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**Ministry in prison: ". . . And you visited me."**

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Support for Catholic prison ministry moves forward

By David Lichter
Executive Director

Welcome to our first Vision article on the theme of prison ministry. In a sense, this issue has been in the works since April 2018, when the NACC was invited to meet with over 30 Catholic organizations and associations to develop a national coordinated ministry to the wide range of people affected by incarceration/detention.

This gathering was a result of discernment by representatives of the Catholic Mobilizing Network, the USCCB’s Subcommittee on Certification of Ecclesial Ministry and Service (SCEMS) and USCCB’s offices of Domestic Social Justice and Peace and Governmental Relations and the then-inactive American Catholic Correctional Chaplains Association (ACCCA).

We gathered at the Catholic University of America in Washington to accomplish this goal. The day-long meeting ended with a commitment of each organization to help strengthen this ministry. Thus, the Catholic Prison Ministries Coalition was formed. Its mission statement is:

*The Catholic Prison Ministries Coalition (CPMC) promotes ministry to all people affected by incarceration. Our goal is to recruit, train, support and empower those called to this ministry. We strive to create a more just and merciful criminal justice system that upholds the dignity of every human person and advances restorative justice.*

These stakeholders quickly determined that they needed a national networking resource and a national approach to preparing, credentialing, and supporting the ministry to those affected by incarceration. Representing the NACC, I was asked to chair one of the three committees formed that day, the Formation Committee.

As you know, the NACC has been working for five years with other Catholic ministry groups to develop pastoral care competencies and resources in many different settings. A primary goal of our 2018-2020 strategic plan was “To lead the strengthening of the Church’s pastoral care ministry.” Our 2019 National Conference was a centerpiece of this planning focus and made available these competencies and resources. One set of competencies was for those working in criminal justice settings.

We are lucky that three former participants in the Partners in Pastoral Care work continue to serve on the CPMC Formation Committee: Harry Dudley, former director of the SCEMS; Fr. Richard Deshaies, SJ, former head of the ACCCA; and Deacon Edgardo Farias, director of the Archdiocese of Miami Detention Program. In coming weeks, you will hear from some of them, as well as many other writers with unique perspectives on prison ministry.

Over the past three years, this Formation Committee has helped support the numerous workshops and town halls that CPMC has offered monthly. It also has developed three pathways for formation and credentialing of those involved in this ministry (www.nacc.org/cpmc/cpmc-formation). Most
ministering in jails or prisons are volunteers organized by dioceses or parishes. Since most dioceses and parishes do not have any formalized preparation programs, these pathways are intended to provide national guidance or support. The competencies and pathways will be presented for approval to the USCCB SCEMS this coming September. The Leadership Specialization Pathway will result in certification: a person who successfully completes this pathway will become a certified Catholic correctional chaplain.

As the CPMC began to become more organized and grow, it needed national funding to fulfill its goal of becoming self-sustaining within a few years. Since the CPMC was not its own independent nonprofit 501(c)(3), the NACC Board of Directors agreed last year to become CPMC’s fiscal sponsor as of May 1, 2020. This means that CPMC can now seek funding under the NACC’s nonprofit status. Since last spring, several grants were applied for and received to help with these efforts.

The NACC Board of Directors receives regular updates on CPMC. The NACC Board Chair, Carolanne Hauck, and I serve on the CPMC Executive Committee. Mary T. O’Neill, former NACC Board Chair, also serves on the CPMC Formation Committee and championed the development of the Intensive Pathway (www.nacc.org/cpmc/intensive).

Historically, the NACC had just a few members involved in prison ministry. But over the last few years, we have offered quarterly networking calls for those members, which have revealed the need and charism of this ministry. Between two and three million persons are incarcerated in our country’s criminal justice system. Every person who is imprisoned has a family that is also affected by crime. Pastoral care is needed for all. But until recently, no one national Catholic organization was working on the range of needs for ministry to all people affected by mass incarceration.

The NACC is grateful now to be even more fully involved in preparing, credentialing, and supporting those in this ministry. Our 2021-2023 Strategic Plan states this ongoing commitment, in its Priority Two: NACC will become the creator and curator of programs for the development and formation of all who serve in the Church’s pastoral care ministry. Key outcomes include:

- Continue the development of common competencies and pathways for various pastoral care ministries across the country, beginning with ministries in correctional settings. Implement these competency and formation model(s) for the Partners in Pastoral Care.
- Assist Catholic Prison Ministries Coalition as the Steering Committee seeks to develop a sustainability model for the future of the Coalition.

We look forward to our continued partnership with the CPMC. I hope that all of our members, regardless of the setting in which they minister, can learn more about this unique ministry over the next two months in this space.
Effective prison ministry depends on minister’s approach

By Anne Windholz


Perhaps like most chaplains, my knowledge of prison life is minimal. Back in the early 1970s, after a picnic at Royal Gorge near Canon City, my parents decided it might be interesting to take a tour of the Colorado State Penitentiary. I was around 10 years old, my siblings younger. I remember little except that the lidless toilets next to the cell beds appalled me, and our genial guide – a “bad guy” named Mullinex – flirted a lot with a pretty blond woman who was also taking the tour. (Some years later, he successfully escaped to Canada with another convict.) My mom regretted taking us to “such a place.”

In the late 1990s, my spouse and I were both professors at Augustana College (now University) in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. He also taught classes in American literature and creative writing at the state penitentiary. Twenty years later, he still remembers relinquishing his belt and completely emptying his pockets before entering the old Victorian compound. He recalls the people imprisoned there as some of the most engaged students he has ever had: “They all had things to say, they were all eager to participate. And they were always polite.” He laughs a little sadly, remembering how they critiqued the protagonist of Richard Wright’s novel *Native Son,* offering spirited suggestions about “the mistakes he made as a criminal.”

Since entering chaplaincy, I have only twice ministered to hospitalized prisoners. But the experience left me curious. Is ministry to someone in prison substantially different from “free” adults? What does it mean to enter a locked space – and what difference does spiritual care make for a prisoner? With those questions in mind, I explored two recent studies of faith’s role in the penitentiary: *God in Captivity* by Tanya Erzen and *The Angola Prison Seminary: Effects of Faith-based Ministry on Identity, Transformation, Desistance, and Rehabilitation* by Michael Hallett et al.

Tanya Erzen, a professor of religion and gender studies who researches incarceration around the country, questions the assumption that religion in prison is an unalloyed good and stresses the need to scrutinize purpose. Starting from Quakers’ reforming focus in early 19th century, *God in Captivity* charts how rehabilitation has failed under mass incarceration. Cutting off Pell grants to for-profit penitentiaries in the 1990s encouraged administrators (despite separation of church and state) to embrace cheap “education” opportunities from largely Protestant volunteers. Often evangelization thinly disguised, such programs provided participants perks like larger cells and lighter work assignments. Religion, Erzen warns, easily becomes an “agent of control” – complicit in systemic carceral dehumanization – rather than what it claims to be: a means to authentic soul.
healing and “heart change.” She advocates for community-building interventions, such as Washington state’s The Women’s Village, where “[a]nyone can join, no matter who they are and what their crime, and although many of its leaders are Christian, the focus is not on the religion but on the work of giving meaning to daily life, a ministry on the ground.”

The Angola Prison Seminary is, as its title suggests, a more focused study of one faith-based ministry program. Angola (Louisiana State Penitentiary) is the largest prison in the world. At the request of Angola’s warden, Baptist Theological Seminary of New Orleans agreed to create an outreach degree program. Relying on volunteers and dedicated to forming “inmate ministers,” the seminary enrolls students of various religious persuasions, including Catholic and Muslim, and offers virtually the prison’s only means of earning college credit. The book’s five authors conclude that faith-based ministry emphasizing “relationship theology” lowers violence, improves “moral behavior,” and helps cover chaplaincy department deficits. Three of the five authors are from Baylor, a Baptist university.

Where Erzen is cautious about the impact of faith-based ministry, Hallett and his colleagues are more partial. That said, the rigorous research methodology undergirding their consensus provides an excellent model for chaplains interested in quantitative research and evidence-based ministry. The authors make a sturdy and sometimes eloquent case for how faith-based ministry has empowered Angola prisoners, helped them actualize some measure of self-determination, and find meaning. In a huge, violent prison where chaplaincy (and other services) are woefully understaffed, inmate ministers provide comfort to the sick, dying, mentally ill, and grieving.

Chaplains exploring vocation among the imprisoned will appreciate both books. A short review cannot do justice to their detailed, intellectually rich investigations of faith in America’s penal system, including observations about Catholics and the role of chaplaincy. Stylistically, readers will find God in Captivity more journalistic and anecdotal, The Angola Prison Seminary more crisply reasoned and copiously documented. Both books criticize for-profit incarceration, linking it to Angola’s roots in slavery and the endemic, systemic racism that continues to dog our country. Together these studies reaffirm what chaplaincy teaches us about justice, accompaniment, and forgiveness. And as for my questions? I found that inmate minister Paul Will’s insight (quoted in Angola) answered them all:

When you demand a behavior without setting a man free to love, you will fail. … When someone meets me, they are not meeting a program. They are meeting me, and I am meeting them. There is only one thing that is urgent – and that is to be a martyr and a witness to life found in the fabric of relationships. The urgency is to know that you’ve encountered that person in God’s timing, with at least a small dose of human love – that you source to God. Love work is the only work.

Anne Windholz, BCC, MDiv, PhD, is a chaplain in west suburban Chicago.
Twenty years in correctional chaplaincy: Sharing humanity and setting boundaries

By Sr. Patricia Weidman, CSA, BCC

My twenty years with the Federal Bureau of Prisons began with the supervisory chaplain telling me that inmates are people, too. They are humans, whose lives have value. His paradigm inspired me to understand that inmates are more than the offense for which they are convicted and that we share a common humanity.

This was in 1997, before we had access to computers. The inmate chapel clerks used typewriters, and we chaplains searched the chapel library in case the clerks were using the typewriters to prepare sports betting slips. I was among the first Catholic sisters to be hired as chaplains, because of the shortage of priests. We had transferable skills in education, ministry, and pastoral care.

At the federal penitentiary, I was the first woman to work alone behind the grill with inmates. The officers wondered if they could protect me, but after I wrote several incident reports, they realized that I followed the policies and procedures. I learned to set boundaries with inmates and to not cross the line of professionalism. I am their chaplain, not their friend. I provide a respectful presence, while coordinating groups of inmates whose interactions can be manipulative, creative, and challenging. As prison chaplains, we protect our own privacy, while also sharing the human condition of feelings, values, and beliefs.

Chaplains are trained in the major tenets of different faith groups, and we help inmates develop their faith by listening and guiding them in finding meaning in their incarceration. Catholic inmates and others sought my spiritual guidance. During my time in correctional chaplaincy, diversity increased among both staff and the inmate population. Diversity is both enriching and challenging. The bureau recognized and valued the diversity of the staff to correspond with the diversity of the inmate population.

Once, I overheard an inmate spokesperson of a non-Christian faith group correct a fellow inmate for using foul language in chapel. I privately thanked the spokesperson, after which he met with me regularly for spiritual guidance. I was blessed by his trust and openness. Chaplains promote and model respect for religious diversity.

When an inmate is angry, and then I become angry, there is the potential for violence. My growing edge is to de-escalate a volatile situation by honoring his feelings and stress. I seek to find goodness in each one, regardless of the wrong he has done.

My friend and classmate in religious life was murdered in 1990, which gives me credibility in promoting nonviolence at every opportunity. Inmates have been both the victims of violence and the perpetrators of violence. I feel empathy for their trauma, while also motivating them to be peacemakers. Sometimes an inmate would learn that a family member was murdered, and I would counsel him. Seeking revenge would harm himself and his family, I would say – but he could honor
the life of the deceased by seeking the listening ear of a trusted confidant. And if the inmate responded that he trusted no one, I would notify the staff to support that inmate in his sorrow.

Of course, religion can also be misused toward radicalizing and extremism. Chaplains received mandatory and frequent training and were occasionally the instructors, working with inmates to influence their faith group for peace and nonviolence. Training was required of all chaplains to recognize and deter religious extremism.

Reentry programs prepare the participants to return to family and society. Facilitating the reentry programs brought out the best of my transferable skills. Whatever we do to help inmates indirectly helps their children. Some inmates confided in me as they would their mother or grandmother. One day, an inmate saw that I was alone with an unstable inmate, distracted the unstable inmate and walked him out of chapel. We all may one day need the good will of another. I pray for protection.

Correctional chaplaincy provided relationships of privileged conversations with both staff and inmates. It is a challenge to be a skilled listener with persons of all or no faith practices, but these privileged conversations are gratifying and sacred. We all share a humanness within our diversity, regardless of whether we are inside or outside the fence.

Sr. Patricia Weidman, CSA, BCC, was most recently chaplain at Federal Correctional Institution Schuylkill in Pennsylvania.
Parish-based jail ministry is rooted in local community

By Jennifer Rogers

When I started attending Mass at Sacred Heart of Jesus in Lacombe, Louisiana in 2018, I was an outsider. I was not Catholic; I was not local to this small bayou community; and I did not know a single person the first time I walked in the door. But a warm, funny, older couple “adopted” me on the spot as we sat together on the back row, and they later agreed to be my godparents at my baptism the following year after my RCIA classes.

I already had a lot of experience volunteering with incarcerated youth in Texas, and I was hoping to get involved in jail or prison ministry again. But as a newcomer to the parish, I wanted to move carefully. I started by asking open-ended questions of our community leaders and elders about what the parish needed, and working with our clergy to discern how we might serve those needs identified by our congregation.

Out of those conversations, eventually we started the jail and prison outreach and re-entry program that we call the “Welcome Home” ministry. My prior volunteer experience was as a lone wolf, long before I was ever involved in any church community, so I had never been involved in a parish-based effort.

Our parish is small, rural, and predominantly comprised of families who are African-American, Creole, and Native American, going back hundreds of years in this community near Lake Pontchartrain (immediately north of New Orleans).

Everyone knows each other in this close-knit community, but there’s limited job opportunity or modernization in Lacombe, so the drug trade too often becomes a way to earn money on the side. As a result, mass incarceration is a real problem in our community, and our local families are broken up in a system that never gets to the heart of the problem.

We decided to focus on incarcerated folks from our own community, with the goal to bridge the gap between jail/prison walls and our own church walls. Before Thanksgiving 2019, we invited parishioners to sign up any incarcerated loved ones to receive a Christmas card from the new ministry. Next, we asked the men who received cards if they wanted to be part of the new ministry, because it was important that everyone feel they had agency in their participation. After getting the proper credentials from the local jail, we were up and running with weekly visits, and I was thrilled to learn the ropes with this particular jail so that we could start adding other volunteers. For the incarcerated loved ones at state prison facilities, our ongoing contact was limited to regular mail given the geographic distance involved, but at least we had weekly visits at the local jail.

Then COVID-19 happened. In-person visits came to an immediate halt, and it made no sense to recruit new volunteers if no one could get new credentials. To keep the weekly contact going, we were blessed to receive a grant and private donations to cover the jail’s fees for video and messaging technology. That is how we still run the ministry, until in-person visits are allowed again.
We also decided to start a quarterly newsletter called “The Good News,” in which the parish’s incarcerated loved ones offer reflections to share with the community. Gathering their reflections and coordinating the circulation of the newsletter has given us all an opportunity to work together beyond jail/prison walls and church walls, and we are grateful to have found ways to keep the ministry going through the pandemic.

In much of the country, jail populations are mostly transient, but in our location, a lot of people are there for several months or years. Some are pre-trial, and bond has been set higher than they can afford. Others have already been convicted but remain at the jail because state prisons lack capacity, so the jail has an agreement to house them. In either case, the jail ministry provides outreach to incarcerated loved ones from our community, wherever they might be housed at any given time.

As our incarcerated loved ones return home to us (beginning this summer for some of them), we plan to coordinate their return with Catholic Charities and other related service partners who might be able to offer programs and services that our parish might not be able to provide directly.

When I volunteer at the state women’s prison with a different Christian organization (which I also love!), I gladly work with anyone I encounter there, and it never matters where they’re from. This parish-based ministry, however, has its roots in the needs of this particular community. This is why anyone starting a new jail or prison ministry in their parish should start by asking questions, not making assumptions. People generally assume that it’s other groups who have needs, but there might be an internal need that is ripe for community-building in one’s own parish.

Jennifer Rogers is a volunteer member of NACC working toward her chaplaincy certification after completing her Master's in Pastoral Studies at Loyola University New Orleans in 2020.
Ministry to released prisoners means facing their private hell

By Fr. Dustin Feddon

As a Catholic priest serving in Florida’s panhandle, I’ve had privileged access to see up-close the realities of life inside prisons. Though my main job was as a parish priest, I made time to visit the incarcerated, especially those in solitary confinement. In the spring of 2018, a few parishioners, my bishop, and I decided to lay the groundwork for establishing a ministry to those returning from prison.

It was a leap into the dark, as I knew very little about how to navigate the various social service channels that are involved, not to mention the precarious psychological and spiritual situation of the people we hoped to minister to.

We had agreed to give priority to individuals who would be homeless upon release or were considered high risk for recidivism. Davy was set to be released in five months straight from solitary confinement. He would be led out of his cell, transported to the local bus station, and then sent to wherever he designated his dropoff.

A 24-year-old black man, Davy seemed more like 15 with his scrawny stature, dimpled face, and bubbly personality. Many of those in solitary confinement intentionally bring on disciplinary referrals so they can escape abuse, debtors, peer pressure for gang violence, rape, or any other form of violence inside the walls. Davy was one of these. His appearance didn’t bode well for him in a prison population often structured by power dynamics.

I had visited Davy a couple of times, but one day he told me he was getting out soon but didn’t have a place to live. He would leave solitary confinement only to go back to the streets in his hometown of Tallahassee. A few friends, a social worker, and I agreed to accompany Davy for the next year. This included paying some court fees so he could get his driver’s license, shopping for clothes, helping him open a bank account, going out to eat, playing John Madden football together, and yes, plenty of exhaustive arguments and bouts of utter frustration.

Soon after his release, I drove Davy to a probation appointment. He became increasingly agitated and belligerent towards me – mocking my classical music on the radio, and then just numb and silently fuming. He put on his headphones, clearly distancing himself from me. Slamming the car door, Davy insisted on going to his probation officer alone, although I usually went in with him.

Afterward, Davy’s fury was unleashed. “These police are ruining my life!” he said. “They want me back in prison. I can’t do anything right. They might as well put cuffs back on me and haul me back to prison, because I’m done.” When Davy entered that office, with the DOC sign on the door and rules like no cellphone, no eating, no drinks, it provoked all those feelings, rendering him muzzled. Trapped. *He has walled me in and I cannot escape; he has made my chains heavy* (Lamentations 3:7).
And I had escorted him into this trap the state had set for him. Or so it felt. And that entangled me in this hostile system. His anger towards me earlier had made me angry as well, and I distinctly recall thinking: we’ll quickly get Davy a job and move on to the next person needing our assistance. But when he exploded afterwards, I realized his aggression toward his perceived persecutors was initially directed toward me.

I don’t really recall what I said, but I was moved by how poisonous these probation visits were for Davy. Understanding that was important for our relationship. Davy calmed a bit, but not because of my words. Rather, I think it was because I stuck by him. Future visits didn’t bring on nearly as much anxiety and conflict. We tried to temper these probation visits with other residents with things they enjoy doing or going to a park afterwards.

When we choose to accompany newly released prisoners, we must be willing to enter into the private hell of others. Praying the office as I think of the prisoners I have met also helps me envision a future of redemption. I don’t mean simply mercy and justice for them in some vague, remote afterlife. No. By redemption I mean dignity restored to their present and future, the possibility that light may shine in their darkness.

Davy’s probation visit was a moment of revelation for me. It was an opportunity for me to hear his anguished plea for a secure home. In these past few years, I have discovered that when we patiently walk with others, we not only discover the mysterious hidden depths of human nature, but we also may create a more just world hospitable to all.

*Fr. Dustin Feddon is executive director at Joseph House in Tallahassee, FL.*
Jail chaplains minister to all walks of life

By Fr. Paul Tolve

I was a prison chaplain for 22 years and 7 months (but who’s counting?). For 12 of those years, I directed the Pastoral Services Team (eight chaplains and over 400 volunteers) at the Westchester County Department of Correction in Valhalla, N.Y. Before New York’s bail reform went into effect, and before the pandemic hit, our population of incarcerated persons ranged from 1,300 to 1,500. But during the pandemic, the population dropped to just below 500 persons.

The pandemic drastically changed the way we ministered. Originally we could not visit the inmates, but we talked with them through their correction officer on their blocks. We also helped their families on the outside by calling them for the detainee. No services were conducted at first, but later we were able to offer Zoom services.

While supervising seminarians’ pastoral training, I would often say that the population you meet in the jail is the closest you can get today to what it was like when Jesus walked this earth. The jail holds every person who gets caught by police in Westchester County. We met people from all walks of life, and they didn’t want to be there. Different from a churched population! Nothing neat about it! Sloppy, unpredictable, depressing, and forgotten at times. People were hurting mentally, spiritually, sometimes physically. All religions were present and — at times — no religion. What did Jesus do? How did he meet them? What was his pastoral approach? Who did he touch and heal?

An image I would often use, for both detainees and staff alike, is that a diamond is formed from coal under intense pressure. God sees the diamond in all of us, no matter how damaged a person may be because of familial, social, spiritual, economic, and psychological pressures. I would share with them that God sees only the diamond they truly are, and when they find God’s love, the coal will disintegrate.

The chaplain is a vehicle of God’s love, in the sense that we must help others to find their part in the process. The chaplain must help the person to own their pain and what they may have done: “to name it is to tame it.” The chaplain must help the person to find the truth of their reality and bring it through the process of identification, truth-telling, reconciliation, and thus healing and inner transformation. At times, I would tell those I serve that they are like the sheep of God’s flock who have some mud on their face — just as we all do. As long as each of us are willing to get up each morning and look in the mirror, we will find God’s face gazing at us with mercy and love, no matter how much the mud and no matter how deep the layers of coal.

Fr. Paul Tolve recently retired as director of pastoral services at Westchester County Department of Correction in Valhalla, N.Y.
NACC sponsors new pathways to prepare for prison ministry

By Harry Dudley

When I worked at the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, many people asked me about best practices in preparing laypeople for ministry. I would tell them to look at NACC because they are the gold standard. NACC has been involved in developing standards and procedures for pastoral care certification longer than any other Catholic organization.

This is why David Lichter, NACC’s executive director, was invited to meet in April 2018 with over 30 national Catholic service organizations and staff from the USCCB about ministry to those affected by incarceration. While there were still some full-time prison chaplains, the landscape had changed. More of this work was now being done by volunteers: laity, religious, and deacons.

In addition, those who were doing the work were often unaware of what others were doing. We had national standards and competencies for chaplains, but none for volunteers. We also needed to identify, recognize, and share information about the many fine programs that existed or were being developed.

That 2018 meeting ended with a decision to form the Catholic Prison Ministries Coalition to recruit, train, support, and empower those called to this ministry. Three committees were formed: a steering committee of leaders from the participating organizations, an executive committee to implement the decisions made, and a formation committee to research, create, and promote formation efforts.

David Lichter agreed to chair the CPMC Formation Committee. In 2020, NACC became CPMC’s fiscal sponsor, but CPMC continues to seek funding and support. He shared about the efforts of the NACC’s Partners in Pastoral Care Project in developing core and specialized competencies for pastoral care. The Association of Catholic Correctional Chaplains of America, which was involved in the Partners project, had already developed the certification process for full-time prison chaplains and encouraged us to move forward.

The CPMC Formation Committee decided to offer three distinct pathways for those who wanted to enter the ministry: Foundational for volunteers, Intensive for those considering a greater commitment, and Leadership/Specialization those committed to leading at an institutional, diocesan, or parish level. The framework for this training would be the four dimensions of formation found in Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord: human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral.
Each session of the pathways would help participants to answer the following questions:

1. **Why am I doing this?** (Motivation for pastoral care ministry)
2. **Where am I, and who is there?** (The culture I am called to serve in)
3. **How do I represent the pastoral care ministry of the Church?** (Pastoral identity)
4. **What am I doing there?** (Accompaniment, listening presence)
5. **What am I doing there?** (Religious agent)
6. **How do I navigate the system?** (The dos, don’ts, relationships)

The first fully developed and piloted pathway is the Foundational Pathway – a national online training effort for volunteers. Two members of the CPMC leadership team were recruited to develop and offer the six sessions for this Foundational formation: **Rev. George Williams, SJ, Ph.D., chaplain, San Quentin State Prison, San Francisco, CA; and Rev. Dustin Feddon, Ph.D., pastor, St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Church, Crawfordville, FL.** This six-hour program was filmed and called Prison and Jail Ministry 101.

Participants were introduced to prison ministry with an emphasis on their own discernment and the unique spiritual, psycho-social, and ministerial needs of the incarcerated. They learned core knowledge and practical tools for successful prison ministry, focusing on empathetic listening and pastoral care presence. Finally, they were invited to consider joining and inviting others to join the next generation of professional prison chaplains.

After filming these sessions, the formation committee developed further support materials, including links to CPMC videos and readings for the facilitated session. A reflection booklet was developed that includes a full script of the video presentation, additional reflection questions, and links to resources mentioned in the videos.

**Participants prepare for a facilitated (online or live) conversation by** reviewing the module sheet and the **required** video(s), booklet(s), and readings. Then they briefly answer in writing the reflection questions for review, which become a journal of what has been learned.

The six modules were piloted by a combined session including volunteers from the archdioceses of Santa Fe and New Orleans. Participants in the pilot and each new cohort have been offered the opportunity to provide input and suggestions. The Archdiocese of Seattle has completed the second cohort, and the Archdiocese of Portland began a third cohort in June.

“IT gave me the feeling I’m not alone, that there are resources to tap into that I didn’t know about,” one participant said. “There are other people who have the same longing to be able to enter into it more deeply. So, I can do this job with the Holy Spirit and with all of you. All the mistakes that I
make are things I can learn from, especially now that I have all these materials that were sent. I can keep going back to them and saying, oh yes, that’s a great idea.”

How can this Foundational Pathway benefit dioceses or parishes?

- By including more experienced persons in the ministry in the training with beginners, a team of mentors can be formed.
- Although this is designed for volunteers, experienced chaplains can benefit from the opportunity to mentor. CPMC has also developed a basic mentoring guide for dioceses interested in developing this aspect of the program.
- The cohorts formed can become support groups to sustain each other in work as well as provide a community for ongoing formation efforts offered by CPMC.
- The Foundational materials and training enable experienced trainers in the diocese to continue replicating the training as needed.

Dioceses and parishes can take advantage of these resources by taking training so that they can offer it themselves, or engaging a facilitator provided by NACC/CPMC. For more information, diocesan or parish staff can visit www.nacc.org/cpmc/cpmc-formation.

Harry Dudley is founder and consultant for Ambulans Vobiscum Consulting in Western Pennsylvania. He assists parishes, dioceses, and nonprofits in recruitment, formation, and support of volunteers and leaders.
Attention, white prison volunteers: Systemic racism is real

By Jennifer Rogers

When volunteers enter a jail or prison, we are privileged to have relational encounters with our brothers and sisters from all manner of life circumstances. We are presented with an opportunity to pause, listen, and reflect. Matthew 25:34-40 calls us to visit those in prison and to see Christ himself in those we visit. 1 John 4:19-21 adds that we love our brothers and sisters because Christ first loved us, and Genesis 1:26-27 provides the larger context that we are all made equally in God’s image.

So far, those are not controversial statements. But when the subject of race or racism come up, some people bristle at the notion that race has anything to do with jails and prisons.

Three years ago, I participated in a Christian training for prison volunteers, and during a break, an older white woman said very matter-of-factly that racism is a thing of the past. “I heard it on the radio,” she said, with the same confidence – specifically, an AM news program with a guest from the Heritage Foundation. I was amazed that a woman who had spent more than 20 years regularly volunteering inside a prison could believe racism is a “thing of the past.”

But recently, it happened again. In a training seminar with Christian jail and prison volunteers, the facilitators raised the issue of systemic racism in the criminal justice system. Two white male participants immediately objected that race and racism should not be part of our training. One said we should be color-blind in our volunteering inside the walls. The other said we live in a post-racial culture, and all this “race talk” only makes things worse.

Many volunteers I have met believe that people are in prison because they did something bad, plain and simple. They believe Christians should bring love to incarcerated folks, and their commitment to prison ministry is authentic and kind. However, they have very little grasp that systemic racism has anything to do with arrest rates, charges brought, bond amounts, conviction rates, or sentencing. I see a disconnect between their Christian ideal to minister to these folks on one hand, and their awareness (or their willingness to become aware) of the systemic inequities that contributed to a prisoner’s incarceration in the first place.

As Auxiliary Bishop Fernand Cheri of New Orleans recently said in a pastoral letter following George Floyd’s murder last year, we as Christians must face evil head-on, and that includes the sin of racism. As a Black youth growing up in New Orleans in a Catholic family, Bishop Cheri experienced racism in every aspect of his life, including his years in seminary and even today. He has never been shy about sharing his frustration and heartbrokenness that the Church must treat racism as fervently as it does any other pro-life issue if we are to be authentic in our Christian voices for the dignity of all human life.

Bishop Cheri specifically eschews the word “color-blind.” The problem with being “color-blind” (and worse, acting as if that proclamation gives us some kind of gold star) is that we are essentially
saying to someone, “I do not see the wholeness of you, and the wholeness of the beauty God gave you in God’s image.”

That might not be how most white volunteers mean it. But it matters how the words are experienced, too, and we must dig deeper than superficial platitudes if we want to be the Christians we say we are.

White volunteers are so accustomed to having race not matter in their daily lives that they assume it does not impact others either. But that projection does not make it fact. If we as Christians genuinely care about the experiences of those we encounter in prison, we would take the time to learn these truths from the people who experience them. For those who do not get the chance to hear these stories first-hand, there are any number of wonderful authors available – Michelle Alexander, Bryan Stevenson, Isabel Wilkerson, and Heather McGhee, just to name a few.

However, it can be just as damaging for a white volunteer to preach about racism to people who live with it every day and who do not need a well-meaning white person to tell them what they already know. This is where the expression white-centering comes from, when we as white people make our anti-racism efforts still about us.

The balance is to pause, to listen, and to reflect, just like we would with any relationship we care about. There does not have to be anything magic or different about white people’s encounters with people of color. We are, after all, equally God’s children made in his image. But that is different from being “color-blind.”

Our role as Christian volunteers inside prison may be color-neutral, in so far as we do not treat anyone differently on the basis of skin color. But that is not the same as saying we are “blind” to someone’s suffering and oppression, or to their fullness and gifts.

Our jails and prisons do not reflect racial equity or justice. And white volunteers have to be honest with themselves that our Christian ideal has fallen short. We can carry the hope that Christ delivered us all from sin, while also knowing that achieving the kingdom of God on earth is a difficult and unending task. By pausing, listening, and reflecting, perhaps we can together be a better messenger for God’s grace.

Jennifer Rogers is a volunteer member of NACC working toward her chaplaincy certification after completing her Master’s in Pastoral Studies at Loyola University New Orleans in 2020.

Which character in the prodigal son parable are you going to be?

By Karen Clifton

I currently feel like I am living in the world of the elder brother in Jesus’ parable of the prodigal son.

As a whole, the United States, like the elder brother, is all about tallying transgressions and successes. The successful people are given full access to everything – they earned it, right? They are welcome in this country, can vote, influence laws and lawmakers, and can access the best of everything.

But those who transgress (or were forced to make bad choices) are marginalized or removed from society through incarceration/detention. This ostracized status bars access to voting, education, good housing or job prospects. Most are branded with the scarlet “worst thing I have ever done” stigma for the rest of their lives.

This narrow view of right and wrong, who is in and who is out, makes life simple. It also makes us angry when anyone gets something for free, didn’t “earn it” or “follow the rules.” On principle, we will not participate in the party or the joy of a restored person having access to the table.

Through this great parable, Jesus gently calls us to be the father and emulate his love – for both the rule-followers and those who go astray. This loving with abandon brings a contagious joy to everyone, which results in celebration and an enrichment to all aspects of life. We are being called to welcome and restore everyone.

Jesus’ images of God in Luke 15 – as a shepherd, a woman seeking her lost coin, or the father of the prodigal son – is one of a God who always makes the first move. Have you felt called to seek out those who have been removed or barred from the table?

With the ripple effects of mass incarceration in this country, the need is great. Aside from the people in prison themselves, their loved ones have been left behind to face shame and hardships from lack of support. This also produces harm that is carried down through the generations. To stop this cycle of violence, we need to accompany the incarcerated with the unconditional love of the father and address their issues which led them to be incarcerated in the first place.

And as a country, we need to look at our systems which have been set up to benefit the elder brothers. We need to educate ourselves about how our systems affect those who are marginalized by racism, poverty, lack of education, broken family structures, and access to citizenship. The Bible is not about believing the words are real or divinely written. It is about taking the words to heart and allowing them to change us individually, as a church, and as a country. At Catholic Prison Ministries Coalition, we are working and advocating to change the systems to include everyone at the table.
How are you ministering? As the dutiful, rule-following elder brother? Repentant younger son? Or as the loving, welcoming father? Please check out our website¹ for tools to assist you in your formation and ministry.

Let’s work to change, individually and collectively as a nation. We don’t have to follow a God of rights and wrongs, exclusion, and anger. The better choice is to emulate the father, the one who seeks to bring everyone to the celebration.

Karen Clifton is executive coordinator of Catholic Prison Ministries Coalition.

¹ www.catholicprisonministries.org/resources#featured