



An inmate puts away the items used on the altar following Mass at the Ellsworth Correctional Facility in Kansas. (OSV News/Karen Bonar, The Register)



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Those who accompany the incarcerated have said there is a lot to do in ministering to a population that has committed crimes and had to live with the consequences of those actions.

This population of men and women often comes from backgrounds of drug use, multiple arrests and instability in employment and housing.

Yet, the work of Catholic prison ministry has been mostly carried out quietly. So much so, that it has long been thought of as something only priests and religious do. This has meant that lay involvement "is almost nonexistent," according to Karen Clifton, executive coordinator of the online-based Catholic Prison Ministries Coalition, or CMPC.

"A survey was sent out," she told OSV News. "And the problem was, we got a lot of responses that said we know somebody in our diocese is doing this work, but we just don't know who they are and what they're doing."

The survey went out to all the dioceses across the country after Pope Francis asked his U.S. nuncio about the state of prison ministry in this country. That was after his 2015 visit to a Philadelphia-based correctional center.

Clifton said the pope's inquiry came as several Catholic prison ministry and advocacy groups banded together in search of national guidance. Both events coincided to form the coalition in 2018, now made up of more than three dozen ministries across the country. The idea, said Clifton, is to have an active prison ministry in every diocese. CMPC was formally incorporated last year.

Bishop William A. Wack of Pensacola-Tallahassee, Florida, the coalition's episcopal adviser, told OSV News the coalition addresses three main concerns through online seminars and resources.

"To form people, to help to train would-be ministers, chaplains, and also to support those who are doing this ministry because, like a lot of ministry, it can be difficult," he said. "People are often isolated, who are doing it in their dioceses, and so we wanted to be that support and also (be) a place for formation. And to advocate for certain things that we need to do the ministry."

Philadelphia-based Augustinian Father Jeremy Hiers has participated "in a lot of (CMPC's) workshops." For more than 50 years, his province has been active in the ministry. Since 2021, he has gone to the state prison in Chester, just south of the city, to give the sacraments to inmates and celebrate weekly Mass in a rotation with his brother friars.

"(Catholic inmates) proactively put together the liturgy," he told OSV News. "They plan the music. They plan who's going to take part in the liturgy, the various roles from altar serving to reading, and so I think it's something that they very much count on happening every Sunday. And it's something that they make sure they invite one another to. So it's a real community."

Hiers also visits those at the infirmary who were not able to attend Mass. Then he spends two to three minutes with each man in the maximum-security wing.

Just north of Chester, the Augustinians also have a degree program at Phoenix state prison, where inmates can work toward an associate or bachelor degree in general studies from Villanova University.

Hiers said other orders do offer Bible study and spiritual resources at Chester. Still, many laypeople have told him they want to do the ministry, and he sees a role for them to fill the gap in accompaniment between Masses.

But, he said, "it's very easy to go inside if you're ordained. It's not as easy for people who are not ordained. ... If I could be king for a day, that would be the first thing I would fix. I would make it much easier for laypersons to find a way to help."

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In the meantime, he encouraged them to become pen-pals with inmates.

"When you go inside, you have a limited amount of time because of the security procedures. And you have a large demand of people and you can only spend a little bit of time with each one, but when you write a letter, that person has your full attention, and you have theirs. And you can develop a much more meaningful relationship that way," said Hiers.

At Lansdowne, Virginia-based Prison Fellowship, the country's largest Christian prison ministry, the most popular programs are relationship-based, according to Cody Wilde, senior vice president of correctional programs.

The organization's cohort-based "academy" program has 500 hours of classes on subjects ranging from criminal thought patterns to conflict resolution. Wilde said participants answer extensive surveys that measure growth in "six core values." He told OSV News it is effective with inmates because they are mostly coached by graduates.

"They get to model not what perfect looks like, but what healthy looks like," said Wilde. "What it's like to be a little bit further along in the journey and to have that life-on-life interaction. Then there's the third dimension, which is community. What you need is a person on your right and your left who's going through the same experience."

He explained participants start to practice "a new way of being" and naturally gravitate toward deeper life questions. They have the option to go further by exploring those questions more explicitly within the Christian context.

While Prison Fellowship's peer-led programs differ from Catholic ministry's sacramental foundation, they are based on the fundamental teaching of accompaniment found in verses 35-36 of Matthew 25.

"I love that Jesus didn't just say, 'Go out and have warm feelings toward one another and love them,' but he said, 'Help them: those who are hungry and homeless and poor and aching, and imprisoned and sick.' ... It reminds us that this is bodily. This is

something that is very physical and we need to share our faith that way," said Wack.

The coalition's Karen Clifton said there is strong interest among the laity to do the ministry. However, she cautioned the goal is not to "fix people or proselytize" but to accompany, and this takes discernment.

"For them to go through a process of understanding, making sure that they're grounded in prayer, that they have spiritual reflection and supervision, and that they have someone to process with, in what they're doing. Because this is different than other ministries. They're working in a traumatizing environment and/or they're working with traumatized people," she said.