’s “We Say Welcome!”

The myth of the lone ranger, rugged individualist, self-made man is an enduring Western male archetype. My work with Illuman challenges that lonely place within myself. Gathering with other men—around a fire, in a drum circle, in the [Way of Council](#), in intimate sharing—has changed my life and helps me explore ways of experiencing ever-wider circles of belonging.

Please feel free to [reach out to me](#) as we continue to explore ways of supporting each other to deepen our spiritual lives and come together as [men transforming men through a power greater than ourselves](#).