

**There is an old story, perhaps a bit silly, about a careless young man who stole his neighbor's sheep and would make a feast of them. Eventually his neighbors grew tired of his behaviors and grabbed him and branded him on his forehead ST—sheep thief. Eventually he came to turn his life around and became unselfish, loving and generous. By the time he was an old man all the children in the village just assumed that the ST on his forehead stood for Saint.**

**My name is Maureen Donegan and I am privileged to coordinate Catholic Charities Justice Services or (CCJS) as it is better known, for the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Vancouver in BC, Canada. There are over 2 1/2 million people living in the Archdiocese. In Canada, there are 13 provinces/territories and 1 federal government. Both the federal and provincial governments operate correctional services. Offenders who receive prison sentences of two years or more are the responsibility of the federal government. Offenders who receive sentences of less than two years are under provincial jurisdiction.**

**Federal institutions in Canada fall into 5 regions. The Archdiocese of Vancouver is in the Pacific region where there are 9 federal institutions, 8 of which are within the borders of the Archdiocese. There are also 5 provincial institutions and one youth detention center in the archdiocese. Much of the reintegration programs and custody/rehabilitation are the responsibility of correctional personnel. Faith communities and individual citizens are invited to contribute to the correctional endeavor primarily through volunteer services.**

**For those in the prisons and for those returning to the community, volunteers are the face of the community bringing love and hope to many. CCJS has one of the largest volunteer bases in the Canadian correctional system with over 230 active volunteers. Our many prison ministries and community support groups provide an opportunity for our brothers and sisters of other faiths to work with us in reaching out to those on the edge of society.**

**Our mission statement is to build an educated Christ-centered community that upholds the dignity of every human person touched by crime.**

**And now for a moment let's return to our sheep story. CCJS volunteers are there for those who like the sheep thief have become involved in crime and feel branded and weighed down by their past actions. The volunteers are there to encourage and support them in their efforts to turn their lives around.**

**Our ministry first began in the Federal institutions over 30 years ago and then in 2014 expanded to the provincial institutions. The heart of our ministry in the prisons is Chapel services, faith studies, Taizé prayer, alpha, suicide prevention , Houses of Healing, book clubs and fellowship, to name a few. The volunteers are always seeking ways to lead engaging discussions with themes that the inmates can relate to.**

**We have two programs to assist offenders as they reintegrate back into the community. Circles of Support and Accountability, which is a national program with 17**

different sites operating across the country. CoSA is for high-risk sex offenders. They are provided with 3-4 volunteers who meet with them regularly to be a support while also holding them accountable to their conditions and other risks that may lead to reoffending. The archdiocese has been doing CoSA for the past 15 years and it continues to be a highly successful program. CoSA shows what community support can do to keep communities safe. Studies show that with a CoSA Circle there is an 83% drop in recidivism.

Our second focus in reintegration is a program designed to support anyone leaving prison who feels they need support to rebuild their lives. Volunteers help ease the readjustment to life in the community by being available to talk especially during difficult times, modeling pro-social behavior, helping to find the resources and services they need to stay off the street and gain employment, and assisting with practical matters such as finding a job, setting up a bank account, using public transportation, establishing a credit rating, using automatic tellers, etc.

We now shift to look at our programming created to assist Victims of Crime. In a restorative justice model, we knew we could not forget to help the many people whose lives are left in disarray after being affected by crime. We offer “Healing Circles of Support” (the name of the program) to anyone who thinks they may benefit from a compassionate Circle of volunteers to assist them on their journey towards hope and healing. Often their official support through government agencies ends after a short while and they are left to do their best, carrying on alone. Sometimes the stigma of being a victim of crime can be so huge, that their own support network either judges them as responsible, or fears association with them.

We believe that through showing care and compassion to victims and released offenders we are slowly changing the culture from one of fear, hostility and opposition, to one of love, acceptance and peace. We believe that no one is disposable, and reach out to those on the margins.

The final group that we extend our ministry to are the families of those incarcerated. They can be ostracized by their community due to the actions of their loved ones and become isolated. We support them through toy drives for the correctional facility visiting rooms. By providing board games and other activities for children, we enhance the quality time families get to spend visiting their loved ones behind bars. We continue to seek new ways to reach out to this group.

Through relationships and honoring the dignity of each person we work with, we believe we are making a difference. Being a support for people as they reenter society, relates to the 4<sup>th</sup> rule of Mandela’s new rules. We offer practical, social, spiritual, and moral foundations for individuals to rebuild their lives on.

Through our connections on the inside via our prison ministry programs, we are able to journey with individuals from their initial pretrial experience to their warranty expiry date (when they must be released), and back into society. Our opportunity to walk with individuals throughout the stages of incarceration bolsters our ability to assist them in

rebuilding their lives. We have listened to their fears, anxieties, values and dreams, thereby equipping us in becoming a valuable resource. As rule 107 of Mandela's explains, "From the beginning of a prisoner's sentence, consideration shall be given to his or her future after release and he or she shall be encouraged and provided assistance to maintain or establish such relations with persons or agencies outside the prison as may promote the prisoner's rehabilitation and the best interests of his or her family." We believe we are doing just that with our wide array of programming and presence in every institution.

We continually ask ourselves the question, "What is the best way to grow and reach more people?" For the moment it is through educating our parishioners and high school students on the principles of Catholic social teaching and restorative justice. For some, prison visitation seems a stretch and so we are finding unique ways to engage them in our mission. One area that is behind the scenes is our prayer team. We have nearly 100 volunteers and church groups who pray daily for the "intentions" of those incarcerated. These intentions are written by the inmates themselves and are quite moving as they speak to the very desires of their heart. Others also assist with administrative tasks, help by baking cookies for the officers, or making rosaries for distribution. This year, with the help of many, we collected over 12,000 Christmas cards from parishes across the Archdiocese for inmates to write to their loved ones. Our parishioners are contributing in a very real way to restorative practices that promote peace and share the love of God with others.

In closing I would like to say how grateful I am to CURE, and to its director Charlie Sullivan for making this conference possible and for giving me the opportunity to share the prison ministry of the archdiocese of Vancouver. I am grateful to my Archbishop, Archbishop Michael Miller for making this ministry possible. It is a ministry unlike any other in Canada. I think that the message the Archbishop and the volunteers bring is:

- that God's love is more powerful than human sinfulness;
- that human dignity is inherent;
- that there is a way to be good and whole again;
- that there are no disposable people;
- that every person is created in the image of God;
- and that Jesus' death means that redemption from the effects of sin is possible.

Thank you.