
Church in the World

**An article from the *Cathedral Times*
by the Rev. Cathy Zappa**

Don't be fooled by the gray classroom, the razor wire lining the tall fences outside, or the khaki uniforms stamped "Department of Corrections." This is holy ground.

As the congregation of twenty or so incarcerated women trickle in, we go to work transforming the space: moving folding tables to the wall, arranging chairs in a circle, and decking out our altar with a white tablecloth, a cross, and LED pillar candles. A woman I'll call C., the *de facto* altar guild and acolyte, reverently sets out the chalice, paten, host, and cranberry-grape juice. W. and P., our music leaders, unpack guitars and start strumming.

Welcome to the Episcopal service at Arrendale State Prison.

By virtue of being an outside volunteer and ordained priest, I'm the designated leader. But the real ministers here are the congregation. It is they who listen to and comfort one another, offer us all life-giving words, sing with joy, and lament with faith. It is they who are teaching me about being church and discipleship.

Through our life together, they are teaching me that church is much more than a building. It is a body: the body of Christ, and the body of the beloved community that follows Christ. It is a community in which we learn to trust God and one another, discover the power of God's love, and share our gifts while receiving the gifts of others.

All of this is true of our life together at the Cathedral, too. Yet there is something about worshipping with my sisters in prison that brings these lessons into sharp relief. There, there is nowhere to hide your grief or your hope. There, where "personal dealings" of any kind are strictly forbidden, all we can offer each other is ourselves, and that seems to be more than enough. I am not there to fix these sisters of mine or to bring Christ to them. God knows, Christ is already with them, and they do not need fixing! Rather, I am there, by the grace of God, to be in Christian community with them, and they with me. We love and celebrate one another, as we are.

This has influenced the way I think of mission and outreach, as well. Outreach, I believe, is not our gift to God or to others. It is God's gift to us. It is a means of grace through which God transforms us and our community. When we reach out across social boundaries, we become even more aware of our human interconnectedness, and we build relationships that will deepen our faith and, eventually, change the world.

Indeed, perhaps one of the most just, caring, and prophetic things we can do is simply to be Church in this broken world: to witness to God's wildly open kingdom through our visible life together, in communion especially with those who are most vulnerable or whom we perceive as other.