

THE COMMUNITY OF
ST. DYSMAS

I was in Prison & You Came To Visit Me



Summer, 2020

Inside Looking Out

Greetings in Christ from your siblings in faith of the Community of St Dysmas!

The novel coronavirus has created a year like none other in my memory. While this pandemic has affected virtually every human on the face of this earth, we know that it has affected some communities even harder than others. Black and brown communities, Hispanic communities, healthcare providers, those who do not have the luxury of working from home because they provide the essentials we need to live—all have been hit particularly hard.

Another community that has been disproportionately affected is the incarcerated and those who must work in those facilities. Supplies of PPE, soap, and disinfecting supplies are sometimes in short supply, and social distancing is difficult or impossible. In the facilities with cells, our siblings inside the walls have had to be confined to their cells 23 out of 24 hours to minimize contact; in facilities with dorms, there is very little way to create distance. Needless to say, this is creating very difficult conditions.



Pastor Susan Beck

One of our members wrote to the ministry and asked, “Is this pandemic God’s punishment for our sins?” The ministry wrote back that no, God in Christ has covered our sins and while our actions have consequences, it is not our loving God who causes calamity to “punish” us. However,

this time is none the less an opportunity to wake up and see the inequities in this world that have created conditions that make God’s children vulnerable to hurt.

My prayer is just that—that we come out of this more aware of our attitudes, beliefs, prejudices, ignorance and actions that have caused pain to others and to creation, and that we do something to change that. That change needs to begin within our souls and move to change in our actions to address inequitable conditions so that all God’s children a chance to live the full life God intends.

From Pr. Beck (continued)

Like all ministries, the Community of St Dysmas has needed to be creative to continue our mission to bring the Good News to our siblings in faith inside the Maryland State prison system, but unlike other ministries which are using the latest technology--we've gone "old school" and use the US Postal system.

Each week, each one of our folks receives a mailing from the CSD with devotional materials, reflections, Bible Study materials or sermons/reflections, The notes from their friends in Lutheran congregations on the "outside" are especially appreciated and a reminder that they are not forgotten.

The ministry is also sending mailings to anyone who has crossed paths with the CSD and is in our database—what I like to call the "diaspora." They are very appreciative to hear from "old friends," and my hope is that, once this is over and we get to the new normal, we can continue to send the materials we give out in person to our congregations at MCIJ, MCIW, MCTC and CMCF to those who are transferred to facilities where we don't yet have congregations.

Two of the facilities, MCIW and CMCF have allowed us to make DVD's to send in to be shown to our members while on their daily break from lock in. We are very grateful to the chaplains there who have helped make this possible.

Because of the uptick in releases since the pandemic, we, in conjunction with the Episcopal Baltimore Area Aftercare program, are also helping more returning citizens to transition to the outside. Our "alumni" doing well and are so very grateful to the Community of St Dysmas for bringing them the life giving Gospel of Jesus.

We are so grateful for the prayer, note writing and financial support that continues to bless us so that we can continue this ministry! We have always known that the razor wire fences and thick walls of a prison can't keep God's Good News from transforming lives—and we hold on in faith knowing that even in these difficult times, God's Spirit is at work bringing God's will to fruition.

May God watch over each of you and give you peace as you know God's presence in all circumstances

Pastor Susan

From Our Members!

Those of us who minister in the Community of St Dysmas always say that our members minister to us as much if not more than we minister to them. Here are a few quotes from letters we've received since the pandemic began. While we cannot share names or locations of the members these are from, we hope that you are ministered to by reading the testimony of these words.

Pastor Susan

"Thank you for reaching out to me with the devotionals. And thanks for not forgetting me!...We miss you so much and pray that the world will recover soon"

"We are all still learning to live this new pandemic existence, and it's crazy. The constant prayers and letters have shown me that St Dysmas is the fit I have been searching for to lead me towards God. You all really walk the walk. Thank you so much. I have tried to do it 'my way' and I've failed over and over. I can't do it without God's help. I am ready."

"I hope all is well with everyone out there. I am better. I had Covid and only felt moderate symptoms. My smell has not returned. (Sometimes I'm grateful because my celly [cellmate] is smelly!)"

"Thank you for your prayers. In this time of pandemic, we all need encouraging words from each other. Prayer and God's scriptures are the best way in dealing with it all."

"For some of us, our mistakes have driven deep wedges between our friends and families and us. Your love, teaching and ministry have forged even better, more meaningful relationships and eternal bonds than the ones we trashed in the world. May God bless you right now for your selfless service!"

"I would like to thank you for all of your support and prayers in this time of need. I have talked to the other guys here and everyone says they have been uplifted by your support. We are keeping you all in our prayers and hope to see you soon. You are a light in a time of darkness."

"You make me believe that I can be forgiven and its never too late to change things around for good...Can't wait to see you all again!"



Guidelines for Writing to Members

As you can tell from the preceding article, it's more important than ever that our Community of St Dymas siblings feel connected to the larger church they are a part of. We've been asking Lutherans and ecumenical partners to submit notes to our office that we can mail to individuals who are a part of the CSD family. In these difficult times, these letters are quite literally a God-send for them. If you or anyone in your congregation would like to write a note, here are the 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 fine 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 Dymas
905 Frederick Rd
Catonsville, Md 21228

Or e mail them to: pastor@communitystdymas.org

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

Join 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 intentionality 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!

The Community of St. Dysmas is an Amazon Smile charity. Please consider supporting CSD in this way.



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 go far 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. Recently, a devout Roman Catholic lady used Thrivent Choice dollars to gift the ministry of St. Dysmas. Thank you (and as the old saying goes, "What Rome throws out, the Lutherans pick up.")

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 many and 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. Gifts are may be given year-round at www.giftsofhopedc.org; however, the program's primary focus is during the Christmas holidays, including the season of Advent. You can contact Gifts of Hope for more information by emailing director@giftsofhopedc.org.

Sundays With CSD

Looking for something different? In addition to the worship and Bible studies conducted within the prison walls, the CSD Speakers Bureau is available and delighted to attend conference meetings, to worship with your congregation, to lead an Adult Forum, or to meet with your council or social outreach committee anywhere in the Delaware-Maryland or Metropolitan Washington DC Synods.

Why not have a special **CSD** Day at your congregation! To schedule a Sunday or other time for Pastor Beck or someone from our Speakers Bureau to visit your congregation to preach, to participate in an adult forum, or to meet at some other time, please contact us by phone at 443-326-1115 or email pastor@communitystdysmas.com.



Do you have a memory or inspiring story of an experience with CSD? If so, please share it with us, and we'll include it in a future newsletter!

Get Involved!

There are several ways you can be involved with this meaningful ministry to God's children behind bars. Please consider praying for us, worshiping with us, and supporting our ministry with your contributions. If you feel a calling to lead worship, participate in the music ministry, or simply to add your presence, please contact us by phone at 443-306-1115 or by email at pastor@communitystdysmas.com.

Baltimore Area Aftercare Community

The Community of St Dysmas is partnering with the Baltimore Area Aftercare Program to meet the needs of our returning citizens. Brother Les Roberts, the director of the program, gives us this update:

As you can imagine COVID-19 has slowed us down; however, it has not stopped the ministry at all. The main issue that BAAP is having is slowness in the mail system. On average, it has been taking 3 weeks from the time the applicant fills out a letter of form for us until we receive it. Sometimes the postmark date is a week or so after the date in the letter. But in any case it is taking long. This means that some are released before we can correspond back, and then we have no way to contact them.

However, there have been several people that BAAP has been able to work with and are still working with. We have 15 applicants that have indicated interest in the program and that we have been actively writing to and sending prayer and spiritual reflections to. Most release dates are projected for the beginning of next year. Several (I believe about 11) are current or previous St. Dysmas members or St. Dysmas referrals.

The BAAP appreciates St. Dysmas and the ministry that you all are providing. Our ministries work perfectly together, and we look forward to this continued relationship. I pray that the coronavirus gets under control so that both of our ministries are able to more effectively serve those in prison, jail, and recently released.

God will and has found a way to join our ministries, and I value that immensely.

Please keep BAAP in your prayers along with whom we serve. BAAP will keep St. Dysmas and those it serves in our prayers as well.

In Christ,

Br. Les Roberts, OSF

Executive Director and President

Baltimore Area Aftercare Program (BAAP)



From One of Our Volunteers

From early 2019 until the correctional facilities were closed in March 2020 due to the pandemic, I led the men's Bible Study at CMCF (Central Maryland Correctional Facility). After the first few nervous meetings, the Sunday evening meeting quickly became the highlight of each week for me. I've been writing weekly letters to the men in my group since the closure, hoping that the words I send provide a little hope for them as they are isolated from friends, family and volunteers. I look forward to resuming our meetings as soon as possible, but realize it is still months away. We may be starting over with unfamiliar faces. There are only two of the men from my group who are still at CMCF.

The hardest thing for me during this separation is no longer having the weekly opportunity to see the men. I miss catching up with them in the hall as we wait for a guard to open our meeting room. I miss their jokes, hearing about their challenges and joys, and the seriousness with which they talk about their Christian faith. I have been constantly amazed at their intelligence, depth of understanding, and search for knowledge. I miss saying goodbye to those who have been released since March. It was so special to be part of the joy those who left while I was there experienced as they approached their release dates. I pray for them daily – both those who have been released and those still on the inside – knowing that God is in control and is with them. I pray that they experience God each day in their difficult surroundings, that they will be strengthened in their faith, and have peace, good health, and joy.

Charlotte Symms

The Community of St. Dysmas

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

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