

NINE PRISON MINISTRY PROJECT
VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES INSIDE PRISONS
AND IN THE COMMUNITY

Many people have asked us recently, “How can I get involved in the Prison Ministry Project?” In response to these questions, we have created this short description of our programs and the varied volunteer opportunities they present for community members. Security background checks are required prior to approval for volunteers who wish to go into prisons. Several opportunities are available if you want to go into correctional institutions, but there are also many ways to be involved if you prefer to work in the larger community.

Five Programs Inside the walls...

1. Restorative Justice

Restorative Justice is a 10- to 12- session program designed to bring offenders, community members, and victims together to identify and heal the harm caused by crime. About 20 inmates, selected by prison staff, meet weekly, for about 90 to 120 minutes, with PMP volunteers and invited speaker/guests. In addition to the weekly meetings, about halfway through the program, 3 full consecutive days are scheduled during which we bring into the group several victims of crime to tell their stories. There are about 20 active Restorative Justice volunteers in Madison and the Fox Valley, and more are welcome. Below is an example of a typical schedule for last year’s Restorative Justice Program held at New Lisbon Correctional Institution.

April 5: Introduction to Restorative Justice, RICH and circle process; April 12: Stories of Respect and Eye Stone small group exercise; April 19: The story of Jumping Mouse; April 26: Meditation; May 3: Show and Tell; May 10: Family Matters Part 1; May 17: Family Matters Part 2; May 24: Ask a Lawyer; May 29-30-31: Three Days with Crime Victims; June 7: Processing the 3-Day experience; June 14: Voices Beyond Bars; June 21: Chaplain Mejchar; June 28: Graduation

2. Family Connections

Every week we are part of a group that maintains the Family Center at Oak Hill, the minimum security prison near Oregon, WI. The family center is a place where inmates can come in the evening to visit with volunteers and work on projects such as recording stories for the “Read-To-Me” Program or making handcrafted greeting cards. These and other activities are designed to help maintain connections with the inmates’ families. Elizabeth Armstrong has been part of the leadership of this program for the past six years. It is a wonderful way to experience our ministry inside the walls and close to home.

3. Interfaith Dialog

Interfaith Dialog is a multi-session, weekly program facilitated by PMP volunteers. It is currently conducted at three prisons. This program brings together a group of inmates and volunteers to be part of a dialog among people who follow the seven spiritual traditions recognized by the Department of Corrections, specifically Protestant, Catholic, Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, Native, and Pagan. Inmates are chosen to participate by prison staff. The group explores questions common to all these traditions with the goal of forming a community of faith in which all can share not just our personal faith experiences, but also help others in the group understand the traditions of many faiths. Volunteers from several faith traditions have participated in this program for the past several years.

Many religious traditions expect their followers to believe that theirs is the one true faith. Nothing in this program will challenge that belief; it will, however, require us all to respect others who feel the same way. The most important question is this: “How do you live a faithful life whatever your faith?”

4. Spiritual Discipline

Discipline imposed is prison. Discipline accepted is freedom. It is possible to connect with a deeper meaning of life and fundamentally change the way you see the world.

For thousands of years, people in prison have found deeper meaning in their lives through the practice of spiritual discipline. Spirituality is a belief in a deeper reality than the “real world” around us. It is a belief that there is something more to life than what just what we see. It may be religious – Christians and Moslems have many well-developed spiritual practices – but it can also be just a feeling of longing for something more. People have learned to connect with this deeper meaning through using practices such as: silence, meditation, prayer, chants, the sharing of sacred texts, and understanding and respecting traditions. In the PMP Spiritual Discipline Program, a group of 15 inmates meets with volunteers to share spiritual insights and experiences using the process of the “talking circle” in which everyone gets a chance to speak and everyone gets a chance to hear.

5. Worship at Fox Lake Correctional Institution

A protestant worship service is conducted by Prison Ministry Project volunteers on the 4th Monday of every month in the afternoon in the prison chapel. This program has also included in the past a special service on Christmas Eve. Many volunteers have attended worship occasionally or regularly over the years.

And Four Volunteer Opportunities in the Community...

The Prison Ministry Project is also involved in public policy issues. Working to promote prison reform, reduce solitary confinement, and oppose the death penalty are important efforts. The current "11 x 15" Campaign is a good place to begin becoming active in these efforts.

1. The 11X15 Campaign: *A Call to Reduce Wisconsin's Prison Population to 11,000 by the end of 2015 for a Safer, Healthier State*

Our state's incarceration rate has grown dramatically in recent decades. Wisconsin incarcerates twice as many individuals per capita than Minnesota, Michigan, or Illinois. The return to an 11,000-inmate system would take us back to 1995 levels. There is no correlation between our rising prison census and the state's crime rate except that individuals who are inappropriately imprisoned are more likely to offend when they are released.

We pay a huge human price for our overuse of incarceration. Families and communities have been destroyed. Costs have risen dramatically. The cost of Corrections in Wisconsin has risen from under \$200 million per year in 1990 to more than \$1.3 **billion** in 2011. This cannot be sustained.

The majority of inmates in our prisons have no history of violence. Many suffer from mental illness and/or addictions. Most are people of color and an inordinate number come from backgrounds of poverty.

The 11X15 campaign challenges SPIRITUAL LEADERS, policy makers, professionals and leaders at every level to look at the evidence provided by current best practices and to make decisions based on the health and safety of our state. When that is done, we will reduce our prison population, creating a safer, healthier and more just state.

Wisconsin has the experience and the expertise necessary to cut our prison population IN HALF to 11,000 by 2015. We need only the will and the courage to act.

2. Thursday Night Adult Worship Service

As part of our commitment to welcome everyone to worship with us, no matter where they are on life's journey, First Congregational United Church of Christ would like to invite the Madison community to attend to a worship service for adults in our Chapel on second and fourth Thursday evenings at 7:00 p.m. First Congregational UCC is located at 1609 University Avenue, Madison, WI. Please use the door off the small parking lot on the South side of the building.

We recognize that for a variety of reasons some people would prefer or should only attend a worship service when children are not present. This service is being offered to meet those needs.

Children will not be present in the service on in the church building. This will be a full service of Christian worship and all are welcome to attend.

Attending and participating in this worship service is an important way that volunteers can serve as part of the Prison Ministry Project.

3. WAVE: Wisconsin Anti Violence Effort and the need to end gun violence

As we think and pray about where to go with our grief and outrage about the tragic evil that happened in December, 2012 in Connecticut, we will, as a church, be talking about gun violence in a number of different ways . One of those ways is to recognize that gun violence is directly connected to our commitment to Restorative Justice and to healing the harm caused by crime. A constant theme in the stories we hear from the men we meet in prison is the role that guns and gun violence plays in their lives and in their communities of origin. For example, last year Chicago had more than 400 gun related homicides and 319 students were shot during the school year, 24 of them fatally.

In 2013, the Prison Ministry Project will begin connecting with the Wisconsin Anti-Violence Effort. Rev. Jerry Hancock has known Jeri Bonavia, the founder of WAVE, for almost twenty years ago and deeply appreciates the WAVE approach to gun violence as a public health issue.

4. Madison Area Urban Ministry Programs

The Prison Ministry Project works closely with Madison Area Urban Ministry, which conducts many additional programs, some involving families of individuals who are incarcerated as well as others directly supporting individuals who were formerly incarcerated. For more information on these volunteer opportunities, please contact Linda Ketcham, Executive Director of MUM, at 608-256-0906.

For more information please contact Rev. Jerry Hancock, First Congregational United Church of Christ, 1609 University Avenue, Madison, WI 53726 jhancock@firstcongmadison.org or 608-568-6630.