



CHARIS of MINNESOTA INCORPORATED

The Olive Branch

LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT: Where are you heading?



**Charis President:
Maret Ryan**

**Charis Mission:
Presenting
God's
reconciling love
in Jesus Christ
to inmates in
correctional
institutions in
Minnesota**

**"Failing to plan is
planning to fail...
the best plans
are birthed in the
presence of
God."**

**Mark Batterson
Draw the Circle**

Where are you heading? That is the question we ask each inmate at the beginning of a Charis weekend. It offers a challenge to everyone present, team as well as inmates, to examine their life, to look at what brought them to this particular place and time, and then to decide where they are going next. What will their future look like? That's what the Charis Board is asking itself too. Where are we heading—as a ministry, as a board, and as a group of committed volunteers?

We have been hearing a lot from the Bureau of Prisons and the Minnesota Department of Corrections about the importance of reducing recidivism. This is the #1 goal for each for the future. And it's no wonder; the statistics are staggering. The United States is the world's leading jailer and Minnesota has the fastest growing prison population—66% of offenders come back to prison after release.

The stated goal of the DOC is to "reduce recidivism by promoting offender change through proven strategies during safe and secure incarceration." We have been told that groups who help meet this goal will be given a priority for programming and that those who don't

will be out. We have also been told that measurable outcomes will be part of the equation.

As a ministry, we are asking what part Charis has to play in reducing recidivism. The relationships we build on a Charis weekend and at the monthly reunions could be a helpful factor in this area. We want to be poised to act to ensure our continuing presence in the prisons.



To help us in our discernment process Board members have been meeting with a variety of resources over the past few months. From experienced Charis volunteers to BOP chaplains and reentry coordinators to experts in the community, we are listening to them all and seeking their advice and wisdom. We are educating ourselves on the issues and priorities of Corrections in order to make the best decisions we can to ensure that Charis remains a viable presence in the prisons. In April we will be meeting with the Regional Reentry Coordinator from the MN DOC.

One other area we need to address is volunteer recruitment. Last February found us seriously short of team members. We were able to fill teams for four prisons — but just barely. It's no secret that the majority of our volunteers are getting older. Just how long can we expect our current volunteer base to keep on going?

The Board recognizes it is time to get serious about recruitment. We also recognize that not as many people are attending the Cursillo-type weekends, which means the volunteer base we draw from is diminishing. As a Board, we will develop a recruitment plan, but we also know that our own volunteers are the best source for recruiting new people. Look around your church community—are there people you could invite to serve? Our future as a ministry depends on a solid base of committed volunteers.

We want to be ready for whatever plans God has in store for us. We also want to be bold with our prayers. In Isaiah 30:21 it says, "Whether you walk to the left or to the right, your ears shall hear a word; this is the way, follow it."

We intend to do just that!

Pillar of the Charis Community: The Rev by Karen Troyer



Pastor Darlene (The Reverend Darlene Auger Stensby) has been a trusted friend and confidant for the women of MCF Shakopee for 30 years. Her beautiful, generous spirit, and a lifelong love for the Lord has provided a loving model and pastor for both our sisters on the inside and our weekend team members who have walked with her and prayed with her during some of the darkest days in her life. We have all been blessed to serve alongside Pastor Darlene and to witness her gentle touch and loving affirmation impact the lives of hundreds of women for Christ in her 30 years at Shakopee. Join us in praising God for this incredible woman of faith who has shared so much of her life with each one of us. I take no credit for this interview – these are Darlene’s words:

After serving in parish ministry for more than 30 years, Darlene retired in 2009 to spend more time with her family. Following her husband Ken’s sudden death in a hiking accident in 2013, Darlene moved to White Bear Lake to be closer to her grandchildren. She went back into ministry as a chaplain for Presbyterian Homes and Services, serving at Summer House of Shoreview. Her work with seniors, time with family and participation in Charis all make for a rich and fulfilling life. In the midst of life-changing tragedy, God has been good.

Darlene attended her Cursillo weekend at Christ Presbyterian Church in Edina in January 1983. She served on her first Kairos weekend at Shakopee in the old prison, in October 1985. “A colleague in ministry urged me to join him on a team and I agreed, somewhat reluctantly, to do so. I found that this ministry has a transforming effect not only on the lives of the people I’m called to serve, but on my own life as well. I’ve been coming back to Shakopee ever since then, whenever time and opportunity permit. I’ve served on over 20 teams at Shakopee and one team at Waseca, in the fall of 2011. All have been amazing experiences. I have also served on the Charis Board of Directors for the past five years.”

“Each weekend has been touched by God’s grace and filled with miracles, large and small. I especially remember a moment in 1986 when Palanca gathered to pray for me about a family matter that troubled me deeply. A gentle and quiet insider named Ann came up to me holding a lovely plant she had received as palanca, the first flowers she had ever been given. Silently, Ann broke off a tiny yellow blossom from her plant and tearfully placed it in my palm. Our eyes met in one of those amazing God moments and we both felt healed of our pain. I still have that little flower; it sits in my jewelry box and is more precious to me than anything that surrounds it there. Whenever I see it I think of Ann and say a prayer of thanksgiving for her.

Several years ago, under more relaxed guidelines, another Charis volunteer and I conducted a support group for women coming out of Shakopee. We named it the Ruth Group, based on the powerful Old Testament story about healing friendship between women in the Book of Ruth. We saw the women regularly, prayed for them daily and helped them in any way we could as they struggled to create a new life on the outside. Watching them grow in the faith was an amazing privilege. Some went on to serve on Kairos/Charis teams at Shakopee and, as far as I know, none ever returned to Shakopee other than to volunteer.

I’ve come to understand through my years in ministry, both inside and outside the walls of a prison, that it is the ministry of presence that is the greatest gift we have to offer. God’s presence, our presence, and the presence of the Risen Christ as is made visible through our words, actions and being. Through the years, many dimensions of our program have been cut back and, though it was wonderful to be able to bring in gifts of food and soft drinks, flowers and gifts, a silly chicken to make them laugh and act like children for a while at least, these were not the things that made God’s grace real in their lives. It is our presence with them, body, soul, and spirit, for 3½ days that makes a difference. God’s presence becomes real for them and for us; Christ is among us in our interactions with one another and it is God’s grace working through us that changes lives. As our program became simpler and more basic it seemed that God’s message became clearer, more focused, more life-giving. Bearing witness to the transformation of a life made possible by that grace is a privilege and a blessing. The word *Charis* means *grace*, and grace abounds through this ministry as we listen, listen, love, love in God’s name.

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Pillar of the Charis Community (continued from page 2)

I am thankful for this Charis ministry and the people I've met and come to know through the years. It is beautiful to see the insiders 'graduate' to serve on teams within the prison, some of them continuing to come in to be on a team after they've left prison. Some have even served in leadership of weekends and their presence has an amazing effect on the weekenders. Could we ever do a weekend without our enthusiastic and hardworking volunteers on the inside?! What a gift they are.

My prayer for the future of this ministry is that we will once again be permitted to walk with these men and women on the outside, as we did in our Ruth Group long ago. To help them make a strong and permanent re-entry into society and to the next stage of their lives seems essential and I know many volunteers who are willing to help with the transition if that were possible. I pray fervently for that next chapter for us all!"



Check it out.
Weekend updates are now on the Charis website. Go to www.charismn.com

Our youngest Charis volunteer!

Anthony, age 7, grandson of John and Karen Troyer was first in line to volunteer to twist the new crosses for Charis. After the crosses were stamped out, each one needed the loop twisted before they could be sent for nickel plating. All 5,000 needed to be finished in time for President's Day weekend. Long-time Charis volunteer, Roy Boeser, built a jig that fit Anthony's little hands perfectly, and once he started, he didn't want to go to bed that Friday night. He was up early Saturday morning and Grandpa John found him at the dining room table, hard at work when he got up. The crosses were done by noon and delivered on Sunday. Best little volunteer we've got!



The Gifts We Bring

Chaplain Dan Pulju of FCI Sandstone challenged the Charis Board of Directors to come up with "talking points" that describe the benefits a Charis volunteer brings to the prisons. As we created the list it became very evident that **we do** have a lot to offer and **we do** make a difference. Charis has volunteers who:

- Are willing to develop on-going relationships with the inmates, and are not threatened by the prison experience.
- Provide high-quality content that challenges the inmate to make wise use of his/her time in prison
- Offer relationships that are healthy, non-sexualized, and non-manipulative.
- Offer a consistent and continuing ministry of presence, year-in and year-out, building relationships. (Change happens through relationships, not through books or lectures.)
- Are wise and mature, with proven track records.
- Are willing to go outside of Charis and help in other areas (dual usefulness).
- Can model "pro-social" thinking and help inmates develop skills in this area (as opposed to anti-social).
- Allow inmates a safe place to practice social skills with someone who is not an inmate.
- Function as a 'filter' offering positive feedback for how to make appropriate choices.
- Model how to follow the rules and surrender to authority.
- Are an inexpensive way for Corrections to multiply its ability to reach inmates.
- Give offenders a place to become positive role models and peer leaders inside the prison (serving on inside teams, giving testimonies, leadership at reunions)
- Engage in healthy mutual accountability groups.
- Help offenders with character and value transformation, tackling tough issues such as forgiveness.
- Are positive role models who interact in a positive way with appropriate boundaries.
- Offer a model for culture change; a paradigm shift, i.e. a different family structure; committed, loving married couples walking together in faith.
- In women's prisons, men who offer an arm to escort rather than an arm that hits; often the first positive male role model the women have ever seen.
- Affirm the offenders; accepting them for who they are with no judgment.
- Can reach the inmate in a unique way; those that often cannot be reached by staff.

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Four Charis weekend retreats will be held during October and November 2015, which requires a lot of team members. If you've been thinking of serving again, now is the time to send in your team application. Know of any people who you think would be great on a team? Now is the time to invite them!

Board Members Needed

The Charis Board of Directors is seeking dedicated members to serve on the Board for a three year term, beginning July 1. We seek members from a variety of denominations and prison representation. The work involves setting the mission and vision for the Charis ministry, participating in a variety of committees, attending a monthly meeting and yearly retreats, and playing a hands-on role at each prison.

If interested, email Maret Ryan at maretryan@gmail.com.

**300 inmates are
waiting for a weekend.**

We can't do it without you!



Serve on a team.

**Download an application
today at
www.charismn.com**

Prayers Needed: Draw the Circle

Join the Charis Board in praying for God's will and vision for the Charis ministry. We seek unity in this effort and will begin a 40 day prayer challenge on March 19, following the book by Mark Batterson called Draw the Circle. The author says, "Prayer turns us into first class noticers. It helps us see what God wants us to notice. The more you pray, the more you notice; the less you pray, the less you notice. It's as simple as that."

Please join us in prayer as we draw a circle around the Charis ministry.