Communitas' grassroots newsletter on criminal justice & prisoner reintegration

the Sou'Wester

Summer 2020

OPEN DOOR ALIVE AND WELL

Celebrating 19 Years of an "Open Door" to the Community

Robin has attended Open Door meetings every Tuesday evening since meetings started in September 2001 (except for a couple of health-related absences) - much as many of you, and I, have been at church every Sunday morning for many years. The principal likeness is that for many who attend, Open Door is their intentional community, as is church for some. Though many at Open Door may not acknowledge, or even understand the likeness, for me it is deep and essential. In each case there is the experience, and nourishment of communion, a coming together significantly in a transition from one condition, typically involving isolation and mistrust, to another condition, of acceptance, respect, inclusion, trust and affection. It is that spiritual dimension of transition, of life–in-change, that I see as essential in the experience of communion which takes place in the movement of the Sunday liturgy and which is also at the heart of the Open Door experience. Even if I would not use this language with Robert or other fellow pilgrims at Open Door, each is liturgical, each is sacramental, they share a common worldly path on which Kingdom is ever possible, even sometimes near.

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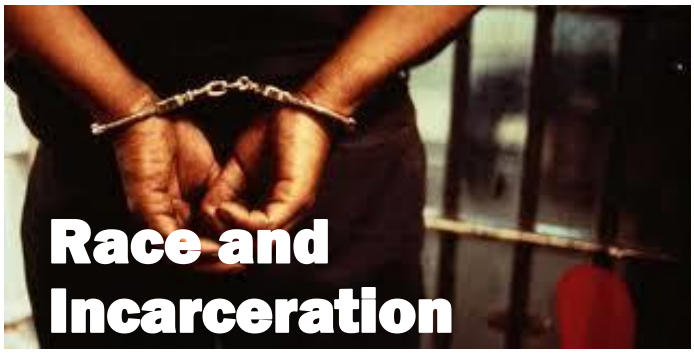

Race and Incarceration

In the award-winning film, In the Heat of the Night, Sidney Poitier's Detective Tibbs memorably leans on a recalcitrant witness in a small town in the Jim Crow South: "Hear me, good mama. Please, don't make me have to send you to jail. Because there's White time in jail, and there's Colored time in jail. The worst kind of time you can do is Colored time." Some fifty years later, the Sou'Wester wants to know if that warning holds true of penitentiary time in Quebec.

Consult a Black inmate, and you are not likely to receive positive reviews of Correctional Service Canada's (CSC) record on race-related issues. Then again, solicit White inmates' comment on life behind bars, and they neither will commend the government's hospitality. One sees the limits of sporadic, subjective anecdotal evidence, which not so long ago afforded the only portrait available. That situation was remedied by three ground-breaking studies, although one casts a wider net than our narrow focus on the Black prison experience; while another, the most sustained examination to date of visible minorities in the Canadian criminal justice system, puts the spotlight only on the provincial prisons of Ontario.

True to its name, the Report of the Commission on Systemic Racism in the Ontario Criminal Justice System (1994 /95) uncovered systemic racism in every part of the system. In the specific area of correctional institutions, if we may borrow the words of Canada's Office of the Correctional Investigator (OCI), the Commission discovered "pervasive racial hostility and intolerance within prison environments, racial segregation of inmates within and among prisons, and racial inequality in regards to the delivery of institutional services." Its pioneering work served as a foundation for the OCI's own study of 2012-2013, A Case Study of Diversity in Corrections: The Black Inmate Experience in Federal Penitentiaries, Final Report (2014), which could not have been better targeted for our purposes.

The last of the three studies, and the broadest in scope, was published in 2015. The author of Ethnocultural Minorities and the Canadian Correctional System, Dr. Emerson Douyon, a highly-respected authority in criminal

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We would love to hear from you!

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The Sou'Wester name is a reference to Montreal's Southwest, where Communitas began its work in 1999 and is still based today.

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OPEN DOOR ALIVE AND WELL

(Continued from page 1)

Open Door is the flagship activity of Communitas, a weekly community meeting that is held each Tuesday evening in Christ Church Cathedral's Fulford Hall, attended by ex-prisoners now in the community, by volunteers, and by inmates on escorted absence from the two minimum security federal penitentiaries in the region. Since we began to use the excellent facilities of Fulford Hall, Open Door has consistently enjoyed high attendance, usually between 30 and 40 people though as many as 65. These meetings are the crossroads where all are welcome, volunteers both serving as well as learning and developing personally in their encounters with our members, while prisoners and ex-prisoners have opportunities, otherwise unavailable to them, to mix and exercise themselves socially, enhancing their prospects for successful reintegration. At each meeting we reflect together prayerfully or spiritually, we engage important life issues, and we celebrate being community, for and with one another. As deacon and chaplain, I am mandated, perhaps even gifted, to speak of our marginality, of transition, of thresholds, of our turnings toward the better, toward the more sacred, and of doing so together. For me there is no doubt that just as Sunday Liturgy carries us in this kind of transition of life, so does Open Door for those who choose it as their place, their path of transition, of turning.

The transition which is at play at Open Door is that of the social integration of ex-prisoners – Jesus' response to "Lord, when did we see you in prison?" is challenge enough, encouraging us, as it does, to visit those in prison but greater perhaps is the challenge to welcome the prisoner back into the community. This is the movement, the transition, that is at play at Open Door. In our shared desire for safety, peace and shared accountability in our community we are embarked upon a personal and shared journey at Open Door, accepting a call beyond the squint of condemnation, punishment and exclusion into which we so easily fall, to the eyes-open practice of radical hospitality and love for one-another that Jesus' Gospel proclaims and celebrates – "just as you do it to one of the least…" who are members of my family, you do it to me. At Open Door we are committed to this same welcome for the stranger, to working at not creating strangers, to being in communion.

Robin is one of hundreds who grace our Open Door community by their participation. He is one who has stayed on longer than most because a relationship of reciprocal service has developed and gives witness to the communion we are. We are blessed by the many we don't see anymore who have gone on to lead productive lives in the wider community, just as we are blessed by the ones like Robert who are present still and we pray that we may bless those whose transition is more tentative and whose participation and turning has interruptions.

Rev. Deacon Peter Huish
President, Communitas Board of Directors

Open Door Attendees Share their High Points of Summer 2020

I've begun learning the trumpet. I live in a six-plex so inside I play with the mute on, but I also go to the park and play there without the mute.

I'm practicing piano like mad so I can get good enough to jam with my daughter.

It's nice to see the world slowing down.

There's so little traffic: I can walk across the street without looking both ways.

Giving away my car. I'm so happy not to have a car anymore.

My parents turned the upstairs into an apartment for me. I can live on my own and stay close to my parents.

Spending time with my brother. We're best friends.

My house is so cool, I don't even feel the heat. People think I have air conditioning but I don't.

For me summer's just starting. I want to experience every minute of it that's left.

Going to the water and watching the yachts. Those poor people: the difference between my weekdays and weekends is not very much, but the difference between their weekends yachting and their weekdays at work must be pretty big.

The solidarity among my neighbours. We've all been helping each other out and it's such a rich experience.

I didn't have to buy a monthly metro pass, only a pass for ten trips.

I went for a walk in the forest for the first time in what, thirty, forty years?

Going to my friend's cottage for two days. What a blessing to get out of the city.

I like to go out to parks near my home but I also like being inside. I have my cats.

(Showing us a big plate of home-grown tomatoes): Spending time in my garden!

Holding my community together and getting ready to re-open our church.

Working on my inner life!

I'm so thankful to be out. If it weren't for Covid, I'd still be inside, but they gave me early release because of it.

August 14 – 17 my niece invited me to her place for three days for my birthday. Now she's inviting me back for one weekend every month!

And a couple of low points:

I can't be with my friends at Open Door and the other groups that I belong to.

I can't see my parents, and my Dad is 89.

I live in an oven.

RACE AND INCARCERATION

(Continued from page 1)

psychology, discloses his guiding lights through several prefatory quotations, among them, "If you're born in America with a black skin, you're born in prison. Malcolm X." Douyon notes the shift in policing from criminal profiling to racial profiling: "In an officer's mind, in an increasingly diverse society, the face of crime tends to be personified by a dark-skinned individual, a typical member of these new, so-called dangerous classes." He has no doubt as to the pervasive presence of racial profiling on the streets of Quebec, with a corrosive impact that continues to work on the mind after entering prison: "For a young Black offender, this daily experience is part of urban life. … Ethnocultural offenders, and members of the Black community in particular, remain emotionally scarred by previous negative experiences with the police. As a consequence, they are highly sensitive to the issue of racism and racial profiling."

It is clear that the disproportionate interaction of visible minorities with the criminal justice system starts early in life: "One common problem does in fact exist among the visible minority groups: the overrepresentation of youth and adults at all levels of state involvement (child protection services, police, juvenile justice, penal and criminal justice, provincial and federal penitentiary system). Documentation in this regard is abundant." The end result is the accumulation over time of Black and other visible minority members in the correctional institutions. Douyon relates that in the period 1997 to 2000, Black people constituted about 2% of the population in Canada, but 6% of offenders in penitentiaries and 7% of those under supervision in the community, and that by 2010, their numbers had risen to 7.9% of federal inmates. An even greater disparity is discerned in the figures employed by the OCI report, which states that in 2013, Black inmates accounted for 9.3% of the total federal prison population, representing an increase in their numbers of 75% over the number of Black inmates in 2002/03; while according to the OCI's newest figures, the total Black inmate population is growing (4.5% from March 2011 to March 2020) while the overall population shrinks, so that now, in August, 2020, Black inmates represent 9.6% of the inmate population and 7.6% of those in the community.

As both federal studies point out, the increasingly diverse population presented important challenges for CSC, particularly with respect to the relevancy of programs and services, representative hiring, and the need for greater staff cultural competence, awareness, and sensitivity. CSC had already followed the lead of the social and biological sciences and Statistics Canada in retiring the concept of race, which genetics had by now repudiated: CSC was now organized around criminology's new approach of 'Ethnocultural offenders,' a concept which may include any number of distinct cultural groups hailing from many distant nations. "To be clear," Douyon explains, "this does not mean, for example, that Black people are not all black, but rather, that this semantic category includes a variety of nations, such as Jamaicans, Haitians, Somalis, other African nationals, Afro-Canadians from Nova Scotia, etc. That cultural distance between Black people must be taken into account, even though the issue of 'Black crime' and its relation to the correctional system remains identical for all Black people in Canada." The Canadian Human Rights Act, Canadian Multiculturalism Act, and The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms added to the pressure exerted by advances in criminology, and CSC "started to understand that the Ethnocultural diversity of prison populations was part of the order in the system," and that despite their unequal bargaining power, ethnocultural groups' distinct needs, goals, and demands must be taken into account.

In accord with the human rights legislation, the Corrections and Conditional Release Act obliges CSC's operations to respect ethnic, cultural, and linguistic differences. Working toward that goal, Dr. Douyon traces his efforts in collaboration with the trail-breaking work of the excellent Marcel Kabundi, who rose from institutional psychologist (where he provided much-appreciated support to many of my clients) to CSC's national manager of ethnocultural services. The result has been what the OCI describes as "an extensive governance structure, including an Ethnocultural Services section at national headquarters, a Regional Manager of Ethnocultural Services, Institutional Ethnocultural Coordinators, as well as a National and Regional Ethnocultural Advisory Committee, all intended to better identify and manage the needs and cultural interests of ethnocultural offenders." The work of these organs is authorized and defined by its own Commissioner's Directive, no. 767 - Ethnocultural Offenders: Services and Interventions, which has seen a number of refinements since the turn of the century.

We have watched CSC's relationship with Black offenders move to a place where legislation and correctional policy officially proscribe hostile actions or evidence of animus toward Black offenders by reason of their Ethnocultural identity– crucial progress, to be sure. Yet we are left with the OCI's description of a myriad of ways federal correctional practice continued to withhold equality, fairness, and respect, and therein lies the evidence of systemic oppression which complacent prison managers deny or downplay. Space will not nearly allow us to bring forward the OCI's discussions in full, but we can at least summarize the 2014 report's key findings.

→ Despite policies endorsing integrated, diverse ranges to reduce violence, CSC disproportionally incarcerates Black inmates in specific institutions in Ontario and Quebec. (Dr. Kabundi observes in the Douyon report, "When I joined Leclerc Institution in the Quebec Region in 1987, I was surprised to discover the existence of a unit commonly known as THE UNITED NATIONS, where all ethnic minority offenders were assigned." And a personal anecdote: around that time, when I appeared in Superior Court for a client who had smacked a guard, a Black witness testified he lived in "The Freak Range." The jury was now wide awake, as the Crown attorney unwisely solicited and received his explanation: "That's where Leclerc puts everyone who's not White and Francophone.")

→ Everything Black inmates do and say appears to be assessed through the lens of a gang stereotype, and some of the assessment criteria are discretionary and open to interpretation and judgment. As a result, Black inmates are disproportionately identified as gang members, and although 79% are not members, "the gang affiliation label is the one issue that seems to both distinguish and define the Black inmate experience in federal penitentiaries." (Dr. Douyon was equally witness to and critical of this phenomenon.)

→ Core correctional programs poorly reflect the lives of Black inmates, offering few opportunities to discuss issues relevant to their knowledge, culture, or traditions. When ethnocultural programming is offered, it is often available in only one institution on an inconsistent basis with limited enrollment.

→ In spite of less favourable conditions and treatment, Black inmates are generally less likely to reoffend while on parole or statutory release, or after warrant expiry. Yet they are released later in their sentence (i.e. lower parole grant rate), and are less likely to be trusted with a grant of temporary absences.

The OCI continues to monitor compliance. On August 2, 2020, Policy and Research Director David Hooey informed us that "While CSC was generally supportive of the recommendations made in the 2013 study, very little has changed materially or substantively for Black inmates since that investigation. Issues raised in the 2013 report continue to be relevant today. During institutional visits and interviews for several of the Office's recent systemic investigations, Black inmates continue to identify issues highlighted eight years ago," including relevant programs and interventions, personal hygiene products, ethnic food at the canteen, culturally relevant community support, discrimination and stereotyping, and lack of Black Inmate Committees at some institutions. Finally, the OCI "continues to call for full-time Ethnicity Liaison Officers…."

by Steve

From the Coordination Team

It has been around 6 months since all the restrictions due to COVID-19 were put into place, and even though we, at Communitas, have tried to adapt to the situation in the best way possible, it still feels as if something is missing. That 'something' is, of course, all of us getting together like we used to.

Having said that, we have all done a great job so far and here are some highlights worth mentioning:

- We continue to see your faces on Zoom. Whether it is for Open Door, a circle meeting, or the Board of Directors getting together… there you are: willing to navigate technology that might not be familiar to you, willing to be patient as technical issues arise, willing to be there with us, even though that was the 27th Zoom meeting you had in a row.

- Communitas' coordination is now handled by a team, with Monika, Bill and Jeri meeting every week to talk about what we are going through, where we want to go as an organization, how to do our work in the best way possible despite the current challenges.

- This is the busiest the office telephone has been in the last 2 years, with a lot of the calls being from members who are still inside. And it is not that different with the letters we receive… Sometimes it may take a while to get a hold of each other, but we always manage! Thank you for your patience.

- In terms of fundraising, the small increase in the donations made to Communitas by our dear members and friends has been noticeable . Since the beginning of the new fiscal year we have received $2003.88 in donations, which means that we have managed to reach 10% of the fundraising goal we set for ourselves at the AGM… we can definitely do it!

All of this gives us the sense that our community is backing us up, making us feel their presence and support, even in these times when this represents quite a challenge.

Take care of yourselves!

The Coordination Team

We at Communitas know that life inside can be difficult, especially now during these 'Covid Times'. Men are even more isolated as they have to comply with safety rules – put in place to protect their health and that of the institution's staff, but paradoxically injuring them mentally - through loneliness and isolation.

Communitas is trying to breach the gap of isolation by reaching into the prisons to send messages of care and cheer. We have written individual letters to our participants inside the prison – giving them news of the outside – what we are up to in the community – despite the hardships of physical distancing. Our letters might take a while to get to their intended recipient inside once mailed, but we know that they are eagerly awaited and shared once they make it in. We have also included in each mailing a copy of the latest Sou'Wester, now that the Chapel is closed to volunteers, so that the Communitas newsletter is no longer is accessible in the flesh – so to speak.

We also continue to make contact with some of our members on a one on one basis via telephone, and we also have individual members who send in personal letters to particular friends.

Communitas is also in constant contact with the Chaplains of the institutions – trying to identify ways in which we can be supportive of their work from the outside. With the huge success of the Zoom-Open Door we are greatly inspired to see how we can start up a Zoom-Bible Study with our incarcerated members. We have not yet been able to implement this last plan, but have re-started Zoom-Bible Study (Encounters with the Gospel) with our members who are in the community. Hope springs eternal that we will be able to extend it in some way into the Prison Chapel.

We sincerely hope that our in-reach efforts are bringing comfort to those in prison and we pledge to continue reaching in – in all the ways we can.

Funny Stuff

Definitions for words that might come up in conversation:

1. Coffee, n. The person upon whom one coughs
2. Flabbergasted, adj. Appalled by discovering how much weight one has gained
3. Abdicate, v. To give up all hope of ever having a flat stomach
4. Esplanade, v. To attempt an explanation while drunk
5. Willy-nilly, adj. Impotent
6. Negligent, adj. Absent-mindedly answering the door when wearing only a nightgown
7. Lymph, v. To walk with a lisp

This March, the nonprofit Rehabilitation Through The Arts (RTA) was in the middle of workshopping the play Midnight with the men incarcerated at Fishkill Correctional Facility in Beacon, New York.

The team planned for a September production inside the facility to audiences both incarcerated there and invited guests from outside. But COVID-19 caused the New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision to suspend outside programming, everything from arts to college courses. RTA staff, teaching artists and the incarcerated members abruptly lost touch.

When it became clear that in-person collaboration was not likely to take place anytime soon, RTA got creative. The organization has spent the past four months developing paper lesson plans covering different art forms, which evolved into audio cassette lessons and will become DVD-led workshops this fall. While RTA staff admit it can't replace in-person engagement, it's become an effective model of maintaining prison programming as facilities across the country suspend outside visitation due to COVID-19.

"I was locked up for 9/11 and it's very scary when you're incarcerated and don't know what's going on," explains Charles Moore, an RTA alum who is now director of operations. "Everything we're doing [at RTA], it's to feel like we're still with the participants even if we're not there in body."

Though the organization moved quickly to pivot to remote programming at all six facilities where it works, it required time, effort and perseverance to meet the guidelines of the corrections department. Devices used by incarcerated people are strictly regulated (cassettes with metal screws, for example, are not allowed) and communication like phone calls are prohibited between RTA staff, teaching artists and incarcerated participants. "In New York, it's the status that we are not allowed to communicate with any of our participants," says RTA founder Katherine Vockins. Instead, RTA relied on its history with the department developed over 24 years. "We've been in close communication with DOCCS … it is a partnership in the sense that they value what we do and we've worked very hard not to have an adversarial relationship," Vockins says.

In 1996 Vockins attended a graduation of the New York Theological Seminary at Sing Sing Prison in Ossining, New York, and casually asked if there was any theater in the prison. There wasn't, and she helped form a theater group that would become RTA. The organization now leads creative arts programming and theater productions across New York State in four men's facilities as well as Taconic and Bedford Hills, two of the state's three prisons for women.

Beyond the close relationship with the state corrections department to produce theater inside prison — administration approves everything from the types of plays performed to the costumes and props used — RTA works with teaching artists who regularly visit the prisons to lead workshops and direct productions. The organization also relies on steering committees of incarcerated participants in each facility who help guide the program.

RTA tapped into all those networks after the corrections department suspended programming on March 16th. In less than two weeks, RTA gained permission to send paper lesson plans to its participants, which a group of teaching artists quickly developed. RTA sent out written step-by-step lessons, which included a guide to public speaking and character development assignments, by the end of May. At the same time, the organization was in conversation with the department about allowing some communication with key members of the steering committee.

RTA wanted to be sensitive to the fears and anxieties of incarcerated individuals during COVID-19. Fishkill Correctional Facility, where the production of Midnight is indefinitely postponed, had more positive virus cases than any New York prison in early May. But rehabilitative, arts and educational programs can also serve as a bridge to the outside world for those incarcerated; COVID-19 has halted them across the country.

With its paper lesson plans, RTA sent a notebook encouraging participants to document what was taking place. In addition, a journalist teaching artist developed a lesson plan on journaling. "The lesson has a focus on how you're feeling and how you're dealing with the stress," Moore says. "There's an importance in our participants being able to express how it feels to be going through this pandemic on the inside."

Moore looked back at his own prison term as RTA brainstormed how to evolve its remote programming. DVDs aren't allowed to be viewed individually by the incarcerated and reading might become tiresome, so he suggested utilizing the prison-approved cassettes that were common while he was inside. So he suggested using the prison-approved cassettes that were common while he was incarcerated. Seven teaching artists submitted a variety of proposals for cassette lessons and RTA decided to use them all.

RTA alumni Colin Absolam and Charles Moore, RTA director of operations, prepare cassette lesson plans at the RTA office. (Photo courtesy RTA)

Charlie Scatamacchia, a teaching artist who was leading a pre-rehearsal workshop for the production of Midnight when programming halted, suggested a lesson plan on "finding your own story." The 63-minute tape includes Scatamacchia leading a physical and mental warm up followed by journaling prompts. "When you do a play and you're assigned a role, you have to create a biography for that character," he says. "I used this as an opportunity to create a biography — tell your own story, unrelated to the play itself."

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Throughout June, RTA recorded and duplicated lesson plans onto 600 cassette tapes, then labeled and distributed following corrections department regulations — a "long, tedious process," as Moore puts it.

The delivery also included letters to members to check on their wellbeing. "I've lost my mother to COVID-19 … I thank RTA for reaching out. Sometimes all one wants to do is to be heard," one member wrote from Fishkill. "I do miss the [in-person] workshops, especially since that's where I believe I could show my true self," another wrote from Woodbourne Correctional Facility.

RTA now awaits a response to a separate feedback form submitted with the tapes. The corrections department now allows two steering committee members from each facility to participate in supervised phone calls with RTA. "Communication is slowly coming back," Moore says.

The cassettes are meant to fill in for an eight-week summer course. With a longer time frame to plan for the fall semester, RTA is working closely with the corrections department on the approval of DVD lesson plans they hope participants can view in small groups. The organization also hopes to incorporate feedback of members inside who have gone through prior lesson plans. "We're in the process of writing lessons that can be done on DVD, which means sound and image, and a document that supports the sound and image," Vockins says.

There are still unanswered questions, of how social distancing may work in prison classrooms and when in-person plays can resume at all. But the main accomplishment, for now, is to continue the programming in whatever form possible.

"From day one, when we started the paper lessons, participants were just so happy to hear from anyone on the outside," Moore recalls. "And they're so thankful that we didn't give up on them."

By Emily Nonko, Next City

https://nextcity.org/daily/entry/bringing-the-arts-to-prison-even-during-a-pandemic

By Patrick

In the Fall

time speeds forward
on the curl of a fallen
sumac leaf.
and rain moistens
every up turned hand
for its last drink
of water.

The squirrels are running
in the walls
of our house.
caught in the act
of stashing
hoarding.

The sky
will not yield a ray
of sunlight.
all branches sway
slightly.
See.
things
are on the move.

Cock-eyed posters
clutch
their telephone poles.
hangers on
after the circus
has left town.

red tail lights
and exhaust.
recent history.

By Pamela

It is with great sadness that we announce the passing of our friend and Communitas member Robert Callender, on Monday, September 14, 2020 after a long illness.

Robert was a quiet unassuming man whom you might not notice sitting amidst us at Open Door, or in a corner on Marie's deck at the Communitas annual summer 'Journee de Ressourcement'. One thing that you might notice however was that he was always surrounded by men who were listening intently or bombarding him with conversation. He had a way of attracting those closer to the margins and was able to - through his quiet manner - offer comfort and support to those in particular need of friendship.

Robert was an ordained Deacon in the Anglican Church – a calling to which he was particularly well suited. His compassion and openness, his quietness and gentleness all made him ideal for the work of Communitas in helping to heal the many wounded who crossed his path.

In the past few years personal issues meant he had to withdraw from active participation in Communitas however there was never a doubt that Robert remained a Communitas member at heart.

Rest in Peace Robert. We will miss you.

SAINT LEONARD'S RESPONSE TO COVID-19

By Dave Williams, support worker at Saint Leonard's House

Saint Leonard's House is a halfway house located in Saint-Henri. It is a transitional living space between prison and the community. There is structure and support to help ex-inmates manage the practical, emotional and social challenges of rebuilding a life on the outside. It is a busy and crowded place where 30 residents and a dozen staff share offices, bedrooms, bathrooms, a kitchen, dining room and den.

When the COVID-19 outbreak began in March, measures, based on recommendations by Public Health and Correctional Services Canada, were put in place to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. As the pandemic evolved, regular meetings were held with the residents and staff to answer questions, explain strategies and address concerns. Below is an overview of the actions that were taken by Saint Leonard's House over the last few months.

Sanitizing

In March, hand sanitizer dispensers were installed at the two entrances to the house. Notices were put up to remind everyone to wash their hands on entering and leaving the building. A janitor was hired to disinfect daily the bathrooms, offices and other common areas.

Social distancing

In March, notices were put up to remind everyone to maintain a two metre distance from others. In practice, this was sometimes difficult to do, because there are several shared bedrooms and offices and the hallways are narrow. To limit the number of people moving around the house, the residents were asked to spend most of the time in their bedrooms, including to eat meals, and the work schedule of staff was adjusted to avoid overcrowding the office spaces. Visitors were no longer allowed to enter the house. Community support services were cancelled or could only be accessed by telephone.

In April, following orders by Public Health, Correctional Services mandated that residents be confined to the house, except for work deemed essential and for medical appointments. All weekend leave privileges to family or friends were cancelled. Many residents resented these measures which are similar to the actions taken in prison, namely confinement and isolation, to contain bad behaviour and punish breaches of rules. A concerted effort was made by the staff to help the residents distinguish between actions taken to protect public health and actions taken to punish their own behaviour.

In May, as the control measures relaxed, the residents were gradually able to resume their activities in the community and meet again with family members. In June, weekend leave privileges were reinstated. Staff returned to a normal work schedule. The two metre distancing rule remains in effect. Many community support services can still only be accessed by telephone or through Zoom.

Masks

While Public health authorities dithered over the benefits of protective face covering, attempts were made to acquire disposable medical masks as early as March. However, they were difficult to find. When a sufficient quantity finally arrived in May, masks were distributed regularly to residents and staff who are required to wear them in all common areas, except while eating. Notices were put up to remind everyone to wear their masks. This rule remains in effect

Quarantine and testing

Two single bedrooms have been reserved to isolate any resident who presents symptoms of coronavirus disease. A staff member who presents symptoms must isolate at home. Fortunately, there have been no confirmed cases of COVID-19 infection in the house. Several residents and staff members have presented symptoms and had to go into isolation. However, tests revealed that they were not infected with the coronavirus. New residents, arriving from other facilities, must go into isolation until testing confirms they are not infected. Testing is done at Hotel Dieu Hospital, usually within the first week of admission to the house.

Conclusion

Now that most of the restrictions, put in place to contain the spread of the coronavirus, have been lifted, we are left with the daily management of common sense protective health measures : regular hand washing, two metre distancing, and the wearing of face masks. Plans have been drawn up to renovate the house, notably to create more single bedrooms and offices.

If there is a second wave and strict social control measures are once again put in place, it would be wise to reevaluate the necessity of prohibiting all physical contact with family and friends. In hindsight, this measure was particularly harsh and caused much emotional and psychological distress for the residents. This could have been avoided if the residents had been allowed to create a bubble of a few people they could regularly meet with, outside at a safe distance. As well, given that we now know that many people who are infected with the coronavirus do not present symptoms, until a vaccine is developed, it is imperative that more people have access to testing on a regular basis.

News of Fernand Bessette

Communitas long-time friend and volunteer Open Door driver Fernand Bessette is in declining health at the Montreal Neurological Institute from which he should be released shortly. Fernand, a Holy Cross Brother and nephew of Saint Brother Andre, was a listening and compassionate ear to many men serving time in recent years. Before beginning his prison ministry, Fernand worked in India with his order for numerous years.

Please keep this amazing man in your thoughts and prayers.

The Case for Reviving Canada's Once-Thriving Prison Press

A Q&A with Okanagan College professor Melissa Munn on the role of inmate publications and her role in preserving the historical record. Edited from The Tyee (https://thetyee.ca/About/Us/)

Aly Laube 17 Aug 2020 | TheTyee.ca

Aly Laube is a multimedia journalist and editor with a passion for amplifying underrepresented voices. She is also a queer, mixed race woman living with chronic health conditions. Contact her at via email here or on Twitter at @godalyshutup.

In 1954, Al Parsons wrote about his life behind bars for the prison publication Pen-O-Rama in an essay that could only come from someone living the experience.

"Did you ever go to a circus or a zoo and watch a caged animal pace back and forth, back and forth with quick, short, nervous steps?" he asks. "Did you know that they do that hour after hour? Did you know that, stupid and futile as it is, men do it too? That even you would if you were caged long enough?"

"All the cells in prison have this one thing in common," his article concludes. "The floors are worn, worn by feet, by the hearts and brains and souls of men who pay their debt to society in a coin that is of no earthly use to anyone."

Parsons was one of many prisoners who contributed to Pen-O-Rama, which chronicled life in the now-closed St. Vincent de Paul Penitentiary outside Montreal.

And Pen-O-Rama was just one of many inmate publications across Canada. They were mostly produced on typewriters and roughly copied, but they shared inmates' stories, poems, drawings and essays, reported on prison sports and other events and generally offered a window into a world most of us won't see.

Behind them was a flourishing but largely unseen network of content creators, their work documented only in printed copies easily degraded or lost in time.

Melissa Munn is working to ensure the work survives. Munn is a professor at Okanagan College with a focus on prisons and their effect on people. A student job helping University of Ottawa criminology Prof. Robert Gaucher copy and catalogue his collection of prisoner publications sparked her interest in the form. When Gaucher retired, she took over his collection.

Now she runs the Penal Press website, http://penalpress.com home to digitized versions of these rare publications. Munn is also preparing to release a book with Okanagan College history instructor Chris Clarkson about prison publications and prison reform in Canada in the mid-20th century.

As Black Lives Matter and other movements have sparked a critical look at the police and prisons, we asked Munn about the prison press and its role. The interview has been lightly edited for length and clarity.

The Tyee: Tell me about the kind of subject matter that tends to come up in prisoner publications across Canada.

Melissa Munn: Historically, the penal press emerged out of sports bulletins, giving sports news. When, in the 1950s, it started to expand, prisoners started talking about things like prison reform, about creating parole systems. In the '50s, they are talking about reducing and recycling. They are talking about the need for drug courts. They are talking about the need for safe injection sites.

They're doing all of that in the 1950s. As the press progresses, we see those kinds of themes continue. They continue to talk about prisoner struggles. They continue to talk about rehabilitation. They talk about victims. They talk about drug and alcohol abuse. They talk about politics. They talk about international situations during the war years. They talk about spirituality, Indigenous issues, gender issues, sexuality. From its inception in 1950 right through to the current publications, we see a real diversity of interests and ways of approaching the world, as we see in the mainstream press.

Now, having said that, the penal press is subject to a censorship that does not plague the mainstream press in the same way.

The Tyee: Can you tell me more about that censorship?

Melissa Munn: Penal press materials are always subject to the censorship of the prison administration, so from its inception that has been a controversy. How much censorship is allowed?

When the penal press was first conceived of by prisoners in Kingston, Ont. — for Canada, anyway — it was perceived as a dialogue between prisoners and their captors. So prisoners were trying to be constructive in their criticism of prison programs, of prison administration. They were trying to suggest that there were problems and there were ways to fix those problems. But of course, when you're pointing out problems with how prisons are run, prison administrators don't always like that.

Very early on, and continuing today, there is always pushback from administrators about how much criticism should be allowed. How much of it is constructive? We see this debate raging over what is appropriate, what is reasonable to put in the penal press, what tone should be struck, what is the public entitled to know.

The Tyee: What led to the launch of these publications?

Melissa Munn: The penal press comes out of a moment in Canadian history when [people involved with prison justice] were looking for what they called the new deal in corrections. They wanted a massive amount of reform in the way that the federal prison system was set up in Canada. They wanted a more humane approach. They wanted a more progressive approach. They wanted a more evidence-based approach.

They really saw the penal press as a mechanism for the new deal, and they thought the penal press would give prisoners the opportunity to have a voice, to engage in constructive criticism that would improve the system. They thought it would give prisoners skills in writing, in editing, in production.

They started it at Kingston Penitentiary, which already had some of the equipment that was needed. The idea very quickly spread across the country. From British Columbia right

through to the Maritimes we see prisoners creating, sometimes with very sophisticated equipment and sometimes with old mimeograph machines, and engaging with topics.

One of the great treats of my life was meeting a fellow named André Dion who was one of the first editors of a publication called Pen-O-Rama out of St. Vincent de Paul Penitentiary in Quebec. He talks about having two typewriters in his prison cell, and if you think about how small a prison cell is and him trying to create this publication out of there, it's really remarkable.

The impetus came from prisoners and the deputy commissioner of penitentiaries, but also the spirit of the era, this reform impulse that comes out of the Archambault report and this new deal in corrections. It came out of a really hopeful era when people were still very much engaged with the treatment of prisoners. We didn't have this law and order agenda that has permeated over the past 20 years or more, or this "lock them up and throw away the key" mentality.

The penal press came into existence because people believed that we could do better, that we could use prisons more sparingly, that when we did incarcerate people, we were going to give them opportunities to improve themselves, to get vocational training, educational and life training. This whole idea of rehabilitation was very strong, not just punishment. The penal press starts a very optimistic period in prison history.

The Tyee: What's changed and what's the state of the prison press now?

Melissa Munn: In the beginning of the press, the editors were celebrated by the administration, so much so that the deputy commissioner took one guy out for dinner while he was on parole and they used to bring the editors over to train the new prison guards. They were given a lot of respect.

I would argue that starting in the '80s, the prisoners who were involved with the press were seen as rabble rousers, seen as troublemakers, and that was held against them, as opposed to people who were trying to engage in conversation.

Not all prison wardens or prison administrators feel the same way or enact policies in the same way, and this has been a challenge in the penal press. In our book, one of the things we discovered was that prison wardens had different tolerance levels for critique, and so their thoughts of what was appropriate and what wasn't varied wildly between the institutions.

You can't really put your finger on a moment in time when the rhetoric changed. It's this process that slowly undermines the penal press, that slowly makes it more difficult, that slowly convinces prisoners they don't need it or it's too risky.

The Tyee: The publications on your website challenge many of the stereotypical assumptions about convicts. Are there any pieces or issues that stick out to you as really spectacular?

Melissa Munn: I use the penal press with my students, and one of the things that always strikes them is just what you've mentioned — how articulate, insightful, thoughtful, considerate the writers are, how they have a unique voice, how through their writing [they are] challenging the dominant discourses on prisoners.

Inevitably, the feedback I get on the penal press website or through the Journal of Prisoners on Prisons is that students come to understand who gets criminalized in a different way. They get to hear a different voice. Inevitably, they're impressed that this voice exists and shocked that they didn't know about it. It refutes the dominant images that we are so often fed in the media about who is criminalized and who goes to prison.

I didn't expect to be as surprised by some of the writing as I was, but there's a power in the writing of the penal press that is startling sometimes.

The other thing that startles me is how advanced in their thinking prisoners were. In British Columbia in the 1950s, prisoners were talking about safe injection sites as a harm reduction method, and here we are 60 years later having the same discussions and finally kind of getting on the bandwagon. There's this power in both the content and the style of their writing that comes from their deep experiences in having time to contemplate.

The Tyee: Why do you think we should be paying attention to the penal press now, as intersecting crises like COVID-19 and police brutality influence public perception?

Melissa Munn: I think it is always important to attend to the lived experience and that is what the penal press does. As Black Lives Matter has demonstrated so effectively, the official state discourse and rhetoric does not always represent what is really going on, how things are being experienced. In contemporary society, we have people videoing what is happening, and this has lent credibility to the claims the disadvantaged and disenfranchised have been making for decades.

Clearly, prisoners don't have the advantage of running video cameras. People are not allowed behind the prison walls. The penal press has been one of the only mechanisms to express and document their experiences.

Read the full interview in The Tyee

https://thetyee.ca/Culture/2020/08/17/Reviving-Canada-Prison-Press/

Melissa Munn is a professor at Okanagan College focusing on the effects of prisons. She now runs the Penal Press website. Photo submitted.

An interview with Ted

SW: Where were you born? You don't strike me as a Quebecker.

Ted: Ottawa. I don't strike you as a Quebecker? I have a friend who always talks to me in French.

SW: What were you like as a kid?

Ted: Introverted. I was the youngest of four kids and just did my own thing, I was a daydreamer. And I had a knack for creative writing. If I went back and read the things I wrote, they'd be about tying everything together: animal lover, a lover of nature. When you go into the woods, your brain is already half into a meditative state. Some people get creeped out by nature: bugs, mysterious things, it freaks them out. But you go in and can feel a calm come over you.

SW: Do you get into the woods now?

Ted: Not enough. I have a favourite tree that I frequent, near the Griffintown condos, a little place on the canal where I spend time stretching.

I lived out West, where the tree hugger thing is real. You look way up at these tall trees and you have to grab onto them to see them, giant trees that grow straight up.

I made it to Vancouver Island, on a peninsula with the Pacific Ocean on three sides. But I never even went into the ocean. I chose not to go in, I don't know why. There's a warm breath of breeze that comes off the ocean, like the heater in your car, in February.

I could spend an hour just talking about the trees on Vancouver Island. I think it's called the Garry Oak that has branches that are all bent at 90 degrees, like a movie tree with branches that are all tangly.

The arbutus is almost like fibreglass, the wood is as hard as metal, tough to cut, and then the inside of the tree is empty, it's like the tree lives off its own death.

Herons, crows, ravens, and then all the stuff that's in the water: sea lions, sea otters, I was so stimulated, then when I came to Quebec I felt like I was in a farmer's field.

SW: The way you describe things is so vivid, are you still writing?

Ted: I'm gearing up to it. I have to find the key: there's going to be a direction, bringing everything back to my key elements, but I haven't really narrowed down on it.

SW: What do you like to read?

Ted: What I have on my table right now is Anna Karenina by Leo Tolstoy. It's one of the Tolstoys that I haven't read, it escaped me. Oh, I didn't see that: 900 pages. These are thin pages.

Often I'm on Netflix and I've been heavy on the kung fu stuff. Zack Song – Master Song, what I find so appealing about this guy is that he's so normal, an unassuming dude, and the transformation when he does kung fu is incredible. He doesn't look like the same person. There are 18 fundamentals in shaolin style, skills that you need to do. They might seem simple, but to see a guy at that level stand in the horse stance and you see it's so perfect. I've been working on it for years. For me to stand like that for a minute is hard and yet some of these guys can stand like that for an hour.

SW: So you write, read, do kung fu, anything else?

Ted: I ride my bike all the time. I bought a Cartier edition Devinci and I've been going nuts on it. I go fast all the time, then I come back drenched in sweat. I'm getting fast, putting pressure on people. The other day this guy goes by me and he's on a racier bike, mine's a heavier, city bike, so I start to pick up speed and pass him, go all the way to the St Paul Locks. He thought I had an electric motor or that my water bottle was a compressed air canister, he couldn't believe it.

SW: I know you're working. What's your job now?

Ted: Unloading containers, like from China. They don't palletise stuff, they just jam in as much as possible. They need guys to take it out and put it on pallets, to take it where it needs to go.

We're paid by the container so it depends on how much you can lift. If it's light boxes, it's a cherry deal. Sometimes I make less than minimum wage, sometimes fifty dollars an hour. But it's an exertion, with lots of dust, and it's hard to breathe in those containers, parked in the sun during the heat wave.

So with my bike and my work, I'm always sweating. With two or three changes of clothes a day, I'm doing truckloads of laundry.

SW: What are your plans for the future?

Ted: I need to get a better job. This is convenient for me now but I need to make more money and I think there's a night job for me, putting out those big cones, those pylons. That sounds like a perfect job for me.

SW: If you had to describe yourself in a word, what would it be?

Ted: Tenacious. That sounds good. But sometimes I'm like two different people; I'm a Gemini.

SW: Geminis are great. What was the favourite time of your life?

Ted: I'm working on it. I don't subscribe to the idea that the past was the best. And then you drag that shit around with you. I don't feel that I've peaked. We need new tools to be better every day, to be more objective. Try to have a new experience every day, to change perspective. Like if I get caught in the rain, I could start cursing. But instead I can just experience it and want to experience it. Life works when you can switch your perspective like that. Hey, did you know that today is International Dog Day?

Montreal Community Chaplaincy (ACM) and its Partners

Communitas members often hear the acronym ACM thrown around at Open Door meetings, our Annual General Meetings as during our Consultations. Other than being known as an umbrella organization through which Communitas receives some funding from Correctional Services Canada (CSC), the work ACM and its partner organizations do often goes unnoticed.

ACM stands for "Aumônerie Communautaire de Montréal ", or Montreal Community Chaplaincy in English. It was founded in October 1995 as an outreach for people with criminal records coming out of prison and re-integrating back into society. It is a non-profit organization with some funding coming from CSC for its operations to help returning citizens with the challenges and demands of society. It describes itself as "a partnership of organizations working for social reintegration".

ACM is also responsible for the **Maison ACM, Residence René-Gagnon, and Centre de Jour René Gagnon**, which are described further below.

Communitas is one of the ACM partner organizations. It must be noted not all partners receive funding through ACM. Also, the COVID outbreak has restricted many of the partner organizations' ability to offer services. The other ACM partners include:

Corporation Jean-Paul Morin: Initiatives include restorative justice workshops; monthly sharing groups for the incarcerated; accompaniment and support for the newly released; various workshops on a variety of topics and for families; promoting public awareness. *https://www.facebook.com/CORPORATION.JEAN.PAUL.MORIN/*

Entrée libre: Similar to Communitas' Open Door, but serving the francophone community, it provides weekly meetings for some incarcerated persons under escort, those in transition houses and under mandate and some volunteers for discussion of various issues relating to social re-integration, daily challenges and sharing with one another. https://www.entreelibremtl.com/

Présence Compassion : Offers one-on-one and group meetings for vulnerable people in the city core with problems of homelessness, and for newly released individuals. There is also an outreach to those incarcerated under escort. Another part of the outreach includes Thursday lunches for the homeless at Parc Émelie-Gamelin. www.facebook.com/Présence-Compassion-447205391958322/

Relais Famille: Offers help and support for families of those incarcerated through individual meetings and group activities including shared meals. https://relaisfamille.org/

Centre de services de justice réparatrice : Accompanying groups and individuals as well as community members who wish to engage in a restorative justice process based on encounter and dialogue; Supporting people who have suffered abuse and individual or collective violence in their need to express themselves, to be recognized and repaired, as well as the perpetrators in their efforts to make them accountable and make reparations. https://csjr.org/

Cercles de responsabilité du Québec: Similar to Communitas' Circles of Support and Accountability program (CoSA) and working in the francophone community, aims to increase community safety and reduce the number of victims of crime by supporting, assisting and empowering individuals who have committed sexual offences and returned to the community to lead responsible and productive lives. https://www.cercledesoutien.org/

Centre d'hébergement (Résidence René Gagnon) et Maison ACM: The mission of these residences is to give a place to live to released persons who do not yet have the aptitudes or the financial means to settle alone in an apartment. These are people still under federal mandate or under long-term supervision who benefit from the accommodation services either as a stopgap or long-term solution. https://www.aumcommtl.com/résidence-rené-gagnon

Centre de Jour René Gagnon : Working in concert with the stakeholders of the Community Mental Health Initiative (CMI), it offers inmates and ex-inmates (institutions, halfway houses) approaching or arriving at the release stage, a service of presence, accompaniment and orientation with a view to their social reintegration through a variety of workshops and social activities. https://www.aumcommtl.com/centre-de-jour-rené-gagnon

Bible Study -- ANOTHER VICTIM OF THE PANDEMIC

For the group of volunteers who, along with numerous inmates, meet twice monthly in the prison chapel, to explore the message that we can draw from the bible, there is a deep consciousness of a missing element, since March, 2020. I describe, below, the usual procedures, in normal times.

The circle that we form on those occasions, is the closest connection that we outsiders have with those inside. We share equally, life events, spiritual or from daily life, along with joys, disappointments, etc.

The group listens with attention to some familiar participants, whose story continues, but also to newly-arrived individuals who may be anxious to unload their story. After this period of sharing, we read a passage from scripture and all present are free to express their reaction to the message it may bring.

Quite suddenly, however, all this to and fro was cut off by the pandemic. Since March, there has been no contact between the inmates and volunteers, difficult both for us and for inmates, even separated by range, so they don't meet other group members, and will each have reacted individually.

Did they feel that volunteers have abandonned them or did they guess that we were anxious for their welfare, loneliness and disappointment at losing visits, outings, etc.?

After four months of waiting for change, the suggestion was made that the volunteers should pick up the tradition of gathering, but using Zoom and, of course, without the inmates. This has happened, and there should be no shortage of life-concerns to share, after such a long forced absence.

For me, however, the irony of being there without the presence of those for whom the group was founded, only emphasizes the very reason for the existence of this Bible Study group. We can only hope that a solution may be near!

By Margaret

Please support Communitas!

Communitas is a non-profit, volunteer-driven organization which welcomes (ex-)offenders back to the community by supporting them in their social, spiritual, emotional and practical needs.

We rely heavily on support from individual donors like you. The stigma associated with work in this area brings unique financial and other challenges with it and so your contributions are essential in sustaining our important work.

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Circles of Support and Accountability (COSA) at Communitas: Is it for you?

Communitas is proud to have introduced Circles of Support and Accountability (COSA) to Quebec in 2000 and have provided more than 50 circles since. COSA matches individuals with a history of sexual offending with a group of everyday community members who are committed to helping you navigate the challenges of life in the community and achieve a successful, crime-free life.

If you are interested in hearing more about the possibility of having your own circle, contact:

Monika Barbe 514-244-6147

coordinator@communitasmontreal.org

We would love to hear from you!

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The Sou'Wester name is a reference to Montreal's Southwest, where Communitas began its work in 1999 and is still based today.

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