

# LIBERATION VOICES!

## VOICES FROM GETHSEMANE

*Chibweze Okorie, Minister of Evangelism*

The ministry of the Church of Gethsemane has been in existence for fourteen years. We are people of different backgrounds including prisoners, ex-prisoners, their families and others who advocate for justice for the poor and needy.

We continue to give special thanks to the Friends of Gethsemane for all their efforts to raise funds for Gethsemane's ministry. The Friends are a small group of committed individuals who have worked together for many years in support of this ministry. They deserve every good reward. Thanks to every individual donor and to the Churches who have always valued our Ministry. We hope that you all will continue to support us.

As we strive to move forward each day through our ministry to the imprisoned, we have observed the increasing population of men and women behind bars. As their population increases, the resources to meet their needs are diminishing. Housing is a particularly difficult issue here in New York City.

Ex-prisoners can not move forward when the burden of life is hindering their existence. They want to live justly. They want to live committed lives and to restore Hope and Confidence they will need. They also want to work toward a good and Godly future, and to be able to be recognized as contributing members of society. Many ex-prisoners end up in the street upon their release, and some of them end up in city shelters and wait to be relocated to other housing or treatment centers. This is a big concern that faces anyone who cares for the poor and imprisoned. "How shall we help?"

We are hoping that its not too late to starting looking for a Gethsemane House Residential Center to enable us to provide housing for ex-prisoners who have nowhere to relocate upon their release. We have achieved a lot in the past years, and we are eager to accomplish this important task through your help and encouragement. We can use various kinds of assistance in this quest for a Gethsemane House – people with expertise in locating suitable buildings, in securing the financial support necessary to realize this dream.

On behalf of the session and the congregation of the Church of Gethsemane I thank you for your support to our prison ministry, may God richly bless you and yours.



Members of the early  
Church of Gethsemane

*"The Spirit of God is upon me,  
to preach good news to the poor,  
to proclaim release to the captives,  
to proclaim recovery of sight to the blind,  
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,  
to proclaim the acceptable year of our God"*

*Luke 4:18-19*

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## News from JusticeWorks Community... by Mary-Elizabeth Fitzgerald

The IFP, sponsored by JusticeWorks Community, is a growing coalition of religious and secular groups working toward more humane and justice criminal justice policies. There has been much energy and enthusiasm generated by recent IFP events:

At the January 18<sup>th</sup> IFP meeting, the featured speaker was **Si Kahn**, founder and Executive Director of Grassroots Leadership Conference in North Carolina. He is also the campaign Director for a Southern and national campaign to abolish for-profit private prisons. The title of his presentation was ***Blood from Stones: Private Prisons and the Corruption of Justice***. His message was very clear—imprisoning human beings for profit affects and endangers young people, people of color, the communities they live in and all of us!

On February 15, the IFP sponsored a Town Hall Meeting/Speak-out on the Rockefeller Drug Laws at Convent Avenue Baptist Church. The Black Radical Congress cosponsored the event. There was an overwhelming turnout of 350 people, directing their concerns about these laws to the legislators who were present: Assemblyman Scott Stringer, Senator Tom Duane, and City Councilman Bill Perkins. There were representatives from Senators Velmanette Montgomery and David Paterson, and a statement was read from Manhattan Borough President C. Virginia Fields. Voices of former prisoners were heard loud and clear! The event closed with a candlelight vigil on the steps of the church to commemorate those who have been and are currently incarcerated under the Rockefeller Drug Laws.

On February 24, the IFP sponsored an organizers training focusing on the repeal /reform of the Rockefeller Drug Laws. There were 40 enthusiastic participants who were given information about the drug laws, heard from two women who had been sentenced under these laws and received training by **Kate Rhee** and **Rashid Shabaaz** of the Prison Moratorium project on how to take actions to change legislation. The training took place at St. Aloysius Church in Harlem.

### **Mothers in Prison, Children in Crisis, Campaign 2001**

JusticeWorks Community is forging ahead in the seventh year of its national grassroots organizing campaign, **Mothers in Prison, Children in Crisis**. Organizers from 21 cities across the country are educating and mobilizing citizens to advocate for alternatives to prison as the sentencing norm for nonviolent mothers with children. Women have been the fastest growing segment of the prison population over the past decade. The model alternative we are advocating for is family residential treatment, since a large percentage of imprisoned women are drug-addicted single mothers with dependent children.

On the Friday before Mother's Day, May 11, 2001, thousands of citizens across the country will participate in marches, vigils and rallies calling for sentencing changes. In

New York City, the public action will take place at **Manhattan Criminal Court, 100 Centre Street, 9:00 a. m.** There will be legislators, members of the community to reform the drug laws, clergy, formerly incarcerated women and their children all calling for change. Please know that we believe that alternatives to prison are appropriate for all nonviolent offenders. We focus on women and children since they a very vulnerable and marginalized population in our society.

As part of the national campaign, there will be almost 500 non-profit agencies and communities of faith serving as public education sites for the campaign. During the Mother's Day weekend, they display our informational brochures, campaign buttons and origami flowers to raise the consciousness of their constituents about the plight of mothers in prison and the children they leave behind.

As an education and recruitment tool for the campaign, JusticeWorks hosts many **Women of Substance** forums at educational institutions, communities and civic organizations. The forum facilitator gives the audience an overview of the criminal justice system and shows a half hour documentary film. It portrays the lives of one woman who has been given a ten-year sentence for having a cocaine baby and others who have entered into family residential treatment with their children. The heart of the forum is the testimonies of ex-prisoner women in recovery. These women also respond to questions from the audience. Recent forums have taken place at City College, College of New Rochelle, John Jay College and SUNY New Paltz.

Calendar items:

On March 20, JusticeWorks co-sponsored a Children's Lobby Day in Albany. The Correctional Association, Incarcerated Mothers Program, Hour Children and Women's Prison Association spearhead this day. The children will hold a press conference at the Legislative Office Building. The young people will express themselves in a variety of ways: statements, poetry, song and dance as well as art work that will be displayed. They will then meet with various legislators to voice their concerns about the Rockefeller Drug Laws. Many of their parents were sentenced under these laws.

On March 27, JusticeWorks joined the New York State Criminal Justice Alliance in **Drop the Rock Day**—a day of education and action in Albany to demand that policy makers repeal the Rockefeller Drug Laws. Thousands of people from all over New York State are expected to converge on Albany that day.

On May 17, JusticeWorks will hold a fundraiser at the Brooklyn Museum, 6:00-9:00 p.m. At this event, **the Rev. Dr. Constance M. Baugh**, founder and first Executive Director of JusticeWorks, and Tina Reynolds, ex-prisoner, mother, and member of The JusticeWorks Board, will be honored.

## Thoughts from the inside - (Project Connect members)

I decided to write you at this time, to express my gratitude to both you and your ministry. In the past you were a blessing both mentally and spiritually. Thanks to you I now realize that although I am in prison there are certain people out there that really do care.

*Tedd Lewis*

I do not believe a person is born bad. I believe that situations and circumstances have an impact on a person's behavior. We have choices that our surroundings influence, those choices are from our culture and environment that lead us to believe the choices are correct.

God is within all of us, and he is willing and able to help us make better choices. I have been through a great deal, and God helped me to understand, and also gave me insight to certain situations. I have love and concern for people in need, and despite my present predicament, I know I have a good heart, and very creative mind. God is very caring and loving, and he understands our needs. He is in control, and his knowledge is beyond our understanding.

*Michael Buchanan*

When I stood up and accepted God in front of the entire congregation, I felt his Holy Spirit. It's like nothing I have ever felt before. It was not emotional, it was like I was in a different universe and it was nothing the world could ever offer. My belief in God allowed me to deal with situations in a peaceful fashion. It has taken me away from a worldly type of mentality. I strive to do the will of God everyday. The will of God is a responsibility to me as a child of God.

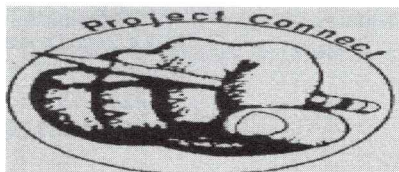
*James Davies*

I am no longer fearful of truth placing me in danger. I am self-empowered by God's spirit. It has given me a value that is above man's. I do not just do and talk for myself, but with the idea that I am guided by God; that the father did come and showed and proved that God does exist; But we were taught to see him wrong. True God is one with you not away from you. True God makes you feel good inside even when all hell is breaking loose around you. True God gives you friends in all walks of life. Our true God reveals his presence time and time again in many ways.

*Maurice (Knowledge) Samuels*

Sometimes things happen to you, and at the time they may seem horrible, painful and unfair, but in reflection you realize that without overcoming those obstacles you would have never realized your potential strength, power and heart.

*Michael Jones*



*Knowledge is Power"*

*Darryl Freeman*

I acquired your letter a few days ago and was indeed very delighted to hear from another member of the community. I found your letter to be very interesting and informative regarding current events which are transpiring at Gethsemane.

I am very optimistic about Gethsemane because I know the presence of God is within the mist of community. I really wish it had been possible for me to be in attendance as an active participant in the services.

Upon entering the prison system many years ago, a female friend shared a saying with me: "Knowledge is power." At that time I was in my early twenties, uneducated, without a focus, and lost. I didn't grasp the significance of what she was telling me, but now I understand what she said. I said all that to say that acquiring a proper education is the key to realizing that power. I am a witness to the reality of this factual statement. A lack of education limits us greatly, and is the number one enemy of anyone seeking to reach new heights - personally, economically, emotionally - in growth and development. We do a great injustice to ourselves when we fail to take advantage of the academic and vocational programs available while imprisoned.

The standard line for failing to take advantage of the academic and vocational training programs range from "I'll do that later on, when I get time", or "When I get out I'll do it." The reality precludes fruition of doing it later when we get out. The reality is how could anyone of us actually expect to return to our respective communities as an asset instead of a liability if we fail to prepare ourselves by taking advantage of academic and vocational training programs when we are imprisoned? How could we promote the concept of academic achievement to our children while we fail to achieve ourselves? If you think about it, doesn't that seem like a double standard? In truth, our children tend to follow the examples that set for them because we are their role models. If we want to play a major role in their lives, then let them see us striving to get ourselves together. Get a GED, and if you have a lengthy sentence - one year or more - go on to obtain a college degree. When we learn to help ourselves, we learn to help our loved ones. As Malcolm X once said, "Education is our passport into the future, tomorrow belongs to those who make preparations for it today." As I have stated before my brothers, knowledge is power.

This is the first time I've read the Liberation Voices, and it filled my heart with such a great joy and happiness. I've been praying for God to open the doors of communication for me with believers on the outside.

This would be very good for me to keep in contact with people who I just know have care and concern for brothers and sisters like myself.

*Kenneth Lowry*

## Voices from Gethsemane...(cont'd from page 1)

Encouraging students to participate in discussions about social issues is one of the reasons I love teaching; seeing students engaged in with ethical questions and learning is rewarding for me. This semester students are exploring different issues connected with prisons in the United States. Most recently, students were asked to examine the recent surge in the building of private prisons. A few students argued that private prisons were a good venture because of the savings created for taxpayers; a few students thought that the private prison facilities were more efficiently constructed. However, the majority of students responded negatively to the building of private prisons, citing that the need to "turn a profit" often cut necessary expenditures. Some of these students suggested that private prisons could be an improvement but only if they were closely monitored by a collection of people not involved directly with the prison. Here are a few of their comments (printed with their permission):

"An additional problem with the private prisons is that offenders can be imprisoned far away from their homes and family members. It becomes impossible for friends and family to visit these prisoners and provide support and counseling for them. Many studies show without friend and family support that if and when prisoners are released, they are much less likely to integrate themselves back into society, and as a result return to prisons."

"What these companies fail to see and incorporate into their business practices is that every life has certain rights. Just because a person is imprisoned he/she does not stop being human. As long as the companies' greed remains the driving force behind its business practices in respect to private prisons, there will always be people to protest violations against basic human rights...for-profit prisons, jail and detention centers have no place in a democratic society. Profiteering from the imprisonment of human beings compromises public safety and corrupts justice. In the spirit of democracy and accountability, we call for an end to all incarcerated for profit."

"It is said that you can judge any society by looking at its prisons. What would people think if they judged us by our private prisons?"

"The problem is clear. Mandatory sentencing had caused an exponential growth in both the number of inmates and the amount of money spent by the state each year. Although politicians may think that creating privately owned prisons will help the situation, it essentially compounds it."

*Elder Debbie Cordonnier*

### **National Church Staff Visits Gethsemane/JusticeWorks**

On Tuesday evening, April 3, seven staff members from the national Presbyterian Church (PCUSA) visited us in Brooklyn.

At a dinner-meeting members of Gethsemane, staff of JusticeWorks, and representatives from Kolot Chayeinu, a progressive Jewish congregation that shares space at Gethsemane, spoke of the mission of both Gethsemane and JusticeWorks Community. The most compelling part of these presentations were the testimonies of several ex-prisoners who recounted their journey to Gethsemane. Eloquent testimonies were given by **Ray Rios, Darryl Carathers, Jose Colon, Jose Reyes, and Minister of Evangelism, Chibueze Okorie.** **Jovanka Fairley**, who serves on the Women of Substance Advisory Council for JusticeWorks spoke passionately of the justice issues involved in our quest for more humane criminal justice policies. Special thanks to **Kathy Lancaster** for arranging this visit. The following day the group visited Sing Sing Correctional facility. An article about the meeting here will appear on the internet on [www.pscua.org/pcnews](http://www.pscua.org/pcnews)

### **Good Friday - The Eighth Station**

Gethsemane was invited to participate in the annual Station of the Cross sponsored by Pax Christi. The Eighth Station is where Jesus meets the women of Jerusalem. Each year on Good Friday, the group assembles at Dag Hammarskjold Plaza at 47<sup>th</sup> Street and proceeds down to 42<sup>nd</sup> Street. **Elder Debbie Cordonnier** wrote the statement and the petitions for the this station which was held in front of the Grace Building. The petitions lifted the concerns of women and children and immigrants. **Elder Louisa Horton Hill** read the petitions. This event addresses contemporary social issues such as hunger, homelessness, commercialization of our lives, excessive militarization across the globe. **Minister of Evangelism, Chibueze Okorie, and Elder Helene Means,** were joined by **Julie Mormando** and **Mary-Elizabeth Fitzgerald** in this Good Friday commemoration.



From left to right: Elder Debbie Cordonnier, and Elder Louisa Hill

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