

Former Inmates Present Drama



April 12, 2011 — A group of "former members" of Celebration Fellowship, a first-of-a-kind Christian Reformed Church congregation at a prison in Ionia, Mich., recently read a drama, a reflection of their own experiences in and out of prison, to members of River Terrace CRC.

Located in East Lansing, Mich., River Terrace is one of the congregations involved in supporting the CRC congregation at the Bellamy Creek Correctional Facility, said Rev. Richard Rienstra, pastor/developer of Celebration Fellowship.

"They (former members of Celebration Fellowship) were well-received by our church," said Adria Libolt, a River Terrace member and past deputy warden in the Michigan Department of Corrections (MDOC).

Libolt, in fact, helped to write the agreement between the (MDOC) and the CRCNA to establish Celebration Fellowship.

The church within the Correctional Facility is unusual for several reasons.

"One is that the prisoners take responsibility with the help of Rich Rienstra and the Chaplain for the church services. They take leadership roles like leading singing, reading from the Word, and witnessing," said Libolt, who is the wife of Clayton Libolt, the River Terrace pastor.

Secondly, she said, it is unusual because the prisoners who attend CF become a community. "They minister to other prisoners who come to the services. When the volunteers worship with the prisoners, they are blessed by the services, too."

Then there is the issue of when prisoners are paroled or discharged. "Many do not have transportation, housing, or employment. They are like refugees," she said.

The men who spoke at River Terrace are being helped with the re-entry challenges by participating in an aftercare support group via a grant from the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship with funds from the Lilly Foundation,

The aftercare program is called "Celebrating Our Need To Adore Christ Together (2010-2011)." Its goals are to "engage 'returning citizens' (former inmates) from the Ionia Bellamy Creek Celebration Fellowship Prison Congregation, current inmates of Ionia Bellamy Creek Celebration Fellowship church, and volunteer-partners of Celebration Fellowship."

This is done, said Rienstra, for the purposes of sustaining accountable relationships with one another, encouraging discipleship by meeting regularly for meals, fellowship, prayer, and worship.

The men also plan components of worship services with the help of resource consultants for four liturgical seasons—Advent, Epiphany, Lent, Pentecost.

In addition, they share with partner churches, community congregations, and the Celebration Fellowship Church the insights they have gained on ways the liturgical, aftercare project can "engage congregations so that worship renewal is grassroots and impacts the worship life and habits of congregations." Program Director for this is Jimmy Erickson: Ericksonj80@yahoo.com.

The dramatic reading performed by the men was called "Even in the Darkest Place." Members of River Terrace filled their gym to hear the reading.

After hearing the drama, River Terrace members compiled a list of prayers, which were "offerings" of to Bellamay Creek and to the men, similar to the way prayers are given as an offering in Celebration Fellowship where monetary gifts are not permitted in accordance with policy.

The "Prayer List" composed by members of River Terrace as an "offering" was placed this week in collection plates at Celebration fellowship in response to the reading and singing of the men who visited River Terrace.

"We are grateful that the service moved so many of the members of River Terrace," said Rienstra.

Here is a sampling of the prayers offered by River Terrace members in response to the reading of "Even in the Darkest Place":

- I pray, a prayer of "THANK YOU," for each of you, Disciples of Christ, and ask that God and Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit may continue to bless you and work through you to advance His Kingdom as you did here today, Sunday, April 3, 2011 in the year of OUR LORD. Your Brother, in Christ with gratitude.
- I pray for an ex-prisoner who has been out since last August, after being in prison 18 years, and is looking for a job; also, he is not a believer in God...Pray that he'll get to know Christ.
- Dear Father thank you for the stories we've heard from these ex-prisoners. Help me to remember and pray for prisoners and their successful lives after release.
- Holy Father, I pray for intercession in establishing a strong support network ... for providing housing, transportation and employment for prisoners returning to our free population. Provide them supportive friends and families as well.
- Pray for my son who abuses substances and is now on probation in three different courts. Pray for insight to realize his errors and change his life.
- Pray for our son, Jeff, who will soon leave Rehab.

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