



Sister Judy Greene
Monroe County Jail Chaplain

On Tuesday afternoons I conduct a Men's Spirituality Group at the Monroe Correctional Facility. At the beginning of a recent group I was talking about making connections when a long-time member of the group said in a stage whisper to a newer member next to him, "She's big on connection." My response, "Yes she IS big on connection AND she's still got pretty good hearing," brought the relief of laughter to our group. I recount this because I believe that making connections and being in relationship is at the heart of my ministry as Catholic Chaplain in the Monroe County Jail System.

The position of Catholic Chaplain at the County Jails was established in 2004 and was the result of a collaborative effort among the Sisters of St. Joseph, the Diocese of Rochester, and the County of Monroe. The main goal in creating this position was to have a consistent presence in both facilities and to serve the needs of incarcerated Catholics, insuring access to sacramental and pastoral care. Included in this goal is outreach to staff. While the Catholic population has been (and is) served by capable, dedicated volunteers including some of our Sisters, I believe that having someone "on site" has made a difference. When I began my ministry, Sister Donna Del Santo and Sister Liz Leonard were already working at the jail. The relationships and credibility that they had established facilitated my acceptance into the system.

The men and women I spend my days with are from the streets of our city and from the suburbs; they are rich and they are poor; some are well educated and many are school dropouts; some have families who love and support them and some have been abandoned by their families; some are jailed for minor offenses and some for murder; some are from our parishes and some have no church affiliation. It is a microcosm of our society.

The majority of my time is spent in one on one visits in the housing units. It is here that I listen to the stories – stories of regret and sadness, stories of courage and forgiveness, and stories of a hunger for God. I witness daily the strength and resiliency of the human spirit and hear of the faithfulness and long-suffering of family and friends. Despite the doubts and fears, many hope in a different future and see a light at the end of the tunnel or, as one person told me, “At least now there is a tunnel.”

Mass or a Communion Service is celebrated weekly in both facilities. We work hard to increase awareness that we, too, are a worshipping community and a part of our Diocesan Church. Sister Kathy Clary conducts a weekly Women’s Meditation Group and I have a weekly Men’s Spirituality Group at MCF. These groups are open to people of all faiths. We also offer Advent and Lenten Scripture Studies at the downtown jail. For the past four summers we have welcomed a deacon intern as part of the Diaconate ministry experience. The inmates have come to realize their role in helping with this formation as they interact with the deacon-in-training.

Financial support for this ministry comes from the Sisters of St. Joseph, the Diocese of Rochester and Monroe County. I am grateful too for the personal support of my Sisters that allows me to continue in this ministry. I feel your support in so many ways - your interest, your concern, your prayers and I count on them. The Sisters of St. Joseph are very much present in the jail. Hardly a week goes by that I am not asked if I know “Sister so and so”- from one of our schools, parishes, or St. Joseph’s Villa. I remember one particular day when I was asked about three Sisters of St. Joseph in the space of half an hour. That evening I called each of those Sisters (with permission of the inmate) and the connections were strengthened. I was proud to be a Sister of St. Joseph. It has been helpful to be able to call Sister Margaret Kunder or Sister Virginia Schmitz, who are hospital chaplains, when a relative of an inmate is in the hospital; to make a referral to St. Joseph’s Neighborhood Center where many of our Sisters minister; to send someone to St. Joseph’s Northside with what Sister Peg lovingly calls “another quality referral from Judy.”

The message I receive most consistently, both spoken and unspoken, is: “There’s more to me than you see.” I am aware as I write about “them” that I’m also writing about “me” and about “us.” Over the years I have developed a healthy respect for the band aid approach. Aware of the overwhelming problems in the system and my inability to significantly change it, I continue to see value in the ordinary daily connections -- the simple but powerful message conveyed by showing up consistently, keeping a promise, and calling someone by name.