Pastor's Report—Rev. Liz Alexander

The Spirit has filled The Church of Gethsemane with new life and hope. Our garden has blossomed creating beautiful outdoor sacred space for everyone to enjoy, and our congregation also continues to blossom with wonderful gifts.

This past year our unique ministry with and for prisoners, ex-prisoners and their families, and those who feel called into ministry with the poor, has been further recognized through our tremendously successful Project Connect Criminal Justice Celebration, visits to local faith communities, and participation in the Brooklyn Community Action Network (BCAN). In addition, Brooklyn Family Theater at The Church of Gethsemane’s production of Annie introduced over 2,000 people from the neighborhood to the church.

Sunday worship remains central to our ministry. We value our diversity and inclusiveness and continue to empower members through lay leadership. This year two seminary interns, Jenna Tillsman, and Jennifer Fox, assisted with worship and religious education for our children and youth.

Several Project Connect Members have completed our membership course and will be received as members into the Church of Gethsemane, even though they still remain in prison. In addition, two of our youth, Darryl and Isaiah Braun, were recently confirmed, and two others will soon become deacons. Last fall Ray Rios and Jose Reyes were welcomed as members of The Church of Gethsemane, and now serve as deacons. They lead a transition support group, Breathing Space, for those coming out of prison (see article). Phill Greenland was ordained as an elder this year.

Members and staff continue to make frequent visits to prisons. Rev. Alyce Rudlan, Presbyterian Chaplain at Riker’s Island Correctional Facility, continues to baptize women and infants at Riker’s who wish to be part of The Church of Gethsemane.

Pastoral concerns have also kept us busy with those struggling with joblessness, homelessness, health concerns, and the need for basic social services. As the church continues to provide for its members and friends, each year the need grows larger. Our financial needs grow also.

We continue to seek additional funding from partner churches, grants, and private donations. We thank all of you who have supported us in the past, and hope you will continue to assist our ministry in every way possible, including telling others about us.

Together let us continue to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ in our lives and justice and peace for the world.

Rockefeller Drug Laws
May 8, 2003 marked the thirtieth anniversary of the enactment of these laws. The Church of Gethsemane and JusticeWorks Community, participated in a rally for their repeal, held in front of Gov. Pataki’s New York headquarters in mid-town Manhattan.

Breathing Space
Breathing Space, Inc. exists for the express purpose of creating a safe place for all ex-offenders, their friends and family. We strive to improve the quality of life and sense of fellowship in our community by promoting unity and communication between all ex-offenders, their families and organizations that support them.

Our support group meets on Saturday afternoons twice a month at Gethsemane from 2:00 to 4:00 PM. Lunch is provided. For additional information, please feel free to contact Ray Rios at (347) 262-6975 or Jose L. Reyes (646) 234-1339.

The first annual Alternatives to Violence Summer Picnic, was held on July 12th, 2003, at the Church of Gethsemane. It was a resounding success, and more details will follow in our next issue.

Minister of Evangelism—Chibueze Okorie

At the Church of Gethsemane, we understand what it means for one to be in prison, especially for those who have neither families nor friends outside. Through my work as the Minister of Evangelism, and as an ex-prisoner, I know how it feels to be alone and abandoned while doing time. Those who are in prison need courage and hope while counting their calendar every day and waiting for the day to be released. To be released from prison does not mean that the trouble is over. Those who are released into parole must continue to report with good records to their parole officer to avoid being sent back to prison.

The word ‘connection’ means a lot to me and others, who came to Gethsemane from prison. I was connected through the Church of Gethsemane’s Project Connect program. Upon my release I made myself available to Gethsemane, and dedicated myself to do whatever it would take to keep me on the right track and stay focused. It was not easy finishing my parole time, but it made me stronger, hopeful and obedient.
Minister of Evangelism

The Church of Gethsemane has ordained ex-prisoners as Elders, Deacons, and other leaders of the Church. These ex-prisoners have uncountable gifts and backgrounds and helped to found the church. We are all connected to prisoners, families and friends through monthly letter writing, visitations, a membership correspondence course, a newsletter and our annual dinner.

Doing time in prison requires a lot of patience and determination to find the transformation behind the bars.

One of our goals at Gethsemane is to educate the public about the high costs to our communities and to taxpayers, when we give non-violent offenders long-term prison sentences. The money we spend could be better used for education, rehabilitation and substance abuse treatment. When a prisoner is released after serving a long time, he/she may have lost contact with their family and community. They may not have any family or friends to assist them. Poor ex-prisoners suffer a lot after lengthy years in prison, and they are mostly the ones to be re-arrested because they can’t find jobs and housing. Here at Gethsemane we understand these concerns, and try to provide support and encouragement.


A Witness for Peace

Rev. Cliff Frasier, Minister of Outreach for Presbyterian Welcome in New York City is serving a 6 month sentence at the Federal Correctional Institute at Fort Dix, NJ for demonstrating against the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHINSEC), formerly known as the School of Americas, in Fort Benning, GA. This act of conscience was a witness for peace in response to a call by faith communities, including the Presbyterian Church (USA), and human rights organizations to bring an end to U.S. military training of Latin American military personnel. Below is a part of a recent letter from Rev. Frasier.

"Your letters and cards have been wonderful to receive. I have a new appreciation for how they give energy and internal strength to those who are incarcerated. It’s inspiring to know that the ministry of the Church of Gethsemane is devoted to this life-giving work. Please tell everyone at Gethsemane how deeply they are living the Gospel through their outreach and advocacy to prisoners."

Project Connect Ministry

—Elder Louis Miner

If you are an inmate in prison, and you have no friends or family to write to, prison can be a lonely place. My own son found that out the hard way. No one in the family, or any of his real friends would write to him, because at the time we firmly believed ‘if you do the crime, you do the time’. But because he knew I loved him when he was released, after six years, my son brought me with him to the Church of Gethsemane.

I made the Church of the Gethsemane my home church, and as an elder became a part of ‘Project Connect’. I am dedicated to visiting the prisoners in our jails, to try to lessen the abandonment and loneliness they feel by writing to them monthly.

‘Project Connect’ also sends ‘Care Packages’ to prisoners. As the membership of ‘Project Connect’, continues to grow, I pray that Our Lord Jesus will give us the power and wisdom to continue to share the message of God’s love.

Thank you for taking the time out to write a brother in prison - while reading your letter, I too felt inspired in that there is still hope out there for prisoners. You see, each time that someone else takes the time out to recognize that even while imprisoned we are still human and for all intended purposes still alive, we are still in need of other human attention.

Frank Green, prison inmate

But when I walked through heaven’s gate I felt so much at home.

When God looked down and smiled at me,

From his great golden throne, he said

“This is eternity, and all I’ve promised you.

Today for life on what is past.

But there it starts anew.

I promise no tomorrow,

But today will always last.

But since each day’s the same,

There is no longing for the past.”

willie Adams, prison inmate
Project Connect Criminal Justice Sunday Celebration
February 9, 2003

Former prisoners, those whose programs minister to prisoners, and a judge each addressed different angles of the criminal justice system and their experiences with it at the Church of Gethsemane on February 9, 2003.

Gethsemane Church hosted more than eighty guests as part of this annual Project Connect Criminal Justice Sunday celebration. This Park Slope Church is a congregation of the Presbyterian Church (USA) created by and for prisoners, ex-prisoners, and people who discern a calling to ministry with the poor. Attendees included friends and supporters, ex-prisoners, family members of prisoners, and criminal justice experts. Gethsemane Church’s pastor, The Rev. Liz Alexander, and Elder Chihoeer Okorie, Minister of Evangelism—he himself an ex-prisoner—gave the words of welcome.

Four poignant presentations were given—two ex-prisoners, Ray Rios, and Tina Reynolds, spoke of their journeys, the need for supportive community after release, and Gethsemane’s providing and being such a community.

Judge Margarita Lopez-Torres, the first Latina elected to Civil Court in Brooklyn, described her roots in East New York, and the role that the criminal justice system played in the lives of community members. She pointed out the difficulty that judges face in sentencing individuals with the crush of court calendars and lack of sufficient information about defendants.

Rev. Dr. George (Bill) Webber, president emeritus of New York Theological Seminary and founder of the Masters of Professional Studies program at Sing Sing, spoke of his own transformation within the prison context as familiar scripture passages assumed new and deeper meaning when he and his students explored the bible. Assembly Member James Brennan also made a brief address.

Several ex-prisoners led the community in A Litany for Justice, followed by the Prayers of the People conducted by Elder James Tse, Moderator of the NYC Presbytery. Following the worship service, guests were served a sumptuous meal cooked by members and staff of Gethsemane. During the dinner, Pam McAllister, Gethsemane’s music director, and Pam Fleming provided a background of jazz music on piano and trumpet. Elder Louis Miner presented a memorial plaque to the family of Deacon Gall Haynes for his incredible work in the Project Connect program of networking with prisoners.

A positive energy permeated the unique celebration renewing each participants resolve to continue the quest for a more just and humane criminal justice system in a caring and supportive community.

Mary-Elizabeth Fitzgerald
The Wonderful Wizard of Oz Pop-musical
October 17 through November 15
Fridays at 8pm, Saturdays at 4pm & 8pm,
Sundays at 5pm
General Admission $12 for all ages

Brooklyn Family Theatre
At The Church of Gethsemane
(718) 670-7205
www.brooklynfamilytheatre.com

Come Join us our Homecoming Service and Picnic
September 7, 2003 at 1:30 p.m.

The Ministry of the Church
Ministers: All the People
Pastor: Rev. Liz Alexander
Director of Community Life: Mary-Elizabeth Fitzgerald
Minister of Evangelism: Min. Chibueze Okorie
Music Director: Pam McAllister
Administrative Assistant: Gerard Nagec
Officers of the Church
Elders/Session: Margaret Anderson, Debbie Cordonnier, Phill Greenland, Orlando Haynes, Louisa Horton-Hill, Louis Miner
Deacons: Jose Reyes, Ray Rios
Deacons in Training: Gregory Braun, Maurice Braun

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