

# THE OLIVE BRANCH



## LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT: Cliff Johnson

### A MINISTRY FOCUSED ON RE-ENTRY

Have you ever lamented prison rules that prohibit you from contacting inmates on the inside — or helping them once they're released?

I get frustrated every time I talk to a soon-to-be-released inmate who admits he will need help once he's released, and I have to tell him I'm sorry but I can't get involved.

Clearly, re-entry help is one of the weak links in our prison rehabilitation system.

Our board recently invited two re-entry experts to speak to us about their programs. Dave Stricker, executive director of Construction Careers Training Program (CCTP) explained how this pioneering program hires, trains and mentors ex-offenders for good-paying jobs in the construction industry.

George Gipson, an ex-offender who served time at Sandstone prison, serves now as executive director of R3 Collaborative. R3 is a non-profit collaborative of organizations working together to help people on the road to recovery, re-entry and renewal. R3 works primarily with men and women facing reentry following incarceration.

Gipson said R3 Collaborative, and a sister organization, Next Step Staffing, are aiming at becoming the first-call clearinghouse for ex-offenders upon their release. It would certainly be a step forward to have a single organization that ex-offenders can call to seek assistance with employment, housing, spiritual growth, life skills, and finding a mentor.

Gipson said R3 strives to break the cycle of incarceration and addiction among prison inmates. He likened many inmates to "greenhouse plants," in that many have had a spiritual awakening in prison but have no roots established on the outside at the time they are released from prison. "Put greenhouse plants outside on asphalt and they can't survive," he said. R3 seeks to help ex-offenders grow the roots they need to survive on the outside, he explained.

At our board meeting, we were heartened to hear Gipson's testimony. He attended a Charis weekend at Sandstone in the early 1990s and then served on many inside teams on later weekends. Charis has had a major impact on his life, Gipson said.

"Charis is so near and dear to my heart on so many levels," he said. "I look forward to partnering with Charis in the future. The heart of your board to not only bring the life-changing gospel but to see it bear fruit after they have made that transition is what our community needs."

Asked about R3's greatest needs, Gipson said prayer is at the top of the list, followed by volunteers and financial support.

To learn more about R3 check out its website [www.r3collaborative.org](http://www.r3collaborative.org).

To watch a video on R3 check out [www.youtube.com/watch?v=IdYz56eB8c4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IdYz56eB8c4)

## What I Learned From Saying Yes

### Thoughts From a Reluctant Leader: Karen Secor

After I was asked to lead weekend #2 in Waseca last fall, I struggled with the decision. Even though I had been an assistant the year before and understood that it was training for the lay director position, I felt the heavy responsibility of all that's required in putting a team together—team meetings, team selection, talks etc. So on the day the decision was needed, my morning devotion led me to II Corinthians 12:9 where the Lord said to Paul, “My grace is sufficient for you for my power is made perfect in weakness.” I felt the Lord speaking those words directly to me that day. I said ‘yes’ and it was so obvious that it was Christ putting together the team, taking care of all the details and roadblocks and running the weekend—not me at all.

The experience of leading the weekend was pretty exhilarating. It's so great to realize that the Holy Spirit is in charge along with valuable assistants, musicians, spiritual directors and each team member who demonstrate their faith to the insiders. Not to mention the Palanca team and their much needed prayer and support. I was definitely just the vessel—the Holy Spirit did the work.

I love being involved with the community of believers from many different Christian faiths coming together to bring some hope and new life to the insiders. And I keep coming back because of the changes we see in the inmates because of the Charis method.

I believe I took away from this experience that when the Lord asks me to do something, I can be obedient to say 'yes' and know that He will guide me, lead me, and accomplish the task that I could never do on my own.

*Yes Yes Yes Yes*

### Thoughts from a Rookie: Wanita Hauger

If someone had told me a year ago that I would be part of a Charis prison ministry team, I'd have told them that prison ministry was not for me. So I was quite surprised to find myself saying yes to being on the Waseca team last October.

Last summer I was in a women's Bible study, and we were reading “Experiencing God” by Henry Blackaby. If you have done that study or read the book, you know that Blackaby says God is at work all around us, and He invites us to join in His work.

Karen Secor, the leader for the Waseca team was also in the study, and during prayer time, she requested prayer because she still needed a team member. As soon as she said it, I had the thought, “That person is you,” followed immediately by the thought, “No, it's not.” And I said nothing to Karen.

About two weeks later I asked Karen if she had all her team members; and much to my surprise, she still needed a team member. I finally admitted that God had told me I was to volunteer and I was willing to be on the team. We agreed to pray about it, and about a week later, Karen called to say I was on the team.

I was excited, nervous, scared, and still not quite at peace. But when I went to FCI Waseca for training and walked through the doors, God gave me peace, and I knew for certain I was to be on the team.

When the weekend came, I was nervous, but it didn't take long for that to pass, and the weekend was such a blessing. It's been wonderful seeing how God is working in the lives of the women at Waseca FCI, and I'm so glad I finally said yes when God invited me to join in His work there.

*Yes Yes Yes***What I Learned From Saying Yes****Thoughts from a New Board Member: Paul Tesarek**

I've been privileged to serve on the Charis Board of Directors for the past nine months. If I were to look back a few years I could not have imagined that I would have had an interest in serving on this board or for that matter volunteering in the Charis ministry at all. But as we all know, God does work in mysterious ways.

My wife Sue and I have been involved in the Cursillo ministry for almost 15 years; during that time I served on many teams, went to many closings. I think back now and remember how I noticed those folks that volunteered in Charis when they would be asked to stand up near the end of the closing as other ministries were acknowledged. I would always think to myself "that would be interesting" but "that's not for me." However, almost seven years ago, completely due to God's perfect timing, Sue and I were asked to serve on a Charis team in Rochester. We were both very uneasy; we felt like we had nothing to offer the ministry in general, or inmates in particular. But God provided a great team of volunteers on that first team. We had excellent caring leadership and seasoned team members that welcomed us with open arms, and when we finally actually went into FMC, we were welcomed by the inmates as well. God took away our cares and worries, and that Charis weekend was filled with many blessings as they all are. Of course we have been back many times since that first weekend.

In the same way a couple years ago God started nudging me to serve in a different way, on the Charis Board. It seemed like it might be time to give something back to this ministry. I started talking to a few people, prayed over it, fretted over it – thinking again that I had nothing to bring to the table. Finally, it was time to either submit my name or move on, and I submitted my name. When I came on the board that first month, a bit nervous, wondering exactly where I could fit it, I found a group of people who loved the Charis ministry and cared for each other, and in that way over the past few months I've grown to feel a part of this special group of people.

As I said at the start, God does work in mysterious ways. Sometimes it just takes some time and an extra step or two to get on His path, where we will always find more blessings received than we give.

**Thoughts from a Seasoned Veteran: Janet Leck**

My first experience as a lay director was back in the horse and buggy days. Well, it was actually 1980. I was the second lay director God selected to lead this new event called Cursillo. As the others have said, it was a very scary, intimidating, yet awesome experience. I had only served on one other team. We had no manuals—no supplies---no experienced team members other than a few Episcopal Cursillistas who graciously helped us to get started.

When God asks you to do something for Him, say YES!. It will change your life! I was blessed in too many ways to list. Becoming part of a beautiful Christian Community and growing in my trust in the Holy Spirit for wisdom and strength.

Through the years God called me to minister in our Charis community, an even bigger blessing as He gave me a love for our brothers and sisters in correctional institutions. There the experience of watching the divine miracle of changed lives happens. When we answer God's call and step out in faith, He "blesses us, and expands our territories!" Those He calls, He supplies, offering His enabling Grace to accomplish His work.

Say YES to God's call, and you will grow closer to Him and to His children as you do His will and answer His call in your lives. I'm telling you this from years of experience—YOU CAN TRUST HIM!

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*Yes*



**CHARIS OF MINNESOTA INCORPORATED**

**Charis Board of Director Elections**

**HELP  
WANTED**

Nominations are now being accepted for the Charis Board elections. New terms of office start July 1. The benefits are many: setting the vision for the Charis ministry, working with a group of loving, caring Christians, and making a difference in the lives of so many who are in prison.

The following is asked of each Board member:

- Honor the Charis guidelines and policies
- Commit to serve a three year term
- Attend monthly meetings on the third Thursday of each month
- Serve on a sub-committee as needed
- Attend Board retreats

*Yes!*

An application and interview with the Charis board will be part of the process. Please contact Cliff Johnson at [cliffjohnson1@me.com](mailto:cliffjohnson1@me.com) if you are interested in serving.