

PRISON MINISTRY-RESTORATIVE JUSTICE (PMRJ)

Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, Ontario. (ONRC).

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There is likely no other area related to poverty that has been generally overlooked by both the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul and the public, than that of our prisons, inmates, ex-offenders and their families. There has always been a certain stigma attached to anyone who is or has been incarcerated. This stigma follows ex-offenders upon their release and can affect their efforts to re-enter society, find employment and attempt to repair relations within their own families.

There is a real need for the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul to address years of inaction and even indifference related to this ministry. While we have small groups of very dedicated members working within our prison system, there is so much more we can and should be doing, both through our charitable work and our social justice efforts. Prison ministry requires advocacy and systemic change in addition to our current works of charity and prison visitations.

Today, it would seem we are at a point in time where we can make positive changes in how we deal with this issue. Pope Francis has displayed his love for those in prisons. Both the USA and Canadian Bishops have strongly supported such action.

What else can we do?

While there is certainly a need to advocate for reforms and changes in our current prison system, there is also an opportunity to address the root causes of poverty that many ex-offenders face upon release and those that their families may endure while a family member is still in prison. There is a direct relationship between poverty, systemic racism, criminal justice and others factors. This relationship to poverty supports the need for us to be more involved in prison ministry/restorative justice.

What can your conference do? Charity Works

1. Ministry of prayer

This work provides members of the conference with a meaningful, low risk level of participation that serves as a direct spiritual support to individuals.

Prayer friends

Hold someone touched by crime in their daily prayers. These prayers may remember a current offender, an offender re-entering society and parents and spouses of those involved in the criminal justice system.

2. Ministry of Works

- Community dinner

The community dinner is an opportunity to share a meal with those who have little or in some cases no family and to help build a sense of community.

- Christmas Basket Program

Christmas is both a special and difficult time of year depending on a person's circumstances. The Christmas basket program aims to help women on parole provide the basics for a Christmas celebration. The program also provides a Christmas package to men and women in halfway houses as a way to demonstrate to them that the community remembers them at this time of the year.

3. Welcome Home Program

This program aims to assist ex-offenders build a place they can call home after release. The Welcome Home program offers practical reintegration support as well as helping individuals and families feel they belong and have arrived home.

4. Ministry of Friendship

This ministry encourages the faithful to extend the hand of friendship and to get involved in a high degree of commitment with an ex-offender through fellowship and 'walking together'. It is anticipated that further training will be available to anyone choosing to enter this program.

5. Friendly Home Visits

Our long standing program of home visits can certainly be integral part of this ministry. It is during our visits that we are able to experience both the seeking and finding Christ in those we visit, as well receiving the love of Christ through our new friends. The home visit can also be used to introduce our other ministry programs to those in need.

Social Justice

1. Second Chance Ministry

This ministry is also one that requires a longer term and more personal commitment from those interested in being a part of it. The goals of this ministry are the following:

- To provide immediate, practical, charitable help to those requesting assistance. (food, clothing, furniture, bus tickets, health issues such as dental work and eye glasses) The need for both spiritual and emotional support is also offered to the maximum of our ability.
- To assist those in need through the bureaucracy they will face. This can include help with bankruptcies, evictions, registrations, bill payments, appointments, etc. This requires a working knowledge of all agencies and the desire to work with them in order to benefit those we seek to help.

- To mentor an individual or couple in order to lift them out the cycle of poverty and despair and away from the environments that led them into the criminal justice system. There is a need for a positive and supportive presence in their lives that gives them hope for the future by knowing that someone does care.

2. **Advocacy**

- Advocacy-We seek to find the root causes of the problems face by ex-offenders as they re-enter society. This work is done in order that we may understand the plight of our friends in need.
- We also strive to find ways to give those we serve a voice and where needed, to speak with and for them.
- This social justice aspect also means we try to educate our own membership, the Catholic population and the general public about the issues related to prison ministry.
- We also seek to partner with other like minded organizations in our efforts and act as the social justice arm of the restorative justice theme as it relates to our Catholic population. The Society of Saint Vincent de Paul has its network of parish based conferences and our long standing efforts of providing Christian charity to anyone in need. We are also blessed with a high level of respect amongst the Catholic faithful as well as other social agencies, which can only add to the success of our collaborative efforts.

If you are interested in joining us or learning more about us, please contact the following:
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