



# Celebration Fellowship Prison Congregation

## News Briefs from Ionia Bellamy Creek (IBC) November, 2008

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### **MDOC Authorizes Ionia Prison Congregation**

In a special meeting in Lansing on October 23, 2008, the Michigan Department of Corrections Chaplains Advisory Council, composed of a cross-section of ministers and other faith leaders, recommended the development of the first prison congregation in the State of Michigan. During the three-hour meeting, members discussed the various goals and the model for the prison congregation.

Adria Libolt and Ralph Monsma, from River Terrace Christian Reformed Church in East Lansing, Jim Tuinstra, retired president of Hope Network Inc., Rev. Don DeYoung, Reformed Church in America pastor, Rev. Jim Vander Schaaf, executive director of Criminal Justice Chaplaincy, Rev. Ben Becksvort, Regional Leader of the Great Lakes Christian Reformed Church of North America Home Mission Board, and Rev Richard Rienstra, pastor/developer of the prison congregation, addressed the ministry goals of the prison congregation model. The prison congregation will be an official congregation in the Christian Reformed Church of North America although it will be ecumenical in its outreach and services. It will be supported by the gifts of the Christian Reformed Church of North America in partnership with the Reformed Church in America. Michigan Department of Corrections Deputy Director Dennis Schrantz addressed the benefits of a prison congregation for prisoners in improved behavior while in prison and in the department's expanded efforts to provide "pro-social activities" for prisoners upon release so that everyone might have safer communities.

As a result of the council's action and other meetings over many months with state officials regarding procedural matters, the Michigan Department of Corrections authorized the first services to be held at the Ionia Bellamy Creek Correctional Facility on November 3, 2008. Besides the establishment of a congregation in a prison that will concern itself with wholistic care for its own members, it will be in fellowship weekly with at least 10 volunteers or partners from outside churches who will engage in Bible study and worship activities with the prisoners. The prison congregation will eventually match church members in mentoring relationships with inmates before they leave prison. It is a

hope of the Michigan Prisoner Reentry Initiative program that the mentoring relationships will continue to provide support when prisoners return to their families, churches, and communities.

### **Volunteers Become Partners in the New Prison Congregation**

Thirty-five church volunteers have become the first volunteer "pilot pool" of Prison Congregation Partners to participate in Bible/book ("The Purpose Driven Life) study and worship activities with prisoners at the Ionia Bellamy Creek Correctional Facility in Michigan. The initial pool of church volunteers includes 16 pastors and another 20 volunteers from the first of 12 church clusters. The first 35 volunteers will serve as a "pilot" church clusters to work with inmates during the first 90 days of the prison congregation's formation.

In addition to the church volunteers there are six "prisoner volunteers" who are serving as a worship planning team with the pastor/developer of the prison congregation. The number of prisoner congregation volunteers will expand in activities and services in the prison as the prison congregation develops. Each of the partner church volunteers have attended mandatory specialized training conducted by the Department of Corrections which has cooperated in making arrangements for up to 10-15 volunteers to enter Ionia Bellamy Creek prison at one time.

### **Ionia Bellamy Creek Prison Congregation Holds First Services**

On November 3, 2009 after many months of dreaming, planning, and meetings, the Ionia Bellamy Creek "Celebration Fellowship" Prison Congregation held its first services of Bible/book study and worship services. Thirty prisoners attended the services that were held in a classroom in an educational building at the prison. In the first hour twelve church member volunteers participated in group discussions with prisoners about "The Purpose Driven Life" by Rick Warren. In the second hour a worship team of prisoners led various parts of the service including confession, intercessory prayers, praise songs, reading of

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*coming, listening, communing, and serving with those in prison, as fellow prisoners made free in Christ*

Scripture, and conducting a “children’s’ moment” where prayers were offered not only for prisoners’ children, but for the children and grandchildren of the “outside” church members. Pastor/developer Rev. Richard Rienstra commented on how Paul and Silas in the book of Acts 16 assured the jailer after an earthquake in the prison that “we are all here” to affirm the need for the church to care in prison not only for the prisoners, but even for those who care for them.

Special guests, besides the prison congregants, included Mary Mortenson, executive director of Prison Congregations of America from South Dakota, Rev Mike Martin, Special Activities Coordinator (head of chaplains for Michigan prisons), Dr. David Schuringa, President of Crossroad Bible Institute, and Rev. Carol Muller of the Church of the Servant Christian Reformed Church. Chaplain Mike Martin commended the Christian Reformed Church in cooperation with the Reformed Church in America for its patience over the many months that it took for the “pilot congregation” to be established. Chaplain Martin encouraged the prisoners and volunteers present to extend the model and mission of the prison congregation to others. He challenged everyone that “the torch is now passed to you.”

Six prisoners serve as a worship planning team with Pastor/Developer Rev. Richard Rienstra. In its many planning meetings the team is guided by a pamphlet - "So You've Been Asked to Plan a Worship Service" - written by Dr. John Witvliet, director of the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship (CICW). The prisoners have decided to name the prison congregation "Celebration Fellowship," a name suggested by a Michigan Department of Corrections Correctional Officer.

## **Ionia Bellamy Creek Prison Congregation Partner Volunteers Expand Plans**

We're now ready to explore various degrees of partnership with more churches. We will be adding up to 12 churches or clusters of church members, each composed of 12 volunteers, as interest, experience in prison ministry, and capacity allow. There will be a minimum of four Bible/book study groups and worship services for each church group or church-cluster group. We hope to involve 12 volunteers from each church cluster for a total of 144 volunteers.

At present the church members who have volunteered as a “pilot pool” are broken down into these categories:

- 16 of the 35 church member partners are ordained ministers
- 10 of the 35 of the lay volunteers have extensive experience in visiting prisoners
- 34 of the 35 have advanced educational degrees

- 50% of the volunteers are from 2 churches-Church of the Servant and LaGrave CRC
- There are 7 married couples among the volunteers
- 27 of the 35 attended workshops of “Calling Offenders to Network Together for Adoration, Confession, and Thanksgiving” (Calvin Institute of Christian Worship grant program for worshipping with prisoners)

Some churches which have been recommended for involvement at this time are:

River Terrace CRC East Lansing, Alger Park CRC, Calvary CRC Lowell, Calvin CRC, Neland Ave. CRC, Sherman Street CRC, First CRC, East Paris CRC, Plymouth Heights CRC, Madison Square CRC, River Tree RCA, Oakdale Park CRC, Brookside CRC, Unity RCA, Central RCA, Coit Community CRC, Ada CRC, Grace CRC, Sunshine CRC, New Hope Baptist, Renaissance COGIC, St Luke AME Zion, Bethel Penecostal Church, New Community

These churches and others will be arranged into “church clusters” as we proceed forward with the plan to provide fellowships of hospitality.

## **Contact and Getting Involved**

Please contact Rev. Richard Rienstra for further information about ways your church can become more involved and to learn more about how “to remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners.” Activities are conducted with group Bible/book studies and worship is held every Monday from 6:30 PM through 8:30 PM. All church volunteers must receive an orientation training of one hour by the Department of Corrections prior to their participation. Support for your work will be provided by the “pilot pool” of volunteers, training as desired, and the prayers of prison congregation members and church partner members. Be assured that you enter the prison in a group and are in fellowship and safety with the members of prison congregation as we all meet and worship together in an expanded classroom to the glory of our Lord.

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For more information about these monthly “News Briefs” contact **Rev. Richard Rienstra**, official church planter: (email [richrienstra@hotmail.com](mailto:richrienstra@hotmail.com) — call 616-464-6065). **OR** for previous issues, or related ministries, visit [www.coscrc.org](http://www.coscrc.org) (**Church of the Servant CRC**, of Grand Rapids, MI, is Rich’s calling church, and is supporting him as he organizes this multi-denominational effort).

