

Charis #8: MCF Faribault: Dan Hartinger, Lay Director

My wife Cyndy and I were just beginning to study the book of Isaiah when I was asked to be the lay director of Charis #8 at Faribault. It wasn't too long before we came to chapter nine and verse two jumped out at me.

"The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned."

I knew that this was to be the scripture theme for the weekend. What more apt description could there be for those locked up in prison: living in the land of the shadow of death. I prayed then that God would use us to shine His light on those residing at Faribault.

Over the next six months in preparing for the weekend, I felt a strong leading to pray for more men to attend the weekend. It seemed like we were always at least 5-6 men short of the 42 man limit, and I was drawn to Matthew 9: 37, 38.

Then he (Jesus) said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field."

I said Lord you've given us the harvesters, bring in the harvest! Give us a full harvest of 42 men to attend Charis #8! Two weeks before the weekend, Chaplain Tony selected 49 men to attend, and we waited to see how many would drop out over the course of time. As of Thursday night, the night before the weekend would start, only one man dropped out. We watched excitedly on Friday morning as the men came in and were escorted to their tables. As the last few men filed into the community room, we realized that God had exceedingly, abundantly answered our prayers for a full harvest. All 48 men showed up! We scrambled to set up an 8th table, even though we didn't have table leaders for it. The leadership team quickly decided to have our four spiritual directors "tag team" the extra table and, when necessary, to use our two musicians. It was incredible!

Our next concern was for the Agape Dinner. The room we had available could barely accommodate 42 men with the tables set up in a cross configuration. How could we make this work for 48 men? By the way, our Palanca leader was sick and couldn't make it to the weekend; how's that for stressing out! But our Palanca team came through brilliantly and set up two more tables at the foot of the cross, making them the "foundation" the cross was standing upon. The room and table were beautiful! I started tearing up as I welcomed the men to their Agape Dinner and told them that this was just a foretaste of the wedding feast of the lamb that was still to come when we all reached Heaven. Many of the men were openly weeping. My heart was full.

What more can I say? God showed up at Charis #8 to shine His light on those living in spiritual darkness. Now my prayer is that each man that attended would yield a harvest 100 fold to reach all the other inmates at Faribault, as well as their families back home. May it be so!

Soli Deo Gloria!

Charis #1: FCI Waseca: Maret Ryan, Lay Director

When you wake up with a smile on your face and it's the day after a Charis weekend, you know you have experienced something wonderful. And when you add a contented heart to the mix, it can only mean one thing: you have experienced God's grace to its fullest.

That grace was manifested so beautifully at Charis #1 at FCI Waseca. So many images play ceaselessly through my mind:

- The women who stated with such sincerity how honored they felt to be chosen from all the women who applied, and who badgered the chaplain's office, begging to be chosen.
- The maturity of the faith demonstrated by all who attended. Faithful in attendance some came early, skipping breakfast, to be able to join the team prayer circle at the start of each day.
- The lighthearted bantering between the women and the team, so playful at times, but quietly and quickly returning their focus to the message of the weekend.
- The deep hungering for God and how quickly they all seemed to "get it."
- The sense of hope expressed: "I learned I am worthy."
- Men in the Community Room serving as table leaders and the wonder and awe expressed by the weekenders at the 'integrity' of these men, something they had never experienced before.
- A well-seasoned team whose members were seen as being "real" and "with no masks."
- The leanest inventory I have ever seen go into a prison in my 20+ years of serving—and how God just doesn't seem to need a lot of stuff for His light to shine so gloriously.
- Charis is back in FCI Waseca!

This weekend was a full 3 1/2 days and on the first night, in a leap of faith, we decided to have the first talk: Purpose. This talk was given by an ex-offender and we are quite certain that it gave us instant credibility with the weekenders. It truly set the stage for the rest of the weekend. For whatever reason, this talk grabbed their attention and we never lost it from that point on.

At the closing, one of the younger weekenders first prefaced her testimony by saying, "Here in prison you have to look out for yourself, because no one else will look out for you; you have to be #1." She then talked about her roommate. "I didn't dislike her, I didn't like her, I was just indifferent to her." On Monday morning our weekender woke up and started her morning devotionals. She could see that her roommate was shivering and not feeling well. As she continued her morning prayers she heard this still voice saying, "Give her your blanket. You're getting up anyway." And she remembered thinking, "No way, I am not giving her my blanket! It's mine!" She continued with her prayers until time to take a shower, when this same still voice said again, "Give her your blanket." And then it hit her. What we had been talking about all weekend—being the hands and feet of Christ. "All right Lord, I'll do it!" As she got down from her upper bunk she put her blanket over her shivering roommate. When she returned from her morning shower her roommate gave her a big hug and said, "That is the nicest thing anyone has done for me since I came to prison." Our weekender then went on to say to us, "I just wanted you to know, I am getting it!"

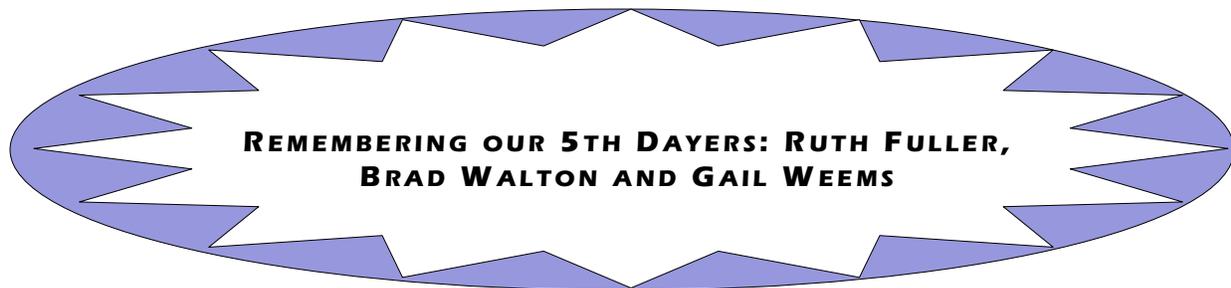
Parting words from the chaplain were that this was the "epitome of weekends; the best effort he has seen from the Charis community." We have a commitment for another weekend in October 2012. Praise God that we are blessed to let our light shine before others!

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A Call for Personalized Palanca by Cliff Johnson

I still remember a palanca note read by the clergy giving the fourth talk (called "Actual Grace" back then) at my Cursillo weekend more than 30 years ago. It was a personalized note from someone in Nome, Alaska and hearing that note read brought a choke to my breathing and tears to my eyes. Someone in Alaska was praying for me!

Because the Holy Spirit is so powerfully present in palanca notes, Charis board members are stepping up efforts to get personalized palanca into the hands of the clergy giving the You Are Not Alone #4 talk on Charis weekends in Minnesota prisons.

At most or all Charis weekends, these personalized notes are posted on walls for offenders to read. At Charis #8 at MCF-Faribault in October, the notes got a lot of attention.

It's a great project for your renewal group -- create an 8-1/2x11 message and have each member sign just your first names. Personalize with weekend number, as in "To the men of Charis #8 at MCF-Faribault," or "To the women of Charis #1 at FCI-Waseca." Then mail your note, well ahead of the weekend, to Charis of Minnesota, P.O. Box 102, Hopkins, MN 55343. You can find weekend numbers and dates on the Charis website: www.charismn.com