

‘WHEN I WAS IN PRISON’

by Jeanne Zammataro

Lately we have been singing in Love Cannon that the Gospel in one word is love, the love God has for us, and, in return, the love we have for God and for neighbor. But what does it mean to love God and neighbor? Matthew 25: 35-40 provides an answer. There Jesus says (and I paraphrase) that we give him food when he is hungry; we give him drink when he is thirsty; we welcome him when he is a stranger; we give him clothing when he is naked; we take care of him when he is sick; and we visit him when he is in prison, when we do these things for the least amongst us.

When I decided to join Second Congregational Church of Londonderry, I knew that it and its members help to feed the hungry through the Neighbor’s Pantry and meals on wheels; that Second Congregational and its members are very welcoming; that some SCCL members provide clothing through the Thrifty Attic; and that Second Congregational members visit the sick and the shut-ins and drive community members to medical appointments. I began driving for meals on wheels and working in the Neighbor’s Pantry, but I wondered about “visiting when I was in prison”. So last fall, I attended an information meeting sponsored by the prison justice group of the Vermont Conference’s Department of Mission. After attending the meeting, which included a tour of the Springfield Correctional Facility, I joined the group. In this and following articles, I want to share what I am learning and to explore what it means “to visit when I was in prison” under modern circumstances.

The first thing I learned is that one cannot simply walk into the Springfield Correctional Facility and visit an inmate. But the Good News is that there are other ways “to visit when I was in prison”. One way is to donate paperback dictionaries. One of the most hopeful undertakings of the Vermont correctional system is the presence of the Vermont Community High School in every correctional facility in Vermont. VCHS provides a high school education for those incarcerated youth lacking a high school diploma, and those completing the program receive a fully credentialed diploma that is more highly regarded than a general equivalency diploma. This better prepares incarcerated youth for future employment and for becoming law-abiding citizens. But many incarcerated youths do not have access to a dictionary, certainly a necessary educational tool. If you would like to donate a paperback dictionary(ies), you can leave them with me, and I will make sure that they are delivered.

Another thing I learned is that there are volunteer opportunities, both inside and outside of the Springfield facility. Outside opportunities include providing support to newly released inmates through the nearest Justice Center so they have a better chance to reintegrate into the community, as well as serving on reparative boards. The Springfield facility volunteer program includes volunteers who lead bible study classes, worship services, AA and similar meetings, music and arts and craft classes. Volunteers also serve as adjunct faculty in the Vermont Community High School. The Springfield facility not only welcomes volunteers, but its security system is designed to ensure the safety of all those in the facility, including volunteers. Springfield also has a volunteer coordinator who both organizes the program and conducts evening orientation sessions.

In following articles, I plan on providing more information on volunteer opportunities and discussions surrounding Department of Correction budgetary considerations that the Vermont Legislature will be considering this year. In the meanwhile, if you would like more immediate information, please let me. Also, I invite your questions, comments and conversation during coffee hour or at 824 8184 or jzammataro@aol.com.

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By: Jeanne Zammataro

On September 20, 2009, Mary Whittlesey and I led a worship service at the Springfield facility. The facility is on RT 11 by the interchange with I-91. If it wasn't for the barbed wire, approaching the prison is like approaching a modern school or hospital. After praying in the car, signing in (twice), locking car keys in the lockers and passing through a magnometer, Mary and I walked to the chapel through a modern cement block corridor to the room that serves as the chapel, not knowing how many inmates would come to the service. That was a concern because that afternoon was the first Jets-Patriots game of the season, and we were afraid that no one would come to the service. Yet six inmates came to worship, to praise and thank God, to sing hymns, to confess sins and to be assured that God loves and forgives, to pass the peace of Christ, to hear scripture, to discuss what inmates can do as Christians to bring God's caring to a culture hostile to any caring, to join in joys and concerns and to pray. I left the service feeling, as did Mary, that Jesus is truly present wherever three or more gather in His name.

Church Visit #1

Valena Austin

As I approach the building, I am struck by its severity. I think to myself what an unlikely place. Garden beds by the door are browned by November's chilly hand. Once inside I find the worship space as severe as the exterior ...cinder block walls and no windows. There are no signs of the room's purpose other than a tall wooden table and a shelf full of hymnals on the back wall. I enter and am provided with an order of worship and a pamphlet of hymns. Looking at the order of service I see that it is very similar to that used by my "home" congregation. I wait quietly, perusing the hymn booklet as is my habit. Fairly soon congregants begin to arrive, all looking as if they had talked to each other on the phone and decided to wear the same color and style of clothing. Greetings are exchanged by everybody and I am able to meet each person individually as the entire group numbers no more than twelve, including myself. The people chat very quietly unlike my home congregation that can be quite noisy before worship begins. Other than in the fashion sense the group has some diversity in age, racial makeup and clearly mental acuity. The only "child" in the room is a gentleman of limited function who seems to be cared for by one of the other men. As worship proceeds, I note a high level of attentiveness in the group. We sing hymns chosen from the pamphlet by members of the congregation. The singing is heartfelt, if a little off key now and again. There is no sermon as such. A passage of scripture is read by a member of the group then the worship leader opens up the floor for discussion of the passage. The discussion may lead almost anywhere and I detect a high level of biblical literalism in the group. The prayer concerns make it evident that within this congregation there is a deep well of pain and sadness.

This room in which I have joined others for worship is the "chapel" at the Southern State Correctional Facility, a men's prison in Springfield, Vermont. Of course, this explains the hideous architecture and bad clothing as well as the sadness present. Jeanne Zammataro, Mary Whittlesey and myself conduct a monthly worship service here and it is the home of some of the most inspiring worship I have ever participated in. The brokenness of these spirits and the system they are caught up in can be overwhelming. Month after month the men troop in to join in worship of a God that must be so hard to see in their situation. They allow us old ladies to presume that we might be of help in their search for God's mercy. These men are clearly hungry for both God's love and contact with those who help them feel it. Their gratitude for our presence is almost palpable and is expressed in both words and warm handshakes during the passing of the peace. I feel humbled in the presence of these thirsting souls.

The liturgy is simple and easily tweaked to suit this purpose. It moves with a familiar flow from Prayer of Invocation through Prayer of Confession, Assurance of Pardon, scripture reading and discussion, prayer concerns and Pastoral Prayer, Passing of the Peace, Sacrament of Communion and Benediction. Interesting adjustments to the service are the use of pre-consecrated bread and juice taken from our home church's monthly Communion service and stored in Jeanne's freezer and the requirement that the chalice used cannot be breakable. I have mentioned to Jeanne in jest that were we to have too little juice, we would need to calculate by weight the level of deconsecration of the juice caused by adding regular juice. Humor aside, the Communion service was an important time of connection with both God and each other as each of us was served the bread and cup in turn. Most moving to me are the prayer concerns. Both joys and concerns are very much about family. Reconciliation with family members is a dominant theme among the inmates along with fears about life after release. As I stated earlier the sole music is hymns chosen by the men during the service. We sing a lot of hymns because they seem to enjoy it and it gives them some say in their worship service. I will be studying piano in order to broaden the range of music available. I have asked God for some planges flexibility. After the Benediction, the men stacked the chairs and left quietly while we picked up papers and hymn booklets.

Doing this service is a joy to us and, we dare to hope, a dose of God's love for the men. Abominable architecture and razor wire aside, this ugly room becomes a temple for a brief time, nourishing all of us within its walls. While this topic may not qualify as a "church visit", it is a remarkable demonstration of "Church" occurring when a group of worshipers gathers to ask God to enrich their lives.

WHEN I WAS IN PRISON

By: Jeanne Zammataro

I have several short stories this afternoon of visiting Jesus when he was in prison.

I am a retired attorney and until 2007 was a very lapsed Lutheran. That winter, a very dear friend was diagnosed with brain cancer. Seeking pastoral care for myself, and so I could be a better friend to a friend in dire circumstances, I started worshipping at Second Congregational Church of Londonderry and decided that I had to start living out my belief in the priesthood of all believers.

I started delivering Meals on Wheels and somehow said yes when my pastor, Rev. Laurie Krooss, asked me to reinstitute our senior lunch. And then I saw a press release from something called the Prison Justice Committee of the Vermont Conference of the UCC that said the Committee was holding a meeting at the First Congregational Church of Springfield for potential volunteers.

I went and met some remarkable people, including Windham-Union's own Will Hunter. So I said sign me up, thinking that my legal skills might be helpful. But I soon learned that prisoners and recently released inmates did not need my legal skills, such as they are, but rather needed my humanity, such as it is.

So when Will suggested cooking and eating at Dismas House, a transitional house for former inmates to live in a structured setting as a way for them and for society to be reconciled, I thought that it made excellent sense, except that in 30 years of marriage my husband had done most of the cooking, and I had rarely cooked for my family, never mind making a meal for 15. But as I thought more about it, I realized that this was a great way to visit Jesus in prison and that it might work if I brought along others who were better cooks. And so now I have been cooking and eating at Dismas House with other members of SCCL for almost two years.

There is a tradition at Dismas House of starting the meal with what are called gratitudes. My first meal I was grateful for getting the meal on the table on time. Over and over again, the residents are thankful for being substance free another day, for having a job interview, for having a good day at work, for being reunited with their families and for the company of the volunteers.

It is clear that our mere presence is strikingly important to the residents. Just by waving to those sitting on the porch as we drive in or out, by laughing and joking with the residents while they help us cook, by saying take care to one of the residents by name as he leaves the kitchen, by listening to the residents individual stories and by sharing a meal at the dinner table, there is a mutuality, sharing and reciprocity of our common humanity that helps the residents understand the possibility of new life.

Will's next challenge was that the mainline churches are not very well represented as volunteers in the Springfield prison. I am even worse at arts and crafts than I am at cooking, I can't sing, and I certainly had never led a worship service. But I thought that I could use my church's bulletin as a guide for putting together a service, and with the guidance of my pastor and the help of those who can sing and play the keyboard, I have joined the worship rotation of the Springfield Area Association of Churches.

The very act of worship has turned a sterile room in the prison into a sacred place. Each time I leave the prison, I feel very deeply that Jesus was present as we gathered in his name. Men come to our worship because we give them a choice of hymns, we discuss scripture, they have a chance to greet each other with a word of peace and we are known as the service that includes prayer concerns. Which in many ways are not so different from the joys and concerns voiced every week in our churches: joy that a mother's health is better than expected, concern for the health and well-being of family, a young man mourning the death of his mother; I wish I could

describe the pain in his eyes that turned into gratitude as I stopped to offer a word of comfort as I was leaving. Some of the concerns are unique to the prison, as the men are concerned for their fellows who remain incarcerated only because they have no place to live, given the huge shortage of transitional housing in VT.

And that brings me to my last story of visiting Jesus when he was in prison: the creation of transitional housing. A retired Lutheran pastor asked me if an inn located in rural Mt. Holly owned by the Lutherans might be suitable for a Dismas House. I said no because there would be no place for the residents to work. But, I thought some more, talked to Will Hunter, and we decided that it would make terrific transitional housing for those who need long term, residential substance abuse treatment. So Will and I went to a meeting of many Lutherans and, long story short, the inn is about to be transformed into thirty bed transitional housing for long term substance abuse treatment.

I would like to close with a quote from Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables*. The setting is that Jean Valjean has just been released from prison, destitute, with nothing more than what is on his back. He has been repeatedly turned away as he seeks shelter and food, until he is welcomed by the priest in a rectory. After Valjean expresses surprise that the priest hasn't asked his name, the priest says:

"This is not my house; it is the house of Jesus Christ. This door does not demand of him who enters whether he has a name, but whether he has a grief. You suffer, you are hungry and thirsty; you are welcome. And do not thank me; do not say that I receive you in my house. No one is at home here, except the man who needs a refuge. I say to you, who are passing by, that you are much more at home here than I am myself. Everything here is yours. What need have I to know your name? Besides, before you told me, you had one which I knew."

The man opened his eyes in astonishment.

"Really? You knew what I was called?"

"Yes," replied the priest, "you are called my brother."

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I may finally understand what Martin Luther might have meant when he spoke of the priesthood all believers. According to John Dominic Crossan, the Good News of the Gospels is that God's kingdom has already begun with Jesus. That is Jesus' message, and He calls us to participate with Him in God's kingdom, right here, right now. His message means that God's kingdom is present when we welcome the stranger, feed the hungry and visit the sick and those in prison.

Palm Sunday will be the fifth time that I will have led worship in the Springfield facility as part of the worship rotation of the Springfield Area Association of Churches. Mary Whittlesey has joined me each time to lead the pastoral prayer, Marilyn McCann will be providing musical support for the second time and Laurie helps with preparation as needed. Our attendance has ranged from four to ten men with each of them eager to worship. In fact, many of the men specifically attend because of the United Church of Christ form of worship, especially the Prayer Concerns.

The order of worship is very similar to the one we use here at Second Congregational, except we sit in a circle instead of rows, and there is, of course, no announcements, children's story or anthem. We enthusiastically pass the peace and sing the hymns, the Introit, the Gloria Patria and the Doxology, a hymn of praise and thanksgiving. We confess our sins in unison, and all are assured of God's love and forgiveness in Christ. One of the men reads the scripture lesson for the day, and I then lead a discussion in response to that scripture in which most of the men participate. Immediately thereafter, we have prayer concerns, giving the men the opportunity to give thanks for the improved health of their families and/or themselves and to express their concerns for their families and their fellow inmates, including their regret that they are not with their families. We close by standing in a circle for the benediction.

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Dismas House traditions include sitting down to dinner every weekday evening and beginning the meal with grace and with each resident, volunteer and staff person stating what it is that each individual is grateful for that day. Many times I have heard how grateful a resident is for the volunteers and the food they prepare. Many residents have said how grateful they are to be reconciled with family and the opportunity to visit with their children, who range from toddlers to college age. Many are grateful that they are dry and sober for another day, or that they had a good day at work/school. Many have said how grateful they are for Dismas House.

I too am grateful for Dismas House, as it provides supported group living to those who are making the difficult transition from prison to living again in society. I am very grateful that members and friends of Second Congregational have joined me in cooking at Dismas House, including Betsey Allen, Val Austin, Sue Egan, Jerry and Roger Oberle and Amber, Jeremiah and Jessup Burrow (Jessup measured and poured ingredients for a warm potato salad). And Sue and Hal Nelson just cooked a turkey dinner at Dismas House with one of their neighbors, for which I am grateful indeed.

I am also grateful for Bob Ray contributing paintings to Dismas House auctions and for his band playing at the latest fundraising dinner. I am grateful for the church's mission committee's cash contributions to Dismas House. I am especially grateful to all those who donated items for the Dismas House backpacks; the toiletries were very much appreciated, especially the items for women. And I cannot say enough about how grateful I am to Laurie Krooss for her support and encouragement for this important ministry and that she taught me that prayer is action and action is prayer.

Gratitude is also due to the Vermont Conference of the United Church of Christ for creating its Prison Justice Committee. Without that committee, I would not have learned about Dismas House, nor would I have become involved in the committee's efforts to bring worship to the Vermont prisons (more on which next Outreach). Recently, Will Hunter, another member of the committee, and I had the opportunity to present information on the need for transitional housing at a meeting of representative of the New England Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America held to determine possible uses of a property that has recently been donated to the synod.

WHEN I WAS IN PRISON: TIME AND CHANGE

BY: Jeanne Zammataro

Second Congregational Church, UCC, of Londonderry has approximately ten members and friends who volunteer either in the Springfield prison, at Dismas House or both. One morning and one afternoon a week Bill Cooley leads several one on one Bible studies and co-leads a group Bible study in the Springfield prison. With several other women, I lead worship in the Springfield prison approximately once a month, I cook at Dismas House once a month with others and I occasionally attend the weekly Episcopal services.

Recently, Bill and I were talking about our experiences in prison ministry. In our conversation, Bill mentioned that one of the things he has learned from his experience is that time means something different to those who are incarcerated. Those with long sentences very much want time to pass by quickly. Yet if time goes quickly, that means that their life is also going quickly, and naturally they would like to have some life left for when they are released.

Some of the men do, of course, put their time in prison to as best use as possible. They attend classes at the Vermont Community High School to stretch their minds, even if they have a high school diploma. Some work at various work jobs for tiny wages, especially in the kitchen where they learn baking and other skills, hoping to make themselves employable in the Vermont tourist economy. There is a significant group who read their Bibles, attend Bible studies, witness to their faith (there have recently been quite a few Baptisms in the prison—I have attended two during the Wednesday afternoon Episcopal services), and attend the variety of worship services that are available to them.

I responded to Bill that another problem of time in the prison is its indefiniteness for many of the men. Those who are coming up to their minimum time, or who are even past their minimums, often do not know when they will be released. Those coming up to their minimum are concerned that the arrangements that they have made for release, such as employment, savings, a place to live, will not pass muster with prison officials. And some who are past their minimums often feel that they are getting the run around; whether that is a fair perception is not easy to discern. Another significant group of men are being detained because they lack the money for bail. Not having been convicted, they have no idea how long they will be incarcerated-- whether charges will be dropped or reduced, if reduced will the sentence be for time served or longer, how long is the state's attorney going to drag out the plea bargaining, will the court session actually occur on

schedule? In our conversations with the men, it is clear how difficult it is for them to live with such uncertainty.

And that brings me to change. During a recent joys and concerns at worship at Second Congregational, one of our member volunteers spoke passionately about the need for change in our criminal justice system. Of all the developed countries in the world, the United States has the highest proportion of its population in prison, many of whom committed nonviolent offenses. Many of those incarcerated are not receiving the mental health care or substance abuse treatment that they need. Recognizing that, the Vermont Conference of the United Church of Christ adopted at its last Annual Meeting a resolution encouraging our lawmakers to reallocate resources away from incarcerating those who have committed nonviolent crimes and towards substance abuse prevention and towards treatment for those with substance abuse issues. The Prison Justice Committee of the Conference's Department of Mission sponsored that resolution and has sent it to the members of the Vermont Congressional delegation and to executive and legislative leaders in Vermont.

WHEN I WAS IN PRISON: Time and Treasure

By Jeanne Zammataro

The last time I wrote about time and change, the change needed in our prison system and time as the length of sentences and as the indeterminacy of release dates. Another aspect of time is the length of our worship service. When I first met with Pastor Laurie to discuss the basic outline of the prison worship, she expressed concern that the service wouldn't be long enough—no announcements, no children's story, no anthem. So Mary Whittlesey and I were quite glad that the first service lasted fifty minutes. Now that we have more experience, the services are lasting around an hour and a half. We sing extra hymns, our discussions of scripture go longer, the time for prayers and concerns lasts longer and at least several of the men stay after the service to talk. For all of us who have participated in worshipping in the prison, Mary, Marilyn McCann, Val Austin and I, Jesus is truly present wherever people gather in His name, even in a windowless, cinder block room.

Still another aspect of time is all the volunteer efforts of church members and friends. Bill Cooley spends much time in the Springfield prison each week leading group and one on one Bible studies. Many of us have helped to cook and share an evening meal at Dismas House: Val Austin, Sue Egan, Jerry and Roger Oberle, Amber and Jeremiah Burrow, Ira Zuckerman (my husband) and myself. Again Jesus is present in all this time, because, as He said, when we visit those in prison (and a half-way house such as Dismas House), we are visiting Him.

Now to treasure. The Church's Mission Committee has been incredibly supportive of prison ministry. The Mission Committee provides funds to supplement the menus at Dismas House and any of the allocated funds left at the end of the year will be donated to Dismas House. The Mission Committee purchased bath towels included in the backpacks given every camper at Camp Agape, a camp sponsored by Methodists, Episcopalians and the United Church Christ for children of incarcerated parents. The Springfield Areas Association of Churches, of which I am an associate member, provides indigent prisoners with Christmas baskets. The Mission

Committee is purchasing drawing pads from the Manchester Dollar store to be included in those baskets.

Finally, the stove in Dismas House had been on its last legs. When I mentioned this to David Forbes, he readily agreed to be on the lookout for a stove being replaced in one of his renovation projects. And just as the old stove was about to give out, David had a wonderful replacement stove from one of his projects. The new electric stove is a joy for cooking; it is almost as sensitive in achieving and maintaining heat as a gas stove, its oven heats much more evenly and is much easier to clean.

Given all the time and treasure given by Second Congregational Church to prison ministry, it is heartily following Jesus' invitation to visit Him in prison.

WHEN I WAS IN PRISON: Children of Incarceration (Newly revised 2012)

by Jeanne Zammataro

Who remembers the children of incarceration? Many incarcerated individuals have young children. And their concern for their children is palpable. They express their concerns during the joys and concerns portion of worship in the Springfield prison, as well as during the time of discussion and conversation. At Dismas House, one of the most frequently expressed gratitudes is for being able to visit with their children.

Camp Agape is a ministry that remembers the children of incarcerated parents. Agape is the Greek word for unconditional love. With one week of free camp, Camp Agape strives to bring the unconditional love God has for each of us into the lives of children seven to eleven who have at least one parent who has been incarcerated.

Here is what campers have said about Camp Agape. Their best memories were meeting new friends, fishing and swimming, canoeing, singing, camping out under the stars and helping with the soup kitchen. These are the things camp meant to them: meeting many other kids going through the same things, activities that I wouldn't have done if I hadn't gone, getting to know God better and praying more and forgiving others.

Having been a school psychologist with many years experience at a Christian camp, Janet Knowles volunteered to be the camp consultant at Camp Agape for a one week session in the summer of 2011. As the camp consultant, Janet worked with counselors and other staff to help them understand the behaviors of the campers, including those campers who have the after affects of alcohol fetal syndrome . She also engaged in camp activities and spent powerful one on one time with kids, reading with them and playing board games. And without hesitation, this is what Janet said when I asked her how her week at Camp Agape went, "I am going back next year!" Unfortunately, Janet's untimely and unexpected death intervened.

Emily Kitteridge volunteered at Camp Agape in the summer of 2012. Here is what she reported to the Conference Prison Justice committee of which she is a member:

“My experience at Camp Agape (Agape means love) was truly wonderful. I stayed in a cabin with 5 kids and two other adults. There were challenging moments and really special ones.

“Our day began with morning watch where we went to the outdoor chapel and sat on wooden logs and listened to the chaplain read a scripture and then be able to relate the scripture to a real life event. We also learned about being mindful and finding our “quiet space”. It was a time when everyone was able to take in the silence and get ready for a busy day.

“Each day was filled with many opportunities for the kids. Some of the activities were swimming, arts and crafts, and sports. There was always a rest time during the day and campfires at night. It was fun singing songs around the campfire as well as before every meal when we sang a grace. The weather was great and I met a lot of people during my experience there and developed close connections/friendships that I will cherish. We were like a family at the end of the week.

“My experience at Camp Agape has changed me spiritually; I felt closer to God and was able to relate many of the scriptures to my own life experiences. I also saw in the short span of time growth in many of the kids. I would encourage others to have the same experience that I had. I am already looking forward to next year. !!!!!”

A SERMON

by Jeanne Zammataro

Grace be unto you and peace from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Today's Gospel lesson (Matthew 25: 31-46) contains Jesus' concrete vision of doing what matters to God, what he described elsewhere as the kingdom of God, that the hungry be fed and the sick and those in prison be visited. What I like about this passage from Matthew is that it's not ambiguous nor is it vague. It's not airy fairy, and no interpretative tools are necessary; it plainly says what it means. It is a passage where the rubber hits the road and the pedal meets the metal. Jesus does not suggest that we feed the hungry. He didn't invite us to visit the sick. He left us with no doubt as to what to do. Jesus said feed the hungry, visit the sick, and, visit those in prison and that when we do those things to the overlooked and ignored, we are doing it to him.

Today I would like to share with you how some of us are visiting Jesus in prison in modern day Vermont, especially since you can't just drive up to a Vermont prison, and say I am here to visit a prisoner. One way to visit Jesus in Prison is to cook and eat at one of the Vermont Dismas Houses. Dismas House provides transitional housing for furloughed inmates as a way of reconciling them with society and society with them. One of the ways of such reconciliation is that on weeknights volunteers cook the evening meal and share it with residents, a way of showing that they are remembered and valued. When someone suggested that I be one of those volunteers, my response was, you want me to cook? In over thirty years of marriage, I had seldom cooked for my family of four, and now you are proposing that once a month I cook meals for ten to fifteen people? But I stopped to think about it. My church is flush with women who cook well. So various women from my church have been helping me cook at Dismas House for

several years. And my husband, the family cook, even joins me in a pinch. The highlight of each meal is the gratitude that is expressed around the dining room table, that a job has been found, an interview was had, children were seen for the first time in months or years, there was another day of sobriety and, always, thanks for the cooks.

Let me tell you of my experience of visiting Jesus in prison. I lead worship in the Springfield prison with two other women from my church. The prison chapel is in a cinder block room that has no windows, no pews, no cross, no lectern and no pulpit. The men are dressed in the same two piece blue jump-suit, and sit in a semi-circle of institutional chairs facing a stark table that serves as a communion table. On the table there is a single paper plate of bread and a silver plated tumbler inscribed with the name of the insurance company that gave it to my husband. The tumbler is filled with grape juice.

Although the men are dressed alike, it would be a mistake to think that they share a socioeconomic background, other than being incarcerated. Most can read, some better than others. Some are highly educated, while others are not. Some have excellent skills and have held responsible jobs, now jeopardized by their incarceration, while others may have just obtained a decent job. Others may never have had a good job and their poor prospects for employment have been made worse by incarceration. Some grew up in rural poverty, one was the son of a judge, and one is a professional artist, who has also been an EMT and a fireman. Most are white, but a few are black. While some grew up in strong families, others grew up in abusive families. Many of the men have underlying addiction issues. A number of them are sex offenders. Everyone of them is a person loved by God, as we are all loved by God, yet our society mostly overlooks and ignores them.

We never know how many or which men will show up— partially because some men are newly arrived or have been transferred in or out with no warning or because they are not sure of the worship schedule or because they have been encouraged to come by the regulars. After the guards have announced the ten minute travel window, the men arrive at the chapel, slowly or all at once and as few as three and as many as fourteen. As they arrive, we greet each man, welcoming those who are new and saying hello to those we know by name. We then follow a form of worship similar to today's and celebrate communion, distributing the pre-consecrated bread and cup face to face.

One of the most powerful aspects of the service is hearing the joys and concerns of the men. Their concerns for their fellow inmates and their families is palpable. And there are even joys, as grandchildren are born and reconciliation with family members is achieved. And their care for each other is impressive. Lobbying the officials to change rules so that an inmate could visit his dying friend in the infirmary, creating a network to support each other through the uncertainties of prison life, especially the uncertainties regarding release, calling the VT hotline when another inmate's medical needs are being ignored to the extent that he would have died without that intervention.

This monthly prison worship service proves the theological truth of the Gospel statement that Jesus is present wherever two or more are gathered in his name. It proves that that it is not the space that makes worship sacred, but rather it is the very act of worship that makes the space

sacred. It also proves the theological truth that when we visit those in prison we are visiting Jesus. And it also caused me to understand one reason that Jesus commands that we visit those in prison, it is an incredible lesson in understanding the presence of the divine spark in all of us. Or as my pastor told me, no one should be remembered for the worst thing a person has done in life.

A STORY

Here is a great story of one of our church members following Jesus' command to "visit him in prison". Damaris Tyler, member of Post Mills Congregational Church, has been an instrumental music teacher for many years, but is, by her admission, not a guitarist. One of the English faculty in the Vermont Community High School in the Springfield facility is a guitarist, and although lacking experience in instrumental instruction, thought it would be great to have guitar classes at the facility. Teaming up, Damaris and the English instructor are now offering guitar classes to both advanced students and beginners. Damaris reports that the students have great enthusiasm have practiced diligently and are eager to perform a show for their fellow residents.

MINISTRY OF PRESENCE

by Jeanne Zammataro

In Down in the Chapel: Religious Life in an American Prison, a Roman Catholic chaplain described his visiting men on death row as a "ministry of presence" -- "to show the men [otherwise forgotten] that they are remembered." That presence is also the way Father Gregory Boyle, a Jesuit priest and author of *Tattoos on the Heart*, describes Jesus' ministry to the marginalized of his day. By eating with sinners, prostitutes and tax collectors, Jesus was present with them, rather than being for them.

And that is how I understand prison ministry. Those of us who do it are present with the men in Springfield prison or with the residents of Dismas House. What we believe, the mechanics of the worship, what we have cooked (or how we cooked it) is not what is important. What is important is that, by being present with them, we have shared our common humanity one with another. We have shared joys and concerns. We have greeted each other. We have listened to each other. We have sung and laughed together. We have eaten ordinary meals together, whether around the dining room table at Dismas House or the Eucharistic table at the prison.

In saying that we visit him when we visit those in prison, Jesus was identifying with prisoners. In visiting prisoners and residents at Dismas House, we meet the divinity of Jesus in their humanity.