

***Our Reflections from our Worship
With the congregation at Living Stones Lutheran Church
At the Men's Prison in Shelton, WA***

Before I went to worship with members of Living Stones Lutheran Church at the men's prison in Shelton, Larry [Olson] asked me why I was doing this. I didn't have an answer other than that, after hearing Pastor Erik [Wangen-Hoch] speak at Calvary last April, I felt strongly compelled to do so. Maybe it was a nudge from the Holy Spirit, but it may also be that two of my friends in the Community of Lay Ministers have long been involved in prison ministry at McNiel Island and the Women's Treatment Center in Purdy. I wanted to get a sense of what their work is like. At any rate, I am very glad I went, and I look forward to going again in February 2009, the next open date when Calvary can attend.

I wasn't nervous exactly, but there definitely is an intimidation factor associated with the starkness of the prison grounds surrounded by high fences and guard stations. We had to announce our arrival as we entered the parking lot. Pastor Erik met us at the door. We were told to leave essentially everything but our car keys and picture IDs in the car. Keys and a couple wallets went into a security locker. We cleared a security screening like at the airport. Then our ID was checked against the pre-approved list of visitors and we were issued badges. He told us to stay on the right side of the hallways, in case guards had to move quickly down the corridors. Passage through some doors and gates--unlocked and relocked as we went--and a walk across a large, open, interior courtyard brought us to the building where worship services are held. What a contrast to the rest of what we saw! It was carpeted (the only one in the facility) and furnished with an altar, a cross, padded bright blue chairs, music stands and amplifiers. In the back of the room was a library containing many books about spirituality and several faith traditions. We were early enough that Pastor Erik was able to describe what the service would be like and how to act and respond to the inmates when they arrived—separate ourselves into groups of two or three, be friendly, ask them questions about their lives, but disclose nothing personal about ours.

Arrive they did! They began coming in at 6:30, wearing three different kinds of clothing, dependent upon which housing unit they came from. They came in noisily, chatting away. The musicians set up their guitars, etc. Others handed out bulletins and Bibles. Words for music were on a screen. The leaders of the congregation seemed to be mostly from Cedar, the cell block housing those with the longest terms. Those men are also involved in school or in apprenticeship programs and do all the maintenance work at the prison. Nearly everyone who came in greeted us with a smile, eye contact and a handshake. They clearly appreciate having visitors.

After about fifteen minutes, the praise band began playing with a lead singer and the parishioners settled into chairs. The music had an exuberant quality; many men were dancing in place, raising their hands in a Pentecostal worship style, and clapping along. It was impossible to not join in. At 7:00 p.m., Pastor Erik greeted everyone, reminded them they must be on good behavior or leave, told them if they were not going to stay they needed to leave now—some come in early for the music or to have conversations with other inmates for reasons that aren't always good. He introduced our group and asked Kari Leal to speak for us, which she did, bringing our greetings to them. From then on, except for the sermon and presiding at Holy Communion, Pastor Erik turned the service over to the men. They led singing, prayers, and reading of scripture. One man gave a testimony. Song leaders and speakers were very competent and powerfully effective. Clearly, they were well prepared. Communion was by intinction, with two stations manned by four men.

I was surprised by how normal it all seemed, except that we were six women amongst 70 or 80 men. The men were clean and neatly groomed. They looked so normal, so like men I could meet anywhere. Why did that surprise me? I don't know what I expected, but not that. They ranged in age from about 18 to men in their 50's and 60's. Most seemed to be in a good mood, but a young man sitting next to me was very shy and sad looking. I was also surprised by how comfortable and welcome they made us feel. They are used to having visitors from Lutheran congregations, but Pastor Erik said they were not coached in how to greet us. After the service ended, many of the men stayed around to talk with us. We heard some of their stories and remembered not to share ours. Then it was back out into the courtyard, through the doors and gates. We turned in our badges, retrieved our belongings and followed Pastor Erik to a casual restaurant in Shelton where we refreshed ourselves with food and beverage and debriefed the experience. If I had to choose just two words to describe the worship service, they would be reverent and exuberant. All in all, it was quite an amazing experience.

Jan Olson

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. [John 1:5]

Indeed, the light shines in the darkness. Even in a place of confinement, a stark and barren landscape surrounded by endless circles of razor wire, the darkness did not overcome the light of Jesus Christ - the light of the world.

Though I have been blessed to serve in prison ministry in the past, visiting the men of the Living Stones congregation was an extraordinary event, for this is a Lutheran congregation within the Shelton Corrections Center and the members serve as worship music leaders, readers, prayer leaders and servers of the Eucharist. Those of us from Calvary were not there to serve - we were gifted with the opportunity to participate in worship as members of the body of Christ.

Light emanated from the men of the Living Stones congregation and radiated the unconditional love of God to me. Such a sound of rejoicing in the singing of praises to God that my heart filled to overflowing with the unity that comes from being a part of the body of Christ. What a privilege it was to worship with these men - to be a witness to the glory of God's most incredible gift of grace. And most especially for me, to receive communion from servants of this congregation brought a sense of oneness in Christ.

We are one in the Spirit. No matter our journey in this life, the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness will never overcome it!

Many blessings,
Kari Leal

As part of Calvary's group's visit to the Shelton Correctional Facility for Men on January 12, 2008, the experience opened my eyes and heart to the power of the Holy Spirit at work. We were promptly introduced to the Worship Team composed of several "joyful spirits" who lead us in Song and Praise for about 40 minutes. It was not difficult to be swept and forget that we were in a restricted environment. Pastor Eric had asked that we sit ourselves next to an in-mate so that we can share a social moment after worship ended. I was blessed to seat next to "Gary". He was convicted for drug use and in that short 7 minutes of conversation we shared - Gary spoke mostly - I learned that he was born in Kentucky and raised by his Southern evangelical grandmother and "should have known better between right and wrong" but unfortunate circumstances and a stressful divorce swayed him into taking drugs and having the "wrong friends". He moved to Washington state and met and married his ex-wife. Gary has asked for prayers for himself and his 15 year old daughter who is presently having a difficult time recognizing Gary's role as her father. No matter he said "I will continue to try and communicate my love and care to for her." He prays that when he is released in 2 years that the relationship would be better.

"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light" Isaiah 9:2

Thanks be to God for these men who really had reasons to be "down in the dumps" but during our brief time with them they showed me what Joy in Spirit means.

Madeline Tam-Yamada