

THE COMMUNITY OF
ST. DYSMAS

I was in Prison & You Came To Visit Me



CSD Newsletter – Fall, 2024

Outside Looking In God's Surprises

When am I going to get it through my thick skull that God always provides?

You'd think I'd be used to it by now, that God coming through and blessing us in unexpected ways is to be, well ... expected. After decades of being a Lutheran and 12 years of being a pastor, you'd think it wouldn't surprise me anymore, but God's amazing providence still knocks my socks off.

From that first phone call a few years ago when then Seminarian Melody introduced herself, I knew that this was a person with the gifts and aptitude to engage in this ministry. It didn't take very long to realize that this was someone we had to have as a called pastor in this ministry.



But—how? There's always those pesky financial realities of how to make things happen

Oh me of little faith. Why did I worry?

God works in so many unanticipated ways. St. Peter's Lutheran Church in Eastpoint granted us funds to expand our ministry, given in honor of Pr. Bob Harvey's faithful service there. We of the Community of St. Dysmas know how we have been richly blessed by Pr. Harvey's dedicated service as our treasurer, but who would have thought God would work to grow this ministry in the future through his devoted ministry in the past to St. Peter's? Well, God never ceases to surprise us in totally unexpected ways.

My call to and love for to the Community of St. Dysmas was certainly not something I had expected. When Pr. Gerry Rickel asked me to volunteer with the Community of St. Dysmas, my answer was an unequivocal NO. Going into prison was definitely not on my radar, but any of you who know the venerable Pr. Gerry know that he's nothing if not persistent. He wore me down, and eventually I said yes.

I didn't like the towering fences laced with razor wire that greeted us. I didn't like the claustrophobic feeling when the sally gates slammed shut behind me. I didn't like the pat down and process to get in through security. I didn't like the ugly gray of everything inside the walls.

But then I met the children of God who gathered to worship inside. I saw people, like me, trying to find their way through all the stuff life throws at them. I saw how the gospel of Jesus is life giving and transformative even in – especially in – these circumstances. I saw how the confession of sin and absolution I had recited in front of congregations so many times was transformative for these folks whose sin was in their faces every day, all day. I saw Jesus in the faces of fellow Christians who have been justly labeled "felon" by the state of Maryland. And I saw a ministry path I had never anticipated.

When Pr. Melody first phoned me, it was clear that she would be a blessing for this ministry. I had no idea how it would come to fruition, but God found a path we couldn't see coming.

Already, teaming with Pr. Melody has expanded this ministry in ways we never could have expected. What does God have in store to provide for us next? I can't wait to see!

Continuing to grow in amazement at God's providence,

Pastor Susan✠

Introducing Pastor Melody

Dear Siblings in Christ,

My name is Pr. Melody Hession-Sigmon. Pr. Susan and I are now co-pastors of the Community of St. Dysmas. We began this new model of co-pastors in July. What has been done in the past, we are now able to do with twice as much depth, twice as much focus, and twice as much love. It is so meaningful to work so closely with a partner.

I met Pr. Susan back in 2020, when I wanted to learn more about the Prison Congregations of America. PCA is an organized, ecumenical body of churches that gather within the walls of prisons all across the country. These churches do not have parishes on the outside. We are congregations just like your own home congregation; we just gather in the spare rooms of prisons.

Like your own home church, we gather for worship, for bible studies, and we are sent on mission in service to the wider community. We are not primarily a prison ministry. We are primarily a parish. We are a parish that gathers on the inside, with our church family who empowers us to respond to God's call in our lives and then sends us back out into the world to be co-creators with Christ.



There are now 23 congregations like us in America spanning across 7 different denominations, but this whole model of existing as the church behind bars began with the Community of St. Dysmas at the Maryland Correctional Institute for Women 40 years ago.


If this mission and vision that came out of the ELCA inspires you, you are not alone. I found myself incredibly inspired back in 2020 when Pr. Susan and I first spoke, and I am so honored to be part of such reformatory, groundbreaking, diligent and committed work of the Holy Spirit. St. Dysmas is a treasure. I am so thankful for all the pastors who have responded to God's call to love and care for this community of faith over the years, and I am deeply honored to be in such company.

I come to this position with a concentration in Criminal Justice and Reconciliation from the Washington Theological Consortium, where I learned what mass incarceration really means and how central stories of incarceration are to our faith. I can no longer hear the gospel nor the ministry of the Holy Spirit among the apostles without noting how many of them were political prisoners and how our Lord and Savior was himself arrested, convicted, and died of capital punishment. I cannot help having my heart softened by Peter's struggle, as he was ashamed of his friend's arrest and ended up denying him three times while on the outside. I can only read of Barabbas's release and wonder how ready he was to return to society when Jesus died in his place.

I quite look forward to the day when I'll get to come visit your churches. I am genuinely thrilled that every time I guest preach at a church on the outside, it is now my job to highlight these essential vantage points of our formative stories and bring them to life for you, as they have been brought to life for me.

Your sister in Christ,

Pr. Melody



*The Community of St. Dysmas
cordially invites you to attend
a Service of Installation
for our co-pastor
The Reverend Melody Hession-Sigmon
on Sunday, October 20, 2024, at 3 pm
at Salem Lutheran Church
905 Frederick Rd.
Catonsville, MD 21228*

*A reception celebrating Pr. Melody and
40 years of CSD Ministry will follow.
If you plan to attend the reception,
please RSVP by Sunday, October 13, to
office@communitystdysmas.com*

Celebration of Lay Ministry

Each year the Delaware-Maryland Synod recognizes individuals and groups involved in lay ministry across the Synod with the Celebrate Lay Ministry Awards. This year one of our own was recognized, and this time it was a first for the Synod. Charlotte Symms, who volunteers at the Central Maryland Correctional Facility (CMCF), received an award at a dinner and ceremony on April 28 at Carroll Lutheran Village. As an active member of Catonsville Presbyterian Church, she is the first non-Lutheran to receive this Lutheran award! Charlotte began volunteering with us in 2018 as a musician at the Maryland Correctional Institution -Jessup (MCIJ) and at CMCF. She now provides almost weekly music at CMCF and leads the Bible study there. She is a trusted and beloved face to the brothers, who share in our gratitude for her service.



Pastor Susan, Carlos, a former Community of St .Dysmas member, and Charlotte



The Presbyterian and the Bishop!



The Assembled Awardees

CCBC Re-Entry Event

Pastor Melody and Pastor Susan were honored to be asked to participate again this year in an extraordinary event at the Community College of Baltimore County (CCBC) that brings attention to the often untenable situations facing returning citizens.

Few people who have not been incarcerated consider the challenges that returning citizens face as they re-enter society. Employment is limited; transportation is often inaccessible; food, clothing and other necessities can be beyond reach. Adding to the problems of survival is the inevitable PTSD from the trauma of the incarceration experience, the continuing issues of recovery from addiction, and the struggles of trying to re-establish relationships after years or decades apart.

CCBC Catonsville held an event that simulated the process of re-entry – from finding employment, to having food and a roof over your head, to figuring out bus routes and getting to parole meetings or job interviews on time. Resources to meet a variety of needs were stationed around the perimeter of the room. Faculty and guests acted as agencies and charities trying to fairly distribute very limited resources. Students from all disciplines played the roles of returning citizens trying to figure out how to negotiate a confusing and often confounding system.

Even though this was all “pretend”, it didn’t take long for nerves to get frayed and anger to surface. Students and other participants alike were encouraged to consider what this would mean to them if this was for real – if there was a real possibility of losing their home, going hungry, relapsing into substance abuse as the stress mounted, and ending up back in prison. The participants left with an awareness of things they may never have considered before.

Kudos to CCBC, the criminal justice faculty and all who organized this event!



Pastor Susan Discusses the Role of CSD
with the Participants

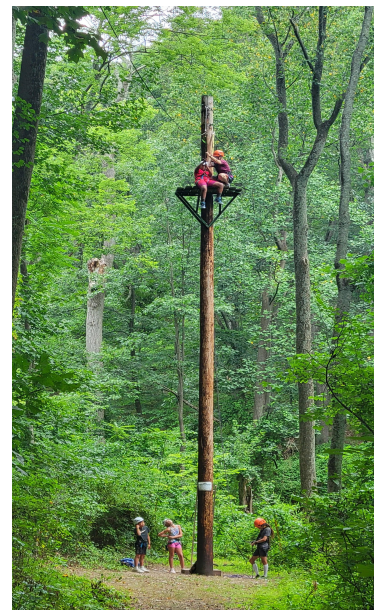


Students Negotiating
the Re-Entry Process

Mar-Lu Ridge Confirmation Camp

This summer, Pr. Melody assisted Pr. Carolyn Lawrence from Salem Lutheran in Catonsville, MD and Pr. CJ Valenti from First Lutheran in Arlington, VA in teaching at Mar-Lu-Ridge's confirmation camp. A highlight of the time there was Day Four's service project day. The confirmands took time to write letters of encouragement to their siblings in Christ from the Community of St. Dymas. They quoted encouraging Bible verses, they drew on their own experiences, and spoke deeply compassionate words of grace and empathy.

It is important to remember that because incarceration happens on such a massive scale in America, millions of children know what it's like to grow up with a parent behind bars. According to the National Survey of Children's Health in 2018, 5 million children had a parent who was incarcerated that year. The Bureau of Justice's Survey of Prison Inmates informs us that nearly half of state prisoners and more than half of federal prisoners have a child who is under 18 years old. Children having a parent who is incarcerated is so common in America, that Sesame Street added a muppet in 2013 named Alex, who's dad is in jail.



This is why Pr. Melody is especially grateful for being invited by Pr. Carolyn in the space of a children's ministry like Mar-Lu-Ridge. She greatly enjoyed spending time with the confirmands and talking about our resources for faith with young people. The picture above shows the confirmands taking a leap of faith from 30 feet in the air at Mar-Lu-Ridge. Gotta love a good zip line!

Looking for a Supply Pastor?

Our pastors 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@communitystdymas.com . To schedule a time for Pr. Melody to visit, please contact her by phone at 443-852-8553 or email rev@communitystdymas.com .

MCIW Service Project

Last Spring, one of St. Dymas' parishioners at the Maryland Correctional Institute for Women (MCIW) approached their pastors with an idea for a service project. She was thinking about people on the outside (of prison walls) who experience bondage in ways that she and her fellow residents of MCIW could relate to.

Prison is a total institution; this means that there are things that are normal in prison that are simply not normal anywhere else. Similarly, hospitals are total institutions. There are things that patients experience in hospitals that are not normal anywhere else, and both beginning a stay and leaving a stay at a hospital can come with major transitions, even something akin to culture shock.

This parishioner at MCIW understood that people in hospitals can feel bound in their circumstances, like she and her fellow residents do, and that they all have difficult transitions in the past or ahead of them. She wanted to provide encouragement from the place of empathy that our parishioners uniquely could. She also named people who are homebound, and her idea was that they could create encouraging artwork that their CSD pastors could distribute for them.

If Pr. Susan or Pr. Melody has visited your congregation in the last several months, you may be familiar with this project, because some artwork may have been brought for your homebound and your sick so that they may receive encouragement from their siblings on the inside. Please enjoy the examples of just some of the artwork that was made in this spirit of service on this page and the next.





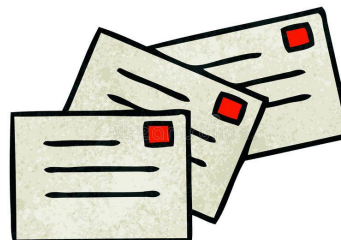
More Creativity Behind the Walls

One of our members created these sculptures from soap, discarded food containers and an empty laundry detergent bottle.



CSD Mailings Ministry

What began as a “temporary” means to provide for and connect with our CSD folks during the pandemic lockdown has grown into a ministry that is its own blessing. We currently mail to 40-50 folks twice a month. The recipients may be incarcerated individuals who have been transferred out of a facility where we have a congregation or anyone in any facility (including out of state) who requests devotional and worship materials. Along with those materials, we include notes from Lutherans and ecumenical partners “on the outside.” Knowing that they are remembered by fellow Christians is a source of great encouragement for our incarcerated siblings in faith and a very tangible sign of God’s love. One recipient recently wrote:



“I was elated and felt loved when they called my name and told me I had mail. I thank God for you and the Community of St. Dysmas.”

If you or anyone in your congregation would like to write a note, here are the guidelines for writing to incarcerated persons:

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,” “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!

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

Lord, please watch over all our brothers and sisters, especially those who are grieving. Let them know that they are not alone and are loved.

Please be with my family and friends in their time of need.

Please pray for our CSD siblings in faith who need healthcare. Pray that systems that too often inadequately provide for basic human needs among the incarcerated are reformed

Lord, please be with our brothers and sisters who have been released.



The Community of St. Dysmas

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

Co-Pastors

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Pastor Melody Hession-Sigmon

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Council Members

Lois Carrigan, Chair

Bob Harvey, Treasurer

Rufus Berry

Linda Fleischer

Myra Keel

Alan Ramsey