



Maryland Church News

March/April 2002

Parishioners Gather From Near and Far For Touchstones Prison Ministry By Howard Zeiderman

Jessup, MD – The parking lot at the Jessup post office is centrally located among the 7 prisons that make up the landscape of this rural area south of Baltimore. Bi-weekly and sometimes weekly, participants in the Touchstones in Prison ministry meet there at 8:30 in the morning.



Program faculty and inmates gather together to discuss key issues affecting their lives

Parishioners from St. Anne's, Annapolis, Christ Church, Georgetown, and St. Mark's, Capitol Hill and this past year almost 50 visitors from parishes, near and far, converge to convoy past the guard booths and towers and the razor wire to the Maryland Correctional Institute/Jessup. There we join a group of inmates who have become leaders in the Touchstones Discussion Project's program in the facility.

Touchstones is an educational, non-profit program created by three faculty members from St. John's College, Annapolis. The program takes participants through the barriers that block us from exploring together as a group, and helps to develop the thinking skills and attitudes necessary to thrive in our complex rapidly changing world.

The program impacts 200,000 students each year as well as executives in corporations and government agencies and seniors in residential centers. A short

classical text is used to focus attention on a topic connected with the participant's experience. In addition, the group continually and explicitly monitors itself as it moves to become a self-governing and self-directed organism.

The prison program is a ministry aimed at enabling the inmate participants to think for themselves and make decisions affecting their own spiritual growth. Parishioners participate to give themselves a new conception of service and to allow them to advance their spiritual pilgrimage by overcoming their preconceptions about themselves and about those the society has incarcerated.

Each week a group of inmate tutors leads discussions with other inmates on short selections from classics from many cultures. For example, they discuss revenge, a dominant fact of life in prison, by considering passages from an essay by Francis Bacon, and then from selections from the Koran. They explore their ideas of God and sacrifice by reflecting on the story of Abraham. Through this year with the assistance of the United Thank Offering grant, each week hundreds of inmates in the prison school participate in the program.

And each week parishioners from local parishes come either to observe the classes or join the leaders in a three-hour session. The inmates lead all the sessions, and the group of inmate facilitators chooses the topic and text for discussion.

This prison ministry was conceived as one in which the inmates would not feel they were purely the recipients of the expertise and talents of the parishioners, and in which the parishioners would not see the prisoners simply as objects of their charity. Instead, the parishioners received instruction in the skills of discussion from the inmates themselves, and learned from them to explore the deepest issues with people from whom they were apparently separated by race, education, economic position, and future possibility.

They had to earn the right to offer their own thoughts and this ultimately led to mutual respect. This enabled the inmates to begin to appreciate their own humanity and the gifts they could bestow on others. They began to recognize themselves as essential members of a community, one in which there was real reciprocity. As one inmate said, "I felt warm hands in what I once saw only as a cold world."

If you are interested in learning more about Touchstones in Prisons, or about Touchstones' other programs, please see our website at www.touchstones.org or call the office at 410.263.2121.