

Prison Ministry – with a twist

By Dawn Pentecost

It was June 2006. Trinity Church in Carbondale (Lackawanna County, northeast Pennsylvania) was working on a search profile for a priest, dealing with financial problems, trying to fix a leaky roof which leaked and damaged the church office, working on getting a computer system up and running, as well as the day-to-day normal operations of a church. All this was the workload of a novice vestry whose members had no prior experience in taking charge and running a church. It seemed like our plates were full. We could not handle anymore. Then came the rains.

After days of non-stop rain, the Lackawanna River, which flows through Carbondale across the street from Trinity Church, jumped its banks and began spilling over the church lawn. The police came to evacuate the building as the water rose. The river raged, picking up rocks, timber, and debris, and crashed through the ground level windows, spilling muddy water and debris into the basement.

After the flood waters receded and we were allowed into the church, an inspection revealed flood waters up to the first floor. A financially strapped church run mostly by women had a disaster on their hands.

The task of cleanup was overwhelming. Not only did we need to clean and disinfect the flooded areas, but we needed to remove all the ruined articles that had been stored in the basement. This included a furnace and heating system that had been destroyed. Water had seeped into the electrical box which needed to be repaired as well. A chest freezer was floating in the water, and a washer and dryer were under water. The task before us – the cleanup, replacing the heating system, and repairing the electrical system – was mind-boggling, not to mention the expense that would be involved. How were a handful of women going to clean up this massive flood damage? How was the church going to go on from here?

That was when the work-release team from Waymart State Correctional Institute stepped in and took over.

Earlier in the year, the SCI Team had been at the church to help us clean away bamboo that was taking over the churchyard and the parking lot. The team came back to help us with painting the church hall, and again to help us varnish the wood paneling, pews, and doors in the church itself. The women of the church had been interacting with the SCI work release team, feeding them breakfast, snacks, and lunch. The women and the workers came to know each other on a first-name basis and looked forward to seeing each other the next time they came to help out at the church.

One woman mentioned that the workers were about the same age as her son. But by the grace of God, it could have been her son. Sometimes, the work release team members varied. One worker from SCI was heard telling a new addition to the work team as they

walked through the church that “this was their church.” It made the people at Trinity feel so proud to know that these men had such a respect and kinship with us.

So, two days after the flood, after contacting Waymart SCI to see if they would be able to help us with the cleanup, the SCI work-release team showed up. They actually had other jobs scheduled for that time, but knowing what a state we were in, they did not want to make Trinity wait for help in cleaning up. They hauled garbage out of the cellar, all the ruined appliances and lawn machines, filling the dumpsters in the parking lot. They cleaned and disinfected the two flooded cellars. While cleaning and disinfecting inside the crawl space, they found a leak in a sewer pipe. Trinity had a sewer problem for years. We could never find where the problem originated. Now we were able to fix the sewer problem as well as our heating problem.

The women looked forward to hosting the work crew, and the work crew looked forward to coming to the church. The mood at the church began to become much more hopeful as the workers were able to complete the much needed cleaning. Other buildings on the same street were declared uninhabitable due to toxic mold from the flood, but Trinity was clean and free from mold, thanks to the hard work of the SCI crew. The women were busy baking and cooking to reward the workers for the hard work. The workers in turn felt very protective of the church and wanted to do the best job that they could.

As a church community, we would like to think that we were able to minister to the SCI work team. “You may be the only Gospel that someone else reads,” some have said. Hopefully we ministered by example to the SCI work crew. However, the benefits of their ministry to us far outweigh what we gave in return. It is indeed humbling to be ministered to in such a way as the SCI crew ministered to us, when under normal circumstances you would expect that it would be the other way around.

We owe a tremendous debt to the Waymart SCI work crew. We would not have been able to emerge from the flood if it were not for their help. And emerge we did, a better and stronger church, thanks to the ministry of the SCI work crew to the church at 58 River Street, Carbondale, PA.

Someone has also said that life is what happens while you are making other plans.

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