

THE COMMUNITY OF ST. DYSMAS

I was in Prison & You Came To Visit Me



CSD Newsletter – Spring, 2023

Outside Looking In

Have you ever heard the legend of George Washington's axe? The story goes that a young man boasted that the head and the handle had each been replaced several times, but it was none the less the original axe of the famous founding father!

Sometimes I think we can compare the Community of St. Dysmas to that axe! We are the same congregation that has existed for more than 40 years, but the locations and the people have changed over and over. As congregations in some prisons diminish in size due to transfer or (happily) release, we are sometimes forced to close down. As populations grow in others, we work to establish new congregations. As word of mouth spreads the news of our worship services and members invite others, we grow in size. A little over a year ago, we started back to post-pandemic worship with very small groups, but we are growing, as one sibling in faith tells another to "come and see." Those are the most effective words for evangelism ever uttered!



And though we change places and people, we remain the same in the essential ways: we offer a place where God's love and mercy transforms lives, where each person is valued as a beloved child of God, where members support and uphold each other to grow in faith and where each person is treasured for whoever they are, whomever they love, and whomever they are growing into.

In one of our congregations, a member is transitioning into the gender they know that God created them to be. The congregation is surrounding them with love, support, and yes, protection. The Community of St. Dysmas provides that welcoming and affirming environment. The niche we fill is essential and life-giving.

In all of our congregations, members are encouraged to share their faith stories—including the stories of doubt and questioning. Our CSD siblings feel safe doing so in our

congregations, because they know that we are open to hearing without judging and that we will always accompany them in the journey of discovering God's love for them. The Community of St. Dysmas is the place where God's people can think, learn and grow. Again, that niche we fill is essential and a taste of freedom and dignity in a place where they have little of either.

So, remember us all with your prayers and your support. As we continue to grow and change, guidance from our Creator, the presence of Jesus, and the sustaining energy of the Spirit keeps us ever the same and ever new.

Peace to you as we walk together in Christ's service.

Pastor Susan✠

A Note from Vicar Melody

This year, Christ Lutheran Church in Washington D.C. has been experiencing a Wednesday night Lenten series where we look at different readings from Jesus' passion narrative through the lens of mass incarceration in America. My name is Melody Hession; vicar at Christ Lutheran Church and author of this series. Over five weeks, we have been considering Jesus' arrest, conviction, and condemnation. Week two, Pr. Susan Beck highlighted Peter's denial of Jesus. So many families are left behind when their loved one is incarcerated, struggling with the shame from the outside, tempted to deny their friends just like Peter did. In order to help us consider how the Church can support families today, we ask questions of our text like, "How might the disciples have supported each other while Jesus was arrested?"

This series is designed to ask justice involved questions of our gospel narrative. Something that has made a big impact on me during our group discussions is how truly grace-filled Jesus' passion narrative is. One participant pointed out how Jesus' story is truly one of grace, not of justice, given that he is wrongly convicted. When our siblings in Christ behind bars are able to find some healing after the experience of incarceration, this is also truly a story of grace, not of justice. It is not justice, what they undergo behind bars in our country today, and it is miraculous grace when they can come out on the other side on a path of restoration.

Week four we looked at Barabbas, who thought that he was going to die on death row, but Jesus took his place. Barabbas was prepared to die, and nothing was done to prepare him for returning to society. So many returning citizens experience something similar because our prisons do not adequately prepare people for life on the outside and our societies are not prepared to receive them. How might the disciples or religious leaders have helped Barabbas' re-entry? How can the Church today prepare to receive our loved one's when they are released from prison?

Ultimately, what's most important about this series is the wideness of God's grace. On the outside, we endeavor to see people behind bars for who they really are, our siblings in Christ, indispensable members of Christ's body, who have an essential understanding of the events of Jesus' passion that the Church needs to hear.

Pastor Susan's Installation

On January 29, Pastor Susan was officially installed as the pastor of the Community of St. Dysmas! It was a long awaited day, but worth the wait—a lively service of amazing music, Word, and fellowship.

Bishop Gohl presided over the occasion with his usual support and humor. Emily Scott, a professional gospel singer, gave stirring renditions of “I am not Ashamed” and “My Tribute.” Pastor Lynell Aljoe-Thurman of St. John’s Lutheran in Pimlico preached an inspiring and energetic word, and the worship assistants were all former members of Community of St. Dysmas congregations. About 30 clergy came to support the Community of St. Dysmas, including former CSD pastors Gerry Rickel and Charles Frederick, along with interfaith and ecumenical partners.

Our siblings in faith still “inside the walls” contributed writings and artwork that were included in the service and on display at the reception. Guy Davis recorded the service so that Pastor Susan has been able to take it into the prisons and share it with the members. Salem Lutheran Church was a welcoming host, including a spread of delicious finger foods at the reception. It was a day of pure joy!



Clergy in Attendance at Pastor Susan's Installation



Pastor Lynell Aljoe-Thurman Preaching



The Rite of Installation



The Laying on of Hands



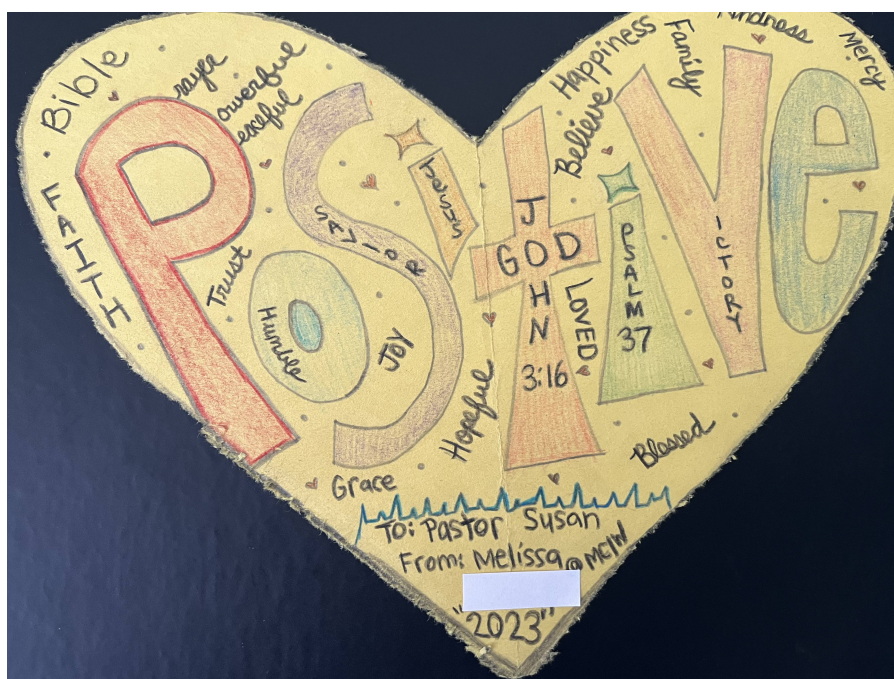
*Pastor Charles Frederick, Pastor Susan Beck,
Council Chariman Lois Carrigan, and Pastor Gerry Rickel*

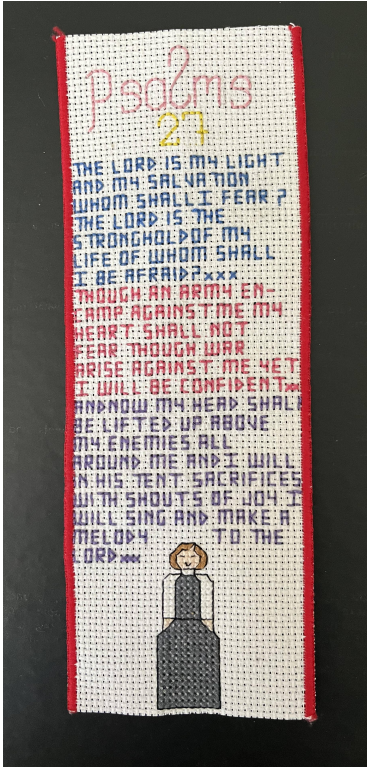


Reception Following the Service

Artwork from Our Members

In honor of Pastor Susan's installation, some of our members put their artistic skills to work. You can see the results below.





Mail Ministry Continues

We are continuing our mailings ministry to our Community of St. Dysmas “diaspora,” those of our folks who are in a facility where we don’t currently have an active congregation. Though this was originally meant to be a way to minister during the pandemic while we weren’t able to go in person, we have found that these mailed worship and devotional materials, as well as (and especially!) notes from fellow Lutherans, are indeed God’s love sealed and stamped in an envelope!

One brother wrote to us, “I want to thank you for all the devotional materials and the letters from fellow Lutherans. You have lifted my spirits beyond explanation (sic) and I look forward to our continued correspondence.”

Others have spoken of the joy they feel knowing that they are not forgotten by their church, and some have said that it’s often the only mail they receive. So please continue to send in notes that we can include to about 40 siblings in Christ that are on our ever-expanding mailing list. Here are the Department of Corrections guidelines for writing:

1. Use only white or plain lined notebook paper. No stationary or greeting cards. Notes can be handwritten or printer generated.
2. Blue or black ball point pen, no color or markers. Line drawings are welcome but no color.
3. Greeting should be generic such as “Dear friend in faith,” “Hello, my sibling in Christ,” etc.
4. Do not give identifiers such as your name, location, etc., *but please say what church you are from*. This helps our people know they are part of the larger church.
5. Generic messages of encouragement, Bible verses or prayers in the body of the note are very much appreciated.
6. Sign with a term such as “Your friend in Christ,” “A fellow Lutheran,” “A sister/brother in faith,” etc.



Please send the letters to our office and we will distribute them to the members.

Community of St Dysmas
905 Frederick Rd
Catonsville, Md 21228

Or email them to: pastor@communitystdysmas.com

On behalf of our Community of St. Dysmas folks, thank you very much!

Looking for a Supply Pastor?

Pastor Susan would be delighted to preach, participate in an adult forum, or to meet with your council, social ministry committee, or other interested group anywhere in the Delaware-Maryland or Metropolitan Washington DC Synods. To schedule a time for her to visit please contact her by phone at 443-326-1115 or email pastor@communitystdysmas.com.

Lifting Labels Ceremonial Apparel




Rev. Chester France

The Rev. Chester France, a native son of Baltimore, retired from the Maryland Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services after seventeen years as a Protestant chaplain in the prison system. He was determined to create an enterprise to employ some of the 2,000 men and women who return to Baltimore each year from prison. Rev. France formed The Chill Station Inc., a nonprofit organization, to support them.

Many of these people had learned sewing skills in prison, helping the Department to produce clothing, uniforms, hats and jackets. What if they could use those skills for gainful employment when they returned home? Lifting Labels, a project of The Chill Station, employs returning citizens to manufacture and market liturgical apparel and accessories, as well as choral, academic, and judicial robes. If you are looking for beautiful and unique vestments, see www.lifinglabels.org for information.





A Tasty Way to Support CSD!

Who doesn't love pizza? The Community of St. Dysmas will be holding a fundraiser at Peace A Pizza at 15 Mellor Ave. in Catonsville on Thursday, May 25, 3-7 pm. Click [here](#) to see the menu. Be sure to mention "Community of St. Dysmas" when you order. We will receive 20% of the proceeds that we bring in. Mark your calendars now! Bring the whole family – parents, grandparents, kids, grandkids – and all the pizza lovers you know!

2023 Spring Report for the Baltimore Area Aftercare Program (BAAP)

BAAP is actively working with four primary returning citizens at the moment and nine in application process/approved waiting for release.

BAAP's Partner for Success Program pairs returning citizens with churches and mentors. It continued to provide support for a former Community of St. Dysmas member. Over \$1,600 was provided for phone and phone service, food assistance and groceries, temporary housing, clothing, transportation (bus passes), and medications in 2022.

Our Project Makeover is an emergency needs program which provided support to nine individuals in 2022.

- BAAP helped former member of the Community of St. Dysmas. She required temporary lodging support at a hotel, rent assistance, food, medicine, childcare support, and personal hygiene items totaling over \$1,900.00 in 2022.
- We helped an individual get his release date corrected by notifying state delegates and working with a legal assistance organization. The individual now expects to be released in July, 2024.
- BAAP helped eight additional former members of the Community of St. Dysmas. The individuals required temporary lodging support at a hotel, rent assistance, and food, clothing, and phone support totaling over \$1,800.00 in 2022.

BAAP also partnered in two ways with Trinity Episcopal Church in Elkridge in 2022.

- The first was an Angel Christmas Tree Members of Trinity helped BAAP participants celebrate the birth of Christ with many presents, clothes, and gift cards; the contributions supported three participants and a child of one of the participants.
- Trinity and BAAP put together an application for a United Thank Offering Grant and submitted it to the Anglican Church.

- “For the next three years, the United Thank Offering, in the spirit of Matthew 25:36, will focus on those whom society has left out or behind. The 2023 grant focus will be on innovative mission and ministry projects addressing all aspects of global incarceration, specifically preventative programs and intervention, prisoner support outreach, prison reform, or post-prison re-entry into society.”
- In December 2022, Trinity was notified that the Diocese Committee and Bishop Sutton were excited about the application and approved it at the diocese level.
- We expect to hear whether the grant will be approved by the Episcopal Church by late spring or early Summer. If awarded, Trinity plans to hire a person to work with BAAP and with the local jails on grant writing.

At the BAAP annual meeting in December, 2022, Jim Kempton was added as a member of the Board of Directors for BAAP to fill the vacancies in the offices of Vice President and Secretary formerly held by Jeff Bosick.

On March 12, 2023, Salem Lutheran Church in Catonsville hosted a fundraiser for BAAP. Les Brown and Jim Kempton discussed the ministry and how the congregation could support it. BAAP received positive feedback on the talk along with initial interest in helping the program. Many thanks to all the people who showed up and supported BAAP.



BAAP has recently received many donations, which are appreciated. However, expenses to support individuals who have been released or will soon be released continue to be significant. BAAP is requesting donations to replenish its funds to help those returning to society. You can donate via credit card, debit card, or PayPal by clicking the Donate button at <https://www.baap-matt25v36.org/about-us>. If you prefer to use a check, please mail it to this address:

Baltimore Area Aftercare Program
c/o Trinity Episcopal Church
7474 Washington Blvd
Elkridge, MD 21075

Thank you for supporting this important ministry.

High School Justice Project

A group of dedicated young people at Catonsville High School, part of the Elijah Cummings Youth Project, are completing a project to bring attention to the factors that contribute to the mass incarceration crisis. They have produced a podcast outlining the plight of students of color in the public school system. Through interviewing victims, experts and stakeholders, they are working to raise awareness to the short and long term detrimental

effects of the school-to-prison pipeline on vulnerable populations. One of the interviewers spoke with three of our Community of St. Dysmas returning citizens to gather data and understanding. Look for their podcast “Justice Is Not Just Us, season 3” which will launch April 23. Kudos to these young people for their heart to examine this very difficult issue!

Help Us With Your Financial Support

Unlike other Lutheran congregations, The Community of St. Dysmas receives no internal financial support. The necessary goal of CSD’s Council is that every congregation of our Synod and as many individuals as possible become financial supporters of The Community of St. Dysmas. The best way your congregation can do this is by putting St. Dysmas in your budget. This shows intent on your part and lets us know we can count on you for support. Other possibilities might include special offerings either monthly or during special services such as Lent, unique fund raisers, or having St. Dysmas offering envelopes available for your people. If you come up with special ideas to raise contributions for The Community of St. Dysmas, we would love to hear about them!



Another way to support CSD is with Thrivent Choice Dollars. Through this program, eligible members are allocated Choice Dollars, based on insurance premiums, contract values, and Thrivent Financial volunteer leadership. Check to see whether

you are eligible to direct your Thrivent Choice Dollars to CSD on the Thrivent website. Your dollars for CSD help to support this ministry and to bring God’s Word to many who so desperately need to hear of God’s grace, love and forgiveness.

In 2018, Gifts of Hope added CSD to the organizations that they support. Gifts of Hope is a ministry sponsored by the Metropolitan Washington DC Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). It is a family of volunteers, congregations, donors, the Synod, and 19 beneficiary organizations. In 25 years they have raised and disbursed over \$3,370,000 to their varied beneficiary organizations. These funds have helped the homeless, the hungry, the job-seeker, the young, the elderly, immigrants, refugees, seminary and college students, and those seeking to improve their lives. They also support the work of companion synods in Namibia, Slovakia, and El Salvador. Gifts of Hope touches the lives of thousands of people—locally and globally. Gifts of Hope serves as an intermediary between donors and organizations serving individuals and families in need. For more information, see [their website](#). Gifts may be given year-round at [the website](#); however, the program’s primary focus is during the Christmas holidays, including the season of Advent.



Now you can also donate through the [Delaware-Maryland Synod website](#). Click on "Give Online!" and then select Community of St. Dysmas from the "To" menu.

Prayer Requests from Our Members

Please lead me on the path you have chosen for me and give me the strength to follow. Heal and protect the men in our church family. Protect and guide my children and open their hearts and minds to reconnect with me.

I pray for my sister who's taking care of my mom and the farm. Please pray for my mom who's suffering from Alzheimer's. Please pray for all my fellow sisters and brothers who are in jail. I pray god touches our hearts and leads us close to him.

Lord, please watch over Kim's mom during her illness.

Merciful God, please watch over my daughter Dawn as she goes through her biopsy. Please let them get all the cancer.



The Community of St. Dysmas

A Lutheran Congregation within the walls of the Maryland Department of Corrections

Pastor Susan Beck
905 Frederick Rd.
Catonsville, MD 21228

Phone: 443-326-1115
Email: pastor@communitystdysmas.com
Website: www.stdysmasmd.org

Linda Fleischer, in-office administrator
Deacon Linda N. Smith, remote administrator

CSD Council
Email: council@communitystdysmas.com

Council Members
Lois Carrigan, Chair
Bob Harvey, Treasurer
Rufus Berry
Linda Fleischer
Myra Keel
Alan Ramsey