

# THE COMMUNITY OF ST. DYSMAS

*I was in Prison & You Came To Visit Me*



## “Barriers, Hoops and Razor Wire”

I have often thought as I enter on or our St. Dysmas sites to lead worship of all the hassles to get inside the facility. First a long drive to reach the site, then a long drive to the facility itself, and the first of several gates. I am struck by the layer upon layer of razor wire surrounding the prison (Curtis Dawkins in his Book “The Graybar Hotel” says about razor wire; “Razor wire is like Slinkys for masochistic giants that sit atop every fence, doubled up on buildings and the ground. It’s sometime called “concertina”. I don’t know why...I have seen plastic bottles and empty coffee bags impaled permanently on the regularly spaced spikes that are meant to snag the clothing of anyone intent on slinking through. The containers remain there empty-warning flags flying and flapping over the years.”). After passing my worship material and myself through a x ray machine, there is the mandatory pat down including emptying pockets and showing the back of my socks. Only then am I allowed to make the long walk to the designated space for worship. The trek to bring God’s Word and the Sacrament to the men and women “onside” takes patience and resolve.

One of our volunteers, Pastor Gary Rhinesmith from All Saints in Bowie, puts the trek into perspective. “We are told in Matthew 25 that when we visit the person in prison, we are visiting Jesus. Considering all the obstacles and barriers that are put into our path, they sure make it hard to see Jesus.”

This in part is a way of expressing my gratitude to the volunteers of the Community of St. Dysmas for all the hoops that they must jump through to bring Jesus to the men and women who make up this unique congregation. They go through a lot and sacrifice a great deal of personal time to minister “to the least of these.”

In addition, my colleague, Pastor Gary, makes am extremely relevant

point. While we are given a mandate by Jesus “to visit the least of these”, society and our culture can put up significant barriers. While not all of you visit “the least of these in prison”, you do live with Jesus’ mandate in Matthew 25. The question for all of us children of God is “what barriers, hoops and razor wire” must you overcome in your ministry to the least of them?

In the Name of Jesus!

Pastor Gerry of The Community of St. Dysmas

PS. Many of the barriers which we overcome is for the sake of security.

#### FROM THE PASTOR'S DESK Recommended Reading

- \*+ “The Graybar Hotel” a collection of short stories by Michigan inmate Curtis Dawkins
- + “Enchanted” a novel where evil and magic collide by Rene Denfeld
- + “America’s Original Sin: Racism, White Privilege and the Bridge to a New America” by Jim Wallis – The title says it all!

#### CELEBRATE ST. DYSMAS SUNDAY

NOVEMBER 26, 2017

“I was in prison and you came to visit me”

#### FACT SHEET

- What is The Community of St. Dysmas?

The Community of St. Dysmas (CSD) is a congregation of the ELCA, serving in the Maryland Correctional System. It is supported by the efforts of churches and individuals of the Delaware–Maryland Synod and the Metro Washington DC Synod.

Where does the name “St. Dysmas” come from?

In Luke’s version of the crucifixion, one of the criminals ask of Jesus, “Jesus remember me when you come into your Kingdom.” Jesus replies, “Today you will be with me in paradise.” Although unnamed in scripture, early church tradition named this man “Dysmas.” (Luke 23: 42–43)

When did the Community of St. Dysmas begin?

It was formally organized as a Congregation on March 16, 1985, following a

period of initial development in 1984. This Congregation was formed through the former American Lutheran Church (ALC) in its Eastern District.

How did The Community of St. Dysmas get started?

In the late 70's and early 80's Lutheran congregations in the Baltimore-Washington area participated in a series of forums on criminal justice sponsored by Lutheran Social Services (LSS) of Central Maryland. From these forums, a task force was formed to identify ways could become involved in the criminal justice system. One of the suggestions was to encourage inmates to develop a group – their own congregation – within the prison. As a result, and following a dialog with the Division of Corrections (DOC) permission was granted for the formation of a Lutheran congregation within the prison.

The ALC offered funds for the organizing of such a congregation. In 1984 Pastor Ed Nesselhuf (died 2016) was called to organize a congregation. Marianna Burt, an attorney and advisor to LSS at this time, sought and saw this as a way for inmates to do something for themselves. As she put it , "You can never do for people; you must do with people," which saw inmate ownership as an essential component of this unique congregation.

How does The Community of St. Dysmas differ from other prison ministries?

CSD differs from other prison ministries in three significant ways:

- It is a real congregation, an actual Lutheran parish of the Delaware-Maryland Synod, with an ordained Lutheran pastor, and with inmate members, ownership, participation and responsibility,
- It is a ministry of Word and Sacrament, offering Holy Communion to its members on a weekly basis; and
- It is a place where inmates and outsiders come together in worship and fellowship, encountering each other, building a network of potential allies and support for the ex-offender upon their release.

How do inmates participate?

In addition to attending worship and Bible studies, led by volunteers from congregations within the DE-MD and Metro-DC Synods, inmates help with support activities. They set up before and clean up after worship; they read lessons, read the Gospel, and lead the prayers; often they will lead singing or

play instruments;; and they assist with the distribution of communion. Additionally, from time to time, “members” make financial contributions to “their church” – The Community of St. Dysmas.

How many members does The Community of St. Dysmas have?

Only inmates of the Maryland Correctional System are members of CSD. Since its inception CSD membership has varied as members thankfully are released. Over the years membership has averaged between 40 and 50. At present there are more men than women in the Congregation.

Who is the current Pastor?

Pastor Gerry Rickel is the called Pastor of CSD, since September 2011. Pastor Gerry partners with other clergy and rostered leaders to preside at worship services and lead Bible studies at the various sites.

How is The Community of St. Dysmas funded?

Although when it was formed CSD was intended to be a self-sustaining congregation of the church, we have never achieved that level of financial security. At present funding for CSD comes from:

- ELCA Partnership Support
- DE\_MD Synod Partnership Support
- Individual ELCA congregations
- Non -ELCA congregations
- Support from individuals

How do outside congregations provide financial support for this ministry?

During the history of CSD, congregations of the DE-MD and Metro DC Synods have offered faithful financial support for this ministry. Some contribute monthly, some quarterly, some semi-annually and others annually. Some celebrate one Sunday each year as “CSD Sunday” and take a special offering for CSD.

How can YOU help The Community of St. Dysmas?

- Pray for the ministry of CSD, its members, its pastor and the volunteers who serve in this ministry
- Invite Pastor Rickel to visit your congregation to preach or lead an adult forum

- Offer a place of hospitality for released members of CSD in your church

### SUNDAYS WITH CSD

Looking for something different? Would you like to plan an outreach event – a ministry event – or a day of community awareness for your congregation? In addition to the worship and Bible studies conducted within the prison walls, Pastor Rickel is available to worship with your congregation, to lead Adult Forums, or to meet with your council or social outreach committees in congregations of the Metropolitan Washington DC and Delaware–Maryland Synods, and to attend conference meetings.

Currently, Pastor Rickel is scheduled to serve at the following:

\*Joy Reigns in Edgewater MD on November 26, 2017

Why not have a special **CSD** Day at your congregation! To schedule a Sunday or other time for Pastor Rickel to visit your congregation to lead worship, to participate in an adult forum, or to meet at some other time, ***contact him*** by phone at [443-306-1115](tel:443-306-1115) or [pastor@communitystdysmas.com](mailto:pastor@communitystdysmas.com).

### MINISTRY REPORT

**Central Maryland Correctional Facility** in Sykesville (CMCF) – a Lutheran Bible Study is beginning on late Sunday afternoons

**Maryland Correctional Transition Center** (MCTC) in Hagerstown is witnessing steady growth in attendance

**Maryland Correctional Institution for Women** (MCIW) in Jessup will have its annual Christmas Eve Service

**Maryland Correctional Institution** – Jessup (MCIJ) attendance is holding steady and can use your prayers.

### The Community of St. Dysmas Council

- Elected Lois Carrigan, a Minister of the United Church of Christ and Vice President of the Mid- Atlantic Conference of the UCC, as its Chair person
- Decided to shape its agenda around the six core values of CSD (worship, member evangelism, marketing, sharing faith stories, managing ministry, and After Care)

## ***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.

### **Join with Us in Prayer --**

"pray for my family and the woman at M.C.I.W.

"Please pray for my Grandmas health to improve and for my depression to lift."

"pray for the hungry, abused, lonely addicted. The United States of America, the volunteers and our pastor."

### **Join with Us in Worship and in Thanks Giving**

If you feel a calling to participate or lead worship, participate in the music ministry, or simply participate to add your presence, please contact us at

[pastor@communitystdysmas.com](mailto:pastor@communitystdysmas.com) or call [443-306-1115](tel:443-306-1115).

### **Join with Us in Your Financial Support**

Unlike other Lutheran congregations The Community of St. Dysmas receives no internal financial support.

You can designate the Community of St. Dysmas on **Amazon Smile** and a portion of our purchase will be donated to St. Dysmas.

On your first visit to AmazonSmile ([smile.amazon.com](https://smile.amazon.com)), you are prompted to select a charitable organization from our list of eligible organizations. You can change your selection at any time.

To change your charitable organization:

1. Sign in to [smile.amazon.com](https://smile.amazon.com) on your desktop or mobile phone browser.
2. From your desktop, go to **Your Account** from the navigation at the top of any page, and then select the option to **Change your Charity**. Or, from your mobile browser, select **Change your Charity** from the options at the bottom of the page.
3. Select a new charitable organization to 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 intentionally on your part and allows us to 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 include 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 know!

### **Join us with Thrivent Choice Dollars**

Thrivent Choice Dollars offers another way to support CSD. Through the Thrivent Choice Program, eligible members are designated 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

[www.thrivent.com/thriventchoice/program/index.html](http://www.thrivent.com/thriventchoice/program/index.html)

Your dollars for CSD go far to support this ministry and to bring God's Word to many who so desperately need to hear God's grace, love and forgiveness.

### **WHO WE ARE**

**CSD** – The Community of St. Dysmas – a Lutheran Congregation within the walls of the Maryland Correctional Institution.

**PASTOR** – Rev. Gerry F Rickel

**DEACON** -- Raymond Toy

+ Please share this information with your congregation. +

*I was in prison, and you came to visit me. Matthew 25:36b*

The Community of St. Dysmas

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