

# LA CROSSE COUNTY JAIL MINISTRY



Volume 12 • Number 1 • Spring 2018

## A Deeply Felt Thank You to Retiring Chaplain Tom

Our Jail Ministry Chaplain for 16 years, Deacon Tom Skemp, retired in February, 2018. His dedication and his heart for this work are deeply appreciated.

Jail Ministry began in 1983 and from the start it has been graced with the support of the elected Sheriffs and County of La Crosse, and characterized by its interfaith nature, a community-based local board of directors, and reliance on financial donations from individuals, churches, civic groups, the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration, and occasional foundations including the La Crosse Community Foundation.

But those are only bare facts. What matters is the heart. Deacon Tom Skemp walks the walk of a spiritual man who, every day, makes real his deep religious values, and the mission of the La Crosse Jail Ministry to create an environment for inmates that awakens their spiritual lives, thereby promoting behavioral change, social reintegration and personal well-being.

I thought a little of Chaplain Tom's formal background might be interesting.

His pathway to this post included obtaining a B.A. in Ministry from Viterbo University and becoming board certified as a correctional chaplain and credentialed as a police chaplain. Since retiring from the U.S. Navy's Submarine Service in 1994, he worked in parish ministry, with Citizen Advocacy of La Crosse, and as a core member at the Catholic La Crosse House, "A Place of

Grace." He served on the Matthew 25 and Ruth House steering committees and as head of the Restorative Justice Task Force of La Crosse's interfaith coalition of religious congregations, now CCFA (Compassionate Community Faith Alliance).

Notably, he initiated the Circles of Support mentoring program for ex-offenders which is very active today though CCFA, joining inmates with community members as they leave jail with the hope that new "non-criminal" personal associations will help them move in a better, renewed direction.

Tom's spiritual walk is what reveals the soul at the heart of this man. If you know him the words "serious" and "dedicated" inevitably arise. You'll hear "intense." His arms and hands, tattooed many years ago, speak of his more youthful, more rebellious days before he rediscovered, renewed, and recommitted himself to the Catholic precepts he was taught as a child growing up here in La Crosse.

Tom is always ready to engage others in intimate conversation and prayerful companionship. It is always mentioned that Tom is one person you can trust to share your most intimate pains and joys, struggles and triumphs. He plants new seeds of life, to not only help inmates to understand and believe in their Creator, but to work towards helping them to become more mature and responsible adults, to show them the very good reasons for being on this earth. He helps

them to let go of their hate, to turn the sorrows that many have felt through their lives into paths toward better understanding as they are accepted for who they are with their serious mistakes not judged by Jail Ministry, and worthy of love no matter who they are.

This intensity and dedication no doubt take a toll on a person. In his retirement letter, Chaplain Tom mentioned the sadness of knowing that drugs and other chaos continue to take the lives of people in our community. He said he personally knew almost all of the people who died of drug overdoses in the previous year, including three in one week. That the sadness of the job was starting to rub off on him and he knew the time to retire had arrived.

As outgoing President, I thank my friend Chaplain Tom Skemp for his faithful service and also for encouraging me to work with Jail Ministry. It has been an opportunity to put my faith into action, and to develop deeper relationships built on our shared values as members of different faith communities.

Jail Ministry deeply thanks Chaplain Tom, as he has been foremost among many in every day making ours a better, safer community through his spiritual work and simply human work with inmates in La Crosse County.

Watching him leave is not easy and we hope to keep Tom involved in

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# A Last Chaplain's Corner from Chaplain Tom Skemp



When I first met this young lady, she was 17 and already a meth addict. In Wisconsin, 17 year olds are treated as adults, and though there have been some changes in how we treat 17 year olds in the adult jail, this is where they come when they are arrested. I knew her family because most of them had also been in jail. Over the years that I got to know her, her addiction especially showed in her teeth. Meth does terrible things to a heavy user's teeth.

This young lady didn't tell me her whole story at once, but it kind of developed over the years. I know she had been 14 when she was locked up in a hotel room to service clients for a pimp. She escaped by purposely overdosing in the hotel bathroom and he left her for dead. Over her life she has suffered all kinds of abuse. She is now 29 and the last time I saw her shocked me. I was walking from the jail to a meeting, and as I was walking a car pulled alongside of me and I heard, "Chap, Chap, you've just got to see the baby!"

She ran around the car and grabbed me in a big hug, then opened the back door to show off her child, not quite one year old. But what I saw was a big kick for me. The child was in a car seat. Something you and I might think is otherwise ordinary, but not for this population. She was smiling and told me that she had a job and was going to school and that her grandmother was helping her look after the baby. She had a dentist appointment tomorrow to start getting her teeth taken care of so she could have dentures. Ordinary stuff, but so exceptional for the men and women I work with in the jail.

The coroner says there were 29 overdose deaths in La Crosse County last year. I knew 23 of them. And this year we've already had six overdose deaths and at least one suicide that I know of. I love the men and women I've worked with for the last 16 plus years and I will miss them in retirement. But I still look forward to seeing them on the street, and can hope and pray that some are better like this young woman.

Thank you for all of your support to the jail ministry and I hope you find it in your hearts to continue to support this desperately needed work.

# Hellos and Goodbyes

Saying hello and goodbye happens frequently in a volunteer organization. New people join eager to contribute, while others end their involvement for various reasons. The La Crosse Jail Ministry is no exception.

In January three long-time Board members completed two consecutive three-year terms and, as our Bylaws require, said farewell: Vicky Gunderson, Sr. Mary Ann Gschwind and Maureen Freedland. These women care deeply for jail ministry and have contributed greatly. Sr. Mary Ann served in various capacities for 20 years or more. Maureen served two years as Board President and fully embraced every necessary task. Fortunately, she will continue to work with us as Past President in an informal capacity.

In May we will say goodbye to another long-time board member. Paul Haugen will retire and relocate with his wife to the Twin Cities area. His insights as a hospital chaplain have been invaluable.

Perhaps the most painful goodbye is to our chaplain. In February Deacon Tom Skemp retired after 16 years as La Crosse County Jail Chaplain. I have appreciated Tom's heartfelt passion for serving the jail population. I will miss him as he moves on to a well-deserved rest and time with grandchildren.

We are currently searching to replace him and hope to say hello to another chaplain soon. In February we said hello to new Board member Sr. Karen Flottmeier who comes with prison ministry experience in Oklahoma.

Finally, I should say hello. I am a relative newcomer, beginning my third year on the Jail Ministry Board. Previously, I volunteered for several years with the Circles of Support program. Knowing and supporting two remarkable young adults as they turned their lives around led to my joining the Board. I look forward to more success stories in the days ahead.

*Don Campbell  
Board President*

## La Crosse County Jail Ministry Board Members

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Treasurer Scott Curtis

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Marilyn Arndt

Sylvia Jimison

Sr. Karen Flottmeier

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Sandra Hoeser

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Thompson

# Friend of Jail Ministry Lawrence Clark Passes

Lawrence Clark passed away on Wednesday, March 14, 2018. Lawrence was a resident of La Crosse and was a longtime volunteer for the La Crosse Jail Ministry.

In his honor we are adding a letter he wrote in 2013 when he was serving as president of the jail ministry board.

For 30 years I served La Crosse as a law enforcement officer. One of my happy moments was when a person I had arrested was sent away for a period of time and my thoughts were, "Why could they be not sent away longer?" I felt that if they were out of our community it would be a better place. I had totally forgotten or ignored the message of my faith background in St. Matthew 25:34-40:

- 34 Then the King will say to those on his right, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.
- 35 For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in,
- 36 I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me."
- 37 Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink?"
- 38 When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you?
- 39 When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?"
- 40 The King will reply, "I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me."

Shortly after retiring I was called into the public ministry as a Staff Minister at my church. My senior pastor urged me in becoming involved in conducting services at the County Jail. I performed these duties, not with the enthusiasm they deserved.

One evening the above passage was the focus of my sermon. God used the message to get through to me and from that point my attitude changed. I now look forward to serving the inmates and have seen the benefits of this ministry.

The Jail Ministry in La Crosse County Jail is an excellent program, but like all programs it needs the support of community members to continue and be successful. This letter is a plea to you to help us support this ministry to those in Jail. Please use the enclosed envelope to help. Thank you.

*Lawrence E. Clark*

*Continued from page 1*

the Jail Ministry as we transition to another leader after 16 years. We have initiated a search for a new full-time chaplain, and ask for your continued support as we seek to serve.

We wish Tom all the best, as he embarks on his next journey and we hope that he enjoys every minute with his family, his motorcycle, his two children and two grandchildren, and his dear

wife of 42 years, Janine, in this special time for relaxing and rejuvenating.

This will include Land Speed Racing: going one at a time down a straight course on the Bonneville Salt Flats in Utah. He held the US record for his class for two years on his 1971 Norton motorcycle and he expects to get the record back next year.

*Maureen Freedland  
Outgoing President*



## What does a jail chaplain do?

- Serves as a liaison to families when requested
- Coordinates retrieval of personal items for incarcerated folks by working with volunteers, friends or families of the incarcerated person. Track belongings when items left at jail.
- Conducts library visits
- Schedules haircuts
- Gives notifications to inmates when a family member has a serious life event
- Advocates for approval and arranges transportation for family funerals
- Provides assistance with complicated transportation issues upon release
- Refers inmates to community resources
- Provides opportunities for one-on-one conversations with inmates
- Provides liturgical duties for their own denomination
- Provides pastoral counseling
- Implements religious program policy/religious program managers
- Provides opportunities for inmates to practice faith of choice
- Coordinates spiritual services with other programming with the jail program coordinator
- Recruits volunteers
- Trains and coordinate volunteers
- Serves as the liaison and gives presentations for outside religious activities, persons or groups
- Supports jail ministry with outreach

**LA CROSSE COUNTY JAIL MINISTRY**

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