

Prison ministries encourage and renew faith

BY CINDY NOVAK

"WHEN I WALK THROUGH the church doors, I feel at peace and happy," Cathy* says. "It's almost like euphoria—being around people who accept me for who I am, not what I've done. It means a lot to me."

Since her release from prison, Cathy has found a church home at Our Saviour's Lutheran Church, Lincoln, Nebraska. She attends worship and volunteers with the congregation's prison ministry, which supported her during and after her incarceration.

'THEY ACCEPT ME AS A PERSON'

While incarcerated, members sent Cathy cards and letters of encouragement. After her release, they arranged a fundraiser to help Cathy pay medical bills. The outreach renewed Cathy's faith in God during a difficult time in her life, she says.

"Our Saviour's is my

family—my rock," Cathy says. "If I have a problem, I know there's someone always willing to listen. They accept me as a person, not a felon."

Cathy represents countless individuals involved in the U.S. criminal justice system who have found hope through prison ministry.

Volunteers worship with inmates in prison congregations, lead Bible studies and help in prison libraries. Others send cards, pray for inmates and help returning citizens reintegrate back into their communities.

The Rev. Lisa Parker, pastor of Redeemer Lutheran Church, Indianola, Iowa, and a board member of Prison Congregations of America, began volunteering 16 years ago.

"I always found people who were grateful, and it made me think, 'Too bad I wasn't doing this before or that more people weren't involved," Parker says. "Through prison ministry, I've always felt energized and renewed, not just in my ministry, but also my faith."

Some volunteers might feel nervous. "Everyone feels intimidated the first time they enter a prison," Parker says. "But I've always found a welcome and people who were grateful, even surprised, that anyone cared. I've met so many women who've all had such different experiences and hopes. They were eager to share their stories and were thankful to not be known for the worst thing they ever did."

WRAPPED WITH LOVE AND OUILTS

Gail Haggerty serves as pastor of Heart River Lutheran Church, an ELCA prison congregation at the North Dakota Youth Correctional Center, Mandan, North Dakota.

"Every sermon I preach includes a message that you are good enough," Haggerty says. "God loves you. You're loved right here and right now. ... Not only do

BY THE NUMBERS

Nearly 1 in 2 Americans have had an immediate family member — a sister, brother, parent, spouse or child — incarcerated at some point in their lives, according to a 2019

50 percent of prisoners in the

highest number of citizens

60 percent of prisoners identify as

people who are incarcerated need to hear that message—we all do."

People in the community support the congregation in a variety of ways, such as setting up a Christmas store where inmates can "shop" for gifts for their family members. Volunteers also provide toiletries and gift cards for "fresh-start kits" (backpacks given to inmates upon their release) and donate hand-made quilts.

Congregations, Women of the ELCA groups and other organizations have sent Heart River Lutheran Church "so many beautiful quilts ... that people had prayed over and blessed," Haggerty says. "The quilts are a real, tangible sign that there's

somebody out there who's pulling for them and who cares about them."

Inmates receive the quilts as they arrive. The quilts go with them when they are released, but not before other congregation members wrap the youth in their quilts and bless them during a special worship service.

As the newly released inmates transition back into their communities, Heart River Bridges of Hope, an outreach and re-entry ministry of the ELCA, is there to help. The ministry connects them to a wide range of services such as recovery programs, haircuts and assistance finding a job.

'CHURCH IS MY SAFE SPACE'

Like Cathy, Kim* also found hope through Our Saviour's prison ministry. After Kim's release, congregation members picked her up on Sunday mornings so she could attend worship, participate in Bible study and then enjoy a home-cooked meal.

This allowed Kim to take part in congregational life again. She read scripture and led prayers during worship. She assisted with vacation Bible school during the summer. She even had the chance to play a shepherd in the children's Christmas program.

"Whenever I participated, I always felt welcome," Kim says. "I felt like I had worth."

Kim credits Our Saviour's,

as well as her home congregation, with helping her reenter her small community. Church members have helped Kim feel at home by reaching out to her to make sure she was doing okay. And they recently elected Kim to serve as secretary.

"Church is my safe space," she says. "It's the one place I can go and feel comfortable outside my home. I don't feel like my guard is up. I feel like I'm part of a community."

WASHED CLEAN

Prison ministry is deeply meaningful for clergy and lay leaders who get involved. "I have always had a passion for prison ministry because I am so strongly moved by the promise that no one is outside the reach of God's grace," Parker says. "Bringing that word of grace, forgiveness and love to people who are so hungry for it is really powerful."

During a worship service at a women's prison congregation, Parker invited inmates to dip their hands in the baptismal font and sprinkle themselves to remember their baptisms.

"Some women took huge handfuls of water," Parker recalled. "We had to provide big bath towels because they got so wet. The women so wanted that new life promised to them in baptism. They wanted that feeling that they were being washed clean."

Prisons aren't known for being welcoming. Sarah Estes, executive director, Prison
Congregations of America, says:
"Prisons are such dark places.
They are cold and there isn't
a lot of good ventilation. They
are depressing. But the beauty
of prison ministry is we get to
bring light in. It's incredible
how things change when you're
worshiping with a group of
men or women who have been
in for a long time. Their whole
demeanor changes... It's the
light of Christ and it's beautiful."

Estes recalls worshiping with inmates at St. Dysmas, an ELCA prison congregation at the South Dakota State Penitentiary.

"After entering through two cell doors, you go upstairs into the sanctuary and it's a whole different place," she says. "Physically, it still looks like a prison, but you see groups of men who are waiting to welcome you. They love that you're there. They're all smiling and [they] want to shake your hand and tell you how wonderful it is to meet you.

"You're in this beautiful...
fellowship of people who love
God and want to express that,"
she says. When the congregation
sings, "you can feel the Holy
Spirit the whole time," she adds.

"People who worship with inmates get so much out of it," she says. "You can't help but come away changed."

^{*}Last names withheld to protect privacy

You can:

Learn more about the criminal justice system by reading "Called to Hear," a study guide based on the ELCA's social statement, "The Church and Criminal Justice: Hearing the Cries."

Worship at a prison congregation. Find one near you by visiting www.prisoncongregations.org.

Volunteer. Active participation from people outside the walls of the prison can bring life and hope to those who are incarcerated. Volunteers find the experience to be powerful as well. Contact your county sheriff's office to learn of volunteer opportunities at prisons in your community.

Send encouraging letters and cards to those who are incarcerated.

Pray for those in your community who are involved in the criminal justice system and those impacted by crime.

Create a devotional and provide copies to your local sheriff to share with those in the jail.

Reach out to family members

of those in prison. A 2019 study led by Cornell University shows that nearly 1 in 2 Americans have had an immediate family member—a sister, brother, parent, spouse or child—incarcerated at some point in their lives.

That means you likely know someone in our congregation or community who has a loved involved in the criminal justice system.

"Families of those accused of crimes, awaiting trial or incarcerated can feel isolated and alone," Parker says.

Parker recommends: "Help them feel safe as they share their own experience or the experience of their family member or friend. Can they trust you to hear their story without judging? Will you listen with compassion and an open mind, looking beyond your own experience?"

Advocate. Learn about the criminal justice system and the experience of those incarcerated and their families. The system, as it currently functions, disproportionately convicts people of color and those of lower economic

standing. Advocate for a greater level of fairness at state and federal levels.

Learn about programs in your community that help returning citizens become productive members of society again. "I was lucky that my family was very supportive and that I had a home to return to," Kim says. "Some people don't have that and may need help finding a place to live, accessing food or getting to medical appointments."

Sarah Estes adds: "You can mentor someone who's recently been released. You also can help returning citizens get jobs, write resumes and provide clothing to wear for their job. It takes many hands to help get people back on their feet."

Treat current and former prisoners with respect. Kim suggests: "Don't treat them like outsiders. Treat them like you would your friends. Let them know you are available in case they want to talk or need something."