

The Church of the Damascus Road

Flash!

Volume 1
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October 1997
Fort Dodge & Rockwell City, IA

There is...

There is in place a steering committee faithfully planning for the ministry of The Church of the Damascus Road. There is in place the support of the synod and synod staff. There is in place the support of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America with money and expertise. There is in place many congregations and many individuals giving money and time. There is opportunity abounding and joyful involvement. One more thing is necessary: your prayers and the prayers of those around you that the Holy Spirit of God might be with us to guide and lead us. Please include The Church of the Damascus Road in your personal prayers and in the weekly prayers of the congregation where you live and serve.

-- Rev. Allen E. Hermeier, Chair
Prison Congregation
Steering Committee



Is Paul's Experience Ours?

When Saul set out to arrest the followers of Christ in the Damascus area, the ascended Jesus interrupted his mission with a blinding light and a question: "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

Days later, Saul was greeted by a reluctant follower of Christ who addressed this murderous Saul as "Brother Saul." This experience caused Saul to be converted from a persecutor to a proclaimer. In a flash of light and a touch from a brother, Saul became Paul the Apostle of Christ and an ambassador of the Gospel of Jesus Christ's incarnate love for all people.

Paul discovered that whatever he does to others he does to Jesus Christ. He also discovered his family ties with God's children everywhere.

People today have experiences like Saul, a dramatic time when their whole life was turned around. Others of us come to this insight over time.

Prison Congregation

New Congregation in Western Iowa

Fort Dodge, IA - Pastor Carroll Lang has been called to serve a new congregation to be organized inside the North Central Correctional Facility in Rockwell City and the Fort Dodge Correctional Facility. The name of the congregation is "The Church of the Damascus Road," and its byline is: "A Christian Community of Reconciliation."

The congregation is a part of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, but it has been organized ecumenically right from the start, with representatives from Episcopal, United Methodist and Lighthouse Ministries. In fact, the chair of the call committee was Father Stephen Hall, of St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Fort Dodge. Rev. Ken Greene, Riverside United Methodist served as part of the fund raising committee. These two, together with Rev. Ken Fogelman, Lighthouse Ministries, assisted in a mail campaign to reach all Christian churches in a 60-mile radius around the two prison sites.

This unique parish will always be an arm of the congregations that surround and support it. It will carry the ministry of these congregations into the two prisons and connect the members of the prison congregation with the members of the congregations that support it with their gifts and presence.

The Church of the Damascus Road is one congregation worshiping and ministering in two places. It provides participants an encounter with the light of Christ. As Saul, later the apostle Paul, encountered Jesus as he traveled the Damascus Road to arrest Christians, the light of Christ can give us a "flash of inspiration" to amend our ways and commit our lives to serving our Lord.

The first worship service was Thursday, August 28 at 6:30pm at NCCF. 25 inmates worshipped and 6 people "from the streets" were there to raise their voices in song and prayer. If you would like to worship with us, please read the article, "Come and Worship" on page two.

OUR
ministry
with
PRISONERS

Amazing Grace

Sing Unto
the
LORD
a
New Song!



I'm going to tell you all a story about when I was the Chaplain in the prison. You know the song, Amazing Grace. Well I really liked it the first 10,000 times I heard it because it really tells my story. Then, well, the second 10,000 times we sang it I kind of wished we'd do something else.

I was the Chaplain for the 'R' Units at Shelton. All convicted male felons in the State of Washington, except for first degree murder, spend 8-16 weeks in the "R" (for "receiving") Units where they are tested and evaluated and generally held until it is determined which of the 22 incarcerative facilities in the State will serve for their time.

The three cell blocks of the R Units are high security and are constructed of concrete and steel; there is little inmate movement except for meals, church, and one hour yard-out. For first-time offenders it's a real shocker and it begins to dawn on them they really are in prison. Folks that are frequent fliers are afraid of all the enemies they made. It's pretty intense. We held church in the cafeteria. That's another story.

It came time for me to leave. This is a terrible time for the inmates and they get very angry. We come in, do our thing, and leave them behind. I gave them all advance notice (actually it was all over the newspapers and TV, but *that's* another story, too) I presented myself frequently to them to hear their anger.

When a lot of inmates are angry, they may 'go off' - this means they may begin the precursor to a riot, they begin a concerted action such as chanting obscenities or throwing feces. It's important to hear them until they feel heard.

We moved on to grief.

They sent me 'kites' (those little pieces of paper you 'fly' with messages). One just said "Alleluia, bloody Jesus." But lots of them - especially those from IMU (Intensive Management Unit, i.e. 'the hole') - said things like:

"I never came to church, but I saw you crossing the yard every day. I just want you to know how much it meant to me just to see you there."

Kite after kite. Inmate talk for "The Incarnational Ministry of Presence".

"I never talked to you...but I knew you were there" "I was ashamed...but I knew you were there" "I was confused..." "I never came to Chapel because I was afraid of what the others would say...but I knew you were there" "I didn't know how much it meant to me until I didn't hear the singing on Sunday..."

And then, and then.

Remember I told you about the R Units and how they're built?

As I was leaving the R Units the final day, I started to walk across the yard. I heard someone start muttering "Amazing Grace" - sarcastic, and angry. And then another voice, a bit thoughtful. And then another voice, singing. And then another voice and another and another. Those concrete walls and steel doors joined in a great and fantastic chorus.

All eight hundred men sang "Amazing Grace," the harmonic parts building and building until, on the last chorus, a breathtakingly beautiful counter tenor came in over the top with the most haunting descant I've ever heard.

It shut the prison down for 20 minutes. For twenty minutes the Kingdom broke through and we saw glory.

And that's the story. You just never know who's watching and what it means to them.

Don't ever, ever, ever go by the numbers. Jesus had only twelve.

From HUGH MATLACK on April 22, 1997

- The Chapel of St Martha & St Mary of Bethany - a Eucharistic community of all kinds of folks in downtown Seattle's historic Public Market

Por la gracia de Dios, hablamos espaxol

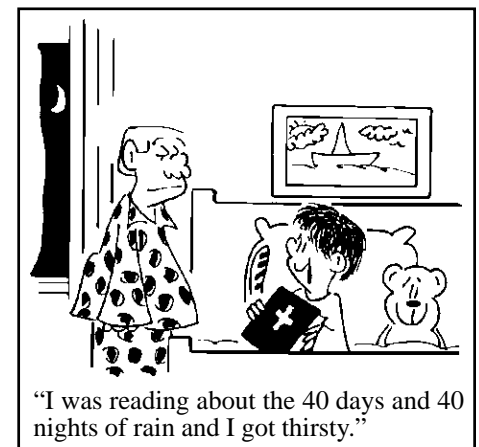
Come and Worship

We welcome you to schedule a visit to one of our worship services. We meet every Thursday evening starting at 6:30pm at the North Central Correctional Facility just east of Rockwell City.

After the worship service there will be a time of fellowship during which you can meet and converse with some of the inmates. Sometime after 8:00pm we will exit the prison and, if you would like, go to a nearby restaurant and discuss the experience.

Your visit will need to be planned ahead of time. An "Institution Guest Authorization" form will need to be submitted (it's painless to fill out). We'll send you a map with directions and some guidelines for your visit. Talk to your friends and/or fellow church members and schedule your visit together.

To schedule a visit, contact Pastor Carroll Lang, PO Box 834, Fort Dodge, IA 50501-0834 or call 515-955-3579.



"I was reading about the 40 days and 40 nights of rain and I got thirsty."

Paul Burton (c)MMI

The Church of the Damascus Road Flash!

Volume 1.1

October 1997

The official publication of The Church of the Damascus Road, a Christian Community of Reconciliation, serving the inmate population of the medium security units at Rockwell City and Fort Dodge, Iowa.

If you are reading a copy of this letter that is not yours, you can subscribe and receive your own copy by writing to:

The Church of the Damascus Road
PO Box 834
Fort Dodge, IA 50501-0834
Office at St. Olaf Lutheran Church
239 North 11th Street, Fort Dodge
515-955-3579

How Can I Help?

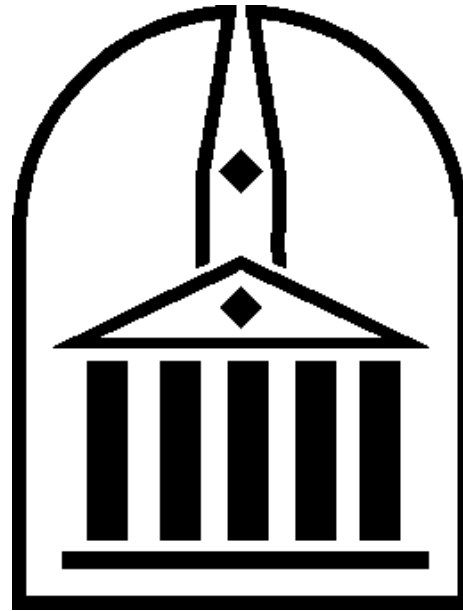
The most important way to support a prison ministry is with prayer. We ask for your daily prayer for this ministry. Prayer really does change things. It changes us. It changes attitudes. Prayer moves the heart of God and touches the hearts of people.

The next way to support this ministry is through your participation in the worship service inside the prison. Come and sit with the members of the congregation. Get acquainted with the men before and after the service. This connection is an important part of this ministry. Bridges are built when genuine love is shown. We are brothers and sisters in Christ no matter what sins we commit, and we show our "family ties" by our presence.

Volunteers will be needed from time to time to participate in Bible studies, direct a choir, play the keyboard for worship, or fill a position on the Outside Church Council.

Yet another way to support the ministry of The Church of the Damascus Road is through your gifts of money. Individuals may support this ministry through regular donations directly or through their congregations. Congregations may elect to support this ministry by adding The Church of the Damascus Road to their annual budgets.

If you would like to help or set up a date to visit the worship service on a Thursday evening, call Pastor Lang at 515-955-3579. If he's not in, please leave a message and he'll get back to you.



What's a Prison Congregation?

A prison congregation simply means a congregation inside a prison. The inmates are the members, and they have an annual meeting at which they set policy and elect officers, and volunteer to be members of boards and committees in the same manner as a normal congregation.

The big difference is that there are no children in Sunday school, and such a congregation can never be self-supporting (unless sweeping changes are made in paying inmates a living wage, but that's another issue).

Bishop Curtis Miller, Western Iowa Synod, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, invited a group to discuss this possibility. Ed Nesselhuf, now Executive Director of Prison Congregations of America, was present to act as a resource and give us a sense of direction as we began this process, which is no different than beginning a new congregation "outside." Also present were Paul Becker, member of Christ Lutheran in Fort Dodge; Paul Stone, pastor of Washington Lutheran in Duncombe and South Enes in Vincent; Allen Hermeier, pastor of St. Olaf Lutheran in Fort Dodge; Gary Reynolds and Rachell Swanson of St. Olaf Lutheran; Jerry Burt, from the Rockwell City prison; Ralph Egbert, pastor of Augustana Lutheran in Manson; Todd Dorman from the Messenger; and Pastor Carroll Lang, then pastor of Christ Lutheran Church in Fort Dodge.

So how is a congregation in a prison supported? By congregations like yours who form a partnership with the inside congregation and with 50-100 other congregations in the surrounding area. Together this coalition provides money to support the pastor, some secretarial help, operating costs and travel, just as in a regular congregation outside. The inmates will also contribute, but their income comes from less than \$2.00 per day of pay for working inside the walls, so they cannot be self-supporting.

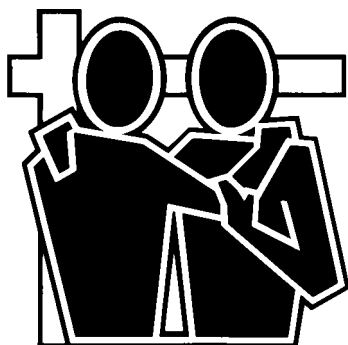
When Jesus told the parable of the last judgment in Matthew 25, he listed the primary ways we minister to the needs of people, "*Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.*"

Most of us have had the opportunity to do five of the above, but visiting the imprisoned is something we probably don't have any idea how to do. Now we will.

As the Church of the Damascus Road begins its ministry, you will have the opportunity to not only support it through your prayers and gifts, but also through your presence as you enter the prison and worship right along with the inmates. Now, just like clothing the naked and feeding the hungry, you are not going to be forced to do something against your will, but you will be asked to respond out of love, and when it is your congregation's turn to have visitors at The Church of the Damascus Road worship service, 5 to 10 from your congregation will have the privilege of sharing that time together in community with our brothers in blue.

You will be hearing a lot more about this in the future.

—Pastor Carroll Lang



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Invite the Pastor to Worship

The worship services at The Church of the Damascus Road are scheduled on week-nights for two reasons. One is to enable people on the outside to worship with the inmates and not miss worship in their own congregations. The second is to make the pastor of Damascus Road available to visit area congregations on Sunday mornings. The pastor can give a brief update on the ministry, sermon, children's sermon, adult forum, children's Sunday school opening or cross-generational class session, any or all of the above, and/or is open to suggestions. All that is asked is that there be time to prepare.

Call 515-955-3579 or write to: The Church of the Damascus Road, PO Box 834, Fort Dodge, IA 50501-0834 to arrange for a visit to your congregation. The pastor speaks Episcopalian, Methodist, Baptist, United Church of Christ, Covenant, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Reorganized Latter Day Saints, Catholic, Evangelical, Reformed, Assembly of God, Nazarene, and a host of other denominations, independents, and non-denominations as well.

