

THE COMMUNITY OF
ST. DYSMAS

I was in Prison & You Came To Visit Me



CSD Newsletter – Spring, 2025

Outside Looking In Roots and Wings

I've heard that we all need both roots and wings: we need to have our feet firmly planted in what gives us meaning and identity, and we need to be able to have that firm grounding to spread our wings and soar.

This is true not only in our upbringing and our daily lives, but in our faith life as well. We need to have a strong grounding in the knowledge of God's love and grace for us so that our identity as God's beloved child is rock solid. Once we are secure in knowing who we are, we can spread our wings and fly, in the assurance that we have a firm foundation to launch from.

And—this is true as well for our Community of St. Dysmas ministry. How many transformations and evolutions have we come through as God works to have us meet the needs of our incarcerated siblings in Christ? From the beginning as a mission start up at MCIW 40 years ago by Pr. Ed Nesselhuff to the present, this ministry has taken many forms of leadership and structure, as the needs and the opportunities changed.

Last July we welcomed Pr. Melody as a co-pastor and our ministry was enriched by her gifts. With her resignation, there is a loss we are grieving, but, off of the Maryland DPSCS volunteer database she is freed to delve more deeply into advocacy, so not only will our CSD folks be blessed, but many incarcerated people will benefit from her voice speaking out on their behalf.

And we, serving our members here in the Maryland DPSCS, will continue to grow, change, evolve, and transform as the Spirit leads. We have the best volunteers anywhere and a council who leads us forward with love and courage. God is taking care of us! So we continue to spread our wings, rooted in the love we see in Jesus and confident in God's providence.

Pastor Susan✠



Sad ...But Exciting News For CSD

The sad news is that Pastor Melody Hession has resigned her position as co-pastor of the Community of St. Dysmas, effective February 28, 2025.

The exciting news is that Pr. Melody has been asked to sit on the Prison and Reentry Support Network, a committee that is gathered by the ELCA churchwide organization. This is a natural progression to the Advocacy work that Pr. Melody has been doing with CSD. She will continue to be a resource for CSD, but now from the outside.

Since Pr. Melody will no longer have volunteer status with MD correctional facilities, she will have no constraints to the type of advocacy she can pursue on behalf of the Community of St. Dysmas, and other organizations like us.

In joining the Prison and Reentry Support Network, (she will be the only east coast member), Pr. Melody will have the opportunity to help our region become more connected to the national context and resources for prison ministry work.

In a goodbye message to our CSD Council and Volunteers, Pr. Melody wrote this:

“It has been a pleasure serving with you all. Now, rest assured, I will be fighting for our parishioners from the outside.”

Fight on, Pr. Melody! We look forward to the positive changes you will make for the incarcerated and ministries like the Community of Dysmas.

Peace,

Lois Carrigan
CSD Council Chair

A Message from Pastor Melody

Dear Beloveds,

When someone tells you that you should give what you have to them because you are a Christian and Christians are supposed to be selfless and share, you might experience pressure to represent Christ well and consent to giving them your possessions, in pursuit of your best efforts to be Jesus's "hands" and "feet" in the world. In this scenario, you are taking your cues from someone else in communicating what is important to you about being a Christian. In this scenario, you might feel uncomfortable and anxious, because the brain and the emotional intelligence that God gave you may be only too aware that the person who is telling you to be selfless is trying to take advantage of you and that they are using your faith resources to do so, faith resources that have been your lifeblood in order to survive this whole life-before-the-resurrection experience so far.


When someone tells you that you should give what you have to them because you are a Christian and Christians are supposed to be selfless and share, you might respond by telling them that you are not going to give them what they are asking for (because even Christians are allowed to set healthy boundaries) and that because you are a Christian, you know that Jesus will forgive you if you have made the wrong choice. What is more important for people to know about being a Christian? That Christians are selfless, or that Jesus forgives?

This is one of the many lessons that I have learned from the parishioners of the Community of St. Dysmas. In prison, there are very limited resources, and the scenario above was probably the most consistent and frequently discussed daily struggle that I've heard about during my last three years on the inside. Whether or not you need to be convicted to share your belongings, we all need to navigate the choices life presents to us grounded in God's grace.

Wherever the call of the church takes me, I will always be an ally of our justice-involved siblings, with the unique privilege of having been formed by their wisdom. See you on the outside.

Gratefully,
Pr. Melody

Hot News! Free Training on March 26!



BICA Training


Bystander Intervention & Cultural Awareness

March 26

About the event

Presented by the Howard County Office of Human Rights and Equity, this interactive training will allow you to develop the skills you need to effectively protect and promote the humanity of those being targeted or harassed because of their personal or cultural identity.

Sign Me Up



FREE!
Held at Calvary Lutheran Church

We Will Explore

- How to recognize and overcome common barriers to intervention.
- The profound impact of bystander behavior and how to center the needs of the targeted person.
- The crucial role of cultural awareness in successful intervention.

AND MORE...

5:30pm

16151 Old Frederick Road
Mount Airy

www.CalvaryLutheranMD.net
410-489-5280

One Isolated Community Shares the Spirit of Christmas with Another

During the past holiday season, our partners at the Baltimore International Seafarers Center (BISC) collaborated with Pastor Susan Beck of the Community of St. Dysmas. St. Dysmas is a community of Lutheran congregations formed in facilities of the State Dept. of Corrections including Central Maryland Correctional Facility.

BISC helped bring their hand-crafted Christmas cards to the 11 remaining crew members of the Dali, the container ship involved in the terrible accident that led to the collapse of the Francis Scott Key Bridge on March 26, 2024.

Hailing from India and Sri Lanka, ten seafarers from the Dali were released in late June 2024. The ship's eleven officers including the captain must stay in Baltimore to help with the FBI investigation as well as the more than 40 separate claims that were filed in federal court against the ship owners. A judge has set a deadline for their depositions for July 16, 2025. Hopefully, the 11 officers will be able to return home after those hearings. What was supposed to be 27-day voyage to Sri Lanka has kept the mariners in the US for a year now.

Pastor Susan shares the following story with us – from one isolated community to another.

While our incarcerated Community of St. Dysmas congregations don't have direct contact with the outside world, they do hear the news. Last March, they were profoundly affected by the news of the Dali's accident that brought down the Francis Scott Key Bridge. Many grew up seeing that bridge from their neighborhoods, so its collapse was very distressing – a part of their landscape was gone.

But more impactful to them was the loss of life and the effect on the seafarers whose work takes them away from home for extended periods of time. The plight of the crew of the Dali hit them – much as they are locked up, so are those men confined on the ship. While the circumstances are very different, the result is the same – separation from all they know and love for a period of time that could stretch on beyond what they expected. So as any good Lutheran congregation would do, they decided to do something to help. They cannot, of course, go beyond the confines of the steel doors, iron bars, and razor wire fences inside which they live, but they wanted to find a way to send encouragement and cheer to others experiencing the hardship of confinement. Our congregation at Central Maryland Correctional Facility in Sykesville decided they wanted to make Christmas cards for the seafarers.

We sought approval to bring in art supplies, and eventually were approved to bring in paper, markers, colored pencils, and watercolor paints. We devoted two of our Bible study sessions to making cards and talking about how there are many ways that people are “locked up”. Prison is one way, but people are also “locked up” by disease, disability, loneliness – by circumstances like those experienced by seafarers in general and the crew of the Dali in particular.

The men took this service project to heart, putting thought, soul, and effort into the cards. One said, “I enjoy being artistic for others”, and another, “It encourages me to encourage others.”

The talent that exists behind bars to create works of art never ceases to amaze, the heart to reach beyond those bars to help others does as well.

In the spirit of Christmas, the Community of St. Dymas brothers at CMCF have reached out to a very different group of brothers, the seafarers. What could be more Christ-like than to reach beyond barriers of steel walls, iron bars, and razor wire all the way to the expanse of the seas?

(This piece originally appeared in the Spring, 2025, edition of "Port Call", the newsletter of the [Seafarers International House in New York City](#). The introduction was written by Henryk Behnke; the main article was written by Pastor Susan.)



Pastor Susan Beck (second from right) brings hand-crafted Christmas cards for the Dali crew to (from left to right) Pastor Joshua Messick, ship visitor Don Bryant, and Pastor K. Robert Schmitt, who then delivered them to the Dali crew stuck in the US. Photo taken by Joey Nelson.

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 Pr. Susan to visit, please contact her by phone at 443-326-1115 or email pastor@communitystdysmas.com .

Community of St. Dysmas Mailing Ministry Reaching Inside from the Outside

In March, 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic began and impacted our ministry in many ways. When we were not allowed to worship in person, Pastor Susan devised a way to send God's love to our brothers and sisters behind bars. She initially compiled a list of incarcerated individuals who belonged to our congregation at the Maryland Correctional Institution - Women (MCIW), the Maryland Correctional Training Center (MCTC), the Central Maryland Correctional Facility (CMCF), and the Maryland Correctional Institution - Jessup (MCIJ).

Pastor Susan collected devotional material that could be used for spiritual growth in the absence of worship. This included the Celebrate inserts that are used for worship and the Daily Discipleship Bible studies from the ELCA online resource site. These two-page Bible studies, are based on the Gospel reading used at Sunday worship and are meant to strengthen faith practices when applied to our daily lives. They can be used individually.

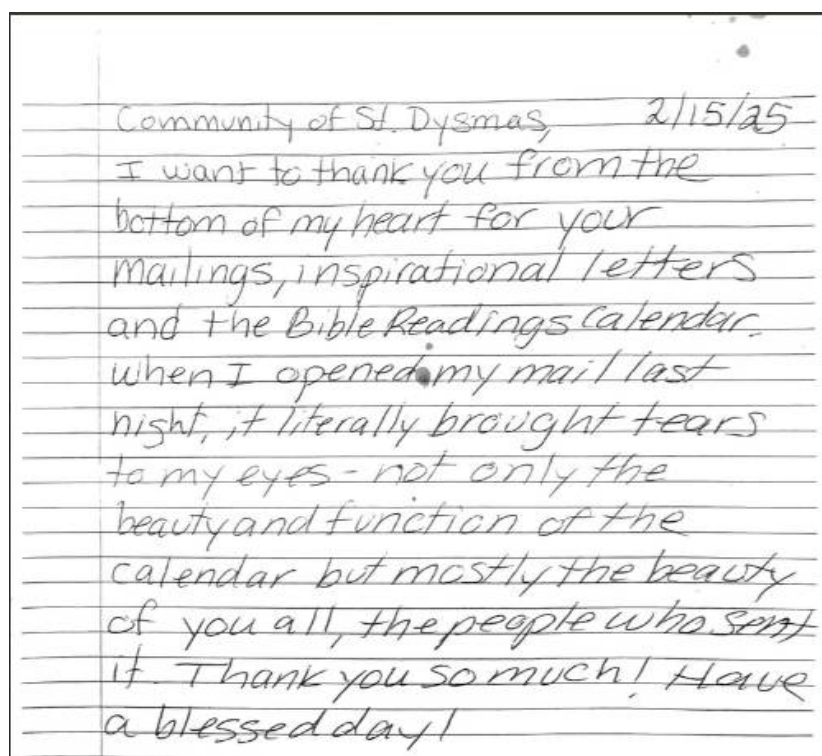
Pastor Susan sent a "shout out" to congregations asking for letters to include in the mailings. The request was met with a flow of personal letters reminding our members behind bars that they are always children of God. Packets that included devotional material and a personal message were assembled and mailed to our brothers and sisters who could not worship. The response was profound.

When worship resumed in three of our facilities (MCIW, MCTC, and CMCF), Pastor Susan returned to her in-person duties. However, during the last several years Incarcerated individuals have been transferred to other facilities. They shared their material with others who requested their own packets. The need for outreach spread to 35 men who cannot worship in person. Each month I mail devotions, letters, and other material suggested by our pastors. These packets are appreciated very much as you can see from the letter following this article.

Our mailing ministry is a vital part of our mission to share the transforming power of Christ's love with persons incarcerated in the Maryland Department of Corrections and to support them through weekly worship and Bible studies. Although the mailings are sent from our office, the personal letters that we include make this initiative a community effort and another example of God's work and our hands.

Linda Fleischer, Office Administrator

A Thank-You from an Incarcerated Person



Guidelines for Writing to CSD Members

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 fine but no color.
3. Greetings should be generic such as "Dear friend in faith" or "Hello, my sibling in Christ".
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".

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

Community of St Dymas
905 Frederick Rd
Catonsville, Md 21228

Or email them to: pastor@communitystdymas.com

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

Prison Congregations of America (PCA) Retreat

An intern contemplates an abstract stained glass representation of Sister Death. A fearless leader humbly admits that they're feeling burned out. Twelve individuals walk a labyrinth together, crossing paths and making eye contact. The Words of Institution become the prose of ordained storytellers as they gather and break bread around a fire, hoping that the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ will strengthen them and keep them in God's grace. Moments of the PCA leaders' retreat continue to echo across the United States as its attendees parted ways and continued their work back home. If you're reading this, then you know that PCA is both no ordinary ministry and the most ordinary of ministries. It is parish ministry, and the congregations gather in prisons.

This year's PCA retreat was held in February and hosted by the Franciscan Renewal Center in Scottsdale, Arizona. Faith leaders from Iowa, Colorado, New Hampshire, Louisiana, Maryland, Nevada, Washington State, and Oregon all gathered to re-ground themselves in their reasons for choosing to take some responsibility for mass incarceration in America. To re-ground themselves in creativity and creation, in the stories of Jesus, in justice and mercy, and in prayer.

Just like parishes on the outside, every prison parish pastor is only one component of a larger ecosystem of care for their parishioners. These PCA pastors are forming relationships built on trust over years of commitment in order to be integrated into their ecosystems, and the results are gospel. Holding vigils for residents who die while in prison, even though that person was not their parishioner. Being a resource to the administration for pastoral visits beyond their weekly services. Sharing resources with their facility's Reentry Coordinator, trying to help fill in gaps for overworked caseworkers. They are integrating into the ecosystem of care, listening and watching for a need and discerning if they can meet it. Did you know that a couple of our PCA pastors are visiting hospice residents of correctional facilities? Did you know that some PCA pastors are crafting the only LGBTQIA+ affirming faith-spaces in their facilities?

PCA is extraordinarily grateful to the ELCA Prison and Reentry Support Network for helping make this trip possible this year. The opportunity for these colleagues and siblings to deepen their relationships with each other was so life giving. Correctional facilities are isolating institutions. They exist to isolate people from society. Likewise, their employees and volunteers can often feel isolated as they too are institutionalized into a system that has rules and ways of being that don't make sense anywhere else. Staying connected to the context of our communities, and growing partners and friendships is so essential for resisting becoming institutionalized ourselves and staying grounded in the values of Christ.

Thank you to PCA Director Sarah Estes and the board for using their commitments and depth of relationships to set a tone for this retreat. Thank you to every faith leader who led us in a spiritual discipline and who spoke vulnerably about their call to service. Thank you to the staff at the Franciscan Renewal Center who made it all possible.

We look forward to next year's retreat, and we know that this time together is going to make the monthly PCA calls have an even greater capacity for depth of collegiality.

Pastor Melody Hession

Help Us With Your Financial Support

Unlike other Lutheran congregations, The Community of St. Dymas 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. Dymas. The best way your congregation can do this is by putting St. Dymas 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. Dymas offering envelopes available for your people. If you come up with special ideas to raise contributions for The Community of St. Dymas, 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. Dymas from the "To" menu.

Prayer Requests from Our Members

Prayers for S, our CSD sister in Christ whose husband passed away on March 5

Prayers for G, a CSD brother who is dealing with an injury and cancer

Prayers for L, a pillar of the CSD, who was transferred to a facility where we don;t have a congregation.

Prayers for the daughter of A, a CSD sister

Prayers of thanksgiving for M, released a few months ago who is reuniting with family and got her driver's license (!)

Prayers of thanksgiving for J and B who were recently released and are doing well



The Community of St. Dysmas

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

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Mailing Address
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Catonsville, MD 21228

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Alan Ramsey, Assistant treasurer
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